



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## **The State Administration Council must stop weaponizing the COVID-19 pandemic**

KHRG is concerned about the State Administration Council's (SAC) mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic which has led to a spike in COVID-19 related deaths throughout the country, including in Karen State. Instead of facilitating access to vital medical care, the SAC is posing as the sole provider of healthcare and using the COVID-19 pandemic as a political weapon to legitimize their illegitimate authority. The decisions the SAC has made thus far about access to resources, services and information concerning COVID-19 have not only led to an escalating crisis, they have prevented other key actors from helping manage the spread of the virus and address the health needs of the people of Myanmar.

The SAC's perverse policy of centralizing control over the COVID-19 response infrastructure despite evidence demonstrating its inability to manage a pandemic has led to many avoidable COVID-19 related deaths, particularly during this third wave. Reportedly, the SAC has only been allowing access to medical oxygen and other COVID-19 related treatment through hospitals under military control, many of which were public hospitals prior to being taken over by the military. Many of these hospitals are also now refusing to treat patients who they suspect have been involved in the pro-democracy movements.

Distrust of the SAC has also led many people to seek private medical treatment, including from healthcare professionals who have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, as well as from ethnic healthcare providers. In rural areas, where healthcare services are already extremely limited, many villagers have no option but to turn to herbal treatments and home-based care strategies that are not sufficient to handle the more serious symptoms of COVID-19. Rather than allowing patients access to life-saving medical care through non-SAC channels, in early July the SAC prohibited the sale of medical oxygen to private clinics and individuals throughout the country. According to some reports, the SAC has also been seizing and confiscating oxygen sent by charities and NGOs destined to aid populations in ethnic areas.

Public hospitals are also unable to provide adequate healthcare to COVID-19 patients as these hospitals are understaffed since many healthcare professionals have rightly refused to work for the illegitimate SAC by joining the Civil Disobedience Movement, or have been forced to go into hiding because of threats by the SAC. Likewise, the SAC has failed to manage the spread of COVID-19 in Myanmar's prison system which led to a protest on July 23<sup>rd</sup> at Insein prison, in which prisoners demonstrated against their lack of access to healthcare.

In Karen State, the SAC is actively undermining the Karen National Union's (KNU) COVID-19 response policies. Our sources tell us that on July 17<sup>th</sup>, the SAC destroyed a KNU COVID-19 screening checkpoint at T'Kaw Boe village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. Also, after the KNU strengthened travel restrictions in Karen State in order to help contain the spread of the virus, the SAC sent a letter to the KNU disapproving because of the potential impact on the movement of SAC soldiers within the region. These actions by the SAC only serve to worsen the spread of COVID-19 in rural ethnic areas where testing kits are not easily accessible, and where COVID-19 prevention supplies and resources have long been scarce, making these populations even more vulnerable to the life-threatening impacts of COVID-19. Curbing travel restrictions to



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allow for the movement of troops also increases security risks for local villagers because it makes possible the ongoing attacks and violence on the part of armed forces in these areas.

The SAC's weaponization of the COVID-19 pandemic to assert its authority over the country is clearly evidenced by the actions it has taken to disrupt COVID-19 response and prevention services provided by private clinics and ethnic healthcare providers. The humanitarian crisis that is currently unfolding must no longer be left in the hands of the SAC to resolve. Many deaths could have already been avoided, and more deaths will continue if action is not taken soon.

KHRG condemns the SAC's disregard of article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Myanmar's legal obligation to ensure the right to health and medical services. The SAC's weaponization of the pandemic constitutes retrogressive measures not permitted under article 12. KHRG also condemns the SAC's overall failure to honor the core tenets of human rights which include the right to life and the duty to protect life. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the UN has repeatedly reminded States that the right to health and access to healthcare is inherent to the right to life, and that human rights need to be put center-stage. It is imperative that those parties who are working towards these ends are allowed to act, and engage in the COVID-19 response and prevention measures that the SAC is trying to thwart.