Outrage in Myanmar after activist allegedly tortured to death

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/15/the-death-of-zaw-myat-lynn-allegations-torture-used-on-opposition-activist-in-myanmar>

Under cover of darkness, the soldiers rolled up outside a school building on the outskirts of [Myanmar’s main city, Yangon](https://www.theguardian.com/world/myanmar). It was 1.30am. The military began searching the Suu Vocational College, in the north-west suburb of Shwe Pyi Thar. They moved swiftly from room to room.

They had come to arrest [Zaw Myat Lynn](https://www.facebook.com/royal.rose.5076798), a prominent community organiser and teacher. He was an activist with the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of [Aung San Suu Kyi](https://www.theguardian.com/world/aung-san-suu-kyi). In November, the NLD won a landslide election victory. It was in power until last month, when the military abruptly ended civilian rule.

Zaw Myat Lynn had been at the forefront of local anti-coup protests. He shared graphic videos of soldiers beating and shooting peaceful demonstrators. On [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/royal.rose.5076798) he spoke out in fearless terms against Myanmar’s ruling junta. Its armed enforcers were “terrorists” and “dogs”, he wrote, adding “people should fight the army even if it costs our lives”.

In his haunting final post, Zaw Myat Lynn [live-streamed a pro-democracy rally](https://www.facebook.com/100025597702554/videos/826165488246700/) close to the school. Locals sought to defend themselves from night-time arrest by putting up barricades and making defences out of sandbags. “We must prepare to protect our people,” he said, adding that an unknown number of troops had taken up positions nearby.

The defences didn’t work. The soldiers discovered him in the school compound, where he lived with his wife Phyu Phyu Win. They dragged him away. Zaw Myat Lynn was 46. He taught Japanese at the college; the couple had two children and a 10-year-old granddaughter. He was loaded into a truck and driven off. It was early morning, Monday 8 March.

Twenty-four hours later, his wife was instructed to visit a military hospital in Mingarlardon township, in north Yangon, according to Maung Saungkha, a family friend. There, she was told to identify a body. It was her husband. Officials said she had to cremate his remains as soon as she took delivery of the corpse.

They gave her an official postmortem “report”. It claimed Zaw Myat Lynn had fallen nine metres (30ft) on to a sharp metal fence while trying to escape from custody. This explained his injuries. It was only after collecting his remains two days later that she discovered another explanation. The horrific nature of his injuries supports allegations that Zaw Myat Lynn had been savagely tortured.

Photographs of his body seen by the Guardian give clues to his horrifying final hours. It appears that boiling water or a chemical solution had been poured into his mouth. The tongue was melted, his teeth missing. Facial skin was peeling off. The body had been wrapped up to conceal further traumatic injuries.

These included a stab wound to the abdomen seemingly made by a cross-sectional knife. The wound appears to have been inflicted while he was still alive, and may have been the cause of death. Severe bruising can be seen on the sides of his body, which had been cut open and stitched up.

“All participants in the civil disobedience movement are aware they are in danger. Lynn knew the risks,” one fellow activist, connected to Myanmar’s underground national legislative committee, the [CRPH](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_Representing_Pyidaungsu_Hluttaw), said. “A lot of young people go out to protest and never come back. We don’t know if they are arrested or dead.”

The activist added: “Lynn was targeted because he was high-profile. The military’s aim is to teach the rest of us a lesson, to say, ‘this is how you will end up’. The strategy won’t work. We are cleverer. We have a lot of social media and ways of reaching the world that we didn’t have before.”

Zaw Myat Lynn was the [second senior NLD aide](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/08/myanmar-un-chief-urges-release-of-trapped-protesters) to perish as the result of alleged torture, according to Ba Myo Thein, an MP in the now-dissolved upper house. Days earlier, Khin Maung Latt, 58, a local NLD chairman in Yangon, also [died in detention](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/08/myanmar-police-occupy-hospitals-in-yangon-ahead-of-national-strike). A party leader said pictures showed he had a wound on the back of his head and bruises on his back.

Since the 1 February coup, the military has shot dead more than 80 people, and arrested over 2,100, amid demonstrations across the country and a general strike. Last week, it accused Aung San Suu Kyi of taking bribes worth $1.3m (£934,000) in cash and gold. Her lawyer has dismissed the charges as a “joke”. But they carry a long prison sentence and represent[an escalation of the regime’s attempts to silence her](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/11/myanmar-un-calls-for-utmost-restraint-from-military-but-stops-short-of-taking-action).

According to witnesses, the police had carried out previous operations at Zaw Myat Lynn’s township, which is separated from central Yangon by the Hlaing River. On 21 February, officers opened fire on unarmed protesters. “As a police vehicle entered into the street, we tried to stop them. Police suddenly shot a man in the head and then drove away,” said Myint Myat Thu who saw the shooting.

Zaw Myat Lynn had met [Aung San Suu Kyi](https://www.theguardian.com/world/aung-san-suu-kyi), who has been under arrest since the coup, and worked for her humanitarian foundation. In the months leading up to the coup he had helped the fight against Covid in Myanmar. “He was well respected and well known in the civil disobedience movement,” a fellow activist, who declined to be named, said.

During the 8 March raid at Zaw Myat Lynn’s institute, three students and three local residents were arrested. Computers, vehicles, phones and money at the school were confiscated, according to Ko Min Wai, a teacher volunteer. The school has offered free training courses on computers, language and mechanics to young people in Shwe Pyi Thar.

Photos from the funeral show Zaw Myat Lynn’s wife crying over an open coffin, surrounded by mourners. “It is not possible,” Ko Min Wai said. “I can’t bear this. How could they do this to an unarmed civilian? Even I was in tears