



Statement in condemnation of escalation of violence in Southeast Burma

July 19th 2022

Over the past month, violence against civilians in Southeast Burma reached new heights as the State Administration Council (SAC) escalated its military offensives. Already engaged in heavy assaults to cripple resistance and cut off resources and humanitarian support since the 2021 coup, the military junta continues to perpetrate gross human rights violations throughout Karen State, including arbitrary arrest and torture, the burning down of entire villages, the use of human shields, and relentless air strikes and shelling. Forced displacements continue to rise, as do the number of civilian deaths and grave injuries.

The SAC is intentionally targeting civilian areas in its air and ground attacks, thus forcing villagers to flee; destroying civilians' homes, farmlands and livestock, local schools, and medical clinics; and placing villagers in constant fear of life. Since the 2021 coup, there have been more than 60 SAC air strikes in Karen State, almost all centred on villages. At least 32 civilians have been killed by these air strikes.¹ Unexploded ordnance from these air attacks have landed inside villages or in villagers' farmlands creating additional risks and insecurity, as does the planting of new landmines. In some areas, indiscriminate shelling into and near villages is taking place on a near daily basis. The estimated number of displacements in Karen State since February 2021 is now over 200,000.

Despite the international community's condemnation of the military junta and its assault on the people of Burma, little concrete action has been taken to end the violence. The ongoing intensification of attacks and human rights violations is proof that current efforts are insufficient. One villager in Karen State, after being interrogated and tortured by SAC soldiers in March 2022,² asked: *"Is the international community just going to watch while civilians have to go through things like this? Is there no longer anything they can do to help us?"*

The SAC's actions are in breach of international humanitarian law, and amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. KHRG condemns these heinous acts, and calls on the international community to take actions that show the people of Burma that there is still reason to trust in the UN, international human rights and justice mechanisms, and the principles that underlie international humanitarian action.

- **Use of human shields, and burning of houses in Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District**

Human rights violations perpetrated by the SAC and affiliated forces have significantly increased in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District since August 2021. Reports of forced labour, including the use of civilians as human shields, looting, and direct threats against villagers have multiplied. On May 1st, two air strikes were conducted, and as a result, 10 houses in Lay Kay village, Bilin Township, were burned

¹ The exact number is likely much higher, but many of these areas are also zones of heavy conflict and ground attacks, making it difficult to gather complete information.

² He was interrogated and tortured simply because a National Unity Government (NUG)-run school was opened in his village.

down and another 66 were seriously damaged. SAC troops at Lay Kay army camp have continued to fire mortars into surrounding villages, injuring a woman with a 2-month-old baby on June 22nd. In May 2022, over 150 villagers in T’Kaw Hpoe and Weh Pyar village tracts, Hpa-an Township, were arrested and forced to act as human shields and porters. Many were detained for around 2 weeks.

Beginning June 1st, SAC troops from Artillery Unit #9 conducted heavy artillery fire into Waw Ray village tract, Tha Htoo (Thaton) Township, for six days straight after an SAC company commander and military medic were captured by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). As a result, more than 3,000 villagers in the area were forced to displace. An SAC officer from Artillery Unit #9 also threatened to burn everything between Hton Bo Gyi and Hton Bo Lay villages in Waw Ray village tract. On June 25th, the SAC set fire to Hton Bo Lay village, after looting homes, the school and monastery, and taking villagers’ livestock. At least 66 houses and 30 thatch huts were completely burned to the ground.

- **Increased fighting and indiscriminate shelling in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District**

Since June 2022, ground attacks have escalated in Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. From June 10th to 13th, and June 25th to July 2nd, SAC troops along with the Phyu Saw Htee (a pro-junta militia group), fired into different villages in Ain Net village tract, resulting in the displacement of 1,489 villagers from six villages. Five villagers were also injured. On June 12th, SAC troops also fired into Lian Pin Wen village, Lian Pin Wen village tract, displacing an additional 1,184 villagers (259 households).

On July 2nd 2022, SAC troops entered into Ler Muh Per village, Ler Muh Per village tract, Ler Doh Township and shot dead four villagers and injured another. SAC soldiers looted villagers’ homes and set fire to the village, destroying 12 houses and several vehicles. In response to the capture of four SAC army camps by the KNLA on July 2nd, the SAC conducted air strikes and heavy shelling in nearby villages in Moo (Mone) Township, killing four villagers and injuring one. These offensives resulted in the displacement of at least 3,202 villagers from 81 villages in Moo Township. Following the air strike and shelling, the SAC entered multiple villages and arrested and tortured 16 villagers.

- **Air and ground attacks, fighting and displacement in Mu Traw (Hpapun) District**

Villages in Mu Traw District, particularly in areas near Hpapun Town and Kamamaung Town, have experienced ongoing attacks. There have been at least 28 air strikes in Mu Traw District alone since the 2021 coup, with the first attack taking place in late March 2021. Most villagers have been forced to flee, seeking refuge in the jungle or along riverbanks, with little access to humanitarian support.

The most recent attack occurred on July 4th 2022, when two SAC aircraft bombed an Arakan Army (AA) camp located near the Thai-Burma border, in a Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled area. The attack destroyed multiple buildings including a clinic. Afterward, one of the SAC’s jets entered into Thai airspace, over Phop Phra area of Tak Province, leading local residents to take shelter in bunkers and evacuate the schools. Yet Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha referred to the incursion as “not a big deal”.

- **Relentless air strikes in Dooplaya District**

The SAC launched 17 air strikes in Dooplaya District, primarily Kaw T’Ree (Kawkareik) Township, between December 2021 and May 2022. On June 27th 2022, SAC resumed its bombardment of Kaw T’Ree Township, first sending three fighter jets into Au Kree Hta village, Choo Kalee village tract. The

attacks in the area continued for six consecutive days, with bombs also being dropped in nearby Thay Baw Boh village tract. The July 1st air attack on Thay Baw Boh village killed two villagers and injured three more. One of the bombs did not explode and remains in the village. The next day, the SAC conducted air strikes in Lay Ghaw village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, injuring four villagers, including an 11-year-old boy. Due to all these attacks and ongoing indiscriminate shelling, about 1,000 local villagers fled once again to the Thai-Burma border. Most villagers continue to be pushed back by Thai authorities.

KHRG makes the following recommendations:

Since the pursuit of justice is one of the most visible forms of accountability and will show that human rights violations and impunity for these acts will no longer be tolerated, there is an immediate need to prosecute military leaders for their past and present crimes. The international community should:

- Support current investigations and proceedings by intervening in the genocide case at the ICJ, and pushing for an ICC referral and acceptance of the NUG's declaration delegating jurisdiction of the court to investigate and prosecute mass atrocity crimes that occurred in Burma since 2002.
- Seek out all additional opportunities (through hybrid courts, ad hoc tribunals, universal jurisdiction and other existing mechanisms) to hold the Burma military accountable for its vast array of crimes committed against Karen peoples, as well as other ethnic and religious minorities.
- Develop and support International Accountability Platforms, and increase support for human rights organisations operating on the ground.

Meanwhile, it is imperative that adequate humanitarian assistance and protection for ethnic populations who are facing violence and atrocities at the hands of the Burma military be ensured. The international community should:

- Consult and sign MoUs with the NUG and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), rather than the SAC, to address the unfolding humanitarian crisis across the country.
- Urge neighbouring countries to ensure that their authorities do not deny entry to people crossing the border seeking refuge.
- Prioritise and strengthen methods of service delivery and communication that rely on local CSO/CBOs and ethnic service providers that have the ability and networks (due to consistent access and trust from the community) for local implementation of support programmes.
- Include local CSO/CBOs and ethnic service providers in decision-making processes since these actors have already worked for decades to provide support and services to local communities, and are the most knowledgeable about current needs and challenges.

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