

## **Written evidence from European Karen Network (MYA0030)**

The European Karen Network (EKN) is a network of nine country-based ethnic Karen groups in Europe which aims to raise awareness about the situation in Karen State and Burma as a whole, and to pressure European governments to support democratic change and peace in Burma. Karen State is located in South-eastern Burma but the Karen people reside in many places in Burma and around the world.

### **Summary**

- As a people, the Karen want to live in peace and freedom where we can speak our languages, practice our culture and traditions, learn our history and develop our communities. We cannot do this unless there is a genuine civilian government in Burma that respects human rights, including ethnic rights, and until there is a political system that guarantees equality, fairness and the rule of law.
- This will never happen under military rule, but the sad truth is that our situation was deteriorating under the NLD-led government as well.
- We believe that decades of the international community ignoring atrocities committed by the Burmese military (the Tatmadaw) on ethnic groups in Burma, atrocities that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, helped lead the way to a situation where the Tatmadaw felt it possible to stage a coup. Decades of impunity have emboldened the Burmese military to believe it can get away with anything because so far, it has.
- That is why we need strong action from the international community, including the British government, in response to the coup. The toxic cycle of human rights violations - impunity – increased human rights violations – and impunity needs to be broken.
- The British government has a special responsibility to Burma in relation to the Karen people. We would like to see the British government supports initiative of international justice, including a referral of Burma to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and build on sanctions already imposed, to increase the economic pressure on the military.
- We appeal for greater humanitarian assistance. The situation in Karen areas is worsening by the day. We need more financial support for IDPs, refugees and people participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that have taken refuge in Karen areas.
- Lessons also need to be learnt by the British government on the overreliance of centralised aid spend and the millions of pounds wasted on the so-called peace process, despite stakeholders on the ground repeatedly telling officials that money were not always used effectively.

### **Historical background**

1. The root cause of the problem in Burma is the continuing refusal by central governments, whether civilian- or military-led, to accept Burma as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Consecutive governments have practiced “Burmanisation”, which is the idea of the superiority of the Burmese language, Burman culture and Buddhism over minority languages, cultures and religions. Burma’s many ethnic groups have been expected to assimilate into the majority population, not exist on equal terms within their own right. This has resulted in systematic discrimination, inequality and unfairness for ethnic and religious minorities.
2. The central government has been systematically crushing diversity in Burma for decades. In the cities, our Karen people are not allowed to learn our own languages in schools, practice our own culture freely, learn our histories and our traditions. In the remote areas in the

jungle, the Burmese military has been attacking the Karen people for decades, resulting in major human rights and humanitarian crises.

3. During the Second World War, the Karen sided with the British with the promise that we would be given our own independent country after the war. The Burmese military, the Burma Independent Army (BIA), sided with the Japanese. After the war, the British betrayed the Karen and we were not given our own country, but were instead part of the independent Burma. The BIA accused the Karen of being a lackey of the British colonial government and escalated repression and attacks on the Karen.
4. Our people have faced the most horrific human rights violations at the hands of the Burmese military, including: killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, rape and sexual violence, executions and destruction of whole villages, homes, and food supplies. The Burmese government blocks aid from reaching displaced Karen civilians. The Tatmadaw is breaking the Geneva Convention by deliberately targeting civilians.
5. The main political organisation representing the Karen in Burma is the Karen National Union (KNU), with its army the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), has been engaged in armed struggle to defend the Karen people and for greater autonomy since 1949.

### **The failed Peace Process**

6. The KNU represents the Karen people's struggle for self-determination, peace and equality through the formation of a federal democratic Burma. The KNU has been working hard to solve the problems for the Karen in a political and meaningful way and in cooperation with other political organisations representing other ethnic groups, to create long-lasting peace. The Burmese military has always been the main obstacle to peace as they are only interested in consolidating their rule and their power.
7. Nevertheless, in the past nine years, KNU signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military with the hope of building a foundation for dialogue and political negotiations. But the military used the ceasefire as an opportunity to strengthen its military presence in Karen areas. The ceasefire led to more Burmese army troops and more military supplies being brought into Karen areas. This has strengthened the Burmese military's hand, so that they have been able to increase attacks after the military coup in a way that wouldn't have been possible had it not been for the so-called "peace process".
8. Karen State has never seen peace, even during the period of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in the country. Prior to the coup, the Burmese military repeatedly broke the NCA, significantly increased its troop movements beyond the ceasefire line, and began new attacks in Mutraw, Karen State on 20th December 2020, forcing villagers from their homes. The Burmese government led by the National League for Democracy's Aung San Suu Kyi did nothing to help stop the attack, not even condemning it. Our Karen people lived in the harsh reality between brutal Burmese military and repressive policies by the NLD-led government.
9. There needs to be review or inquiry within the international community about its multimillion support for the "Peace Process" - including support from the British government - that seems to have been based more on wishful thinking than any real analysis of the prospect of genuine peace with the Tatmadaw as a still dominant political force in the country. Also, this support was heavily weighted towards central government structures, further undermining ethnic minority groups' negotiating power and capital.
10. During the period of the NLD-led civilian government, all the way up to the military coup, more and more international aid went through the central government, sidestepping genuine grass-roots organisations, including ethnic organisations with real knowledge, skills and infrastructure to run truly functional and efficient projects in their own areas.

## The military coup

11. On 1st February, the Burmese military staged a coup in the country, detaining many politicians, artists, activists and others. In response, people formed the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and started protesting across the country. Karen people across Burma including in KNU-controlled areas took part in these nationwide protests. Many workers employed by the government, including doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, bankers and local administrators went on strike, refusing to work for the military regime.
12. The military responded with violence, killing and injuring peaceful protesters and civilians including children. The violent response by the military has increased ever since CDM was launched. More and more pro-democracy activists, students, politicians and CDM strikers have taken refuge in Karen State and other ethnic areas. These areas are often outside of control of the Burmese army, offering more protection.
13. These areas are now in desperate need of more humanitarian support from the international community, to deal with this large influx of people, who have often left their homes with little or nothing.
14. At the same time, the Burmese military has increased its attacks in Karen State after the military coup. The Burmese military uses fighter jets bombing villages and fields. Before the coup, the last major airstrike that took place in Karen State was in 1995. Now, indiscriminate mortar shelling by the Burmese Army occurs on a daily basis while their drones fly over and identify targets for attacks. At least 14 people have been killed and 28 have been injured.
15. According to OCHA, approximately 40,000 people have been displaced in South-Eastern Burma since December 2020 up until April. Before the coup, 12,000 people were displaced in Karen State and Bago region<sup>1</sup>.
16. The Burmese military has shot at an aid convoy that carried life-saving supplies for IDPs. Indiscriminate attacks against civilians are war crimes, and blocking aid and obstructing aid to displaced civilians is crimes against humanity.
17. As a result of these increased attacks by the Tatmadaw and the increased number of IDPs, the humanitarian need is huge. People need shelter, food, medicines, drinking water. Local Karen organisations are doing a phenomenal job of supporting the influx of IDPs and others taking refuge in the area, but they need much more international financial support.
18. There has been a large influx of children into these areas who need access to education. There are local organisations offering education but they need financial support.
19. Over 3,000 displaced Karen crossed the border into Thailand in March but the Thai government forced them back into the conflict zone. The Thai government has also blocked the delivery of aid to Karen IDPs. Both these actions by the Thai government are in breach of international refugee law. It has recently been revealed that the Thai authorities have pushed back another 2,000 Karen refugees in May<sup>2</sup>.
20. According to The Border Consortium, there are 87,000 refugees from Burma in camps on the Thai-Burma border. The absolute majority of these are Karen. Over 100,000 refugees from the camps have been resettled around the world since 2006, overwhelmingly in the United States<sup>3</sup>, and around 500 in the UK.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Myanmar%20-%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%20Number%20No.%206.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fortifyrights.org/tha-inv-2021-05-12/?fbclid=IwAR1o-Js4qa5pE0TLu6mBOCYaDoomOO3H94WabUSW9wfZtB35CtDDrdOKAH4>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/where-we-work/camps-in-thailand/>

## Recommendations

21. We appreciate the humanitarian aid from the British government to date, but there is an urgent need of increased aid for refugees, IDPs and people from the CDM who are now taking refuge in Karen areas.
22. The UK government should prioritise aid through local grass-roots organisations and consider re-introducing cross-border aid into ethnic areas of Burma, including Karen State.
23. We need to see the British government putting pressure on Thailand to stop forcing refugees back to Burma's conflict zone and to stop blocking aid to IDPs.
24. We want to see justice for our people. We want the British government to support the referral of the situation of Burma to the ICC, and build a coalition of countries that support such a referral, to put pressure on China and Russia, which without more international pressure are likely to veto a referral. We want to see an end to Burmese military impunity to prevent further crimes.
25. We want the international community to cut the economic life-line of the Burmese military regime. We welcome the sanctions placed on MEHL, MEC and MGE by the British government, and urge for further sanctions that target the economic interests of the Burmese military, including sanctions on timber.
26. We want to see the UK government leading efforts to persuade countries to introduce arms embargoes on Burma, as a way of sidestepping a likely veto at the UN Security Council for a global arms embargo.
27. We would like to see a review of UK policy towards Burma during the last decade, so lessons can be learnt on impunity, the naïve optimism regarding Burma's "democratisation" that excluded ethnic groups, and centralised aid spend<sup>4</sup>.

**21 May 2021**

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<sup>4</sup> As suggested by this IDC report <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/1054/105402.htm>, and this FAC report: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaaff/435/435.pdf>, both in the previous Parliament.