



# May 2021

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

## SITUATION UPDATE

It has now been over 100 days since the Burmese Army unlawfully took control over the country in a coordinated coup d'état. The actions of the security forces at the command of the so-called State Administrative Council (SAC), have forced civilians into oppressive rule through their morally corrupt policies. Violent policing and increased disappearances of those involved in anti-coup activities has stripped the people of Burma/Myanmar of their rights, as the junta continues to rule with an iron-fist approach. Several crises are unfolding in Burma/Myanmar at the moment; the coup, the COVID-19 pandemic and active armed conflict in several ethnic states including Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni/Kayah and Shan States.

The four months which have passed since the day Burma's history was so selfishly alternated comes as 48 women have now been killed by the military's brutality, and the detainment of 835 women, including LGBTQ+ and activists tied to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).



840

KILLED



48

5,554

ARRESTED

835

According to the [Assistance Association of Political Prisoners](#), at least 21 people, including two women, have been killed since the military coup after being arrested and tortured at various interrogation centers. The junta is insisting on carrying out their campaign of fear as more activists disappear, and late night abductions and arbitrary arrests continue. Property is being unjustly confiscated and the junta is demanding bribes for their return. Women and young girls are among those who have forcibly been detained and denied any access to legal representation. Calls for the release of detained senior government officials and a restoration of civilian government, as well as an end to state sponsored human rights violations are still being amplified from all corners of the country.

Women in particular, when arrested and detained, are subject to torture that includes sexual violence and assault. The military has shown a lack of respect for women by using rape and other violent means as a war tactic to intimidate, threaten and traumatize. This threat is real for the women in WLB's network who are actively protesting and organizing. Of additional concern is the lack of credibility in the courts to hear the cases of activists. The legal system has been controlled by the military junta. Women rights defenders rarely see justice and are limited by various roadblocks including access to a lawyer and the fees needed to go through court. Knowing this, the military takes advantage by prolonging cases and issuing false charges.

However, alongside state-sponsored repression is a revolution. Civilians refuse to be governed by a murderous regime, notorious for its oppression of ethnic people, and systematic subjugation of young women and girls. They will not be silenced or coerced into accepting authoritarian norms. As protest signs and art curated by youth so poignantly put it, the junta has messed with the wrong generation.

# 1 Impact of the Military Coup

Gendered violence and the systematic targeting of young women and girls by the Burmese military is ongoing. Lethal violence has been increasing against women at the hands of the junta, where unfortunately women are no exception. They are being killed by security forces in broad daylight without consequences. Children are forced to grow up without their mothers, and parents without their daughters. The Burmese military is tearing families apart in their war on the country.

On May 25, a young mother aged 24, was **killed** by a bullet to the head in Salin Township, Magwe Region during a raid by the junta in response to graffiti with anti-coup messaging. Witnesses reported the soldiers were indiscriminately firing 'non-stop.' The woman who was killed had a six-year old daughter who went missing after the raid, and has not been found. An elderly woman, a 13-year-old girl and a woman with disability were also arrested, but later released. Hundreds of innocent civilians, including women and children, continue to be used as human shields.

Children have also been killed in the crossfire of indiscriminate junta violence. A **statement** released by the National Unity Government of Myanmar, revealed that 73 children (including nine girls) were killed by military forces from February 15 to May 15. Deprived of their childhood, some of those who lost their young lives were killed during protests. Others were shot in their homes, or while playing.

Soldiers are also arresting children if their family members are not present when they arrive to detain them. On May 27, armed security forces arrived at the home

of May Thu, 44, who is a wanted member of the National League for Democracy. As she was not there, the 20 plainclothes soldiers **detained** her 22-year old son and 12-year old daughter instead. They were taken to a nearby pagoda and interrogated separately where they say they were coaxed and threatened to provide information about their mother. The interrogation went on late into the night where they were eventually put into prisoner transport vehicles. They were released in the morning. This unacceptable treatment of minors cannot go on without repercussions.

In a separate case, a 64 year old mother of activist sons was **arrested** by a military court martial and sentenced to three years in prison for incitement under Article 505(a) of the Penal Code. She was violently beaten and detained after junta forces searched her home looking for sons. Since she was arrested under martial law, she was denied legal representation and faced a grueling several days of interrogation.

Although little is still known about how women and young girls are treated in detention, years of documentation by rights groups like the WLB and sister organizations are aware that rights are denied and violent interrogations rampant. Testimonies have emerged from family members detained together. Ma Chaw, 17, and her mother were arrested on April 14 in Yangon. She **said** she and her mother were beaten, kicked in their private areas and threatened with sexual violence during her six days in detention and was molested by a police officer while being interrogated. Ma Chaw was released on April 20, but her mother remains in Insein Prison.

Additionally, information on the whereabouts of detained journalists, including **Kay Zon Nway of Myanmar Now**, is virtually non-existent. Kay Zon Nway is among at least 45 journalists who are still in detention since the coup. She was arrested covering police clashes with protesters on February 27. She has reportedly been kept in solitary confinement and had injuries and bruises on her face as well as some parts of her body. Her next hearing is June 3, where she faces up to three years in prison under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code.

All of these incidents indicate a backwards spiraling of human rights, particularly for those who are the most vulnerable in conflict-like situations. The Burmese Army is an institution of impunity, which continues to fuel their assault on democracy and human rights. The Burmese Military claims to exist as a body to protect citizen security. However, it has long been known that the soldiers do not act in line with serve and protect values. For decades, they have tarnished their reputation waging war on ethnic groups and terrorizing populations ill equipped to match their violence and weapons. Even before the coup on February 1 put a spotlight on the devastation the regime is capable of, the Burmese Army was well known for their disregard for human life. Women organizations have witnessed and documented their record of torture, arbitrary arrest and detainment, destruction of properties and gender-based violence.

# 2

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

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), displacement remains **widespread** in several ethnic states as conflict ravages livelihoods. There are over 150,000 IDPs in Burma/Myanmar. Displaced women and children face the most severe impacts in conflicts, where the growing humanitarian crisis has threatened their well-being. Their livelihoods and prospects for education have been forcibly put on hold.

In **CHIN STATE**, there has been paramount resistance against the brutality of the Burmese Army. Clashes have been ongoing in Mindat since April 24, where rights groups have declared the livelihoods of civilians as 'under siege.' According to the Chin Human Rights Organization, about **40,000 people have fled Chin State** since May, and face many difficulties in their departure. With soldiers blocking the roads, the prospect of return is seemingly impossible. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), on 15 May, at least five people were killed, ten injured and properties were destroyed from heavy artillery and ground assaults by the Burmese military in what they deemed crimes against humanity. One attack by soldiers led to the death of a six day old newborn baby when the conditions in the jungle after being forced to flee limited the family from access to medicine and care. Women and young girls are at risk of being targeted by the increased presence of armed soldiers. There were also reports of soldiers assaulting young women. Secretary of Chin Women's Organisation Hakha expressed worry that the military could use sexual assault and rape as weapons of war, "The lives of Chin women and young girls, and all women in Mindat, are not safe anymore."

In **KACHIN STATE**, fighting has forced more IDPs into camps. Exacerbating the high-risk situation further is food aid being blocked by the Burmese Army. Fighting between the Karen Independence Army (KIA) and the Burmese military has intensified over the last three months. As a result, IDPs camps are completely full. Community-based organisations, such as the Kachin Baptist Church (KBC) are working to fill the needs but face many limitations. Not only is any aid available being blocked, but the nationwide limits on the amounts of cash allowed for withdrawals has also complicated the humanitarian response. There are 166 IDPs camps

in Kachin and northern Shan State. According to the Human Resource Development Department of the KBC, the daily cost to provide food, clothing and medicine to 150,000 people is \$96,000 USD.

Thousands in **KAREN STATE** are still fleeing the impacts of conflict in their villages. Airstrikes in the Salween Peace Park and surrounding areas on March 27 left civilians fearful of further attacks. More than 80% of those displaced are women and children. Thailand continues to push back refugees fleeing for their lives. Those displaced have been forced to live in conditions detrimental to their health and overall well-being. On May 8, an urgent statement was **released** by the Network of the People in the Salween River calling on the Thai authorities and security agencies to coordinate with the Burmese Army to stop airstrikes along the border immediately. There were also calls for Thai security agencies to abide by humanitarian principles and show compassion for those fleeing conflict and are in need of relief. Lastly, it called for coordinated and transparent measures to ensure the safety of those displaced is prioritised.

In **KARENNI/KAYAH STATE**, clashes have displaced one third of the population as a result of fighting between the Karenni People's Defense Force (KPDF) and the Burmese military. Those in Demoso Township have faced regular attacks by heavy artillery shells, jets, helicopters and airstrikes. Loikaw, the State capital, is also experiencing regular explosions. Electricity, communication and main transportation routes have been cut off in order to stop the flow of supplies and humanitarian access. According to the Irrawaddy, **70,000 residents** from around 150 villages in Demoso, Loikaw and Shan State's Pekon Township have been internally displaced, the majority of whom are women and children. The conditions which IDPs have been forced to survive in are treacherous as there is an urgent need for food, water, shelter and medical supplies. IDPs are also facing the onslaught of the rainy season, in which humanitarian assistance is being denied by the junta. Aid workers have also been targeted, as in the case of two young Karenni women currently in military detention after trying to facilitate donations to displaced groups.

Conflict in the northern parts of the **SHAN STATE** has led to suffering by civilians who are caught in the crossfire of ongoing offensives. Following intensified clashes on May 3 between the Burmese military and the Northern Alliance (Ta'ang National Liberation Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Kachin Independence Army), civilians were **forced** to hide in bunkers near Kutkai Township for several hours in the afternoon until the early evening. The day before, 33 homes were destroyed in the crossfire. Since 1 February, **30 civilians have been killed**, 268 arrested and 227 detained in Shan State. Once detained by the military, youth are subject to torture and violent interrogations.

# Women's Human Rights Defenders & Political Participation

Gender stereotypes continue to be defied by women of all different ages and backgrounds who are using their voices to call for accountability and end state-sponsored violence by the junta. Women have long been leaders in the country, and the post-coup campaigns against the military have highlighted their resilience and persistence for equality and justice. They have come from all backgrounds and professions in adamant pursuit of a democracy. A former pageant queen for example, has taken up arms against the junta. **Htar Htet Htet** joined the resistance alongside an ethnic armed group fighting the regime to show her strong opposition. Similarly, Thuzar Wint Lwin, Burma/Myanmar's Miss Universe contestant used the pageant as a platform to **call** for action and consequences against the junta.

Educators in Burma/Myanmar are mostly women. They have been defiant against military orders to open schools on June 1. Many have also joined anti-coup activities, including the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). In response, the junta has **suspended** more than 125,000 teachers for their refusal to comply with 'military-slave education.' Over half of the teachers in Burma/Myanmar are on strike. Many young students have rallied behind them for support as **90 percent** refuse to enroll in the current post-coup situation. Even military appointed staff, such as the University of Education, Sagaing Rector, Dr. Daw Pyone Nain who was appointed as the Basic Education Department Director on March 2, **rejected** the post and joined the CDM. A young woman **told** the *Globe and Mail*, a Canadian publication: "I am afraid to be out of school for a long time if the military remains in power, but I must do my part to strive for democracy."

**I am afraid to be out of school for a long time if the military remains in power, but I must do my part to strive for democracy.**

*A young woman told the *Globe and Mail*, a Canadian publication*

Thin Thin Aung a prominent women human rights defender and founding sister of WLB remains arbitrarily detained. On May 19, **Nobel Peace Laureates appealed** for her immediate release and for all charges to be dropped. Thin Thin Aung was arrested on April 8 and had not been seen in public since April 21 when she was transferred to Insein Prison. She has been charged under the controversial Section 505(a) of the Penal Code. On May 20, she attended a court hearing and will have another on June 3. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden **released a joint statement** calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all human rights defenders, including prominent women's rights activist Thin Thin Aung, so that they can continue their important work for gender equality in Burma/Myanmar.

Myo Myo Aye, a labour rights activist, also remains in detention after being abducted from her office on April 15. She was taken to a police station, and later was transferred to Insein Prison. Like most detained, she has been charged under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code. Very little is known about her condition inside the prison. Women in prison are frequently subjected to sexual violence and assault, and a complete denial of their rights and freedoms. Faith in the judiciary since the coup has cast doubt on any possibility for a free and a fair ruling.



The **#Sisters2Sisters** campaign continues to spotlight concern for women human rights defenders and activists who are at an increased risk of military violence. The campaign has helped increase the visibility of the challenges women face and how they are overcoming. The Letters to Sisters welcomes letters to be written to current inmates at various prisons and detention centers across Burma to share words of encouragement and empathy. Through this campaign, over 80 civil society organizations have called for an end to violence against women in Burma/ Myanmar and for the **release** of women human rights defenders.

WLB member organizations have been actively responding to the situation since the coup by participating in protests when it is safe for them to do so. Their bravery and commitment to resistance has cost them. Many of our sisters have been forced into hiding. As a consequence of the difficult situation, WLB members have reported suffering from mental trauma and are experiencing increased stress and depression. When their safety has been threatened, they've been forced to flee their hometowns to other regions or to the border areas. Offices have been forced to close for the safety of the staff and beneficiaries as military raids have become frequent occurrences. Deciphering a 'safe' place to stay has become a consideration of life and death. The Burmese Army maintains heavy surveillance of local community-based organizations to target pro-democracy activists.

Despite planned activities being postponed, our sisters are still working to their fullest abilities. The fearlessness which they continue to show is a testament to their determination to change the landscape of rights in Burma/Myanmar. The strength and courage of their will must not be underestimated. They are actively resisting the dictatorship and the patriarchy.

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

**May 3**

WLB General Secretary, Naw Hser Hser, **spoke** with Phillip Adams on Late Night Live on the leadership roles of women in Burma/Myanmar amid ongoing protests.

**May 19**

The Karenni National Women's Organization **called** for women and child prisoners to be freed in Burma/Myanmar, as they are more likely to suffer physical and permanent mental trauma.

**May 25**

WLB - Just Associates (JASS) signed onto a statement **demanding** an end to the violence and calling for the release of women human rights defenders. The statement condemned the neglect of ailing political prisoners being denied life-saving medical treatment and the unlawful arrests of women, and LGBTQ protesters.

**May 26**

The Karen Women's Organization **addressed** the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee's Hearing on the Myanmar crisis. General Secretary, Naw K'nyaw Paw, called on the UK government to hold the Myanmar military accountable for their war crimes and crimes against humanity.

**May 28**

The Karen Women's Organization prepared 2,500 hygiene packs for women and girls who have been displaced as well as sarongs, underwear, toothbrushes, women's menstruation kits, hair brushes, shampoo. These items are useful and restore their dignity in times of great uncertainty.



## CONCLUSION:

As the situation in Burma/Myanmar threatens the lives of women and children increasingly every day, there is all the more need to support those living under the junta's rule. Mounting evidence, including through testimonies of detainees is further proof of the horrors women and young girls have been forced to endure. Women human rights defenders and professionals of various backgrounds are being targeted for their efforts to speak truth to power against the regime. The terrorist junta does not discriminate on the basis of age and gender. Women and young girls need protection and more visibility must be given to their plight. Further, the escalation of armed conflict in Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni/ Kayah and Shan States spotlights a culture of deeply entrenched military impunity. With humanitarian aid not even being allowed to flow, the lives of displaced civilians (the majority of whom are women and girls) become more at risk.

Women will always be at the forefront of the causes they champion. Their efforts have extended to providing aid relief to the thousands who are displaced across the country. By working tirelessly and engaging with various actors, change for the better will be slow but pivotal. Women are no stranger to hardships in Burma/ Myanmar, nor are they inexperienced with managing and responding to crises on the ground.

## 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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