

*“How can we
survive in the
future?”*

Atrocity Crimes in Karenni State

An Executive Summary

February 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the attempted coup on 1 February 2021, thousands of Karenni people participated in the peaceful mass protest movement against military rule that spread across the country. After the regime's brutal crackdown and killings of peaceful protestors, young people in Karenni State set up barricades and roadblocks and took up arms to defend themselves. Some joined the Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces, while others joined local Peoples Defense Forces groups.

Since May 2021 the junta has attempted to exert control over Karenni State through rapid militarization. Military reinforcements are routinely deployed across townships in Karenni State and neighboring areas. **At the same time, the Burmese military has ruthlessly employed its counter-insurgency strategy known as the "four cuts." This deliberately targets civilians, viewing them as the support base for armed resistance groups, and aims to cut off access to four essentials: food, funds, intelligence, and recruits.**

As part of its collective punishment strategy, the Burmese military has occupied villages across Karenni State, razing civilian infrastructure, setting up temporary outposts, and planting landmines around villages. When soldiers from the Burmese military retreat from a village, they typically burn down civilian homes.

The **serious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law** documented in this report include both **indiscriminate and targeted attacks on Karenni civilian populations, murder and mass killings, widespread destruction of civilian property, forced displacement on a massive scale, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and cruel treatment, sexual violence, and using Karenni civilians as forced labour and human shields.**

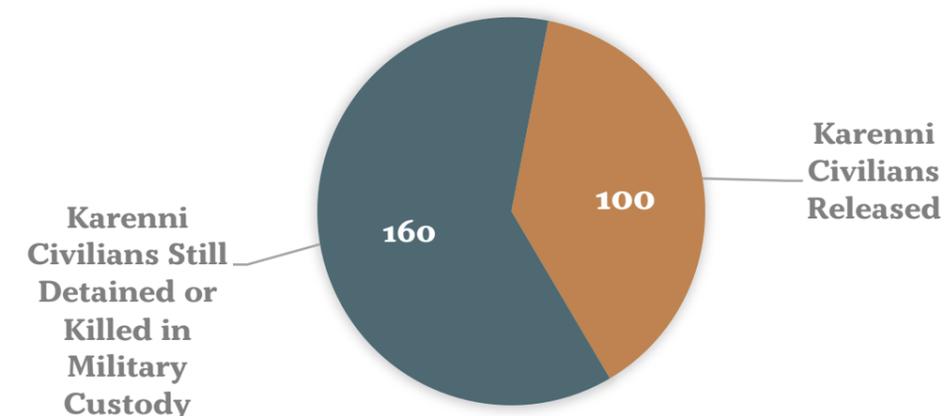
Conflict-related sexual violence is a growing threat to women's safety, particularly as junta forces expand their presence in civilian areas. Women and girls constantly worry that Burmese military soldiers will force them to be human shields. Whenever a woman is in any kind of military custody, she faces the prospect of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence, particularly rape and gang-rape. Female humanitarian aid workers and volunteers and Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) leaders are expressly targeted for arbitrary arrest and detention.

"It is not safe or secure for women to travel alone because they could be hit by a bullet anytime. She could also face sexual violence. If she is attacked, there is no law to protect her," said a displaced woman living in Hpruso township.

Victims of arbitrary detention include ordinary civilians, peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators, CDM participants such as teachers and medical personnel, and humanitarian aid workers. The military junta has made it clear that no one is allowed to provide aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs), even going as far as limiting the amount of medicine a person is allowed to carry. Young men and women can be stopped and questioned at any time while traveling on foot, or at military checkpoints set up along the roadside.

This report documents the arbitrary arrests of at least 260 Karenni civilians including 33 women by junta forces throughout Karenni State and Pekhonn township in southern Shan State. However, the true figures are likely to be higher, particularly for women. After being arrested, most Karenni civilians are detained, tortured, or even killed. Through September 2022, we documented that the junta unlawfully killed 115 civilians in their custody after arbitrarily arresting and detaining them.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS OF KARENNI CIVILIANS



This report also documents **three mass killing events**. On the morning of 24 December 2021, a group of Karenni villagers were arbitrarily arrested and detained for one hour before they were burned alive in Muso village, Hpruso township. **A total of 34 civilians were murdered by junta soldiers in this mass killing event.**

The families of those murdered in the Christmas Eve massacre are deeply traumatized and struggle to come to terms with their loss. The wife of one of the men who was arrested and killed in Muso village is suffering from psychological trauma. She said:

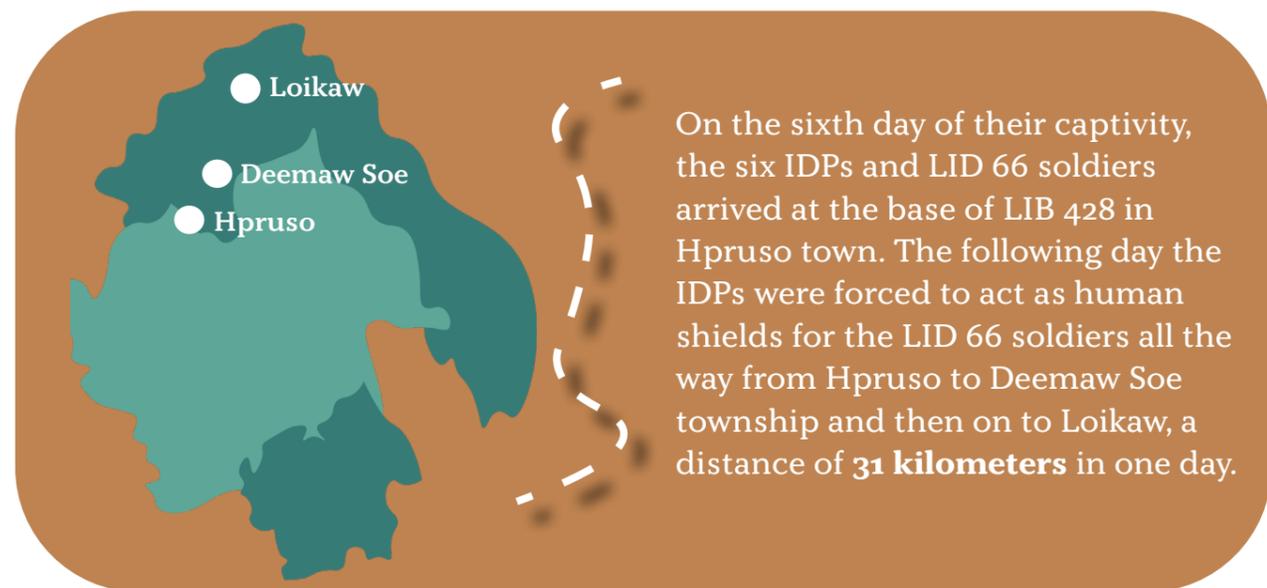
"I cry every night. I am very depressed. I wish that I had died together with my husband. I never got to see my husband's face for the last time. It makes me really sad. Every time I go home, I miss my husband."

The other two mass killing events took place in January 2022, of a group of five IDPs in Deemaw Soe township, and six civilians in Loikaw township. In both cases, junta forces disposed of their victims' bodies in degrading places such as sewers and wells in an attempt to destroy evidence of their crimes. Their conduct demonstrates blatant disregard for the victims by debasing them even in death and adds to the suffering of their families by denying them the dignity of a decent burial for their loved ones.

In Karenni State, civilians are at high risk of being forcibly taken as guides, porters and human shields for the Burmese military. Often this is when troop reinforcements have been deployed,

while the military is expanding its presence in Karenni State and setting up new bases. While on the move, the Burmese military soldiers attempt to protect themselves from coming under attack from anti-junta resistance forces by using Karenni civilians as human shields.

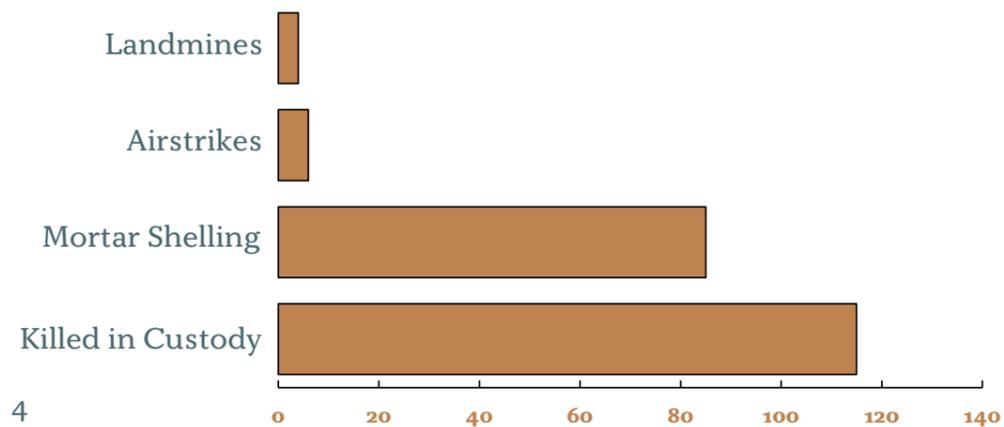
This report documents six separate incidents of the use of forced labor and human shields by the Burmese military in Karenni State, involving a total of an estimated 65 Karenni civilians including women and children. In one emblematic incident, a group of six male IDPs including a teenage boy were abducted by Burmese military soldiers and forced to act as human shields for them for 8 nights and 7 days through Hpruso, Deemaw Soe and Loikaw townships. The entire journey was 65 kilometers. During this time they were brutally tortured by the soldiers.



The Burmese military's rapid expansion of its presence in Karenni State has escalated the armed conflict. Villages have been turned into battlegrounds, resulting in rising civilian casualties. This report documents the killing of at least 85 civilians killed by mortar shelling in Karenni State between May 2021 and September 2022, including women and children. More than 240 people have been injured in crossfire.

Junta forces also launched airstrikes on five different villages in Hpruso, Loikaw and Deemaw Soe townships in Karenni State. At least six civilians including three children were killed in these attacks, and nine were injured.

Civilians Killed by Junta Forces



On 17 January 2022, the junta launched an airstrike on Reekee Bu village in Hpruso township, an area under the control of the Karenni Army and the Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces. Prior to this attack, there was no active fighting in the immediate area and armed opposition groups were not nearby. Many Karenni civilians had fled to Reekee Bu following armed clashes and the Christmas Eve massacre in Muso the previous month.

A 40-year-old woman recalled the attack on her IDP camp in Reekee Bu village. The day before, around 6 PM, junta aircraft flew low and surveyed the camp. Then, around 1AM, her camp of approximately 300 IDPs was bombed.

As the Burmese military attempts to secure more territory by establishing new bases and expanding their operations, landmines are intentionally placed around local villages. The report documents 22 landmine incidents that killed four civilians and seriously injured 70, including children.

"In our village, we are not safe, so we had to flee. No one dares to return to the village because there are landmines and villagers are afraid that they will step on them and be harmed. Until now, the military junta is still living around our homes in the village. There is no security. We are afraid to go home and we don't even know when this would be possible," explained a displaced woman.

When Burma Army soldiers retreat, they typically destroy villagers' homes in arson attacks on the pretext that they are ambushing Karenni armed resistance groups. Arson attacks are part of the Burmese military's strategy of collective punishment of Karenni civilians for their perceived support of the anti-junta resistance forces.

1,190 homes in 87 Karenni towns, wards and villages have been either severely damaged or completely destroyed by junta forces. At least 180,000 Karenni people have been forcibly displaced out of an estimated total Karenni population of 420,000. This means that more than 40 percent of the Karenni population have been forcibly displaced, the vast majority of them women and children.¹ Some families have been displaced multiple times.

"I lost everything. I don't know where to take my children to stay and hide. I am really afraid and I don't know where we can keep running safely," said an internally displaced woman from Hpruso township whose home was destroyed by the regime's mortar shelling.

Already traumatized by the atrocity crimes they have experienced, the IDPs live in constant fear of renewed attacks by junta forces.

“When the plane bombed the area, it was dark in the middle of the night. We had to run without light. We did not know where we were going. I ran to the mountains. My knee was injured from shrapnel and my knees still have scars. Because of the bomb, my two daughters were killed. When I talk about them, I feel so depressed and my heart breaks.”

1. The total Karenni population is estimated at 420,000, based on the population of Karenni State and the estimated Karenni population of Pehkon township in present-day southern Shan State. This area is home to the Kayan, one of the Karenni ethnic groups. It is regarded as part of the historic Karenni homeland. The Karenni women's groups estimate that women comprise 35-40% of the IDP population and children another 30%.

“Our village has become a battleground. We have to run away and hide. Now we are IDPs. We are facing so many difficulties. We cannot live a good life. We don’t have good food or health care. The military came to our village and stole our things. They even burned down our house.... I miss my home and village. Of course I want to go back and live there. Who wouldn’t want that?” said a displaced man in Deemaw Soe township

The attacks on IDP sites continue unabated. On 23 October 2022, junta forces shelled an IDP site in Loikaw township, killing one man and injuring two other civilians. On 16 November 2022, a child was killed and eight other civilians were injured when a mortar shell fired by the Burmese military landed on the nursery school where they were taking shelter, also in Loikaw township.

Many Karenni IDPs are subsistence farmers who have had to abandon their rice paddies and other crops. IDPs constantly worry about food insecurity. A displaced woman in Hpruso township expressed her fears:

“We are really worried that the rations will be cut. The military is targeting aid workers and arresting the people who are helping us. Sometimes they are even killed. If the rations are cut, it will be more difficult. With less available the rations will get smaller, but it is not enough to keep us from starving.”

IDPs are relying entirely on outsourced assistance, but it is insufficient. Sometimes women are left with no choice; they need to leave their temporary shelters in search of food for their families, and sometimes walk back to their village to retrieve food and other essentials. This carries the risks of stepping on a landmine, being hit by mortar shelling, or shot at by Burmese military soldiers.

The human rights documentation in this report is contextualized with legal analysis. In summary, based on the findings of this report it is reasonable to conclude that **members of the Burmese military have committed the war crimes of attacking civilians, attacking protected objects, pillaging, murder, torture, cruel treatment and displacing civilians in Karenni State. The conduct of the Burmese military likely also constitutes the crimes against humanity of imprisonment or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, murder, torture, enslavement, other inhumane acts, and forced displacement when considered in the context of a widespread or systematic ‘attack’ against the civilian population in Burma, committed with the requisite knowledge of the attack.**

The Burmese military can commit these atrocity crimes with impunity because the international community does not hold them accountable, even though it has a legal and moral obligation to do so. A series of important steps must be taken to ensure that individual perpetrators from the Burmese military are held accountable. This includes referral of the situation in Burma to the International Criminal Court, which provides a pathway to justice and reparations for the thousands of victims. Without justice and accountability, there can be no lasting peace for Karenni communities.

This report also urges the international community to take action beyond mere ‘statement diplomacy’ to protect the thousands of civilians who live with the daily threat of being murdered by the military regime. This should include imposing a coordinated global arms embargo on the Burmese military and sanctioning aviation fuel supply in a bid to end deadly airstrikes on civilian populations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. In line with obligations under UNSCR 1325, fully integrate the gender perspective in responding to the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Burma. Pay particular attention to protection of the rights of women and children, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, equal participation for women as key stakeholders in decision-making processes, and the rehabilitation needs of women and children;
2. Consult with local civil society organizations for accurate, up-to-date information about the humanitarian crisis and human rights situation on the ground in Karenni areas;
3. Avoid channelling humanitarian aid via international bodies required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the junta. Provide direct funding to local civil society and community-based organizations for the distribution of cross-border humanitarian aid, to minimize overheads and maximise support reaching the internally displaced populations in Karenni areas;
4. Increase direct funding and support to local civil society and community-based organizations to meet the following needs of internally displaced populations in Karenni areas:
 - Sufficient nutritional food rations, clean water supply, shelter materials and sanitation facilities;
 - Healthcare assistance, medicines and medical supplies, including dignity and personal hygiene kits, delivery kits, nutrition packs for children and the elderly, as well as sexual and reproductive health services for women;
 - Psychosocial support and trauma healing for displaced communities, including for victims of torture and sexual and gender-based violence;
 - Rehabilitation and physiotherapy support for victims with life-changing injuries and disabilities;
 - Special considerations for women’s safety and dignity in temporary shelters and communal areas of IDP sites;
 - Education assistance for children and young people.
5. Increase funding to local civil society organizations for human rights education, human rights documentation, and advocacy work, coupled with targeted long-term psychosocial assistance for victims of torture and sexual and gender-based violence to support and empower them to speak out about the violations they have experienced;
6. Impose further coordinated targeted sanctions against the military and its leadership, specifically targeting Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises;
7. Impose a coordinated comprehensive global arms embargo on the Burmese military;
8. Sanction aviation fuel supply to the Burmese military to limit its ability to launch airstrikes against civilian populations, including IDPs;
9. Support international justice and accountability efforts by:
 - Recommending the International Criminal Court accept the declaration lodged by the National Unity Government of Burma, under Article 12(3) of the Court’s Rome Statute, accepting the Court’s jurisdiction concerning international crimes committed in Burma territory since 1 July 2002;
 - Proposing a UN Security Council resolution that refers the situation in Burma to the International Criminal Court;
 - Publicly supporting the creation of an ad hoc international tribunal through the UN General Assembly or UN Human Rights Council, should a UN Security Council resolution on ICC referral fail;
 - Exercising universal jurisdiction to investigate any individual from Burma – irrespective of position or rank – who may be responsible for committing genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity under international law, including in Karenni State.

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Cover Photo: Evidence of the destruction caused by artillery shelling and attacks by the Burma Army, and deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure