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Asia - Burma

Libel suit

Positive move in trial of weekly The Voice but vigilance still needed

23 May 2012

Reporters Without Borders hails today's decision by a Burmese court in the libel case against the weekly *The Voice* brought by the mines ministry over an article published on 12 March exposing cases of corruption in six government ministries.

The court ruled that the weekly did not have to disclose the identity of the article's author as originally demanded by the mines ministry. Reporters Without Borders welcomes the ruling but remains concerned about the future course of the trial, whose next hearing will take place on 6 June.

In recent months, the Burmese government has issued warnings and launched proceedings against several media organizations, meddling in the work of the media without resorting to open censorship. In January, a libel suit was launched — and subsequently dropped — against the journal *Modern Weekly* by a construction ministry engineer over an article published last November.

15/03/2012 - Is government reneging on promise to respect media freedom?

Reporters Without Borders is worried by the mining ministry's announcement that it plans to launch "legal proceedings" against the Rangoon-based weekly *The Voice* for reporting that cases of alleged corruption involving the mining ministry and five other ministries were revealed by the report of a government audit that was given to parliamentarians last week.

The press freedom organization urges the mining ministry not to bring a libel suit against the weekly as it would send a negative signal to the media and they have a legitimate right to take an interest in the functioning of government institutions.

Several news media mentioned the audit report and the corruption allegations. The mining ministry has a right of response and has publicly denied the allegations. But a libel suit would intimidate Burmese journalists and would encourage self-censorship.

The ministry's announcement has served to re-emphasize the need for the creation of an independent press council that can mediate between the media and plaintiffs.

The mining ministry's statement was reported yesterday by the government-run *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper. One of the cases of alleged corruption involving the mining ministry concerns the sale of a mining project to Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings (UMEH), a leading industrial holding with close links to the military.

An official with the information ministry, one of the six ministries named in the audit, told *Democratic Voice of Burma* reporter **Than Win Htut** that he objected to the use of the word "embezzlement of Information Ministry".

On 13 March, Reporters Without Borders and its partner organization, the *Burma Media*

Association (BMA), expressed concern about recent restrictions on media freedom in Burma.

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