



The Rise of Pro-Junta Militias in Southeastern Burma

This briefing paper was researched, written and produced by the Human Rights Foundation of Monland. August 2022





*The Rise of Pro-Junta Militias
in Southeastern Burma*

The Human Rights Foundation
of Monland, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	PG. 4
FIELDWORKERS NOTE	PG. 5
SITUATION OVERVIEW IN MON STATE, KAREN STATE AND TANINTHARYI REGION	PG. 6
ANALYSIS OF ACTIVE PARA-MILITIAS IN BURMA	PG. 7
STRATEGIES OF PARA-MILITIAS	PG. 9
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS PERPETRATED BY PARA-MILITIAS	PG. 12
CONCLUSION	PG. 14
RECOMMENDATIONS	PG. 15

INTRODUCTION

Across the last year and a half, the Burma Army has continued to wage unprecedented levels of violence against a largely unarmed civilian population. Their campaign of fear and barbarity has led to thousands of deaths and injuries across the country. Innocent people are routinely rounded up and arrested before being forcibly detained under fabricated charges. In addition to a worsening humanitarian crisis that has seen over one million people displaced,¹ the military junta has relentlessly blocked key routes intended for aid delivery and service provision.²

The junta is paving pathways for destruction as the country's prospects for democracy slowly deteriorate. Their desperate quests for power were apparent even before the attempted coup on 1 February 2021, as they sought legitimacy through various diplomatic channels while the very institution of the Tatmadaw was becoming increasingly more unpopular. Their tirade of war crimes, as well as crimes against humanity and genocide, is further evidence of the great lengths that the military junta is willing to go to invoke cruel means of control onto the people of Burma.

One of the ways that the junta has attempted to squander the opposition movement, including those who have aligned themselves with the pro-democracy movement, is through the backing of para-militias. These include: Pyusawhti, Thway Thauk and the Black Kite Brotherhood among others. These groups have targeted supporters and affiliates of the Spring Revolution including members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the People's Defense Forces (PDFs).

According to documentation and reporting by the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) and networks, there have been at least 129 victims of militia violence, with 18 killed across target areas of Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region since the attempted coup. The majority of the victims have been in Dawei, as tensions between armed groups continue to rise. The victims are mostly young men, but their families, including women, the elderly and children, have also been targeted. They have been shot, and brutally tortured before their deaths. Many human rights defenders have fled in exile to avoid being caught and killed by groups such as these.

Further, the purpose of this briefing paper will be to outline how the paramilitaries since the coup were formed and the types of human rights violations they have perpetrated in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region. The report will include case studies and analysis on how the paramilitias are committing human rights violations. It will cover from 1 January 2022 until the end of July 2022.

1 "Myanmar's Total Displaced Population Tops 1 Million, Says UN," *The Diplomat*, 3 June 2022

2 "Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid," *Human Rights Watch*, 13 December 2021

FIELDWORKERS NOTE

HURFOM has fieldworkers in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi Region, as well as human rights networks across the country. Three reporters are working from Mon and Karen State in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations. Within this team, HURFOM will continue to monitor the human rights situation in our target areas as closely as possible. Given the new limitations that civil society organizations now face in the post-coup environment, we have found that the human rights situation is an even greater concern.

Fieldworkers continue to document human rights violations as best as they can, given the extreme risks they face on a daily basis. The growing threats to their safety only speak to the society of fear the junta has created. HURFOM's documentation and data is sourced from our network of field staff reporting on the ground. The restrictions imposed by the junta have made it much more difficult to access all of our target areas freely and without repercussions. HURFOM field staff are facing serious risks to their physical and digital security. Secure methods of communications have been adopted, such as using encrypted technology but there are still many challenges to ensure that the Burma Army does not infiltrate the work, and documentation that HURFOM is reporting on.

The Burma Army is known for intimidating and harassing fieldworkers documenting human rights violations. Soldiers often threaten survivors who share their stories with rights groups as well. At the moment, HURFOM is safely able to work in ceasefire areas and armed controlled territories of the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party. Recording of events and testimonies is extremely high-risk outside of these areas.

The movement restrictions and curfews in place due to COVID-19 have also limited the amount of documentation possible, for security reasons. Therefore, the information outlined in this short briefing paper includes HURFOM data from the ground. Many of our estimates are likely significantly higher given the challenges we face collecting these data. Our team is immensely grateful to those who shared their fears and hopes for the future with HURFOM.

SITUATION OVERVIEW IN MON STATE, KAREN STATE & TANINTHARYI REGION



Cases of theft, extortion and raids, in addition to indiscriminate firing and artillery attacks by the military junta are rampant and continue due to the lack of reliable domestic accountability channels in place. Civilians have been forced to endure multitudes of uncertainty as their futures remain in jeopardy, due to the junta's growing presence, and selfless acts of war. Security forces have been authorized to arrest anyone who does not comply with military orders, or shoot individuals who may attempt to flee from investigations conducted by the junta.

Amid all of the uncertainty, the majority of people in HURFOM target areas are worried, and fearful. In Mon State, frustration is rampant as political groups including the Mon Unity Party and the New Mon State Party have both agreed to engage with the military junta as part of the so called 'peace process.' The decision has resulted in a loss of trust among Mon nationals amid criticism shared on social media. The soldiers and Commanders of the military junta cannot be trusted to lead in any capacity.

The junta's actions and offensives have forced many villagers to flee. In Ah Sin San Pya village, located in Ye Township, Mon State, the military continues to arrest those it perceives to oppose the coup. Ah Sin San Pya village has the highest number of deaths, arrests, and disappearances among the many villages in Ye Township. An estimated 60 households and individuals in the village have fled their homes because of their involvement in the anti coup movements over the last year.

Alongside increasing surveillance, HURFOM has documented that people in southeastern Burma are living in constant fear, with no protection, no security, and no rule of law. The junta forces in southeastern Dooplaya, Karen State have continued to deploy relentless attacks against villages in the areas with heavy mortar shelling, which saw an additional 500 displaced locals at the end of June 2022.

Tanintharyi region in particular has witnessed the rise of attacks perpetrated by junta-backed militias who have an agenda that seeks to terrorize and intimidate innocent civilians. Their homes are raided, burned and scorched with no regard for the law. HURFOM has recorded dozens of instances where civilians are abducted, and killed. While some of the attacks appear random, others are targeted, especially when it comes to assaulting human rights defenders. The situation is deeply unstable, and is cause for alarm.

ANALYSIS OF ACTIVE PARA-MILITIAS IN BURMA

Paramilitaries are organizations whose structure, tactics and training closely resembles those of the formal military institutions. However, they are not technically a part of their armed forces. In Burma, they are organized by the junta. The regime is able to distance themselves when it is convenient to do so, as paramilitaries are considered to be unofficial and illegal. Some militias are integrated into the junta's defensive strategies and are fully armed. In addition, they are supported with equipment, military training tactics, and authorization by the Burma Army to kill, injure and terrorize combatants and civilians. Other militias in Burma have been established in less formal capacities. They are not as strongly influenced by the junta and were organized informally. Some were founded by Border Guard Forces (BGF) and operate in villages, and townships.

Throughout Burma's history, dozens of para-militias have existed, and been supported by the junta since the Ne Win era. Between 2009 and 2010, the Thein Sein government ordered ethnic revolution organizations (EROS) who signed peace agreements to expand their troops to former BGFs. Those who refused to adhere to the request formed splinter groups and militias. Despite many years of establishment, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of paramilitaries in Burma, but there are hundreds, even thousands which still exist³. In the months which have passed since the coup, there are now over 70 paramilitaries in Sagaing region alone,⁴ which speaks to their increasing presence across the country.

Individuals who join the militias are typically young, uneducated and impoverished men who are looking for opportunities which grant them shelter and a modest salary. Young boys are recruited young, and even face threats to themselves and their families if they do not adhere to orders to join. Forced recruitment into the military in Burma is not uncommon, though it is of additional concern given that Burma has one of the largest numbers of child soldiers of any country in the world, with up to 50,000 children serving in both government armed forces and armed opposition groups.⁵

3 "Militias in Myanmar," John Buchanan, *The Asia Foundation*, July 2016

4 "The Rise of Pyu Saw Htee," *Progressive Voice*, 12 March 2022

5 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 - Myanmar," *Refworld* 2021

Under the terrorist-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, the paramilitaries have been expanded and reformed numerous times. Among the combatants are those linked with extreme nationalistic Buddhist groups such as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (Ma Ba Tha), which has reemerged to Burma's political scene in support of the junta. This can be observed in Sagaing region where opposition forces against the junta have been successful in their offensives. Now, monks led by U Wasawa from the ultra-nationalist Association for Protection of Race and Religion, have been recruiting men to form militias.⁶

The paramilitaries have largely adopted the junta's command structure including pro-government militias and former anti-government EROs. Soldiers are well trained and are provided with economic incentives to carry out the junta's dirty work.

The structure of para-militias changes often and is subject to reshuffling of soldiers, equipment and location depending on the orders of the military junta. The paramilitaries are directed by the military defense commands, or by state-backed junta officials deployed in different states, townships and regions.

MILITARY JUNTA & JUNTA-BACKED MILITIAS

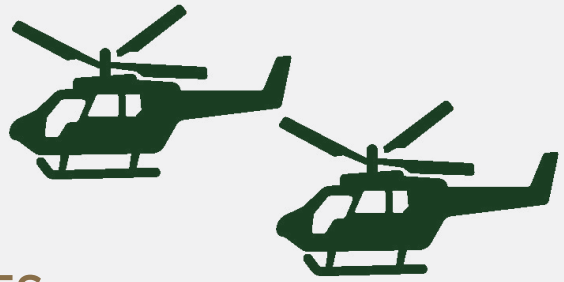


The military junta has been terrorizing the civilian population for decades and deploying violent tactics intended to terrorize.



Under the terrorist-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, the paramilitaries have been expanded and reformed numerous times.

6 "Nationalist Monks Recruit Pro-Myanmar Regime Militias in Sagaing," *The Irrawaddy*, 29 June 2022



STRATEGIES OF PARAMILITARIES

Based on the information and cases documented by HURFOM in target areas, the attacks by the paramilitaries are targeting NLD officials and pro-democracy activists involved in the Spring Revolution. Those suspected of supporting the People's Defense Forces (PDF) have also been tracked closely by informers and junta-minded groups.

The following strategies have been attempted by the paramilitaries in their violent mission to create and dispel chaos:

DIVIDE AND RULE

A well-known strategy by the Burma Army has long been to ravage local communities with fear and violence to the extent that villagers begin to lose faith in opposition groups and turn against them as ongoing clashes put civilian lives at risk. The para-militias are trying to instill fear among civilians and make clear that the consequences of joining the revolution are life and death. They want to discourage involvement in politics and campaigning against the junta. The intention behind this strategy is to deter support from communities who back local opposition groups including EROs and PDFs.

CASE STUDY

A 50-year old man from Ka Nyin Inn village, from the Wun Ford village track, Yebyu Township was killed at his home by an unknown group on June 16 2022. Since the coup, the military has frequently killed innocent civilians in the Tenasserim Division. Other armed and violent groups like the Pyu Saw Htee and Black Kite Brotherhood are believed to be sponsored by the junta, and they have targeted family members of the NLD supporters and the PDFs.

TYRANNY THROUGH TERROR

The military has made it clear that they are not afraid to respond with force in order to force civilians to submit to them. In line with many of the junta's strategies, the militias have also responded with more violence in response to the fact that the junta is losing support on a regular basis. This is evident through the rise in military junta defections and opposition groups yielding more support. The Burma Army is relying on airstrikes because of weaknesses on the ground, and have looked to paramilitaries to breakdown communities through violence and terror.

CASE STUDY

The Black Kite Brotherhood killed two villagers and destroyed a house in Eai Ka Ni village, Yebyu Township, in Tanintharyi Region on 24 June 2022. The group arrested Ko Myo Ko and Ko Yan Pine Soe of A Ka Ni village and killed them near Watt Chaung village. Then, they abandoned their bodies, and scattered their group's logos around the scene, as reported by a local resident. The group then invaded a house owned by a NLD party supporter in order to arrest him. Because their target was not at home, they detonated a bomb in the house. "On that day, the whole village was noisy with the sounds of gun shoots and a bomb blast. Then, they tied the daughter of the NLD support inside the house and left," said a villager. The two young men who were killed by the group were not supporters of any political parties, They were just ordinary villagers who made their livelihoods peacefully.

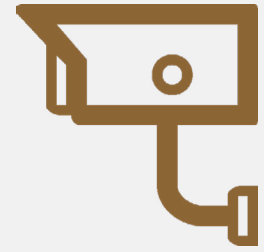
CASE STUDY

At 11:30 PM on June 26th, 2022, joint troops of the junta sponsored militia forces and junta soldiers from LIB No.406 raided five houses in Kadak Gyi village, Longlone Township, Dawei. They arrested a 60-year-old couple and tied their hands behind their backs and shot them at close range.

INFORMERS AND SPIES

Military sponsored informers and spies are used to pull information from civilians and commit human rights violations against activists. In villages and townships, civilians must be extremely careful as the presence of informers has increased. These are people who are working very closely with the junta and are committed to imprisoning pro-democracy activists and those also involved in the CDM, PDF or the Spring Revolution. This tactic is deployed through paramilitary soldiers also acting as informers and infiltrating villages with their presence.

The junta's use of surveillance is also increasingly worrying.



The junta's use of surveillance is also increasingly worrying. The roll out of Chinese built cameras which recognize faces are an attempt to directly target members of opposition forces.⁷ Imported technology from Russia, Singapore, and even European Union manufacturers has added an additional layer of scrutiny against rights defenders who fear for their physical and digital security. HURFOM has documented dozens of cases of civilians prominent with the various pro democracy movements who have had to flee and are living in exile because of the regime's blatant attempts to track their movements and identities. Informers are able to use the surveillance information provided by the junta to assault their targets sooner.

The soldiers have targeted activists, journalists, social workers, and members of political parties including the NLD in gruesome murders. These attacks are intended to stroke fears and tensions.

CASE STUDY

On May 2nd, 2022, two pro-military men on a motorcycle arrived at the home of a NLD representative Daw Shan Ma, aged 50. She was shot, and then the culprits fled. One week prior to the attack, two NLD members and supporters were killed in Long Lone Township, Dawei. Many believed that the junta-backed militia members committed these murders. The group declared publicly that they had plans to also target members of the press, and their families.

CASE STUDY

On the night of July 14, 2022, two tutors from Myeik University of Technology and Computer University were accused of being linked with the CDMs' assets and abducted by the junta security forces. They both are female tutors: Daw Ei Ei Phyo and Daw Thi Thi Swe. Some witnesses reported that during the forcible arrest, the soldiers continued beating them.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS PERPETRATED BY PARA-MILITIAS

Since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021, the establishment of militias has been on the rise. Further, the attacks perpetrated against civilians by paramilitaries are more violent. Victims have been found with evidence of torture before they were killed, including beheading and dismembering of limbs. In some cases, bodies have been so badly disfigured that they could not be identified. The junta has ordered many of the deceased to be cremated to prevent families from seeing the victims in the aftermath of their violent deaths, in a reckless attempt to destroy evidence of their murders.⁸

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence since the attempted coup has also been on the rise. HURFOM reported that organizations providing legal support to women and children report increases in domestic assaults and rape - particularly of children. One organization said they have twenty case files open regarding rape involving children, and 10 cases of domestic assault. The increasing presence of soldiers has led to a lack of accessible protection mechanisms largely due to fear that families have to report their cases as was the case in Sagaing region, following the attempted rape of an eight-year old in Kantbalu Township by a pro-junta militia leader.⁹ These attacks extend to HURFOM target areas as well where young women and girls are subject to harassment by the junta. The military junta has long used rape as a tool of terror, and a weapon of war to assert dominance and fear.

ABDUCTIONS & MURDER

The victims of the paramilitaries include anyone who has shown support for the Spring Revolution. However, attacks also appear to be random and targeted at civilians who may even be living in close quarters of opposition forces, even unknowingly. The paramilitias have branded themselves as being violent, and have not hesitated to show off threatening behavior.

These crimes take place with impunity, and often at night with few witnesses. The attacks are unsuspecting and leave victims isolated without a means to escape, or protect themselves. Further, due to the fact that the militias are protected by the junta, they simply cannot rely upon domestic accountability mechanisms.

8 "Pro-Regime Militia Blamed as Another Member of Myanmar's NLD Killed," *The Irrawaddy*, 15 July 2022

9 "Pro-Junta Militia Leader Attempts to Rape Second Grader in Upper Myanmar" *The Irrawaddy*, 5 July 2022

Members of the NLD have been targeted openly and without hesitation by the military junta, and the associated militias. According to the NLD's Human Rights Record Group, the junta has killed nearly 50 former members of Parliament, and over 900 NLD lawmakers have been arrested since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021.¹⁰ Among those killed, 29 were murdered without 'reason' by the junta-backed group, the Thway Thauk militia. This group is made of ultra-nationalists and members of the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party.¹¹ As a result of the worsening socio-political climate, many NLD officials and activists have been forced into exile. As a result of the worsening socio-political climate, many NLD officials and activists have been forced into exile.

CASE STUDY

On the night of July 9th, 2022, a group of junta forces and their sponsored-armed militants stormed a civilian house in Wei-Kyun-Myothit Ward, Dawei, and abducted three young men. According to local sources, it was later confirmed that one of them was shot to death.

CASE STUDY

The junta-sponsored thug forces, Pyu-Saw-Htee, joined the Burma Army and arbitrarily arrested ten villagers as porters, and killed two of them in Kyaikhto township, Mon State, according to an escapee who spoke with HURFOM.

CASE STUDY

On June 15, 2022, around 4:00 am, a group of twelve junta-sponsored para-militia forces arrived in Ekni Village, Yebyu Township, Dawei and arrested and then killed two young villagers, Ko Myo Ko, age 22, and his friend Ye Pai Soe, age 23, according to local witnesses. During their crackdown operation in the village, an NLD member, Kyi Ngwe's home, was also bombed, and indiscriminate gunshots were fired at the village, according to the villagers. The junta-backed militia's logo was strewn across the street. Extra-judicial killings are on the rise in the region. No junta troops have taken accountability and responsibility for the killing of innocent civilians. Our lives are a real-life killing field," a 45-year-old villager from Wet Chaung village, Yebyu, expressed.

The attacks against civilians and members of PDFs, and the NLD are unwarranted and are in violation of international laws, norms and principles. The para-militias have continued to destroy and devastate civilian lives because they are protected by the military junta through the courts which they have corrupted to work to their own benefit.

10 "Nearly 50 members of Myanmar's deposed government have been killed since coup," *Radio Free Asia*, 18 July 2022

11 *Ibid*

CASE STUDY

On May 2, 2022, at around 9 am, two pro-military men on a motorcycle came to Daw Shan Ma's house, aged 50, and an NLD member. They shot her, according to a villager of Pan-Dalae village, Long Lone Township, Dawei. Two junta-backed militias opened fire on her house and fled. She was shot in the leg. Two NLD members and supporters were reportedly also killed in Long Lone Township the week before. Many believed that the junta-backed militia members committed these murders. "On Telegram, they also announced plans to target journalists and their families," said a young man who saw the post about the junta-backed militia forces intimidating the civilians.

The assaults on people's lives by paramilitary groups is an extension of the junta's violence. Their disregard for the law, and the value of human lives in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights treaties which make clear the preservation of life. The reason opposition groups are targeted is because the junta fears dissent, and it fears being overcome by greater, stronger forces of democracy, peace and freedom.

CONCLUSION

The attacks against civilians by paramilitaries are hostile, vindictive and evil. They amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The human rights violations being perpetrated are reminiscent of the junta's playbook at war and must be met with the same consequences being called upon to the international community.

The people of Burma want action beyond words of condemnation from global actors who have political tools at their disposal to act swiftly and with urgency. In the months which have passed since 1 February 2021, civilians have been burned alive. They've been arrested and sent to wait in unsanitary prison conditions to hear unjust charges and sentences. They have been routinely displaced. And yet, despite the fierce adversity that they are faced with, they are resilient. The National Unity Government and the many people ensuring the success of the Spring Revolution must be supported. Local stakeholders and their voices must be prioritized.

Change cannot come from inside Burma alone. International stakeholders have a moral and political obligation to intervene when the safety of innocent people is at risk. Each day that passes without action is one more which must rest on the consciousness of world leaders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the International Community:

- Targeted sanctions on military junta officials, as well as their families, which puts holds on their financial assets and possessions and undercuts their ability to do corrupt business dealings abroad.
- Concerted and coordinated action by global actors for an urgently mandated global arms embargo which would prevent the free flow of weapons into the hands of the murderous junta.
- Aviation fuel sanctions to put an effective end to the airstrikes in Burma which have contributed to significant loss of life, particularly among innocent civilians.

To UN Affiliated Groups

- A referral of the situation on the ground in Burma made immediately by the United Nations Security Council to the International Criminal Court.
- Strengthened and renewed protection mechanisms which grant civilians who are vulnerable and at risk of assault in a position where they are able to access justice referral and accountability pathways.
- Renewed and continued funding support for local organizations responding to the needs of their communities on the ground. Cross-border aid pathways must be accessed and all humanitarian aid in the hands of local actors.
- An abrupt and immediate halt to the use of torture by the military junta, and further we call for investigations to probe the unlawful deaths of civilians in Burma who have been tortured to death, as well as those who have been forced to endure trauma and long-term injuries as a result.

To the National Unity Government

- To support the flow of humanitarian assistance to high impact areas of southeastern Burma, and across the country to ensure unmet needs among the most vulnerable are readily addressed.
- To continue to effectively and urgently advocate to UN agencies directly on the need for action on the ground in Burma where civilians continue to be hard hit by the impacts of the junta's devastating crimes against them.
- To utilize all networks to call for more protection of civilians in Burma, including victims of sexual assault and rape by the military junta, and paramilitaries.



**The Rise of Pro-Junta Militias
in Southeastern Burma**

**The Human Rights Foundation
of Monland, August 2022**