

2013 Golden Pen of Freedom Awarded to Than Htut Aung of Myanmar

BANGKOK, THAILAND: Than Htut Aung, Chairman and CEO of Eleven Media Group in Myanmar, known for its audacious defiance of official censorship and dedication to democratic freedoms, has been awarded the 2013 Golden Pen of Freedom, the annual press freedom prize of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).



The award was presented Monday in Bangkok, Thailand, during the opening ceremonies of the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum, before more than 1,500 publishers, chief editors, CEOs, managing directors and their guests.

"I have my own strong set of principles for how to conduct business in the media, and despite everything I've never changed these," Dr Aung said. "I always resisted the harassment and defended my journalism, my ethics, my standards. No matter what the military regime tried to do, I never let them touch these principles."

Dr. Than Htut Aung and his editorial staff have campaigned tirelessly for transparency and government accountability in Myanmar since the media group was founded 11 years ago. Eleven came to be portrayed as the symbol of protest during a period in which the group's offices were raided by military intelligence, and death sentences and prison terms were levied against its editors. Than Htut Aung was himself briefly arrested in 2011.

In presenting the award, World Editors Forum President Erik Bjerager said: "Myanmar is building for the long-term, and the media has a vital role during the transition and beyond to lay firm ground for future generations. One man who knows this more than most is our laureate, Dr. Than Htut Aung."

"Under his leadership, Eleven Media Group has prospered, despite the years of adversity. Building his business from the ground up, he faced heavy government pressure and the ever-present censor's pen. Nonetheless, he consistently defied restrictions on freedom of expression. Dr. Htut Aung stood up to the junta, and today, Eleven Media continues to broaden the boundaries of Myanmar's newfound liberties."

As a student of medicine, Than Htut Aung won a place at a university in the UK in 1988, but the military junta refused to issue him with a passport. Choosing instead to go into business, an opportunity arose to publish the First Eleven sports journal.

The weekly title came into being with a staff of just three and an initial print run of 5,000 copies. First Eleven captured readers' imaginations in an increasingly repressive and autocratic environment, with Than Htut Aung and his writers cleverly crafting political messages into their football articles. "Man in the middle - the referee is 'not fair'... Football is played not just among the 22 but all the audience" (an analogy to parliamentary politics), showed how the publication was willing to use extraordinary ingenuity to slip through the censors' net and inform the public.

In a March 2012 documentary aired on US broadcaster PBS, Eleven Media Group's newsroom was considered "a proving ground for the nascent freedoms" in Myanmar. Today, it employs 120 reporters and publishes four times a week, also operating English-language SMS mobile services and websites.

In May 2012, Eleven Media Group signed a joint publishing venture pact with The Nation Multimedia Group in Thailand.

While welcoming the "amazing" steps towards democracy witnessed in Myanmar over recent years, Than Htut Aung has warned the process is now under threat. "If Myanmar goes backwards, it will be due to corruption," he has said, reflecting a sense of uncertainty regarding the road to full democracy.

Despite the challenges, Than Htut Aung's dedication to the long and difficult process that lies ahead is unwavering. "Media is our country and the public is our real partner," he has said. "This media company is not owned by me, but the people of Myanmar ... as they have been struggling, and they continue to fight for democracy and freedom.

More on the Golden Pen of Freedom can be found at <http://www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/golden-pen-of-freedom>.

More on WAN-IFRA press freedom campaigns can be found at <http://www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/press-freedom>.

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