



June 2021

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

Women remain at the forefront of the ongoing revolution in Burma/ Myanmar where protests are continuing against the military council. But in the aftermath of the coup in February, the military has attempted to stifle the voices of pro-democracy activists where often women are on the frontlines. For decades, women have been proactively resisting patriarchal norms by challenging a system designed to suppress their voices. The male-dominated Tatmadaw exemplifies sexist behaviours and attitudes which continue to threaten the safety of women and young girls.



884

KILLED



57

6,435

ARRESTED

1,060

The **Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)**, found that 57 women have been killed and 1,060 detained since February. At least 56 children have also been killed. Further, at least **45 LGBT** civilians have been arrested for protesting the junta since the coup. Over 76 people have been taken **hostage** and at least 45 remain in custody.

In remote, conflict prone areas, women and young girls are particularly unsafe. Conflict-related sexual violence is all the more prevalent as the junta expands its military operations. In a **statement** by Pramila Patten, the United Nations Special Representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, called the patterns of sexual violence in conflict in Burma/Myanmar 'extremely concerning.' As women organizations have documented and reported sexual assaults and patterns of impunity, there has been an increase in reports of cases after the military coup. On June 14, **two women**, 26 and 20 in Manton Township, Northern Shan State were raped by the junta's soldiers while looking for seasonal mushrooms to feed their family. Even a 14-year-old Buddhist nun was reportedly raped at a temple in Nam Hpat Kar, Kutkai Township.

SITUATION UPDATE

The ongoing arrests and unlawful detention of women and young girls now include children as young as five years old. Family members are being used by the military as scapegoats. Su Htet Wine, 5, was **detained** with her mother, and 17-year-old sister on June 13. She spent her fifth birthday behind bars. They were taken hostage when soldiers came to arrest her father, Soe Htay, a local protest leader in Mandalay. Su Htet Wine was released from detention on June 30 in an amnesty by the junta, after being denied proper meals. Her mother and older sister still remain in prison. Su Htet Wine is one of 85 civilians **taken 'hostage'** by the regime. The detention of children shows the mercilessness of the regime and their reluctance to adhere to international norms.

Even places of education and religious worship have not been spared by the destructive forces of the junta. Schools in ethnic areas have been bombed and destroyed by artillery fire and airstrikes. Churches have been looted and destroyed by highly sophisticated weapons by the power-hungry junta. At least 103 schools and other education facilities have been **attacked** since May. With places of refuge under attack, communities have been forced to flee to the jungle where harsh conditions threaten their overall well-being. Children, expectant mothers and the elderly must often withstand the country's rural elements. Trekking through mountainous conditions in the rain has created a crisis of its own. In conflict ravaged Chin State, a pregnant woman, two children and three seniors died due to insufficient access to medical care while they were hiding in the jungle. Deaths like these are completely preventable.

On top of the human rights concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to devastate the country. Rather than taking preventative measures which would protect the population and prioritize high-risk groups, the junta has instead derailed all meaningful efforts to curb infections. Dr. Htar Htar Lin, national immunisation director is among 26 other doctors who have been **charged** with the Unlawful Association Act for allegedly assisting the National Unity Government. She was detained with her husband and 7-year-old son. The fact that medical workers are being arrested based on anti-military affiliations is further evidence that despite the Burmese Army's claims that they are protecting the people, it's clear that they have no interest in doing so.

The junta's attempts to silence and evoke fear through violence, threats, and intimidation has not stopped efforts to delegitimize their governance. Protesters are denouncing the illegal and illegitimate power-grab. But the military has responded by opening fire into crowds and unlawfully arresting peaceful protesters.

Despite the release of over 2,300 prisoners on June 30, many women human rights defenders remain behind bars. This includes a founding WLB sister, Thin Thin Aung, who was in critical condition at the time of her

arrest. Her condition is only worsening in prison. Thin Thin Aung and all other women human rights defenders must be released immediately.

While international condemnation of the attempted coup from UN bodies and governments is a consistent source of support, there must also be tangible action on the ground and at the international arenas. On June 18, there was progress when the United Nations General Assembly unanimously passed a resolution which called on members to stop the flow of weapons into Burma/Myanmar. The junta must not be recognized through any channels of formal and informal diplomacy - instead global leaders must take concerted action to denounce the coup, and the regime's top leadership. A referral of the Burmese Army to the International Criminal Court would set an important precedent which makes clear violence is not tolerated in Burma/Myanmar.

1

Impact of the Military Coup

Arbitrary arrests, unlawful detainment and widespread attacks has created a climate of fear in the country. The military carries out raids at night, arresting civilians at their homes. They mainly target civilians they perceive as dissident. But they also detain family members of critics who have successfully fled. Two elderly women, aged 90 and 64, were **beaten** by junta soldiers in a raid targeting a high profile activist in Yangon's North Okkalapa township. They were then unjustly sentenced to a prison term of three years for violating Section 505(a) of the Penal Code. The junta's assault on the elderly by arresting, torturing and sentencing is further evidence of crimes against humanity.

But the deceitful tactics of the junta are not new. Mai Nuam Za Thiang, a 19 year old who had just graduated from high school was **shot** by the military in Sagaing Region while riding on the back of a motorcycle. She bled to death. But the regime disgracefully lied to her family about what happened. The military insisted she had COVID-19, and cremated her body immediately in order to hide the evidence that she was shot.

Women are also stripped of their rights in detention. In addition to the harrowing cases of soldiers sexually abusing and assaulting female detainees, they are also

denied basic hygiene care. According to **testimony** from Human Rights Watch, a 23 year old woman from Yangon was violently arrested at a protest. She was kicked and punched in the face before being thrown into the back of a police truck. Once she arrived at Insein prison, she was detained in close quarters with 500 other women. The women had to share two toilets. They weren't given drinking water and had no privacy at all. Her requests for sanitary pads were denied for two days.

Experiences like this can be humiliating and degrading, especially due to the many harmful menstruation taboos in Burma/Myanmar which suggest a woman is dirty when she is on her period. Besides, the discrimination and sexualization of girls begins at a young age in Burma/Myanmar and reinforces the urgency to bring an end to the Burmese Army's degrading attitudes and behaviours towards women. As the junta ordered the schools to reopen this month, images emerged of Burmese military soldiers posing in classrooms with guns. Students were seen holding weapons while at their desks. The military was clearly violating the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which Burma/Myanmar ratified in 2019. One soldier shared a photo of himself with a young female student and claimed he could not wait to rape her when she was older. The assumption that women are weak, and are unable to challenge systems which discriminate against them only emboldens perpetrators to evade responsibility.

Attacks on children and youth are also on the rise as the junta targets young CDM activists. Two children were **sentenced** to death for allegedly murdering a supporter of the coup by setting him on fire in South Dagon Township, Yangon, at the end of March. A spokesperson from AAPP said the death sentences were issued 'out of resentment.' Any cases, especially those which go to trial under the military junta, are **politically motivated**. AAPP documentation found that 55 children (under 18) have been **killed** by the junta since the coup, 17 people who were 18 years old have also been murdered.

The list includes Moe Thandar Aung, a one and a half year old infant who **died** in an accident where her father, who was carrying her, was unable to stop on time at a military checkpoint. The Deputy administrator of the General Administration Department from Kengtung Township then rammed his vehicle into the motorcycle, killing the child. The lack of empathy, compassion or remorse shown by the regime is evident even for unborn children as seen in the case of a pregnant woman from Yangon Region's Hmawbi Township who was **detained** and beaten by the junta. She consequently had a miscarriage.

Despite all the evidence, the system of impunity continues. The justice system is on the terms on the military junta. The military's only interest is to hold on to their power. The arrest, the torture of the people is in fact a crime.

2

Impact of Military Offensives and Human Rights Violations in Ethnic Areas

The result of intensifying armed conflict in ethnic areas has had deeply consequential impacts on civilians who have been forced to flee military offensives. Heavy monsoon rains, compounded with the cold, have threatened the health of internally displaced persons (IDPs), 80% of whom are women and children. But as the crisis worsens, the military continues to block lifesaving aid.

Since the military coup, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says the number of those displaced has **increased** to at least 230,000. Relief operations are being postponed or stopped completely as a result of internal conflict raging alongside the coup, and the pandemic. The Burmese military is expanding their operations in ethnic areas of, Chin, Karenni/Kayah, Kachin, Karen and Shan States, where ethnic civilians are at an increased risk of oppression.

Amid growing numbers of displaced populations who are in dire need of food and materials, the junta is targeting relief workers, **burning** rice, medicine, and other goods for IDPs. Their intentional derailing of life-saving support only worsens the situation of those on the ground, particularly women and children who are most vulnerable to disease and malnutrition.

CHIN STATE

In villages ravaged by the military, only silence is found. Fear has paralyzed towns such as Mindat, where evidence of the junta's destruction lingers. Ongoing clashes which have taken place over the last several months have devastated communities. The Burmese Army has ravaged homes and deeply evoked a lingering sense of fear, which has paralyzed villagers. Those who remain are the women, children and elderly who were not able to flee offensives quickly enough. The situation in Mindat created 'ghost-like' conditions after nearly all residents abandoned their homes and livelihoods after the offensives. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization, the junta has **arrested** 450 people and 47 people have died. Mindat remains an area where shootouts between rival armed groups are frequent. At least 10,000 people in Mindat alone are in hiding, staying in mock displacement camps or nearby villages with regular shortages of food, water and shelter.

Landmines remain littered across Chin State. Burmese Army soldiers deliberately placed landmines following heavy casualties by the military

on June 6. A 13-year old child **stepped on a landmine** while traveling to a farm with his family and was killed instantly.

KACHIN STATE

Kachin rights groups marked the ten-year anniversary of the ceasefire breakdown between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Burmese Army on June 9. Burmese military soldiers violated the ceasefire when they attacked KIA positions along the Taping River east of Bhamo, Kachin State. Thousands of civilians were displaced. As clashes become more frequent between the Burmese Army and the KIA, warnings have been issued to civilians cautioning them that fighting can “erupt at any time in urban or rural areas.” The coup has only worsened the state of human rights, where women, children and the elderly are among the thousands who are living in IDP camps. The junta is also targeting religious figures, among them several priests **charged** under Penal Code Section 505(a) for attending a prayer service organized by youth in the community.

KAREN STATE

The Burmese Army is pursuing military operations in Karen State as border based human rights organizations continue to work towards meeting the needs of displaced populations. Food, water, medicine and shelter are among the most urgently requested items for support as over 70,000 displaced fled from the Burmese Army.

On 1 June, fighting **broke out** between the Burmese military and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) due to a territorial dispute. Villagers tried to escape to neighbouring Thailand but were faced with difficulties crossing the Moei River and were confronted by a growing security presence of Thai authorities. Ethnic health care providers have **expressed** concerns over the need for humanitarian aid, particularly in KNU controlled Brigade 5 where over 4,000 villagers from Mutraw have been displaced. Among the IDPs are 980 households which include 53 pregnant women, 8 children under one year of age and 954 children over 5 years of age. According to AAPP, the junta’s artillery shelling **resulted** in the death of a 35 years old woman, and injury to the left shoulder of her husband, Saw Mya Aung, after their house was hit.

KARENNI/KAYAH STATE

One third of the population has been forcibly displaced in Karenni/Kayah State, with more than half of the IDPs being women, children and the elderly who have been deeply traumatized by their experiences. According to the Karenni Youth Union, at least 50 civilians were killed between March 19 and June 11. Myanmar’s Roman Catholic **leader** called for an end to attacks on places of worship after four people died and more than eight were wounded when they sought refuge in a church during fighting. The

Karenni National Progressive Party also called on the Burmese Army to stop their assaults, particularly on aid workers. The Burmese military operations in Demoso Township, Hrpuso Townships and the State Capital of Loikaw include indiscriminate firing, shelling, and even air attacks. Civilians in Pekon and Hsi Seng in Southern Shan State, are also fleeing the onslaught. Survival has become the main priority for civilians in these locations.

Although fighting between the Karenni People's Defence Force (KPDF) and the Burmese Military eased at the end of the month following a ceasefire, roads continued to be blocked in Karenni/Kayah State to prevent travel and the flow of resources. This only heightens fears of a looming food crisis. Those who return home, often only find the **decomposing corpses** of their neighbors in the streets. According to the Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO), IDPs in Karenni/Kayah State, are living without adequate shelter or access to food and clean water. Disease is on the rise, particularly for women and children, who face high risks of dehydration and diarrhea. The arrival of the rainy season has made the situation all the more challenging.

Aid workers in Karenni/Kayah State have also been targeted. According to KNWO, four youth, including two young women, were detained after providing humanitarian aid to IDPs. They were reportedly held in a military compound. The risks for women and young girls are especially high in custody of the junta where they may face gender and sexual violence.

SHAN STATE

Shan Human Rights Day was commemorated on June 16, which marks the anniversary of a massacre against the Shan people by the Burmese Army. In 1997, 56 men, women and children were executed by the Burmese Army soldiers of Light Infantry Battalion 513 LIB 246 in Kunhing, Southern Shan State. Over 300,000 from 1,400 villages were displaced and more than 600 women were raped. The victims and survivors of the atrocity are still waiting for justice.

In Southern Shan State, villagers are **being used as human shields** by the Burmese Army in combat against civilian defense forces. Family members reported their loved ones being blindfolded during their abductions and forcing them to stand between the army and the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF).

Violence between rival ethnic armed groups is fueling displacement in northern Shan State with civilians regularly being forced to flee. The situation has had life threatening impacts on women and children, including expectant mothers being forced to give birth in the forest. Having no other option compromises the health of the woman, and newborn baby. In Shan State, **a baby died** after the mother was forced to flee conflict and attempt to survive under harrowing conditions, including extreme cold in southern Shan. IDPs camps are quickly running out of supplies, only adding to the worsening situation.

Women's Human Rights Defenders & Political Participation

A state which has embodied a culture and set of traditions that prioritise men has made the fight for equality an uphill battle for women. However, the sincere lack of political will to support the full implementation of women's rights in Burma/Myanmar has made it more difficult for them to secure their rights and fundamental freedoms.

One of the most important developments since the coup, has been the establishment of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The movement has attracted over 230,000 followers, where women make up 60 percent, since its immediate launch following the coup, CDM has adopted a stance of “no recognition, no participation” in defiance of the military regime. Women using their networks and experience to delegitimize the coup face significant risks in Burma/Myanmar.

The Burmese Army never fails to find new ways to torment those who challenge their rule. One woman was **shot in the head** for hiding protesters three months ago. The junta denied her medical aid, but remarkably she still survived. Her family went nearly three months without knowing where she was. They are now calling for urgent medical treatment and her release. The inhumanity behind this rationale is part of a greater institutional problem of the Army. Women are portrayed as the weaker sex in Burma/Myanmar, which only deepens the distrust and disdain for any young women who impede their rule.

High profile women's rights activists are being hunted down by the Burmese Army. May Thu, a women human rights defender and member of the National League for Democracy, went into hiding when junta soldiers arrived to arrest her. But in her place, her children aged 12 and 22, were taken, **interrogated** and threatened to give up information about her whereabouts.

Prominent female filmmaker, Ma Aeint, **disappeared** after she was picked up by the security forces on June 5. Her family has no idea where she is being kept. Ma Aeint has an impressive background in film where her work has been shared internationally at various film festivals. Her family has not been told where she is, only that she is being interrogated at an unknown location. Since her abduction, there has been no contact with her family. While in detention, **she has been tortured**. Her toes were broken during interrogation and was hospitalized for ten days. Approximately 20 international film organizations demanded her immediate release.

The unlawful arrests of artists like Ma Aeint indicate a worrying trend. Poets, singers and writers have been arrested, and tortured to death during interrogation. While the junta attempts to silence and suppress creators, their work lives on and continues to inspire.

ACTIONS BY WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA (WLB) AND HER MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

June 3

WLB is **presented** with the Judith Lee Stronach Award, which honors individuals and organizations that have made an outstanding contribution to the movement for global justice.

June 4

The Karenni National Women's Organization **spoke** on a panel hosted by ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights addressing the crisis in Karenni/Kayah State

June 16

The Kachin Women's Association Thailand **released** a new briefing paper on the human rights violations by the regime's security forces in urban and rural areas of Kachin State and Muse District of northern Shan State in April and May 2021.

June 19

On the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, WLB **urged** the general public to join our campaign against military impunity. WLB is committed to ending a nationwide pattern of sexual violence in conflict and to hold military junta accountable for sexual violence in conflict.

June 21

The Karenni National Women's Organization spoke on a panel hosted by the US Campaign for Burma on **World Refugee Day** to draw attention to the plight of women and children in Karenni State fleeing military offensives.

June 24

WLB, APWLD and Global Justice Center jointly organized a press conference on Burma/Myanmar Women Demand International Action Against Military Coup where WLB's General Secretary, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand and the Karenni National Women's Organization presented the ground situation. All speakers **demanded** greater accountability from ASEAN and the international community in their response to the recent military coup in the country.

June 26

On the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, WLB joined Asia Justice and Rights, the Network for Human Rights Documentation-Burma, the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, All Arakan Students' and Youths' Congress and Burma Civil War Museum in **calling** for an immediate end to the brutal torture of civilians. Torture remains a practice that harms innocent civilians in Burma/Myanmar, including women and young girls. It must end immediately.

CONCLUSION:

The Burmese military is failing on its obligations to uphold and protect all civilians in the country. Despite signing onto several internationally binding commitments to human rights. Let alone access to justice, civilians are denied basic human rights to livelihoods as a result of the junta's indiscriminate attacks in all regions of the country. Women, children and the elderly are the most vulnerable in which their overall well-being is being threatened. A pervasive culture of military impunity has only emboldened the junta to act outside of the parameters of law. As women have already experienced over the last 70 years of militarized culture, gender-based crimes continue to undermine the security of those most in need of protection.

As women continue to fearlessly put their lives on the line in defiance of the military and in providing basic needs to their communities, all stakeholders including international bodies must prioritize their support for their security and protection. The recognition of and support to women's resistance to the coup in various forms is key to upholding and protecting rights of marginalized groups.

WLB would like to extend our calls for Action to the International Community



**REJECT MILITARY
COUP/SO-CALLED**
State Administrative
Council



REFERRAL TO ICC
for its crimes against
humanity



**GLOBAL ARMS
EMBARGO**

- SUPPORT local rights defenders who are providing safe houses/shelters for peaceful protestors, especially women human rights defenders.
- SUPPORT those in the country with ensuring a political space for women's rights organisations and civil society
- SUPPORT our advocacy to end system of impunity for all forms of violence against women and girls including conflict-related sexual violence and sexual assault & sexual harassment in custody

WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA

The Women's League of Burma is an umbrella organization comprising 13 women's organizations of different ethnic and political backgrounds. WLB was founded on 9 December 1999.

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