

DIRE HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY:
The urgent need to address human security consequences of junta violence

- The Burmese military junta’s systematic and widespread escalation of violence following its attempt to seize power on 1 February 2021, has created a humanitarian crisis that poses a grave threat to regional human security.
- During 1 Feb 2021 – 15 Apr 2022, there were 10,786 armed clashes and attacks on civilians, more than in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, or Afghanistan in the same period. The junta has killed at least 2,146 and arrested at least 13,282 civilians. Those killed and/or detained include elected MPs, journalists, humanitarian workers, civil society members, and students. In the first 4½ months of 2022 alone (1 Jan - 15 Apr), there were 3,134 such incidents involving air strikes, artillery shelling and other battlefield tactics, in every State/Region and the capital territory.
- The systematic targeting of civilians, in addition to intensifying the humanitarian crisis, also amount to atrocity crimes that continue to drive up the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Burma. According to UNHCR, 614,000 people have been displaced since the coup attempt, adding to over one million people displaced by pre-existing armed conflict and abuses. These populations, further affected by ongoing attacks and blocks on humanitarian aid, are in desperate need of protection, shelter, food, water, medicine, and other aid.
- Humanitarian need is greatest in border regions in Burma’s southeast and west, where conflict is particularly high relative to the population size, where the junta continues to block or destroy aid from others.
- It is imperative for ASEAN members to facilitate cross-border aid, partnering with like-minded countries and organizations, in the interests of regional human security and its own credibility.

The Burma military has a long history of violence against, displacement of, and disregard for the humanitarian needs of ethnic minority populations, particularly at the country’s borders. This was shown clearly in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020, when the military continued its widespread violence, gave minimal aid or blocked aid to border regions, and destroyed ethnic health checkpoints for detecting COVID.

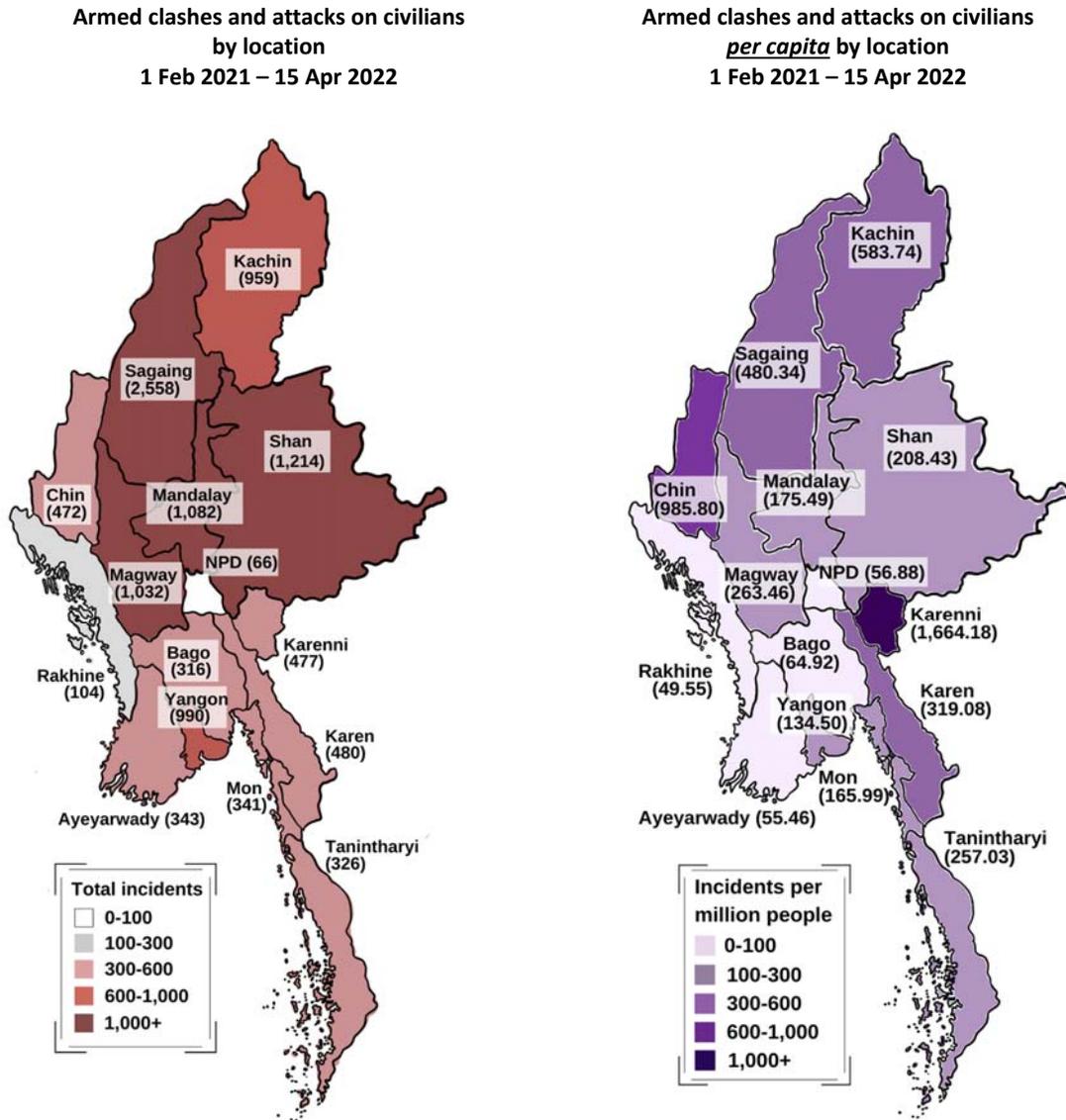
On 1 February 2021, the military attempted to launch a coup. It locked hundreds of parliamentarians—set to convene parliament that day—in their lodgings; put others under house arrest; and took others to jail. Since that time it has only increased its detentions and other targeting of politicians. It also responded to nationwide peaceful resistance with shocking violence, escalating attacks that have resulted in nationwide conflict.

Armed clashes and attacks on civilians by country, 1 Feb 2021–15 Apr 2022

	Burma	Syria	Yemen	Afghan.	Iraq
Feb	211	777	606	778	212
Mar	773	716	742	820	220
Apr	660	616	627	988	291
May	837	654	460	1,121	498
Jun	656	817	494	1,139	402
Jul	502	864	523	854	365
Aug	608	760	512	491	526
Sep	845	696	530	93	480
Oct	800	652	586	123	373
Nov	891	631	587	121	230
Dec	869	631	585	146	267
Jan	1,013	777	697	190	216
Feb	837	606	525	158	204
Mar	870	439	542	174	206
Apr*	414	283	230	98	116
Total	10,786	9,919	8,246	7,294	4,606

*extracted from ACLED as of 15 Apr 2022

The intensity of conflict and attacks on civilians is not uniform. Although junta troops have torched villages and towns in central Burma, raided them, and arrested civilians there, the humanitarian implications of its onslaught have been worse in areas traditionally targeted by the military. The following maps show (1) raw conflict numbers by State/Region and (2) adjusted for population, mindful that the border zones already suffer a legacy of decades-long conflict and deprivation prior to the coup.



Intensifying the humanitarian emergency and impeding humanitarian assistance

The junta’s violence has had terrible consequences for Burma’s civilian population. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as of 4 Apr 2022 there were 561,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Burma and 53,000 refugees from Burma *who had been displaced after 1 Feb 2021*, in addition to hundreds of thousands of people previously displaced. In other words, as of 4 Apr, there were at least 1.89 million displaced persons in Burma and just across its borders in neighboring countries.¹ These numbers are likely significant underestimates, based on local reporting.

¹ UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP) (6 Apr 2022) Myanmar Emergency Update as of 6 April 2022

The junta has worked to prevent others from providing humanitarian aid or healthcare to vulnerable populations. In June 2021, junta troops blocked aid for Karenni IDPs, and destroyed an ambulance bringing humanitarian aid to Moebye Township (Shan State). The ambulance reportedly contained 80 sacks of rice, medicine, and medical equipment.² In July 2021, the junta reportedly allowed only around 450kg of rice to enter Mindat (Chin State) each day—not enough to feed residents—despite a ceasefire and humanitarian agreement.³

Junta troops have arrested volunteers for assisting IDPs in Chin, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mandalay, and Sagaing States/Regions.⁴ International NGOs have alerted the world that the junta was blocking aid and using systematic efforts to starve people and prevent them from accessing healthcare.⁵

Junta troops have particularly targeted Burma’s healthcare sector: As of 10 Jan 2022, there had been at least 415 attacks and threats against health workers, facilities, and transports; 30 health workers killed; 286 arrested or detained; and 128 attacks on healthcare facilities. This focus on the health workers stems from the perception that they began the civil disobedience movement.⁶

Junta troops have also targeted IDP camps and their populations, killing those in need and further preventing others from being able to help. In January 2022 in Karenni State, staff and patients fled a Loikaw hospital amid clashes and junta-imposed electricity blackouts;⁷ and junta planes bombed two IDP camps, killing at least six IDPs.⁸ Amid conflict in Karen State, junta planes bombed a hospital for the second time in January, and attacked refugee camps.⁹

“Severity of humanitarian conditions and number of people in need”



OCHA (Dec 2021) Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022

² Kantarawaddy Times (7 Jun 2021) Twenty-five Percent Of Karenni State Displaced By Conflict; Ro Nay San Lwin (via Twitter) (11 Jun 2021) <https://twitter.com/nslwin/status/1403221421610999809>

³ Myanmar Now (10 Jul 2021) Transport of food, medicine restricted despite temporary ceasefire extension in Mindat

⁴ Irrawaddy (24 Sep 2021) Villagers Displaced by Myanmar Military Regime Infected With COVID-19; Kantarawaddy Times (18 Sep 2021) Tatmadaw Attacks Relief Vehicle In Demawso Township; Irrawaddy (24 Sep 2021) Myanmar Junta Seeks to Arrest Doctor Assisting Displaced Persons in Chin State; Mizzima (26 Sep 2021) Spring Revolution Daily News for 26 September 2021; Mizzima (21 Oct 2021) Seven workers from the Catholic Church arrested; Al Jazeera (10 Nov 2021) Myanmar military accused of blocking aid to displaced civilians; Shan News (17 Nov 2021) Burma Army Arrests Volunteers in Southern Shan State; Mizzima (19 Nov 2021) Spring Revolution Daily News for 19 November 2021; Myanmar Now (18 Nov 2021) Plainclothes soldiers arrest leader of Mandalay charity on suspicion of links to PDF; Mizzima (18 Nov) Spring Revolution daily news for 18 November 2021; Myanmar Now (24 Nov 2021) Loikaw church closes clinic after military arrests medical staff

⁵ Human Rights Watch (13 Dec 2021) Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid; Amnesty International (17 Dec 2021) After coup, Myanmar military puts chokehold on people’s basic needs

⁶ Physicians for Human Rights (26 Jan 2022) 415 Attacks on Health Care in Myanmar During One Year of Crackdowns Following Military Coup: Report

⁷ Kantarawaddy Times (17 Jan 2022) Health workers and patients evacuated from Loikaw General Hospital to Taunggyi

⁸ Kantarawaddy Times (19 Jan 2022) Thousands of Phruso refugees have fled into the jungle after the bombing

⁹ Irrawaddy (12 Jan 2022) Regime Airstrike Destroys Hospital in Lower Myanmar; Mizzima (17 Jan 2022) Crisis as 50,000 civilians displaced by fighting in Myanmar’s Karen State

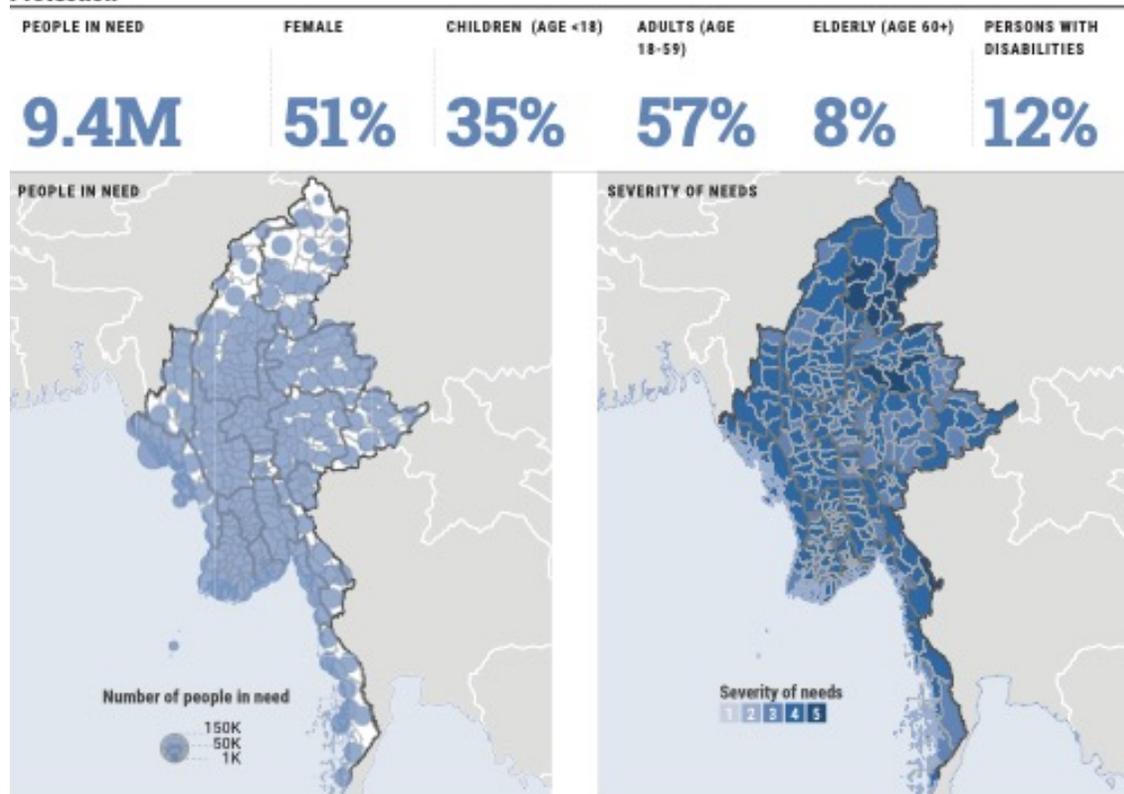
Activists and vulnerable communities from urban areas and central Burma have also fled to border areas, where they seek refuge from the junta’s terror. These populations join those in need in border areas, and their presence has also served as a pretext for further junta military attacks, such as those in Lay Kay Kaw, Karen State,¹⁰ which have displaced over 10,000 people.

The scope of need – up by 1,300%

As a result of these actions, along with the junta’s mishandling of the economy and the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people are living hand to mouth, in intense insecurity. In December 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that 14.4 million people in Burma would need humanitarian assistance in 2022, a 1,300% increase from its prediction for 2021.¹¹

While need is high nationwide, the severity of need is highest in border regions. According to OCHA, by December 2021 there were 526,000 IDPs in “extreme” need, across the southeast (Southern Shan, Karenni, Eastern Bago, Karen, Mon, and Tanintharyi), northwest (Chin, Sagaing), northeast (Kachin, Northern Shan), as well as in Magway and Rakhine. Since that time, over 5,000 people have crossed the border into Thailand, and many have sought shelter on either side of the Moei river, which divides the two countries;¹² the UNHCR and Thai officials estimated in April 2022 that 17,000 people had crossed into Thailand since February 2021.¹³ Furthermore, the enormous number of people in need even in areas fully under junta control demonstrates that the junta is either unwilling or unable to meet people’s basic needs.

Protection



OCHA (Dec 2021) Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022

¹⁰ Irrawaddy (14 Dec 2021) Myanmar Junta Forces Raid KNU-Controlled Town; Democracy Activists Feared Arrested

¹¹ OCHA (Dec 2021) Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022

¹² Irrawaddy (27 Dec 2021) Myanmar Regime Continues to Shell Karen State Border Town

¹³ Los Angeles Times (7 Apr 2022) Thailand sends thousands of refugees back to Myanmar, where war and danger await

Numerous challenges prevent delivery of humanitarian aid within Burma. From the OCHA report:

While international and local humanitarian organizations [...] have stayed and delivered during the recent crises, attacks on health workers and severe access constraints (particularly in conflict areas) are resulting in unmet needs with a multiplier effect into 2022. A number of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) ...had their offices raided, materials confiscated and leaders arrested. Disregard for human rights and international humanitarian law by parties to the conflict is becoming increasingly common, and the operating environment for humanitarian workers has worsened with continued attacks on health and education facilities and personnel [...].¹⁴

Community-based and border-based organizations part of the solution

Non-governmental health organizations already have infrastructure for healthcare delivery, and have ably provided healthcare in border areas for decades, including emergency public health responses to displaced persons during the pandemic. They coordinate through the Ethnic Health Committee (EHC), comprised of independent Community-Based Health Organizations (CBHOs) and Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs) under the structure of ethnic organizations such as the Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Peoples' Party (KNPP), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Shan State-based, and Burmese groups.

Ethnic health providers have *already* played a key role in responding to the pandemic, and are now organizing vaccine distribution in ethnic areas. The Chin National Front started administering Covishield vaccines on 15 Aug 2021. The New Mon State Party opened five temporary medical centers and 18 checkpoints in the areas it controls, and is reportedly conducting a vaccination campaign. With the help of the Chinese Red Cross, the Kachin Independence Organization has vaccinated at least 20,000 people, and the Shan State Progress Party has similarly vaccinated over 3,000 people.

Civilian and humanitarian aid groups have shown they are serious about combating COVID-19, as well as poor healthcare generally, and could make significant progress with additional funds. The National Unity Government (NUG)—Myanmar's civilian government—has created a National Health Committee and a National-Level Commission on COVID-19, and established itself as a willing liaison between foreign donors and local communities.

ASEAN can lead the way in facilitating aid, but this must involve cross-border assistance. Otherwise, the bloc risks undermining a multi-stakeholder approach and making its intervention dangerously political and one-sided – aligned with the junta which has been the root cause of this threat to regional human security.

Cross-border aid essential

In light of the desperate humanitarian situation in and outside of Burma, and conflict-related and other junta-imposed impediments to providing in-country assistance, it is critical that foreign states and organizations facilitate the flow of cross-border aid.

Furthermore, sole reliance on cooperation with the junta would be misguided and inexpedient, and would exacerbate pre-existing humanitarian gaps in Burma. The military has proven time and again that it is not a responsible steward of humanitarian aid or any other assistance for the people of Burma. Its presence, even alongside foreign aid providers, is likely to frighten communities, and the junta is liable to use aid as a means to further securitization and commission of atrocity crimes.¹⁵

¹⁴ OCHA (Dec 2021) Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022

¹⁵ Progressive Voice and FORUM-ASIA (2021) Great Expectations: Analysis of the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management; Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Kachin Women's Association Thailand, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Women's Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karenni National Women's Organization, Pa-O Women's Union, Progressive Voice, and Ta'ang Women's Organization (Sep 2021) Nowhere to Run: Deepening Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar

It is notable that Adelina Kamal, former Executive Director of the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre, is among the loudest voices calling for ASEAN, Burma's neighbors, the UN Special Envoy on Myanmar, and other international actors to support *humanitarian aid that goes through non-state actors* in Burma, such as community-based health organizations.¹⁶

Funding already exists for cross-border aid. On 10 Aug, the US Department of State announced an aid package of more than US 50 million to provide life-saving protections, food and shelter, health care, WASH, and support to people being persecuted and displaced in Burma.¹⁷ On 12 Aug, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield met virtually with Dr Cynthia Maung—head of the NUG's COVID-19 Task Force—to discuss US contributions to the COVID-19 relief effort.¹⁸

In October 2021, 397 local and allied groups co-signed a letter, calling on International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to repurpose hundreds of millions of dollars in frozen Burma aid to support effective COVID-19 assistance for border-based ethnic communities and prisoners in Burma.¹⁹

The first step forward towards a sustainable solution to strengthen community resilience and significantly mitigate the crisis' destabilizing impacts on the ASEAN region, would be to restart and scale up cross-border aid programs that were present on that Thai-Burmese border in the 1980s – 2000s. It is imperative that the management and implementation of such efforts be organized with the inclusion of and implementation by community-based organizations that already have the trust and cooperation of affected communities on the ground.

¹⁶ Fulcrum (16 Feb 2022) Myanmar Crisis: A Humanitarian Stalemate or Fresh Opportunities?

¹⁷ US Department of State (10 Aug 2021) United States Announces More than \$50 Million in Humanitarian Assistance for the People of Burma and \$5 Million in COVID-19 Assistance for Thailand

¹⁸ US Ambassador to the UN, via Twitter (12 Aug 2021) <https://twitter.com/USAmbUN/status/1425521480788594695>

¹⁹ ALTSEAN-Burma (13 Oct 2021) International Finance Institutions: repurpose unspent Myanmar funds to support COVID-19 relief through trusted partners