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Myanmar: Surging Landmine Use Claims Lives, Livelihoods

Highest Casualties Worldwide Since 2023

(Bangkok) – [Myanmar's](#) military forces are increasingly using banned antipersonnel landmines that indiscriminately kill and injure people across the country, Human Rights Watch said today. Over the past year, fighting between the junta military and alliances of opposition and ethnic armed groups has spiked nationwide. Landmine casualties and contamination have been documented for the first time in all 14 Myanmar states and regions, affecting about 60 percent of the country's townships.

In the newly released [Landmine Monitor 2024](#), Myanmar unprecedentedly topped the global list of casualties, with 1,003 documented civilian deaths and injuries from landmines and explosive remnants of war in 2023, almost three times the previous year. The rate has continued to rise in 2024, with 692 civilian casualties, about one-third children, recorded in the first six months – though the actual numbers are presumed much higher. Countries participating in the Mine Ban Treaty's Fifth Review Conference from November 25-29 in Siem Reap, Cambodia, should condemn Myanmar's use of antipersonnel landmines while strengthening efforts to support victims.

"The Myanmar military's widespread use of antipersonnel mines will threaten the lives and livelihoods of villagers now and for decades to come," said [Shayna Bauchner](#), Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The junta's planting of landmines in homes, villages, and farms appears designed to both terrorize and harm civilians."

In October, Human Rights Watch interviewed four landmine survivors and six medical and humanitarian workers who provide support to victims. All four survivors lost one or both legs. People interviewed described soldiers planting mines around houses and along pathways in villages emptied by fighting, imperiling residents upon return. Three victims said they were injured either when returning to their villages or while fleeing.

Myanmar is one of only four countries actively using [antipersonnel mines](#), along with Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The Myanmar military has long used antipersonnel mines, but new use has increased since the February 2021 coup amid the junta's campaign of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Non-state armed groups have also used antipersonnel mines, often improvised, and have stockpiled junta-produced mines collected in the field.

The junta's Directorate of Defence Industries, known as KaPaSa, produces at least five types of antipersonnel mines, including blast mines, stake mines, Claymore-type directional mines, and bounding fragmentation mines. Mines have been planted at schools, medical clinics, monasteries and churches, plantations, cell towers and power stations, displacement camps, ports, development projects, and bridges.

Military units have increasingly rounded up villagers to act as "human minesweepers," including children, forcing them to walk ahead of troops to detonate any explosives. "Sometimes they force them to wear military uniforms," said a doctor who travels to conflict regions. "If they're injured, they're just left to die."

A surgeon who operates a clinic in Karenni (Kayah) State said he had treated 15 civilian landmine survivors since 2022 – including three children ages 8, 12, and 15 – and over 50 opposition fighters injured by mines. "Junta soldiers will displace villagers, then place landmines in the village, farms, rice and corn fields, and around the military camp," the surgeon said. "Villagers are scared, but when it's time to harvest the rice and corn, they have to go back. Kids will go with them, playing in the fields. The junta is intentionally harming villagers by placing mines in the farms because to them, villagers are the enemy."

Daw Khin, 57, stepped on a landmine near her toilet, two days after returning from a displacement camp in September 2022. She had fled military airstrikes over a year earlier. "I went back to clean like many other villagers," she said. "I didn't think the military would lay mines in my house." She was unconscious for three days, during which doctors amputated her entire right leg, lower left leg, and finger. "I was crying for weeks and so depressed.... I'm still in pain. I feel numbness all the time."

The surgeon said he had seen landmine injuries double or triple over the past year – the second most common injury he treats, after wounds from

airstrikes.

Myanmar's conflict has internally displaced more than 3 million people since the coup, including over 1.8 million since October 2023. The growing contamination of landmines and unexploded ordnance threatens their return.

A medic who provides treatment at displacement camps in Karenni State said he had met about 40 civilian landmine survivors over the past year, including four or five children. He said landmine contamination has increased in tandem with the military's territorial losses. "When the military is retreating, soldiers will carry landmines in a pull cart and just dump them everywhere."

The military's use of landmines in civilian areas appears linked to its longstanding "four cuts" strategy, in which it seeks to exert control over an area by isolating and terrorizing civilians through collective punishment.

"The military has been using more mines since [Operation] 1027," an opposition fighter said, citing an [anti-junta offensive](#) launched in October 2023. "The military's putting more mines in residential areas to keep the resistance out. They're mining the walls of houses, inside compounds, throughout villages. They're booby-trapping people's gates with wires."

Non-state groups using landmines and other explosive devices include longstanding ethnic armed groups as well as opposition forces established since the coup. "Any armed group, whatever village they conquer, they'll plant mines," a humanitarian worker said. "For the resistance, mines are the cheapest way to protect against a SAC [junta] offensive." Both the Myanmar military and ethnic Arakan Army have laid landmines along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border while [fighting for control](#) of the area. Abdullah, 40, stepped on an antipersonnel mine while fleeing his village in Maungdaw, Rakhine State, in August 2024. Doctors in Bangladesh later amputated his lower left leg.

In September, flooding and landslides from Typhoon Yagi affected an estimated one million people, while increasing risks from dislodged landmines and unexploded ordnance. "With the flooding, the mines have moved everywhere, across villages, IDP camps," said a medic who has demined affected areas. "The monsoons bury the landmines under mud so they're no longer visible."

Landmine contamination has exacerbated Myanmar's spiraling food insecurity and economic collapse, with millions [at risk of starvation](#). A humanitarian worker said that villagers are often injured when hunger and desperation push them into unsafe areas to find food. Landmines have killed livestock and cut off farmers' access to land.

Survivors are often unable to return to their former livelihoods. "Since I was injured, it's been getting harder to survive," said U Win, a 45-year-old farmer. He lost his lower left leg from a blast antipersonnel mine in February 2023, a year after his home was destroyed by an airstrike. "I can't work. I don't have money or a job. The military destroyed everything."

Access to long-term services and rehabilitation, prosthetics, and assistive devices in Myanmar is extremely limited. Health workers said people often make their own crutches from rubberwood. Amid the ongoing conflict, survivors with disabilities face greater risks of being unable to flee hostilities or access lifesaving aid.

Survivors describe struggling with feelings of depression, helplessness, and fear. "I don't feel like a normal person anymore, even though I survived," said an opposition fighter who lost his lower right leg and partial hearing from a landmine blast in March 2022. "I'm in pain. I used to bleed from my ears, but not so much anymore.... After I stepped on the mine, I heard a click and realized, 'Oh shit.' I'm still traumatized by that 'click.'"

"Some become suicidal," the surgeon said of his patients. "They have no resources to support their mental health needs. They lose their work, their mobility, their pastimes. They believe they'll never recover."

Mine clearance efforts in Myanmar are extremely limited and ad hoc. Some villagers said they rented a vehicle with a backhoe attachment to try to clear affected land. The opposition fighter said he was injured despite his unit using a mine detector.

A total of 164 countries are party to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, which prohibits use, production, transfer, and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines. The treaty also requires parties to destroy stockpiles, clear mine-affected areas, and assist victims. Although Myanmar is not a party to the treaty, the junta's use remains unlawful because the weapons are inherently indiscriminate, unable to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Individuals responsible for using prohibited weapons or carrying out indiscriminate attacks may be prosecuted for war crimes.

The Myanmar military and non-state armed groups should immediately stop all use of antipersonnel mines, Human Rights Watch said. Donors should channel aid through local civil society groups and cross-border efforts to increase landmine risk awareness and provide assistance to victims and their families, including rehabilitation services, assistive devices, psychosocial support, and access to food and basic livelihoods.

"Governments meeting at the Mine Ban Treaty conference in Cambodia should coordinate efforts to press Myanmar's junta and non-state armed

groups to end their use of landmines,” Bauchner said. “Myanmar military officials should be held accountable for their unrelenting use of a devastating weapon that most of the world has banned for 25 years.”

Associated documents

Document ID 2118237 Chapter

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Myanmar

Statements of witnesses and victims of antipersonnel landmines

[I Didn't Think the Military Would Lay Mines in My House; Accounts from Landmine Survivors in Myanmar](#) (Appeal or News Release, English)

en

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