

Increasing Use of Air and Drone Strikes in Attacks on Health Care in Myanmar

February 2024



Since the Armed Forces of Myanmar (Tatmadaw) seized control of the country on 1 February 2021 following a general election that the National League for Democracy party won by a landslide, **Insecurity Insight** has documented how violence has devastated the health-care system. Starting in late 2022, armed violence has escalated, with the Myanmar military increasingly using aircraft-delivered explosive weapons against communities that strongly resisted the military's rule. Kayah state has been particularly affected.

Forty incidents were recorded in which Myanmar military aircraft dropped explosive weapons that damaged or destroyed clinics, hospitals, pharmacies and rural health centres. Incidents occurred during wider attacks on civilians and opposition groups and often involved other civilian infrastructure being damaged, including homes, monasteries and schools. In addition, at least one health worker was killed and two others injured when the facility that they were working inside was hit by military air strikes. In total, nine health workers were killed and four injured by explosive weapons dropped by Myanmar military aircraft. Staff were harmed while providing medical care to people injured during armed clashes at an IDP camp and in health facilities inside the camp. In one incident in April 2023 a fully functioning hospital was damaged when it was struck by Myanmar military air strikes, injuring a nurse, a patient and three civilians. Two ambulances were damaged and IDPs sheltering near the hospital were further displaced.

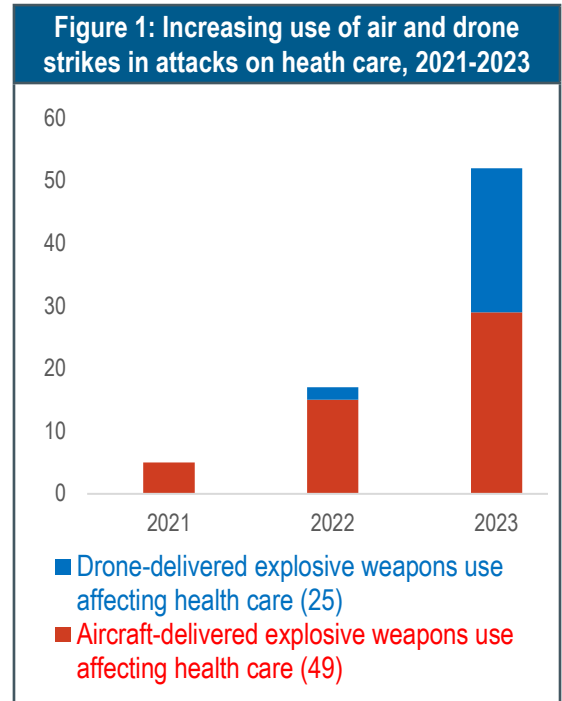


Figure 2: Japan International Cooperation Agency Hospital, Myaing township, Magway region, 18 April 2023¹



One of the 40 hospitals affected by air strikes was the hospital building that had been donated by the Japan International Cooperation Agency in Myaing township, Magway region, which was destroyed on 18 April 2023.

Since April 2023 units of the Local Resistance Forces (LDF) have increasingly been using drones armed with explosive weapons to carry out attacks on Myanmar military forces occupying hospitals and health centres.² In at least 25 incidents drone-delivered explosive weapons damaged health facilities taken over by the Myanmar military. This was particularly frequently reported from Sagaing. In one incident in July 2023 a hospital occupied by the Myanmar military was hit by four bombs dropped by local resistance forces drones in Sagaing.

Air-dropped explosive weapons usually have a wide-area effect and cause death and destruction beyond the intended target, thus having reverberating adverse effects on the health sector. The psychological impacts of these attacks affect staff and patients in profound ways, resulting in a reduced-skilled workforce and barriers to seeking health care, with wide-ranging consequences for individuals and public health.

This data is available on [HDX](#). See where incidents happened on this [interactive map](#).

Devastating impact on access to health care

The extensive damage to and destruction of hospital infrastructure have far-reaching impacts on access to health care. On 24 March 2023 the Dawtamagyi CDM-affiliated hospital in Kayah state was severely damaged by bombs dropped from Myanmar military helicopters. Staff and patients had fled the facility prior to these air strike due to the persistent air strikes and artillery attacks in the area, demonstrating the challenges health workers can face when attempting to secure long-term employment security. Air strikes on 5 April 2023 destroyed the Si Thar Station Hospital, Kachin state. All medical equipment and medicine were lost.

Prior to the coup, Myanmar had a shortage of health workers, with only 0.7 doctors per 1,000 people in 2019. In the past three years of conflict this shortage has worsened, because health workers are targeted by the military regime and many medical professionals have fled or relocated. State hospitals lack adequate human resources, and the damage inflicted by explosive weapons increases the difficulties for the health-care workforce.

Figure 3: Aircraft- and drone-delivered explosive weapons use affecting health care, 2022-2023

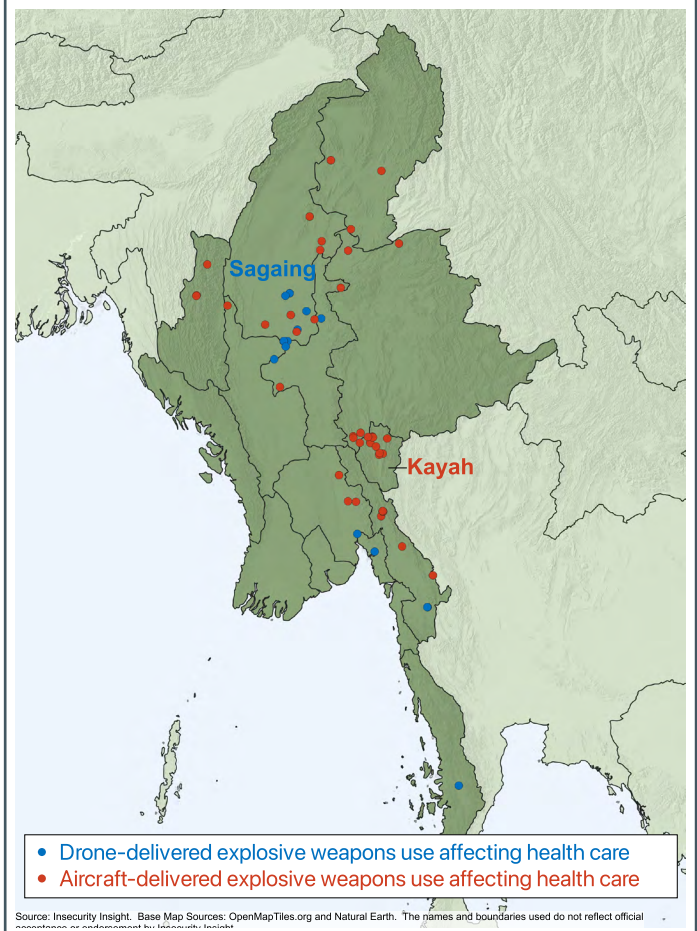


Figure 4: The Dawtamagyi Hospital after the Myanmar military air strike on 24 March 2023



Reduced access to health care, staff shortages and distrust of the government have resulted in long-term adverse effects on population health, particularly child health. Childhood immunisation rates are at a record low since the coup in 2021, with approximately 1.9 million children requiring catch-up vaccinations. With inadequate communications infrastructure and limited resources, disease surveillance and monitoring are not occurring, increasing the likelihood of uncontrolled outbreaks of disease.

Violence against health care has also had devastating mental health impacts on health workers. There is increasing evidence that high levels of stress resulting from the widespread violence are causing many health workers to flee or stop providing health care. Over time, such violence has a devastating impact on the quality of care provided by a health-care system. The military's blockade of opposition-controlled areas has also deprived displaced civilians of medical and humanitarian aid.

Figure 5: Air strikes on Saung Phwe Hospital, Yin Nwe village, Pekon township, Shan state, 25 April 2023



The consequences of explosive weapons use

When towns and cities are bombed, it is civilians who suffer most. The use of explosive weapons continues to cause an unacceptable and foreseeable pattern of civilian suffering, from immediate deaths and injuries to the disastrous, widespread damage to civilian infrastructure civilians depend on, including, as this brief shows, the health system in Myanmar. It is therefore vital that states put the protection of civilians at the centre of their military policy and practice.

The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences of the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, endorsed by 83 states in Dublin in 2022, is the first formal international recognition that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has severe humanitarian consequences that must be urgently addressed. It includes commitments to restrict or refrain from the use of explosive weapons to avoid harm to civilians, to protect civilians from the direct and indirect effects of these weapons in military operations, to collect data on civilian harm, and to assist conflict-affected communities.

“The public hospital may still run, but it is not safe to access.”

Volunteer nurse

Figure 6: Saung Phwe Hospital, Pekon township, Southern Shan State, 25 April 2023



As a result of air strikes, a total of five civilians, including a 15-year-old child, were injured. These attacks almost totally destroyed the hospital, patients' quarters and buildings, medicines and medical equipment, and nearby cars and motorcycles.

Recommendations

- The Armed Forces of Myanmar (Tatmadaw) should refrain from using heavy explosive weapons in populated areas, and in particular in the vicinity of health facilities, due to the high risk of harm to civilians.
- The Local Defence Forces should refrain from using air-dropped explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas due to the high risk of harm to civilians.
- All countries should endorse the Dublin Political Declaration and embed in their national policies and practices the recommendation of the UN Secretary-General and ICRC that parties to conflict should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.
- Concerned countries should continue to publicly acknowledge and call for action to address the severe harm to individuals and communities caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, both direct and indirect.

¹ All images included in this brief have been shared with us by a contact from Myanmar. We trust the authenticity of these images. However, Insecurity Insight was not able to identify the photographer of these images and is therefore not able to credit whoever took these pictures. In case of concerns over intellectual property rights to any of these images, please get in touch with info@insecurityinsight.org and we will remove any image or add credits as requested.

The "Federal Wings" unit of the PDF has been active since at least September 2022, using drones to attack military targets; see [Drones level playing field for Myanmar's armed opposition against powerful military — Radio Free Asia \(rfa.org\)](#); but their use against hospitals occupied by the military was first recorded by Insecurity Insight in April 2023.

As an **H2H** (humanitarian-to-humanitarian) association, Insecurity Insight supports the work of aid agencies; the providers of health-care, education, and protection services; and other civil society organisations by providing publicly available information that humanitarian organisations can use to design evidence-based policies. We collect and analyse data about violence against civilians and damage and destruction of vital civilian infrastructure in order to strengthen civilian protection and the delivery of aid in armed conflict.

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