



Statement on 2024 International Day to Protect Education from Attack

September 9th 2024

On this *International Day to Protect Education from Attack*, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) condemns all actions that expose students and education personnel to insecurity, deprivation of rights and deadly violence, including the bombing, shelling and burning of schools and educational facilities. Throughout Burma, students and teachers are being killed, maimed, threatened, arbitrarily arrested or forcibly disappeared by the State Administration Council (SAC). Today, we call on all relevant stakeholders to closely monitor the unfolding violence against education in Burma and to take concrete action to prevent and punish these attacks.

For decades, ethnic minorities in Burma have been fighting for the right to learn and teach in accordance with their own heritage and identity, as ethnic culture has been subject to systematic control and suppression by the Burma Army and government. For instance, until 2014, teaching ethnic minority languages in schools was prohibited across Burma.¹ Many villagers thus considered the development policies established by the Burma government as a means of Burmanisation²: for instance, during the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) period, more government schools were built in mixed-control areas and the curriculum did not include the Karen language or culture.

The threat or use of violence against students, education personnel and infrastructures has been documented from both the military junta and ethnic resistance organisations in the conflict.³ Yet, since the coup in February 2021, the frequency and intensity of SAC attacks has led to a systematic increase in human rights abuses, dramatically disrupting education and impacting learning opportunities for students in Southeast Burma.⁴ School buildings have been heavily affected by the conflict and remain under threat of attacks and destruction by the SAC.⁵ This not only affects the preservation of the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, but also denies children and young people protection from the brunts of war.⁶ The already dire situation was exacerbated by the illegitimate enactment of the 2010 People's Military Service Law in February 2024,⁷ which caused hundreds of people, including students and teachers, to flee their homes to avoid forced recruitment, disrupting further the education system. Despite such attacks, community members and parents apply local agency strategies in relentless efforts to ensure their children's schooling in times of crisis.⁸

Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) schools and educational facilities, under the Karen National Union (KNU), have been largely affected by SAC military attacks, causing deaths and injuries among students, villagers and teachers, and destroying school buildings. For instance, on September 7th, 2023, the SAC conducted an air strike on Ce--- village, in Nah Koh Hkee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District: bombs were dropped, with some landing in the village KECD school. Saw

¹ KHRG, [Beyond the Horizon: Local Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Accountability in Southeast Myanmar](#), September 2019.

² A term used by ethnic minority groups to describe the assimilation policy implemented by the Burmese government to assimilate non-Burman/Bamar ethnic groups into Burman/Bamar. See KHRG, [Minorities under Threat, Diversity in Danger: Patterns of Systemic Discrimination in Southeast Myanmar](#), November 2020.

³ See KHRG, [Schools Under Attack. Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma](#), June 2023.

⁴ KHRG, [Beyond the Horizon](#), September 2019.

⁵ KHRG, [Schools Under Attack](#), above.

⁶ Oslo Conference on Safe Schools, [Safe Schools Declaration](#), 29 May 2015.

⁷ See KHRG, [Statement of condemnation of the enactment of conscription law by the military junta in Burma/Myanmar](#), March 2024.

⁸ KHRG, [Schools Under Attack](#), above.

R---, the father of a student from Cm--- village, Nah Koh Hkee village tract, reported: “*After shrapnel hit my son, the KECD head [township coordinator] informed me about it, and then I immediately went to see my injured son. I talked to him and he told me ‘Dad! I was hit by the aircraft and I think I am going to die.’ I told him: ‘You will not die. Stay strong in your heart.’ [...] We live in a rural area so it is hard to access healthcare. He passed away on the way to the clinic, while we were carrying him in a hammock. [...] It made me feel devastated.*”⁹

Education is a fundamental human right under international law, enshrined in Article 26 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), Article 13 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Article 28 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).¹⁰ In addition, the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC applicable to armed conflict prohibits the targeting of children and places where there is a significant presence of children, such as schools.¹¹ Parties to the armed conflict must refrain from actions that impede children's access to education.¹² Under international humanitarian law (IHL), both state and non-state actors have a responsibility to protect civilian objects from attack: in case of doubt concerning an object normally used for civilian purposes, armed actors must presume that such an object is not being used for military purposes.¹³ Finally, the intentional targeting of educational buildings may also constitute a war crime.¹⁴

On this *International Day to Protect Education from Attack*, KHRG urges international stakeholders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and regional and foreign governments to:

- Acknowledge that the SAC is the cause of the current human rights and humanitarian crisis, and refrain from giving any legitimacy to the junta.
- Broaden the scope of international investigations to include human rights violations against the Karen people and hold SAC leaders accountable for their crimes against civilians in Burma.
- Implement further sanctions against SAC officials, aviation fuel and arms and ammunition suppliers to weaken the junta's ability to continue its attacks on villages and schools.
- Coordinate with local civil society and community-based organizations (CSO/CBOs) to provide humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected areas in Southeast Burma, focusing on educational supplies, protection of learning spaces, and psychological support for victims.

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⁹ KHRG, *Schools Under Attack*, above, pp.6-7.

¹⁰ [UNUDHR](#), 10 December 1948; [ICESCR](#), 16 December 1966; [UNCRC](#), 2 September 1989.

¹¹ [UNCRC Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict](#), A/RES/54/263, 25 May 2000.

¹² UN Security Council, [Resolution 1998\(2011\)](#), 12 July 2011; [Resolution 2601 \(2021\)](#), 29 October 2021.

¹³ ICRC, Rules of Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules [7](#), [9](#), [10](#); and, 1977 Additional Protocol I to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, [Article 52](#).

¹⁴ International Criminal Court, 1998 Rome Statute, [Article 8\(2\)\(e\)\(iv\)](#).