



Myanmar Military's War Crimes in Kawthoolei: Loss of Lives and Livelihoods after the Coup of 2021





December 2022

This report was prepared by Research and Documentation Branch of KNU's Department of Organizing and Information (DOI), Foreign Affairs Department (FAD) and Human Rights Committee with an instruction from KNU's Central Executive committee. Members of KNLA, civilians, Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD), Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and KNU's Transitional Justice Team have also contributed data and pictures for the report. A full original Burmese version of this report can be available on KNU's official website at www.knuhq.org.

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To United Nations

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Photo: A monastery destroyed and burnt down by Myanmar military's arbitrary air strike in November 2022

Executive Summary

The unlawful seizure of power from the elected civilian government by the Myanmar military—under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—on the 1st of February 2021 was nothing but a clear act of taking the country back into the dark ages. The act also very much repeats what the previous dictator General Ne Win—who claimed himself to be the father of the country—did in 1962. With a similarly stated mission to “rebuild the nation”, the State Administration Council (SAC) led by Min Aung Hlaing announced the establishment of a care-taker government on the 1st of August 2021, with the Senior General appointing himself as the country's Prime Minister. However, the junta's subsequent military operations targeting civilians in Southeast Myanmar have proven to be the opposite of what the care-taker government had supposedly set out to do. The Karen National Union (KNU) has been closely monitoring and documenting the activities of the Myanmar military across its seven districts. After a careful examination of all the oppressive and brutal actions of the Myanmar military against the opposition movements rejecting their attempted coup, we conclude that the military junta has not only failed to abide by the military's code of conduct but also categorically committed massive human rights

violations. Consequently, the KNU has been accommodating and providing shelter to thousands of civilians from all walks of life, most notably civil servants that had joined the civil disobedient movement (CDM) and reached the KNU's controlled areas, trying to escape the brutal oppression and widespread human rights violations of the Myanmar military.

The KNU is standing firm on its stated belief that the only way to overcome chauvinism and all forms of authoritarianism—including military dictatorship—in a socially and religiously diverse country such as Myanmar and build a long-lasting peace is by establishing a federal democratic union where democratic principles are not only proclaimed but also practiced.

The KNU Human Rights Committee, established by the 16th Congress of the Karen National Union in 2017, has been documenting cases of human rights violations committed by the SAC since the coup in close collaboration with respective KNU district officials and local people on the ground. This report is based on the evidence collected through the committee's joint efforts with respective district and township leaders, carrying out extensive interviews with local residents impacted by human rights violations, complemented by daily updates and telegrams from the Karen National Liberation Army-Headquarters (KNLA-HQ). During October and November 2022, KNU's in-house technical advisors and external experts also provided support to ensure the data featured in the current report is credible and accurate. In this report, we cover human rights violations committed by the troops of the Myanmar military—or the so-called SAC—since from the beginning of the attempted coup until December 2022 with the aim to inform the wider audience on how the rights of innocent civilians have been brutally violated.

Soon after the attempted coup and following the excessive deployment and reinforcement of troops by the Myanmar military in clear violation of the ceasefire agreement, armed conflicts between the KNU's KNLA and the military junta reignited and have been escalating until today in six out of seven districts of the KNU (except Hpa-an District).

The KNU is an ethnic armed resistance organization that has been at the forefront of fighting for an end to military dictatorship in Myanmar and for the greater equality of the country's ethnic nationalities in line with



international principles and laws. The KNU has always been strictly committed to its own policies, protocols and military code of conduct, even when facing troops of the Myanmar military with formidable firepower. The KNU has been especially vigilant about making sure the military code of conduct is not violated during armed conflicts, and in the event that alleged cases of such violations have been reported, the KNU has made its best efforts in rigorously following its own laws by carrying out investigations and taking legal actions accordingly.

The irrefutable evidence of systematic human rights violations documented in this report is based on our analysis of the patterns of these violations committed by the SAC's troops. We found that the SAC has been increasingly deploying its "Four Cuts" Strategy across the country, with absolutely no concerns for the potential negative implications this might impose on the people. This is a clear sign that the SAC's troops are deliberately targeting and attacking innocent civilians—the very people they are supposed to be providing protection to.

All the heinous acts the SAC has been committing across the country prove that the junta is responsible for systematic human rights violations. In addition, the new legislation and various amendments of the existing laws imposed by the SAC since the coup—with a clear aim to control civil liberties and other civil rights—are also a clear violation of the fundamental right to freedom of expression.

The KNU Human Rights Committee has documented a total of 7,587 clashes in Kawthoolei—the areas under the KNU's administration—between February 2021 and December 2021, leading to at least 365,187 people being displaced from their homes. The committee has carefully analyzed all forms of human rights violations that had occurred during these armed clashes and found that there are nineteen different human rights violations being committed in Kawthoolei as shown in the illustration below.



KNU's Human Rights Committee documented a total of 19 types of human rights violations by the military junta in KNU areas.



Number of Internally Displaced People in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)

No	Township	Distirct	Person (quantity)
1	Kyaik Hto	Doo Tha Htu	24,965
2	Billin	Doo Tha Htu	7,790
3	Thaton	Doo Tha Htu	6,840
4	Hpa An	Doo Tha Htu	35,109
5	Daw Pa Kho	Taw Oo	10,000
6	Ler Doh	Kler Lwee Htu	44,441
7	Mone	Kler Lwee Htu	12,453
8	Hsaw Hti	Kler Lwee Htu	8,092
9	Ta Naw Ta Ree	Mergui - Tavoy	2,648
10	Ler Ker Saw (Lay Nya)	Mergui - Tavoy	1,054
11	Ler Mu Lar	Mergui - Tavoy	6,154
12	Ker Ser Doh	Mergui - Tavoy	1,963
13	Dwe Loe	Mutraw	45,080
14	Bu Thoe	Mutraw	51,087
15	Lu Thaw	Mutraw	2,067
16	Kawkareik	Dooplaya	62,968
17	Kyone Done	Dooplaya	2,898
18	Wing Yay	Dooplaya	15,520
19	Noh Ter Kaw	Dooplaya	15,457
20	Hlaing Bwe	Hpa-an	8,600
Total			365,187

Aerial Bombardments/Air Strikes



“Our village head had instructed us to prepare bunkers or bomb-proof shelters in order to protect ourselves from airstrikes. The first bombardment hit us around late in the afternoon. I was taking cover inside the bunker with my wife and two of my children. There were no Karen soldiers in the village but only ordinary villagers. One of the bombs landed on the front of our house but the damage was luckily minimal. The village school was demolished. The hospital was also destroyed. I don’t understand why they are targeting our houses, hospital and school in the village.”

Karen Villager, Luthaw Township, Mutraw District

The use of air strikes has become quite frequent lately, as the SAC faces heavy casualties on the ground and thus accelerates the excessive force in its offensive aerial attacks against the revolutionary forces. Fighter jets and helicopter gunships—including other air force carriers—have been deployed increasingly and with higher intensity in order for the SAC to get the upper hand.

When launching airstrikes with fighter jets and helicopter gunships, the SAC is not only deliberately targeting armed resistance groups but also villages, hospitals, schools and religious buildings. This study has clearly found that airstrikes deployed to the southern part of Myanmar—especially to the KNU-controlled areas—have brought more damage to civilian, communal buildings and livelihoods of the people than to

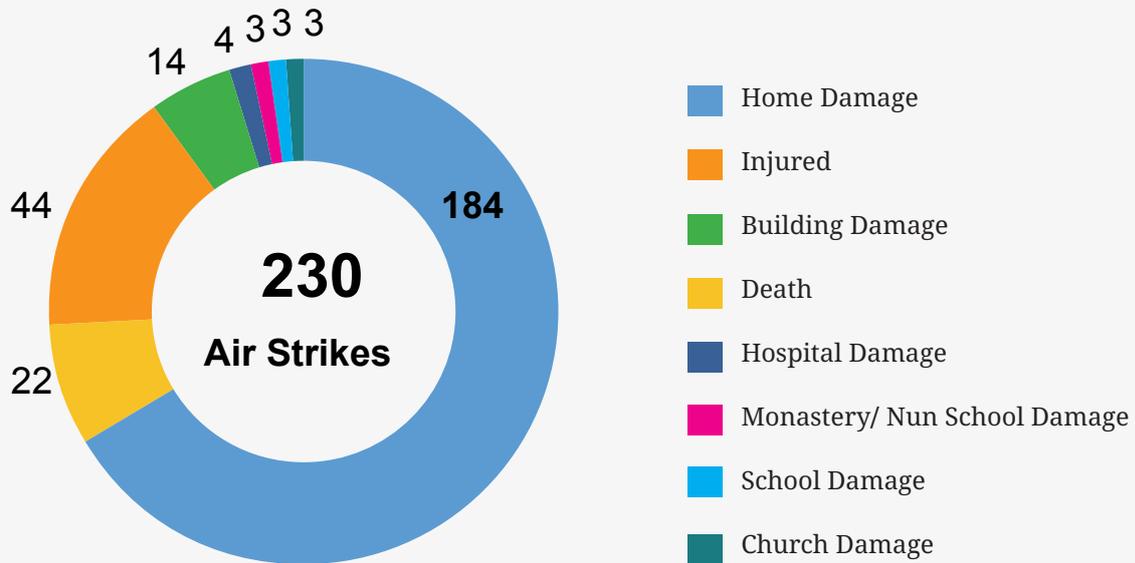
military targets. Two conclusions can be drawn from this finding: first, the SAC has been doing this to instigate fear among the civilian population with the aim to prevent it from joining hands with anti-dictatorship forces as well as to completely cut or reduce its support and contributions to the KNU. Second, the SAC has also been trying to enhance its maneuverability upon anti-dictatorship forces in these areas, since it knows that the KNU will always prioritize the safety and security of people living in its territory. This analysis thus confirms that the military goals, operations and strategies of the Myanmar military have clearly no consideration for the safety and security of the people. Instead, the SAC is committing deliberate, destructive acts to these people's lives.

The KNU has documented ample evidence confirming the number of airstrikes as well as of people impacted by the destruction caused by these air strikes. However, the increased usage of surveillance planes and drones hovering over our areas— which is indeed terrifying for the people living there—has been simply too frequent to be documented precisely. In addition, frequent disruptions of communication lines in the respective areas, especially in Mutraw district, have also been undermining our capacity to monitor and document drone attacks by locally stationed forces of the Myanmar military. Still, we have been able to learn of the incidents of drone attacks from the testimonies of survivors, respective community leaders and from troop members of the KNLA.

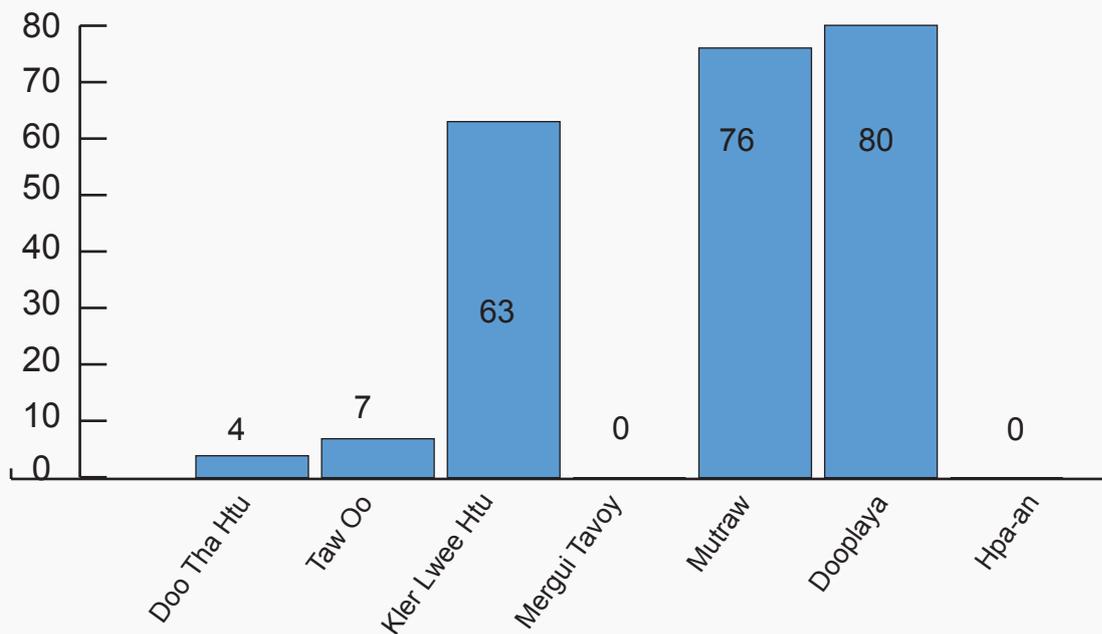
There was some media coverage on the reinforcement and procurement of new fighter jets by the military council—including flight trainings in preparation for handling high-tech aircrafts—at the time of writing this report. Aerial threats with the capacity to massacre and inflict mass destruction are extremely concerning for the safety and security of the people. Unfortunately, these findings clearly indicate that the military junta is certain to continue their crimes against humanity and systematic violations of human rights in the future as well.



Damages Caused by Air Strikes Targeting Villages in Kawthoolei
(Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Number of Air Strikes Targeting Villages in Kawthoolei
(Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Excessive Uses of Heavy Artilleries



“The commander always commands us to aim at villages whenever there is military tension and clashes around the neighborhood. So, we fire heavy artillery directly into the villages as we are told. The strategic commander gave us an order to fire at May Kyone and Mi Gyaung Kwin villages when I was there. We shot four or five rounds of ammunition at a time. The orders of the strategic commander to fire heavy artillery used to come through our battalion commander. To fire heavy artillery, you need permission from higher-up.”

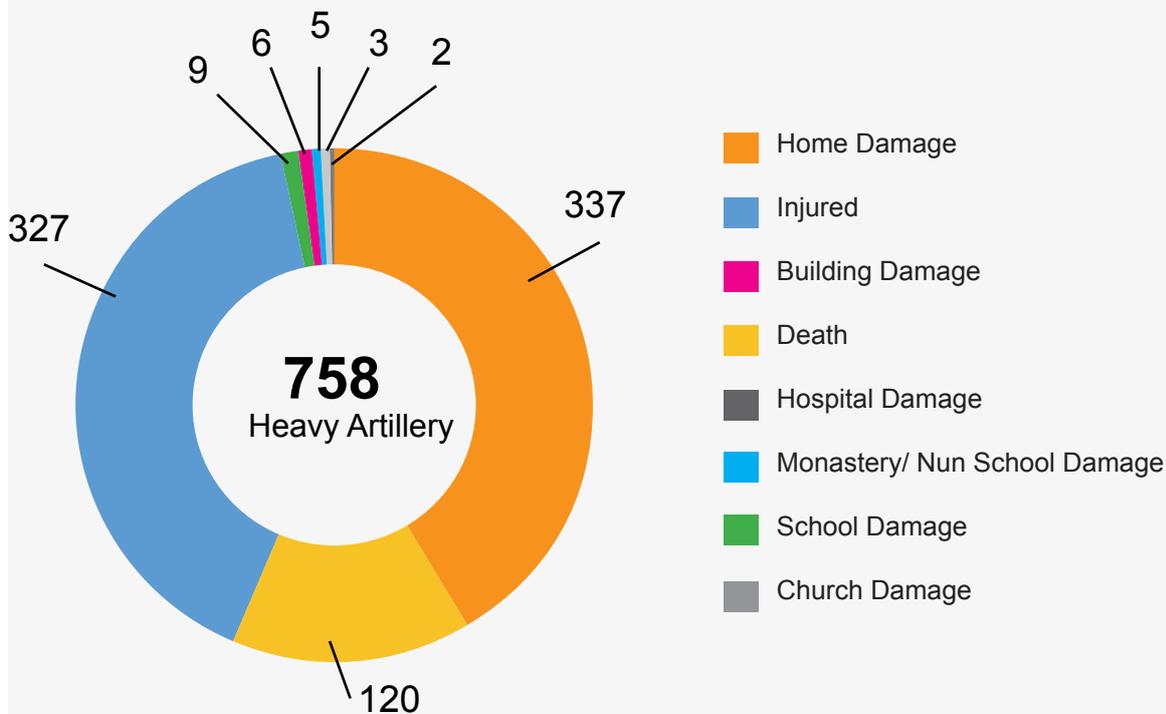
CDM Soldier, IDNumber: Tha 5/, khamaya 403, Thayetchaung

Ethnic minority communities across the country have been bracing the Myanmar army’s reckless and indiscriminate shelling of heavy artillery—like a pouring rain—for more than 70 years. The use of heavy artillery has indeed been a part of the notorious “Four Cuts” Strategy that the Myanmar military has been employing to counter ethnic armed resistance groups for decades. Various reports and studies by security researchers and specialists have already documented that such heavy artillery had been applied not only to target ethnic armed troops but also indiscriminately at any and all areas—including civilian areas—even when there had been no evidence of active presence of ethnic resistance troops. The Myanmar military’s deliberate shelling of civilian targets as a part of its overall military strategy clearly shows that it has been systematically undertaking terror campaigns against those whom they have, in fact, a duty to protect.

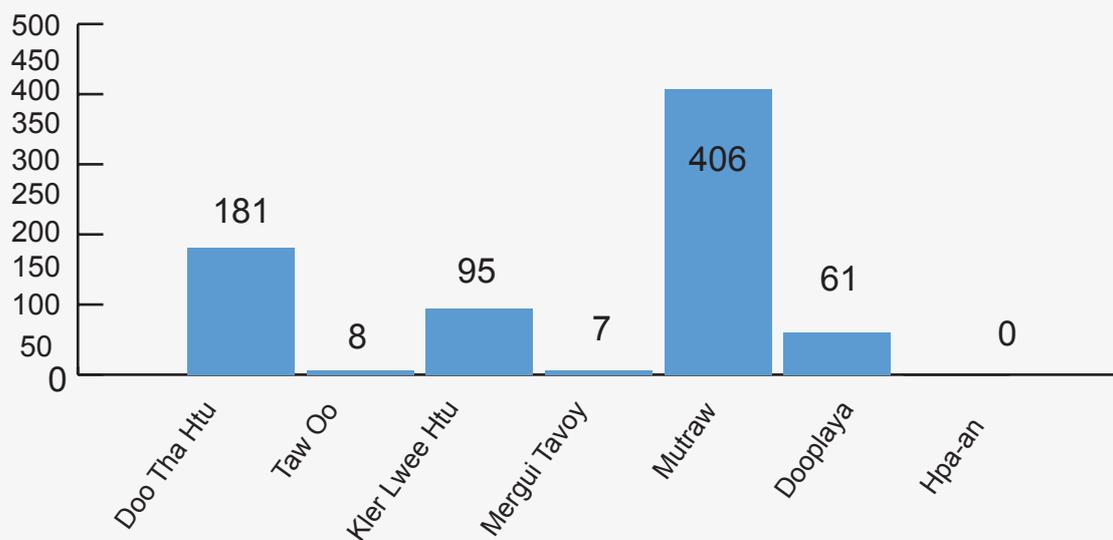
Generally, all armed groups are at times required to use heavy artillery, and this is typically when they need to reach to a long-range target or make a significant impact on their military target. Heavy artillery in this context usually means mortar/rocket launchers and 60- or 120-millimeter rocket-propelled grenades that are widely used during battles in Myanmar. Using mortar launchers to fire at long-range targets is however limited in its precision. Based on our research, the Myanmar military has been basically using two tactics when launching heavy artillery across Kawthoolei: the first tactic is using civilian, residential areas (such as villages) as its bases and protective shields, and launching attacks from these at targets afar. The second tactic is launching heavy artillery from its temporary outposts or from the front-line during crossfires and firing at suspicious targets or to deliberately target civilian areas. Our interviews with civilians confirmed the Myanmar military's reckless and widespread use of both tactics in order to get the upper hand at all costs, thereby committing war crimes.



Damages Caused by Heavy Artilleries Targeting Villages in Kawthoolei
(Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Number of Heavy Artilleries Targeting Villages in Kawthoolei
(Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Modern Day “Four Cuts” Strategy

Following February 2021, the Myanmar military has once again been using its notorious “Four Cuts” Strategy when cracking down on anti-coup and resistance movements. The strategy is primarily used to disrupt or destruct access to food, funding, information and recruits of the resistance forces by deliberately targeting civilian communities that are supporting the revolution.

Based on the KNU's experience, the “Four Cuts” Strategy may be effective in a short run but it has not proven successful in toppling the resistance movement in the long run. It is thus unclear why the Myanmar military continues to employ this strategy. What is clear is that it is still the same brutal military that tends to use public fear as a way to obstruct or stop systems of support for the anti-coup movement.

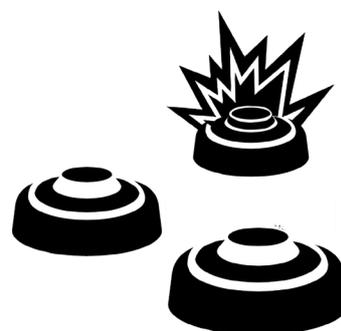
The KNU was the first ethnic armed resistance group to emerge in Myanmar and has received almost full support from the people it represents. Following the military's attempted coup in 2021, the organization has become even more prominent among the general public, this time receiving support and trust from other, non-Karen ethnic groups as well. Consequently, the Myanmar military has been deliberately attacking residential areas, farmlands and farmers working in the fields, causing serious threats to food security, especially for highland communities with limited access to water supply. Communities in peripheral areas—often at high altitudes—are in dire situations due to serious shortages of food caused by the junta blocking their road access. In addition, the local population is facing security threats and restrictions to move around, as the junta troops stationed in Kawthoolei as well as the Karen Border Guard Forces under its command are suspecting them of supporting the KNU and anti-junta forces.

Since February 2021, there have been travel and communication restrictions imposed across Kawthoolei. For example, while all four telecom operators and mobile Internet service providers (MPT, Telenor, Ooredoo and Mytel) had been operating in KNU's Thaton District before the coup, from around June or July 2021, only the military-owned Mytel services have stayed available. The district has been experiencing frequent



communication cuts, as not all mobile towers in the area are operational. In Mutraw District, all mobile operators have stopped operating since a few months after the attempted coup until the time of reporting. Other districts are also facing similar limitations. Basically, a vast majority of people across Kawthoolei has been deprived of access to political, security and other important news due to massive communication cuts, while living under constant fear and feeling of insecurity, with the junta's fighter jets flying over their heads on a daily basis. Cutting access to communication is clearly a part of the junta's "Four Cuts" Strategy, with a total disregard for the people who have been eking out a living after being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Travel bans or restrictions of movement are other forms of "cuts" used by the junta. People's lives have become increasingly difficult, with more security checkpoints and mounting restrictions over the transport of essential daily needs (e.g., rice, cooking oil, solar-powered products, batteries, etc.). People live in constant fear, as they can become suspected of supporting the resistance forces anytime. Even worse, the junta has been planting landmines along transportation routes largely used by civilians, and also using civilian trains or cars to transport military equipment. All of these heinous acts testify that the junta has no regard for the public's safety, does not value people's lives and instead treats them as its enemies.



“The military officers ordered us to plant landmines on the road with the mindset that anyone who would step on the landmines is our enemy regardless of who they are—a civilian or resistance force member. Some officers are different in a way that they even want to show the number of casualties [they cause]. Sometimes we are accused by those officers for not getting the job done properly, especially when no one gets hurt or there are no casualties from the landmines we have planted.”

Combat military engineer joining civil disobedient movement (CDM) from Combat Military engineering division 3, Kawkareik Township, ID number Tha 2, private.

Civilians often have to run and hide in nearby forests, mountains, caves or other villages when the military convoys enter their respective areas or when they hear news about military deployments heading towards their way. Even in villages that are not directly targeted by the junta, grown-up men usually avoid living for too long at a time and only women stay behind to take care of village affairs. Even though these women have to worry about potential sexual abuse and life-threatening risks on top of everything else, they try to guard their hard-earned homes and properties. The bravery of such women has often been demonstrated to hold the communities in the villages together. In cases when everyone—including men, women and families—had left their villages with no one staying behind, the Myanmar soldiers have typically looted personal belongings, destroyed properties or even burned down the entire villages. In many areas, men usually avoid staying in the villages when the Myanmar military arrives as they can be subject to arbitrary arrest, interrogation or forced labor due to the soldiers' suspicion that these men might be KNU supporters or might fight against them one day. Such forms of harassment have been commonplace for more than 70 years across the ethnic areas, and now the exact patterns of brutality against the public are being committed throughout the country to instigate fear among the people. Inflicting fear among the public again and again shows that the Myanmar military is systematically using public fear as a weapon.



International Laws and Principles Violated by the SAC

The military junta's use of innocent civilians and their residential areas as defensive shields to advance its military interests clearly violate many principles stipulated in one of the four Geneva Conventions related to the protection of civilians during armed conflict. For example, the military junta is deliberately launching indiscriminate heavy artillery shelling to destroy essential public facilities, such as hospitals and schools. The KNU Human Rights Committee has documented numerous cases of health-care facilities being destroyed in this way. Not only are people's livelihoods getting ruined, these people often also have to leave their homes behind and flee to find safe places yet with all kinds of hardship related to food, health and education. The Article 18 (2) of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, adopted on the 12th of August 1949, specifies the obligation to protect civilians in time of war as well as to protect and refrain from attacking essential public facilities such as hospitals and clinics.

By committing arbitrary unlawful arrests, killings and tortures of civilians, the military junta is blatantly violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that every member state of the United Nations (UN) is obligated to comply with, not to mention the four international conventions and the two subsequent conventions that a country must sign to comply with. The first three out of four Geneva Conventions have provisions related to protecting the rights of combatants from both parties in conflict, while the Fourth Convention requires its signatories to protect civilians in time of war, all of which the military junta has failed to fulfill.

Although Myanmar is a signatory of the Geneva Conventions, it has been constantly violating the agreements. For example, Paragraphs 31, 32 and 33 of Chapter 3 require member states to refrain from forced labor, torturing to extract information, physical abuses, unlawful killings, massacres and verbal coercion. Besides, Paragraphs 89, 90 and 91 of the Fourth Geneva Convention specify duties to provide adequate food, clothes, medical check-ups and treatment for the prisoners of war. However, the Myanmar junta and troops under its command have orchestrated systematic oppression and killings for their military gain instead of fulfilling these obligations.



Recommendations to Protect Human Rights and Bring Justice for the People

The act of deliberately targeting and attacking civilians constitutes crimes against humanity, and justice must be brought for the people in this regard: the Myanmar military must be held accountable and face due process at the International Criminal Court. Unfortunately, the international community has been unwilling and/or unable to put effective pressure on the military junta, while some international organizations and foreign governments continue to maintain their business-as-usual relationships with it, thereby directly or indirectly reinforcing the junta's legitimacy usurped and atrocities committed. As such, the KNU strongly recommends the following demands to all the concerned parties:

To the UN

1. We urge the UN to take serious actions in order to bring an end to the military dictatorship, its chauvinism and all other kinds of dictatorships, and to support the realization of a peaceful union in line with the UN's 2022 theme of ending racism and building peace.
2. The intensity of humanitarian crisis the Myanmar people are facing is directly correlated with the political turmoil inflicting the country. We also urge the UN to make their best efforts to take the following into consideration in order to provide effective humanitarian assistance and help protect civilians from the Myanmar military's brutal attacks as follows:
 - (a) To designate a no-fly-zone for military flights in Myanmar with an international monitoring mechanism in place to ensure compliance;



- (b) To designate internationally guaranteed protection of safe zones for civilian areas, such as villages, internally displaced people camps, hospitals, clinics and schools in need of protection from military attacks; and
 - (c) To establish internationally negotiated humanitarian corridors to guarantee unhindered cross-border aid delivery or to provide safe passage for local humanitarian actors operating inside Myanmar in order for them to be able to provide timely humanitarian assistance to those most in need.
3. We welcome the proposal of the UN Special Envoy to the UN General Secretary to take the approach of "International Humanitarian Plus," and urge the UN to make a concerted effort with Myanmar's neighboring countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and international community to designate internationally guaranteed safe zones and humanitarian corridors.
4. We call on the UN and the International Committee of the Red- Cross to facilitate negotiation and coordination between the ASEAN, India and Thailand on establishing temporary humanitarian corridors to allow for unhindered access in order to deliver humanitarian aid to most needed areas.



To Foreign Governments and International Organizations

1. We urge the foreign governments and international legal and justice institutions to take legal actions against the military junta that has blatantly violated the international humanitarian law.
2. We urge them to stop cooperating with the military junta's humanitarian programs that are designed to benefit those who are living in the SAC's designated areas but exclude the actually affected communities and stakeholders.
3. We urge them to engage in discussions on all-inclusive humanitarian dialogue based on the values and norms guided by international humanitarian laws and best practices.
4. We urge the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Committee of the Red Cross to pursue agreements for cross-border humanitarian assistance in order to address urgent humanitarian needs.

To Thailand and ASEAN Member States

1. We urge the Thai Government to help facilitate international humanitarian organizations' access to refugees and delivery of humanitarian aid as needed.
2. We urge the ASEAN to prioritize organizing an emergency meeting in order to prepare for a potential outflow of refugees out of Myanmar into other member states. Inside the country, there is a sense of urgency, as the military junta is gearing up to launch the worst airstrikes against the people living along the border with Thailand and thus preparing to commit gross human rights violations once again.

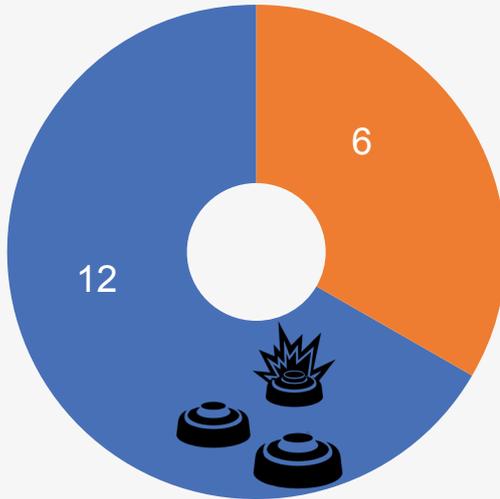
■ To Soldiers of the SAC

The KNU urges high-ranking Myanmar military officers, middle-level officers, ordinary soldiers and civilians under the SAC to seek truthfulness by carefully reasoning between “justice” and “injustice”, and to make brave decisions to disobey unjust commands by the SAC, leave the institution behind and instead join the revolution to bring an end to military dictatorship.

■ To the SAC

We strongly demand that the SAC respects the people and stops all the sources of conflicts, such as violent attacks, tortures, acts of burning villages, heavy artillery shells and air strikes, because trust-building is the most important prerequisite for meaningful peace negotiations. We demand that the Myanmar military junta promises to give up its ambition to participate in politics, as this is the only way to move towards a federal democratic country and help bring an end to over 70 years of conflicts.

Number of Injured and Death due to Land Mines in Kawthoolei
(Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)

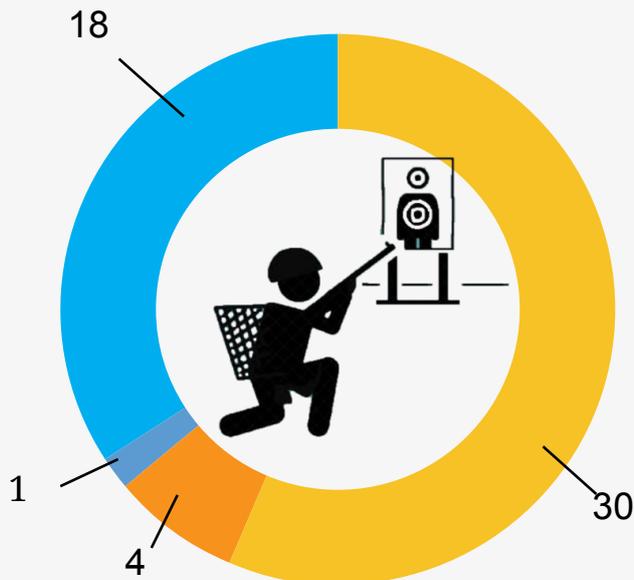


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Incidents of Land Mines
Planted on Public Roads by
Myanmar Military

- Death
- Injured

Number of Damage, Injured and Death due to Myanmar Military's Arbitrary Shootings
at Villagers in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)

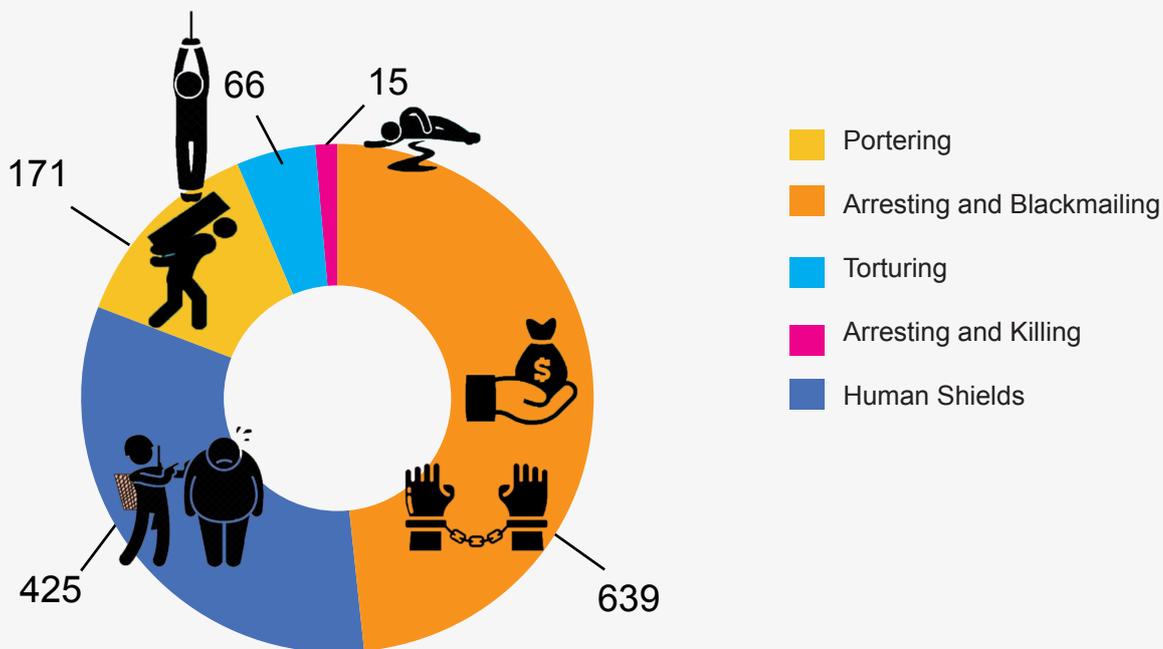


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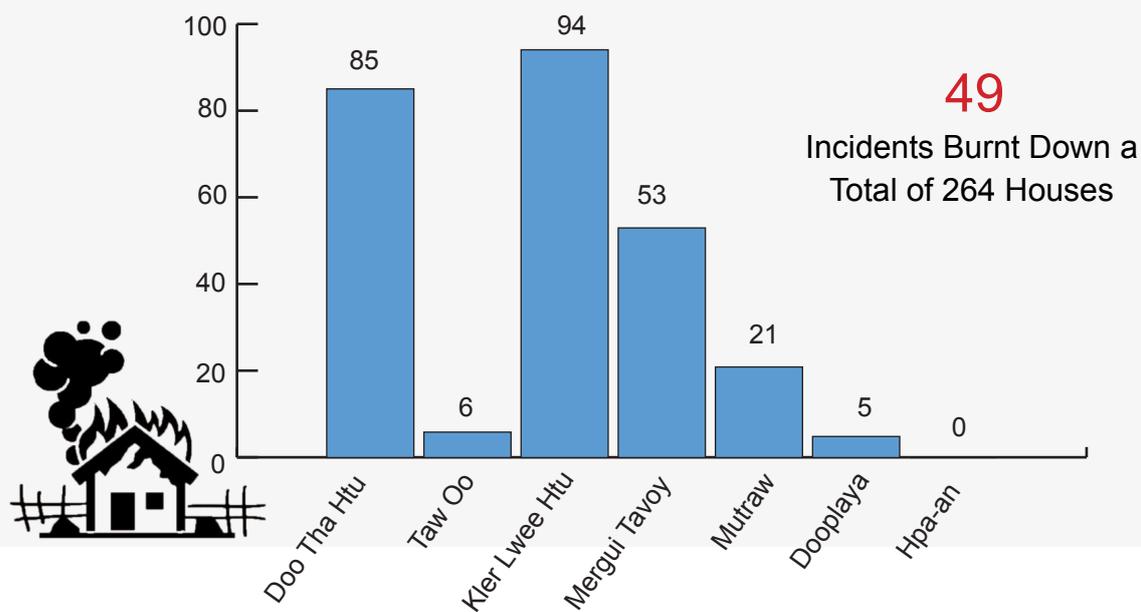
Incidents of Myanmar
Military's Arbitrary
Shootings at Villagers

- Home Damage
- School Damage
- Injured
- Death

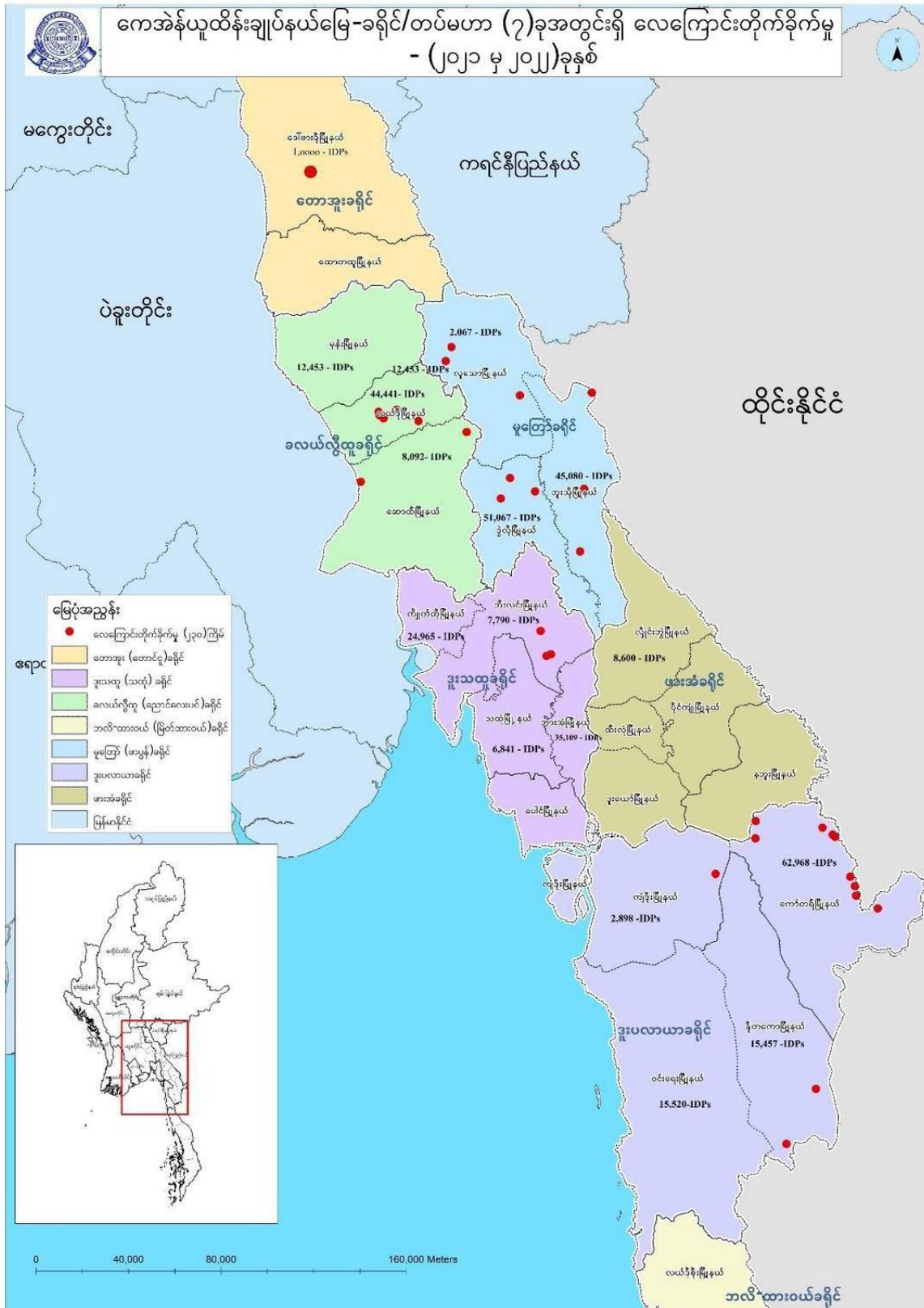
Number of Civilians Abused by Myanmar Military in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



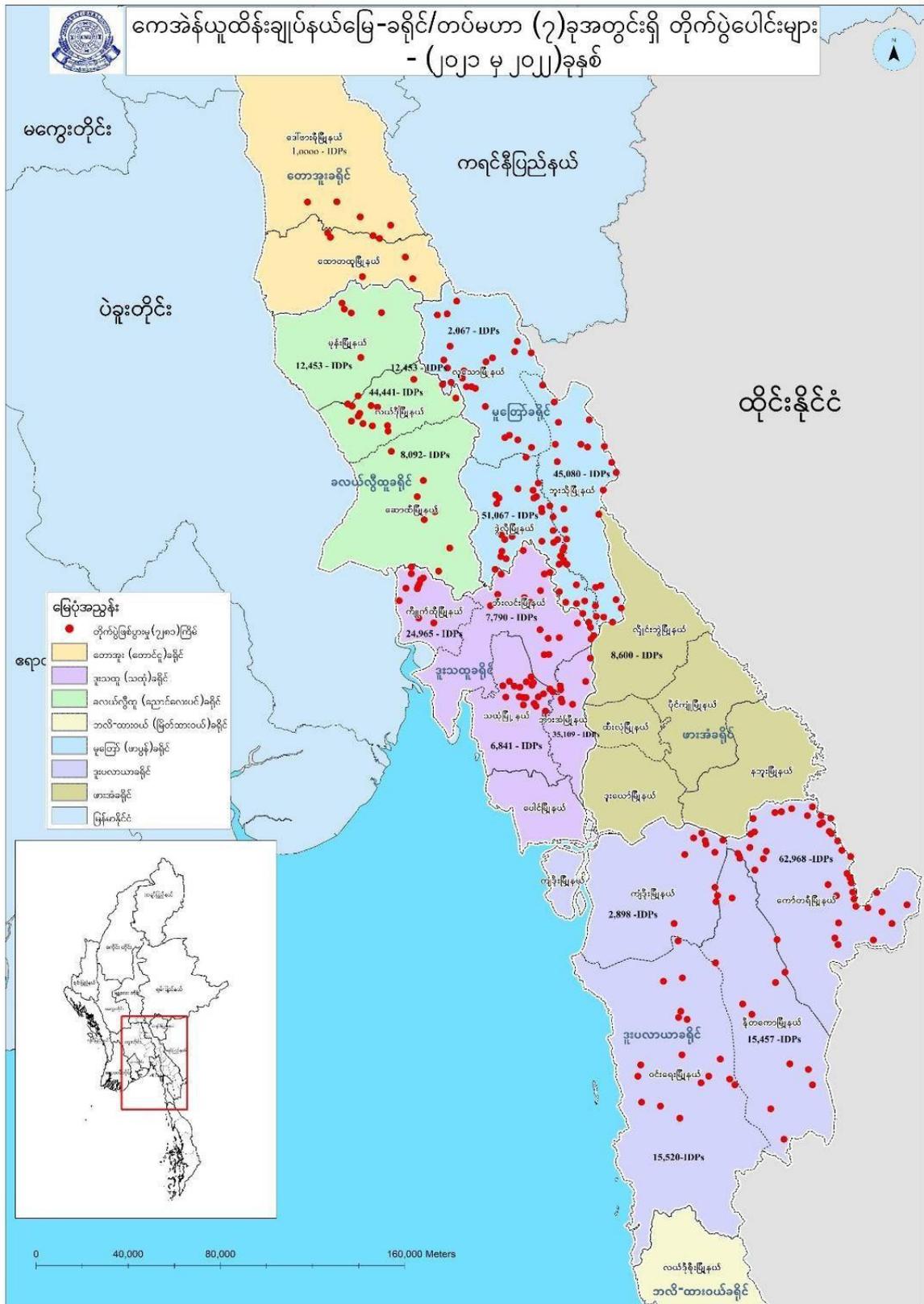
Number of Civilians' Houses Burnt Down by Myanmar Military in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



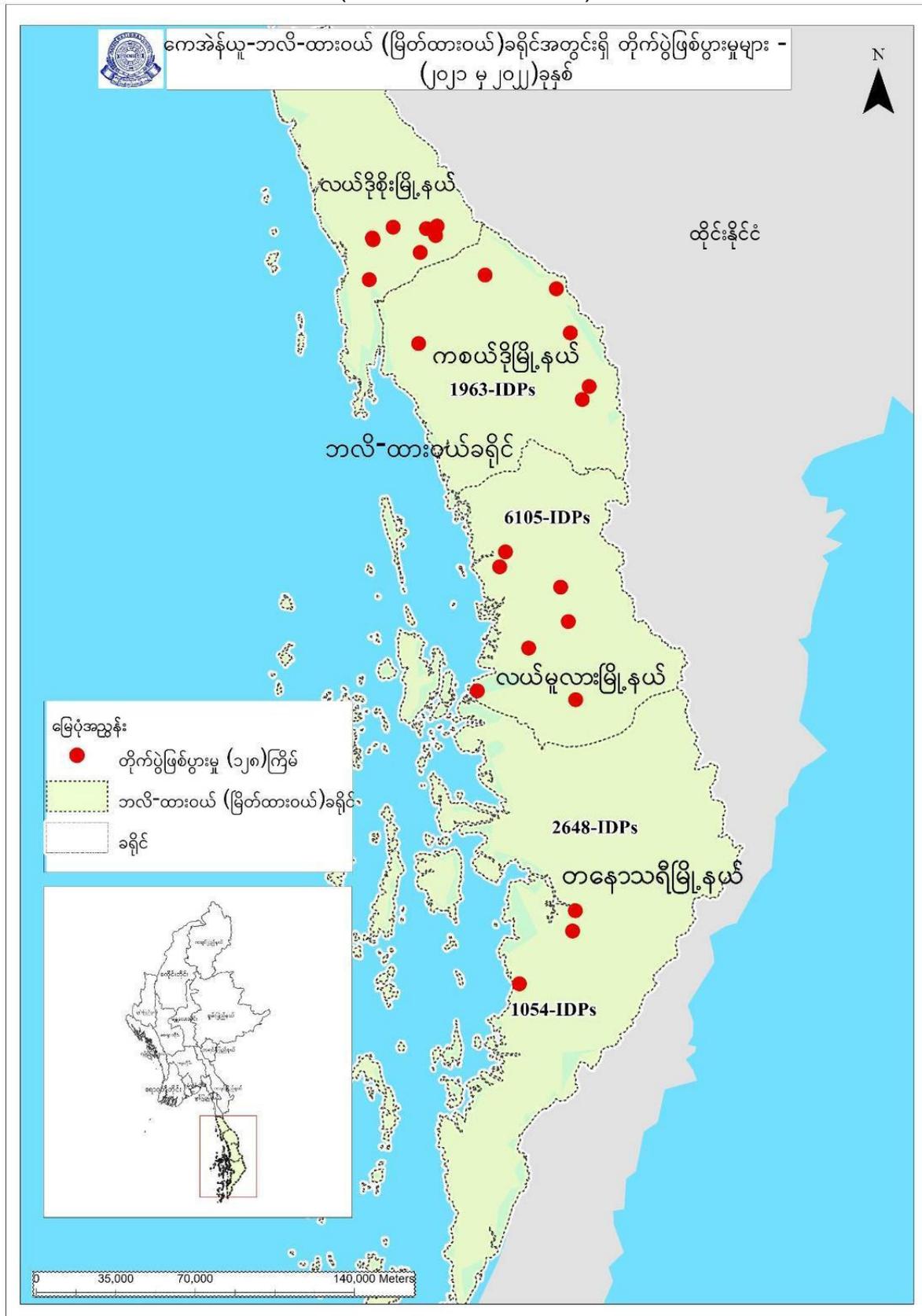
Locations of Air Strikes by Myanmar Military in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Locations of Armed Clashes in Kawthoolei – Northern and Central (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)



Locations of Armed Clashes in Kawthoolei – Southern (Feb 2021 - Dec 2022)





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