

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

JUNE 2023 REPORT

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

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I. Coup, Crackdown on Protests and Civilian Resistance

Attacks between the military forces and resistance groups continue across the country. Multiple resistance groups worked together to ambush two checkpoints in Durian Seik village, which is along the border of Kayin and Mon States, on June 1.¹ Forty-five military soldiers and police officers were killed and 19 were injured.² On June 6, resistance forces raided a Pyu Saw Htee (pro-military group) militia village, where around 50 soldiers were stationed, in Shwe Bo Township, Sagaing Region.³ As a result, 18 soldiers were killed and more than 20 were injured.⁴

From June 8 to 11, at least 44 soldiers and five resistance fighters were killed while fighting in Shan and Chin States and Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway Regions.⁵ At least 20 of these soldiers and four resistance fighters were killed in Pekon Township, southern Shan State on June 11, when three resistance groups attacked a column of soldiers assigned to the area.⁶

At least another 44 military troops and 12 resistance fighters were killed from June 22-25 in Sagaing, Magway, Bago and Tanintharyi Regions and Kayin State.⁷ In Sagaing Region, at least 35 resistance fighters were killed from June 25-28, 14 of whom were killed in the east of Sagaing Township on June 28.⁸ Fifteen resistance fighters and three civilians were killed when around 100 army troops assaulted a People's Defence Force ("PDF") base in Ngazun Township, Sagaing Region on June 25.⁹ In Ye Township, Mon Region on June 26 and 27, more than 30 soldiers were killed in attacks.¹⁰ Around 29 military troops were killed in Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway Regions and in Mon State from June 27-29.¹¹

Eighteen civilians were taken as hostages when the military raided Kawlin Township from May 26 to June 4.¹² At least nine of these hostages were later executed, while seven others were reportedly released on June 3.¹³ On June 4, around 150 soldiers began raiding Salingyi Township, which led tens of thousands of residents to flee from their homes.¹⁴ From June 9 to 11, more than 100 houses in Nyaungpingyi Village in Salingyi Township were burned down by military forces.¹⁵ On June 27, the military conducted two airstrikes in Pale Township, killing at least 11 civilians and wounding five others.¹⁶

In early June, at least five civilians of Taung Khin Yan village in Gangaw Township, Magway Region were killed, and several others were detained, by military forces in retaliation for the death of a military officer, an attack against a police station in May and for the refusal of individuals to join the Pyu Saw Htee.¹⁷ A series of attacks between military forces and resistance groups took place in Moebye, Pekhon Township from May 27 to early June, in an effort by the military to regain control of the area.¹⁸ Three residents were killed on June 5.¹⁹ Overall, as of June 8, nine civilians, including three children, have been killed in the clashes.²⁰

On June 16, a column of more than 70 troops raided villages and burned homes in the Tanintharyi Region, causing around 6,000 residents to flee the area.²¹ Seven residents were captured.²² In Thayetchaung Township, at least 17 people were injured and at least three civilians died during the military raid.²³

II. Political Developments

A. Rohingya Refugee Crisis

On June 1, the World Food Programme made a second round of food ration cuts to Rohingya refugees after a funding shortfall of US\$56 million.²⁴ The food ration cuts are reportedly pressuring refugees to return to Myanmar.²⁵ However, refugees that return are required to pass through transit centers in Rakhine State before being resettled in a “designated area of 15 newly constructed villages” which the returning Rohingya will “not be allowed to leave freely.”²⁶

Several countries have agreed to support Rohingya refugees. Japan has pledged to provide \$2.9 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to assist Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh.²⁷ Additionally, both the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency have agreed to cooperate in handling Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar.²⁸

B. Corruption

On June 2, the Union Supreme Court, which is controlled by the Myanmar regime, agreed to hear the special appeal by Aung San Suu Kyi against her five-year sentence for improperly accepting money and gold.²⁹ Aung San Suu Kyi is currently serving a 33-year sentence under several convictions.³⁰

According to the activist network Myanmar Mining Watch Network, the Myanmar regime benefits from exploiting natural resources, particularly rare earth mining, in ethnic areas.³¹ Since the coup in February 2021, in the absence of law enforcement and transparency, the Network noted a surge of mining activities in ethnic areas like Kachin State, Shan State, Kayah State and Kayin State, pursuant to which gold, jade, rare earth elements, amber, tin, tungsten and white gold are extracted.³² Kachin residents have reported that Military Council troops were actively involved in gold mining operations.³³ Due to these operations, nearby rivers have significantly changed their courses giving rise to drinking water shortages, the destruction of tea plantations and vegetable farms and health issues.³⁴ According to the Network, in addition to the detrimental impacts on the surrounding environment, gold mining has also caused social problems.³⁵ The influx in male workers has reportedly resulted in sexual harassment of local women near the region and the Network states that it is also a driving factor in growing drug use, even among children, to cope with cold weather.³⁶

An event in Naypyitaw was held on June 29 that resulted in the donation of 16.177 billion kyats (US \$7.6 million) for a colossal marble sitting-Buddha statue commissioned by junta boss Min Aung Hlaing.³⁷ The guest list included prominent business tycoons such as the founder of CB Bank, Khin Maung Aye, and the chairman of Max Myanmar Group of Companies, Zaw Zaw.³⁸ One notable attendee was Maung Weik, the founder of Sae Paing Development Ltd.³⁹ He was released from detention on the same day after being held for two years for allegedly making around US \$550,000 in illegal payments to deposed civilian leader

Aung San Suu Kyi to protect his business.⁴⁰ Maung Weik was a key prosecution witness in corruption cases against Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy, including the party's vice chair, Dr. Zaw Myint Maung.⁴¹

C. International Community / Sanctions

The U.S. imposed additional sanctions on the Myanmar Ministry of Defense and two regime-controlled banks that facilitate foreign currency exchange within Myanmar.⁴²

Japan is withdrawing its Official Development Assistance to the Yangon-Mandalay railway, a project that was focused on upgrading aging rails and bridges between the two cities.⁴³

During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States, Prime Minister Modi and U.S. President Joe Biden released a joint statement expressing deep concern about Myanmar.⁴⁴ The statement also called for the release of all political prisoners, the establishment of constructive dialogue and a transition to an inclusive, federal democratic system.⁴⁵ The Myanmar junta's Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the joint statement and claimed that the regime has not unlawfully detained anyone.⁴⁶

According to the United Nations ("UN"), the junta has suspended travel authorizations for aid workers trying to reach Rakhine State in the wake of Cyclone Mocha.⁴⁷ Myanmar's ousted National Unity Government denounced the junta's manipulation of relief aid meant for Rakhine State and called for international intervention.⁴⁸

The UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar ("IMM") said that the frequency and intensity of war crimes in Myanmar have dramatically increased in recent months, and that the IMM has significantly increased its investigation and collection of evidence.⁴⁹

Outgoing UN special envoy for Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, called for political dialogue in Myanmar before the upcoming election, warning that the lack of an "inclusive political dialogue" risks worsening violence.⁵⁰

Using open-source research, rights group Justice for Myanmar alleges that Austrian-based Diamond Aircraft Industries has been providing the Myanmar military with components to assemble surveillance aircraft and trained key junta personnel to produce and use the aircraft, in what appears to be in contravention of restrictive measures imposed by the European Union.⁵¹

III. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

On June 5, *Democratic Voice of Burma* reported several incidents of junta personnel arresting and interrogating relief workers working on cyclone relief.⁵² On June 2, junta personnel inspected the car of a Mrauk-U-based rescue team at a check point and subsequently arrested eight people.⁵³ Even though some of the detainees were later released, the leader of the group is reported to still be under arrest.⁵⁴ The regime claimed that the detainees have "links

with local media outlets.”⁵⁵ The arrests have led to relief workers voicing fears of arrest and hindrance of their work.⁵⁶

On June 5, *The Irrawaddy* reported increased abuse of prisoners.⁵⁷ According to the report, prison guards tied up and beat at least ten political prisoners in the governor’s office at Myingyan Prison in Mandalay Region between May 21-28.⁵⁸ The guards further kept the prisoners in solitary confinement and denied them medical treatment.⁵⁹ Soldiers and police forces were also deployed after the prisoners staged a hunger strike.⁶⁰

On June 9, Human Rights Watch released a report on the regime’s threats and harassment of lawyers defending the rights of protesters after the coup.⁶¹ The report claims that the regime systematically harassed, monitored, arrested and even tortured lawyers, especially targeting those taking on political cases in special courts set up by the junta.⁶² For example, Tin Win Aung, a high court lawyer from Mandalay Region, said he suffered a broken arm and leg and had to have a feeding tube inserted into his stomach after he was beaten by security forces personnel during pretrial detention.⁶³

On June 10, actress May Panache was sentenced to three years in prison after she posted a black profile picture in protest against the regime and comments about the Pazigy Village massacre.⁶⁴ Also on June 10, singer Shwe Yi Thein Tan was sentenced to three years in prison for posting a black profile picture in protest against the junta.⁶⁵

On June 14, five union leaders were arrested for advocating for a pay rise at a local Chinese-owned factory, which manufactures clothes for the retailer Zara.⁶⁶ The leaders were arrested after they met with their employer’s representative to settle the dispute at the township’s General Administration Department office.⁶⁷ As result of the arrests, Zara announced that it will stop buying clothes from the Chinese factory.⁶⁸ The detainees face up to two years in prison.⁶⁹

On June 15, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that junta courts have sentenced 730 people to prison terms, including life imprisonment, and imposed the death penalty for political reasons in the first five-and-a-half months of this year.⁷⁰ Of the 730 people sentenced, 15 people were sentenced to death and 54 were given life terms.⁷¹

On June 20, nearly 100 people were arrested for wearing, holding, selling or buying flowers on June 19 as part of a nationwide flower strike on the birthday of Aung San Suu Kyi.⁷² The arrests occurred in several regions of the country, including Sagaing region, Kamayut Township, Mingaladon Township and Myit Nge Township.⁷³

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

On June 10, the former editor-in-chief of *The Voice Journal* Kyaw Min Swe was sentenced to three years in prison for posting a black profile picture in protest against the junta.⁷⁴

On June 10, *Ayeyarwaddy Times*’ media license was revoked by the military junta.⁷⁵ Since the coup, the junta has revoked the licenses of fourteen news outlets.⁷⁶ The junta uses the revocation of media licenses to threaten journalists, targeting those who continue to work for

unsanctioned outlets.⁷⁷ *Ayeyarwaddy Times* allegedly breached Article 8 of the Publishing Act, which prohibits disseminating information that disrupts public peace and tranquility.⁷⁸ The outlet claims it will continue to operate, despite the official revocation, to fulfill its role in promoting “freedom, justice, and peace.”⁷⁹

On June 28, a junta-controlled court sentenced *The Irrawaddy*’s former publisher Thaung Win to five years in prison for sedition under Article 12-A.⁸⁰ The court also issued arrest warrants for three of the outlet’s editors on the same day.⁸¹ Thaung Win was arrested in September, three days after *The Irrawaddy* published a story exposing the close ties between the junta’s general, Min Aung Hlaing, and a business tycoon, Aung Ko Win.⁸² In October, the junta revoked the outlet’s publishing license and ordered its closure.⁸³ Despite the military regime’s attempts to shut down *The Irrawaddy*, it continues to operate from abroad.

IV. Economic Development

A. Economic Development—Legal Framework, Foreign Investment

The Myanmar Foreign Exchange Supervisory Committee issued an order on June 1 requiring traders to open Chinese yuan accounts in local banks if they want permits for cross-border transactions and made it mandatory for exporters and importers to use yuan in trade transactions with China.⁸⁴

Foreign investment in Myanmar fell 60% in the first quarter of this year compared to the same quarter in 2022, according to figures from the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration under the junta’s Ministry for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations.⁸⁵ In the first quarter, the regime approved US\$178 million of foreign investment, down from US\$402 million in the same period last year, which was itself down 50% from US\$908 million in the first quarter of 2021.

B. Economic Development—Infrastructure, Major Projects

On June 15, Union Minister for Electric Power Thaung Han attended the International Economic Forum 2023 (SPIEF’23) held in St Petersburg, Russia⁸⁶ and signed a memorandum of understanding with NovaWind, a subsidiary of Russia’s state-owned nuclear firm Rosatom, and Myanmar’s Zeya & Associates on wind-power feasibility studies.⁸⁷ The memorandum provides for cooperation in carrying out wind measurements and a feasibility study to build a 200 MW wind farm near the towns of Kyaukpadaung and Nyaung-U in the Mandalay Region.⁸⁸

C. Land Seizure

There have been no material updates since the prior report.

V. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

On June 2, the Karen National Liberation Army (“KNLA”) and allied groups attacked a police station and administrative offices in Kyainseikgyi, Kayin State, reportedly killing close to ten junta soldiers.⁸⁹ In retaliation, the military conducted airstrikes, forcing resistance forces to withdraw.⁹⁰

Fighting broke out in Shan State on June 2, when a 70-soldier military column attacked the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Hsenwi Township.⁹¹ Clashes continued on June 3, when a junta column of 100 soldiers launched an attack on an MNDAA base in Ton Shan region, southwest of Laukkai in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone.⁹² In response, the MNDAA assaulted a police station and two military bases in Lashio Township, Shan State on June 5.⁹³

On June 6, an allied force consisting of KNLA and PDF fighters blew up a strategically important bridge over Sittaung River in eastern Bago Region’s Kyaukki Township.⁹⁴ The bridge connects the town of Penwegon and a junta base in Kyaukkyi Township, which sits in KNLA territory.⁹⁵ The resistance forces also attacked a police station in the town of Nat Than Kwin, as well as two nearby police outposts and military targets.⁹⁶ The destruction of the bridge triggered additional clashes that lasted for hours, until airstrikes forced the resistance groups to retreat.⁹⁷ The airstrikes allegedly damaged several houses and forced more than 10,000 locals to flee.⁹⁸

There have also been reports that a bomb was dropped by military aircraft on the village of San Hpala in Kawkareik Township, Kayin State on June 6.⁹⁹ The bomb reportedly destroyed several farms, houses and a primary school.¹⁰⁰

A woman was killed and her infant child was injured by artillery shells during a battle on June 11 between military troops and the MNDAA in Man Bang village, northern Shan State.¹⁰¹ Close to 170 villagers, mostly of Kachin ethnicity, have been displaced as a result of the fighting, and many are in desperate need of food and medical care.¹⁰²

On June 13, an alliance of anti-regime forces including the Karenni Army, the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (“KNDF”), the Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (“KNPLF”) and PDFs ambushed a police station and three military outposts in eastern Kayah State’s Mese Township.¹⁰³ The township’s chief of police was killed in the attack.¹⁰⁴

On June 15, fighting between the Myanmar military and resistance forces broke out in Htilin Township, Magway Region, leaving two members of the Yaw Revolution Army dead and three other resistance fighters injured.¹⁰⁵ The Yaw Region is home to the Yaw People, an ethnic Bamar subgroup, and consists of Htilin, Gangaw and Saw Townships.¹⁰⁶

On June 23, Kayah resistance forces allegedly captured two junta outposts in Mese Township.¹⁰⁷ Several junta soldiers, including a battalion commander and deputy commander, surrendered to resistance forces as a result of the string of successful raids that had taken place over the past two weeks.¹⁰⁸ An information officer of the KNDF confirmed that 23 junta troops have surrendered so far, with a list of prisoners still being compiled.¹⁰⁹ Kayah military analysts attribute the resistance forces' recent victories in Mese Township to the involvement of the KNPLF.¹¹⁰

On June 29, two junta administrative officials were killed by drone attack while they were inspecting damage from a mine blast on the Kyone Ate Bridge over the Ataran River in Mon State.¹¹¹ Twenty-seven other officials were also injured in the attack.¹¹² The KNLA claimed responsibility for the attacks, admitting that they had received intelligence that the junta officials would be inspecting the bridge.¹¹³ The Kyone Ate Bridge is an important route for military traffic and supply lines in the Mon State capital of Mawlamyine.¹¹⁴

B. Peace Talks

Peace talks between a junta delegation and the Three Brotherhood Alliance – a group consisting of the Arakan Army, the MNDAA and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army – were scheduled to take place in Mongla, eastern Shan State, from June 1-3 under the supervision of the Chinese government.¹¹⁵ However, the talks came to a halt after just two days as clashes broke out in Shan State between June 2-5 and ended with no official agreement.¹¹⁶ The ethnic armed groups have been providing military training and supplies to resistance forces fighting against the junta.¹¹⁷

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- ²¹ The Irrawaddy, June 17, 2023: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/over-6000-people-displaced-by-myanmar-junta-raids-in-tanintharyi.html>.
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- ⁸² *Id.*
- ⁸³ *Id.*
- ⁸⁴ The Irrawaddy, June 8, 2023: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-bans-dollars-for-border-trade-with-china.html>.
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