



August 2021

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

In the seven months which have now passed since the junta's attempted coup, the people of Burma/Myanmar have been forced to endure multiple grievances, all of which have taken a toll on the state's economy and socio-political affairs. The whole country has been pushed back to living under constant threats and insecurity. The military has used all forms of violence including arrest, killing, torture and sexual assault to suppress any actions taken against the coup. The junta also employs state-controlled media to defame women who have joined resistance forces. The junta's spokesperson in particular has used sexist and patriarchal language against these brave women in an attempt to discredit them.



1,040
KILLED



73

7,701
ARRESTED

1,192

After the arrest, the people continue to suffer from the violence during the interrogation process and in detention. Three dozen civilians have already been **tortured to death** following interrogations by the military. Many died within 24 hours of being tortured. **Eighty-two percent** of those in detention are in locations that the junta has not disclosed. At this moment, it is impossible to know how many more women and children are being abused under the scrutiny and increased surveillance of the junta.

Women face various challenges as they face the onslaught of the pandemic in the midst of the coup and crippling internal conflict. Female health workers are under attack as they join the hundreds forced to go underground as the junta seeks out medical professionals with any connection to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

SITUATION UPDATE

The worrisome situation has led some to make impossible choices at a moment's notice. Several youths **fleeing** the junta's grasp in Yangon chose death over capture as they jumped from the top of an apartment building in Yangon. At least two out of the five were killed immediately, with the others suffering from serious injuries. Of those who died was **Wai Wai Myint**, a 29-year-old mother who only recently became active in political activism. Called as 'Apple' by her close friends, she had no prior political interests until she learned about Mya Thwet Thwet Khine, a young protester who was shot dead in Naypyitaw in February. Wai Wai Myint will be remembered as a brave young woman who resisted the reins of the regime by jumping to her death to evade unjust consequences.

Alongside state-wide oppression is the increasing threat of COVID-19. The junta is unrelenting in their attacks against civilians as they send military reinforcements to ethnic areas to attempt to squander dissent rather than allow pathways for urgently needed humanitarian aid. This is appalling given that 90 percent of the country has been **impacted** by COVID-19. Decentralized ethnic health providers are filling gaps in the provision of services, though with limited funds and resources along the Thai-Burma border. Instead of containing the virus, the junta uses the pandemic to justify their attempt to isolate the population, limit their access to humanitarian aids and restrict the movements of civilian resistance groups. Furthermore, the military deploys excessive checkpoints which terrorize populations throughout the country.

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Impact of the Military Coup

The military's only concern is to hold the absolute power of the country and to protect its own interests, which have violated fundamental human rights of the people in Burma/Myanmar. Let alone to promote the rights of women, they have been lawlessly suppressing any resistance against their reign. The gendered impacts of the coup are continuing to take its toll on women and children. Cultural norms which prioritize men are epitomized within the various ranks of the Burma military who prey on women in their violent and lawless acts. Internal conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the daily life of the people, particularly women who are taking the lead in protesting the junta while continuing to be the care-giver of the family.

Women who were arrested are often sexually abused in detention and during interrogation. In a recent disturbing incident, a high-ranking military officer sexually **abused** a woman in front of her father in Maubin of the Ayeyarwady Region while being questioned. As the law is whatever the junta says it is,

women who experience sexual abuse as well as their families are hesitant to report the crimes perpetrated against them.

Activists, ousted politicians and resistance fighters who remain on wanted lists by the junta are evading unlawful arrest. As a result, the military is piling onto the conscience of those refusing to turn themselves in by arresting family members. In one case, the wife and one year old daughter of a suspected resistance soldier were **arrested**. The infant was released after being detained for 48 hours without any admission of fault by the junta despite the 2019 Myanmar Child Rights Law **stipulating** that “criminal justice stakeholders have the ability and authority at every stage to release children from detention, or to not detain them in the first place.” Rather, the soldiers declared the separation was justified because the mother had COVID-19, but offered no evidence of their claim. She remains imprisoned and is being prevented from breastfeeding or having any contact with her child.

Burma’s health care system has always been ranked as one of the last at 190th out of 195 with the country’s public health infrastructure on the verge of collapse with one of the **lowest** maternal mortality rates in the region. For expectant mothers, Burma’s crippling healthcare has left them **stranded** and at risk. Pregnant women who contract the virus have been turned away from hospitals because of the influx of COVID-19 patients occupying beds. A husband and wife rushed to various hospitals with an oxygen tank to keep the mother alive. Despite their efforts, the twin babies and young woman both died.

With more than **70 percent** of the population living in remote areas, where 90 percent of maternal deaths take place, women cannot be expected to hold-off from giving birth during what quickly becomes a life or death situation. A mother from Manton, Shan State, **lost** her new-born child on the way to Lashio’s hospital as being referred by the hospital in Manton due to the limited resources and facilities. For breastfeeding mothers in conflict-related situations, the mothers and babies are malnourished and in poor health due to the scarcity of food and shelter in the camps.

In addition to the lack of responsibility as the authority of the state, the junta has continued to terrorize medical personnel and relief/aid workers. A woman who **provided** oxygen concentrators for free to those in need in Yangon was arrested and deemed a ‘terrorist.’ Friends of her family recalled that plainclothes policemen raided her home and called her a murderer.

Another major crisis to the livelihood of the people after the military coup is the weakened economic crisis. WFP **estimates** that an additional 3.4 million people could face hunger by October as a result of the political crisis, compounded by the economic effects of COVID-19. This may lead to an increase in domestic violence against women as families are struggling to make ends meet amid an increasing military presence and COVID-19 lockdown. WLB members have reported that women who are unable to leave their homes regularly and safely

are being denied their rights to sexual and reproductive health. This includes compromised access to oral contraceptives, and contraceptive immunizations. COVID-19 is making it even more difficult to make ends meet.

As **noted** in a joint statement issued by UNFPA and UN Women in Myanmar, “Women and children are expected to bear the heaviest brunt of the combined crises with those most at-risk including single women, pregnant and breastfeeding women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, older persons, people with disabilities, children and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.”

2

Situation in Ethnic Areas

Expanded military operations in ethnic areas of Kachin, Karen and Karenni/Kayah states only threaten to displace even more civilians, the **majority** of whom are women and children. Since the coup, the mounting humanitarian crisis in Burma’s ethnic areas has **resulted** in the internal displacement of 210,000 civilians due to clashes and state insecurity. The incoming dry season will make it easier for soldiers to maneuver through ethnic territory, creating yet another fear for civilians.

The cost of conflict has many ripple effects on women. When the military discovers displacement sites, they are quick to loot the few belongings IDPs have. Emergency food, clothes, medicine and temporary shelter materials are the first things to be taken away. As a result, women in the IDP camps feel extremely insecure.

In the months which have passed, clashes between local resistance groups and junta backed security forces have forced thousands to seek safety. For women and children seeking shelter in conflict, they are at a high risk of being exposed to seasonal illnesses. Due to the collapsed health infrastructure, people have no choice but to rely on traditional herbal treatments.

CHIN STATE

Chin State remains one of the state’s most impacted by the aftermath of the coup. Civilian life has been devastated amid shop closures and high-running tensions drawn from a lingering armed presence. In Mindat alone, desperately needed humanitarian aid has been **prevented** from reaching 50,000 refugees. Junta security forces have deliberately blocked off routes, and anyone who tries to pass through is **interrogated** by soldiers. Aid from UNHCR was also **denied** from reaching 5,000 IDPs. The move by the military has resulted

in villagers being stranded outside of the town, too fearful to travel to shops and markets. Since August 31, 108 Chin people have been **killed** by the regime, including seven women and 14 children under the age of 18. The Chin National Organization reported several other civilians were also arbitrarily arrested.

Women are targeted by the Burmese Army where state-wide oppression and violence has long been used as a weapon of war to intimidate and traumatize the population. On August 10, a woman named Pi Ngeik Tling, aged 60, was outside her village attempting to flee when she was **shot** and killed by junta forces. The same day, Burmese soldiers killed a pregnant woman who was returning to her home on a motorbike taxi, and an elderly woman who was in critical condition.

KACHIN STATE

In Kachin State, civilians are facing the realities of civil war compounded with COVID-19 cases. Villagers continue to be caught in the crossfire, including a young man who was **shot** on sight as he simply walked past the Burmese Army. The Burmese Army indiscriminately fired shells which landed in a nearby village. At the beginning of the month, A woman from Wu Yang was killed when shells struck her village. Since the coup, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) has documented 32 cases of civilians killed and 444 arrests.

Natural disasters have also had devastating impacts on civilians. Following a landslide in Maga Lang IDP camp, a woman was **killed** and an 80 year old woman was wounded. Homes collapsed as the landslide rolled down the mountain. This is only one of the many challenges faced by IDPs who are running out of food and medical supplies as the Burmese Army **blocks** routes needed to allow supplies to reach them. This has devastating impacts on children and elderly who are sick without treatment, and living in an environment where their lack of nourishment is not being met with an adequate response.

Among the challenges for displaced women including pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are the financial constraints. It is also difficult for the elderly to get proper nutrition. Pregnant and lactating women in particular are more likely to be affected by the COVID-19 virus than those who are infected with the common virus.

In Tanai Township, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) has helped facilitate vaccines and has **ordered** residents in controlled areas not to gather in large groups for any reason. Schools and markets have also been closed.

KAREN STATE

The increased deployment of Burmese Army soldiers to civilian areas of Karen State has heightened local fears and anxieties. It has very quickly become a

very challenging time for civil society organizations working to fill the many gaps in the provision of goods and services. Some of the challenges faced by civilians due to the increased presence of the Burmese military and Border Guard Forces in Mutraw/Hpapun District, **includes** the fact that it has become much more difficult for displaced communities to access aid. The Burmese Army has indiscriminately fired and shelled local civilians, and their homes while establishing their bases in Karen villages. Their fears have prevented them from traveling to get food, or to their farms to pursue their livelihoods. Any move by the junta seen as suspicious could cost them their lives.

Reports of airstrikes and more soldiers have civilians worried and deeply concerned for their livelihoods. Residents have also been forced to porter for the Burmese Army, and act as human shields in their offensives against the Karen National Union (KNU). They must also carry food and equipment for the soldiers.

KARENNI/KAYAH STATE

Since the clashes between the Burmese Army and the resistant forces in Karenni/Kayah State in May, civilians have been forcibly displaced. Among the **120,449** IDPs in Karenni/Kayah State, half of them are located in Demoso Township, with 69 percent of residents displaced. The majority of IDPs are elderly, women and children, including some one-month-old babies and pregnant women. The Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO) reported that there are malnourished children, and pregnant women without adequate access to food and secure shelter. Civilians are also reportedly being used as **human shields**.

The safety and security of civilians have been threatened. According to KNWO, two females and seventeen males were arbitrarily arrested in August. Most of those detained have been charged with the controversial Penal Code. Women human rights defenders are being targeted specifically for their activism in calling for an end to the dictatorship.

SHAN STATE

Since the coup, people in mainly Southern and Northern Shan State, have been faced with the brunt of clashes between rival Shan armed groups, and with the Burmese Army escalate. An estimated **4,000** people have been forcibly displaced in northern and southern parts of Shan State in August. Confronted with COVID-19 and armed conflicts, many IDPs in Hsipaw, Kyaukme and Mong Kung are extremely worried given the hardships of their current situation.

Among the displaced are women and children are in urgent need of beddings, clothes, food and medical support. As cases of COVID-19 **rise** in the IDP camps, villagers are in need of support. In Mong Ngor, 21 cases have been confirmed and in Kyaukme the town has at least 700 cases. At a Lashio monastery, half of the 110 nuns have tested positive for the virus. In Lashio alone, there have been

200 COVID-19 related deaths with nearly 3,000 confirmed cases in northern Shan State. Regional health care workers in Shan State are **working** to mitigate the rising number of COVID-19 patients by raising awareness on protection.

Sixteen males were arrested, along with one female. One female was killed, two males and one injured. In the last months, **42 people** have been killed in Shan State, 332 arrested and 270 people are still being detained in Shan State, according to documentation by SWAN.

Clashes are also undermining civilian safety. The fighting between the Burmese Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army has escalated throughout Muse District. The clash between the two groups in Pan Seng Town of Muse on August 20 has displaced at least **1,400** people. They are in need of humanitarian assistance. On August 29, a child was **killed** along with his/her family when an artillery shell struck a home in Nam Har village by the Burmese Army.

SAGAING REGION

Sagaing Region has been hit particularly hard by the junta's forces as civilian resistance is widespread. State-backed security forces have used excessive means of brutality during warrantless raids and artillery shelling. Protest leaders in Kale Town say that since the coup, approximately 100 civilians have been arrested and more than 40 killed. The clashes between the Burmese Army and People's Defense Force have led to civilians fleeing regularly. However, even unprovoked junta soldiers are showing their true colours by victimizing and killing civilians in broad daylight. A man who was sitting at a ferry port was **killed** instantly when he was shot in the head by soldiers when questioned why he was not wearing a face mask while chewing betel nut. Those responsible for killing the 39-year-old civilian were reportedly intoxicated.

The 44th and 99th Light Infantry Division, including the 228th battalion based in Kale Township, carried out **massacres** across Kani Township. The very presence of Burma Army battalions has permeated waves of fear throughout the region. Twelve people were arrested in connection with an anti-coup crackdown in Kale, Sagaing Region on August 26. The detainees included eight women as well as several minors.

Burmese soldiers have taken their typical intimidation and torture tactics to remote, rural areas to seek out villagers in hiding. Bodies in Sagaing Region have been recovered with evidence of severe marks of torture before they were killed. Their presence has had deeply worrying impacts on communities who have abandoned everything for their survival. For women and children, the increasing impacts of soldiers in civilian areas has trauma inducing impacts which threaten their mental well-being in the midst of the many crises unfolding.

3

Women's Human Rights Defenders

Threats and violence against women and girls are ongoing in Burma/Myanmar. But despite the escalation of human rights violations, women human rights defenders remain persistent in their pursuits for justice. The willingness and cooperative nature of women in their approaches to bring peace to their communities has made space for dialogue to emerge. The dwindling space for freedoms has made it more difficult for women leaders. But nonetheless, women-led organizations are defying the limits faced upon them to ensure service delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid, particularly in conflict-torn ethnic areas.

Resistance takes different forms and embodies courageous acts. A Kachin nun who bravely **stood** between the junta and peaceful protesters shortly after the coup was remembered for telling the soldiers to shoot her instead. She has once again met the moment of crisis and is now **treating** COVID-19 patients and stated:

Even if I were to die while treating them, I would still do it. Otherwise, many more lives will be lost.

Freedom of expression remains under attack in Burma/Myanmar with female journalists among those being arrested in the junta's war on the media. Htet Htet Khine, who works as a freelance producer for BBC Media Action, was **charged** under section 17(1) of the Unlawful Association Act for interacting with the NUG. The junta **declared** the NUG a 'terrorist organization' on 10 May, with a penalty of up to 10 years to life in prison if convicted. At least three foreign journalists have been **detained** since the coup and 96 **arrested** with 46 remaining in junta custody. Of those arrested, 31 have been detained for over four months. Tu Tu Tha, a Burmese writer and journalist **spent** her most recent birthday in prison, where she's been detained since August after being arrested at her home.

ACTIONS BY WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA (WLB) AND HER MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

- 3 August:** Representatives of the Women's League of Burma and the Karenni National Women's Organization spoke on a panel hosted by **Ewha Women's University**.
- 10 August:** On the 71st Karen Martyrs Day, the Karen Women's Organization released a **statement** to commemorate the memory of Karen martyrs who have sacrificed their lives to protect civilians and ensure they can live with dignity. KWO paid tribute to their legacy. Karen martyrs have lost their lives fighting for our freedom.
- 19 August:** The Kachin Women's Association Thailand spoke on a panel for the launch of a report by Fortify Rights, "**Ending Impunity in Myanmar.**"
- 25 August:** WLB and KWO calls for an end to military impunity and state sponsored violence in a letter of **solidarity to our Rohingya** brothers and sisters.

The Kachin Women's Association Thailand continues to provide IDPs in Kachin State with emergency food support and helping with the CDM movement by ensuring human rights defenders have adequate food and shelter in hard to reach areas.

The Karenni National Women's Organization are providing shelter, hygiene products, and nutritional food for displaced women, girls and children in Loikaw, Demoso and Hpruso, as well as the provision of basic medicine. Door to door counseling was done in line with COVID-19 safety procedures. During the home visits, KNWO gave out water-free hand sanitizer.

The Pa-O Women's Union is supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement in southern Shan State with basic food and medicine. COVID-19 personal protective equipment was also distributed to townships in southern Shan State.

The Shan Women's Action Network is regularly providing support for the Civil Disobedience Movement and supporting field health workers in order to help and solve some lack of healthcare in those areas. SWAN also continues to raise awareness on COVID-19 including prevention and vaccinations.

Women for Justice is supporting staff involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They are providing urgently needed support for displaced communities in the camps. WJ is also providing remote counseling through the phone.

CONCLUSION:

As guardians of democracy, it is the people who hold the power. The junta has failed in their attempts to demoralize the country. Overwhelmingly, the people of Burma/Myanmar refuse to accept any pathway to reconciliation which takes the lives of innocent civilians along the way.

Economically and socially, the repercussions of the junta's selfish actions are being felt across the country. The continued mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and their reckless pursuits for power, no matter the cost, has made the life of civilians much more difficult. Rampant conflict which puts villagers in the crossfire has further jeopardized livelihoods. The Burmese Army knows only violence which is evident across decades of their hardened rule. The arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions, which are ongoing, is in violation of international law, including the Geneva Convention.

Long-held military impunity has emboldened the junta to commit human rights violations without conscience or respect for rule of law. And yet, despite being faced to confront many challenges, there is solidarity across ethnic and gendered lines to work together in pursuit of a greater, more equal future in Burma/Myanmar. The situation has also reinforced the collective will power of citizens and their desire to live freely and in peace.

The people of Burma/Myanmar have spoken and reiterated their shared commitments to fighting against all forms of dictatorships in Burma/Myanmar, alongside alliances in the federal democracy movement as well as with various international and regional actors to raise awareness about the situation inside Burma, in particular highlighting the plight of women, girls including all human rights defenders.

International Community must



**REJECT MILITARY
COUP/SO-CALLED**
State Administrative
Council



REFERRAL TO ICC
for its crimes against
humanity



**GLOBAL ARMS
EMBARGO**

- SUPPORT local rights defenders who are providing safe houses/shelters for peaceful protestors, especially women human rights defenders.
- SUPPORT those in the country with ensuring a political space for women's rights organisations and civil society
- SUPPORT our advocacy to end system of impunity for all forms of violence against women and girls including conflict-related sexual violence and sexual assault & sexual harassment in custody

WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA

The Women's League of Burma is an umbrella organization comprising 13 women's organizations of different ethnic and political backgrounds. WLB was founded on 9 December 1999.

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