



COVID-19 Weaponized for Political Gain in Myanmar

New Report Highlights Ongoing Human Rights Violations Amid COVID-19

[2 June, 2020] The Myanmar military, with the endorsement of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, has weaponized the COVID-19 pandemic and is using it to intensify its repression of ethnic communities, rights defenders and the media, while also taking advantage of the pandemic for political gain, said Progressive Voice in a report released today. Myanmar must halt all violence against ethnic nationalities and declare and implement an immediate, meaningful and comprehensive nationwide ceasefire, said Progressive Voice.

“The Myanmar military is making a mockery of the government’s ‘no one left behind’ policy. It is using COVID-19 as a cover in its ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity in ethnic areas, particularly in Rakhine where hundreds have been tortured and killed,” said Khin Ohmar, Chairperson of Progressive Voice. “Without the military committing to end its attacks against ethnic communities, the government’s claimed comprehensive pandemic response is impossible to implement on the ground.”

The report “*A NATION LEFT BEHIND: Myanmar’s Weaponization of COVID-19*” is produced based on review of media reports, and civil society, government and ethnic armed organizations’ (EAOs’) statements from 23 March until 10 May, 2020. The reviews involved collecting information on and analyzing the government and EAOs’ COVID-19 response strategies, the intensifying civil war, and the diminishing tolerance for dissent during the pandemic as well as the impact of the highly centralized aid and funding structures in Myanmar.

After over a year of brutal fighting in Rakhine and Chin States, the Myanmar military has ratcheted up its offensives against the Arakan Army, particularly since first cases of COVID-19 were recorded. During the short span of producing the report, at least 30,000 *more* Rakhine, Chin, Rohingya and other ethnic communities have been displaced in Rakhine and Chin States. Myanmar has long been accused of committing grave international crimes, in violation of international human rights and humanitarian law. It currently faces a case brought against it by The Gambia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in violation of the Genocide Convention for its grave human rights violations against the Rohingya in 2017. On 23 May, Myanmar submitted its first reporting on compliance with the ICJ’s provisional measures, which ordered Myanmar to protect the remaining Rohingya in Rakhine State. With the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the continued government-imposed internet blackout in Chin and Rakhine State, the military has seized an opportunity to intensify its violence rather than protect the remaining Rohingya, with Rakhine and Chin now bearing the brunt.

Not only is the military intensifying armed conflict in western Myanmar, but it is actively undermining COVID-19 prevention efforts by EAOs in eastern Myanmar. As the report highlights, the burning down of two Karen National Union COVID-19 screening posts, as well as attacks on Restoration Council of

Shan State medics who were raising awareness and doing temperature checks in Shan State, indicates that the Myanmar military simply does not care if ethnic people contract the virus.

Furthermore, existing government health and humanitarian aid provision structures in Myanmar are highly centralized, excluding the most vulnerable ethnic populations who live in remote, conflict-affected ethnic regions. Thus, international COVID-19-related aid distributed through these structures, rather than directly to ethnic health providers and ethnic community-based organizations, is unlikely to reach those who need it the most.

“While the NLD government’s announced the formation of a coordinating committee to cooperate with EAOs to prevent the spread of the virus, in reality ethnic health services are being undermined and actively destroyed. It is imperative that no restrictions are placed on the provision of health services by local actors, and that humanitarian aid reaches them directly,” said Khin Ohmar.

Finally, the report also exposes how NLD government and other political parties—particularly those allied with the military—are using this pandemic as an opportunity to project an image as benevolent protectors of the people. Likely with an eye toward the upcoming national elections, much of the coronavirus-related activity, such as the distribution of masks, is well branded, accompanied by flashy logos and ample social media promotion. Such performances stand in contrast to the government’s lack of coordination with ethnic health service providers and a chronically underperforming and neglected healthcare system.

The report further calls on the Myanmar government to end restrictions on and ensure the free passage of humanitarian aid and necessary COVID-19 response assistance to all ethnic areas with special attention to conflict-affected areas and immediately cease all threats against and obstruction of efforts being made by EAOs to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It also recommends that the government and military recognize the role of ethnic health organizations (EHO) and provide financial and material resources in line with federal democratic principles. The report raises concerns of how the provision of international funding directed solely through Naypyidaw threatens to exacerbate armed conflict and undermine ethnic rights, and existing ethnic health infrastructures. It therefore urges the international donors and financial institutions to make their assistance available through the provision of direct cross-border aid and equitable funding to EHOs and ethnic community-based organizations providing essential services to displaced persons and other conflict-affected areas for COVID-19 response.

“If the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide of which the Myanmar state stands accused had not already made apparent the military’s intentions toward its own people, the air strikes, artillery shelling, arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings during COVID-19 has,” said Khin Ohmar. “Myanmar must be held accountable for these grave international crimes, either through a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court or an ad hoc tribunal,” she added.

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