



# July 2021

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

## SITUATION UPDATE

Six months have passed since the Burmese Army seized power in a coup. Since that dark day, the people of Burma/Myanmar have continued to suffer the consequences. In the months following Feb 1, it has become abundantly clear that the terrorist junta has neither the political will nor the ability to govern with compassion and humanity. Something must be done to reverse the devastation. But dismantling the junta's legacy of violence and impunity is not without its challenges. Yet, the on-going civil movements and growing calls for action alongside campaigns for accountability, signals that the struggle for freedom, equality and peace for the people of Burma/Myanmar will continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already devastating political, economic and social climate. At the time of this writing, the country has reported over **300,000** confirmed cases. Ethnic areas are also seriously affected by the pandemic. Exploitation of the pandemic has led to countless preventable deaths. The junta's negligence has been made clear in their **hoarding** of oxygen tanks for themselves as they threatened health care workers, forcing many to go underground.

Pharmacies have been **forced** to close due to insufficient stock, and those that remain open are inaccessible to many due to price inflation. For displaced populations and refugees, their situation comes with a lack of direct access to healthcare facilities. Children and the elderly are facing many difficulties because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 'war on health' is the latest battle the people of Burma/Myanmar are now facing. The military is moving backwards by arresting health care workers who share anti-coup views. According to recent statistics, the majority of health workers involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) are women, and they too are putting themselves at risk providing medical services to the infected. In this new struggle, women are disproportionately impacted. Across generations, women take on many responsibilities in the household, including being a primary caretaker. As they give their energy to their infected loved ones, they put themselves at more risk of catching the virus.



999

KILLED



65

7,320

ARRESTED

1,084

Meanwhile, unlawful arrests and persecution of pro-democracy activists continues. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 1,084 women have been arrested and 65 killed since Feb 1. Another 100 youth have been **killed** by the junta, including 75 children. Additionally, 1,000 young people between the ages of 10 and 19 have been detained. Of those arrested, 65 have been **sentenced to death** through military tribunals, including four women. Burma/Myanmar has not evoked the death penalty since 1988. These sentences are excruciatingly punitive and they lack legitimacy. Peaceful protest is not a crime, and yet under the junta's control, those with different views are persecuted.

1

## Impact of the Military Coup

The junta continues to deny and dismiss the severity of the multiple crises unfolding within the country. International intervention to curb the rate of infections and carry out an effective humanitarian response is urgently needed.

Women and children have suffered enormous consequences since the junta's ruthless takeover. Surviving under an authoritarian regime has been immeasurably difficult for the most vulnerable. In Burma/Myanmar, women are unfairly recognized as the weaker gender. The military often treats them with severe disrespect, abusing and intimidating them to maintain their control. Since the military overthrew the democratically elected government, sexual harassment, rape, and arrests have **increased**. There is no compassion shown for the elderly, the sick, people with disabilities or young. To the Burmese Army, they are simply the threats to their new political order. Women have also been threatened by the junta for their pro-democracy activities.

2

A weak legal system has undermined all prospects for justice and accountability. Women's access to justice referral pathways is also limited by patriarchal and cultural stereotypes. Isolating civilians from life-saving services is another branch of the junta's deceitful tactics. Many of the victims of their atrocities are from low-income communities who lack the financial capacity and legal literacy to access services.

The junta has a long history of committing sexual abuse against young women and girls. The abuse leaves survivors traumatized, often without reparations for the crimes committed against them. In detention, prisoners are allowed limited access to water. Due to the unsanitary conditions, women in the prison often take contraceptives. Even though there may be consequences to their health, women political prisoners in Dawei Township have no choice but receive the contraceptive injections through the clinics in the prison. Inadequate access to sanitary conditions while unlawfully detained is yet another violation they are forced to endure.

As tens of thousands of positive cases and hundreds of deaths from COVID-19 are being reported, prisons throughout the country are also affected by the coronavirus. Making it worse is the military's unwillingness to contain the pandemic and provide proper medical care. Dr. Htar Htar Lin, the Director of the National Immunization Program and one of the leading experts on COVID-19 in Burma/Myanmar, who was arrested with her family on June 20, is now **infected** with the virus. While two women reportedly died in Insein Prison in the month of July due to being denied medical care. One was **Moe Thu**, a 42-year-old anti-coup protest leader from Khayan Township in Yangon Region, whose colleagues believed she died of COVID-19. In response to the **negligence** of the prison's management over the deteriorating COVID-19 pandemic and its discriminatory medical treatment within prison, women from the two female detention blocks in Insein Prison staged a protest in the morning of July 23 spreading across the prison.

Young children are not exempt from this horrendous treatment. Ko Soe Htay, a Burmese human rights activist, says his five-year-old daughter was arrested and detained in his place with his wife and elder daughter. The family was **forced** to endure stress positions by the junta. Since her release, he says his young daughter has been traumatized. His eldest, who remains in prison, is **suffering** from life-threatening injuries.

# 2

## Situation in Ethnic Areas

The lives of people in ethnic have never been free from threats and insecurity. The military coup has meant more military offensives, including airstrikes in various ethnic areas. As of July 16, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that **220,000 people** have been displaced since the military coup. This number comes at a time when the humanitarian crisis in Burma/Myanmar is worsening daily with growing needs for food, shelter and medicine. The junta has weaponized the aid response in Burma/Myanmar and have sabotaged multiple attempts to ensure life-saving materials reach the most vulnerable. Women living in conflict-prone areas are one of the most vulnerable.

In many cases, pregnant women have been forced to flee to the jungle to escape internal conflict. They have been forced to make life or death choices to protect themselves. After seeking refuge from violence in Southern Chin State, a young expecting mother had no choice but to give birth in the forest. But it is a dangerous trend, as women who deliver their babies in desolate areas, far from health infrastructure and care, do so with great risk. They are also constantly forced to be on the run from military troops. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), since the coup the majority of pregnant, displaced women **lack** access to emergency obstetric care. UNICEF added that routine immunizations for babies have come to a halt, with 950,000 women missing out on essential vaccination services.

While already facing consequences of military attacks, the severe flooding due to heavy rains in July has displaced even more populations in many ethnic areas. At times, they have fled as their villages were **razed** by the junta. Their actions and response to the multiple crises taking place in Burma/Myanmar speak to their sinister nature and preference for enforcement over protection. The spread of COVID-19 only deteriorates the health conditions in displaced communities.

### CHIN STATE

Since the military coup, at least 80 civilians from Chin State have been **killed** by the junta. Their deaths represent the abhorrent violence that the junta is capable of. According to the Institute of Chin Affairs, those **murdered** by the Burmese Army include two infants, and a 15-year-old rape victim. Chin State is one of the hardest hit areas by the junta's violence for their resistance to the coup. The Chinland Defense Force (CDF) has been engaging in heavy warfare between the Burmese Army, which has resulted in mass displacement and a growing sentiment of fear in Chin communities.

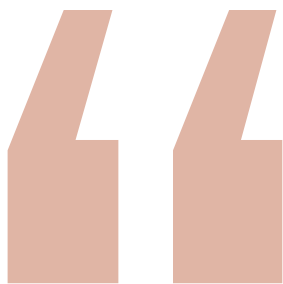
Ceasefire negotiations between the CDF and the Burmese Army **broke down** this month after the junta demanded all weapons seized be returned. Over 20,000 people have fled Mindat for their safety where they are in need of aid. A UNHCR dispatched set of goods intended for displaced populations in Mindat **failed** to reach their target number of beneficiaries due to interceptions by the junta.

## KACHIN STATE

Civilians in Kachin State have been caught in the crossfire of clashes between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Burmese Army. In Hpakant Township, **shelling** forced over 200 civilians to flee. The IDPs were forced to survive off of donations from local community groups and religious affiliations. Meanwhile, local administrators were threatened with more artillery shelling by the junta if their villages failed to notify the military when the KIA was present.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are among the most vulnerable in Kachin and northern Shan State, especially amid the worsening pandemic. According to the Kachin Joint Strategy Team, there are approximately 104,431 IDPs in 166 camps, and 38,147 are staying in areas controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). While stay-at-home lockdowns or semi-lockdowns have been imposed in the camps, their concerns for the spread of the disease are matched with the lack of access to emergency health care and a sincere distrust in the junta's vaccination programs.

Rape and sexual violence also remain prevalent. A 55-year-old woman was **raped** and murdered by three soldiers in Kachin State. The victim, Khaw Ywe, went missing on July 14. Her family discovered her in a forest with multiple stab wounds on her body and a cloth around her mouth. A police complaint was filed with the Myothit police station and the junta acknowledged the incident, claiming the soldiers 'accidentally' killed Kyaw Ywe in an altercation. Despite the family's insistence for a trial and justice, the military responded with compensation to which the Kachin Women's Association Thailand, **remarked**,



**When we talk about truth and justice, this does not imply giving compensation. After killing someone, they pay compensation. This is utter nonsense!"** Calls remain for the case to proceed in a civilian court.

## KAREN STATE

For districts inside Burma/Myanmar, the pandemic comes with the presence of the junta who are indiscriminately firing and shelling into Karen villages. Approximately **5,000 villagers** crossed the Salween River to flee violence from the junta. Failing to act on humanitarian grounds, the Thai military has pushed back Karen refugees. Their plight must be met with dignity and empathy for the war-like realities they are being forced to confront. Community based organizations along the Thai-Burma border are eager to fill protection gaps by the government, but are limited by the Thai authorities who have not permitted full access.

Flooding is having a disastrous impact on communities in Karen State where approximately 16,000 have been displaced by the **rising** water levels. In the State capital of Hpa-An, over 10,000 residents have been affected and sought shelter in 12 relief camps throughout the state. Among those staying at the Karen State Stadium, 21 are pregnant women, 81 are children under the age of five and nearly 180 are young students. The impacts of declining health on women and children increase in close capacity where a lack of access to clean water and food is a breeding ground for disease to spread. As the rainy season continues, the threat of disease is at an all-time high. Those particularly vulnerable are women and children.

In the seven districts of the Karen National Union administrative areas, COVID-19 cases are rising. Some schools have been forced to close as teachers and students began testing positive. Lockdowns have been put in place, but it has created challenges for refugees to be able to move freely, ultimately affecting their livelihoods. On top of this, gender-based violence is increasing in some of the camps.

## KARENNI/KAYAH

The onslaught against civilians by the Burmese Army is **intensifying** in Karenni/Kayah. Civilians are continuing to flee to border areas for their safety. Airstrikes are occurring in areas where IDPs are taking refuge. The attacks have led to secondary displacement, pushing people deeper into the jungle. **Over 3,000 IDPs** have joined the now more than 100,000 others who have already sought safety along the Salween River. More than half of the IDPs are women, children and elderly who are in serious need of food, blankets and medicine. The lack of clean drinking water and nutritional food is compromising the health of IDPs. A recent needs assessment found that temporary shelters were insufficient for the IDP population. It also found that there is a lack of basic hygiene and nutrition for the elderly, infant and pregnant women.

Making matters worse, organisations and individuals who are responding to this urgent humanitarian crisis are being targeted by the military. The Burmese Army has continued to block the transportation of food and non-

food items, and medicine for the IDPs. The Karenni Civil Society Network **estimates** that as of July 22, 82 people have been killed, 102 injured, and 132 arrested in Karenni/Kayah State.

## SAGAING REGION

On July 26, three civilians, including two children were killed by an unexploded ordnance device in areas of Sagaing Region where tensions have been escalating between the Burmese Army and the People's Defence Force. A pregnant woman was among those **injured** while fleeing attacks by the Burmese Army. Soldiers began indiscriminately firing at those fleeing when she was shot in the leg. The clashes also resulted in a five year old girl being **paralyzed** after she was struck by shrapnel and did not receive adequate medical treatment in time. High fees for the family have further complicated this situation.

Estimates by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) **suggest** that nearly 16,500 people are being hosted in over 100 displacement sites in five townships since May, combined with those in Sagaing Region.

## SHAN STATE

For several months now, the fighting between rival Shan armed groups, Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Shan State Progress Party has been **increased** in a number of townships in Shan State, including Kyaukme, Mong Kung and Kesi townships. Despite **attempts** for dialogue to resolve tensions between the two armies, clashes are **continuing**. It has created a climate of fear, as many are worried of being caught in the crossfire, while many will have to remain in refugee sites.

In Namlan Township, IDPs fled but had nowhere to go because of a lack of camps in the area. This has also impacted their ability to access aid. In Kyaukme Township, 80 people from 20 families did not **receive** assistance because they were not a part of the population data collected for IDPs in the sub township. Additionally, those who are staying in camps risk catching COVID-19 due to close living quarters and the risk of the disease quickly manifesting.

Like many parts of Burma/Myanmar, the COVID-19 situation in Shan State is also severe. According to Kanbawza Tai, in the months of June and July, over **8,000 people** tested positive, and the total of 414 people died from COVID-19. Numbers of COVID positives and deaths have been reported daily from many townships of Shan State.

Meanwhile, a free **vaccination** program was launched by the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), the political wing of the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) in the third week of July. It was reported that the SSPP has planned to provide free vaccinations to around 500,000 people in their controlled areas of Monghsu, Kesi, Mongyai, Tangyan and Hsipaw townships.

# 3

## Women's Human Rights Defenders

Women human rights defenders are facing more risks than ever. With the junta tightening their control of the country in response to the growing mass resistance movements, no one is safe. But the work of women-led organizations, committees and organizing initiatives is ensuring that momentum is not lost. Their efforts caught the attention of Mary Lawlor, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, who commented on the **bravery** of women human rights defenders. She acknowledged women continuing to speak out against the human rights violations being perpetrated by the military, coming as it does in the face of threats of gender-based violence and massive risks for their safety.

Among the many women human rights defenders currently imprisoned by the junta, Thin Thin Aung has been detained since April 8. Amnesty International has **called** for urgent action and for her immediate unconditional release. Thin Thin Aung stands to face three years in prison under the controversial section 505(a) of the Penal Code for publishing news about the junta's illicit activities in Mizzima, the Burmese publication she co-founded. Another woman, Myo Myo Aye, who is a leading labor rights activist was arrested on April 15 by the junta. JASS, a women's agency for collective power for justice, has amplified calls for her release. Because of their underlying health conditions and the spread of COVID in the prison, they are highly at risk of being infected.

Prisoners are denied adequate medical attention and families are restricted from sending in supplies and treatment. Both of these women were using their voices to speak truth to power. They were just exercising their right to free speech. The junta has shown repeatedly over the course of its history that if the public's truth does not align with their propaganda, then repercussions follow. WLB echoes these calls for solidarity and support for women who have been unjustly imprisoned.

Despite the threat of reprisals by the military, women human rights defenders have not been discouraged by the deteriorating situation. They remain committed to the revolution and are spearheading pathways for transformative change.

During a protest against the junta in Mandalay on July 27, a 25-year old woman was **shot** in the head. She died instantly when the Burmese Army opened fire without warning and her body was **cremated** without the consent of her family. Countless families have been devastated without answers in the military's cruel pursuits for power.



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

WLB and its members have continued their resistance against all forms of dictatorship. In this revolution, they have been involved in various ways including providing support to the CDM and strikes apart from ongoing steadfast support through offering food, medicine delivery and safe shelter for survivors of violence. Members have used their resources and expertise to leverage anti-coup dynamic campaigns with messages and materials.

The Burmese Women's Union (BWU) is working to fill these gaps in service provision by supporting pregnant women through delivery and postnatal care at clinics in Karenni/Kayah State. But it is still not enough.

The Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO) and the Kayan Women's Organization (KyWO) are both working tirelessly to assist the displaced population due to the fighting between the Karenni People's Defense Force (KPDF) and the Burmese military. They are supporting displaced groups by offering food like rice, oil, salt, lentils and medicine.

The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) has supported over a thousand Civil Disobedience Movement activists, students and people who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Doo Pla Ya, Hpa-An and Taw Oo districts of KNU's demarcation. KWO hopes to continue providing testing kits and nutritional food.

The Ta'ang Women's Organization has joined the Ta'ang Strike Committee and the Lashio Strike Committee to bring upon crippling economic repercussions for the junta. Aligned with these efforts, the Pa-O Women's Union (PWU) is participating in a multi-ethnic boycott of the military businesses. Likewise, the Lahu Women's Organization has been working in collaboration with civil society organizations to lead various strikes across the country.

In Dawei, strikes are ongoing every day with women taking leading roles in organizing and advocating for the people in their area. The Tavoyan Women's Union is supporting the strikes and between 600 and 700 CDM activities in their areas through fundraising and protection initiatives.

The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) is conducting health check-ups and providing nutritional support for women and children, while PWU has openly condemned the violence against civilians and is working towards making sure pathways are available to vulnerable women. Since the coup, documentation from SWAN indicates that 35 civilians have been killed, 317 arrested, and 256 detained.

In Sagaing Region, Women for Justice has continued supporting local needs for medical treatment and various forms of justice. They are also providing security for women in Kalay township.

All of these activities come with great risk and no guarantee that the junta will not come to arrest leaders of the various movements. As a result, many young women are in hiding and constantly on the run. WLB members remain committed to the cause.

# CONCLUSION:

Most recently, the military junta officially **annulled** the 2020 election results, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide. A new commission was appointed to take charge of the polls, and subsequently a 'caretaker government' was **adopted**. The situation in Burma/Myanmar demands an urgent coordinated response to the atrocities taking place. Despite the exponential loss of life from COVID-19, the junta has not stopped their brutality against the people.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma/Myanmar (UNSR), Thomas Andrews, has **called** for the formation of an Emergency Coalition for the People of Myanmar. This would coordinate a more organized response to the junta's inadequate acknowledgement of the pandemic and continuation of rampant rights abuses. A new **COVID-19 ceasefire** is being urged by the UNSR. They hope that a ceasefire will put pressure on the regime to immediately stop their attacks on civilians.

But serious international attention is urgently needed to contain the COVID situation because Burma/Myanmar could be a COVID-19 "**super-spreader state**" of the region. The Burmese military has chosen to vilify those objecting to their rule. Similarly, to how the junta handled Cyclone Nargis in 2008, they are showing once again that they have no intention of taking care of their own citizens. As **vocalized** by international experts, UN mandated action is urgently needed. Further, the military must not be recognized as a partner for the delivery of aid and health workers must be protected from the wrath of the junta's extreme and unrelenting violence.

It has become abundantly clear that the junta's violence knows no bounds. Decades of deeply entrenched impunity and a failure to be held accountable under domestic and international laws has emboldened the Burmese Army to willingly disregard democratic norms and principles. For decades, civil society organizations have helped to raise the voices of various communities across Burma/Myanmar from the ground up. Their calls must be heard.

## 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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