

## International

# Myanmar soldiers jailed for Rohingya killings freed after less than a year

## Officials say punishment was reduced by military

**YANGON:** Myanmar has granted early release to seven soldiers jailed for the killing of 10 Rohingya Muslim men and boys during a 2017 military crackdown in the western state of Rakhine, two prison officials, two former fellow inmates and one of the soldiers told Reuters. The soldiers were freed in November last year, the two inmates said, meaning they served less than one year of their 10-year prison terms for the killings at Inn Din village.

They also served less jail time than two Reuters reporters who uncovered the killings. The journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, spent more than 16 months behind bars on charges of obtaining state secrets. The two were released in an amnesty on May 6. Win Naing, the chief warden at Rakhine's Sittwe Prison, and a senior prison official in the capital, Naypyitaw, confirmed that the convicted soldiers had not been in prison for some months. "Their punishment was reduced by the military," said the senior Naypyitaw official, who declined to be named.

Both prison officials declined to provide further details and said they did not know the exact date of the release, which was not announced publicly. Military spokesmen Zaw Min Tun and Tun Tun Nyi declined to comment.

The seven soldiers were the only security personnel the military has said it has punished over the 2017 operation in Rakhine, which drove more than 730,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh. UN investigators said the crackdown was executed with "genocidal intent" and included mass killings, gang rapes and widespread arson.

Myanmar denies widespread wrongdoing and officials have pointed to the jailing of the seven soldiers in the Inn Din case as evidence Myanmar security forces do not enjoy impunity. "I would say that we took action against every case we could investigate," the military's commander in chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, told officials from the UN Security Council in April last year, according to an account posted on his personal website.

The army chief cited the Inn Din case specifically. "The latest crime we punished was a killing, and ten years' imprisonment was given to seven perpetrators," he said. "We will not forgive anyone if they commit (a) crime." Reached by phone on Thursday, a man named Zin Paing Soe confirmed that he was one of the seven soldiers and that he was now free, but declined to comment further. "We were told to shut up," he said.

**'First step'**  
The 2017 campaign was launched across hundreds of villages in northern Rakhine in response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents. Reuters exposed the killings in a report published in Feb 2018. Troops from the 33rd Light Infantry Division, a mobile force known for its brutal counter-insurgency campaigns, worked with members of a paramilitary police force and Buddhist vigilantes to drive out the entire Muslim population of Inn Din, burning and looting Rohingya homes and property, according to Buddhist and Muslim villagers and members of the security forces.

On Sept 1, 2017, soldiers and some villagers detained a group of 10 Rohingya. The military members said they were farmers, high school students and an Islamic teacher. The next morning, witnesses said, Buddhist villagers hacked some of the Rohingya men with swords. The rest were shot by Myanmar troops and buried in a shallow grave.

The two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone, 33, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 29, discovered the grave and obtained pictures of the 10 men before and after they were killed. The journalists were arrested in Dec 2017 while investigating the killings and

later sentenced to seven years in prison under the Official Secrets Act. Defense lawyers argued their arrest and prosecution were aimed at blocking their reporting, and one police officer testified that a senior police official had ordered that the reporters be set up and arrested.

In April 2018, after launching an investigation into the killings, the military announced that four officers and three soldiers of other ranks had been dismissed from the military and sentenced to 10 years with hard labor for "contributing and participating in murder". Neither their names nor details of their roles in the killing were disclosed. Civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi welcomed the convictions, telling reporters at the time the sentencing was Myanmar's "first step on the road of taking responsibility". Suu Kyi's spokesman, Zaw Htay, did not pick up a call seeking comment on the release of the seven soldiers.

### 'Year that changed my life'

Two men who recently spent time in Sittwe Prison told Reuters the seven soldiers were well-known among prisoners there. "We were in the same building but different cells," said one of the men, Aung Than Wai, a political activist from Sittwe, who spent nearly six months in

prison under a privacy law after he criticized a state official and posted an image of the official online. Aung Than Wai, who was released from Sittwe in December, said he wanted to speak publicly about the soldiers' early release because an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist villager also jailed over the Inn Din killings was still in prison. The villager, school teacher Tun Aye, is serving a five-year sentence for murder at Buthidaung Prison in northern Rakhine, said his lawyer, Khin Win.

The convicted soldiers in Sittwe were given beer and cigarettes even though such indulgences were off-limits to other prisoners, Aung Than Wai said. The soldiers were also visited by army officials, said the second man who was in the prison at the time and asked not to be named. In November, the seven men were taken away in a military vehicle, he said. The same month, Zin Paing Soe, one of the convicted soldiers, set up a new Facebook account, noting in his biography that he attended the military's elite Defense Services Academy. In one of the account's first public posts, he said he was looking forward to the end of a year spent mostly in prison. "When will these unfortunate things end for me?" the post reads. "The year that totally changed my life: F\*\*\* 2018." — Reuters

## Political novice wins Lithuania presidential race

**VILNIUS:** Gitanas Nausėda, a centre-right independent and political novice, won Lithuania's presidential runoff in a race marked by low populist sentiment and concerns over inequality in the Baltic eurozone state. Although Lithuanian presidents do not directly craft economic policy, bread-and-butter issues have dominated the race. Experts also noted that by choosing between two pro-EU, centre-right candidates in the runoff, Lithuanians who see the European Union as a source of prosperity and security bucked growing eurosceptic and populist sentiment in the bloc.



Gitanas Nausėda

Vowing to build a "welfare state", Nausėda said he would bridge the gap between rich and poor in Lithuania, which is among the most pronounced in the 28-member EU, adding that he would also seek to bring urban and rural Lithuanians closer together. "All people can live with dignity in this small country," the 55-year-old former bank advisor and economist told reporters as he claimed victory at his campaign headquarters in the capital Vilnius following Sunday's vote.

Nausėda also hinted he wanted to soften Lithuania's often sharp rhetoric towards Russia, but insisted that relations could only be improved if Moscow changes its policy towards Ukraine. Challenger Ingrida Simonyte, a conservative-backed independent MP conceded defeat, telling public broadcaster LRT she had wished Nausėda "success in uniting Lithuanian people." Nausėda scored 65.86 percent of the vote ahead of 32.86 percent for Simonyte based on full official results from all 1972 polling stations.

Vilnius voter Jonas Jovaiša, 25, said that Nausėda's lack of party affiliation made him the most suitable to lead the nation. "He doesn't depend on any political party and that will help him to work with any parliament or government," he told AFP after casting a ballot for Nausėda. He will replace popular incumbent President Dalia Grybauskaitė, a 63-year-old independent who cannot run for a third consecutive term. Dubbed the "Iron Lady" for her hard line on Russia, Grybauskaitė is tipped as a possible for European Council president.

### Rich-poor divide

Lithuania is struggling with a sharp population decline owing to mass emigration to Western Europe by people seeking better opportunities. The rivals pledged to bridge the rich-poor divide in the nation of 2.8 million where, despite solid economic growth, almost 30 percent are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, notably in rural areas. Growth is forecast at 2.7 percent this year, higher than 1.1 percent average in the 19-member eurozone, but income inequality is still among the highest in the EU.

Decades of TV appearances as an economic expert have made the married father-of-two a household name reputed for his intelligence, calm and moderation. Critics, however, had argued his platform is too vague and see his political inexperience and business links as liabilities. Simonyte, 44, was finance minister during the global financial crisis and saw the economy shrink by nearly 15 percent, a decline that took a high toll on low-income earners. Socially liberal, she supports same-sex partnerships, a position which has stirred controversy in the predominantly Catholic country. Lithuanian presidents steer defense and foreign policy, attending EU and NATO summits, but while they have veto powers they must agree senior appointments with the prime minister. Nausėda firmly supports EU and NATO membership as bulwarks against neighboring Russia, especially since Moscow's 2014 military intervention in Ukraine. Grybauskaitė had called Russia a "terrorist state" in 2014 after it annexed Crimea from Ukraine but Nausėda said on Sunday that he "would like to be diplomatic and to use wording which could be slightly different from what we used previously." But he added that "it will be very difficult to improve relations" with Russia if it continues its current policy on Ukraine. — AFP

## Everest 'traffic jam' survivor calls for tougher rules

**KATHMANDU:** Ameesha Chauhan, a survivor of the Everest "traffic jam" who is in hospital recovering from frostbite, said climbers without basic skills should be barred to prevent a recurrence of this year's deadly season on the world's highest peak. Ten people have died in little more than two weeks after poor weather cut the climbing window, leaving mountaineers waiting in long queues to the summit, risking exhaustion and running out of oxygen.

Nepal issued a record 381 Everest permits this season, and several hundred of the summiteers are not properly trained, take poor decisions and "put their own life in risk and also the Sherpa guides", Chauhan said. The 29-year-old Indian had to wait 20 minutes to come down from the 8,848-m peak, but others were held up for hours. "I saw some climbers without basic skills fully relying on their Sherpa guides. The government should fix the qualification criteria," she told AFP in Kathmandu's general hospital, all the toes on her left foot black and blue and her face weather-worn. "Only trained climbers should be granted the permit to climb Everest."

As well as the Everest deaths, nine climbers have died on other 8,000-m Himalayan peaks, while one is missing. At least four deaths on the world's highest mountain have been blamed on over-crowding with teams waiting sometimes for hours in the "death zone" where the cold is bitter, the air dangerously thin and the terrain treacherous. This year's Everest toll is the highest since 2014-15 when huge earthquakes triggered devastating avalanches.

## Vanquished Aussie opposition shifts left with new leader

**SYDNEY:** Australia's opposition is set to anoint Anthony Albanese as its new leader, hoping to win back the working class after a shock election defeat to the conservative government. The Australian Labor Party unexpectedly lost to incumbent leader Scott Morrison on May 18, despite leading in the polls running up to the election. Albanese, from Labor's left faction, replaced Bill Shorten when the former union chief stepped down hours after losing the vote.

The 56-year-old will be officially confirmed by the Labor caucus on Thursday after the uncontested leadership ballot. Albanese vowed to create a "larger, more inclusive party" amid soul-searching within the ranks over the defeat. "I understand that it is a big mountain that we have to climb," Albanese told reporters in Sydney, where he holds his lower house seat, yesterday. "I want to build relationships between the Labor Party and those people who voted for us, but also those people who wanted to vote for us, who were open to vote for us, but who felt like they couldn't." Labor's large and progressive policy

## 3 migrants hidden in cars at Spain border

**MADRID:** Three African migrants, including one who is 15, were discovered squeezed inside compartments under car dashboards and behind seats at a border crossing from Morocco to Spain, police said yesterday. Spanish police found a 15-year-old girl and two men aged 20 and 21, Friday morning when they searched three cars at the border between Morocco and the Spanish territory of Melilla, a spokesman for the Guardia Civil police force said.

Two migrants were found crammed inside tiny spaces installed under car dashboards while a third was hidden in a compartment behind the rear seat of one vehicle, a Guardia Civil statement said. Two of the migrants required medical attention because they showed "symptoms of asphyxia, disorientation and generalized pain in the joints due to horrible way in which they were traveling," the statement added. Police arrested the three drivers, all Moroccan men aged 19-31, on suspicion of people smuggling.

Border police also found a 20-year-old migrant on Friday hanging from the undercarriage of a truck at the border crossing. Spain's two North African enclaves, Melilla and Ceuta, have the European Union's only land borders with Africa. They are often used as entry points into Europe for African migrants, who usually either climb over border fences or try to swim along the coast. — AFP



**EVEREST, Nepal:** This handout photo taken on May 22, 2019 shows heavy traffic of mountain climbers lining up to stand on the summit of Mount Everest. — AFP

The crowding was laid bare in a photo taken last week by Nirmal Purja, a former Gurkha soldier, of a long queue of climbers snaking up to the summit. The photo by the head of the Project Possible charity aiming to climb the 14 8,000 m-plus peaks in the world in seven months has gone viral from his @nimsdai Twitter handle and highlighted the dangers amidst the mania to climb Everest. "Many climbers' oxygen was running out," Chauhan said. "Some climbers died due to their own negligence. They insisted on reaching the top even if their oxygen is running out, which risks their life," she said.

Another climber, the "adventure filmmaker" Elia Saikaly, posted on Instagram on Sunday that he had reached the summit of Everest and "cannot believe what I saw up there". "Death, Carnage, Chaos. Lineups. Dead bodies on the route and in tents at camp 4. People who I tried to turn back who ended up dying. People being dragged down. Walking over



Anthony Albanese

reform agenda, which it campaigned heavily on, as well as Shorten's unpopularity with voters, have been blamed for the election upset. Morrison successfully cast Labor's proposals, including tackling climate change, as too risky and damaging to household finances at a time when the national economy is slowing down. The Labor party performed particularly poorly in Queensland state, where Shorten was perceived to be lukewarm about a potential large

India-backed mine that promises to create thousands of jobs. But Albanese argued it was possible to grow the economy, and create jobs while still pursuing a progressive agenda. "The economy must work for people, not the other way around. I view unions and business as having common interests," he said. "But... we can't judge the economy separate from the people it's meant to serve. I believe in an inclusive society, one that looks after the most vulnerable." Albanese was raised by a single mother in public housing in Sydney and has previously touted his roots as helping him connect with lower-income voters, who deserted Labor in droves at the last election. — AFP



**MELILLA, Spain:** Handout pictures made available yesterday show members of the Spanish Guardia Civil checking inside a compartment built behind a car dashboard, where African migrants were squeezed. — AFP



**KATHMANDU:** Indian Everest climber Ameesha Chauhan dips her fingers in a warm solution at a hospital yesterday. — AFP

bodies," Saikaly wrote. "Everything you read in the sensational headlines all played out on our summit night."

Mountaineering has become big business since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made the first ascent of Everest in 1953, with the mountain becoming a favorite "bucket list" feat. Nepal's permits this season cost \$11,000 each, providing the impoverished Himalayan country with much-needed foreign currency. At least 140 others were granted permits to climb from the northern flank in Tibet. Although final numbers are yet to be released with the season set to wrap up this week, this could take the total past last year's record of 807 people reaching the summit. The dead included four climbers from India and one each from the United States, Britain and Nepal. An Irish mountaineer is presumed dead after he slipped and fell close to the summit. — AFP

## US Army Twitter question highlights toll of America's wars

**WASHINGTON:** Days ahead of an annual holiday when Americans remember those who died while serving in the armed forces, the US Army's Twitter account asked people how their time in the military affected them and received an outpouring of grief. The question drew some 10,000 replies since it was posted late last week - many of which were anonymous or included details that could not be independently confirmed, but which paint a harrowing picture of the toll America's wars have taken on those who fought them.

"OEF, OIF PTSD with chronic pain," one Twitter user wrote, using the US military's acronyms for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the abbreviation for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The US launched the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Iraq war in 2003. The conflicts left thousands of American service members dead and many more wounded. US troops are still deployed in both countries to this day.

"My dad came back from fighting in Iraq and was abusive, constantly angry, paranoid, and following that went through a lot of therapy but his mental and physical health are still off and he was definitely changed through all he had been through," another user wrote. "My son served and did one tour of OEF, he made it back, re-enlisted, and shot himself in the head," said another. "The 'Combat Cocktail': PTSD, severe depression, anxiety. Isolation. Suicide attempts. Never ending rage. It cost me my relationship with my eldest son and my grandson. It cost some of my men so much more," another Twitter user wrote. "How did serving impact me? Ask my family."

Not all the replies were about the toll taken by combat. "I was forced to resign my commission while serving in Kuwait during the first Gulf War because I am gay. I received an other than honorable discharge despite excellent performance reviews," one man wrote. An other than honorable discharge is the most severe military administrative dismissal. It can follow a former soldier well into civilian life, leaving them ineligible for benefits and making it difficult to find work.

The Army thanked those who replied to its official account, saying: "Your stories are real, they matter, and they may help others in similar situations. As we honor those who paid the ultimate sacrifice this weekend by remembering their service, we are also mindful of the fact that we have to take care of those who came back home with scars we can't see." — AFP