



Maintaining dignity in the face of denial of freedom and justice

KHRG and KWO Statement on Human Rights Day

December 10th, 2022

Today, the 10th of December, the world celebrates Human Rights Day in commemoration of the approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. However, today we cannot celebrate the dire situation of human rights in Southeast Burma. Decades of military impunity granted to the Burma Army continue to impact the lives, livelihoods and safety of the villagers in Karen State, while the international community remains ineffective and passive. The international community has failed to take genuine action to prosecute these long-standing military leaders and their blatant disregard for human rights. The 2022 Human Rights Day theme of “Dignity, Freedom, and Justice for All” falls flat as freedom and justice are being denied in Karen State. Still, villagers remain strong and dignified continuing to stand up for human rights. Today, we celebrate the strength of citizens in Burma demanding their rights be respected.

Since the 2021 coup, the Burma Army has undertaken widespread violence and attacks against civilians throughout Burma imposing its dictatorial rule once again. Their crimes include grave human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, forced displacements, shelling of civilian areas, looting, destruction of property, threats, extortion, forced labour and sexual violence, as well as the employment of the ‘four cuts’ strategy that makes civilians the central target of military offensives. More than 350,000 people have been displaced this year, the majority of them women and children. This violence is a mirror of the abuses perpetrated against the Karen peoples during earlier periods of military rule, from 1962 to 2011.

On October 3rd 1991, the Myanmar Air Force killed 41 students from Tee Tah village instantly during the bombing and strafing of their school and village, in the Delta region. Thirty-one years later, on March 5th 2022, junta troops from the army camp in Hpapun Town fired artillery into Klaw Day village, Mu Traw District, killing seven civilians, including three children and a pregnant woman, and wounding four more, including a 3-year-old boy and a 17-year-old girl.

In 1992, a survivor of conflict-related sexual violence from Doo Tha Htoo District described her experiences to KHRG: *“All night long the [Burma Army] soldiers would come and drag women away to be raped. They took turns and women were often raped by several soldiers in one night. I was raped frequently like the others. While I was being raped or trying to sleep, I could hear the screams of other women all around. This went on all night, and then in the morning they'd make us carry our loads over mountains again.”* After the 2021 coup, villagers in the Lay Kay area, Doo Tha Htoo District, informed KHRG researchers that they were sending away young women to hiding sites when Burma Army soldiers were nearby the village.

Between 2021 and 2022, KWO has documented 2,999 cases of human rights violations perpetrated by the Burma Army against civilians in Karen State. KWO has documented reports of 153 people killed,

including 30 women, and 276 civilians wounded, including 117 women. There are 447 cases of looting and at least 171 burned homes, by the military since February 2021. The actual numbers are certainly much higher as many human rights violations have not been able to be reported or documented.

For the past 30 years, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and the Karen Women Organization (KWO) have documented the experiences of rural villagers in Southeast Burma, the crimes committed against them, and their resilience despite longstanding campaigns by the Burma Army to eradicate all forms of opposition. Yet, these detailed testimonies of decades of state violence and military impunity have been met with little to no action by the international community, and no justice for survivors. Today, as local actors who have been working together to ensure that international stakeholders have the necessary evidence to hold the Burma Army soldiers and commanders accountable, we find ourselves outraged by the failure of regional and international bodies to support the dignity, freedom, and justice of all civilians in Southeast Burma.

“The perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Karen State are military leaders. Ethnic minorities are oppressed by the military junta’s system of rule. Our human rights are severely violated. We are human beings but the junta seeks to crush our human dignity”, explains Saw Nanda Hsue, Advocacy Coordinator at KHRG. *“There has never been justice for any violation committed against us. If this military dictatorship continues, ethnic people will never be allowed to live with full human dignity and rights.”*

To this, Naw Knyaw Paw, General Secretary of the KWO, adds, *“Women and children are killed, and displaced. The shelling of civilian areas has dramatically increased. The international community must take more effective actions, and impose more sanctions including prohibiting the sale of jet fuel to the junta and boycotts of the SAC junta so that they will be disabled, disarmed and disbanded. Many years of impunity have emboldened the junta and they continue to commit atrocities without fear of consequences. No one should be above the law. We need action.”*

On this 10th of December, the Karen Women Organization (KWO) and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) honour all civilians in Southeast Burma struggling against military atrocities and bearing the impact of systematic abuse. We celebrate today the resilience and fierceness of our Karen sisters and brothers who continue to fight for their human rights, and to defend dignity, freedom and justice for all. Likewise, we notice villagers’ increased knowledge of international human rights frameworks and their desire to engage the international community directly to demand justice. Therefore, we again call on the international community to condemn the crimes committed by the Burma Army, both past and present; to end all engagement that grants legitimacy to the junta -including with businesses that boost the junta’s economic power, as well as eliminating the sale of aviation fuel and arms trade to the junta; and to take concrete and coordinated action to assist local efforts and solutions to the humanitarian and human rights crisis in Burma.

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