



[Statement] The Burma Army Must Immediately Halt Fighting & Adhere to A Global Ceasefire in Response to COVID-19

10 April 2020: The Network for Human Rights Documentation Burma (ND-Burma) is concerned that the Burma Army is using their response to COVID-19 to justify its authority and presence in conflict affected ethnic areas, where they are largely responsible for fuelling conflict and exacerbating tensions between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). ND-Burma condemns any emergency relief effort that puts the needs of the military before the people of the country.

The Burma government has taken several steps including forming an emergency task force with military and civilian ministries to support measures around law enforcement and stability and to expand government efforts to respond to the pandemic. However, these efforts have been met with caution as it appears the Burma Army is only interested in preserving their power through any means possible. The military has their own budget and facilities for health and care, which are inaccessible to the majority of the population. It has been made clear that the military is well prepared to protect themselves from COVID-19, though the same cannot be said for civilians.

As the pandemic quickly spreads across Burma, ND-Burma is particularly worried about cases in conflict affected areas of northern Shan and Rakhine States, where access to treatment, information and support is compromised by active fighting. According to Ta'ang community-based organizations, including ND-Burma members, the Ta'ang Women's Organization and the Ta'ang Students and Youths Union, in March 2020 alone, there were 18 documented cases of arbitrary arrest, torture and forced portering in northern Shan. In Rakhine State, relief efforts are compromised as the world's longest running government-imposed Internet shutdown continues. This only makes the situation more dangerous as civilians lack access to critical information about the precautions they should be taking amid COVID-19. Last month, ND-Burma member, All Arakan Students' and Youths' Congress, documented 51 cases of killing, torture/ inhuman degrading treatment, disappearance and arbitrary arrest and oppression of media in Arakan State and Paletwa township of Chin State. Despite the UN General-Secretary Antonio Guterres calling for a 'global ceasefire,' the Burma Army has rejected calls for ceasefires from the Brotherhood Alliance and the Chin National Front. Clashes remain active across Burma's ethnic states indicating that COVID-19 has not changed the rules of combat.

Recently, the Burma Army soldiers and Commander in Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing donated US \$1.6 Million to be used in the prevention, control and treatment of COVID-19. While it was a move that demonstrated the financial invested needed to combat the virus, it should not have been necessary, had health infrastructure been adequately funded. The amount donated also shows the extortionate amount of money that the military receives – for salaries alone – in a country where 37% of the 51 million people live near or below the poverty line. There are many vulnerable groups in Burma who cannot access or afford basic health infrastructure. With many different ethnic languages spoken,

the Burma government must make health awareness materials available that are translated and adapted for those who are not literate.

With the safety of at-risk populations has already been made evident by increases in domestic violence, food shortages, and inadequate community shelters for quarantine purposes, the government response has also been slow and ill-informed. Civil-society organizations are currently working overtime to fill the gaps and facilitate food, basins for hand washing and disinfection sprayers.

We have seen this type of behaviour from Burma's military many times in the past. Their response to crises in the country has set an unfortunate precedent that the Burma Army has no moral compass – no sense of compassionate leadership that would otherwise see their efforts spent engaged in tactful response, rather than strategic warfare. The handling of the situation so far is subject to further critique by the military's efforts to censor information by the media that they feel harms their reputation. In times of emergencies, the press should be allowed access to free, fair and protected spaces to do their jobs and raise the voices of local people who have been impacted.

ND-Burma members call for the Burma government and military to ensure no civilians are left behind in efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19. The Internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin States must be lifted immediately and the Burma Army must agree to a nationwide ceasefire if they are truly sincere in their attempts to protect the people during the pandemic. Support must be given to humanitarian aid groups to facilitate aid safely and without fear, and every effort should be made to provide access to information on COVID-19. ND-Burma calls for the government and military to ensure all civilians have personal protective equipment including masks, hand sanitizer and access to hand washing basins and safe spaces for group and self-quarantine.

ND-Burma believes that true peace in Burma is possible if the Burma Army, EAOs and the government work together to overcome all obstacles, including COVID-19, especially when it comes to assisting populations who are highly vulnerable. This includes women, children, the elderly, and civilians forcibly displaced by conflict and those living in rural, difficult to access areas. The circumstances of COVID-19 have called on the world to become more compassionate to the needs of the poor and marginalized. Burma's response is no exception and history will not judge the military or government kindly if they fail to act in line with basic human rights principles.

Media Contact

Thet Thet Aung, Future Light Center
Phone No: +95 9794932344

Lway Poe Jay, Ta'ang Students and Youth Union
Phone No: +95 9264162229

--

ND-Burma is a network that consists of 12-member organisations who represent a range of ethnic nationalities, women and former political prisoners. ND-Burma member organisations have been documenting human rights abuses and fighting for justice for victims since 2004. The network consists of nine Full Members and four Affiliate Members as follows:

Full Members:

1. [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma](#)
2. [Human Rights Foundation of Monland](#)
3. [Kachin Women’s Association – Thailand](#)
4. [Ta’ang Women’s Organization](#)
5. [Ta’ang Students and Youth Union](#)
6. [Tavoyan Women’s Union](#)
7. [Association Human Rights Defenders and Promoters](#)
8. [All Arakan Students’ and Youths’ Congress](#)
9. [Future Light Center](#)

Affiliate Members:

1. [Chin Human Rights Organization](#)
2. East Bago – Former Political Prisoners Network
3. [Pa-O Youth Organization](#)
4. [Progressive Voice](#)