

ကဘီယူဟဲလံ *K'Baw Yoo Heh Lee!*  
**Aircraft coming!**

Impacts of air strikes on local communities and villagers' protection strategies in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup.

ကဘီယူဟဲလံ **Aircraft coming!: Impacts of air strikes on local communities and villagers' protection strategies in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup**

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## Executive Summary

Since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has committed widespread and systematic attacks on civilians. In Southeast Burma, the ‘four cuts’ strategy has been reinvigorated by the Burma Army, attacking civilians and armed resistance fighters alike. However, where past counterinsurgency operations were predominantly conducted through ground forces, since 2021, the SAC has unleashed a relentless wave of attacks by air, leaving civilians unable to escape or shield themselves effectively from sudden and devastating assaults. These attacks are conducted indiscriminately, and in many cases, are directed at the villagers and their communities.

Air strikes in Southeast Burma since 2021 are particular in their nature: they are conducted without warning, on villages, homes and schools, and with suddenness and magnitude. While some air strikes are conducted on particular villages using a limited number of large munitions, other areas have been subject to waves of bombardment. Some air offensives follow fighting or other military activity, but other air strikes are conducted in the absence of any identifiable link to the armed conflict. Despite their variation, the scale and magnitude of such attacks on civilians across locally-defined Karen State is consistent.

In this report, KHRG presents the multiple, widespread, and interlinked impacts of SAC air strikes on villagers and their communities, through villagers’ own experiences and perspectives. Reports collected on incidents occurred within the reporting period (February 2021 to June 2024) show the dire consequences of the SAC’s direct and indiscriminate air attacks including extensive loss of life and injury; mass displacement; physical damage to entire communities; and deep psychological harm. To this day, many villagers and children remain displaced, unable to return to their villages, facing acute food insecurity as well as escalating health, education and livelihood challenges.

Villagers navigate these impacts and challenges amidst the ongoing risk of air strikes. They employ self-protection strategies such as using bunkers, fleeing the area upon warnings from others on aircraft movements, as well as reducing visibility and movement to avoid being targeted. Community leaders, villagers, and local civil society and community-based organisations do their best to utilise community structures to mitigate the impacts and challenges, however they do so in an environment of armed conflict, diminishing resources, the SAC’s blockage of humanitarian aid, and a void of international support. There remain significant gaps in protection, particularly for children, pregnant women, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

By shedding light onto the nature and scale of SAC attacks, which amount to gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, KHRG aims to redress the lack of information on the situation in Southeast Burma, and to contextualise air strikes within the protracted history of oppression by the Burma Army in Karen State. By showing the impacts of air strikes on the lives of villagers in Southeast Burma since 2021, and projecting the voices of witnesses and survivors, we aim to bring attention to the immediate needs and ongoing hardships of villagers caused by SAC air attacks, urging for relevant stakeholders to take decisive action to protect civilians. This report also serves as an invitation to acknowledge local villagers’ hopes and demands for a future of peace, justice and freedom.

## Introduction

Since the 2021 military coup<sup>1</sup>, the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> has conducted widespread and systematic attacks on civilians throughout Burma<sup>3</sup>, in attempt to consolidate power and suppress opposition. As part of this effort, the SAC has increasingly relied on the use of air strikes, including within locally-defined Karen State<sup>4</sup>. Despite international calls for the SAC to cease its attacks on civilians, air attacks in Southeast Burma have increased at an alarming rate, having detrimental impacts on villagers and their communities.

The use of air strikes is consistent with the Burma Army's<sup>5</sup> longstanding practice of conducting attacks on civilians to undermine resistance movements, spread terror, and force civilians under its control. Whilst previously realised through ground attacks under the 'four cuts' strategy (attacks on civilians conducted with the aim of severing ties of armed resistance groups to food, recruits, funds and intelligence), air attacks since the 2021 coup have both reinvigorated and intensified past military operations. Attacks by air, characterised by their suddenness, magnitude, and unpredictability, leave villagers with fewer means of self-protection, cause extensive destruction to communities, and create a threat that permeates all aspects of everyday life. Nowhere in Karen State is safe.

SAC air attacks are conducted indiscriminately against civilians in the context of fighting between armed resistance groups and the SAC. However, many attacks are directed at villagers in the absence of any identifiable link to the conflict and away from the presence of armed resistance fighters. The nature of these attacks on civilians vary - with some air strikes directed at particular villages or specific community buildings, while others are carried out by bombardment, impacting multiple villages over an extended period of time. When examined holistically, and consistent with the Burma Army's enduring view of villagers as being an extension of armed resistance

<sup>1</sup> On February 1st 2021, the Burma (Myanmar) military deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Burma's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Burma military invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

<sup>2</sup> The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Burma (Myanmar) and leads the Military Cabinet of Burma, the executive branch of the government.

<sup>3</sup> In 1989, the then-ruling military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar without consultation from the people. Despite controversy over this name change, the use of Myanmar has become more common on an international level in recognition of the establishment of a civilian government in 2016. KHRG prefers the use of Burma because it is more typically used by villagers and since the name change to Myanmar is reflective of the military regime's longstanding abuse of power. In 2013, KHRG made a decision to use Myanmar in our reports and publications, recognising that it would be difficult to do advocacy directly with the Government if KHRG called them by a name they no longer recognise. Since this type of advocacy is no longer relevant, KHRG has decided to return to using the term Burma. Some of KHRG's past reports cited in this document do, however, still refer to Burma as Myanmar.

<sup>4</sup> Karen State, defined locally, includes the following areas: Kayin State, Tanintharyi Region and parts of Mon State and Bago Region. Karen State, located in Southeastern Burma, is primarily inhabited by ethnic Karen people. Most of the Karen population resides in the largely rural areas of Southeast Burma, living alongside other ethnic groups, including Bamar, Shan, Mon and Pa'O.

<sup>5</sup> The terms Burma military, Burma Army, SAC, Tatmadaw, and junta are used interchangeably throughout this report to describe Burma's armed forces. Villagers themselves commonly use Burma Army, Burmese soldiers, or alternatively the name adopted by the Burma military regime at the time -since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council.

groups, it is alleged that air strikes in Karen State are used as a form of collective punishment. These attacks amount to war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity where they are conducted throughout Southeast Burma, placing an obligation on the international community to act to prevent such crimes and assist with the urgent protection needs of civilians.

While the international community remains inactive, villagers and communities in Karen State continue to face the devastating consequences of SAC air strikes, including rising civilian casualties, the destruction of entire villages and communities, mass displacement, food insecurity, escalating health concerns, and ongoing psychological harm. These consequences are multiplying, as the SAC continues to act with impunity, and local actors struggle to mitigate challenges in an environment of ongoing armed conflict, and a lack of resources without international support. For the international community to act expediently to stop the SAC's attacks on civilians, and to assist with urgent protection needs, a clearer picture of the situation on the ground is required.

With that goal in mind, this report aims to shed light on the widespread and grave impacts of SAC air strikes, looking not only at the direct consequences of death, destruction and displacement, but the additional associated challenges on livelihoods, education, health and psychosocial wellbeing. It aims to highlight the way in which villagers aim to mitigate these impacts through village agency strategies, to map the available local and international support, and critically, to identify the gaps in protection. To achieve this, KHRG has gathered information from villagers who experienced SAC air strikes since the 2021 coup (and until June 2024). It is the views of these villagers that form the basis of this report and require the immediate attention of stakeholders. Their experiences are set out throughout the report, and their demands are found at the last chapter, namely for SAC air strikes to end, for communities to be able to return home and be reunited, and for the accomplishment of peace and justice in Karen State.

## Key Findings

Since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has conducted frequent and widespread air strikes against villagers and communities in Southeast Burma, as an extension of the 'four cuts' strategy. They have done so with total impunity. These unlawful attacks are conducted indiscriminately and directly on civilians, and as a form of collective punishment, resulting in high levels of civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. These attacks amount to war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.

SAC air strikes vary in terms of the types of weapons and methods used, however some characteristics can be identified: villages and villagers are most often the object of attack, no warnings or other precautionary measures are taken by the SAC to avoid harm to civilians, reconnaissance is frequently conducted prior to an attack, and sometimes attacks take place at night. The impacts flowing from these SAC air attacks are multi-dimensional, widespread and severe, affecting all aspects of life in Karen State.

Direct and indiscriminate attacks against villagers in Karen State have resulted in extensive loss of life and severe injuries of villagers, including a high number of casualties of children and the elderly. The magnitude, suddenness and unpredictability of air strikes prevent villagers from being able to implement effective protection strategies, leading to increased casualties. This is compounded by the lack of access to urgent and sufficient treatment due to SAC attacks on clinics and healthcare workers, and transportation challenges in armed conflict.

Air attacks have destroyed homes, schools, clinics, temples, churches, food stores and other community buildings in Karen State. Attacks on village buildings have separated villagers and precluded access to healthcare, education and places of worship. With plantations and farmland also destroyed, and facing rising costs of inflation, villagers face severe livelihood challenges and food insecurity.

SAC air strikes have caused acute impacts on villagers' psychological wellbeing. Air strikes have instilled permanent terror into communities, affecting all aspects of villagers' life and causing villagers to remain constantly vigilant to attacks. The distressing nature of air strikes is evident through the extreme physical reactions reported by villagers including sleep deprivation, shock, crying, and panic. Grappling with the loss of life and destruction of homes, air strikes have also caused widespread anguish and collective suffering.

SAC air strikes have caused mass and protracted displacement. Families are often separated and villagers often have to flee without their belongings due to the lack of warnings. Displaced villagers face significant challenges including food insecurity, life-threatening health issues, inadequate shelter, and disruptions to education. Villagers are required to take measures to reduce their visibility and many continue to flee from one place to another, avoiding further attacks.

Villagers, local civil society, and local leaders are working tirelessly and in adverse circumstances to mitigate the impacts of SAC air strikes. They do so amidst active armed conflict, with limited resources, blocks on aid and attacks by the SAC, and a void of international support. As such, significant protection gaps remain, including access to healthcare, food security, education and specific gendered needs. Children, pregnant women, and the elderly face particular challenges.

There is a lack of international action concerning the SAC's use of air strikes against civilians. Villagers demand an urgent response to stop such attacks and to provide them with the necessary protection and support. They want to return to their villages, live in peace, and be free from oppression by the Burma Army.

## Recommendations

*To international stakeholders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and regional and foreign governments:*

- Impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Burma/Myanmar and implement extensive sanctions on the supply of arms and military material to the Myanmar military including aviation fuel, aircraft, aircraft parts, maintenance supplies, munitions, technologies, training or other technical assistance or services.
- Implement further coordinated and targeted sanctions on oil and gas revenues, as well as sanctions against junta officials to undermine their ability to finance their attacks on civilians.
- Increase support to local civil society (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and ethnic service providers who are currently assisting villagers to recover from, and cope with, the severe impacts of State Administration Council (SAC) air strikes. Assist with the development of comprehensive support mechanisms, including psychological support, for affected communities.
- Engage with neighbouring countries to ensure the effective passage of aid into Burma, in particular via land borders and through cross-border aid organisations and local civil society organisations already operating in the area.
- Acknowledge that the military junta is the root cause of the current human rights and humanitarian crisis, and the perpetrator of widespread, indiscriminate and direct attacks against civilians, as well as the driver of mass displacement in Burma. Acknowledge that the SAC is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Refrain from conferring any legitimacy onto the SAC, including by signing agreements with it and presenting it with credentials. Similarly, refrain from engaging in any form of cooperation with the SAC, including military and economic cooperation that helps them to perpetuate human rights violations and unlawful attacks on civilians.
- Support international investigations to hold the SAC accountable for its crimes against civilians in Burma, including by prosecuting SAC leaders in international courts such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), and through universal jurisdiction proceedings.
- Broaden the scope of international investigations to include the systemic violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in Karen State, particularly the malevolent use of air strikes to inflict terror and suffering against villagers.
- Listen to and support local and civil society organisations in their efforts to document human rights abuses in Southeast Burma, advocate for victims' rights, and provide comprehensive support to ensure their safety.
- Support authorities and organisations operating in the formal refugee camps in Thailand, given the increase of villagers permanently displaced due to SAC air strikes, to ensure the betterment of the wellbeing, livelihood opportunities, and liberty of populations seeking refuge in Thailand.



## Methodology

To understand the challenges that villagers have faced due to SAC air strikes since the 2021 coup, KHRG interviewed villagers who had experienced or witnessed air attacks between February 2021 and June 2024. KHRG interviewed 22 villagers (including six village leaders) from all seven districts of locally-defined Karen State in May 2024. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a preliminary questionnaire prepared for KHRG field staff on the issue of air strikes. Three additional interviews were conducted in August 2024 with local civil society and non-governmental organisations involved in the local humanitarian response.

Drawing from KHRG's documentation database, KHRG also analysed 141 previous interviews with local villagers (and two interviews with two members of local ethnic armed groups) relating to air strikes, conducted from February 2021 to July 31<sup>st</sup> 2024. These interviews were conducted by local researchers trained by KHRG to document human rights violations occurring in their communities.<sup>6</sup> All participants were informed of the purpose of the interviews and provided consent for their interviews to be used in KHRG's publications. This report is based on those two types of interviews as well as material documented in 66 KHRG's field reports (including incident reports, short updates, and situation updates) received from March 2021 to July 2024.

The interviews and field reports cover all seven districts within KHRG's operational area: Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton), Taw Oo (Toungoo), Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin), Mergui-Tavoy, Mu Traw (Hpapun), Dooplaya and Hpa-an.<sup>7</sup> These areas are commonly referred to as 'districts' and are the names used by the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>8</sup>, as well as by many local Karen organisations, and local villagers. KHRG's use of the district designations represents no political affiliation; rather, it is rooted in the fact that these designations are most commonly used by the local population.

Due to insecurity in the region, all seven districts are not equally represented in the sample of interviewees and field reports. The majority of interviews were conducted in Dooplaya and Mu Traw Districts, and the majority of field reports cover Dooplaya, Mu Traw and Mergui-Tavoy Districts. The imbalance in representation is a result of varied security issues, travel difficulties, and personal risks faced by KHRG field staff when documenting human rights violations in Karen State. For instance, only 14 interviews and 14 field reports were obtained from Kler Lwee Htoo District due to heightened security risks. Likewise, the actual numbers of SAC air attacks on communities are vastly undervalued in this report, due to challenges faced by community members in both reporting and documenting.

To ensure the security of interviewees and affected villagers, their personal names and locations have been replaced by single- and double-digit letter codes, where appropriate. These codes are applicable only to this report and have no link with the actual names of the villagers, or past published KHRG reports. All names and locations censored correspond to actual names and locations on file with KHRG.

<sup>6</sup> KHRG's full documentation philosophy and methodology is available upon request.

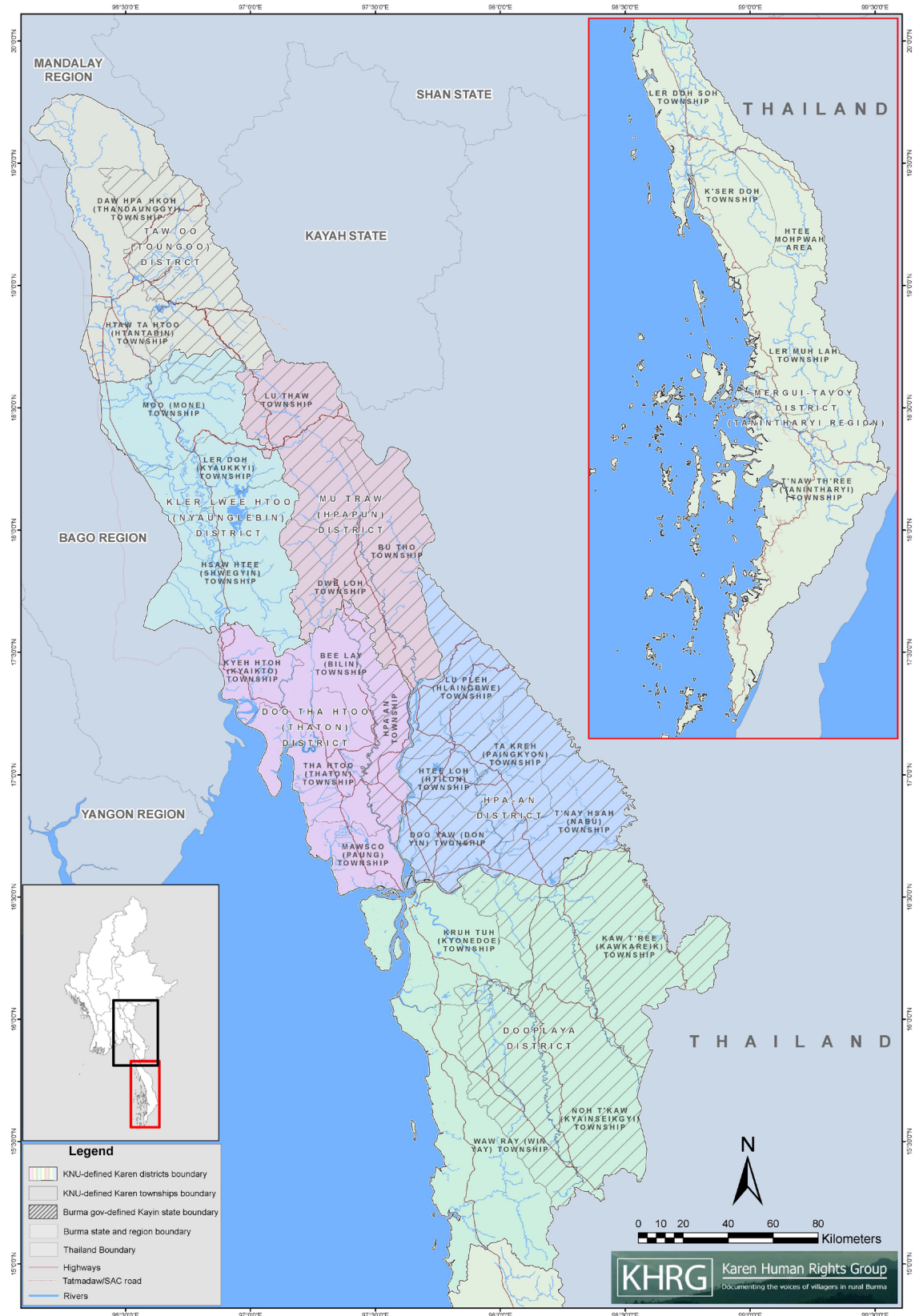
<sup>7</sup> For clarity, the Burmese terms used for these districts are provided in brackets but do not correspond with the Burma (Myanmar) government administrative divisions.

<sup>8</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, following the 2021 coup staged by Burma Army leaders, the KNU officially stated that the NCA has become void.

## Terms and Abbreviations

AAPP	Assistance Association for Political Prisoners
BGF	Border Guard Force
BPHWT	Backpack Health Worker Team
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
KDHW	Karen Department of Health and Welfare
KECD	Karen Education and Culture Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion
LID	Light Infantry Division
MOC	Military Operations Command
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Force
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SAC	State Administration Council
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations

Map 1: KHRG operational area (KNU-defined Kawthoolei and Burma government-defined state and region boundaries)



## Chapter 1. Background and context of the conflict in Southeast Burma

This section provides an overview of the human rights situation in Southeast Burma, contextualising the history of oppression and attacks on civilians. It also provides the context of SAC attacks on civilians in Burma since the 2021 coup, including the use of air strikes.

### ***Historical background: Burma Army abuses and ethnic resistance***

Since Burma's independence in 1948, generations of villagers in Southeast Burma have endured violence, oppression and human rights abuses at the hands of the Burma Army. In response, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>9</sup>, have fought against this, demanded political autonomy, sought to protect villagers, and provided essential services through their health, education and justice departments. The ongoing conflict in Karen State has lasted for over 70 years, with detrimental impacts on villagers.

In the 1960s, the Burma Army implemented the 'four cuts' strategy: a scorched-earth tactic used to cut off armed resistance forces from their communities, and severing access to food, money, intelligence and recruits.<sup>10</sup> While officially targeting members of opposition groups, the reality was a protracted campaign against civilians, leading to widespread and systematic attacks, including arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate shelling, burning of villages, forced relocation, destruction of food and medical supplies, and forced displacement. Between 1992 and the mid-2000s, when General Than Shwe sought to consolidate power, large-scale offensives and clearance operations also resulted in the displacement of thousands of villagers,<sup>11</sup> largely unaddressed by the international community. During this period, air strikes played little to no part in these operations, which were primarily carried out by ground infantry forces.

In 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between KNU officials and the Burma military regime. In 2015, the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)<sup>12</sup> was signed by eight ethnic groups. In the same year, national elections were held that resulted in the formation of a quasi-civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD)<sup>13</sup>. However, despite some progress in democratisation and social policy, human rights abuses persisted, and those responsible for decades of violations continued to enjoy impunity.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Escalation of human rights abuses since the February 2021 coup***

The human rights situation drastically worsened after the military coup in February 2021, which reinstated authoritarian rule. The State Administration Council (SAC), led by Senior General Min

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<sup>9</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Smith, "Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity", New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TTBC), *Displacement and Poverty in South East Burma/Myanmar*, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the Karen National Union (KNU). It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma government.

<sup>13</sup> The National League for Democracy (NLD) is the political party that governed Burma from 2016 to January 2021. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 General Elections. The NLD government was deposed by the Burma Army in the February 2021 coup d'état, after which elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

<sup>14</sup> KHRG, *Beyond the Horizon: Local Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Accountability in Southeast Myanmar*, September 2019; KHRG, *Foundation of Fear: 25 Years of Villagers' Voices from Southeast Myanmar*, October 2017

Aung Hlaing<sup>15</sup>, unleashed a new wave of violence across the country, employing tactics similar to those of previous military juntas including the 'four cuts' strategy.<sup>16</sup> Since then, the Burma military has continued to violate international human rights and humanitarian law through its armed attacks on civilians, extrajudicial killings, mass arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, and enforced disappearances. Armed attacks have included the widespread use of air strikes, shelling and landmines.<sup>17</sup> The estimated number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Karen State has exceeded one million,<sup>18</sup> accompanied by an escalating humanitarian crisis aggravated by the military's heavy restrictions on livelihood activities, as well as the destruction of essential infrastructure, foodstuffs and medical supplies.<sup>19</sup> Impunity for these acts has prevailed.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Air strikes conducted by the State Administration Council (SAC)***

Since the 2021 coup, the SAC has increasingly relied on air warfare alongside ground offensives to target local communities and ethnic resistance forces.<sup>21</sup> As a result of these widespread attacks, civilians have been killed or injured in high numbers, and whole communities have been destroyed. In October 2023, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Thomas H. Andrews, noted that "[t]he Burma military appears to be intentionally targeting civilians, by repeatedly launching air attacks on villages, IDP camps, schools, hospitals, clinics, churches and monasteries. In many cases, air strikes on villages have followed attacks on SAC units by opposition armed groups, which suggest that they are used as a form of collective violence."<sup>22</sup>

From February 2021 to June 2024, there were a total of 1,977 air strikes in Southeast Burma, with 956 (48,35%) incidents occurring in the first half of 2024 alone.<sup>23</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in September 2024, there has been a marked escalation of the use of air strikes throughout Burma since April 1<sup>st</sup> 2023, with a 95% increase in civilian deaths in Burma resulting from air strikes since October 2023.<sup>24</sup> In June 2024, 'Bellingcat' attributed the escalation of attacks against civilians as a military response to the Burma Army's territorial losses to armed resistance groups, with at least 100 air strikes being conducted by the SAC per month in Burma since October 2023.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A Senior General in the Burma Army who has served as Chairman of the State Administration Council, the executive body governing Burma/Myanmar since February 2021. He has also served as the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces since March 2011. Min Aung Hlaing seized power after overthrowing the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1st 2021, ending a nearly ten-year period of civilian rule. He has appointed himself as Prime Minister of Myanmar on August 1st 2021, and became Acting President of Myanmar on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024.

<sup>16</sup> KHRG, *Why would they target us?: Exploring patterns of the Burma Army's retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma*, June 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in Myanmar since 1 February 2022 – Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/HRC/52/21, March 2023.

<sup>18</sup> As of August 2024, the number of IDPs in Karen State is estimated to be 1,002,377. See: Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), "Kawthoolei-Displacement Map", August 2024. [on file]

<sup>19</sup> KHRG, *Denied and Deprived: Local communities confronting the humanitarian crisis and protection challenges in Southeast Burma*, June 2022. Also: UN General Assembly, *Situation of human rights in Myanmar, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*, A/78/527, October 2023, para. 20

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Council, *A/HRC/52/21*, March 2023, para. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, "Bullets rained from the sky": War crimes and displacement in eastern Myanmar, March 2022.

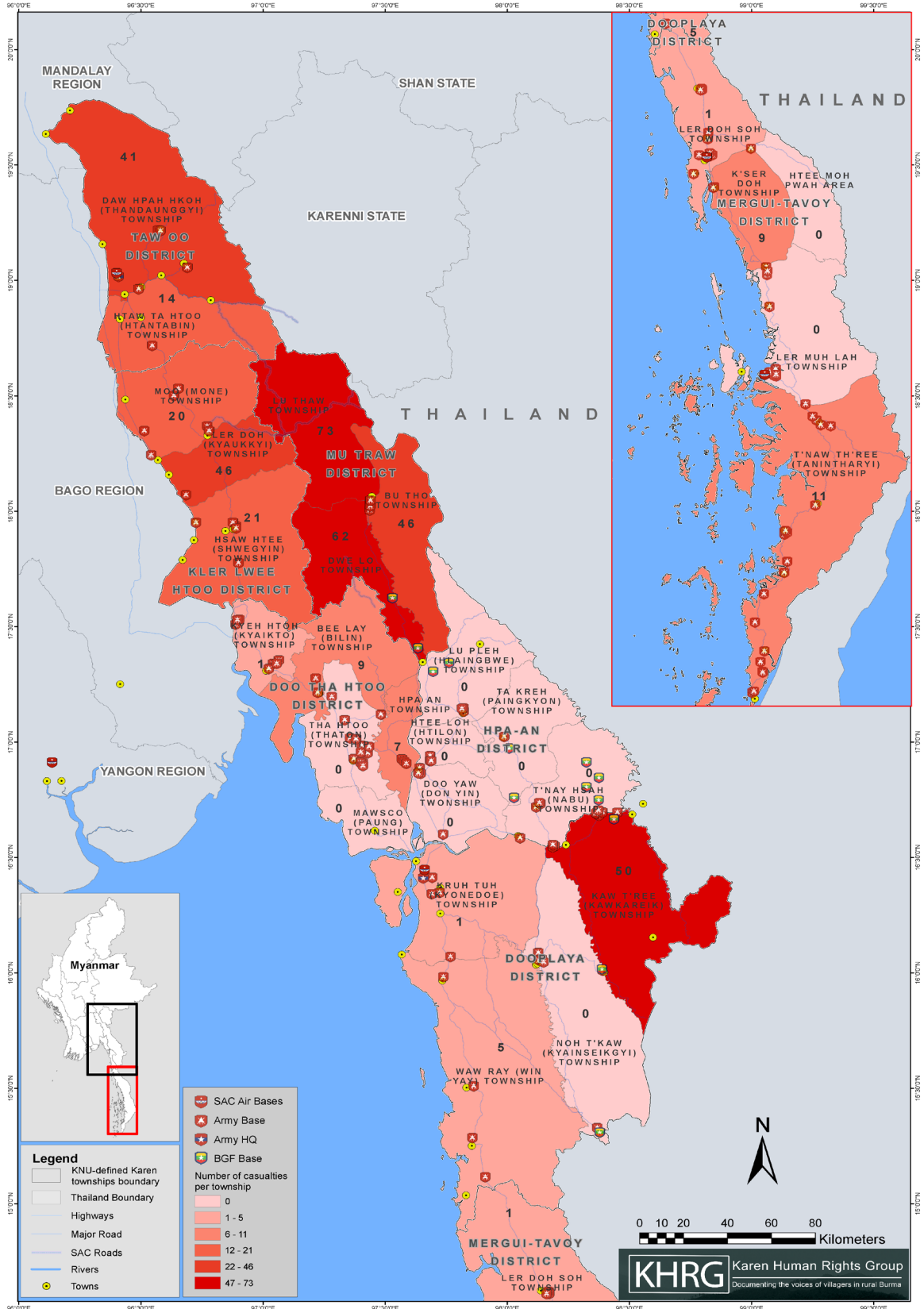
<sup>22</sup> UN General Assembly, *A/78/527*, 12 October 2023, para. 29.

<sup>23</sup> According to public information shared by the KNU, in Karen State, the SAC conducted 15 air strikes in 2021, 215 in 2022, 791 in 2023 and 956 in the first half of 2024. The KNU collects information on air attacks through radio messages, and counts air strikes by the number of firing/striking from aircraft.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in Myanmar - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Advance unedited version*, A/HRC/57/56, September 2024, paras. 12-14, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Bellingcat, *Burning Villages: Violence Escalates as Myanmar Military Reacts to Territorial Losses*, June 2024.

**Map 2: Reported civilian casualties per Township (KNU-defined Kawthoolei Township and District boundaries) caused by SAC air strikes from February 2021 to June 2024**



## Chapter 2. Air strikes impacting villagers in Karen State

Air attacks on civilians in Southeast Burma have caused mass casualties (including children and elderly), mass displacement and extensive damage to entire villages including to homes, schools, temples and clinics. Beyond the physical destruction, SAC air strikes have caused detrimental impacts on mental and psychosocial wellbeing, including instilling a pervasive sense of fear and vigilance, prevented villagers from being able to secure their livelihoods, affected children's ability to go to school, separated families, hindered villagers' ability to seek adequate healthcare, and disrupted community life. With little means of self-protection – namely fleeing the area on informal warnings from other villagers or using makeshift bunkers - SAC air strikes have affected every aspect of daily life for villagers in Southeast Burma.

Since the 2021 coup, community members in locally-defined Karen State have reported 227 incidents<sup>26</sup> of SAC air strikes causing civilian casualties or damage to KHRG. 41% of all air strikes were conducted from January to June 2024 alone.<sup>27</sup> Almost all documented attacks were conducted on civilian areas (including on villages, community workplaces, plantations and farms). The use of air strikes was widespread, with 11 incidents occurring in Doo Tha Htoo District, 13 in Taw Oo District, 89 in Kler Lwee Htoo, 23 in Mergui-Tavoy, 55 in Mu Traw District, 34 in Dooplaya, and two in Hpa-An District. Consistently, there was a lack of effective advanced warnings or other precautionary measures taken by the SAC to avoid or minimise civilian losses. Villagers believe that attacks on civilians in Karen State are intentional as civilians are perceived to be opponents of the regime; an extension of the 'four cuts' strategy.

This chapter examines the impacts of SAC air strikes in Southeast Burma including death and injury (*Chapter 2.1*); destruction of civilian property, community, and livelihood means (*Chapter 2.2*); impacts on mental and psychological wellbeing (*Chapter 2.3*); and mass displacement (*Chapter 2.4*). The associated impacts on healthcare, livelihood and education are discussed throughout.

### Chapter 2.1. Death and injury caused by air attacks in Southeast Burma

During the reporting period (February 2021 to June 2024), KHRG documented at least 417 civilian casualties from SAC air strikes in Karen State: 168 villagers were killed and 249 were injured. Those killed or injured were most often participating in everyday activities, such as feeding their livestock, farming, sleeping, constructing community buildings or gathering at home. Of those killed or injured, at least 67 were children and 29 were elderly. Only 22 non-civilians were reported as being injured or killed from documented air strikes during the same period.

This chapter first examines the nature of deadly air strikes in Karen State, which are most often conducted on villages without warning, as well as villagers' views that those attacks are intentional. Second, some other particular features of SAC air strikes in Southeast Burma are identified including (a) families and children killed together; (b) air strikes conducted at night in civilian areas; (c) attacks by bombardment; (d) other conflict-related attacks; and (e) the use of large and deadly weapons. The bombardment of Day Bu Noh area; the first incident of air strikes in Karen State since the coup is also presented in this section as a 'case study'. Third, the lack of available healthcare is examined, a factor affecting the number of deaths and severity of injuries. Other associated impacts of air strikes are discussed throughout, including the distressing nature of injuries, the lack of space and time to recover or mourn, and the impacts on villagers' wellbeing.

<sup>26</sup> KHRG quantifies the number of incidents by counting attacks by incident place, instead of by the number of firing/striking from aircraft. Therefore, in KHRG data, one air strike incident could entail several bombs dropped by multiple aircraft in an area in a particular time.

<sup>27</sup> 13 in 2021, 57 in 2022, 64 in 2023, and 93 during the first quarter of 2024.

### 2.1.1. SAC air attacks are being conducted onto villages

A significant proportion (89,4%) of documented SAC air strikes were conducted on villages in Karen State, causing mass civilian casualties and extensive damage to communities. Of the 203 air strikes conducted on villages, 89 damaged community buildings, such as schools, monasteries, churches and clinics. Of the other incidents reported, nine occurred in plantations and farmlands, two in displacement sites, 11 in areas between villages, and two in mining sites. Villages and community buildings are gathering places for villagers to establish their social and familial well-being. However, based on KHRG documentation, these places are not safe as the SAC continues to commit attacks on those areas.

Villages in Karen State are comprised of houses and community buildings, such as churches, temples, schools and clinics that are identifiable from the air. In some cases, villagers reported the use of air reconnaissance prior to attacks and aircraft flying low to the ground when striking, even in the absence of any military activity or fighters in the area. In other cases, villagers described evidence of inaccurate methods such as unguided air delivery or dropping bombs from high up onto villages. Consistent across all cases was the lack of warnings or other precautionary measures<sup>28</sup> to avoid harm to civilians or damage to civilian property. These factors align with villagers' views that air strikes are conducted intentionally to harm them.

#### **Intentionality of SAC attacks on villagers:**

Villagers consistently stated that air attacks on villages were intentional, providing different reasons for their views. Naw<sup>29</sup> A--- from Za--- village, Htee Wah Blaw village tract<sup>30</sup>, T'Nay Hsah (Nabu) Township, Hpa-an District, stated: *"I think they want to oppress Karen people. We feel bad when they oppress civilians"*. Another villager, Saw<sup>31</sup> B--- from Zb--- village, Yaw K'Daw village tract, Noh T'Kaw (Kyainseikgyi) Township, Dooplaya District, stated: *"I think [air strikes occurred] because we don't stand with the SAC. And I think, if they [SAC] label civilians as 'enemies', then we Karen ethnic [people] also will be their enemies. That's why they came [conducted air strikes]."* Naw C--- from Zc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, also expressed: *"The reason is beyond what I can think of. They attacked the village; the community directly. I think they are trying to create a conflict between us and our leaders. They intend to make us fear so we stop supporting the resistance work. I think this is their purpose of attack. [...] As they are armed actors, they are supposed to attack their armed enemy. It is not appropriate when they attack civilians instead."*

Assertions that villages are being targeted are entrenched in the experience of the protracted conflict in Karen State and a prolonged use of the 'four cuts' strategy. Saw D---, a village leader who witnessed air attacks on Zd--- village, Pa De Kaw village tract, Ler Doh (Kyaukkyi) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, contextualised the use of air strikes stating: *"We also have known about them [Burma Army] before [in the past]; that they are powerful and they have targeted us. If they fight to capture army objectives, they do not only attack the [resistance forces] army camps' areas but they also take the local villagers' properties and kill and target the local villagers, so we have learned through their actions and our experiences, so that is why I think like that"*. Similarly, Saw E---, the secretary of the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) for Dooplaya District, narrated: *"If we look at the present situation, villagers from villages and village tracts are*

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<sup>28</sup> Customary International Humanitarian Law (IHL) - Rule 15 ('Principle of Precautions in Attack'): In the conduct of military operations, constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population and all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid or minimize civilian losses.

<sup>29</sup> 'Naw' is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>30</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>31</sup> 'Saw' is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.



against them [SAC], so they [SAC] indiscriminately conduct air strikes anywhere they would like to, on the places that they specify as “a’mel yang nel myay” [black area]<sup>32</sup>. So, they [SAC] may be satisfied wherever the bombs landed”.

In some cases, villagers described air strikes being used as a form of collective punishment. Saw G---, a village tract leader from Zg--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, stated: “Sometimes, they have conducted air strikes when they were attacked [by armed resistance forces]. [...] They feel it, then they attack back by indiscriminately dropping bombs into the area so our village was attacked among this [indiscriminate bombing] as well.”

Significant evidence points to the SAC repeatedly directing air strikes at civilians or civilian property in the absence of any identifiable link to the conflict, supporting villagers’ views that they are being intentionally targeted. One such case concerns the air strike on Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2023. On this day, two SAC aircraft dropped eight bombs onto the village and the village surrounding area despite there having been no warnings, no fighting or other military activity in the vicinity before the attack. As a result of the air strike, five villagers were killed, including a 3-year-old girl. Two women were also injured. Two church buildings, one hospital, and two newly-built school buildings were destroyed by the air strike along with multiple houses. Following the air strike, villagers pulled down the damaged houses and community buildings and fled for their safety.



This photo was taken on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2023 in Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2023, four SAC fighter jets conducted an air strike on Zh--- village. The fighter jets dropped eight bombs, and six of them fell onto Zh--- village. The other two bombs fell beside the village. Five villagers, including a 3-year-old infant, were killed, and two villagers were injured. This photo shows four villagers, including the 3-year-old baby, who were killed by the air strike. [Photo: KHRG]

Saw I---, a villager who was making a roof on the outskirts of the village, explained that the aircraft, “flew low. If it flew high, they could not have met their target when they struck”. He explained that the villagers were carrying out daily activities when they were killed by the air strike: Saw Df--- and Saw Dg--- were killed instantly as they were building one of the church buildings; his brother-in-law, Saw Dh---, was killed in his home; and a villager named Naw Di--- and her 3-year-old child were killed by the second aircraft as they had returned home from a displacement site to feed their pigs. Saw H--- described some of their injuries: “The woman [Naw Di---] was hit on the back of her neck [by shrapnel]. Her daughter was hit on her forehead. [...] Saw Df---’s stomach and intestines were coming out. The whole body of Saw Dg--- disappeared. We could only find one of his feet. His head had disappeared”. Naw I---, the wife of Saw Df---, also described his fatal injuries: “His whole body... His body was cut into two [parts].”

<sup>32</sup> Under the ‘four cuts’ strategy, first used in the 1960s, the Burma military viewed territories as ‘black’, ‘brown’ or ‘white’ according to the extent of EAGs’ activities in these areas. A black area denoted “an area controlled by insurgents but where the Tatmadaw operates”, a brown area denoted “a Tatmadaw-controlled area where insurgents operate”, while a white area denoted territory which has been “cleared” of EAG activity. See: Maung Aung Myoe, “Neither Friend Nor Foe: Myanmar’s Relations with Thailand since 1988,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2002, p. 71.

Naw I-- went on to explain some of the challenges she now faces: "Since he [Saw Df--] has left us there have been many challenges. For example, it is not easy to support my children one-by-one. As a woman, it is not easy to find the money. I can't find food or look for a job as my children are still young. We face many difficulties". Similarly, speaking with concern for his sister, Saw H--, also from Zh-- village stated: "[the] family is going to face problems if they live here [in the village]. As I said, they must be kept [relocate] in a safe place so her children will be able to go to school. She [his widowed sister; Naw I--] has to take care of their small children".

Regarding the incident, Saw J-- stated: "We are not soldiers. We are villagers. We do not [act in any way] against the military. We live in our own village. We do not break any rules of the country. Why are they [the SAC] attacking us with a military fighter jet? As civilians, we should understand that the military oppresses us." Naw I-- expressed her view that the SAC deliberately attacks essential community buildings to prevent development, and that attacks may be used as a form of collective punishment: "They conducted air strikes because they saw that there are more buildings and the buildings are getting better. [...] Or it could be that after they were attacked by others and when they feel aggrieved, they want to do bad things to civilians."

#### **Lack of warnings to prevent civilian deaths:**

Consistent across all air strikes documented during the reporting period was the failure by the SAC to give warnings or take other precautionary measures to minimise civilian casualties. From all the 227 incidents reported to KHRG, only one incident involved a verbal warning given the SAC Battalion Commander of Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>33</sup> 314 to two SAC-affiliated administrators in early April 2021, who advised village leaders from Zk-- village and ZI-- village, in Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, to warn villagers to flee. By the time the warning was given, the SAC had already started conducting air strikes in nearby Meh Way area, Meh Way village tract, and Meh Kaw Loh area, Meh Thuh village tract. The air strikes resulted in casualties, destruction and mass displacement in Meh Way village tract area.

On some occasions, local villagers and village leaders reported assessing the imminence of air strikes based on identifying aircraft activity or increased presence of armed groups. Nevertheless, villagers reported difficulties knowing accurate dates, times and locations of incoming air attacks. Additionally, despite communication being one of the most effective protection strategies used by local villagers, several interviewees reported that the SAC cut communication in certain areas, particularly around the time of air strikes. Naw K--, from Hpapun Town, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, testified: "Since the beginning [of the armed conflict in 2021], villagers could not properly access phone connection. They couldn't make phone calls to every place. They could only start to call us only at a specific place on top of a hill [where there was phone connection]. We couldn't call them from here [the town]. Now people have to be careful when they travel so we are still asking [each other] about the situation. We cannot access good communication like before." In order to mitigate communication challenges, some community leaders and villagers started using radio devices.

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<sup>33</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

### 2.1.2. Other characteristics of SAC air strikes

Air strikes in Karen State are conducted by the SAC in various and multiple ways, each with deadly and destructive consequences on villagers and their communities. The following section identifies some significant features of SAC air strikes, some of which impact levels of death and injury, including the time and intensity of attacks, the weapons used, or the context of incidents.

#### a) Families and children killed together inside their homes

Due to the Burma Army conducting air strikes onto villages - including on houses or community buildings like schools, school dormitories, churches and monasteries - groups of villagers, particularly families or students, were often killed or injured together.<sup>34</sup> From the testimonies collected from villagers across Karen State, the high number of children and families killed together inside their homes is striking.

For instance, on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, at around 6 pm, an SAC aircraft dropped four bombs, in two rounds, onto villagers' houses and a school administered by the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)<sup>35</sup> in Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. Villagers reported that there had been no other military activity, army camps or soldiers near the area prior to the attack. As a result of the attack, three children and one villager were killed. Four children and two villagers were also injured. A number of the casualties were students from different villages living in the same school dormitory. The other victims belonged to one family: 47-year-old Saw Dj--- was killed along with his 13-year-old son, Saw Dk---, and his other two children, Naw L--- and Saw M---, were injured.<sup>36</sup> Saw N---, a relative of Saw Dj---'s family, and the school principal, explained: *"The air strike [bomb] fell on his house and hit him [Saw Dj---]; his head was lost [obliterated]. One of his sons [Saw Dk---] also died; his intestine burst out of his body and he died. The younger sibling of [Saw] Dk--- was seriously injured on his face. [Saw] Dk---'s older sister was also injured on her face."*

Naw O---, sister of Saw Dj--- and mother of two of the injured students, described some of the impacts of the casualties: *"They [SAC] destroyed my children's physical wellbeing. Moreover, when thinking about my younger sibling's family situation, I don't know who will take care of his wife after he passed away, because he has no elder son to support her. It is very difficult for the remaining family to do everything for a living. When I lie down and think about this, it really breaks my heart. If it caused minor impacts, it would be okay, but it seriously impacts us. His [Saw Dj--- 's] wife feels very heartbroken because many of her family members were injured [and died from the air strike]. My nephews and nieces cried every night and I really pity them, especially his wife. She struggles to work for the family because the family does not have any other income. She doesn't have any older son to help her."*

As explained by local villagers to KHRG, at the time of the air strike, a large group of villagers were returning from a prayer ceremony. All buildings were civilian, some easily identifiable from the air, including the big E-shaped school building with a large schoolyard in front. As a result of the attack, a church, the school dormitory, several houses and trees were damaged or destroyed. The village head, Saw P---, expressed: *"Min Aung Hlaing himself claimed to destroy the buildings*

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance: KHRG, "Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC air strikes killed four villagers and injured nine, including children, in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township (February 2024)", June 2024; KHRG, Taw Oo District Short Update: Air strikes, displacement and property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, July 2023, August 2023.

<sup>35</sup> The Karen Education and Culture Department is the education department of the Karen National Union. Its main goals are to provide mother tongue education services to rural Karen populations in Southeast Burma, as well as to preserve the Karen language, culture and history. Despite being an important education provider in the region, it is not officially recognised by the Burma government.

<sup>36</sup> KHRG, *Schools Under Attack: Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma (June 2023-February 2024)*, July 2024, pp. 6-7

associated with the KNU and to destroy the Karen people. [...] They launched air strikes upon the villagers and communities. [...] They are not attacking their enemy but the villagers.” Naw Q---, daughter of Saw Dj---, also expressed: “We can say it [air strikes] is the most dangerous thing for us; the way they do it to us. They [SAC] even did it [conducted an air strike] unexpectedly in the village. [...] Why did they have to fire at us [conduct an air strike] in the village and oppress us, resulting in death of villagers and students? [...] From my point of view, I think it was not right because it was not their enemy’s place. [...] They were firing at civilians; they were firing at villagers and they were firing at the students. They were not firing at their enemy”. Naw O---, Saw Dj---’s sister, also added: “I think they intentionally targeted villagers.”



This photo was received on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2022 from a Zr--- villager, located in Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. On February 5<sup>th</sup> 2022, SAC jets dropped bombs into Zr--- village, Ma Htaw village tract. Due to the bombing, two villagers, Sai Dp--- (45 years old) and Naw Dq--- (43 years old), husband and wife, were killed and their three children were injured. In total, six villagers were injured in the attack: Naw S--- (22 year old), Saw T--- (30 years old), Saw V--- (16 years old), Naw W--- (32 years old), Saw Y--- (35 years old), and Sai Z--- (7 years old). The dead body of Sai Dp---, killed inside his house, can be seen in the picture. [Photo: local villager]

In another instance, between 5 – 6 pm on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023, two SAC fighter jets dropped three bombs on Zn--- village, Kyue Lan village tract, Bon Ma Ti area, Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo District, followed by further air strikes (by firing machine guns from the aircraft) on Zo--- and Zp--- village. The air strike destroyed two houses in Zn--- village, the school in Zo--- village and civilian houses in Zp--- village. Inside the destroyed houses in Zn--- village were three villagers who were killed and two who were injured. The deceased were a family of three: 22-year-old DI---, and her mother and father, Dm---and Dn---. The father and daughter died immediately, and the mother died in Zayet Gyi Hospital, that same night. The injured villagers were DI---’s uncle and cousin.

In another incident on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2023, two air strikes were conducted on Zq--- village, Htee Tha Hsaw area, Daw Hpah Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo District, using machine guns and bombs, causing extensive damage to civilian property including to at least 15 houses, a church, a school and plantations. Inside one of the homes hit by a bomb was Naw Do---, her three children (14-year-old Saw Dc---, 9-year-old Saw Dd---, and 12-year-old Naw De---) and her 12-year-old nephew. Naw Do---’s nephew died immediately after being hit by shrapnel in the back of his head, and the other four family members were seriously injured. The injured children and mother were sent to the hospital, and the mother later died from her injuries. Saw R---, a villager from Zq--- village area explained: “Their livelihood is not that good as they lost their mother. The children are still very young, and they stay home. Their father takes care of them.” There had been no fighting in the village around the time of the attack, however it was reported that some People’s Defence Force (PDF)<sup>37</sup> members were staying in the village for one night following

<sup>37</sup> The People’s Defence Force (PDF) is an armed resistance established independently as local civilian militias operating across the country. Following the February 1st 2021 military coup and the ongoing brutal violence enacted by the junta, the majority of these groups began working with the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Burma/Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

fighting in neighbouring Yar Don village.<sup>38</sup> Saw R--- stated: *"Using aircraft is very dangerous for civilians. It has also resulted in much harming to civilians such as destruction, injures and death. Innocent children and villagers have died due to air strikes. [...] I feel like they conducted an air attack on innocent civilians who live in mountainous area. The air strike resulted in deaths and people being separated from their families, so it is sad for us."*

### **b) Air strikes conducted overnight in civilian areas**

SAC air strikes in Karen State are often conducted on civilian areas at night. Reportedly, at least 52 air attacks on civilian areas occurred during the night-time (after dark), mostly while villagers were preparing dinner, gathered with friends and family, or sleeping in their homes or in displacement sites. Attacks after dark pose higher risks to the lives of villagers, as villagers are less alert and find it harder to flee. Running in the dark also causes additional injuries, coupled with the difficulties accessing healthcare during those hours. Additionally, attacks at night provoke fear among villagers, with some villagers reporting sleep deprivation from anxiety and vigilance at night.

In one case, on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2022, at about 7 pm, an SAC aircraft conducted an air strike on Zt---village, Thay Baw Boe village tract, Kaw T'Ree (Kawkareik) Township, Dooطلا District, dropping several bombs. Although there was an SAC army camp near the village, there had been no fighting or other military activity in the area in the period leading up to the attack, so villagers had not fled their homes. Villagers were together in their houses, having dinner, watching television, worshipping, or preparing to sleep, and did not know that an air strike would happen. The bombing killed two villagers: Saw Dr--- (25 years old) and Saw Ds--- (36 years old). Three other villagers, who were family members, were also injured. Naw Aa---, one of the injured villagers, explained to KHRG: *"On that night, my father and niece were having a conversation in the living place [room] and I was setting up the mosquito net in the bedroom, about to sleep. At that moment, an aircraft flew very close to us, the sound was like 'Tuuuuuu', extremely loud, and it was like I was in the chest [central part] of the aircraft. I have never heard a noise as loud and had never experienced it [anything] like this. [...] [She heard] the sound of something, in pieces [shrapnel], also falling on my house, like 'Praaa Praaa Praa', and on the house floor 'klaaww klaawww', and my body was also propelled [by the explosion]. [...] I just ran around the house calling: 'Father! Father! Niece! Where are you niece? Where are you father? When I saw my father, he was lying down, pulling his legs, and putting his hands on his head. He told me: 'I might not be able to stand up anymore, my legs might be broken.' [...] I was running outside and searching for people [to help] because people were running separately [towards a safe place], in the valley. I was running and then I saw a woman and told her: 'I was also hit [by shrapnel]'. But I only realised which part [of the body] [...] when stepping on my slippery blood [on the floor]. [...] Then, people [other villagers] shone a light on my leg and saw that my leg was broken [hit by shrapnel], and the injury was big [...]. All of us [gathered] were women, so the women tried to carry me on their backs until we could pass a plantation [while fleeing]. Then, men [villagers] contined to carry me. When we arrived at the truck place, I saw my [75-year-old] father lying down and [he] was not moving. [...] My [19-year-old] niece was also crying from [the pain] of injury because she was injured on her [upper] thigh joint [groin]." The three family members were able to access medical treatment across the border, as explained by Naw Aa---: *"We were taken to the Thai side [of the border], to Phop Phra [District], for medical treatment, and my father was transferred to [a hospital in] Ty--- Town. My injured leg needed 12 stitches, and my eyelid and upper lip on my skin [were also injured]. I was too fearful, deeply in my heart, and I did not know what to do anymore."* The attacks continued by bombardment in Thay Baw Boe area over the following days, causing at least four more civilian casualties.*

<sup>38</sup> KHRG, "Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC air strikes killed two villagers, injured three children, and caused property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township (September 2023)", February 2024.

In another instance, in May 2024, an air strike was conducted by an SAC fighter jet at night in Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo (Mone) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. The aircraft dropped an unknown number of 300-pound bombs, killing a villager who was sleeping in his house, and injuring one woman. As explained by Saw Ab---, a villager from Zv--- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract: *"The air strike that happened [in May 2024] was at night time; I did not see it [the aircraft]. It sounded like 'Wowa...Wowa' and some [villagers] ran into the bunkers, and some were in a deep sleep and they woke up during the air strike. [...] They [the victims] were asleep and the injured one [woman] woke up [from the sound of the air strike] and ran to avoid the air strike. For the dead person, he did not wake up so he was killed immediately when the bombs landed [beside his house]."* The injured woman accessed free medical treatment at a clinic under KNU administration.

Villagers also reported attacks at night on community workplaces, including farmlands, killing civilians.<sup>39</sup> At least two mining areas, in Kler Lwee Htoo District and Dooplaya District, were attacked by SAC air strikes at night, killing 12 workers and injuring eight more.<sup>40</sup>

Due to the challenges of escaping in the dark, villagers also reported additional casualties caused by falling on sharp objects or being injured while running. For example, on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, three SAC aircraft flew over Zw--- village, Meh Thu village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, and dropped two bombs onto Zw--- clinic area, inside the village. The air strike caused the destruction of villagers' houses and the clinic building. While fleeing from the air strike in darkness, four villagers were injured by accidentally hitting sharp wood and bamboo, including one child, who was injured on the eye. Another villager from Ler Mu Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township also reported falling into a water channel when fleeing an air strike in 2023.

### **c) Attacks by continuous bombardment**

In addition to isolated attacks on villages, data collected by KHRG indicates numerous instances where the SAC conducted air strikes intensively over several days or months on the same area, often impacting several villages over the course of the attack and resulting in death and injury of civilians. In some cases, extensive bombardment took place across areas where villagers had already fled, resulting in mass destruction of civilian property but limited casualties. Air strikes by bombardment took place across various districts in Karen State.

The fear expressed by villagers in relation to bombardment was described by Saw Ac---, a Zy-- village tract administrator in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, which had been subject to extensive bombardment and higher levels of fighting in 2021: *"All eleven village tracts in Bu Tho Township are in a risky situation now [in 2021]. Villagers from some village tracts are in fear of Tatmadaw [SAC] fighter jets dropping bombs and villagers from the area near the Tatmadaw [SAC] army camps have security concerns that the Tatmadaw will indiscriminately fire into their villages."*<sup>41</sup> Due to fears of indiscriminate attacks, many villagers leave their villages and displace at the first signs of aircraft.

Sometimes aerial bombardment is conducted by the SAC in tandem with ground attacks such as shelling. For example, from December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021 to May 2022, Kaw T'Ree and Noh T'Kaw Townships in Dooplaya District were subject to multiple episodes of bombardment from SAC air strikes and shelling, including a first 'wave' which lasted six days. As stated by a displaced villager, *"the SAC dropped bombs and fired machine guns [from helicopters and jets] so bullets*

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance: KHRG, *"Doo Tha Htoo District Incident Report: SAC air strikes killed a villager and damaged civilian property in Hpa-an Township (March 2023)"*, December 2023.

<sup>40</sup> KHRG, *News Bulletin: A Worrisome Escalation: Tatmadaw airstrikes kill at least 16 villagers, displace thousands in Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo districts, March 2021*, May 2021

<sup>41</sup> See KHRG, *A Worrisome Escalation*, above, for more information on attacks in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo Townships.

[and bombs] fell from the sky just like rain.” At the time, the area was a significant place of refuge for many activists and civil servants fleeing towns and cities after the coup, while also being an area of active armed conflict. During this period, at least 23 air strikes were reported in those two Townships in Dooplaya District, with KHRG documenting the casualties of at least eight people (although the figures are likely to be significantly higher).<sup>42</sup> Bombardment by shelling caused additional casualties, with 15 villagers injured and six killed in the same period.



These photos were taken on April 21<sup>st</sup> 2024 in Zz--- monastery, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. These photos show an 85-year-old grandmother and her 12-year-old granddaughter who were injured by an SAC air strike conducted on the evening of April 20<sup>th</sup> 2024. The air strike was part of a bombardment on the area that took place between 9-10 pm that day, onto Ha T'Reh village tract, damaging Zz--- monastery compound and farms, and in Meh Th'Na village tract, damaging the Ya--- monastery compound and farms, in Hpa-an Township. Two small bombs hit the monastery in Ya--- village, injuring the two villagers, who were staying in the monastery and cooked for the monks. The granddaughter was injured on her right arm and her grandmother was injured on her right foot, severing three of her toes, and injuring the back of her neck.

[Photos: KHRG]

Villages located near SAC army camps are at particular risk of aerial bombardment and shelling when the SAC transports rations. For instance, starting in November 2022 until 2024, air strikes were conducted multiple times per month in Zd--- village next to an SAC army base in Pa De Kaw (Pa De Khaung) village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, and the surrounding area. Saw D---, a villager from Zd--- village, reported: “At the time [November 2022], they [SAC] were blocked [by armed resistance forces] on their way to transporting the rations. In the past, if they [Burma Army] transported their rations, they transported them by foot or car on the road. But since then [November 2022], they transport it [rations] by aircraft, and they conduct air strikes whenever they transport their rations. They transport their rations in four rounds [times] per month. [...] Even though they [SAC] were not sure if their enemies [armed resistance groups] were there [in the village] or not, they just conducted it [air strikes] indiscriminately. [...] They did reconnaissance on the village a few times during each round [of delivering rations], then they conducted air strikes continuously.”

<sup>42</sup> KHRG, *News Bulletin: Bombs and Bullets Like Rain: Air strikes in the 'peace town' and places of refuge in Dooplaya District, December 2021 to May 2022*, December 2022. Not all air strikes documented in this news bulletin were conducted in civilian areas, with some targeting military objectives such as resistance army camps.

## Case study: Bombardment on Day Bu Noh area; first air strikes in Southeast Burma

At around 7:30 pm on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC launched its first air strikes in locally-defined Karen State since long before the ceasefire period. The attack took place on Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, 11 kilometres away from an SAC army camp<sup>43</sup> that had been attacked and occupied by KNLA soldiers on the same day. Following the initial air strikes, the SAC proceeded to conduct multiple air strikes on Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo Districts over a period of several days, killing at least 16 people, injuring 25 others and forcibly displacing at least 15,000.<sup>44</sup>

Day Bu Noh is a remote area where indigenous Karen people live, surrounded by mountains and rivers, away from big cities and towns. The area contains ten Karen villages, and more than 1,931 villagers. Between the villages, there are plantations, forests and rivers. The ten villages – comprised of wooden and bamboo houses, along with schools, clinics, and churches - are: Yb---, Yc---, Yd---, Ye---, Yg---, Yh---, Yi---, Yj---, Yk---, and Yl--- villages. This vast territory is KNU-administered. It is also the location of a number of schools where children from around Mu Traw District come to study. The area includes one high school, one junior college, and one post-Grade 10 school (administered by KECD); as well as highly equipped hospitals (administered by the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)<sup>45</sup>). Other civil society organisations and ethnic service providers also have their offices there. In a separate location, around 2 or 3 km away from Yb--- village, there is the military base of KNLA Brigade #5.

At around 3 pm on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, villagers noticed five SAC jets conducting air reconnaissance. A local Karen relief worker explained to KHRG: *"I think there were a lot of jets because we heard the loud noise of jets in-flight. The jets were flying over our heads"*. Whilst they had been warned by the KNU earlier that day to remain cautious, given the fact that there had been no air strikes in Karen State since long before the ceasefire period, many villagers and students continued their everyday activities.

At around 7:30 pm, the SAC aerial bombardment of Day Bu Noh area began. The first round of air strikes lasted until 9 pm. The following day, on March 28<sup>th</sup>, at around 12:45 pm, two more jets came and bombed the area again. Naw Ad---, the CIDKP district coordinator in Yb--- village, spoke about the unexpected nature of the attack: *"At that time, we did not know that it was an air strike. We just heard a sound [like] 'Groo'. We just thought that something was damaged. However, we saw the big fire, and many small weapons fell down. I called for my husband and said, 'an air strike is happening'. At that time, I picked up my kid and went under the house. A bullet went between me and my kid who I was carrying while I was on the ground [crawling to shelter]. Then, many people were screaming and running around"*.

KHRG documented the list of casualties from the first 24 hours: Naw Ae---, 58 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Naw Ag---, 25 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Saw Ah---, 47 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Saw Ai---, 37 years old, seriously injured (Yb--- village); Saw Aj---, 18 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Naw Ak---, 18 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Saw Dt---, 52 years

<sup>43</sup> SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #603, under Military Operation Command (MOC) #8, is based at this army camp, in Thee Mu Hta place, near Meh Nuh Hta village, Pah Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township. It takes 1 day to travel from Day Bu Noh area to the army camp by motorbike due to the mountain range and curved dirt road.

<sup>44</sup> KHRG, *A Worrisome Escalation*, above.

<sup>45</sup> The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.



old, deceased (Yb--- village); Saw Al---, 35 years old, injured (Yn--- village); Naw Am---, 12 years old, injured (Yb--- village); Saw Du---, 8 years old, deceased (Yo--- village); name unknown, 2 years old, deceased (Yp--- village). Reportedly, there were more undocumented casualties from that night.

Describing the horror, Naw An--- (26 years old), a villager who was also in Yb--- village at the time, testified: *"Some villagers got hit on the butt, legs, faces and heads by fragments of the bombs. Some petrol bottles exploded, and the fire burned villagers' faces. I saw these villagers were coming to stay with us together in the cave [where villagers had fled]. I saw there was a child and the entire face of that child was burned from the fire, and the head was hit by fragments from the explosion. [The child] was killed on the spot because when the kid arrived [in the cave], the kid lost their breath [stopped breathing] already. On that night, there was a house that was burning from the explosion and a villager was killed in the fire.[...] There were also two people from a house who were injured from fragments of the explosion. The father was hit on his jaw that broke by the fragments of the explosion. His son was injured on the head. The father shouted to his wife to come and fetch her son who was injured. She rushed to take her son and she saw her husband's jaw was badly injured and it fell off and there was a lot of blood coming out from his mouth. Her husband just died on the spot. Then she sent her son to the hospital."*

Reportedly, there was only one non-civilian casualty from this attack, KNLA Official Bo<sup>46</sup> Dv---, who was hit inside his home while sleeping, and died several hours later in the forest due to his injuries. Naw Ao---, a villager who was having dinner with friends in Yb--- village when the air strikes happened, explained: *"When her [Naw Ap---'s] husband [Official Bo Dv---] was about to pass away, at about 1 am [on March 28<sup>th</sup>], her younger sister came to her and told her to go and look after her children in another [safe] place. She replied: 'I will look after their father first. I will do it [look after him] until after I have buried him.' I witnessed that she was deeply sad. She also said that she wanted to make a coffin for her husband. [...] A villager was able to get one set of clothes for him, but we could not get shoes for him. [...] He [the KNLA official] left his widowed wife with six children without a father. His corpse was buried without [proper] clothes because we were all terrified. It made me sad to see it. [...] When it was time to bury his corpse, his wife wanted to get a coffin for him, but all the people were busy [terrified and occupied by the situation] so they could not make it for her. The boy [from another family] who died on the first night was buried without his parents' presence [in the service] because we were all busy fleeing separately."*

SAC aircraft continued to conduct air strikes using bombs and machine guns on Day Bu Noh area on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March, continuing for several days. At least three more villagers were injured between 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March including Saw Aq---, 65 years old (Yb--- village); Saw Ar---, 58 years old (Yp--- village); and one child.

Due to the SAC's bombardment of Day Bu Noh area in March 2021, the CIDKP district coordinator reported that between 10,000 to 20,000 people from Mu Traw District were displaced. Many villagers reported having to flee urgently due to the unexpected nature of the attack, without any belongings or food. Many students and children were separated from their families. As stated by Naw An---: *"Children and mothers from families fled to different directions. They were searching for each other during that night but they could not find each other."* She also described around 400 or 500 villagers including children fleeing to a river source: *"They [displaced children] had to sleep in a sitting position and felt uncomfortable as well as slept in fear"* A relief worker from Day Bu Noh area named Saw As--- explained: *"I saw [that] children here in a very pitiful situation because some of the babies were newborns. They*

<sup>46</sup> 'Bo' is a Burmese honorific title meaning 'officer.'

*had been born just two days before but they had to flee with their mothers. Sick villagers were also in a very pitiful situation too. They had to flee to forests and hide in caves. What I saw from the situation, it made me feel very sad."*

Since March 2021, the SAC has continued to regularly conduct air strikes on Day Bu Noh area, with air reconnaissance often being used prior to attacks. As such, villagers remain displaced, vigilant and in constant fear, with one villager reporting fears of rebuilding the destroyed houses and community buildings. Saw At---, who lives in Yh--- village, Day Bu Noh area, explained: "After that air strike [on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021] was conducted, SAC military jets kept coming back continuously to conduct reconnaissance and therefore, villagers continued to stay in their hiding places. [...] There are only around one third of villagers who have come back to stay in Yb--- village". According to KHRG documentation, the SAC has conducted air strikes at least 13 times in Day Bu Noh area from March 2021 to March 2024. The attacks after March 2021 have caused at least two civilian casualties and the destruction of at least 21 houses, one church, and plantations.<sup>47</sup> Naw An---, gave his view on the reasons for the extensive attacks on Day Bu Noh area: "I felt like their aim is to destroy all the buildings in the areas whether clinics, district office, or all the military areas [KNLA bases] in the brigade". Naw Av---, a Yb--- villager, also said: "They [SAC aircraft] fire at everything that they see."



This photo was taken in March 2021 in Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. This photo shows an injured girl receiving treatment in an informal displacement site after the first air strike on Day Bu Noh area on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021. [Photo: KHRG]

#### **d) Other conflict-related attacks**

37% of interviewees who experienced air strikes reported that armed conflict was ongoing or had occurred recently in the vicinity. Only 25% mentioned the presence of armed resistance soldiers in the village or incident area. The high levels of civilian casualties and damage that occurred in such cases suggests that the SAC fails to distinguish between armed resistance fighters and villagers, and points to the disproportionality of attacks. In some cases, the nature and timing of the attack suggests air strikes are directed at the civilian population as a form of collective punishment. As with the rest of the incidents, there were no effective advanced warnings given by the SAC in conflict-related attacks to spare civilians and minimise civilian losses.

When recounting incidents of SAC air strikes (both after, during and in the absence of conflict), villagers often described bombs as being dropped 'randomly', 'indiscriminately' or from 'high up', as well as bombs landing in areas next to, or surrounding villages, indicating indiscriminate methods of attack. When describing the continuous air strikes conducted on and around Kyeh Doh Town, Kaw T'Ree Township, in March 2024, Naw Aw---, a villager from Yq--- village, Htee Hpa Hta village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township, Dooplaya District, explained: "As I heard,

<sup>47</sup> This number may not be accurate and precise as KHRG researchers could not go to Day Bu Noh area and document all SAC air strikes due to security threats.

*there were damages in other villages and villages' surrounding areas due to the air strikes. They did not conduct the air strike in a targeted area. They were flying very high as well. They dropped bombs randomly and [the bombs] fell wherever they wanted to, so it hit houses and schools as well." A religious member from Day Bu Noh area, Mu Traw District also stated: "It is dangerous to live in the villages because there is indiscriminate firing [air strikes] from aircraft."*

In some cases, villagers perceived that attacks were directed at them as a form of collective punishment, following activities of armed resistance groups. For example, when describing an attack on Zd--- village on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2022, Saw D--- explained: *"They conducted an air strike on [around] their camp where fighting had occurred once, then flew back. Then they [the SAC] returned again with helicopters and conducted three rounds of air strikes around the village and into the village. They did reconnaissance on the village for a few times in each round, then they conducted air strikes continually."*

In Mergui-Tavoy District, indiscriminate air attacks have increased alongside escalating armed conflict in the area since the 2021 coup, intensifying in 2024. In one particular incident, on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2024, the SAC conducted an air strike on Yr--- and Ys--- villages, K'Ser Doh Township, where soldiers had been celebrating after KNLA troops captured the SAC's Pe Det army camp, located on the Mergui-Tavoy road (about 50km away from incident place). The celebration, from 9 to 11 am, was shared online, during which an SAC aircraft was seen flying over Ys--- village, conducting reconnaissance. In the afternoon, between 4 and 6 pm, a fighter jet described as flying *"high up"* dropped bombs between Yr--- school and a football pitch, and on Yt--- Hospital. The air strike killed 2 children (around 15 years old) and injured four other villagers, who were playing football at the time. No non-civilian casualties were recorded. A local teacher named Ay---, who was in Yv--- village, Saw Khay area, explained: *"I did not expect that the SAC would drop the bombs. [...] I saw the civilians were running here and there. [...] No villagers [in Yr--- village] have makeshift bunkers. The villagers learned the technique of how to lay down when the incident happened, and they also understood to lay down [keeping the chest] two inches away from the ground"*.



These photos were taken on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2024 in Ys-- village, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. These photos show Yr--- school (on the left) and Yt--- hospital (on the right) destroyed by an SAC air strike on Yr--- and Ys--- villages, K'Ser Doh Township, on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2024. [Photos: local villager]

As a result of the air strike, Yt--- Hospital, which had recently been opened under the SAC administration, was damaged along with some houses. The teacher added: *"I heard [some] soldiers from the armed resistance groups received treatment at the hospital after the seizing of the SAC army camp. [...] The SAC heard the news that soldiers from armed resistance groups received treatment at the hospital. [...] In my opinion, the fighter jet might have a record of the location of the hospital. The [Yt--- [cantonment] Hospital is a newly constructed [by the SAC]. It hadn't even been used [properly] yet. The school had also been renovated. They [the SAC]*

*conducted the air strike on the hospital and school as they have a location record. [...] I think their intention was targeting anyone [there]. They are not distinguishing between military targets and civilians. It seems that they [the SAC] are trying to frighten civilians. If the civilians are afraid, they [resistance armed groups] will also be afraid. They will be afraid to continue [their fight] if civilians are hit."*

### e) Large, deadly and prohibited weapons

When conducting air strikes in Karen State, the SAC typically uses explosive weapons on populated areas. The most common explosive weapons employed are unguided bombs in varying sizes, however rockets, missiles and munitions from aircraft-mounted autocannons are also used. In many cases, a small number of explosives with a large destructive radius were used during attacks, such as 500-pound bombs. Other attacks used multiple explosive weapons dropped simultaneously over a wide area, or in repeated waves, over an extended period. In at least seven cases, prohibited weapons<sup>48</sup> were used, including one incendiary shell, four cluster bombs and two munitions with effects compatible with chemical weapons. All weapons deployed in SAC air strikes cause brutal suffering and destruction, and increase the risk of UXO contamination.

According to villagers' testimonies and corroborating photographs, the SAC's use of large bombs including 500-pound bombs<sup>49</sup> causes extensive civilian damage and distressing injuries.<sup>50</sup> On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2024 at around 6 pm, the SAC dropped two 500-pound bombs on Yw--- village, Kyaw Hta village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, followed by another aircraft firing mounted autocannons into the village. There were reports that some KNLA soldiers were temporarily resting in the village while fighting was ongoing in Kyeh Doh Town, around 2 hours away by motorbike. The first bomb exploded, killing a married couple who had been displaced from Kyeh Doh Town, and who were washing their car. Villagers explained that the blast severed the lower part of the wife's body and the legs of the husband. The incident also injured Az---, a 17-year-old student on both arms, while she was visiting her brother's parents-in-law. Az--- sought treatment for her hands at Yy--- Hospital, in Tak province, Thailand, where a metal rod was inserted into her left hand.



This photo was received on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2022. It was taken in Wc--- village, Meh Way village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. This photo shows the remnants of an exploded air-to-ground rocket used during an SAC air strike on March 29<sup>th</sup> 2022 on Wc--- village. The characteristics of the weapon are consistent with a 57mm S-5 rocket of Russian origin. [Photo: local villager]

<sup>48</sup> Customary IHL prohibits any weapon 'of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering', including chemical weapons, cluster munitions, and incendiary weapons, among others.

<sup>49</sup> A 500-pound bomb can severely harm or kill anyone or anything within a 20-meter (65 foot) blast radius.

<sup>50</sup> See also: KHRG, "Dooplaya District Incident Report: SAC air strikes injured an 11-year-old boy and a pregnant woman, in Kaw T'Ree Township (November and December 2023)", May 2024.

Az--- explained to KHRG: *"The bone of my left arm was broken, and the shrapnel went in through my [left] arm and out of the other side, injuring my right arm. [...] We had been to see my older brother's parents-in-law for merit-making and were returning home. [...] We were on the motorcycle to return, when we heard the sound of an aircraft. My mother told me that the aircraft was coming, so we planned to run into a shop. However, I was injured on the way, before I reached the shop. [...] I ran into a bunker after I was hit. After that, I could not come out of the bunker [due to the pain], so [KNLA] soldiers picked me up and sent me to my home. [...] The second aircraft [that conducted the second air strike firing mounted autocannons] was a bit far from me. [Otherwise,] In my opinion, I would not be alive this evening [now]."* Due to her injuries, she suffered long term pain and was unable to attend school or help her family with work, as of April 2024. The second bomb did not explode, so local resistance soldiers tried to dig out the UXO but were unsuccessful. Many houses, cars and motorbikes were also damaged during the air attack.

In a separate incident in April 2024, after local KNLA attacked an SAC army camp close to Zd-- village, Pa De Kaw village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, SAC jets dropped around four 500-pound bombs onto the upper part of Zd-- village, called Wa---, as well as in Wb--- village and monastery compound. The attack killed two villagers and injured six more, also destroying and damaging several houses. Saw D---, a villager from Zd-- village explained: *"Fighting had occurred only at the area near their army camps, when their camps had been attacked [by the KNLA] to be captured. Around the village or in the village there was no fighting occurring. [...] The villagers were injured by the air strike [in April 2024] because the air strike hit the monastery. Because they [villagers] thought it would be safe for them to stay [shelter] at the monastery as it is a place of religion."* The villager concluded: *"Villagers are now most afraid of missiles fired from aircraft. They [missiles from aircraft] are the most dangerous."*

As reported to KHRG by community members, in at least four incidents, cluster munitions were used during air strikes.<sup>51</sup> One such incident took place on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2024 on Wd--- village, Noh Poe village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, killing one villager, injuring two others and destroying five houses, one elementary school and a middle school. Naw Ba--- explained: *"I heard people say within one big bomb, it scattered on the way into nine bombs and just one or two bombs did not explode. People said that the bomb was huge and it was green. [...] People went to pull it out [the remains of bomb]"*.



This photo was taken on April 2023 in We--- village, Noh Poe village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. On April 11<sup>th</sup> 2023, the SAC conducted an air strike on We--- village after fighting happened between KNLA and SAC troops in the village earlier that month. The air strike destroyed a village church, a school, and houses. This photo shows the outer canister of a cluster bomb used during the attack. Reportedly, several words could be read on the metal sheet of the canister, including "9x28mm ON SKIN PASSED THAILAND", in English language, and "Flat piece of steel" written in Thai language. (all photos on file) [Photo: KHRG]

KHRG also has evidence suggesting that chemical bombs were used by the SAC. Two munitions with effects compatible with chemical weapons were dropped by an SAC aircraft on April 10<sup>th</sup> 2022 near Lay Kay Kaw New Town, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, at around 6 pm,

<sup>51</sup> Photographic evidence of weapon remains submitted to KHRG could indicate the use of at least 10 cluster bombs during SAC air strikes, as analysed by a weaponry expert.

after fighting had occurred earlier that day.<sup>52</sup> According to a KNLA official from Battalion #27, Brigade #6, around twenty KNLA soldiers needed urgent medical treatment after they felt dizzy, nauseous, short of breath and had burning eyes, after being in the incident area. A community member who travelled to the area the next day for documentation also experienced burning eyes.



These photos were taken on April 2022 in a place near Lay Kay Kaw area, Pa Lu village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. On April 10<sup>th</sup> 2022, fighting broke out between KNLA Cobra Column and the SAC in Lay Kay Kaw Town, and Wg--- village and Wh--- village, P'Loo village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township. SAC military jets conducted air strikes for the whole day in Lay Kay Kaw area, including by dropping two chemical bombs. These photos show the remains of one of the chemical bombs. [Photos: KHRG]

As a result of the deadly and destructive nature of weapons used by the SAC, many villagers reported witnessing the distressing injuries of others, including the obliteration of body parts. For example, a villager called Saw Bb--- described the death of a fellow villager, killed by air strikes on Wi--- village, Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021: *"His whole body was gone, only his foot and a little bit of his shin, and his palm were left, other parts of his body were all gone. We only saw his flesh in pieces and we collected it and then put it on the piece of tarpaulin. For the other [dead villager], they lost their thigh and side part of their body as well".* Due to the urgency of air strikes, many villagers like Saw Bb---, were unable to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones or fellow villagers, and in some cases, were unable to carry out proper burial services. As stated by Naw Ad---, a villager from Wj--- village, Ywa Kyay Aye village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District: *"Currently, people in our village tract are killed just like dogs and pigs and then we just have to throw the corpses [without funeral]."*

Hiding in makeshift bunkers is a common strategy that villagers have used for decades to protect themselves from indiscriminate shelling or firing of bullets by the Burma Army. It is the first place that villagers think of, and run to, whenever they hear explosions nearby. Villagers now report a significant increase in reliance on bunkers due to the magnitude of SAC air strikes, even though on many occasions, bunkers could not provide sufficient protection from attacks. Naw Bc---, the 51-year-old villager and family member of the victims from Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, explained: *"We did make the bunker before, but since the [bomb] explosion was huge, it didn't protect anything. My brother just died in the bunker."* In another case, Ay---, a villager from Yv--- village, Saw Khay area, K'Hser Doh area, Mergui-Tavoy District reported that the SAC obstructed the building of bunkers: *"When the SAC found out that villagers made makeshift bunkers, they asked 'What is this pit?'. When the SAC soldiers found out the villagers made makeshift bunkers, they fined the villagers. The SAC also conducted shelling*

<sup>52</sup> See: KHRG, *Bombs and Bullets Like Rain*, above, for more information on the use of chemical bombs in Dooplaya District in 2022.

into the village daily. That's why villagers were afraid to make makeshift bunkers."

### 2.1.3. Lack of access to healthcare

Lack of access to healthcare is a significant issue that affects the levels of air strike casualties in Karen State. In many cases, villagers injured from air strikes subsequently died as they were not able to access medical treatment in time, particularly when air strikes were conducted at night. The lack of available medical treatment is aggravated by the lack of equipped clinics and security risks taken by injured villagers and healthcare workers when travelling to seek or provide healthcare.<sup>53</sup> As stated by Naw Bd---, from Wk--- village, Khaw Hpho Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *"When people need medical attention, we have to look for doctors or nurses who have also run away and are sleeping elsewhere. Having mobile phones helps, but sometimes we don't have a good connection. Healthcare is really hard and difficult for us."*

During the air strike on Zm--- village on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 set out above, one of the students died on the way to the local clinic for medical treatment. His father, Saw Be---, testified: *"After shrapnel hit my son, the KECD head [township coordinator] informed me about it, and I immediately went to see my injured son. I talked to him and he told me 'Dad! I was hit by the aircraft and I think I am going to die.' I told him, 'You will not die. Stay strong in your heart.' There are no health workers in our village. We live in a rural area, so it is hard to access healthcare. He passed away on the way to the clinic, while we were carrying him in a hammock. [...] After the incident, fathers, mothers and children were crying. I was also crying because it made me feel devastated."*<sup>54</sup> The other injured villagers were sent to Wl--- clinic, under KDHW administration, located three hours away on foot, and some were later transferred to better equipped clinics, such as Yb--- hospital. Naw Bc---, the mother of two other injured students expressed: *"The bleeding from the wounds would not stop [running] and it [the wounds] continued bleeding, but there was no medic. We [friends and fellow villagers] could only take them to the clinic after the medic [from another village] came to meet us. [...] They were sent to [KDHW] Zw--- clinic [also known as Wl--- clinic]. The treatment didn't cost any money. But since the wounds became seriously infected, they told us that the patients needed to be transferred to another place, because they were concerned that if the wounds were not treated well in the beginning, it could cause recurrence [further problems] or the children might no longer be able to work [move properly]."*

### 2.1.4. Air strikes not causing civilian casualties

In some instances, local villagers reported that air strikes did not cause any casualties. This was usually when air attacks did not hit the village, but the surrounding areas, or when villagers were able to flee in advance, following the first signs of air attacks (such as reconnaissance or air strikes in nearby villages), particularly in areas of extensive bombardment such as Dooplaya and Mu Traw Districts.<sup>55</sup>

Saw Bg---, a villager displaced in Wm--- village, Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District explained: *"There were no injuries or destruction [from bombardment] in Wn--- village*

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, KHRG, *"Dooplaya District Short Update: SAC shelling and air strikes resulted in civilian casualties, property destruction and displacement, in Kruh Tuh Township, December 2023."*, August 2023.

<sup>54</sup> KHRG, *Schools Under Attack*, above.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example: KHRG, *"Taw Oo District Short Update: Shelling, air strikes and house burning by SAC troops, and use of forced navigators by PDF soldiers in Htaw Ta Htoo Township (November to December 2023)"*, April 2024; KHRG, *"Taw Oo District Short Update: House burning, indiscriminate shelling and air strikes by the SAC in Htaw Ta Htoo Township (September to November 2023)"*, March 2024; or KHRG, *"Kler Lwee Htoo District Short Update: SAC air strikes and indiscriminate shelling caused casualties, destruction, and displacement, in Hsaw Htee Township (November to December 2023)"*, June 2024

*[from March 15<sup>th</sup> 2024 to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2024] because the weapons used did not fall in the centre of the village. Also, the villagers sensed that the situation was not good and they had already been suffering from something like this before so they had fled before the air strike happened".* Such attacks also further serve to illustrate the imprecise and indiscriminate nature of SAC air attacks.

Villagers use different strategies to protect themselves and their families from the danger of air strikes, including displacement. Over the three years, villagers and community members have made adjustments based on their experiences and knowledge. More information on strategies villagers take to minimise casualties is provided in section [3.1.1](#) below.

## **Chapter 2.2. Destruction of civilian property and community**

Air strikes conducted on civilian areas in Karen State since the 2021 coup have not only led to extensive civilian casualties but have also caused large-scale damage to villagers' homes, community buildings and plantations. Villages constitute the physical spaces where the lives of villagers, their families, and communities evolve in Karen State, providing places to gather, celebrate and spend time with one another. Direct and indiscriminate attacks disrupt these essential social structures, leaving families without shelter, villagers and children without access to crucial healthcare and education, and religious communities without their places of worship.

The first section of this chapter sets out the destructive impacts of direct and indiscriminate attacks on villages in Southeast Burma. With the SAC attacks directed at villages and community buildings, villagers lose their shelter, money, and basic services. The scale of destruction is increased for villages situated in areas of active conflict, which are often subject to multiple attacks and bombardment. Where villages are now considered unsafe spaces for villagers, and in the belief that these attacks are conducted by the SAC to oppress, terrorise and displace them, villagers remain afraid to live or gather in structures visible from the sky. This section also examines the disruption of community life caused by the destruction of community buildings and the separation of villagers. The second section examines the impact of SAC attacks on villagers' livelihoods, as air strikes destroy and impede villagers' access to their plantations, constrict their freedom of movement, cause market scarcity and contribute to rising inflation and costs of goods; all of which have led to systemic food insecurity.

### **2.2.1. Destruction of villages and community life**

A high number of houses, schools, medical facilities and religious buildings have been damaged or destroyed as a result of air strikes conducted by the SAC since 2021, with villagers reporting damage to civilian property in at least 184 SAC air attacks. Out of those, at least 67 religious buildings, 42 schools and 14 medical facilities were damaged or destroyed. 121 air strikes were also documented as causing extensive damage or destruction to villagers' houses. It is likely that all figures are significantly undervalued due to difficulties faced by villagers in reporting exact damage and destruction while fleeing. Such attacks cause villagers to lose their homes, livelihoods, access to essential services, disrupts the community and causes displacement.

#### **a) Destruction of villagers' houses and property**

In Karen State, most community buildings and homes are identifiable from the air. Houses are usually concentrated in a particular area, and community buildings such as schools and religious buildings are of larger size, with coloured roofs, and have identifiable features such as playground areas, pagodas or crosses. In many cases, reconnaissance was used by the SAC prior to attacks on villages, and villagers sometimes described aircraft as flying low to the ground when conducting their attacks. In some cases, attacks on homes and community buildings took place in the absence of any identifiable link to the conflict. Villagers often reported that the SAC intentionally targets community buildings. As stated by Bh—, a villager Wk— village, Khaw



Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *"We heard and see that they usually target hospitals, schools, and churches."*

On another occasion, between 10:40 pm and 11:30 pm on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024, villagers reported that the SAC dropped a total of 12 bombs (including a cluster bomb and mortar shells) on Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, damaging or destroying at least 11 houses and four school buildings, and damaging two monastery buildings. There was no fighting or other military activity in the area at the time. Members of KDHW had met in the village two days before the attack. All villagers were sleeping in the village when the air strike happened. Multiple villagers expressed their views, including Naw Bi---, from Wo--- village, who stated: *"From my, and villagers', perspective, they aimed to destroy our village and buildings, because there was no fighting that happened [nearby]. [...] They just conducted air strikes intentionally. The village was damaged, and both education and healthcare were affected. The dreams of children were shattered, and the villagers had to flee. This behaviour is absolutely wrong."* Naw Bi--- explained that she warned other villages to run into the makeshift bunkers when the attacks started. She also mentioned at least three air strikes on nearby villages, including an air strike conducted on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2024 at 11:33 pm on nearby Wk--- village. Daw<sup>56</sup> Bj---, a displaced villager from Wp--- village who saw the incident stated: *"They just wanted to target villagers so they conducted the air strike."*



This photo was taken in February 2024 in Wr--- village, Hkay Kyi village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. On February 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, at around 11 am, SAC LIB #439 conducted a drone attack in Wr--- village by dropping bombs. The photo shows a house that was burned by the air strike. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers across Karen State shared similar views. For example, Saw Bk---, a villager from Wq-- village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, where 10 houses were destroyed and 59 were damaged by air strikes,<sup>57</sup> stated: *"Villagers think that they [SAC] just conducted air strike in the village like that, to destroy the village's buildings such as our houses, schools, and our religion places."* Saw D--- from Zd--- village, Pa De Kaw village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, also stated that the SAC conducts air strikes on villages: *"because then the villagers would not get to enjoy their life."*

The damage and destruction of homes in Southeast Burma due to SAC air strikes has devastating impacts on local communities, as families are displaced and villagers face the material loss of their shelter and belongings, which are often built and accumulated over a lifetime. As stated by Naw BI---, a villager whose home was destroyed from an air strike in Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District: *"There are many difficulties with taking care of my children. I can't find money and support for all my children. Furthermore, my house was destroyed and it is not easy for me to rebuild it as I don't have money."* Naw Ao---, a villager who was in Day Bu Noh area at the time of attacks in March 2021, also commented generally: *"It is very hard for villagers to build a house and it is hard to gain income. They have to build their own house with their own energy. And now, they cannot live in their houses, and they have to flee to other places far from their house."* A community school principal Saw Bm---, from Zm--- village,

<sup>56</sup> 'Daw' is Burmese honorific title for female adults, a married woman or a woman of a higher social position.

<sup>57</sup> KHRG, *Human, Not for Shield: Attack on civilians in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, April 22nd to May 22nd 2022*. December 2022

Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, also stated regarding the wider impacts on the community: *"We struggle so hard to develop our community. It is heartbreaking when our community was destroyed after we made progress in development."*

Due to air attacks, villagers reported their fears of living in houses or other structures visible from the sky. After the air strike on Ws--- village, Hter Wa Law village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, Saw Bn--- from Bo--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, expressed: *"Bombs were simply dropped onto the village. No KNLA soldiers were there. No one [soldiers] was there. [...] Right now, people dare not to live in places that are obvious to see [visible from the sky]. For example, if there are lots of houses, or if the houses' roofs are close together and are situated in a bigger area, or the zinc roofs have a white colour, civilians do not dare to live in such places, because they [the SAC] drops bombs onto places that are obvious to see. They [the SAC] did not only drop bombs on one place but on many places. So, some [houses] were damaged by the bomb explosions".*

Additionally, where villagers were able to build more permanent and expensive structures during the ceasefire period, villagers are now returning to a pre-ceasefire view that improving their homes and community buildings is futile due to the constant risk of attack by the Burma Army. As explained by Saw Bp---, from Wt--- village, Maung Nwe Gyi village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District: *"I even wanted to rebuild my house to be bigger but my wife told me that we should not rebuild the house because air strikes can happen anytime. If air strikes happen in our village, our house will be destroyed. So, we will not rebuild the house. We will only rebuild our house when the political situation gets back to normal."*

**Extensive destruction of communities in areas with active conflict:**

In areas with active armed conflict, villagers reported increased levels of air strikes causing extensive damage and destruction, affecting homes and community buildings, as well as preventing villagers' access to their plantations and causing displacement.<sup>58</sup>

For instance, in 2022, the SAC conducted air strikes by bombardment from June 26<sup>th</sup> to July 2022 in and around Wv--- village, Thay Baw Boe village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, after armed resistance forces attacked an SAC army camp nearby. Whilst there were no casualties as villagers had fled prior to the attacks, the bombing destroyed villagers' houses, a monastery, a school and clinic buildings. According to a Wv--- villager, Naw Bq---: *"[The whole village] broke into the ground [due to the air strike]. [...] People's houses were destroyed so none of the [bigger] houses are good now. Some small houses with roofs made of leaves are still good [not destroyed]. There were only about four houses with zinc roofs that remained [not destroyed] and I did not dare to look at [check all] the houses much [due to further risks of attack]. [...] I could see aircraft flying [conducting air strikes] every day from my farm [hiding place]. Sometimes, three aircraft and sometimes two aircraft came [conducted air strikes] each time."*

Due to the nature and timing of air strikes, often occurring on villages following military activity of armed resistance groups such as attacks on SAC army camps, air strikes appear to be conducted as a form of collective punishment. This is also supported by the frequent use of reconnaissance by the SAC prior to attacks. For example, on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2024 at around 3 pm, the SAC conducted an air strike on Za--- village, Htee Wah Blaw village tract, T'Nay Hsar Township, Hpa-An District, causing significant damage to civilian property following fighting in a nearby area. Naw A---, a villager whose house was burned alongside her mother's house and rice storage barn, explained: *"At first, the aircraft came [every day] for three days. The aircraft was patrolling [conducting reconnaissance] over the village, but [initially] they conducted air strikes at the fighting*

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance: KHRG, "Dooplaya District Short Update: SAC shelling and air strikes resulted in civilian casualties, property destruction and displacement, in Kruh Tuh Township, December 2023.", August 2024.

place [a distance of approximately 30 minutes by car]. We were not aware of it because we are villagers and there were no soldiers in our village, so we lived as usual. Yet, on that day [March 9<sup>th</sup>], in the afternoon around 3 pm, they [SAC] conducted an air strike [on Za--- village], so we were afraid and fled here and there. My house was burned by the air strike, so we did not dare live in the house anymore.” Naw A--- was able to see that the aircraft was white because it flew low above the village when it conducted the air strike. The aircraft dropped around seven bombs onto the village, while all villagers ran to hide in their makeshift bunkers.



This photo was received in February 2024. On February 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, at around 11 am, SAC LIB #439 conducted a drone attack in Wr--- village, Hkay Kyi village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. Bombs were dropped, causing a villager’s house to burn. This photo shows one of the unexploded bombs dropped by the SAC drone. [Photo: local villager]

KHRG also has evidence of at least one incendiary weapon being used by the SAC during air strikes, following military activity by armed resistance groups.<sup>59</sup> Daw Bj---, a villager from Wp--- village, Htee Day area, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, described how her and her mother’s houses were burned by an SAC “firebomb” in 2024, after PDF soldiers built an army camp near the village: “It was a firebomb they [SAC] dropped the last time [the last of many bombs, during the same air attack]. Some bombs exploded very loudly but I don’t know what kind of bombs they were. However, we heard other villagers were screaming saying ‘it is burning, it is burning’. Then, I went out of the bunker and went to see what happened. I saw that two houses and the cowshed were burning down.” Daw Bj--- explained the impacts of losing her home: “I don’t think I have hope that I will be able to build a [new] house. I don’t think I can get back what I have lost. In the beginning, I did not feel much about what I had lost. Later, I became sadder and sadder about what I had lost because we worked very hard in order to be able to build our house and our lives [...] We have lost everything now. We currently live in a small house. Now we cannot work on our land. We are struggling with our livelihood situation. With this challenge, how can we build a new house again? We are struggling with our lives just to survive.”

In some instances, villagers reported that the SAC bombed their village areas, destroyed their houses and caused displacement, to later steal property, or occupy villages and set up temporary army camps there.<sup>60</sup>

## b) Destruction of community buildings and essential services

Across most air strikes, villagers reported the destruction of key community buildings, precluding villagers’ access to essential services, such as healthcare and education. Such attacks also impact villagers’ ability to gather as a community and perform cultural and religious ceremonies, as well as develop their family lives in their homes.

<sup>59</sup> The burning of houses is also a common attack used by SAC ground forces. See: KHRG, *Burning Karen State: Retaliatory burning of houses and property against rural civilian communities of Southeast Burma (2021 and 2022)*, March 2023

<sup>60</sup> See also: KHRG, “*Taw Oo District Short Update: Air strikes, displacement and property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, July 2023*”, August 2023



This photo was taken in April 2023 in We--- village, Noh Poe village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows a Karen Baptist church in We--- village, destroyed by a bomb from an SAC air strike on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2023. The air strike also destroyed a village school and villagers' houses. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on February 2023 in Vc--- village, Kwee K' Hsaw Hsee village tract, Waw Ray Township, Dooplaya District. It shows a village monastery, destroyed by an SAC air strike. On the evening of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023, fighting happened between local armed groups and SAC troops near Vc--- village. After the fighting, on January 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023, the SAC conducted air strikes on Vc--- village, destroying villagers' houses, the village monastery, as well as betel nut and rubber plantations. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on March 2024 in Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh (Min Saw) village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. It shows a KECD-administered school destroyed by an SAC air strike on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024. The air strike destroyed all four school buildings, including the school materials inside. The air strike also damaged villagers' houses and injured a villager. Three bombs remained unexploded. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on January 2023 in Zw--- village, Meh Thu village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. It shows Wl--- clinic (administered by the KDHW) destroyed by the SAC air strike. On January 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, at 10 am, SAC fighter jets conducted an air strike in Zw--- village and dropped five bombs on the village. The clinic and healthcare workers' rooms were destroyed. *[Photo: KHRG]*

**Air attacks on schools:**

KHRG has received reports of the damage or destruction of at least 42 schools by SAC air strikes. Such attacks put children's safety at life-threatening risks, impede their access to education, and impact future generations.

Almost half of the reported cases of schools damaged/destroyed in Karen State were located in Mu Traw District. In Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, set out above, where an air strike caused extensive civilian casualties, and damaged eight houses, two school buildings and three church buildings, the village head Saw Br---, explained: *"Unfortunately, the SAC frequently conducted air strikes on schools, specifically targeting the zinc roofing"*. Naw Bi---, from Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, also stated: *"They usually target schools. Schools are not their enemy."*

Attacks on schools have a particularly devastating impact on community life, not only causing life threatening risks and immediate loss and trauma amongst students, but also disrupting education and destroying safe spaces for children to gather, learn and play.<sup>61</sup> Saw Bs---, from Ww--- village, Hpla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District explained some of the challenges communities face after attacks: *"Although schools started operating, students attended with fear. Parents also felt anxious about sending their children to school. Unfortunately, some students stopped learning because their parents lacked confidence to send them to school. It's because the parents can't reach the areas where schools are located if something happens to their children. Some students are tired of the repetitive cycle of going to school and coming back repeatedly so they stopped studying and started working in other places."*

**Air attacks on medical facilities:**

As reported to KHRG, SAC air attacks have damaged or destroyed at least 14 medical facilities. In one instance, two SAC aircraft conducted an air strike on Bt--- village, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, resulting in casualties and damage to buildings in the village, including the hospital. Six villagers were killed and nine were injured, including a doctor.

Due to SAC attacks, both villagers and workers reported being afraid to obtain and give treatment inside medical facilities. Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District, explained: *"As far as I know, there was only one hospital [Zw--- hospital, in Zw--- village, Meh Thuh village tract, Dwe Lo Township] and no other. However, almost all hospital [health workers] stopped treating the patients in the hospital, both in those hospitals that were attacked as well as some that were not attacked. [...] Due to our enemy, the Burmese dictatorship [SAC] conducting air strikes on our village, [...] we can't provide treatment to civilians like before. We have to stay in a safe place. The place is not good [comfortable] and the situation of the patients is also not very good."* Similarly, Naw Bw---, the head of Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) in Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"As they came and fired [conducted air strikes] like this, we faced many challenges because we dared not and could not go to the area that we planned to go to. And there was fear inside our workers and also in the place where we lived. [...] We have to stay in the jungle. Our workers also dare not stay in the village [...] It is a big challenge for us because we have to go [travel] around as we are Backpack [BPHWT staff]. We have to travel from village to village [for our work]. Due to this kind of situation, we are afraid."*

**Air attacks on religious buildings:**

SAC air strikes have destroyed or damaged at least 45 religious buildings since 2021. Such buildings are clearly identifiable from the air, and as explained by local villagers, are often damaged or destroyed by air strikes, following reconnaissance. For instance, on January 4<sup>th</sup>

<sup>61</sup> KHRG, *Schools Under Attack*, above.

2024, a temple was destroyed by a single bomb near Wy--- village, Tx--- village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. Saw By---, the village tract administrator, stated: *"Before the aircraft conducted an air strike, it flew around a few times. Maybe it was conducting reconnaissance in other villages as well. After it flew for a while, when it reached above a [Wy---] village, the aircraft dropped a bomb. They weren't like shooting from the fighter jet. The helicopter dropped a bomb. It was not a jet, it was a helicopter. It landed directly on the temple"*. In a separate incident on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2023, an SAC aircraft dropped two 500-pound bombs on a monastery in Wz--- village, Mae Theh village tract, Kruh Tuh (Kyonedoe) Township, Dooplaya District, killing a monk named U<sup>62</sup> Bz--- and damaging a Buddhist temple. The Buddhist festival of 'Kahtin Pwe'<sup>63</sup> was being celebrated at the time, and there had been no military activity in the area prior to the attack.

Attacks on religious buildings prevent villagers from being able to access their places of worship. Furthermore, as religious buildings often serve as places of refuge for villagers in Southeast Burma, air strikes increase the risk of death or injury.<sup>64</sup> Due to the fact that the SAC-conducts air strikes on religious buildings, displaced people reported fears of seeking shelter at monasteries. On March 31<sup>st</sup> 2024, an air strike was conducted on Va--- temple where people were sheltering, in Hpapun Section 2, Mu Traw District, killing six people and injuring nine. One of those injured was sent to a Thai hospital (Mae Hong Son Province) but he passed away on the way.

Due to the nature of SAC air strikes, communities reported being afraid to rebuild significant buildings including temples, schools and homes. After the SAC dropped bombs onto a monastery in Vb--- village, Meh K'Tha village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District on October 6<sup>th</sup> 2022, at 2:30 am, the village tract administrator, Saw Ca--- from Vb--- village, explained: *"Actually, this monastery hadn't been finished yet. We planned to finish it [monastery] this year, but there was no hope of finishing building it because it was destroyed [by an air strike]."*

### **c) Disruption of community life**

Villages are community spaces in Southeast Burma where families gather and enjoy social, religious and cultural activities together. They are collectively built and materialise the community's social and cultural identity. SAC attacks destroy these social spaces, and the threat of attacks prevent villagers from using community buildings and gathering in groups. Saw Bg---, a displaced community member from Wn--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"On that morning [March 17<sup>th</sup> 2024], it [SAC air strikes] happened at 7 am. It was on Sunday morning at 7 o'clock. It [aircraft] came and conducted the air strike. We were about to go to church, but we did not dare to go anymore."*

Sleeping, working, joining events and eating together in the community are highly valued activities in Southeast Burma. However, air strikes have disrupted family and community life, as villagers face the death and injuries of loved ones, the destruction of shared spaces, and the separation of family and community members. Many villagers reported having to spend several days looking for each other after fleeing air strikes, made worse by communication and security challenges. Following the incident in Yb--- village, Day Bu Noh area, Naw Ao--- (27 years old), explained: *"We were terrified so some people fled in fear without a clear direction. Some of them reached to Bu Tho [Township] and some of them reached to another side [of Thailand]. Some of them just followed others without knowing where to go so many children and parents were separated, and they could not find each other. They will have to take time to be reunited. On*

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<sup>62</sup> 'U' is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>63</sup> The 'Kahtin Pwe'(ကတိန်ပွဲ) is a Buddhist ceremony where villagers celebrate the children that will become novice monks by marching around the village, carrying donations, and for merit-making. There are also dances and music by villagers.

<sup>64</sup> KHRG, *"Dooplaya District Short Update: SAC shelling and air strikes resulted in civilian casualties, property destruction and displacement, in Kruh Tuh Township, December 2023."*, August 2024.

*the next morning [March 28<sup>th</sup> 2021], masses of people were looking for each other to gather into a family. [...] Some families could find each other, but some still don't know where their family members are [...] Children are far from their parents, so they all worry for each other. My parents were also not with me when I fled so they were really worried about me. We immediately fled in different directions without knowing where to flee during the incident."*

The displacement and separation of villagers also impacts the community's ability to gather for celebrations, as well as for everyday activities central to the practice of community life and the maintenance of support networks. A village tract administrator, Saw G---, from Zg--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, described the situation in his area: *"There has been so much change in villagers' daily actions after these air strikes. Because we no longer dare to stay in our own villages, and we have moved to other places in the jungle, it impacts us. If we have events [traditional Karen commemoration days or celebrations], we cannot start them at the right time because we need to gather our villagers from different parts [displacement sites] as there are many villages and we have fled to different places, so it is one of the challenges for us as well. We have to close our schools and we dare not go back to the churches in the village. And the children no longer dare to go to school."* As above, the sudden impact of air strikes causing villagers to flee urgently and often separately also impacts villagers' ability to hold proper ceremonies for their loved ones and community members.

SAC air strikes have also impacted community development including women empowerment programs, education, culture, healthcare services, transportation and shared livelihood practices. After the air strikes in Day Bu Noh area in early 2021, Saw Ac---, a village tract administrator from Vd--- village, Zy--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, commented on challenges to education: *"The first incident in my community happened after school term [during school holiday]. However, KECD planned to organise a teacher training program in my village tract on May 3<sup>th</sup> 2021, but it had to be cancelled [due to the fighting]. Normally, school registration starts on May 25<sup>th</sup> but we currently have not received any radio messages about the direction of the 2021-2022 school academic year so we do not know how to run the schools for this year yet. It is already May 4<sup>th</sup> and we are in an unstable and insecure situation."*

Saw Bs---, a committee member of the Salween Peace Park<sup>65</sup>, also explained: *"In Ler Muh Plaw village tract, numerous rice barns were established as we encouraged villagers to store their harvest. We specifically empowered women to take the lead in organising rice storage, especially during the SAC air strikes and shelling. This initiative aimed to promote equality and develop leadership among women. Regular meetings were held with these women every three months, where two committee members from each village participated. However, some villagers were afraid to attend due to the risks of SAC air strikes and shelling. Some had small children, while others expressed their fears candidly, explaining that they dared not come to the meetings. That has made it difficult for us to bring development in the community. The rice barn storage should be increasing yearly."* Naw Cb---, the treasurer of the women-led Buh Hpaw rice storage group, in Ve--- village, Hpla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District added: *"I was thinking about planning a meeting but what if the air strike happened after I go. So, I could not hold the meeting. I was also planning to invite members of Buh Hpaw [rice storage] Group from Hkay Poo community. They said they would come, but if there was firing [an air strike], it would cause a huge problem for me. So, I couldn't do it."*

<sup>65</sup> The Salween Peace Park (SPP), located at the basins of the Salween River in Mu Traw District, at the Thai-Burma border, is a community-led initiative developed through collaboration among local villagers, Karen civil society organisations, and KNU leaders. The SPP covers 6747.546 km, and includes 443 villages that are home to more than 111,694 people. The SPP contains 295 demarcated Kaw (customary) lands, 43 community forests, nine forest reserves and six wildlife sanctuaries. The people of Mu Traw District joined together in 2018 to preserve the Salween River basin's biocultural diversity, revitalise their traditional practices, and protect their homes from war and destruction through peaceful and sustainable co-management of their lands. Read more: KESAN, 'Salween Peace Park Program', at: [kesan.asia/salween-peace-park-program-3936/](https://kesan.asia/salween-peace-park-program-3936/)

### 2.2.2. Destruction of livelihoods

Communities in Southeast Burma mainly rely on agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods. The physical destruction of plantations and livestock by SAC air strikes causes long-term impacts on villagers' livelihoods by destroying value, and creates impediments on travel that hinders villagers' ability to access markets.

#### ***Air attacks on shops, livestock, and farmlands:***

Value is often stored in villagers' livestock, access to plantations, farming equipment and food stores. As such, villagers face significant challenges to their livelihoods where air strikes are conducted on fields, plantations and pastures, leave UXOs, or destroy essential items such as tractors, motorbikes or farming equipment.

At least 16 interviewees reported air strikes on plantations or farmland, mostly conducted by bombardment or other indiscriminate attacks. One example includes the air strikes on Wn-- village area, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, which lasted five or six hours, causing extensive damage to villagers' farms and plantations. Villagers from Wn-- village had previously fled the area upon the warnings of KNU leaders so there were no casualties, but villagers were unable to return home or access their plantations due to ongoing bombardment (as of the end of April 2024). Naw C--, a villager from Zc-- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained her views: *"The fighter jets dropped bombs onto villagers' hill fields or farms [as well]. I think they have done that [dropped bombs] to instill fear and so that we are not able to work in our hill field. Or they have done that [conducted air strikes on the farms] deliberately to attack us.*

Air strikes on villages and plantations cause significant damage to individual livelihoods. At least 27 incidents of air strikes resulted in the killing or injury of livestock during the reporting period (including many more killed as a result of villagers being unable to return to their villages). As stated by Saw Ab--, from Zv-- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District: *"There are so many things that impact my livelihood such as livestock, my domestic animals, and plantations damaged. Transportation was also impacted, among many other things".* An instance of extensive damage to individual livelihoods includes the air strikes on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2023 in Vg-- place, near Vh-- village, Ta Kaw Poe village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, which damaged a hut and plantation owned by Saw Cd--. Due to the air strike, most objects from his hut were destroyed and more than 1,000 *Japan Kyun Pin*<sup>66</sup> trees were damaged.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to plantations, attacks on shops and businesses also affect villagers' livelihoods and community development. Saw Ce--, a village head from Za-- village, Htee Wah Blaw village tract, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, described the damage of an air strike in March 2024: *"We can't gauge the damage and destruction in Nyi Naung [Thin Gan Nyi Naung Town]. The big shop [containing export materials] was burned. It would cost around many millions [worth of] baht [Thai currency] if we measure. That is not a small cost."* Saw At--, a villager from Yh-- village, Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, also reported: *"In the past, I had a brick-making business. However, after the military coup and after the SAC conducted an air strike here [Day Bu Noh area], my work was ruined. We could no longer continue the work. All of the workers whom I had employed also already returned to their place [villages]. Currently, there is nothing in particular that I can do for a living. I just cultivated some plants for a living."*

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<sup>66</sup> Variety of fast growing, cheap and easily workable wood commonly used locally to build furniture.

<sup>67</sup> KHRG, *"Doo Tha Htoo District Incident Report: SAC air strikes killed a villager and damaged civilian property in Hpa-an Township (March 2023)"*, December 2023.



Villagers also face livelihood challenges when they flee, at risk of their belongings being stolen. Naw Cg---, a 59-year-old villager from Vi--- village, Ywa Gyi Aay village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"Villagers from some villages fled in the middle of the night after hearing some sounds [unidentified] and they were not able to take their belongings with them when they fled. Therefore, villagers' belongings that were left behind were stolen by thieves. We are so saddened and disappointed by what happened to us because we have been working so hard to get what we have and they [belongings] have been stolen from us like this."*

#### **Disruption of agricultural activities:**

Due to the risks posed by SAC air strikes on plantations, many villagers reported difficulties carrying out agricultural work, with some villagers reporting having to stop work entirely.<sup>68</sup> As stated by Ch---, a villager from Vj--- village, Thay Baw Boe village tract, Kaw T'Ree (Kawkareik) Township, Dooplaya District: *"I think the villagers will not be able to do farming for their livelihood. We have to abandon everything."* Many villagers reported having to be hypervigilant at all times including during work, preventing villagers from being able to engage effectively in productive work, including harvesting paddy and tending to their livestock. Naw Ci---, a villager from Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"We have to be afraid of the Burma Army's, Ming Aung Hlaing's, aircraft. We are very afraid whenever military junta's aircraft come. We dare not go to our workplace. We have to hide. For example, the paddy on the farm is ready to harvest but we dare not harvest it because there is fighting sound 'doo doo da da' [sound of mortar explosions] happening in the area."* A few villagers reported having to work despite the risks of air strikes, to avoid starvation.

Saw At---, the villager from Yh--- village, Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, explained some of the future challenges of keeping livestock and carrying out agricultural work if air strikes continue: *"After the first air strike happened, most villagers sold their animals. Villagers no longer have animals now because they had already faced food issues [insecurity] and therefore, it would be more challenging for them if they have animals to raise. [...] A few buffaloes that are left might be sold soon by their owners as well because they can no longer take care of them properly."* The villager added: *"If these kinds of SAC military activities such as air strikes and mortar shelling continue, there will be more problems and challenges for villagers' livelihoods. We villagers here used to make our livings by farming and cultivating. [...] As a result, if the situation does not get better soon, there may be a shortage of essential food."* The disruption of farming activities and risks to livestock affects both immediate and long-term food security.

In one particular instance, bombs were dropped by the SAC on a plantation near Waw Lay Myaing Town, in Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, leaving UXOs which blocked travel and caused starvation. Cj---, a villager from in Vk--- village, Bago Division, Kler Lwe Htoo District, explained: *"It happened on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2022. [...] We were in the cornfield tending to the corn [crops], so we were very afraid and we ran to hide. [...] we had bought food for ten days but after that, our food ran out and we had to eat our planted vegetables from the fields [...] As we had nothing else to eat, we went to ask help from a nearby [army] gate at an A Po<sup>69</sup> [DKBA commander]'s house for food. [...] The air strike was conducted [again] on June 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> 2022. On those days, a lot of bombs were dropped. I was weeping when I saw the air strikes. [...] We watched an aircraft flying and stayed careful. On the days of the air strikes, we did not go to work and dared not work because the aircraft flew above us. [...] We had no cars, or motorbikes and also, we had 12 members in our group. We just stayed to die like this. We just starved in the boss's hut and we did not flee"*.

<sup>68</sup> See, for instance: KHRG, Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC air strikes killed two villagers, injured three children, and caused property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township (September 2023), February 2024

<sup>69</sup> 'A Po' is a familiar term of respect in Burmese attributed to an old man that translates to "Grandpa/Grandfather," but it does not necessarily signify any actual familial relationship. It is sometimes used to refer to the highest ranked of military officers in an army base, army camp or military installation.

***Impediments to market access, economic impact and inflation:***

In addition to the disruption of agricultural activities, villagers reported that air strikes preclude the ability to travel and trade freely, preventing villagers from being able to buy and sell produce. Travel generally is extremely limited in many parts of Southeast Burma due to the active conflict - including risks of shelling, air strikes and landmines - as well as the risk of arbitrary arrest and torture at SAC checkpoints.

Saw Ck—, a former schoolteacher from Yb— village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained some of the challenges now faced by villagers and the impacts on the wider economy: *“Some villagers used to buy stocks [of food and other items] from Thailand. Villagers are now afraid to sell their stocks because of the current situation. Only a few people sell their stock now. These people are brave to sell their stock. If they do not sell their stock, they have no income. If they do not sell their stock, other villagers [also] cannot find anywhere else to buy stock that they need. Some villagers are afraid that their stocks will be destroyed when the SAC comes to conduct air strikes. They are afraid that it will affect their business and they will lose their profit. [...] If we go with the economic rule that ‘if there is low supply, there is high demand’, the stock price in Day Bu Noh will now go up due to the demand.”*

In addition to market scarcity, multiple villagers reported increasing inflation and costs of goods, leading to food insecurity. Saw Be—, a farmer and shop owner from VI— village, Nah Ko Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *“After the 2021 coup, villagers [...] in the entire Mu Traw District have been living in fear of threats from the military junta, including air strikes. We always have to stay in fear and stay alert. It’s not easy for us to travel and carry out our livelihood activities and therefore, we face food insecurity, and there has also been an increase in commodity prices. Moreover, the value of the money [Myanmar kyat] has dropped. Even salt, which was cheap has become expensive now. The price of one bag of salt has increased to 7,000, 8,000 and even to 10,000 Kyat [4.76 USD]<sup>70</sup>. There are many challenges that local community members here have to face.”*

## **Chapter 2.3. Impacts of air strikes on mental and psychosocial wellbeing**

Air strikes in Karen State since the 2021 coup have caused severe and enduring impacts on villagers’ mental and psychosocial wellbeing. The pervasive threat of air strikes, their sudden and deadly force, and the scale of destruction left behind communities grappling with multiple distressing emotions including terror, constant vigilance, grief, hopelessness, and anger.

This chapter explores the acute impacts of air strikes on the psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities in Karen State. This chapter first sets out the *terror and constant vigilance* that air strikes perpetuate, creating an environment of sustained fear and hyper-alertness, as well as causing other somatic responses such as shock, panic and anxiety. Secondly, *expressions of anguish and collective suffering* are presented, showing the impacts of air strikes on mental health caused by the death of loved ones and the destruction of lives, homes and communities. *Other emotional responses* are also examined briefly, showing the varied ways villagers express themselves regarding the use of air strikes, including anger and difficulties conveying emotions.

### **2.3.1. Terror and constant vigilance**

The psychological toll of air strikes affects the daily lives of individuals and communities across Karen State, as villagers constantly assess risks of attacks, implement strategies for self-protection and navigate the ongoing impacts of sustained fear. As expressed by Naw Cl—, a

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<sup>70</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the October 10th 2024 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyats to USD 0.48 (taken from <https://wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate>).

villager who experienced an air strike near Vm--- displacement camp, in Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022: *"We have to stay in fear always. We thought that we could sleep well [outside of the village], without having to be afraid, but we were told to stay alert and be ready always."* Naw Bw---, the head of BPHWT in Kler Lwee Htoo District explained: *"Regarding the mental health situation, everyone is afraid. If we hear someone talking about aircraft, we don't know how to live; we just want to flee"*.

### a) Air strikes perpetuating terror and anxiety

The use and threat of air strikes by the SAC since the 2021 coup has instilled terror among villagers in Karen State, aggravated by the fact that attacks are conducted from the air, with suddenness and magnitude, onto civilian areas, without warning – leaving villagers with little time or means to protect themselves. This is a significant change from past conflict in Karen State, where ground attacks provided more opportunity for villagers to seek safety, due to the increased likelihood of advanced warnings from others, or attacks being stopped by armed resistance forces. Fear was the most reported emotion, mentioned 186 times in 83 translated and coded interviews and with 89% of women and 80% of men explicitly reporting fear associated with SAC air strikes.

The SAC's use of air strikes – in particular, its use as a new and aggravated form of warfare - was reported by villagers as increasing fear among communities, with some villagers noting the particular impact on children, many of whom are experiencing air strikes and armed conflict in Karen State for the first time. For example, Naw Ao--- from Vn--- village, Baw Thay Hta village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained the significant impact of the first air strikes in Karen State, conducted on Yb--- village, Day Bu Noh area, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021: *"All the children were in fear and full of concern, with the sound of [children] crying and calling [for their family]. I felt deeply unpleasant to see it. We were trembling so the only thing we could do was to pray to God. We could not do anything. We were extremely fearful because we had never experienced the most extreme bomb [explosion] like this before. It was the very first time in our life [...] This is the first time for the children who had never experienced the war before to experience extreme incidents [of war] and they are now separated from their parents and are in horror"*. Other villagers, such as Naw Cl---, described the fear around air strikes as contextualised as part of the protracted history of attacks against civilians in Karen State: *"There is no difference except we were not attacked by air strikes before. We have to see injuries, blood, and death both in the past and now. The fear that we had before and the fear that we have now because of the attack is the same."*

Villagers often reported intense physical reactions due to extreme fears of air strikes. Naw Bd---, a villager from Wk--- village, Khaw Hope Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, described villagers shaking and vomiting blood, after an air strike was conducted on her village in the middle of the night, causing the destruction of houses and community buildings. In a separate incident on Zc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2023, a child did not speak for three days from shock after a bomb landed next to a makeshift bunker where he was hiding.

Naw Bi---, a member of the KDHW, described the physical and emotional sensations she experienced while hiding in a bunker during an air strike on her village, Wo---, also in Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024: *"During the incident when I was running, I couldn't breathe well. My hands and legs were shaking and becoming numb. Afterwards, I told my sister that if the aircraft came again, I would die just because of hearing the noise, not because I was hit by the shrapnel. There were two aunties [honorific for middle-aged women] in the village who went into shock due to the air strike. It is also difficult for us to find a doctor. We can only help them by massaging [them]. The children were also afraid. Whenever the children heard the sound of air strikes, they just started running. I worry that children will become traumatised. For old people, I*

worried that they would pass away from shock. Even myself, I feel like I can't breathe well, my legs and hands become numb and shaking”.

Villagers also described the proliferation of panic and anxiety amongst villagers, particularly where sudden air strikes impact the ability to seek safety. Ay---, a school teacher from Yr--- and Ys--- villages, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, stated: “The villagers only ran when the attack happened and were panicking”. Naw Ao---, from Vn--- village, who was in Day Bu Noh area, also described villagers fleeing “without a clear direction”. Regarding the air strike on Zg--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, Saw Bb---, a village tract leader, stated: “It sounded really horrible and our heart is shrilling [pounding] by hearing it. It [the sound] causes anxiety and fear to the villagers.” Saw Bv---, head of KDHW in Mu Traw District, also commented on the impact of the frequency and constant nature of attacks: “It seems like after they [villagers in Day Bu Noh area] experienced the first air strike, there was fear in their hearts. Furthermore, among those [who fled], some returned and they experienced another air strike. [...] Even when the aircraft didn't come every day, sometimes, it came two or three times a week. We are afraid when we hear the sound [of aircraft] from the sky, even when air strikes are not conducted. We, the civilians, have an issue regarding health [now]. If we call it in medical terms, it is mental illness. [...] Their [villagers] eyes become wide and they run into the bunker. And some, if they hear the engine sound of the aircraft, they want to defecate and urinate”.

The depth of terror relating to air strikes is also evidenced in the high level of reports of villagers being triggered by the sight or sound of aircraft, including commercial airplanes, even where only flying overhead or conducting reconnaissance. As reported by Saw Bk---, a villager from Wq--- village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: “Some of the children run and cry out loud whenever they see an aircraft [flying in the sky] after the air strike happened [in Wq--- village]. Some villagers defecate on themselves whenever they see an aircraft [flying over them] because they are very scared of the aircraft.” Saw E---, CIDKP secretary from Dooplaya District, also stated: “This [trauma] is marked in their [villagers] hearts. There were people traumatised because they experienced the same incident multiple times. [...] Some villagers, when they heard the sound of the aircraft, [...] they were in [a state of] shock”. Ay---, from Yr--- village, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, added: “Every time the villagers heard aircraft; they were afraid. It mentally [emotionally] affected them just even when they heard an



This photo was received on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2023, sent by a local villager. On October 4<sup>th</sup> 2023, two SAC helicopters and one fighter jet conducted an air strike on Vo--- village, Maw village tract, Noh T' Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, after SAC troops were attacked by KNLA troops in Vp--- village, Maw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township. One unexploded bomb landed inside a church, damaging it. This photo shows a 12-year-old child named Saw Cm-- , from Vn--- village, hiding behind a bush during the air strike. When the attack occurred, villagers immediately ran in fear in different directions. The boy's parents were working on their plantation at the time and ran to another place near the village. They did not have time to call for each other as they rushed to flee for safety. There were no casualties during this attack. [Photo: local villager]

*aircraft. Some men even cried”.*

Whilst it is difficult to assess the long-term impacts on physical and mental wellbeing due to the ongoing use of air strikes by the SAC and an inability for villagers to seek recovery from the conflict, villagers being triggered by the sight or sound of aircraft also signals a risk of protracted mental health issues. Naw Cn---, a Karen human rights defender described some of the immediate and ongoing impacts of an air strike she experienced on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2024 in Mu Traw District: *“I was very afraid and filled with thoughts about whether the place where we were hiding was safe or not, what I should do if a bomb landed on us or right beside us, leaving us severely injured, and how many more hours the bombing was going to continue as we continued to hear the sounds of the helicopter, drone, and jet fighter. [...] Although I had always heard about SAC air strikes [...], I could not really comprehend the impacts they could have, especially on one’s emotional and mental state, until I experienced it myself. I feel like there are no words to effectively explain the fear that I had during that incident, and even now, I am still unconsciously triggered when I hear the sound of an airplane”.*

Villagers also described the lingering impacts of air strikes as ‘affecting the spirits’ of villagers. For example, a village leader from Yp--- village, Yaw K’Daw village tract, Noh T’Kaw Township, Doolaya District, explained: *“When they [husband and wife] heard the sound of the air strike [on their village on August 28<sup>th</sup> 2022], they ran to get cover under some bushes. Later, she [the wife] did not seem ‘full’ anymore. The wife ‘lost her spirit’. A few days later, the husband requested permission from me [the village head] to return [to the village] and regain his wife’s spirit [through a traditional ritual]”.*

Witnessing the extreme levels of violence, distressing injuries and devastation from air strikes is also likely to have long-term impacts on villagers’ mental health. Naw Cl---, the villager who experienced an air strike near Vm--- IDP camp, Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District explained her experiences: *“They [air strikes] affected me both physically and mentally. Seeing people dying and injured, such as losing their legs, hands, hearing, and eyesight from the bombing as well as from landmine explosions with my own eyes really affected my mental [health]. If I was not mentally stable and strong, I might have become crazy. I will never be able to forget these abuses committed by the Burmese military dictatorship [SAC]”.* Regarding the widespread nature of mental health impacts, Saw Bv---, the head of the KDHW of Mu Traw District, commented: *“Everyone feels afraid in their heart. Mostly, they will have heart and brain disease [mental health issues]. [...] Regarding mental health, let’s say it [air strikes] affected everyone”.*

### **b) Air strikes and the need for constant and hyper-vigilance**

With an ever-present and uncertain risk of air strikes across Karen State, villagers are forced to remain in a protracted state of fear and constant vigilance. Even after displacement, fear and constant vigilance remains high. Vigilant behaviours reported by villagers include seeking information regarding the timing of air strikes; preparing for the event of an air strike; and taking precautionary measures to reduce visibility and movement for fear of being targeted. These measures impact villagers’ ability to live with autonomy and freedom of movement.

#### ***Timing of air strikes and preparedness:***

To mitigate the uncertainty of air strikes and to try to seek safety prior to attacks, villagers rely on fellow villagers and local KNU leaders for warnings despite information often being *“not very precise”*. One villager from Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, described multiple incidents in which local leaders could not provide accurate information regarding the location and timing of air strikes, increasing levels of anxiety and fear. A villager from Wk--- village, Khaw Hope Pleh village tract, explained: *“We didn’t have*

details or exact information. We just warn each other, and we don't know when they will conduct the air strike either". In addition to sharing of information, villagers also reported remaining vigilant to sounds of fighting, explosions, or aircraft.

Naw Cb---, the villager from Ve--- village, Hpla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, described the anxiety associated with having to maintain constant vigilance: "Currently [June 2024], the villagers have returned to the village and live in their houses. They wait and see the situation. They always think about whether they [SAC] will conduct air strikes tomorrow or not. They live in the village in fear of [SAC attacks]. [...] Some people use traditional beliefs to foresee fate. For some other people, they just go to work cautiously. [...] As far as I know, villagers started having problems. If I go and work today, what if the incident happens before I go or what if the incident happens after I go? Right now, villagers are working but they always think about it [air strikes]. Their physical [bodies] may work but their mind always thinks about it. So, they experienced this kind of problem. [...] They just do their work in [a state of] anxiety".

The high number of air strikes conducted at night instils fear and hypervigilance at all hours. Naw Co---, a villager from Vq--- village, Kaw Baw village tract, Ler K'Hsaw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, explained: "Currently, more airplanes travel at night, so I feel insecure when I sleep at night. I worried that bombs will be dropped". Consequently, some villagers reported sleep deprivation, including Saw D---, a villager from Zd--- village, Pa De Khaw village tract, Ler Doh Township who explained: "At night-time, villagers need to stay awake to see the red light [explosion or firing]; they only go to sleep when they really feel sleepy. And sometimes we are anxious because of the air strikes as well, because air strikes happen also when we are not cautious [not prepared]. So, that's why we always need to be cautious". Naw Cp---, a villager from Vr--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Doo Playa District, also stated: "We hear that the aircraft will come at night so how can we sleep? We are afraid of that".

Due to the insecurity and uncertainty posed by the risk and threat of air strikes, villagers reported living in a constant state of readiness. Whilst some villagers described preparing food and clothing, others explained that preparedness is often not possible due to the sudden nature of air strikes, with villagers often fleeing in panic without extra clothing or food. In addition, with makeshift bunkers generally serving as the only protective shelter in villages, villagers reported remaining close-to or in-and-out of bunkers, depending on the risk of air. Being in a constant state of readiness increases anxiety and impacts villagers' ability to look beyond their immediate survival needs.



This photo was taken on March 2024 in Vs--- village, Pone Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. On February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024, at around 5:30 pm, the SAC conducted an air strike on Vs-- village, damaging villagers' houses and property. During the attack, villagers from Vs--- village fled to other villages nearby for their safety, and some returned to Vs--- village after the incident. After they returned, an SAC aircraft flew above the village causing villagers to hide in their bunkers. This photo shows a mother and her baby hiding in their bunker after the SAC aircraft was spotted. [Photo: KHRG]

**Reducing visibility and movement:**

Constant vigilance was reported by a vast number of villagers in relation to the necessity to hide and/or limit movements to avoid being visible to SAC aircraft. These measures support villagers' views that they are being targeted and has profound impacts on overall wellbeing by restricting freedom of movement and autonomy.

Measures reported by villagers to reduce their visibility included (i) not repairing or tearing down damaged houses and community buildings after attacks due to fears that the SAC would see the repairs and target them; (ii) not building huts together for fear of being identifiable from the air; (iii) displaced villagers not staying in groups of more than 10; and having to move from place to place to avoid being targeted. When fleeing, villagers also reported having to implement self-protection strategies to reduce their visibility. One villager described pregnant women and children fleeing in the darkness without torches due to the suddenness of the attack as well as fears of being targeted.

Once in displacement sites, villagers across Karen State consistently reported taking measures to reduce their visibility including not hanging clothes outside, not making fires to cook (due to the visibility of smoke), and not creating any light. Naw Cq--, a villager from Vt-- village, Maw Nay Pwa area, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, explained: *"We dared not cook when we fled nor turned on the torches. We were told not to cook. If we cook, the smoke will come out and the light of the fire could make people [SAC] see us. If we want to cook, we have to do it in a hurry. When the aircraft comes, we have to stop the fire right away. It was difficult for us when we had to cook and eat in a hurry. We were told [by local leaders and elders] to cook rice only and nothing else. We were told not to make a lot of fire and to be quiet."* Saw Bg--, a displaced villager from Wn-- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, also stated: *"We couldn't hang too many clothes during the daytime because they [Burma Army soldiers] conducted [air] reconnaissance and took photos [of the location], so our [local KNU] leaders informed us not to hang too many clothes. If we hang clothes, they will spot our location and target us. We were warned by our leaders that even if they do not see Karen soldiers, they would target villagers. Furthermore, the SAC drones also conduct reconnaissance during the night. Sometimes, and if we cast light on, they will see and notice us."*

A village tract administrator from Zy--, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, also reported that in his area, meals for the whole day are cooked at 2 or 3 am to reduce the risk of detection. Regarding the measures taken by villagers to reduce their visibility and movements, he explained, *"This is how we live in the forest"*.

**2.3.2. Expressions of anguish and collective suffering**

A vast array of emotions were reported by villagers across Karen State in the wake of air strikes, including sadness, grief and hopelessness. These feelings were often expressed in a collective manner, with villagers describing their concerns for others, and were most often linked to the devastation caused by air strikes including the death of relatives and community members, the destruction of community property, the separation of families, and the virtual impossibility to protect one another from air attacks. After 'fear', mental anguish, expressed as 'sadness' or 'suffering' in the local language, was the second most prominent psychological impact reported by villagers.

Expressions of collective suffering were often connected by villagers to the history of oppression and attacks on civilians by the Burma Army in Karen State. Saw Be--, from VI-- village, Nah Ko Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *"We, Karen people, have been suffering for many generations already. I had to flee since I was very young. [...] These sufferings have been there since our parents' generation and they are still there now in 2023. Looking at the*

situation makes me feel very sad because whether under the rule of Min Aung Hlaing, U Than Shwe, or U Thein Sein, civilians always have to suffer. We have to live in fear and face numerous crises.” Naw Ao—, the 27-year-old villager who experienced the air strike in Day Bu Noh area, in March 2021, also stated: “My Karen people, civilians and friends are now suffering in this tremendously difficult situation”. Cj—, the displaced villager from Bago Division, who experienced bombardment while working in Waw Lay area, Choo K’Lee village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, expressed, while crying: “I also do not want to live as refugee [displaced person] for longer. I feel sad. I never experienced this kind of situation before, though I am about 41 years old. I am afraid and I do not want others to face it.”

Ay—, a school teacher from Yr— and Ys— villages, K’Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, described feeling helpless in relation to the suffering of others: “When I see civilians suffering, I feel sad because I cannot assist them [...] It saddens me deeply to see civilians displaced and in a state of panic. [...] I am in their shoes feeling how they have been experiencing it”. When describing the response of his staff to the suffering of others, the CIDKP secretary for Doolaya District stated: “As we have met them [villagers] and stood in front of them, we have seen that they have been through a lot [...] We get to know what they have been through and the challenges they face, so in our spirit, we would like to help them. [...] We do not feel good. It is not because we are in fear but because we sympathise with villagers when we see them [...] Due to their [CIDKP staff] sympathy, I can see the expression on their faces, but this expression is not fear. And if we look at their passion, none of them have stopped doing what they do”.

### **a) Loss and grief**

The extensive loss and destruction left behind after SAC air strikes has caused widespread grief, fear and hopelessness in Karen State. Describing the impact of the deaths of students killed by the air strike on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2024 in Zm— village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, the school principal Saw Bm— stated: “Almost every student cried about what happened; they feel bad for their friends and they want their friends back. They were full of sadness and fear”. In relation to his own grief, he stated: “As two students have died in the dormitory, I feel the most distress, anxiety and horror but I can’t do anything about it. Another nephew of mine died in the house together with his father. They are my relatives. So I’m full of worry. I try to control myself but sometimes my tears are falling. I have been thinking about it every day”. Regarding the same incident, 23-year-old Naw Q— stated: “People in my village are also suffering. They are suffering deeply. Just like my father and my two younger brothers, there were two other students who also died and one or two other students sustained injuries. [...] My father worked for the school and he was a school committee member. People in the village including children and adults loved him a lot because he worked for others’ cause. He worked and gave it all for the community when he was alive.”

Many villagers also expressed grief in relation to the loss of their property caused by SAC air strikes, including Bh—, a villager who described feeling “hurt inside” when recounting the destruction of the air strike on Wk— village Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. Villagers often expressed hopelessness in relation to this loss. Describing the mental health impacts, Saw Bk—, a villager from Wq— village, P’Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, stated: “After their [villagers’] houses were burned because of the air strikes, it seemed like their brains were disordered [facing mental health issues]. [...] Those whose houses were burned, their brains are not back to normal yet [they have ongoing mental health issues]. They have trauma from the destruction of their houses. [...] Because if you try to talk to them, they do not even respond to you for a while [not immediately]”. Naw A—, a villager whose house was burned from an air strike on Za— village, Htee Wah Blaw village tract, T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-An District, on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2024, also stated: “I was traumatised. When we fled and lived in other people’s houses, the owner warmly welcomed us, but it was not



as comfortable as our own house. My heart was hurt the most. I was downhearted. Sometimes I acted like a crazy person”.

The injustice of SAC air strikes was often expressed alongside feelings of grief, particularly in relation to the death of innocent villagers and the destruction of communities. Villagers, such as Saw Bm---, the school principal from Zm--- village, sometimes expressed the injustice through not wanting to accept the loss and devastation left behind after air strikes: *“We do not want our homeland to be destroyed or attacked this way. We don’t want to accept this and we are afraid.”* A few interviewees also expressed specific emotional pain around the lack of dignity in death caused by SAC air strikes, where family members were unable to get a coffin or proper burial clothing for their relatives killed by air strikes.

### **b) Feelings of helplessness**

Sudden and indiscriminate air strikes, which are virtually impossible to predict or defend oneself against, perpetuate feelings of helplessness. As explained by Saw Cr---, a villager from Vv--- village, T’Kaw Boe village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *“Although we feel upset, we can’t do anything because it [the danger] is in [coming from] the sky”*. Naw Bi---, from Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, also stated: *“If something happens to us, it might be our fate. We saw some news that when they conducted air strikes, villagers in the forest were killed. Therefore, no place is safe. It depends on our luck.”*

Saw Be---, from Vl--- village, Nah Ko Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, described feelings of helplessness emanating from the death of his son on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 in Zm--- village: *“After my son was killed by the air strike, our family members told each other that they [Burma military] should not have done that to us. We are just civilians but they come and attack us. We are very sad but we cannot do anything. My son has already been killed so there is nothing that we can do. Sometimes, his mother said that her son died because we let him attend school there. I told her that nowhere is safe. They [Burma military] can conduct air strikes anywhere, whether in Ym--- School, Tw--- School or Zm--- School. I just told her that our son had already been killed so there is nothing else we can do. We just have to try to stay positive.”*

In relation to the inability to defend oneself from air strikes, Saw By---, a village tract administrator who witnessed an air strike on Wy--- village, Tx--- village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2024 stated: *“We were afraid and did not have any response. We endured the suffering. [...] We fled and hid. Because we didn’t know what to do. We didn’t have weapons [...] We dare not respond to anything. We just fled from the village and hid. We have no weapons. We have nothing.”* As a result, some villagers described an inevitability or resignation to death. Saw Cs---, a village leader from Vw--- village, Nat Than Kwin village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, stated: *“if I die, I die and if I live, I live. [I] cannot do anything”*.

### **2.3.3. Other emotional responses**

Beyond the predominant expressions of fear and anguish, villagers expressed their emotions in a variety of ways during the interviews. Some interviewees, such as Naw Bc---, a villager from Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District expressed anger in relation to the injustice of SAC air strikes: *“I feel angry because our village was destroyed. It makes all of us feel upset. [...] I feel disappointed because we have problems rebuilding our village.”* Similarly, Naw Bc---, another villager from Zm--- village whose brother, nephew, two daughters, and niece were killed or injured by the air strike on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, also expressed: *“I got very angry at Ming Aung Hlaing and I don’t want to hear about them [SAC], because I feel very heartbroken and disappointed after seeing the situation of my child.”*

Some villagers had difficulties describing their emotional distress due to the gravity and horror

of air strikes. Naw Q—, whose father was killed in the air strike on Zm— village, stated: *“I cannot express the suffering and I don’t know how to express them [feelings]. I feel very stuck inside. I cannot answer or express everything: I’m so overwhelmed and worried now”*. She continued, *“my heart and my thoughts are filled with many things inside. [...] I cannot say more than this as I feel so choked up inside and worried”*. Saw E—, CIDKP secretary for Dooplaya District, also explained: *“Karen people cannot make conversation [they struggle to talk about what they have been through]. Even us [aid workers], we do not really talk [about what we have been through]. When we went there [to give support to the IDPs], even if they stay under the shade of trees [without shelter] and had only betel nut, they still invite you to eat with them. [Even though] they might have only one meal’s worth of rice left for their dinner. [...] They still sit to make small talk with us and we can understand [what they are feeling inside]. During some small talk, they talked and laughed together with us, but their tears also fell down in some parts of our small talk.”*

## **Chapter 2.4. Displacement due to SAC air strikes**

Villagers across Southeast Burma have been - and continue to be - displaced in vast numbers due to SAC air strikes. Some villagers flee after warnings from others, some flee when they hear sounds of military activities, and others flee urgently during air attacks, despite great risks. Villagers consistently reported the predominant reason for their displacement was to seek safety from air strikes, as well as ongoing risks of air strikes in displacement site alongside additional challenges. Whilst the wider impacts of displacement were consistent among villagers, challenges varied depending on the duration of displacement, whether that be overnight, short-term or long-term.

The constant threat of SAC air strikes drives villagers’ need for self-protection. Throughout this chapter, displacement is understood as both a forced action caused by SAC attacks as well as an agency and protection strategy employed by villagers. This chapter first outlines different challenges and trends associated with the length of displacement, followed by the broad picture of challenges faced while fleeing, namely on villagers’ health and access to education, as well as the lack of shelter and essential supplies.

### **2.4.1. Duration of displacement**

Some villagers flee from their villages routinely only overnight, sleeping in farmlands or forests due to the risk of air strikes on villages at night. Others are displaced on a short-term basis due to constant bombardment or ongoing risks of air strikes. Long-term displacement occurs when there is an increase in air strikes or other military activity in the area, including the presence of SAC soldiers in or near the village, or when villagers’ houses have been destroyed. In many cases, villagers reported having to hide continuously for their safety, elongating the length of displacement.

#### **a) Overnight displacement**

Twelve interviewees described protecting themselves from air strikes by sleeping outside the village, in nearby farm huts or in the forest. While this allows villagers to have access to their plantations and other livelihood means, villagers displaced routinely overnight face particular challenges including the continued risk of injury or death by an air strike when returning to the village or farmland during the day or the risk of being apprehended and arrested or killed by SAC ground forces. Villagers displaced overnight also continue to face risks of air strikes given the proximity of displacement to the village. For instance, a villager from Wo— village, Khaw Hph Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Dooplaya District, was injured by an air strike conducted on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024, while he slept at his hut.

In at least three instances, villagers were killed or injured while returning to the village from displacement sites. For instance, three villagers (including a mother and her 3-year-old), who had been sleeping in the jungle, were fatally hit when they returned to Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2023 during the daytime to care for their properties and livestock. In a separate incident, a villager from Yd--- village, Thay Gay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, was killed by the air strike on their village at 1 am on March 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, as he believed it was safe to return to the village to sleep.

Despite the continued and constant risk of air strikes, the need to avoid food and economic insecurity often takes precedent over safety. Bd---, a villager from Wk--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, who experienced the air strike on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2024, reported: *"We cannot work freely. We have to run and don't dare to stay at home. So, we have to work under circumstances that are not as expected."* This has a particular impact on men, who are most often the ones who return to the village to feed livestock or obtain food. Saw Ac---, the village tract administrator of Zy--- village tract, in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"Villagers, especially the strong men, always have to get food from our villages, and children [and women] remain in [the hiding site] outside of the village. [...]. They flee into bunkers or the valley when they hear the sound of the jet or during the air strike. And then they run out of the village when they [hear] the jets are far away from their village."*

### **b) Short-term displacement**

When air strikes are conducted for consecutive days or when other military activity is ongoing, villagers often remain in displacement sites for extended periods. Challenges associated with short-term displacement include increased uncertainty and continued risk of air strikes, as well as poor shelter and food insecurity.

When displaced short-term, villagers remain constantly vigilant, assessing the continued risk of air strikes and their ability to return home. As Naw Ct---, a villager from Vy--- village, Noh T'Khaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, explained: *"Before dawn [on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024], an aircraft came and dropped [bomb(s) onto Vy--- village] [...] Right now, the situation is not getting better, an aircraft came and continuously [conducted] reconnaissance in the village. [...] We don't know when we will be able to return [home]. We also dare not return in this situation. Therefore, we will keep listening to the news and information."* Saw Bk---, a displaced villager from Wq--- village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, described the continued risk of air strikes in displacement sites: *"Now, even when we are displaced, we still have to fear air strikes, because the air strikes happen often at this time. Even though we are in the forest, we are not sure whether bombs [from air strikes] will land on us or not. Even when we sleep, we have to sleep in fear, and with anxiety and worry."* Naw Bi---, another villager from Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, expressed her concerns about staying in large groups and seeking shelter in schools and monasteries, because they are also attacked. She added: *"There is no safe place for us, whether we live in the forest or the village."*

Given the uncertainty regarding the length of displacement, villagers often remain in poorly built shelters, or hide in caves and forests, waiting to be able to return to their villages. This was the case following the initial air strikes on Day Bu Noh area. Saw Ac---, from Vd--- village, Zy--- village tract, in Bu Tho Township, explained: *"The weather in the past [couple of weeks] has been really hard for us [IDPs] because it has been raining and storming, so the rain entered into our tents made with tarpaulin roof. Therefore, we could not sleep so we just had to sit together under the same roof in a small dry place and look [at the rain] for the whole night [...] At first, we thought the displacement would only be for a few days, but it has now been weeks already, so we are now facing [livelihood] difficulties."*

Due to the suddenness of attacks and lack of warnings, villagers often flee with no or limited food, belongings, clothes, shelter, medical supplies and utensils. A villager from Vz--- village, Htee Day area, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, explained: “After the air strike, we fled to the forest. When we arrived in the forest, we ate food. We shared food with each other because some villagers could not bring food. We faced some difficulties as we could not bring everything we needed when we fled. When we came back to our village, we could not buy things we needed because those who sell things also fled from the village”. When fleeing for weeks on end and with insufficient rations, villagers often need to return to the village to collect food and check on their houses, facing the same risk of injury or death from air strikes as those displaced overnight.

Villagers also reported being affected by other military activities, including the presence of SAC soldiers, shelling, landmines and restrictions on movement. Some villagers in KNU-controlled areas reported having to ask permission from the KNLA authorities to return to their villages and were only allowed to return in small groups of two or three people.

### c) Long-term displacement

Some villagers are displaced long-term for reasons including ongoing or frequent air strikes and other military activities; the occupation or presence of SAC soldiers or remaining UXOs in their village; a persistent and uncertain risk of air strikes; or the destruction of homes and livelihood means. The large number of people facing long-term displacement demonstrates the extended impacts of air strikes on villagers’ freedom and security.

The threat of, and constant, unpredictable nature of air attacks often makes it impossible for some villagers to return to their villages for prolonged periods. This has been the case for many villagers from the Day Bu Noh area, who have remained displaced due to ongoing risks of attack since March 2021, and have expressed fears of rebuilding their villages. Similarly, many of the tens of thousands of villagers who were displaced to the Thai border after the bombardment of Dooplaya District over the Christmas period of 2021 remained displaced after the SAC continued its air offensives from January to May 2022 primarily targeting Kaw T’Ree Township, near Kawkareik Town, Lay Kay Kaw Town, and areas along the Thai-Burma border. Due to ongoing fighting, ground and air attacks in the area, as well as the occupation of villages and the presence of SAC troops, many villagers have remained displaced since December 2021. Some villagers from this area attempted to seek refuge in Thailand but were pushed back into Burma.<sup>71</sup>



*This photo was received on April 2021. It shows displaced villagers from Pay Kay village tract, Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, hiding in the jungle after the first SAC air strike on Day Bu Noh area on March 27th, 2021. The displaced villagers are from Yb---, Yc---, Yd---, Ye---, Yg---, Yh---, Yi---, Yj---, Yk---, and Yl--- villages, Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. Since March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC air strikes forcibly displaced at least 15,000 villagers from Mu Traw and Kler Lwee Htoo Districts. [Photo: KHRG]*

<sup>71</sup> KHRG, *News Bulletin: Bombs and Bullets Like Rain*, above.

Uncertainty about the risk of air strikes can persist for many months, leaving villagers in a precarious state for prolonged periods of time. As stated by Saw By--- (41 years old), the displaced village tract administrator from Wy--- village, Tx--- village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, "We could hear the sound [of explosions] for 12 months". In some circumstances, villagers were unable to return to their village due to the destruction of their homes and communities caused by air strikes.



*This photos was taken on April 14<sup>th</sup> 2021 in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw Distirct. This photo shows displaced Cv--- villagers, from Tay Muh Der village tract, Lu Thaw Township, fleeing from an air strike on Day Bu Noh area in March 2021. Cv--- villagers were forced to displace several times due to the threat of SAC air strikes on Tah Muh Der village tract, located close to Day Bu Noh area. [Photo: local villager]*

With great uncertainty and fear of being targeted in displacement site, villagers frequently described having to move from place to place. Cw--- from Ta--- village, Yaw K' Daw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, explained: "Villagers from the 11 villages in Yaw K'Daw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, were running-sleeping-running [for safety; constantly fleeing] for a few months, starting on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2022 after the air strike on [Yaw K'Daw village tract], escaping one incident after another." Saw Ck---, a villager from Yb--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, also stated: "As we have been living for a long period of time in the forest, we wonder whether they have already registered our location. Therefore, displaced villagers had to be displaced from one place to another after two or three days." Bh---, a villager from Wk--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, also explained: "Some villagers are fleeing by motorcycle, while others are fleeing by car, moving farther and farther away each day. So, the villagers have no other way to protect themselves; their only option is to flee. [...] Within this year, they [the SAC] have conducted air strikes many times. Villagers were afraid. Most of the villagers have fled to refugee camps [located in Thailand]".

Similarly, Saw E---, the CIDKP secretary for Dooplaya District, added: "There are security concerns [for the civilians] that if we formed camp sites [for displaced villagers], and if the tents are visible, definitely air strikes will happen [onto the area] so that's why they dare not form camps.[...] So, they [local KNU leaders] organise [gather] four, five or ten households [only] in each [displacement] place." The risk of air strikes being conducted on displacement site, including more formally established camps near the border, was explained by Naw Cl---, who experienced an air strike near Vm--- IDP camp, in Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022: "The bombs landed not very far from where we lived [Vm--- displacement site] so we were very afraid and tried to cross the Salween River to go and seek refuge in Thailand".

Due to the fact that nowhere in Southeast Burma is safe from air strikes, fleeing to refugee camps in Thailand or sending children to schools for migrants on the Thai side of the border, such as in Ty--- Town and Tz--- [refugee camp], in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces, is sometimes considered the only option – both in short-term and long-term circumstances. However, villagers reported challenges of discrimination and pushbacks in Thailand. Saw Ck--- described his experience: "When we reached the other side of the river, we were not welcomed by Thai authorities and were told to return to our place. They [Thai authorities] told us that we shouldn't cross the river and seek refuge in Thailand unless air strike was conducted in Vm--- [IDP] camp.[...] We are oppressed both in Burma and Thailand. Why can't we get to stay in peace anywhere? We have to face difficulties everywhere we go."

On some occasions, SAC soldiers entered the villagers after conducting air strikes, forcing villagers to flee, and occupied, destroyed or burned villagers' houses. The planting of landmines inside the villages,<sup>72</sup> the destruction of houses, or fear of remaining UXOs were also reported as reasons keeping villagers displaced. SAC attacks on villages, which prevent villagers from being able to return to their homes, is consistent with the Burma Army's long history of keeping Karen peoples displaced, as well as forcing their relocation to areas under their control.<sup>73</sup> As stated by a 100-year-old woman displaced from Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township: *"I don't know how many times I have been displaced. It might be two hundred times already because I always have to flee and have fled since I knew myself [as a child], during Japanese [occupation]"*.

#### **d) Villagers remaining in the village**

Some villagers reported staying in the village despite the risk of air strikes as they feared their belongings would be stolen, to take care of livestock or carry out other livelihood activities, or because they were unable to flee. For instance, whilst almost all villagers from Wk--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District fled following the air strike, some villagers stayed in their houses to look after their belongings. One villager from Tb--- village, Mo Kaung village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township also reported that occasionally, one person from each household stays on a farm outside the village, so they can more easily return to check their properties. Saw Ab---, a village elder from Zv--- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, also reported: *"Most of my 'children' [referring to all villagers] fled to the jungle. I mostly stay in the village. Because I have only transportation [of goods to sell] as my livelihood. So, I keep myself strong [to face these challenges] and say to myself that it would be over if the air strike hit me. And I am always living my life with caution and fear."* Those who remain in the village to protect property or carry out livelihood activities are typically men. Some villagers also reported that pregnant women, elderly or persons with physical disabilities sometimes remain in the village due to their difficulties fleeing.

### **2.4.2. Impacts and challenges during displacement**

During displacement, villagers reported significant challenges associated with the lack of adequate shelter and essential supplies, increased risk of health issues, having to maintain constant vigilance including reducing their visibility and movements, difficulties securing their livelihoods, food and economic insecurity, challenges with education, and a disruption of community life. This section focuses on (a) the lack of essential supplies and shelter; (b) impacts on health; and (c) impacts on education during displacement.

#### **a) Lack of essential supplies and shelter**

Due to the urgency of air strikes, villagers often reported being unable to flee with their belongings or essential items. One villager from Tc--- village, Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"We could bring only some clothes like two sets and rice for a couple of meals. We all had to leave everything; including rice, clothes and livestock such as chicken, cows and buffalos."* In one instance, children who fled from Yr--- village and Ys--- villages, located in K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, had to eat banana tree trunks for around three days to survive.

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<sup>72</sup> See, for instance: KHRG, *Southeast Burma Field Report: Intensification of armed conflict, air and ground attacks, and widespread human rights violations, July to December 2021*, March 2022, p. 46

<sup>73</sup> KHRG, *Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers' testimonies in rural Southeast Burma*, December 2022.

Facing food insecurity and starvation in displacement, some villagers borrow food from other villagers. Despite this, food shortages were commonly reported, compounded by livelihood challenges arising from air strikes in plantations, farmland and villages.<sup>74</sup> Often, villagers are unable to access their farmland and plantations while displaced, leading to increased risk of food and economic insecurity. As summarised by Saw Ab--- from Zv--- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District: *“There are changes to villagers’ daily actions and their livelihoods. If they don’t work, they have nothing to eat. There is no more safety for them to work in order to secure [their] livelihoods”*. A displaced villager from Vd--- village, Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, explained in 2021: *“As a result of living in the forest without the possibility of working on our farms, we face more difficulties and deep food shortages in the upcoming year of 2022. [...] I assume we might be able to survive for about two or three months more. However, [...] if we cannot work on our farms, and I assume it will bring us into an extremely difficult situation in 2022.”* Villagers also reported difficulties travelling to and from displacement sites due to the risk of air strikes, making it difficult for villagers to purchase essential items. Anticipating this, some villagers hide their belongings in the forest after hearing about potential SAC military activity in their areas.



This photo was taken on March 2024 in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. This photo shows displaced villagers from Te--- village seeking refuge in a cave in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2024, the SAC conducted an air strike in Te--- village area using aircraft and drones. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers also reported challenges with shelter in displacement sites. In some areas, tarpaulins, bamboo and other basic materials were obtained by villagers or provided by local leaders or local organisations, but were often insufficient or did not provide adequate protection in the rainy season. Saw Ck---, a displaced villager from Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“Villagers faced difficulties during the rainy season. Some villagers slept on hammocks, and some slept in caves as well as makeshift bunkers bedded with mats and blankets. It’s been difficult for the pregnant women and mothers who have newly given birth to travel back and forth to the village from the displacement site. It’s really difficult for them to live in the forest because it is not like home.”*

### **b) Impacts on health during displacement**

Villagers consistently reported health issues during displacement from air strikes, aggravated by the lack of shelter, essential supplies and access to medical treatment. Some villagers reported

<sup>74</sup> See also KHRG, “Kler Lwee Htoo District Short Update: SAC airstrikes destroyed two houses and resulted in the displacement of villagers in Ler Doh and Hsaw Htee townships, March to April 2022”, June 2022; KHRG, “Kler Lwee Htoo District Short Update: Fighting and displacement, air strikes and SAC indiscriminate shelling, July to September 2022”, February 2023; and KHRG, “Kler Lwee Htoo District Short Update: Fighting, indiscriminate shelling, displacement, air strikes, and limited access to education, August to September 2022”, March 2023

contracting diseases or illnesses while fleeing; a risk highlighted by Naw Bi---, a KDHW worker from Doo Tha Htoo District, working in Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, who felt hesitant about advising villagers to flee due to the health risks. While displaced, many villagers reported experiencing or witnessing others having symptoms such as coughing, skin infections, sneezing, diarrhea, and fever. Saw Cy---, a villager from Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“Currently, it is a cold season. We do not have enough clothes. We have been bitten by mosquitoes. Especially the children get skin diseases. Some people were coughing due to the cold.”* Saw Bh---, a villager from Wk--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, also noted: *“Due to the air strike this month, children who were fleeing [hiding] in the forest became sick, and we do not have sufficient medical supplies. During this season, most of the children became ill and were bitten by mosquitoes. As a result, they suffered from diarrhea, headaches, and fever.”*

Malaria in displacement sites was commonly reported in different districts, particularly during rainy season as displaced villagers often sleep in caves and forests without protection. Saw Ck---, the villager from Yb--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained: *“There were so many people infected by malaria as they did not have enough mosquito nets and had to sleep on the hammocks”*. Naw C---, a healthcare worker from Zc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, reported that infected villagers were afraid to return to villages to get treatment for malaria due to the risk of air strikes.

Villagers described the crowded and unsanitary conditions of displacement sites as both causing and worsening health problems. As stated by Saw Ck---, from Yb--- village: *“The displaced villagers had to sleep under poor conditions, so it was easy for them to get sick and develop a runny nose [...] If villagers lived separately and in a clean place, the villagers would not have been infected. The disease spreads very fast when a group of people stay together. About 100 to 200 students [children] were sick when they became infected by the disease within a week. It is contagious when people are grouped up together.”* He added: *“There was water pollution as so many people were using the same stream. [...] Without water sanitation, diarrhea followed.”* Illnesses were commonly attributed to water contamination, particularly for those in Mu Traw District. Naw An---, who experienced the air strike in Yb--- village, Day Bu Noh area, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, explained: *“There were many people crowded along the river throughout the river source. We used the water from that river to drink and bathe. Some people drink water from that river and defecate in the river. We could not go anywhere so we had to drink and poo there. [...] Drinking unclean water impacts our health and could cause diarrhea. There were over 300 to 400 [people] relying on that river, drinking and bathing.”*



This photo was taken on March 2024 in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. This photo shows displaced villagers from Te--- village seeking refuge in a cave in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2024, the SAC conducted an air strike in Te--- village area using aircraft and drones. [Photo: KHRG]

Health issues during displacement are exacerbated by the lack of availability of food, medicine and healthcare facilities, including basic medical supplies such as paracetamol. Concerning the availability of healthcare and difficulties travelling to obtain healthcare, Naw Bi---, a villager from Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, said: *“When we have to flee, the children drink unclean water and sleep in random places. When they are not feeling well, such as having diarrhea, we send them to that [CDM] clinic [in the forest]. However,*



for serious cases, such as giving birth, we have to go to Td--- hospital. Sometimes, transportation goes well, but other times, we face difficulties, such as checkpoints on the way, and we need to contact the doctor to check whether they are at the hospital or not". Travelling to seek healthcare is often difficult due to security risks (such as air strikes, SAC checkpoints, or active fighting) as well as weather hazards.

The displacement of both villagers and healthcare workers also increases difficulties in seeking and providing assistance, as reported by BPHWT, CIDKP and KDHW workers to KHRG. Additionally, there is often a lack of specialised services and insufficient resources. Healthcare workers also struggle to carry out their work effectively due to the risk of air strikes. Children, newborns, the elderly, and pregnant women face particular health challenges while displaced, due to their specialised needs. Several women had to give birth in the forest while displaced due to air strikes.<sup>75</sup>

### c) Impacts on education during displacement

During displacement, children and students face many challenges relating to their ability to access education, despite their desires to attend school. Challenges include general insecurity, attacks on schools, lack of materials, fear and other emotional impacts, difficulties studying in displacement sites, and family separation.

Given the ongoing conflict, attacks on schools and villages, and the continued risk of air strikes in displacement sites, finding a safe place to study remains challenging. A school committee member named Saw Be--- explained some of the challenges faced after an air strike destroyed the school and caused students casualties in Vl--- village, Nah Ko Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District: *"In our area, the students do not get to study smoothly. As one of the school committee members in Vl---, we went to look for a place [in the forest] for students so that they can be protected from injury [from attacks] if something happens. Tomorrow is Sunday so, on Monday, we will have to go and build shelters for children to seek refuge and study. We are doing that to protect students from the Burma military's air strikes and shelling. Four of us [school committee members] are just back from checking the place [to set up shelters for students to study]. We will have a meeting this evening and we will start building [shelters] on Monday. We will build [shelters] for both teachers and students in order to protect them from any casualties."* Despite the best efforts of teachers and communities, the risk of air strikes remains ever present. As stated by Naw C---, a healthcare worker from Zc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District: *"The students studied while they were displaced, but SAC's bombs fell nearby the temporary school building. Then, the students were afraid to continue their studies in the forest."*

Many villagers reported a lack of materials to build temporary schools in displacement sites, as well as a lack of supplies for teaching. Saw Bm---, a villager from Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, stated: *"We have been facing so many challenges; we have to arrange for safety and temporary buildings, but we do not have materials to build it."* Villagers also reported that children often have to flee urgently, without their books or other educational supplies, and are sometimes separated from their parents and teachers. Naw l---, a villager from Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"Schools are closed because we fled to different places. The teachers fled to one place and their students fled to another place."* An aid worker in Kler Lwee Htoo District also reported that building temporary structures in the forest for children to study also increases the risk of children contracting diseases like dengue and fever.

<sup>75</sup> See: KHRG, *"Taw Oo District Short Update: Air strikes, displacement and property damage in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, July 2023"*, August 2023

Villagers also reported that children remain fearful and insecure in displacement site, impacting their ability to study. Saw Ck---, a school teacher from Day Bu Noh area, described the challenges faced by students when trying to study at night, fearful of being identified by SAC reconnaissance. He described students searching for creative solutions like covering lights with blankets, placing them inside bamboo or reading in makeshift bunkers. He explained: *"That [strategy] has become typical for the students"*. Despite fears, Saw Ck--- observed the resilience of students and the community: *"We and the students do not give up easily. The zealously of the students is so strong."*

As stated above, due to insecurity in the forest, some parents choose to send their children to study elsewhere, including parts of Thailand. There, although villagers can study without the danger of air strikes, students cannot access education in their own language, learn about their ethnic culture, and are away from their communities and friends. As stated by Az---, a 17-year-old villager from Yw--- village, Kyaw Hta village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District: *"I want to go to school. Before, I studied together with my friends. I want to meet with my friends and study together as before. Some of my friends cannot continue their education [as they fled to other areas]."*

## Chapter 3. Support available, protection gaps, and villagers' needs

Different, yet limited avenues of support are available to villagers facing air strikes in locally-defined Karen State. Villagers and the community support each other by using agency strategies; civil society and local non-governmental organisations have been delivering a coordinated humanitarian aid response; and local leaders and authorities play a role in offering protection, advice, precautionary warnings, and transportation to villagers. International support in rural Southeast Burma is limited.

Given the scale of the ongoing conflict, which extends beyond air attacks, the basic needs of many villagers are not being met. Significant protection gaps are present, including the need for the protection of children, specific gendered needs, and needs pertaining to other vulnerable persons including the elderly, pregnant and villagers with disabilities, as existing services struggle to reach those who are remotely displaced. Villager's needs are also exacerbated by the many other human rights abuses committed by the SAC in Karen State.

### Chapter 3.1. Support available amid air attacks

Villagers maintain resilience and solidarity through self-support mechanisms. Local networks and community-based organisations organise mutual aid, which is critical for addressing immediate needs. Local KNU authorities assist by arranging emergency shelters and providing some security measures in their controlled and administered areas. A few international organisations are also active in the region, but their support and accessibility in ethnic areas is scarce. Overall, the effectiveness and extent of protection efforts is inconsistent, with some areas receiving more substantial support than others, leading to disparities in the availability of resources and services.

#### 3.1.1. Village agency strategies and community support

Villagers and communities in locally-defined Karen State have developed a range of self-support strategies to cope with the challenges arising from air strikes. Community-based efforts include sharing resources such as food, shelter, and medical supplies, as well as transporting injured villagers and setting up temporary education facilities in displacement site.

##### **Addressing food necessities:**

Since the primary way villagers protect themselves from air attacks is by fleeing to safer areas including to bunkers, forests, caves or religious buildings, either for short or more extended periods of time, food insecurity is widespread. As seen, food scarcity is aggravated by additional livelihood challenges, rising food prices, travel restrictions, and the general risk of conflict.

Longer periods of displacement increases the risk of severe food shortages. A religious member from Day Bu Noh area, Mu Traw District, highlighted the support villagers provide each other in these situations: *"Only some families brought food. But we looked at the situation, and for those who dare to go back to get food from the village, they went back to get food. Those who do not dare to go back to the village borrow other people's food. They could not bring a lot of food [when they fled]."* Sometimes, religious members at monasteries and churches provide shelter and food to displaced villagers.

Villagers have also developed innovative methods to safely manage their limited resources, such as hiding supplies and preparing meals under stringent conditions to avoid detection. Saw Cs---, a village leader from Vw--- village, Nat Than Kwin village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, described the collective effort to address food shortages in his area: *"How can they [displaced villagers] bring food? We just prepare meals for them and send them to the jungle."*

*Now, when we can send those [rations] to them, we send them. But some of them [villagers] still continue to flee [to further places]. So, we cannot do anything about that. But for those who stay close, we find donations [support] for them."*



These photos were received in December 2021 from Palu village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. On December 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, fighting broke out between combined SAC and Border Guard Force (BGF) troops against KNLA troops in Lay Kay Kaw area, Palu village tract. Following this skirmish, the SAC reinforced their troops in the area and carried out heavy ground and air attacks. Thousands of villagers from many villages in Palu village tract, including Lay Kay Kaw area, fled to the Thai-Burma border due to the fighting and air strikes. The left photo shows displaced villagers from Palu village tract gathered during the day. The right photo shows some displaced villagers next to the Thoo Mweh river, close to the Thai-Burma border, where they stayed overnight. While they slept, it started raining and the water level rose quickly, forcing the villagers who were sheltering there to move. *[Photo: local villager]*

Naw Ct---, a women's group leader at her church in Vy--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, explained the feelings of discomfort and indebtedness some villagers face while displaced: *"Here we live far [from home]. We live in others' houses so we felt 'annar'<sup>76</sup>. [We need] support for food, we didn't bring much money, rice was provided by the family [relatives]. [...] [With the] money that we brought, we bought vegetables, onion, garlic, dry fish, oil. We bought these to eat together with family members. They told us that we don't need to feel 'annar' but we feel 'annar' because they gave us rice. Now, [when] travelling [displaced] like this, [we] need rice the most. If we have fish paste and salt, things are fine."*

The hardships caused by the conflict and attacks on civilians are exacerbated by other weather hazards, as reported by numerous interviewees. One villager from Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *"We have been living in conflict for a long time. We need to live alert [to threats posed by the conflict]. We did not have enough food. Our livelihoods also have not gone well because of climate change. We face two challenges. First, climate change. Second, armed conflict. We need many things. We have to return to the village and prepare things [for survival]. We will be starving if we flee for a long time"*.

### **Addressing security and protection:**

Villagers share information and try to warn each other when they believe an air strike might happen, so that they can flee the area in advance. However, without effective advanced warnings, difficulties arise. Ay---, a villager from Yv--- village, Saw Khay area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, explained: *"It is hard to predict where the fighter jet is coming from. The sound of the engine might sound the same in your ears. [...] I would like to say that civilians have good*

<sup>76</sup> Burmese word meaning 'fear of offending someone or causing someone to lose face, become embarrassed, or fear of being inconvenient'.

communication. When the fighter jet took off from Dawei Town, they informed each other that the fighter jet had taken off. During that time, the civilians received the news about the fighter jet taking off [and fled].” Similarly, Saw Ab---, one of the village elders from Zv--- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: “I just looked [to] the plane and warned the ‘children’ [referring to all villagers]. And they avoided it [the air strike] by hiding in their safe places so there were no injuries here [in Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, in May 2024].” Despite the warnings, several other attacks conducted at night in the area caused casualties, including another attack in May 2024 that injured one woman and killed one villager.

While villagers try to guarantee effective information sharing by using phones, social media and different devices, unfortunately, warnings do not always reach villagers, particularly those who live in areas of limited connection. While some villagers live in areas of available phone connection or internet, others rely on in-person communication or radio devices, and some travel far to access phone connection and information. Some villagers also have contact with resistance armed groups to access information about the situation in the area.

Aside from warnings, communities also work together to guarantee their safety and security including establishing rules such as nightly patrols to prevent theft and to maintain safety in their temporary shelters.

#### **Addressing education needs:**

Villagers have created informal systems to address educational needs amidst active conflict, keeping education ongoing for children and students.<sup>77</sup> Naw Ci---, a villager from Zm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, explained: “There are not enough supplies for the children at the school. Some parents tried very hard and bought teaching stationery [...]. They have hopes that one day their children will be educated and become leaders.”

In response to the extreme danger that students face while studying, parents, village leaders, and local administrators establish committees to organise safer spaces for students to continue schooling. Village leaders also cooperate with community KNU leaders at the township level and village tract level to arrange safe places for the students to study.

#### **Addressing healthcare needs:**

Accessing medical treatment is one of the main challenges faced by local villagers during the ongoing armed conflict. Villagers help each other by transporting patients to equipped clinics, despite the security risks, which are heightened at night. Difficulties are aggravated by the distance to available healthcare services and insufficient medical supplies in rural areas. Due to these challenges, many injured villagers lose their lives before or after reaching healthcare, or have to travel extremely long distances despite risks. Naw Ao---, a villager who experienced the air strikes in Day Bu Noh area in March 2021, explained: “My friends who are health workers informed me of the shortage of medical supplies in the incident zone and they expressed, ‘We are now in an extremely hard situation. There are patients that come to us but we do not have sufficient medical supplies. [...] Due to the insufficient medical supplies and displacement, villagers cannot access medical treatment. Therefore, the severely injured villagers have to go gradually to Tg--- village [close to the Thai border to access to medical treatment].”

Although mobile clinics are sometimes set up in the forest by humanitarian organisations, some villagers still face difficulties accessing them and are required to take care of their own health needs. Saw By---, a village tract administrator from Tx--- village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, said: “After the air strike, we didn’t dare to live in the village [Wy--- village]. We took care of our own survival, including healthcare.” While some villagers bring herbal medicine

<sup>77</sup> See also KHRG, *Schools Under Attack*, July 2024, above

or traditional remedies with them to displacement sites to treat minor illnesses and fevers, they are reportedly ineffective against more serious infections and diseases such as malaria. Displacement is one of the main reasons impacting villagers' access to essential goods and services, adequate living conditions, and basic and specialised healthcare, as discussed above.

### **3.1.2. Civil society and local non-governmental organisations support**

Civil society and community-based organisations (CSOs/CBOs), local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and ethnic service providers work hard to deliver resources for villagers affected by air strikes. Support includes financial aid, food, and healthcare support in the form of medicine, medical supplies and setting up mobile clinics. Food aid is most often provided in the form of basic staples for a limited period, such as one week or one month. Support for education is most often provided by the KECD in the form of financial aid to pay for teacher's salaries and for the reconstruction of destroyed school buildings or the construction of temporary school facilities in safe areas. This response is coordinated among local specialised organisations to cover different areas and address the various and most pressing needs.<sup>78</sup>

Due to the difficulties posed by the armed conflict, support often does not reach remote areas or is insufficient to cater to the needs of all villagers. Saw At---, a village advisor from Yh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"Villagers receive support from some local organisations that work to tackle social issues in the community. [...] We receive support and aid from these organisations but they are not sufficient for everyone because there are many people."* Saw E---, the CIDKP secretary for Dooplaya District explained: *"In the past, we prioritised providing basic food. Later, we had difficulties with transportation so we provided money. [...] For food and healthcare support, each Township has an 'emergency committee' [to provide support]. Before, the village head stored rice and basic food. [...] However, we were able to support only basic needs but the provided support was not sufficient. We have a lot of challenges. For villagers to [go to] live back in the village, we [also] check whether there are unexploded bombs and the amount of damage due to the air strikes. We have to check every detail. [...] We check whether the village is safe for villagers or not."*

The provision of financial and food aid by local CSOs and NGOs is unsustainable to alleviate livelihood challenges, as villagers face long-term unemployment and/or displacement. One villager, Saw Cz--- from Ti--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *"Financial support [from local humanitarian organisations] was provided for a week or up to a month. I would like to tell you that we are having difficulties caused by food insecurity. The provisions [from humanitarian organisations] are not enough. Don't provide support to us for just a week or up to a month."*

Healthcare workers from local organisations attempt to provide special support for vulnerable populations by setting up mobile clinics and outreach programs in displacement site, however, the vast and challenging terrain, as well as security risks, makes it difficult to reach all those in need. Local healthcare workers also report that they face difficulties treating all patients given the lack of available medicine. Local organisations try to address the mental health needs of communities, although the availability of support is extremely limited. As explained by Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District: *"For something like going and visiting patients with mental health disorders every day for two or three months, we do not have this kind of thing yet. But we do*

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<sup>78</sup> These main local CSOs/CBOs operating in rural Southeast Burma are the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD), the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), the Karen Women Organisation (KWO), the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), and Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT). Ethnic service providers include the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW). Since the 2021 coup, their response is coordinated under the network of the Karen Emergency Response Team (KERT).

something like encouragement in a group. [...] Our organisation, a women's organisation, and an organisation led by young people do this."

Local healthcare workers are also limited in their operations to KNU-administered areas due to risks associated with active conflict, SAC attacks, and having to cross multiple SAC checkpoints, where they face arrest and confiscation of supplies. Naw Bw---, the head of BPHWT in Kler Lwee Htoo District, also explained some of the mental health impacts of air strikes on the operation of healthcare workers: *Regarding the mental health situation, everyone is afraid. [...] This fear impacts us. [...] When they [aircraft] flies over, our hearts beat fast. We are afraid. Due to this situation, we couldn't reduce the feeling of fear among our workers. They have conducted air strikes twice [in her area]. So, we couldn't say that they wouldn't conduct it again. [...] It affected our mental health by causing insecurity and fear. Even when we hear the sound of aircraft, we want to run. We couldn't live still [without being vigilant]. Our workers also have to be afraid while they are providing treatment to civilians. While we provide treatment to the patients, we remain afraid.*" KHRG has previously documented the direct attacks on humanitarian aid delivery by Burma soldiers.<sup>79</sup>



This photo was received from a KNLA medic in April 2021. This photo shows a trench in the forest where KDHW staff was providing medical treatment to villagers injured by the bombardment on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021 on Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. [Photo: KNLA medic]

### 3.1.3. Support from local authorities

The KNU coordinates with local authorities, such as village tract administrators and village leaders, to provide guidance and logistical support to villagers and displaced populations, including resource management and travel advice.

KNU members inform local leaders and villagers about the possibility of SAC air attacks: at least 37 reported having received a warning from KNU leaders to flee in advance. Whilst warnings are often inaccurate or communication issues prevent the effective sharing of information, fleeing after receiving prior warnings or signs or possible air strikes is one of the most effective protection strategies for villagers. As explained by a villager from Wq--- village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *"Because there was fighting in Wq--- and Tj--- villages, civilians fled to avoid the potential harm on time. Civilians were informed that [armed resistance groups] surrounded them [SAC army camps] to capture them, so civilians fled from their village. For Tk--- village, they [villagers] had heard about it [air strike would happen] because our local [KNU] leaders informed them so some of the villagers [in Tk--- village] fled to avoid the potential harm but they did not inform all the villagers so some villagers remained in the village."*

In some areas, KNU authorities provide safety advice and guidance to villagers. Saw Ac--- from Vd--- village, Zy--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"With regard to villagers' security, only village leaders communicate with village tract leaders and then village tract leaders have contact with KNLA. The KNLA take responsibility for guarding and defending us for our security at the [Thai-Burma] border and in the areas close to the [SAC] army camps. We have to follow the direction [of the KNU] for our transportation and security; for example, the*

<sup>79</sup> KHRG, *Denied and Deprived: Local communities confronting the humanitarian crisis and protection challenges in Southeast Burma*, June 2022. See also: KHRG, *Resilience and Resistance: Challenges and threats faced by Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup*, September 2024.

*times we can or cannot use torchlights and the times we can or cannot travel.”*

### **3.1.4. International support**

International support in ethnic and rural areas in Southeast Burma remains limited and inconsistent due to accessibility challenges and security risks. The larger INGOs, including UN agencies, have signed official agreements with the SAC authorities and mainly operate in SAC-controlled cities, leaving the vast majority of Karen villagers unprotected. Some INGOs have attempted to mitigate this by funding and cooperating with the local civil society organisations to reach rural areas. As explained by Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District: *“For [I]NGOs, they didn’t enter [Karen State] themselves due to security [risks]. They combine and collaborate with CBOs and CSOs that help us.”*

Other organisations operating in rural ethnic areas mentioned by interviewees included the Free Burma Rangers (FBR); the Tq---, a religious organisation from Thailand; and support groups such as the Tr---. These organisations mostly provide healthcare, food and financial support. Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District, noted: *“For FBR, they take care of the roof [shelter], food as needed, and healthcare. They provide support in all areas. [...] They [also] go to the incident places and encourage civilians and pray for them. They take care of healthcare [needs] and wherever they arrive, they try to make the civilians feel happy. They will pray with them, and provide support, encouragement, as well as clothes. FBR do this regularly. They have done this kind of things since the past. The more incidents [occur], the more they go [assist].”*

In some rural areas, transporting in-kind support is extremely difficult due to the inaccessible roads, remote displacement sites, or due to SAC checkpoints. Cash support is also sometimes ineffective in areas with travel restrictions, as access to shops, markets and stocks is limited. Some international organisations that support local organisations prioritise urgent medical emergencies, hence not being accessible to all villagers and leaving other protection needs unaddressed.

## **Chapter 3.2. Other protection gaps and villagers’ needs**

Villagers encounter significant difficulties accessing essential resources, including basic items such as beds, blankets, shelter materials, food staples, hygiene products and medical supplies. For many, the immediate priority becomes survival rather than addressing long-term needs. While all villagers are affected by air strikes and other military attacks, certain groups such as children, the elderly, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities have additional needs. Women and men also experience different needs based on their gendered roles amidst the conflict.

### **3.2.1. Children’s needs and violations of children’s rights**

The ongoing conflict in Southeast Burma has detrimental impacts on the lives of children. Air strikes and violence have disrupted family life, education, mental well-being, and overall safety of children, creating a generation facing unprecedented challenges and an uncertain future. Air strikes are also killing and maiming children at an alarming rate, with casualties increased due to the difficulties faced by healthcare workers to reach certain areas, insufficient resources and supplies, and the blockage of humanitarian aid by the Burma Army.

The magnitude of attacks, the destruction of homes and safe spaces, and the separation from their families have heightened children’s exposure to trauma, leading to increased levels of anxiety and shock. The destruction of educational facilities, often via intentional attacks, and the constant threat of air strikes, have impacted access to education and deprived children of safe and quality education, as well as spaces to gather, develop their personalities, and play. The situation has led to a reduction in school attendance, as well as the closure of schools.



Air strikes often separate children from their families and communities and children face difficulties reuniting with their families and communities in safer areas. Many students are forced to flee alone, taking minimal resources with them, and struggle to continue their education. Efforts are made by the community to continue education for students amidst these conditions, including building makeshift classrooms and arranging flexible schedules. Some children flee unaccompanied to third countries to continue their schooling, although such programs do not include Karen language and culture, and some face discrimination in neighbouring countries.



This photo was taken in December 2021. It shows displaced villagers from Tl--- village, in Tm--- IDP site, Palu village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, near the Thai-Burma border. Approximately 1,000 villagers from Palu village tract, including Lay Kay Kaw area, fled after the SAC conducted ground and air attacks in the area on December 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, following fighting between combined SAC and BGF troops against KNLA troops in Lay Kay Kaw area. [Photo: KHRG]

### 3.2.2. Gendered needs of villagers

The conflict and air strikes in Karen State have impacts on women and men, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and gender roles, and creating new challenges.

#### **Double burden: caregiving and breadwinning:**

One impact of the conflict in Karen State, is the increased burden of caregiving following the loss of life of relatives. Women are usually the primary caregivers to children and the elderly, but often find themselves additionally becoming the primary breadwinners when widowed, lose support networks or become single mothers. Cj--, a single mother working in Waw Lay area, Waw Lay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, who was stranded on the plantation due to air attacks, described some of her struggles: *"I am divorced from my husband. I have one child. And now, I am the breadwinner for my child. I transfer 100,000 kyats [47.59 USD] per month to the village [Vk--- village]. It took three months for them [her child] to receive it. Right now, the problem is we cannot transfer money to the village because we do not get to meet with our boss [to get payment]. Also, it is the end of the month but I do not have money as I did not get paid yet so I cannot transfer money to the village"*.

Women in other types of employment, including those connected to community caregiving, also face economic hardships. Saw Br--, a village head from Zh-- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained the difficulties and the extra toll it takes on women: *"Most of the teachers are women. Some women who live in the mountain areas have a lot of children, so the yearly support is not enough for them to secure their livelihood. [...] They also work on their hill fields and farmlands. They depend on one another. [...] They have difficulties. They have to go to teach in schools and work in the hill fields and farmlands in the evening."*

These difficulties were echoed by healthcare workers, who are often required to take care of patients while being responsible for the safety of their children. Naw Bw--, the head of BPHWT

in Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"In my perspective, if we compare men and women, women face a bit more difficulties. Sometimes, we have to carry our kids when we work and also, when we have to travel alone, it is difficult for us. For male workers, sometimes, they don't need to carry their kids. So, when the incident happens suddenly, we have to save our lives and [the lives of] our kids. That is the difference. [...] However, we have [also] seen that when some women workers have to go and work, they have to leave their families behind. [...] When they [women] travel, they are worried about how their family will secure their livelihoods."* Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District, added: *"For women health workers who don't have children, they can work more. For those who have children, they have to take care of their child, schooling, and housing. So, some days, they just work for half a day and go back to take care of their child and house at noon."*

### **Challenges during displacement:**

Women are often on the frontline of coping with the challenges of displacement, as they are often the first persons to flee from air strikes, together with their children. Naw Ct---, a women's group leader at her church in Vy--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District explained: *"My family members: four [came with me]. Me, my aunt, and my two kids. And my husband, we left him at home. If we all moved we wouldn't be able to hear [receive information]. In this situation, one military group [SAC soldiers] is scattered [everywhere] and we worry that they will enter our house. We have our property, we have a pig, so, when we all moved, we left the men. They can run. Us, we have kids, we moved first."* Naw Bw---, the head of BPHWT in Kler Lwee Htoo District, added: *"We've seen that newborn mothers and pregnant women have to take care and protect their children due to this kind of scary situation. [...] Those women struggle with their family, the environment, and the current situation that they have to overcome. It is not the same for single people. [...] For instance, if something happens, they [childless villagers] have only themselves [to take care of]. For pregnant women and elderly women, if something happens suddenly, it is difficult for them to move immediately [with their children]."*

A religious member from Day Bu Noh area, Mu Traw District, also described the situation faced by pregnant women and mothers who are displaced: *"The villagers will have big problems staying in the forest with tarpaulins as their tents if the air strike happens again. It is very difficult to live in wet places with the tarpaulin shelter, because the shelter does not get dry if it rains a lot. Secondly, those who have newborn babies have big difficulties to live that way [in temporary shelters]. And if they have to continue fleeing, it is such a big difficulty for pregnant women who have to give birth."*

Women's needs are exacerbated by the lack of available support services. For instance, there is a severe lack of prenatal and postnatal care. Saw Da---, a villager from Tn--- village, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"There is no support for them [pregnant women]. There are no medicines or medical equipment available. In the village, we only have kits for checking malaria, and villagers are given malaria medicine if they contract the disease. There is no specialized medical care available for pregnant women and women with newborn babies."* Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW also reported a significant shortage in menstrual products: *"For women healthcare workers, their needs are slightly different from men. As they are women, [...] their needs each month [menstrual cycle], some couldn't afford to buy it [menstrual products]. In the past few years, in 2021, some groups such as KWO, KDHW, or Tr---, they helped by giving things for female [menstrual] hygiene. Later, we didn't see it anymore. [...] I've also known that KWO has tried their best to help pregnant women. They've done the best for pregnant women, children, and providing healthcare [services] for women."*

Conflict, and the use of air strikes, also augments gendered expectations for men. Interviewees repeatedly described men as being expected to return to their villages or remain behind to work on plantations, tend to livestock, manage property, transport food, or obtain information, which exposes them to heightened risks. This was reported by villagers as relating to their perceived strength and ability to run to safety, in the event of an air strike.

### 3.2.3. Needs of other vulnerable persons

Elderly individuals, pregnant women and persons with physical disabilities in Karen State face particular challenges due to active conflict including ongoing air strikes. Their limited mobility and health issues make evacuation and access to safe zones particularly challenging. The destruction of healthcare facilities and disruption of medical services also preclude their access to medical assistance, exacerbating their vulnerabilities. In displacement sites, the specific needs of the elderly, pregnant women and persons with disabilities are often not met, leading to heightened isolation and neglect.

For example, one villager reported the particular psychological impacts of continued air strikes on an elderly woman. Saw Ab--- from Zv--- village, Kwee Doo Hkaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, recounted: *"Your aunty [honorific title referring to his wife] needed to inject one Moriamin [medicine for elderly people] each time there was an air strike. Because she is the one who always struggles with disease [health issues]. Her heart is not still [in Karen, this refers to mental health problems], so we need to give her one Moriamin injection each time there was an air strike."*

Displacement exacerbates the challenges faced by all villagers, especially vulnerable populations including those with chronic health conditions or other specialised needs. The lack of accessible medical care and appropriate resources during displacement further impacts their health and safety. Ensuring that displaced persons receive specialised support and services is crucial.



This photo was taken April 2021 in a cave in Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, where villagers from Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township were seeking refuge after the SAC bombarded on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021. The picture shows an elder woman, who was over 100 years old at the time of displacement, sheltering in a cave. [Photo: KHRG]

### 3.2.4. Other human rights abuses which exacerbate villagers' needs

In addition to air strikes, villagers face a myriad of human rights violations amid the armed conflict, including forced recruitment, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture, landmine and UXO contamination.<sup>80</sup> Saw Bv---, the head of KDHW in Mu Traw District, explained some of the protracted human rights abuses faced by villagers: *"While going to work, if our enemy, Burmese dictators [Burma Army], saw us [villagers] in our plantations or farmland, they called us, tied us, ordered us [to do things], and beat us. In the future, I don't want these kinds of things to happen. [...] In the past, we have seen that when they [Burma Army] arrive at a village, they abuse our civilians by looting, arbitrary arrest, and asking things from villagers. Even to animals [livestock] [...]. They just do whatever they want. They shot at it [livestock], and killed it. When they couldn't eat anymore, they just throw it away."*

Villagers also face challenges from mortar shelling, mostly conducted by SAC troops from nearby army camps into villages. Saw Cs---, a villager from Vw--- village, Nat Than Kwin village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained the situation in his village: *"Their army camp is based there and they had already killed someone from Anyar Su [village] [by using drone]. They [SAC] often conduct mortar shelling, and if you see a drone we have to be cautious. If*

<sup>80</sup> KHRG, *Undeniable*, above.

*we hear 'Sweeh' [drone sound] we have to run into [bunker] immediately". Landmine and UXO contamination of villagers' land also presents significant risks and challenges. U Db---, from Tp--- village, Me Pa La village tract, Htan Ta Pin Township, Taw Oo District, explained: "Of course, they [SAC] planted [landmines] because there have been casualties of cows. And we have not finished landmine clearing yet. We cleared [most of] the landmines already but there are some left. Three landmines exploded in the previous day, it was from a cows stepping on the landmines."*

## Chapter 4. Villagers' views and demands

Villagers interviewed for this report believe that air strikes conducted by the SAC on civilian areas are wrong and unlawful. Villagers ask to be distinguished from military objectives in the conflict and for their villages and community buildings not to be the object of attacks. Villagers do not want to be displaced or to become refugees. They do not want to depend on external support, but they consistently acknowledged the urgent need for more protection from international stakeholders. Many villagers expressed the need for action to be taken against SAC leaders, including for SAC officials to held accountable for their crimes. Villagers hope for the end to the military dictatorship, the withdrawal of SAC troops from their areas, and the cessation of air strikes. They want to return to their villages, reunite with their families, resume their livelihood activities, and live in peace and with freedom.

### **Direct attacks on civilians**

Villagers across locally-defined Karen State believe that the SAC attacks are being intentionally directed at civilians, their villages and plantations, causing extreme fear, casualties and destruction. In particular, attacks on villages in the absence of soldiers, fighting or other military objectives in the vicinity, makes villagers believe that attacks are conducted to terrorise, displace and oppress them. As stated by Saw Br--, a village head from Zh-- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District: *"This is not the right thing to do. If they conducted air strikes into an army camp, I would not say anything. It is not the right thing to conduct an air strike into civilian areas"*.

A number of villagers described the use of air strikes since 2021 as aggravating past suffering from previous conflict and oppression. As expressed by Saw At--, from Yh-- village, Day Bu Noh area, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District: *"The problems we are facing is because the Burmese military wants to have absolute power and does not want to give any rights to civilians and ethnic people. Therefore, if the Burmese military leaders keep exercising dictatorial power, peace will never be able to be established in the country."* Some villagers expressed their desire for self-determination for the Karen peoples and non-intervention of the SAC. Villagers emphasised their concerns about the impact on younger generations, who now face attacks on their schools and communities, and a precarious future.

Villagers believe the only way for the conflict to end is for the SAC to be removed from power. Villagers consistently called for peace, and to be able to resume life as before, living and working without fear or restrictions. As said by Naw Bd-- from Wk-- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *"We want to live freely, work freely, and move freely"*.

### **Demands for action and protection**

Villagers frequently highlighted the lack of international attention, protection or support relating to the SAC's use of air strikes and the extreme levels of violence since the 2021 coup. As questioned by Naw Bi--, a villager from Wo-- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract: *"Is there anyone who can confront the Burmese government about their actions? Is there no one left? Or are foreign leaders no longer willing to help? Will international leaders continue to watch what is happening in Myanmar like this? Can they no longer assist with what's happening in Myanmar? Are they thinking that the conflict is in Myanmar and does not concern them? Even if they think that way, we still want them to lend a helping hand"*.

Villagers called on the international community, including the organisation of the United Nations, to put an end to the military dictatorship. They call for foreign governments not to cooperate with the military junta, including refraining from providing military support and assistance. As stated by Saw Bg--, a villager who experienced and suffered from air strikes in Mu Traw District: *"I would like to suggest or urge foreign governments not to cooperate with the Burmese Army."*

*We hope they will stop their [SAC's] air strikes and refrain from providing them with weapons and jet fuel.*" Villagers also call on global leaders to collaborate and take action against Burma military leaders, including by pressuring them to stop conducting air strikes and committing other human rights violations. Without urgent action being taken, many villagers believe unlawful actions by the SAC will continue.

Some villagers expressed hopes that the UN would intervene after the coup and pressure the SAC to stop the systemic violation of human rights. While some remained hopeful about international action, others like Ay---, a teacher from Mergui-Tavoy District who witnessed the death and injury of children from an air strike, described his loss of trust in the international community: *"Since the beginning of the revolution, we have yearned for the support of the UN, [under the] R2P [Responsibility to Protect], and ASEAN. [...] To be honest, I have no hope in them [...]. What do I want in the future? I am exhausted. I long for this to end soon, although it's not a straightforward process"*.

### **Humanitarian and emergency assistance**

Most villagers reported a reliance on the KNU to protect them from SAC attacks. In order for villagers to have time to seek refuge, prepare what they need, and protect themselves from air strikes, villagers ask KNU leaders to warn them in advance about possible SAC attacks, as well as provide them with further awareness on safety and security, including information on how to build effective bunkers. Villagers also call on KNU leaders to help with humanitarian support. A number of villagers call for unity among people in Karen State and KNU leaders to fight together against the military dictatorship.

Regarding humanitarian support, villagers request that international and local humanitarian organisations prioritise civilians in rural and active conflict areas, as most international humanitarian aid only reaches SAC-controlled cities. They ask for organisations to focus on supporting those who are most in need, and stress that current support is insufficient for all villagers affected by conflict in Karen State. In addition, villagers call for help rebuilding their communities, which have been destroyed by SAC air strikes. Some villagers ask for further protection in neighbouring countries, including Saw E---, the CIDKP secretary from Dooplaya District committee, who expressed: *"My civilians [villagers] want to return to their places and country [in Karen State]. They [villagers] want to live as indigenous people as before [...] The place where we are living here [while displaced in Thailand] is other people's country, and we just took shelter. We have to live in fear. We dare not to turn on the torchlight at night because we are afraid. We worry that if the Thai [authorities] see us, they will force us to go back [refoulement], so we are afraid. Thai [authorities should] put their consideration on Karen people and put pressure on the Burma [army] to stop these kinds of actions."*

Villagers consistently expressed that they do not want to remain displaced or become dependent on external support, and stressed the importance of retaining their own agency. Naw Aw---, a villager from Yq--- village, Htee Hpa Hta village tract, Waw Ray Township, Dooplaya District, stated: *"If we continue like this, we will be like disabled persons [...] relying on others to feed us and others' care to survive. If we continue like this for long years, we will not be able to be independent. [...] When we get used to relying on supporters, we become a society that is left behind by other societies. We have to 'breathe through others' noses"*. Commenting on the protracted history of forced displacement, Naw Ao---, a villager from Vn--- village, Baw Thay Hta village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, who was in Day Bu Noh area, stated: *"I want my people, nation and ethnic group to be free from displacement"*.

**Justice and accountability**

Grounded in concerns regarding the lack of international attention, villagers called for the situation in Southeast Burma to be documented, reported on, and for concrete and comprehensive action to be taken to protect civilians. Villagers expressed that due to barriers in reporting human rights abuses, relevant organisations and stakeholders must share the experiences of villagers in Karen State, help advocate for their rights, and work to prevent further abuses from occurring. Saw At---, the villager from Yh--- village, Day Bu Noh area, expressed: *“If these kinds of SAC military activities such as air strikes and mortar shelling continue, there will be more problems and challenges for villagers’ livelihoods. [...] We need international organisations and human rights organisations to report on our situation, to have empathy for us, and to support us during this time of difficulty; otherwise, life will be extremely challenging for local villagers here”*.

Villagers are deeply concerned about the conflict and the lack of accountability for unlawful attacks. Some villagers are aware that such attacks are prohibited, and call on international stakeholders to take action to hold the military junta accountable for its crimes. Naw Bi---, who witnessed the air strike on Wo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024 stated: *“As we know, there is a law [against attacks on civilians] and we would like the stakeholders to hold the Burma military regime accountable. If we look at our villagers, now what they are afraid of the most is the missiles that are fired from aircraft. They are the most dangerous, so if possible, I do not want to face them or experience them anymore. So, we believe that if stakeholders and authorities can support us in that way, the air strikes might stop”*.

Villagers almost unanimously express hopes for lasting peace and freedom. Villagers envision this peace to mean the end to conflict, a return to their homes, work and lives, and to be reunited with their families and communities. As expressed by a religious member from Day Bu Noh area: *“We hope the Karen people will be free from the violations and oppression that they have been through for many years”*.

## Conclusion and discussion

Since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has spread violence and destruction through its use of air strikes across locally-defined Karen State. Despite the scale of attacks, there is limited available information documenting these attacks in Southeast Burma, and the effects that ripple through affected communities. This report investigates the devastating impacts of SAC air strikes including the high number of civilian deaths and injury; the destruction of villages including homes, schools, clinics and religious buildings; the effects on mental and psychosocial wellbeing; mass displacement; and impacts on livelihood, healthcare, education and community life. The report also maps villagers' strategies and the available support. Given the findings of this report, concrete action must be urgently taken by international stakeholders to end the SAC's unlawful attacks and alleviate the devastating impacts on communities in Karen State.

### *Impacts of SAC air strikes*

Evidence gathered for this report shows that air strikes conducted by the SAC across Southeast Burma are consistently directed at villagers, their buildings and community infrastructure. SAC air strikes are conducted in multiple and irregular ways: some being carried out using a limited number of bombs directly onto villagers and their community buildings, while others are conducted by bombardment, using multiple munitions over an extensive area, including over multiple villages and plantations. Whilst some attacks take place in the context of active conflict, others are conducted in the absence of fighting or armed resistance soldiers in the vicinity. Attacks on villagers and their communities force them to take urgent measures for their safety, including fleeing and living for prolonged periods in hiding. Consistent across Karen State is the scale and frequency of attacks, as well as the absence of warnings or other precautionary measures taken by the SAC to minimise damage to civilians and civilian objects.

The effects of these air attacks are multiple, wide-reaching, and affect every element of daily life in Karen State. SAC air strikes have killed villagers in high numbers, including children and the elderly, caused life changing and distressing injuries, and forced villagers to flee en masse. The urgent and sudden nature of attacks by air limits the availability of protection strategies, prevents villagers from being able to flee with adequate supplies or conduct proper burials for loved ones, causes families and communities to be separated, and instils a pervasive sense of terror and vigilance. Those who are injured face difficulties finding urgent medical treatment with clinics attacked, and healthcare workers operating under immensely challenging conditions, without adequate medical supplies. The destruction of homes, schools, clinics and religious buildings has disrupted community life and left villagers and children without access to their homes, education or places of worship and gathering. While displaced, often hiding in poor shelters in the jungle and caves, villagers face escalating health concerns, including outbreaks of malaria, water-borne diseases, and women giving birth without medical support. Displaced villagers also remain at risk of attacks, taking measures to avoid being targeted such as not casting light, not making fires, not hanging clothes, and staying only in small groups. Village buildings remain destroyed and empty.

Despite these conditions, villagers and local civil society and community-based organisations have demonstrated immense resilience, sharing limited resources and taking measures to ensure one another's safety, including transporting the injured to healthcare, operating to make sure children continue their schooling in temporary shelters and caring for one another after attacks. However, they continue to do so in an environment of insecurity, a lack of sufficient support, and a void of international attention. Villagers almost unanimously express hopes for lasting peace and freedom. Villagers envision this peace to mean the removal of the SAC and the end of armed conflict.



### **Legal implications of the findings**

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), all parties to the conflict must distinguish between civilians and civilian objects, and fighters and military objectives.<sup>81</sup> The civilian population should at all times be protected against the dangers of conflict, and attacks must only be directed at fighters and military objectives.<sup>82</sup> Direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects are prohibited, amount to war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.<sup>83</sup> Indiscriminate attacks (including bombardment), disproportionate attacks, and collective punishments are also prohibited.<sup>84</sup>

SAC air attacks in Southeast Burma have violated - and continue to violate - international humanitarian law, including by failing to take feasible precautions to spare civilians,<sup>85</sup> by carrying out indiscriminate attacks including bombardment that fails to distinguish between civilians and military objectives, and by carrying out attacks directed against civilians. This report presents evidence that the SAC has repeatedly conducted direct and indiscriminate attacks, causing extensive loss of life and the destruction of entire communities including homes, schools, churches, clinics and temples. There have also been grave violations committed by the SAC against children,<sup>86</sup> including killing and maiming, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of access to humanitarian aid.<sup>87</sup> KHRG documentation strongly supports the allegation that these attacks are war crimes and, where they are conducted across Karen State in a widespread or systematic manner, may amount to crimes against humanity. When contextualised in the history of Southeast Burma,<sup>88</sup> and given the nature and timing of attacks, it is alleged that both direct and indiscriminate attacks in Karen State are conducted as a form of collective punishment.

In addition to the illegality of SAC attacks under IHL, this report has set out the additional grave and reverberating impacts on communities in Southeast Burma violating rights protected under international human rights law including, but not limited to: the right to life, liberty and security (UDHR<sup>89</sup>, article 3); the right to a standard of living for the health and wellbeing of oneself and one's family including food, housing, medical care and necessary social services (UDHR, art. 25); the right to education (UDHR, art. 26); the right to freedom of movement (UDHR, art. 13); and the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community (UDHR, art. 27). The SAC has also demonstrated total disregard for other international law instruments that serve to protect civilians in armed conflict, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>90</sup> Convention on Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,<sup>91</sup> Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons,<sup>92</sup> and the

<sup>81</sup> Customary International Humanitarian Law (CIHL) Rule 1.

<sup>82</sup> CIHL Rules 6, 7, 9, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Article 8(2)(e) of the Rome Statute; Article 7 of the Rome Statute.

<sup>84</sup> CIHL Rules 11, 12, 13, 14, 103.

<sup>85</sup> Including, but not limited to, failing to provide effective advance warnings to civilians (CIHL Rule 20); failing to assess that the objectives are not civilian or civilian objects (CIHL Rule 9) and/or failing to take all feasible precautions in choice of methods and means to avoid or minimise civilian losses (CIHL Rule 17).

<sup>86</sup> Violating CIHL Rule 135.

<sup>87</sup> The six grave violations affecting children in armed conflict are identified in the first resolution on children in armed conflict, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1261, 30 August 1999.

<sup>88</sup> KHRG, Why would they target us?, above; KHRG, *Undeniable*, above.

<sup>89</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

<sup>90</sup> Convention of the Rights of the Child, Geneva, 20 November 1989.

<sup>91</sup> Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, Geneva, 3 September 1992.

<sup>92</sup> Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May be Deemed to be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, Geneva, 10 October 1980.

2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.<sup>93</sup>

### ***Policy implications of the findings***

Having acknowledged that international crimes are being committed in Southeast Burma with grave impacts on local communities in Karen State, the international community must take urgent and concrete steps to stop the violence and civilians from armed attacks. This includes the necessary measure of immediately suspending the direct and indirect supply, sale, and transfer of aviation fuel to Burma. A comprehensive arms embargo on the country is also needed.

With attacks ongoing, international stakeholders must take steps to protect civilians from the impacts of air strikes, including providing comprehensive humanitarian assistance. Voices of villagers must be recognised and engaged with, to ensure informed humanitarian responses are implemented. In particular, international stakeholders, including INGOs, must be attune to the multiple and intersecting impacts of air strikes in Southeast Burma, that extend beyond the grave statistics of death and destruction, understanding that air strikes affect all aspects of villagers' lives including their health, education, psychosocial wellbeing and livelihoods. Additionally, stakeholders must be aware of local systems of aid and support already in place, and fund them so that assistance can be effectively integrated and reach all remote areas and informal displacement sites. This approach not only enhances the impact of aid but also fosters community ownership, empowerment and long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, it is critical to contextualise the use of air strikes by the SAC within the protracted history of oppression of villagers in Karen State. Villagers have made clear that these attacks constitute an extension of historic attacks on civilians, systemic violence and forced displacement perpetrated by the Burma Army for decades. Action must be taken to end the impunity of Burma Army leaders and hold them accountable for their crimes. The international community must take all measures within its power to prevent such crimes and prevent further human rights abuses from occurring, including for example, State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on Prohibition of Chemical Weapons adopting appropriate countermeasures to ensure Burma's compliance.

SAC air strikes are ongoing and being conducted across Southeast Burma each day. This report only scratches the surface of the devastating impacts, with numbers of attacks and the resulting loss of lives and destruction to civilian property deeply undervalued due to security concerns and challenges faced by researchers and displaced villagers. Whilst this report provides an important starting point, investigative mechanisms and experts must continue to work with local human rights organisations to ensure that ongoing evidence of attacks on civilians in Southeast Burma are documented, including conducting further research into weapons and munition used by the SAC. Nevertheless, KHRG hopes that this report provides greater understanding of the situation in Southeast Burma, triggering concern for the severe and enduring impacts of air strikes, and prompts immediate international action to put an end to these unlawful attacks.

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<sup>93</sup> Convention on Cluster Munitions, Dublin, 30 May 2008. Even though Burma is not a signatory to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the prohibition of use of weapons that cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering is enshrined as customary IHL (Rule 70 of CIHL).

## Photos: Front and back cover

### Front cover photo:

This photo was taken in February 2024 in Ts---village, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. On February 1<sup>st</sup> 2024, at 4:10 pm, SAC aircraft fired mounted autocannons at Ts---village, damaging the roofs of two houses and displacing Ts--- villagers to a nearby forest. The photo shows a group of children hiding from the air strike under tree roots. There were no reported civilian casualties. *[Photo: KHRG]*

### Back cover photo:

#### Top row, left to right:

On November 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 an SAC fighter jet crashed in Tt---place, between Tu--- village and Tv--- village, Htee Tha Saw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The fighter jet was shot down while conducting an air strike in Karenni State, and fell on the border of Karenni State and KNU-controlled territory in Taw Oo District. On November 12<sup>th</sup> 2023, the SAC conducted an air strike in the same area, but there were no reported civilian casualties. *[Photo: local villager]*

On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2023, four SAC fighter jets conducted an air strike on Zh--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. The fighter jets dropped eight bombs, and six of them fell onto Zh--- village. The other two bombs fell beside the village. Five villagers, including a 3-year-old infant, were killed, and two villagers were injured. This photo shows the deceased 3-year-old and her mother. *[Photo: KHRG]*

#### Bottom row, left to right:

On March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC conducted the first air strikes since the 2021 coup in Southeast Burma, in Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. The photo shows a destroyed high school in Day Bu Noh area, administered by the KECD, destroyed by the SAC air strikes. *[Photo: KHRG]*

On December 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, following fighting between combined SAC and BGF troops against KNLA troops in Lay Kay Kaw area, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, the SAC conducted ground and air attacks in the area. This photo shows displaced villagers from Tl--- village, in Tm-- displacement site, Palu village tract, near the Thai-Burma border. Approximately 1,000 villagers from Palu village tract, including Lay Kay Kaw area, fled due to the attacks. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## Title of the report

The title of this report, ကဘီယူဟဲလ် (K'Baw Yoh Heh Lee) - 'Aircraft coming!' was extracted, and slightly modified, from a quote by Az---, a 17-year-old girl interviewed for this report, who was injured by an SAC air strike on Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. The original quote reads: *"The bone of my left arm was broken, and the shrapnel went in through my [left] arm and out of the other side, injuring my right arm. [...] We were on the motorcycle to return, when we heard the sound of an aircraft. My mother told me that the aircraft was coming, so we planned to run into a shop. However, I was injured on the way, before I reached the shop. [...] I ran into a bunker after I was hit. [...] The second aircraft [that conducted the second air strike firing mounted autocannons] was a bit far from me. [Otherwise,] In my opinion, I would not be alive this evening [now]."* 'K'Baw Yoh Heh Lee' is a phrase commonly used by villagers in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup, due to unpredictable nature of SAC air strikes conducted on villages.