



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Statement on International Day of the World's Indigenous People 2020

9 August 2020

August 9 commemorates the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People. The day was created by a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1995 to mark the date that the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations first convened in 1982. The event is meant to celebrate the myriad contributions that indigenous populations make to global issues, like environmental protection and cultural diversity, while also raising awareness for the many challenges that threaten indigenous peoples' enjoyment of their rights and identity.

Since the Working Group was first established, the international community has made tremendous strides to protect and promote indigenous rights. Most notably with the 1989 ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal People and the General Assembly's adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) in 2007. Amongst other things, these mechanisms established into international law the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) which requires governments and non-state actors to obtain consent from indigenous communities before engaging in activities that may affect them and their territories.

The state of Myanmar is not a signatory to Convention 169, nor does it recognize the indigenous identity of the country's ethnic peoples. While there is much disagreement on the number of ethnic groups in the country, the official government stance is seen as both inaccurate and divisive. Indigenous rights activists in the country seek to emphasize the commonality of the various ethnic communities through their translation of indigenous into the Myanmar language term *htanay taing yin tha* (ဤနေ့တိုင်းရင်းသား). They recognize in this term in the international understanding of indigenous peoples as those who identify as indigenous, occupy a non-dominant position in the national context, with understood ancestral territories, and historical continuity.

Decades of conflict have brought the suffering of ethnic groups like the Chin, Rohingya, Shan and Karen to international attention. However, all of Myanmar's distinct ethnic people face similar violations of their rights, including land confiscation by the Tatmadaw and development projects; negative environmental and social impacts; forced displacement; and ongoing threats to their distinct cultures, languages, and identities.

As the global Covid-19 pandemic introduces new challenges to Myanmar's indigenous peoples, KHRG would like to call upon the international community to not only support the country's ethnic groups in the defense of their rights, but also to celebrate their resilience in the face of adversity and persecution. KHRG urges Myanmar government to recognize and respect the rights of all indigenous people in Myanmar.