

The Burmese regime's proxy political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has launched a social program in Rangoon to help bereaved families and HIV/AIDS sufferers, in what is being interpreted as a pre-election move to win popular support.

Kyaw Thu, founder of the Free Funeral Services Society (FFSS), whose work has often run into official disfavor, said that in Rangoon's South Dagon Township the USDP was offering to take over funeral arrangements and was paying each bereaved family 30,000 kyat (US \$30).

The government also opened a shelter for HIV/AIDS sufferers in Rangoon's Tharketa Township in August.

"We heard that they [members of the USDP] are getting involved in social work because the election is approaching," Kyaw Thu said in a phone interview with The Irrawaddy. "I think what they are doing is just an election campaign."

Kyaw Thu said: "It is better if they are doing it with good intentions, but it's not good if it's being done just for their own sake."

Kyaw Thu founded the FFSS in 2001 and this year alone it has financed 10,000 funerals, according to the FFSS's official website.

A resident of Yenangyaung Township in Magwe Division said the USDP was also paying people who were over 70 a sum of 5,000 kyat (\$5).

Last month, a Ministry of Health official visited a shelter operated by members of the disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) and urged them to send patients to the government center, according to Yazar, an NLD youth member who works for an HIV/AIDS welfare group.

But Yazar told The Irrawaddy: "I took some of the patients and went to the hospital but they refused to accept people with HIV/AIDS."

A Thaketa Township hospital official said the center lacked the facilities to deal with very serious cases, which were referred to Mingalardon hospital.

The newly-opened facility was staffed only by two doctors and one nurse, the official said.

Phyu Phyu Thin, a well-know HIV/AIDS activist and leading figure in the NLD-affiliated welfare group in Rangoon, said: "The government has never taken care of people living with HIV/AIDS but just neglected them. But recently they implemented this project. We believe they are doing it to get support from the Global Fund."

The Global Fund will return to Burma with a two-year \$110 million grant to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, according to media report.

In August 2005, the Global Fund, the world's leading donor of grants to fight the three diseases, terminated its anti-AIDS program in Burma, saying the military regime had placed prohibitive

restrictions on the implementation of its aid.

Phyu Phyu Thin said the authorities were still not helping HIV/AIDS sufferers and were hampering the efforts of social workers.

“Since we started our social work we don’t get permission from the authorities. They never support our work but hinder us all the time,” she said.

Since early in 2007, hospitals and clinics in Rangoon have stopped providing ARV drugs to new HIV/AIDS patients because of limited budgets. The only ARV drugs available in Rangoon are being supplied by the Wai Bar Gi (Rangoon Infectious Diseases Hospital) and the AZG clinic, which is funded by the Dutch branch of Médecins sans Frontières.

According to a World Health Organization report in November 2007, there are more than 339,000 people with HIV/AIDS in Burma—one of the highest numbers in Asia.