

# **DISPLACEMENT ON THE RISE:**

## *A Crisis in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi Region*

By: The Human Rights Foundation of Monland



## PART 1: SITUATION OVERVIEW

The short-lived era of democratic reform in Burma came to an alarming halt on 1 February 2021, when the leaders of the Burmese military seized power in a well-orchestrated coup. The democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government was overthrown and key members of parliament arrested. The military generals who staged the power grab said that the November 2020 election was fraudulent. But despite their claims, there has been no evidence of this at all.

Not long after the military took control, laws were amended to make it easier to prosecute anyone who challenged their authority. The most widely used law has been Section 505 of the Penal Code, used by the authorities to stifle dissent. The law stipulates that it is illegal for anyone to make, publish or circulate any statement, rumor or report with intent to cause, or likelihood to cause fear or alarm to the public. The free press specifically has been targeted for reporting on the military's violence and like many others, have faced charges under botched trials by the junta-controlled courts inside detention centers and prisons. The moral landscape of human rights in Burma has been eroded and deliberately derailed by the Burmese military.

But civilians have responded with state-wide protests. The demonstrations went on for months, and drew thousands condemning the actions of the military. The junta in turn, at the direction of the so-called State Administrative Council (SAC), has continued on a spree of mass human rights violations across the country. Despite bloodshed, warrantless arrests and impositions of Martial Law in several townships, the people of Burma remain defiant. General strikes led to the establishment of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and a shadow government, the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) was formed.

Resistance to the military continues to take on different forms. The military's attacks on all people of various ages, genders, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities have triggered growing calls for more unity and collective action to overthrow the junta. These efforts are a growing force in the rallying calls for long-needed change in Burma, including for a democratic, federal union.

## PART 2:

# INTRODUCTION

In areas which the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) works in, including Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region, the assault of fundamental freedoms against innocent civilians has been widespread. This is especially true for those associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), an active movement of resistance taking place across multiple fronts, from striking doctors to armed protesters in the street. Those arrested have been forced to endure torture in detention. According to HURFOM data, at least 41 have been killed across the target area states. Another 222 have been injured, while 1,372 have been arrested and detained since the coup. But the nationwide death count has soared to almost 900, with over 6,000 arrested. HURFOM has also observed an increase in the confiscation of mobile devices and destruction of private property, including people's homes.

The sense of hope and freedom brought on from Myanmar's democracy era is now totally lost. Survival has become the main focus as rallying forces continue to be fueled by wide-spread rejection of a military-government. The only way to beat the junta is to stay alive and to find new ways of delegitimizing their rule. Human rights defenders are regularly on the run, forced to meet in secret with other dissidents to overcome the harsh realities of the present moment which people are being strained to contend with.

The chaos and instability of the security forces brazen attacks have affected thousands of civilians who have fled their homes to seek safety. HURFOM has categorized the mass internal displacement into three groups of people fleeing: political dissidents escaping persecution, civilians fearing the junta in their villages, townships and those who have been economically impacted seeking better opportunities. Further, this short briefing paper outlines the impacts of militarization on displaced communities since the coup and the underlying consequences. In addition, this briefer also makes direct calls for action regarding the humanitarian situation in Burma, where for the most vulnerable demands an immediate response.

## **PART 3: FIELDWORKERS NOTE**

HURFOM has 18 direct staff working in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi Region. The organization includes a network of over 50 individuals throughout Burma. Within this team, we will continue to monitor the human rights situation in our target areas as closely as possible. Given the new limitations that civil society organizations now face in the post-coup environment, we have found that the human rights situation is of an even greater concern.

Fieldworkers continue to document human rights violations as best as they can, given the extreme risks they face on a daily basis. The growing threats to their safety only speak to the society of fear the junta has created. HURFOM's documentation and data is sourced from our network of field staff reporting on the ground. The restrictions imposed by the junta have made it much more difficult to access all of our target areas freely and without repercussions. The Burma Army is known for intimidating and harassing fieldworkers documenting human rights violations. Security forces often threaten survivors who share their stories with rights groups as well. But at the moment, HURFOM is safely able to work in ceasefire areas and armed controlled territories of the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party. Recording of events and testimonies is extremely high-risk outside of these areas.

Therefore, the information outlined in this short briefing paper includes HURFOM data from the ground. Many of our estimates are likely significantly higher given the challenges we face collecting these data. Our team is immensely grateful to those who shared their fears and hopes for the future with us.

## **PART 4:**

# **TYPES OF RELOCATION**

### **A) Political Dissidents Fleeing Oppression**

Both human rights defenders and local civilians have been forced to seek refuge and protection as a result of the expanded military operations across Burma.

The following are three categories with related case studies on why people are escaping.

#### **1) Political Dissidents Fleeing Oppression**

It has become clear that the SAC leadership did not expect the mass resistance to their coup. In the months that have passed, resentment for the deeply unpopular Burma Army increases. Those who are leading calls for the release of all political prisoners, for the resumption of the democratically elected NLD government and an end to rights violations, now have a target on their backs. Junta-backed security forces have no patience for the protests. Therefore, those organizing rallies and lobbying activities against the military's interests are having to do so in hiding. This group of people includes leaders in the CDM, high-profile politicians and activists.

The political oppression they face has forced them to abandon their homes and flee to the Thai-Burma border. It's pushed them into ethnic armed controlled areas where conflict has been waging for decades. They must be on the move constantly to avoid the possibility of arrest, which could easily result in torture and death. In recent weeks, security forces have searched homes and arrested the family members of those detained if a dissident they are seeking is not home. In HURFOM target areas, it's estimated that 500 dissidents from Mon State have been forced to flee for political reasons. In addition, 300 have fled in Hpa-An, Karen State and at least 700 in Dawei. Across all three target areas, over 1500 have had to seek safety away from their home for their political activities.

The majority of the detainees are young protesters and activists. Those in hiding are unfortunately often found as movement restrictions in several places in Hpa-An and Mawlamyine have been increased. The parents of those arrested claim the junta is fabricating evidence to justify charges against their children.

Most detainees are young protesters and activists. Those in hiding are unfortunately being found, amid heightened movement restrictions in several places in Hpa-An and Mawlamyine. The parents of those arrested claim the junta is fabricating evidence to justify charges against their children.

### CASE STUDIES

**Case 1: On June 13, thirty-two young CDM protesters were sentenced up to two years imprisonment by the junta court. Most of them were arrested mid-March and charged with Penal Code 505 (a) and (b) included in the judgements. A source close to one of the detainees from Eain Du, Hpa-an, said those arrested instead of their family members who were involved in CDM and in hiding, were included in the charges.**

**Case 2: Four young activists and two university students were abducted from their homes by security forces on 2 June. Junta troops are relying on informers in each quarter. A family member told HURFOM: “My sister [Ma Nge Lay] was abducted on June 2. She received warning messages from the informers a few days ago, but she decided not to hide.” Ma Nge Lay was arrested and taken to Kyaikmayaw prison.**

**Case 3: Arbitrary arrests following midnight raids and unregistered overnight guest checking is ongoing in Mudon township. At least five civilians were abducted after the SAC security troops raided the homes of suspected CDM activists and protesters. A resident explained to HURFOM, “About five people who I know well have been arrested since May 28. Some were arrested for no reason. The police officer just said they had their reasons and took them away. U Chit Win, 60, and U Hla Wai, from Sar Sin Ward, were abducted from their houses for no reason.” In some cases, the security troops could not find their targeted person and arrested the families. “Kyaw Thu Myo was arrested instead of his sister, who was involved in CDM and therefore is in hiding,” said his friend.**

## 2) CIVILIANS FLEEING AMID INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE BY THE JUNTA

Since the coup, the armed forces have killed eight people in Mon State, including an 11-year-old child. Over 200 people have been charged, and evidence is being fabricated to justify the regime's harsh crackdown. Children are no exception. at least 73 have been killed by the junta. They too are being targeted and becoming political prisoners. Subsequently, rural people are seeking more secure places, but there is nowhere safe to go under this illegitimate regime.

State-sponsored human rights violations are happening daily with total impunity. With the military in control of key government ministries, there is no law. There are no domestic mechanisms of accountability being upheld. The violations are ongoing and have led to at least 1000 residents (in HURFOM target areas) fleeing daily threats and violence. The lack of security in these areas only exacerbates people's fears. Many are forced to relocate at least temporarily as they hope for conflict to end so that they can return safely to their communities.

The junta has also employed a "stop and frisk" policy to intimidate and extort possessions from civilians. Locals have said to "check bags and back-up phones before leaving home." Security forces are seeking any excuse to imprison civilians who they find are opposed to the coup. The reasons used by the junta to justify their arrests are outlandish. Evidence based on case-studies from HURFOM indicates that the regime is doing whatever they can to maintain dominance and control.

## PART 4:

# TYPES OF RELOCATION

## B) Civilians Fleeing Amid Indiscriminate Violence by the Junta

## CASE STUDIES

**Case 1:** On 13 June, SAC security troops abducted 20 villagers in Kanet-Thiri village, Thayet Chaung Township, in Dawei, according to local sources: “These arrests were not explained. Due to the increase in the number of soldiers, we have faced more movement restrictions. We feel like we are in a risky situation,” said an anonymous villager who confirmed the arrests and explained the current situation in Thayet-Chaung Township.

**Case 2:** On 15 June, in Ye Township, Mon State, an unknown gunman shot two civilians. One died on the spot. “The incident occurred at 3PM in front of the B.E.M.S (2),” a local resident reported. “My native place is a battleground now. How long we have to live with in fear and anxiety?”

**Case 3:** A local traveler was shot and injured by security forces based in Kamyaw Kin Bridge, in Dawei on the morning of 16 June. Their arrest was confirmed and they were sent to the military hospital, according to locals.

## PART 4:

# TYPES OF RELOCATION

### C) Livelihood Deprivation and Economic Insecurity

#### 3) CIVILIANS FLEEING AMID INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE BY THE JUNTA

As a result of the military's harsh economic policies along with violence in both urban and rural areas, livelihood opportunities have been lost. It's a particularly pressing problem for civilians in rural areas as they are dependent on farming and factory work for their source of income. But an increased junta presence has made people afraid to go to work. The junta is also planting more landmines and forcing villagers to porter in these parts. It's led to a growing sense of uncertainty which has forced many to abandon their livelihoods in their hometowns to seek opportunities elsewhere. The lack of consistent income has caused growing food insecurity as they struggle to provide for themselves and their families. The desperation has pushed villagers to flee to border areas neighboring Thailand, such as Myawaddy, Tachileik and Three Pagodas Pass.

Although it's easier to find work in areas under ethnic armed control, travel between regions has become extremely high-risk. The Thai authorities have also increased security along the border to prevent the crossing of Burmese citizens. Attempts to cross the border to Thailand to find work are illegal and civilians are often arrested or detained then promptly deported back to Burma by Thai authorities.

Many young people and children are suffering in this current socio-economic climate. Children are among those who have been arrested when migrating across the Thai border and mothers are separated from their children. This alone is enough reason for Thailand to act on humanitarian grounds and offer protection to the thousands of newly displaced IDPs. HURFOM estimates that 2000 villagers from Mon State, Karen State and Dawei have been forced to flee in their attempts to find work opportunities in other parts of the country, or in Thailand.

Since the coup, numerous checkpoints along Ye–Dawei Motor Road have been operated by various branches of the state army and security troops, including special police, riot police, and other army–related groups like Border Guard Forces. Due to these checkpoints, civilians are forced to pay unofficial arbitrary fees and fines. Under the guise of ‘security,’ junta troops take local goods and demand they pay a high tax. One civilian said, “I have to pay about 40 % of taxes for my rubber products.” After the coup, the army became what they call themselves: “father of the nation.”

Restrictions on trade, travel, and cultivation have increased. Life is difficult for individuals attempting to make a living to survive. Many villagers living in areas under the full control of the SAC army control are restricted from leaving their villages (to Dawei or Ye town) and must pay for passes from local authorities to get permission to leave. This is more than corruption; the junta is abusing their power.

### **CASE STUDIES**

**Case 1: On 9 May, Thai border police arrested over 40 migrants who attempted to cross the border to Thailand: “We know the Thailand COVID–19 measures and restrictions, but we faced complicated lives amid the political crisis,” said an arrested young Karen woman.**

**Case 2: “Trade restrictions have been imposed since the military seized power. This is a threat to our economic survival. That is why we have no other option but to flee our homes to the border for more opportunities,” said a local sharing their experience to HURFOM.**

**Case 3: “For villagers like my family who were attempting to work in our rubber plantation far away from my home, it is nearly impossible to find work to make a living. The establishment of army camps has led to enforced restrictions. Many villagers are facing these new rules and regulations. Our harvests are destroyed or lost or stolen, when I leave to try and sell my rubber.”**

# PART 5:

## CONCLUSION

Each individual case of suffering, either through escape or from losing a loved one reflects the thousands of civilians facing the same pain across the country. Protection is desperately needed for human rights defenders who still remain in hiding. Humanitarian assistance is required for the over 100,000 internally displaced persons in Burma today. Further, the unlawful arrest and detainment of civilians must be met with international consequences, along with their immediate release.

The situation for all people inside Burma is deeply worrying. Even for those who have managed to flee to ethnic armed controlled areas, life is still incredibly challenging. Armed groups are also limited in the food and shelter and it's difficult to take on hundreds of new people fleeing. It's even more perilous for people fleeing urban areas. Most do not understand the background of armed groups and are unfamiliar with the area. Meanwhile, pressure is mounting on the Thai side to act in line with humanitarian norms.

HURFOM has learned that due to political tensions and restrictions, cross border aid is the only way to provide emergency assistance to ethnic armed controlled areas sharing borders with Thailand. Along with other civil society organizations in our network, we joined calls to international donors to work with local community-based service providers, organizations, and civil society groups in order to coordinate an effective and efficient humanitarian response.

The communities in HURFOM target areas and across Burma cannot afford to wait any longer. They need immediate humanitarian assistance. The reality is that displacement is on the rise. It's a marker of inhumanity when a person is denied the right to feel safe in their own homelands. The junta must not be allowed to continue their rule.

## PART 5:

### RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Junta Military Council\*

1. Immediately issue commands to stop the assault of civilians by ending the use of widespread violence to perpetrate human rights violations.
2. Forfeit power, and transfer governance to the democratically elected National League for Democracy.
3. Co-operate with the international community and domestic accountability mechanisms which hold those responsible for crimes against civilians.
4. Immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.
5. Adhere to international norms and principles which condone the brutalization of innocent civilians and the free press.

**\*HURFOM does not recognize or accept the military council as the leaders of Burma. They have created a tirade of problems in the country, and are responsible for war crimes and must be held accountable. The National Unity Government of Myanmar is the interim government of Burma which should be recognized.**

To the International Community

1. Increase pressure on the junta to stop their offensives against civilians, particularly rights defenders who are at high risk of torture and unlawful detainment.
2. Support calls for a global arms embargo to immediately halt the sale and supply of weapons to the junta.
3. Support calls for a referral of Burma to the International Criminal Court so that perpetrators of human rights are held accountable under rule of law, and to set a precedent in the country that such atrocities will not be tolerated.
4. Recognition of the National Unity Government which is represented by Members of Parliament democratically government in the 2020 General Election.

## PART 5:

### RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Donors and international agencies focusing on war-affected refugees and IDPs must recognize the work of local community-based service providers, organizations, and civil society groups who are already trusted by the beneficiaries to coordinate an effective and efficient humanitarian response.
6. Neighboring countries which border Burma such as India and Thailand must protect refugee rights. They must sign on to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, to ensure refugees are granted protection and access to UN agencies and humanitarian organizations for their immediate assistance.

#### To the National Unity Government of Myanmar

1. To organize and implement an effective and efficient humanitarian response which meets the need of the current refugee crisis.
2. Refugees must be recognized as past survivors of human rights violations and be granted victim reparations.
3. Transitional justice mechanisms must be adopted to support potential victims in the right to justice.
4. The threat of further displacement must be recognized as a serious threat to the livelihoods of thousands forced to flee violent, and solutions must be matched to their needs.

## **ABOUT HURFOM**

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HURFOM was founded by exiled pro-democracy students from the 1988 uprisings, recent activists and Mon community leaders and youth. Its primary objective is the restoration of democracy, human rights and genuine peace in Burma. HURFOM is a non-profit organization, and all its members are volunteers with a shared vision for peace in the country.

## **WEBSITE**

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<http://rehmonnya.org/>

## **SOCIALS**

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