



# **Destruction & Displacement: Civilian Safety and Security at Risk Post-Coup in Myanmar**



*Photo: Kantarawaddy Times  
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**The Network for Human Rights Documentation - Burma**

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## SITUATION OVERVIEW

After ten years of a slow but steady transition to a democratic civilian government, the Myanmar Tatmadaw launched a military coup in the early morning hours of 1 February 2021. Their actions resulted in the unlawful detainment and arrest of political leaders and activists.

The coup came as a new parliament was set to begin. The Myanmar Tatmadaw showed early signs of refusing to cooperate with the democratically elected party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) following the November results of the 2020 General Election. The NLD won in a landslide. However, the military alleged voter fraud without evidence and continued to challenge the Union Election Commission's authority on the matter. The coup is the military's response to what they feel was a fraudulent, illegitimate election and went as far to say that their actions were 'inevitable.'

This situation has since put Myanmar at a crossroads; a departure from the norms of governance over the last ten years.

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## INTRODUCTION

Myanmar has been embroiled in decades of internal warfare. It is a country, though vast in resources and diversity, has been oppressed by authoritarian leaders who have squandered political dissent in exchange for more power and profit. Victims of human rights violations across Myanmar's 70-year civil war have not received reparations. Before and after the failed coup, junta soldiers continue to brutally crackdown on peaceful protesters. They are also responsible for arbitrarily arresting and detaining civilians, torturing them, killing them and committing acts of sexual violence against young women and girls. Moreover, shelling in ethnic areas is ongoing, which has resulted in widespread internal displacement. The coup by the military has only exacerbated brewing conflict in the borderlands as the junta's quest for power and control has blinded them from justice and meaningful reforms. Moreover, the perpetrators must be brought to justice.

Displacement is rampant and widespread in Myanmar as intensified clashes between

the Tatmadaw and armed groups force thousands to flee. The establishment of the People's Defense Force has forced civilians to defend themselves against the regime by taking up arms. Junta security forces have been relentless in their offensives, particularly in civilian areas. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has put internal displacement in Myanmar at over 330,000.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the junta continues to block aid and urgently needed supplies to displaced groups. This short briefing paper will detail the impacts on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in ethnic areas of Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah and Shan States from 1 May to 15 June and make strong recommendations to the international community to put an end to decades of entrenched military impunity – which has contributed to prolonged conflict and a war on human rights. It is based on accounts from local and international media, and from reports and briefing papers from ND-Burma members.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar: Humanitarian Snapshot, June 2021 (covering conflict-affected areas under 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan), 16 June 2021



Photo: Kantarawaddy Times | May 26 2021

## DISPLACEMENT IN CONFLICT AREAS

Civilians have been forced to suffer from the Myanmar Army's violence for decades. The coup has further emboldened the junta's operations as urban and rural areas witness the expansion of military forces. The following section outlines the timeline of clashes and subsequent impact on residents.



### CHIN STATE

The situation in Chin State began to worsen in May 2021 when civilians in the town of Mindat demanded the release of protesters arrested by the junta. When they were not freed, violence against the Myanmar Tatmadaw was initiated through the establishment of the Chinland Defense Force (CDF). The junta in response declared martial law in the town – which too went on ignored. The military has continued to act with impunity as it sexually assaults young women and girls, and commits acts of torture, arbitrary arrest and detention and killing.

Those who have managed to flee are also not safe, as they risk bombardments by the regime. Those displaced are in urgent need of food, medicine and supplies as the Tatmadaw continues to deploy the use of highly weaponized attacks against the local community. According to media reports, at least 10 junta soldiers were killed, and approximately 20 critically injured in five clashes between 19 and 20 May in Chin State.<sup>2</sup> Executive Director of ND-Burma affiliate member, the Chin Human Rights Organization, noted that over 35,000 civilians from Chin State have fled their homes since the attack on Lot Klone. He added the main target of the Tatmadaw is young people – resulting in many forced to flee.

2 New Clashes Between Myanmar's Military and Ethnic Armies Exacerbate Refugee Crisis, 20 May 2021



## KAREN STATE

The Myanmar Army has fired mortar shelling into villages and farms, killed and injured people in Karen State. People are also being arbitrarily arrested and forced to work for the military. Since the military staged the coup, the regime has carried out multiple air attacks which killed at least 16 people and injured 20, and displaced more than 70,000 people. Families have had to move and hide in the forest whenever the Burmese military ground and air forces attack. Ongoing clashes on 1 June between the junta and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a splinter revolution group based in Karen State, displaced an additional 500 villagers from South Myawaddy, Pa Lu village on the Thai side of the border, according to Karen rights groups.<sup>3</sup>

Since the coup, there have been 13 airstrikes, 13 injuries, 18 deaths and numerous homes and properties destroyed in Karen State.<sup>4</sup> Indiscriminate firing remains a serious risk in civilian areas of Karen State where those killed have been fired at in their homes, foraging for goods and attempting to live their lives peacefully.

3 Burma Army Fights DKBA and its Allies – 600 Villagers Displaced in Myawaddy Township, Karen News, 2 June 2021

4 See Karen Human Rights Group Twitter: <https://twitter.com/khrg>



## KAYAH STATE

In Kayah State, fighting remains rampant particularly in Demoso township. In a short while, nearly one third of the population in Kayah State has been displaced due to fighting between the Myanmar Army and the Karenni People's Defense Force. Thousands have been forced to flee to the jungle where internally displaced civilians are running out of urgently needed medical supplies, shelter and food as the number of IDPs in the State passes 100,000.<sup>5</sup>

On the morning of 24 May, a church was bombed in the state capitol of Loikaw. The explosion killed four civilians; one man and three women who were sheltering in the Church after clashes broke out near their home.<sup>6</sup> Six were seriously injured. The Tatmadaw has increased their operations in Kayah State and have been contributing to an environment of fear. Civilians have reported being chased and of indiscriminate firing. Explosions and the sounds of helicopters can be heard throughout the night.

5 Number of IDPs Surpasses 100 000 in Kayah State, 14 June 2021, Development Media Group

6 Four killed as military shells a Catholic church near Loikaw, 24 May 2021, Myanmar Now



## KAYAH STATE CONTINUED

Reports from local media also indicated that phone lines, Internet and electricity in some areas was cut in Demoso Township. This has forced hundreds to hide in nearby forests as the junta seeks to punish civilians for the resistance of the KPDF. The risks for those trying to bring protection to the displaced are high. Two youth were shot and killed by the junta while trying to deliver food to refugees in temporary camps.

Nonetheless, protests against the military dictatorship in Kayah State are continuing as many expressed their frustration with the Army's presence in their townships, as heavy artillery and weapons are waged against them.



## KACHIN AND SHAN STATE

Fighting between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Tatmadaw in Kutkai township, Shan State also continued, including the attack of six military boxer trucks carrying oil along the highway from Muse, in what was a suspected delivery from China to fuel the Myanmar Army's aviation.<sup>7</sup> Clashes between the KIA, members of the Northern Alliance and Myanmar Tatmadaw have forced hundreds of villagers in surrounding townships to flee, and to also dig bunkers in case an emergency retreat is necessary. Following clashes on 19 May between the Restoration Council of Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Shan State Progressive Party, 1000 more villagers were displaced in Hsipaw Township. Additionally, over 3,000 Kachin refugees also were forced to flee their villages to escape being caught in the crossfire.<sup>8</sup> The Chairman of the Kachin Baptist Church added that the military was also blocking food transportation routes. Most recently, a convoy sending food and medicine for displaced villagers in Southern Shan State was set on fire.<sup>9</sup>

As reported by ND-Burma member, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand in their latest briefing paper, "Deadly reprisals: regime steps up attacks on civilians in retaliation for conflict losses in northern Burma," notes how security forces have continued to use live ammunition against unarmed protesters, including by detaining suspected activists and torturing suspects.<sup>10</sup> Survivors were beaten in the heads and burned with cigarettes.<sup>11</sup>

7 New clashes break out between KIA, regime forces in northern Shan State, 18 May 2021, Myanmar Now

8 Fighting in Myanmar's Kachin State Drives More Refugees Into Camps, With Food Aid Blocked by Government Troops, 17 May 2021, Radio Free Asia

9 Tatmadaw Destroys Food Destined for IDPs in Southern Shan State, 14 June 2021, Network Media Group

10 Deadly reprisals: regime steps up attacks on civilians in retaliation for conflict losses in northern Burma, 16 June 2021, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand

11 Ibid

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## IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT:

There are many effects on populations as a result of being forcibly displaced. All groups suffer from mental and in some cases physical trauma as a result of being forced to leave their homes. Unfortunately, in the current context few mental health resources, such as counselling are available on the ground to displaced groups who are living in deeply remote areas where Internet connections for example, are weak. In these situations, survival is the number one priority.

### LIVELIHOOD AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

1

IDPs are fearful for their futures from various standpoints, including economic security. Families are concerned with how to ensure their children stay healthy and maintain access to education. Displacement disrupts all avenues of opportunity.

Prospects for work in the current economic environment have posed new threats. Any indicator of owning or working for an establishment which is anti-military could come with a warrantless arrest, detainment, torture or death at any moment. In addition, many businesses have been forced to close. With several townships being described as ‘ghost-towns.’<sup>12</sup> There are no customers and no way to safely earn a profit.

With limited ways to earn an income, the future has become even more uncertain for IDPs who foresee finding shelter and food as their daily focus.

<sup>12</sup> Mindat becomes a ghost town under military rule, 14 June 2021, Myanmar Now

### PHYSICAL SECURITY THREATS

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IDPs are in urgent need of protection. At any time, they can be targeted by the regime. This threat extends to being forced to porter for Tatmadaw soldiers where they are at risk of stepping on a landmine or being used as human shields in conflict.<sup>13</sup> In an incident reported by Myanmar Now, a 17-year-old boy was forced to hold a bag with a bomb. Junta forces threatened to shoot him if he ran away.<sup>14</sup> Those in military detention have been subject to beatings that make it impossible for them to sit and stand comfortably. They are not safe under these current conditions.

<sup>13</sup> Junta troops use locals as human shields in Moebye clash, 7 June 2021, Myanmar Now

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

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## HEALTH AND EDUCATION ACCESS

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Ethnic health care providers are filling meaningful gaps in the absence of services available for IDPs. Living in the jungle means having to withstand the elements of nature, which can be unpredictable and cruel. Rain in recent months has led to the destruction of shelters and damaged food supplies. It has also made forest terrain more difficult to travel in, especially for the elderly. Hunger is plaguing the survival of IDPs as rations are limited and humanitarian aid channels are blocked by the junta.

The humanitarian crisis has been especially hard on women and children who are more susceptible to water-borne diseases.<sup>14</sup> Airstrikes in Karen State late March forced civilians to flee where since then, at least 200 children have been suffering from diarrhea.<sup>15</sup> Women and young girls are also more prone to conflict related sexual violence. With an increased militarized presence, there is reason to fear for them.

Education has been put on hold for youth and children living in fear away from their homes and schools. They are unfairly being denied the very basic right to learn and attend school.

14 Displaced Women, Children Face ‘Humanitarian Crisis’ Following Myanmar Coup, 13 May 2021, Radio Free Asia

15 Ibid



*People flee from fighting in Myanmar’s northwestern town of Mindat in Chin State, Myanmar, May 17, 2021. Credit: Reuters.*

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## CONCLUSION

The Myanmar Tatmadaw has knowingly and willfully manipulated the democratic transition in the country and derailed any attempts for meaningful peace and reconciliation. As a result, the country has been submerged into chaos. Consequences for such negligence are long-overdue. Basic human rights and fundamental freedoms are being denied as fear forces people to abandon everything they hold of value to seek refuge at any cost.

This is history repeating itself. Lessons from the past must speak louder to the international community who have the resources and ability to act with urgency to put an end to the atrocities taking place. The Myanmar Tatmadaw must be referred to the International Criminal Court to ensure accountability from the top levels to all parties involved in committing crimes against humanity. To allow such brutal regime forces to benefit from impunity only emboldens them to act without consequences. The needs of the people of Myanmar cannot be overlooked as their security remains in limbo every day they are forced into the crossfire of a conflict threatening their existence, while denying them basic everyday privileges.

Further, reparations are long overdue for victims of past and present atrocities by the Myanmar Army. With a target on the backs of so many civilians, whether it be activists, laborers, business owners, students or politicians, the junta is acting with careless momentum in their oppressive quest for power. The displacement crisis only looks to worsen as refugees along the Thai-Burma are forced to see prospects of a safe return even more unlikely. Without any immediate course of action to set back the junta, the numbers of those unlawfully arrested, detained and mercilessly killed will only continue to rise. A response to the multiple crises unfolding must be met with action to put an immediate end to the Tatmadaw's ability to wage senseless, and perpetual violence.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. Support humanitarian aid organizations with the funding and resources needed to provide aid to their communities directly. Any facilitation of aid through the junta assumes recognition of the regime, which should not be legitimized
2. Ensure channels of aid and funding opportunities are flexible for local organizations to focus on the distribution of food, medicine and other life-saving support
3. Engage in pro-active conversations with local activists and the National Unity Government of Myanmar to understand the situation in Myanmar from a localized perspective, informed with years of dealing with the Burma Army's politics
4. The United Nations Security Council must follow up to the resolution passed on 18 June at the United Nations General Assembly by imposing an arms embargo, targeted sanctions and measures to hold the junta accountable.



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