



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

KHRG: Statement on Human Rights Day, 2021

December 10, 2021

Today, December 10th, people from around the world observe Human Rights Day to commemorate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“UDHR”) in 1948. Because of the February 2021 military coup, this year’s Human Rights Day is an especially solemn and painful occasion for the people of Myanmar. The human rights violations being committed against the people of Myanmar since the coup are a direct result of the failure to end the Myanmar military’s longstanding oppression of ethnic and religious minorities. Thus, it is fitting that this year’s theme for Human Rights Day is Equality, as it serves as a reminder of what may come to pass when the principle of equality is disregarded. The human rights principle of “Equality” is found in Article 1 of the UDHR, which states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Since February 2021, people across Myanmar have been protesting against the junta — a regime that has consistently sought to undermine the principle of equality, impose discriminatory practices and sentiments, and embed them in the legal, political, economic and social framework of the country.

From the outset of the coup, people of all ages, ethnicities and religions in Myanmar have come together to peacefully demonstrate against a military dictatorship that pays no regard to human rights and uses its power to discriminate and oppress. Participants of the Civil Disobedience Movement (“CDM”), composed mostly of professionals in the public sector, have sacrificed their careers, freedoms, and lives by refusing to work for the junta. Similarly, young people have been on the frontlines fighting for their rights, often supported in the background by older civilians who also are standing against the military dictatorship in the hope of building a Myanmar in which the rights enshrined in the UDHR will become a reality for all. In their struggle against dictatorship, people across Myanmar have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention; torture, including sexual and gender-based violence; and enforced disappearance; with many being murdered by the junta in their defense of human rights.

Ethnic minorities in rural areas, who have long been the target of military abuse are once again facing challenges and threats to their lives, livelihoods, and physical security and integrity. Since the military coup, armed conflicts occurring between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed organizations have intensified. As early as March 2021, the Myanmar military began an airstrike campaign in Southeast Myanmar that often-targeted civilian areas. These airstrikes destroyed villages, killed many civilians, and caused mass displacement of villagers from their homes and ancestral lands. Southeast Myanmar continues to be heavily militarized by the junta. Civilians are unable to go about their daily lives due to the high risk of being killed, injured, or detained by the Myanmar military. Furthermore, there has been a recurrence of the military’s use of civilians for forced labor and as human shields, which were common forms of human rights abuses under past military regimes. Despite facing these abuses, rural villagers have been active in supporting the anti-coup movement and in protecting those who have placed themselves on the line in the defense of human rights. Local villagers have provided shelter and protection to CDM participants, ousted members of parliament, protesters and human rights defenders, and Myanmar military

defectors. They have also participated in peaceful protests, even in the face of heavy military presence.

In recognition of the painful events of the past ten months, as well as the long history of ethnic oppression by the Myanmar military, the Karen Human Rights Group honors the people of Myanmar who continue to fight for a new Myanmar that recognizes that all are equal in dignity and rights. We also strongly urge the international community to remain steadfast in their support for the people of Myanmar, and to refrain from aiding or assisting the junta's commission of human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations. This means actively refusing to give any legitimacy to the junta, and refusing both direct or indirect recognition of the junta as the government of Myanmar. It also means cutting ties with all businesses that support the junta or are implicated in the provision of weapons to the junta and its affiliates. Finally, we commemorate all those who have lost their freedoms and even their lives as a result of their resistance to the junta, in service to the fight for a federal democracy that respects, protects, and fulfills the human rights of all people of Myanmar equally.