

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

MARCH 2023 REPORT

Summary. This report reviews the March 2023 developments relating to human rights in Myanmar.

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I. Coup, Crackdown on Protests and Civilian Resistance

The military continues to crack down on resistance forces, particularly in areas under martial law. Around 66 military troops were killed between March 1-3 in clashes with People's Defense Forces ("PDFs") and an ethnic armed organization in Magway, Sagaing and Mandalay regions and Kayah State.¹ Between March 4-6, 35 troops were killed in Magway, Sagaing and Mandalay regions and Mon State.² Eighteen of those soldiers were killed in a joint attack by ten PDF groups in Wetlet Township, Sagaing Region on March 5.³ Between March 6-8, at least 42 troops were killed in Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway regions and Kayah State.⁴ At least 74 troops were killed between March 9-12 in Mandalay and Sagaing regions and Chin, Kayah and Mon States.⁵ Resistance groups in Pekon Township, southern Shan State reported that at least 31 military troops, four resistance fighters and three civilians were killed between March 11-12.⁶

Additionally, between March 12-17, at least 79 military troops were reportedly killed in Mandalay, Sagaing, Magway and Tanintharyi regions and southern Shan State.⁷ At least 121 troops were killed between March 15-19 in Kayin, Kayah and Chin States, as well as in Sagaing and Magway regions.⁸ At least 40 of those soldiers were killed and 30 were injured on March 15 in Kyainseikgyi Township, Kayin State.⁹ Between March 21-27, around 140 troops and ten resistance fighters were killed in clashes in Kayah, Kachin, Kayin and Chin States and in Sagaing, Magway and Bago regions.¹⁰ Ninety of those soldiers were killed and around 50 were injured in clashes that took place between March 20-23 in Demoso Township, Kayah State.¹¹

A group of around 70 troops, called the "Ogre Column" because of their focus on capturing, torturing and killing members of resistance groups instead of raiding villages, has reportedly been targeting leaders of resistance groups in the southern Sagaing Region since late February.¹² After killing and dismembering the bodies of five resistance group members,¹³ they also killed 17 residents in Tar Taing.¹⁴ Kyaw Zaw, a leader of a resistance group in the area, was found disemboweled and dismembered.¹⁵ The deaths of ten more civilians in the southern Sagaing Region were also attributed to the Ogre Column. Most of the victims were internally displaced people ("IDPs") from Ma Yoe Kone, a village around ten kilometers away.¹⁶

Multiple raids and airstrikes were conducted on villages in Yinmabin and Wetlet Townships, Sagaing Region on March 1.¹⁷ More than 80 homes were destroyed in Wetlet Township¹⁸ and four residents were killed in Kone village, Yinmabin Township.¹⁹ According to a resident of Kone, only 40 out of the 600 homes in the village are still standing after the military's arson attacks.²⁰ On March 4, a group of around 130 soldiers raided the village of Phalangon in Ye-U Township.²¹ Five members of an anti-military regime police force were killed.²² At least 89 houses in at least ten villages in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region were torched from March 6-9.²³

Twenty-two civilians, including three monks, were killed by the military at the Nam Nein Village monastery on March 11.²⁴ Eleven villagers remain missing.²⁵ Less than a week later, the National Unity Government ("NUG") held a press conference presenting forensic evidence obtained from the monastery.²⁶ The NUG asserted that the bullets used to kill the 29 civilians were manufactured by the military.²⁷ The NUG also noted that many bodies showed evidence of torture.²⁸

Military troops attacked an IDP camp near Hle Htun village in Pekhon Township on March 12.²⁹ Homes were torched and four people, including an elderly couple, were reportedly killed.³⁰ On March 21, military troops raided and torched more than 130 houses in two villages in Launglon Township, Tanintharyi Region.³¹ One villager was killed while trying to put out the fire.³² Residents say that there had been no fighting in the area prior to the attack.³³

II. Political Developments

A. Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Seventeen members of Myanmar's immigration department, headed by Aung Myo, the social welfare minister for Rakhine State, travelled to Cox's Bazar on the Bangladeshi coast for a week to interview Rohingya refugees to verify their repatriation claims and select members for a pilot "family-based repatriation" project.³⁴ Around 70 Rohingya refugees from 20 families were reviewed for verification.³⁵ A UNHCR spokesperson told *AFP* that UNHCR had "facilitated the transport of some officials" from Myanmar to Bangladesh "in support of interaction between the de facto authorities in Myanmar and refugees."³⁶ However, the UNHCR maintains that conditions in Myanmar remain unsafe for the return of Rohingya refugees.³⁷

B. Corruption

The Supreme Court has rejected an appeal to seize Naypyitaw land from the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation, a charity founded by jailed former State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi.³⁸ In 2018, Aung San Suu Kyi bought about 100 acres of land in Naypyitaw for the planned La Yaung Taw project to establish a vocational training school and forest to raise public awareness of the impacts of deforestation.³⁹ Following the 2021 coup, the junta accused Aung San Suu Kyi of abusing her power to purchase land for the project at lower than market value and filed three counts of corruption against her.⁴⁰ A junta court sentenced her to three years in jail for each charge, to be served concurrently.⁴¹ In December, the junta-controlled Attorney-General's Office appealed, seeking to seize the land and buildings for the La Yaung Taw project.⁴² The Supreme Court has rejected the appeal.⁴³ However, the rejection of the regime's appeal is not final and it could still submit a special appeal to confiscate the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation assets.⁴⁴

A Yangon guerrilla group, the Urban Owls, says it has killed Minn Tayzar Nyunt Tin, a junta legal and money-laundering aide, in Yangon Region.⁴⁵ The 52-year-old founder of the Biz Law Consult Myanmar legal firm was shot at least 13 times on a Thanlyin Township street on March 24.⁴⁶ Minn Tayzar Nyunt Tin operated firms in Thailand, India, Vietnam, Singapore and Cambodia.⁴⁷ He has been accused of money laundering for the junta and its generals and, according to the Urban Owls, his companies helped buy condos, land and establishing companies.⁴⁸

C. International Community / Sanctions

The United Nations special envoy for Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, told the UN General Assembly that there is no prospect for a negotiated peace settlement in Myanmar as "both sides are intent on prevailing by force."⁴⁹ Heyzer also stressed that "violence continues at an alarming

scale” in Myanmar, “putting more civilian lives at risk and further complicating humanitarian operations.”⁵⁰ Heyzer, as well as human rights groups, have condemned the international community for its failure to take effective action on Myanmar over the past two years.⁵¹

The United States announced US\$26 million in new humanitarian aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and other regions in Asia, bringing the total humanitarian aid provided by the U.S. to US\$2.1 billion since August 2017.⁵²

Burma Campaign UK has called on the UK Foreign Secretary to increase aid to Rohingya refugees following newly released figures showing that the UK government has cut aid to Rohingya refugees by over 80% since 2019.⁵³

China has called on the junta to increase security cooperation between Myanmar and China, including collaboration between the two nations’ police forces.⁵⁴ China has also signed an agreement with the junta to jointly implement wind power projects in Rakhine State.⁵⁵

III. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

Myanmar’s election commission announced that Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (“NLD”) party would be dissolved for failing to re-register under a new military-drafted electoral law.⁵⁶ Out of 90 existing parties, only 50 have applied to register under the new rules.⁵⁷ The dissolution of the NLD has drawn wide international condemnation.⁵⁸

Ousted NLD lawmaker Thet Htar Hnong was sentenced to a further 11 years in prison on March 30 under the Counter-Terrorism Law.⁵⁹ Thet Htar Hnong had previously been sentenced to one year in jail on an incitement charge in 2022.⁶⁰

Senior monk and leader of the Pyigyitagon anti-dictatorship strike group, Sayadaw Agga Wuntha, and five other men were detained by a junta task force in a raid of Lak Ka Pin Village in Myinmu Township, Sagaing Region on February 26.⁶¹ Three civilians were killed in the raid.⁶² Sayadaw Agga Wuntha has been charged with incitement by the military regime for protesting the 2021 coup.⁶³

At least 1,113 people have died in regime custody since the start of the February 2021 coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (“AAPP”).⁶⁴ According to the rights group, many were shot, set on fire or tortured to death shortly after being detained.⁶⁵ Four political prisoners, including former NLD lawmaker Ko Phyo Zeya Thaw and veteran democracy activist Ko Jimmy, were executed by the junta in July last year for fighting the regime.⁶⁶

On March 13, United Nations-appointed human rights experts called for social media companies to take action against the online abuse of Myanmar women.⁶⁷ Pro-regime accounts promoting a common ultranationalist, discriminatory and Islamophobic narrative have proliferated on Telegram, in particular, due to its lax content moderation.⁶⁸ Some pro-military accounts are reportedly doxxing and harassing Myanmar women, “causing women to retreat

from public life.”⁶⁹ The UN experts applauded Telegram’s recent decision to remove some pro-junta accounts for harassment.⁷⁰ They urged social media companies to proactively identify, prevent, and mitigate human rights abuses on their respective platforms.⁷¹

Myanmar was downgraded from “repressed” to “closed” in international non-governmental organization CIVICUS Monitor’s 2022 annual civic freedoms report, published on March 16.⁷² The rating is based on “the respect in policy and practice for the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression which are underpinned by the state’s duty to protect civil society.”⁷³ CIVICUS Monitor downgraded Myanmar because of the military junta’s increased suppression of media and civilian groups.⁷⁴ The 2022 Registration of Associations Law has made it even more difficult for civil society and non-governmental organizations to operate in Myanmar.⁷⁵

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

On March 7, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland published a report entitled “We Dare Not Return,” which details human rights violations committed by the military junta in Mon State, Kayin State and the Tanintharyi region.⁷⁶ According to the report, the junta prohibits the public from using social media to share news about armed clashes, bomb explosions or other information related to the resistance.⁷⁷ The report states that the junta routinely arrests reporters and people who record their activities.⁷⁸ In the areas covered by the report, the military junta has arrested 166 people and sentenced more than 50 people to prison for violating the social media ban.⁷⁹

On International Women’s Day on March 8, Reporters Without Borders called for the release of the 73 women journalists imprisoned around the world.⁸⁰ Former *BBC* journalist Htet Htet Khine remains imprisoned in Yangon’s Insein Prison.⁸¹ She was sentenced to two three-year sentences with hard labor under §505(a) for incitement and under the Unlawful Association Act.⁸²

IV. Economic Development

A. Economic Development—Legal Framework, Foreign Investment

Keppel Land and its subsidiary, Double Peak Holdings, have announced a divestment of their 100% stake in Greenfield Development for US\$57.4 million.⁸³ Greenfield Development wholly owns Straits Greenfield, which has the right to build and operate a hotel in Myanmar.

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing met a Russian trade delegation for the second time in four months to discuss the promotion of trade and investment between the two countries.⁸⁴ The delegation from Fund RC-Investments, an investment platform of the Roscongress Foundation under the direct control of Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, first met Min Aung Hlaing in November last year.

Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels, the operator of the upscale Peninsula hotel chain, has said it is prepared to resume its stalled US\$130 million project in Yangon whenever conditions are deemed “suitable.”⁸⁵ The project is a joint venture with two companies controlled by

Myanmar tycoon Serge Pun’s Yoma Group: Singapore-listed Yoma Strategic Holdings and Yangon-listed First Myanmar Investment. Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels owns 70% of the joint venture, while Yoma holds the remainder.

B. Economic Development—Infrastructure, Major Projects

On February 23, Global Star Co. Ltd. unveiled a partnership with United Amara Bank and Huawei to distribute its FusionSolar line of products in Myanmar.⁸⁶ Global Star is a subsidiary of Dragon Group, which is owned by junta official Win Aung.⁸⁷ Thurane Aung, managing director of Global Star and the son of Win Aung, told local media outlets that Global Star is planning to distribute Huawei’s solar inverters and batteries to three market segments in Myanmar, starting with household use, then expanding to the industrial level and eventually supplying the products for use in mega-projects.⁸⁸

C. Land Seizure

See the “Corruption” section above.

V. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

On February 27, the Karenni Army (“KA”), Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (“KNDF”) and local PDF groups jointly attacked regime forces and the junta-allied Pa-O National Army (“PNO”) in Pekon Township, southern Shan State and reportedly killed nine junta soldiers.⁸⁹ Further, at least ten junta soldiers were reportedly killed in Bawlakhe Township, Kayah State on February 27 when the KA and the KNDF jointly occupied a military outpost.⁹⁰

On March 3, six junta soldiers were reportedly killed in Kyaikhto Township, Mon State in a joint attack by the Karen National Liberation Army (“KNLA”) and Kyaikhto Revolution Force on regime patrols on the Yangon-Mawlamyaing Highway.⁹¹

On March 15, at least 40 junta soldiers were killed and 30 others injured in Kyainseikgyi Township, Kayin State in an attack by the combined forces of PDF groups and the KNLA.⁹²

At least three regime soldiers were reportedly killed on March 16, when the KA and the KNDF seized a regime outpost near the Than Lwin River on the Thai border.⁹³

On March 21, the KNLA together with local PDFs dropped bombs on the headquarters of a military division in Kyaikhto Township, Mon State.⁹⁴ Separately, ten junta soldiers were reportedly killed in an ambush by the Kachin Independence Army in Putao Township, Kachin State on March 19.⁹⁵ On March 21, at least 13 junta troops were reportedly killed in Palaw Township, Tanintharyi Region when five PDF groups and the Karen National Defense Force clashed with 200 junta soldiers that had been traveling through the area.⁹⁶

Between March 20-23, 90 junta troops were reportedly killed and more than 50 were injured during clashes between the junta and several local PDFs along with the KA in Daw Ta Ma Gyi Village.⁹⁷

On March 26, junta fighter jets bombed two villages in Shwegu Township, Kachin State in response to attacks by PDF-Shwegu and the Kachin Independence Army on March 23 and March 24.⁹⁸

On March 28, the KNLA reportedly seized and burned down the strategic Mal Kha Hta military outpost on the bank of the Than Lwin River near the Thai border in Hpapun District, Kayin State.⁹⁹

Three regime soldiers were killed and seven injured in Kyaikhto Township, Mon State on March 28 when several PDF groups and the KNLA conducted drone strikes on a military checkpoint at Mayan Chaung Village.¹⁰⁰

B. Peace Talks

Between March 28-29, the junta-appointed National Solidarity and Peace Negotiation Committee held informal talks with seven National Ceasefire Agreement (“NCA”) signatories in Naypyitaw.¹⁰¹ The meeting primarily focused on holding another peace conference in the future and proposed amendments to the constitution.¹⁰² The seven NCA signatories were the Restoration Council of Shan State, Arakan Liberation Party, New Mon State Party, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council, Lahu Democratic Union, and Pa-O National Liberation Organization.¹⁰³

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- ¹⁰⁰ The Irrawaddy, March 30, 2023: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/at-least-40-myanmar-junta-troops-resistance-commander-killed-in-four-days-of-clashes.html>.
- ¹⁰¹ The Irrawaddy, March 31, 2023: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-meets-allied-ethnic-armed-groups-eyes-peace-conference.html>.
- ¹⁰² *Id.*
- ¹⁰³ *Id.*