

Written evidence from International Karen Organisation (MYA0042)

International Karen Organization is a community based organisation made up of ethnic Karen groups around the world to raise awareness of Karen suffering and human rights violations in Burma, and advocate for stronger international action against Burmese military to help promote genuine peace in the country.

Summary

1. The Karen people and the people of Burma are doing everything we can to resist the military dictatorship. But we need much more support from the UK and international community.
2. The UK response to the Burmese military coup has been too slow and weak. More than 800 civilians have been killed, over 5,000 people have been arrested and over 60,000 have been displaced. We need to see strong UK and international action against the military to end impunity and prevent further crimes.
3. The UK has made many statements regarding military atrocities since the coup, but did not raise its voice over the escalating attacks in Karen State, where at least 15 people have been killed, 28 people have been injured and over 40,000 have been displaced. Many people are hiding in the jungle without food, medicine and shelter.
4. The UK must end its silence on escalating attacks by the Burma Army against civilians in Karen State, and immediately demand the military to stop the attacks and call for unrestricted humanitarian access to displaced villagers and withdrawal of Burmese army troops.
5. The UK should increase aid to the people of Burma, and should prioritise providing life-saving aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) through cross-border mechanisms run by local civil society.

Background

6. The Majority of the Karen population are in Burma, while many are in Thailand. We call our land Kawthoolei, located in Southern and Eastern Burma. However, a large number of Karen people are in Irrawaddy Delta and central Burma. There are several tribes within the Karen ethnicity, but the most predominant groups are Pwo Karen and Swaw (Sgaw) Karen.
7. Due to the Burmese violent atrocities, and the social and political repression of the Karen people in Burma, the Karen had no choice but to take up arms and defend our people in our struggle for rights and freedom. The Karen National Union (KNU) is a leading democratic Karen organisation representing the Karen people with the aims to achieve peace, human rights and democracy in a federal Burma. The KNU was founded in 1947, and its predecessor organisations date back to 1881.
8. Our Karen people have been suffering for decades under Burmese governments, during periods of civilian governments and military dictatorships. Karen civilians have been subjected to serious human rights violations including forced labour, looting, extortion, destruction of homes, villages, crops and fields, forced relocation, extrajudicial killing

including women and children, beating, torture and the systematic rape of women and children by the Burmese Army.

9. Many of us have been forced to flee our homes, hiding as displaced people in the jungle. Hundreds of thousands now live in refugee camps along the border of Thailand, or have had to find new homes all over the world. In reality, our people just would like to go back home and live in peace.
10. There still hasn't been any justice or accountability to hold the Burmese military to account for their crimes. The generals continue to enjoy impunity which encouraged them to step up attacks in other ethnic areas committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Kachin, Shan, Rohingya and Arakan.

The flawed peace process

11. In 2012, the Burmese government began a so called "peace process", mainly designed to ease international pressures and consolidate military rule by allowing very limited political reforms under a new military constitution. The KNU, with other ethnic organisations, signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), with the hope to engage in political dialogue with the Burmese military that would lead to a political solution.
12. However, the Burmese military was not interested in dialogue and genuine peace. We have seen an increased military presence by the Burma Army and hundreds of incidents of the Burma Army breaking the terms of the NCA. In fact, since the peace process, there has been an increase in conflict nationwide, although, Karen State was one of the few areas where there was a significant reduction in conflict.
13. We did warn the international community that the ceasefire was only a pause button, not a stop button to the conflict. The voices of people from conflict zones were ignored by the UK and others. Ethnic people continue to suffer as the Burmese Army never stopped attacking us. The UK support for the deeply flawed peace process was delaying real political progress in creating a workable process to bring real peace to our country.

Military Coup

14. Peace can never be achieved under military dictatorship. We strongly believe that military impunity and the failure of the UK and international community to take strong action against international crimes committed by the Burmese military have enabled Min Aung Hlaing to stage a coup in Burma.
15. Now, the very same army that has been attacking the Karen people for decades is once again staging a coup in Burma, ruling the whole country by force and cracking down on protesters. Tens of thousands of Karen people from both Burmese government-controlled areas and KNU areas join hands together, united in opposing the coup and opposing the occupation of Karen lands by the Burmese military.
16. In remote jungle where there is no media, brave villagers in Taw Oo (Taungoo) and Dooplaya areas held protests in several locations in front of the Burmese Army's camps. The army that has been attacking them, killing them, and abusing them for the past 70 years.

17. Karen Youth Network, a leading political activist group in Burma joined hands with other ethnic and political groups in their demand for an end to authoritarian rule, the release of all political prisoners and the establishment of a genuine federal democratic Burma. Many Karen workers take part in Civil Disobedient Movement (CDM) where they have been arrested by the Burmese security forces.
18. Like many people across Burma, Karen protesters were killed, arrested and seriously injured during violent crackdowns by the Burmese police force including in Irrawaddy Delta, Mandalay, Yangon, Hpa-An, Myawaddy, Dawei and other places. Currently, high profile detained Karen activists include Saw Lin Htet, Saw Poe Kwar, Nant Chit Su Lwin, Saw Oak Kar Oo, and Nant Su Myat Naing.

Attacks in Karen State

19. While the Burmese military regime killed, arrested and tortured protesters across Burma, their soldiers intensified military offensives, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in their indiscriminate attacks in Karen State. Since early December 2020 the Burma Army has been deliberately firing artillery shells into civilian areas, breaking the NCA. The attacks against civilian villages are taking place inside Salween Peace Park in Mutraw (Papun) and Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin) districts of northern Karen State.
20. We are truly shocked to see the UK's silence over these attacks, despite being one of the main donors to the Joint Peace Fund, which is supposed to support the peace process.
21. The Burmese military fighter jets bombed Karen State again for the first time in almost thirty years. On 27th March, jets flew over the Day Pu No area of Mutraw (Papun) District in eastern Karen State, Burma. At night they returned twice, and one of the flyovers bombed the area, killing at least three people and injuring more. Many homes were damaged or destroyed and more than 1,000 local people were forced to flee and hide in the jungle. Night time air strikes represents a new military capability. In the past ten years the military has purchased significant new equipment and technology, and this is being used against the civilian population.
22. Our people worked so hard in the past 10 years to rebuild our lives and live in peace while ensuring our children get basic education, with very limited freedom and resources, only to be bombed and destroyed by Burma Army's air strike. To these days, Jets are still flying low over Karen State, prompting fears of more bombing while drones are also being used by the Burmese military to identify targets.
23. The Karen Peace Support Network, representing a broad range of Karen civil society, has been calling for the withdrawal of all Burmese army troops in our areas. Our people will only feel safe when there is a political settlement in place that guarantees human rights and genuine peace.

Humanitarian crisis

24. Appallingly, refugees and IDPs have never been prioritised by the UK and international donors despite being some of the most vulnerable communities in the country. Currently, there are over 40,000 IDPs in Karen areas who are in desperate need of food, medicine, clothes and clean water. Humanitarian aid has also long been restricted in Karen areas by the Burmese authorities.

25. Thousands crossed into Thailand for safety, but the Thai government harshly forced them back into conflict zone in Karen State while blocking aid to Karen IDPs. Sadly, the Thai government is favouring relationship with the Burmese military over upholding the international refugee law.
26. Meanwhile, in squalid camps along the border of Thailand and Burma, refugees faced aid cuts after the fake peace process, where they are left without proper food, shelter, medical care and education for their children.
27. Now, thousands of protesters from across Burma who have escaped brutal military crackdown and fled to ethnic areas since the coup are also in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. The majority are in Karen State.
28. The Burmese military has shown it will continue to indiscriminately target civilians and cause more displacement, while they continue to restrict humanitarian access from inside Burma.

Our calls

29. The UK is not doing everything it can do. The UK must do everything it can to apply more pressure on the military.
30. We appreciate some economic sanctions imposed by the UK government against the Burmese military. We strongly believe it will reduce revenue for the military, which is paying for military equipment used against our people.
31. We call on the UK to impose more sanctions;
 1. Stopping imports of timber and gems from Burma.
 2. Stopping payment of oil and gas revenues.
 3. Requesting other countries to impose an arms embargo and a ban on the supply of any equipment and technology to the Burmese military.
32. UK should publicly state their support for referring the situation of Burma to the International Criminal Court. UK must join the Rohingya genocide case at the International Court of Justice. Karen communities joined Rohingya at the court to support them when the case began.
33. UK government must urgently and flexibly work with local civil society organisations in Karen State and other ethnic states where Burmese military attacks and militarisation have caused major displacement and increased poverty.
34. UK government must also work with local civil society organisations to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to protesters taking refuge in Karen State.
35. The Burmese Army has been committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against us for so long. The UK has recently condemned the Burmese military for using force against protesters in Burma. We are explicitly urging the UK to also condemn the Burmese military for their continuous attacks against Karen and other ethnic groups. Concerns raised by the UK and the international community will make a difference for grassroots civilians on the ground, as the military will likely refrain from further and more brutal attacks.
36. UK must also provide support for local Karen and other grassroots organisations documenting human rights abuses.
37. UK must put pressure on the government of Thailand to stop forcing refugees back to Burma and to stop blocking aid to Karen IDPs.

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