



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Statement for International Human Rights Day

On this 71st International Human Rights Day, December 10th 2019, we at KHRG are grateful for our continued ability to work for human rights in Southeast Burma/Myanmar. We are proud of the people and the other community organisations that continue to do so, often at great personal risk and despite limited resources.

Sadly we are conscious, on this day, of the human rights abuses that continue to be perpetrated in our communities, and the lasting effects of old abuses. There are many remaining problems such as militarisation and fighting, internal and cross-border displacement, sexual violence, and land confiscation. There are children today growing up in Southeast Myanmar in landless families, their parents missing from torture, killing, and poverty, and with totally inadequate education and health resources.

The theme of this year's Day is 'youth standing up for human rights', and there has never been a more relevant time for this in Myanmar. Myanmar is slowly entering into a new phase in its history, from full military control to partial democratic leadership. There is increased investment, building, and connectivity, and a slow-moving peace process between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups. Right now it is unknown when these changes will bear their most significant effects, and what human rights abuses will arise as a result. It is incumbent on Myanmar's younger generations to be prepared by increasing their knowledge of human rights and growing their capacity to fight for them.

Myanmar's youth have shown their strength in challenging injustices despite threats. Some cases have caught national media attention, such as Karenni youth protesting the construction of a General Aung San statue without local buy-in and Kachin youth protesting the persistent fighting and displacement going on around them. The most famous examples are unfortunately brought to light because they involve jailing protesters for asserting their right of expression, highlighting a tactic used to suppress even those youth who struggle for human rights by non-violent means. In August 2019 Karen activist Naw Ohn Hla and two Karen youth were arrested for organising a Karen Martyr's Day celebration in Yangon. All of these cases illustrate difficulties in fighting for human rights in Myanmar, but they also all illustrate the need to do so.

In the words Naw Ohn Hla, *"The future is in the young people's hands. They should know what human rights are."* As old types of abuses continue unabated in Southeast Myanmar and new ones arise, younger generations must do three things. They must continue to defend human rights by finding novel ways to assert their individual and collective rights, they must engage with the government and civil society, and they must hold actors accountable. We at KHRG are appalled by the abuses we see, but we are also inspired by the youth in our communities, and we remain hopeful for the future of Myanmar.