



# ON-THE-GROUND IN BURMA

A DIGITAL BRIEFER

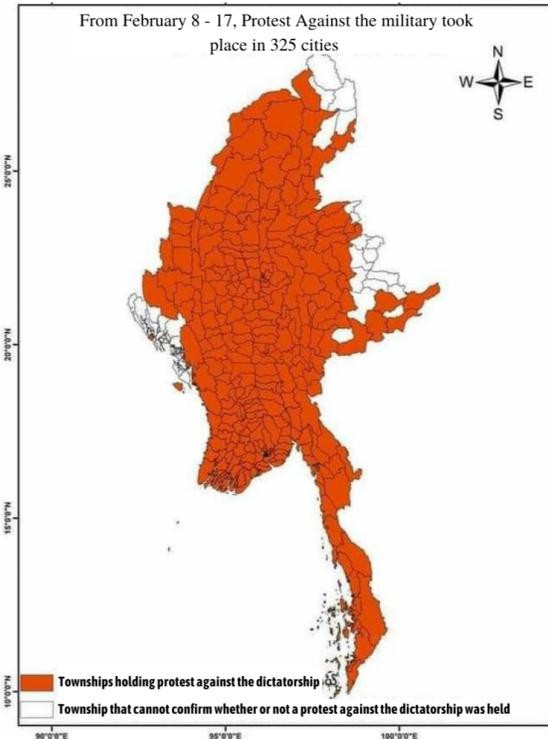
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## February coup d'etat: The military's war on the people of Burma continues

On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw seized control of the nation, detaining Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and many members of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). This coup follows a general election in November 2020 where the [NLD won 82% of the people's votes](#). Suu Kyi is under house arrest, charged with possessing illegally imported walkie-talkies. Burma is now under the leadership of the Tatmadaw commander-in-chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, with the military claiming that they retain the right to lead the nation in a state of emergency (citing the 2008 military-drafted constitution).

These actions follow decades of oppressive tactics and policies from the Tatmadaw. They have led a brutal campaign of natural resource extraction, land grabs, human rights abuses, and accumulated mass amounts of wealth. The coup has been met with widespread protest and opposition by the people of Burma and Burmese people abroad. Protests began with healthcare employees and garment factory workers going on strike; it has now widened to a nationwide strike and grassroots campaign called the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Map of Townships Holding Anti-military Dictatorship Protests



Though the protests, encompassing 325 different cities from the ethnic states to central Burma, have largely been peaceful, the military and the police forces have responded with terror. The military are shooting live ammunition and water cannons at people, reinstating restrictions that require citizens to report overnight visitors in homes, raiding houses at night to draw out protesters, and implementing a

sweeping cybersecurity bill that nullifies civil liberties (e.g. prohibits speech the Tatmadaw deems hate speech, prohibits online businesses and shopping, prohibits online gatherings). There is an increased police presence in many of the protest areas in addition to longer [internet blackouts](#) and attempts to harm 60 civilian lives.



*Ammunitions used to shoot on protesters  
Photo cred: Khin Ohmar*

The situation in Burma is volatile. There is little question that the junta will be cruel in its governance of the country, but several factors remain to be seen. How hard will the military crack-down on protesters? How much further will they restrict civil liberties? How long will this junta actually last? If precedent means anything, the military is likely to redefine the meaning of cruelty through unrestricted use of surveillance and force.

The international community should not accept military rule as Burma's political destiny. Strong grassroots movements have

been a hallmark of Burma's society for quite some time. The same people who fought the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the People's Republic of China's authoritarian "development" in the country are currently in the streets protesting the military junta.

10 ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that are signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) [announced on February 20](#) that it would suspend political talks with Burma's military government. Instead they offer support to the growing Civil Disobedience Movement in response to the military coup on Feb 1. The EAOs also show a willingness to collaborate with the international and national partners to seek sustainable solutions to end the military dictatorship.

However, these movements cannot succeed on their own. They need strong support from the US, and its international partners across Europe and Asia, in order to succeed. The SPDC collapsed only after America [imposed tough sanctions](#) on the military and held its leaders accountable on the international stage. The 117th Congress and Biden administration must work to support the people of Burma in opposing the junta.

The military is immune to condemnations. The U.S. and the international community must take immediate and effective action to hold the military accountable for its violent crimes. Otherwise, the military junta will continue to commit human rights abuses and perpetrate atrocity crimes with impunity.

## ANALYSIS

Discrimination of Burma's ethnic minority groups is ingrained in the nation's laws and political systems. Longstanding tensions, rooted in conflicts of autonomy and what many ethnic Bamar people see as the need for a unified Burmese identity, has resulted in decades of armed conflicts in Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Chin States.

Burma has more than half a million IDPs and around [1.1 million refugees](#) who have fled to Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia, and many more countries. The number of IDPs is mainly a result of the clashes between the Tatmadaw and armed militias; furthermore, these clashes stem from the ethnic minorities' fight for basic human rights and self-determination, defiance of ethnic Bamar hegemony (which has been characterized by the forced removal of native languages, customs, and land), and the desire for political and economic autonomy as many ethnic states remain underdeveloped and deep in poverty compared to central Burma. In Rakhine State alone, the poverty rate is at 78 percent, or twice the national average. The IDPs and refugees are a direct result of a deliberate Tatmadaw policy of impoverishment and marginalization that renders the ethnic minorities weak.

In Rakhine and Chin States, there are increasing clashes between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed militia known as the Arakan Army. Despite attempts at ceasefires, the Tatmadaw refuses to withdraw from many states. There are large-scale attacks in northern Burma, in addition to massive civilian displacement, arbitrary arrests, torture, and the destruction of civilian property. All of these abuses and mass atrocities perpetrated by the

Tatmadaw result in an ever-increasing and suffering number of IDPs and refugees from and in Burma.



*Unexploded shells found after a clash between the Burma military and Arakan Army in Kyauktaw township, western Burma Rakhine state*

*Photo Cred: Radio Free Asia*

In Burma's northern states, conflicts between the military and ethnic armed organizations have left behind countless landmines and undetonated ordinance. In the first 19 weeks of 2020, [at least 16 civilians were killed by landmines and 48 people were injured](#). The bulk of incidents occur in Rakhine state, where fighting between the Arakan Army and military had been running until 3 months ago. Now, the government is trying to return [hundreds of thousands of IDPs back to their villages](#). Many IDPs do not believe the military has made an effort to remove unexploded landmines or bombs. If something is not done soon, the influx of returning villagers is sure to increase the number of ordnance-related casualties.

The plight and standing of the ethnic minority groups is worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The [Burmese government has blocked humanitarian aid](#) for COVID-19 relief

in IDP camps. Many camps in the ethnic armed [controlled areas are completely inaccessible](#) due to military blocks on movement; though there is a need to be cautious during the pandemic, it is clear that restrictions and blockades on humanitarian aid are a continuation of the military's discriminatory tactics. Furthermore, due to a government block on mobile communication services in places like Rakhine State, there is a lack of outreach and awareness among displaced communities. Though COVID-19 affects everyone in Burma, it harms IDPs among the ethnic minority groups at an alarming rate.

Another problem facing many of Burma's ethnic states is land confiscation. It is difficult to estimate the number of acres that have been confiscated by the military. The government offers little to no compensation. In 2016, the Farmers Affairs Committee estimated the number was as high as [2 million acres](#). The Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Act and the Farmland Act strip land rights from many farmers. This land is then used in special economic zones, castor oil plantations, and mining operations. Ultimately, only the military profits.

These three military-controlled crises, ongoing war and conflict, the coronavirus pandemic, and land confiscations, also contribute to the extreme environmental degradation of Burma. An example of mass environmental destruction can be seen through the construction of Shan state's [Upper Yeywa and Upper Kentawng dams](#), which are affecting the quality of nearby water and exploiting the land of local communities for the benefit of the military.

Extractive projects are used to finance military crimes- unfortunately, the same can be said for international funds being used to support those same military activities. In light of the coup, [International Financial Institutions \(IFIs\) are being called upon](#) to reassess their

relationship with Burma, where IFIs' loans, grants, and disbursements could support the military junta both financially and symbolically by legitimizing military rule. Irresponsible investment and funding are issues also in need of attention and should not be overlooked.



*Temporary IDP shelter in Karen State.*

*Photo cred: Free Burma Rangers*

These are the primary issues facing ethnic minorities in Burma. Each problem they face can be traced back to one source- the military. It is the military's control over capital and politics that allows it to extract and oppress with impunity. Supporting and investing in the development and empowerment of ethnic minority communities and ethnic-led organizations is the best long-term prospect for Burma's democratic transition. The military must be held accountable for their atrocities both with respect to the coup and their history of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide across the country. The ethnic minorities are long deserving of security, peace, and basic human rights after decades of oppression and harm by the military. It is high time for the United States, and its international counterparts, to hold the military accountable for its crimes while preventing future transgressions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Impose immediate targeted sanctions on military-owned and military-controlled companies, as recommended by the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar;*
  2. *Immediately suspend and reassess all financial responsibilities, linked to the military junta, its businesses (including Myanmar Economic Corporation - MEC, and the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited - MEHL), its cronies, and its business partners;*
  3. *Provide immediate and direct cross-border assistance to address the humanitarian needs of all IDPs and refugees suffering from the Burmese military's ongoing militarization and offensives. This aid must be particularly directed to ethnic-led community and civil society organizations whose access and operations do not rely on the central government and military;*
  4. *Suspend all political and financial support to the military regime and the nationwide peace process, including to the Joint Peace Fund. Demand a new framework for political dialogue for negotiations towards reconciliation that are not constrained by the 2008 constitution;*
1. *Pressure the Burma Military to:*
    - a. *Stop offensives throughout the country, pull back troops in the ethnic areas, respect the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and proceed with political or tripartite dialogue;*
    - b. *Immediately and unconditionally release all arbitrarily detained political prisoners, including those who won seats in the recent 2020 election;*
    - c. *Immediately restore the Internet and all forms of communications;*
    - d. *Allow the parliament elected by the will of the people in November 2020 to take office and allow elected MPs to fulfill their mandate without impediment.*

# AN OVERVIEW OF BURMA'S ETHNIC STATES

## CHIN

The conflict between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw in Arakan State has spilled into neighboring Chin State, resulting in [60,000 IDPs](#) trapped in their villages since September 2020. Since coronavirus restrictions and ongoing conflict block humanitarian aid from accessing those displaced, food shortages are common. Also present are blackouts, state-wide airstrikes, and the destruction of villages by the Tatmadaw. The Chin State government was [criticized](#) for its neglect of IDPs in Paletwa, with many calling for more transparency surrounding donor aid funds. COVID-19 has been difficult to contain due to prolonged internet bans that block communication and prevent access to proper information. The addition of 7 checkpoints in a 30-mile route in Chin State blocks entrances for supplies and has only resulted in poor state handling of these crises. Lastly, the state of peace talks remains a concern amongst IDPs.

## KACHIN

The people in Kachin State experience various forms of human rights violations, such as killing, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, and forced disappearances. [Clashes](#) between the Burma military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) ended a 17-year ceasefire in 2011. The armed conflict forced nearly [120,000 IDPs](#) to flee to 140 camps across Kachin State. Areas under control of the KIA are prevented from receiving aid, exacerbated by the closures of borders due to COVID-19. Additionally, this is compounded by food shortages in the state due to the military prohibiting supplies to ethnic armed-controlled areas. This will continue to be a problem as more than 40% of IDPs live in KIA and other areas controlled by ethnic armed groups. In late 2020, a landslide at the [military-owned Hpakant jade](#) mine killed nearly 200 miners. Lack of transparency in the extractives industries, broken reform promises, and illicit financial practices led to the deadly disaster.

## KARENNI

Extractive land development projects and destructive land reform laws have continued in Karenni State, with many residents of the state vocally against both of these efforts. The Burmese [military has confiscated 1,500 acres of farmland](#) in Loikaw and Deemawso townships and an additional 125 acres in Hpa-Saung Township. 41 farmers were arrested and jailed for protesting the land grab. Due to land confiscation and armed conflict, the state currently has about 35,000 IDPs. Using the COVID-19 outbreak and the unilateral ceasefire, the [Burma military launched military offensives](#) throughout the state.

## MON

The most pressing issue in Mon state is land confiscation. In the early 2000s, the military junta displaced numerous families after confiscating over [1,000 acres](#) from villagers in Kyon Kwel under the pretenses of “development.” In 2016 and again in 2019, farmers appealed to the NLD government for compensation and justice, but these demands were met with silence. Additionally, in the Magyi village tract alone, 98 acres of land have been confiscated for stone mining. The [Excellent Fortune Corp.](#) plans to use these 98 acres for mining and requested that a further 625 acres be requisitioned. This corporation secretly purchased land around the villages without permission, and people who attempted to bring the issue before local leaders were sued for defamation. Vague telecommunications and defamation laws are [used by many local leaders](#) in Mon state to silence critics. Additionally, the Mon Peace and Defense Front has [requested](#) 177 acres be requisitioned in Magyi village tract.

## KAREN

There are roughly [10,400 IDPs in Karen state](#). In the past two months, [5,300 people](#) have been displaced due to the military's harassment in Muthraw and Nyaunglaypin districts. The military has indiscriminately mortared the area and burned at least one home in Mai Lai village. The depopulation of these districts coincides with the military's construction of new bases and roads. There are [80 military bases](#) in Muthraw district alone. This activity is [forbidden](#) by the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and was met by protest on January 5th. [10,000 villagers protested](#) the militarization of the area. Karen State IDPs also suffered from [humanitarian aid blockages](#) by the military. While supplies are ready for distribution, the military refuses to allow aid providers travel permissions to transport the goods. Estimates report that on the night of February 14 alone, [200 Karen people were forcibly displaced](#) after shelling of their villages.

## SHAN

An ethnically diverse state, civilians live in fear of [armed conflict](#) between the Shan State Army-South, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Burmese military. There are roughly [13,100 IDPs in Shan state](#). In October, 2020, [3,900 people](#) became displaced in Kyaukme Township and Namtu Township when they lost their homes due to the clashes. People in Shan State also suffer various human rights violations tied to armed conflict, such as torture and sexual violence. Accused of being spies for ethnic armed organizations by the Burma Army, [three farmers were blindfolded, beaten, and tortured](#) during interrogation on September 20, 2020. Aside from armed conflict, land confiscation is another problem in the state. The Burmese military confiscated land from [23 families in Nawng Nguen village](#) for use in an industrial zone. These families were offered measly 80x80ft parcels, which does not even begin to fairly compensate for their multi-acre farms that were requisitioned. The [Burma Army prosecuted Pa-O farmers](#) after they refused to relinquish their land and were charged with trespassing in August 2020.

## RAKHINE

There are roughly [210,000 IDPs in Rakhine state](#) and an additional [130,000 Rohingya and Kaman](#) are confined to apartheid camps in central Rakhine. Though fighting between the Arakan Army and military has died down in the [past 3 months](#), villagers feel they cannot return home. Many places, such as the [environs of Marlar village](#), are still occupied by the military. Additionally, landmines and other explosives have [killed 35 people](#) and maimed 73 in the past two years. Between January-September 2020, [13 children were killed](#) by explosives and 56 were maimed. Additionally, at least [21 people](#) who were taken into military custody in Tinma village have not been heard from in 2 years. There are over 1,000 IDPs currently residing in the Wutbazawadi Buddhist monastery in Sittwe who have [reported](#).



*Chin villager killed by bombs dropped by Burma Army jet fighters.*

*Photo Cred: Free Burma Rangers*