



Statement on World Refugee Day

20 June, 2026

Displacement, largely caused by the Burma military regime, has been a constant fixture in Burma's history. Most refugees from Burma seek protection in neighbouring countries, with at least 1.6 million across Bangladesh, India, Thailand, and Malaysia.¹ However, none of these have signed the Refugee Convention nor do they have their own legal frameworks for refugees, leaving most refugees in a state of legal precarity, with limited access to the human rights to which they are entitled. On this World Refugee Day, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) recognises the enduring strength and courage of the people of Burma and calls on the international community to act in solidarity by ensuring that all refugees' human rights are respected and protected, and by guaranteeing them the dignified life to which all people are entitled.

Burma Army violence in majority ethnic areas has compelled internal and cross-border displacement for decades. In locally-defined Karen State, Southeast Burma, people have reported leaving to escape human rights violations and abuses,, such as deliberate attacks on civilian targets, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearances, torture, killings, forced recruitment, forced labour, forced relocations, and land confiscations perpetrated by the Burma Army, as well as the significant negative impact this violence has on livelihoods.² For many villagers, displacement is also used as an intentional strategy to resist oppression and protect themselves from further abuse.

As explained by a villager from Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District who has been displaced multiple times both internally and into Thailand since the 1990s:

"Many villagers were killed because of fighting and by the Burmese military shelling. Burmese soldiers also came into villages and shot dead villagers. I was almost killed as well because Burmese soldiers fired mortars into our village. Villagers were frightened and scattered around the village when Burmese soldiers fired mortars and my nephews and nieces were among those who were hit by the fragments of the shelling."

"In the beginning, villagers were thinking to start working on their farm but after Burmese soldiers came and burned down villagers' rice barns and killed their cows and buffaloes, villagers fled without being able to return to the village again. Since our rice barns were burned, we didn't have

¹ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, [Myanmar Situation](#), Accessed 19 June 2026

² For further reading, see KHRG, [Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers' testimonies in rural Southeast Burma](#), December 2022, pgs. 69-71

rice with us when we were hiding in the forest. We could not also get food from anywhere else when we were in the forest because it was not safe to go anywhere.”

“To be honest, I feel like every challenge that I have been facing was caused by the Burmese military. We still haven’t been able to return and live in our village... The only way for us to solve the issue was by fleeing. We never stayed to face them and let ourselves suffer from their abuses.”

In Thailand, over 100,000 people from Burma currently live in refugee camps near the border,³ but many more live outside the camps with limited access to legal protections due to varying and opaque access to formal documentation. Despite this, civil society and community-based organisations have shown remarkable initiative and resilience by taking responsibility for refugee camp governance, and organising humanitarian aid for both refugees in Thailand and displaced people inside Burma. Examples such as these clearly demonstrate that refugees are active agents working towards their own solutions, not passive victims in need of saving as they are often portrayed by international actors. True solidarity requires recognising this agency and working with refugees as equal partners to support the work they are already doing for their community.

While most neighbouring countries hosting refugees from Burma are not parties to the Refugee Convention, many have nevertheless assumed binding obligations under other international human rights treaties. Refugees and asylum seekers do not lose their rights simply because they cross into a country that has not ratified the Refugee Convention. Yet the reality faced by many refugees from Burma suggests that these obligations are too often disregarded in practice. Across the region, refugees continue to face arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion, exploitation, restrictions on freedom of movement, and barriers to accessing documentation, education, healthcare, and lawful livelihoods.⁴ These conditions leave many people in a state of legal precarity, exposing them to abuse and insecurity while undermining the dignity and protection to which they are entitled. The fact that a state is not party to the Refugee Convention cannot be used to justify practices that place refugees at risk or deny them the basic rights and protections afforded under international law. Similarly, states must not engage in refoulement. There have been too many instances of refugees and asylum seekers from Burma being forcibly returned only to face arbitrary arrest, persecution, torture, forced recruitment, and other serious human rights violations.⁵ The prohibition on refoulement is a well-established principle of customary international law and cannot be disregarded simply because a state has not joined the Refugee Convention.

³ The Border Consortium, [Refugee Camp Population: April 2026](#)

⁴ HRW, [“I’ll Never Feel Secure”: Undocumented and Exploited](#), 2025; HRW, [Malaysia: New Refugee Registration System Raises Concerns](#), 2026; HRW, [Bangladesh: Rampant Police Abuse of Rohingya Refugees](#), 2023

⁵ The New Humanitarian, [Myanmar migrants forced to join junta forces after deportation from Thailand](#), 2025; DVB, [Over 200 Myanmar nationals deported from Thailand in June; Reports of forced military conscription](#), 2025

Recommendations

“I would like relevant stakeholders to take action on the situation that is currently happening [fighting, air strike, shelling],” a villager from Mergui-Tavoy District shared.⁶ “I would like them to go [act] in truthful ways and take action for our justice. Due to the current situation, all civilians are facing problems. Some of them [civilians] died, some were disappeared, and some were injured. We become people who are in trouble. But all of us want to live our lives with full justice. We do not want to hear about any conflict, fighting, and striking. When it happens, all the civilians face problems. All civilians would like to live their lives peacefully and work freely. We want justice. We only want justice for our lives.”

On this World Refugee Day, we call on neighbouring countries, ASEAN, other international governments, and the United Nations to:

- **Recognise that the Burma military regime is the root cause of the human rights and humanitarian crisis** in Burma by publicly condemning their actions and refraining from any engagement that confers legitimacy.
- **Strongly enforce current military sanctions** by closing loopholes that the regime and their partners are exploiting and **place further sanctions on arms, fuel, and other military equipment** to both the Burma Army and those enabling them via these sales to weaken the military junta’s ability to continue attacks on civilians and to prevent further displacement of people.
- **Partner equally and transparently with local CBOs and CSOs working on both refugee and internally displaced persons issues** by providing increased funding and technical support to address the urgent humanitarian needs shared by them.
- **Guarantee protection for refugees** by ending all refoulement practices, allowing entry on humanitarian grounds, and providing documentation, work, and education rights for all refugees and migrants from Burma.
- Neighbouring countries should **accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Optional Protocol**, if they have not yet already.
- **Honour commitments made in the Global Compact on Refugees** by increasing resettlement pathways for refugees and enhancing cooperation with neighbouring countries that support refugee protection.

Media Contact:

Saw Albert, KHRG Research and Advocacy Director: albert@khr.org (Burmese, Karen and English)

⁶ This information is taken from an unpublished interview from Mergui-Tavoy District conducted in December 2025 with internal log number #25-468-A1-I1.