



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Statement on International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

30th August 2023

On this day, August 30th, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) commemorates the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances by **condemning this atrocious crime and standing in solidarity with all victims in their struggle for justice**. Enforced disappearances are a dreadful abuse of power and are illegal under international law, yet we still see it perpetuated throughout the world. Southeast Burma is no exception. As a human rights organisation, KHRG denounces any act that infringes upon the fundamental rights and dignity of individuals and stands firm in our commitment to condemn this heinous crime.

Enforced disappearance cases occurred in Southeast Burma even before 2021, resulting from the lack of rule of law holding armed actors accountable, and have dramatically increased since the military coup. This crime often goes unreported for fear of retribution from the perpetrators, due to a sheer absence of knowledge of the victim's whereabouts, or due to the lack of support structures available for family members. We are only beginning to understand the magnitude of this issue in Karen State, as more families have come forward about their disappeared loved ones. **Since the 2021 coup, more than 72 civilians have been reported to KHRG as victims of enforced disappearance in Southeast Burma.** We have received reports that disappeared villagers are arrested without warning and taken to army camps or prisons without due process. Families are not informed about these arrests, nor about the welfare of the detained, and come to know only through rumors around the community and the sharing of information among villagers. Often, families are left alone to search for their relatives and negotiate with armed actors, at high risk to their lives. Other reports document how Burma Army soldiers *have disappeared* civilians and used them as porters, human shields, navigators and minesweepers. Villagers are arrested and disappeared for weeks, forced to walk among Burma Army soldiers from village to village, with no possibility to contact their families and inform them of their location or health condition.

The Burma Army, under the command of the State Administration Council (SAC), is not the only armed actor committing such crimes. KHRG has received some reports of armed resistance groups operating in locally-defined Karen State who also use this practice, forcibly disappearing civilians accused of being spies (or *da-lan*). This is a grave breach of international humanitarian law and perpetrators cannot remain unaccountable.

The crime of enforced disappearance first and foremost impacts the victim, who is frequently subjected to torture and at high risk of extrajudicial execution. Enforced disappearances also inflict profound and enduring consequences on the families of the victims. The sudden and unexplained disappearance of a loved one often **leads to emotional distress and psychological turmoil**. The lack of information regarding the victim's whereabouts, condition, or fate leaves families searching and waiting for news, sometimes for years. KHRG documentation also shows that the disappeared victims in the majority of cases are young men, who are usually main breadwinners, and hence families' livelihoods are also jeopardized. Enforced disappearance is also used in Karen State as a **strategy to spread terror**, generating insecurity and displacement in communities.

On this day, 30th August, we call all armed actors to cease this atrocious crime as well as urge the international community to **immediately act**. The State Administration Council (SAC) and other armed groups cannot continue any longer arbitrarily arresting villagers, providing little to no details on their detention, and extrajudicially executing them. It is also imperative that local civil society and community-based organisations unite in efforts to **raise awareness about enforced disappearance in Southeast Burma**, and obtain support for victims/survivors, especially where such crimes often remain hidden and villagers are unprotected. Projecting the voices of villagers, especially those impacted by this crime in their communities, is an essential step towards finding justice for the victims.

To eradicate the crime of enforced disappearance and provide justice to the victims and their families, KHRG calls upon the international community and relevant stakeholders to:

- Take concrete action to stop the crime of enforced disappearance in Southeast Burma;
- Investigate the nature of this crime in ethnic and rural areas in Southeast Burma, and expand the current services to reach all regions in Burma;
- Advocate for accountability for the perpetrators and the establishment of mechanisms to investigate cases of enforced disappearance, as well as to prevent such crimes from occurring in the first place;
- Provide comprehensive support to victims and their families, including legal aid, financial support, and psychological support.

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