

Suspected Use of Chemical Weapons in Karenni State and Throughout Burma Raise Alarm

Overall Analysis:

Across the second quarter of the year, the Karenni Human Rights Group (KnHRG) continued to document ongoing human rights violations against innocent civilians. Several alarming observations are being closely monitored, including the suspected use of chemical weapons.

During clashes in Hpasawng township, Karenni State, the Karenni Army stated their soldiers had experienced symptoms, including shortness of breath, dizziness, and vomiting from inhaling gunpowder fumes, leading to deliberation over whether or not the junta used chemical weapons.

Al Jazeera also found evidence of similar accounts reported by Karenni soldiers and medical doctors who stated that the combat wounds they treat are 'different.' The use of chemical weapons in all forms is prohibited under international law.

Drones by the military junta are also of growing concern. They are a compromising tool of

Major Quarterly Developments in Karenni State: April-June 2024

- 22+ Civilians Killed
- 48+ Civilians Injured
- 48+ Homes and Buildings Destroyed, including at least 50 homes burned by the junta in Loikaw
- 9+ Cases of Landmines
- 9+ Cases of Mortar Shelling

surveillance against the opposition and civilians and are the latest weaponization of technology threatening local livelihoods. During the reporting period, a drone attack by the Burma Army killed one monk in Pin Long, Lwe Kain village monastery while it was under fire by joint armed forces.

Earlier this year, the New York Times reported that consumer technologies, such as drones, are changing how war is being fought throughout Burma. They are cheaply manufactured and widely mass-produced. The increased use of drones by the junta comes as they lose momentum not only on the battlefields but also from the air.

Several military aircraft have been shot down in recent months.

Photos:

Left: Destruction of a home following mortar shelling by the junta in Western Deemaw Soe.

Right: Destruction of a home following an airstrike on Laei village, Phe Khong township.



Additional areas of concern were the junta's ongoing use of human shields, in which, in May alone, 58 cases were documented by KnHRG. This comes as the junta continues to issue orders which command civilians to return to their villages, where they are then trapped. Anyone caught trying to leave risks being shot on sight by the Burma Army.

In June, KnHRG reported that an older man, age 40, who was fearfully fleeing conflict in his village, crashed his motorcycle while driving at high speed to try and escape and was unfortunately killed upon impact.

KnHRG also documented the worsening impacts of the ongoing conflict by the Burma Army against women and children. Their safety and security continue to be undermined by the lack of health services available, which affects infants, young children and mothers.

Without adequate medicine and nutritional food, families are devastated by the loss of their children from preventable illnesses. In temporary shelters and internal displacement camps, the rapid spread of disease is due to close quarters and shortages in clean water supply.

In May, KnHRG visited children in the refugee camps in Karenni State to make them laugh and learn through dancing, storytelling, quizzes, and games. The deprivation of childhood has serious and long-term impacts on their



Photo:
Child victims being treated by medical volunteers after mortar shelling in Hpawsaung by the junta in April 2024.

development, which local organizations are aware of, and seeking to secure funding for trauma-informed care.

The Karenni Interim Executive Council (IEC) expressed widespread alarm in response to their most recent reports, which **found** nearly 50 people had been killed in Karenni State by the junta between January and June 2024. The majority of the victims were innocent children who died from artillery shelling and airstrikes.

According to the IEC, of the total 48 civilian deaths, 16 were caused by airstrikes, ten by heavy artillery shelling, four by landmines, one by gunfire, seven by being captured and executed while serving as human shields, two by indiscriminate firing, five by abduction and execution, one by drone attacks, and two from malnutrition.

In addition, 142 civilians were injured during the six months, including 28 men, 21 women, and 58 children. The Burmese junta's corrupt quest for power continues to cost lives and traumatize conflict-affected groups. Over 500 innocent people have been killed in Karenni State since 1 February 2021.

Nonetheless, the attempted coup has exposed the junta's weaknesses. The people's spirit and resilience are evident. Some have taken up arms or provided health care and education services. Others have opened places for people to discuss politics freely. The revolution will succeed because of their commitment.

Further, the international community must show its solidarity and support by heeding the calls of local people and supporting pro-democracy institutions, including the National Unity Government. Global actors must also provide emergency humanitarian assistance through localized pathways and work towards holding the junta accountable by referring the situation of human rights in Burma to the International Criminal Court.

Human Rights Violations

Airstrikes

Aerial and ground attacks by the junta have led to an ongoing rise in internally displaced people and are fueling a deeply concerning humanitarian crisis. Data and analytics from Nyan Lynn Thit, an independent, non-partisan, and nongovernmental research organization which supports a peaceful and secure society, released findings of airstrikes across Burma in May 2024. They **found** at least 26 incidents of airstrikes in Karenni State between January and April 2024. Attacks from the air threaten civilian security and safety. There is not enough medical capacity to treat all victims.

Local Karenni resistance groups **control over 90% of the State**. However, one of the main challenges is the ongoing airstrikes by the junta, which target civilians. In April, KnHRG reported that ten people were killed in airstrikes, including five children. In addition, airstrikes injured thirty people. One 15-year-old boy was wounded by mortar shelling. Two people were hurt when bombs were dropped in Loikaw.

On April 11th, at 10:15 PM, the junta deployed an airstrike in Loi Yin-Pi Kin village, PheKhong Township. Three civilians were killed, including two children, a 3-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl. In addition, at least five civilians were injured.



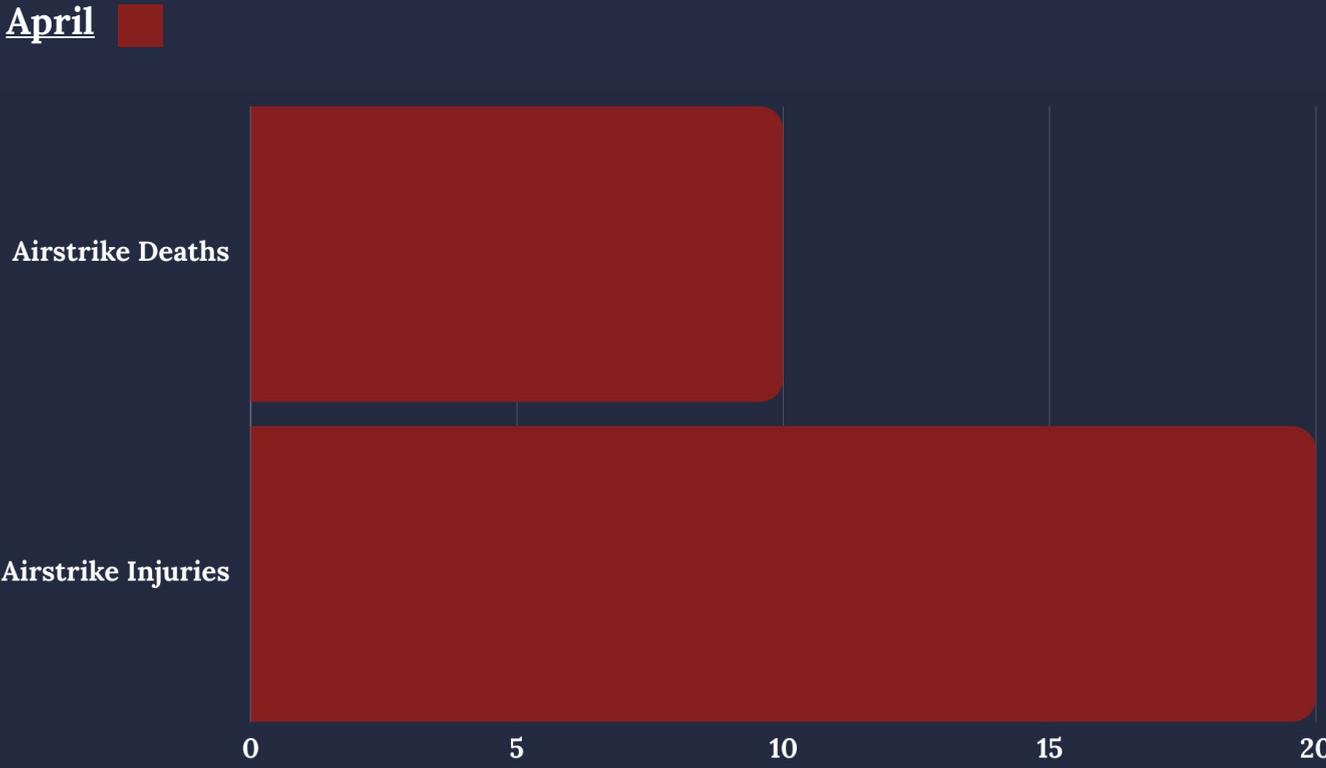
Photo:
Building damage following an airstrike in Laei village, Phe Khong township, along the Karenni-Shan border.

According to reports on the ground, the military junta used a 500-pound bomb that was fired from the air to attack a local village. In addition to the civilian injuries and deaths, several buildings were also damaged. Two of the victims had previously fled violence and were internally displaced within the State. KnHRG has documented cases of airstrikes, with at least 30 occurring in March of this year alone.

KnHRG **condemned** the act of violence, stating that *“the junta has continued to scale up its attacks against civilians through the use of airstrikes.”*

On April 4th, during a UN Security Council briefing on Burma, the body failed to address the severity of the situation in the country. Notably, it fell short of calling for a global arms embargo and targeted sanctions on aviation fuel. There have been **long-time demands** from civil society and human rights organizations who are seeing the direct impact and devastation caused by the airstrikes and related junta violence.

The ongoing aerial bombardments threaten civilian safety and security and must end.

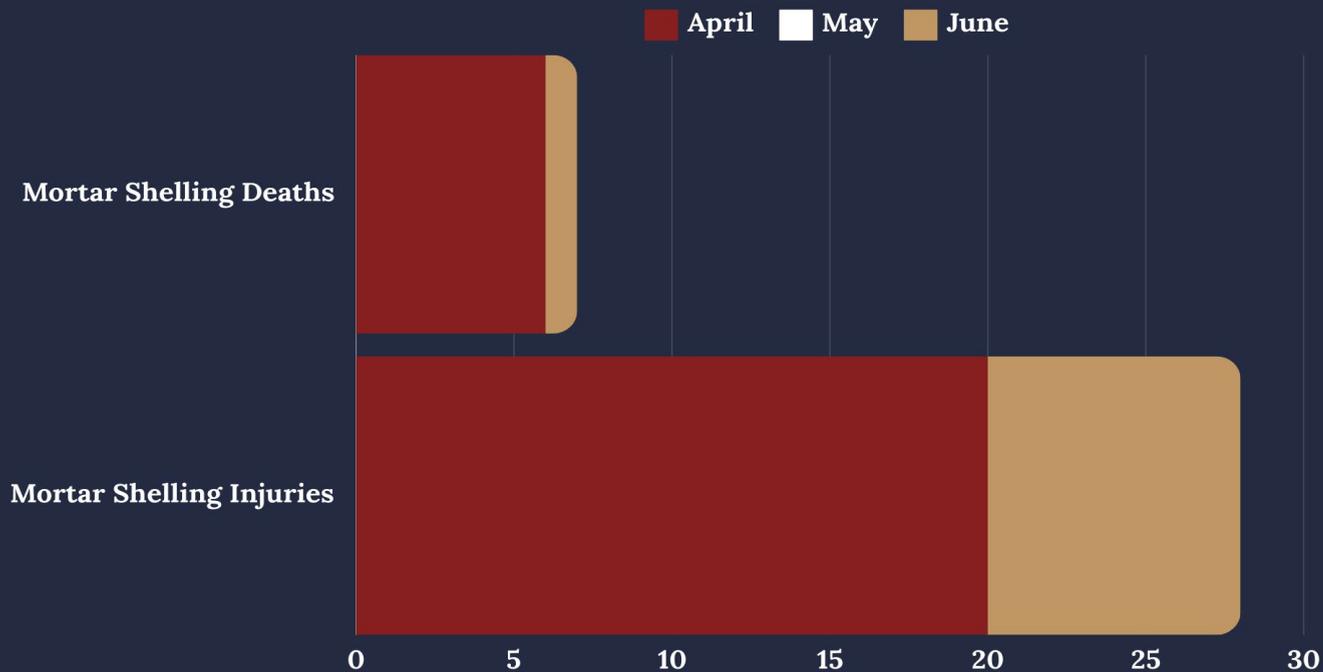


*KnHRG did not document any cases of airstrikes in May and June.

Mortar Shelling

Six civilians, including two children, were killed, and more than 20 were injured when the junta bombed Kone Thar village in Loikaw Township on April 20 at 11 AM. More than 20 houses were destroyed.

In June, a six-year-old girl was injured by mortar shelling, as well as four men and three women in the attack. Mortar shelling also led to the death of an infant, and two children also died due to a lack of nutritional food. One was a newborn baby and less than three weeks old.



Landmines

Alarming, many of the victims between April and June suffered from landmine injuries and fatalities. In the first quarter of 2024, KnHRG **recorded** nearly a dozen cases. During this second quarter, nine instances were recorded. According to the Karenni Interim Executive Council (IEC), over 100 landmine victims have been in Karenni State since the attempted coup.

The IEC has also **underscored** ongoing deficiencies in landmine risk education programmes amidst the continuing conflict in Karenni State. By IEC's estimates, as of May 1st this year, at least 35 civilians have been wounded by landmines in Karenni State, with at least two fatalities. The toll of landmines in eastern parts of the country is expected to surpass previous years by the end of 2024.

As landmines are rarely visible, it is nearly impossible to avoid them. The Burma Army deliberately plants them in civilian areas to cause fear and terror among villagers.

In April, one teenage boy was killed by a landmine, and one man was injured. In May, all of the cases of deaths and injuries reported were due to landmines. One woman was killed, and three others were wounded. During the last month of the reporting period in June, a local woman returning to her village in Loikaw was injured by a landmine that exploded on her path.

Two displaced men from Phe Kon township were also wounded by landmines while returning to their communities with rations and medical equipment for a clinic.

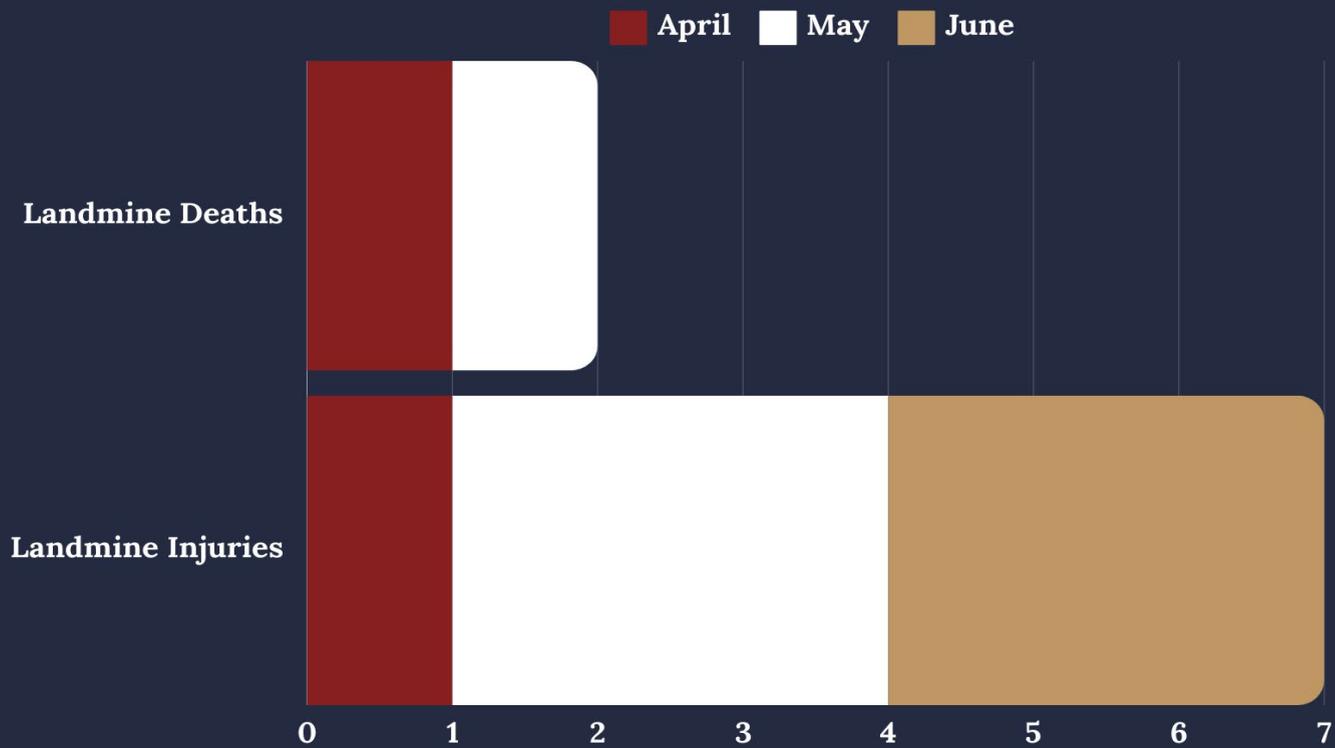
Two years ago, Amnesty International **released findings** about the use of banned landmines by the Burma Army in Karenni State, which they declared amounts to war crimes. Their investigation uncovered that the military junta had deliberately planted landmines near homes, on farming lands and on church grounds.

As KnHRG and other Karenni community-based organizations **noted** in a joint report last year, customary international humanitarian law prohibits the use of weapons that are by nature indiscriminate. Landmines are victim-activated weapons that cannot distinguish between civilians and combatants. Most were impacted by the landmines detonating while foraging for food. Skyrocketing rice prices have added to the challenges for people trying to survive amid a worsening food crisis.



Photo:

Above is a man who stepped on a landmine planted by the junta. After being treated by medical volunteer teams, his foot was amputated. His lower leg has been fitted with a prosthetic.

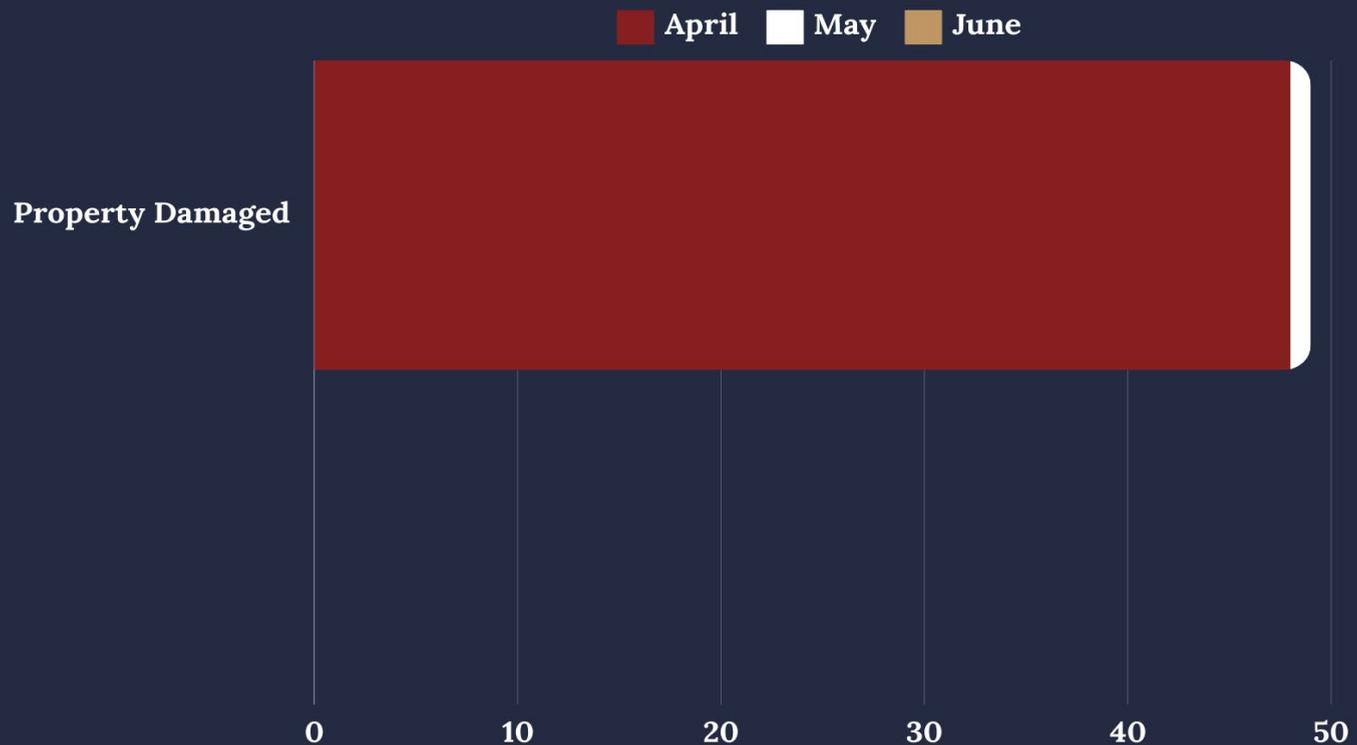


Property Damage

Throughout April, there were forty-eight homes destroyed by the junta, including six from mortar shells, 39 by jet fighters and three from bombs deployed by the junta.

On May 10th, junta battalion 102/427 attacked homes in Western Demoso at 11:30 PM. Several properties were damaged. The firing took place without any active conflict. No one was killed or injured in the indiscriminate attack, though villagers were frightened of a potential follow-up attack.

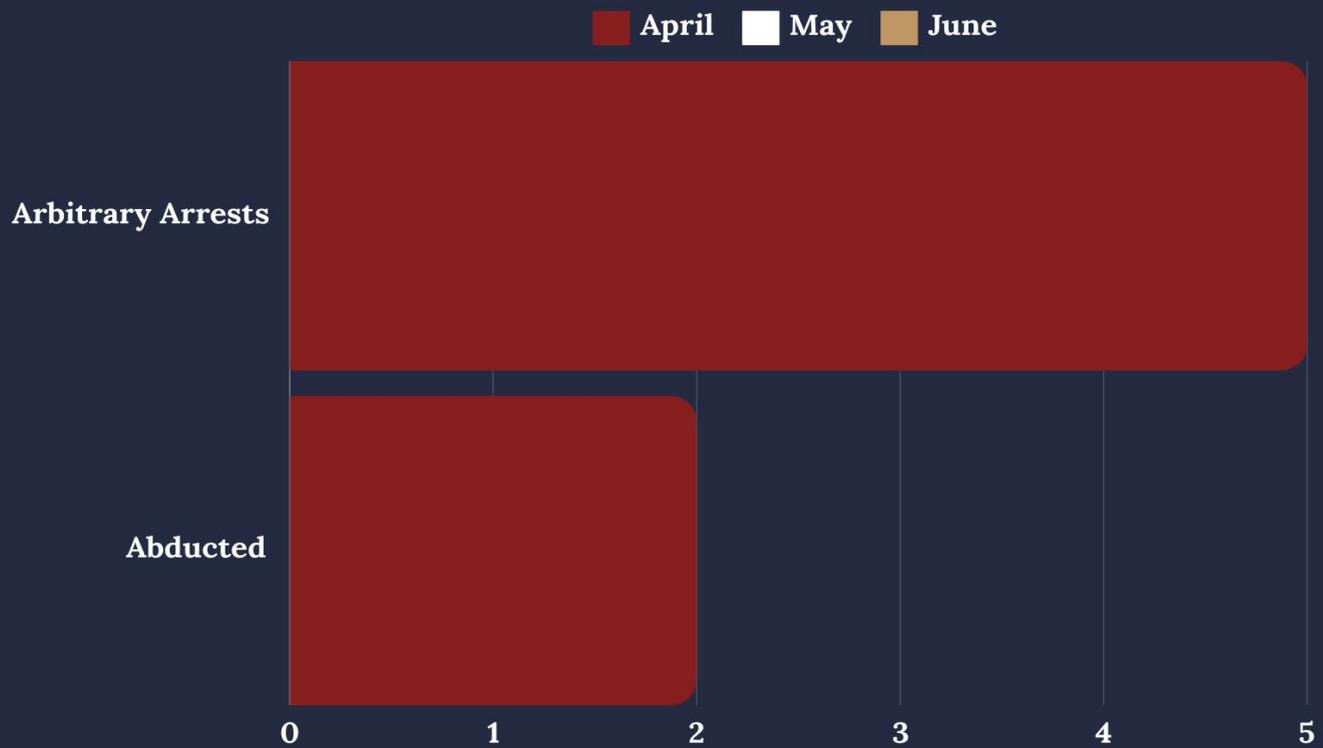
KnHRG has reported an increase in the destruction of civilian properties amid air and ground attacks by the junta.



Arbitrary Arrests

In April, five people were arrested and killed in military custody, including two men and one displaced woman, as well as a couple from PheKon who were shot and killed by the Burma Army while farming. Two people were abducted and remain missing.

Between 21 and 23 April, the junta arrested and murdered a total of five women and three men.



Feature:

In August of 2023, KnHRG interviewed a 60-year-old internally displaced person (IDP)* about the difficulties they were facing.



Right now, rice is the most important staple food item that we do not have enough supply of. There are no more donors, and it is difficult for them to provide adequate funding as there are a large number of people in three different IDP camps*. We work for the local villagers and buy rice, especially those who have nothing to borrow from others who have been displaced.

It is challenging these days. Normally, I purchase oil at the shop, where they sell it at half price. However, because the cost of rice has increased, I asked them to sell rice at half-price instead of the oil. They said they could only sell it to me but not to everyone. I told them to help with rice, at least. For curry spices, we can just go to the mountains or ask for it from someone else. It has been quite a while since we have eaten rice gruel sparingly.

My children no longer want to go to school because they can't study and feel safe. The lamp battery runs out when they try to do their schoolwork at night, and the small solar battery is broken due to prolonged use. We charge the lamp in the sun and study with it when we can. They want to quit school for these reasons. Even though I tell them to stay, I understand their feelings. For them, I just say they can quit school if they want.

During my stay here, most people have become seriously sick with the seasonal flu in the IDP camps. It's worrying because a week ago, a 2-year-old child died from the flu.

To survive, I cultivate a small field temporarily and go to the mountains to forage for food. The people who are displaced

here are farming in the hills. Because of these activities, the mountains have become barren, and there is no place for the cows to graze. During stormy days, heavy rains flood the area and damage the crops.

I'm not happy being here. Maintaining a livelihood has become very difficult. I don't get to sleep with light at night. I envy hearing that some people have shelter and food at the Buddhist monastery. I want to go there but am scared that I must side with the Burmese junta if I go. I decided to die here in the displacement camp to boycott them.

Since we have been displaced, my husband is no longer in the right state of mind because of the trauma he has experienced. He would grab his clothes, saying the Burmese military is going to start shelling us soon. Then, he will pace around the tent and sit down from exhaustion. It gets worse and worse.

The children don't want to take care of him and don't visit us anymore. So, I am his sole caregiver. I tell him the soldiers are coming and I will get him to the hiding place. I comfort him by saying that the public fights the soldiers off.



**Name and locations removed for safety and security.*

Recommendations

1. Direct coordinate emergency humanitarian aid provision efforts, including through cross-border channels, for the aid to reach the vulnerable population of more than 200,000 Karenni IDPs resulting from the military violence and airstrikes, and combat COVID-19 by providing resources and working in equal and meaningful partnership and collaboration with ethnic and community-based humanitarian and civil society organizations;
2. Impose further targeted sanctions against the military and its leadership and military businesses, including specifically targeting Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises (MOGE), military-linked business partners and a network of arms dealers;
3. Impose a coordinated global arms embargo on the Burmese military;
4. Sanction the supply of jet fuel to the Burmese military to end airstrikes and impose a no-fly zone;
5. Recommend the International Criminal Court to accept the declaration lodged by the National Unity The government of Burma, under Article 12(3) of the Court's jurisdiction concerning international crimes committed in Burma territory since 1 July 2002;
6. Formally designated safe zone for internally displaced persons under United Nations agencies management, which the Burmese military is not allowed to have access to.