



ON-THE-GROUND IN BURMA

A DIGITAL BRIEFER

Issue 4 | May 31, 2021

MONTHLY HIGHLIGHTS

- [Save the Children, UNESCO, and UNICEF are concerned](#) children in Burma, especially in ethnic areas, continue to lack access to safe, quality education as COVID-19 and the coup impact learning opportunities.
- [More than 73 children have lost their lives](#) to military violence since the coup. An effort by NUG to account for deaths in ethnic areas is on-going and the number of casualties is expected to rise.
- Over 85 cases have been identified where the [Burmese military has used dead bodies](#) or wounded individuals to create terror in the civilian population.
- [Aung San Suu Kyi appeared in court](#) for the first time since her February 1 arrest. She is being detained at an unknown location and currently without contact to the outside world.
- The UNDP is concerned that nearly half of [Burma's residents will be living in poverty](#) by the beginning of 2022 if COVID-19 and coup conditions continue in the country.
- The National Unity Government announced the [creation of the People's Defense Force](#), a militia that will oppose the illegal military junta, on May 5.

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Still taken from video of Burmese military soldiers dragging body away

Photo Cred: Unknown

ANALYSIS

On May 15, the Chin town of Mindat fell to junta forces. Overnight, 12,000 people were displaced and thousands were trapped in the town itself. Troops imposed martial law on the township, cut water access, and began looting homes and businesses. The secretary of the Chin Womens Organization has stated that the risk of sexual violence against women and children is high- the military previously committed widespread gang rape in neighboring Rakhine State during the Rohingya Genocide.

This horrible situation comes on the heels of clashes between the military and the Chin Defense Forces (CDF). This organization only formed a month ago, on April 4, and has already seen some victories against the army. The CDF held onto Mindat for weeks despite bloody military assaults and even managed to secure the [freedom of 20 of its soldiers](#) from police custody. These early triumphs over the junta in Chin State have inspired ethnic people to take up arms. On May 5, the National Unity Government announced the creation of the [People's Defence Forces \(PDF\)](#). Communities across Burma have begun forming their own PDF battalions.



Civilians fleeing from the Burmese military occupation of Mindat.

Photo cred: BNI

These groups are poorly armed, usually relying on homemade hunting rifles, but are cunning in their tactics. PDF fighters in [Kani, Sagaing region](#) have lured junta forces into traps that force them to retreat over minefields. In

Karenni State, anti-coup fighters [reportedly killed 40 regime troops](#) and raided a police station in Loikaw. As a result, the military has begun an especially brutal campaign in the area. It has fired artillery at villages in the region, killing [four civilians in a Catholic church](#). Photos and videos of tanks and armored vehicles patrolling the streets of Loikaw and Demoso circulate on social media.

ASEAN Response

Over a month has passed since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations met on April 24, 2021, to [discuss the situation in Burma](#). Given the grave nature of the human rights and humanitarian situation in the country, a review of the Five-Points Consensus is appropriate to determine if the ASEAN response to this crisis is sufficient.

Burma has failed to uphold the Five-Point Consensus, which first and foremost called for an immediate end to the violence and utmost restraint. Over 840 have been killed¹ since the ASEAN meeting, which hardly reflects restraint by the military. A recent example out of Mindat, Chin State, highlights the military's failure to follow the consensus. On May 13, 2021, the [military declared martial law](#) over the town and flew in several rounds of reinforcements by helicopter. Civilians have no freedom of movement to obtain food or supplies and an estimated 70% are hiding in surrounding forest areas. The tough forest displacement conditions [claimed the life of a six day old baby](#). The military has used [sexual violence, land and air strikes, and human shields](#) during its operation in the region. In an attempt to trick resistance fighters in the area, the [military dressed like fleeing civilians](#) to ambush those fighting to protect Mindat; a similar strategy was used when the military pretended to

¹ On April 24, 2021, [AAPP lists](#) 748 killed and 4,429 arrested since February 1, 2021. Data from May 31 [shows](#) 840 killed and 5,554 arrested.

surrender, but then attacked the opposition once they walked closer. None of these actions reflect a military acting with utmost restraint.

The second point of the Five-Point Consensus asked all interested parties to initiate dialogue to develop a peaceful solution. The Burmese military now stands in direct opposition to this effort, [claiming CRPH, NUG, and PDF are terrorist organizations](#) and demanded in a May 11, 2021, communication that diplomatic missions, UN agencies, and INGOs end their communications with those groups. The National League for Democracy, the winning party of the 2020 election, has a strong interest in a peaceful solution, but the military appointed [Union Election Committee \(UEC\) has announced it will disband the NLD](#) due to fraud. Two independent organizations who observed the 2020 elections have found the [elections represented the will of the people](#). With actions like these, it is no wonder most major [political parties in the country have refused to meet with the UEC](#).

A further analysis of the Five-Points Consensus seems futile if basic requests, such as the end of violence and efforts to begin dialogue, are being ignored by the Burmese military. What is clear is the Five-Point Consensus has been insufficient to address the mass atrocities and humanitarian concerns across Burma. This same ineffective response to prior atrocities, especially the genocide of the Rohingya, has only emboldened the Burmese military to act with impunity as they target anyone across the country who opposes their attempt to rule. While the opportunity exists for international actors to help ASEAN understand their role in helping to bring stability to the region and in increasing economic opportunity to benefit the Burmese people and ASEAN member countries, the international community cannot stand by and let an ineffective ASEAN solution drag Burma further into chaos.

Refugee Protection

UNHCR estimates over [12,000 people have now fled Burma](#) into neighboring countries since the start of the coup. The recent increase in fighting in Chin State has led to additional arrivals in neighboring Mizoram State, India, where local government officials are seeking solutions on how to meet the needs of the newly arrived refugees. The [provision of medical care and food are of particular concern](#) to the group as more refugees are expected if violence continues.



IDPs arriving to a Buddhist monastery in Bhamo district, Kachin state on May 18, 2021.

Photo cred: Kachinwaves

Refugee crossings along the Thai-Burma border continue as military offenses in the eastern part of Burma put ethnic populations at risk. News reports have cited concerns that [refugees are being pushed back from Thailand](#) and most of [those who were officially counted by Thailand have been returned](#). High level talks were recently held in Bangkok to [ask for Thai support to address the situation in Burma](#) and Thailand agreed to [end the refoulement of refugees](#) fleeing violence. This commitment to the universal norm of non-refoulement will be crucial for all neighboring countries to uphold so those fleeing Burma are not returned to unsafe conditions.

Protracted refugee situations continue to need international attention. UNHCR has raised less than [half of the funds needed to support Rohingya refugees](#) in Bangladesh. If the

international community cannot help end the current political and human rights crisis in Burma, the need for funds to support refugees created by the Burmese military's brutality will only increase.

Sanctions and Arms Embargoes

The United States added an [additional 16 individuals and the military regime's State Administrative Council \(SAC\)](#) to its growing list of sanctions. While these moves are beneficial, the military can still rely heavily on income from Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprises (MOGE) to fund their brutal campaign. MOGE is partnered with several international corporations, including [US based Chevron](#), the largest US based investor in Burma². Instead of the government of Burma and its people benefitting from natural resources within the country, the oil payments have [historically gone](#) to shareholders of the military-linked MOGE. By sanctioning MOGE, the US Government can cut off funds that pay military personnel, purchase weapons, and line the pockets of military connected individuals. This call is [echoed](#) by over 440 civil society organizations in Burma and represented in the bi-partisan letter sent by congressional representatives to the Departments of Treasury and State on April 27, 2021. While the May 26 decision by Total to suspend some dividend payments will put slight pressure on the junta, hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue will continue to flow from gas sales, royalties, and [corporate income taxes](#) and additional sanctions are needed to cause significant economic impact to the military.

The US should act quickly to end military access to funds. The Burmese military visited Russia in May 2021 to [discuss projects](#) to include arms and military hardware purchases. Burma is already successfully utilizing their current arms supply to commit war crimes across the country

² On May 26, Chevron [announced](#) that it would suspend payments from a Burma-based pipeline project to limit support of the junta, however, the decision is in regards to a mere 15% dividend of profits.

and awaits delivery of fighter jets, an air defense system, and surveillance drones it [ordered prior](#) to the coup. For these reasons, an international arms embargo is an appropriate next step to address the Burmese military. Over 200 civil society organizations have [called on](#) the UNSC to enact such a measure.

War Crimes

Reports of increased violence in Burma include acts considered war crimes. Listed below are acts of concern:

- Extrajudicial killings: [Sagaing Region](#); [Mindat](#), Chin State; [Magway Region](#); [Mandalay Region](#); [Karenni State](#), [Bago Region](#), [Mon State](#)
- Torture: [Magway Region](#), [Shan State](#), [Yangon Region](#)
- Rape: [Mindat](#), Chin State, [general reports](#)
- Attacks on places of worship: [Kachin State](#), [Karenni State](#), [Rangoon](#)
- Attacks on educational facilities: [occupation of schools](#)
- Attacks on hospitals/medical facilities: [occupation of hospitals](#)
- Attacks on humanitarian assistance: healthcare workers arrested [Mindat](#), Chin State; ambulances seized [Matupi](#), Chin State; humanitarian aid trucks attacked [Mindat](#), Chin State; obstructing medical personnel from assisting injured at [protest sites](#); [looting](#) medical equipment
- Pillaging a town: [Sagaing Region](#), [Kachin State](#), [Chin State](#), [Shan State](#)
- Extensive destruction of property: residential areas [Mindat](#), [Chin State](#), [Kachin State](#), [Karen State](#) market place [Sagaing Region](#), [Shan State](#)

The available data suggests these crimes committed by the military are widespread, with 11 of the 14 states or regions in Burma reporting one or more war crimes. With limited internet access across the country, it is likely that additional reports have yet to reach the outside world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Impose immediate targeted sanctions on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise and the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank;*
2. *Provide immediate cross-border assistance, directly to local civil society organizations, particularly those working in ethnic areas and conflict zones;*
3. *Suspend all political and financial support to the military regime and the peace process, including to the Joint Peace Fund;*
4. *Recognize and engage with the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate government of Burma instead of the illegal military junta;*
5. *Urge the Thai government to give protection and shelter to refugees fleeing Burmese military attacks and persecution, allow humanitarian aid agencies to access and assist these refugees, and allow humanitarian aid to be delivered cross-border to conflict-affected ethnic communities;*
6. *Exert all possible pressure through every available means, including multilateral, regional and bilateral engagement, to ensure that the military:*
 - *Ends all violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, especially in ethnic and ceasefire areas, and ensures that all civilians are protected, including lifting all barriers to humanitarian assistance and ensuring the non-interference of aid to ethnic areas;*
 - *Immediately stops offensives throughout the country, pulls back troops and demilitarizes ethnic areas, respects the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, and proceeds with political or tripartite dialogue;*
 - *Immediately and unconditionally releases all arbitrarily detained protesters and political prisoners, including those who won seats in the November 2020 election;*
 - *Immediately restores full and continuous access to the Internet and all forms of communications;*
 - *Allows the parliament elected by the will of the people in November 2020 to take office and allow such duly-elected Members of Parliament to fulfil their mandate without impediment.*

VOICE OF A ROHINGYA

Ro Yassin Abdumonab is lucky. Unlike many of his friends and neighbors, when his home in the northern side of Maungdaw in Rakhine State was burned to ash by the Tatmadaw, he had not been locked inside. Nor had he been thrown into the nearby river to drown alongside the village children. He had even managed to escape the arsenic that killed so many of his friends and never had to look into the eyes of an unknown soldier as the soldier slowly throttled the life from his body.

Instead, Yassin watched as the Tatmadaw stripped away every bit of happiness from the Rohingya people, his people. All valuable property was taken. Community mothers and sisters were raped. Others, not killed in indiscriminate shootings, were arbitrarily arrested and jailed.



Elderly Rohingya man seeks shelter under a tarpaulin after a March 2021 fire destroyed parts of the Balukhali refugee camp in Cox's Bazar.

Photo Cred: Ro Yassin Abdumonab

Finally, unable to take the continued violence and persecution, Yassin and his family fled. They ran from village to village, seeking refuge in the surrounding forests. Days went by with nothing to eat and the constant fear of the patrolling military, who shot whomever they found, cut short any respite.

Hoping to escape the nightmare, Yassin and his family joined the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya following a trail of death into Bangladesh. Bodies marked the way, lining the path and littering nearby paddy fields. It took nearly seven grueling days, but Yassin finally managed to cross the border and reach the Kutupalong refugee camp.

However, what Yassin found in Kutupalong was not an end to the nightmare, but its new form. Instead of being burned alive or drowned, Yassin watched the Rohingya children's future destroyed by a lack of education and opportunity. Due to the scarcity of jobs, many turned to criminal activity, including prostitution and drugs. In response, the Bangladeshi government erected great barbed-wire fences and severely restricted movement in and out of the camp. As for the community elders who had managed to escape being arbitrarily shot or strangled, Yassin witnessed many waste away, worrying themselves to death over never being able to return to their home country.

Today, it has been four years since Yassin arrived in the camp and very little has changed. Even the weather brutalizes Kutupalong. Monsoon season brings mudslides, soil erosion and floods. In contrast, the hot months are marked by a general malaise and unrest as the community languishes under hot tarpaulin and bamboo shelters. Disease runs rampant, and the community is struggling to contend with the new layer of hardship brought on by Covid-19.

Yassin continues to keep his vigil, bearing witness to the plight of his people. Now an accomplished photographer, he knows that the Rohingya are in an untenable position. There is no future for them in Kutupalong. Therefore, he calls upon the United States to help bring an end to the nightmare of the Rohingya people. They belong in Burma, with full rights and citizenship. After all, it is their home.

AN OVERVIEW OF BURMA'S ETHNIC STATES

CHIN

Formed in early April, the [Chinland Defense Force](#) (CDF) is attacking and ambushing Burmese military soldiers in order to fulfill its duty of protecting its people. In retaliation, the Burmese military ramped up its violent campaign in Chin State. After the May 4 conflict between the CDF and the Burmese military, the [military arrested three people](#) after raiding a home in Hakha. Since the junta imposed [martial law](#) in Mindat on May 13, the Burmese military began using youth as human shields. They also occupy hospitals and schools while destroying surrounding property through coordinated land and air attacks. The Burmese military launched a [coordinated attack against the CDF](#) on May 15. Several waves of incoming troops in dozens of helicopters and relentless artillery strikes on the town [forced the CDF to leave](#) Mindat in order to prevent further loss of the local people. An estimated 15,000+ civilians were forced to flee to neighboring Mizoram, India. On May 16, [five civilians were killed](#) from the Burmese military shelling of Mindat. On May 18, a 9-year-old boy was killed by a landmine.

KACHIN

On Monday, May 10, [Burmese military forces shot at civilians](#) that were caught outside after the 8pm curfew in Namti, Mogaung Township. According to locals, at least three were injured and one was killed from a gunshot to the head. Starting on May 11, [armed conflict between the KIA and the Burmese military](#) lasted for a three-day period in Mansi Township and Manda Mountain. Since the loss of the strategic locations on Alaw Bum and Salaung Hill, the Burmese military continue [airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling](#) of KIA battalions to recapture the prized locations. While most residents in Mansi Township fled the fighting, it is predicted that IDP numbers will continue to increase. A total of 166 IDP camps currently host a population of [nearly 150,000 IDPs](#) in Kachin and Northern Shan States. 3,000 displaced Kachin in the last three months have settled in 13 new camps located in Hpakant, Waingmaw, Momauk, Bhamo, and Ingyanyan. On May 24, [hundreds flee from Momauk Township](#) after the Burmese military launched artillery strikes at their villages.

KARENNI

On the evening of April 30, [74 Karenni youth were arrested](#) after returning home to Hpruso town from a skills development course. They are currently being detained in Loikaw. In retaliation to the Karenni People's Defense Force offensive in Demoso, the [Burmese military launched heavy artillery attacks](#) on civilians residing in Demoso and Loikaw townships since May 23. On May 24, as part of the retaliation, the [Burmese military fired mortar shells](#) at Sacred Heart Church in Kayanthayar Parish near Loikaw, where nearly 300 people were seeking shelter from the armed conflict between the Burmese military and the KPDF. On May 31, the Burmese military launched airstrikes, in addition to continued heavy artillery attacks, on Demoso Township. At least [26 civilians were killed and many others were injured](#) from the Burmese military's deadly retaliatory assault. Tens of thousands of Karenni were forced to flee from their homes in Demoso, Loikaw, and Moebye townships.

MON

Mon State has suffered explosions in its cities almost every day since late April, rocking [offices and an NLD leader's home](#). Several people were [injured in these blasts](#) and police [arrested a few youths](#), though it does not seem they were connected to the attacks. On May 19 and 20 alone, Ye township saw [four bomb blasts](#) that injured four individuals, including a child. Mon State has been heavily policed since the coup, with [checkpoints at all entrances to cities](#), a curfew, and [media blackout](#). [Eight people have been killed](#) in Mon State after curfew and 300 have been arrested. Over [3,000 teachers](#) from 10 Mon State townships have been suspended by the junta due to involvement in Civil Disobedience Movement protests. There are several reports of [Burmese soldiers looting and confiscating, as well as destroying property](#). Informers and plain-clothes police officers are not only targeting CDM activists in Mon state, but also medical doctors and one member of the Myanmar Red Cross Society.

KAREN

[70,000 civilians in Karen State](#) and at least 90% of the rural population have been displaced by Burma Army attacks since March. The military has launched mortars and airstrikes into villages, destroying homes and schools and [killing more than 20 people](#). [Refoulement by Thai forces](#) has been a problem as of recent- thousands of IDPs have not been able to seek refuge in neighboring Thailand [despite reassurances from the Thai Prime Minister](#). Displaced people have little access to [food, shelter, and healthcare](#). As a result, there has been a spike of COVID cases in IDP camps, forcing at least [one camp to go into lockdown](#). Despite the ongoing Burmese military's ground and air attacks, some [aid relief reached 40,000](#) displaced Karen. Free Burma Rangers distributed rice, medicine, and tarps for temporary shelters in Papun District and Butho Township. From May 16 to 24, the [Burmese military launched mortar shells](#) into Taw Mu Pler Mae, Ler Mu Plaw, Kaw Kyo, Kaw Ter Der, Ta Ner Shee Daw Ko, Ker Ser Pa, Ko Ka Paw, Wah Kaw Hta, and Thwa Ko Lo villages.

SHAN

The largest persisting issue in Shan State is fighting amongst the Burmese Army, Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), and Northern Alliance forces. This conflict has displaced [more than 2,000](#) in Kyaukme, Hsipaw, and Namtu townships. A May 24 report estimates that over [2,510 villagers](#) are sheltering in the Wan Seing village Buddhist monastery after fleeing clashes between the RCSS and Ta'ang National Liberation Army. Anti-junta protests have been ongoing in Muse. As a result, security forces arrested [eight young activists on May 11](#), including [a 17-year-old](#). Those detained were reportedly beaten by police and tortured while in custody. Despite threats of arrest from the Burmese military, youth in Pindaya Township have [continued protests](#) against the junta. Numerous bomb blasts have resulted from increased militarization in the area. The most recent blast [killed](#) a Shan State university student on May 19. Two youths were [beaten and arrested](#) by Burmese military for spray painting anti-regime slogans. On May 26, five youths collecting donations for IDPs were arrested. More than 50 people were arrested in Taunggyi after a bomb exploded in front of the military-backed USDP office.

RAKHINE

Teachers have been targeted recently by the junta in Rakhine State. Teachers were ordered [back to work on May 3](#), but many ignored the order and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. Many university students and staff have refused to participate in classes and [several student unions have pledged support](#) to anti-junta activists. Unexploded ordnances persist in Rakhine State. [Three people were injured](#) by an explosion on May 7. The Burmese military [previously promised](#) Rakhine villagers that all unexploded mines would be cleared, however this initiative has been largely ineffective and resulted in 45 deaths and 91 injuries since December 2020. Further, Rakhine State's IDPs continue to suffer, with an estimated [100,000 individuals](#) surviving in makeshift camps unsuited for the country's upcoming rainy season.



Home destroyed after Burmese military fired heavy artillery on Yayyo village in Loikaw Township, Karenni State on May 24.

Photo cred: Kantarawaddy Times