



Setting the Tinderbox Alight
The Humanitarian Crisis in
Myanmar's Dry Zone
(Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions)

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About Us

‘Progressive Voice,’ or in Burmese, ရှေးပြေအသံအဖွဲ့, ‘Shay Pyay Athan,’ was born out of Burma Partnership, a network of organizations throughout the Asia-Pacific region, advocating for and mobilizing a movement for democracy and human rights in Myanmar that was established in 2006.

Progressive Voice is a participatory rights-based policy research and advocacy organization rooted in civil society, that maintains strong networks and relationships with grassroots organizations and community-based organizations throughout Myanmar. It acts as a bridge to the international community and international policymakers by amplifying voices from the ground, and advocating for a rights-based policy narrative.

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Scence of the village burned by the junta soldiers in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

Introduction

The brutal attempted coup d'état launched by the Myanmar military has had devastating and far-reaching consequences for the people of Myanmar, which are leaving indelible scars on the lives of civilians across the country. The Myanmar military was unprepared for the mammoth and unrelenting nationwide protests, strikes, boycotts, acts of civil disobedience, armed resistance and ethnic resistance in response to their unlawful attempted power-grab and denial of the result of the national election in November 2020. This rejection of the Myanmar military has been nationwide, including a strong crystallization of resistance within the heartland of the Bamar majority population in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions. These regions have been hit hard by the military junta's scorched earth campaign, experiencing devastating airstrikes and massacres of civilians. The fallout from these attacks has been burning to the ground of tens of thousands of civilian houses (nationwide estimate range from 11,000 to over 19,000, with an estimated 9,000 to 17,000 houses destroyed in Sagaing and Magwe Regions alone at the beginning of 2021),¹ mass displacement and humanitarian catastrophe on a scale never before experienced in these regions.²

While incidents of grave crimes have been reported within the media, much remains to be understood about the extent and breadth of humanitarian needs, responses and challenges on the ground in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions. Historically, these regions

have never been devastated by the Myanmar military's fierce attacks. This is in contrast to the experiences of ethnic communities, particularly in Karen, Rahkine, Shan, Chin, Karenni and Kachin States, where the same military has carried out full-scale attacks for decades, resulting in protracted displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. From this dark history and experience, ethnic communities, particularly in Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni and Karen States, have built local community structures and developed solutions to address the decades of humanitarian crises. Despite not having a long history of humanitarian crises and responses in Bamar majority populated areas of Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions, there has still been the development of robust local responses in the relatively short period since the attempted coup and escalating violence in the region.

This briefing paper offers a snapshot of the immense humanitarian challenges and local responses on the ground in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions since 1 February 2021. The findings presented in this briefing paper are based on interviews with nine local humanitarian aid providers and desk research including news, reports by human rights organizations and local partner organizations, as well as the UN and humanitarian organization sources. The interviews for this briefing paper were conducted online through safe channels, because in-person field research carries heightened risks for researchers and interviewees. This paper

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- 1 Media Monitoring Collective Data. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10160164677431473&set=pcb.10160164678221473>; "Over 11,000 Houses Burned Down in Myanmar Junta Attacks Since Coup," The Irrawaddy, 2 May 2022. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/over-11000-houses-burned-down-in-myanmar-junta-attacks-since-coup.html>
 - 2 Both protracted and newly displaced since the attempted coup on 1 February, 2021 is over 1.2 million resulting from conflict and violence. "Myanmar Emergency Update (as of 1 August 2022)," UNHCR, 5 August 2022. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-emergency-update-1-august-2022>

sheds light on the situation for those internally displaced in the three regions, and advocates for a solidarity approach to humanitarian assistance – one that places local humanitarian organizations at the center of the solution to the humanitarian crisis, that focuses on channeling funds directly and flexibly to these organizations, and that includes support for the extension and strengthening of cross-border channels.

The United Nations, international donor countries and international humanitarian organizations must focus on supporting local humanitarian structures and providing aid in solidarity with Myanmar's people. Providing humanitarian aid through or in partnership with the military junta will only exacerbate conflict and human suffering, while failing to reach those in need in accordance with international humanitarian principles, particularly the principles of 'do no harm,' humanity and impartiality. The Myanmar military, both historically and after 1 February 2021, uses humanitarian aid as a weapon; they repeatedly block, confiscate, destroy and manipulate the

distribution of aid for their political and strategic advantage.³ The military junta is brazenly using aid as leverage and a bargaining chip to further their legitimacy on the international stage.

The military remains the root-cause of suffering, decades-long conflict in ethnic areas and the protracted human rights and humanitarian crises in Myanmar, and thus they cannot be the means to providing a solution to the Myanmar crisis. As such, the international community must realize their commitment to localizing aid, and adapt the provision of humanitarian assistance to support and be in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and their legitimate governance actors and structures, including the National Unity Government (NUG), Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and local administrations. This must also place the protection of human rights and human security, the principle of 'do no harm,' impartiality and the agency of local humanitarian organizations at the center of their engagements in Myanmar.

3 "Nowhere to Run: Deepening Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar," Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Kachin Women's Association, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Women's Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karenni National Women's Organization, Pa-O Women's Union, Progressive Voice and Ta'ang Women's Organization, 7 September 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoice-myanmar.org/2021/09/07/nowhere-to-run-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmar/>

Background

Since the early days of the attempted coup d'état, the resistance fortified nationwide, with a stronghold in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions, with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), Strike Committees, medical professionals, youth, women and LGBTQI+ community persistently showing up in force to resist the junta's failed power grab through protests, strikes, non-cooperation and boycotts of military products.⁴ In response, the military resorted to extreme violence in an attempt to quell the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets to protest. These defiant actions continue to this day, utilizing flash mob protests, boycotts, and silent protests to show defiance – showing that the junta has failed to execute a power-grab or enforce control on the population.

As protests grew, the junta rapidly escalated violence, and self-defense forces began to form in villages as a last resort in response to grievous acts committed by the junta against civilians.⁵ These self-defense forces, which became known as the Peoples' Defense Forces (PDFs), formed organically and sporadically across Myanmar to protect civilians from the junta's

merciless violence. The people of Myanmar were left with no other option than to take up arms, after repeated outcries and calls to the international community for assistance, such as the deployment of the responsibility to protect (R2P) and UN Security Council sanctions, were ignored.⁶ On 7 September 2021, the NUG declared the people's defensive war,⁷ lending support and working with some of the over 259 PDFs formed, as well as 401 guerrilla forces and 250 township-based forces.⁸ The PDFs can be generally understood as those that operate under the NUG. The other forces, sometimes referred to as Local Defense Forces (LDFs), operate independently of the NUG and are localized to their communities, organically established in defense of their communities. Some LDFs are engaging or receiving training from the long-established EROs.⁹

The military junta has conducted an all-out war against the people of Myanmar, and a litany of barbaric acts to suppress people's aspirations for federal democracy and liberty. Using data gathered by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

4 “The Resistance is Live,” Progressive Voice, 12 February 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/02/12/the-resistance-is-live/>

5 “Face with Overwhelming Power, the People Resist,” Progressive Voice, 7 May 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/05/07/faced-with-overwhelming-power-the-people-resist/>

6 “With the UNSC's Failure, Myanmar's 'People's Defensive War' is Inevitable,” Progressive Voice, 20 September 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/09/20/with-the-unscs-failure-myanmars-peoples-defensive-war-is-inevitable/>

7 “Myanmar Resistance Responds to NUG's Declaration of War on Junta,” The Irrawaddy, 8 September 2021. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-resistance-responds-to-nugs-declaration-of-war-on-junta.html>

8 “NUG Settling in for Long Fight Against Junta,” Frontier Myanmar, 28 April 2022. Available at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/nug-settling-in-for-long-fight-against-junta/>

9 Ye Myo Hein “One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion,” Wilson Center, May 2022. Available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/ASIA_220519_1YearOn-BRIEF_V1r2.pdf

(ACLED), ALTSEAN-Burma estimates that as of 29 July 2022, 14,070 armed clashes and attacks have been recorded and the junta has killed as many as 2,138 people.¹⁰ The actual numbers could be far higher than what has been recorded, as those killed in conflict areas may not have been recorded in the fatality list. In contravention of international law, the junta has committed multiple massacres of civilians,¹¹ indiscriminate shelling and deliberate targeting of civilians through airstrikes from fighter jets and helicopter gunships,¹² razing and burning of villages, firing artillery shells and mortars into villages, hospitals, schools and places of worship.¹³ They have targeted hospitals,¹⁴ schools,¹⁵ at least 132

places of worship,¹⁶ perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence and torture,¹⁷ used civilians as human shields,¹⁸ and conducted arbitrary arrests, detention, torture and extrajudicial killings of pro-democracy activists, including children.¹⁹

The military junta has shutdown, severely restricted or cut internet and telephone reception in 54 townships across the country to control information flow and terrorize people.²⁰ The junta has also targeted aid workers and medical professionals, including torture, killing and burning remains of at least 40 civilians and two Save the Children

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- 10 “Coup Watch July 2022 – Junta’s Execution Spark Global Outcry as Opposition Promises Payback,” Altsean Burma, 5 May 2022. Available at <https://altsean.org/coupwatch-briefer.html>
- 11 “Anatomy of Impunity,” Progressive Voice, March 2022. Available at https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Anatomy_of_Impunity_2022_Final.pdf
- 12 “Witness: Army attacks in eastern Myanmar worst in decades,” AP News, 14 March 2022. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-southeast-asia-asia-new-york-33c0d542db04a6b8ad7d7864c5b625df>
- 13 Ibid. Esther J “Myanmar Army Troops Set Fire to Catholic Church in Karenni State,” Myanmar Now, 17 June 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-army-troops-set-fire-to-catholic-church-in-karenni-state>. Also see, “Christmas Eve Killings Reinforce Views of ‘Evil’ Myanmar Military, Al Jazeera, 30 December 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/30/a-dark-christmas-in-myanmar> “Fighting in Northeast Picks up at Year’s End,” The Irrawaddy, 26 December 2017. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/fighting-northeast-picks-years-end.html> “Where Should I Flee Next?: Fighting and displacement in Doo Tha Htoo, Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts, December 2020 to January 2021,” Karen Human Rights Group, 9 April 2021. Available at <https://khrgh.org/2021/04/21-1-nb1/%E2%80%98where-should-i-flee-next%E2%80%99-fighting-and-displacement-doo-tha-htoo-kler-lwee-htoo>
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 “Coup Watch July 2022 – Junta’s Execution Spark Global Outcry as Opposition Promises Payback,” Altsean Burma, 5 May 2022. Available at <https://altsean.org/coupwatch-briefer.html>
- 17 “Myanmar Junta Soldiers’ Gang Rape Victim Reveals Her Ordeal,” The Irrawaddy, 19 November 2021. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-soldiers-gang-rape-victim-reveals-her-ordeal.html>
- 18 “Junta Forces Kill 20 Civilians in One Day in Myanmar’s Sagaing Region,” Radio Free Asia, 5 May 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/killings-05052022203642.html>
- 19 The junta has arrested a total of 14,032 people, with 10,976 remaining in detention. “Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup,” Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 7 June 2022. Available at <https://aappb.org/?cat=109>
- 20 “Internet Access Amid Darkness and Lives Amid Threats – Analysis of Internet Blackout,” Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization, May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/30/internet-access-amid-darkness-and-lives-amid-threats/>



A village in Yay Lal Kyun, Yaysagyo Township, Magwe Region was burned down by the junta soldiers on 15 and 16 August 2022. [Credit: Yay Lal Kyun News]

workers on Christmas Eve 2021 in Karenni State.²¹ Simultaneously, the junta has blocked, destroyed and manipulated humanitarian aid for their own advantage, denying the affected civilian populations access to lifesaving aid. Some have sought refuge in neighboring countries, such as Thailand and India, but many are pushed back or detained in contravention of international law – against the principle of non-refoulement.²²

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, affirms that war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed every day by the junta, who continue to wage war with complete impunity.²³ Echoing this, the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, has reported that “crimes against humanity continue to be systematically committed in Myanmar.”²⁴ The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar,

comprised of former Myanmar mandate holders, have determined that brutal and violent acts described above and throughout this paper amount to the acts of a terrorist organization under international legal definitions and Myanmar’s domestic terrorism laws.²⁵

The onslaught of attacks by the Myanmar military against civilians in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions have been some of the most brutal and grievous since the attempted coup, and on a scale that is unprecedented in these Regions’ histories. This is no coincidence; these regions were centers of anti-military resistance after February 2021, and prior to that the people in these regions voted overwhelmingly in favor of the National League for Democracy (NLD) over the military’s proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, during both the 2015 and 2020 elections.²⁶

21 “Anatomy of Impunity,” Progressive Voice, March 2022. Available at https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Anatomy_of_Impunity_2022_Final.pdf

22 Salai Hung Tun Gei “The Potential for Long Term Support for Refugees who Fled to India,” Chin World, 29 April 2022. Available at <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/potential-long-term-support-refugees-who-fled-india>

Shaikh Azizur Rahman “Crackdown Forces Rohingya Refugees Underground, Flee to Bangladesh,” Voice of America, 7 June 2022. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-crackdown-forces-rohingya-refugees-to-go-underground-flee-to-bangladesh/6606459.html>

“Denied and Deprived: Local Communities Confronting the Humanitarian Crisis and Protection Challenges in Southeast Burma,” Karen Human Rights Group, 8 June 2022. Available at <https://khrhg.org/2022/06/denied-and-deprived-local-communities-confronting-humanitarian-crisis-and-protection>

See Nowhere to Run (note 27)

23 “UN Expert: Myanmar people betrayed with ‘vague declarations’ and ‘tedious, endless wait’ for action,” Press Release, 21 March 2022. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/un-expert-myanmar-people-betrayed-vague-declarations-and-tedious-endless>

24 “Report of the International Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar,” Human Rights Council, 12 July 2022. Available at <https://iimm.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/A-HRC-51-4-E.pdf>

25 “Announcement on Counter Terrorism and Designation of Terrorist Organizations,” 7 June 2021, Announcement (3/2021), The Republic of the Union of Myanmar National Unity Government. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/crph.official.mm/photos/pcb.197140835745229/197139209078725>. “SAC-M: The Illegal Junta Should be Designated a Terrorist Organisation,” Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 15 December 2021. Available at <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/2021/12/sac-m-the-illegal-junta-should-be-designated-a-terrorist-organisation/>

26 “NLD Claims Huge Victory as USDP Crashes and Ethnic Parties Struggle,” Frontier Myanmar, 9 November 2020. Available at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/nld-claims-huge-victory-as-usdp-crashes-and-ethnic-parties-struggle/>

For the military junta, these regions – Myanmar’s “Dry Zone” – form religious, cultural and historical significance in the Bamar-Buddhist majority’s collective mentality, as the birthplace of the last Bamar dynasty and the heartland of Buddhist education.²⁷ Thus, for these three regions to continue to strongly reject the Myanmar military, who believes they are the protector of Bamar-Buddhist hegemony, challenges the military’s claims to power and authority.

The military has faced operational challenges in these areas, with only a few pre-existing military bases and difficulties controlling the main road and river routes. The military has been unable to effectively combat the PDFs in Myanmar’s Dry Zone, who employ decentralized guerrilla warfare. In an attempt to overcome these operational challenges, the military has formed and utilized pro-military militia forces called Pyu Saw Htee and Thway Thout Ah Phwe to assist during clashes with PDFs and to help in the persecution of civilians, activists and politicians.²⁸

While the focus of this paper is limited in scope to Myanmar’s Dry Zone, many of the

same experiences described in this paper are mirrored in the Regions of Tanintharyi, Bago and Yangon as well as the ethnic areas of Myanmar, particularly Karen, Karenni, Chin, Shan, Rakhine, Kachin and Mon States. Over seven decades of war, ethnic areas have faced a barrage of artillery shelling and bombing, as well as massacres, looting and razing of villages, use of civilians as human shields, sexual and gender-based violence, and the cutting off of aid – with the added systemic discrimination and forced assimilation under the military’s Bamar-Buddhist hegemonic agenda.²⁹ Ethnic communities have been subjected to atrocity crimes committed by the Myanmar military, who have enjoyed blanket impunity despite repeated calls and appeals from civil society to the international community to take concrete actions to hold the Myanmar military accountable for these crimes including the crime of genocide against the Rohingya in 2017.³⁰ This historic impotence by the international community has emboldened the Myanmar military to further commit atrocity crimes with total impunity, and has provided the base for the cruel and horrific violence that plagues the people of Myanmar today.

27 Mary Callahan “Myanmar’s Dry Zone: The History of a Tinderbox,” Fulcrum, 9 February 2022. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-dry-zone-the-history-of-a-tinderbox/>

28 “Blood on the streets Runs a River of Sadness,” Progressive Voice, May 9 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/09/blood-on-the-streets-runs-a-river-of-sadness/>

29 “Terror from the Skies,” Karen Peace Support Network, May 2021. Available at https://www.karenpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Terror-from-the-Skies_Briefing_KPSN_English.pdf
 “Denied and Deprived: Local Communities Confronting the Humanitarian Crisis and Protection Challenges in Southeast Burma,” Karen Human Rights Group, 8 June 2022. Available at <https://khrhg.org/2022/06/denied-and-deprived-local-communities-confronting-humanitarian-crisis-and-protection>
 “New Threats from the Air,” Kachin Women’s Organization Thailand, 1 June 2022. Available at <https://kachin-women.com/new-threats-from-the-air/>
 “Nowhere to Run: Deepening Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar,” Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Kachin Women’s Association, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Women’s Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karenni National Women’s Organization, Pa-O Women’s Union, Progressive Voice and Ta’ang Women’s Organization, 7 September 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoice-myanmar.org/2021/09/07/nowhere-to-run-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmar/>

30 Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar (2018), Human Rights Council, A/HRC/39/64. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/ReportoftheMyanmarFFM.aspx>

Four Cuts (Phyet-Lay-Phyet)

The Myanmar military's response to the resistance is reminiscent of their Four Cuts or Phyet-Lay-Phyet strategy, which inflicts brutal collective punishment on communities to counter resistance forces.³¹ While there are different interpretations of the exact definition of the four cuts strategy, it is largely accepted as a strategy of cutting off food and/or humanitarian aid, funds, intelligence (including internet and telephone reception) and recruits from a community in an effort to sever resources to EROs and PDFs.³²

In deploying the Four Cuts strategy, the Myanmar military launches indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery, including shelling schools, homes, hospitals, churches and communal spaces, also targeting civilians as a form of collective punishment, all the while expelling villagers from ERO and PDF controlled areas in an attempt to divide communities and resistance fighters.³³ The Myanmar military's "clearance operations" are emblematic examples of the Four Cuts

strategy, where the military "clears" whole villages, burning, pillaging, torturing, killing and destroying livelihoods under the pretext of combating terrorism, as in the case of genocide against the Rohingya in 2017.³⁴ The military have deployed similar strategies in the Dry Zone, with devastating consequences for the people. Both the junta and their proxy militias have perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence during raids of villages including the rape of a woman living with a mental illness in Mandalay Region.³⁵

For months the Myanmar military junta has systematically imposed internet shutdowns or severely interrupted services, depriving local people of information and restricting their ability to seek and receive assistance. These shutdowns have been particularly severe in large swaths of Magwe and Sagaing Regions where internet, mobile and landline connections have been blocked since late 2021, with only intermittent access throughout the day.³⁶

31 Maung Aung Myoe "Building the Tatmadaw – Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948," Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maung-Myoe/publication/272092747_Building_the_Tatmadaw/links/54dac5d50cf2ba88a68de69a/Building-the-Tatmadaw.pdf


32 Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan and Vahpual "What is the Myanmar military's 'four cuts' strategy?," Al Jazeera, 5 July 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/5/what-is-the-myanmar-militarys-four-cuts-strategy>

33 "There is No One Who Does Not Miss Home: A Report on Protracted Displacement Due to Armed Conflict in Burma/Myanmar," 15 Myanmar Civil Society Organizations, 20 June 2019. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2019/06/20/there-is-no-one-who-does-not-miss-home-a-report-on-protracted-displacement-due-to-armed-conflict-in-burma-myanmar/>

34 Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan and Vahpual "What is the Myanmar military's 'four cuts' strategy?," Al Jazeera, 5 July 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/5/what-is-the-myanmar-militarys-four-cuts-strategy>

35 Interview R1-03

36 "Open call to all international actors: do more to stop internet shutdowns shrouding torchings and killings in Myanmar," Access Now, 22 June 2022. Available at <https://www.accessnow.org/statement-against-myanmar-shutdowns/>

A photograph showing an elderly woman with grey hair, wearing a white patterned long-sleeved shirt and a dark floral skirt, crouching on the ground. She is surrounded by the charred remains of a house, with blackened wood and debris visible. She appears to be sorting through the ruins, with a small bowl and a large white plastic bag nearby. A red text box in the upper right corner contains the caption.

An old lady salvaging pieces of her house and belongings after the junta soldiers burned her house. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

Internet blackouts and limited 2G network availability has affected more than 5 million people in Sagaing Region, 600,000 people in Magwe Region and nearly 482,000 in Mandalay Region.³⁷ Telecommunication companies have been ordered by the junta to shut down their services in certain areas, allowing the military to commit their atrocity crimes in the darkness of information blackout.³⁸

Those on the ground in Myanmar's Dry Zone are unable to gather information of imminent attacks, contact family and friends, access online education, or search for help.³⁹ This is coupled with the strict military checkpoints that prevent cars and trucks from carrying moderate quantities of goods, deprive people of essential food, medicine and access to transportation.⁴⁰ Civil society organizations have stated that the "Internet shutdowns have fortified the military's oppressive "Four Cuts" strategy."⁴¹

37 Ibid.

38 "Internet Access Amid Darkness and Lives Amid Threats – Analysis of Internet Blackout," Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization, May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/30/internet-access-amid-darkness-and-lives-amid-threats/>

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. Interview R1-03

41 Ibid.

Pyu Saw Htee and Thway Thout Ah Phwe

The Myanmar military is facing a strong resistance from the people, which has resulted in losing battles, increased defections and many casualties. To try and mitigate this, they have drawn from their old playbook of arming and training ultranationalist groups to act as violent militias.⁴² Pyu Saw Htee is largely made up of military veterans and Buddhist pro-military supporters, with its roots in Ma Ba Tha, an organization of ultranationalist Buddhists whom the military bred and nurtured, both financially and politically.⁴³ Pyu Saw Htee operate secretly in plain-clothes, and have used their anonymity to terrorize civilians and ambush PDFs with the support of junta troops.⁴⁴ While it is clear that the junta actually directs Pyu Saw Htee, it offers the junta a degree of plausible deniability to claim they are not responsible for the militia's actions.

Thway Thout Ah Phwe is a pro-military proxy group that has conducted targeted killings on specific individuals, particularly in Mandalay city, abducting, murdering and dumping the bodies of prominent NLD supporters and pro-democracy activists.⁴⁵ While the military has

not openly acknowledged their connections to the Thway Thout, the group has publicly announced its “Operation Red” in late April 2022, pledging to exterminate NLD party members, NLD supporters, PDFs and the family members of NLD and PDF targets.⁴⁶ In contrast to Pyu Saw Htee, Thway Thout operates far more covertly, with the goals of creating terror among local populations, quelling activism and acting as an undercover ally to the military junta.⁴⁷

Within the context of Myanmar's Dry Zone, the Myanmar military and Pyu Saw Htee use a scorched earth strategy in villages where resistance remains strong, conducting clearance operations through airstrikes, killing civilians on sight, committing massacres, looting homes, and burning rice and crops, livestock and homes. This is often conducted under the cover of an internet blackout, not only to cut the flow of intelligence and information, but for the junta and Phyu Saw Htee to conceal their crimes.⁴⁸

42 Khin Yi Yi Zaw “Leaked Document Confirms Myanmar Junta is Arming Anti-Resistance Militias,” Myanmar Now, 2 March 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/leaked-document-confirms-myanmar-junta-is-arming-anti-resistance-militias>

43 Allegra Mendelson “Myanmar's Military Turns to Buddhism in Bid for Legitimacy,” Al Jazeera, 30 January 2022. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/30/myanmars-military-turns-to-buddhism-in-bid-for-legitimacy>

44 “The Rise of Pyu Saw Htee,” Progressive Voice, 12 March 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/03/12/the-rising-of-pyu-saw-htee/>

45 Ibid.

46 “Blood on the Streets Runs a River of Sadness,” Progressive Voice, 9 May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/09/blood-on-the-streets-runs-a-river-of-sadness/>

47 “Blood on the Street Runs A River of Sadness,” Progressive Voice, 9 May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/09/blood-on-the-streets-runs-a-river-of-sadness/>

48 “Internet Access Amid Darkness and Lives Amid Threats – Analysis of Internet Blackout,” Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization, May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/30/internet-access-amid-darkness-and-lives-amid-threats/>



Villagers seeking safety after a warning of junta soldiers approaching their village.
[Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

Airstrikes and Artillery Shelling

The junta has utilized fighter jets and helicopter gunships to target civilians and PDF fighters in Myanmar's Dry Zone. This is part of a carefully established plan of attack, using indiscriminate airstrikes to clear out villages, followed by ground raids, where Pyu Saw Htee and junta troops are more easily able to raid and torch the villages. At least 336,600 people in Sagaing Region have been internally displaced due to junta's ground offensives, airstrikes and all manner of attacks against civilians, in concert with Pyu Saw Htee.⁴⁹ For sake of brevity, not all cases of airstrikes, massacres and arson attacks could be examined within this paper due to the sheer breadth of destruction by the military junta.

Airstrikes are also used as a retaliatory measure when the military suffers large losses or casualties. In Kale, Sagaing Region, indiscriminate airstrikes from two helicopter gunships killed 20 civilians in late December 2021, triggering mass displacement.⁵⁰ In an attack in Kale Township in June 2022, junta troops intentionally shelled a monastery where IDPs were sheltering, critically injuring a 10 year old boy.⁵¹

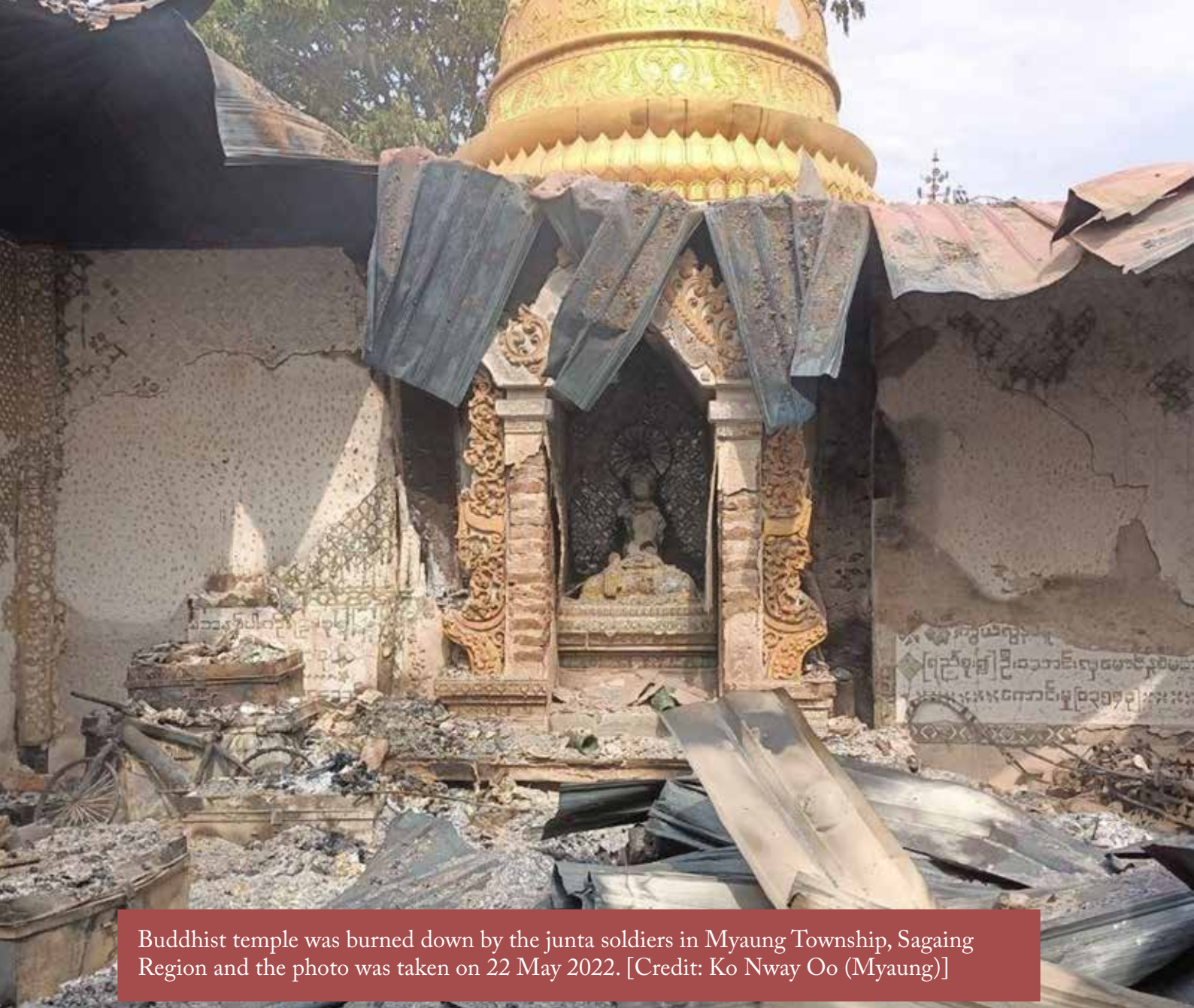
On 4 January 2022, two Mi-35 attack helicopters launched six rockets at residents of Gahe, Sagaing Region. One rocket directly hit a house, killing three children and two adults.⁵² In early June 2022, an eight-year-old boy, his

49 "Myanmar Emergency Update," UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP), 1 June 2022. Available at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/2501>

50 "Anatomy of Impunity," Progressive Voice, March 2022. Available at https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Anatomy_of_Impunity_2022_Final.pdf

51 "Ten-year-old Boy Critically injured in Army Shelling of Myanmar Refugee Camp" Radio Free Asia, 1 June 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/monastery-shelling-06012022082312.html>

52 "Myanmar Military Helicopter Attack on Populated Village Kills 5 People," Radio Free Asia, 7 January 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/helicopter-01072022154230.html>



Buddhist temple was burned down by the junta soldiers in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region and the photo was taken on 22 May 2022. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

mother and his grandfather were killed when artillery shells hit their home in Koe Taung Boet, Kanbalu Township, Sagaing Region.⁵³ Tragically this is all too familiar. According to the Media Monitoring Committee, between 1 February 2021 and 6 April 2022 at least 239 children have been killed nationwide, including

47 killed in March 2022 alone.⁵⁴ In a more recent report from June 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, determined that at least 382 children have been killed or maimed since the attempted coup.⁵⁵

53 “Junta Artillery Shell Kills Three, including 8-year-old boy, in Sagaing Village,” 4 June 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-artillery-shell-kills-three-including-8-year-old-boy-in-sagaing-village>

54 “Children Killed Since Feb 2021,” Media Monitoring Committee, 6 April 2022. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10160045935036473&set=pcb.10160045935591473>

55 “Losing a Generation: How the Military Junta is Devastating Myanmar’s Children and Undermining Myanmar’s Future,” Human Rights Council, Fiftieth Session, 14 June 2022, A/HRC/50/CRP.1. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc50crp1-conference-room-paper-special-rapporteur-losing-generation>

Massacres

The junta massacres civilians *carte blanche*, without fear of persecutions, as they continue to enjoy impunity built on decades of inaction by the international community to hold the Myanmar military to account for historic atrocities, predominantly committed against ethnic communities, particularly Rohingya, Karen, Kachin, Ta'ang, Chin, and Shan.⁵⁶ The massacres highlighted below represent a small handful of those committed by the military junta in Myanmar's Dry Zone since the attempted coup. It should be noted that massacres have been perpetuated throughout Myanmar not just in the Dry Zone.

On 5 May 2022, troops entered a monastery in Oak Pho, Budalin Township, Sagaing Region where IDPs were sheltering from an earlier raid, then opened fire on IDPs as they ran for their lives. A total of nine IDPs were mercilessly killed at close range.⁵⁷ On 8 June 2022, in a sadistic act, junta troops shot dead at least six people who were IDPs at Myat Saw Nyi Naung Monastery, Myinmu Township, Sagaing Region – telling 30 IDPs to run before opening fire, killing them for sport.⁵⁸ The junta

also burned IDPs' motorcycles and 500 sacks of rice, intended to sustain IDPs who fled to the monastery after the junta attacked their village.

In Kani Township, Sagaing Region, the murdered bodies of at least 43 people were recovered throughout July 2021, including a child and a person with a disability. Graphic images were circulated in the news and social media, showing mutilated, bound, torture-marked and charred bodies – many left to rot in the sun or in shallow graves.⁵⁹ The incident triggered 10,000 people to be displaced. In December 2021, junta soldiers stormed and raided Don Taw Village, Sagaing Region, captured bound and massacred 11 people, including five children, and then burned their remains.⁶⁰

At the end of February 2022, and under the cover of internet blackouts, military junta forces targeted Chin Pone Village, Yinmabin Township, Sagaing Region over three days with indiscriminate airstrikes from five Mi-25 combat helicopters, followed by a ground attack where approximately 80 children and nine teachers were held hostage after fleeing

56 Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar (2018), Human Rights Council, A/HRC/39/64. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/ReportoftheMyanmarFFM.aspx>

57 Khin Yi Yi Zaw “Myanmar Soldiers Execute Nine IDPs Sheltering at Sagaing Meditation Centre” Myanmar Now, 5 May 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-soldiers-execute-nine-idps-sheltering-at-sagaing-meditation-centre>

58 “Illegitimate Court, Illegitimate Junta,” Progressive Voice, 18 June 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/06/18/illegitimate-court-illegitimate-junta/>

59 “Massacres in Kani Township, Yinmabin District, Sagaing Region,” The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 18 August 2021. Available at <https://aappb.org/?p=17120> and ‘Junta Massacres 40 People in Myanmar Resistance Stronghold During July’, The Irrawaddy, 3 August 2021. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/junta-massacres-40-people-in-myanmar-resistance-stronghold-during-july.html>

60 “Eleven Villagers Shot and Burned Alive by Myanmar Soldiers, Report Says,” The Guardian, 9 December 2021. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/eleven-villagers-shot-and-burned-alive-by-myanmar-soldiers-reports-say>

to a nearby monastery.⁶¹ At least 13 bodies, some with signs of torture, were found after troops had raided and set fire to the village.⁶² Around 5,000 villagers from Chin Pone and surrounding villages fled for safety.⁶³

Near the end of June 2022, evidence affirming the brutality of the junta and continuing culture of impunity rife within the ranks of the Myanmar military surfaced from a lost cell

phone of a junta soldier found by a villager in Ayadaw Township, Sagaing Region. A wealth of images and videos were found on the phone, depicting the torture and massacre of civilians, with soldiers decapitating and massacring civilians, nonchalantly posing next to dead bodies and boasting about killings.⁶⁴ These acts are part of a larger pattern of grave atrocities committed by the Myanmar military, including their propensity for committing massacres.

Torching Villages

Deliberate arson attacks on villages as a form of collective punishment is a hallmark of the Myanmar military.⁶⁵ The military junta and military proxy militia Pyu Saw Htee jointly enter villages, destroying places of worship, looting and killing, and systematically burning them down.⁶⁶ From February to April 2022, the junta burned 5,617 houses in Sagaing Region.⁶⁷ Since the attempted coup, a total of

12,687 house were burned in Sagaing Region as of 31 May 2022.⁶⁸ A local source wryly commented that there are no more villages in Sagaing Region left to burn down.⁶⁹

When the military razes villages, all means of local livelihood are also systematically destroyed, including cattle, pigs, stores of seed and fertilizer and even crops in the fields. This

61 “Statement Condemning the Hostage-taking of up to 80 Children by Military Junta Forces in Sagaing Region,” National Unity Government Ministry of Human Rights and Ministry of Women, Youths and Children Affairs, 20 February 2022. Available at https://www.facebook.com/mohrmyanmar/photos/pcb.281907877416984/281907617417010/?_rdc=1&_rdr

62 Ko Cho “Nine Dead, Dozens of Children Held Captive in Junta Raid in Northwestern Myanmar’s Sagaing,” Myanmar Now, 1 March 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/nine-dead-dozens-of-children-held-captive-in-junta-raid-in-northwestern-myanmars-sagaing>

63 “Myanmar Junta Troops Said to Have Held Preschoolers as ‘Human Shields’ After Raid,” Myanmar Now, 28 February 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/preschoolers-02282022183713.html>

64 Khin Maung Soe and Nayrein Kyaw “I had to cut off the head, bro – Myanmar troops swap slaughter stories,” Radio Free Asia, June 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/myanmar-soldier-atrocities/index.html>

65 “Myanmar: Military onslaught in Eastern States Amounts to Collective Punishment,” Amnesty International, 31 May 2022. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/myanmar-military-on-slaughter-in-eastern-states-amounts-to-collective-punishment/>

66 Khin Yi Yi Zaw “Myanmar Military Destroys more than 100 Houses in Latest Attack on Catholic Village,” Myanmar Now, 9 June 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-military-destroys-more-than-100-houses-in-latest-attack-on-catholic-village>

67 Local HRD Source for Magwe Region.

68 Media Monitoring Collective Data. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10160164677431473&set=pcb.10160164678221473>

69 Local HRD Source for Sagaing Region



prevents people from being able to return to their land and reestablishing means of sustaining their livelihoods after the troops leave the area. In Magwe, monitoring organizations report that 4,384 houses have been set alight but a local source confirms that the number of burned houses in Magwe is much higher than public reports, and likely to be between 10,000 and 15,000.⁷⁰ In Singu Township, Mandalay Region, junta and Pyu Saw Htee torched houses in Kyettuyway, Tamarkone and Meinmahlagyun Villages in mid-May 2022, a retaliatory attack after a Pyu Saw Htee member was killed.⁷¹

The junta targets areas where the PDFs are based, burning houses as a form of collective punishment.⁷² The razing of villages is a tactic the military junta uses when it is unable to out-fight the local PDFs.⁷³ On 3 March 2022, in Lel Yar Village, Magwe Region, junta and military proxy Pyu Saw Htee militias raided and torched 200 homes, completely destroying essential property including homes, livestock feed, a water pump, agricultural fields and food.⁷⁴ One interviewee in Magwe Region, reported not being able to source clean drinking water and food, and people having experienced unhygienic living conditions causing disease

70 Ibid. Local HRD Source for Magwe Region.

71 “Mandalay Villages Torched a Day After Killing of Pyu Saw Htee Member,” Myanmar Now, 18 May 2022. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/mandalay-villages-torched-a-day-after-killing-of-pyu-saw-htee-member>

72 “Myanmar: Military onslaught in Eastern States Amounts to Collective Punishment,” Amnesty International, 31 May 2022. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/myanmar-military-on-slaught-in-eastern-states-amounts-to-collective-punishment/>

73 “Thousands of Homes Burned by Soldiers in Myanmar’s Sagaing Region,” Radio Free Asia, 25 May 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/sagaing-arson-05252022182104.html>

74 Ko Cho “Villages Go Up in Flames as Junta Troops, Militias Continue Central Myanmar Raids,” Myanmar Now, 5 March 2022. Available at <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/villages-go-up-in-flames-as-junta-troops-militias-continue-central-myanmar-raids>

after their village was burned down.⁷⁵ One interviewee stated that in Khin-U and Yay-U Townships, all villages had been burned down, and everyone had been displaced.⁷⁶

The elderly, children, pregnant women and the disabled are the most vulnerable in these situations, unable to escape quickly. Horrifically, the junta has burned civilians alive or burned their bodies after executing them – including the chilling case in Mandalay of a man being thrown by junta troops onto a pile of burning tires.⁷⁷ On 4 April 2022, junta troops entered

Hle Hlaw Village, Gangaw Township, Magwe Region, and abducted 14-year-old Moe Moe Htwe and her father, U Aung Ye.⁷⁸ She was brutally gang raped and killed by soldiers, and her and her father's bodies were burned. The junta continues to wage this brutality every day against the people of Myanmar with impunity. One interviewee describes how junta soldiers entered a village in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region, on 3 July 2022, burned it to the ground and killed two cattle – with locals left to clean up the devastation.⁷⁹

75 Interview R1-07

76 Interview R1-03

77 “Myanmar Soldiers Burn Man Alive in Weekend Orgy of Junta Violence,” Radio Free Asia, 28 March 2021. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/mandalay-burning-03282021175912.html>

78 “Family member says 14-year-old girl raped and burned to death in Gangaw,” Radio Free Asia Burmese, 12 April 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/14-year-old-girl-was-raped-and-burned-to-death-in-gangaw-04122022081950.html>

79 Interview R1-09

New Humanitarian Challenges and Responses in Myanmar's Dry Zone



Many local people in these Bamar-majority regions had never experienced such military attacks prior to the attempted coup, and thus do not have the pre-existing specialized social structures or mechanisms to deal with mass displacement – unlike many ethnic minority communities who have developed these systems, local capacity and expertise over decades of violence and cycles of displacement.⁸⁰ Being the heart of Bamar majority population, these areas have traditionally served as a base for new recruits for the military. When confronted with advancing troops brandishing weapons in their

villages, these communities are often stunned and unsure where to run. Interviewees shared how many IDPs, upon returning to their burned villages from which they were initially displaced, then experience secondary displacement when the junta soldiers returned to their villages.⁸¹ Many feel intense psychological trauma and grief at losing their livelihood, homes and loved ones, which they have spent their lives building.

Additionally, the topography and climate of Myanmar's Dry Zone compounds their challenges, including difficulties in finding

⁸⁰ Interview R1-04

⁸¹ Ibid.

natural cover from junta troops and Pyu Saw Htee on the flatlands where there are no pre-existing established IDP camps or humanitarian networks and few places to hide.⁸² Interviewees confirmed that those displaced have sought refuge in monasteries,

surrounding forests, neighboring villages, and other places; however, none of these places provide adequate safety. As detailed above, the junta purposefully targets IDPs, hunting them out in places where they attempt to hide with both ground attacks and airstrikes.

“There is no support from international community”⁸³



Houses burning in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region after junta soldiers set the village alight. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

The scale of this crisis and immense human suffering caused by the Myanmar military junta should be ringing alarm bells for a multilateral emergency response, coordinating an aid mission, swaths of targeted sanctions and political actors devising solutions – in the way the international community has responded to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Yet, these actions have not been forthcoming, only serving to embolden the junta to continue to commit

atrocities. The atrocities detailed above bear a striking resemblance to those of the Rohingya genocide in 2017, and to the war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated in ethnic areas over the last three decades – for which the Myanmar military has yet to be held to account.⁸⁴ The military junta has blocked the roads and restricted access to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) who has noted with concern

⁸² Interview R1-03

⁸³ Interview R1-04

⁸⁴ “Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar” Karen Human Rights Group, 30 October 2017. Available at <https://khrgh.org/2017/12/foundation-fear-25-years-villagers-voices-southeast-myanmar>
Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar (2018), Human Rights Council, A/HRC/39/64. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/ReportoftheMyanmarFFM.aspx>

that the northwest Myanmar ‘remains hard-to-reach.’⁸⁵ UN OCHA was only able to assist approximately 20,000 people in June in Chin State and Sagaing Region – where displacement is collectively over almost 500,000.⁸⁶ Multiple interviewees say that international support is not present in the areas they work, and they

have not encountered them while conducting aid networking or on the ground – most prominently in Sagaing and Magwe Regions.⁸⁷

One interviewee, who has been displaced by the junta’s attacks in Shwebo Township, Sagaing Region, stated:

“People have nowhere to go when their rights are being violated; their houses were burned down; and many are being arrested and killed. Who will be accountable for all these crimes? Still, there is no support from international community. We want everyone to be aware of the situation on the ground here, and we are ready to cooperate.”⁸⁸

There have been an overwhelming number of massacres, airstrikes and arson attacks, and those highlighted in this paper represent the

tip of the iceberg – as the Myanmar military continues their wanton destruction in different parts of the country, especially in ethnic regions.

85 “Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 20,” OCHA, 31 July 2022. Available at <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar>
“Myanmar Emergency Update,” UNHRC Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP), 1 June 2022. Available at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/2501>

86 “Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 20,” OCHA, 31 July 2022. Available at <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar>

87 Interview R1-03, R1-09

88 Ibid.

Complexities of Aid Distribution in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions



While many horrific accounts of human tragedy have been shared about Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions in the news and on social media, by citizen journalists and civil society, much remains to be understood about the breadth of humanitarian needs, responses, and challenges on the ground. Interviewees have provided detailed accounts from the ground, and how they and their colleagues are providing and supporting those uprooted and displaced, left homeless and without a livelihood as a result of the military junta's grave acts of terror.

As outlined briefly in the background, the consequences from the junta's attacks have been immense. One interviewee describes the continued burning of villages, resulting in 100,000 people being displaced in Shwebo Township, Sagaing Region.⁸⁹ In Magyi Thone Pin, Shwebo Township, villagers fled with only essential belongings after junta troops surrounded their village in mid-May. After a week of displacement, villagers face a bleak prospect of staying – with food running low, with no shelter only tree cover, their homes and livelihoods destroyed – or leave and risk violence at the hands of the junta.⁹⁰ Some

⁸⁹ Interview R1-03

⁹⁰ Interview R1-03 and R1-07. Also see, "More than 9,000 Civilians Flee Myanmar Junta Raids," *The Irrawaddy*, 24 May 2022. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/more-than-9000-civilians-flee-myanmar-junta-raids.html>

IDPs have faced violence upon their return to their villages.⁹¹ One Interviewee described how local PDFs have to check for the presence of junta troops before villagers return, but this does not guarantee safety as junta troops could return without warning.⁹² People continue to face immense losses, unable to plant crops for next season and having no shelter during the

monsoon season, their means of subsistence dashed. Even materials for temporary shelters cost at least 200,000 kyat (approximately \$109 USD), and have to be sourced from outside the Dry Zone according to an interviewee.⁹³ One interviewee from Shwebo Township, Sagaing Region says:

“The junta has banned and threatened people from helping IDPs fleeing around Shwebo Township, Sagaing Region, due to the junta’s violence and arson [sic]. IDPs are in need of food, shelter and other supplies but people cannot help them openly. Some IDPs are trapped and the junta has restricted the access to them.”⁹⁴

UN OCHA estimates that 14.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Myanmar.⁹⁵ Staggeringly, half of Myanmar’s population (25 million people) is likely now living in poverty, over 760,000 people have been displaced since 1 February 2021, with a total of 1.1 million people displaced inside Myanmar and an additional 62,000 having crossed into neighboring countries according to UN OCHA – but based on local reporting and interviews this is a significant underestimate.⁹⁶ Only \$138.1 million USD of the \$826 million

USD required for 2022 (16.7%) has been raised, a shortfall of around \$720 million USD.⁹⁷ Yet, even if these budget requests were met, operationally, it will be difficult for the aid to reach the people in need if the UN continues to work only or largely through the military junta.

The junta continues to block, destroy, restrict and control the areas where UN agencies and international organizations can operate while attacking humanitarian aid and medical workers.⁹⁸ For instance, aid from the World Food

91 Press Briefing for “Report on Serious Crimes of International Concern Committed by the Illegal Military Junta,” National Unity Government, March 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/03/16/statement-on-the-report-on-serious-crimes-of-international-concern-committed-by-the-illegal-military-junta-submitted-to-49th-session-of-human-rights-council/>

92 Interview R1-09

93 Interview R1-09

94 Interview R1-03

95 Global Humanitarian Overview 2022,” OCHA. Available at <https://gho.unocha.org/myanmar>

96 “Myanmar Emergency Update as of 6 July 2022,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 6 July 2022. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/591bf0d5-25d9-4835-a074-a91ecd037ef/Myanmar%20Emergency%20Update%20-%206%20July.pdf>

97 UN OCHA “Humanitarian Response Plan 2022,” May 2022. Available at <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/153/summary/2022>; “Humanitarian Response Plan: Funding Update,” OCHA, accessed 25 July. Available at <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar>

98 “Many in Mindat Still Need as Junta Imposes Restrictions on Distribution of UNHRC Aid,” Myanmar Now, 20 July 2021. Available at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/many-in-mindat-still-in-need-as-junta-imposes-restrictions-on-distribution-of-unhcr-aid>

Programme (WFP), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)⁹⁹ and UN OCHA has been blocked and restricted.¹⁰⁰ On 3 April, a WFP convoy carrying basic food aid destined for Yaw and Kyaukhtu Townships in Magwe Region and Mindat Township in Chin State, was blocked and forced to return.¹⁰¹ Despite the immense needs, UN OCHA has continuously noted challenges in accessing conflict areas, most recently stating in its 28 June 2022 update that “Most of the affected communities across the southeast remain difficult to reach,” citing “checkpoints and roadblocks” as among the challenges faced by humanitarian actors.¹⁰² They further state that “delays and denials of Travel Authorizations (TAs), the volatile security situation and increased scrutiny of humanitarian supplies and personnel have” hampered timely delivery of aid.¹⁰³

Under international humanitarian law, all parties to an armed conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief to civilians in need of aid.¹⁰⁴ UN agencies have not been given the requisite travel authorizations to go to conflict areas.¹⁰⁵ For instance, WFP was denied access to Myaing Gyi Ngu Village, Karen State in May 2021 and junta soldiers destroyed 80 bags of rice, barrels of cooking oil, other food and medical aid destined for Karenni State in June 2021.¹⁰⁶ Blocking humanitarian aid is a violation of the right to life, adequate healthcare, water and food, and could also amount to a war crime and violation of international humanitarian law under the Geneva Conventions.¹⁰⁷ The interviewees confirm that the junta has repeatedly and blatantly seized food, medicine and other aid if

99 Ibid. “Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid,” Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2021. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/13/myanmar-junta-blocks-lifesaving-aid#:~:text=Amid%20the%20healthcare%20system's%20collapse,deliver%20oxygen%20to%20affected%20communities>.

100 “Nowhere to Run: Deepening Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar,” Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Kachin Women’s Association, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Women’s Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karenni National Women’s Organization, Pa-O Women’s Union, Progressive Voice and Ta’ang Women’s Organization, 7 September 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoice-myanmar.org/2021/09/07/nowhere-to-run-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmar/> “Access Denied: The Myanmar military Junta’s Deprivation of Lifesaving Aid in Karenni (Kayah) State,” Fortify Rights, November 2021. Available at <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2021-11-10/>

101 “Authorities Block UN World Food Programme Convoy from Reaching IDPs,” Mizzima, 4 April 2022. Available at <https://mizzima.com/article/authorities-block-un-world-food-programme-convoy-reaching-idps>

102 “Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 19,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 28 June 2022. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/8403e702-aaca-4d28-9201-a37b104b9600/Myanmar.pdf>

103 Ibid.

104 “Rule 55. Access for Humanitarian Relief to Civilians in Need,” International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC). Available at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule55

Article 23, The Fourth Geneva Convention, Available at https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf

105 “Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid,” Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2021. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/13/myanmar-junta-blocks-lifesaving-aid#:~:text=Amid%20the%20healthcare%20system's%20collapse,deliver%20oxygen%20to%20affected%20communities>.

106 Ibid.

107 Geneva Conventions I, II, III IV and Additional Protocol 1. “How Grave Breaches are defined in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol,” ICRC. Available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/fq/5zm9f9.htm>

it suspects it is intended for IDPs, a breach of international law *carte blanche*.¹⁰⁸

While some international aid is trickling through, it often cannot reach those in areas where it is most needed. For instance, WFP rice being resold at local markets or bartered for other necessities in Karenni and southern Shan State, with local humanitarian aid workers lamenting that this aid is being applied ineffectually, only in cities and towns not conflict zones.¹⁰⁹ Junta troops at military checkpoints often confiscate aid, medicine, and the delivery of motorbikes intended to assist IDPs, thus applying direct funds is the best solution to assist those in areas where cross-border aid or aid through Yangon will be intercepted.¹¹⁰ The junta will only allow assistance to be provided in some areas that fall under their control, and in order to receive the assistance, the military's administrative wing, the General Administration Department (GAD), in each township collects the names and details of families, making them vulnerable to further surveillance, extortion and control.

International humanitarian aid responses are failing to reach those in need in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions, unable to adequately respond to the emergency situation on the

ground. This is not a new phenomenon but a consistent pattern of the Myanmar military over decades of conflict and disasters. During the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which displaced nearly two million people and killed 140,000, the Myanmar military weaponized aid for their own benefit, prevented and slowed aid to affected communities and in some cases used aid to elicit votes in favor of the military-drafted constitution during the military orchestrated and controlled constitutional referendum in 2008.¹¹¹

Multiple interviewees for this paper expressed that international aid actors were not present in Dry Zone regions currently, with IDPs being supported financially and subsisting on aid provided by local humanitarian and civil society groups, diaspora communities, local administration forces of the revolution, NUG, neighbors, relatives and friends.¹¹² Local humanitarian workers in Sagaing Region are buying from local farmers in order to limit their reliance of aid supplies from outside the region, while also helping local farmers, many of whom are struggling – so direct cash assistance is essential to support this work.¹¹³

Interviewees relayed that IDPs are in acute need of food, medicine, shelter, clothing, vehicles to

108 Interview R1-09

109 "Authorities Block UN World Food Programme Convoy from Reaching IDPs," Mizzima, 4 April 2022. Available at <https://mizzima.com/article/authorities-block-un-world-food-programme-convoy-reaching-idps>

110 Interview R1-01 and R1-02

111 Ashley South "Making a Disaster Out of a Cyclone," *The World Today*, July 2008. Available at <https://open-research-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/47277/4/'WorldToday'July2008.pdf> "I want to Help My Own People – State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis," Human Rights Watch, 28 April 2010. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/04/28/i-want-help-my-own-people/state-control-and-civil-society-burma-after-cyclone>

112 Interview R1-03, R1-04, R1-09. "Annual Report on the Activities of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management of the National Unity Government," NUG, 16 April 2022. Available at https://assets-mohadm.nugmyanmar.org/images/2022/04/MOHADM-1-year-report-public-Eng_finale.pdf

113 Interview R1-09



A teacher from Myaung Education Network is teaching the children in Sagaing Region. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

get to and from IDP sites, and the restoration of full internet access.¹¹⁴ Supplying satellite phones or access to non-military controlled internet service providers is essential. An added challenge is extreme inflation of commodity prices and petrol costs, and commission fees on withdrawing cash.¹¹⁵ One interviewee in Sagaing Region pressed the need for cross-border aid through India with the support of the international community, to ensure aid safely reaches those in need.¹¹⁶

Naw Htoo Htoo, the Program Director of Karen Human Rights Group has stated that when cross-border aid is effective, it reaches beyond ethnic and border regions.¹¹⁷ Cross-border aid has a flow-on effect to other regions outside immediate ethnic border regions, benefiting people throughout Myanmar. Cross-border aid continues to successfully reach conflict areas, historically in ethnic areas, which is not possible when aid is distributed in partnership with the Myanmar military. Local and border organizations have decades of experience, time-

114 Interview R1-02, R1-04, R1-06.

115 Interview R1-04. "Junta Tanks Myanmar's Economy," Progressive Voice, 14 May 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/05/14/the-junta-tanks-myanmar-s-economy/>

116 Interview R1-02

117 Webinar for "Denied and Deprived: Local Communities Confronting the Humanitarian Crisis and Protection Challenges in Southeast Burma," Karen Human Rights Group, 8 June 2022. Available at <https://khrgh.org/2022/06/denied-and-deprived-local-communities-confronting-humanitarian-crisis-and-protection> and <https://twitter.com/khrgh/status/1534355190031077376/photo/1>

tested knowledge and networks to assess and fulfil the needs on the ground. These networks have deep connections and strong bonds with the communities they serve – which facilitates local humanitarian actors effectiveness in the delivery of the aid.

In addition to the calls for cross-border humanitarian channels, another interviewee has recommended that international donors apply direct assistance to the CDM Committees or local humanitarian organizations, to assist the CDM and their families who face persecution.¹¹⁸ UN OCHA, and other donors, as part of their humanitarian plans have allotted cash payments as a means of providing assistance to be given directly to local humanitarian actors and human rights defenders (HRDs) – which must be increased to allow for emergency, short term and medium term solutions.¹¹⁹

The NUG has successfully applied 2.73 billion kyat (approximately \$1.45 million USD) of donations into humanitarian assistance throughout Myanmar between April 2021 to April 2022, including approximately 412 million kyat (\$218,000 USD) to local organizations, local administrations under the NUG's oversight or organic community administrations and

civilians in Sagaing Region, in coordination with local PDF groups within PDF-controlled territory.¹²⁰ Mandalay Region has received 81 million kyat (approximately \$44,000 USD) and Magwe Region has received 114 million kyat (approximately \$62,000 USD).¹²¹

Local civil society organizations are able to support those in Myanmar's Dry Zone, for example LGBTQI+ networks that have been able to support LGBTQI+ displaced youth but rolling internet cuts have posed challenges.¹²² Additionally, local grassroots governance structures have been formed by the people outside of the junta's control, providing a network for aid and donations.¹²³ Responses from local community actors, civil society and humanitarian organizations have been effective in reaching those in dire need, despite the junta's disruptions of the distribution of aid.¹²⁴ There must be a meaningful commitment to the localization of aid using local frameworks, in recognition of the agency and effectiveness of local actors, as well as the nexus between distributing aid through the junta and the suffering it creates.¹²⁵ The UN and international humanitarian aid organizations must back-up their support for the localization of aid with meaningful actions.

118 Interview R1-05

119 UN OCHA "Humanitarian Response Plan 2022," May 2022. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-january-2022>

120 "Annual Report on the Activities of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management of the National Unity Government," NUG, 16 April 2022. Available at https://assets-mohadm.nugmyanmar.org/images/2022/04/MOHADM-1-year-report-public-Eng_finale.pdf

121 Ibid.

122 Interview R1-03

123 Interview R1-06

124 Interviews R1-01, R1-03, R1-06.

125 Anne Decobert "The Struggle isn't Over: Shifting Aid Paradigms and redefining 'development' in Eastern Myanmar," *World Development*, Volume 127, March 2020. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104768>

UN Fails to Meaningfully and Effectively Respond to the Myanmar Crisis

The UN Secretary General and Myanmar Envoys,¹²⁶ the UN Security Council,¹²⁷ the UN Human Rights Council,¹²⁸ and the UN General Assembly¹²⁹ have all urged the junta to allow humanitarian access to these regions but to no avail, and there have been no consequences for the junta's non-compliance.¹³⁰ UN actors have been repeatedly denied access in delivering humanitarian aid to central regions and ethnic areas, both in terms of being the agent to deliver the aid and working in partnership with the junta.¹³¹

Politically, the UN Security Council is stagnant on the Myanmar crisis, as UN member states remain impotent as China, Russia and India – who also continue to arm and fund the military and its atrocity crimes – block meaningful action against the military junta.¹³² Vehement

calls from civil society for the UN Security Council to impose a global arms embargo and targeted sanctions against the junta, and to refer the situation of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court or establish an ad hoc tribunal, have gone unmet. The UN and international community have deflected responsibility on to ASEAN, which has failed to provide any solution to Myanmar's multiple crises.

Despite repeated calls from Myanmar, regional and international civil society organizations, those working within the UN inside Myanmar and regionally have been slow and ineffectual in responding to the crisis or have risked complicity in the junta's atrocities by signing Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) with the junta in the distribution of aid.¹³³ The UN does not have a coordinated or holistic approach to handling

126 "Note to Correspondents: Statement by the Secretary General's Special Envoy on Myanmar Regarding the ASEAN Humanitarian Consultations," UN Secretary-General, 3 May 2022. Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2022-05-03/note-correspondents-statement-the-secretary-general%E2%80%99s-special-envoy-myanmar-regarding-the-asean-humanitarian-consultations#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Secretary%20General's,local%20humanitarian%20networks%20to%20effectively>

127 "Security Council Press Statement on Myanmar," Press Release, 10 November 2021. Available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14697.doc.htm>

128 "Situation of Rights in Myanmar," UN Human Rights Council Resolution, 49th Session, 29 March 2022, A/HRC/49/L.12. Available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G22/294/58/PDF/G2229458.pdf?OpenElement>

129 "Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 June 2021: The situation in Myanmar," UN Doc. A/RES/75/287, available at <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/287>.

130 "UN Chief Presses Myanmar Junta for Aid Access," Reuters, 31 January 2022. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-chief-presses-myanmar-junta-aid-access-2022-01-31/>

131 "Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid, Donors Should Channel Assistance Via Local and Cross-Border Efforts," Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2021. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/13/myanmar-junta-blocks-lifesaving-aid>

132 <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-asia-china-032418ad6c63394ce2968dd665f90633>

133 "Nowhere to Run: Deepening Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar," Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Kachin Women's Association, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Women's Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karenni National Women's Organization, Pa-O Women's Union, Progressive Voice and Ta'ang Women's Organization, 7 September 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoice-myanmar.org/2021/09/07/nowhere-to-run-deepening-humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmar/>

the crisis in Myanmar. Their limited actions reflect fragmented and disjointed leadership at the highest levels of the UN strata. For instance, Myanmar has repeatedly been without an in-country permanent Resident Coordinator for prolonged periods, and even in the midst of the current catastrophic crisis, the position has been left vacant for months at a time.¹³⁴

During more than four decades of cycles of conflict and displacement, many international humanitarian organizations and UN actors have not shifted from working with successive military regimes, even when this results in the junta weaponizing aid for their own strategic political and military gain. These organizations continue to apply the same model of humanitarian aid distribution and engagement in Myanmar, which results in their operations being taken advantage of by the military and causing irreparable harm to the people of Myanmar. This failure was starkly evident during the Rohingya genocide, where an

independent UN-mandated Rosenthal Report determined the UN's engagement in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018 was a "systemic failure," "dysfunctional" and that UN actors were silent about ongoing atrocities being committed against the Rohingya so as not to risk their access to the then NLD-led government and Rakhine State.¹³⁵

The failures of the UN have contributed significantly to the current crisis in Myanmar. These systemic failures remain unresolved by the UN, and rather than tackling the known issues so as to not repeat its mistakes, these issues are being swept under the carpet.¹³⁶ For example, the most recent UN Secretary-General's follow up report to the Rosenthal Report paints a rosy picture of "new generation of UN Country Teams, under the leadership of an empowered, independent reinvigorated Resident Coordinator," while Myanmar repeatedly remained without a Resident Coordinator.¹³⁷

134 "UN Secretary-General's New Report Whitewashes the UN's Historic Failures in Myanmar," Progressive Voice, Press Release, 18 May 2022. Also mentioned in the Rosenthal Report - "A Brief and Independent Inquiry into the Involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018," Gert Rosenthal, 29 May 2019. Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/Myanmar%20Report%20-%20May%202019.pdf>

135 Ibid.

136 "UN Secretary-General's New Report Whitewashes the UN's Historic Failures in Myanmar," Progressive Voice and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia), 18 March 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/03/18/un-secretary-generals-new-report-whitewashes-the-uns-historical-failures-in-myanmar/>

137 Ibid.

ASEAN and the AHA Centre

ASEAN's proposed solution to the Myanmar crisis is the Five-Point Consensus, devised at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on 24 April 2021.¹³⁸ Its name is misleading given the exclusion of major stakeholders, and complete disregard for the Myanmar peoples' democratic will. Nevertheless, the "consensus" called for the cessation of violence, dialogue among conflict parties, mediation facilitated by an ASEAN Special Envoy, for the ASEAN Special Envoy to visit Myanmar to meet with all parties, and crucially the delivery of humanitarian aid through ASEAN.¹³⁹ The junta leader Min Aung Hlaing had no intention of following through on the Five-Point Consensus, almost immediately backtracking on his word before the ink had dried on the consensus, saying the military would consider the proposals "after stabilizing the country."¹⁴⁰ The military's escalation of violence since the adoption of the Five-Point Consensus is consistent with this position, as Min Aung Hlaing continues to blatantly ignore the agreement, committing heinous atrocity crimes across the country.

ASEAN is ineffective in responding to the junta's non-compliance with the Five-Point

Consensus, and yet the international community continues to defer to ASEAN – halting any meaningful solutions to the crisis in Myanmar. Rather, by allowing the military junta to join the regional grouping's platforms and by allowing the military to continue defense ties with the region as well as its dialogue partners,¹⁴¹ ASEAN is risking complicity in military's atrocity crimes. Instead of providing solutions, ASEAN has prevented the international community from taking proactive steps to stop the junta's violence and has further emboldened the military. Civil society organizations have repeatedly called on ASEAN to move beyond the Five-Point Consensus, which after over a year has failed to yield results and is no longer relevant in the current context in Myanmar.¹⁴²

Tied to the Five-Point Consensus is ASEAN's commitment to provide aid through ASEAN's disaster management and humanitarian wing, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), which was not designed to respond to conflict and certainly not a multidimensional crisis that have metastasized over seven decades.¹⁴³ Former Executive Director of the AHA Centre,

138 Five-Point Consensus, ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, 24 April, 2021. Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>

139 Ibid.

140 Bhavan Jaipragas "Myanmar's Junta to Consider ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus After 'Stabilising' the Country," *The South China Morning Post*, 27 April 2021. Available at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3131248/myanmars-junta-consider-aseans-five-point-consensus-after>

141 "ASEAN's complicity in the Myanmar military's atrocity crimes," *Justice For Myanmar*, 10 May 2022. Available at <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/aseans-complicity-in-the-myanmar-militarys-atrocity-crimes>

142 "Myanmar: ASEAN must move beyond consensus to facilitate cross-border aid," *Progressive Voice*, Forum Asia and CIVICUS, 6 May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/06/myanmar-asean-must-move-beyond-consensus-to-facilitate-cross-border-humanitarian-aid/>

143 'Great Expectations: Analysis of ASEAN Humanitarian Response to Myanmar Crisis,' *Progressive Voice* and Forum Asia, 28 July 2021. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/08/04/great-expectations-analysis-of-the-asean-coordinating-center-for-humanitarian-assistance-on-disaster-management/>

Adelina Kamal, has made clear that the AHA Centre's function is to address natural hazard-induced disasters, not man-made disasters.¹⁴⁴ Kamal's recommendations are to suspend the participation of the junta in all decision-making processes and activities, including the provision of aid.¹⁴⁵ Civil society have further repeatedly called on ASEAN to join forces with the UN and partner with local organizations to deliver aid directly to the people, not with the military junta. Overall, an approach that centers on solidarity with the Spring Revolution, human rights and 'do no harm' as key guiding principles must be fostered.

On the contrary, the AHA Centre is further entrenching military's role in the distribution of humanitarian aid. According to the AHA Centre's standard operating procedures, the state receiving the humanitarian aid is able to "exercise the overall direction, control,

coordination and supervision of the assistance" as a member of the Governing Board.¹⁴⁶ With the junta-controlled Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement on the Governing Board of AHA Centre despite having no legitimacy and no control over the country, the junta is able to determine the areas where aid will be distributed.¹⁴⁷ Initially, UN OCHA and the AHA Centre were preparing to conduct a needs assessments and delivery programs for humanitarian aid, as an outcome of the 6 May Consultative Meeting on the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar.¹⁴⁸ While it is unclear what role the UN OCHA and other UN agencies have had in implementation of the agreement from the Consultative Meeting, according to the NUG and EROs, the assessment has been conducted excluding these key actors and civil society from consultation.¹⁴⁹ The current status of the assessments is unknown.

144 "An ASEAN-led Inconvenient Approach to Myanmar Crisis," Jakarta Post, 23 October 2021. Available at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2021/10/22/an-asean-led-inconvenient-approach-to-myanmar-crisis.html>

145 Ibid.

146 "Standard Operating Procedure For Regional Standby Arrangements And Coordination Of Joint Disaster Relief And Emergency Response Operations (SASOP)" ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management, April 2018. Available <https://ahacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/SASOP/2.-SASOP-Revision-V2.0-April2018.pdf>

147 Ibid.

148 "Press Release on the Outcomes of the Consultative Meeting on ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar, 6 May 2022," ASEAN Press Release, 7 May 2022. Available at <https://asean.org/press-release-on-the-outcomes-of-the-consultative-meeting-on-asean-humanitarian-assistance-to-myanmar-6-may-2022/>

"UN and ASEAN Risk Complicity in Myanmar Junta's Weaponization of Aid and Atrocity Crimes" Altse-an-Burma, Chin Human Rights Organization, Karenni Civil Society Network, Karen Peace Support Network, and Progressive Voice, 31 May 2022. Available at <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/31/un-and-asean-risk-complicity-in-myanmar-juntas-weaponization-of-aid-and-atrocity-crimes/>

149 "Response to the Consultative Meeting on ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar," NUG Statement (9/2022), 7 May 2022. Available at <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2022/05/07/statement-9-2022-response-to-the-consultative-meeting-on-asean-humanitarian-assistance-to-myanmar/>

Solidarity Approach

According to the International Committee for the Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC), humanitarian assistance aims to save lives, alleviate suffering, and protect the dignity of the affected population – relying on four principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Yet, in the context of Myanmar, international aid agencies and the UN have repeatedly failed to achieve all four principles time after time.

Often international humanitarian organizations place too much emphasis on neutrality over other important considerations, such as the ‘do no harm’ principle, protection of human rights, supporting democracy, solidarity with local communities and effectiveness of aid solutions. Hugo Slim, former Head of Policy and Humanitarian Diplomacy at the ICRC, articulates that in today’s wars, neutrality is not ethically desirable, practically possible, nor is it necessary in order to be a good humanitarian.¹⁵⁰ A humanitarian should not be neutral in the face of genocide or while communities are being bombed.¹⁵¹ When aid agencies cling to the dominant model of neutral humanitarianism it is at great cost of human suffering. In the context of Myanmar, they do so in defense of working with the junta, but there is nothing neutral or impartial about working with a brutal junta in the distribution of humanitarian aid,

and doing so emboldens the junta to further weaponize aid.¹⁵² The decision to partner with the junta is also inherently politicized – it is impossible to be neutral. The junta manipulates humanitarian aid to their advantage, choosing where and when it is distributed – attempting to starve communities who resist them. This has been the case historically in ethnic areas, and is the current situation in Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions. People in these areas have been deliberately cut off from humanitarian assistance as part of the junta’s Four Cuts strategy which has resulted in their houses and villages being burned to the ground and their livelihoods being destroyed.

The most effective way to effectively provide humanitarian assistance in the context of Myanmar is through an approach focused on solidarity with the people of Myanmar in their fight against the illegitimate junta – a terrorist organization.¹⁵³ A solidarity approach is the “employment of humanitarian action within a political strategy on behalf of victims.”¹⁵⁴ Support for ethnic communities and local governance formed out of Myanmar’s inspirational Spring Revolution or from previously existing structures in ethnic regions under the governance of EROs must be recognized for the provision of essential services to people in need on the ground.¹⁵⁵ Ethnic community-

150 Hugo Slim “You Don’t Have to be Neutral to be a Good Humanitarian,” *The New Humanitarian*, 27 August 2020. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/08/27/humanitarian-principles-neutrality>

151 Ibid.

152 Khin Ohmar “There is Nothing Neutral About Engaging with Myanmar’s Military,” *The New Humanitarian*, 28 July 2021. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/7/28/theres-nothing-neutral-about-engaging-with-myanmars-military>

153 Ibid.

154 Thomas G. Weiss “Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Volume 13, Issue 1. 11 April 2006. Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1747-7093.1999.tb00322.x>

155 Statement “Revolutionary Systems of Local Governance in Myanmar Should Receive International Assistance,” Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 1 June 2022. Available at <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/2022/06/local-governance-international-assistance/>



Villagers putting out fire after the junta soldiers burned their village in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region. [Credit: Ko Nway Oo (Myaung)]

based organizations have been undertaking this work effectively and successfully for decades, with the assistance of donors throughout the 1990s and onward.¹⁵⁶ Aid agencies can achieve this through cross-border channeling and by directly applying funds to local humanitarian actors. Additionally, these local groups have financial systems, policies and procedures in place that can facilitate large aid grants – for which they have decades of experience to show their effectiveness. The technical knowledge among these groups and their ability to access and assist their own communities is invaluable to international actors. To effectuate this, international donors and actors need to foster and support connections and networks that

are already growing organically, and help communities and systems in the Dry Zone connect with and learn from groups elsewhere, in particular those along the border areas.

Together with local communities, aid agencies should work through community-based humanitarian agencies that are best placed to serve their communities, access local populations and provide aid following principles of humanity and impartiality and save lives.¹⁵⁷ The approach of working around local ethnic and community based organizations rather than working with them “represents a colonization of aid practices – a denial of locals’ agency.”¹⁵⁸ To localize humanitarian aid, the UN and

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Khin Ohmar “There is Nothing Neutral About Engaging with Myanmar’s Military,” *The New Humanitarian*, 28 July 2021. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/7/28/theres-nothing-neutral-about-engaging-with-myanmars-military>

international agencies must form meaningful and equal partnerships with local organizations and take a solidarity-based approach to addressing the humanitarian crisis that places the agency of locals at the center of the solution.¹⁵⁹

While positive actions have been taken to support local humanitarian actors by some international organizations and agencies, the support must be increased to match the rapidly expanding needs of IDPs during the monsoon season, as well as the need for food, medicine, adequate shelter, means of transportation to reach IDPs and sanitation supplies.

In order for international actors to fully implement the localization of aid, they need to remove barriers to accessing funds, including through the simplification of bureaucratic requirements. Many feel overwhelmed with cumbersome reporting obligations and delays in emergency funding that place an extra burden on local actors unnecessarily. Therefore, funds must be applied flexibly, in a timely manner, and without onerous reporting requirements. Dialogue with local groups and IDPs, in solidarity with them, is crucial to easing suffering and breaking the shackles of the junta's oppression.

159 Anne Decobert "Myanmar's Human Rights Crisis Justifies Foregoing Neutrality for a Solidarity-based Approach to humanitarianism," *Melbourne Asia Review*, 4 August 2021. Available at <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/myanmars-human-rights-crisis-justifies-foregoing-neutrality-for-a-solidarity-based-approach-to-humanitarianism/>

Khin Ohmar "There is Nothing Neutral About Engaging with Myanmar's Military," *The New Humanitarian*, 28 July 2021. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/7/28/theres-nothing-neutral-about-engaging-with-myanmars-military>

Conclusion

The findings presented in this briefing paper show that Sagaing, Magwe and Manadaly Regions desperately need immediate and urgent humanitarian assistance from the international community. Presently, the response to this crisis from the UN and ASEAN is nowhere near proportionate to the devastation on the ground, and they must change course to implement a coordinated humanitarian response that centralizes local actors as the solution to the humanitarian crisis.

In solidarity with communities on the ground, the international community and international aid agencies must shift the current humanitarian aid paradigm, and fully commit to localization of humanitarian aid in support of local humanitarian organizations and actors, through cross-border channeling and direct assistance. There is an existing foundation of strong, well-coordinated and expert border-based humanitarian and civil society organizations currently delivering humanitarian assistance. International actors need to access this existing local capacity to better assist the people of

Myanmar, not just along the border in ethnic areas but extending into the central parts of Myanmar where there are extremely high levels of displacement and humanitarian need since the February 2021 attempted coup.

It is abundantly clear the solution to the crisis is not the military junta. They cannot be an aid partner, as they are the root-cause of this catastrophic multidimensional crisis. Myanmar's humanitarian crisis will continue, until and unless, the junta is dismantled, and federal democracy is established. The resistance and resilience of the people of Myanmar is strong and their fight for a genuine federal democracy will continue, but it matters how the international community, donors, humanitarian agencies will come to support their struggle against the military. To date, their response leaves much to be desired. With these findings, this briefing paper offers the following recommendations to UN, ASEAN, international humanitarian organizations and donors as well as to the NUG and EROs.

**“Only the village can be burned down,
not the spirit!”¹⁶⁰**

160 “Myanmar Villagers Protest Arson Attacks by Junta Forces,” Radio Free Asia, 11 February 2022. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/sagiang-arson-protest-02112022170937.html>

Recommendations

ASEAN and AHA Centre

- Move beyond the Five-Point Consensus, work in tandem with the UN to devise robust and durable solutions to the political and humanitarian crises in Myanmar, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the NUG, EROs, Myanmar civil society and local humanitarian organizations; and
- Suspend all humanitarian activities with the military junta, and distribute aid through local and community-based humanitarian organizations.

International Humanitarian Organizations and Donors

- Do not work in partnership with the military junta in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- Consult and coordinate with EROs, NUG, and in particular, local humanitarian organizations and ethnic and local civil society organizations for the provision of cross-border aid;
- Facilitate cross-border aid delivery by supporting and working in equal and meaningful partnership with local humanitarian organizations and civil society, in full respect of the agency of local communities;
- Apply funds directly and flexibly to local humanitarian organizations, so they are able to respond effectively to the humanitarian crisis on the ground, while also relaxing onerous reporting requirements to allow civil society and local humanitarian organizations to focus on the emergency situation at hand. Cross-border aid does not stop in ethnic border areas, with support and funding, it can reach communities in Myanmar's Dry Zone;
- Employ a solidarity approach to the distribution of humanitarian aid – putting the welfare, human rights, human security and agency of displaced communities and local humanitarian actors at the center of solutions to the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar; and
- Move beyond ASEAN's solutions and the Five-Point Consensus to address the humanitarian, human rights and political crisis in Myanmar and recognize and support the NUG.

United Nations

- Do not work in partnership with the military junta in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- Call on the international humanitarian community to consult and coordinate with the NUG and EROs to support the provision of humanitarian aid through local humanitarian aid organizations, civil society organizations and ethnic health and service provision organizations including through cross-border channels;

- Conduct a full and independent inquiry into the actions of involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar, following on from the Rosenthal report and post 1 February 2021; and
- Call on bordering countries, especially Thailand, India and Bangladesh, to open their borders for unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid into Myanmar.

UN Security Council

- Refer the situation of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court or establish an ad-hoc tribunal to investigate and prosecute grave atrocity crimes;
- Impose a global arms embargo on the Myanmar military;
- Impose targeted sanctions against the military leadership, military businesses and military-affiliated businesses as well as their web of arms dealers; and
- Impose sanctions on jet fuel to the Myanmar military;


Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations and the National Unity Government of Myanmar

- Move beyond ASEAN and its Five-Point Consensus, including the humanitarian aid provision by AHA Centre; and
- Hold consultations with local humanitarian and civil society organizations on matters related to the assessment, coordination and delivery of humanitarian aid assistance and ensure their equal partnership in the planning of aid programs.




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