



Statement on International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

June 26th, 2024

On this *International Day in Support of Victims of Torture*, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) calls to action on all stakeholders and individuals to unite in support of the hundreds of thousands of people around the world who are victims of torture. Together, we can raise awareness of the plight of torture victims in Southeast Burma, support their healing journey, and work towards a future free from the horrors of torture and arbitrary detention.

Since the 2021 military coup, human rights violations committed against villagers by armed actors in Southeast Burma have grown in intensity and cruelty. Among these violations, incidents of torture of civilians have increased alarmingly. As highlighted in KHRG's latest Briefing Paper, ***Permanent Scars***, in 2023 alone, 33 incidents involving at least 37 victims were reported to KHRG, mainly perpetrated by the Burma Army.¹ Physical and mental violence is used by the State Administration Council (SAC) as a weapon of war, in gross violation of the internationally recognised human rights norms. This systematic abuse affects the lives, safety, and livelihoods of villagers, causing them serious injuries and trauma.

Torture is a crime under international law, defined by the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) as any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as to obtain information, to punish for an act committed or suspected of having committed, to intimidate, coerce, or for any reason based on discrimination.² Protection against torture and inhuman or degrading treatment is an absolute human right that upholds the individual's right to the protection of his or her dignity and integrity.³ Torture is a grave breach of Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions:⁴ in Karen State, these acts amount to war crimes and, given their widespread and systematic nature, crimes against humanity as defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.⁵

The SAC military has systematically subjected villagers to arbitrary arrest and detention to extract information or force confessions about the activities of local armed resistance groups, particularly following attacks or clashes.⁶ While villagers are often deprived of their liberty without a trial nor supporting evidence, SAC soldiers use physical violence and other forms of ill-treatment as *punishment* for villagers suspected of being affiliated to, or supporting, local armed resistance groups.⁷ Torture of villagers is also committed by the SAC and other affiliated armed groups to *intimidate* and demonstrate that they have the power to act with impunity, inflicting harm to the

¹ KHRG, [Permanent Scars: Torture of villagers under arbitrary detention by State Administration Council in Southeast Burma \(January - December 2023\)](#), Briefing Paper, April 2024, p.2.

² 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Article 1

³ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 5.

⁴ 1949 Geneva Conventions, Common Article 3(1)(a).

⁵ 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Articles 7(f) and 8(2)(c)(i).

⁶ KHRG, *Permanent Scars*, Briefing Paper, April 2024, pp. 4-7.

⁷ KHRG, *Permanent Scars*, Briefing Paper, April 2024, pp. 7-9.

civilian population in a serious abuse of power.⁸ The SAC also uses arbitrary arrests of villagers to *coerce* them into acting as human shields or forced porters, accompanying troops as they travel on foot through contested territory. These acts may amount to torture, as villagers are forced to carry heavy loads while at high risk of being drawn into active fighting or landmine-contaminated areas. In addition, villagers forced to act as human shields are verbally and physically abused while detained. In 2023 alone, KHRG documented 13 incidents of human shielding and forced portering, involving at least 97 villagers.⁹

The impact of torture extends beyond the immediate victims. Families and communities suffer deeply as their loved ones endure unimaginable pain, long-term psychological scars, and physical disabilities that affect their ability to be independent. The pervasive fear of arbitrary detention and torture disrupts social cohesion, undermines trust, and fuel constant insecurity. The trauma inflicted by these acts leaves lasting damage, hindering the ability of individuals and communities to rebuild their lives and sustain themselves. Despite these challenges, efforts to heal and rehabilitate victims of torture in Southeast Burma continue. Local civil society and community-based organisations (CSOs/CBOs) play a crucial role in providing psychological support, legal aid, and financial assistance to survivors and their families. Comprehensive support systems are essential to help victims cope with trauma, reclaim their dignity and reintegrate into society.

On this International Day in support of Victims of Torture, KHRG urges international stakeholders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and regional and foreign governments to:

- Recognise the serious crimes committed by the Burma Army leaders, avoid endorsing or legitimising the State Administration Council (SAC), and hold the Burma Army leaders accountable in impartial and independent courts.
- Support local civil society and community-based organisations (CSOs/CBOs), including ethnic service providers, to expand psychological support programmes for survivors, their families, and local communities to help them cope with their trauma.
- Listen to and support local and civil society organisations in their efforts to document arbitrary detention and torture in Southeast Burma, advocate for victims' rights, and provide comprehensive support and protection to witnesses who come forward to testify about arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture.
- Raise international awareness of the crimes of torture and arbitrary detention in rural Southeast Burma and explore actionable measures to deter and address the occurrence of these crimes, including by expanding the scope of international investigations to include these crimes.

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⁸ KHRG, *Permanent Scars*, Briefing Paper, April 2024, pp. 9-10.

⁹ KHRG, *Permanent Scars*, Briefing Paper, April 2024, pp. 10-11.