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Asia - Burma

Journalists arrested

Four journalists facing possible 14-year jail terms on state secrets charge

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Four journalists with the *Unity Weekly* newspaper and the newspaper's CEO have been detained for the past four days in connection with a report about an alleged secret chemical weapons factory in the northwestern city of Pauk.

"We firmly condemn the detention of these journalists and call on the authorities to release them without delay," said Lucie Morillon, Reporters Without Borders head of research.

"This latest violation of freedom of information is indicative of legislative gaps in Burma, which is finding it hard to adopt a media law. The public has a right to be informed on a subject of general interest like this. Journalists who are just doing their job must be protected, and if anyone has to be prosecuted, it should be the newspaper. Under no circumstances should journalists be imprisoned because of the content of their articles."

Published on 25 January, the offending story was headlined "A secret chemical weapon factory of the former generals, Chinese technicians and the commander-in-chief at Pauk Township."

Unity Weekly reporter **Lu Maw Naing** was the first to be arrested. Police detained him in Pauk on 31 January on a charge of violating the state secrets law, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years in prison. The authorities told his family that, in view of the charge, he could not be freed on bail and that he would be transferred to a special police unit near Pakokku.

Unity Weekly CEO Tint San and three more of the newspaper's journalists – **Yarzar Oo**, **Paing Thet Kyaw** and **Sithu Soe** – were arrested the next day. Shortly before his arrest, Tint San told *The Irrawaddy* newspaper that he could prove the story's claims and that he was "ready to face whatever happens."

The authorities meanwhile seized copies of the offending *Unity Weekly* issue throughout the country.

The story reported that the chemical weapons plant was built in 2009 on more than 3,000 hectares of land confiscated from farmers and that it was visited by former army chief Than Shwe in 2009 and by the country's vice-presidents in 2011 and 2013.

"Reporters Without Borders is very concerned about the precarious status of Burma's journalists, which has also been highlighted by the case of *Weekly Eleven* reporter **Ma Khine**," Morillon added.

An appeal court in the city of Loikaw rejected Ma Khine's appeal on 27 January. She was [sentenced on 17 December](#) to three months in prison on charges of trespassing, using abusive language and defamation in connection with her visit to a lawyer's home for an interview on 27 October.

The company that owns *Weekly Eleven* said it would not appeal against the latest ruling because Ma Khine would be released by the time it was heard.

Burma rose 18 places in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#) to be ranked 151st out of 179 countries.

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