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For democracy activist Nyi Nyi Aung, homecoming is bittersweet

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Dissident Nyi Nyi Aung, a U.S. citizen, was imprisoned for months in Burma. He was moved from one solitary confinement cell to another, suffered beatings and was denied food or sleep. Now Aung is back home in Montgomery Village after suddenly being released last week.

Just eight days ago, Nyi Nyi Aung didn't know whether he would live to see his home again. Imprisoned in the Burmese jungle, he'd been beaten, forced to sleep in a kennel in his own excrement, denied medical treatment and told by captors that his U.S. citizenship didn't matter.

At times, it seemed as if it didn't. Aung, sentenced to three years of hard labor after he was caught promoting democracy in Burma, the land of his birth, was crippled by back pain and pain in his right leg from the beatings. Over six months, he had been moved from one solitary confinement cell to another, the last one a stagnant, mosquito-infested room with crumbling walls and a plastic bottle for a toilet.

Aung knew prison conditions in Burma could prove fatal -- a friend had died behind bars -- and sentences could be extended without due process. U.S. consular officers were rarely allowed to visit him.

Then, last week, Aung was suddenly released. Within two days, he was sitting in his Montgomery Village living room, surrounded by lush potted plants, intricately carved wooden statues and gold-plated lacquer boxes.

It felt both miraculous and not strange at all.

"It's my home," he said quietly of the duplex he shares with his fiancée, Wa Wa Kyaw, who sat nearby, nursing a cup of coffee.

Aung, 40, had always known what he was doing was risky. The naturalized U.S. citizen had devoted his life to trying to undermine the military government that has ruled Burma, also known as Myanmar, since before he was born. As a teenager, he was arrested and tortured for participating in a 1988 democracy movement. He fled the country and taught nonviolent resistance along the Thailand-Burma border. He came to the United States in 1994 under the refugee resettlement program and studied computer science at Purdue University.

Occasionally he made forays into Burma to train activists and collect information. It was dangerous work in a country where more than five people at a time cannot gather in the street and where printing anything at all -- even a restaurant menu -- requires government approval.

"In Burma, every citizen has been breaking the law. For listening to the radio, they can arrest you," Aung said. "All the rules are crazy. However, you don't get caught unless you're against the regime."

On Sept. 3, Aung's luck ran out. He landed in Rangoon and was pulled aside by the authorities. At first he denied that he was Nyi Nyi Aung, the name he had taken as an activist. For travel to Burma, he had always used his given name, Kyaw Zaw Lwin.

But last summer he had presented the United Nations with a petition containing 680,000 signatures that called for the release of political prisoners in Burma, and news reports had used both names. He went ahead with his travel plans regardless, saying he was "more worried for the Burmese people."

Harsh prison conditions

Aung recounted his story three days after returning to the United States. He had dropped from 140 pounds to 120 and was hobbled by what doctors on Saturday diagnosed as sciatica from a herniated or slipped disk caused by mistreatment in prison.

But his hands flew in graceful animation as he recounted what happened after he was detained.

He was handcuffed to a table for 10 days and denied food and sleep. Every couple of hours, new interrogators would ask the same questions, trying to catch him in a lie: Where did he live? What was his involvement with the armed resistance and terrorist acts along the border?

"If they link him with terrorists, they think the U.S. won't help," Kyaw said.

Every day Aung asked for access to a U.S. consular officer. "We don't care if you're American," he recalled his interrogators telling him. "You're in Burma." No officer arrived. Instead, there were curses, more beatings and sleep deprivation. "It's terrible, it's a hell," Aung said.

"They treated me like a Burmese citizen," he said, adding: "I'm not white. They know me as Burmese."

Kyaw, who knew from Aung's friends that he had never exited the airport, alerted the U.S. Embassy in Burma, and 17 days later Aung was allowed a supervised visit from a consular officer. The officer complained about Aung's treatment, but it did not improve, leaving Aung with mixed feelings. "I felt better because the U.S. government knew," he said. "But the U.S. government was requesting medical care for me and couldn't get it, so I'm going, 'Does the U.S. government really have power?'"

By then he was in Rangoon's notorious Insein Prison, steadily losing weight. Prisoners survived by eating food brought by relatives. But most of Aung's relatives, including his ailing mother, were political prisoners themselves.

When his aunts on the outside finally visited, he made a point of speaking openly about repression in Burma. "I'm already in their hands, so whatever the sentence, 20 years, 65 years, death sentence . . . I'm thinking, 'I will do what I can for Burma to be free, even if I die. But I'm not shutting my mouth.'"

Listening in, an officer warned him that conversation during such visits was limited to family topics. "I said, 'How do you define the word family? The world is my family. All the people in my motherland are my family.'"

Sometimes Aung communicated with other prisoners by yelling over a wall; many knew of him from his activism.

"Prison," Aung said, "is the only place you can express yourself freely in Burma. You don't need to be careful, because they've already got you."

In December, he went on a hunger strike -- not, he says, to protest his detention but to draw attention to the more than 2,000 other political prisoners in Burma. In response, his jailors moved him to a kennel.

In February, Aung was sentenced to three years of hard labor for carrying a fake ID, failing to declare currency and failing to inform the Burmese government of his movements -- "sham charges," according to the human rights group Freedom Now. "Twenty percent of prisoners die from forced labor, so we were terrified," said Beth Schwanke, a spokeswoman for the organization.

Pressure from U.S.

After his conviction, Aung was transferred to a remote jungle prison, a bad sign. "They'd never transferred a foreigner out of Insein before," Schwanke said. Kyaw, whom Aung has known since they met as exiled activists in 1988, feared she would never see him again.

But members of Congress had been pushing for Aung's release. They sent a letter to the military government warning of tougher sanctions on Burma. After Aung's sentencing, the State Department issued a statement condemning his imprisonment and calling the conviction "unjustified."

On Wednesday of last week, an officer shackled Aung's leg and took him on a public bus for a six-hour journey back to Rangoon. Worried that other passengers would think he was a criminal, Aung spoke loudly to the guard: "I'm of the [activist] student generation. I'm Nyi Nyi. I'm a political prisoner." People gave him silent thumbs-up, he said. They were afraid to do more.

The next day he learned that he would be released. The reason, according to official Burmese media, was to honor "bilateral friendship and at request of U.S. State Department." Aung attributed his release to pressure from the U.S. government and inside Burma, which this month faced international condemnation for restrictive new election laws. Two hours after the announcement, he was on a plane to Bangkok.

Since returning to the United States, Aung has spent most of his time visiting doctors, who say that his right leg could have been permanently paralyzed if left untreated for one more month. He plans to meet with politicians who pressed for his release and continue his activism from here.

It was good to be home, he said, but the feeling was bittersweet.

"I left all my family and friends in the prison," he said. "My aims are not reached yet. I want to be free altogether."