



Human Rights Now

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Statement on the Assassination of Myanmar Lawyer and Human Rights Defender Ko Ni

On Sunday, January 29, 2017, Ko Ni, senior advisor for legal affairs for the National League for Democracy (NLD), the current ruling party under Aung San Syi Kyi, and a prominent Muslim human rights lawyer, was fatally shot at the Yangon International Airport. A taxi driver who ran after the murderer was also killed.

Ko Ni was a vocal critic of the military's control of politics and a constitutional lawyer who worked on NLD's plan to amend Myanmar's constitution to loosen the military's grip, such as articles which give the military control of one quarter of parliament and total immunity for official acts. Ko Ni also defended the rights of Muslim minority groups in Myanmar and advocated for rule of law and respect of human rights. He had been an activist since the 1988 student uprising, was a political prisoner, and was involved in a number of lawyers associations, including the Myanmar Lawyer Network and Myanmar Muslim Lawyers' Association. A spokesperson for NLD described Ko Ni as "irreplaceable".

The shooter was apprehended shortly after the shooting. Leaked police documents state that the shooter said that he was hired to shoot Ko Ni in return for a car by a man named Myint Swe, who used a racially derogatory term to refer to Ko Ni, alluding to the fact that Muslim groups in Myanmar face discrimination and Ko Ni was both a Muslim and defender of their rights. Ko Ni's daughter, Yin Nwe Khine, also noted that Ko Ni had long received threats for his statements against the military and on constitutional reform.

Attacks against lawyers and human rights defenders in Myanmar had been rare in recent years. However, this open attack against such a prominent human rights lawyer puts the entire legal profession on alert and seriously undermines the rule of law, threatening efforts by all human rights defenders and lawyers to protect human rights in Myanmar. We express grave concern that this kind of attack will have an enormous chilling effect among Myanmar's civil society.

While the exact reason for the shooting is unknown, the assassination highlights the need for human rights defenders and lawyers in Myanmar to be protected and to feel safe in continuing their vocal human rights work. NLD representatives have condemned the murder, and the President's Office promised an investigation by police into the shooting, which it is calling a political assassination.

Human Rights Now condemns the murder and offers its condolences to all those connected Ko Ni and his work. We call upon the Myanmar authorities to conduct a thorough investigation of this crime and to ensure that those who are responsible are identified and brought to justice.

We also call on the Myanmar government to ensure that the security and voice of human rights defenders of all religions and ethnicities are respected in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders so that the work of human rights defenders in Myanmar are not deterred.