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Section on Public and Professional Interest Awards Presentation

IBA Annual Conference 2026

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ZarLi Aye

Winner

IBA Outstanding Contribution by a Legal Practitioner
for Human Rights Award



Speech

Good morning, colleagues and friends.

It is a profound honour to receive the IBA Human Rights Award. I receive it with deep gratitude and humility, knowing that the work recognised today has never been mine alone.

I come from Chin State in Myanmar, and my experiences through my ethnicity, gender and faith shaped why I became a lawyer: because I believe the law must protect everyone, especially those whose voices are too often unheard.

I am deeply grateful to CAN, an LGBTIQ rights-based organisation, for nominating me, and to the International Commission of Jurists, where I have had the privilege of working for more than a decade.

I first crossed paths with the IBA in 2014 through work concerning Myanmar's Bar Council, and it is deeply meaningful to be here today.

But as I stand here, my thoughts are with my fellow lawyers in Myanmar. Since the military coup in 2021, lawyers have faced enormous pressure simply for carrying out their professional duties and defending the rights of others. Some are behind bars, some have had their licences revoked, and others have been forced to leave the country.

I am one of those lawyers. Because of my work defending people and human rights in Myanmar, I eventually had to leave my own country. But leaving Myanmar did not mean leaving behind my commitment to its people. From exile, I continue to support lawyers and work towards justice for Myanmar.

Yet we continue to believe in justice. We document today's violations in the hope that one day we can rebuild an independent, inclusive and accountable justice system.

I humbly ask this international legal community to continue standing with Myanmar's lawyers with your solidarity, expertise and support.

I accept this award as encouragement and strength to keep walking until we reach our goal: a Myanmar where no one is denied justice because of who they are, what they believe, or whom they love.

Thank you.