

Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)

Évènements en 2021

Military coup

On 1 February 2021, the Burmese Military – known as the Tatmadaw – staged a *coup d'état*, arresting the elected government and imposing a national state of emergency, all through powers allegedly granted under the 2008 Constitution. The rationale was that mass voter fraud, to the tune of 8 million illegal votes, had taken place during the landslide election win for the National League for Democracy (NLD). This has never been substantiated.

Acting President Myint Swe transferred legislative, executive and judicial power to the Commander in Chief. The state of emergency has since been extended to 2023.³

Aung San Su Kyi, the ousted leader of the NLD and former State Counsellor, has to date been held at an undisclosed location, only having been seen in court as she faces a slew of spurious charges ranging from breaking the official secrets act to corruption, inciting unrest and violating COVID-19 regulations.⁴ Her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw was issued a gagging order which prevents communication to the media, international organizations or foreign governments.⁵

The coup triggered mass protests and an ongoing civil disobedience movement (CDM), with the majority of the public sector remaining on strike.⁶ The military cracked down on the peaceful protest movement with lethal force, killing hundreds of people. This eventually provoked an armed uprising against its rule in the form of localized peoples' defence forces (PDFs). Many of these were trained by established Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and remain linked either by ethnicities, for example to the numerous Chinland Defence Forces (CDFs) operating across Chin State, or as part of the developing framework under the exiled National Unity Government's (NUG) long-term plan for a "Federal Union Army".⁷

On 7 September, the NUG declared a "peoples' defensive war". Duwa Lashi La, the acting president of the NUG issued a call for a nationwide uprising, which was delivered with a military Code of Conduct aimed at keeping the multiple PDF factions accountable to international human rights and humanitarian laws, and the Geneva Conventions.⁸

"Parallel" government-in-exile

In March, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), established by ousted lawmakers in the wake of the military coup in February, formed a National Unity Government (NUG) based on the mandate bestowed on it by the people in the 2020 general election, which the NLD won by a landslide. Despite being outlawed by the SAC junta, the NUG enjoys popular support in Myanmar and growing recognition abroad as the legitimate government.⁹

The NUG, which functions in exile, has purported to build a Union State with the following values as their guiding principles:

1. Democracy Rights, Gender Equality and basic Human Rights;
2. Equality and Self-Determination;
3. Collective Leadership;
4. Diversity, Social Harmony, Solidarity and Non-Discrimination; and
5. Protection of Minority Rights.¹⁰

In a move designed to gain the support of Western democratic nations, some initiatives spearheaded by the NUG's Ministry of Human Rights distanced the government-in-exile from previous controversial stances taken by the NLD. For example, in July, the NUG lodged a declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute delegating jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court (ICC) - an important step towards improved accountability for atrocities committed in Myanmar or by Myanmar nationals.¹¹

Similarly in June, the NUG released a new policy which, using the term "Rohingya", committed to ending human rights abuses against this group and promised to grant them equal citizenship rights, thus signalling a marked departure from the previous administration's stance.¹² The NUG also suggested that once a new constitution could be drafted they would repeal laws used to repress the Rohingya and other ethnic groups deemed to be outside of the "national races" groupings.¹³ National news outlets suggested this was a premature initiative and potentially opposed in Rakhine State.¹⁴

The establishment of the NUG was set out in Part II of the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC), which provides a framework for interim governance. This includes a National Unity Coordination Council (NUCC) as a platform for negotiating the FDC's strategic development.¹⁵ The NUCC members include the CRPH, currently serving as the interim legislature, the NUG as the executive, EAOs and ethnic political parties, CDM groups, general strike councils, and civil society organizations from across the country.

Interim councils have been established in some states, largely made up of ethnic political gureheads that report through the NUCC.¹⁶ At the local level, various “Peoples’ Administrations” have also been established. For example, the Mindat Peoples’ Administration announced in February that it would govern the Southern Chin Township under the 1948 Chin Special Division Act.¹⁷ In some cases, peoples’ administrations stretch further down than the township level and administer specific ethnic groups, such as the Yaw People’s Administration in Magway Region.

War crimes and crimes against humanity

The SAC’s violence became increasingly more brutal throughout the year as PDF combatants, members of the civil disobedience movement, aid workers and the civilian population at large were targeted with extreme and arbitrary violence. Multiple independent United Nations experts have stated that the Myanmar junta’s systematic and widespread attacks on the civilian population since February 2021 amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.¹⁸

Widespread instances of murder, torture, sexual violence, rape, enforced disappearances and the destruction of property have taken place.¹⁹ As of 31 December, the SAC has killed more than 1,300 civilians, arbitrarily detained over 11,000 and a further 1,964 civilians have had arrest warrants issued against them.²⁰ The UN reported in early December that there were 284,700 people newly displaced since the coup and at least two million newly in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021, while projecting that humanitarian needs would further escalate in 2022.²¹

In early December, 11 unarmed people, including teenagers and a disabled person, were captured and massacred by junta soldiers in a village in Sagaing Region. Photos of the incident seemed to infer that the victims had been set on fire while still alive.²² In similar circumstances, on Christmas Eve, 35 people including women and children were killed and burned by the military in Hpruso township, Kayah State.²³ Save the Children later confirmed that two of its staff were among those killed in the massacre.²⁴

The Tatmadaw has also been accused of instances of rape and other forms of gender-based violence. On 11 November, SAC troops entered the village of Aklui in Teddim township, Chin State, and entered the home of a 27-year-old woman who had given birth less than one month earlier and raped her. Reports suggest that the soldiers held her husband at gunpoint and forced him to watch the crime taking place. On the same night, soldiers raped the woman’s 30-year-old sister-in-law, who was seven months pregnant.²⁵ On 7 November, a junta soldier raped a 62-year-old woman in Kutkai township, Shan State.²⁶

Torture has also been systematically used across the country with reports of widespread and systematic mistreatment in detention.²⁷ Civilians arrested after being shot by security forces are often denied medical treatment and subsequently die from their injuries. There are multiple instances of mutilated bodies being returned to families. Some bear the marks of organ removal.²⁸ Others have been returned to their families alive, only to die a few hours later from their injuries.²⁹

A return to the “Four Cuts” doctrine

Since May, in places such as Chin, Kayah and Karen states, the SAC have been undertaking a well-known response to armed dissent by initiating a policy commonly known as the “four cuts”, i.e. restricting access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits to ethnic armed groups.³⁰ In implementing this strategy, local populations are treated as a central resource in the conflict area and exposed to extreme violence and livelihood destruction.

For example, in Chin State, the Tatmadaw have been implementing this policy since May, when the community of Mindat were violently suppressed for peacefully protesting against the coup. Meanwhile humanitarian access to the area has been arbitrarily restricted, medical supplies impounded or destroyed en route to IDP camps and those attempting to deliver stated items arbitrarily arrested and sometimes tortured.³¹ Similar practices have been documented in Kayah³² and Karen states.³³

Operation Anawrahta

During October, in the midst of an overwhelmingly supported CDM movement and in response to heavy losses inflicted by the CDF,³⁴ the SAC launched “Operation Anawrahta” in the Northwest.³⁵

The symbolic operation – named after the warrior-founder of the Burmese nation – was overseen by the Tatmadaw’s hard-line, newly placed commanders, Lieutenant General Than Hlaing, deputy interior minister and head of Myanmar’s militarized police force and Lieutenant General Tayza Kyaw, head of Bureau of Special Operations No 1.³⁶

The operation thus far has led to the destruction and burning of a large portion of Thantlang town and multiple villages across Chin State that military convoys and battalions pass through in clearance operations. Almost all of the town’s shops and businesses have been destroyed.³⁷

Targeting of churches and religious infrastructure

A prevailing pattern amongst the Tatmadaw’s military operations across the country has been the targeting of religious leaders and the wilful destruction of church buildings and other religious infrastructure in ethnic states and regions where the population form a Christian minority.

As crackdowns on protests and protestors grew, the military began actively pursuing religious leaders and religious institutions.

On 13 March, the Kachin Theological College and Seminary in the Kachin state capital, Myitkina, were raided when 15 military trucks surrounded the school and began to search the grounds and property. The school has since remained closed. Other Kachin churches were also subjected to targeted searches.³⁸

Searches sometimes resulted in the arrests of pastors. On 14 June, three pastors in Kachin State's Nawngmun township were detained on charges of incitement for allegedly using the phrase "ending military dictatorship" during a prayer for peace.³⁹ On 23 September, Pastor Ngai Kung was arrested in Ngaleng village in Chin State along with four others. The four other civilians were released but Pastor Ngai Kung remains detained by the military.⁴⁰

Between February and July, 14 churches were bombed in Kayah State, places where civilians were seeking shelter from the ongoing conflict across the state. In one such instance, on 24 May, the Tatmadaw bombed the Sacred Heart Church in Kayan Tharyar that was housing 300 people from Loikaw township, killing four and injuring eight more. White flags were raised around the religious infrastructure and soldiers had previously entered the premises and warned the people sheltering not to leave the church as a search took place.⁴¹ The day after, Cardinal Charles Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon, released a statement calling on the junta to refrain from targeting churches.⁴² Father Celso Ba Shwe from Demosa stated that churches were now unsafe to house IDPs due to their active targeting.⁴³

In Thantlang, the Assembly of God Church and a church belonging to the Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches were burned down by government soldiers.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, across Chin State, the Tatmadaw began implementing a policy whereby soldiers were ordered to use churches as bases on the rationale that they would be less likely to be attacked by local defence forces.⁴⁵ This inevitably led to looting and desecration of church belongings and infrastructure in Kanpetlet, Mindat, Falam and Hakha townships.

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The author and publisher of this article are well aware of the existing Myanmar/Burma name dispute; however, Myanmar is used consistently in this article to avoid confusion.

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