



# April 2021

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

Democratic norms, values and principles are not being protected, nor upheld in Burma/Myanmar. April was a devastating month; with mounting evidence of clear crimes against humanity including sexual and gender-based violence. Those who are speaking the truth are facing fierce condemnation and force by the regime. Regardless, the people of Burma/Myanmar have continued to stand firm with their rejection of the military coup.

Women in Burma/Myanmar have a long history of using their political will-power for change and organizing campaigns for equality against exceptional odds. With **over 60 percent** of the women leading the protests, they are fearlessly putting themselves on the direct line of defense. Against the backdrop of the coup, women are showing momentum in their roles in many ways, such as through **organizing protests**, responding to the needs of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in ethnic areas and **providing pro-bono legal services**. Including the Women's League of Burma (WLB), the women have **facilitated panel discussions** to draw attention to the plight of women and their respective challenges and response to the situation in Burma/Myanmar.

The Burmese military has never shied away from using repressive forms of sexual violence to intimidate and silence women's voices. The leadership of the so-called State Administrative Council (SAC) have been targeting and exploiting women human rights defenders using sexual and gender-based violence. Though the known-status of detainees is limited, torture has been used in the prisons for decades to coerce information. For women, this extends itself to rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Based on WLB documentation and analysis, we can say with confidence that swift and concerted international action is needed in Burma/Myanmar to hold perpetrators accountable and set a precedent that the military cannot continue to get away with such injustices. This includes a referral to the International Criminal Court and a global arms embargo.

SITUATION UPDATE

# Impact of the Military Coup

State-sponsored violence by the Burmese Military, since the military coup on February 1 has had devastating impacts on civilians. Despite the harrowing ordeals, many have been forced to endure or bear witness to the resilience of the people.



**759**  
KILLED



**47**

**4,537**  
ARRESTED

**792**

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, at the end of April there were 759 people killed, 4,537 arrested and 3,485 detained. and sentenced with an additional 1,316 evading arrest. Among those killed, **at least 51 were children**, and 47 were women. Out of those detained 792 are women including Thin Thin Aung, a women human rights defender and a founding member of WLB, Myo Myo Aye, a labor activist and Tu Tu Tha, a writer and journalist.

Disturbing accounts have also emerged of women and girls in detention. According to a 17-year-old former detainee, Shwe Yamin Htet, who shared a cell with the victim and was recently released from the detention center, Khin Nyein Thu **endured** a harrowing interrogation by security forces. In custody, she was first taunted and asked questions about her sexual history. Her answers were met with violence when she responded that her boyfriend was a foreigner. Racial slurs followed as she was forced to open her legs. Security forces then began attacking her. They targeted her genitals with kicks and a mop stick. They left her bleeding and unable to walk. Fellow detainees who saw her after the six-hour interrogation recalled her looking incredibly weak while medical treatment was largely denied. She received only eye drops, Betadine Antiseptic solution and some gauze. She remains in critical condition.

In addition to sexual violence, security forces have also been pressuring women for sex in exchange for ensuring that their names are removed from warrant lists. A series of text messages released online revealed two brokers

attempting to arrange women on the list of warrants with the option to have sex with security forces in order to take their names off the list. In another disturbing message released publicly, a security officer told an actress turned activist that he had masturbated to her Facebook photos, and upon her arrest, he would rape her. These messages provide further evidence that women are not safe in the custody of the Burmese Army.

Moreover, these incidents have added to the tons of evidence documented by women's rights groups for years of documentation, and verified that sexual violence, bribery and threats are tools used by the military to intimidate and maintain their power and control.

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## Impact of Military Offensives and Human Rights Violations in Ethnic Areas

The presence of Burmese military soldiers in ethnic areas has had devastating impacts on villagers who have already been forced to endure many years of oppression. Ethnic people comprise approximately 40% of the country's 52 million people. As the situation on the ground intensifies, ethnic people are reliving the horrors that took place during years of pronounced military rule. Between April 24 and 29 alone, the Burmese Army launched 41 airstrikes on civilians in Kachin and Karen State leaving thousands displaced. The most vulnerable, including women, children, and the elderly are at an especially high risk as their mobility is limited and they are at a higher risk of experiencing conflict related sexual violence.



# 41

**airstrikes within only 6 days  
leaving thousands of people in Karen and  
Kachin State displaced.**

In Kachin State, fighting has been intensifying since the beginning of March between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Burmese Military. The KIA began retaliating after two Kachin civilians were killed in a crackdown by junta forces. In response, the junta fired artillery shells into villages in Momauk

Township and killed three civilians from three different villages. The victims were an 83-year-old woman, a 23-year-old woman and a 21-year-old woman. In addition to violence, the Burmese military has also looted villagers rice, money, motorbikes and farming equipment. Landmines in civilian areas, near villages and farmlands have been laid as arbitrary arrests and detention continues. As the clashes have continued and Burmese military used fighter jets targeting civilians, villagers are terrified for their safety.

Starting from March 27, the Burmese military **launched deadly airstrikes** using rockets, bombs and strafing cannons in northern Karen State and continued to do so on 1 April and then again on 27 April to 3 May 2021. More than three bombs were dropped - all of which landed outside of villager areas near the Karen IDP camp, Ei Htu Hta, forcing residents into hiding. On April 28, there was **a series of six more airstrikes**, in which the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) confirmed that there were jet planes, helicopters, bombings and heavy machine gun firing. On 30 April, there were three more airstrikes, all in the area of Dar Gwin. Many IDPs have sought safety in Thailand where the compliance of Thai authorities for a desperately needed humanitarian response has been denied. As a result, people were forced to **hide in caves, valleys and under rocks**. The rainy season has made living in the jungle even more difficult. Shelters and belongings have been destroyed in flash floods, including rice.

The Thai-Burma/ Myanmar border remains closed, and the Thai Army is refusing aid access to areas where support is greatly needed. This has prompted local leaders to ask permission from the Thai military to allow IDPs to stay for at least ten days. This request went without a response. As of 30 April, there were 7000 IDPs along the border and no organisation has been able to reach them yet. Community based organisations, several led by ethnic Karen women, are responding to the emergency needs of the displaced. Calls to the international community are vigilant - a dialogue must be made with the Thai government to encourage them to allow access to those in need.

At least 25,000 have been hiding in northern Karen State alone due to the Burmese Army's attacks from March, according to Free Burma Rangers, and they are facing serious risks of food shortages. Over fifty have been wounded, and twenty killed by ground attacks. For those who remain the most vulnerable in conflict, including women, children and the elderly, the realities they face are much harsher than men. War has impacts on everyone, but women and children are at an increased risk of conflict related sexual violence by Burmese soldiers who use rape as a weapon and as means to coerce and harness control. The health of pregnant women has also been compromised, as they have no other option other than to give birth in the forest because it is no longer safe

in their villages. Elderly women are forced to relive the horrors of their past as they trek through rough terrain. They are deprived of their dignity and the right to age peacefully. Despite the grueling situation they are faced with, the Royal Thai Government has failed to act in line with humanitarian norms and principles. These countless acts of violence and human rights abuses against Karen people go back over seventy-years, where the Burmese military has regularly increased their operations in ceasefire areas, and in KNU controlled territory. An eruption of violence began at the end of December 2020, when the military began shelling Karen civilian areas, almost daily. As many as 60,000 people have been displaced from their communities.

Similarly, the Burmese Army has also used its forces to attack administrative areas of Ethnic Armed Organizations in Shan State. On April 18, the military shelled and reinforced hundreds of troops near Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp on the southern Shan State-Thai border. The attack left over 2,500 IDPs in fear for their lives. The Shan State Refugee Committee has called for the Thai government to allow these IDPs to cross over into Thailand and to provide them safe refuge, shelter and access to humanitarian aid. **Escalating conflict in Ta'ang regions**, Southern Shan State conflict between ethnic Shan armed groups, including the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) have been involved in increasing clashes since 29 March 2021. In an incident from 7 April, three homes were struck by artillery and several other homes hit belonged to the Ta'ang.

Resistance against the coup also continues in Karenni/Kayah State where ethnic youth and ethnic armed organisations are signing up to fight back against the regime. Police and armed soldiers have exercised their exploitative tactics on the people of Loikaw, the capital of Karenni/Kayah State, forcing one protester to jump into a nearby creek after security forces confronted demonstrations.

Even with funding limitations, border-based organizations including members of WLB are supporting displaced communities in Shan, Kachin and Karen States who need medical supplies, shelter, food and assistance claiming their legal rights to asylum. They urgently need increased cross-border aid.

In ethnic areas where women have taken on leadership roles, their lives are also at an increased risk. Many have been forced to go into hiding as a result, and are on the move regularly. WLB has provided support to women in our network who require specific needs covered while they are seeking emergency relocation, such as communications and transportation support.

# Women's Human Rights Defenders & Political Participation

As the Burmese Army continues to violently crackdown on protesters, arbitrarily arrest political leaders, activists, journalists and protesters across the country, they also target attacks on prominent women human rights defenders. Thin Thin Aung, Myo Myo Aye and Tu Tu Tha are among those who were arbitrarily arrested.

## Thin Thin Aung



Thin Thin Aung was arrested and taken away in Yangon by plainclothes members of the Burmese Army April 8. She is a founding sister of the WLB, a founder of Women for Justice and co-founder of Mizzima News, an independent media organization. Ever since she became involved in the 1988 uprising which forced her into exile, she has been a leading women's rights advocate within the democratization of Burma/Myanmar. In 2014, along with a range of organizations and networks focusing on women's rights, gender justice and the peace process, Thin Thin Aung helped found the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP).



Photo: Clean Clothes Campaign

## Myo Myo Aye

Myo Myo Aye, a labor activist and union leader, was forcibly abducted from her office and arrested on April 15. She has been a leading voice against the coup in her role as the leader of the Solidarity of Trade Unions in Myanmar. Her advocacy was specifically **focused on defending workers' rights**, freedom of association and freedom of expression - all arenas which the Burmese military regularly violates. According to various reports, Myo Myo Aye has been transferred to the notorious Insein prison, in Yangon.



Photo: The Irrawaddy

## Tu Tu Tha

Tu Tu Tha, a writer and journalist, is among the 39 journalists who **were arrested** and are still in custody. She was detained at her home in Yangon's Thanlyin township on 24 April, with her 18-year-old son and her younger brother. Tu Tu Tha is former editor at The Irrawaddy's Burmese edition. She also worked as the editor-in-chief of the Thanlyin Post and trained other journalists in her spare time.



On April 16, the **National Unity Government (NUG)** was officially formed. Those in the body include members of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). The individuals represent diverse ethnic groups with experience and commitment to human rights. Its establishment signaled positive change towards overdue reforms and ethnic recognition and was embraced by several ethnic civil society organizations. Of those in the NUG, so far eight representatives are women. The youngest being Ei Thinzar Maung, as the Deputy Minister, Ministry of Women, Youths and Children Affairs. They also represent different ethnicities, such as Karen, Shan and Kachin. Noted Karen Member of Parliament, Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe and Union Minister, Ministry of Women, Youths and Children Affairs, who had served with the National League for Democracy, (NLD) expressed a desire to move forward with human rights as priority and by listening to voices from ethnic areas. She offered an apology for not raising her voice enough under NLD leadership.

On April 29, the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs **condemned the allegations of sexual and gender based violence against women and girls** in unlawful detention by the junta. It went on to acknowledge the military's misconduct in the past and wide patterns of sexual and gender-based violence.

Women's organizations have been vocal in their calls for international intervention, such as by **appealing to ASEAN** (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) leaders to urge the junta to release all women human rights defenders. The Women's League of Burma has launched a series of campaigns and actions concerning the situation of women human rights defenders in Burma/Myanmar, including Thin Thin Aung, who is a founding sister. Meanwhile, as they always have been, WLB's member organizations have tirelessly taken leadership in responding to the need of immediate humanitarian assistance in ethnic areas



The **#Sisters2Sisters** global campaign is another prominent example of solidarity among women rights organisations. Launched on 28 April, the campaign calls for participation from organisations and individuals concerned with upholding and protecting the rights of women human rights defenders in their current situation.

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

**April 5 - 9** Southeast Asian Women Convening – as a member of APWLD, WLB participated and gave a presentation in the session: Peace, Justice, Governance and State Accountability on April 7. A solidarity action for Burma/Myanmar also took place on April 9, among the participating organizations.

**April 8** At a virtual press conference co-hosted by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) and WLB, WLB's General Secretary, and the representatives of the Kachin Women's Association Thailand, the Karen Women's Organization and the Shan Women's Action Network highlighted the impacts of the military coup on women, and the deteriorating human rights situation with continuous military offensives in ethnic areas especially airstrikes in Karen State.

**April 16** WLB and APWLD jointly released another statement concerning Thin Thin Aung and WHRDs in Burma/Myanmar. On the same day, WLB also launched a social media campaign raising awareness about Thin Thin Aung and inviting followers to call for the release of her and other WHRDS on social media.

**April 22** As a member of APWLD, WLB participated in the "SEA Peoples' Summit on Myanmar" prior to "the ASEAN Special Summit on Myanmar" on 24 April. A solidarity video was played portraying Thin Thin Aung and WHRDs in Burma/Myanmar during the morning session. In the evening session, WLB's General Secretary gave a presentation at the "Public Dialogue on ASEAN responses to Myanmar."

**April 27** WLB called for endorsement to send a letter to ASEAN regarding the release of Thin Thin Aung and other WHRDS

Among WLB member organizations, there is a collective resilience taking place in defiance of the junta. In Karenni/Kayah State, the sisters at Kayan Women's Organization are working with donors to encourage their allocation of funds towards the Civil Disobedience Movement. In areas where the presence of junta security forces is high, such as in Chin State, Women for Justice is providing medical treatment and security for protesters. In Shan State, the Ta'ang Women's Organization is also fundraising for the Civil Disobedience Movement and working to compile data and documentation on the current situation.

Their activities put these women at high risk. Being included in the junta's lists for arrests, several WLB sisters have been forced to go into hiding and communicate discreetly from unknown locations for their safety. Regardless, all women human rights defenders including members of WLB continue their work to protect and aid the community.



## CONCLUSION:

The impacts of the military coup continue to have ripple effects on people across Burma/Myanmar. Thousands have been deprived the right to live freely and safely as the junta hunts down dissidents and descends the country into chaos. While there have been mounting disappointment and fear, there has also been courage and perseverance. Diversity is being celebrated and ethnic lines are being crossed as differences are embraced, rather than used as barriers. There is solidarity and hope alongside the struggle for true and meaningful peace for the generations to come.

Women have shown great strength and commitment to the quest for federalism and democracy. Despite threats and harrowing testimonies of violence they endured or witnessed - they are prevailing stronger and all the more determined to use their experience to protect others. WLB sisters are elated to see the momentum and will continue to do our part to ensure ethnic voices of women are heard in the decisions being made. Our participation is paramount to ensuring the future of Burma/Myanmar is free, fair, federal and feminist.

## 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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