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Myanmar: 28 civilians killed in military air strike – new investigation and witness testimony

- *At least 12 children killed, and a reported 57 people injured*

The Myanmar military killed at least 28 civilians in an air strike on a displaced persons camp in an attack that may amount to a war crime, Amnesty International said today.

At approximately 11.30pm on 9 October 2023, the Myanmar military launched an attack that hit the Mung Lai Hkyet displacement camp, close to the town of Laiza in Kachin State, near Myanmar's border with China.

Witnesses told Amnesty International that a large bomb exploded near the camp, which was followed by sustained mortar fire from nearby Myanmar military positions.

The camp is home to an estimated 150 displaced families and situated near other civilian homes in Mung Lai Hkyet village. The camp is around three miles from central Laiza, the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/A), an ethnic armed group that has fought the Myanmar military for decades.

"This murderous assault by the Myanmar military is further proof of their complete disregard for civilian life," said Matthew Wells, Director of Amnesty International's Crisis Response Programme.

"The air strike on the Mung Lai Hkyet displaced persons camp is the latest in a long list of indiscriminate attacks against civilians committed by the Myanmar military since its coup in 2021, many of which amount to war crimes.

“The world must wake up to the horror unfolding daily in Myanmar. The UN Security Council should impose a long-overdue arms embargo, including on the supply of aviation fuel, as the Myanmar military repeatedly unleashes its arsenal on civilians across the country.”

Amnesty International's weapons expert analyzed photos and videos of the aftermath of the attack, which show evidence of a single massive blast that flattened dozens of nearby buildings – including a church, preschool and many homes – and started fires.

The blast wave caused catastrophic overpressure and fragmentation injuries to the victims, including fatal wounds to heads, lacerations that exposed organs, and the removal and pulverization of limbs. The size of the crater and observed damage is consistent with the largest aerial-delivered bombs known to be in the inventory of the Myanmar military. Amnesty International believes the Myanmar military almost certainly used an unguided bomb, which is an inaccurate weapon completely inappropriate for use in the vicinity of civilians.

The Myanmar military denied responsibility [in a statement](#), saying it was an explosion of a site where the KIO/A stored ammonium nitrate. That explanation is at odds with consistent witness accounts, which noted the explosion served as the start of a coordinated attack. In addition, the bomb fell on a large open field with regular vehicle traffic, unlikely to be an ammonium nitrate storage area.

Based on the totality of the evidence, Amnesty International finds the most likely scenario to be a strike with a single unguided bomb. The Myanmar military has an extensive history of carrying out indiscriminate attacks similar to this one, including on other displaced persons camps.

Under international humanitarian law, which applies to the [ongoing non-international armed conflicts](#) in Myanmar, including [in Kachin State](#), indiscriminate attacks are those that fail to distinguish between military objectives and civilians or civilian objects, and as such are prohibited. Where an indiscriminate attack kills or injures civilians, it amounts to a war crime.

‘On that night, I even thought that I would die’

Amnesty International interviewed three witnesses of the attack and immediate aftermath.

One woman, whose family survived the blast, told Amnesty International: “I went to bed around 10.30pm. While I was listening to news about the conflict between Israel and Hamas on Facebook, at around 11.30pm, a huge bomb fell.

"I was staying with my niece in one room, and my sister and other people were staying in another room. I suddenly woke up once the heavy weapons exploded. While I was still laying in my bed, I called out to my family members... I said, 'We cannot stay here anymore. We need to move'.

"As we are IDPs [internally displaced people], we have to live on other people's land... We did not have a place to dig a bomb shelter. We had to hide in the concrete water drain on the side of the road. We sat there and kept on shouting for help... On that night, I even thought that I would die."

The woman and her nine family members remained hiding as mortar fire landed a short distance away, before escaping to take shelter nearby. She added: "When I look into the future of our [IDP] lives, I feel darkness."

A person staying nearby, who arrived approximately two hours after the bomb exploded, told Amnesty International: "We don't know how they dropped or fired the first bomb, but we know that the... follow-up firing came from where [Myanmar] military posts are located.

"I saw 28 bodies... Almost all [of the] people were killed because of the bomb blast. Some of their heads were destroyed beyond recognition. A mother and two of her children were among the victims. I could not bear it when I saw the baby and children die. I could not control my tears."

According to a list of victims seen by Amnesty International, which appears to have been compiled by the KIO, at least 12 children were among those killed, and at least 57 more people were injured.

Another witness living next to the camp, who said he heard the sound of a jet overhead, told Amnesty International the bomb left a huge crater in the middle of a nearby field. He said a Baptist church on a hill, like dozens of other civilian objects near where the bomb fell, was destroyed.

He said: "The explosion destroyed all the houses... In Kachin language, this kind of bomb is called a 'hell bomb'... I had to crawl out of the debris to survive... My whole body is in pain, and my ears are still buzzing from the bombing."

Amnesty International is [again calling](#) for the UN Security Council to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Myanmar and to refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, so that those responsible for crimes under international law can be brought to justice.

Background

Since carrying out a coup on 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military has

increasingly relied on air strikes to attack the civilian population.

The KIO/A is one of numerous ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar's border areas. The Myanmar military and the KIO/A have been engaged in a non-international armed conflict [for decades](#). Fighting between the two forces has continued since the coup, with the KIO/A active in the broader nation-wide movement against the military's rule.

In a May 2022 report, *'Bullets rained from the sky': War crimes and displacement in eastern Myanmar*, Amnesty International found that Myanmar's military had subjected civilians to collective punishment via widespread aerial and ground attacks, arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions, and the systematic looting and burning of villages.

A further investigation in October 2022 found that [deadly air strikes on a music concert in Kachin State](#), which killed dozens of people including civilians, appeared to fit a pattern of unlawful attacks. A November 2022 report, *Deadly Cargo: Exposing the Supply Chain that Fuels War Crimes in Myanmar*, identified companies involved in the supply chain of aviation fuel to the Myanmar military, and revealed new accounts of air strikes on civilians.

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ecoi.net description:

Kachin State: Air strike by Myanmar military against Mung Lai Hkyet camp for displaced persons on 9 October 2023; at least 28 persons, including 12 children, killed and 57 people injured

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