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Townships in Myanmar's Chin state hit by one airstrike per day over last two months

Myanmar's military averaged nearly one airstrike per day on townships under martial law in Chin state, in the western part of the country, in the first two months of 2023 alone, an ethnic Chin minority rights group said Thursday, as NGOs urged governments to sanction companies selling jet fuel to the junta.

The military launched at least 53 airstrikes, dropping more than 140 bombs, on the townships of Mindat, Hakha, Matupi and Thantlang, the Chin Human Rights Organization said, killing five members of the Chin National Army and three members of local anti-junta People's Defense Force paramilitary groups. The strikes injured six civilians, the group said.

The military is increasingly using airstrikes in its multi-front conflict with the armed resistance as it becomes more formidable and effective in its use of guerilla tactics to stymie ground assaults by junta troops. But the

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Chin state: According to rights group, military averaged nearly one airstrike per day on townships under martial law

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strikes lead to significant collateral damage and sources say it is the civilian population that bears the biggest brunt of the attacks.

Salai Htet Ni, a spokesman for the Chin National Front, said that the junta had initially set out to crush his and other PDF groups in the area with ground troops reinforced by artillery shelling and airstrikes.

“But there aren’t any clashes on the ground,” he told RFA Burmese. “They mainly launch airstrikes to attack us” because they have been so effective.

Trying to regain control

Airstrikes were part of a bid by the military to regain control of the area in northwestern Myanmar because “everywhere other than the junta camp are under the control of regional defense groups,” he said.

Based on the CHRO’s reporting, Thantlang was hit the hardest by air attacks in January and February as the junta targeted the area with 41 airstrikes and 115 bombs. On Jan. 10-11, the junta used two fighters to bomb the Chin National Front’s headquarters in Thantlang, killing five CNF soldiers and damaging a hospital and other buildings.

The CHRO said that the junta launched airstrikes on Mindat seven times, dropping 13 bombs, Matupi three times, dropping 13 bombs, and Hakha twice, dropping four bombs over the two-month period.

A resident of Mindat, who declined to be named for security reasons, said that as the military has increasingly targeted the area with airstrikes, civilians no longer dare to stay in their homes and are mostly taking shelter in upland farms.

“The civilians are too scared to stay at home as they know that the military can launch airstrikes in their area at any time,” the resident said. “Local

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defense forces have also announced plans to dig bomb shelters and instruct residents on the dos and don'ts for using them."

Residents of nearby Kanpetlet township, which is not under martial law but has seen its fair share of airstrikes, told RFA that an increase in the number of junta attacks from the air had also led them to dig trenches to shelter from falling bombs.

The junta has yet to release any news regarding the airstrikes and attempts by RFA to reach Thant Zin, the junta's social affairs minister and spokesman for Chin state, went unanswered Thursday.

Cutting off fuel supplies

The CHRO's findings follow a March 3 report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights which said that junta airstrikes had more than doubled from 125 in 2021 to 301 in 2022.

They also followed a joint statement on March 1 by Amnesty International, Global Witness, and Burma Campaign (U.K.) urging governments to sanction companies that sell jet fuel to the junta to limit the country's air force.

Montse Ferrer, Amnesty International's researcher and advisor on business and human rights, claimed that his organization had traced new shipments of aviation fuel that he said had "likely ended up in the hands of Myanmar's military, which has consistently conducted unlawful airstrikes."

"These attacks regularly kill civilians, including children, yet planes can only take off if they have fuel," he said.

"Since the military's coup in [February] 2021, it has brutally suppressed its critics and attacked civilians from the ground and the air. Supplies of

aviation fuel reaching the military enable these war crimes. These shipments must stop now.”

According to the joint statement, Asian and European companies make up the lion’s share of those exporting aviation fuel to Myanmar’s military.

In eastern Myanmar’s Kayah state, the air force has carried out airstrikes on rebel-controlled territories “regardless of whether [the targets] are civilian or armed resistance,” said Khu Nye Reh, the ethnic Karenni government's interior minister.

“It seems to me that they regard all of us as their enemies. They likely think that wherever the civilian population is, the resistance forces are too,” he said. “There are many incidents where they come and attack villages based on any report of suspicion. It happens almost everyday.”

In the two years since the coup, the junta has carried out 177 airstrikes in Kayah state, targeting schools, hospitals and Christian churches, according to a March 1 statement by the Progressive Karenni People’s Force.

RFA could not independently confirm the number of airstrikes claimed by Karenni and Chin state People's Defense Forces.

Saw Khin Maung Myint, the junta’s economic minister and spokesman for Kayin state, told RFA on Feb. 15 that the military does not target civilians, but warned that if the PDF hides among civilians, there will be unavoidable casualties.

“The military never targets the civilians – only the PDF ... but if [PDF fighters] are mixed with local civilians, the military might have harmed them unknowingly,” he said. “The aircraft use modern devices such as night vision to distinguish civilians from PDF forces.”

Effectiveness of sanctions

Kyaw Zaw, the spokesman for the office of NUG President Duwa Lashi La, said that sanctions targeting companies that sell jet fuel to the junta must be coordinated and strictly enforced to be effective.

“The companies importing aviation fuel to Myanmar have been found to have changed their names to avoid sanctions or maneuver their routes from locations where the sanctions are not in effect,” he said.

“Therefore, in order to stop the imports of jet fuel to Myanmar, international coordinated sanctions should be implemented with specific measures.”

Kyaw Zaw did not provide details of what such measures would entail.

But Ze Thu Aung, a former captain of the air force who has since joined the anti-junta Civil Disobedience Movement, warned that as the armed resistance grows throughout the country, the military will increasingly use superior force in its attacks. He said something must be done to limit the air force’s capabilities or civilian casualties are sure to multiply.

He said that while international sanctions can limit the air force to some extent, they will never be fully effective while powerful countries are backing the junta.

“Since they have Russia and China backing them, they will always be supported with aircraft and related supplies, including aviation fuel,” he said.

In the meantime, Chin Human Rights Organization Director Salai Manhin said that his and other groups are documenting the airstrikes and other

human rights violations as part of a bid to hold the perpetrators accountable.

“The junta’s airstrikes result in massive civilian population losses, rather than serving their military purposes. They also force more people to ... become displaced or flee their homes,” he said.

“The CHRO is keeping a detailed list of all the human rights violations in Chin state ... and we are working to take action against those responsible according to international law.”

Translated by Myo Min Aung. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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