

# THE NATION

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## JUNTA EXAGTS REVENGE ON AMERICAN CITIZEN

*The fiancée of Burmese-American activist Nyi Nyi Aung describes hearing of how he was snatched on a visit back to his homeland, then tortured ahead of his trial*

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**EARLY ON** September 3, my phone rang. Hurrying to get ready for a nursing shift, I picked up, thinking it might be my fiancé, Nyi Nyi, who was visiting family in Bangkok. But it was Nyi Nyi's brother Nyi Nyi, he said, had boarded a plane to our native Burma earlier that day, hoping to visit his mother who has cancer. But according to friends waiting at the baggage claim, he never arrived. In all likelihood, the military junta seized him.

Nyi Nyi's brother was still talking, but I couldn't hear him. Nyi Nyi is an American citizen, I thought. How could this happen? And then, it hit me: I might never see him again.

I called the US Embassy in Rangoon; I wrote to our Congressional representatives. And I waited. On September 20 - 17 days after Nyi Nyi disappeared - the junta acknowledged his arrest. The charges, according to the state-run newspaper, was "plotting riots and sabotage". I felt sick, but not surprised - although Nyi Nyi has always been a non-violent activist, the junta will say anything to justify its actions. Then, after the Embassy was allowed a brief visit with Nyi Nyi, I learned the worst of it: He was tortured. He was denied food for over a week. Kicked in his face. Beaten on his back. Not allowed to sleep.

I was furious - and scared for him and for us.

As a peaceful participant in the 1988 Burmese student protests, Nyi Nyi had once before been detained and badly tortured by the junta. I, too, had been involved in the student uprising, and like many others, fled to Thailand after the brutal August 1988 military crackdown. That's where Nyi Nyi and I first met. While in Thailand, Nyi Nyi

worked with organisations providing humanitarian assistance to the refugees, while continuing his efforts to peacefully advocate on behalf of Burmese democracy and human rights. In 1991, drawn to the United States, which offered the promise of freedom and a better life, I decided to re-settle here; he followed two years later.

Nyi Nyi flourished in the US. He received a computer science degree from Purdue University and started working for high-tech companies. He became a naturalised US citizen, like me.

We got engaged. But Nyi Nyi never forgot Burma. He continued working to advance Burmese democracy and human rights, quietly assisting groups organising peaceful opposition to the junta. As part of this work, Nyi Nyi returned to Burma five times in recent years, each time with his US passport and a valid entry visa. The first four trips he went unnoted.

The fifth trip was different. Nyi Nyi is currently standing trial in Burma. The terrorism charges have been dropped, but Nyi Nyi is now facing sham charges of fraud and forgery relating to his alleged possession of a fake Burmese identity card - even though Nyi Nyi clearly had no need of fake identification, given the protections of his American passport and valid

visa. He's also been charged with illegally importing Burmese currency into Burma and failing to declare US currency at customs. But Nyi Nyi was arrested before he even had a chance to go through customs. He faces a maximum sentence of 17 years. The courts in Burma are tools of the junta, and there is little doubt that he will be convicted. The only question is what will happen next.

Recently, the Obama Administration completed its Burma policy review. Sanctions will remain in place, but the Administration has signalled that it will pursue greater engagement with the junta. Recently US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell travelled to Rangoon, becoming the most senior US diplomat to visit Burma in over a decade. I hope and pray he raised Nyi Nyi's case with junta officials.

But Nyi Nyi is far from alone. He is the only American political prisoner in Burma, but there are over 2,000 Burmese prisoners of conscience. This number includes my nephew, Nyi Nyi's mother and two of his cousins. Their only crime? Peaceful support for freedom and human rights in a country oppressed by a brutal military regime.

Several months before his arrest, Nyi Nyi travelled to New York City to deliver a petition to the United Nations. The petition had over 675,000 signatures, and urged the



NYI NYI AUNG is currently on hunger strike in Rangoon's Insein Prison.

release of all political prisoners in Burma (ironically, a category to which Nyi Nyi now belongs). Addressing his words to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a press conference, Nyi Nyi said, "My message is simple. Your words show you take this issue seriously. But now I want to see what action you take to secure the release of my family and all Burma's political prisoners."

So now, I must speak for Nyi Nyi, as he has so often spoken for others. Nyi Nyi's arrest, detention and treatment has been condemned by the United States and the international community. And so I say: your words show you take this issue seriously. But what will you do?

WA WA KYAW is the fiancée of imprisoned Burmese-American human rights activist Nyi Nyi Aung, also known as Kyaw Zaw Lwin.