

March 13, 2018



Burma's "Peace Process": The Government Talks, the Military Shoots, Villagers Flee

Implications for Canadian Policy and Development Assistance

The horrific treatment of Rohingya Muslims and their violent expulsion from Burma has shocked the world. As the Karen Community of Canada (KCC), an organization representing ethnic Karen refugees from Burma (Myanmar), we stand in solidarity with the Rohingya people who face the same brutal treatment that Karen and other ethnic peoples have suffered at the hands of the Burmese military for decades.

We welcome Prime Minister Trudeau's appointment of Bob Rae as Canada's Special Envoy to Myanmar. However, we are disappointed that Mr. Rae's interim report overlooks the systemic nature of Burmese military oppression against all ethnic minorities in Burma. A more holistic approach is needed if Mr. Rae's final report is to effectively guide Canadian policy toward Burma.

Past and ongoing Burmese military abuses extend far beyond the current Rohingya crisis, as UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee emphasized in her end of mission statement on February 1. For example, the war in Kachin State has driven more than 100,000 civilians from their homes since 2011; in 2017 alone, 15,000 villagers in Kachin and northern Shan States were forced from their homes by Burmese military attacks. Offensives in Kachin State, including airstrikes, displaced nearly 2,000 civilians in January 2018, and fighting there continues as we write. Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government cooperates with the Burmese military to block food and medical aid to these internally-displaced persons (IDPs) trapped in the forest, leading to starvation and chronic illness.

There is also an urgent situation developing in our homeland of Karen State. On March 4, the Burmese military began invading Karen villagers' lands in northern Mutraw (Hpapun) District, causing the largest forced displacement of civilians in Mutraw since the Karen National Union (KNU)¹ signed a bilateral ceasefire with the military in 2012. Many Karen people in Canada come from this area of Karen State, and we are worried for our relatives who remain there. As of March 9, over 1500 villagers from at least 15 villages had been forced to flee, and the region could erupt into renewed civil war unless the Burmese military takes immediate steps to de-escalate the situation. Please refer to the attached statement from the Karen Peace Support Network.

The Burmese military's actions in Mutraw violate the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), which the KNU signed in 2015 and which prohibits the deployment of troops into contested areas while the parties engage in political negotiations. The current offensive is also taking place within the Salween Peace Park, a grassroots initiative to create a 5,400 sq. km Indigenous Karen reserve dedicated to peace-building, biodiversity conservation, and cultural preservation. The military's actions, combined with ongoing attacks against Kachin, Shan, and Rohingya, demonstrate that the Burmese military is determined to sabotage the peace process and use armed force to crush all resistance regardless of the cost to civilians. Ongoing military occupation in Karen State also prevents the return of IDPs and over 100,000 Karen refugees who remain in Thailand.

On February 16, Canada blacklisted Major-General Maung Maung Soe for his role in the campaign against the Rohingya. We thank Canada for taking this step. However, Burma's war crimes are not a case of rogue soldiers and officers breaching the military's code of conduct. The Burmese military is a violent and corrupt institution, and their attacks against Rohingya are consistent with past and ongoing brutalization of other ethnic peoples such

¹ The KNU is the de facto ethnic government representing the Karen people, which has steadfastly opposed military dictatorship in Burma, but which in 2012 signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government.

as Karen, Kachin, Ta'ang, and Shan. Blacklisting one general will not change this. The government of Canada must take much stronger action against the Burmese military if it wishes to demonstrate its "solidarity with the Rohingya people and other ethnic minorities," as Minister Chrystia Freeland stated.

The military is ultimately responsible for atrocities against ethnic peoples, but Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are not innocent. They never criticize attacks against ethnic communities, instead complying with the military's blockade of humanitarian aid to displaced villagers. The government also aided and abetted the military's campaign against the Rohingya by spreading hate speech on social media and defending the military's actions.

The Burmese military's current advances in Karen State demonstrate the flaws of the peace process in Burma. The NCA is becoming a tool for the military to crush ethnic peoples and their political aspirations for equality and self-determination. For example, when the KNU issued a statement in October 2017 to advocate for Karen villagers' land tenure security, the government complained that the statement was inflammatory propaganda violating the NCA. The military has also hindered Shan, Karen, Rakhine, and Chin ethnic armed organizations from holding local community consultations on the peace process. Finally, the Burmese military's current advances in Mutraw district, Karen state, in blatant violation of the NCA, call into question the ability of the current peace process to rein in the excesses of a military that considers itself above any law.

In fact, the current peace process will never bring peace to Burma as long as the military continues to attack ethnic groups and pressure them to accept its terms of domination. Canada and the rest of the international community need to recognize this, and instead of pressuring ethnic armed organizations to accept the current inequitable and military-controlled peace process, they should press the Burmese military and government to reconstitute the peace process in a way that respects the inherent political rights, civil rights, and citizenship rights of all ethnic peoples in Burma.

Recommendations to the Government of Canada to Uphold Human Rights and Promote Peace in Burma

1. Demand that the Burmese military immediately stop its offensives and respect ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed organizations

Canada has invested in Burma's peace process as a contributor to the Joint Peace Fund. We ask Canada, and other countries who contribute to the Fund, to demand that the Burmese military stop attacking ethnic armed organizations, respect ceasefire agreements, and commit to peaceful negotiations. The current offensive in Karen State is a blatant violation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, which the Karen National Union signed in 2015, so international donors to the peace process need to hold the Burmese military accountable for this breach.

2. Ensure that Bob Rae's final report addresses the systemic nature of Burma's military oppression against all ethnic groups in the country.

To guide Canadian policy toward Burma, Mr. Rae's report needs to address the Burmese military's past and ongoing human rights abuses in a holistic fashion. Burmese military attacks and human rights violations continue to escalate in Kachin and Shan States, and the new military offensive in Karen State violates the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and threatens to plunge our Karen land into renewed civil war. The Rohingya crisis is not an isolated problem, and an isolated response will fail to promote peace, justice, and human rights for all ethnic peoples in Burma.

3. Impose further targeted sanctions on Burmese military, government leaders, and military-related companies.

Blacklisting General Maung Maung Soe is not enough. We ask Canada to consider the decades of past and ongoing human rights violations perpetrated by the Burmese military in Karen, Shan, and Kachin States, and to impose asset freezes and travel bans on military and civilian government leaders complicit in these abuses. At the very least, we ask Canada to blacklist General Min Aung Hlaing, commander in chief of the Burmese military. We also ask Canada to strengthen sanctions against the military and military-related companies listed in the Special Economic Measures (Burma) Regulations.

4. Prioritize humanitarian assistance to ethnic civil society; avoid cooperation with the central government

We thank the Canadian government for its ongoing support of ethnic civil society organizations providing humanitarian aid to vulnerable displaced communities and working for peace, justice, and human rights in Burma. We call on Canada to continue supporting humanitarian aid for refugee and IDP communities on the Thai-Burma border. As the Burmese military's actions in Karen State since March 4 demonstrate, it is not yet safe for refugees and IDPs to return home.

We are worried about the CAD \$20 million in Canadian government assistance to Burma announced in June 2017, much of this in cooperation with the central government. Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are more partners with the military than opponents of it, spending more on the military than on education and health combined. Therefore, we urge Canada to suspend development aid to the central government and redirect this aid through experienced organizations such as Inter Pares, who directly support civil society in Burma and on the border.

5. Advocate for a UN-mandated international arms embargo and international action against the Burmese military.

With all the evidence of military atrocities against ethnic peoples in Burma, it is unconscionable that countries such as China, Russia, India, Israel, and Ukraine continue to sell weapons to these war criminals. (As we write, Russia is poised to sell 6 new fighter jets to the Burmese military). We urge Canada to use all diplomatic avenues possible to advocate for a UN-mandated global arms embargo on Burma.

As the Commander-in-Chief of Burma's military since 2011, General Min Aung Hlaing is ultimately responsible for rampant human rights abuses that continue to occur under his watch. On February 21, over 100 British MPs called on the UK government to refer the general to the International Criminal Court (ICC). We ask Canada to endorse this call, and to work through diplomatic channels to demand that Burma's war criminals be brought to justice. If the Burmese military is allowed to continue committing abuses with impunity, it will continue intensifying its campaigns of terror against the ethnic peoples of Burma.

Over 6000 Karen refugees from Burma have resettled across Canada, the majority arriving in 2006-2007. The Karen Community of Canada (KCC) is an umbrella organization that represents Karen people in Canada and promotes Karen culture, human rights and democracy.

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