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The human rights situation deteriorated dramatically after a military coup in February. Security forces killed over 1,000 people and detained many thousands of others who opposed the military takeover. Widespread torture of detainees was reported. Armed conflict, including indiscriminate attacks and attacks against civilians and civilian objects by the military, forcibly displaced tens of thousands of people. Similar vast numbers remained displaced as result of past conflict or violence. People in areas affected by armed conflict lacked basic services, and in some areas the military blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid. Women and girls were subjected to sexual violence by the military. Children were denied the right to education. Dozens of people were sentenced to death by military tribunals in their absence.

Background

The military staged a coup on 1 February and arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, along with other senior leaders from the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). The military formed the State Administrative Council (SAC) to govern the country led by General Min Aung Hlaing, who was also appointed as prime minister when the role was re-established in August.

Following the military takeover, thousands of people throughout the country took part in protests, and public and private sector employees participated in a mass civil disobedience movement.

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of NLD-led elected members of Myanmar's parliament, formed a National Unity Government. It was led by Duwa Lashi La as acting president in place of the imprisoned U Win Myint. The National Unity Government, which also included some representatives of ethnic minority groups, was declared a terrorist group by the military.

On 5 May, the National Unity Government announced the establishment of the People's Defence Force (PDF) to counter SAC “violence against the public and its military offensives”. On 7 September, the National Unity Government declared a “people's defensive war”, which was followed by escalating violence throughout Myanmar. Fighting between the military government's forces and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) also escalated.

Repression of dissent

The military government violently cracked down on those who opposed its February coup, widely using rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannons, live rounds of ammunition and other lethal force against protesters. According to the NGO Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPP), as of 31 December the military government's security forces had killed at least 1,384 people, including 91 children, and arrested 11,289.

Those killed included protesters and bystanders. On 10 March, after examining more than 50 video clips of the ongoing crackdown, Amnesty International concluded that the military had used lethal tactics and weapons appropriate only for battlefield use against peaceful protesters in cities and towns across the country.¹ On 2 May, for example, there were reports of security forces throwing grenades into a crowd of protesters in northern Kachin State. Soldiers were also witnessed indiscriminately firing live ammunition in urban areas on multiple occasions.

Thousands of doctors and other healthcare workers joined the protests and refused to work under the military government, although many provided medical care to injured protesters and to Covid-19 and other patients outside state hospitals. As of 31 December, at least 12 health workers had been killed, and 86 remained in detention.

The military authorities also attacked trade unionists, workers and civil servants who joined protests demanding a return to democracy. Workers were intimidated and threatened into returning to work, and trade union leaders and workers were among those arrested and killed.

Freedom of expression and association

The military government announced amendments to the Penal Code that criminalized both the intent to criticize and actual criticism of government actions. These included the addition of Section 505(a) which criminalized comments that “cause fear” and spread “false news”, as well as criminalizing individuals “committing or agitating, directly or

indirectly, a criminal offense against a government employee”. As of 31 December, 189 people had been convicted under Section 505(a). According to AAPP, at least another 1,143 detained individuals were awaiting sentencing and warrants for 1,545 others had been issued, including under Section 505(a) which carries a sentence of up to three years’ imprisonment.

New provisions were also introduced in the Criminal Procedure Code to allow searches, seizures, arrests, surveillance and interception of communications to take place without warrants.

The military authorities periodically imposed nationwide internet and telecommunications shutdowns, violating the right to freedom of expression. In areas where there were military operations, such as in Hpakant township in Kachin State, Chin State and the regions of Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay, internet and WiFi services were suspended and, in some instances, mobile phone networks cut. This severely obstructed communications, including those concerning human rights violations committed by security forces, as well as negatively impacting humanitarian operations.

The military authorities closed at least five independent news publications and revoked the licences of eight media outlets. At least 98 journalists were arrested following the coup, including three foreign journalists. One journalist, Ko Soe Naing, died while in custody.

At the end of the year, at least 46 journalists and other media workers remained in detention. This included 13 who had been convicted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

In early December, a court sentenced Aung San Suu Kyi to four years’ imprisonment, later reduced to two, on bogus charges of inciting dissent and breaking Covid-19 rules. Verdicts in relation to other charges against Aung San Suu Kyi were postponed.²

Torture and other ill-treatment

According to the AAPP, at least 8,338 of those arrested since 1 February remained in detention as of 31 December, including 196 children. In addition to journalists, these included NLD party members and their relatives, peaceful protesters, members of the civil disobedience movement and other activists, as well as bystanders. Relatives who were able to visit family members in detention reported seeing physical injuries and other signs of torture or ill-treatment. The UN also documented the widespread use of torture by security forces against detainees, in some cases resulting in death.

Sexual violence and threats of sexual violence by the security forces against women, girls and in some instances men arrested during protests, were documented by the UN and others, including in the context of interrogations. Detained LGBTI people who participated in the protests, often under rainbow flags, were also reported to have been subjected to torture including sexual violence.

Attacks on civilians

The military used its “Four Cuts” strategy to cut off EAOs and People’s Defence Force (PDF) units from funding, food, intelligence and recruits with devastating consequences for civilians. The military launched air strikes, shelling and arson attacks against towns and villages in the ethnic states of Kayah, Kayin, Kachin and Chin, and in the regions of Sagaing, Magway and Thanintharyi. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar reported that, as of September, 200,000 people had been forcibly displaced in a bid to escape attacks by the military.

In May, following assaults by a newly formed PDF unit, the Chinland Defence Force (CDF), the military laid siege to the town of Mindat in Chin State using heavy artillery fire and cutting off essential services. According to the UN, around 15 villagers, including a pregnant woman, were used by the military as human shields and others were trapped without water or electricity. As clashes between the military and the CDF escalated in October, there were also reports of arson attacks by the military. In the town of Thantlang alone, at least 160 houses and four churches were reportedly destroyed in late October.

From May to November, the military launched retaliatory attacks on villages in Kayah and Southern Shan states in response to attacks by the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, a joint PDF and EAO force, on police and military facilities in Demoso and Loikaw townships in Kayah State and Pekon townships in southern Shan State. At least 55 civilians were killed and churches reportedly destroyed during successive military attacks in these areas.

In December, reports of the killing by the military of at least 35 civilians in eastern Kayah State, including four children and two humanitarian workers from Save the Children, prompted condemnation by the UN Security Council and renewed calls for a global arms embargo on the Myanmar military government.

There were reports of rape and other sexual violence by the military against women and children in conflict-affected areas. According to media reports, soldiers gang-raped a woman in front of her husband during a military raid in Aklui village close to Tedim township in Chin State in November. The victim’s pregnant sister, who lived in the same village, was also reportedly raped. According to the same source, the military also raped a 62-year-old woman in Kutkai township, northern Shan State.

Internally displaced peoples’ rights

As of 9 December, indiscriminate attacks and attacks directed against civilians and civilian objects, primarily by the military, and fighting between the military, EAOs and PDFs, had displaced more than 284,700 people, including over 76,000 children.

Around 336,000 people were already internally displaced prior to the military takeover. These included 130,000 people living in camps in Kachin, northern Shan State and parts of the south-east, and more than 90,000 people in Rakhine and Chin states displaced by fighting between the Arakan Army and the military before hostilities between them ceased in November 2020. There were concerns about lack of humanitarian access to many of the sites in which they were living.

At least 126,000 Rohingya Muslims remained effectively interned in camps in Rakhine State since violence in 2012. After the coup, local authorities reinstated a directive that further restricted the freedom of movement of Rohingya communities living in northern Rakhine. These communities continued to have very limited access to basic services, including healthcare and education. The rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in Myanmar failed to provide an enabling environment for voluntary repatriations of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh who fled atrocities in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017.

Denial of humanitarian access

The military authorities restricted humanitarian access to internally displaced people in Kayah, Chin and Shan states. There were reports of roads being blocked and aid convoys being turned back by the soldiers. In June, the military destroyed an ambulance and burned stockpiles of rice and medicine intended for displaced people in Pekon township, Shan State.¹ In other areas, including Kachin and Rakhine states, the military authorities imposed additional requirements on humanitarian organizations in order to obtain travel authorizations that severely delayed the delivery of aid to vulnerable populations.

Abuses by armed groups

In July and September, fighting erupted between the Restoration Council of Shan State, the Shan State Army-North, and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, three EAOs in Shan State. These groups reportedly abducted villagers and subjected them to forced labour.

Right to health

The health system effectively collapsed in the aftermath of the military takeover as health workers joined the civil disobedience movement and a third wave of Covid-19 hit the country. Health workers clandestinely providing medical care, including to injured protesters, were attacked and arrested by the security forces. According to the WHO, more than 286 attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel took place during the year, accounting for over one third of attacks on healthcare globally. The majority of attacks were attributed to the military, although bomb attacks by unknown assailants against military-run hospitals were also reported. At least 26 health workers were killed and 64 injured during the year.

The military government further undermined the Covid-19 response by confiscating personal protective equipment and already severely limited oxygen supplies in Chin, Kayin and Yangon for use by the military. In July security forces reportedly opened fire to disperse people queuing for oxygen cylinders in Yangon.

Women and girls faced difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare, especially in armed conflict areas. There were reports of displaced women giving birth without access to basic medical services. In several reported cases in Kayah and Shan states, newborn babies of displaced families died due to lack of adequate healthcare and shelter.

Right to education

Almost 12 million children and young people had no access to formal education due to the combination of Covid-19-related school, college and university closures, armed conflict and the actions of the military authorities. Teachers who participated in the civil disobedience movement were among those arrested and at least 139 teachers had been detained as of the end of November. Schools and other educational facilities were bombed or otherwise attacked by unknown actors. In May alone, at least 103 such attacks were reported. The military occupied schools and university campuses across Myanmar.

Death penalty

Military courts sentenced dozens of people, including several children, to death after unfair trials. Many were tried in their absence.

1. [“Myanmar: Vast arsenal and notorious troops deployed during nationwide ‘killing spree’ protest crackdown”, 11 March](#)

2. [“Myanmar: Unbridled destruction of freedoms as Aung San Suu Kyi sentenced”, 6 December](#)
3. [“Myanmar: After coup, Myanmar military puts chokehold on people’s basic needs”, 17 December](#)

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