A photograph of three women walking away from the camera on a wide, reddish-brown dirt road. The woman on the left wears a light green long-sleeved shirt and a purple and white striped sarong, carrying a brown bag. The woman in the middle wears a blue shirt and a purple and white striped sarong, carrying a large woven basket on her head. The woman on the right wears a brown jacket and a black and white striped sarong, carrying a child on her back. The road is flanked by lush green trees and vegetation under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

VOICES OF WOMEN DISPLACED BY THE WAR IN MYANMAR

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JANUARY
2023



About the authors: Paschal Zayar, Summer and ZMM are the pseudonyms of Burmese journalists and researchers who come from the central plains of Myanmar. Laure Siegel is Southeast Asia correspondent for French- investigative outlet Mediapart and a media trainer. In the wake of the 2021 military coup d'Etat in Nay Pyi Daw, they co-founded The Myanmar Project Collective, a network of reporters who document the post-coup events across the country from the ground. Their curated work can be followed and supported on Visual Rebellion, a platform for Burmese photographers, filmmakers and artists to publish high-value content on what is happening in Myanmar.

About Researchers' Republic: We are a team of about a dozen researchers from across Myanmar, led by our director, May Zin Thaw, who founded the organization in 2016. Many of us have worked together for a number of years. Most of us are still based inside Myanmar, and some of us have left the country since the military coup of February 1st, 2021. Our aim is to document the situation in Myanmar, and put it in perspective, looking into the past, not just the present, and with the future in mind. We believe that almost every aspect of life has been made so much worse by the coup and the criminal and exploitative nature of the military regime. But we also believe that it is important to see that the situation was already difficult, for the people and for the environment, long before the coup. So that the democracy movement and the people of Myanmar can identify solutions today, and when democracy returns to Myanmar. That day could not come soon enough! Our work has a strong focus on northern Myanmar and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. It focuses particularly on issues of climate change, the environment, land rights, labor rights, business and human rights, natural resources management, drugs, health, education, conflict, displacement, and gender.

About the project: This research paper is the fourth in a series produced by Researchers' Republic in collaboration with The Myanmar Project Collective / Visual Rebellion Myanmar. This series of reports was funded by the United States Institute of Peace. You can find our previous reports on the war in the information and telecommunication sectors, the impact of the economic collapse on grassroots people as well as the building of a fence at the China-Myanmar border.

Pictures by Visual Rebellion Myanmar or courtesy of local sources
Source Names followed by * have been changed for safety reasons

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INTRODUCTION

The military coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing on 1 February 2021 plunged Myanmar into a humanitarian crisis characterized by attacks and arrests by state authorities, the conflict between the Myanmar military, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and People's Defense Forces (PDFs), and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. In Shan, Chin, Rakhine, Karenni (Kayah), and Karen (Kayin) States, as well as in Sagaing and Magway Regions, the Myanmar military, the Border Guard Forces (BGF) and militia (Pyu Saw Htee) have been intensifying its campaigns under the pretense of eliminating any and all opposition, such as historically entrenched EAOs and, most especially, actors affiliated with PDFs and/or the parallel National Unity Government (NUG).

Unarmed civilians remain the main targets of the military and over the last 18 months, more than a million people have been internally displaced. During displacement, men tend to more

Photo: ©Local Source

often stay behind to look after household property, including agricultural fields and homes, or they may themselves engage in armed resistance against the military. An overwhelming majority of women and children have therefore had to live in informal settlements or refugee camps. Many are deprived of regular support as international aid agencies lack access to the most vulnerable communities in conflict-affected areas due to severe official restrictions.

In this report, we seek to provide displaced women in Myanmar with the opportunity to openly express their fears and needs amidst such mass displacement and rampant insecurities. It is based on extensive interviews by secure communication channels from January to July 2022 with fifteen people living in or working in IDP camps in Shan, Chin, Rakhine, Kachin, Kayah and Kayin states and in Sagaing and Magway divisions. Two-thirds of them are women living in camps, one-third are NGO workers or spokespersons for ethnic charity groups or rescue teams, including one person being a Rohingya male in a Bangladeshi camp.

Prior to the Myanmar military coup on February 1st, 2021, there were 1.1 million refugees originating from Myanmar and staying in neighboring countries, including 900,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh. According to the sources, there were between 300-500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) within Myanmar itself. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) officially identified 330,000 people as IDPs at the time, in camps or camp-like situations in Kachin, Shan, Rakhine, Chin, and Kayin States, 69% of whom were women and children.

In June 2011, armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the largest EAO in Kachin State and northern Shan State, resumed after a 17-year-long ceasefire. Fighting erupted between the Burmese army and EAOs from the Northern Alliance in Namtu, Kyaukme, Namkham, Muse, Kutkai, and Lashio Districts. As reported by Trocaire, IDPs have had to reside in over 170 camps across Kachin and northern Shan State after the ceasefire was broken. At the time, there were 100,000 IDPs in the region. Data gathered by the Myanmar Peace Monitor shows that as of 2014, there have been an additional 100,000 IDPs in the Kokang Region in northern Shan State.

From December 2018 to June 2019, the Myanmar military signed a unilateral ceasefire in Kachin and northern Shan States to allow IDPs to safely return to their villages. However, discussions

about how to best assist IDPs in their return did not happen, and access to government support for safe return was very limited. Since June 2016, UN agencies and international organizations have been prohibited to travel to non-government areas and also some government-controlled areas in the region. In 2019, 97,000 IDPs remained living in 140 camps or camp-like settings in Kachin State, and more than 9,600 IDPs remained in 33 camps in northern Shan State, including 78% of women and children, per the Myanmar Shelter Cluster.

A year and a half after the most recent coup, as of October 2022, more than 1.3 million people remain displaced across the country, of whom more than 1 million have been displaced since the 2021 military takeover.

In the days and weeks following the military coup of 1 February 2021, the public peacefully protested against the State Administration Council (SAC), the official name of the military junta led by General Min Aung Hlaing. However, peaceful protests were short-lived as the SAC soon carried out a violent crackdown on demonstrators. Twenty-year-old Mya Thwe Thwe Khine is the first known casualty of the anti-coup protest movement as on 19 February 2021, a bullet fired by a senior policeman punctured her helmet during a demonstration in the capital of Nay Pyi Daw. In the coming days and weeks, policemen and soldiers unleashed greater violence on peaceful demonstrators, including tear gas/bombs, sound grenades, and live rounds. Demonstrators also became much more at risk of nighttime arrests, arbitrary detention and torture. Facing violence from the SAC, many civilians began to question the likelihood of non-violent resistance to bring power back to the people.



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On 5 May 2021, the NUG announced the creation of PDFs, prefiguring a federal army that would seek to bring together EAOs and civil defense groups under a central command towards coordinating attacks on Myanmar military forces. Since this official announcement, thousands of youth have sought out guerilla combat training in areas administered by some of the strongest EAOs, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Karen National Union (KNU). Many of these youth have since joined local PDF branches or resistance militias, such as those in Chin State and Sagaing Region. After their training, they started targeted operations against the Burmese army, and the country has since been in a stage of full-blown multi-frontline conflict.



As of October 2022, Sagaing Region counts the highest number of IDPs, with over 545,000 persons displaced by attacks from the Burmese army. The junta has laid siege to communities throughout the region by killing and arresting individuals, raiding homes and launching airstrikes, which have forced many to flee into the jungle and to neighboring villages for safety. The same treatment has been applied to more than 102,000 displaced people in neighboring Magway. The central region had also been spared in previous decades by full-scale conflict but became a target of the military's ire because of the strong resistance activities in the areas since the coup.

In the eastern parts of Myanmar, UNOCHA estimates that 90,000 people remain displaced in Karen (Kayin) state and 77,000 people in Karenni (Kayah) state. Precise numbers are

difficult to assess, and it should be noted that the Karenni Human Rights Network Group counted 202,000 persons displaced out of an estimated population of 300,000. According to their November 2022 report, 284 persons have also been killed in Karenni State since the military coup due to shelling and airstrikes on communities or following arrest and torture by the Burmese army.

The escalation in fighting between the Burmese Army and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine state and southern Chin has displaced thousands of people and prompted movement restrictions. More displacement has also occurred in Shan, Mon, and Kachin States as well as Tanintharyi Region.

The dilemma between poor conditions within camps and a fear of returning (or inability to return) to one's native community plays out in all corners of Myanmar.



THE RETURN OF THE OLD BATTLES

THE ENDLESS EXODUS TO THE EAST



In the eastern parts of Myanmar, another generation is being introduced to decades-long armed conflict, says a local youth: “During my grandparents’ time, Kayah State went through this experience. Ethnic armed organisations have existed since independence in 1948, and the civil wars in Karen, Kachin, and Shan States continue to this day. We cannot live in peace.”

On 6 January 2022, fighting erupted between the Myanmar military and the Karenni People’s Defense Forces (KNDF) in Loikaw, the capital of Karenni (Kayah) State. According to the Network for Helping Karenni IDPs, nearly all residents of Loikaw were evacuated over the following ten days, during which time the Burmese army launched an indiscriminate bombing campaign on the city. On 17 January 2022, a bombing by the army killed three people sheltering in an IDP camp in Hpruso Township. Violence has multiplied across the state since then, and residents feel that nowhere is safe.

IDPs in Chin and Karenni (Kayah) States have not been able to receive any assistance from international and national organizations due to restricted access brought on by the SAC and insecurity due to ongoing armed conflict. IDP communities in these areas have consequently depended on self-reliance and assistance from local actors. For example, the Network for Helping Karenni IDPs has been able to raise funds and make donations to people in need, but working in dynamic and unstable circumstances has been challenging. Says a spokesperson: “It is difficult to determine the exact number of IDP camps because the evacuation sites are unstable. People are fleeing at random. If violence breaks out in one place, they move the next day to a different location. As far as I’ve gathered, there are over 100 IDP camps at the moment in Karenni State.”



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During the same period, fierce fighting between the SAC regime and Karen resistance forces in Dooplaya District (KNU’s 6th Brigade) was reignited on both sides of the Dawna Range, south of the Asia Highway, Burma’s main trade route to Thailand. Communities in Karen (Kayin) State were among the first to be targeted with airstrikes, shelling, and ground attacks after the military coup, which were intended for civilian areas and non-military targets, including houses and schools. Populations were often forced to find any place to hide, even if they could not access camps. A video released on 3 May 2022 by the Free Burma Rangers shows approximately 8,000 IDPs hiding in nearby caves as the military waged attacks on the Bilin area of Doo That Htoo District, Karen (Kayin) State. 90% of the rural population of the Mutraw (Hpapun) District was forced to flee into the jungle and construct temporary underground bunkers. Near Ei Htu Hta IDP camp, airstrikes were carried out and traumatized many persons who had previously fled past attacks throughout decades of conflict in the area.



Lay Kay Kaw Area - ©Visual Rebellion Myanmar/ Local Source

Saw Nimrod Andrew, Secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Karen National Union (KNU), explained the backdrop of the comeback of armed conflict in neighbouring Karen (Kayin) State during a conference hosted by the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand in January 2022: “Tensions escalated after a military raid on Lay Kay Kaw on 14 December 2021. Lay Kay Kaw had been the model of a peaceful village where displaced local people would return, and then politicians, activists, non-violent protesters, journalists, and CDM teachers came to live here starting from April 2021, after the anti-coup public protests had been broken up in the cities.”

From December 2021, more than 20,000 people have been displaced in surrounding villages, and some have crossed the Thai-Myanmar border to temporary shelters at sites such as Man Mae Kone Kane (Mahawan Moei Khong cowshed) in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, Thailand. Some women there had to deliver babies while lying on the floor of farm buildings. The conditions are difficult, and the situation is tenuous. As Saw Nimrod Andrew explained: “Thai authorities have supported them, and Thai people have helped them a lot, but immigration authorities do see this as a temporary solution. If the current situation is prolonged, it will overwhelm local civil society groups. Therefore, long-term support from international organisations is necessary.”

“It’s politically dangerous for the Thai government to quantify the amount of people who come over,” says Patrick Phongsathorn, *Human Rights* Advocacy Specialist at Fortify Rights. “Thai authorities have housed these refugees in what they call ‘temporary safety areas’, but they have not allowed UNHCR or other aid agencies access. It’s questionable how these areas have been run, what aid has been given, what kind of protection screening mechanisms, if any, have been put in place.”

There have been refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border since the mid-1980s. At times, hundreds of thousands of people crossed into Thailand to escape fighting in the country’s long-running conflict between the government and ethnic minority armies in the eastern parts of Myanmar. These nine camps inside Thailand currently hold 91,000 people, according to the UN, with a further 5,000 refugees outside the camps classed as urban refugees. The Border Consortium (TBC) provides food and shelter to more than 80,000 people staying in the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.



Mae La Refugee Camp, Tak Province, Thailand, has been opened in 1984
©Visual Rebellion Myanmar / Laure Siegel

During the conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Thailand, Sally Thompson, Executive Director of TBC until June 2022, highlighted the challenges faced on the border: “Some people attempt to cross the border, but Thailand sends them back to Myanmar as soon as fighting subsides in the immediate area, and they have to camp on the banks of the river. But this is not an issue of localized conflict. This is a crisis affecting the whole country and is caused by a brutal military regime. We

know that it's really a last resort for people to choose to cross international borders illegally, so it shows how desperate the situation is. The international community and the UNHCR have no access to those areas because of the quarantine imposed by the Thai government, which is scared of humanitarian staff bringing COVID and other diseases into the camps. People need to be moved to an area of safety away from the border where they can receive services as soon as possible. For the moment, the Thai authorities say they are in control and don't want help from other agencies."



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Thailand has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention on refugees. "Thai authorities regularly breach the international legal principle of non-refoulement, a key principle when handling people who fear for their safety," says Patrick Phongsathorn, "In April 2021, we documented at least 2,000 people being forced across the river into Karen State."

In April 2022, aid workers reported that still, around 12,000 displaced persons were living in makeshift tents on the banks of the Thaung Yin (Moei) River following months of armed clashes. From June 2022, most people had been pushed off the banks following an incursion of a Burmese military jet into Thailand territory and the beginning of a heavy monsoon season and have retreated further into the hills. Access to these communities has been made very difficult from within Myanmar, as well as from Thailand, as the Thai authorities have a policy to push back people who attempt to cross the border without paperwork.

According to the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Thai authorities sent back 300 Karen students fleeing fighting in Karen State in late September 2022. Two boats collided on the Moei River. One sank. Luckily no one died.



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But in early October 2022, Ma Theingi, a 25-year old CDM nurse living in a village in Karen State was shopping for groceries in a border market. She saw Thai police raiding the place looking to arrest illegal immigrants, and out of panic, she jumped into the river and drowned. She leaves a four-year-old somewhere in Karen state, People's Spring reported.

Political considerations, Patrick Phongsathorn says, dictate what happens along the border. "Thailand has hosted pretty sizable refugee populations for forty years, and they really want to avoid having that situation again with the recent refugees. Thailand's laws and policies criminalise seeking refugee status. That pushes people to lead a life in the shadows, under constant fear of extortion, arbitrary arrest and detention and forced return. That, in turn drives people into modern slavery. The Thai government's relations with the Burmese junta also play a part in how refugees are treated."

THE RAKHINE FAULTLINE

On the western side of the country, the situation in Rakhine state has, over the last few years, been anything but peaceful, and tensions are only intensifying. On 21 December 2018, fighting erupted between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw in a village belonging to the Mro, a subgroup of the Rakhine ethnicity, in Kyauktaw Township. Ma Aye Khin, a Mro woman, had to flee to Kyauktaw town when artillery shells began hitting her village. Since then, she has been living at Taungmin Kala camp alongside over 500 other Mro, including 200 women and nearly 100 children.



©Local Source

There are many immediate needs in the Taungmin Kala camp. Explains Ma Aye Khin: “During the winter, there are not enough warm clothes, so children and the elderly are exposed to the cold. The amount of water we can get in the camp is restricted. Fetching water is possible outside of the camp, but sometimes the local Mro community gets angry with us because they don’t want to share their own scarce resources with IDPs. We are afraid to return home.”

Across the Naf River and another border, close to a million Rohingya refugees remain languishing in unsafe camps in Bangladesh. Most fled from ethnic persecution in Myanmar, following campaigns from Buddhist Rakhine nationalists and later the Myanmar military, which began in October 2016. An investigation into genocide is currently being held at the International Court of Justice.

There, they fear the fires that have broken out and engulfed parts of the camps numerous times over the last several years, as documented in this photo essay. Rashid, a volunteer for the Rohingya Charity Organization, explains: "The situation regarding the victims of the fire is very critical. More than 500 houses were burned in Camp 16 at Shafiulla Khata on 9 January 2022. People are now living in temporary shelters and need food, water, and blankets as soon as possible. NGOs are working with us but only give us a bit. It's not enough as the fires keep happening, and there is no accountability about who may be starting them and why. There are so many people who need help."

Although Bangladesh is sheltering more than one million refugees without support, the UN humanitarian appeal for the Rohingya refugees has received only a third of the funding required in 2022. State minister for foreign affairs, Shahriar Alam, told the Guardian that financial support for the Rohingya has decreased each year and he fears even less money would be donated next year because of rising costs globally.

An unsettling series of killings of Rohingya leaders has also been unfolding since September 2021, when a prominent representative of the community, Mohib Ullah, was shot by gunmen in the office of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, the organisation he was chairing in Kutupalong refugee camp.

Bangladeshi authorities identified more than 25 suspects, including members from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an ethnic insurgency group claiming to fight for the interests of the persecuted community against the Myanmar military. As ARSA relocated and expanded its network in the refugee camps in the neighbouring country, they are accused of intimidating the residents into thinking that they offer the only legitimate and efficient way out for the community. The leaders who favor a pacifist approach and speak out against ARSA's alleged criminal activities live in deep fear.

On October 12th, 2022, Maulvi Mohammad Yunus and Mohammad Anwar, two leaders of Camp 13 were killed by a mob. Bangladeshi journalist Muktadir Rashid reports that 15 Rohingya people were shot dead from August to October 2022 "over extortion, gangland fighting or helping Bangladesh authorities to trace criminals."

Nowhere is safe for the Rohingya. Saed, a social worker with the

NGO Solidarités International, discusses the situation for the ones who still reside in Rakhine State, Myanmar: "As of January 2022, there are around 100,000 Rohingya in camps around the capital Sittwe. The situation has worsened since the military coup as the SAC has started a new process of collecting a list of names, and they are investigating by taking photographs of each family member who stays in the camps. The same process has happened in Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships to keep Rohingya concentrated in IDP camps."

Rohingya have been forced to remain in 13 camps in Sittwe Township, five camps in Pauktaw Township, two camps in Kyauktaw Township, and one camp in Myebon Township. Kaman, another predominantly Muslim group in Rakhine who, unlike Rohingya, are recognized by the central state of Myanmar

as an 'official' ethnic group, mostly live in a camp in Kyaukphyu Township. Because the Rohingya are not an 'official' ethnic group, they have no citizenship rights and, therefore, no freedom of movement inside Myanmar. Additionally, all Muslims living in Rakhine, including official ethnic groups like Kaman, need travel authorization. Thousands have been forced to sell their family's property in order to finance a perilous journey organized by traffickers through a series of checkpoints to Yangon. Their end goal is to embark by boat to Malaysia in hopes of life opportunities that have been denied to them over generations in their native Rakhine State. Unfortunately, many aspiring migrants are regularly arrested by law enforcement, who send them back to Rakhine State or sentence them to jail under Article 13 of the Immigration Act.

AÑRÁ ROHINGYA **(We are Rohingya)**

by Shahida Win

We are Rohingya
citizens of Myanmar.
We are not stateless
nor illegal immigrants.
We are human beings
and belong to mankind.
We were born free
and deserve to be at peace.
To dream of a joyful life
and a future in our motherland.
A home we seek with love,
the place we've always been
and we truly belong.
We are the Rohingya
from Arakan.

Photo: Poem

On 29 November and 22 December 2021, near the Bangladeshi-Myanmar Border, dozens of Rohingya, who were on their way to Yangon or already kept in safe houses by traffickers, were arrested and sentenced to five years imprisonment by the SAC. Saed explains: “Nowadays, people stay in the camps as there are very few possibilities to leave because of the restrictions imposed on our community. People are also scared of being jailed. International NGOs who try to help face a lot of obstacles to provide their services in the camps. They have to request official approval to bring aid into the camp, as well as secure travel authorizations, which take a long time.”

Back in Bangladesh, some Rohingya people still risk everything to get out of the camps by embarking via human traffickers on a boat to Malaysia. They get into debt-holes to finance the journey and ultimately pay with their lives. In early October 2022, the bodies of three Rohingya women between 18 and 20 years old washed up on Shilkhali beach in the coastal town of Halbunia. More than 20 people remain missing after their boat ran into a storm in the Bay of Bengal.

Saed says, “The main needs for the community are job opportunities, education, and healthcare, but access to those is often based upon citizenship rights and requires the official recognition of Rohingya as an ethnic group in Myanmar.”

THE NORTHERN CLASHES



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In Kachin and northern Shan States, ongoing clashes between armed groups regularly drive thousands of villagers to temporary shelters and monasteries for decades. This situation has dramatically worsened since the military coup. Since March 2021, there has been renewed instability, with more security checks, arrests, and explosions, as well as the increased presence of EAOs such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The movement of civilians has become greatly restricted, and fundamental services, such as schooling, are difficult to access. IDPs living in camps in Kachin State mostly use Chinese SIMs to access the internet, but the connection is often cut. Young people are unable to attend online education services due to such technical limitations. IDPs cannot easily move around outside of camps due to the heavy military presence and increased use of checkpoints. IDP women face severe challenges in terms of employment opportunities, capacity development, the increased price of commodities, and the ongoing responsibility of needing to provide for their families.

On 12 July 2021, Lwee Mi Mi, a 26-year-old Ta'ang (Palaung) woman, was forced to flee her village in Momauk Township, Kachin State. She explains her perilous journey: "I stayed at my relative's house in Bhamo for two weeks. I then went from Takundai camp to Three miles camp, and finally, on 25 December 2021, I moved to Nam Hlaing camp. Heavy gunfire was launched in our village, and heavy artillery was dropped on

our house. It did not stop. People died. Some homes were destroyed by fire.” Lwee Mi Mi’s house was hit by artillery shells, so she was forced to flee with her disabled father, her mother, and her two-and-a-half-year-old son.

Lwee Mi Mi’s family can stay in Nang Hlaing village for free, but they must provide their food. Her money has run out, and she has had to leave with her parents and her child to move to Yangon, over 1,000 kilometers away, to try her luck. A year after the military coup, disruption to the 2021 rice harvest season caused by the armed conflict is leading to food shortages across Myanmar and working abroad to make ends meet has become a very difficult option.



©Local Source

During previous crises, people from Bhamo and Moemauk in Kachin State and northern Shan State were able to migrate to China in search of work. However, in April 2020, the Chinese government closed all gates at the China-Myanmar border following the COVID-19 outbreak. After positive cases emerged in the area, residents living along the border said the number of border guards increased, and access was further tightened. China has also worked to limit illegal border crossings. As covered in a [prior report](#) from Researcher’s Republic, in September 2020, Chinese authorities began constructing a permanent fence equipped with modern surveillance technology, and they also expelled most of the Myanmar migrant workers from the Chinese side.

Daw Win Win Shwe, is a Ta’ang (Palaung) woman who has been living in Namkham’s Ne Win Ni camp in Shan State for the past

decade due to conflict between the Burmese army and local EAOs. She describes the challenges the new fence presents: “People from Myanmar are not allowed to enter China at all, making it extremely difficult for displaced persons to seek refuge on the other side or look for work like we used to. People return from China to Myanmar, but no one is able to enter China.”

She laments the current situation: “After the coup, I was at a loss for words. It seemed like I was being pushed off a cliff, and all my hopes were destroyed. Everyone feels delighted if they can have their own home, even if it is only ten feet in length. Agriculture can be done on one’s own land. We had such great hopes, but now I am concerned about the war that will occur at some point in the foreseeable future because troops are stationed near here. We must prepare to flee again.”

Recurring violence, and the confusion around where safe refuge may exist, is a major fear of IDPs. As Daw Win Win Shwe explains: “The fighting continues to occur. Children are fearful when heavy artillery strikes occur, and we have no idea where to go after packing all of our belongings. Do we turn around and go back to where we came from? Do we have to take refuge in the gully? When we had to escape in 2012, it was the most terrifying experience I had ever had.”

Like Daw Win Win Shwe, IDPs across Myanmar want the fighting to end as soon as possible so they may return home. The SAC has told IDPs that they can return to their villages if



©Local Source

they wish, but those living between hills are scared of the potential damage to their villages and their own safety if fighting was to resume.

On the night of 23 October 2022, a horrifying warfare crime in A Nang Pa, Hpakant Township, Kachin State, plunged the country into shock. Four airstrikes by the Myanmar Air Force hit a crowd at a concert intended for the 62nd Anniversary Ceremony of the founding of KIO (Kachin Independence Organisation). At least 80 civilians were killed, including famous musicians, as well as high-ranking KIO officials and soldiers. More than a hundred people were injured but denied access to medical aid by Burmese troops.

The National Unity Government said that since seizing power, the military had carried out nearly 240 airstrikes targeting the civilian population throughout Myanmar, “resulting in [the] deaths of over 200 civilians and destruction of many houses and religious buildings.”

It is expected that in the aftermath of the A Nang Pa tragedy, the deadliest airstrike since the coup, the resistance in the northern regions against central military rule will only get stronger and battles erupt in most districts.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW FRONTLINES

The first recorded clash between the Myanmar military and PDFs occurred in Mindat, in Chin State, which had previously been considered a “battle-free” town about 100 kilometers from the Indian border. On 26 April 2021, civilian defense forces ambushed a convoy of six military trucks after the army had refused to release seven detained pro-democracy youth activists. Soldiers responded by firing rockets and other artillery into Mindat town and martial law was imposed two weeks later. The Chin Human Rights Organization reported that during this time the military used local youth as human shields, occupied schools and hospitals, destroyed property, and conducted heavy-weapon attacks by land and air during a three-day siege on the town. The civilian forces, largely armed with homemade ‘Tumee’ hunting rifles and makeshift explosives, claimed to have killed dozens of soldiers before retreating into the surrounding hills when troops stormed Mindat town.



©Local Source

Residents of Mindat town, who had previously never experienced armed conflict, were forced to flee. According to a Mindat resident in her early twenties, “Nobody thought we would have to flee for such a long time. Mindat has never experienced fighting before. Since this was the first time, most

people were unaware of what to do and left their valuables at home. The majority of our residents left, but some elderly who were unable to go were left behind. Those who remained in the town experienced difficulties as shopkeepers who fled the area had closed their stores. Everyone, those who fled and those who stayed, was in danger.”

Many other areas across Myanmar would soon become similar to Mindat as communities that previously had little or no experience with armed conflict suddenly found themselves dealing with displacement caused by violence involving armed forces.



Since the beginning of 2022, hundreds of villages have been partially or completely burned by the Burmese army as it continues to use widespread arson in the central heartlands of Myanmar, areas that are chiefly Bamar and Buddhist. Large-scale atrocities have been reported in Sagaing and

Magway Regions, geographically new conflict-affected areas with no existing aid network nor facility, in addition to a terrible record of the Burmese army conduct.

A woman from Myo Thit hamlet recalls her escape to a neighboring monastery and into the forest of Khin Oo Township, Sagaing Region: “We had to flee and didn’t have time to bring blankets. There aren’t enough blankets at the monastery for all of the IDPs. We cannot get a good night’s sleep because it’s winter. Those who sought refuge in the forest have been unwell because of the excessive wind and cold temperatures. I’ve been sick because, due to our cultural norms, I haven’t been able to wear shoes in the monastery.”

Daw Nyo, a villager from Yae Kyaw, recounts the harrowing experience: “Large planes were flying overhead while we fled. We had to run all night into the middle of the forest and maneuver around thorns and bushes.” This was her first time experiencing the sound of planes and bombs. Although when she was young, Daw Nyo’s grandmother told her about similar experiences of the Japanese Imperial Army’s invasion of Burma during the Second World War. Says Daw Nyo: “What my grandmother said about her own experience of fleeing is what

we are feeling right now. We were told that she had to live in the jungle in order to avoid bombs and airstrikes. Now, that era of my grandmother's is back. We feel that we have to face the worst conditions."

Unfortunately, there is no specific rescue team in Pauk Township to support IDPs. Rather, there is only sporadic support from local communities and revolutionary groups, and IDPs are struggling to survive. There are no toilets available, so IDPs have to fulfill their hygiene and sanitary needs in the forest. IDPs cannot return to their village to get drinking water because it is too far from the place where they are currently sheltering and, moreover, most everything has burned down in the village. Daw Nyo explains: "There is not as much water to drink as we all need. It is only enough to survive. People can only bring water in buckets from nearby villages." IDPs prefer to drink water from wells rather than from lakes, which they believe contain harmful particles.

The April hot season has brought increasingly difficult temperatures to many IDP camps, where temperatures may regularly reach as high as 43°C. In many emergency settlements, IDPs can only find respite from the heat under palm trees while trying to find better-covered places for children and the elderly to rest. Reports Daw Myo: "I do not know how to live, and I feel listless. We have to stay in the shade of the trees during the afternoon. Some people suffer from urinary incontinence and others from high blood pressure when the weather is so hot."



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This ongoing military campaign is an attempt to put down an unprecedented series of resistance maneuvers by guerilla cells belonging to PDFs, the armed wing of the NUG, and EAOs. In townships where anti-SAC resistance is particularly strong, thousands of houses have been destroyed by the Burmese army and Pyu Saw Htee militias as acts of retaliation. According to The Irrawaddy, “Pyu Saw Htee” are widely viewed as military stooges and reportedly formed by township-level offices of the General Administration Department. They consist of active and retired military personnel, civil servants, members of the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party, ultranationalists, and members hired for a daily wage of 5,000 kyats.”

Beyond the harsh conditions IDPs have had to experience when fleeing, a major concern remains with the loss of their houses and the occupation of their villages by pro-SAC vigilante groups. Says a member of the rescue team of the Ayadaw Township Peoples Administration, which operates under the NUG: “Nearly 400 people have fled from Thitkyingyi village, where Pyu Saw Htee and troops are now stationed. They have stolen all of the possessions from the houses.”

Around 400 people from the villages of Thitkyingyi, Naungkyiaing, Shwe Kha, and Keba are being provided with food and shelter, thanks to some support from local people and the NUG. Reports a member of a rescue team: “Some villages are in near ruins, and only Pyu Saw Htee members are left. Those from villages close to the army camps do not dare return home.” The NUG does not provide a fixed amount of support per month nor per person, and distribution of resources to IDPs occurs based on data gathered by local rescue teams, who identify the most urgent needs and most vulnerable households.

In an interview conducted in September 2022 by our team, NUG Minister of Women, Children and Youth affairs Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe explains: “We have 580 CDM staff who don’t want to work for the junta and who are working for our Ministry on ground level. We also formed a women's network with representatives from the whole of Myanmar working together to implement quickly and effectively. Some of them are IDP camp leaders, and one of the main missions of the network is to help the IDP. They send us information about their needs, then we can send money or support to that area. We work with our women MPs who are still in their constituencies and existing political parties in the ethnic states, such as the Karen Women Organisation in Kayin state or the Karenni Women Organisation in Kayah state. Our budget is made of both donations from

international partners and our people. But our needs are very high, our country is in crisis, so it's not enough, and we need much more to be able to fully operate and ensure rehabilitation for IDP, protection of women, etc".

As per data gathered by the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar up to September 15th, 2022, over 36,000 houses and buildings have been burned since the coup. 70% were destroyed in Sagaing Region. Data for Myanmar completes, "Sagaing Region, Magway Region, and Chin State are the three most affected regions as they lost 20,153 houses, 5,418 houses, and 1,474 houses, respectively, as of 25 August 2022. The trend shows that in 2022 April, May and June were the highest months. A total of 15,000 civilian homes were lost within three months."

A woman from Myo Thit hamlet in Khin Oo Township, Sagaing Region, worries about the conditions of the village she had to flee: "Dalans' (informers of the SAC) give Tatmadaw soldiers the location of houses where people who are somehow connected to PDFs live. When people flee to a safe location, soldiers then seize or demolish these houses. I am worried about my village because Sagaing Region has been the worst in terms of the number of villages being burnt down. I can't afford to rebuild a house since I don't have enough money. I will always be concerned about our well-being if this political chaos doesn't end."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN ALL-OUT WAR ON CIVILIANS

FOOD INSECURITY



The Myanmar Food Security Cluster (Myanmar-FSC) coordinates the response of the UN and aid organizations to food crises in the country. In a report from February 2022, Myanmar-FSC predicted a grim future: “The burning of villages and displacement of inhabitants in areas such as Sagaing and Magway – where much of the country's crops are produced - will disrupt sowing and harvesting. Reduction in production in such areas will lead to a deficit in the overall food supply and will further escalate the already high food prices. The conflict is impacting agricultural supply chains and prices, and retail rice prices have increased 11% since the military takeover.”

Food security and safe access to agricultural lands and markets have been disrupted in Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay Regions as well as in Mon, Karen (Kayin), Kachin, and Karenni (Kayah) States, and half the country is now living in poverty. IDPs fear they won't have anything to return to, even if the opportunity presents itself.

Under the NLD administration, Khin Mar Soe's husband was the Administrator of Thitkyingyi village. After the military coup, the couple joined CDM and were forced to flee last October when their house was burned down by a Pyu Saw Htee militia. With the rainy season approaching, the wish to live in her village is stronger than ever. As Khin Mar Soe notes: "I want to go back because it is going to rain. It is time for farmers to work."

But when the paddy-sowing period, lasting from June through August, arrived this year, so much had been burned, and people were on the run. Khin Mar Soe says: "Due to fighting and instability, we are unable to plant paddy as we did before during the summer months. All year round, we used to have no worries because we had enough rice. But now, we and our fellow villagers have no idea how to survive the coming months. We can't buy enough food, especially meat, because vendors won't come to my village. We only eat vegetables and are unhealthy and malnourished."

In December 2021, the World Food Program described the situation in Myanmar as "the most acute humanitarian crisis the country has faced since Cyclone Nargis in 2008" and warned that the number of people needing emergency food supplies would nearly double from 2.4 million in 2021 to 4 million in 2022.

Before the military coup, the World Food Program (WFP), and in coordination with domestic organizations, was one of the main providers of assistance in IDP camps, with 15-17,000 MMK (USD 7-8) provided per person each month. Some



assistance for IDP camps has been able to continue post-coup. For example, the WFP, Save the Children, UNICEF, and Myittar Resource Foundation are providing assistance to over 200 IDPs in Kachin Baptist Convention camp two in Kutkai, Shan State. According to an official from this camp, additional support is needed, most especially food and kitchen-related items.

The report of Myanmar-FSC urges for a restructuring of humanitarian aid in Myanmar to the most conflict-affected parts of the country: "In general, food security partners are not operating in the parts of Myanmar most affected by conflict in

2021. Humanitarian partners have traditionally focused on Rakhine, Kachin and northern Shan – the areas which had experienced more conflict in the past. However, a shift in the conflict dynamics in Myanmar has not yet led to a reallocation of resources to target new populations most affected by conflict. Sagaing Region experienced the most conflict in 2021, followed by Kachin and northern Shan; however, humanitarian partners continue to work in Rakhine, Kachin and southern Shan, with some shift towards working in peri-urban Yangon and Mandalay. The allocation of funds away from Sagaing and Magway may also be a result of OCHA's decision to focus on peri-urban areas under the Interim Emergency Response Plan for Myanmar, which was released in June 2021."

In Myanmar Humanitarian Update n.22, UN-OCHA invokes a lack of resources: "Humanitarian partners have continued to respond to new needs, reaching 3.1 million people with at least one form of assistance in the first half year of 2022. However, a shortfall in funding and access constraints have hindered partners from delivering the range of relief required, leading to significant unmet needs. The 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is only 20% funded, leaving a gap of US\$660 million. Partners are consequently being forced to make tough decisions about the prioritisation of their assistance. Worryingly, funding remains below 2021 levels despite a dramatic increase in needs in 2022."

For now, support to refugees is mostly limited to funds provided through the solidarity of local communities, which is often managed by religious or political organisations. Even small-scale charity carries great risks of being arrested for collaboration with EAOs that have been labelled "terrorist" by the SAC.

LACK OF ACCESS

Inside Myanmar, actors face numerous barriers when providing access to IDP camps. The neighbouring governments of Thailand and India have also heavily restricted the activities of groups involved in cross-border aid.



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A project coordinator for a humanitarian aid organisation working in Karen (Kayin) State explains: “Our organisation cannot work openly as there are security checkpoints everywhere. We have to therefore keep a low profile when delivering food and clothes to IDPs. It is also difficult to collect data on how many people are staying in the camps, so when we deliver assistance, we often face the issue of not having enough items for everyone. Moreover, it is difficult to determine who might be afflicted by COVID-19 as we don’t have the testing capabilities. And when people are fleeing from conflict, measures such as wearing masks and social distancing cannot be realistically applied. One thing the IDPs in Karen State need is medicine, but many organisations must focus on providing food and clothes because of restrictions on providing medical supplies. IDPs who cannot afford to pay traffickers cannot migrate to Thailand, and they cannot return to their villages either because soldiers destroyed their houses and stole their property. Many are trying to survive in informal IDP camps in the jungle, which are very difficult to access.”

During a conference in January 2022 in Bangkok, Bernard Doyle, the Deputy Director of the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, echoes these popular sentiments about the need for international support: “This is absolutely a regional and international situation, and the intensification of a decades-long situation. For the moment, support only comes from local communities, and the only solution is to secure access so international and national agencies can take over and bring relief. All the solutions we need are in the Rakhine Commission Report[1], but for the moment, international agencies are stuck in the daily grind of dealing with government agencies under military rule.”

In an attempt to remain in-country, some international organisations have fired staff who has joined the CDM, such as Medical Action for Myanmar, according to Khit Thit Media. In order to continue their operations, many, but not all, international organizations make accommodations with the SAC, which remains very reluctant to permit the authorization necessary to travel to those areas most affected by conflict and access the communities within. The NUG says it is setting up an oversight and punitive process for international organizations doing business with the junta, i.e. those who sign or renew memoranda of understanding, pay taxes, and subject their activities to junta directives.



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Sally Thompson of The Border Consortium (TBC) explains the ongoing challenges facing international actors and the essential role of local actors: “The international community does not have access to the conflict areas where the IDPs are. Only local networks and CSOs, which have been built over decades of instability, can function there, and they have had to shift their priorities from development activities back to humanitarian assistance. They know best who needs what and how to deliver it, so it is essential that these people are supported in bringing food, medication, and education to people who are displaced. The international community has to be flexible and provide resources to those groups so they can scale up their operations. We cannot wait for a ceasefire agreement. We need to now help those who have access to these people, and the only way is to engage with the NUG and EAOs. We also have to ensure that neighbouring countries keep their borders open so that people are able to receive asylum and assistance abroad as long as the conflict is escalating.”



In a [fact sheet](#), the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) states that "From 1992 to 2020, border-based Karen organizations assisted over 1.7 million vulnerable persons living in Burma with over US\$ 32 million of aid, mainly for rice. This aid has been delivered directly to the beneficiaries without any financial, military or political benefits going to Burma's military governments since these programs began. From February 2021 to July 2022, Karen Community Based Organisations (CBO) raised funds from the diaspora and international donors and provided US\$8.7 million dollars of food aid to over 388,000 beneficiaries. This border-based aid was of vital importance, as

aid from inside Burma had trickled to a halt due to the SAC regime's weaponization of humanitarian assistance, including blockage, diversion and destruction of aid deliveries. Despite the deepening crisis, the level of international donor assistance has not kept pace with the growing humanitarian needs or even the pre-existing aid-delivery capacity of the border-based Karen groups. Until now, half of the funding provided to the Karen groups has come from private donations, mainly from the diaspora, and this is not sustainable. Based on current estimates, Karen CBOs are facing a food aid funding shortfall of at least US\$ 17 million dollars for the next 12 months alone."

In a quarterly briefer from April 2022, the Karenni Human Rights Group (KnHRG) warned of a similarly critical situation: "As junta forces continue to attack villages and cities, their campaign has expanded to include IDP camps. Assaults on IDP camps force constant movement of IDPs in the Karenni state, as well as to neighbouring states and regions. In addition to fearing for safety and the risk of violent attacks by the Burmese military, IDPs must worry about the shortage of supplies as humanitarian aid and assistance are blocked by the Burmese junta. As food security is threatened and access to necessary supplies, such as medicines and clean water, are limited, IDPs are faced with the possibilities of starvation, disease, and, unfortunately, death. This is not a problem that will solve itself with the current noninterference policy most countries are adopting. Until the international community enacts targeted sanctions against military businesses, implements a coordinated global arms embargo and a no-fly zone, coordinates emergency humanitarian and cross-border aid, and designates safe zones for IDPs, the Burmese junta will continue to commit crimes against humanity, war crimes, and human rights violations with impunity."

Some actors have already been caught in state-initiated violence. For example, as reported internationally, such as by CBS News, on 24 December 2021, 35 civilians, including two staff from the INGO Save the Children, were shot and their bodies burned by Tatmadaw soldiers during an offensive in Moso village, Hpruso Township, Karenni (Kayah) State. KnHRG has recommended that the International Criminal Court accept the declaration lodged by the NUG under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute, accepting the Court's jurisdiction with respect to international crimes committed in Myanmar since 1 July 2002.

MINEFIELDS OUTSIDE

A report by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) estimated before the military coup that it would take 20 years to clear all landmines in Myanmar. Daw Win Win Shwe from Ne Win Ni camp notes: “There were a lot of mines in our village in June 2016. Then in December 2017, the military launched airstrikes against us. Many things were damaged, and several mines were discovered. I don't think we will dare to return until the mines are cleared. We cannot live in such dangerous circumstances.”

Unfortunately, this harrowing long-term safety issue is only worsening and expanding. On January 21, 2022, a six-month pregnant woman and her young son were killed after they stepped on a landmine at Pawatphar village in Palaw Township, Tanintharyi Region. A resident quoted by the Democratic Voice of Burma said that around 40 Tatmadaw soldiers had occupied the village and planted mines around its perimeter out of fear of being attacked by PDFs.



In June 2021, the ICBL confirmed in a report that new use of landmines had been reported by both Burmese military forces and armed resistance groups in Chin State and Karenni (Kayah) State. At 43%, Rakhine State has the highest concentration of landmine casualties. The threat of landmines effectively bars IDPs from movement outside camps or informal settlements. Ma Aye Aye Khin, a female leader from Taung Min Kala camp in Kyauktaw Township, Rakhine State, is very concerned: “I do not dare return until the mines around our village have been cleared.”

TARGET FOR SOLDIERS

There are numerous risks for women when living in volatile conditions amongst various armed groups. In such a context, victims are often unable to seek any form of justice. Many women in IDP camps are physically and mentally vulnerable and often feel unsafe.

Women's feelings of fear peak when battalions of the Myanmar military station near IDP camps. They know that the presence of armed troops from any side of the conflict increases the likelihood of gender-based violence and abuses such as rape, forced marriage, and trafficking. The UN Population Fund and Danish Refugee Council surveyed women IDPs and reported the risks they face: "IDP women and girls are highly vulnerable due to the destruction of their coping mechanisms and community structure. Most of the respondents reported a feeling of fear and insecurity generated by the risk of their children being victims of human trafficking."

The COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup have been a double blow for women in Northern Myanmar, as many used to enter China to cut and sell sugar cane, which netted them around 200 yuan (USD 28), a much higher daily wage than what they would get for agricultural work in Myanmar. Such opportunities are vanishing due to the new fence. Amidst such hardships, the price of commodities has more than doubled due to disrupted border trade, with the price of one kg of potatoes rising from six to fifteen yuan (0.80 to 2 USD). The sharp rise in food prices is a burden for all displaced

women who are expected to provide for their children, and even more so for the widows of husbands who served in EAOs and were killed in combat.



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Many women have worked as farmers in rural areas, although the management of the land they once cultivated was based on community recognition, so they do not hold official land ownership documents. When they cannot work on their land, they have few other sources of income, and during times of conflict and also post-conflict, they become commodities. Some women and girls are trafficked and sold in neighbouring countries when facing such desperate economic conditions. As Daw May Sabe Phyu, the Director of the Gender Equality Network (GEN), explains in The Irrawaddy: “Every year hundreds of Myanmar women, especially from Shan and Kachin States, are trafficked to China as ‘brides.’ Many are tricked into traveling to China to seek job opportunities, while some are kidnapped and held against their will to be sold to Chinese men seeking wives.” An official report from 2019 documented 239 trafficking cases with 358 victims, including 196 cases of forced marriages with Chinese nationals.

In conflict-affected areas, women are at risk of being subjected to forced labor, torture, and sexual assault by soldiers and policemen. They are also at risk of being used as human shields. For example, as reported by the Karen Human Rights Group, after a confrontation between the Tatmadaw and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in Paing Kalan Done village tract in Kawkaraeik Township, Dooplaya District on 1 September 2021, Tatmadaw soldiers took 30-year-old Naw Mu Htee Kaung and forced her to march in front of them as they entered further into KNLA territory.

In an interview, Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe, NUG Minister of Women, Youths and Children Affairs, says: “It has always been hard for women in Myanmar because it’s a patriarchal society historically under military rule and culturally conservative. After the most recent coup, the situation became even worse because military power has greatly increased, and they use rape as a weapon to oppress the opposition groups. Whenever they burn houses and attack the communities, they find women to rape. They rape them in front of their husbands and in front of their fathers. They did it before in the ethnic states, now even in the cities, when they arrest people, especially the women, in police stations, they humiliate them in public, touching them, raping them.”



24/04/2022 - A memorial in Pyay, Bago Region against victims of sexual assault after two young women were reportedly assaulted, beaten and tortured by soldiers according to the testimony of another victim who has been released from Shwe Pyi Thar interrogation center, Sanchaung Township, Yangon (TW: sexual violence, torture: [Full Interview](#)).

FORCED PROMISCUITY



When conflict erupts, men typically stay behind to look after the property while women, children, and the elderly flee. If the conflict worsens, the men may follow their family members to IDP camps, but women nonetheless make up a sizable portion of the adult population in camps and face gender-specific challenges within. In Northern Myanmar, healthcare facilities are not accessible in most IDP camps, and it has been very difficult to access medicine as the route to Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, is now littered with checkpoints. Even those infected with COVID-19 lack basic medicines such as paracetamol.

The houses in the camps may be too small and are often built so close to one another. Water for hygienic use may be scarce, and there is often a lack of women's clothing and sanitary pads. Ma Aye Aye Khin, a female leader from Taung Min Kala camp in Kyauktaw Township, Rakhine State, observes: "When young women don't wear a brassiere because they don't have any or own only one, they have to suffer from the mockeries of the boys."

She tries to deal with issues around sexual harassment and early pregnancies inside the camp: "Families with bachelors are frequently at odds with families with virgins. Women taking

baths may be visible from some houses. Some women choose to forgive voyeurs, but others fight back against those households where men are watching them. As a result, we always have to deal with these matters and tensions between people on top of everything else.”

Domestic violence remains a problem and is often worsened by the high rate of drug use within the male population in the northern States. Women and children are often put at risk of sexual assault when they are forced to share a single room in a crowded shed. Moreover, women in IDP camps lack access to sustainable livelihoods, sufficient food, information, education, clean water, privacy, and healthcare.

Saw Nimrod Andrew offers recommendations: “A majority of displaced people are women, so we now need to move from protecting women to engaging women’s participation and leadership in conflict management, civilian protection, and offer humanitarian support to prevent sexual harassment. There is also a need for trauma and mental health support.”

In November 2021, the NUG Ministry of Health launched an online counselling service called Taing Pin Phaw which is led by medical doctors and open to everyone who feels the need to be helped with mental health issues.

■ TROUBLED PREGNANCY

Pregnant women are worried about giving birth, especially given the airstrikes the Tatmadaw has been conducting near IDP camps. A pregnant woman living in Mai Ja Yang camp explains: “Every morning, I hear gunshots from the Burmese army. It is not fighting between two groups. It is just unilateral actions from the soldiers. Even staying in the IDP camp makes me feel unsafe and insecure when I hear such frightening sounds. But I have to stay here as I cannot cross the border to work or go back home to farm.”

Says the humanitarian aid worker from Karen (Kayah) state: “The limited facilities in camps threaten women’s security as they may need items such as sanitary pads and private toilets. Mothers are worried about the health of their families and the education of their children. For pregnant women, it is often worse as they sometimes have to give birth in the forest, in caves, or in other areas in which there is a complete lack of healthcare facilities and access to maternal support.”

Two other examples from Karenni (Kayah) State show the difficulties pregnant women face and the tragedies that may ensue. In one instance, the Kantarwaddy Times reported that a woman who had been displaced several times suffered a miscarriage during her seventh month of



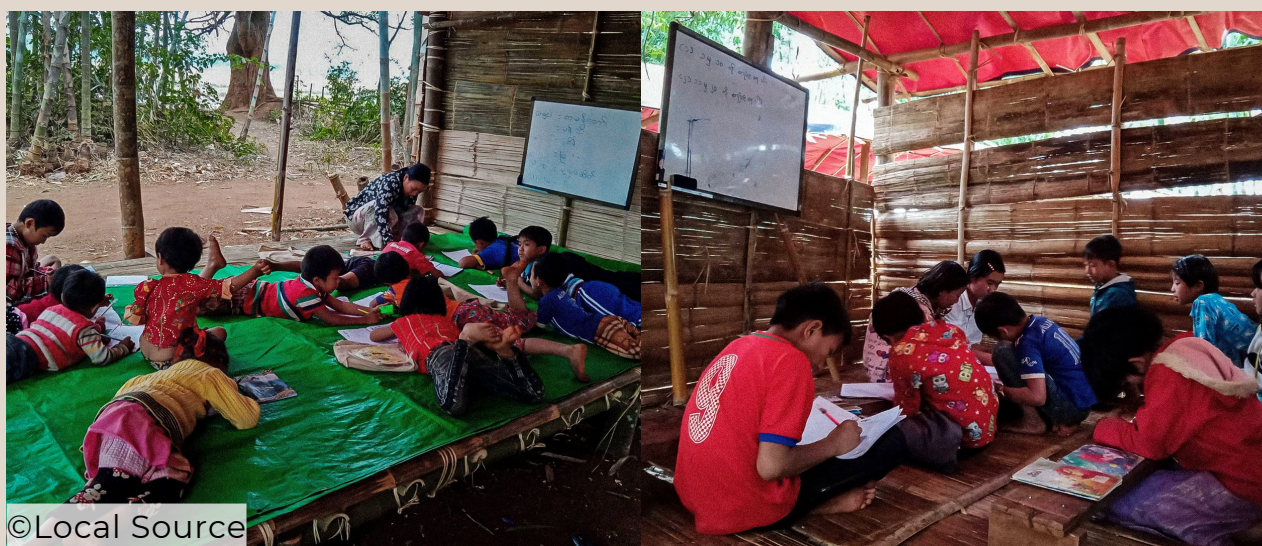
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pregnancy due to extended physical exhaustion and trauma. In another instance also reported by the Kantarawaddy Times, newborn twins died in an IDP camp near Demoso Township in October 2021 after their mother developed complications during childbirth and was unable to receive treatment in time.

In other instances, children are born stateless refugees when their mothers have had to deliver them in Thailand after fleeing conflict in Myanmar. On 20 December 2021, during heavy fighting between the military and Karen National Union in Lay Kay Kaw in Myawaddy Township, Karen (Kayin) State, a woman gave birth after crossing the Moei/Thaungyin River and arriving in Mae Sot, along the Thai-Myanmar border in western Thailand. With the help of a Thai doctor, she gave birth to a boy, and both were treated at the Mae Sot General Hospital.

OFF THE RECORDS AND ON THEIR OWN

IDPs face a lack of food, shelter, medicine, finances required to purchase basic essentials, and schooling for children. They are oftentimes only supported by local humanitarian partners and community groups. According to a 2020 [Human Rights Watch](#) country report: “IDPs face economic desperation from displacement by conflict, an inability to pursue viable livelihoods by farming, and little access to other forms of employment.”



One primary school teacher interviewed by our team, who had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), had to flee with her family in May 2021 when heavy artillery shells landed near her house in Six Miles Village, Demoso Township, Karenni state. Since then, she has been living in her aunt's village, just a little further away from the violence, and the decision to not relocate to an IDP camp was a hard one: “My father always has a cough and my mother's health would have worsened if we lived in an IDP camp, so we chose to stay with relatives. But this means we don't have any access to donated food and clothes.”

The schoolteacher had assumed that IDPs residing in the homes and villages of relatives would receive some assistance, even if less than the support received by those registered in camps. However, she discovered that families like hers must provide for themselves: “My mother still must earn an honest living by selling sticky rice dumplings and engaging in small-scale farming. I'm not happy with the fact that we haven't received any support because we aren't staying in the IDP camps. We are similarly impacted because we have been displaced due to fighting and have lost our houses and our jobs. Yet some cities are still quiet and undisturbed by clashes between armed groups.”

She continues to work hard for the survival of herself and her nine family members: “I was a teacher, but I also used to help my family, who cultivated rice for a living. Now we have had to abandon our farming activities due to the conflict. We cannot afford to buy vegetables, so the only thing we can do now is grow onions in the backyard of a shop. We are struggling a lot.”



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Many refugee families must now rely on male and female members working outside the camps. Initially, Ma Aye Khin, a Mro woman from Rakhine state, moved to the city, but even this option may no longer be possible. As she explains: “I had to leave my mother in the camp and try to provide for our family. But since most of us make our living from farming, we were not familiar with the jobs in the city and our life was tough.” Following the military coup, many factories were closed due to a lack of employment in the cities, and so many people were forced to return to the camps despite most camps not having any assistance programs. Ma Aye Khin discusses the burdens carried by IDP youth since the coup: “Some are still trying to work in Yangon. Some live with their family in the camps. All must support schooling for their siblings and the costs of living for their relatives. All are terrified of the army.”

From an IDP camp in Magway, Daw Nyo wants above all for the military to leave her village so that she and her neighbours may return to their lives as soon as possible: “All of this is because of the disproportion of weapons. Sometimes I wish we had good weapons as I am eager to fight against the soldiers myself. I’m a woman, and I am getting a little old, but if I was as strong as a young person, I would fight them.”

Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe, NUG Minister for Women, Youth and Children’s Affairs, urges for our collective attention: “I would like the international community to not close its eyes, to not shut its mouth. The military is perpetrating genocide against our people, killing children, raping women, attacking schools and hospitals. We need to take action against this barbarous military. If the international community recognizes us as the legitimate government of Myanmar, we could easily receive international support and funding, we could transform the military into a professional army, and we could fully control the situation. Now the military can only control the big cities and fight with jet warplanes in the countryside. So first, other countries should stop selling fuel to the junta. This is why NUG should be the legitimate government so they can control this sort of issue and save our people.”

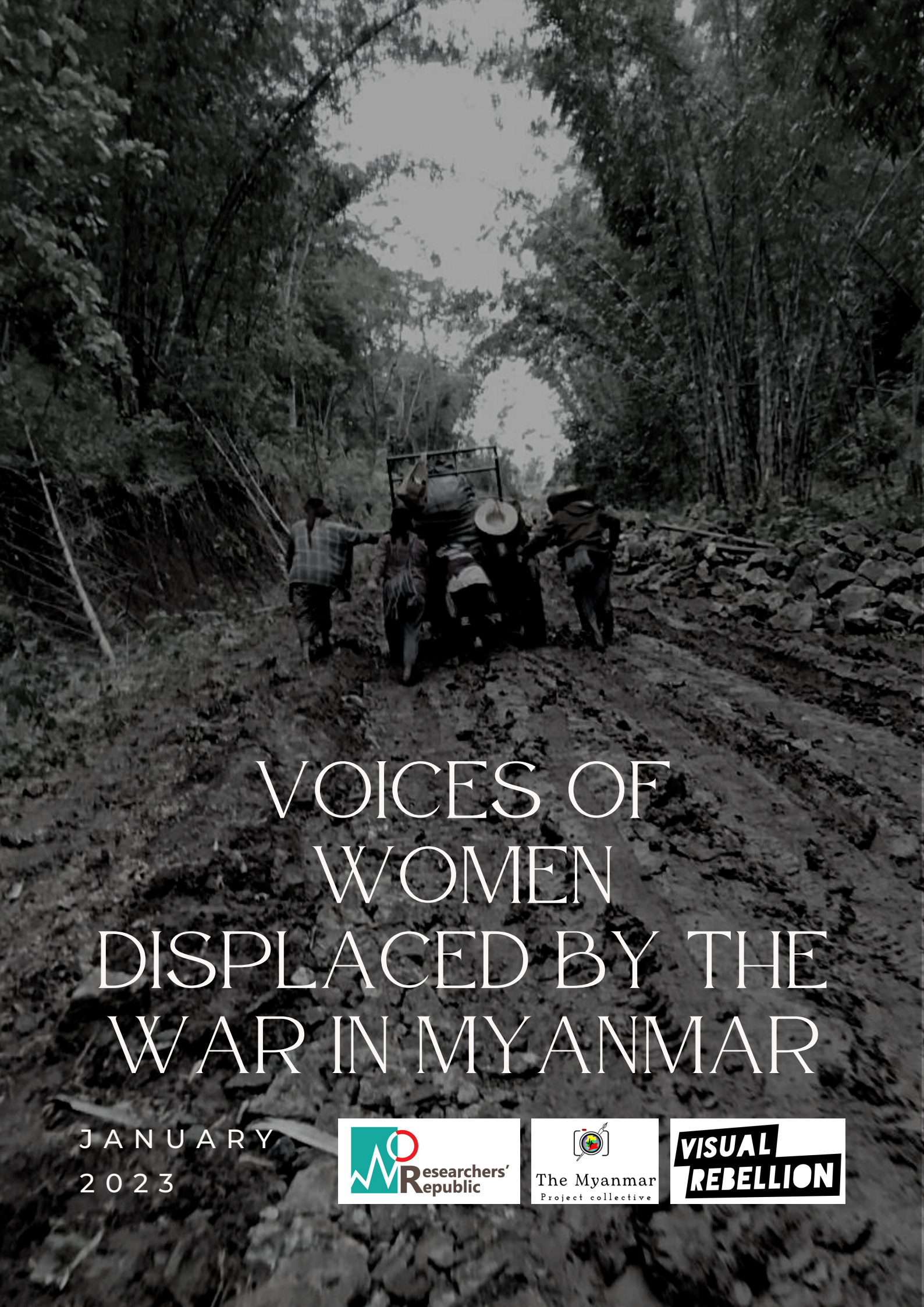


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CONCLUSION

Endemic conflicts in Myanmar have, for decades, affected women. The effects may, at times, be similar to those experienced by men, but women also have to deal with gender-specific social, economic, physical, and psychological vulnerabilities and needs during and after conflict. In conflict-affected areas, high rates of forced recruitment by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and casualties have placed significant burdens on an increasing number of female-headed households. With few or no job opportunities and with a growing absence of male relatives to provide for households, women struggle to provide for children and elders within their families. Moreover, forced displacement and a general lack of access to information about family members who have joined armed groups have contributed to trauma, stress, and uncertainty about the future. Women may also experience physical violence, such as torture or forced use as human shields, and emotional violence, through sexual abuse and the breakdown of families. Pregnant women and mothers are doubly affected in conflict-affected areas. Access to shelter, food, water, sanitation, healthcare, and dignity kits should be the norm for all women, men, children, and elderly persons who are victims of displacement, and their needs must be considered from a gendered perspective. Ultimately, only better gender representation in all sectors and an end to the conflicts will bring an end to this suffering.

[1] At the behest of the Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and in collaboration with the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State was founded in September 2016 as a neutral and impartial body that aimed to propose concrete measures for improving the welfare of all people in Rakhine state. In August 2017, it presented its final report “Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine”, which takes into consideration humanitarian and developmental issues, access to basic services, legal questions including citizenship and the assurance of basic rights, and security to all people in all communities. <https://www.rakhinecommission.org/>



VOICES OF WOMEN DISPLACED BY THE WAR IN MYANMAR

JANUARY
2023

