

# Forced to Harm

Impacts of the State Administration Council (SAC)'s forced recruitment and enactment of the conscription law in Southeast Burma (January 2024 – February 2025)

Briefing Paper

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**KHRG**

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## 1. Introduction

Since the February 2021 coup<sup>1</sup>, armed conflict between the State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> and armed resistance groups has escalated in Southeast Burma/Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> The SAC has attempted to forcibly recruit civilians into their ranks at an increasing rate, from both towns and rural areas, including by announcing the enactment of the People's Military Service Law in February 2024. Such attempts have resulted in the displacement of many young people trying to avoid conscription. The Burma Army<sup>4</sup> has committed numerous human rights violations for decades against the people of Southeast Burma, reinvigorated since the 2021 coup, resulting in villagers being deeply distressed at the prospect of being forced to commit similar atrocities against their own friends, families and fellow villagers, if conscripted. In 2024, the SAC targeted and forcibly recruited villagers in Southeast Burma through violent means, including arbitrary arrests, explicit threats, enforced disappearances, and physical attacks, affecting the security and livelihood of villagers in Southeast Burma.

This briefing paper presents the impacts and challenges faced by villagers in locally-defined Karen State<sup>5</sup> posed by the SAC's forced recruitment, including the enactment of a conscription law, since January 2024 until February 2025. The first section provides a brief overview of the context of the human rights situation in Southeast Burma and Burma's conscription law(s). Secondly, it presents evidence of SAC tactics used to forcibly recruit villagers, the impacts on the communities, and the challenges that villagers have faced, including SAC retaliation for refusal to follow conscription orders, villagers' displacement to avoid conscription, and severe effects to villagers' livelihoods and mental health. Thirdly, the briefing paper includes a security and legal analysis of the situation as well as a set of policy recommendations for local and international stakeholders.

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> The terms Burma military, Burma Army, and SAC are used interchangeably throughout this report to describe Burma's armed forces. Villagers themselves commonly use Burma Army, Burmese soldiers, or alternatively the name adopted by the Burma military regime at the time -since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC).

<sup>5</sup> Karen State, defined locally, includes the following areas: Kayin State, Tanintharyi Region and parts of Mon State and Bago Region. Karen State, located in Southeastern Burma, is primarily inhabited by ethnic Karen people. Most of the Karen population resides in the largely rural areas of Southeast Burma, living alongside other ethnic groups, including Bamar, Shan, Mon and Pa'O.

## 2. Contextual overview: abuses in Southeast Burma and forced recruitment

### Background of the conflict in Southeast Burma

Since Burma's independence in 1948, the Burma Army has repeatedly violated villagers' human rights by abusing and oppressing civilians in Southeast Burma.<sup>6</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>7</sup>, and other local resistance armed groups have been engaged in armed conflict with the Burma Army since 1949. The four-cuts strategy<sup>8</sup> was first utilised by the Burma Army in the 1950s and 1960s to cut off ethnic armed groups from villager support, and its implementation involved the burning of villages, destruction of food, medical supplies, and other property, and the forced relocation of villagers, in clear violation of international human rights and humanitarian laws. The Burma Army's counter-insurgency strategies in Karen State, which lasted from the mid-1970s until the mid-2000s, involved attacks on civilians, arbitrary arrests, forced labour (including forcing villagers to act as minesweepers and human shields), forced relocation, along with extrajudicial killings and torture, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>9</sup> A preliminary ceasefire was implemented in 2012, and again in 2015, however, villagers in Southeast Burma still reported facing many abuses such as extrajudicial killings and torture.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2021, the Burma Army staged another coup d'état, denying the results of the democratic elections of December 2020, and proclaiming itself the State Administration Council (SAC). Since then, the SAC has reinvigorated its four-cuts strategy by violently attacking villagers and their homes, including through the use of air strikes, mortar shelling, burning of houses, shooting and killing villagers on sight, and torturing and arbitrarily arresting them, which has resulted in mass displacement and terror in locally-defined Karen State.<sup>11</sup>

### Forced recruitment and conscription laws in Burma

Burma's first conscription law, the National Service Bill, was drafted in 1955, however it was never officially entered into force.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, an investigation conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1998 found evidence of "regular forced recruitment throughout Myanmar, including of minors, into the Tatmadaw and various militia groups," without any official military service law being in place.<sup>13</sup> These actions were conducted in the wake of the pro-democracy movement in 1988, also known as the 8888 Uprising.<sup>14</sup>

The People's Military Service Law was first introduced in November 2010 by the then-ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>6</sup> KHRG, *Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers' testimonies in rural Southeast Burma*, December 2022.

<sup>7</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, following the 2021 coup staged by Burma Army leaders, the KNU officially stated that the NCA has become void.

<sup>8</sup> In Burma/Myanmar, the scorched earth policy of 'pyat lay pyat', literally 'cut the four cuts', was a counter-insurgency strategy employed by the Tatmadaw as early as the 1950s, and officially adopted in the mid-1960s, aiming to destroy links between insurgents and sources of funding, supplies, intelligence, and recruits from local villages. See Martin Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999 pp. 258-262.

<sup>9</sup> KHRG, *Undeniable*, above. Also: International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, "Crimes in Burma," Cambridge, MA: International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> KHRG, *Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers' voices from southeast Myanmar*, October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> KHRG, *တပ်ဖွဲ့များ၏ လေကြောင်းတိုက်ခတ်မှုများ: အလင်းရောင်အောက်တွင် ကျားများ၏ အသံများနှင့် ကျားများ၏ ကာကွယ်ရေးစံနှုန်းများ* *Aircraft coming! : Impacts of air strikes on local communities and villagers' protection strategies in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup*, November 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Ye Myo Hein, "Myanmar's Fateful Conscription Law", United States Institute of Peace, February 2024.

<sup>13</sup> International Labour Organisation, "Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed under article 26 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation", July 1998.

<sup>14</sup> United States Institute of Peace, "Myanmar's Fateful Conscription Law", February 2024.

<sup>15</sup> The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was created by the military junta ruling Burma/Myanmar in 1997. It followed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which ruled from 1988 until its dissolution in 1997. The SPDC was officially dissolved on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 by Senior General Than Shwe following the election of a quasi-civilian government in Burma/Myanmar in November 2010.



but was not enacted at the time. The law requires all men between the ages of 18 and 35 and women between the ages of 18 and 27 to serve in the Burma Army for 24 months. The law also stipulates that the length of service for individuals with technical expertise, such as doctors or engineers, can be extended to 36 months, with the age ranges extending to 45 for men and 35 for women. Those exempt from military service include: members of a religious order (such as monks, nuns, and reverends), housewives, people with permanent disabilities, and those who are exempted by the Central Drafting Board. According to the law, students, public servants, people who fail to meet medical fitness requirements, and people taking care of their elderly parents can appeal to the Central Drafting Board to temporarily postpone their military service. Those who are found guilty of failing to follow the law can be sentenced with imprisonment for three to five years or fined, or both. The fine amount is not specified.

### Forced recruitment since the 2021 coup

Following the 2021 coup, the SAC faced territorial losses throughout Burma.<sup>16</sup> A 2023 report from the Commission of Inquiry from the International Labour Organization (ILO) found evidence that the Burma Army had been subjecting civilians to forced labour in the context of military activities, often in the form of forced portering or as human shields, since the 2021 coup.<sup>17</sup> Starting in December 2023, reports received by KHRG demonstrated that the SAC was forcibly recruiting villagers in Southeast Burma.<sup>18</sup> These actions by the SAC constitute violations of international law.

On February 10<sup>th</sup> 2024, the SAC announced that it would enact Burma's 2010 People's Military Service Law. A few days later, after facing public backlash<sup>19</sup>, it was announced that the law would not take effect until after the 2024 April New Year (or *Thyngian* Festival) celebrated from April 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>. Many reports suggest that the SAC has recruited around 5,000 conscripts per batch, with the ninth batch starting in late January 2025, although official numbers have been difficult to verify.<sup>20</sup> Given the opposition they have faced since staging the coup, as well as their lack of public support and military control of the territory, the SAC's legal power to enforce the military service law has been largely contested, including by international rights authorities.<sup>21</sup>

Following recent military setbacks by the SAC, they announced in January 2025 that there would be stricter regulations for those who are eligible for conscription.<sup>22</sup> Individuals who are on waiting lists will now no longer be authorised to travel outside the country and people who have completed their service may be recalled for additional service. The SAC regime reiterated that citizens living abroad are expected to register and only "solid evidence" will be accepted to explain their absence.<sup>23</sup> Recent reports suggest that the SAC has also compiled lists of eligible women, resulting in concerns that women would soon face the same threats as men.<sup>24</sup>

In January 2025, General Maung Maung Aye, SAC Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Central Body for Summoning People's Military Servants, stated that the SAC is not summoning people by force, despite numerous reports to the contrary.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Special Advisory Council: Myanmar, "[SAC-M: Myanmar Military no Longer in Effective Control of the Country](#)", May 2023. Also: Free Burma Rangers, "[Situation Maps: The Burma Army's Authority Deteriorates as it Struggles to Maintain Control within the Country](#)", April 2023.

<sup>17</sup> International Labour Organization, [Towards Freedom and Dignity in Myanmar](#), October 2023. See also, KHRG, [Shadow of Death: Use of civilians as human shields by the State Administration Council \(SAC\) in Southeast Burma since the coup](#), July 2023.

<sup>18</sup> KHRG, "[Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Forced recruitment of villagers by an SAC-affiliated militia causing displacement in Ler K'Saw Township \(December 2023 to March 2024\)](#)", April 2024.

<sup>19</sup> The Irrawaddy, "[Military Conscription Sparks Furious Backlash in Myanmar](#)", February 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Progressive Voice, "[Myanmar's Youth at Risk](#)", January 2025.

<sup>21</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "[Illegal and Illegitimate: Examining the Myanmar military's claim as the Government of Myanmar and the international response](#)", March 2023; APHR, "[APHR Denounces Myanmar's Forced Conscription of Youth, Calls for Urgent International Action](#)", December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Democratic Voice of Burma, "[Naypyidaw issues stricter military conscription regulations nearly one year after law enacted](#)", January 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Democratic Voice of Burma, "[Naypyidaw issues stricter military conscription regulations](#)".

<sup>24</sup> Democratic Voice of Burma, "[Myanmar refugee dies in Thailand after US clinic closed; Military denies reports it's now conscripting women](#)", February 2025.

<sup>25</sup> SAC Ministry of Information, "[People's Military Servants Summoning Central Body holds 2025 inaugural meeting](#)", January 2025.

### 3. Factual summary: villagers' challenges in Southeast Burma due to SAC's forced recruitment

The SAC announced the enactment of the conscription law in February 2024 in order to boost their military might and manpower, since then forcing villagers and civilians to be conscripted against their will through means of violence, including arbitrary arrest, explicit threats and physical attacks. The SAC's forced recruitment has caused fear and panic among local communities in Southeast Burma, leading to mass displacement. The SAC's conscription has also forced villagers to participate in the perpetration of serious human rights violations, continuously harming villagers and violating their human rights.

From January 2024 until February 2025, KHRG received 37 reports detailing impacts of the SAC's enactment of the People's Military Service Law and the ensuing conscription conducted by the Burma Army and SAC-affiliated armed groups in all seven districts in Southeast Burma.<sup>26</sup> Such reports included 30 incidents of forced recruitment, including three instances of SAC forced recruitment before the enactment was announced in February 2024. One incident concerned recruitment by the SAC-affiliated Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>27</sup> and two included forced recruitment into other SAC-affiliated militias. As reported to KHRG, at least 214 villagers have been forced to join the SAC forces as soldiers against their will during the reporting period. The reports indicate men, between the ages of 18 and 50, were forcibly detained and conscripted. Forced recruitment by the SAC has occurred in all seven districts of locally-defined Karen State, predominantly in Taw Oo (Toungoo) District, Mergui-Tavoy District, and Dooplaya District.

This section shows the impacts of SAC forced recruitment and the challenges villagers have faced in Southeast Burma since the enactment of the conscription law by the SAC forces. It presents (3.1.) displacement due to fear of SAC conscription and arbitrary arrest, (3.2.) SAC retaliation against

villagers who refuse to follow conscription orders, (3.3) impacts on villagers' livelihoods, and (3.4.) effects on villagers' mental health. Villagers' strategies to respond to SAC forced recruitment are presented throughout.

#### 3.1. Displacement to avoid conscription

During the reporting period, KHRG received at least 15 reports of villagers displacing in fear to avoid forced recruitment by the SAC, both before and after the announcement of the military service law in February 2024. Reportedly, after the SAC announced the military service law, villagers from both urban areas and rural areas in Southeast Burma fled their communities en masse. Many villagers worried about the safety of their family members, and chose to flee together with their children and parents to avoid SAC retaliation. Villagers, along with their family members, were often threatened with severe physical punishment, arbitrary arrest, or extortion if they were to refuse recruitment orders.

KHRG received evidence that villagers fled at different moments: some after hearing about the law or upon discovering their names were on the conscription list, and others after being warned by village heads or learning of forced recruitment by SAC soldiers. According to villagers' testimonies, most of the displaced villagers, especially young people, fled to KNU-controlled areas, out of reach of SAC ground soldiers, and/or across the border into Thailand.

##### a) Displacement due to fear of SAC recruitment

At least 78 villagers had to flee from their homes as they were afraid of SAC recruitment, as per KHRG reports. The total number of displaced villagers is significantly higher; however, it is challenging to obtain the exact number due to the urgency

<sup>26</sup> KHRG operates in seven areas in Southeast Burma: Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton), Taw Oo (Toungoo), Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin), Mergui-Tavoy, Mu Traw (Hpapun), Dooplaya and Hpa-an. When KHRG receives information from the field, it organises data according to these seven areas. These are commonly referred to as 'districts' and are used by the Karen National Union (KNU), as well as many local Karen organisations, both those affiliated and unaffiliated with the KNU. KHRG's use of the district designations in reference to our research areas does not imply political affiliation; rather, it is rooted in the fact that many rural communities commonly use these designations. For clarity, the Burmese terms for these districts are provided in brackets but do not correspond with the Burma (Myanmar) government administrative divisions.

<sup>27</sup> Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

with which people fled. SAC soldiers employed various methods to select villagers for forcible recruitment, including issuing conscription orders to local leaders, arbitrarily arresting individuals for conscription, drawing lots, and recording villagers' names for conscription without prior notice.

Direct orders to local authorities for the conscription of villagers were one of the most common methods that the SAC used for their recruitment in the areas under their control or under mixed control. KHRG received eight reports indicating that the SAC directly gave orders to (mostly SAC-appointed) village heads and village tract<sup>28</sup> leaders to recruit villagers into the Burma Army. This led to mass displacement as villagers were afraid that they would be forcibly recruited into the military. For instance, on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2024, SAC authorities, including a general administrator of Hlaingbwe Township, and SAC police held a meeting with village heads and village tract leaders in U--- village, V--- village tract, Ta Kreh (Paingkyon) Township, Hpa-an District, to discuss the forcible recruitment of villagers. The village is located in a mixed-control area where the SAC, KNU, BGF and Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC)<sup>29</sup> operate. In the meeting, the general administrator of Hlaingbwe Township ordered village authorities to recruit villagers as SAC soldiers given the SAC-enacted conscription law. He also threatened village authorities that villagers would either have to pay a large fine or provide a family member as a replacement if they tried to flee. Therefore, young local villagers, village heads and parents from V--- village tract were worried about this situation.<sup>30</sup>

Over a week after the meeting that the SAC held in U--- village, the SAC members came back again to the village and asked local authorities to collect a list of villagers' names for recruitment. However, village heads and village tract leaders had not

compiled the list yet. On March 19<sup>th</sup> 2024, village authorities from V--- village tract went to meet with a KNU chairperson from Ta Kreh Township in order to seek help to avoid the SAC conscription orders. Following this, the KNU sent letters to village heads in the area telling them not to collect any money or recruit any villagers for the SAC. Since the SAC announced the military service law, most of the young villagers from U--- village, as well as young villagers from V--- village tract, crossed the border into Thailand to avoid recruitment. As of January 2025, no villagers from V--- village tract were recruited to be SAC soldiers.

Frequently, local authorities from Taw Oo District reported to KHRG that they do not want to follow the order of SAC conscription because they worry that villagers' lives will be put at risk if they were recruited to join the Burma Army. Leaders in mixed-control areas also worry that soldiers from the People's Defence Force (PDF)<sup>31</sup> will target them if they follow SAC orders. So instead, they informed villagers to be careful in order to avoid being forcibly recruited when encountering SAC soldiers. For instance, on December 26<sup>th</sup> 2024, a general administrator from Thandaunggyi Township department in Thandaunggyi Town, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, phoned a village head named U<sup>32</sup> A--- from W--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, and requested him to attend a meeting in the general administration office. The general administration department oversees all issues within Thandaunggyi Township, including issues related to the enactment of the conscription law. In the meeting, the general administrator ordered U A--- to recruit five villagers from P'Saw Loh village tract to be SAC soldiers. On the morning of December 30<sup>th</sup> 2024, U A--- explained to local villagers what the general administrator ordered him to do, and asked them to stay alert.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

<sup>29</sup> The KNU/KNLA-PC is an armed group based in the Htoh Kaw Koh village tract area, Hpa-an District. It split from the Karen National Union (KNU) and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government in 2007, but refused to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) in 2010. It signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015 (and are still part of it after the 2021 coup). They currently operate in Hpa-an and Doooplaya districts.

<sup>30</sup> Unpublished report from Hpa-an District, received in March 2024. (#24-142-D1)

<sup>31</sup> The People's Defence Force (PDF) is an armed resistance established independently as local civilian militias operating across the country. Following the February 1st 2021 military coup and the ongoing brutal violence enacted by the junta, the majority of these groups began working with the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Burma/Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

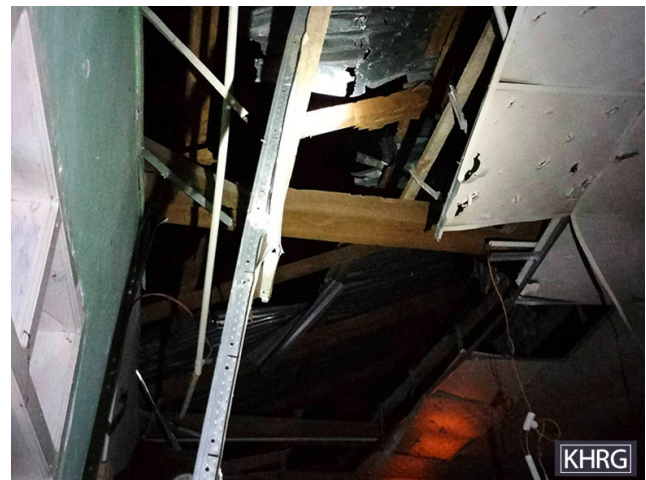
<sup>32</sup> 'U' is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

<sup>33</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in January 2025. (#25-29-D1)



Villagers also reported the SAC pre-selecting names of villagers to be recruited as SAC soldiers without providing prior notice or giving people time to appeal the recruitment order. For example, in March 2024, SAC authorities from the Ministry of Immigration and Population Office, in Toungoo Town, Taw Oo District, assigned the duty of recruiting new soldiers to the village tract Administration Office in Saik Phu Taung village tract. On March 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, the office clerk of the Saik Phu Taung village tract Administration Office, named Zaw Min Thet, ordered a village head, named Ko<sup>34</sup> B---, from X--- village, Day Loh village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, to communicate to 16 villagers from his village that they had to join the Burma Army. The Township Administration Office had already prepared a document containing a list with 16 villagers' names. Then, Ko B--- reviewed the names of the 16 villagers (all between 18 and 22 years of age) and he copied it. Before March 2024, most villagers from X--- village had fled from their village due to armed conflict, so Ko B--- contacted local villagers over the phone who had fled and warned them to stay alert when travelling around or when in the village. The parents of these 16 villagers whose names were recorded to be conscripted were very worried about their children dying in battle or being forced to attack Karen villages, in a manner similar to previous attacks suffered in X--- village, such as the SAC air strike that was conducted on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2024. Therefore, they instructed their children to avoid being recruited and urged them to hide to escape the forced recruitment.<sup>35</sup>

After the meeting in March 2024, SAC soldiers went to X--- village where they found some villagers who had remained in the village, including elderly women, pregnant women, and people with disabilities. SAC soldiers told them that they would arrest the villagers whose names were recorded on the list for conscription wherever and whenever they saw them. After this, local villagers were afraid to disclose their identity and the name of their village to SAC soldiers, fearing being targeted



This photo was taken in January 2024 in X--- village, Day Loh village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. On January 4<sup>th</sup> 2024, an SAC fighter jet conducted an air strike in X--- village, Day Loh village tract. The air strike seriously damaged a monastery in the village. The photo shows the damages in the monastery. [Photo: KHRG]

for conscription.

Due to the possibility of being arrested by SAC soldiers into conscription, villagers have been afraid to travel, especially to towns and cities, and cross SAC checkpoints, and many fled from their towns to avoid arrest for SAC conscription. A villager named U C--- from Y--- village, Taung Ti village tract, Win Yay Township, Doooplaya District, explained that villagers in KNU-controlled areas are protected from SAC conscription law: *"None of them [young people] from my village fled [to Thailand and other areas]. [...] We do not need to worry about it in our village because the conscription law is not really active in our village due to having the KNU [Karen National Union] in our village. They always provide security for our peaceful life. [...] In my opinion, this [SAC] conscription law cannot affect Taung Ti area [village tract]."*<sup>36</sup> Saw<sup>37</sup> D---, a 24-year-old university student from Y--- village, who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)<sup>38</sup>, explained: *"For young people from our area [Taung Ti village tract], they are afraid to be*

<sup>34</sup> 'Ko' is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used for relatives as well as non-relatives.

<sup>35</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in April 2024. (#24-143-D1)

<sup>36</sup> Unpublished report from Doooplaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-111-A2-I1)

<sup>37</sup> 'Saw' is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>38</sup> On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run hospitals and medical facilities across Burma/Myanmar spearheaded what is being referred to as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of labour strikes in protest against the February 1st 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to include civil servants from all sectors of the government who are walking off their jobs as a way of non-recognition and nonparticipation in the military regime. Because of the popularity of the movement, and its seminal role in wider protests across the country, some people have begun using it as a catch-all phrase to include other protest forms like boycotts and pot-banging.



These photos were taken in March 2024 in Z--- village, Sa Tain village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. After the SAC announced the conscription law in February 2024, many young villagers from several villages in Sa Tain village tract were afraid to travel out of their villages, fearing arrest and forced conscription by SAC soldiers. Many of those young villagers fled to forests and had to sleep there to avoid encountering SAC soldiers. Some young villagers fled to Thailand. This photo shows a group of young villagers who are making their journey to Thailand to avoid conscription. In the photo, soldiers from local armed resistance groups were checking and questioning the young villagers on the road, as they were travelling through a mixed-controlled area. [Photos: KHRG]

arrested [outside of the village tract]. After the conscription law was announced, they do not travel to towns anymore. They know that they could be arrested if they travel to towns.<sup>39</sup> He added: "As far as I know, two days after the conscription law was announced [by the SAC], we saw young people were travelling every day on a main road in our area. At least 10 or 20 cars full of young people were passing through the road per day. I think they [those young people] could be travelling to Thailand [to avoid forced recruitment] or they could be travelling to seek refuge in our area [KNU-controlled areas]. [...] I think most of those young people are from towns and cities such as Mawlamyine and Mudon."

**b) Concern for family safety during displacement**

Villagers who avoided SAC forced recruitment reported they have a concern that the SAC might target and attack their family members if they cannot recruit villagers. In March 2024, Saw E---, a 26-year-old villager from Toungoo Town, Taw Oo District, who fled due to fear of SAC forced conscription, told KHRG: "I have a concern about it [forced conscription]. Although I fled to a safe place, my family members are in the town. I worry

about my family members there [in Toungoo Town] because they [SAC] can do or change the law as they want. For example, if we tell them [SAC] that I go to work in another country they ask [to see] the evidence. They want us to show documents in order to prove that I go and work in another country. I worry that they [SAC] will harm my family if they cannot recruit me as a soldier or they will force my family to pay money."<sup>40</sup> Due to concerns about family members, some villagers chose to flee together with their children and parents. As Saw G---, a 61-year-old villager from Aa--- village, Daik U Township, Nyaunglebin (Kler Lwee Htoo District) District, reported: "We heard that people [the SAC] would recruit more soldiers and our children are at the age where they might be recruited as soldiers, so we escaped from that. If only children escape from that, it might become a problem for the parents, so I have five members in my family and we moved here together."<sup>41</sup>

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025, the SAC announced and updated the conscription law requiring Burmese citizens living and working abroad to return home and serve in the military, otherwise actions, such as fines or imprisonment, would be taken against their family members.<sup>42</sup> According to Saw H--

<sup>39</sup> Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-111-A3-I1)

<sup>40</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in March 2024. (#24-145-A1-I1)

<sup>41</sup> Unpublished report from Kler Lwee Htoo District, received in April 2024. (#24-155-A2-I1)

<sup>42</sup> Mizzima News, "Myanmar junta enforces military conscription law, restricts travel for summoned individuals", January 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-130-A1-I1)



-, a 27-year-old villager from Yangon who fled to Dooplaya District due to fear of SAC forced recruitment:

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*“For the families who have relatives in other countries, they [SAC] ordered them to inform their family members to return, [and] if they do not return, [Saw H--- believes that] their family would be arrested and tortured.”<sup>43</sup>*



This photo was taken in February 2025 at the entrance of Seikgyi Town, Noh T’Kaw (Kyainseikgyi) Township, Dooplaya District. It shows an SAC checkpoint run by SAC Infantry Battalions (IBs) #32 and #284, and SAC police from Seikgyi Police Station, where they check people and ask them to show ID cards. After the SAC announced the conscription law, some villagers from Seikgyi Town fled to Thailand because they worried that they would be recruited as SAC soldiers. Villagers from nearby areas are also afraid to travel through this checkpoint because they worry that the SAC would force them to be soldiers. [Photo: KHRG]

In 2025, villagers also worried about the SAC starting to recruit women. For instance, in February 2025, a 56-year-old villager from Ab--- village, an SAC-controlled area in Day Loh (Doe Thoung) village tract, Htao Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, said: *“I heard [from other villagers who were told by the SAC-appointed Doe Thoung village tract*

*leader] that the SAC will recruit 12 women from our village. My daughters are now working in Bangkok [Thailand], so I don’t worry about them. But I worry about other young women in the village.”<sup>44</sup>*

### 3.2. SAC retaliation against villagers

Villagers who refused or failed to comply with SAC conscription orders or demands often faced retaliation. This included physical violence from SAC soldiers, shootings, threats of arrest and death, threats of eviction, and enforced disappearances. During the reporting period (January 2024 to February 2025), SAC soldiers beat and shot three villagers and verbally threatened several villagers with physical harm. Many villagers expressed fear of SAC retaliation for refusing to be recruited.

In one incident, on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, SAC soldiers, based in Nay Pyi Taw Council Territory (administrative division in central Burma), tried to persuade U I---, a villager from Htee Day (Pi Dauk Kon) village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, explaining that they would give him 300,000 kyats [USD 142.91]<sup>45</sup> and a bag of rice if he joined the SAC, but U I--- rejected it. Then, one of the SAC soldiers hit U I---’s head with a piece of flat wood. The SAC soldier loaded his gun and aimed at U I---. The villager pushed the gun to the side and ran away, as the SAC soldiers shot at him four times. None of the bullets hit U I--- and he was able to return to his village in Htee Day village tract. The incident took place in Lewe Township, Nay Pyi Taw Council Territory. Prior to this incident, U I--- was working in Lewe Township as a factory worker, but he never returned to his job after the incident, afraid of being forcibly recruited by the SAC, which has negatively impacted his livelihood. He explained to KHRG that he did not want to be a soldier because the SAC killed and oppressed villagers and peaceful protestors, looted villagers’ property and burned villages, and conducted shelling and air strikes. He worried that SAC would order him to commit crimes if he became an SAC soldier. <sup>46</sup>

In another incident on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2024, before the SAC’s enactment of the People’s Military Service

<sup>44</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2025. (#25-73-D3)

<sup>45</sup> All conversion estimates for Kyat are based on the official market rate as of February 25<sup>th</sup> 2025 at 1 USD = 2,099.02 MMK, conversion rate available at <https://www.xe.com/>

<sup>46</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in March 2024. (#24-95-D1)

Law, soldiers from SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>47</sup> #351 and Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>48</sup> #60 arbitrarily arrested a villager off the street named Ko J--- (35 years old) in Ac--- village, Ton Gyi village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, to be a soldier for an SAC-affiliated local militia. Prior to January 18<sup>th</sup> 2024, SAC soldiers had sent an order letter for recruitment to two village heads in Ac--- village and Ad--- village, Ton Gyi village tract. When Ko J--- ran away, SAC soldiers shot at him, injuring the villager on his thigh, however, he was still able to escape. Local villagers sent him to the hospital in Tougoo Town, Taw Oo District. Due to this incident, many villagers from Ton Gyi village tract fled to their plantations, farmlands and forests in order to avoid the SAC's forced recruitment. Some villagers fled to Thailand.<sup>49</sup>

The SAC threatened villagers that they would be arrested and killed if they did not follow their orders of recruitment. In January 2024, even before the People's Military Service Law was enacted by the SAC, authorities from the Ministry of Home Affairs held a meeting with SAC-appointed village heads and other village authorities from Day Loh village tract and other village tracts in Htaw Ta

Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. SAC authorities ordered the village heads to recruit new soldiers from their villages. On January 24<sup>th</sup> 2024, SAC soldiers, who were holding guns, forced villagers from Ae---, Af---, Ab---, and Ag--- villages in Day Loh village tract, to draw lots to determine which villagers would be forcibly recruited as soldiers. Parents whose children had fled before January 24<sup>th</sup> 2024, after hearing news earlier in January of SAC recruitment, were forced to draw lots on behalf of their children. After villagers had picked cards indicating recruitment, they were instructed to sit in SAC military trucks nearby. As a result, at least 46 villagers from Day Loh village tract were forcibly recruited in the months of January and February 2024.

Cards that did not indicate recruitment indicated monetary payment of 50,000 kyats [USD 23.82] per month. Many villagers were afraid, so they fled in January and February 2024 to other villages or forests in Taw Oo District, and some fled to other Districts. According to a local villager from Day Loh village tract, SAC soldiers verbally threatened some villagers in February 2024 by saying: *"If you do not give us villagers [to recruit] for soldiers, we*



These photos were taken in January 2024 in Ah--- village, Day Loh village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2024, at around 6 pm, the combined forces of the KNLA and PDF attacked SAC LIB #39 army camp which is based in Lay Maing area, Thandaunggyi Road, Taw Oo District. At around 9 pm, SAC LIB #39 and other SAC troops from Kon Nit Maing army camp fired 13 mortar rounds into five villages including Ai--- village in Day Loh village tract. On January 10<sup>th</sup> 2024, at around 10 am, the SAC LIB #39 went to Ah--- village, and they burned down 17 villagers' houses in the village. These photos show some villagers' houses that the SAC burned down in Ah--- village. [Photos: KHRG]

<sup>47</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. Most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers, yet up-to-date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

<sup>48</sup> An Infantry Battalion (IB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

<sup>49</sup> Unpublished report from Kler Lwee Htoo District, received in September 2024. (#24-36-D1)



will arrest villagers. If we cannot arrest villagers, we will shoot villagers if we see them.”<sup>50</sup> SAC soldiers also conducted mortar shelling and burned villagers’ houses in five villages in Day Loh village tract in January 2024, resulting in villagers fleeing and living in fear of SAC attacks.

The SAC also threatened to evict villagers if they refused to join their recruitment. For example, starting in December 2023, SAC soldiers and an SAC-affiliated village militia in Aj--- village, Ma No Ro village tract, Ler K’Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, forcibly recruited seven villagers each week in Aj--- village. Villagers were threatened with being forcibly evicted from the village if they refused to join the militia. In addition, the SAC and this village militia forced seven villagers each week to keep watch at the gate of the SAC army base in Aj--- village. This situation created severe safety and security concerns for villagers, causing many to flee.<sup>51</sup>

The SAC has also been arbitrarily arresting villagers and forcibly disappearing them, with villagers believing detainees are forced to join the SAC military. A villager named K---, from Anot Myo Town, in Ler K’Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, who fled to Thailand as he was afraid of SAC forced recruitment, told KHRG: *“They [SAC soldiers] arrested people who went out at night to recruit them as soldiers. Those people are around 45 and 50 years old. We have not heard anything about them [since they were arrested] but they [SAC] only released one person. He is from the section where I lived in the town. They [SAC] arrested him because he went out at night. He was detained for two or three days. After that, they released him. He was beaten and tortured when he was detained. He sustained injuries all over his body. All over his body was bruised and it became dark brown colour from being tortured.”* K--- believes this person was released because he has a thin physique, and so seemed too weak to be a soldier. Even though one villager was released, villagers in the area reported that others who were arrested were taken to military training.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Saw L---, a community member from Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, also explained the situation in his area:

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*“For some who were arrested [by the SAC], they disappeared after they were arrested and nobody knows what happened to them.”*<sup>53</sup>

### 3.3. Livelihood impacts related to the SAC’s forced conscription

The SAC’s forced conscription has also impacted villagers’ livelihoods. During the reporting period, KHRG received reports that the enforcement of the SAC conscription law has primarily affected villagers’ freedom to travel, in turn affecting access to their jobs. On some occasions, villagers also paid money to SAC authorities to avoid forced conscription, which also caused livelihood challenges.

#### a) Travel restrictions to avoid SAC soldiers

Villagers faced travel restrictions due to fear of SAC forced conscription, especially at checkpoints, which undermined their ability to access their work. During the reporting period, KHRG received 12 reports about SAC soldiers arbitrarily arresting villagers, and later forcing them to become soldiers, especially when they were travelling in towns and cities, causing livelihood challenges.

After SAC authorities ordered village authorities to recruit villagers as SAC soldiers in Peh Kyaw village tract, Ta Kreh Township, on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2024, Saw M---, a community member from Ta Kreh Township, Hpa-an District, explained to KHRG: *“Villagers are now afraid to travel as they worry that SAC soldiers would arrest them to be forcibly recruited because they heard that some other villagers were arrested to be recruited as [SAC] soldiers. They do not feel secure to travel in the area. They also do not feel secure living in their villages. Due to such travel restrictions, villagers are facing livelihood challenges as they cannot freely travel for work, especially they are afraid to travel to Hpa-an Town.”*<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> KHRG, [“Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC forced recruitment and extortion of villagers, and resultant displacement in Htaw Ta Htoo Township \(January to February 2024\)”](#), March 2024.

<sup>51</sup> KHRG, [“Mergui-Tavoy District Short Update: Forced recruitment of villagers by an SAC-affiliated militia causing displacement in Ler K’Saw Township \(December 2023 to March 2024\)”](#), April 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in March 2024. (#24-133-A1-I1)

<sup>53</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in January 2025. (#25-73-D1)

<sup>54</sup> Unpublished report from Hpa-an District, received in January 2025. (#25-73-D2)



## b) Loss of jobs and income

Due to fear of SAC forced conscription, many villagers lost their jobs and stopped working in towns and cities. Some families were also deeply affected when the arrested villager was the main breadwinner.

On April 21<sup>st</sup> 2024, SAC soldiers arrested a 20-year-old villager named Maung<sup>55</sup> N--- on a main road in Pyu Town, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, when he went to a barber shop in Pyu Town. Maung N--- is from Ak--- village, Me Teh Taw village tract, Moo Township. On April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024, the SAC soldiers sent him to a local SAC military recruitment camp in Toungoo Town, Taw Oo District. On April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024, Maung N---'s mother, named Ma O--- (44 years old), went to see her child in the camp after she was informed by other villagers where her son was located but they were only allowed to meet each other for ten minutes. Maung N---'s mother reported that the SAC gave military training to her son in that camp. Since then, his mother could not contact or see her child anymore.<sup>56</sup> Ma O--- explained: *"It's not only him [the son]. There were many other people as well. I heard that they arrested 'Ka La'<sup>57</sup> and also other people; whomever they encountered, including women. My son was unlucky and went [to the town] on that day. [...] I felt very sad, and I also have bad health as well. We tried to reach him via phone call [in the days after seeing him] but we could not."*

Since Maung N--- was the breadwinner in his family, his family has been facing livelihood challenges after he was arrested for conscription. Ma O--- had also borrowed money to send her son to Bangkok for work, pawning her land to raise 20,000,000 kyats [USD 9,527.92] which she gave to brokers who would transport her son across the border. Since the brokers had already made arrangements before Maung N--- was arrested, she cannot get her money back.<sup>58</sup>

## c) Extortion and money in lieu of recruitment

The SAC also forced local communities to pay money or to provide a replacement in exchange for recruitment which impacted villagers' livelihoods. KHRG received eight reports about the SAC

demanding money from villagers at different amounts from at least 50,000 kyats [USD 23.82] to 7,000,000 kyats [USD 3,335.06]. The majority of villagers in rural Southeast Burma work on plantation and farming to support their livelihood, and so the amount of money the SAC demanded is much higher than the income villagers receive. Some villagers used their earnings of a whole year to pay the money that the SAC demand in exchange of recruitment. Villagers are struggling to cover their basic needs after they pay money to the SAC.

Between August and September 2024 (exact date unknown), SAC soldiers and police arrested a 32-year-old villager named Saw P--- at an SAC checkpoint located in Payar Chan Yin village, near the army camp of IB #39, located on Thandaunggyi Road, Day Loh village tract, Htaung Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. Saw P--- was arrested while he was travelling to Au--- village, Day Loh village tract, by motorbike in order to buy a piece of farming equipment. The SAC told him he was under arrest because he did not have a motorbike license and he was not wearing a motorbike helmet. After his arrest, he was sent to SAC Police Station #3 in Toungoo Town. Villagers who witnessed the situation informed Saw P---'s father, named Saw Q---, about the incident, so he could go to the police station. The SAC police told Saw Q--- that he had to pay money for the release of his son, or otherwise his son would be sent to Nay Pyi Taw to serve the SAC military. Later, the SAC police charged Saw P--- with a crime (unknown) and sent a complaint to a court in Toungoo Town. After that, they sent Saw P--- to Toungoo prison. To release Saw P---, Saw Q--- had to give money to the SAC police, authorities in the court and authorities in Toungoo prison. In total, he gave 7,000,000 kyats [USD 3,335.06] to different SAC authorities. Saw P--- was finally released, after being detained in Toungoo prison for a month. Saw Q--- had to sell 100 baskets of his rice to pay money to the SAC for the release of Saw P---, equivalent to a year's income. Since this family relies on rice farming, they were struggling to get basic needs and faced livelihood challenges in 2025.

Many other villagers in Taw Oo District also faced

<sup>55</sup> 'Maung' is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>56</sup> Unpublished report from Kler Lwee Htoo District, received in July 2024. (#24-300-D1)

<sup>57</sup> Ka la, is a Burmese/Myanmar term which is sometimes used to refer to individuals in Burma who are perceived to have a darker skin colour. In Karen State, it is often associated specifically with followers of Islam (Muslims), although this association is sometimes erroneous, and Muslim individuals do not typically self-identify with this term.

<sup>58</sup> Unpublished report from Kler Lwee Htoo District, received in July 2024. (#24-300-A1-11)

a similar situation as Saw P--- and his family. KHRG has received information that at least 8 other villagers in Taw Oo District have faced the same situation: villagers were arrested for multiple reasons (including not having driving licences or helmets) and after, they were told by the SAC to pay money for their release, to avoid conscription.<sup>59</sup>

Saw L---, a community member from Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, also explained the situation in his area: *“I heard that SAC soldiers tried to arrest young male villagers for their recruitment. For those who were arrested, their family members had to give money to the SAC to release the arrested villagers. Some had to pay 100,000 kyats [USD 47.64] and 200,000 kyats [USD 95.29]. Some had to pay 1,000,000 kyats [USD 476.52], 1,500,000 kyats [USD 714.79] or 2,000,000 kyats [USD 952.96]. Some even had to pay 7,000,000 kyats [USD 3,335.06].”*<sup>60</sup>

### 3.4. Mental health: villagers’ fears and concerns

Due to the SAC’s forced conscription, villagers have been living in fear, with some losing opportunities to work and study, and some being left in the dark as their family members were forcibly disappeared after they were arrested, deeply impacting their mental health. Many villagers worry about being forced to commit the same crimes that SAC soldiers committed against fellow villagers, if conscripted. Others worry about dying when fighting in SAC ranks, or being abused by SAC soldiers while under their detention.

#### a) Fear: risk to life and abuse in the Burma Army

Four villagers expressed feeling distressed as they do not want to be recruited as SAC soldiers, because they are afraid that they would be sent to the frontlines to die. K---, the 31-year-old former monk from Mergui-Tavoy District, who fled to Thailand due to fear of SAC forced recruitment, also explained: *“The civil war is happening in our country. If a war happens between countries, I might join an army if I were chosen. Now the civil war is happening in our country. It looks like they [SAC] want us to go and die in battlefields for them. [...] Nobody wants to be a soldier [for SAC]. They [SAC] force the people to be their soldiers. That is why people have to be their soldiers although they*

*don’t want to. If we become their soldiers, we have to consider ourselves as dead men. That is why I do not want to join [SAC] army.”*<sup>61</sup>

Some villagers reported to KHRG newly recruited soldiers are sent to the frontlines untrained or with a short duration of training. Saw R---, a villager from Ayeyarwaddy Region who fled to Doooplaya District to avoid SAC forced recruitment, told KHRG:

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*“I think they [SAC] lost their soldiers. I think they just have a few soldiers and currently they are facing [fighting] with many revolutionary groups, so they don’t have enough soldiers. I heard people who are selected to join the [SAC] army, they [SAC soldiers] give them training three days and let them to go to the frontline.”*<sup>62</sup>

In one reported instance, a villager from Ab--- village, Doe Thong (Day Loh) village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, who was forcibly recruited as an SAC soldier in January 2024, died after he was sent to the frontline. He received basic military training for a short time (around 1 to 3 months) and after he was sent to the frontline and died on the battlefield.

Not only male villagers, but women also reported being scared of SAC soldiers. Panic over SAC forced conscription was reportedly also linked to fears of sexual violence perpetrated by the Burma Army. On February 20<sup>th</sup> 2025, a young woman from Kawkareik Town, Kaw T’Ree Township, Doooplaya District, who fled to Thailand due to fear of SAC conscription, explained to KHRG: *“In the beginning, they [SAC] said they will only recruit men. So, I do not worry much about it. Later [in January 2025], they also recruit women. So, I do not feel safe anymore. [...] I am even afraid, sleeping at night, when hearing the sound of cars in the town [in Hpa-an] because I worry and fear that they [SAC] will come to my house and take me for conscription. I could not sleep well for so many nights. Therefore, I finally decided to come to Thailand because I am afraid that I would be recruited. [...] If I join the SAC, I will have to obey everything they tell me. The law is in their hands. For example, if they ask me to go to the battlefield, I have to go, although I don’t want to. If I go to the battlefield, I will be killed. [...] I worry*

<sup>59</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2025. (#25-68-D1)

<sup>60</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in January 2025. (#25-73-D1)

<sup>61</sup> Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in March 2024. (#24-133-A1-I1)

<sup>62</sup> Unpublished report from Doooplaya District, received in May 2024. (#24-264-A1-I1)

*that I will be sexually abused in the army. I'm afraid that they [SAC] will force me to have sex. [...]"<sup>63</sup>*

### **b) Loss of opportunities for the future**

Due to fear of SAC forced conscription, many villagers stopped working and studying in towns and cities, which has negatively impacted their opportunities and hopes for the future. As Saw D---, the 24-year-old university student originally from Y--- village, Taung Ti village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township, Doolaya District, who returned to his village due to fear of the SAC-enacted conscription law, reported: *"For most villagers who are [working and studying] in towns, they come back to stay in their villages after the conscription law was announced."<sup>64</sup> U C---, the local healthcare worker also from Y--- village, told KHRG: *"For parents who send their children to schools in Hpa-An, Mawlamyine and Mudon [towns], they are very worried about their children. [...] For those children who go to school in towns, their parents worry about them. For college students, their parents worry more about them"<sup>65</sup>**

Young villagers reported feeling their futures were lost due to the conflict and the enactment of the law. A 32-year-old villager from Ta Kreh Township, Hpa-an District, expressed: *"We do not have many opportunities to continue our education due to political issue. If we are forced to join the SAC, it will be worse. I feel like our future will be lost."<sup>66</sup> A 23-year-old villager from Kaw T'Ree Township, Doolaya District, who went to work in Thailand, reported: *"If I become their [SAC's] soldier, I will not be able to work in Bangkok to support my family in my village. I know that my life will end if I join the Burma Army. There is no future for me there."<sup>67</sup>**

### **c) Villagers' moral concerns**

Villagers reported feeling distressed about SAC's forced recruitment as they do not want to join the Burma Army, understanding that the SAC commits violence against villagers and civilians. Saw E---, a university student from Toungoo Town, Taw Oo District, who joined the CDM, explained: *"I feel like nothing is good for us regarding this [SAC-enacted] conscription law. I know that military conscription*

*is practiced in other countries, but I thought that it is a reason to defend our nation and country. However, in our country, we will be asked to harm our people if we join the military. Therefore, many young people including me do not want to accept this situation. [...] If I join them, I will be ordered to do like SAC soldiers do. For example, they torture people. They harm people in different ways. [...] I'm afraid to be an SAC soldier. Also, there is no guarantee [of safety] for our lives if we become their soldiers. We can be killed at any time and our family members will be in trouble."<sup>68</sup>*

Similarly, Saw S---, a community member from Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, reported: *"Young people [throughout Burma] do not want to serve in the SAC military because the SAC illegally seized power to rule the country. They oppressed and killed people. SAC soldiers were forced to use drugs to fight in battlefields. They [SAC soldiers] stole villagers' property and burned down people's houses. Young people recognise the SAC army as a bad army because they act like a terrorist group. Because of this, young people fled to other countries. Some fled to liberated areas to find jobs. Some joined the revolutionary groups."<sup>69</sup>*

Naw T---, a villager from Av--- village, near Pa Thein Town, Ayeyarwaddy Division, who fled to Doolaya District together with her husband, explained:

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*"Burma soldiers said they will recruit every man who is between 16 and 60 [years old]. They want to recruit more soldiers because they don't have many soldiers. [...] Villagers do not want to be Burma soldiers because Burma soldiers ask them to do things they do not want to do because they [Burma soldiers] kill our people, they torture our people and they oppress our people."<sup>70</sup>*

For those reasons, Naw T--- and her husband fled to avoid forced conscription by the SAC.

<sup>63</sup> Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in February 2025. (#25-73-A1-I1)

<sup>64</sup> Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-111-A3-I1)

<sup>65</sup> Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-111-A3-I1)

<sup>66</sup> Unpublished report from Hpa-An District, received in March 2025. (#25-105-D1)

<sup>67</sup> Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in March 2025. (#25-106-D2)

<sup>68</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2025. (#25-56-D1)

<sup>69</sup> Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2025. (#25-41-D1)

<sup>70</sup> Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in February 2024. (#24-79-A3-I1)



## 4. Security and legal analysis: SAC conscription in Burma

The SAC has been forcibly recruiting villagers against their will, including by enacting the People's Military Service Law, in an attempt to increase their numbers and to control villagers in Southeast Burma through means of violence, which has mentally and physically affected villagers. From January 2024 until February 2025, KHRG received 37 reports of the impacts of forced conscription by the SAC in Southeast Burma, including at least 214 villagers who were forcibly recruited as SAC soldiers. The condition and whereabouts of many villagers who were forcibly recruited remains unknown, causing undue distress for their families. Villagers in Southeast Burma do not want to serve in the SAC military, with many expressing that they view the SAC as an army that commits atrocities against civilians. Village heads in mixed-control areas have oftentimes resisted following SAC orders of recruitment.

Displacement is a common strategy that villagers use to avoid SAC forced conscription, with many fleeing to other villages under KNU control or to Thailand. Local villagers faced livelihood challenges as the fear of the SAC's forced recruitment undermines their ability to travel, study, and work. Some villagers are forced to pay high fees in exchange for not being recruited. Men, especially young people, have been more vulnerable to the SAC's forced conscription, which has driven young villagers to leave their homes and even the country.

While conscription has been seen as a necessary element to defend a nation, recent discourse within international human rights law has opened up to the possibility of conscription being a human rights violation. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has posited that Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which gives people the "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion", can be interpreted as granting people the right to be conscientious objectors.<sup>71</sup> Villagers in Southeast Burma have not been granted the freedom to conscientiously object to their conscription, with many being forcibly conscripted and taken by the SAC. Villagers also questioned the SAC's intentions and legitimacy in enacting a conscription law, and

rejected sharing any feelings of it defending the nation.

The SAC's military campaign has included gross violations of human rights, widely condemned by international stakeholders. Forcing villagers to commit such acts of violence, and participate in a war to which they fundamentally oppose, could amount to "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment", contrary to Common Article 3(1)(c) to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions.

Under the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s Forced Labour Convention (1930), compulsory military service laws are exempted from the definition of "forced labour".<sup>72</sup> However, evidence collected during this reporting period suggests that the SAC was forcibly recruiting villagers for months before the announcement and enactment of the military service law in February 2024 and April 2024, respectively. Villagers were often given no choice when SAC soldiers ordered them to be recruited, with many experiencing threats of physical violence as a form of coercion. Additionally, the ILO's 2023 report from the Commission of Inquiry found that "the military continues to exact different types of forced labour in the context of armed conflict," such as through the use of forced portering and human shields.

The SAC has also not followed the procedures under the People's Military Service Law. According to Part I(2)(b) of the law, those eligible for conscription are "a male, any citizen from the age of 18 to 35 or if he is an expert [professional occupation] male, a citizen from the age of 18 to 45". However, as shown in this report, KHRG received evidence that the SAC has forcibly recruited villagers who are older than 45 years old who do not possess any title of "professional occupation" in Southeast Burma. In addition, the SAC have not used a proper screening or reviewing process for their recruitment, as is required by the People's Military Service Law. Villagers were recruited immediately as SAC soldiers as soon as they drew lots indicating SAC recruitment, without appeal or review from the central drafting board. More than that, as shown from evidence KHRG received, SAC soldiers tortured and shot villagers

<sup>71</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, [General comment adopted by the Human Rights Committee under article 40, paragraph 4, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), 1994

<sup>72</sup> 1930 Forced Labour Convention, International Labour Organization, Article 2(2)(a).

when they refused to follow their conscription orders, which violates basic human rights.<sup>73</sup> Several villagers have reported receiving cruel and inhuman treatment from SAC soldiers in their recruitment practices.

The UNHCR handbook states that a person can claim refugee status after deserting or evading military service, where “the type of military action,

with which an individual does not wish to be associated, is condemned by the international community as contrary to basic rules of human conduct, punishment for desertion or draft-evasion could [...] in itself be regarded as persecution.”<sup>74</sup> This applies to Burma.

## 5. Recommendations

For international stakeholders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local authorities, and regional and foreign governments:

- Reject the enactment of the 2010’s People’s Military Service Law by the State Administration Council (SAC), and urgently denounce their widespread forced recruitment in Southeast Burma;
- Acknowledge that the SAC is the root cause of the current human rights crisis in Burma, and refrain from giving them any political legitimacy;
- Refrain from engaging in any form of collaboration with the junta, including military, economic or humanitarian collaboration, that will help them to continue their cruel human rights abuses against civilians;
- Urge neighbouring countries to ensure that their authorities do not deny entry to people crossing the border seeking refuge, and encourage them to work with cross-border organisations to develop support and protection services for those seeking refuge;
- Increase the provision of support to those who seek protection and refuge in KNU areas due to fear of SAC conscription.

### Front cover note

The drawing on the cover is based on a photo taken by a KHRG researcher in March 2024 in Z---village, Sa Tein village tract, Ler K’Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. After the SAC announced the enactment of the People’s Military Service Law in February 2024, many young villagers from several villages in Sa Tain village tract were afraid of forced recruitment, resulting in many fleeing to other areas, including across the border to Thailand. This drawing shows a group of young villagers being questioned by local armed resistance groups on their journey to Thailand to avoid forced recruitment. *[Credit: Anonymous artist]*

#### About KHRG

Founded in 1992, Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Burma. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).

<sup>73</sup> Human Rights Watch, “[International Law and Human Rights Standards](#)”, 2001.

<sup>74</sup> UNHCR Handbook, page 40, paragraph 171.