



The Karen Women's Organization and the Karen Human Rights Group Condemn the Burmese Junta's Use of Women as Human Shields

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The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) strongly condemn the use of women as human shields by the Burma Army in Karen State and other ethnic areas. Women in particular face many risks in being used as human shields, being subjected to forced labour, to torture and sexual violence, and to assaults in military custody. This type of inhumane treatment by the Burma Army must end immediately and all soldiers responsible for subjecting women to this harrowing ordeal need to be held accountable without impunity.

Rampant militarization throughout the country is threatening the stability and security of civilians who are living in fear amidst ongoing attacks. On August 19th 2021, at 1:00 PM, the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #341 and LIB #410 from Ler Toh army camp, based at Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mutraw district. When the soldiers arrived, they confronted and arrested three women villagers. The soldiers kicked and stepped on them and asked them many questions. These two military battalions forced three women to carry their materials and equipment and used them as human shields until they reached Kyaw Hta Loh River, where they were released after sustaining minor injuries. And on September 1st at 2:00 PM, after a skirmish between the SAC and the KNLA soldiers at Paing Kalan Done village tract, Kawkareik Township, Dooplaya District, SAC soldiers took Naw Mu Htee Kaung, 30 years old, and used her as a human shield by placing her in front of them as they marched farther into KNU territory. Using civilians as human shields is forbidden under international humanitarian law.

The Burma Army's use of sexual violence in conflict areas is nothing new. However, what is increasingly frustrating is that the crimes committed by the Burma Army remain unpunished. Rape and other forms of gender-based violence have been systematically used by the Burma Army as a weapon of war for decades. The cases mentioned are not isolated incidents. KWO and KHRG remain extremely concerned at the growing level of unrest in Burma. No one should ever be subjected to the terror of being used as a human shield. Throughout the country's turbulent history, women have never been safe and this is yet another example of how their lives are at risk. Weak rule of law, which has been in place for decades, only undermines their struggle further, and pursuits for justice and accountability have been hijacked by the junta.

Last month, KWO received reports from the ground about an increase in Border Guard Forces and Burma Army soldiers in Karen State. The state-backed regime is forcing villagers to go to their bases and use them as human shields. They also stayed in the villages and looted villagers' properties such as money, jewellery, motorbikes, tractors, food supplies, livestock, and destroyed houses. Burma Army drones and airplane surveillance in Karen areas have caused fears among villagers of potential airstrikes. The increase in fighting is directly linked to the expansion of Burma Army operations.

Since the coup, KHRG has documented an increase in militarization in Karen State. The increase in military presence, fighting, shelling, and airstrikes have caused mass displacement and civilian casualties. Women and girls are especially affected by mass displacement. According to KHRG's documentation, women have been forced to give birth and to take care of their new-borns in the caves and jungles, without access to adequate maternal care.

The international community must do more to act on behalf of the people of Myanmar. We call on the UN Security Council to refer the Burma/Myanmar situation to the International Criminal Court and to declare a no-fly zone in Karen areas. Humanitarian support must be

provided for those fleeing from fighting. In addition, steps must be taken to refrain from all engagements with the junta and the so-called State Administration Council, and instead to recognize the National Unity Government, who represents the people's voice. Further, human rights must be a priority at the upcoming United Nations General Assembly later this month where a pivotal decision will be made on who will be the chosen representative for Burma/Myanmar. UN bodies must recognize that the people of Burma/Myanmar overwhelmingly reject the junta and their unlawful attempts to seize democracy in the country. KWO and KHRG urge the protection of all civilians in the country and for the UN to act swiftly and with conviction to intervene in the declining state of human rights in Burma/Myanmar.

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