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Burma Summit: Economic Issues

Women's League of Burma

Women's League of Burma (WLB) was established on December 9, 1999 with the aim of increasing the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights, promoting women's participation in the national peace and reconciliation process, and enhancing the role of the women of Burma at the national and international level.

WLB is made up of 13 women's organizations representing women from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Collectively, WLB works for the advancement of the status of women and a peaceful, just federal democratic union of Burma.

Economic Issues in Burma/ Myanmar

The Burma/ Myanmar economy has all but collapsed, leaving the majority of people in Burma/ Myanmar struggling to meet their basic daily needs, such as food, medicine, and housing. Women have been particularly impacted because they are often responsible for taking care of their families, and the industries that largely employed women have been hit hard by international divestment.

Prior to the coup, the impact of the pandemic and restrictive measures to mitigate a health crisis hit the Burma/ Myanmar economy hard. The military coup worsened the situation, with poverty estimated to have doubled since March 2020. Approximately 40 percent of the population – 22 million people- are living below the national poverty line; a decade of progress on poverty reduction has been undone.

The price of rice, the staple of the Burma/ Myanmar diet, has increased by 45%, while the price of palm oil has tripled. Fuel prices have also significantly increased which has had an impact on goods, travel, and the cost of agriculture.

70 percent of people in Burma/ Myanmar live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. The cost of fuel and fertilizer has had a devastating impact on farmers and community agriculture. In addition, many farmers have been displaced or are too fearful to return to tend to their crops. The military has laid landmines around farmland, making it very dangerous.

Women who run small businesses, such as market stall holders and produce sellers, are struggling to survive. If a business has managed to profit, there is a real risk that the military Junta or military support groups will raid and occupy the business.

The conflict has increased the risk of running business in Burma/ Myanmar, forcing many industries to shut down and move their business to other countries, or reduce their operations. Many women have been laid-off, with increasing number of casual or daily labour and irregular working hours. Workers are receiving less pay and labour rights have significantly eroded. Women have reported sexual harassment from their managers, inhumane working conditions, and mandatory overtime.

Women have no opportunities to earn an income and many women who have lost their jobs have been forced to turn to sex work. Sex work is criminalized in Burma/ Myanmar and women working in the industry experience physical and sexual violence, rape and extortion from the military, police, gangs, and clients.

Due to the increase in the number of women turning to sex work, and the economic crisis, women have limited bargaining power over how much they can earn. Sex workers in Yangon report earning less than half their pre-coup minimum rate of K20,000. Some report taking whatever the customer will pay.

Women are being forced to take significant risks in order to feed themselves and their families. The risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking for sexual exploitation is very real for women and girls in Burma/ Myanmar and is on the rise.

Despite an increase in the number of people needing life-saving humanitarian assistance, funding remains below 2021 levels. The 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan is only 20 per cent funded, leaving a gap of US\$660 million. A significant increase in funding is needed to urgently address country-wide food shortages.

Urgent humanitarian assistance delivered by INGOs has been blocked by the military junta and in May 2022, ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance agreed to deliver aid to Burma/ Myanmar under the supervision of the military regime. Unsurprisingly, this aid has not yet reached the people.

Recommendations

WLB makes the following recommendations to the international community:

- Increase country contributions to humanitarian aid for Burma/ Myanmar
- Direct aid funding to local actors, including women's organisations to deliver aid to their communities while avoiding any contact and cooperation with the military or its proxies.
- Mediate with neighboring countries, such as Thailand and India, to open a humanitarian corridor to provide assistance to local aid actors; protect aid workers, including women first responders, from harm and harassment

- Streamline aid procedures and delivery to be flexible and user-friendly to eliminate administrative burdens; and find innovative and alternative ways, using existing reliable social networks, to distribute aid outside of military channels.

Conclusion

Despite the economic crisis and suffering women are experiencing across Burma/ Myanmar, they continue to stand up against the military and offer support for one another. International financial support for women's organisations is critical for them to respond to the current crisis and work towards future stability and prosperity in Burma/ Myanmar.