



## Statement on World Refugee Day

June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024

On this *World Refugee Day*, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) celebrates the strength and courage of people forced to flee Burma to escape conflict and persecution. For internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Karen State, for communities sheltering in refugee camps in Thailand, and for those on the run along the Thai-Burma border, KHRG draws international attention to the needs and hopes of the displaced. Today, KHRG calls on the international community to stand in solidarity with all who have been forced to flee their homes to escape the junta's targeted attacks on civilians. We call on neighbouring countries, as well as global international actors, to take concrete and effective action to protect civilians fleeing such brutality and those who support them.

Despite initial voluntary repatriations and returns had increased after the signing of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA),<sup>1</sup> the 2021 Coup and the violence that followed have reinvigorated the mass displacement of civilians in Karen State and other regions. The State Administration Council (SAC) is responsible for the ongoing violence, persecution and other serious human rights violations, including indiscriminate shelling, air strikes and the burning of entire villages, which have plunged the country into chaos and created a dire humanitarian crisis. Children are the most disproportionately affected by the fighting, facing dangers and disruptions to their education and well-being. Deprived of their childhoods, they are the future of Burma, and ensuring their access to education is crucial to lasting peace.

The SAC continues to deny the critical humanitarian needs of displaced civilians, while actively obstructing and sabotaging the delivery of humanitarian aid to those in desperate need. This is a clear violation of international humanitarian law, which underlines the obligation to prevent and repress forcible displacement of the civilian population by warring parties,<sup>2</sup> and to protect and assist civilians fleeing systematic violence and conflict.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, under international refugee law, the 1951 Refugee Convention sets the standard for protection: although most Southeast Asian countries are not signatories to the Convention, its core principle of non-refoulement, which states that refugees should not be rejected entry to a safe country, nor should be returned to a country where they face a serious threat to their life or freedom,<sup>4</sup> is universally recognised as customary international law.<sup>5</sup>

Displacement has a profound and lasting psychological impact, not only on the survivors but also on the wider community. When attacks against the civilian population are particularly widespread,

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG, [Stepping into Uncertainty: Refugee and IDP Experiences of Return in Southeast Myanmar](#), Thematic Report, August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Rules of Customary International Humanitarian Law](#), Rule 129 (B).

<sup>3</sup> Article 3 Common to the 1949 Four Geneva Conventions; Article 13, Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts. See also, ICRC, [How does IHL protect refugees and internally displaced persons?](#), Article, 22 January 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW), [Thailand: Recent Refugees Pushed Back to Myanmar](#), 29 November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [The Principle of Non-Refoulement as a Norm of Customary International Law. Response to the Questions Posed to UNHCR by the Federal Constitutional Court of the Federal Republic of Germany in Cases 2 BvR 1938/93, 2 BvR 1953/93, 2 BvR 1954/93](#), 31 January 1994.

especially when they are part of or combined with other acts of terror and intimidation, those who perceive themselves or their children to be at risk may live in fear and experience lasting psychological trauma. This trauma can also affect social cohesion within the community, straining relationships and making it difficult to rebuild a sense of normalcy.<sup>6</sup>

On this World Refugee Day, KHRG urges international stakeholders and foreign governments to:

- Ensure that neighbouring countries' authorities do not deny entry to people crossing the border seeking refuge, and encourage them to work with cross-border organisations to develop support and protection services for those seeking refuge.
- Allow aid to enter Burma through cross-border aid agencies and local civil society organisations (CSOs) already working in the area.
- Diversify the distribution of funds to include non-state actors, especially local ethnic service providers and CSOs, regardless of their registration status, and involve local actors and communities in decision-making on humanitarian response and crisis resolution.
- Recognize that the SAC is the root cause of the current human rights and humanitarian crisis and refrain from legitimizing the junta by signing agreements or working with them.
- Ensure the SAC has no decision-making power over aid distribution and prevent funds from being indirectly channelled through them.
- Take immediate steps to bring Burma's military leaders to international justice for ordering and/or permitting the targeting of civilians.

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<sup>6</sup> KHRG, [Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers' testimonies in rural Southeast Burma](#), Thematic Report, December 2022, pp. 62-64. See also, P. Kaiser, M. T. Benner, K. Pohlmann, Prolonged Humanitarian Crises – Mental Health in a Refugee Setting at the Thai-Myanmar Border, [Athens Journal of Health & Medical Sciences](#), Vol. 7, Issue 2, June 2020, pp. 105-126.