



Defending Democracy: Four Years Since the Failed Coup in Burma

A short report by the Network for Human Rights Documentation-Burma

Situation Overview

Despite the many challenges and changes that the people of Burma have experienced since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021, there remains a joint commitment and effort for a federal and democratic future. Four years ago, the military junta did not hesitate to fire bullets at peaceful, unarmed protesters who swiftly denounced the General's disregard for the nationwide 2020 election results, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) party won its second landslide victory since coming to power in 2015.

On the morning of when the new Parliament was set to resume, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, along with his corrupt allies, immediately changed course by hijacking and bluntly dismissing the results. Despite no evidence of fraud or interference, the regime claimed that the election was stolen and that it was, therefore, the rightful ruler to govern. They arrested their political opponents, including the leader of the NLD party, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and President U Win Myint.

The junta expected to be recognized as the governing authority, believing the civilian population would promptly comply. This assumption was a significant misjudgment, as the military seriously underestimated the determination, commitment, and dedication of the millions who still oppose the regime's oppressive actions.

Young people, notably women, were among the first to organize protests and led creative campaigns calling for immediate action by the international community to bring an end to decades of military rule in Burma. The military responded with deadly force. The first case of violent suppression of civic freedoms occurred on February 9, 2021, when police shot and killed a young woman peacefully protesting. This brutality only intensified the protesters' resolve as they called for an end to injustices, urging the junta to restore power to democratically elected officials and to release all unjustly imprisoned individuals.

Four years later, unfortunately, all calls remain unanswered, as they have been ignored not only by the terrorist regime but also by international and regional stakeholders, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), who refuse to act with the urgency that the crisis warrants. The junta has swiftly targeted individuals attempting to undermine its agenda.

The National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) was established less than two months after the coup. It is Burma's only legitimate representation, founded by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). The NUG arose from the democratic elections in 2020 and collaborative efforts with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC).

On September 7, 2021, the NUG proclaimed a 'defensive war' against the junta, marking the shift from peaceful protests to armed resistance in the people's revolution. The People's Defense Forces (PDFs), made up of civilians trained for combat, are now allied with various ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) in their fight for freedom against the military junta.

In the time that has elapsed, many things have changed. However, longstanding issues of concern remain woefully unaddressed. The human rights situation has significantly worsened, as millions are displaced and thousands remain unjustly imprisoned. By the end of 2024 alone, the NUG Ministry of Human Rights recorded an alarming 7,394 cases of widespread and systematic attacks in various forms against civilians. Their documentation included nearly 1800 cases of extrajudicial killings and 1355 cases of property destruction.

ND-Burma member the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) also released findings which found nearly 100 civilians, including fourteen under the age of 18, were killed in December 2024 alone. The majority, approximately 45, lost their lives in airstrikes. A subsequent report, "Close the Sky" by Blood Money Campaign, reported over 4000 airstrike incidents between 1 February 2021 and November 2024.

And yet, the international community, including ASEAN, has repeatedly engaged with the military which has risked lending the regime the legitimacy it so desperately craves.

Further, the junta's crimes have been largely ignored, encouraging it to push forward with plans for a fraudulent election scheduled for later this year. Despite this, the military is increasingly losing its control of bases and territory across various states and regions. Their denial of their current reality is contested by the decision to implement forced conscription. Enacted nearly a year ago, the newly passed law highlights the junta's desperation to restore its strategic leverage. There have been record levels of military defections and historically low morale throughout the various battalions. Furthermore, following its setbacks against EROs there has been a significant increase in aerial assaults by the junta.

Without immediate and coordinated action by international stakeholders, including consultations with civil society organizations, to end the junta's retaliatory and indiscriminate attacks, the military will only continue to perpetrate human rights violations with the same impunity it has benefited from for more than seven decades.



Demonstration opposing the military coup in Yangon in 2021. Photo : mmlwin

Introduction

This short report by the Network for Human Rights Documentation (ND-Burma) maintains that the coup on 1 February 2021 was unsuccessful. Neighbouring countries' assertions that the junta is in any leadership position have neglected to acknowledge the realities on the ground, which indicates that the military junta is not in control.

In addition, the junta was not democratically elected, and its assertion that it is the government violates its very own 2008 military-drafted Constitution. However, perhaps most importantly, the overwhelming majority of people in Burma do not accept the junta as any form of governing authority and have repeatedly called for intervention that would hold the military accountable for its crimes.

ND-Burma, in collaboration with our members, has documented dozens of cases of the military junta's consistent brutality. Our member organizations work together to report these violations, contributing information to a secure central platform compiled through a nationwide network. Our analysis, contextualized with evidence from our members between 2021 and 2024, shows that the junta has committed widespread crimes for which it must be held accountable.

Most often, it is the most vulnerable who the junta injures and kills in its attacks. Violations committed against the elderly, minors, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities are a daily constant for many conflict-affected groups. Given the current political climate in Burma, security concerns for civilians are significant, and human rights monitoring cannot be openly conducted.

Earlier this year, the junta enacted a new cybersecurity law restricting virtual private network (VPN) use. The law mandates penalties of up to six months in prison and fines of up to 2 million Myanmar kyats for those caught using VPNs. It also includes penalties for cybercrimes such as online fraud, illegal gambling, and unauthorized financial transactions, with prison sentences ranging from two to seven years and significant fines.

This enactment is only the latest in the military's ongoing curtailment of fundamental rights and freedoms. In response, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), an ND-Burma member, organization said, *"In free countries, cybersecurity regulations ensure the right to information, freedom of expression, and digital safety. These laws protect the public, not oppress them."*

Fieldworkers from ND-Burma's member organizations risk their safety to document these violations. Therefore, accurately capturing the full extent and scope of all breaches in Burma is not feasible. Both fieldworkers and those who interact with victims to document their experiences face security threats, even in ceasefire zones, as the military junta often intimidate or threaten victims into silence. Documenting human rights violations in ethnic areas, particularly in conflict zones, can result in arbitrary arrest under oppressive laws, harassment, or even violent retribution.

Further, the analysis provided in this briefing paper from 2021 to 2024 summarizes the research accumulated by ND-Burma members since the failed coup and is a stark reminder of the ongoing challenges the international community must confront to ensure justice prevails.



*A young girl, displaced by conflict from the junta's attacks, is seen in a displacement camp.
Photo : Maw Ree Re, Ka Nyar Maw Foundation*



2021

During the first year of the failed coup, the people of Burma encountered many losses. Children were relentlessly shot at, and young men and women were abducted and disappeared, never to be seen again by their families. Health workers, educators and social service providers were targeted. A barrage of bullets sealed the fates of many on blood-stained sidewalks and roads.

Since the start of the Spring Revolution, those on the ground have fearlessly confronted power despite the significant risks in denouncing the junta's numerous illegal and unjust actions. This has resulted in thousands of arrests as freedom fighters lay down their lives for democracy in Burma.

At the end of 2021, ND-Burma reported that the junta had killed at least 1200 civilians since February, with over 10,000 arrested amid a profoundly hostile environment for peaceful protesters. In the first year in the aftermath of the coup, Burma was rated the deadliest country in the world for demonstrators. Excessive lethal force by the military saw at least 25% of those fired upon while protesting being shot in the head. Since then, the violent actions of the junta have not declined. Instead, it has worsened and exacerbated civilian anxieties over their well-being and security.



Demonstration opposing the military coup in Yangon in 2021. Photo : mmlwin

During this period, ND-Burma found through a combination of desk research and member organization data that there were, on average, between 35 and 43 cases of human rights violations amounting to war crimes each, which were committed in Chin State, Karenni State and the Sagaing region. These are grave breaches of the Geneva Convention and constitute war crimes, including murder, torture, sexual violence, rape, enforced disappearances, and destruction of property.



Women hold a portrait of Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing. The 20-year-old was shot in the head at a protest in Naypyidaw and died 10 days later [Stringer/Reuters]

Furthermore, artillery firing, shelling, and airstrikes, particularly in ethnic areas continue, leading to widespread internal displacement. The military coup has only intensified the growing conflict in the border regions, as the junta's pursuit of power and control has led to the denial of justice and meaningful reforms.



Demonstration opposing the military coup in Yangon in 2021. Photo : mmlwin



2022

From January to December 2022, the junta committed numerous human rights abuses and international crimes in Burma. A collaborative report by ND-Burma, the National Unity Government, the Ministry of Human Rights with Equality Myanmar, and Spring Archive found that the most targeted area for human rights violations was the Sagaing Region, with 783 cases, followed by the Magway Region, with 311, and the Yangon Region, where the country's commercial hub is located, with 171.

This report found that most human rights violations were reported in the Sagaing Region's Kalay, KhinU, and Yinmarbin Townships. Eighty-one violations were recorded in Kalay, 61 in KhinU, and 57 in Yinmarbin Township, for 30 types of violations.

Rakhine had the highest number of human rights violations among the states, with 138 cases. Kyauktaw Township has the highest number of human rights abuses, with 24 cases. Junta soldiers have committed 18 types of human rights violations in Rakhine State.

Most targeted area of human rights violations 2022



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Human rights violations was the Rakhine State, with 138 cases

The report concluded by noting that arbitrary arrests and airstrikes were the most common human rights violations documented during this period, followed by the burning of public housing and property. Firing heavy weapons into civilian areas is the third most common violation committed by the junta troops.

Beyond the worsening daily offensives perpetrated by the military junta, on July 25, 2022, the regime announced the unlawful executions of four prominent, imprisoned activists: Ko Jimmy (Kyaw Min Yu), Phyo Zeya Thaw, Hla Myo Aung, and Aung Thura Zaw.



Four pro-democracy activists, Ko Jimmy (Kyaw Min Yu), Phyo Zeya Thaw, Hla Myo Aung, and Aung Thura Zaw, were unlawfully executed by the military junta in July 2022.

ND-Burma member, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) expressed grave devastation at the news and asserted it was a grave miscarriage of justice. AAPP Joint Secretary U Bo Kyi said: *“If they executed the four, it is a crime, Min Aung Hlaing committed murder. The junta is illegal, unelected by the people, they have no right to execute.”*



2023

In 2023, fighting led to 80% of the country's townships (225 out of 330) being impacted by the intensifying armed conflict. The launch of Operation 1027 in Shan State also proved to be a pivotal moment in the shifts on the battlefield. Operation 1027 was a coordinated military attack against the junta on October 27, 2023. It was carried out by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which includes the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army.

Months later, the Three Brotherhood Alliance convened three meetings to negotiate with China on January 11 and to discuss a ceasefire with Haigeng's agreement in Northern Shan State. Despite these discussions, the military junta continued its heavy artillery attacks and airstrikes on the townships in Northern Shan State. In response to the military's operations, the Three Brotherhood alliance and various revolutionary forces launched "The Second Wave of Operation 1027" on June 25, 2024, four months after the ceasefire. The military junta notably increased its airstrike frequency during this second wave.



In 2023, the Spring Archive and ND-Burma jointly produced a report documenting civic freedoms and human rights violations committed by the junta since 1 February 2021. The report examined breaches of freedom of assembly, expression, and association in the first two years following the coup. It detailed numerous protest crackdowns, arrests, and abuses against civic activists, human rights defenders, health workers, democracy supporters, journalists, and other members of civil society.

The report evidenced attacks against protesters and the use of extreme violence by the junta-backed security personnel who routinely fired live rounds of ammunition at those peacefully calling for an end to the military dictatorship. It also noted the extensive strategies deployed by organizers to distract and confuse the military officials sent to dispel it. This included ‘surprise protests by smaller groups, poster and stickers campaigns, and local pamphlet distribution to drive support for the opposition movement.’

Compounding the attacks on protesters was the worsening suppression of freedom of expression, which included the suspension of local media outlets and the continuing targeting of journalists:



Journalist Han Thar Nyein, co-founder of Kamayut Media, is among the many members of the press whom the junta has unlawfully detained. Photo: mmlwin

“Journalists are typically accused of one of nine types of offences and unjustly punished with prison terms. The commonly used charges against the journalists include Penal code Section 505 (A) and (B), Section 33 (A) and (B), Section 124, Section 253 (A), Section 13 (1), 52 (A), and 19 (F).”

One of the most common charges against civilians and press members includes the deeply problematic Penal Code 505A. The junta has deliberately weaponized the rule of law, which it has used to ‘justify’ the imprisonment of media officials and citizen journalists.



Police arrest Myanmar Now journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon on February 27, as protesters were taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. Photo: AFP

Press freedom continues to be worsening, and the junta’s efforts to silence truth-tellers are increasing. Freedom of speech and assembly remains significantly restricted, as evidenced by the ongoing power cuts and limited access to communications nationwide. The junta’s blackouts are one of the main ways it seeks to exert control over local populations and minimize the risk of human rights documenters collecting evidence of its crimes against civilians.

In 2023, Burma ranked as one of the most unsafe places for journalists as the military actively suppresses the flow of free information. Reporters Without Borders noted that the military regime was the world’s second-biggest jailer of journalists since the military coup in February 2021.



2024

The intensity of the Burma Army's attacks escalated in 2024. In Karen State alone, for the first time in history, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) reached its highest level on record, including more than 1 million people, which was an alarming 40% increase from the year prior. For much of the borderlands, expanded military operations saw rising displacement numbers and soaring levels of attacks that continued to contribute to devastating losses in livelihood and education opportunities. Nationwide, 18.6 million people required urgent humanitarian assistance.

In ND-Burma's member areas, the instances of severe violence carried out by the military have resulted in a humanitarian crisis as a significant number of civilians have been consistently displaced.

In September 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) declared that at least 5,350 civilians have been killed and more than 3.3 million displaced in Burma since the coup. Local organizations have reported higher



Internally displaced people from Karen State are seen fleeing violence in their communities in a desperate and urgent effort to attain safety. Photo : NUG

numbers in their respective areas, including the Karen Peace Support Network, which states more than one million IDPs in Kawthoolei alone. In addition, according to OHCHR estimates, at least 1,853 people have died in custody since the coup, including 88 children and 125 women.

Between January and June 2024, ND-Burma members recorded at least 323 cases of violence perpetrated by the military junta, which resulted in 106,500 internally displaced people (IDPs) across member states and regions. ND-Burma members in their respective locations documented that airstrikes by the junta killed 58 people, including 10 men, 10 women, 14 children, and 24 unknown genders and ages. An additional 119 were wounded, among them being 21 men, 12 women, 45 children, and 45 unknown gender and age.



This photo taken and obtained from the Facebook account of Mai So Jar on Sept. 6, 2024 shows people gathering around a destroyed building following an air strike in Namhkham township in Burma northern Shan state. (Photo Courtesy of Facebook user Mai So Jar / AFP)

ND-Burma member organizations are actively collecting evidence of the junta's crimes in their respective States and regions. Additional information on several of these cases and data is as follows:

The All Arakan Students' & Youths' Congress (AASYC) recorded sixteen cases of human rights violations in Rakhine State. The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) documented nearly forty violations in Chin State.

Meanwhile, in the southeast of the country, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) found eleven cases, all in the Tanintharyi region, of indiscriminate firing, which in every case but one led to the deaths of innocent civilians. In eight cases documented by Helping Hand-Burma, civilians in Karenni State were directly targeted between February and April 2024, with half of the cases reported being airstrikes resulting in the deaths of seven people. The remaining cases were deaths due to gunshot firing by the junta.

Communities in northern Shan State, which borders Karenni State, were also caught amid attacks by the junta, which threatened their safety and overall well-being. The Pa-O Youth Organization (PYO) found eleven cases, including artillery firing, airstrikes, drone attacks and forced labour in Shan State, and the Ta'ang Students and Youth Union (TSYU) recorded an additional 35 cases. Eight of these cases were due to injuries and deaths from landmines, five from artillery attacks, sixteen cases of harm as a result of torture, nine instances of arbitrary arrest, as well as various occurrences of property destruction.

The Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) reported on nine cases of human rights violations, with the majority being due to the detonation of landmines and unexploded ordinance devices. The ongoing threat of landmines underscores the continuous risks displaced communities endure while traversing conflict zones, striving to survive amidst chaos and uncertainty.

The Kachin Women's Association Thailand, an ND-Burma member, reported in February 2024 the death of one man who was shot and killed.

In addition, Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP), documented an alarming 34 cases between January and June 2024. These cases included torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, arbitrary arrest, destruction of properties, artillery and mortar



Internally displaced people, including women and children, in Mon State sheltering in a cave as they seek safety from attacks by the junta. Photo : The Human Rights Foundation of Monland

shelling, airstrikes and civilians shot on sight.

The impacts of the attacks by the junta have resulted in forced displacement. There are many effects on populations as a result. All groups suffer from mental and, in some cases, physical trauma due to being forced to leave their homes. Unfortunately, in the current context, few mental health resources, such as counselling, are available, but locally led, ethnic women's organizations have worked dutifully to fill these gaps.

Conclusion

Human rights in Burma have undeniably faced a severe decline. However, despite these grim realities, it's crucial to acknowledge and praise the resilience of individuals from diverse backgrounds who have come together in a joint effort to overthrow the dictatorship.

Justice for the people of Burma is significantly overdue. Despite persistent demands from civil society organizations for action against the junta's misconduct—such as targeted sanctions on aviation fuel, a global arms embargo, and a referral of Burma's human rights situation to the International Criminal Court—these appeals persist. They resonate with the United Nations Security Resolution 2669, adopted on 21 December 2022, which calls for an immediate cease to violence, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights, highlighting the necessity of safeguarding the rights of women and children and the critical need for accountability.

Civilians in Burma continue to face negative impacts on their livelihoods and have limited prospects for their futures as trauma lingers and uncertainty is a constant. IDPs face threats to their physical and mental well-being, and their health and education prospects have been significantly undermined.

Nonetheless, the junta's efforts to silence and undermine the diverse resistance movements have not succeeded. Despite relentless threats and escalating violence from the military, the unified effort to confront the dictatorship has effectively hindered the junta's aspirations for recognition and legitimacy, which they desperately seek.

As 2024 concludes, the drive for action regarding the human rights situation in Burma remains strong. With new challenges looming as 2025 begins, individuals from varied ethnicities, genders, religions, and socio-economic statuses will persist in demanding accountability from a regime that has jeopardized their fundamental rights.

The international community, equipped with the necessary resources, must heed the lessons of the past and urgently act to end the ongoing atrocities. The Burma Army

must be brought before the International Criminal Court to ensure accountability for all those involved in committing crimes against humanity. Allowing such a brutal regime to escape consequences only encourages further violations.

The people's needs in Burma cannot be ignored, as their security hangs in the balance, forced daily into the crossfire of a conflict that threatens their very existence while depriving them of fundamental everyday rights.

Furthermore, reparations are long overdue for the victims of both historical and ongoing atrocities committed by the junta. Many civilians—whether they are activists, labourers, business owners, students, or politicians—face a target on their backs as the junta demonstrates reckless momentum in its oppressive pursuit of power.

The displacement crisis is likely to intensify as refugees along the Thai-Burma border encounter ever-diminishing chances of a safe return. Without an immediate strategy to combat the junta's actions, the number of individuals who are unlawfully arrested, detained, and brutally killed will continue to escalate. Responding to the various crises at hand must include measures to immediately curtail the junta's ability to cause senseless and ongoing violence.



Internally displaced children in Karenni State receiving clothes supported by donors and local civil society organizations. Photo : Maw Ree Re, Ka Nyar Maw Foundation

Recommendations

To the International Community






- Immediately refer the human rights situation in Burma to the International Criminal Court and further evaluate and consider all pathways to justice for victims of the military junta's mass crimes against civilians.
- Impose and enforce aviation fuel sanctions to deter the use of airstrikes by the military junta.
- Immediately adopt a resolution which acknowledges the worsening of the human rights crisis on the ground in Burma and impose a global arms embargo which would halt the free flow of weapons into the conflict-torn country.
- Support civil society organizations on the ground and respective human rights defenders by advancing documentation and evidence of mass crimes against humanity perpetrated by the military junta.
- Immediately dispatch a monitoring team to assess the human rights situation in Burma, particularly in conflict-affected areas.

To Donors

- Work in equal partnership with and support locally-led aid initiatives by civil society and community-based organizations, human rights defenders, and frontline responders to ensure the safe, effective, and prompt delivery of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected areas.
- Provide long-term, flexible funding to ethnic humanitarian responders who are providing urgent emergency assistance to IDPs, including medical services to those who are wounded.
- Reduce rigorous funding applications, which disadvantage local organizations due to language and capacity constraints. Make funding models and avenues accessible in English and ethnic languages.
- Secure funding for documentation efforts to ensure the protection, preservation and collection of human rights violations perpetrated by the junta and ensure accountability through international systems.

To the National Unity Government

- Advocate for local organizations and the international community for localized systems to be recognized and supported.
- Encourage diplomats and world leaders to end existing relationships with the military junta and their affiliates to dismantle any credibility or recognition.
- Coordinate effectively and consistently with ethnic service providers, civil society organizations, and human rights defenders in Burma to align advocacy calls and areas of support from displaced communities.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Network for Human Rights Documentation-Burma (ND-Burma) consists of 13 organizations representing a range of ethnic nationalities, women, and former political prisoners. Since 2004, ND-Burma member organizations have been documenting human rights abuses and fighting for justice for victims. The network has nine full members and four affiliate members.