



CULTURE IN THE CROSSHAIRS

*How the Junta is Systematically Targeting
Human Rights Culture with Military Impunity*

*A report by the Human Rights Foundation of Monland
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INTRODUCTION

For nearly three years, the Burma Army has continued to commit countless human rights violations with impunity. The people overwhelmingly reject the junta as any entity of authority and leadership. The illegal coup has resulted in widespread displacement and a worsening conflict that has impacted human rights culture. As the regime continues and fails to seek recognition, they are also losing a war that they have been embroiled in for decades.

In stark retaliation for the junta's lost bases and control, civilians have been targeted in a widespread campaign to demoralize support for the opposition. In Karen State alone, at least 700,000 people have been internally displaced since 1 February 2021. The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) has been documenting human rights violations in Mon State, Karen State and the Tanintharyi region and has continuously presented evidence of military impunity. Of the dozens of cases recorded, no victim has seen justice. The security, safety, and stability of civilian livelihoods have dramatically decreased across all target areas.

This briefing paper, '*Culture in the Crosshairs*,' was written in line with the 2023 Human Rights Day theme: "Consolidating and Sustaining Human Rights Culture into the Future." The junta in Burma has never respected the cultures or identities of ethnic people. HURFOM argues that the military is not only committing human rights violations, but they are also attempting to disintegrate ethnic cultures and traditions in Southeastern Burma.



The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) aims to ensure the protection of economic, social and cultural rights, including Freedom from discrimination and the right to equality between men and women, as well as the right to work.¹ Myanmar is neither a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the ICESCR, nor their optional protocols.

1 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 16 Dec. 1996, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights

Chapter 8 of the junta's military-drafted 2008 Constitution guarantees many ESC rights.² Nonetheless, the Constitution makes a mockery of human rights. It is discriminatory and has no legitimacy - not even to the junta who violated its terms when they attempted a coup. This further emphasizes that there is no basis for trust in the military to follow through with any commitments to peace or democracy, including cultural preservation, even those enshrined their own doctrines.

Historically, brutal campaigns by the Burma Army targeted ethnic people and attempted to assimilate them into Burman identities and politics. This became well known as the practice of 'Burmanization,' a deliberate strategy used to try and erase the culture of ethnic people through fear and scorched-earth campaigns that sent thousands of people to border countries such as Thailand, India, and China.³ 'Divide-and-rule' tactics were also deployed in which the junta tried to make other ethnic groups represent one another in a bid to break ties of solidarity.⁴

In the current situation, the people of Burma are fighting to restore their rights and freedoms and preserve their culture. This requires creating new systems that protect and uphold human rights through transitional justice mechanisms and building an ecosystem that places equal value on promoting a human rights culture. More awareness raising and information sharing is required.

Thus, HURFOM maintains the importance of sharing the lived experiences of the people on the ground and ensuring they are not ignored or neglected. There must also be increased support for human rights organizations operating on the ground. The preservation of their culture is interlinked with their fight for their ongoing survival.

2 "Transforming the Culture of Human Rights in Myanmar." Human Rights Watch, 16 Dec. 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2013/12/16/transforming-culture-human-rights-myanmar

3 "Burmanisation and Discrimination." Burma Link, 25 Aug. 2020, www.burmalink.org/background/burma/dynamics-of-ethnic-conflict/burmanisation-and-discrimination/

4 Brenner, David. "The Tatmadaw's Divide-and-Rule Tactics in Myanmar." – The Diplomat, 17 Mar. 2014, thediplomat.com/2014/03/the-tatmadaws-divide-and-rule-tactics-in-myanmar/

When the junta initiates conflict on ethnic land, they are deliberating, trying to destroy the ecosystem that sustains the way ethnic people survive and adapt. This short briefing paper will contextualize the human rights violations in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region from July to November 2023 through a cultural lens, including how attacks on civilians in ethnic areas target their livelihood traditions, connection to their land and environment and their communities. It will conclude with calls and recommendations to the international community.

FIELDWORKERS NOTE

HURFOM has fieldworkers in Mon State, Karen State, and Tanintharyi Region, as well as human rights networks. Several reporters are working from Mon and Karen State in areas controlled by ethnic revolution organizations.

Our field workers continue to document human rights violations as best as they can, given the extreme risks they face daily. The growing threats to their safety only speak to the society of fear the junta has created. HURFOM's documentation and data are sourced from our network of field staff reporting on the ground. The restrictions imposed by the junta have made it much more challenging to access our target areas freely and without repercussions.

HURFOM field staff are facing severe risks to their physical and digital security. Secure methods of communication, such as encrypted technology, have been adopted. However, there are still many challenges to ensure that the Burma Army does not infiltrate our work and documentation. 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. Currently, HURFOM can safely work in ceasefire areas and armed controlled territories of the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party. Recording events and testimonies are extremely high-risk outside of these areas.

The movement restrictions enforced by the military limit the documentation possible. The information outlined in this short briefing paper includes HURFOM data from the ground. Given the challenges we face collecting these data, many of our estimates are likely significantly higher. Our team is immensely grateful to those who shared their fears and hopes for the future with HURFOM.

SCOPE OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

This briefing paper will apply cultural analysis to the various human rights violations committed by the military junta in Southeastern Burma. Culture is an essential pillar of life that the people of Burma have long used to foster ties to their environment, traditions and beliefs within their communities. It has had to be strengthened repeatedly as the Burmese military seeks to break the ties to ethnic traditions, religion, and practices of their daily life.

The military junta is violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of civilians, in addition to the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which notes: ***“Affirming that respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security.”***⁵

HURFOM defines culture as the right to freely celebrate, commemorate, manifest, and participate in daily and annual affairs rooted in the identity of how an individual or community asserts their belonging in a collective setting. Various human rights documents are enshrined with economic, social, and cultural rights. Examining human rights violations through a cultural lens offers insights into what values and social norms bind a community together. It also reveals communities’ power and how they can apply resilience coping mechanisms rooted in this strength from decades of cultural practice.

Culture drives history, and it has a vital role in the context of human rights movements. The Spring Revolution, for example, has been successful because it propels shared values and calls for a future free from military rule. People from all backgrounds and ethnicities have united to defeat the junta. Economic, cultural and social rights are often overlooked in war. Yet, they are among the driving factors that put community histories at risk of being left behind.

5 “Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity | OHCHR.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/universal-declaration-cultural-diversity>

This briefing paper will identify the rights the junta is violating in a cultural context, as identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). These are all tied to Article 27: the Right to Participate in the Cultural Life of Community. Human rights violations committed by the junta attempt to assert fear and dominance and to break the bonds that tie communities together. HURFOM has observed several ways that the junta has targeted culture in Southeastern Burma, including:

Destroying the fields where farmers tend to live daily through long-held traditional agricultural practices and making it impossible for them to gather and celebrate their martyrs and days of cultural significance.

Destroying community gathering places, including churches and monasteries, schools and offices belonging to social service providers.

Increasing militarization efforts damage the land that sustains and preserves ethnic ties to their land.

Instilling fear and trauma into the lives of civilians who fear any observation of celebration will draw attention to them and encourage the junta to attack.

Implementing decade-old policies, including Burmanization, the Four Cuts and Divide and Rule to distract communities from cultural ties instead of exploiting differences among one another.

HURFOM will draw upon coping and resilience strategies to defend their culture identified by the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) in their report from February 2023: “*We Protect Our Kaw, and Our Kaw Protects Us*,” such as promoting social structure systems, applying nature-based livelihood practices, sustainable natural resource management and traditional knowledge.⁶

Further, with contextual and cultural analysis, this briefing paper is organized into sections on human rights violations perpetrated by the junta in Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region.

6 Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, 2023, “*We Protect Our Kaw, and Our Kaw Protects Us*,” <https://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Resilience-of-Indigenous-Communities-English-web.pdf>

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS IN SOUTHEASTERN BURMA

• *Forced Relocation and Displacement*

Forcing civilians from their homes violates the right to adequate housing. During a presentation to the United Nations General Assembly, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, stated: “We should stop shutting our eyes to the widespread or systematic destruction of civilian homes in conflict. We need to stop what must be called domicide.”⁷

For example, houses in Mu Du Eastern village, located in the Dawei Special Economic Zone area in Yebyu Township, are repeatedly being set on fire. A resident of Mu Du village stated that the military junta troops have been burning the houses since the early morning of October 20th 2023. A local man estimated that the number of homes that have been burnt may be as high as ten. Before the houses were set on fire, at least six local people were arrested from Mu Du West village. Some of them were released. Most of the residents fled their homes, according to the residents.

“They have all fled. There are no more villagers in the village.”

Residents of Mon State are also constantly worried about the ongoing threat of militarization as artillery weapons continue to force people from their homes. In July 2023, the Infantry Battalion (IB) No.31, based in Khawza, Ye, Mon State, warned people not to stay in rubber, durian, and betel nut plantations around the area: “They called for us to leave immediately,” said a resident.

Civilians who try to escape are caught in the crossfire of the worsening war. On July 7, 2023, six people were injured when the military junta launched artillery weapons at Shwe Yaung Pya village, Belin Township, Mon State. The victims, 5-year-old Saw Sin Min Oo, 56-year-old Naw Mu Lar Pye, 18-year-old Naw Mi Htoo, 57-year-old Naw Tin Aye, 25-year-old Saw Ku and 9-year-old Naw Thingyan Phaw, were injured when the 314th Artillery Battalion of Junta Council fired artillery shells.

⁷ “Domicide” Must Be Recognised as an International Crime: UN Expert | Ohchr, 4 Nov. 2022, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/domicide-must-be-recognised-international-crime-un-expert

The Artillery Battalion No.314, stationed in Shwe Yaung Pya village, west of Zee Won, near Ka Sai and Htee Pyo Nya Le, in Belin Township, often launches weapons indiscriminately.

Residents of six villages had to evacuate almost entirely because of the military junta-based battalions launching artillery weapons into Bilin Township of Mon State. Junta battalions based in Bilin, including the Artillery Battalion No.314, have been firing artillery weapons into the village day and night since early July 2023.

“They fired artillery weapons into the villages daily, and most villagers ran into gardens and forests. Locals who can afford money run to their relatives’ houses in the city,” said a resident of Zi Wun.

The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and joint forces are attacking the junta’s battalions, and the junta is targeting local people in response by firing artillery weapons into the villages. On July 12, the junta forces stationed at the monastery in Hnit Ka Yin village, Ye Township, Mon State, checked the phones and arrested the villagers they suspected on various alleged topics related to giving information to the People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) and the KNLA.

In addition, it is reported that hundreds of villagers fled their homes due to warnings from Ye-based People’s Defense Forces to evacuate. By the middle of July 2023, locals said that about three-fourths of the villagers of Hnit Ka Yin, which has around 3,068 households, had fled. These volatile conditions included worsening military offensives, including the use of human shields, indiscriminate firing, as well as air and ground attacks, all of which have led to a worsening humanitarian crisis.

The junta perpetrated dozens of human rights violations between 25 July and 6 August. On August 14, 2023, the military junta troops that entered the KNU Brigade No.1 Administrative Areas shot and killed a civilian and forcibly took valuable materials from 36 houses owned by the villagers.

The ongoing targeting of internally displaced people (IDPs) also prompted HURFOM to release a statement in August 2023 condemning the military junta's deliberate attacks in Southeastern Burma.⁸ Between July and August 2023, HURFOM observed an increase in displaced civilians being abducted and tortured by various battalions of the Burma Army. The impacts have been devastating as the ongoing conflict threatens their survival. At the time of writing, the number of displaced people had only continued to rise.

Forced displacement is one of the many impacts of the military junta's attacks on civilians. When villagers must leave their homes for safety and security reasons, it deprives them of reliable access to food, medicine, shelter, and their community. As noted by KESAN, when displaced populations struggle to survive in remote areas far from their homes, "their traditional responsibility to sustain, manage and protect their land, water, forest, and biodiversity remained unfulfilled."⁹

The impacts have been devastating as the ongoing conflict threatens their survival



Photo: *The 557th LIB, based in Out King village, Tenasserim Township and the 558th LIB, launched indiscriminate and unprovoked artillery attacks.*

8 The Human Rights Foundation of Monland Condemns the Ongoing Targeting ...” The Human Rights Foundation of Monland Condemns the Ongoing Targeting of Internally Displaced People in Southeastern Burma, 18 Aug. 2023, https://rehmonnya.org/reports/August_Statement_HURFOM.pdf

9 Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, 2023, “We Protect Our Kaw, and Our Kaw Protects Us,” <https://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Resilience-of-Indigenous-Communities-English-web.pdf>

• *Militarization and Obstruction of Freedom of Movement*

When the junta enters a village, shots are fired to intimidate and bring fear into the people's lives. In the Tanintharyi region, between the 11th and 14th of August, the junta troops burned more than 30 houses in Ayekani village and three houses in Wazun Taw village. They also broke into the houses in these villages and stole mobile phones, including gold and cash. Then, on August 15, 2023, a monk and a young man were shot in Ayekani village, Yebyu Township. The day before, there were clashes in the morning with the opposition forces. After attacking with artillery weapons and small arms, the military junta troops burned down the houses.

The places people live are integral to community life as families pass along generations of cultural traditions within their households. It is a sacred space where stories are passed down between generations, and offerings are presented to those who have passed on through shrines in homes. When the junta burns down villages, possessions representing cultural ties are also destroyed. Communities strive to salvage material losses of culture with oral histories. Adequate housing should respect and consider the expression of cultural identity and ways of life.¹⁰

Destruction of property, particularly the devastation of homes, is a tactic that the junta continues to deploy. Since September 16, 2023, the military junta troops repeatedly fired in Lakku village. According to locals, the Burma Army shot and killed four civilians in Pyin Phyu village in Pulaw Township, Tanintharyi region, and destroyed their homes. The KNU Thaton district claims that the military junta troops stationed in Kyaikhto Township have been arresting and killing residents, destroying roads connecting villages, and firing artillery weapons into the villages where civilians live daily.

In addition, the destruction of civilian homes and towns by the junta shows a lack of respect for community sanctuaries, expression, cultural identities, and ways of life. Homes are constructed with locally sourced and sustained materials. For the Karen, timber is among the primary materials used to build temples, homes, and other infrastructure.¹¹ Active military operations make it more difficult for communities to preserve resources for future generations to build for the next generation.

10 "OHCHR and the Right to Adequate Housing | Ohchr." OHCHR and the Right to Adequate Housing, www.ohchr.org/en/housing. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

11 Ibid

At the end of the third week of November 2023, the two battalions of the military junta burned down 18 houses in Muu Duu village, Yebyu Township. HURFOM fieldworkers met with most victims and inquired about the incident.

“They are destroying every house they see. They also arrest and kill people. We must always be on the run. If there were people in the house when they came and set fire to the house, they would surely shoot them. Our village has been defined as a battlefield for a long time. The situation feels very hopeless. We have been trying to build a house for many years, but now we know that the junta will only burn it down if we do,” a 45-year-old mother of four children in Muu Duu village, Yebyu Township, told HURFOM.

“Currently, the biggest difficulty is that we have to go to places where the children and mothers can stay safely and have enough food for a week. We don’t know where to go. In the long run, we will face food shortages,” said the 40-year-old father of two children, a native of Muu Duu village.

Another added: **“Before the house was burned, the money I had saved to buy a motorcycle was about 3 million kyats. The soldiers took it all. Besides, they took valuable and useful things. Later, they burned the house. This is what happens to everyone,”** said a 35-year-old villager.

Photo (left): Beginning on the morning of October 9, thousands of residents fled from the villages in the west of Yebyu town and northwest of Long Lon town as military Junta forces raided the villages.



Since 2023, military junta troops have been frequently raiding villages around the deep sea port on the west side of Yebyu Township, shooting and killing civilians. Arrests were being made, and houses were being burned. Since this incident, more than 200 houses have been torched in this area.

The burning of homes is a tactic deployed by the junta throughout the country. Militarization forces are responsible for much of the land degradation in Southeastern Burma as homes, forests, farms and vast spaces of land are burned to the ground by the junta.¹²

Militarization is ultimately preventing communities from their right to participate in cultural life. With active conflict making it increasingly difficult for ethnic people to access and participate in their traditions, this is a violation of their right to exist with meaning and purpose.

¹² Ibid

• *Obstruction of Freedoms of Expression and Assembly*

Places of worship and religious practice are being targeted across Southeastern Burma, which is an insult to the cultural ties people have to their faith. Monasteries are among the most common safety areas as the monks often protect those fleeing junta-sponsored violence. Now, the military is reinforcing and mobilizing its presence in villages between the Ye and Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State.

Soldiers are currently stationed at the monasteries across various villages in Southeastern Burma, which eliminated pathways for security and brought new fears for villagers. Due to the heavy presence of Burmese troops, they are also seriously concerned about the possibility of armed clashes. One local told HURFOM: ***“Our village has become a battlefield, and we are afraid.”***

In September 2023, the junta forces Light Infantry Battalion No.410, which is operating under No. 8 Military Operation Management Command, based in Thaton Township, Mon State, led by the brigade commander Nay Min Soe, deployed their forces in the campus monastery of Kandaw Nee village in Thaton Township, Mon State, for more than 40 days.

The abbot of the monastery told the military junta brigade commander Nay Min Soe that “if your troops are staying here and in this village, the local revolutionary forces will come and attack, and then all the villagers may be injured and killed. I begged the military commander to stop their operations,” said another anonymous monk. As of September 2, 2023, the Light Infantry Battalion No.410 continued to be based inside the Kandaw Nee’s monastery:

“We don’t know how much damage there is in the monastery. They don’t treat the monks with respect. They are arrogant and rude and have made themselves look like they are on the battlefield. Many of our villagers are moving to places outside the village that they think are safe. Now, many families are leaving the village. It’s as if the villagers are being used as protectors for them,” said a 45-year-old man from Kandaw Nee village, Thaton Township.

As noted by the Burma Human Rights Network, there has been an increase in targeted attacks on mosques, churches, and monasteries and violence perpetrated against minority Christians and Buddhists since the coup.¹³

In another instance, at 2 AM on December 1st, the military junta launched a bomb attack by air in Mi Ka Thit village. The junta helicopter departed from the Southeast Command, based in Mawlamyine, and dropped a 500-pound bomb, which killed a monk and damaged a school in Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State. A monk was killed, and the monastery, including the ordination, was damaged, according to local sources.

A 500-pound bomb was thrown into the courtyard of the Bandar Dana Tawya Monastery. The victim, 42-year-old U Zin Oak Thama, was hit by the bomb and died on the spot: **“I awoke in shock. The houses near the monastery shook,”** said a local.

13 BHRN. “Violation of Freedom of Religion and Belief in Myanmar during Anti-Coup Revolution - Burma Human Rights Network.” Burma Human Rights Network, July 2022, www.bhrn.org.uk/en/burma-briefing/1198-violation-of-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-in-myanmar-during-anti-coup-revolution.html



Photo: *Between September 15 and 18, Burma Army troops who entered Latt Ku and Toe villages burned civilian properties in Pu Law Township, Myeik District.*

There remain endless challenges on the ground. Across the last three weeks of November 2023, the conflict intensified between the military junta and the revolutionary forces, which has been fierce in the area of Chaung Hna Kwa in Kyaikmayaw Township, and thousands of residents were forced to flee their homes. Currently, the fighting between the two sides has calmed down a bit, but the military junta is systematically cutting off mobile lines as well as Wi-Fi.

At least 30 villages in Kyaikmayaw have been cut off from phone and internet connections, and local security news and communications have been disrupted, leaving residents worried. As a result, concerns are rising among residents as they can no longer communicate with each other and information about their safety.

The latest report by the rights and advocacy group Athan Myanmar, notes:

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights unequivocally establish that the right to freedom of expression is an inherent and inalienable right of everyone while also serving as a pivotal political right for all citizens. However, for the people of Myanmar, who have endured a series of illegitimate military regimes since the 1962 coup, fundamental human rights, let alone the freedom of expression, were unattainable. The military leaders and their cohorts perceived human rights and democracy as ideas threatening their interests and political authority.”¹⁴

Despite establishing freedom of expression as a fundamental right, the junta views it as a threat. It is perhaps no surprise that cutting off communities and armed groups from information is one of the pillars of the regime’s notorious 4-cuts strategy, which seeks to isolate opposition forces. When individuals cannot express themselves freely, including their fears and calls for protection, this inhibits their connections with key stakeholders who share the same community and cultural values.

• *Violations of the Right to Health, Food and Nutrition*

According to the World Health Organization, ***“The right to health must be enjoyed without discrimination based on race, age, ethnicity or any other factor. Non-discrimination and equality requires states to redress discriminatory law, practice or policy.”¹⁵***

Increasing conflict in Southeastern Burma has led to food shortages which are especially crippling for children who require essential nutrition, as well as the elderly and expectant mothers. When IDPs are sheltering in the forest, they are fearful not only for their safety but also for their survival. Diseases also spread quickly without access to health facilities. The discrimination of ethnic people is evident in the military’s attempts to deprive them of their fundamental health rights.

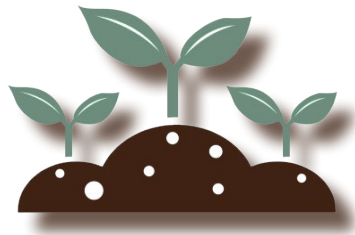
14 “Myanmar and Its Vanishing Freedom of Expression: The Situation of Freedom of Expression After Two Years of the Military Coup.” Athan , Nov. 2023, athanmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FOE-ENG-Nov-11.pdf

15 “Environmental Rights.” The Pachamama Alliance, <https://pachamama.org/environmental-rights#:~:text=What%20Are%20Environmental%20Rights%3F,rights%20are%20dependent%20upon%20it>

In the Tanintharyi region, on the morning of August 20, the military arrested a Ram Ma Zu villager and a Tha Ye Ngoat villager. Then, on August 21, they arrested a plantation worker from Wa Gone village. Family members were worried as they did not know where they were taken: “All the arrested villagers are plantation workers. It is believed the three were only released in the evening of August 23,” said a local man.

The villagers assumed those abducted were being used as porters to carry military equipment. Forced labour is part of a long-standing cycle of human rights violations in Burma, where the junta exploits local people, often threatening them with their lives if they do not cooperate.

The military has more than 100 troops in the area conducting secret operations. Local people are worried, and some have fled to the forests. Due to the military presence in the region, villagers from Ram Ma Zu, Tha Ye Ngoat, Lake Kyel Pyaung, Tin Gan Tone, Wa Gone, and Ba Wa Bin villages have sought refuge in the forests.



Environmental rights are an extension of health rights, which cites that in addition to having the right to food, clean water, suitable shelter, and education, having a safe and sustainable environment is paramount, as all other rights depend on it.¹⁶ When communities are forced to flee, their rights are undermined and at risk because they do not have the critical resources for survival.

Ethnic communities, notably the Karen, take great care in preserving their homelands and natural surroundings. KESAN states:

“Local ecological knowledge passed down by the community’s ancestors that teach communities to maintain harmonious and interdependent relationships with nature through sustainable natural resource management, and protection and preservation of their traditional culture, knowledge and way of life.”¹⁷

16 Ibid
17

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, 2023, “We Protect Our Kaw, and Our Kaw Protects Us,” <https://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Resilience-of-Indigenous-Communities-English-web.pdf>

Since the end of June 2023, more than 1,000 residents from Khalae, Takhon Taing, Pulain, and Nyein Chan Myaing villages in Kyarinnsaikyi Township, Karen State, have abandoned their homes and sought shelter due to the junta's artillery battalion No.318 based in Abis village in Mudon Township fired with artillery weapons almost every day.

There were frequent explosions around and nearby villages. A mother of five children from Takhon Taing village said at an IDP shelter that the shells were fired in unpredictable places, and they had to escape. A statement by the KNU also confirmed that the military junta targeted civilians and opened fire on the villages and surrounding areas with artillery weapons every day. Approximately 1000 village residents evacuated, including Pulain, Khalae, Takhon Taing, and Nan Taing Thon. According to the emergency response team, the people who fled faced difficulty with their livelihood and needed emergency health assistance due to the continuous daily rain.

“In the rainy season, it is more challenging to reach people in need. In addition, diseases such as dengue fever for children and seasonal flu are common, so there is a special need for food, medicine, and treatment teams,” said a local emergency aid group.

According to a statement by the local PDFs, clashes broke out between local KNLA joint forces and the military junta due to the junta troops entering the village of Khalae and Takhon Taing in Kyarinnsaikyi Township. Over 3,000 residents left their villages due to the junta troops' military offensives.

With a force of nearly 150, the soldiers have been on the offensive, firing artillery and small weapons from Nyat Phaw Taw and Ah Lu villages in Kyaik Hto Township since last July 14th. Nearly 700 households and more than 3,100 people from Zee Kone, Padauk Taw, Chan Myae, Nyat Phaw Taw, Ka Ra Way Saik and Shan Su villages evacuated to safe places after the junta troops went in.

“We had to flee when the soldiers arrived. Now it's raining continuously, so older people and children are suffering. They are having a lot of trouble finding safe and secure shelter,” said a resident of Zee Kone



Photo: On September 15, 17, and 18, the military junta troops burned 29 houses in four villages when they entered Pu Law Township, Tanintharyi Region, according to local sources.

Most fleeing locals stay in makeshift shelters in gardens and forests but struggle to survive due to limited resources and access to medicine and food.

In addition, most of the refugees had to run away with few items. As the fighting continued, there remained an urgent need for food. On July 16, 2023, fighting broke out between the KNLA and the Burma Army. Three civilians were shot dead by the junta during the battle, according to KNU Thaton District.

The soldiers have been firing artillery weapons into the villages every day since early July. At least 20 public houses and religious buildings were damaged. A statement by the KNU of Thaton district indicated that more than 4,000 residents of eight villages fled due to the military junta firing weapons.

Conflict-affected populations continue to be affected by the war, which has only continued to escalate. Civilians with treatable illnesses are left with limited options due to being far from clinics and not having reliable medical treatment.

Conflict-affected populations continue to be affected by the war, which has only continued to escalate.

According to ALTSEAN Burma, the junta has “attacked hundreds of local communities in environmentally sensitive zones in its failing quest to gain territorial control. This violence has been fueled by revenue from natural resources.”¹⁸ They also note that as of 31 October 2023, the junta has arrested more than 25,000 people, and among them are many environmental defenders. Others have been driven underground.¹⁹

This deprivation of rights extends to being cut off from the cultural ecosystems that allow communities to nourish themselves with resources from the lands they farm, harvest and tend to – mainly rice, which is the primary source of their ecological systems and nourishment.

Further, the culture ethnic people have surrounding food is rooted in their collective habits, rituals, beliefs, values, lifestyle, and practices around producing, procuring, and intaking food. It shapes how people live and feel and is linked to their ethnicities and, thus, how they identify.

THE RESILIENCE OF COMMUNITIES IN PRESERVING AND PROTECTING THEIR CULTURE

Despite the many challenges communities face in preserving their culture under constant attack, decades of resilience strategies and coping mechanisms have shown their adversity, even in times of great turmoil and uncertainty. The strength of ethnic people has been repeatedly tested across Burma’s long trajectory of war.

Nonetheless, their commitment to upholding their traditions through passing down knowledge of their history has allowed their culture to outlive the junta’s darkest pursuits. The resourcefulness embodied in ethnic communities results from decades of resistance to the military junta.

18 “V6B Environmental Briefer 2023.PDF.” BURMA/MYANMAR: ILLEGAL MILITARY JUNTA’S WAR ON CIVILIANS & THE ENVIRONMENT UNDERMINES CLIMATE RESILIENCE, ALTSEAN Burma, 30 Nov. 2023, drive.google.com/file/d/1tWbihA-S7aq0o409O3lnNYoJSno9eeF4/view

19 Ibid

KESAN observes the following:

“The indigenous knowledge, local institutions, and a spirit of community collectivism passed down through the generations promote harmonious relations between the community and their Kaw, enabling them to navigate through periods of difficulty, as well as sustaining their forests and resources for future generations.”²⁰

KESAN also notes that sustaining resource-based traditional livelihoods is another coping mechanism used by communities in Southeastern Burma to overcome the brutality of the junta when their culture is under attack.²¹ This includes farming systems integral to sustainable land management, allowing them to sow plants and vegetables. Their familiarity with the land and its elements is advantageous when they must forage in remote areas.

In a briefing paper released by HURFOM in October titled “The Resistance and Resilience of Civilians in Southeastern Burma,” we called for community systems of resilience to be recognized, strengthened and supported.

HURFOM highlighted the resilience of communities in their advocacy for transitional justice mechanisms to ensure that advocating for transitional justice is crucial for the democratic movement’s success in Burma.²²

The four pillars of transitional justice are truth, justice, reparations, and non-recurrence (institutional reform). Even before the coup, the military denied pathways to justice mechanisms for those affected by junta violence. This, unfortunately, remains ongoing.²³ Justice through internationally recognized accountability mechanisms is not only a recognition of the suffering of the people but also recognizes their right to exist freely and with the right to express themselves.

20 Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, 2023, “We Protect Our Kaw, and Our Kaw Protects Us,” <https://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Resilience-of-Indigenous-Communities-English-web.pdf>

21 Ibid

22 “The Resistance and Resilience of Civilians in Southeastern Burma.” Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Oct. 2023, rehmonnya.org/reports/R&R-ENG.pdf

23 Ibid

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that when rights and culture collide, multiple aspects of discrimination and violence take place. When civilians assert their rights to land, places of worship and sanctuary, and the ability to express themselves freely, they exert the power of their culture. Nonetheless, the attacks by the military junta continue to threaten the spaces in which cultural traditions can take place. The storytellers in communities, often the elderly, are also among the most vulnerable who are being targeted in the crossfire of violence. Their legacies must be carried out to share ethnic histories with the next generation.

The international community must not be distracted by the military junta's attempts to appear legitimate. They are attacking a civilian population who are being deprived of the right to peace and security. Global actors must also recognize the importance and significance of culture and the historical obstacles it has taken ethnic people to ensure their language, religion and practises are not lost to a power-hungry regime.

There is still time for the international response to Burma to shift its focus from negotiations and engagement with the junta to one rooted firmly in advancing meaningful dialogue on a democratic future in Burma. Securing the future of the country will be a joint effort. However, it can only be achieved if the efforts are collective, inclusive, locally led and sustained.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

1. A referral of the situation on the ground in Burma is to be made immediately by the United Nations Security Council to the International Criminal Court.
2. Concerted and coordinated action by global actors for an urgently mandated international arms embargo which would prevent the free flow of weapons into the hands of the murderous junta.
3. 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.
4. Targeted sanctions on military junta officials and their families and holds on their financial assets and possessions undercut their ability to conduct corrupt business dealings abroad.
5. Strengthened and renewed protection mechanisms grant civilians who are vulnerable and at risk of assault a position where they can access justice referral and accountability pathways.
6. 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 must be in the hands of local actors.
7. Foreign investors in Burma must immediately cease their operations and withdraw their involvement from all development projects in the country, including but not limited to airports, seaports, and cement businesses.
8. 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.

CULTURE IN THE CROSSHAIRS

*How the Junta is Systematically Targeting
Human Rights Culture with Military Impunity*

*A report by the
Human Rights Foundation of Monland
December 2023*

