

Two Baptist pastors in Myanmar may face eight years in prison

July 25, 2017

FALLS CHURCH, Va.—Two Baptist pastors in Myanmar who have been imprisoned since Christmas Eve face up to eight years in prison for helping a journalist who photographed evidence of the Myanmar military's bombing of a Catholic church.

Elijah Brown, executive vice president of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and the [next general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance](#), has joined other human rights advocates in urging the international community to intervene on behalf of Kachin pastors Langjaw Gam Seng and Dumdaw Nawng Latt.



Kachin pastors Nawng Latt and Gam Seng.
irrawaddy.com / Ministry of Defense / Facebook

Amnesty International, the [21st Century Wilberforce Initiative](#) and other human rights groups believe the charges against the ministers are politically motivated, and they cite concerns about their health.

'Chained for the truth'



Elijah Brown “For seven months, these two Baptist leaders have been chained for the truth,” Brown wrote in a July 25 email.

The two ministers disappeared on Dec. 24, 2016, and officials announced in January they were charged with unlawful association and use of an unlicensed motorbike.

A few weeks before their disappearance, the pastors helped facilitate a visit by journalists to Monekoe, a town in the northern Shan State, where [reporters documented destruction](#) caused by Myanmar Army airstrikes.

“Using helicopter gunships, warplanes and heavy artillery, the military drove a coalition known as the Brotherhood of the Northern Alliance out of Monekoe, and in the process intentionally targeted and bombed the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church,” Brown wrote.

“The military, which has a [documented history of civilian abuse](#), claimed the BNA was hiding weapons and ammunition in the church—a claim flatly denied by Catholic Bishop Philip Za Hawng.”

On July 11, [Amnesty International reported](#) the pair faced an additional

charge of defamation. An army colonel filed a lawsuit against them in February, based on an interview the ministers gave to a newspaper in which they asserted the Myanmar military committed human rights violations last year during fighting in Monekoe.

Concerns about health of prisoners

Prolonged detention already has taken a toll on the two pastors and their families, Brown noted.

“Pastor Latt, 67, suffered breathing complications prior to his arrest. Multiple reports confirm that incarceration has further exacerbated his medical problems, and he is being denied access to proper treatment,” he said.

“Pastor Seng, 35, has a 10-year-old boy. These long months of separation have left Seng and his family depressed. With Seng prevented from working, his local Baptist church has helped care for the family’s financial needs.”

Amnesty International reported the ministers, who are detained in the Lashio prison in northern Shan, were too sick to eat for five days in early July.

‘A deviation from positive progress’

The [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) has reported ongoing violations of religious freedom in Myanmar—particularly Rohingya Muslims and Christian minorities in particular regions.

“Nevertheless, on the ground, some Christians have reported that at least in their areas there have been significant advancements in both political and religious freedom. This is part of what makes the case of these two Kachin pastors so alarming: It seems a deviation from positive progress,”

Brown wrote.

"Two weeks ago, I was in Myanmar, and on my final day visited the U.S. Embassy regarding the situation facing these two believers. I was particularly encouraged by the robust awareness and engagement being pursued at the U.S. Embassy, where officials noted their commitment to continue to focus on this case in particular. Though grateful for the good work of the U.S. Embassy in this regard, the situation for these two leaders remains quite grim."

The two ministers were formally arraigned in mid-July and were scheduled to appear in court July 26—the first in a series of hearings.

Call to action

"Facing the possibility of up to eight years in prison, these next few weeks are critical for Pastor Seng and Pastor Latt," Brown wrote. "Their freedom may well depend upon the actions taken on their behalf."

He urged concerned Christians and others to write to officials in Myanmar, calling on authorities to drop politically motivated charges against Seng and Latt, to ensure their humane treatment while detained and to repeal or amend laws that freedom of expression.

Brown suggested using formatting provided by [Amnesty International](#), addressing correspondence to Union Attorney General U Tun Tun Oo at ago.h.o@mptmail.net.mm, the director general of Lashio Prison and State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and to copy all correspondence to Ambassador Scott Marciel at the U.S. Embassy in Myanmar.