Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization

Internet Access Amid Darkness and Lives Amid Threats

Analysis of Internet Blackout

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Internet access is a crucial medium of communication in promoting democratic rights, human rights, and the right to freedom of expression. It has become essential not only in our daily routine but in a range of other activities such as verbal expression, writing, and information dissemination for communication, information sharing, education, health, and a citizen's right to participation in political affairs. While internet access has become a fundamental human right in the global community, it is weaponised to obstruct and oppress people's right to freedom of expression in authoritarian states or states ruled by strongmen.

In Myanmar, a country ruled by successive authoritarian governments, internet access is often cut to stash human rights violations of authoritarian rulers. Mainly, Myanmar encountered three significant internet shutdowns at three different times in history. The earliest incident was on 28 September 2007 during the Saffron Revolution.

The number of social media users in Myanmar was over 20 million in January 2022, which dropped by nearly 9 million from 29 million in January 2021 when Myanmar saw 29 million social media users.[1]

(1.1) Internet Blackout in 2007

When Saffron Revolution emerged on 20 September 2007, only one percent of Myanmar's population had internet access[2]. The very low internet access, however, failed to prevent the people from spreading footage of regime troops dispersing the peaceful protests in the revolution to global media moguls, mostly using internet cafes. Then-military junta raided Myanmar Info-Tech, situated within the compound of Yangon University, in Yangon's Hlaing township, on 28 September to curb the dissemination. Saffron Revolution mainly demanded lower consumer prices, political dialogues, and the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and political prisoners.[3]

(1.2) Internet Shutdown in Rakhine State and Chin State in 2019

About a population of 1.4 million was subject to human rights violations in internet disruption under the NLD-led so-called democratic government.[4] Internet connectivity was cut off in eight townships of Rakhine State and Chin State's Paletwa township for more than a year, from June 2019 until August 2020 when only 2G internet was restored[5], ending up with a severe impact on information access and circulation as well as a failure to receive real-time information relating to coronavirus. As a result of the delayed process of providing health aid and lack of

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[1] https://datareportal.com/digital-in-myanmar
[2] Internet Access Cut Off in Burma. (2007, September 28). *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/sep/28/burma.marktran
[3] Falise, Thierry. Saffron Revolution: A Rangoon Diary. (2007, September 20). *The Irrawaddy.* https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/saffron-revolution-rangoon-diary.html
[4] Newman, Lily Hay. Myanmar Internet Shutdown Is an Act of 'Vast Self-Harm. (2021, April 2). *Weird.* https://www.wired.com/story/myanmar-internet-shutdown/
[5] Freedom on the Net 2020. *Freedom House.* https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-net/2020

credible information, the COVID19 cases surged in the two ethnic minority States during the second wave of the pandemic[6] while the residents experienced socio-economic problems and academic studies in their daily lives.[7]

(1.3)   International Standards on Internet Shutdown

An Internet shutdown occurs when a government disrupts Internet services in order to prevent its people from accessing the Internet. Full Internet shutdowns include blackouts, where a population entirely loses Internet access. Other tactics, while technically only partially shutting down the Internet, can still substantially cut Internet access. For example, a government can order a service provider to slow a connection so much that most websites cannot load. Or it can halt mobile data services, effectively blocking the Internet for those who only access the Internet via their phones.

Governments may also interfere with the Internet in other ways, such as by blocking access to specific websites. When government blocks are sweeping, such as by creating an extensive "blacklist" of prohibited sites or blocking popular sites such as social media, the impact may be similar to an Internet shutdown. In practice, governments often use a mix of tactics to restrict Internet access, alternating full blackouts with other restrictions.[8]

Regardless of the technical tool or method used, any interference which substantially prevents persons from accessing the Internet raises similar concerns under international human rights law. The right to freedom of expression, which is protected under human rights law, also includes the right to access information. In the modern era, this includes a right to access the Internet, which is indispensable for receiving and sharing information in today's society.[9]

Governments may restrict freedom of expression and access to information, but only according to a precise three-part test.[10] Under this test, any restriction on freedom of expression must:

1) be provided for by law
2) seek to protect national security, public order, public health or morals, or the rights or reputations of others
3) be necessary to protect one of those interests and constitute a proportionate response. This means that if the claimed interest is national security, for example, the government cannot generically reference national security concerns. Instead, the restriction must be

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[6] "A Study on the access to information and digital rights". (December 2020). *Athan.*

[7] ibid

[8] Steven Feldstein, "Government Internet Shutdowns are Changing. How Should Citizens and Democracies Respond?, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 March 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/government-internet-shutdowns-are-changing.-how-should-citizens-and-democracies-respond-pub-86687.

[9] See, for example, United Nations Human Rights Council, Resolution 44/12, adopted 16 July 2020, para. 8(h)(iii), http://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/44/12.

[10] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13.

carefully tailored. It should only limit freedom of expression to the extent necessary to prevent harm to a specific national security interest.[11]

Internet shutdowns can never meet these standards and are always improper under international law.[12] If the shutdown occurs without a proper legal basis, such as by an arbitrary order, it is automatically improper under part one of the test. Similarly, if it is for an improper purpose (such as silencing political opposition) it cannot meet part two of the test. However, even if a shutdown is legally authorised and for a proper purpose, it will never be able to meet the third part of the three-part test. Cutting internet access entirely is always an unnecessary and disproportionate measure, even in response to a legitimate public safety or security concern.

In summary, Internet shutdowns violate international human rights law. They are not permissible under protections for freedom of expression and access to information. They also negatively impact other rights, including social, economic, and cultural rights. Actions which are not technically a full shutdown but mimic their impacts, such as widespread blocking of popular websites and platforms, also are not acceptable under international human rights law.

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[11] Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 34, Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression*, 12 September 2011, para. 34, undocs.org/CCPR/C/GC/34.

[12] *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*, 30 March 2017, paras. 9-14, undocs.org/A/HRC/35/22.

Chapter 2

Returns to Dark Age in 2021 or Human Rights Violations Concealed Under Internet Blackout

The military shut down internet and mobile phone connection at a nationwide level at the dawn of 1 February 2021, hours before staging a coup d'état. Myanmar saw two common types of internet disruption after the coup: (1) Nationwide internet blackout and (2) regional internet blackout.

(2.1)   Nationwide Internet blackout

In terms of practising nationwide internet shutdown, there are three types of blackout: (1) Blackout for Several Days (2) Blackout for a Specific Period and Number of Days, and,(3) Internet Speed Restriction and Internet Tax Increase. The military junta instilled nationwide long-term internet outages initially after the coup.

(2.2)   Blackout for several days

Disruption of mobile phone access and mobile internet connectivity commenced in a nationwide internet shutdown on early 1 February 2021 when the coup was staged. Internet access was restored on 1 February afternoon until another nationwide shutdown between 6 February and 7 February, which lasted for about 30 hours. Wi-Fi internet and mobile internet were cut off from 1 am to 9 am daily between 14 February and 15 March. Another nationwide internet blackout was staged between 15 March at 1 am and 28 April.[13]

(2.3) Blackout for Specific Period and Number of Days

(a)   Internet Blackout During NUG's Meeting

The brutal military junta issued a directive ordering telecommunication service providers across the country to cut mobile internet access on 4 June 2021, to prevent people from watching an online meeting held by the NUG, with another blockage of Wi-Fi internet from 5 pm to 6 pm.[14]

(b)   Blackout Observed on 12 February 2022

A nationwide mobile internet shutdown was imposed from 4 am to 11 am to prevent anti-junta protests on "Union Day" which was named by the successive authoritarian regime, observed on 12 February 2022.[15]

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[13] Article 19. (2021). "Unplugged in Myanmar, internet restrictions following the military coup". Available at (Unplugged in Myanmar, "Internet restrictions following the military coup", 9 July 2021, Article 19.)

[14] NetBlocks. https://twitter.com/netblocks/status/1400788015518306304?lang=en

[15] အင်တာနက် ဖုန်းလိုင်းဖြတ်၍ အာဏာသိမ်းခဲ့သည့် အဖွဲ့က ပြည်ထောင်စုနေ့ အခမ်းအနားကိုလည်း အင်တာနက်လိုင်းများ ဖြတ်တောက်ပြီး ကျင်းပမည်။ (2022, February 11). Tachileik News Agency

(2.4)   Internet Speed Restriction and Internet Taxes Increase

Internet speed has been significantly throttled with a ban on a great number of websites and social media platforms since the military coup[16]. Using Virtual Private Network (VPN) also caused noticeable internet latency.

Besides, the military junta announced an internet data package increase, starting from 8 December 2021. Previously, 999 Myanmar Kyat could have bought 925 MB of data on Telenor and Ooredoo, and 999 Myanmar Kyat 950 MB of data in MPT respectively. According to the changes on 8 December, 1,990 Kyat could buy only 1 GB of data in Telenor and Ooredoo, 1,795 Kyat 935 MB in MPT, and 968 Kyat 512 MB on Mytel.[17]

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16 "Restriction on Internet Freedom by the junta". (December 2021). Athan.
17 ဖုန်းခေါ်ဆိုမှုနှင့် အင်တာနက် သုံးစွဲခနှုန်းထားများ ယနေ့စတင်၍ ဈေးနှုန်းမြင့်တက်. (2021 December 8). The Standard Time Daily. https://www.facebook.com/599363770175581/posts/4302579386520649

Chapter 3

Regional Internet Blackout

Myanmar people from various areas took up arms to resist the brutal military junta following its violent crackdowns, unlawful arrests, torture, unlawful detentions, and killings of peaceful protesters as millions of people around the country joined protests against the coup. Thus, Local Defence Forces (LDFs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs) evolved into stronger organisations in Sagaing Region, Magway Region, Mandalay Region, Chin State, and Kayah (Karenni) State which, after 2021, especially became intense battlefields where the military junta cut off internet connections in some parts to rupture information flow. Internet blackout was imposed on most townships in Sagaing Region, some townships in Magway Region, the entire Chin State, some townships in Kayah (Karenni) State, and one township in Kachin State, and two townships in Mandalay Region.

Internet Blackout Areas in the Country
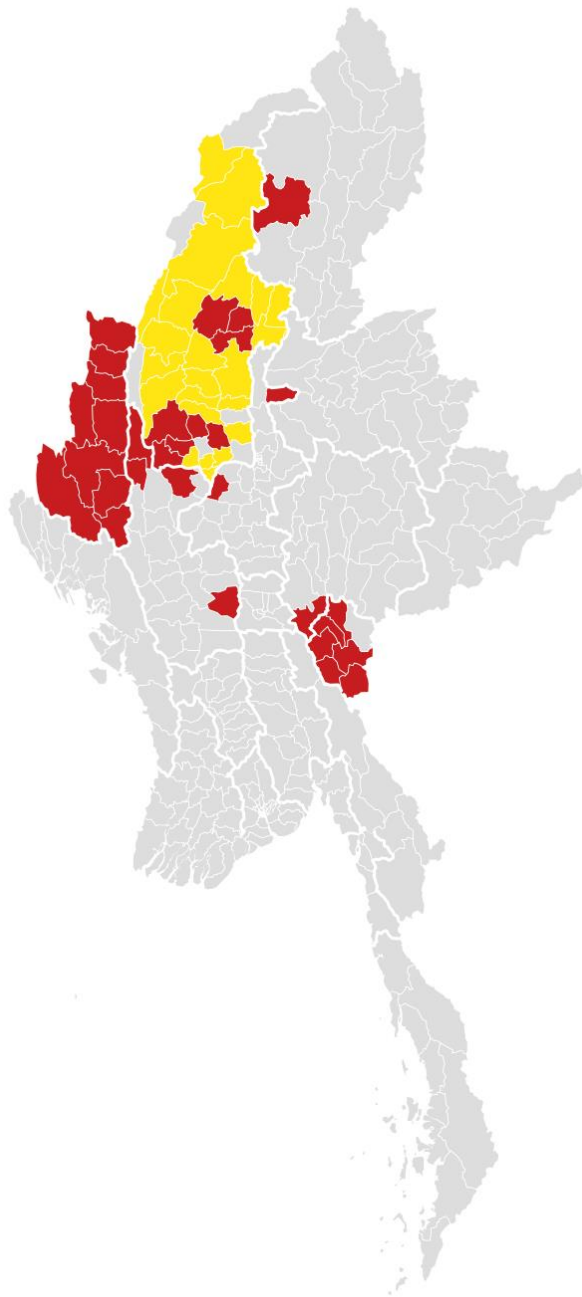
State/ Region	Internet Blackout	Only 2G available	Total
Sagaing	8	23	31
Magway	4	-	4
Mandalay	2	-	2
Chin	9	-	9
Kayah	6	-	6
Kachin	1	-	1
Shan	1	-	1
Total	**31**	**23**	**54**

Finding

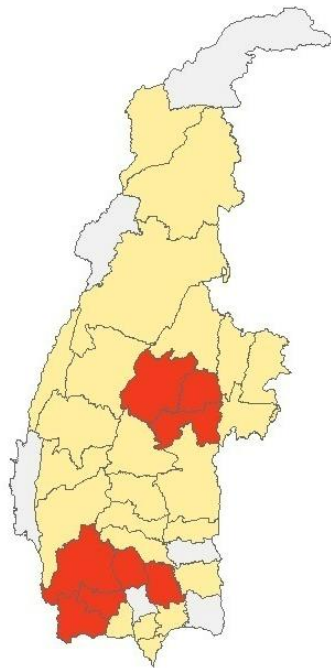A handful of the aforementioned areas under the blanket ban on internet access reported intermittent internet access at some points despite the military-issued long-term internet blackout in those areas. This report, however, considers those areas as the areas under long-term internet and phone access blackout

(3.1) Sagaing Region

Affected people – 4,225,907

Sagaing Region

Only 2G available	
Township	**Population**
Banmauk	118,834
Chaung-U	114,109
Hkamti	50,079
Homalin	270,724
Indaw	127,650
Kalewa	59,989
Kanbalu	313,641
Katha	176,971
Khin-U	156,827
Kyunhla	110,467
Lahe	50,788
Mawlaik	54,501
Mingin	111,081
Myaung	115,462
Myinmu	115,943
Paungbyin	119,167
Salingyi	131,185
Tabayin	150,940
Tamu	121,128
Taze	176,858
Tigyaing	137,742
Wetlet	211,849
Ye-U	127,103
Total affected population	**3,123,038**

Internet Blackout	
Township	**Population**
Ayadaw	167,725
Budalin	133,413
Kani	143,748
Kawlin	155,231
Pale	154,347
Pinlebu	118,762
Wuntho	78,158
Yinmabin	151,485
Total affected population	**1,102,869**

Internet connection was cut off in 30 townships in the Sagaing Region, one of the most highly war-torn regions in the country, resulting in more than five million people having their right to internet access violated in 2022 according to the 2014 consensus. The blackout was imposed on 9 September 2021 first then on 26 September secondly, bringing about a blanket ban on 13 townships in the Region within one month alone. The rest of all 30 townships experienced the blackout on 4 March 2022.

> *"The combats between two parties (the regime troops and the local defense forces) were intense. The military junta experienced heavy casualties so they cut the internet while they were sending reinforcements. …*

(3.2)   Magway Region

Affected people – 668,948

Township	Population
Taungdwingyi	259,436
Myaing	226,801
Gangaw	132,980
Tilin	49,722
Total affected population	668,939

The military junta cut off internet connection in four townships in Magway Region on 14 September 2021 to seek an advantage as the local defense forces in Magway. More than 600,000 people in four townships, namely; Taungdwingyi township, Myaing township, Gangaw township, and Htilin township – were subject to human rights violations.

(3.3) Mandalay Region

Affected people – 481,930

Township	Population
Mogok	180,414
Myingyan	301,516
Total affected population	481,930

Internet blackout in Mandalay Region, starting on 13 September 2021 affected approximately 500,000 people including Mogok township and Myingyan township.

(3.4) Chin State

Affected people – 535,977
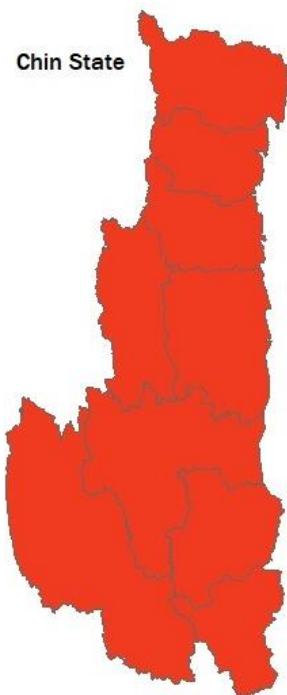
Township	Population
Hakha	54,192
Htantlang Township	56,509
Falam	53,869
Tedim	98,128
Tonzang	35,657
Mindat, Chin State	47,624
Matupi	57,596
Kanpetlet	24,026
Paletwa	108,376
Total affected population	535,977

Internet connection has been severed in the entire Chin State, another severely war-torn region after the coup since September 2021. The total population of 530,000 in Matupi township, Tonzang township, Paletwa township, Falam township, Kanpetlet township, Thantlang township, Tedim township, and Hakha township in Chin State were affected.

(3.5) Kayah State (Karenni State)

Affected people – 335,970

Township	Population
Loikaw	154,751
Demoso	94,741
Bawlakhe	13,170
Hpasawng	30,566
Mese	7,541
Total affected population	**300,769**

Kayah (Karenni) State's Loikaw township faced an internet shutdown on 6 January 2022 then Bawlakhe township, Demoso township, Hpasawng township, and Maese township followed on 1 February 2022, resulting in an average of more than 320,000 people affected.[18] A resident of Loikaw township said in a research interview made by Athan that *the main cause of internet blackout in the State is electricity outage and intensification of conflicts from the beginning of 2022. Mobile phone access and mobile internet access got worsened day by day, deficient and no longer accessible even in previously available areas. Due to the lack of communication between even the eastern part and western parts of any villages caused by the mobile phone access disruption, patients and internally displaced people (IDPs) had to go in person in case of emergency health issues amid the inconveniences.*[19]

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[18] အက်စတာ�‌ေ။ "ကရင်နီ‌ဒေသတွင် အင်တာနက်နှင့် ဖုန်းလိုင်းပြတ်‌တောက်မှု ပိုဆိုးလာ". (2022 February 8). Myanmar Now. https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/10395

[19] ကယားပြည်နယ်၌ ဆက်သွယ်‌ရေးလိုင်းများ ပြတ်‌တောက်မှု ပိုဆိုးလာ. (2022 February 7). Democratic Voice of Burma. http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/515743

Furthermore, the internet connection was cut off in Hpe Khon, a township in the border area between Shan State and Kayah State (Karenni State) following ferocious combats between the local defense force and the regime troops.[20]

(3.6) Kachin State

Affected people – 386,795

Township	Population
Hpakant	386,795
Total affected population	386,795

More than 380,000 people in the Hpakant township of Kachin State have been affected by internet blackout since 20 August 2021 at 9 pm. Unlike the other territories affected by internet blackout, Hpakant has not been home to intense armed conflicts after the coup. In an interview, a resident of Hpakant said, *"You have to pay between 5,000 and 10,000 Kyats to use the internet for an hour, but just for texting. Only businessmen can install very expensive satellite internet at home. One month's price for 2 Mb of data is 1,500,000 Kyats, and 10 Mb of data is 9,000,000 Kyats. We gained information in the past when we had internet access. Now, we have to pay a gigantic amount of money to gather information"*.

He also shared his knowledge on the reason for the internet blackout in Hpakant, "People belatedly realised that internet was blacked out in Hpakant was not because of escalation of military tension. The blackout was deliberately staged for illegal jade mining in the area".

Hpakant has endured the suspension of internet connectivity for nine months without armed combats in the area. Myanmar's military and other ethnic revolutionary organisations are endeavouring in various ways to gain territorial control, sometimes committing illegal activities and human rights violations, in the mineral-rich area.

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[20] မိုးမြိုမြို့ပေါ်တွင် တိုက်ပွဲပြင်းထန်နေပြီး အင်တာနက်များပါ ဖြတ်တောက်ခံရ. (2022 February 17). The Irrawaddy. https://www.facebook.com/121507374560090/posts/5418107811566660

(3.7)   Other Areas Where Partial Internet Blackout Imposed

Kachin State's Puta-O township suffered an internet blackout, starting on 25 February 2022 for days as blockage of stuck fuel transport vehicles hit access to oil supply for telecom towers. *Interview answers also indicated that intermittent internet connection and latency were experienced in Puta-O at the time of the interview*. WiFi internet services and mobile SIM internet except MPT and Mytel were halted in some townships in Tanintharyi Region's (Tenasserim Region's) Dawei (Tavoy) district between 2 pm and 4 pm on 5 September 2021.[21] Moreover, mobile phone access and internet access were cut off in Karen National Union (KNU)'s Brigade 4, Battalion 7, Unit 1which is domiciled in Palaw township, Tanintharyi Region from 3 am to 9:57 am for seven hours.[22] Moreover, on May 23, 2022 (11:48 p.m), the internet was cut off in Monywa Township, and landlines have been cut off in most parts of the Sagaing region where internet access was previously shut down.[23]

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[21] ထားဝယ်ခရိုင်တွင် အင်တာနက်လိုင်းများ ၂နာရီခန့် ပြတ်တောက်. (2021 September 5). *Mizzima-News in Burmese.* https://www.facebook.com/216265185075061/posts/4738596379508563

[22] အကြမ်းဖက်စစ်ကောင်စီမှ KNU တပ်မဟာ ၄ နယ်မြေကို ၇ နာရီကြာ ဖုန်းလိုင်းဖြတ်တောက်. (2022 April 13). Myanmar Pressphoto Agency. https://www.facebook.com/874334009274294/posts/7347395195301444

[23] မုံရွာ အပါအဝင် စစ်ကိုင်းတိုင်း မြို့နယ်များတွင် အင်တာနက်နှင့် ဖုန်းလိုင်းများ ပြတ်တောက် (2022 May 24). *Democratic Voice of Burma* http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/535099

Chapter 4

Current Situation of Internet Access

In the aftermath of the coup, internet speed was strangulated across the country, and phone access and internet access were also severed in several places. According to a resident in Gangaw township, people only accessed 2G internet in many parts of Gangaw township where mobile phone and internet services from two main telecom operators -MPT and Telenor were blocked. WiFi internet, the last remaining internet service, was no longer accessible about one month ago either.[24]

A CDM student in Sagaing Region said that the military troops launched brutal military offensives targeting Khin-U, Ye-U, and Depayin townships where internet connection was blacked out by the military junta to halt the flow of information.[25]

While our research found that the military junta frequently cut off internet connections and mobile phone connections in areas where intense fighting occurred, a student living in the western part of Yinmabin township acknowledged that **the residents needed to climb hills or hilly areas to search for an internet signal outside her village which has lacked internet access for more than eight months. However, a maximum of only three devices could access some patchy signal (only at some spots) at the same time even on the hills. 2G mobile phone access of Telenor and MPT was no longer been accessed in the area after the middle of March.[26]**

(4.1)   Reasons Behind Internet and Mobile Phone Access Blackout

Our findings on the potential reasons behind the internet access and mobile phone access blackout indicated much evidence that the brutal military committed mass human rights violations including burning people's houses, using airstrikes to bomb villages, carrying out massacres, looting precious jewelry and properties of residents, and several other inhumane crimes in the areas where internet access was cut. Regarding the internet blackout, a woman living in Sagaing Region's Khin-U township answered, *"The combats between two parties (the regime troops and the local defense forces) were intense. The military junta experienced heavy casualties so they cut the internet while they were sending reinforcements. … During the internet blackout, the military set up a base in Pyin Daung village on 2 April and was waging war. The entire village was ruined and the rice paddles were allegedly looted"*. She also said that the brutal junta troops shot dead an innocent child and burned some villages nearby while their march towards Ye-U township where she lives. Another man in Gangaw township also said, *"I assume that the military junta committed blatant crimes because of the combats in Gangaw township"*. The brutal military has launched military offensives against the local PDFs and LDFs and committed human rights violations against the residents in some areas where internet connection had been cut off a long time ago. A resident in Yinmabin said, *"I think they cut internet because they wanted to halt information flow and*

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[24] Research Interview answers
[25] Research Interview answers
[26] Research Interview answers

to prevent PDFs in my area from attacking them with remote-controlled bombs. Particularly, they wanted to obliterate PDF military bases in our Sagaing Region. I have another opinion that they cut the internet to prevent PDFs and their donors in foreign countries from communicating with each other. … Some politicians I know estimated that the military wanted to infiltrate Chin State and this part (Region). They cut the internet with a belief that they could completely occupy the central part of Burma if they have territorial control by infiltrating this Yinmabin township and Pale township. Furthermore, they could move easily during the internet blackout". She also pointed out that the difficulty for the regime troops to mobilise their units from place to place due to information related to their movement spread by the residents on social media might be another reason why the military cut internet access and mobile phone line over the area. Another student from Kale township confirmed the temporary internet and mobile phone blackout in her township during the regime troops' military offensive against the local PDFs and LDFs as it mainly aimed to cut the connection between military units of PDFs. *"I think the internet and mobile phone lines were cut to prevent the PDF units from contacting and communicating with each other during the combats. As far as I know, there are different groups with different activities in my area such as bombers and gunfighters. I think it (internet blackout) was aimed for making them incommunicado"*.

(4.2) Internet Blackout and Security of Local Residents

The brutal military committed several human rights violations including internet blackout to cut the information flow, using airstrikes to bomb innocent civilians in villages, and unreasonably burning the villages within the extremely war-torn areas. Besides, the military junta issued an order impelling the telecommunications operators to help it make surveillance and eavesdropping on in effect to orchestrate widespread stalking, arrest, detain, and murder. A resident in Gangaw township acknowledged, *"Only 2G internet was accessed and connection has been being poor for about 20 days even we set up Wi-Fi internet as we prepared for internet blackout … I am concerned if the world and stakeholders are not aware of the lawless and violent arrest, killing, and arson in my area. And, I am very concerned if I am arrested after they eavesdropped on my phone calls and got my location"*. A student living in western Yinmabin said, *"At first, I was very scared when internet and mobile phone access was cut off because, as mentioned earlier, once the telephone lines are cut, the military always burns down the villages, bombs by plane and wages combats. So, we packed and collected dry food and ration and then fled with the families to the forest. …We have not experienced bombing in our village, but we already dug trenches in the village and agreed to hide in the Gramineae grasses beside the main creek. But, I don't think we will have enough time if the military launches an airstrike. We won't even get information as there is no internet access. We did not have time to do anything either when neighboring villages were hit by bombs. The main problem is the lack of internet. We did not even have time to flee as we gained no information"*. In earlier times, the residents built some buildings and shelters somewhere in the forest for the villagers to take sanctuary if the brutal military advanced on the village. According to the interview answers, however, the residents found it difficult to flee from the village and finally have no other option left but to face the military troops as they made attacks from both ground and air.

(4.3)   Situation After the Internet Blackout

Due to the internet blackout, people reused radios to listen to real-time information related to incidents across the country. Moreover, people within the potential armed conflict areas packed and stored rations, clothes, and essentials in safe places. A school teacher in Gangaw township said that he listened to DVB, Mizzima, PVTV, BBC, and VOA radio channels as primary sources of information after the internet blackout, sometimes sought to access 2G internet signal to read Facebook news, and packed medicines, clothes, food, and essentials as the fighting can erupt anytime.[27] Another resident in Khin-U township, subject to brutal military junta's military offensives, said that people fled from the villages, leaving their rice buried in soil or stored at a monastery as they were concerned if the soldiers burned the ration when the regime troops entered the villages. Some villagers sold their rice and kept the money in cash.[28]

As a result of experiencing gross human rights violations and life-threatening risks daily in the areas where internet access and mobile phone access were cut off, local residents reportedly underwent the psychological consequences of fear and anxiety. A Gangaw township resident said that she was **suffering amnesia and loss of appetite at the moment day by day because of the extreme anxiety that was worsened by the lack of information during the internet blackout**. [29]

(4.4)   Impact of Internet Blackout on Education, Health, Economic, and Other Sectors

As a country that has encountered both coronavirus pandemic and d'état at the same time, Myanmar is steadily edging towards the collapse of pivotal sectors including education, health, and economy, particularly nudging closer to a failed state. A youthful population in Myanmar resorts to relying on the online education system which plays an important role in its future. Nevertheless, local students found it difficult to continue learning on that platform as the military junta cut internet access for several months in neighbouring areas of conflict-hit areas where it launched military offensives. A student girl from Yinmabin township said, "*Regard education in our country, you know, before the coup, students had returned to their native villages and some students had kept learning online when the coronavirus pandemic had erupted. … After the coup, the National Unity Government (NUG) organised online courses and programs and the youths attended to learn. However, this initiative could not forge ahead due to the lack of internet. I feel that I am now in North Korea*".

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[27] Research Interview answers
[28] Research Interview answers
[29] Research Interview answers

> *"Regard education in our country, you know, before the coup, students had returned to their native villages and some students had kept learning online when the coronavirus pandemic had erupted. … After the coup, the National Unity Government (NUG) organised online courses and programs and the youths attended to learn. However, this initiative could not forge ahead due to the lack of internet. I feel that I am now in North Korea." (A student from Yinmarbin)*

These aforementioned facts indicated that the myriad educational opportunities of youths in Myanmar were scattered as a consequence of the military coup which also brought the minors who have reached a certain age for education but no education access, to earlier labour, and premature marriage. A student who has joined the civil disobedience movement (CDM) in Khin-U township where the brutal military was launching an offensive at the time of writing this report, said in tears, *"If I have to tell you about the impacts of internet blackout, education stops; now, children in urban areas can still learn but children in rural areas do not. My younger brother was supposed to learn in preschool. Now, he is 8. He has not attended any class yet. My younger sister who was supposed to study in Grade 9, has to work in the field now. Some girls in my village got married as well"*.

Trade was halted and consumer prices skyrocketed, directly affected by the transportation conundrum in conflict-hit areas according to the residents. The brutal military's violent acts of torching innocent people's farms and lands, groundless killings of farmers, and bombings over their communities prohibited the residents who mostly relied on agriculture, from resuming their work. A Yinmabin resident said, *"Prices increased after the internet shutdown, mainly because the trade transportation was hit. When internet access was available, truckers gained information about the location of battles and military blockage thus they could avoid. Now, they dare not to come here without internet access. Vice versa, the traders in the village no longer dare to go and buy in the city either. So, the price increases double. These days, they (the military troops) install checkpoints and make arbitrary vehicle checks on the roads. When they check, they order them to unload all goods then they don't help the drivers load the goods on the truck again after the check. Thus, the driver needs the helpers to load the goods again. Consequently, the drivers need to pay further wages, and finally, commodity prices skyrocketed"*. In terms of agricultural work in the areas, the interviewee added, *"Our village manufactures or produces nothing but relies on the cultivation of fruit crops. We have finished sowing but no one dares to do anymore. Sometimes, we have to hide during plowing while aircraft fly over us. They shoot if they see crowds on the farms and near the edges of the forest. No one in the village can do business well"*.

A CDM student from Khin-U

"If I have to tell you about the impacts of internet blackout, education stops; now, children in urban areas can still learn but children in rural areas do not. My younger brother was supposed to learn in preschool. Now, he is 8. He has not attended any class yet. My younger sister who was supposed to study in Grade 9, has to work in the field now. Some girls in my village got married as well"

"*There is no trade. Sales are getting less in the village. Recently, we have even run out of eggs. We could eat only vegetables in the village. There is no job either. We could not cultivate summer crops. It would probably be sufficient for the whole year if we could cultivate summer crops*", another woman from Sagaing Region's Khin-U township who participated in the survey by Athan on the socioeconomic impact of the coup staged by the brutal military. She also implied that former civil servants joining the civil disobedience movement (CDM) came to find it very difficult to survive as they could no longer earn some income by doing business via the mobile banking system due to the internet blackout.

"*Following the economic crisis, particularly blue-color class faced problems. Another class is CDM employees. We, the villagers, could provide materials to CDM employees early initial after the coup. We cannot do anything for long-term assistance for them. Additionally, we had not received support from any organisations even when we had internet access as we don't know how to effectively use social media. This NUG-led government said they provided a certain amount of support and help or budget to former school teachers and showed their list. But, they (CDM employees) in this area including my village did not receive it. I don't know where the NUG provided its support. CDM employees in our community did not even receive a penny. When some youths who understood this situation tried to link the NUG and CDM employees living in our village, internet access was cut*", a resident of Yinmabin highlighted the struggles of CDM employees in Yinmabin and criticised the weakness of the NUG's management on condition of anonymity.

"Our village manufactures or produces nothing but relies on the cultivation of fruit crops. We have finished sowing but no one dares to do anymore. Sometimes, we have to hide during plowing while aircraft fly over us. They shoot if they see crowds on the farms and near the edges of the forest. No one in the village can do business well".

(A Yinmarbin resident)

Chapter 5

Internet Blackout and Human Rights violations

It is unambiguous that the military junta acts inhumane violence including unlawful arrests, torture, torching villages, destroying and plundering public property, stealing sealing off civilian houses, raping and murders of women, and burning alive in a massacre against those resisting its cruelty under the cover of the internet blackout. Violent oppression and persecution against the civilians in stronghold areas of anti-junta resistance forces in 2022 under the cover of the internet blackout will be highlighted in this chapter.

(5.1) Deliberate Killings of Innocent Civilians

Our findings indicated that the brutal military staged inhumane killings of innocent civilians under the internet blackout in the Sagaing Region, Magway Region, Chin State, and Kayah State, stronghold areas of local PDFs and LDFs. Many innocent civilians have been murdered since January 2022, daily monitoring data and interview records also implied. On 19 January, the regime troops that entered Thit Seint Gyi village by boat set fire to six villagers from the age of 17 to 50 who had their hands tied. The six local men had been arrested and used as forced labour to guide the way before they were killed although all of the rest villagers escaped.[30]

On January 16, the regime soldiers raided Pa Lu Thar village in Kant Ba Lu township, arresting six villagers of Plu Thar village including U Maung Nyunt who had migrated from Ma Gyi village. Five villagers were belatedly released as their families had no ties with the PDFs. U Maung Nyunt, however, was beheaded somewhere in the forest following the five villagers' testimony claiming that he had a sister belonging to the PDFs. A young person in Sagaing Region said *"There are so many crimes the terrorist military has been committing, in addition to the internet blackout, which included burning people alive with their hands tied up somewhere, I am not very sure about the location. I am not sure it was in Kyun Daw or Ohn Daw. But I know that village is situated on Mon Ywa – Pathein highway. Groups of villagers were handcuffed and burned alive. They also arbitrarily shot the people cultivating in the fields beside the highway. They were neither protesting nor resisting them. They just shot dead the farmers".* Furthermore, the military arrested and killed anyone wearing sports trousers, accusing them of belonging to PDFs, in a manner of repeating its cruel tactics orchestrated in Rakhine State in recent years[31] during an armed conflict against the Arakan Army. We had a chance to hear some residents telling the evident events, online, that military troops raided villages in Karenni State's Demoso township and Hpruso township to groundlessly arrest and torture civilians and children and heavy artillery fires killed civilians.

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[30] ဝက်လက်မှာ လက်ပြန်ကြိုးနဲ့ မီးရှို့ခံထားရသူ ခြောက်ဦး အလောင်းတွေ့. (2022 February 4). RFA Burmese. https://www.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161638658273128

[31] AA အားကစားဝတ်လှူပ်ရှားဟု တပ်မတော်ပြောဆိုချက် ရခိုင်တိုင်းရင်းသားများ ဝေဖန် (2019 March 28). The Irrawaddy. https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/03/28/187722.html

People are subject to such killings by the military and internet blackout may hide a lot of further atrocities.

(5.2)   Burning Civilian Houses and Villages

On 18 January, the military raided and set fire to about 100 houses in San Myo, a village of 210 households in Magway Region's Gangaw district, fired rifles and heavy artillery, forcing more than 1,000 residents to flee from the village. [32]

On 22 March, the military torched Moe So village and Chaung Kauk village, with only one house and one monastery left undamaged in the former village in Gangaw township, according to the interviewees. The miliary also burned Luu Tar Tharzi village on 23 March and Hmway Lel village on 24 March as well, the residents said.

On 4 February, another 700 households in Hlaw Gar village and Kaing Dwin village in Sagaing Region's Pale township where an internet blackout has been imposed, were burnt down. According to a news article reported by Radio Free Asia, quoting a resident, the regime troops burned 500 houses in Hlaw Gar village, home to 1,000 households, and 200 houses in Kaing Dwin village, home to 260 households, and ransacked civilians' properties on 4 February after the residents had fled the village following the presence of junta troops at the village in earlier days.[33] On 31 January, the military and members of the Pyu Saw Hti network, completely burned down Bin village and Ohn Nel Boat village in Min Kin township. Such outrageous mass destructions of civilian property are fueling the outrage of Myanmar people to transform the Spring Revolution into a stronger one. On the other hand, it is grisly to perceive a series of war crimes by the Myanmar military directly targeting innocent people in any part of the country every day like a permanent job.[34]

An estimate of 9,187 households was burned down by the military and its lackeys from 1 February 2021 to 13 April 2022.[35]

(5.3)   Unlawful Arrests of Civilians

The military troops conducted arbitrary arrest and torture in interrogation sessions against many people on the suspicion of having ties with local PDFs and often detained civilians they suspected during a transfer from a village to another or during making inquiries with villagers. On March 5, 30 local youths of Taung Dwin Gyi Township, Magway Region, including

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[32] စန်းမြို့ရွာက အိမ်ခြေ ၁၀၀ ခန့်မီးရှို့ ဖျက်ဆီးခံရ. (2022, January 19). RFA Burmese.

https://www.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161606577853128

[33] ပုလဲမြို့နယ်က ရွာနှစ်ရွာမှာ အိမ်ခြေ ၇၀၀ ခန့် မီးရှို့ခံရ. (2022 February 5) RFA Burmese.

https://www.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161640986628128

[34] မင်းကင်းမှာ အာဏာသိမ်းစစ်တပ်မီးရှို့လို့ ရွာနှစ်ရွာ ရွာလုံးကျွတ်ပြာကျ၊ ကင်းရွာမှာလည်း ပျောက်ဆုံးနေသူတွေရှိ. (2022 January 31). Mawkun Magazine.
https://www.facebook.com/278607422252157/posts/4739610079485180

[35] Number of Houses burned down by Myanmar's military. *Data for Myanmar.*
https://www.datawrapper.de/_/jXRPW/

women, mostly Asho Chin ethnic people were arrested and disappeared without letting families or friends know their whereabouts, after a complaint by a military informant, on the suspicion of involvement in an assassination of the military-appointed village administrator, though some escaped the arrests.[36] On 21 March, about 30 local men from Ywar Htaung village and Lay Ywar village were detained in a military raid of about 100 troops who opened artillery fires against the civilian community and led the villagers to flee away from the village, without any armed conflicts between the local defense forces and the junta troops.[37] On January 31 and February 1, the troops and Pyu Saw Hti, pro-junta vigilante, raided and burned down the Anout Taw village, Bin village, and Ohn Nel Kone village that are situated on the lower side of the local river in Min Kin township, detaining 30 residents as hostages and human shield. [38] Wealthy youths were coerced to pay bribes in detention or imprisonment and some youths have often been plagued by mental health, according to an interviewee from western Yinmabin township. Unlawful arrests are dramatically getting high due to delays in proactive dissemination of information about the movement of the junta troops, triggered by the inability to share information on Facebook within communities in the Sagaing Region and several parts of Magway Region and Karenni State where the military junta has imposed internet shutdown.

(5.4)   Sexual Violence and Murders of Women

The regime troops burned alive a father and his 14-year-old daughter, on 4 April, from Htal Hlaw village who both were tied up in handcuffs on their back, following a gang rape on the girl after they had been arrested in the forest. Villagers who fled to the forest told Radio Free Asia that they heard the scream and cries of the girl and the man.[39] *"I am sad from the bottom of my heart. The father was in the front room. The girl was in the rear one. The father also screamed as his daughter was being raped. So, they killed him. Then they burned their bodies"*, answered the late girl's aunt.[40] In another case, regime troops from a military base installed in Sagaing Region's Min Kin township raped and murdered two girls aged 14 and 16, and another 35-year-old woman on 5 April.[41] The regime troops gang-raped and murdered the older women and mentally ill women in some villages of Pale township in the Sagaing Region where internet connection is cut off, according to the interviewees.

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[36] တောင်တွင်းကြီးမှ အရှိုချင်းလူငယ် ၃၀ နီးပါးကို စစ်တပ်ဖမ်းဆီး. (2022 March 7). Myanmar Pressphoto Agency. https://www.facebook.com/874334009274294/posts/7185126921528273

[37] ယင်းမာပင်က ဒေသခံအမျိုးသား ၃၀ ကျော် ဖမ်းဆီးခံရ. (2022 March 22). RFA Burmese. https://www.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161722908783128

[38] မင်းကင်းမြို့နယ်၊ ရွာသုံးရွာအား စစ်တပ်က မီးရှို့၊ ဒေသခံ ၃၀ ကျော်ကို လူသားဒိုင်းအဖြစ် ဖမ်းဆီး. (2022 February 3). *Democratic Voice of Burma.* http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/514973?fbclid=IwAR2Yq_XuAOQYxF65xClEEUil1BJ9niW9SVNoqWSa0ZqE7tfrklSSSJVygJk

[39] ဂန့်ဂေါမှာ ၁၄ နှစ်သမီးကို စစ်ကောင်စီတပ်သားတွေ အဓမ္မကျင့်ပြီး မီးရှို့သတ်ဟု မိသားစုဝင်တွေပြော. (2022 April 12). RFA Burmese. https://www.facebook.com/39218993127/posts/10161762709433128

[40] ibid

[41] မင်းကင်းတွင် အမျိုးသမီး ၃ ဦးအား စစ်ကောင်စီ အဓမ္မပြုကျင့် သတ်ဖြတ်ဟု ထုတ်ပြန်. (2022 April 6). The Irrawady. https://www.facebook.com/121507374560090/posts/5555230781187695

The brutal military's execrable actions against civilians included cutting regional internet connections and mobile phone access aimed not only to cut the information flow but to take military advantages since the coup. Internet blackout deprived the people who already lost their right to education, right to health care services, and other relevant rights due to the military coup, of all of their fundamental rights including online education and information related to health and socioeconomic affairs.[42]

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[42] Research Interview Answers

Chapter 6

Recommendations

- According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", internet freedom is a fundamental human right and seeking, receiving and imparting information through the internet is intrinsic freedom. Ergo, restrictions and violations must be stopped.
- International and regional organisations should prioritise more effective and faster ways by which they can send the essential support to the people and the local people in internet blackout areas regularly gain information access.
- Telecommunications service providers must comply with international standards in shutting down the internet and maintaining the personal information of the customers.
- National Unity Government (NUG) should urge telecommunication companies in Myanmar to follow international standards on human rights and international regulations in a constructive way.

Research Methodology

This research report is based on the answers of local residents interviewed by Athan and news reports gathered from 48 online media outlets in the context of egregious human rights violations by the brutal military junta under the cover of internet and mobile phone connection blackouts in some parts of the country to sever the information flow after the military coup. We contacted and interviewed a total of 15 people from the areas where internet access has been cut – four residents of Magway Region's Gangaw township, three residents of Kayah State's Demoso township, three from Sagaing Region's Khin-U township, Kalay township, and Yinmabin township, three from Kachin State's Hpakant township and Puta-O township, and two from Shan State's Hpe Khon.

Research Challenges

The main challenge to this research is contacting local residents of the areas under internet blackout to amass data. Due to the heavy fighting and the difficult time for travel, it was not possible to go to these areas to conduct inquiries and investigations in person. In terms of field data collection, the in-person interview was conducted only one time and most interviews were conducted via local mobile phone connections and online platforms. The internet blackout, deliberately issued by the brutal military, imposed many challenges in engaging the residents online. For instance, only 15 of 30 potential interviewees from the States and Regions with internet access were cut; appointments were repeatedly postponed due to the poor internet connection on the participants' side, and some were never reached out again. In some cases, the
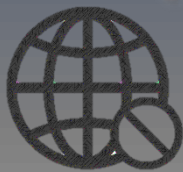
questionnaire was sent to residents dwelling in the areas where only 2G internet is accessed on which online messaging applications did not work, resulting in no follow-up questions and difficulties to access quotes.

For the sake of cyber security of the researchers, consultation with experts and alliance organisations on digital security then the systematic method was verified. The personal information of participants in this survey is not presented in this report as the security and safety of the residents are the priority at this moment.

Reference:

014 Population and Housing Census; District and Township Population Estimates (2014-2031). April 2019 Department of Population, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population; Office No. (48), Nay Pyi Taw.

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