



Statement on International Day of the World's Indigenous People

August 9th, 2024

On this *International Day of the World's Indigenous People*, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) celebrates the resilience and courage of all groups of Indigenous People in Burma to preserve their cultural heritage, and condemns the brutal attacks perpetrated by the State Administration Council (SAC) against them. This international day was established by the UN General Assembly to commemorate the date of the first meeting of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982. Despite enduring decades of relentless violence at the hands of the Burma Army and numerous military regimes, ethnic minorities in Burma, including the Karen people, continue to uphold their culture and traditions, and fight for their rights and self-determination.

Armed violence against civilians and *Burmanisation* of ethnic minorities, together with political, cultural, and religious discrimination, affects indigenous communities since the country's independence, including throughout the quasi-civilian government era. After the 2021 Coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has exacerbated the repression of Indigenous People's rights, including by increasing military presence and widespread attacks against minorities, such as shelling and bombings.

In Burma, a complicated legal landscape of ethnic identities hinders access to citizenship and furthers unequal access to rights for the Indigenous People: instruments like the 1982 Citizenship Law and the 2014 census attempt to push members of a society into predefined categories that have political and social implications for the individuals themselves.¹ Civil status documents and national ID cards systematically Burmanises the names and titles of individuals belonging to ethnic minorities on these very same documents and, in doing so, removes an important ethnic identifier for them. Indigenous communities still face restrictions when it comes to holding celebrations or erecting statues to pay tribute to historical leaders and expressing their identity through their ethnic flags. In addition, location names have been changed into Burmese in Southeast Myanmar, in what appears to be an on-going process of erasing ethnic identity from these places.² The repression of ethnic education programs has dramatically eroded the preservation of indigenous languages and cultural heritage. For decades, Burma government's school curriculums have disregarded local languages and alienated ethnic minorities. While displaced, villagers also face multiple difficulties to organise lessons and ensure that their children's schooling remains uninterrupted.

Even when the armed conflict decreased, the Myanmar government used peace agreements to further the exploitation of the traditional lands of the Karen peoples, for the construction of so-called development projects without 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent', and violated Karen customary rules, such as those of land ownership.³ After the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, business actors and private companies operated corporate development projects with little regard for the long-term

¹ KHRG, *Minorities Under Threat, Diversity in Danger*, pp.11- 18

² KHRG, *Minorities Under Threat, Diversity in Danger*, pp.29-37.

³ KHRG, [*'Development without us': Village Agency and Land Confiscations in Southeast Myanmar*](#), August 2018.

social and environmental impact on local communities. Land confiscations and development projects, such as dam construction and mining, have severe impacts on Indigenous communities, exacerbating displacement and environmental degradation, along with people's livelihoods, wellbeing, and cultural integrity. Human rights violations were often linked to the planned project site, including forced labour, sexual violence, and forced displacement of thousands of people.⁴ In contrast to the principles and standards enshrined in the UNDRIP Declaration and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, stakeholders fail to obtain the consent of local populations prior to confiscating land. Villagers in Southeast Myanmar struggle to secure their land rights, with little recourse to justice or compensation.⁵

Myanmar has historically denied the indigenous identity of the country's ethnic people and dismissed the applicability of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Myanmar has not signed the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) or ratified the 1989 International Labour Organization (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal People Convention No. 169. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is seen as a threat to national sovereignty, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) was only ratified in 2017. At the national level, despite references to equality, the 2008 Constitution, the 2014 National Education Law, and the 2015 Ethnic Rights Protection Law, leave considerable room for discrimination between the ethnic groups that the government has recognized as the 'national people' of Myanmar. By stating that specific rights only exist to the extent that they do not go against national security, this legislation guarantees the protection of Bamar ethnic majority privilege and justifies policies of forced integration.

As we recognize the contributions of indigenous peoples, we condemn the oppression they face and advocate for their rights, self-determination, and sustainable development that honours their cultural heritage and protects their lands.

On this *International Day of the World's Indigenous People*, KHRG urges international stakeholders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and regional and foreign governments to:

- Recognise the systemic discrimination and widespread attack on ethnic minorities' rights perpetrated by governmental, armed, and corporate actors, and raise awareness on the many violations to the political and cultural rights of Indigenous People in Burma.
- Support local civil society (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and ethnic service providers to expand support programmes for Indigenous People, particularly those focused on access to healthcare, education, legal assistance, and humanitarian aid.
- Listen to and support local and civil society organisations in their efforts to document violations of Indigenous People's rights, advocate for victims, and provide comprehensive support and protection to witnesses of human rights abuses.

Media contacts:

Saw Nanda Hsue, Advocacy Coordinator at KHRG, hsue@khrq.org

Naw Paw Lah, Advocacy Officer at KHRG, nawpawlah@khrq.org

⁴ See KHRG and KRW, [The Construction of the Hatgyi Hydropower Plant Along the Salween River Must be Stopped](#), Joint Statement, 11 June 2021.

⁵ KHRG, '[Development without us](#)', above.