

Defying Hunger

State Administration Council (SAC)'s systematic destruction of civilian livelihoods and food systems in Southeast Burma (January - December 2024)

Briefing Paper

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KHRG

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

1. Introduction

Since the 2021 military coup,¹ villagers in Southeast Burma(/Myanmar)² have faced constant threats to their livelihoods. Ongoing attacks by the State Administration Council (SAC)³ on villages and plantations have critically disrupted farming, foraging, and other traditional livelihood activities. Looting and the destruction of foodstuffs and agricultural assets have further deprived villagers of key resources necessary for survival and income generation. Additionally, SAC checkpoints have restricted access to agricultural land and local markets, thereby limiting villagers' ability to travel and trade essential goods such as food and medicines. These abuses, combined with escalating fighting between the SAC and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁴, along with other armed resistance groups, have aggravated the daily hardships experienced by communities. As a result, villagers continue to face forced displacement, chronic instability, and significant obstacles to achieving sustainable food security.

This briefing paper examines how the SAC's systematic destruction of agricultural systems, indiscriminate and targeted attacks on essential assets, obstruction of basic livelihood activities, and the resulting forced displacement, have undermined villagers' livelihoods and exacerbated food insecurity in Southeast Burma, as reported by villagers from January to December 2024 in locally-defined Karen State.⁵ First, the paper examines the historical patterns of livelihood destruction in Southeast Burma under successive military regimes. The second section illustrates the different factors contributing to this destruction in 2024, including the SAC-perpetrated attacks

on agricultural production, harm to livestock, and disruptions to access to food and essential economic activities. It also highlights how the destruction of homes, forced displacement, and denial of humanitarian assistance compound the hardships endured by the civilian population. The third section analyses the legal implications of these actions under international law. Finally, the paper concludes with targeted recommendations for local and international stakeholders.

2. Contextual overview: dismantling of livelihood systems in Southeast Burma

Historical context: systematic destruction of livelihoods in Southeast Burma

Human rights in Southeast Burma have been under constant threat since the country's independence in 1948. Under successive military regimes, civilians were subjected to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, inhumane treatment, and both targeted and indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas, constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁶ Beginning in the 1960s, the Burma Army⁷ launched a large-scale counter-insurgency campaign known as the *four cuts* strategy, aimed at severing all civilian support to ethnic armed organisations by cutting off four essential pillars: food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. Under this logic, all villagers were perceived as potential members of armed groups and were therefore indiscriminately targeted.

¹ On February 1st 2021, the Burma Army (or Tatmadaw) deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces, and invalidated the NLD's landslide victory in the November 2020 General Election.

² In 1989, the then-ruling military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar without consultation from the people. 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.

³ 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 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.

⁴ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁵ 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.

⁶ KHRG, [Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers' testimonies in rural Southeast Burma](#), December 2022. Also: International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, "Crimes in Burma," Cambridge, MA: International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, 2009.

⁷ The terms Burma military, Burma Army, junta, 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).

Depriving communities of agricultural land was central to the implementation of the first *cut*. In Karen State, where most of the population relies on farming, Burma Army soldiers systematically attacked food sources, including by confiscating farmland, harvests, and essential supplies – especially rice. This pattern was also driven by the failure of Burma’s military leadership to provide adequate food or pay to ground soldiers and was frequently carried out under orders from commanding officers.⁸ In addition, land was seized for military and developmental projects, while strict travel restrictions prevented villagers from accessing fields, trading, or foraging. Those who failed to comply risked being accused of supporting the resistance and faced detention, beatings, or even being shot on sight.⁹ Together, these tactics fostered food insecurity and poverty.

Building on this strategy, the Burma military also conducted clearance operations to depopulate contested areas. These operations relied on scorched-earth tactics –such as the destruction of food supplies, livestock, and homes– rendering vast areas increasingly uninhabitable. To ensure compliance, the Burma Army employed direct violence, forcing entire villages to relocate to designated sites –often fenced and under strict military control– where they were subjected to forced labour and denied access to medical care.¹⁰

While the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreements and the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) reduced the frequency of armed clashes, land rights remained a serious concern for local communities. The 2012 Farmland Law and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law –along with their subsequent amendments– failed to acknowledge customary land tenure

systems prevalent in locally-defined Karen State.¹¹ These laws allowed Burma authorities to classify ancestral lands customarily owned by local villagers as deserted and reallocate them to private companies –often without meaningful consultation or adequate compensation.¹² Combined with inaccessible land registration procedures, many villagers became vulnerable to land confiscation and the loss of their livelihood means.

Post-2021 coup: intensified violence and the targeting of livelihoods

Since the military coup of February 2021, staged by the Burma Army leaders, the human rights situation in Southeast Burma has rapidly deteriorated. Soldiers under the command of the State Administration Council (SAC) have carried out a campaign of widespread violence against civilians, including arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, and shelling and air strikes on civilian areas.¹³ Available evidence suggests that crimes against humanity –such as murder, torture, deportation, and forcible transfer– have been committed across the country, including in Karen State.¹⁴

Amid ongoing violence and repression in Southeast Burma, livelihood security has drastically declined. The SAC has reinvigorated the *four cuts* strategy, once again placing civilians at the centre of military offensives.¹⁵ To this end, the military has imposed severe restrictions on movement, confiscated and destroyed food and medical supplies, and arrested those attempting to deliver them.¹⁶ Travel bans and curfews not only deprive civilians of basic livelihoods, but are also used to perpetrate further abuses, such as arbitrary arrests, extortion, forced recruitment, and the reinstatement of shoot-on-

⁸ KHRG, [Undeniable](#), above, p. 50.

⁹ KHRG, [STARVING THEM OUT: Forced Relocations, Killings and the Systematic Starvation of Villagers in Dooplaya District](#), March 2000; KHRG, [Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar](#), October 2017.

¹⁰ KHRG, [Foundation of Fear](#), above; KHRG, [Undeniable](#), above, pp. 36-38.

¹¹ See: Farmland Law (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law) No. II of 2012, 30 March 2012; Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Rules, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation Notification, No. 1/2012, 31 August 2012.

¹² KHRG, [‘Development without us’: Village Agency and Land Confiscations in Southeast Myanmar](#), August 2018; KHRG, [‘With only our voices, what can we do?’: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar](#), June 2015.

¹³ KHRG, [တပ်မတော် Aircraft coming! : Impacts of air strikes on local communities and villagers’ protection strategies in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup](#), November 2024.

¹⁴ KHRG, [Undeniable](#), above. Also: Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, “[Detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar](#)”, A/HRC/42/50, 19 September 2019; Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), “[Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar](#)”, A/HRC/51/4, 12 July 2022.

¹⁵ KHRG, [Why would they target us? Exploring patterns of the Burma Army’s retaliatory abuses against villagers across Southeast Burma](#), June 2023.

¹⁶ KHRG, [Denied and Deprived: Local communities confronting the humanitarian crisis and protection challenges in Southeast Burma](#), June 2022; KHRG, [Resilience and Resistance: Challenges and threats faced by Human Rights Defenders \(HRDs\) in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup](#), September 2024.

sight policies.¹⁷ The renewed “*burn all, destroy all*” approach mirrors earlier patterns of violence and continues to isolate communities from essential resources, deepening their vulnerability and long-term hardship.

As a result, the number of internally displaced civilians has increased sharply. According to the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), more than 1,000,000 villagers were displaced in locally-defined Karen State as of January 2025.¹⁸ The SAC’s restrictions on movement and transportation of goods have also restricted humanitarian assistance, leaving most international organisations unable to reach communities in rural areas. Consequently, displaced communities face prolonged deprivation and serious health risks.¹⁹

3. Factual summary: attacks on civilian livelihoods and access to food by the SAC in Southeast Burma

Villagers in Southeast Burma endure repeated attacks by the SAC that, alongside ongoing armed conflict, severely undermine their livelihoods. In 2024, the SAC’s targeted and indiscriminate air strikes, shelling, and ground offensives destroyed homes, villages, and plantations, disrupting agricultural production and other essential livelihood activities. The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) further restricted access to farmland, endangering civilians as they attempted to carry out routine tasks. In many instances, this destruction was accompanied by the killing of livestock and the looting of food supplies and other vital belongings. These abuses were compounded by strict travel and transportation restrictions imposed by the SAC, which blocked access to markets, farmland, and basic services. Consequently, communities across the region have faced widespread displacement,

prolonged deprivation, and a sharp decline in food security.

The evidence presented in this factual summary shows how the SAC’s attacks on villagers’ essential livelihood assets and economic activities, combined with the escalating armed conflict, have resulted in food insecurity in Southeast Burma. KHRG received 233 field reports –including audio interviews, situation updates, incident reports, and short updates– documenting villagers’ livelihood struggles from January to December 2024, in all seven districts of Karen State.²⁰ These include 66 interviews with men and 52 with women, offering diverse perspectives on the livelihood challenges they faced. Documented patterns of abuse include: (3.1.) destruction and disruption of agricultural production; (3.2.) harm to livestock and looting of essential supplies; (3.3.) obstruction of food access, movement, and economic activities; (3.4.) destruction of homes and resulting displacement; and (3.5.) denial of humanitarian assistance. While the vast majority of these systematic violations were perpetrated by SAC soldiers, a few incidents were also reported in which armed resistance groups engaged in acts that endangered villagers’ livelihoods and food security.

3.1. Destruction and disruption of agricultural production

In 2024, farmlands in Southeast Burma continued to be destroyed by SAC air strikes and shelling. Fearing fighting and SAC attacks, villagers were forced to stop working on their plantations, disrupting their main source of food and income. In several incidents, primary breadwinners within households were injured or killed in these attacks, leaving their families with limited means to support their livelihoods. Landmine contamination also posed serious risks, endangering villagers as they searched for food, attempted to access farmland, or sought income-generating activities.

¹⁷ KHRG, *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)*, March 2025; KHRG, *Deadly Encounters: Killings of civilians by armed actors in Southeast Burma (October 2022 - April 2023)*, June 2023.

¹⁸ CIDKP, “Kawthoolei-Displacement Overview Map”, January 2025. [on file]

¹⁹ KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline: Challenges to the right to healthcare, and local efforts, in Southeast Burma (January - October 2024)*, December 2024.

²⁰ 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.

a) Destruction of farmland and threats to villagers' agricultural work

SAC attacks on civilian areas not only affected villages but also farmlands, causing extensive destruction of plantations and fields across Karen State. Air strikes and shelling destroyed crops, damaged agricultural land, and deterred villagers from working in their fields due to the fear of further violence. These attacks posed a direct threat to the livelihoods of communities, severely limiting access to food and undermining local sources of income. In 2024 alone, KHRG documented at least 33 incidents involving attacks on farmlands by the SAC. Additionally, at least 50 other interviewees reported that they feared working in their plantations due to such danger.

When attacks occur during or before harvesting season, villagers' livelihood means are especially affected. In January 2024, a villager named Naw²¹ A---, from Aa--- village, Hpgha Ghaw village tract²², Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported that SAC shelling from K'Ma Moh Town damaged some of her plantations: *"In the morning, when I came to take out [cut] sesame plants and harvest paddies, I looked and my heart was broken [when seeing the destruction], and my blood pressure rose. I did not dare to work, and I fled back [home]. [...] I have only sesame and paddy crops. I haven't finished harvesting paddies. I have constant fear."*²³ On January 17th 2024, at 9 pm, SAC-affiliated Border Guard Force (BGF)²⁴ Battalion #1014 (led by Bo²⁵ Maung Chit and based at Thah Ghaw Play army camp) shelled into Aa--- village and the surrounding areas again, including villagers' farmland. One of the affected villagers reported that the paddies had already been harvested from the 6-acre land, and it was now time to harvest sesame. However, the frequent mortar shelling prevented villagers from working on their farmlands.²⁶

Villagers consistently described how the persistent threat of air strikes and shelling created a climate of constant fear, preventing them from safely



This photo was taken in May 2024 in Ac--- village, Law Muh Per village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. On May 23rd 2024, at 9:43 am, an SAC fighter jet dropped nine bombs on villagers' farmland near Ac--- village. Seven exploded, while two remained unexploded. After the air strike, villagers were too afraid to return to their farms. The photo shows the damage caused to a farmland by one of the bombs. [Photo: KHRG]

cultivating farmlands. Many reported living under the daily risk of being injured or killed while trying to sustain their livelihoods. For instance, on April 24th 2024, shelling took place in Ag--- village, Z'Yat Gyi Taung Chan village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, resulting in mortar rounds landing onto farmlands. The village head, named E---, stated: *"Currently, the civilians are afraid of the risk of big weapons [shelling] and air attacks. Not only one villager, but every villager has fear. Currently, it is not even okay to harvest paddies."*²⁷ Similarly, Saw²⁸ G---, a villager from Aa--- village, Hpgha Ghaw village tract, explained that he no longer dared to work on his farmland due to the SAC's constant shelling. He described: *"We have to constantly listen and assess the situation to decide if it's safe to work. We work and flee, work and flee."*²⁹

These disruptions have therefore damaged local agricultural production, contributing to food scarcity and rising commodity prices. A villager named U³⁰ D---, from Ae--- village, Hkaw Poo

²¹ 'Naw' is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

²² A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

²³ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in February 2024. (#24-58-A1-I1)

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ 'Bo' is a Burmese honorific title meaning 'officer.'

²⁶ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in February 2024. (#24-58-I2)

²⁷ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in August 2024. (#24-352-A1-I1)

²⁸ 'Saw' is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

²⁹ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in January 2024. (#24-27-A2-I1)

³⁰ 'U' is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, described: *“Local villagers secure their livelihood by working on their farmlands. Due to the [SAC] shelling and air strikes, villagers are afraid of going to work on their farmlands, resulting in a shortage of rice. As a result, the price of rice has increased, and villagers cannot afford to buy rice.”*³¹

The continued attacks have made it increasingly difficult for villagers to cover basic needs, making them fear for their long-term food security and stability. Daw³² C---, who lives in Ad--- village, Win Kan village tract, Kyeik Hto Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported in September 2024:

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*“Working is going unwell because we have to be afraid of the [SAC] shelling. It seems like people are going to be gradually starving because work is going unwell. [...] We have to work in fear. [...] If we don’t work, we will starve.”*³³

Following the attacks on January 2024 on Aa--- village, Hpgha Ghaw village tract, on February 4th 2024, SAC forces based in K’Ma Moh Town conducted indiscriminate shelling again. Several

mortar rounds landed onto the farmland of a villager named Af---, destroying his sesame plantation. Saw Bu---, from Aa--- village, described: *“If they [SAC] keep shelling in the future in one or two years, we will not be able to work independently in this area. We will always be afraid.”*³⁴

This situation of hardship was reported in other districts. Due to the escalation of the ongoing armed conflict in Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, in 2024, villagers also reported being deeply concerned as they struggled to complete their agricultural work. With no alternative economic opportunities available, they feared starvation.³⁵

b) Death or injury of breadwinner

Attacks on agricultural land also resulted in the injury or loss of life of villagers, leaving families struggling and facing hardships to find alternative livelihood means.³⁶ For instance, on November 21st 2024, at around 11 am, SAC forces at Thay Say Taung, Pyoung Tho, and Baw G’Lee army camps, under the command of Military Operations Command (MOC)³⁷ #20, shelled into a plantation near Ai--- village, Kaw Thay Der (Yay Tho Gyi) village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, injuring a villager named Naw H--- and killing another one, Saw I---. Saw J---, a fellow villager who



These photos were received on May 31st 2024 from a local leader. They were taken after an SAC aircraft dropped two 500-pound bombs onto Ah--- place, in Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, and show the resulting farmland destruction and bombs’ fragments left behind. [Photos: Local villager]

³¹ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in July 2024. (#24-332-S1)

³² ‘Daw’ is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person’s name.

³³ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in November 2024. (#24-443-A1-I1)

³⁴ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in February 2024. (#24-58-A2-I1)

³⁵ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in November 2024. (#24-466-S1)

³⁶ See, for instance: KHRG, [“Taw Oo District Situation Update: SAC shelling, drone attacks, forced recruitment, threats, and other military activity, causing casualties and livelihood challenges in Htaw Ta Htoo and Daw Hpah Hkoth Townships \(November 2024 to January 2025\)”](#), May 2025.

³⁷ Military Operations Command (MOC) is comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) made up of three battalions each.

was working on the plantation that day, explained: *"Then, another mortar landed and exploded in the betel nut plantation where we were working. [...] The shrapnel hit his [Saw L---] neck, hand, and leg, and he died on the spot. [...] There was no [safe] place to hide in the betel nut plantation during the shelling. [...] I was very afraid because I had never experienced such an incident in my life."* With the death of Saw L---, his family faced great livelihood challenges, as he was survived by his wife and three children, who now struggle to secure a living without his income.³⁸

Several villagers shared with KHRG that they faced serious challenges when one of the family's breadwinners was injured or killed, as they had to balance caring for their children and securing their family's livelihoods. A villager named K---, from Lay Kay Kaw Town, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, described the livelihood difficulties she faced after being injured by an air strike, as she and her husband were working as daily labourers to support a family of nine. She explained: *"It was a little bit better when two of us [she and her husband] worked together. But now, only one person works [as she was injured]. He [the husband] went to work today, but he did not get to work [as there was no job availability]."*³⁹



This photo was taken in March 2024 in Am--- village, Meh Nyoo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. The photo shows a rice-milling machine damaged by an SAC drone strike in Am--- village on March 25th 2024. With the destruction of the rice-milling machine, villagers have to mill the rice by hand, which is a lengthy process. [Photo: KHRG]

c) Destruction of farming infrastructure and equipment

The SAC attacks have also severely impacted villagers' farming infrastructure and essential equipment, which are crucial for carrying out agricultural activities and storing farming products. When these facilities and tools are destroyed or damaged, securing livelihoods becomes extremely difficult for villagers. For instance, rice barns serve as vital lifelines, enabling the secure storage of a reliable food supply throughout the year. The damage inflicted on these critical resources further exacerbates villagers' struggles. During the reporting period, KHRG received five reports on damage and destruction of rice barns by SAC air strikes and shelling in Taw Oo, Mu Traw, and Dooplaya districts.⁴⁰

d) Contamination by landmines, UXOs, and shrapnel remains

Villagers in Southeast Burma faced significant challenges in resuming their agricultural activities after hostilities due to the pervasive presence of unexploded ordnance and shrapnel left behind by SAC shelling and air strikes on farmlands. In addition to the fear of renewed SAC attacks, these hazards pose a serious threat to villagers' safety, particularly for children. The risk of triggering unexploded devices has made even routine tasks such as ploughing or harvesting extremely dangerous, discouraging many from returning to their fields.

For instance, on April 20th 2024, at 9 pm, SAC fighter jets dropped bombs on Saw L---'s farmland in An--- village, Meh K'Na Hkee Doh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, damaging his crops and leaving shrapnel behind. Saw L---, who grows sugar cane, rambutan, and paddy on his farmland, expressed his fear of continuing to work, given the risk of injuries: *"I just would like to say, how are they to deal with those shrapnel? Should we hide it in a safe place? It might cut our legs and hands [while working on the farmland]. We cannot collect them [shrapnel] all."*⁴¹

Landmine contamination also poses a significant challenge for villagers working on plantations. For instance, on January 24th 2024, at 9:45 am, a villager named Saw M--- from Ao--- village, Ler Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu

³⁸ Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in November 2024. (#24-452-I1)

³⁹ Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in October 2024. (#24-406-A5-I1)

⁴⁰ See, for instance: KHRG, ["Taw Oo District Situation Update"](#), May 2025, above.

⁴¹ KHRG, ["Doo Tha Htoo District Incident Report: SAC air strikes injured two villagers and damaged monasteries and farms in Hpa-an Township, April 2024"](#), December 2024.

Traw District, was maimed by the explosion of a M14 landmine planted by SAC soldiers at Cb--- place, in Ler Muh Plaw village tract, while he and other villagers were searching for a place to start hill farming. As a farmer working to secure his livelihood, he later faced significant challenges and depended on his siblings for support.⁴²



This photo was taken by a local villager on May 3rd 2024. The photo shows a 12-year-old girl from Ap--- village, Pyi Gyi Ma Naing village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, who was seriously injured after stepping on a landmine while crossing a rubber plantation on her way to collect 'dog fruit' (jengkol) leaves, on May 3rd 2024. The plantation is located behind the army camp where SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #560 is based, so villagers believe the SAC planted it. Facing livelihood hardships, she had been collecting the leaves to earn income and buy food for her family. [Photo: Local villager]

In 2024, KHRG documented 18 incidents in which villagers (including nine children) were injured or killed due to landmine and UXO explosions. The danger posed by landmines or UXOs extends

beyond farming activities. It also threatens villagers as they venture to forage for food.⁴³

3.2. Harm and confiscation of livestock and looting of villagers' foodstuff

Livestock farming is a vital component of villagers' livelihoods in Southeast Burma. However, these animals are frequently killed or injured by SAC air strikes and shelling, as well as looted by ground soldiers. Villagers are unable to take their livestock while fleeing and often cannot return to the villages to take care of them due to continuous attacks, further undermining their economic stability.

In addition to the loss of livestock, villagers also face severe hardship when food-related belongings and valuables are looted. These items – often the result of years of hard work – are essential to their survival and their loss leaves households in extremely vulnerable situations. As reported to KHRG, these acts of looting were primarily carried out by SAC soldiers, though armed resistance groups were also implicated in some instances.

a) Livestock being harmed or stolen

KHRG documented at least 20 incidents of villagers' livestock being killed or injured by SAC air strikes and shelling in 2024. Additional incidents of harm to livestock occurred during armed clashes between the SAC and local resistance armed groups.

SAC ground soldiers have also deliberately targeted livestock. On April 12th 2024, SAC troops entered into Ar--- village, Kaw Nweh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, and looted villagers' property, including livestock. A villager from Ar--- village explained: *"They [SAC soldiers] took chicken on the day that they arrived. They also took pigs, cooked and ate them. [...] They asked the house owners to get out. They rummaged the houses, broke the lock of the doors and took things from the houses."*⁴⁴ Similarly, following fighting between People Defence Force (PDF)⁴⁵ and SAC near As--- village, P'Shaw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, on July 21st

⁴² KHRG, "[Mu Traw District Incident Report: A villager stepped on landmine planted by the SAC in Lu Thaw Township, January 2024](#)," December 2024.

⁴³ See, for instance: KHRG, "[Mu Traw District Incident Report: One teenager was killed and another was severely injured by a UXO explosion, in Lu Thaw Township \(July 2024\)](#)", September 2024.

⁴⁴ Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in May 2024. (#24-211-A2-I1)

⁴⁵ 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 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

2024, SAC soldiers from Infantry Battalion (IB)⁴⁶ #39 went into the village, and, as reported by a villager named Daw N---: *"They [SAC IB #39] killed and ate all pigs and chickens in the village."*⁴⁷

Raising livestock is essential to the livelihoods of many villagers. However, villagers cannot take care of their animals while fleeing from SAC attacks, prompting many to sell their livestock at low prices. A village committee member named Saw O---, from At--- village, Kaw Ler village tract, Tha Htoo Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, explained: *"We do not feel secure to work on our farm and sold our livestock, like cows and buffalos, at a lower price because we did not feel secure to live in the village to take care of the livestock. For example, one cow costs about 500,000 kyat [USD 238]⁴⁸, but villagers have to sell it only for 200,000 [USD 95] or 300,000 kyat [USD 143]. They have to sell at a lower price because they assumed they could lose their livestock without receiving anything in return."*⁴⁹

Despite the risks, some displaced villagers seek a chance to return to the village to feed their livestock. A displaced villager named Naw P---, from Av--- village, Shwe Yaw Pya village tract, Tha Htoo Township, whose house was destroyed by SAC shelling in 2024, explained: *"Some villagers return to the village during daytime and go out of village to sleep [in the hiding place] during nighttime."*

*They [some villagers] go back to the village to feed their chicken and other livestock because they have some livestock in the village."*⁵⁰

b) Looting and pillaging of foodstuff and belongings

When hostilities force villagers to flee to the forest or other areas, they often have no choice but to abandon their belongings, which are then frequently looted or burned by SAC soldiers. For instance, on January 15th 2024, SAC based at Shway Nan Ka Lay village (in Nga Pyaw Taw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, in Taw Oo District), led by Operation Commander Ha Lin Aung, entered Aw--- village, Htee Tha Saw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, and looted various items from Saw Q---'s house, including three bags of rice, a water pump, a laptop, and other essential belongings.⁵¹

Similarly, on July 22nd 2024, at 11:50 am, after fighting between the SAC and PDF soldiers at P'Shaw Loh area, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, some SAC soldiers went into Ax--- villagers' houses and shops and looted indiscriminately. Saw R---, a local villager, explained: *"They [SAC] went into the shop and confiscated eggs, snacks, and other food they could take."* On that day, the SAC also destroyed the belongings of a villager named S---, inside her



These two photos were received from a local villager in Aq--- village, Htee Day village tract, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The photos show two cows, owned by Aq--- villagers, killed by bullets during a skirmish between SAC troops and local resistance armed groups on February 10th 2024. [Photos: Local villager]

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in January 2024. (#25-2-A1-I1)

⁴⁸ All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the May 30th 2025 mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyat to USD 0.48 (taken from wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate)

⁴⁹ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in January 2024. (#24-13-A1-I1)

⁵⁰ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in December 2024. (#24-269-A1-I1)

⁵¹ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in April 2024. (#24-157-D1; #24-157-A1-I1)

house, and confiscated Saw T---'s money, taking everything they could.⁵² Another local villager, named Naw V---, stated:

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“These [SAC] soldiers shouldn’t do this to us. [...] They shouldn’t take our belongings. They shouldn’t destroy our houses. However, they entered the village and destroyed things as their typical habit. They looted people’s belongings. They ate. They destroyed and shot houses.”⁵³

In two reported incidents, armed resistance groups also looted villagers’ belongings. On May 5th 2024, after the combined forces of the KNLA and PDF fought against the SAC in Ay--- village, Kleh Mu Htee area, K’Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, PDF soldiers broke into villagers’ houses and confiscated their belongings, such as motorbikes, cars, phones, and other items.⁵⁴

3.3. Disrupting food access, movement, and economic activities

Villagers also face significant challenges in accessing food and tending to their farmlands due to severe travel restrictions. These include limitations on transportation, barriers to movement, and targeted interference in daily economic activities. At SAC checkpoints, villagers not only risk the confiscation of goods, but also questioning, physical violence, and arrests. Such oppressive measures not only hinder the trade of goods but also obstruct access to food, healthcare, and safe farmland, undermining communities’ ability to survive.

a) Transportation restrictions and confiscation at checkpoints

Villagers face severe hardships due to restrictions imposed by the SAC on purchasing and transporting essential goods, including rice and medicine. Coupled with the ongoing armed conflict and instability, these limitations exacerbate their struggle to access necessities. All of these obstacles –strict checkpoints, confiscation of

goods, and extortion– pose a serious threat to their livelihoods, with villagers often forced to pass numerous controls and comply with multiple demands from the same or different armed groups.

When transporting food supplies through SAC checkpoints, villagers frequently face accusations of supporting armed resistance groups. A villager named Daw C---, from Ad--- village, Win Kan village tract, Kyeh Htoh (Kyaikto) Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, explained: *“They [SAC] don’t allow us to carry more than three to four half-full bags of rice. They [SAC] only allow carrying rice bags half-full; not even a whole bag of rice. [...] They said we are supporting PDF soldiers [with such rice], so they [SAC] do not allow [to carry many bags]. [...] If there are many rice bags, they [SAC] drag them down [confiscate the rice].”⁵⁵* Since September 19th 2024, the SAC numerous checkpoints located in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, have also imposed strict restrictions on the transportation of rice and gasoline, creating significant difficulties for villagers. Those who exceed the permitted limits (for instance, only three bags of rice per vehicle) faced confiscation of goods. SAC restrictions on transporting rice and gasoline fuelled inflation in rural areas.⁵⁶

Similar incidents of confiscation happened in some areas of Doolaya District. On February 10th 2024, SAC soldiers stationed at the Yay T’Law army camp (in Htaw Wa Law village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township), confiscated three baskets of rice from a villager from Ba--- village, Hkyoo K’Lee village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township. The villager had transported the rice from Bb--- village to store it for future consumption, in case he needed to flee. However, upon reaching the area near the army camp, SAC soldiers demanded that he hand it over. Fearing repercussions, the villager complied without opposing.⁵⁷

Medicines have also been confiscated and destroyed at SAC checkpoints.⁵⁸ A local leader from Bh--- village, Tha Kyat village tract, T’Naw Th’Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, also explained how difficult it is to reach incident locations and provide emergency support to those in need: *“We couldn’t go to the village on the 29th [August 2024]*

⁵² Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in July 2024. (#24-317-A1-I1)

⁵³ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in July 2024. (#24-317-A2-I1)

⁵⁴ Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in July 2024. (#24-309-D1)

⁵⁵ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in November 2024. (#24-443-A1-I1)

⁵⁶ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in September 2024. (#24-395-D1; #24-395-A1-I1)

⁵⁷ Unpublished report from Doolaya District, received in February 2024. (#24-70-D1)

⁵⁸ KHRG, [Emergency Lifeline](#), above, p. 10.

because the SAC waited at the entrance of the road on that night. When we went there, we did not pass the checkpoint. We used the thief's [hidden] road to get into the village. We were going to the village just like thieves. [...] There's an SAC base there. It would not be easy for us if they knew that we are carrying medicines."⁵⁹ He accompanied healthcare workers to Cj--- village, Ba Wa village tract, T'Naw Th'Ree (Tanitharyi) Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, to provide medicines and healthcare.

Additionally, villagers might have to pay multiple armed groups when travelling, depending on the area or crossing. For instance, villagers have to pay a tax of about 10,000 kyat [USD 4.76] to the BGF at their checkpoints located in K'Ter Tee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. The BGF only allows villagers to transport two bags of rice per vehicle.⁶⁰

In some instances, the transportation restrictions were also imposed by armed resistance groups. On August 6th 2024, PDF and KNLA combined forces set up a temporary checkpoint in Sa Tein village tract, Ler K'Hsaw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, confiscating villagers' petrol during searches. Some villagers were also asked to pay money to pass.⁶¹ In Bu Tho Township, a villager named Saw X---, from Bc--- village, Day Wah village tract, explained: "They [KNU] initially decided to close the road because the enemy [SAC soldiers] transports rations. If we transport rice bags by boat, only two bags of rice are allowed to be transported in each boat." Villagers have to pay 5,000 kyat [USD 2.38] per boat trip, although KNLA soldiers there do not use force if villagers are unable to pay such amounts.⁶²

b) Travel restrictions

Villagers' freedom of movement has been severely restricted, impairing their ability to work, farm, and access basic services. Curfews, road closures, and fear of arrest restrict movement to farmlands and local markets in nearby towns and villages. These constraints disrupt income-generating activities and make it harder to secure food and meet basic needs.

Limited freedom of movement has prevented many farmers from accessing their farmlands safely and regularly. A displaced villager named Ko⁶³ Y---, from Bd--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: "The most difficult thing is living among the SAC. Nothing is okay in terms of movement and travelling. That's the difficult thing. For example, let's say we are going to the farm, but we have to see the specific time to go to the farm. As hill farmers, we go to the farm early. We return from our farm before it is getting dark. They don't allow that, and they limit the time."⁶⁴

Due to travel restrictions around Be--- village, Seik Poo Tuang village tract, Toungoo Township, Taw Oo District, a villager named Saw Z--- also reported facing difficulties working and providing for his family's livelihood. He explained:

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"We face many things [difficulties] in terms of work and travelling. We are daily labourers. It is extremely difficult to travel. In my house, I am the elder son, and I have to work, but it is not okay to work because of the closure of the road [by the SAC]. It's really difficult for livelihoods because we cannot go out to work".⁶⁵

In some areas, villagers primarily rely on fishing for their livelihoods. However, in places where travel restrictions are enforced by the SAC, pursuing these activities becomes increasingly difficult, thereby jeopardising villagers' survival means. For instance, in 2024, SAC soldiers arbitrarily arrested two fishermen from Bg--- village, HK'Rweh village tract, Kyeh Htoh Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, while they were fishing at night. The SAC had imposed travel restrictions and curfew in the area, and had also planted landmines near the riverbank, severely impacting villagers' ability to sustain their livelihoods.⁶⁶

The enactment of the People's Military Service Law by the SAC has also drastically altered mobility in

⁵⁹ KHRG, [Emergency Lifeline](#), above, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in October 2024. (#24-418-A1-I1)

⁶¹ Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in August 2024. (#24-347-D2)

⁶² Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in October 2024. (#24-418-A1-I1)

⁶³ 'Ko' is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used for relatives as well as non-relatives.

⁶⁴ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in April 2024. (#24-214-A2-I1)

⁶⁵ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2024. (#24-65-A1-I1)

⁶⁶ KHRG, "[Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: SAC shelling and drone strikes causing casualties and damage, and livelihood constraints in Kyeh Htoh Township \(January to May 2024\)](#)", May 2024.

Southeast Burma, with young and early middle-aged men avoiding travel due to fear of SAC forced recruitment.⁶⁷ Oftentimes, women have taken on the roles of travelling, shopping, and attending social engagements on behalf of their families, due to the perception that they will face less risk of abuse or harassment at SAC checkpoints. Some women travel with their babies to avoid scrutiny at military checkpoints.⁶⁸

3.4. Destruction of homes and forced displacement

The destruction of homes by the SAC and ongoing hostilities have resulted in the widespread displacement of villagers across Southeast Burma. When homes are destroyed, families lose not only their shelter, but also their sense of security and stability, often forcing them to flee to temporary shelters or other villages that may lack adequate resources. This sudden uprooting and the struggle to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar environments adds further stress and challenges to their already difficult circumstances.

a) Destruction of houses by the SAC

In 2024, KHRG received 92 reports of house destruction caused by SAC attacks. As explained by a village committee member named Saw O—, who lives in At— village, Kaw Ler village tract, Tha Htoo Township, Doo Tha Htoo District: *“Villagers whose houses were destroyed [by SAC shelling] face very hard situations to raise up [to rebuild their*

*houses and livelihoods]. They probably won’t be able to build houses like this if their children do not migrate to Thailand [for job opportunities].”*⁶⁹

A villager named Saw B—, from Ab— village, K’Ter Tee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, who had his house destroyed in an SAC air strike on December 31st 2024, reported: *“I want to say, if the conflict ends, I don’t know what to do when I return to the village. We have to work for the coming year. I cannot find support anywhere. I need food, clothes, and cooking materials because my entire house was destroyed.”* Saw B— has six children, and he and his family fled to Bi—’s cave in Lay Poe Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, due to the air strike. On that day, Saw B— was injured and now faces great difficulties in continuing to work and supporting his family.⁷⁰

Beyond shelling and air strikes, SAC personnel also deliberately set houses on fire upon entering villages. For instance, on February 10th 2024, at 6 pm, after fighting occurred between SAC soldiers and local armed resistance groups near Aq— village, in the Htee Day area, Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, SAC troops from Naypyidaw entered the village and burned down 64 houses.⁷¹

Amid ongoing hostilities, rebuilding houses becomes extremely difficult, and many villagers choose not to do so, knowing that they are likely to be targeted and damaged multiple times. U Cg—, a villager from Bk— village, Pa Dawk Kone village



These photos were taken in January 2024 in Bj— village, Day Loh area, Htao Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. On January 10th 2024, SAC soldiers burned down 17 villagers’ houses in Bj— village, after an SAC army camp was attacked by KNLA and PDF forces. [Photos: KHRG]

⁶⁷ KHRG, [Forced to Harm](#), above, March 2025.

⁶⁸ KHRG, [“Taw Oo District Situation Update”](#), May 2025, above.

⁶⁹ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in January 2024. (#24-13-A1-I1)

⁷⁰ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in January 2025. (#25-25-A1-I1)

⁷¹ Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in February 2024. (#24-84-D1)

tract, Yay Ta Shay Township, Taw Oo District, whose house was burned by SAC soldiers on April 28th 2024, explained: *“Currently, I don’t have any plans to rebuild a house. It is not easy to rebuild a house like this one. I was thinking of rebuilding a house after the revolution. It might not be the same as this one, but it is enough if we can live in it.”*⁷² Similarly, in Dooplaya District, when several houses from Bl--- village, in Kaw T’Ree Township, were destroyed by SAC air strikes in 2024, a villager named Ch--- stated: *“Right now, wood is expensive. All burned houses were wooden houses. A wooden house would cost a minimum of 400,000-800,000 kyat [USD 190-381]. That’s only the price of wood. Buying nails and other house tools are excluded [in the price]. That is just the price for a small house. Not [the price of] a family house type.”*⁷³

During the reporting period, KHRG also received one incident involving attacks by PDF soldiers resulting in the burning of villagers’ houses. On May 5th 2024, during fighting between PDF-KNLA combined forces and SAC soldiers, the PDF soldiers burned down 16 houses owned by militia personnel in Ay--- village, Kleh Muh Htee area, K’Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, and the fire also spread to villagers’ houses.⁷⁴

b) Forced displacement

The SAC’s deliberate destruction of homes and its targeted and indiscriminate attacks on villages and plantations in Southeast Burma have forcibly displaced large numbers of villagers, severely

undermining their livelihoods. Separated from their homes and farmlands, many are unable to bring essential belongings with them and face significant challenges in resuming their agricultural work. Consequently, access to food becomes increasingly limited, often resulting in acute food insecurity.

Naw Cd---, a villager living in Bn--- village, Kaw Baw village tract, Ler K’Hsaw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, experienced an air strike near her village in May 2024. She described the conditions that she and other villagers faced during displacement: *“We could not prepare anything. We had to flee to the jungle. [...] I did not prepare anything. I fled when the air strike happened. [...] We do not have clean water to drink, so some children got diarrhoea.”*⁷⁵

Displaced villagers struggle to survive without job opportunities, making it hard to afford food. Humanitarian aid is often insufficient, especially for families with children, who struggle to secure essential supplies such as rice, and therefore face severe food insecurity. A displaced villager named Ma⁷⁶ Bx---, from Br--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, who had to flee on March 27th 2024, reflected: *“We have been living here [Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township] for so long. We were provided with food, but it is not enough for us. We have a big family of about seven people. We bought food with money that we brought with us.”* She added:



These photos were taken in March 2024, at Bp--- place, Bq--- village, Meh Nyuh village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. They show villagers from Bq--- village, who fled to the jungle due to the SAC air strike on March 25th 2024 and had to live in temporary huts that they built. [Photos: KHRG]

⁷² Unpublished report from Taw Oo District, received in June 2024. (#24-244-A1-I1)

⁷³ Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in March 2024. (#24-116-A2-I1)

⁷⁴ Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in July 2024. (#24-309-D1)

⁷⁵ Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in April 2024. (#24-214-A7-I1).

⁷⁶ ‘Ma’ is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person’s name.

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“The money we were provided has ran out because we have been spending it while living here for many months. The children lack nutrition when we cannot buy them [food]. They cannot live well here. I feel upset when I cannot buy them [food].”⁷⁷

Similarly, a displaced villager named Naw Ck---, who had to flee due to the SAC air strike that occurred in Bo--- village, Htee Wah Blaw village tract, T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, further explained: *“We do not have any grain of rice to eat. I have to borrow rice from my friends. For example, the impact [of SAC attacks] includes not being able to go to the plantation to work or travel.”⁷⁸* As a coping strategy, some villagers are taking temporary jobs near displacement sites whenever opportunities arise. These jobs often involve tasks such as planting and harvesting corn and beans.⁷⁹

While displaced, women often bear the responsibility of caring for children, while men often face the pressure of securing financial stability. Ma Bx---, the displaced villager from Br--- village, shared how displacement affected her as a mother taking care of her children, considering the lack of nutrition, inadequate shelter, and impossibility to buy food: *“As a mother, it upsets me to see my children suffer.”⁸⁰*

3.5. Limited access to humanitarian aid and assistance

When villagers’ livelihoods are destroyed, humanitarian aid is the last resource villagers can rely on. However, this aid has remained scarce, as the SAC has obstructed its delivery. Most international organisations have been unable to access conflict-affected and rural areas of locally-defined Karen State due to security risks and access constraints. As a result, local civil society organisations are often the sole providers of aid, despite facing significant challenges in reaching

informal hiding places in the jungle through inaccessible routes.⁸¹ As previously documented by KHRG, local humanitarian workers have been facing severe risks delivering aid, including SAC attacks, harassment, and arbitrary detention.⁸² This situation has left many internally displaced persons with little to no access to aid.

Amid ongoing hostilities, many villagers go without sufficient food and humanitarian relief for extended periods. Due to air strikes conducted on May 26th and 28th, and June 9th 2024, in Bs---, Bt---, and Bv--- villages, in Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, villagers were displaced in the forest for nearly four months, leading to a significant food shortage. The displaced villagers did not receive any support from humanitarian organisations and were in urgent need of assistance. With the ongoing conflict, they dare not work on their farms, and they were concerned about a food shortage in the coming year.⁸³

A displaced villager named Daw Cf--- from Bw--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“Now, we are facing starvation. [...] Now my kid is sick, and I cannot even afford to buy a bottle of juice that costs only 500 kyat [USD 0.24]. We were provided [by an unspecified organisation] with rice and oil. Before, they were enough. Now, we cannot afford it [food] because the price has increased. [...] I want organisations to come and provide support. The rice and oil provided to us is not enough. I want international donors to provide support. We do not have enough food to eat. Another thing is: I don’t have income so I cannot afford to buy [food]. And we lack nutrition.”⁸⁴*

Despite these hardships, the spirit of collective support remains strong. As support from humanitarian organisations is not enough for some villagers, they rely on assistance from other villagers and remittances from their children and other family members working abroad to overcome food insecurity.⁸⁵ Villagers have also been sharing the little they have with others in nearby displacement sites.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in November 2024. (#24-436-A2-I1)

⁷⁸ Unpublished report from Hpa-an District, received in May 2024. (#24-232-A1-I1)

⁷⁹ Unpublished report from Dooplaya District, received in October 2024. (#24-406-A6-I1)

⁸⁰ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in November 2024. (#24-436-A2-I1)

⁸¹ KHRG, [တပ်မတော်က လေကြောင်း တိုက်ခိုက်နေကြောင်း အတည်ပြု](#) *Aircraft coming!*, above, pp. 60-69

⁸² KHRG, [Resilience and Resistance](#), above.

⁸³ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in July 2024. (#24-301-D1)

⁸⁴ Unpublished report from Mu Traw District, received in November 2024. (#24-436-A4-I1)

⁸⁵ Unpublished report from Mergui-Tavoy District, received in July 2024. (#24-304-A1-I1)

⁸⁶ Unpublished report from Doo Tha Htoo District, received in January 2024. (#24-13-A1-I1)

4. Security and legal analysis: implications of the SAC attacks on livelihoods

Since the 2021 coup, and persistently in 2024, constant attacks by the SAC on civilian areas have systematically dismantled villagers' livelihoods in Southeast Burma. Living conditions have become increasingly unbearable due to the widespread destruction of essential resources and the obstruction of economic activities fundamental to villagers' self-sufficiency. With the reinvigoration of the *four cuts* strategy as part of the post-coup repression, civilians –and their livelihood means– have become deliberate targets of the Burma Army military offensives.

Beyond the destruction of physical assets, the SAC's campaign of air strikes and shelling on civilian areas –coupled with the presence of UXOs– has created an environment of constant fear, severely restricting villagers' ability to farm or forage. When villagers are killed or injured, families are left in precarious conditions with limited means to sustain themselves. The resulting drop in food production further strains the local economy, drives inflation, and forces families to sell off belongings and livestock at low prices. Already struggling to secure basic resources, villagers are forced to flee as SAC attacks on civilian areas destroy their homes, leaving behind food supplies, personal belongings, and livestock –which are frequently looted or destroyed by SAC soldiers. Forced displacement further strips communities of shelter, livelihoods, and income, leaving many with no choice but to risk returning to work on their farmland under threat of renewed attacks and UXO contamination. Displacement adds yet another layer of hardship, particularly for families with children.

These challenges are further exacerbated by the SAC's imposition of heavy restrictions on travel and the transportation of goods. The widespread presence of military checkpoints leaves communities cut off from their plantations, markets, and supply routes –all vital avenues to secure food and income. The SAC's military presence not only obstructs livelihood activities but also endangers villagers' safety and savings, with encounters at checkpoints often resulting in the confiscation of food and medical supplies, financial extortion, and arbitrary arrests –as villagers are often accused of transporting provisions to armed resistance groups. Consequently, villagers

must avoid roads with SAC checkpoints, further isolating them and forcing them to take longer, less accessible routes, or go without basic supplies altogether. These patterns also had gendered impacts: the widespread presence of SAC checkpoints –where villagers' face violent abuses– and the threat of forced recruitment have constrained men's mobility, pushing women to take on increased responsibility for securing food and other essentials. During displacement, women also bear the primary burden of caregiving.

With primary livelihoods increasingly out of reach, humanitarian assistance becomes the last resort for communities facing food insecurity. Yet, access to aid remains severely limited due to SAC-imposed restrictions. As a result, many displaced villagers have limited access to humanitarian relief and go without sufficient food or basic supplies while hiding for prolonged periods, unable to carry adequate provisions or access markets. The deliberate blockade of life-saving assistance leaves the civilian population at serious risk of starvation and constitutes a form of collective punishment.

Ultimately, the combined effects of the SAC's violations –the destruction of essential resources, the impossibility of carrying out livelihood activities, the loss of homes and possessions, and the lack of humanitarian support– have inevitably led to severe food insecurity across Southeast Burma. The incidents presented in this paper reveal a systematic pattern of abuse and deprivation, resulting directly from military practices ordered by the Burma Army leaders. The widespread attacks on civilian areas show an omnipresent disregard for civilian life, constituting violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), international criminal law (ICL) and international human rights law (IHRL), as set out below.

The current situation in Southeast Burma qualifies as a non-international armed conflict, to which IHL applies. Burma is a party to the Geneva Conventions, making Common Article 3 –which prohibits, *inter alia*, cruel treatment and outrages upon personal dignity– applicable. While Burma has not ratified Additional Protocol II (AP II), many of its key provisions reflect customary international law and are therefore binding. Notably, Art. 14 AP II and customary international law prohibit the use of starvation as a method of warfare, including through the destruction of *objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population*, such as

foodstuffs, crops, livestock, and water sources.⁸⁷ These rules are closely linked to the obligation to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief for civilians in need, as set out in Art. 18 AP II and customary international law, and the fundamental principles of distinction and proportionality, which require attacks to be limited to military objectives and to avoid excessive harm to civilians in relation to the anticipated military advantage.⁸⁸ In addition, pillage is expressly prohibited under Art. 4(2)(g) AP II and customary international law.

As evidence presented in this paper demonstrates, the SAC has repeatedly targeted and destroyed objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, while also obstructing access to humanitarian aid and severely restricting civilian movement, thereby depriving entire communities of food and essential resources. Framed within the broader context of the SAC's *four cuts* strategy, this pattern of deprivation appears deliberate rather than incidental, risks reducing the civilian population to a state of starvation, and therefore likely amounts to the use of civilian starvation as a method of warfare. These attacks cannot be considered proportionate and fail to distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects or populations, thereby undermining the principles of distinction and proportionality, and contravening the minimum protections guaranteed to civilians under Common Art. 3. In particular, the use of UXOs in civilian areas are considered indiscriminate in effect and unlawful under IHL. Finally, reports of SAC soldiers looting homes and farmlands, including the confiscation of food and livestock, may further violate legal prohibitions against pillage and reinforce the systematic nature of the abuses.

While the majority of documented violations concern actions perpetrated by the SAC, all parties to the conflict are equally bound by IHL. Allegations of looting and confiscation by armed resistance groups, such as the PDF, though more limited in scope, may also constitute violations of customary IHL, including the prohibition of pillage.

The actions of the SAC may also give rise to criminal responsibility under ICL. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) identifies several acts as war crimes in internal armed conflicts, including: intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population (Art. 8(2)(e)(i)), pillaging (Art. 8(2)(e)(v)), and starvation of civilians as a method of warfare (Art. 8(2)(e)(xxv)).⁸⁹ It also defines crimes against humanity as certain acts –such as inhumane treatment (Art. 7(1)(k))– when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against civilians.⁹⁰

The SAC's pattern of conduct presented in this report –including deliberate attacks on civilian objects, obstruction of humanitarian aid, looting, and other actions resulting in the starvation and displacement of civilians– likely falls within the scope of these provisions. In particular, the intentional targeting of civilian areas likely amounts to the war crime of directing attacks against the civilian population, while the destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population and the denial of humanitarian relief may constitute the war crime of starvation of civilians,⁹¹ or qualify as inhumane treatment, given the inherent and severe physical or mental suffering these acts entail. The appropriation of civilian property may further amount to pillaging. These SAC acts do not appear to be isolated incidents but rather reflect a broader and long-standing practice of systematic abuse historically associated with the Burma military, which has long benefited from impunity and limited international accountability efforts.

Lastly, Burma remains bound by its obligations under IHRL during times of armed conflict. The right to food and an adequate standard of living is a fundamental human right, indivisibly linked to human dignity and essential for the enjoyment of other rights. It is enshrined in Art. 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Art. 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and other instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

⁸⁷ Rules 53 and 54 of the ICRC Rules on Customary International Humanitarian Law, available at: ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary

⁸⁸ Rules 55 and 564 of the ICRC Rules on Customary International Humanitarian Law.

⁸⁹ In 2019, the crime of starvation as a method of warfare in non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) was added to the Rome Statute (Art. 8(2)(e)(xix)) by amendment. However, the provision only applies to States Parties that have ratified the amendment.

⁹⁰ Although Burma is not a State Party to the Rome Statute, the ICC may still exercise jurisdiction through a UN Security Council referral (Art. 13(b)) or Burma's retroactive acceptance of jurisdiction (Arts. 11(2) and 12(3)).

⁹¹ The use of starvation against civilians in NIACs, and the classification of such acts as a war crime, remain contested issues in legal scholarship. Due to the limited scope of this paper, it does not elaborate on the full legal analysis, but adheres to a broader interpretation of the prohibition, in line with: Tom Dannenbaum, "Criminalizing Starvation in an Age of Mass Deprivation in War: Intent, Method, Form, and Consequence", 55 Vanderbilt Law Review 681, 2023.

against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), all of which Burma has ratified.⁹² In addition, the right to liberty of movement is protected under Art. 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Art. 13(2) of the UDHR. Although Burma has not ratified the ICCPR, the majority of the rights it enshrines—including freedom of movement—are widely recognised to reflect customary international law and are therefore binding.

SAC actions—such as destroying food systems, obstructing livelihoods, and arbitrarily restricting movement and humanitarian aid—undermine key human rights, particularly the rights to food, adequate living standards, and freedom of movement. These ongoing violations amount to serious breaches of Burma’s obligations under IHRL.

⁹² 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Art. 12(2) and 14(2); 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Art. 24(2)(c) and 27.

5. Recommendations

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

- Acknowledge that the military junta is the cause of the current human rights and humanitarian crisis, and refrain from giving legitimacy to the junta, including by signing agreements with it, presenting it with credentials and including it in international decision-making events.
- Impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Burma and implement extensive sanctions on the supply of arms and military material to the SAC, including aviation fuel, aircraft, aircraft parts, maintenance supplies, munitions, technologies, training, or other technical assistance or services.
- Support and expand the scope of international investigations to encompass violations of international human rights, humanitarian, and criminal law committed against the Karen people and hold the SAC accountable for its crimes against civilians in Burma by prosecuting SAC leaders in international courts, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), and through universal jurisdiction proceedings.
- Condemn deliberate attacks on villagers' livelihoods as violations of international humanitarian and criminal law, emphasising the SAC's broader, systematic pattern of abuse and the severe impact on civilian survival.
- Increase support to local civil society (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and ethnic service providers who have access and trust from local communities, and are currently assisting villagers to recover from, and cope with, the severe impacts of SAC attacks on civilian areas. This will help ensure that all displaced villagers have access to assistance that meets their basic needs. Prioritising localised, context-specific responses will allow for more effective and appropriate support tailored to the diverse conditions across different regions.
- Collaborate with local service providers to design and implement long-term assistance programmes for landmine victims, their families, and communities whose livelihoods are impacted by landmine contamination. Sustained support should address both immediate needs and long-term recovery, including rehabilitation, livelihood restoration, and community resilience.
- Urge neighbouring countries and international donors to ensure that cross-border humanitarian aid is guided by the priorities of local community-based organisations in Southeast Burma; and facilitate safe passage to people crossing the border seeking refuge.

Front cover note

The photo on the cover was received from a local humanitarian volunteer on September 29th 2024. The photo shows over 60 houses burned down by the State Administration Council (SAC)'s LIB #285 in September 2024 in P'Law area, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, during territory clearance operations. The military operations were carried following several clashes with local armed resistance groups in the area. *[Photo: Local villager]*

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.