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Women's League of Burma (WLB) Statement On The Military Offensives in Rakhine, Chin, Kayin / Karen States and Northern Shan State

April 9, 2020.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused damages to people's lives and frightening social and economic complications throughout the world and many countries are seeking ways to respond the crisis. Meanwhile, there has been intense fighting between the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and ethnic armed groups. In light of these circumstances, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) would like to raise our serious concerns. These fightings have not only pushed away the current implementation for peace and federal democracy but also resulted in the failure to provide essential health measures for the population in ethnic areas.

While the country is encountering the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) is escalating its offensives against ethnic armed groups in Rakhine, Chin, Kayin / Karen states and Northern Shan State. During the military offensives in ethnic areas, many innocent civilians have suffered from more human rights abuses including loss of lives, extrajudicial arrests, and eviction from their homes causing an increased number of refugees.

The intense fighting between the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and Arakan Army (AA) since the first week of March 2020 has forced more than 3,000 civilians to flee from their homes. A total of 21 villagers were killed and about two dozen injured as a result of aerial bombings on four villages in Paletwa Township of Chin State by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) ¹. On March 23, a nine-year-old child was killed and 15 civilians were seriously injured in a Chae-Taung village of Chin ethnic in Rakhine State's Minbya Township in an air strike by the Myanmar military.²

The ongoing fighting between the Tatmadaw and AA forces have forced people to leave their homes, and the number of refugees has reached over 150,000 in Northern Rakhine State.³ Because of the fightings, the villagers have lost their homes, and the survival of the elderly, women and children have been threatened. Due to the information black-out, many villagers have limited access to information. At the same time the dissemination of news has been difficult.

¹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/21-killed-many-injured-myanmar-military-jets-straft-villages-chin-state.html>

² <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nine-year-old-killed-rakhine-myanmar-military-launches-air-strikes-aa.html>

³ <https://burmese.voanews.com/a/rakhine-refugee-/5347926.html?fbclid=>

On March 23, the President of Myanmar /Burma declared the Arakan Army (AA) as an illegal organization and as a terrorist group. WLB considers that such a move is an enormous challenge while seeking a political solution to a political problem of the country. This will create a major obstacle for the implementation of the peace process as WLB believes that without the participation of all ethnic armed forces, there will be no genuine peace.

Furthermore, the Myanmar military has been frequently advancing offensives against the KNU (Karen National Union) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)/ Shan State Army (SSA), the signatory members of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

The fighting between the Tatmadaw and Karen National Union (KNU) has become more frequent since 2019. The fightings broke out when the Tatmadaw had advanced the road construction in KNU controlled areas without prior consent. Because of the shelling of the Tatmadaw forces in Mutraw (Papun) District in the Northern Karen State, as many as 2,000 villagers have left their homes to escape the fighting, and are now living in fear without support.⁴

Similarly, the Tatmadaw launched an offensive against the RCSS/SSA camp at Loi Taung / Mountain Taung, in Mong Keng Township of Southern Shan State on 27 February 2020. This has forced local population in Mong Keng and Kesi townships to abandon their homes. The properties including houses and farms of local population were destroyed by the shelling. Because of the fighting in the northern Shan State, almost 7,000 people have fled from their homes and they are struggling with an insecure and fearful lives.

In view of all these, it is obvious that the Tatmadaw has no political will for peace even if it is a party participating in peace process. Having witnessed their discussion in the constitutional amendment sessions at the Parliament / *Hluttaws* as well as the extensive increased militarization in ethnic areas, it is very clear that the Tamadaw is working only to strengthen of their power grip.

At the same time, WLB feels that the government elected by the people does not fully understand the peace-building of the country, thus its commitment to the implementation of the peace process has become weak, and as a result, it is incompetent to fulfil the basic requirements of the people. Although it has claimed as a democratic government, the government itself is violating fundamental rights of citizens: freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and right to information of freedom to collect information and reporting. These acts have clearly derailed the principles of democracy, and become a major challenge for peace. Furthermore, it is allowing the Tatmadaw to infringe the provisions under the NCA.

⁴ <http://karennews.org/2020/02/burma-army-attacks-displaces-300-karen-villagers-as-suu-kyi-tours-karen-state/>

Being an organization working for the advancement of the status of women toward a peaceful and just society, WLB upholds “Zero tolerance’ to any forms of violence, and oppose any fightings and conflicts obstructing peace and human development of the country.

Therefore, WLB would like to call the Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw, and respective ethnic armed groups for:

1. Immediate cessation of fighting between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army (AA) and fighting among the ethnic forces
2. Withdrawal of Tatmadaw’s encampment in the ethnic areas
3. Adherence to Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) provisions
4. Immediate ending of human rights abuses in ethnic areas committed by the Tatmadaw; the Tatmadaw and those responsible to take its accountability to those victims and damages caused, and to support those victims and redress for their rehabilitation.
5. Lifting internet shut-down and all measures prohibiting communication, for the citizens can enjoy their fundamental rights to information
6. Stop arresting human rights activists and immediately release of those arrested

Regarding COVID-19

7. The Myanmar Government to keep its transparency on its management of COVID-19 pandemic and to fulfill the basic needs of the people, including preventive measures
8. The Myanmar Government to provide effective support and prevention to women and children at the time of pandemic.
9. For the benefit of the people of the country, the Tatmadaw, and ethnic armed groups to stop fighting, and together with the government, to cooperate in COVID-19 awareness education and prevention measures.

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