News



People in northwestern Myanmar displaced by fighting between junta forces and anti-junta fighters walk in Chin state May 31, 2021. (CNS/Reuters)

Kyaw Lin Htoon

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Myanmar's junta has sentenced a Catholic nun who has been providing aid to internally displaced people to eight months in prison under a law widely used to suppress dissent since the military seized power in February 2021.

The sentence, handed down on June 24 by a military tribunal inside a prison, came two weeks after Sr. Benedetta Nya Moe, 50, of the Sisters of Charity of Saints Bartolomea Capitanio and Vincenza Gerosa, was detained and interrogated near Loikaw in Kayah (Karenni) State, according to sources familiar with the case.

The nun was transferred to Loikaw Prison on the day of her sentencing, they said.

Nya Moe was sentenced under Section 505(a) of the penal code, which has been widely used by the junta to target both its opponents and civilians, and carries a maximum jail term of three years.

Nya Moe, an ethnic Kayan who marked 25 years of religious profession with her congregation recently, has been providing healthcare and medical access to IDPs and residents in camps and villages across eastern Demoso and near Loikaw.

She worked alongside fellow nuns and personnel from other Catholic missions in collaboration with Loikaw diocese, a local nun who previously worked with her in Demoso Township said, requesting anonymity.

"From what we have learned, she crossed paths with a military column and was arrested while transporting a displaced patient to a hospital in Loikaw," the nun told UCA News on June 25.

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Two local residents accompanied Nya Moe as they drove a female patient from Zayatphyu village near Loikaw, the junta-controlled capital of Karenni State, on June 10.

"During a search of their phones, soldiers found records of donations received on Kpay [a commonly used mobile banking app] and news related to the armed conflict on the nun's phone, which led to their arrest," Ben Khoo, a resident of Loikaw, told UCA News.

The three were kept at a military battalion base in Loikaw for interrogation. The two villagers were released four days later, but the junta continued to detain and question the nun.

Catholic congregations and church communities across Myanmar are praying for her, seeking protection, strength and speedy release.

Demoso Township, the primary area where the nun has been assisting IDPs, was held by Karenni resistance forces until August last year. The junta forces have since claimed full control of the township, though it remains heavily contested.

Karenni resistance forces claim the military only holds the abandoned urban center.

The Myanmar Peace Monitor says the military lacks total control anywhere and the resistance groups maintain an active presence surrounding the capital, Loikaw.

Sources in the know noted that Sr. Benedetta Nya Moe and her team regularly traveled to western Demoso Township to provide medical care, distribute pharmaceuticals, and run food and nutrition initiatives for IDPs.

"She just recently came to western Demoso to celebrate her religious jubilee," said a member of the management committee of an IDP camp in the township.

"They only work within their assigned duties. It is deeply heartbreaking to hear about this," he said.

Christians make up nearly 6% of Myanmar's population of 54 million, while Buddhism is the state religion and is practiced by 89% of its people.