

Journalists under attack for defending Myanmar's environment

Submission to the UN OHCHR on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity – March 2025

Introduction

Violence against journalists and a pervasive culture of impunity have gravely undermined freedom of expression, particularly for those investigating environmental issues, and have only escalated since the military's 2021 coup. This submission examines the intersection of journalist safety, environmental reporting, and judicial impunity under military control. Focusing on cases such as that of Soe Moe Tun, HRM analyses how State repression and a compromised justice system have imperilled independent reporting and stifled public accountability. HRM presents its findings to inform the United Nations OHCHR's 2025 inquiry into the safety of journalists and the challenges posed by systemic impunity.

Overview of attacks on journalists in Myanmar

There has been a sustained increase in targeted violence against journalists and media workers in Myanmar. Under military rule, journalists are frequently subjected to intimidation, arbitrary detention, physical assaults, abduction, and even assassination.¹ Since the 2021 coup, between eight and 14 journalists have been killed, in addition to six killed before the military seized power.² These attacks target those reporting on conflict, military abuses, corruption, and environmental degradation.

The pattern of violence is not random but reflects a calculated strategy by the military to silence dissent. Journalists documenting environmental damage are viewed as undermining the military's narrative of stability and progress. They face systematic harassment through threats, covert surveillance, censorship, and, in extreme cases, extrajudicial killings. These measures not only violate the right to freedom of expression (ICCPR, Art. 19) but also the right to information, thereby reducing the diversity of voices available to the public.

¹ International Center for Not-for-profit Law (2024), "[Assessing detentions of journalists in Myanmar](#)".

² Data on the number of killed journalists varies depending on the definition of journalist used by individual monitors.

Violence against journalists signals a broader assault on human rights and democratic governance too. When journalists are silenced, military narratives go unchallenged, depriving people of essential information required for informed decision-making. The suppression of critical voices erodes public trust, hindering the realisation of rights such as participation in public affairs (ICCPR, Art. 25).

Environmental reporting in a repressive context

Environmental reporting is crucial when degradation directly impacts the public interest. In Myanmar, independent environmental journalism exposes the hidden costs of military policies and exploitative business practices that threaten natural resources and community well-being. Investigative reporters uncover illegal mining, unregulated industrial pollution, rampant logging, and unsustainable land practices—issues made worse by a lack of transparency and accountability under military rule.

Journalists in this field translate complex scientific data into actionable insights, shaping policy debates and, at times, spurring reforms. However, under Myanmar’s repressive regime, probing environmental misconduct often means investigating military activities, which makes these reporters prime targets for harassment, censorship, and violence.

Case Study: Soe Moe Tun

The tragic case of Soe Moe Tun starkly illustrates the lethal risks faced by journalists reporting on the environment.³ Soe Moe Tun dedicated his career to exposing environmental abuses—from deforestation to toxic waste management—that have profound effects on public health and ecological balance. His murder in 2016, with his killers never brought to justice, epitomises the culture of impunity that endangers reporters and deters critical investigations.

Case study: Sai Zaw Thaike

Photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaike’s experience further highlights these dangers. Arrested in May 2023 in Rakhine State while reporting on the devastation caused by Cyclone Mocha—the country’s worst storm in a decade—he was sentenced to 20 years in prison under charges of spreading fear and sedition.⁴ In February 2025, he endured a further two weeks of torture by prison authorities for allegedly exposing human rights abuses by prison staff during an inspection by the military’s National Human Rights Commission.⁵ His ordeal underscores the brutal measures taken against journalists who dare to report on sensitive issues.

³ Free Expression Myanmar (2022), “[9 killed journalists remembered on international impunity day](#)”.

⁴ Natural Disaster Management Law (2013) and Penal Code (1861).

⁵ Associated Press (2025), “[A Myanmar online news site says its jailed journalist is tortured for revealing abuses of prisoners](#)”.

Impact of violence on environmental information

Systemic violence and pervasive censorship have severely hampered environmental reporting in Myanmar.⁶ The military's tight control over information limits journalists' access to reliable environmental data, leading to widespread censorship and self-censorship. This not only compromises the public's right to information but also undermines public health by keeping communities uninformed about critical environmental risks. The ongoing struggle for environmental transparency is therefore not only an ecological necessity but also a cornerstone of democratic accountability.

The military justice system and the culture of impunity

Since the coup, Myanmar's military justice system has been restructured to favour politically motivated prosecutions and arbitrary detentions, systematically undermining fairness and accountability.⁷ Judicial processes now lack transparency and operate without clear separation from military control, ensuring that cases involving State critics—including journalists—are predetermined. This manipulation of legal procedures violates not only the right to a fair trial (ICCPR, Art. 14) but also exacerbates the culture of impunity by allowing State violence to go unpunished.

Several systemic flaws in the military justice system contribute to a pervasive culture of impunity:

- **Politicisation of the judiciary:** Judges and prosecutors are controlled by the military, aligning verdicts with political objectives rather than objective legal standards.
- **Lack of independent investigations:** Incidents of violence against journalists are routinely dismissed by military-controlled agencies, precluding unbiased inquiries.
- **Arbitrary application of the law:** Laws are selectively enforced, often justifying violent actions against journalists as necessary measures to prevent incitement.
- **Intimidation and coercion:** The close nexus between the judiciary and military security apparatuses further deters victims' and lawyers' efforts to seek justice.

These mechanisms not only violate the right to a fair trial (ICCPR, Art. 14) but also signal to society that dissent and investigative reporting are punishable offenses.

⁶ Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "[Access to information on climate change in military-controlled Myanmar](#)".

⁷ Free Expression Myanmar (2023), "[Myanmar military's 'justice' system](#)".

Impact on journalism and society

The compromised judicial system has far-reaching implications. When State actors are not held accountable, the suppression of investigative reporting becomes yet more normalised, forcing journalists to either operate underground or from abroad. This stifles public debate and diminishes informed participation in democratic processes, directly impacting freedom of expression and the right to participate in public affairs (ICCPR, Art. 25). The erosion of judicial accountability not only undermines public trust in the legal system but also creates an environment where authoritarian practices can flourish unchallenged, deepening the cycle of repression and impunity.

Conclusion

The plight of journalists—especially those reporting on environmental issues—epitomises a broader crisis of human rights and judicial impunity in Myanmar. Decades of systematic violence and manipulated judicial processes, as exemplified by the tragic case of Soe Moe Tun, reveal a State that prioritises power over public interest. It is imperative that national and international stakeholders act swiftly to protect media freedom and restore accountability. We call on the OHCHR and the global community to implement comprehensive reforms that safeguard journalists and uphold the rule of law, ensuring that no critical voice is left unprotected.

Recommendations

- **Enhance legal protections:** Urge Myanmar authorities to enact laws that safeguard freedom of expression (ICCPR, Art. 19) and hold perpetrators accountable for attacks on journalists.
- **Promote journalist safety:** Recommend that States establish robust safety protocols—such as emergency response networks and capacity-building initiatives—for journalists operating in high-risk areas.
- **Document and investigate violations:** Call for the creation or strengthening of independent investigative mechanisms, with international oversight, to thoroughly document and probe attacks on journalists and violations of the right to life.
- **Demand judicial reforms:** Advocate for reforms that ensure judicial independence from military control, transparent trial processes, and public accountability in cases involving state violence.
- **Strengthen multilateral engagement:** Encourage the OHCHR to work closely with regional human rights bodies and local civil society organisations, facilitating coordinated monitoring and advocacy efforts.
- **Leverage economic and diplomatic Tools:** Recommend targeted sanctions and diplomatic pressure against individuals and institutions responsible for suppressing media freedom, thereby reinforcing international standards for accountability.