

Kachin Baptist to appear in court after White House meeting

August 30, 2019

The [Baptist World Alliance](#) and others voiced concern about the safety of a Kachin Baptist leader who has been ordered to appear in court for comments he made at a White House meeting in July.

An officer in the Tatmadaw—the Myanmar military—accused Hkalam Samson, president and former general secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention, of defamation for his remarks about human rights violations soldiers committed against ethnic and religious minorities.

Samson participated in an Oval Office meeting with President Trump during the Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom. He thanked the United States for [imposing a travel ban](#) on Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and three other senior officers. The Trump administration imposed the sanctions for what it called “atrocities” the military committed against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, also known as Burma.

Samson also urged the United States to support Myanmar’s transition to “genuine democracy” and federalism. His comments were included in a live news broadcast subsequently posted on social media.

Lt. Col. Than Htike from the Northern Command brought the defamation charges against Samson in Myanmar’s Myitkyina Township Court on Aug. 26. Samson has been ordered to appear in court Sept. 9.

[Human Rights Watch](#) reported a significant increase in prosecutions for

criminal defamation in Myanmar last year, primarily focused on individuals who criticized military, state or political party officials.

BWA urges authorities to uphold Samson's rights



Elijah Brown

Elijah Brown, general secretary of the BWA, sent a letter Aug. 29 to officials at the United Nations and the United States government expressing concern about Samson's safety, saying his "human rights are being subjugated."

"We are asking you to follow up with the appropriate authorities in Myanmar about a just and speedy resolution that upholds the rights of Rev. Dr. Samson," he wrote.

Brown noted Samson "has long been a proponent of religious tolerance and justice for all the peoples of Myanmar."

"For many years he has worked for a just and fully integrated Myanmar,

including a peaceful resolution for the 100,000 Kachin who remain as Internally Displaced Persons, and the restoration of over 200 churches destroyed in Kachin State,” Brown wrote.

“Religious freedom and free speech remain cornerstone rights to a healthy and flourishing society. Even as Rev. Dr. Samson has spoken to challenging contexts, he has sought to maintain a position of a just and integrated Myanmar. We ask that his rights and those of all citizens in Myanmar continue to be upheld and respected.”

Continued concern about retribution

Brown sent the letter to U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and Yanghee Lee, special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar in the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

He also sent it to Nicholas J.C. Snyder, special adviser for Asia in the office of the U.S. vice president; Sam Brownback, U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom; Kelley Curie, U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues; and to Sen. James E. Risch, chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and Rep. Eliot L. Engel, chair of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

[Two weeks earlier](#), the BWA sent a letter to the same officials to voice concern about the safety of Samson and Pastor Langjaw Gam Seng of Myanmar. Both participated in the White House meeting with Trump to talk about persecution in Myanmar. At the time, sources inside Myanmar had indicated the two Baptist ministers could be arrested upon their arrival at Yangon International Airport.

American Baptists call for charges to be dropped

The [American Baptist Churches, USA](#), and its Burma Refugee Commission, sent a “Declaration of Concern” regarding Samson to U.S. and international officials on Aug. 30.



(Photo / “Burma Violence” / AK Rockefeller / CC BY-SA 2.0)

The declaration notes Samson consistently has urged that “elements of the military responsible for the destruction of over 200 churches in Kachin State alone and who have used rape as a weapon of war be brought to justice.”

“The American Baptist Churches USA urges that the charges be dropped against Dr. Samson and asks the civilian government leaders of Myanmar and the military to support the democratic rights of Dr. Samson and all citizens of Myanmar to the fundamental right of peaceful free speech even when it is critical of the conditions within Myanmar,” the declaration states.

Lee Spitzer, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches, USA, said: “The American Baptist family continues to support and advocate for the safety and freedom of activity for all of our Baptist partners in Myanmar. We hope that the government and military in that country will

respect the rights of our brothers and sisters. Our Burmese Refugee Commission continues to monitor and respond to the challenges Baptist leaders are facing on a daily basis.”

[International Christian Concern](#), an organization focused on persecuted Christians, called for the court in Myanmar to dismiss the charges against Samson.

Gina Goh, the group’s regional manager for Southeast Asia, said the case against Samson “goes to show that any Christian in Myanmar can be singled out by the Tatmadaw and slapped with absurd charges.”

“Myanmar needs to show that it is truly a democracy by respecting freedom of speech and admitting its shortcomings in regard to religious liberty,” Goh said.