
Myanmar: 7 members of the Caritas staff arrested in Loikaw by the military junta as they were taking humanitarian aids to displaced persons

Yesterday in Loikaw, in the State of Kayah, just 7 kilometres from the diocesan centre, two four-wheel drive cars were seized, and 7 members of Caritas Loikaw were arrested. It is father Francis Soe Naing, chancellor of the diocese of Loikaw, that earlier today reported the news to SIR, specifying that “the Caritas group was taking humanitarian aids, such as food and medicines, to the displaced persons. Along the way, they were arrested by the Burmese junta and have not been freed yet”. Just a few days ago, the news had arrived that the military junta had attacked the Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception, in Phruso, also within the diocese of Loikaw, in fact the seventh one after the coup that on 1st February took the military to power in the country. Unfortunately, in this region of the country, fights among the local defence forces and the Burmese military junta are intense, and the endless fighting is forcing thousands of people, especially women and children, to leave the country. It is on them that the help of the Catholic Church is focussing. SIR had called father Francis Soe Naing because yesterday they had heard the news that three Baptist pastors from Kachin were among the over 5,000 prisoners freed in Myanmar through a general amnesty granted to political prisoners. The three pastors of the Baptist Church, one of whom is old and has serious health problems, had been charged and then arrested on 28th June just for organising prayers for peace. Kachin is a mainly Christian area in Northern Myanmar. The Kachin Baptist Convention plays a key role in humanitarian responses to the problems faced by the internally displaced persons in the States of Kachin and Shan. It is not infrequent in Myanmar, devastated by the conflict, for Christians and their organisations to be picked on. The churches are often raided and bombed, especially in the States of Kayah, Chin and Kachin. Priests and pastors have been arrested, while many unarmed civilians, including Christians, have been killed. The political prisoners – as pointed out by the Catholic information website UcaNews – were released after the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) excluded the leader of the military junta from attending the summit of 26-28 October. From Loikaw, father Francis points out that, “though this is good news, many innocent people and political leaders, such as Aung San Su and president U Win Myint, are still in prison”. And he adds: “Many people think that, put under heavy pressure, the Burmese junta is only trying to show off by releasing a few prisoners”.

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