

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Naw Hser Hser
UN Security Council Open Debate on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
14 July 2023

President, Excellencies, civil society colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on the occasion of today's annual open debate on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). I am Naw Hser Hser, Advisory Board Member of the Women's League of Burma, a civil society coalition of 12 organizations representing women from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

It has now been over two years since the military launched a coup overthrowing the democratically elected civilian government, which has generated further conflict across Myanmar. Over 23,000 civilians have been arrested by the junta, more than 1.8 million have been displaced, and women and girls are at greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, not only at the hands of the military but also by anti-junta defense forces.

Despite these many risks, women remain at the forefront of the resistance to the military, comprising over 60 percent of pro-democracy human rights defenders. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) of different ethnicities, religions, and ages across Myanmar are on the front lines, providing essential services to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and survivors of CRSV, reporting on human rights abuses, and providing shelter and safe houses for pro-democracy protestors. WHRDs are unified by our collective call for a federal democratic Myanmar. And we know that in order to do so, we must not only defeat an oppressive military junta, but also challenge patriarchal oppression.

WHRDs in Myanmar face enormous challenges, including threats to their safety and security, and that of their families. For example, the military has issued arrest warrants for most of our member organizations' staff, hampering our ability to support IDPs and survivors of CRSV. The military junta has informants throughout the country, making it difficult to know who can be trusted. Many WHRDs are in hiding or, like me, have been forced to leave Myanmar in order to continue our work.

Using sexual violence to attack civilian populations has long been the military's modus operandi. Rape and sexual violence were hallmarks of the military's 2017 genocide of the Rohingya, and Rohingya women and girls who fled Myanmar for Cox's Bazar, including transgender women, now face heightened risks of violence. Since the coup, my organization has documented over 100 cases of CRSV and gender-based violence. In one case, junta soldiers repeatedly raped a woman at gunpoint in front of her husband in Chin State. That same evening, the victim's sister-in-law, who was seven months pregnant, was also raped by junta soldiers. The real number of cases is likely much higher, since many victims and survivors do not report sexual violence for fear of further abuse and harassment by the military junta.

Women and LGBTQI people in detention are particularly vulnerable to torture, including sexual violence. Over 4,300 women have been arrested since the coup, and over 3,600 women are still in detention. 15 women have been unjustly sentenced to death for their pro-democracy activities.

Sexual violence is also a deliberate and systematic tactic to target WHRDs and punish them, not only for speaking out against the regime, but also for defying patriarchal norms. Many WHRDs face both online abuse and doxxing tactics that can result in offline violence, false allegations and unlawful arrests. Women from ethnic or religious minorities, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women, and women who are politically active or are linked to politically active individuals have been targeted for such abuse. As a result of such attacks, many women feel

they have no choice but to censor themselves and scale back their public activity, or to retreat from activism altogether. Supporting WHRDs, protecting their fundamental rights, and enabling their participation in all aspects of public life and decision-making, including at the international level, must be prioritized by all international actors.

Excellencies, threats and attacks against all human rights defenders and peacebuilders, wherever they occur, are unacceptable. They deter women and other advocates for peace, human rights and gender equality, especially those from marginalized communities, from participation and leadership. The Security Council has called upon Member States to put in place measures to protect women civil society and strongly encouraged States to create a safe and enabling environment for all those who protect and promote human rights, including women leaders, peacebuilders and other advocates for gender equality, to enable them to carry out their work independently, and to address threats and attacks against them — yet WHRDs in Myanmar continue to face attacks unabated.

Accountability is essential for ending all forms of violence against women in all their diversity. The 2021 coup was a result of decades of impunity for the military junta, including for its use of sexual and gender-based violence as a tactic to target and terrorize civilian populations. Since independence in 1948, successive authoritarian regimes have perpetuated systemic discrimination based on gender, and actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.

As the airstrikes that killed at least 165 people in Sagaing in April so painfully illustrate, continued impunity emboldens the junta in its use of violence against civilians, and the military is escalating the scale of its attacks.

At present, domestic options for justice are impossible. I therefore urge the Security Council to refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity, including widespread and systematic acts of rape and sexual violence against women and girls. Alternatively, the international community could support the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal to bring the junta to justice and provide meaningful reparations to survivors and their families. Member States should also fully support the work of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar recently said, the military junta needs three things to sustain itself: arms, money, and international legitimacy. Women civil society know all too well that these are also the tools used to perpetrate violence against women in the country.

The Security Council should impose an embargo on the sale and transfer of arms, ammunition, and aviation fuel. I also urge the international community to enact coordinated and targeted sanctions against the military and its proxies, including Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, to cut off financial support for the military and its atrocities. In addition, I urge you to reject any efforts by the military junta to hold sham elections to legitimize its rule. Any election administered by the junta cannot be free or fair, nor lay the groundwork for a democratic future. Finally, I urge you, as Security Council members, to build on the progress of Resolution 2669 (2022) to continue to demand an immediate end to all forms of violence in Myanmar, including sexual and gender-based violence, and to keep Myanmar on the agenda of the Security Council, in open session, so that civil society can participate in your deliberations.

Currently, one in three people in Myanmar is in need of humanitarian assistance due to food insecurity and limited or no access to healthcare, including essential and life-saving sexual and reproductive care for survivors of CRSV. Local ethnic women's organizations are vital in providing humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected communities. They have experience, expertise, and the trust of their communities, but they require political support and resources from the international community in order to carry out their efforts.

This is a pivotal moment for Myanmar. For the first time, the people of Myanmar are united across ethnic, religious, and gender lines in our common struggle for ending military dictatorship, ensuring justice, and calling for a federal democratic Myanmar that embraces diversity and pluralism. Now, we need your support.

Excellencies, I would like to end my statement today by reiterating one simple point: Myanmar is one example of how political violence, including sexual violence, is being used to intimidate, punish, and silence WHRDs, peacebuilders, journalists, and politically active women in many conflicts on the Security Council's agenda. These

very tactics are being deployed against women and girls in Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Colombia and countless other conflicts and crises. As nearly 23 years of the Women, Peace and Security agenda have reiterated, and as this Council has repeatedly underlined, including at the open debate on protecting women's participation in January 2022, retaliation for political participation, human rights work, peacebuilding, or cooperation with UN mechanisms, including the Security Council, fundamentally undermines women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace and security, the bedrock of Resolution 1325 (2000). I urge you today to demand an end to attacks, reprisals, and all forms of violence against all WHRDs, peacebuilders, and civil society leaders, and to demonstrate, by meaningful action, that protection of women's human rights is fundamental to peace not only in Myanmar, but in all conflicts and crises.

Thank you.