

STOLEN CHILDHOODS

Violations of children's rights, urgent needs, and local agency in rural Southeast Burma during the conflict



KHRG

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Stolen Childhoods

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Southeast Burma during the conflict

Karen Human Rights Group
October 2025

Stolen Childhoods: Violations of children's rights, urgent needs, and local agency in rural Southeast Burma during the conflict.

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Executive Summary

Since the 2021 military coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has intensified militarisation and violence in Southeast Burma. Children in locally-defined Karen State are particularly vulnerable, facing both the immediate threat of violent abuses and the longer-term harm caused by the destruction of services essential to their development and wellbeing.

Building on villagers' voices, this report provides an account of the multifaceted impacts of armed violence on children during 2024 and 2025. It examines the barriers children face in accessing education, detailing how SAC attacks on schools have caused casualties, destruction, and disruptions to schooling. Children have also been forced to continue their education in displacement, without adequate shelter and materials, and under constant fear of hostilities. Conflict-related factors, such as livelihood challenges, have further contributed to school dropouts. The report also analyses how SAC-led attacks and movement restrictions have severely disrupted access to healthcare, sanitation, nutrition, and safe living environments, leading to deteriorating health outcomes. Clinics and medical personnel have been repeatedly targeted, while confiscation of aid at checkpoints has created acute shortages of medicines and equipment. High treatment costs and widespread poverty further strain children's health.

Furthermore, it explores the impact of militarisation and ongoing violence on children's psychosocial wellbeing. Living under the constant insecurity of attacks caused fear and distress among children, many of whom have lost family members, seen their homes destroyed, or been forced into displacement. These experiences have disrupted family and community life, depriving children of a childhood where play, learning, and hope for the future can thrive, and have led to broader social consequences such as rising drug use among youth. The report also examines how direct violent abuses, mostly committed by the SAC, continue to endanger children's lives and wellbeing. KHRG documented killings, injuries, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, ill-treatment, and sexual violence against children. It also covers the recruitment of children as soldiers within armed forces.

Despite these grave harms, children and their communities show remarkable resilience. They continue to sustain schools, clinics, and support networks under extreme risk, while children voice aspirations for safety, education, and peaceful futures. The report also evaluates the availability of humanitarian aid and identifies critical gaps in local support systems.

The findings of this report reveal a consistent pattern of abuse against children amounting to serious violations under the United Nations' Six Grave Violations Framework and international human rights and humanitarian law, in many instances, rising to the level of war crimes or crimes against humanity. Immediate action is needed to stop the SAC's actions, protect children's lives, and restore dignity and wellbeing. Safeguarding children in Southeast Burma is not secondary to resolving the conflict: it is a necessary step toward meaningful and lasting peace.

Introduction

Children are central to peace and at the heart of the futures of their communities, yet they are disproportionately impacted by the war and armed conflict in Southeast Burma¹. Since the 2021 military coup, the Burma Army², under the command of the State Administration Council (SAC)³, has carried out widespread attacks on villages in an effort to crush dissent, continuing a long history of repression against civilians in the region. During this period, KHRG has documented SAC abuses against villagers taking place with renewed intensity, including air strikes, indiscriminate shelling, burning of villages, torture, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, forced labour, killings, and sexual violence. These practices have created a human rights and humanitarian crisis that systematically denies children their fundamental rights.

Direct and indiscriminate attacks on communities carried out by the SAC during 2024-2025 are heightening the exposure to violence and deprivation faced by children, already among the groups particularly vulnerable during times of armed conflict. These attacks bring harm to the communities that support children, killing and injuring parents and loved ones, destroying homes, and weakening the social fabric on which children rely. Beyond the harm inflicted to their families and villages, attacks carried out by the Burma Army also directly threaten children by killing and maiming them; destroying the education, healthcare, and humanitarian networks they depend on; and irreparably damaging their psychological wellbeing. Despite the special protections guaranteed under international law, children in locally-defined Karen State⁴ continue to live under direct and constant threat to their existence, development, and dignity. Any meaningful effort to address the conflict in Burma must recognise such direct, severe, and widespread violations of children's rights, and therefore ensure that the protection of children, and the systems that sustain their care and survival, are treated as an urgent priority.

This report examines the many ways in which armed conflict and SAC abuses are undermining children's safety, integrity, and development. Bombings of schools, clinics, and community spaces have deprived children of education, healthcare, and safe environments to learn and play, while the destruction of livelihoods, movement restrictions, and repeated displacement have left families struggling to secure food, medicine, and shelter. As a result, children grow up without stability or safety: some drop out of school to avoid further attacks, while others face preventable diseases and acute hunger that puts their lives at risk, with little access to the support they urgently need. These conditions have undermined family and community life, leaving children fearful, traumatised, and uncertain about their future. At the same time, children

¹ In 1989, the then-ruling military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar without consultation from the people. KHRG prefers the use of Burma because it is more typically used by villagers, and since the name change to Myanmar is reflective of the military regime's longstanding abuse of power.

² The terms Burma military, Burma Army, Tatmadaw, SAC, and junta are used interchangeably throughout this report to describe Burma's armed forces. Villagers themselves commonly use Burma Army, Burmese soldiers, or alternatively the name adopted by the Burma military regime at the time -since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC).

³ The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Burma/Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup. The military junta changed its name in July 31st 2025 to State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC).

⁴ Karen State, defined locally, includes the following areas: Kayin State, Tanintharyi Region and parts of Mon State and Bago Region. Karen State, located in Southeastern Burma, is primarily inhabited by ethnic Karen people. Most of the Karen population resides in the largely rural areas of Southeast Burma, living alongside other ethnic groups, including Bamar, Shan, Mon and Pa'O.

are also being subjected to direct forms of violence by the Burma Army, including killings, torture, sexual violence, and injuries from shelling, air strikes, and landmines. Forced underage recruitment by SAC forces continues to militarise children further and expose them to grave danger. Other armed groups, including the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁵, which operates under the Karen National Union (KNU)⁶, and the People's Defence Forces (PDF)⁷, have been reported to perpetrate some abuses, including carrying out arrests, deploying landmines, and recruiting teenagers, albeit on a far smaller scale.

Adding to these hardships, SAC restrictions on the transportation of humanitarian aid in rural Southeast Burma have deprived children of essential support for their education, health, and basic survival, particularly food, medicine, and school materials. As a result, children are left more exposed to harm and barriers to their development. Local community-based organisations, who remain the main providers of assistance, face severe challenges at the hands of the SAC armed forces including harassment at checkpoints and the constant threat of air strikes. They require greater support from international stakeholders to sustain their work.

In the face of these attacks, children and their communities continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience: villagers organise hidden schools and mobile clinics, share scarce resources, and provide mutual support. Children themselves continue to dream of a future free from violence, in which they can learn, play, and grow in safety. By documenting these realities, this report highlights both the devastating impact of the SAC's continued abuses and the armed conflict on children in Southeast Burma and the determination of communities to protect them despite overwhelming odds. Together, these testimonies provide a grassroots perspective on how children experience (and understand) the abuses and deprivations of the armed conflict in Burma.

This report serves as an entry point to understanding these perspectives across a wide range of issues concerning children and their experiences during 2024 and the first half of 2025 and should help inform stakeholders on the steps necessary to ensure access to fundamental rights for children in Southeast Burma. By amplifying the voices of children and their communities, this report not only documents the harms they endure but also highlights their demands and aspirations for a safer future. Ensuring the protection of children in Southeast Burma is not secondary to resolving the conflict but is a necessary step toward any meaningful and lasting peace.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁶ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, following the 2021 coup staged by Burma Army leaders, the KNU officially stated that the NCA has become void.

⁷ The People's Defence Force (PDF) is an armed resistance established independently as local civilian militias operating across the country. Following the February 1st 2021 military coup and the ongoing brutal violence enacted by the junta, the majority of these groups began working with the National Unity Government (NUG), a body claiming to be the legitimate government of Burma/Myanmar, which then formalized the PDF on May 5th 2021 as a precursor to a federal army.

Key Findings

The Burma Army's military offensives in rural Southeast Burma have turned children into one of the groups most impacted by the conflict. The SAC's direct and indiscriminate attacks on villages frequently resulted in the death and injury of children, and the destruction or damage of the education, healthcare, and welfare systems that children rely on for their survival.

Between January 2024 and June 2025, KHRG documented repeated acts that fall within all six grave violations against children identified by the UN Security Council, mainly perpetrated by the Burma Army. The SAC's repeated abuses also violate international human rights and humanitarian law and may constitute war crimes or amount to crimes against humanity.

In particular, the SAC carried out air strikes and shelling on schools that severely limited students' access to education. These attacks killed and injured children, destroyed school buildings and facilities, and increased rates of school dropouts. Schools that faced SAC attacks are mainly those locally run by villagers or by the Karen administration. Attacks and conflict also prevented children from accessing schooling by increasing displacement and poverty.

Similarly, SAC offensives severely undermined children's access to healthcare and basic survival needs. SAC attacks on villages and on healthcare facilities; checkpoints and travel restrictions; and the high costs of SAC-run healthcare facilities increased rates of preventable disease and death amongst children in Southeast Burma in 2024-2025. Together, these attacks drove up food insecurity, left children in unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, cut access to crucial clinics, medicine, and vaccinations, and limited access to reproductive health protection.

The psychosocial health of children has also been severely affected by SAC attacks on villages and the armed conflict. Children witnessed violence, including the death and injury of loved ones, and experienced the erosion of their family life, including losing their homes and access to care. The risk of attacks also prevented children from playing, accessing education, and attending social gatherings as they had done before the 2021 coup. Attacks also led to increased poverty, displacement, and drug use amongst children. These experiences have left many children experiencing extreme fear, worry, sleep deprivation, anger, or despair.

At the same time, SAC attacks and violent abuses during the reporting period have caused injury to hundreds of children, including permanent disabilities, trauma, and death. Attacks included air strikes, shelling, shootings, and landmine explosions in homes, schools, villages, farms, and places of worship. The SAC also carried out arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, and forcibly recruited children. Other armed groups, including the KNLA, also recruited underage children during the reporting period.

While local community-based organisations work tirelessly to meet children's basic needs, the constant threat of SAC attacks and limited funding have left nursing mothers and children without the support needed to survive. Moreover, the SAC also threatened humanitarian workers, making it difficult to reach vulnerable populations in remote areas.

Overall, villagers continue to adopt various strategies to protect children in their communities and maintain their access to healthcare and education. They do this by relocating schools and clinics, building bunkers, finding ways to support teachers, transporting injured children to access services at the border, encouraging children, and holding gatherings in secure locations.

Recommendations

To the United Nations, Donor States, ASEAN Member States, and the International Community:

- Ensure that all engagement with Burma prioritises child-centred protection and humanitarian support, while explicitly avoiding any legitimisation of the military junta or its political processes and institutions.
- Implement a comprehensive arms and aviation fuel embargo and coordinated targeted sanctions against the military junta and its affiliates to weaken their capacity to attack civilians, especially children.
- Publicly and collectively condemn the non-democratic elections in December 2025, stressing that they are designed to entrench the junta's illegitimate rule and do not reflect the will of the people, while reaffirming support for genuine democratic aspirations in Burma.
- Maintain and urgently increase flexible funding for Burma, given the dire humanitarian crisis, ensuring that conflict-affected and displaced populations, especially children, have sustained access to essential protection, services, and life-saving assistance.
- Prioritise sustained funding for cross-border and community-led social services, including education, health, nutrition, shelter, and mental health programs, delivered by local community-based organisations (CBOs) to displaced and conflict-affected children.
- Condition all aid and diplomatic engagement on measurable benefits for children and ensure it is not diverted to the junta, guaranteeing accountability and protection from exploitation and harm.
- Collaborate with local civil society organisations (CSOs) to monitor and publicly report grave violations against children, including attacks on schools and clinics, child recruitment, and denial of aid.
- Strictly uphold the principle of non-refoulement in light of mass displacement and forced recruitment by the military junta and ensure protection for children and families fleeing conflict.
- Guarantee access to education, healthcare, and birth registration for refugee and displaced children to prevent statelessness and exclusion.
- Support accountability efforts through international justice mechanisms, universal jurisdiction, and child-sensitive investigations.
- Urgently refer the situation in Southeast Burma to the International Criminal Court (ICC) under Article 13(a), exert diplomatic pressure for a UN Security Council referral under Article 13(b), and provide political and financial support for child-sensitive investigations, evidence collection, witness protection, and meaningful victim participation.

To Humanitarian Actors, including INGOs:

- Expand support available for organisations doing cross-border and mobile delivery of essential health, nutrition, and psychosocial services to reach all areas of Southeast Burma.
- Increase support for education in emergencies by focusing on rebuilding school facilities, providing essential learning materials, and offering bursaries for children to continue their education despite conflict and displacement.
- Urgently address adolescent health, mental health, and substance use prevention through trauma-informed approaches, and significantly increase funding to build the capacity of

local humanitarian actors and first responders to better prevent and respond to children's experiences of human rights violations and trauma.

- Provide support to Thai-based actors, especially border schools and clinics, recognising that many displaced children and communities from Southeast Burma rely on these services.

To Accountability Actors, including International Justice Mechanisms and National Prosecutors:

- Bolster accountability mechanisms by supporting local partners to gather and safeguard evidence of child rights abuses in Southeast Burma.
- Facilitate independent monitoring and capacity-building for the KNU to implement international humanitarian law (IHL) and child-protection standards, while investigating and holding all armed groups in Burma accountable for any violations to prevent impunity.
- Broaden the scope of international investigations to include crimes committed in Southeast Burma and pursue accountability through universal jurisdiction and all other available legal avenues, with explicit recognition and inclusion of all affected ethnic communities.
- Ensure investigations and prosecutions are child-sensitive, protecting survivors' safety, dignity, and participation.
- Develop reparations frameworks, in collaboration with local civil society, addressing education, healthcare, psychosocial support, and livelihoods for affected children and families.

To local Community-based Organisations (CBOs) and Ethnic Service Providers:

- Strengthen community-based child protection networks through technical support, awareness raising, training, clear referral pathways, and robust monitoring and accountability.
- Continue to enhance the coordination between different service providers in Southeast Burma to ensure affected children across all districts in locally-defined Karen State are protected.

To the Karen National Union (KNU) and the National Unity Government (NUG) Leaders:

- Uphold and enforce existing policies to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and strengthen transparent, accountable processes for their demobilisation and reintegration.
- Provide safe, unimpeded humanitarian access for local actors, ensuring aid reaches affected populations, and prioritise child-focused medical, nutritional, and educational services.
- Place the best interests of the child above all political, military, or other interests.
- Ensure that all armed wings strictly refrain from using schools, health facilities, religious sites, and other civilian infrastructure for military purposes.
- Protect and bolster children's rights to play, rest, education, and a safe social life, and ensure these rights are prioritised in policy, funding, and programming.

Methodology

To better understand the challenges faced by children in rural Southeast Burma amidst the conflict, KHRG conducted 93 interviews with parents, children, and other community members during May and June 2025. These interviews examined the situation of children's rights in education, healthcare, welfare, and protection between January 2024 and June 2025 in locally-defined Karen State. In total, interviews were carried out with 54 adults (35 women and 19 men) and 39 children (21 girls and 18 boys). Interviews were semi-structured and followed a preliminary questionnaire prepared for KHRG staff. These interviews were conducted by KHRG field researchers: local community members trained to document issues affecting children in their communities.⁸ All participants were informed of the purpose of the research and provided consent for their interviews to be used. Additionally, KHRG conducted five focus group discussions with children in Mu Traw and Doolaya Districts in May 2025.

The interviews cover all seven districts of KHRG's operational area. Due to security risks faced while documenting abuses in the region, all districts were not equally represented in the interviews conducted for this report. KHRG carried out 11 interviews in Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District, 14 in Taw Oo (Toungoo) District, seven in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District, six in Mergui-Tavoy District, 32 in Mu Traw (Hpapun) District, 17 in Doolaya District, and six in Hpa-an District.⁹ These district designations are names used by local villagers, as well as many local Karen organisations. KHRG's use of these names represents no political affiliation.

To supplement the analysis, KHRG also reviewed an additional 157 previously documented interviews with local villagers, which covered issues affecting children in 2024-2025. KHRG also examined 76 field reports (including incident reports, short updates, and situation updates) produced by community members in 2024 and 2025 on abuses in their communities.

Finally, in September 2025, four additional interviews were conducted with local organisations and service providers operating in the region, including with the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), and the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW). One more interview was conducted with a representative from the Karen National Union (KNU).

This thematic report is subject to some research limitations. KHRG documentation focuses on the situation of villagers in rural Southeast Burma, and therefore issues affecting children in SAC-controlled towns and cities were not extensively documented. In addition, this report does not cover child trafficking or drug trade and trafficking. Likewise, the actual numbers of attacks on communities and conflict-related violations against children are vastly undervalued in this report, due to challenges faced by community members in both reporting and documenting.

To ensure the security of interviewees and villagers, their personal names and locations have been replaced by single- and double-digit letter codes, where appropriate. These codes apply only to this report and have no link with the actual names of the villagers or past published reports. All names and locations censored correspond to actual names and locations on file with KHRG.

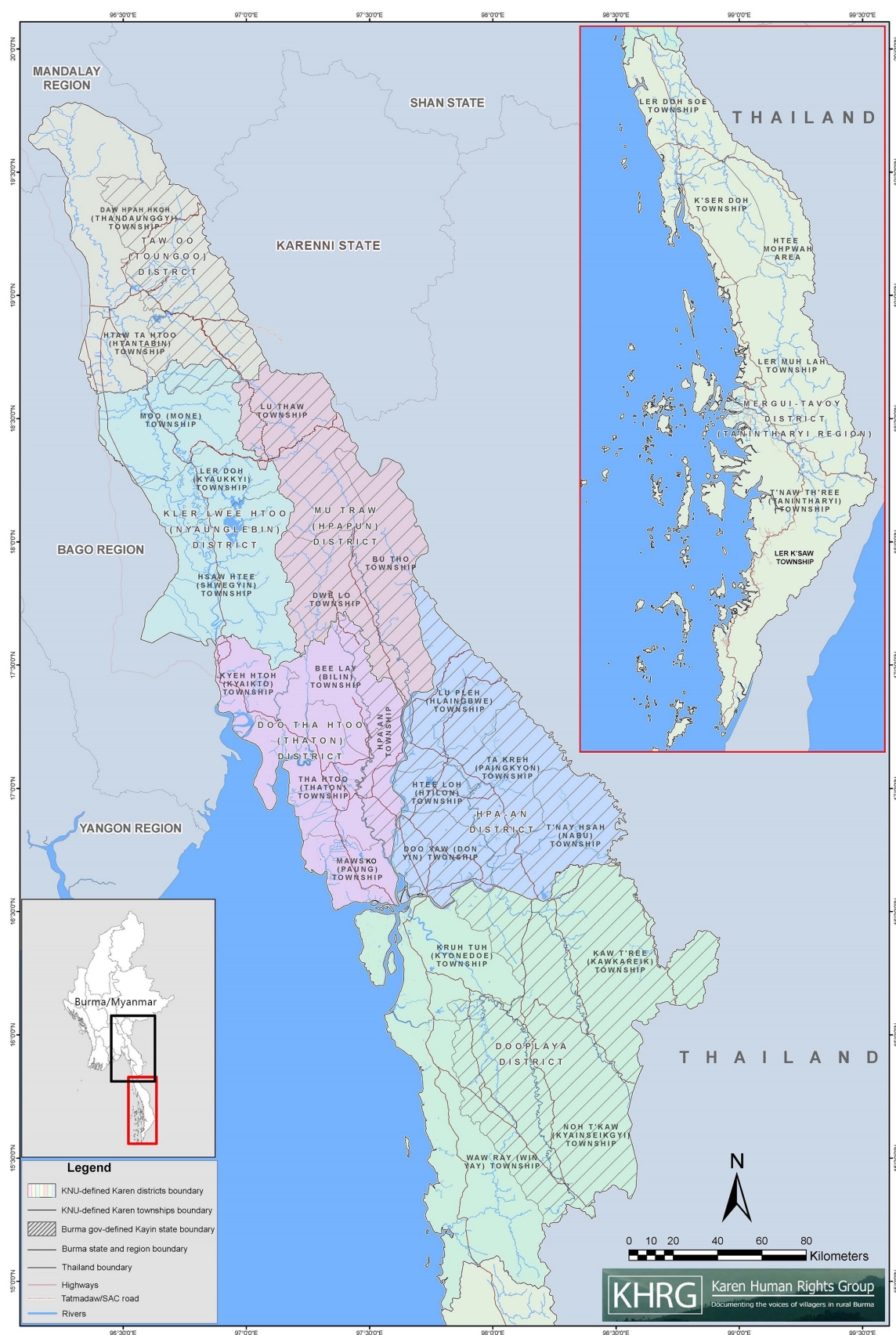
⁸ KHRG's full documentation philosophy, methodology, and child protection and safeguarding guidelines are available upon request.

⁹ For clarity, the Burmese terms used for these districts are provided in brackets but do not correspond with the Burma (Myanmar) government administrative divisions.

Terms and Abbreviations

AAPP	Assistance Association for Political Prisoners
BGF	Border Guard Force
BPHWT	Back Pack Health Worker Team
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
IB	Infantry Battalion
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KDHW	Karen Department of Health and Welfare
KECD	Karen Education and Culture Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNDO	Karen National Defence Organisation
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organization
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion
LID	Light Infantry Division
MCH	Maternal and Child Health program
MOC	Military Operations Command
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict
PDF	People's Defence Force
SAC	State Administration Council
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VTHC	Village Tract Health Centres

Map 1: KHRG operational area (locally-defined Kawthoolei and Burma government-defined state and region boundaries)



Chapter 1. Background of the conflict in Southeast Burma

This chapter overviews human rights in Southeast Burma and the history of oppression and attacks on civilians by the Burma Army. It also discusses SAC attacks on children since 2021.

Historical background (1948 – 2011): abuses of children under the ‘four cuts’

Since Burma’s independence in 1948, villagers in Southeast Burma have faced decades of Burma Army violence. In response, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), took up arms in 1949 to push for political autonomy. From the 1960s onwards, the Burma military implemented the “four cuts” (or *pyat lay pyat*) counter-insurgency strategy, designed to sever resistance forces from access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. Enforced as a scorched-earth campaign, this policy led to entire townships being declared ‘black areas’, where all civilians were targeted as insurgents. The Burma Army caused mass displacement and the forcible relocation of entire communities and committed widespread violations against villagers, including children, such as indiscriminate shelling, extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, destruction of homes and crops, denial of aid, and forced labour.¹⁰

In 1992, the then-ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)¹¹ junta tried to limit international pressure by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, it was condemned for making reservations on articles prohibiting the torture and execution of children.¹² Following the ratification, the SLORC did not take any steps to guarantee compliance and continued to violate children’s rights at high rates.¹³ The SLORC also shut down Karen schools and took control over Karen cultural activities during this period.¹⁴

Despite violations, children and their families adopted strategies to avoid direct abuses, preserve community, and advocate for their rights. During the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, Karen State youth also joined nationwide protests for peace and democracy.¹⁵

Ceasefire period (2012 – 2021): Despite advances in child rights, abuses persist

Child rights mildly improved following the 2012 preliminary ceasefire signed between the KNU and the Burma military leaders. In 2015, the KNU also signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) along with seven other ethnic armed groups. National elections in 2015 also resulted in a quasi-civilian government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). This led to improvements in education and healthcare in certain areas and reduced attacks.¹⁶

¹⁰ KHRG, *Undeniable: War crimes, crimes against humanity and 30 years of villagers’ testimonies in rural Southeast Burma*, December 2022.

¹¹ State Law and Order Restoration Council, which replaced the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) following the September 18th 1988 coup d’état by then General Saw Maung (later Senior General). The SLORC was officially dissolved in 1997 by Senior General Than Shwe and replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

¹² International Commission of Jurists, “Reservations to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Look at the Reservations of Asian State Parties”, 1994, pg. 24.

¹³ KHRG, *Undeniable*, above; KHRG, *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State*, April 2008.

¹⁴ KWO, “State of Terror”, February 2007.

¹⁵ KHRG, *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*, November 2008.

¹⁶ KHRG, *Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar*, October 2017.

At the same time, serious abuses continued. Villagers in Karen State still faced discrimination, land confiscation, and exploitation, often linked to militarisation and military-backed development projects. Perpetrators continued to act with impunity.¹⁷ Despite challenges, children continued to defend their rights, with many gaining greater access to schooling and others taking part in rights awareness trainings and peace discussions with ethnic service providers.¹⁸

The Burma government also made several commitments on child rights during this period. Burma signed a UN Action Plan to end child recruitment (in 2012), ratified the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (in 2013), signed (in 2015) and later ratified (in 2019) the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and ratified ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age (in 2020). Significantly, the 2019 Child Rights Law¹⁹ strengthened labour protections and prohibited child recruitment in armed groups. However, these commitments were unevenly implemented and threats to child rights continued.²⁰ The KNU also signed a 'Dead of Commitment' with Geneva Call in 2013, prohibiting child recruitment.²¹

Coup in 2021 (until present): children under renewed military repression

After the Burma Army's coup in February 2021, the military has repeatedly violated international human rights and humanitarian law, attacking civilians, carrying out extrajudicial killings, and conducting mass arbitrary arrests.²² In response, civilians across the country, including youth, launched the Spring Revolution, a resistance movement calling for peace and democracy.²³

In Southeast Burma, the military has reinvigorated its 'four cuts' strategy, using widespread air strikes, indiscriminate shelling, shoot-on-sight policies, landmines, and destroying, confiscating, and restricting food, medical supplies, and aid. Schools and clinics are frequent targets for attacks.²⁴ Children continue to be used as porters, forced labourers, human shields, and forced recruits.²⁵ By September 2025, more than one million people were displaced in Karen State.²⁶

In 2025, the United Nations Secretary-General identified the SAC armed forces as primarily responsible for committing grave violations against children during conflict in Burma.²⁷ Other groups were also deemed responsible for violations, though in much smaller amounts.

¹⁷ KHRG, *Undeniable*, above, p. 11.

¹⁸ KHRG, *Foundation of Fear*, above.

¹⁹ Myanmar: The Child Rights Law (The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 22, 2019) [Accessed [online](#)].

²⁰ KHRG, *Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar*, May 2019; KHRG, *Foundation of Fear*, above.

²¹ Geneva Call, "[Deed Of Commitment Under Geneva Call for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict](#)", July 2013. Currently, the KNU is also in the process of drafting a specific "Child Protection Law".

²² AAPP, "[Accountability for the Junta Criminals](#)", July 2022; OHCHR, "[Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar \(A/HRC/60/20\)](#)", August 2025.

²³ KHRG, *Military Atrocities and Civilian Resilience: Testimonies of injustice, insecurity and violence in Southeast Myanmar during the 2021 coup*, November 2021; KHRG, *Resilience and Resistance: Challenges and threats faced by Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup*, September 2024.

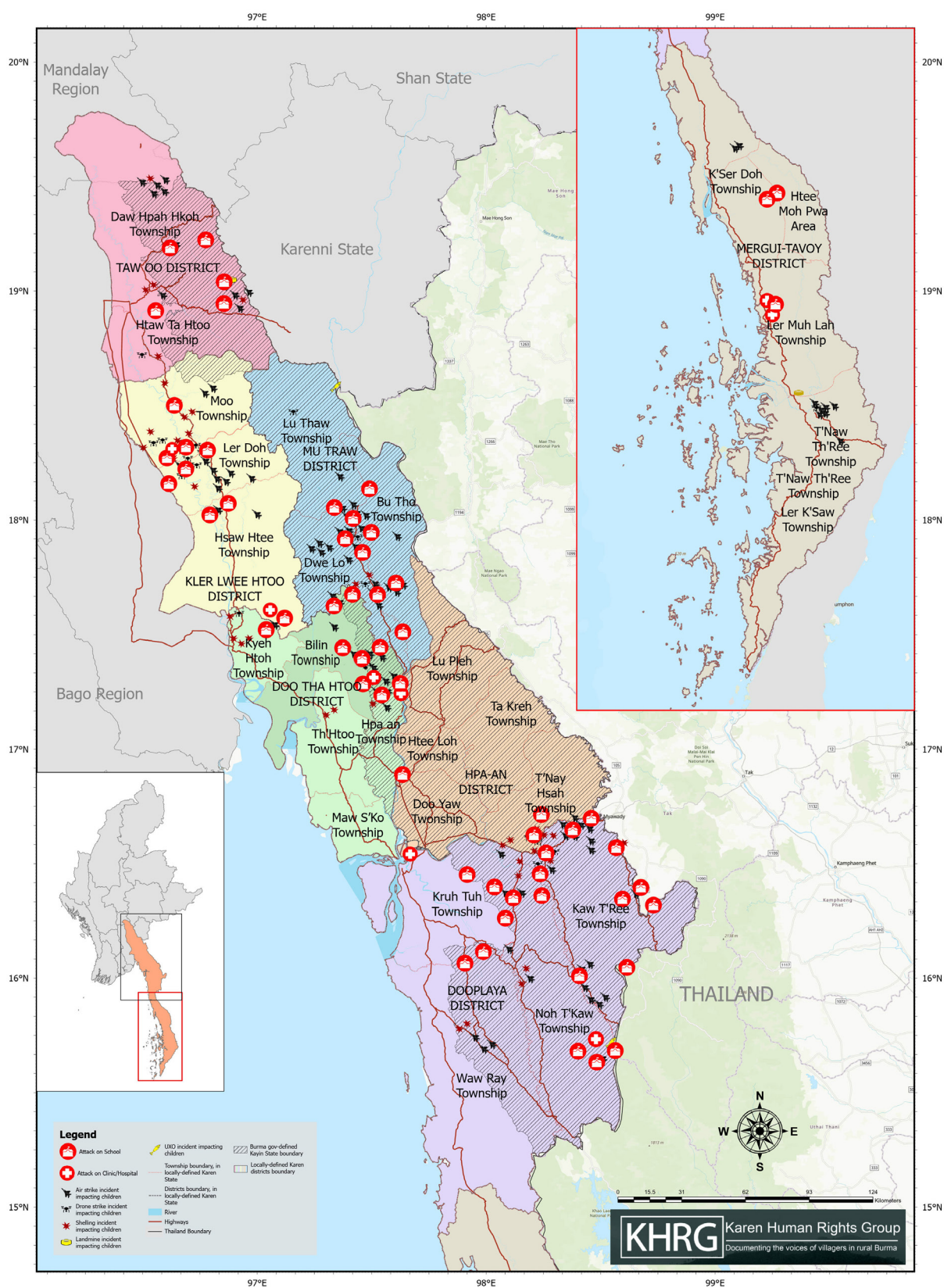
²⁴ KHRG, *Schools Under Attack: Challenges to the right to education in Southeast Burma (June 2023-February 2024)*, July 2024; KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline: Challenges to the right to healthcare, and local efforts, in Southeast Burma (January - October 2024)*, December 2024.

²⁵ KHRG, *Shadow of Death: Use of civilians as human shields by the State Administration Council (SAC) in Southeast Burma since the coup*, July 2023; KHRG, *Forced to Harm: Impacts of the State Administration Council (SAC)'s forced recruitment and enactment of the conscription law in Southeast Burma (January 2024 - February 2025)*, March 2025; HRW, "[Myanmar: Stop Recruitment, Use of Child Soldiers](#)", June 2025.

²⁶ CIDKP, "[IDPs Dashboard](#)", October 2025.

²⁷ UN Secretary General, "[Children and armed conflict in Myanmar](#)", March 2025.

Map 2: Reported armed attacks impacting children in locally-defined Karen State from January 2024 to June 2025



Chapter 2. Violations of the right to education

Children in locally-defined Karen State have faced numerous barriers to access education as a result of ongoing armed conflict and serious human rights violations. These include attacks carried out mainly by the SAC against educational facilities, teachers, and students, through indiscriminate and direct air strikes, shelling, and ground operations. These abuses have caused casualties, destroyed schools, disrupted lessons, displaced communities, and instilled fear. This has denied children the right to a safe and free education.

From January 2024 until June 2025, the SAC armed forces attacked at least 48 schools, killing five students and injuring nine. SAC soldiers also confiscated school property and used school buildings for military purposes. Other conflict-induced challenges included livelihood difficulties, restrictions on movement, early marriage, school closures, and displacement, further undermining education access. Three attacks on education by other armed groups were also reported to KHRG.

This chapter presents obstacles faced by children in accessing education in Southeast Burma. Firstly, attacks on schools by armed forces and their immediate impacts are discussed (2.1.), including casualties, destruction, and fear. Secondly, difficulties during displacement and inconsistent schooling are summarised (2.2.), such as the lack of safety, travel obstacles, and language barriers. Thirdly, other conflict-induced challenges leading to school dropout are presented (2.3.), including the lack of financial means, the lack of school materials, early marriage, and military recruitment. Finally, the community's efforts to continue education are highlighted (2.4.), from relocating schools to supporting teachers' livelihoods or seeking schooling across the border.

2.1. Attacks on schools by armed forces

Attacks on schools have become widespread in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup. The Burma Army carried out deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on schools, mainly through air strikes and shelling, which killed and injured students and teachers, destroyed facilities, and created deep fear in local communities. Many attacks occurred during school time.

From January 2024 to June 2025, KHRG documented at least 40 SAC air strikes and drone strikes on schools in all seven districts, particularly in KNU-controlled areas. Schools in Karen State are typically large buildings with colourful or shiny roofs and spacious playgrounds, which makes them easily identifiable from the air. The SAC frequently conducted extensive air reconnaissance flights before some of the strikes, but never issued early warnings or employed other precautionary measures to protect children. In some incidents, strikes followed attacks by local armed groups on SAC army camps. However, none of the reported incidents perpetrated by the SAC took place while schools were being used for military purposes.

In mixed-controlled areas where ground fighting is active, schools were also struck by artillery fire, such as mortar shelling (six incidents). On two occasions, schools were also attacked by SAC ground troops, while five schools were forced to close, relocate, or suspend classes due to skirmishes or battles. Additionally, in at least three incidents, other armed groups not affiliated with the Burma Army also attacked education by using school compounds for military purposes and threatening teachers working under the SAC administration.

Most SAC attacks documented by KHRG concerned schools supported by the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)²⁸. The majority of the documented attacks on schools occurred in Mu Traw and Dooطلا districts, with particularly widespread and severe incidents taking place in Dwe Loh and Kaw T'Ree (Kawkareik) townships, respectively. In Kaw T'Ree, there was fighting in many mixed-controlled areas every month in 2024 and 2025.

a) Students and teachers' casualties in schools

One of the most direct consequences of these attacks on schools has been the killing and injury of students and teachers inside school compounds. SAC attacks on schools killed at least five students and one teacher and injured at least nine students. Of these attacks, air and drone strikes killed five students and injured five students, while shelling attacks injured four students. Attacks on school grounds render classrooms unsafe places and prevent children from learning.

On November 19th 2024, at 9:15 am, for instance, an SAC drone dropped two bombs on a school in Ba--- village, Taw Kyaw Paw village tract²⁹, Ler Doh (Kyaukkyi) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, when students were gathering in the school to receive food. As a result, a 9-year-old student, named Naw³⁰ A---, and an 8-year-old student, named Ma³¹ B---, were injured. Naw A--- was injured on her shoulder and Ma B--- was slightly injured on her head. The drone also destroyed the school and a community hall in the compound. Naw C---, the vice-principal from Ba--- school, explained: *"When the drone attacked, I felt like I couldn't think or that I had forgotten everything, because I had never experienced it before. After the drone strike, I came out of the smoke [from the explosion]. After I came out, the children screamed and called out to their parents, and followed me. We gathered them and asked who was injured. Two children were injured."* The 9-year-old was sent to Bb--- hospital (in Bc--- village, Law Mu Thaw village tract, Ler Doh Township), as her injuries were severe. Ma B--- received treatment at the school clinic.

Before the attack, SAC soldiers based in Bd--- village, Nat Than Kwin village tract, Ler Doh Township, had fired mortar rounds into Ba--- village area at 3 am on November 19th. Thus, school authorities had planned to close the school, but villagers wanted to donate food to students before. The drone, which had been flying over the school, struck after the students received the food. The SAC conducted shelling in Ler Doh Township almost every day in November 2024, although there were no ground skirmishes in this KNU-controlled area. After the attack, shelling continued in the village tract. The school vice-principal shared: *"I couldn't think of this [why the SAC conducted a drone attack]. Actually, they [SAC] shouldn't drop bombs where there are children because this is not their enemies' place. I don't know what they were thinking. I think about it and I feel upset."*

In another instance, on Sunday, May 18th 2025, around 11:30 am, an SAC fighter jet dropped two 500-pound bombs on the campus of Be--- high school, built near Bf--- village, K'lay Loh Mu Htaw (K'lay Wah Mu Htaw) village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo District. One of the bombs exploded. Saw³² Nl---, the school principal, was hit by the shrapnel

²⁸ The Karen National Union's Education and Culture Department is the education department of the Karen National Union. Its main goals are to provide mother tongue education services to rural Karen populations in Southeast Myanmar, as well as to preserve the Karen language, culture and history. Despite being an important education provider in the region, it is not officially recognised by the Myanmar government.

²⁹ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

³⁰ 'Naw' is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

³¹ 'Ma' is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

³² 'Saw' is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

and sustained injuries to his shoulders. As a result of the explosion, two villagers' houses, some bamboo and betel nut trees, and a toilet, all located on the campus, were also damaged. There were about 20 people, including students, local health workers, and teachers, in the school compound when the incident happened, but only the principal was injured.

Saw D---, a KECD teacher from Be--- high school, explained: *"When I was about to leave his [Saw Nl---'s] house, I heard the sound of the aircraft coming. I ran to somewhere [near the house] to hide. After the bomb shell was dropped and exploded, I heard him screaming. Then, he called me. He told me that he was hit and injured. [...] He was bleeding. [...] The air strike was terrible. Teachers fled to a stream. They tried to find a safe place near the stream. For students, a teacher took them to the stream to get them to a safe place. No student was injured, but they were very afraid. They were crying very loudly."* Saw D--- added: *"In the past, we did not need to worry so much. We were able to go to school safely. [...] Because of this attack, students' parents do not feel strong [confident] to send their children to the school. [...] As a teacher, I want protection for our students in the future. [...] Students have to be safe to get an education."* Villagers did not expect the attack to occur, as this was the first air strike in Bf--- village area and fighting had never happened there before.

On May 29th 2025, SAC fighter jets dropped at least six bombs in Bg--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. One of the bombs landed and exploded near a school dormitory in the village at around 7 pm, injuring three students: Saw E--- (aged 14), Saw G--- (aged 15), and Saw H--- (aged 16). After the incident, local authorities and KNLA soldiers sent them to a clinic in Bh--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, to receive medical treatment. Saw E--- was transferred to Bi--- hospital, in Thailand's Tak province, as he was seriously injured on his left thigh. Saw J---, the school vice-principal, expressed: *"They are my students. I feel very sad about what happened to them. [...] After they were injured, they could not study [for a couple weeks]."* The bombs also injured one more villager and damaged a school building, houses, a shop, and plantations. Other villagers also reported children left school or stopped attending school temporarily due to the injuries sustained in attacks.³³

Before this incident, fighting had happened between SAC and KNLA soldiers in Thay Baw Boh village tract, but not in Bg--- village. During the fighting, the KNLA and PDF troops had attacked and occupied SAC army camps, including Bler Doh army camp. Villagers also reported that the SAC fighter jets dropped at least ten bombs in Bj--- village, near Bg--- village, on May 25th and 29th 2025, injuring two villagers and damaging villagers' houses. Armed resistance soldiers were not present in these villages when the SAC bombardment occurred.

Several villagers reported that the SAC attacked schools to spread terror in their communities. For instance, Naw K---, a schoolteacher from Bl--- village, Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *"They attacked our school by conducting an air strike because they wanted to harm us. They wanted to frighten us. They want to take our lands."* Nan³⁴ L---, a schoolteacher in Bm--- school, P'Loo (Palu) village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, explained: *"Students and teachers just hold pens, but they [the SAC] attacked us. [...] I myself would like to ask them [the SAC] why would they purposefully conduct an attack on a school when it couldn't harm them back at all. What was their purpose in targeting the school? Did they want students from this country to lose their lives? Or did they want to target teachers who were teaching in this school? What danger do we bring to them?"* Bm--- school, previously a Burma government school, adopted the KECD curriculum in 2024. The school was attacked on October

³³ See, for instance: KHRG, "Taw Oo District Short Update: A landmine explosion severely injured two villagers, including a 13-year-old, in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township (May 2025)", July 2025.

³⁴ 'Nan' is a Pwo Karen title used for women, before their name.

1st 2024 by SAC shelling when all students and teachers were inside the school, injuring Ma M---, the mother of two students.



These photos were taken on February 13th 2025, in Bk--- village, Kyauk Pyar village tract, Kyeh Htoh (Kyaikto) Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. On February 13th 2025, at around 4:30 pm, the SAC conducted an air strike on a primary school in Bk--- village, which destroyed the school and damaged a clinic located beside the school. The school is under the administration of the KECD. After the air strike, villagers fled to safer locations. Villagers reported that an SAC Y-12 aircraft had conducted air reconnaissance in Kyauk Pyar village tract almost every day for several weeks before the air strike happened. The photo shows the damage caused by the SAC air strike to Bk--- primary school. [Photos: KHRG]

b) Damaged, destroyed, or unusable educational facilities

Burma Army attacks on schools, learning centres, and dormitories have destroyed spaces that not only facilitate learning, knowledge-sharing, and cultural development but also provide children with vital services and stability for their adequate growth. The destruction of these spaces leaves children unprotected from armed conflict. From January 2024 to June 2025, KHRG documentation shows at least 17 schools destroyed and 29 damaged by SAC attacks.

Villagers reported challenges accessing education because schools were destroyed and damaged by SAC attacks. For instance, as the SAC conducted air strikes on a school in Bn-- village, Pyin Yay village tract, Hsaw Htee (Shwegyin) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, on February 15th 2025 and May 11th 2025, the school buildings as well as the school materials were destroyed. Daw³⁵ N---, the principal from the KECD school, explained: *"The aircraft came two times and the school was damaged two times. The first time, the bomb landed in the backyard of the school. The school's windows and toilets were damaged. The second time, the whole school was destroyed, including the ceiling. [...] We can't study in the school as it was destroyed."*

Villagers raised concerns about rebuilding schools due to fear of renewed attacks. Saw O---, a schoolteacher from Bo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported: *"We have not fixed them until now. The air strike damaged the school buildings, causing two holes in the building. We have a dream to fix it, but do not fix it because we have*

³⁵ 'Daw' is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

concerns that they [the SAC] would come again." The incident occurred at around 11:30 pm on April 29th 2025, while local villagers were sleeping. An SAC aircraft dropped two bombs in Bo--- village, and one of them landed in the school compound, destroying two school buildings and a school hall. The other bomb landed in the village, injuring 14-year-old Naw P--- on her right leg and damaging 21 villagers' houses and a shop. There is no army camp in or near the village and neighbouring villages, and there was no fighting on the day of the attack.

Other attacks on schools involved SAC ground troops. On September 11th 2025, about 200 SAC soldiers from an unknown battalion entered a middle school in Bq--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, during a military operation against the KNLA. The school, formerly run by the Burma government, had been closed since the 2021 coup. SAC soldiers from Infantry Battalion (IB)³⁶ #26, based in an army camp near the village, often used the school in 2024 and 2025. KNLA snipers sometimes targeted SAC soldiers based in the school. Villagers reported that the SAC used the school as cover, as they knew that the KNLA avoided using artillery weapons on the school to prevent impacting villagers living nearby.

Two interviewees reported that other armed groups had also sometimes used school buildings to rest, including in conflict-affected areas like Mu Traw District. A middle-school student living in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, told KHRG during a focus group: *"I am afraid when I see PDF soldiers coming to our village. They stay in our village. They sleep in our school. There are many PDF soldiers. They carry guns. I worry that [SAC] aircraft will come and strike them at the school. We had to go and sleep in the forest [when PDF soldiers stayed in the village]."*



This photo was taken in March 2024, in Bp--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. On March 23rd 2024, at around 10 pm, two SAC aircraft dropped 12 bombs on Bp--- village, injuring one villager, destroying four school buildings and two villagers' houses, and damaging two monastery buildings and five more houses. The photo shows the destruction caused by the SAC air strike on the school buildings. This school was previously under the Burma government administration, but adopted the KECD curriculum in 2022. [Photo: KHRG]

School buildings were also forced to close when skirmishes occurred nearby. For instance, on June 3rd 2025, combined forces from Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)³⁷ Battalion

³⁶ An Infantry Battalion (IB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

³⁷ The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

#8, KNLA Battalion #28, and the PDF attacked the SAC army camp near Bs--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. During the attack, the SAC carried out multiple air strikes on Bs--- area, using helicopters and fighter jets. These air strikes were not conducted on the fighting site but on villagers' houses and plantations. Local KNU authorities had instructed villagers to move to other places beforehand, and therefore no villagers' casualties were reported. As a result, Bs--- school was forced to close once again, as fighting often happened between local armed groups and SAC troops in the village.

Reflecting on the situation, Nan L---, a teacher at the former school in Bm--- village, P'Loo village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, who was now providing education to displaced students in Jh--- displacement site, said: *"Fighting is something that should not happen inside the village. There should be a marked place as fighting area. If they did it like that, villagers would not be harmed. [...] But now, everything is mixed. When combatants and non-combatants are living in one area, it's hard for us to live; we don't know how to live. So, if they want to fight, give us one safe place to stay. If not, do not fight in the place we live, but in other places."*

In past years, the KNLA has also attempted to close SAC-administered schools before attacking SAC-controlled areas. For instance, on June 28th 2024, KNU authorities released a statement ordering all SAC-appointed public staff in Dooplaya District, including teachers, to leave their jobs, relocate, or join the KNU.³⁸ As of 2024, no 'mixed-administration schools'³⁹ were left in Southeast Burma, as many were now operating completely under KECD administration.

c) Fear of attacks on schools disrupting learning

Every child should be able to study without fear, in a safe environment where they can learn and grow. However, children in Karen State are constantly afraid of air strikes, shelling, and fighting while at school. 62% of interviewees (71 out of 114)⁴⁰ reported to KHRG that villagers faced challenges to access education due to fear of attack in their communities. Saw O---, the KECD teacher from Bo--- village, Khaw Hpoh Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported: *"In school, the only thing is fear. I think the children always hear the aircraft. When they heard the aircraft coming this morning, they were running [out of the school]. It illustrates that they face difficulties to study. They cannot fully enjoy the freedom to study. They always have to study in fear. They always have to be vigilant."*

The lack of safety in schools due to SAC attacks and fighting was reported as a major reason causing children to drop out of school. Naw Q---, a displaced mother of five from Bt--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *"Due to the armed conflict and the aircraft coming regularly, some people dare not let their children go to school."* In the same township, 17-year-old student Naw R---, from Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, said: *"The number of students in Bu--- school decreased after the air strike happened [on March 19th 2022 on the Bu--- village school]. As some students were injured by the air strike, some students dropped out of school, so the number of students decreased."* After the attack, Naw R--- moved to Dj--- displacement site, in Htee Ler Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District.

³⁸ Karen Information Center (KIC), *"စစ်ကောင်စီနှင့် ပူးပေါင်းလုပ်ဆောင်သူများ နှုတ်ထွက်ပေးရန် KNU ဒူးပလာယာခရိုင် အသိပေး၊ လိုက်နာမှုမရှိပါက အရေးယူမည်ဟု သတိပေး"*, June 2024.

³⁹ Mixed-administration schools are schools that include Burma government and KECD teachers, sometimes teaching from both KECD and Burma government curricula. They were most commonly seen during 2015-2019 in mixed-control areas.

⁴⁰ Using software designed for qualitative analysis, KHRG coded and analysed all 93 interviews and five focus group discussions focused on children carried out for this report, along with 16 other previously documented interviews which included detailed discussion of abuses committed against children.

Even in areas where air attacks have never occurred, children feel unsafe to study in their villages. Naw S---, mother of two underage children from Bz--- village, Htee Klay village tract, T'Nay Hsah (Nabu) Township, Hpa-an District, reported: *"They [students] do not have full security. They have to be afraid of aircraft. Teachers inform them to stay and hide inside the school and not to go outside of the school and lie down on the ground when they hear aircraft."*



KHRG received this photo on August 17th 2024, from a villager from Bu--- village, T'Keh village tract, T'Naw Th'Ree (Tanintharyi) Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. Villagers from Ji---, Bv---, Bw---, and Bx--- villages, all in T'Keh village tract, fled their homes after SAC air strikes conducted on August 15th 2024, on Ji--- village. As a result, students had to stop going to school. The photo shows schoolchildren in Ji--- village coming out of a ditch near the village school, where they had taken shelter during the attack. Roads from By--- village, in Kleh Muh Htee area (K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District), were also closed by the SAC, and villagers faced difficulties due to such travel restrictions. Among the displaced, elderly villagers and mothers who had recently given birth needed food and medicine for various ailments. *[Photo: Local villager]*

Naw T---, a 16-year-old student from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, explained: *"When teachers were lecturing and we were warned to move elsewhere, we had to leave our lectures. Mostly, [this happens] when the aircraft come. [...] When we were notified about the aircraft [by teachers and local authorities], we grabbed our bags and we ran everywhere."*

Villagers also reported challenges and fear of holding school celebrations due to SAC attacks. For instance, on October 1st 2024, at around 1:15 pm, SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)⁴¹ #275 and #118, under Military Operations Command (MOC)⁴² #12 (based in A'Myauk Kone Artillery Unit army camp), conducted shelling into Bm--- village, P'Loo village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township. The troops fired three rounds of 120 mm mortar shells, one of which destroyed the village clinic, located near the school. No casualties were reported from this first round. After the clinic was hit, schoolteachers worried that the following shells would land on the school, so they tried to

⁴¹ A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Burma military are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up-to-date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

⁴² Military Operations Command (MOC) is comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) made up of three battalions each.

evacuate students. Shortly after, SAC troops shelled again, hitting the school building, causing the roof to collapse, and injuring a mother who was inside the compound. Another round on the same day also landed on the school, further destroying the building. On the incident day, teachers and students were cleaning the school compound as they planned to celebrate World Teachers' Day on October 5th. Due to the SAC attack, teachers and students in Bm--- village were too afraid to celebrate. Nan L---, a teacher from the school, reported: *"I was at the school. I was teaching. Students were cleaning the school for the Teachers' Day ceremony. Students practiced singing songs for Teachers' Day. At that time, a shell landed [in the school compound]."*

2.2. Displaced and inconsistent schooling

Another factor challenging access to continued and safe education is the displacement of villagers and the resulting closure of schools. Many students have to study at displacement sites (such as caves, forests, or other villages) where they feel safer. Fifty-six villagers interviewed by KHRG reported difficulties in continuing basic education while displaced, due to fear, lack of proper shelter, travel difficulties, or language barriers. Forty-eight villagers reported inconsistent schooling as a result of attacks on schools and the armed conflict.

a) Difficulties in travelling to functioning schools

Villagers reported challenges accessing education due to travel difficulties and road closures. For instance, many villagers from Cb--- village, Noh Nya Lah village tract, Moo (Mone) Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, fled to the forests in 2023 to avoid fighting in their village area. They faced difficulties sending their children to the functioning school in Cb--- village, due to its distance from their hiding sites. Saw V---, the KECD teacher from Cb--- school, explained: *"Some parents are living in the forest as they have their plantations far from the village, and they don't live in the village, so it is not easy for them to travel or to send their children to school."*

Likewise, 15-year-old Ma W---, a Grade 9 student from Cc--- village, Wah Ka (Win Ka) village tract, Kruh Tuh (Kyonedoe) Township, Dooplaya District, had to study in a town located far away because there was only a middle school in her village and no high school. She reported: *"The difficulty is travelling. As I am studying in Hlaingbwe Town [Lu Pleh Town, Hpa-an District], sometimes roads are closed [due to armed conflict]. So, we have to find another way, which is a longer way."*

Many children in rural areas end up dropping out after they finish primary and middle school (Grade 1 to Grade 9), as secondary schools are difficult to reach. High schools are scarce, and located at a greater distance from communities, usually congregating many students from across a village tract. Saw Y---, a pastor from Cd--- village, S'Tein village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, reported: *"In our country, because we have a low education level, our standard of living is low, and our thinking, knowledge, and technical abilities are low. So, in my opinion, I think education is fundamental and important."* After graduating from Grade 12, girls are also more likely than boys to stop their studies and not continue their higher education.

b) Hardships while studying hiding in the jungle

While studying in the forest often gave children a greater sense of safety, the makeshift nature of the shelters used for learning also disrupted their education. Displaced students lacked properly covered rooms, school furniture, and suitable lighting. Exposure to mosquito-borne diseases added further risks. These makeshift school buildings, made of tarpaulins, bamboo,

and thatched leaves, were built as temporary shelters, but the protracted conflict has forced villagers to use them for extended periods of time, now amounting to years.



This photo was taken in June 2024 at a villager's plantation. Day Loh village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Taw Oo District. On September 12th 2023, a skirmish took place between SAC troops and PDF soldiers in Cf--- village, Day Loh village tract. On September 13th 2023, SAC combined troops, including IB #39, carried out patrols in Ce--- village, Cf--- village, and Cg--- village, Day Loh village tract. Afraid for their safety, villagers from these three villages fled to nearby areas. To ensure that children continue studying, parents held a meeting with Ce--- village head, who discussed the situation with other KNU local authorities. Ultimately, they built three small huts on plantations for children to study, as seen in the photo.

[Photo: KHRG]

On April 8th 2025, at 5:25 pm, the SAC conducted an air strike on Ch--- village, Ler Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, causing injuries, displacement, and damaging houses. In 2023 and 2024, villagers from Ch--- village were already forced to flee due to fighting between KNLA and SAC troops in the area. As a result, the village school was often closed, preventing children from attending class regularly. Naw Z---, mother of seven children, explained: *"In 2023, they [my children] attended school in the forest throughout the year. In 2024, they attended school and fled, attended school and fled. They could attend school occasionally, but sometimes, they had to flee. In 2023, for the whole year, they attended school in the forest. [...] They [some children] said they were afraid to attend school."* She also shared the difficulties her children faced: *"They had to attend school in the forest, enduring insects and mosquito bites along with the rain."*

Similarly, a young student living in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained during a focus group with KHRG the difficulties children face while studying in the forest: *"Sometimes we face difficulties when we go to school because aircraft are flying over our village. [...] When aircraft are coming, our teachers ask us to go and study in the forest. [...] If we study in the forest, mosquitoes bite us. It is also very cold in the forest. It is also far from here. If we go to study in the forest during the rainy season, we have to go through a rice field. When we walk in the rice field, we get wet. [...] If we go to school in the forest, we also have to bring our food for lunch because it is too far to go back to our house to have lunch. If we study in the forest, we don't have places to write and read. The place in the forest is not convenient."*

Many community members expressed a shared feeling of a lack of safety, even when children study in the forest. Naw Q---, mother of five (four of them underage), from Bt--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained: *"Now, it gets worse because they [children] have to 'study and flee', 'study and flee'. During the examination period, they have to study and live in the forest and, if the aircraft come, people do not allow them to turn on the light. If they light candles, people scold them. So, they do not get to study well, and they have to study with fear."*

Similarly, a displaced student from Cj--- village, Pay Kay village tract, who fled to study in a forest after his school was destroyed by an SAC air strike in 2023, told KHRG during a focus group: *“We are still afraid of air strikes, even though we study in the forest. [...] We have been studying in the forest for three years already.”*



This photo was taken in January 2025, near Ci--- cave, K'Ter Tee (Ka Taing Ti) village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. The photo shows displaced children attending class near Ci--- cave. During November and December 2024, combined KNLA and PDF forces fought with SAC troops in Dwe Lo Township after trying to attack and occupy SAC army camps in the township, including Htee K'saw Meh army camp (in K'Ter Tee village tract) and K'Ser Ther Pler (Taung Thone Lone) army camp (in Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract). This led to mass displacement in the township. Some villagers from K'Ter Tee village tract fled to Ci--- cave. As shown in this photo, villagers tried to provide education to their children during displacement by organising classes at the displacement site. [Photo: KHRG]

c) Language barriers in schools for displaced students

Some displaced villagers reported difficulties in studying due to language barriers when schools followed different curricula. After the 2021 coup, many villagers began sending their children to KECD schools.⁴³ However, former students from Burma government schools had not learnt the written Karen language, as it was not taught under the government curriculum. This left them struggling to adapt. Naw Aa---, mother of five (four of them underage), from Cl--- village, Kaw Wa Hlaing village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooplaya District, fled with her children to Cm--- village, Kaw T'Ree Township, due to armed conflict in their area. There, she enrolled them in a KECD school, although her children had previously attended a Burma government school in Cl--- village. She reported: *“They [my children] said that they have never learnt the curriculum [of the KECD], but it might become easier to study soon. I asked them about the other subjects. They said that they can do well in English and Burmese language classes because they had learned them before. They said that they need to put more effort into the Karen language class.”*

Geba Karen⁴⁴ villagers from Cn--- village and Co--- village, in Htee Thar Saw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, also reported children experiencing language barriers in 2024. Both villages, located in a mixed-controlled area, used to follow the Burma government's education system, taught in Burmese. After the coup, newly self-funded schools introduced the KECD education system in S'gaw Karen. As a result, children struggled to understand lessons, causing some teachers and students to leave. Reportedly, villagers communicated with KNU leaders and requested more Karen language teachers in the area to solve the difficulties.

2.3. Conflict-induced livelihood challenges and deprivation

In 2024 and 2025, thousands of children were affected by armed conflict and Burma Army attacks on villages and plantations. Such difficulties impacted the financial situation of families, teachers, and educational organisations, creating challenges for parents to pay school fees and

⁴³ KHRG, *Schools Under Attack*, above.

⁴⁴ Geba Karen is one of the Karen sub-ethnic groups. They mainly live in Taw Oo District.

forcing many students to leave school. Economic challenges also translated into a shortage of school materials and qualified teachers, and left many children's basic needs unmet, further hindering their studies. 74 villagers from all seven districts interviewed by KHRG mentioned knowing about children who had to drop out of school due to livelihood- and conflict-related challenges.

a) Poverty related to the armed conflict

Reportedly, a common cause for school dropout in 2024-2025 was poverty. Most villagers in Karen State work on plantations and farms to support their livelihood, but many had to flee their homes, leaving their property and jobs behind. While displaced, they have limited or no job opportunities, resulting in severe livelihood challenges. This situation was documented in all seven districts. For instance, Daw Ab---, her family members, and other villagers from Cp--- village, Moo K'Poh area, T'Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, fled to Cq--- village, Moo K'Poh area, due to an SAC air strike on their village on December 18th 2024. She explained the difficulties children faced in accessing education: *"Some children cannot afford to attend school since their parents are struggling with their livelihoods. Then we need to buy all their school supplies, including books, so we cannot afford it. [...] They want to go to school. But there are difficulties with us. Another point is that we do not have our own house and farm. We need to make a roof with tarpaulins and stay under it, so it is a bit difficult for us."* Naw K---, a KECD teacher from Bl--- village, Day Bu Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, also reported: *"Some children dropped out of their school due to their parents' livelihood challenges. They think they have to help their parents work for their livelihood. Although they want to study, they have to work for their livelihood."*

Similarly, Ma W---, a 15-year-old student from Cc--- village, Wa Ka village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, who fled from his home due to an SAC air strike in his village on April 23rd 2025 that destroyed the school buildings and several houses, reported: *"A lot of students dropped out of school. Some went to study in Thailand. Some just work in this village. [...] Mostly, those who dropped out go to Thailand to work. [...] My age is a time to pursue education. Some could not attend school. For them, I want them [authorities] to support those who need help to attend school."*

Several children who had to leave school told KHRG that education is important for their lives and expressed a willingness to continue studying. In some areas, it was also documented that, when families could afford to send only one child to school, girls were often expected to work as caregivers for their families.

b) Lack of school materials and personnel

Villagers and children also faced challenges in accessing quality education due to a lack of school materials and teachers. SAC attacks destroyed school supplies and led many teachers to leave their jobs, while SAC soldiers also blocked the delivery of educational materials to schools. Sai⁴⁵ Ac---, a community member from Cr--- village, Cs--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"The education quality is not good. Children are unable to study freely. [...] They also do not have enough equipment to teach. For example, we don't have textbooks. So, the difficulty is that five children have to copy from one textbook. [...] The [KECD] school [in Ct--- village, Ma Htaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township] was damaged [by an SAC air strike during the last week of March 2025], and they [villagers] left the school in the village and*

⁴⁵ 'Sai' is a Shan title, used by men, before their name.

fled somewhere safe. In the displacement area, they built their new school [a community-run school] with bamboo and wood logs. They study in every possible way.”

The lack of school resources and teachers has negatively impacted the quality of children’s education. Nan L---, from Lay Kay Kaw Town⁴⁶, Kaw T’Ree Township, who teaches Chinese to children in a KECD school at Jh--- displacement site, P’Loo village tract, reported: *“During conflict, we have a lack of support for teachers, thus we couldn’t provide all the subjects. We could only provide the main fundamental subjects like English, Burmese, and Math. Additional subjects that we can provide are computer class and Chinese class.”* Similarly, the pastor Saw Y---, in Cd--- village, S’Tein village tract, Mergui-Tavoy District, explained: *“In some places, one teacher should teach only one grade, but they have to teach two or three grades because they do not have enough teachers. [...] In our village, there has been armed conflict, so the [Burma] government’s teachers do not want to come to our village. [...] We have volunteer teachers and teachers from the village to help us. [...] One teacher gets around 150,000 Kyat [71.43 USD]⁴⁷ [per month]. The situation now is that, because of the conflict and difficulties, all of the villagers are facing financial difficulties, so they can give them [teachers] just a little [salary] for their service.”*

Moreover, some teachers reported that SAC troops confiscated school textbooks. Naw Ad---, the school principal from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der (Yay Tho Gyi) village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, reported: *“In the academic year of 2024-2025, we do not have enough textbooks for our students. Therefore, we, as teachers, had to find ways to get more textbooks. We went to Cv--- Town to print copies of textbooks. [...] One time [in June 2024], at an SAC checkpoint in Cw--- Town, SAC soldiers checked our bags, and they saw printed copies of our school textbooks. [...] Then, they confiscated the copies of textbooks. [...] It is not easy for us to transport textbooks, A4 papers, and school materials. We cannot easily hire a car to transport those things because car drivers are afraid to transport those things, as SAC soldiers strictly check those things.”*

Forty-seven interviewees reported that there is a lack of support for children’s education. Although KECD and other organisations provide support to schools in Southeast Burma, it remains insufficient. Saw Ae---, the KECD Township Coordinator from Ta Kreh (Paingkyon) Township, Hpa-an District, explained: *“Some teachers receive support from the KECD. Some of them receive some support from villagers. We have insufficient textbooks. For example, two or three students have to share one textbook.”* Similarly, support for rebuilding destroyed schools is very limited and rare. Saw Ae--- explained: *“There are a lot of needs for the school buildings because some school buildings are destroyed; like the roof or the floor is broken. Therefore, we need to renovate the buildings already, but we have not secured financing and have not seen any donors who will support the buildings yet, so students still have to study in the destroyed buildings.”*

⁴⁶ Lay Kay Kaw New Town was first established in 2015, as a resettlement site where refugees who had fled to Thailand during past periods of conflict could return to re-establish their lives in Burma. It was established through the initiative and funding of the Nippon Foundation. It is situated close to the border with Thailand and about 14.5 km south of Myawaddy Town. It comprises 1,250 units that house over 3,000 residents, mostly former refugees and IDPs. More people arrived after the 2021 coup, seeking refuge. The December 2021 air attacks by the SAC on Lay Kay Kaw Town received substantial attention in the media due not only to the scale of the attacks but also the symbolic role of Lay Kay Kaw as a ‘peace town’.

⁴⁷ All conversion estimates for the kyat are based on the September 8th mid-market exchange rate of 1,000 kyat to USD 0.48 (taken from wise.com/gb/currency-converter/mmk-to-usd-rate).

c) Early marriage as a barrier to children's education

Villagers also reported that children dropped out of school when they got married at an early age. In particular, 29 interviewees mentioned knowing about children in their communities who got married or became pregnant while underage. These practices are rooted in gender norms, where men are often seen as in charge of providing for their partners and children. Armed conflict and livelihood challenges further reinforce these norms, leading some children to get married earlier and drop out of school at increasing rates.

Community members highlighted the links between conflict, poverty, and child marriage. Naw Af---, the Social Welfare Program Coordinator at the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), explained how the loss of villagers' livelihoods due to SAC attacks and fighting has led to increased rates of child marriage: *"The percentage of children getting married is increasing continually. [...] If we review the source of how it happened, it is because of fighting and difficulties regarding the movement of the enemy [Burma Army soldiers]. Some of them might not want to get married. But their family would tell them that if they marry early, their husband might help their family members' work to secure their livelihood."*

Similarly, Naw Ag---, a displaced schoolteacher in Da--- village, originally from Cz--- village, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, discussed how hardship has led teenage girls in her community to get married and have children: *"Even my nieces got married at the age of 14 years old. [...] She has several children. [...] In this area, most [girls] get married early at the age of 16, 17, and 18 and are having children. [...] When I got married, I was 24 years old. [...] [She told them,] 'Hey! You guys are too young'. They said, 'What can we do. It's just 'ta heh wee' [destiny]'. They just work and go."* 'Ta heh wee' refers to the belief that something is preordained or unavoidable for villagers due to their circumstances.

Some villagers mentioned that the desire of children in conflict-affected areas to get married early was itself driven by a lack of access to schooling. Naw Ah---, the headmaster of a primary school from Db--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, discussed: *"The children should study, but they don't get to study, so they are looking for work and they have to travel a lot. They may also have to work a lot without having vision. They are not forced by their parents, but just by themselves. Some children get married because they don't know how to decide to complete their goals. [...] The main problems are that they don't know how to decide to reach their goals because they don't get to go to school a lot."* Both air strikes and shelling by the SAC had caused casualties in Db--- village previously.⁴⁸

This sometimes forces young girls to give up their dreams for future careers. Naw Ai---, a 17-year-old girl from Dc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained her dreams before she got married: *"I got a husband. [...] I did not go to school anymore. When I was at school, I was thinking I would be working in the medical field after I graduated."* She dropped out of school when she was a Grade 7 student, after getting married.

Underage pregnancy also drives young girls to leave school. Naw Aj---, a villager from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, said: *"Last year [2024], a girl student dropped out of school because she was pregnant. However, she had a*

⁴⁸ KHRG, "Mu Traw District Short Update: SAC air strikes destroying civilian houses and property and causing displacement and livelihood challenges in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo Townships (April 2024)", February 2025; KHRG, "Mu Traw District Situation Update: Air strikes, indiscriminate shelling, displacement, landmine explosions, retaliation against civilians and arbitrary taxation, December 2021 to February 2022", July 2022.

miscarriage [due to unspecified health problems]. [...] She never went back to the school after that."

d) School dropouts due to armed recruitment

Children are also unable to continue their education in their communities because of recruitment by different armed groups in Southeast Burma. Twenty-one interviewees mentioned teenagers in their areas leaving school to join armed resistance groups. The dynamics of child recruitment in Southeast Burma are explained in [Chapter 5](#).

Saw Ak---, a local Karen Youth Organization (KYO)⁴⁹ leader from Noh T'Kaw (Kyainseikgyi) Township, Dooplaya District, reported: *"Some children joined voluntarily. Children under the age of 18 years old are willing to join an armed group. Some of them joined because they don't want to study. Some of them join [local armed groups] because they hate [the SAC]. They joined with their own feelings."* Recruitment of youngsters impeded their access to further education. Naw Aj---, the villager from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Taw Oo District, explained: *"Some will have to join the army [the KNLA] when they reach 18. So, they cannot continue their further education. [...] Some parents said that they want their children to continue their education until they finish school."*

2.4. Agency to access education

Many villagers in Southeast Burma stated the importance of education for their children and employed strategies to ensure access to schooling. These strategies include moving schools into the forest, building bunkers to protect children from SAC attacks, supporting teachers' livelihoods, or attending schools in Thailand and the border area.

a) Moving schools to the forest

Villagers often move schools to ensure safe access to education. Thirty interviewees reported that villagers moved schools to forests to provide children with education safely. Mostly, villagers provide money, materials like leaves for roofs, and labour to build makeshift shelters. When this is not enough, villagers seek funds from the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), the KECD, and other educational organisations. Local KNU leaders help by providing advice on which areas are safest to build makeshift schools.

Nan L---, the school teacher from Lay Kay Kaw Town, Dooplaya District, discussed steps teachers took after the SAC shelled a school in Bm--- village on October 1st 2024: *"After the shell landed inside the school, we were told [by local KNU authorities] to move to a safer place, to avoid the attack. [...] We discussed how we should continue the children's education. It's not okay for students to pause their education. Children must attend school. [...] So, we have decided to move students to Jh--- [displacement site], as much as possible. We will build a temporary school and continue to teach there. I think it would take a long time to rebuild the other school."*

A villager from De--- village, Hkay Poo village tract, Lu Thaw Township, discussed how they organised schooling for children once they were displaced: *"We have built a school under tall trees that can cover the school, making it difficult to be seen by drones, helicopters, or jet*

⁴⁹ The Karen Youth Organization is the youth branch of the KNU and was first founded in 1936 by Karen leaders in order to support pre-existing Karen political organisations. In 1989, the organisation was reformed to focus on developing Karen youth leadership.

fighters. We also asked for help from those who are educated to be volunteer teachers for our generation.” Another villager from Df--- village, Pee Tee Hkee village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, shared their motivations for opening a school in their village: *“We will build a private school for future generations. Instead of giving up our future, we will find another way and make a positive decision for the generations [to come].”*

Parents, teachers, and local authorities tried to encourage children not to give up on education. Saw Ak---, the local KYO leader from Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, said: *“Children were able to play around before, but now they cannot. Some might think that the country would continue just this way. Some think education makes no difference. But we keep encouraging children to keep studying. ‘No need to feel small; someday, the country will be in a better place’. We just have to talk like that [to children].”*



This photo was taken in August 2024, in Di--- village, Maw Ma village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Dooplaya District. In Maw Ma village tract, children had to study in a monastery, where lessons were taught by both formally and informally trained teachers, after SAC shelling, air strikes, and fighting forced schools across the village tract to close. From January to March 2024, SAC IB #97 fired shells into Maw Ma village tract almost every day. Unable to attend school, some children also had their relatives teach them at home, as shown in the picture. On the boards, there are a motto and a poem. The motto, written in Pwo Karen, speaks about the responsibility of younger generations to cherish the cultural heritage passed down from their ancestors. The poem, written in Burmese, teaches students about different animals and their behaviour. [Photo: KHRG]

b) Building bunkers near schools

Villagers also build bunkers near schools to protect students from SAC shelling and air strikes. Twenty-five interviewees reported that bunkers are built near schools’ areas or displacement sites where children study. Villagers mostly funded the construction of these bunkers themselves, although some mentioned receiving support from local authorities, local community-based organisations (CBOs), or even from international donors.

Naw Al---, a 17-year-old student from Dg--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *“There was a bunker [specific location censored for security]. We ran into the bunker when the military junta aircraft came. Those who were playing at home also ran into the bunker when the aircraft came.”* Similarly, Naw Am---, a KECD teacher from Dg--- village, explained: *“There were no children who got injured in our village because the leaders [KNU] always told us to stay alert. Whenever the shelling or an air strike happened [by the SAC], we went into the bunker. Even though the students were studying or eating, we went into the bunker so they were safe.”* Overall, however, children still reported that they faced many risks to their lives, even when they had bunkers in their communities.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For instance: KHRG, “Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC soldiers shot and injured a villager, and conducted shelling and an air strike causing destruction, in Htaw Ta Htoo and Daw Hpah Hkoth townships (January to March 2025)”, August 2025.

c) Supporting teachers' livelihoods

In response to difficulties faced by teachers, villagers often try to provide them with support, including money, food, and accommodation, so they can continue teaching their children. The KECD provides a subsidy to teachers in KECD schools, although the amount varies in different areas. In rural areas of Karen State, teachers usually combine their job in schools with work on farms and plantations to support themselves. Naw An---, a 17-year-old student from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, reported: *"In Ca--- village, villagers support teachers' salary by providing money to the teacher. For villagers from Dh--- village, they supported the teachers' salary by providing rice to the teachers. [...] Probably 10 baskets of rice, and they also provide [some] money to teachers."* In some areas, like Mu Traw District, teenagers also volunteered in plantations after school hours, to provide livelihood support for their teachers.

d) Travelling to Thailand or border areas to attend school

Children also flee across the border to attend schools in Thailand, or along the border, due to a lack of school availability in their areas, a lack of safety due to armed conflict, and a lack of access to higher education. Fourteen interviewees reported students going to the border or into Thailand to attend schools. Naw Ao---, the school headmaster of Dj--- high school, in Htee Ler Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *"After the changes in 2021, the number of students in our school has reduced. [...] It is because we couldn't study in our country, in our area, freely. That's why we looked for schools that they can study freely. For example, some go to study in the refugee camps [in Thailand]. Some go to study at Jk--- school and [other] migrant schools, [such as] Jl--- and Jm--- schools."*

Chapter 3. Challenges to the right to health and healthcare

In interviews with KHRG, villagers raised a wide number of diseases faced regularly by children. These ranged from ailments such as runny noses, diarrhoea, and itchy skin to more serious conditions, such as malaria, measles, dengue fever, and malnutrition. Rates of these illnesses are closely related to social and environmental factors, which include access to healthcare, sanitation, food, and livelihoods. In Southeast Burma, the SAC was the primary actor undermining these determinants of health during the reporting period (January 2024 – June 2025) and, thus, driving up rates of illness amongst children. They do this primarily through attacks on villages, the imposition of travel restrictions, and high treatment costs at clinics. Additionally, direct attacks on and destruction of healthcare systems and facilities were also recorded.

This chapter presents evidence related to the SAC's influence over determinants of health for children in Karen State. SAC attacks on villages and the ongoing armed conflict (3.1.) impact children's health by (a) destroying health clinics and hospitals, depriving children of access to healthcare services; (b) limiting access to food for children, leading to higher rates of foodborne illness and malnutrition; (c) removing opportunities for children to access support and education on issues related to sexual and reproductive health; (d) causing displacement into hidden, remote sites, where shelter and sanitation conditions are inadequate; and (e) dropping bombs with chemical irritants which caused itchiness and dizziness, and forced children into bunkers. Additionally, the SAC's imposition of travel restrictions (3.2.) impacts children's health by (a) preventing villagers from accessing hospitals, (b) creating shortages of medicine, (c) reducing access to vaccines, and (d) hindering the availability of medical equipment and personnel. Unaffordable healthcare costs (3.3), worsened by conflict-impacted livelihoods and high medical fees at SAC clinics, frequently prevent children from lower-income families from seeking out treatment. The chapter ends by presenting villagers' agency strategies related to health (3.4.), including the creation of mobile clinics and the transportation of patients across the border.

Direct violent attacks on children by armed groups, causing physical harm, are discussed in a separate chapter (Chapter 5), and this section spares mention of these.

3.1. Impacts of fighting and SAC attacks on villages

In Southeast Burma, the SAC's presence is defined in large part by its repeated air strikes and shelling attacks on villages and plantations. These attacks destroyed healthcare services, forced villagers and health workers into displacement, and destroyed sources of livelihoods for families. Collectively, these have caused children to lose access to clinics and hospitals, experience growing levels of malnutrition, lose access to sexual and reproductive health support, struggle to obtain clean water and shelter during displacement, and face the risk of bomb-borne illnesses and poorly-ventilated bunkers.

a) Attacks on clinics and hospitals

SAC attacks destroyed medical facilities and prevented clinics and healthcare workers from operating regularly, and as a result, impede children's access to care. Attacks also leave villagers afraid to seek medical care, fearing they will be caught in another strike. They also force clinics to repeatedly relocate, making it hard for villagers to rely on consistent healthcare in their area. From January 2024 to June 2025, KHRG documented eight SAC attacks on hospitals in Southeast Burma, resulting in damages to six of them and the destruction of two more.

SAC attacks disproportionately impacted hospitals run by the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)⁵¹ or doctors in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)⁵². As villagers living near healthcare clinics stated, these targeted attacks on hospitals and Village Tract Health Centres (VTHCs)⁵³ leave them worried for their safety. In one instance, on May 14th 2025, at around midnight, the SAC carried out an air strike on Dk--- hospital, located near Dk--- village, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, and destroyed the hospital buildings. While the hospital was previously run by the Burma central government, it had become a CDM hospital after the 2021 coup. Villagers believed the SAC targeted the hospital because it was run by CDMers. It also occasionally provided treatment to injured KNLA soldiers. Dk--- hospital was one of the largest hospitals in Hpa-an Township, and villagers from Thaton and Bilin townships also sought treatment there.

As villagers were verbally warned by local KNU administrators about the possibility of an SAC attack, healthcare workers were able to move all important equipment out of the hospital in advance, and villagers were able to flee the area. Nonetheless, the attack forced healthcare workers at the hospital, as well as those providing service at a clinic in Dk--- village, to set up a new hidden hospital. This has made access to healthcare workers difficult for villagers. As a 17-year-old boy named Saw Kt---, from Dk--- village, stated: *"Before [the air strike attack], we had a clinic, but now there are no people [health workers]. They joined the [new] hospital after the air strike incident. [...] I will rebuild the destroyed hospital buildings when I become an engineer and learn how to build."*

Also discussing the impacts of a KDHW hospital being moved following an SAC air strike, Saw V---, a headmaster from Cb--- village, Noh Nya Lah village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"Earlier, [the KNU set up] a hospital in Dl--- village, but now we don't see it, because this hospital was moved to Dm--- village, so it is a little bit far from here and hard for us when we have urgent needs."* Saw V--- also reported that a child passed away while trying to reach a clinic in the area. He added: *"If we had been able to travel [to the healthcare facility], that child would not be dead. So, we want children to have good healthcare and to be able to get medicine."*

In another incident, this time involving an SAC-run hospital, the SAC police department and LIB #603 fired shells on February 2nd 2024 into Ta Poo (Leik Tho) Town, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. The attack injured three villagers, including a nine-year-old boy, who had to have his leg amputated afterwards. It also damaged 15 houses. As Saw Ap---, a villager from Dp---, explained: *"Many houses were hit by the mortar rounds fired from the police station. [...] Houses near the police station were hit as well as a hospital."* As the hospital was not safe,

⁵¹ The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

⁵² On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run hospitals and medical facilities across Burma/Myanmar spearheaded what is being referred to as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of labour strikes in protest against the February 1st 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to include civil servants from all sectors of the government who are walking off their jobs as a way of non-recognition and nonparticipation in the military regime. Because of the popularity of the movement, and its seminal role in wider protests across the country, some people have begun using it as a catch-all phrase to include other protest forms like boycotts and pot-banging.

⁵³ The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) operates 93 clinics, or Village Tract Health Centres (VTHC) as they refer to them, and four referral centres, and four secondary health care facilities, which cover a population of approximately 460,000, across 1,249 villages.

and was partly destroyed by the shelling, villagers were not able to access medical treatment in their town and had to travel to Toungoo or Si Poo towns.⁵⁴



KHRG received these photos from a local villager. On August 13th 2024, at 6:20 pm, SAC IB #264, based in Pein Z'lot Town, dropped bombs onto Js--- village, Ka Nyin Taing village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, using a drone. One of the bombs landed and exploded in a hospital, while another bomb landed and exploded in a school. The photo shows the destruction caused by the SAC drone attack on the village hospital. In 2024 and 2025, IB #264 conducted indiscriminate air strikes and shelling into many villages from different village tracts, killing and injuring villagers, and damaging and destroying community building. Reportedly, the indiscriminate attacks occurred as SAC troops suspected that PDF and KNLA soldiers were present in the area, despite the absence of fighting. [Photos: local villager]

Villagers also reported SAC soldiers verbally threatening healthcare workers in their area. These threats leave villagers worried about accessing care at clinics, as they may be targeted by attacks. Naw Aq---, from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, stated: *"The Burma Army tried to threaten health workers and schoolteachers in our area. Some health workers from Ds--- clinic are CDM participants. [...] They [the Burma Army] said they know where the clinic is and they know where the school is. They can attack those school and clinic at any time if they want to. This is a kind of threat, like they tried to make people afraid."*

In another instance, after the SAC carried out an air strike in Dt--- village, Thoo K'Bee village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, villagers raised concerns that the SAC had targeted the village because of a KDHW clinic that had opened shortly before the attack. The attack damaged six houses and injured one villager. As Naw Ar---, the injured villager, stated: *"In my point of view, they [the SAC] might have received information about the clinic being relocated into our village, so the air strikes happened. In the past, the shelling never landed in the vicinity [of the village]. The clinic was [previously] located in Du--- village [in Thoo K'Bee village tract], so the drone strikes happened in Du--- village. [...] After the clinic was moved to*

⁵⁴ See: KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline* above, p. 04.

Dt--- village over one month ago, villagers have been afraid. We, villagers, asked each other, 'Did you hear the clinic is set up there?'. We were afraid that if the Burma Army were attacked at night, injured [resistance forces] soldiers would be taken to our clinic, and then they [SAC] might attack us."⁵⁵



These photos were taken in July 2024, in Dv--- village, Z'Yet Gyi Taung Chan village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. On July 6th 2024, an SAC MI-35 helicopter and a fighter jet conducted air strikes on a hospital in Dv--- village. The SAC aircraft dropped four bombs and strafed the hospital multiple times, destroying it. Although clashes occurred between PDF and SAC forces in Z'Yet Gyi Taung Chan village tract in 2024, the SAC launched attacks even in the absence of active fighting. This hospital was under SAC administration. Villagers believe it was bombed since injured armed resistance soldiers had been treated there occasionally. [Photos: KHRG]

Ultimately, these attacks force villagers and healthcare workers alike to flee and leave them in fear. Naw Ah---, from Db--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, discussed the impact of repeated air strikes in her village on access to health workers: *"Due to the air strikes, it is really hard to look for health workers. There is no doctor or nurse in the village during the conflict if we need them. As a result, they [villagers] would be late to get a doctor for children. Some [of the parents] would think that they can just treat [their children] themselves, so the health situation of children is becoming more and more serious."* According to local villagers, in Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, there is one Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) clinic for all 15 villages in the village tract, making it very difficult for them to access care. Similarly, Sai Ac---, from Cr--- village, Cs--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"There are cases where the KWO supported infants and mothers who have newborn babies. But during the fighting, everyone flees, everything was disorganised, and no one was helping anyone."*

In at least one instance, SAC armed forces occupied hospitals for military purposes. Saw At-- -, a displaced villager in Dw--- village, Htee Hpa Htaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, explained how the occupation of a hospital by SAC soldiers made it difficult to access healthcare: *"Sometimes we had sick patients who were about to die, we wanted to send them to the hospital, but we couldn't because Burma [Army] soldiers were living in the hospital [SAC-run Kyainseikgyi Public Hospital, in Kyainseikgyi Town]. During the daytime, they [Burma Army soldiers] allowed us [villagers] to send patients [to receive treatment at the hospital]. But at nighttime, patients were forced to go home."*⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See: KHRG, *Community spaces under fire : Attacks and destruction of community buildings and cultural events in Southeast Burma by the State Administration Council (SAC) (January - June 2025)*, August 2025, p. 11.

⁵⁶ See: KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline*, above, p. 05.

b) Increasing food insecurity

SAC attacks on villages and plantations prevent villagers from maintaining their livelihoods, leading many to struggle to feed themselves and their children. Additionally, displacement deprives villagers of their usual sources of food and thus increases the likelihood of hunger amongst children. Malnutrition amongst children is a major concern for villagers —the lack of food was raised in 27% of interviews (31 of 114) conducted by KHRG, making it the most frequently cited health risk for children. This was especially pronounced in Mu Traw District, where nearly 40% of interviewees (15 of 38) discussed difficulties related to child food insecurity.

Saw Au---, who lives in Dx--- village, Thoo K'Bee village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *"In the past, we just did farming, but the paddy was destroyed, so since then we have been doing labour as a daily worker. Sometimes, if we have nothing to eat daily, we just borrow from others and pay back later."* In another instance, a villager named Saw Av--- from Dy---village, in Kya K'Wa village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Doolaya District, reported that he and his wife had to beg for food for their children from others while they were displaced in Bj--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township. Naw Nk---, a 13-year-old girl from a single-parent family in Ja--- village, T'Hka Kloh village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, also explained: *"I feel sad. I was sick too: I had a headache and itchy skin. [...] I did not have enough medicine because my mother alone cannot afford it. [...] We live in poverty. [...] Sometimes, my grandmother was sick. Sometimes, my mother feels tired of working. My youngest sibling also suffered from a toothache and a common cold. We do not have food to eat like other people. [...] We do not eat like other people. [...] We rarely have eggs for our meals."*

Moreover, SAC blockades and confiscation of food on transportation routes across Southeast Burma limited the flow of foodstuffs into villages and drove up the price of food available in villages.⁵⁷ This makes it difficult for villagers to afford food. According to Naw Integer, who oversees the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Program at KDHW, this impacts mothers and newborns in particular. When mothers do not have enough food to support themselves, they are unable to produce enough milk for their newborns. Naw Aa---, from in Cl--- village, in Kaw Wa Hlaing village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Doolaya District, reflected on how food shortages affect her children: *"I need milk. We dare not provide them [her children] with enough milk [as she must spend money on the other food needs]. [...] So, I feed them with a limit. [...] They did not get to drink enough milk."*

Villagers are forced to rely on spoiled or unclean food, leading to the prevalence of food-borne illnesses. When even this is unavailable, children go hungry, potentially leading to malnutrition and death. Saw Ax---, the KDHW Township coordinator for Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, described this situation: *"Related to this [fighting nearby], villagers felt panicked. Therefore, some parents faced difficulties securing their children's livelihood means. As a result, some children do not receive enough nutrition, so they get malnutrition. It is a big difficulty. Some of the parents, their livelihoods are really bad. Their paddies died. So, they became daily wage workers. Due to this, they cannot afford nutritious food for their children. [...] Most of the local area has clinics. Some of the children get malnutrition, but in some areas, there is no program for these children yet due to the unstable situation. So, some of them passed away."*

Displacement following fighting and SAC attacks also has a direct impact on access to food for villagers. While displaced, villagers often have few ways to access sources of income or seek out food for themselves. Several villagers reported children not having regular meals. Villagers

⁵⁷ See: KHRG, *Defying Hunger: State Administration Council (SAC)'s systematic destruction of civilian livelihoods and food systems in Southeast Burma (January - December 2024)*, May 2025.

also reported that children are only able to eat food with sufficient nutritional value on special occasions. Naw Aj---, from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, stated: *“Children do not get access to nutrition. Sometimes children can get nutritious food if somebody celebrates their birthday in the village because they donate food. Sometimes children can get snacks when they go to Sunday school [at church].”* Additionally, pregnant women are also in need of prenatal vitamins and nutritious food.

c) Adolescent pregnancy and sexual health challenges

The impacts of SAC attacks and fighting on livelihoods and access to schooling lead to higher rates of child marriage and sexual health-related issues. As villagers discussed, SAC attacks and fighting near villages cut them off from their livelihoods and reduced opportunities for children to go to school. The resulting loss of access to these services often leaves young people with both poor knowledge of sexual health and without the support needed to address these issues.

Once people are married, they commonly have children shortly afterwards, regardless of age. Villagers pointed out the dangers this posed for the health of young mothers. Naw Ag---, the displaced schoolteacher and mother from Cz--- village area, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, added further to the complications of delivery with young girls: *“It’s difficult for those who have problems with the uterus. Their uterus ‘drop’ [uterine prolapse]. Some people [girls] were affected inside when they [midwives] massage their belly [to move the baby to the right position], as they are too young. Some people were affected in their bladder area. They are too young. [...] It is difficult to handle when they have close births [consecutive births], so they are not doing well, and they are living with ‘skin paleness’ [not healthy].”*

Other challenges to sexual and reproductive health were also mentioned by girls, including period management. For instance, seven interviewees reported facing pain or discomfort related to periods. While three interviewees mentioned accessing medication and menstrual pads, at least two children mentioned that they did not visit health professionals when they faced difficulties with their periods. Naw An---, a 17-year-old girl from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Dooplaya District, stated: *“It’s really not fun when you have menstruation. My bladder [area] hurts so much. My menstruation comes once every two months. [...] I do not go for a checkup.”*

d) Lack of adequate shelter and sanitation during displacement

Beyond acting as direct threats to their life, fighting and SAC attacks also undermine the living conditions necessary for villagers to protect children from commonly seen, yet deadly, illnesses. During displacement, children are faced with poor shelter, unclean water, and a general lack of sanitation. Mosquito-borne diseases affecting children were frequently reported by displaced villagers, including malaria and dengue. These experiences lead to higher rates of communicable diseases, skin infections, and foodborne illnesses amongst children.

Villagers saw the lack of clean water at displacement sites as leading to both persistent skin disease and diarrhoea amongst young children. Naw R---, a 17-year-old who stayed at Dj--- displacement site (constituted as a village in 2024), Htee Ler Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, during 2023 and 2024, reported that she became sick because of the lack of clean water at the site: *“We don’t have clean water to drink and bathe. We just drink water from a small stream. We dug a small water well beside the stream. The water level decreased in the hot season. It was flooding when it was raining. We have just a few water wells, so it became*

a problem when many people used them. [...] In my first year of studying there [in Dj---], I got a skin disease because of the dirty water. I was sick for the whole year when I studied Grade 8. I got better when I returned [to her home village in Br--- village].” Another 15-year-old girl named Naw Az---, from Eb--- village, P’Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported similar issues after she and her family were displaced from their homes during clashes between the KNLA and SAC: *“I would like to live in the village. I wanted to drink fresh water because we did not have fresh water to drink or fresh water to take a bath. We had to flee and carry our loads.”*

Villagers raised concerns about the lack of dry shelter and the lack of mosquito nets while displaced. Poor shelter and protection from the rain raised the risk of malaria, dengue fever, and flu amongst children. As Saw Y---, a community member from Cd--- village, S’Tein village tract, Ler K’Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, stated: *“Sometimes, when the armed conflict occurred, the villagers had to escape and flee to a safe place. They had to live and eat in that place, and they did not have shelters, and they had to sleep without mosquito nets, so mosquitoes bit them. Consequently, it caused malaria and dengue among children.”*

Ma Ka---, a villager from Cp--- village, Moo K’Poh area, T’Naw Th’Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, discussed her family’s conditions after being displaced by an SAC air strike in December 2024 on her village. She stated: *“We fled to the forest first. Sometimes we fled to someone’s farm, and sometimes to a cattle-pen. We are just fleeing and are being displaced like this frequently. Then, finally, we could no longer stay in any of those places, so we moved to Cq-- - [village, Moo K’Poh area], and we begged to stay under someone’s house. [...] We covered the ground with tarpaulins and stayed on them under someone’s [stilted] house. [...] Mosquitoes bite us. Some of the villagers made a shelter with tarpaulins underneath the trees. [Sometimes] it is raining a lot. So, it is not really comfortable for us. We also face difficulties with [not having enough] blankets. [...] We do not have enough food for our children, and we also do not even have enough mosquito nets for the children. So, it affects our children’s health as mosquitoes are biting us. They also experienced dengue fever and malaria.”*

Naw Aa---, a mother of five from Cl--- village, Kaw Wa Hlaing village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooplaya District, recounted the difficulties that she and her two newborn twin infants faced after SAC air strikes forced them to flee their village around 20 days after their birth: *“When I fled, I got wet from the rain. My children were only a few days old. I was sick when I arrived. My children got sick, and I also got sick. [...] The children are like that. They have the flu and a fever when they get wet from the rain. They got stomachaches when they ate the wrong food. As we are not familiar with the environment, as newcomers, sometimes we felt sick when we drank water and ate food.”* Sanitation issues during displacement disproportionately impacted young children and children with disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility or who are dependent on caregivers. As reported by villagers, teenage girls also experienced difficulties managing their periods during displacement due to poor sanitation, which caused health issues, including abnormal discharge.

e) Illnesses as direct consequences of SAC bombing

In a few instances, villagers raised suspicions that the occurrence of illness amongst children was linked with substances released by bombs dropped during SAC attacks.⁵⁸ SAC attacks

⁵⁸ It remains unclear what such toxic substances are. Several organisations across Burma have raised that, since the 2021 coup, the Burma Army has used different toxic substances, causing symptoms that match the description provided by villagers to KHRG, such as white phosphorus, aluminum phosphide, or bombs with ‘poisonous gas’. See: Quinley, C., “Anti-coup forces allege Myanmar military using banned, restricted weapons”, Al Jazeera, June 2024.

also force villagers into poorly ventilated bunkers for long periods of time, raising the risk of skin and respiratory infections amongst children.

Naw R---, a displaced 17-year-old from Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *“When the air strikes happened [on March 19th 2022], the scent of the weapon caused dizziness. Some people cannot study in the village and have to move to another place. Some students who studied in Hf--- area smelled the smoke from the air strikes. They suffered from illness inside their body.”* Naw Aq---, a mother from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, raised a similar concern: *“My eldest son’s health condition is not very good. Many people here recently felt itchy. Their ears are itchy. Their eyes are itchy. We don’t know what the main cause of it is, but I think [SAC] aircraft might drop something that includes chemical things, which makes people feel itchy. [...] My children also get sores on their skin. Then, they get sick. Then, they cannot breathe well. They get tired easily. They lack energy.”*

Ongoing SAC bombing campaigns also impact villagers’ day-to-day health by forcing them to frequently use makeshift bunkers, commonly shallow, cramped, and built out of logs and dirt. Naw Kb---, a mother from Ec--- village, T’Hka Kloh village tract, Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, raised concerns over the makeshift bunkers and its impacts on the health of her children: *“If [the children hear] the sound of the weapons, they run into a bunker. In and out, in and out of the bunker, so they did not have enough sleep. They brought their blankets and pillows and got dirty. [...] They were afraid of the sound of the weapons. [...] The smell of the bunker was bad, even though we cleaned it. [...] My daughter felt itchy on her body when she stayed in the bunker. Then, she felt dizzy.”*

3.2. Checkpoints and threats during travel

Travelling on transport routes in Southeast Burma exposes villagers and healthcare workers to the risk of encountering SAC soldiers, crossing SAC checkpoints, being caught in attacks, or having goods confiscated by SAC troops.⁵⁹ The fear of such scenarios often forces villagers to take longer, low-quality back roads when seeking out medical treatment. Poor road conditions in mountainous areas also make travel to clinics difficult, especially for sick and injured children. Travel difficulties are even more pronounced by displacement, as fleeing villagers are often forced to take shelter in hidden, jungle areas with little to no developed transport infrastructure.

a) Preventing villagers’ travel along roads to healthcare clinics

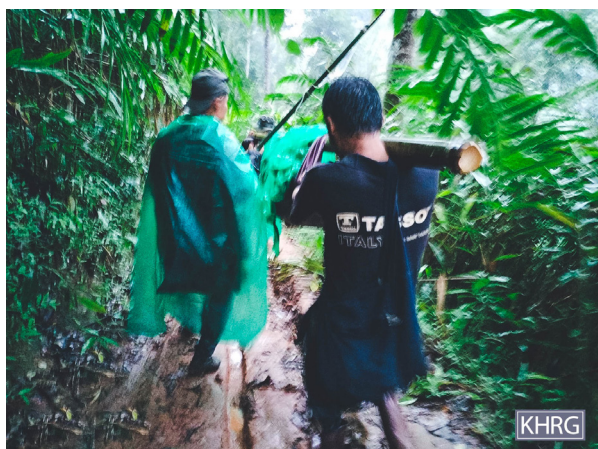
SAC checkpoints, curfews, and armed presence on large roads often prevent villagers from seeking urgent medical treatment, making it extremely difficult for people to access care. Due to such restrictions and long distances to healthcare facilities, villagers reported children and newborns dying on the way to hospitals.⁶⁰

Several villagers talked about travel restrictions and militarisation by the SAC armed forces deepening the difficulties of reaching clinics and healthcare workers. A local KYO leader named Saw Ak--- in Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, said: *“Here we don’t have a clinic. The closest one is in Seik Gyi [Town]. Going to Seik Gyi at night is not an easy thing to do as well.”*

⁵⁹ See: KHRG, *Defying Hunger*, above.

⁶⁰ For instance: KHRG, *“Taw Oo District Short Update: fighting, SAC looting and burning of villagers’ houses, and two children killed by an UXO explosion, in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township (February and March 2024)”*, July 2024.

Some dare not go. It's not easy to go. It would be a big support for us if we had a clinic in our village." Seik Gyi (Kyainseikgyi) is a town in Noh T'Kaw Township, heavily militarised by SAC soldiers.



This photo was taken in May 2025, on a road near Ed-- village, Day Loh Mu Nu La (Day Loh Muh La La) village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District. On May 29th 2025, a 13-year-old villager, named Saw Kc---, was injured by a landmine explosion in Ee--- village, K'Lay Loh Mu Nu La village tract, while he was travelling to Shel Tho Maing ('13 Miles') Town with his two friends. He was injured on his right foot, right arm, and chest. The photo shows local villagers carrying Saw Kc--- in a hammock from Ed--- village to the clinic in Ef--- area, Day Loh Mu Htaw village tract.

[Photo: KHRG]

Naw Kb---, from Ec--- village, T'Hka Kloh village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, explained the difficulties that SAC checkpoints and curfews presented for one woman going into labour: *"People were not allowed to travel after 6 pm [...] Until [6 am in] the morning [...]. A woman who had difficulty delivering went to Seik Gyi [Town]. When they arrived at the [SAC] checkpoint, they called the soldiers to open the gate for them."* Although the SAC soldiers eventually opened the gate for the woman in labour, the encounter further demonstrated to villagers the risks of travelling along SAC roads. As she added: *"Even though they [the SAC] closed the road, people have [no choice but] to travel if they have emergency healthcare problems, but they are afraid when they travel."* In another instance, Naw Kb--- continued, in Eg--- village, another woman was unable to travel to a hospital after going into labour in the village: *"The aircraft came. She [the pregnant woman] was afraid at the same time. Her belly was also in pain [to deliver the baby]. People had to find a midwife in the village. [...] At that time, her belly was in pain, but she could not go anywhere. So, people asked for help from a midwife in the village."*

Naw Kd---, a mother from Eh--- village, Way Hka Na village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township, Dooplaya District, raised similar fears of using large, accessible roads due to SAC presence: *"We often meet with a nurse now and then. But we did not reach the hospital. [...] It is very far. [...] We just worry that if we go, there might be an air strike while we are on the way to the hospital. We worry that we would get hit. [...] We have to go through the curvy [rural, inaccessible] road [...] Because we are scared of Burmese [SAC soldiers]."*

Several villagers reported that the health situation of newborns and their mothers became more severe while displaced. Daw Ab---, a mother from Cp--- village, Moo K'Poh area, T'Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, was displaced with her family due to an SAC air strike on Cp--- village in late December 2024. She explained: *"The situation is worse [for mothers of newborns]. Due to them being displaced in the forest, it is not easy for them to come to the clinic. So, their health condition is really not good. I mean, it is difficult to travel, and the roads are also not good. So, it is not easy to travel by motorbike."*

b) Limiting access to medicine by the SAC

Constant SAC attacks, SAC presence on transportation routes, and SAC confiscation of goods and medical materials by SAC soldiers at checkpoints make it difficult for clinics in Southeast Burma, particularly rural ones, to stock enough medicine to support children's health needs. 36

interviewees raised concerns over the lack of access to medicine. 62% of interviewees (26 of 42) who mentioned accessing healthcare via a KDHW clinic also stated that a lack of medicine was a major challenge for them. Naw Integer, who oversees the MCH program at KDHW, stated that Taw Oo District was the most difficult district to travel in for healthcare workers, while Mergui-Tavoy District was the second most difficult.

As well as impeding villagers' travel and making them afraid of arrest and torture, SAC soldiers at checkpoints also confiscate their food, medicines, and medical supplies. U⁶¹ Ke---, who lives in Ei--- village, Za Yat Gyi Tuang Chan village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, said: *"There is no way to transport medicines. They [the SAC] did not allow transporting medicines here, so people transport medicines with their nearest connection."* Similarly, the villagers of Ej--- village in the Leh Hka village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, faced healthcare challenges as transportation of medicine from the city to the village was prohibited by the SAC. Naw Kf---, from Ej--- village, explained: *"There is no way to get medicine or go to the hospital because of the conflict, and sometimes Burmese [Burma Army] soldiers interrupt us on our way."*⁶²

Daw Ab---, the villager displaced to Cq--- village, Moo K'Poh area, Mergui-Tavoy District, also described how the threat of having the SAC confiscate goods or assault travellers discouraged her and other villagers from travelling to access medicine: *"We also need medicine since there is no place to buy medicine. Even though we had a pharmacy [nearby], there was no medicine in the pharmacy. So, they [healthcare workers] went to buy medicine for us at nighttime. I want to say that, related to our healthcare condition, it costs more money. It was easy to travel from the upper part⁶³ of the village, but it was not easy to travel in the lower part of the village because Bamar [Burma Army] soldiers were stationed temporarily in that part."*

In Taw Oo District, this is more pronounced when the SAC transports weapons and food to the frontline, as SAC soldiers do not let villagers go to town to buy medicine. Naw Aj---, a mother from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, stated: *"People are not allowed to go and buy medicine easily. Even if [sometimes] we can [travel to] buy medicine, it is also expensive."* Naw Ay---, a mother from Bf--- village, K'lay Loh Mu Htaw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, discussed seeking out treatment for her son's stomach ache: *"He received treatment from Be--- clinic. [...] Sometimes they don't have enough medicine because they cannot transport medicine because roads are blocked."*

Naw Ag---, a schoolteacher and mother from Cz--- village, displaced to Da--- village area, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, raised the challenges the lack of medicine poses for pregnant women: *"It might be because the support disappeared [was confiscated] on the way, or it was hard to transport. Two of my children need nutrition. People came and collected data, but the support disappeared. I tried to get medicines such as 'tonic' [orally administered vitamins] from other places. For my other children, I received none [support] in the past. [...] You cannot find 'medicine' here at all. The pregnant women are mourning, and they only have 'drip' [IV-administered saline solution and lactate solution]. [...] Some [pregnant women] face difficulty because they cannot buy things. For some babies, they only use pieces of shirts and old blankets."*

⁶¹ 'U' is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

⁶² See: KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline*, above, p. 10.

⁶³ The upper part of a village can either refer to the eastern part of a village or the part of a village on raised ground. Conversely, the lower part of a village refers to the west of a village or the part of a village on lower ground.

c) Limiting vaccination access by the SAC

The risk of SAC attack or confiscation of materials along roads has also curtailed the ability of healthcare workers to carry out vaccination campaigns for children in villages across rural Southeast Burma. Both the KDHW and the BPHWT carried out immunisation activities in mixed- and KNU-controlled villages in Southeast Burma, in close collaboration. KDHW reported that they provide vaccinations for children in accordance with World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations for routine immunisation. However, in 2025, CBOs have been unable to travel to many villages due to the conflict and funding cuts.

Out of all interviews that discussed vaccination, 39% (17 of 44) stated that children in their areas had not received vaccines at all, while 52% of interviewees (23 of 44) stated they had received some vaccines, or heard of some vaccines in their area. A further 23% (10 of 44) reported challenges accessing vaccines for children in their area.

Health professionals pointed out the risks of not vaccinating children. Healthcare worker Naw Kg---, from Ek--- village, Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, also laid out variations in access to vaccines: *"When we look at other villages that we [KDHW] haven't reached and which haven't received vaccination yet, it's really different because the children do not have full body resistance. [...] Long-term coughing has occurred. Yesterday, there was a child coming here [Dj--- village, Htee Ler Poo village tract]. When we look at the reason, they did not receive vaccinations. [...] They were affected by these diseases. All these children did not receive vaccinations."*

Naw Kh---, from El--- village, Htee Ghu Thaw village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooplaya District, reported that periodic visits had decreased because it had become difficult for KDHW to reach the village: *"Right now, children don't receive it [vaccines] much anymore. It comes rarely. They missed many months when they were supposed to come. They [KDHW] could not reach us anymore. [...] It has been two years since they have not been able to come on time. [...] Now they come once every six months instead of once every three months."*

The risks of travelling with vaccines are magnified by the requirement for specialised equipment needed to keep vaccines from spoiling. Saw Ax---, the KDHW Township coordinator for Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, discussed this point: *"When we examine our area, to do vaccination or look after malnutrition for the children in mountainous areas, some medicines need [to be kept in the] freezer. Related to this, some places are really far, and it is hard to travel during the rainy season. We need to be afraid of flooding, and roads are damaged. So, we cannot provide it [vaccines and nutrition in mountainous areas]. [...] I said we face difficulties as we need to put it [vaccines] in a freezer, so since we do not have electricity, it creates so many challenges for us to continue our journeys."*

d) Limiting access to medical equipment and personnel

Across Southeast Burma, the lack of equipment and personnel is an issue primarily in rural villages, where clinics are often only able to equip themselves to provide basic care to patients. The lack of supplies is linked to many of the same root causes preventing children from being able to travel to seek care at hospitals. SAC's confiscation of medical supplies makes it difficult to equip smaller clinics, and SAC attacks prevent clinics from being able to put in place more complex equipment, out of fear that it will be destroyed. In addition to this, villagers raised concerns over insufficient funding and training for healthcare workers in rural clinics. At least 18 interviewees raised concerns over the lack of sufficient equipment and personnel to treat

children effectively at clinics. Such concerns were large in Doooplaya District, where 28% (8 of 28) interviewees raised the issue.



This photo was taken in June 2025, in Jj--- clinic, Bu Arr Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. The photo shows a child receiving a vaccination in the KDHW clinic. [Photo: KHRG]

The lack of equipment at the local clinics forces people to risk travelling through SAC-run checkpoints to access care at SAC hospitals in towns, or to cross into Thailand and access hospitals there. Naw Aq--- from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, stated: *“Some villagers have to go to towns to get medical treatment because the clinic here [Ds--- clinic, near Dq--- village] does not have enough medical resources and supplies, such as X-rays and laboratory. The clinic also does not have surgeons. Therefore, some villagers had to go to Toungoo Town to get medical treatment.”*

The lack of equipment also creates complications for supporting births. The displaced healthcare worker named Naw Kg---, from Ek--- village, Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *“The problem that we are facing in treating children is inadequate medical supplies. We can say that our capacity is not sufficient, and we have fewer healthcare workers. We live in a mountainous area. We do not have adequate medical supplies. We are taking care of the patients as much as we can. [...] Although we have advanced medicines, we cannot use them all because we do not have testing materials. The clinic here is just a primary [healthcare clinic]. [...] We can take care of babies who are expected to have a smooth delivery. It is okay if both the mothers and babies are healthy when babies are delivered. [...] We know whether a [pregnant] woman is in danger if they come to the clinic. We don’t know if they do not show up. [...] If something happens, we should send the person to the big hospital [in Thailand] to save the lives of babies and mothers.”*

3.3. Unaffordable treatment costs

Villagers reported that they faced difficulties covering fees when seeking treatment for children, or avoided seeking treatment entirely, as they were unable to afford the costs. Due to conflict-induced inflation and the SAC’s destruction of traditional sources of income, people are struggling to support themselves and their children, and face severe difficulties in covering transportation, medicine, and medical fees.

Interviewees in areas with SAC clinics reported struggles with paying for healthcare: 70% of interviewees (7 of 10) who discussed accessing healthcare from an SAC clinic reported concerns over financial difficulties, compared to 24% (10 of 42) among those who discussed accessing health from a KDHW-run clinic. This difference stems from SAC clinics charging villagers for

treatment, while KDHW and village-run clinics either do not charge villagers or charge at significantly lower rates. While SAC hospitals are located mainly in SAC-controlled towns, KDHW or BPHWT-run clinics operate in mixed control or KNU-controlled areas due to the threats they face operating in SAC areas.

Naw S---, from Bz--- village, Htee Klay village tract, T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, discussed the high fees that they faced while seeking out treatment for their son’s asthma at an SAC clinic in town: *“Going to a ‘no fee’ clinic [run by the KDHW] cannot treat every [sickness], so we had to go to another [private] clinic and had to pay money. Sometimes, we face difficulties [paying medical fees] because we do not have enough [money]. [...] Because my son has asthma, we had to take him to the [SAC-run] hospital when he had an asthma attack, so the expense is high. We take him to Ho--- [Town]. [...] We do get medicine, but it costs a lot too. [...] The first time we visited [the doctor], it cost about 300,000 Kyats [142.86 USD].”*

This impacts preventive treatment as well. Saw Ak---, from Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, discussed the changing cost of vaccinations at the SAC clinic in Seik Gyi (Kyainseikgyi) Town: *“Before pregnant women, newborns, and newborns’ mothers received vaccination freely. But now, the person has to find a way by herself. [...] Before, the vaccination fee was free. But now, a shot costs 500,000 Kyats [238.10 USD].”*

Ultimately, while some villagers are still able to pay higher costs at clinics, low-income earners often struggle. As a result, some villagers working as daily wage workers reported being unable to afford care for their children. Ma Ki---, a 22-year-old mother who was displaced to Cq--- village, Moo K’Poh area, T’Naw Th’Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, due to SAC attacks on her village, reported about her three-year-old son’s health challenges: *“Since we are daily wage workers, we cannot afford enough food. [...] We do not have enough money when we go for a checkup at a clinic, so we do not receive enough medicine. We cannot borrow medicine first and then pay the expense later. [...] The children frequently experience diarrhoea. They have regular bowel movements only once or twice a month. Since we do not have enough money, we cannot afford the full treatment for them. [...] In our environment, we are away from water [sources], so he [her son] does not have enough water to drink. Since we are trying to work hard to secure our livelihood, we do not have enough time to take care of him as well. Also, to provide treatment for him until he is fully recovered, we cannot afford it.”*

Like with other barriers to access, the inability to pay for care has resulted in the death of children. Saw Kj---, a 16-year-old boy from Cc--- village, Wa Ka village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooplaya District, reported how a child in his village died at birth, in part because traveling to a clinic was not affordable: *“The incident that I know happened to my friend [...] His wife was pregnant. A week before the delivery date, they returned to the village. When their baby was born, the umbilical cord was around the neck, so the baby died shortly after the delivery. [...] She gave birth at home. [...] They did not have enough money to pay for a car to go [to the hospital].”*

3.4. Villagers’ agency strategies for healthcare

Villagers take a number of steps to ensure that children are able to receive treatment for injuries and illnesses. These steps included parents of children, fellow villagers, and local leaders organising to help transport sick or injured children to hospitals or helping source medicine for children. For instance, Naw Kl---, a 17-year-old displaced to Bs--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Dooplaya District, noted that: *“When students are sick, teachers take them to the hospital [Bs--- clinic, under the KDHW] by motorcycle.”* In many other cases, villagers travel great distances by motorcycle and otherwise to carry injured and sick children

to healthcare facilities, sometimes using hammocks as makeshift stretchers.⁶⁴ When care is not available at clinics and hospitals in Burma, they will often help them travel to Thailand to seek out care. In some cases, villagers mentioned seeking out traditional herbal remedies for their children's illnesses either to supplement allopathic medical treatment methods or as a substitute when such treatment methods were not available.

Villagers also reported that they had rebuilt clinics to ensure access to basic care. Sai Ac---, a villager from Cr--- village, Cs--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, described: *"Similarly, for healthcare, we could not build a clinic and hospital within or near the village [Br--- village], so we had a clinic far away from us [Br--- village]. We [villagers] built a clinic. Some adults and children could not access the clinic. The clinic also does not have sufficient medication."* Villagers also supported the operation of mobile clinics, which are usually managed by CBOs, in their areas.

Health workers also often move the clinic location repeatedly in order to ensure villagers can continue to access healthcare. Saw Kt---, a 17-year-old boy from Dk--- village, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, stated: *"Currently, clinics are required to function. They [health workers team] have to move from place to place; sometimes they move to villagers' rubber plantation, and sometimes they move [set up clinic operations] in the area beside the river. Now, they cannot operate [beside the river] due to the rain and flooding, so they have to move to the forest area; they cut the trees and clean the area [for the clinic operation campus]. They have to try their best as much as they can."*

⁶⁴ See, for instance: KHRG, "Taw Oo District Short Update: A landmine explosion severely injured two villagers, including a 13-year-old, in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township (May 2025)", July 2025.



This photo was taken in May 2025, in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Doo Play District. It shows a drawing collectively made by six boys who participated in KHRG's focus group. The drawing shows an air strike on their village in 2024, which burned homes and injured a villager. The drawing also shows villagers fleeing, taking shelter in makeshift bunkers and others escaping into the forest when the attack happened. The boys in the focus group also expressed their longing for peace, sharing that living amid conflict prevents them from attending school safely or playing freely. Some names have been censored for security. [Photo: KHRG]

Chapter 4. Threats to the mental and psychosocial wellbeing of children

Children need a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for their full development and wellbeing. However, children in Southeast Burma have been unable to enjoy these fundamental rights. Since the 2021 coup, and during the reporting period, they have been exposed to ongoing armed conflict and have lived in extreme insecurity and fear due to SAC attacks, including air and drone strikes, shelling, and burning of villages. The violations and attacks by Burma Army soldiers on villages significantly harm children's social and mental wellbeing by causing death or injury to family members and friends; destroying homes; and inducing poverty, food insecurity, injury, and protracted displacement. The resulting deprivation of emotional wellbeing of children negatively affects communities at large. Nonetheless, children continue to apply coping strategies with the support of trusted adults to enhance their resilience and restore their welfare.

This chapter presents the situation of the wellbeing of children in Karen State, as reported from January 2024 to June 2025, including the forms of psychological harm inflicted on children and their physical manifestations. Children in Southeast Burma experienced a lack of physical safety and mental suffering and distress, due to witnessing violence and conflict (4.1.), including panic and fear, sleep deprivation, lack of motivation, anger, or emotional numbness. Family wellbeing has also been altered (4.2.) due to the death and injury of relatives, the loss of homes, and conflict-induced family separation. Similarly, the conflict and SAC attacks are impacting social and community wellbeing (4.3.) by denying children's opportunities to play, depriving them of socialisation, limiting their expectations for their future, and increasing drug use among youth. To cope with such attacks and their impacts on the mental health of children, youth are employing agency strategies (4.4.), including playing, participating in religious events, getting encouragement from adults, and providing motivation among themselves.

4.1. Impacts of violence on the psychological wellbeing of children

The mental wellbeing of children living in conflict-affected areas is dramatically impacted by their experience and exposure to abuses. Violence and attacks lead children to live with insecurity, fear, sadness, depression, a lack of motivation, and anger. Such violence also causes psychosomatic symptoms in children, including difficulty breathing, body tremors, insomnia, self-isolation, and loss of the ability to speak. Sometimes, children have also normalised these violations and reported feelings of emotional numbness.

a) Experiencing and witnessing violence and attacks

Villagers reported that children who directly witnessed abuses in their villages, as well as the loss of homes and community members—mainly caused by SAC attacks—experienced extreme fear and anxiety. Children who witnessed violent attacks often had trouble breathing, body tremors, and temporary mutism. Daw N---, a local teacher from Bn--- village, Pyin Yay village tract, Hsaw Htee Township, in Kler Lwee Htoo District, reported: *“When the aircraft came for the first time, the bomb landed near a bunker. At that time, a child got scared, panicked, and ran into the forest. We told the child to stop running, and we warned that we needed to check if the second aircraft might come or not. But the child was out of control and ran into the forest anyway. The child was traumatised and would not sleep in the village. The child sleeps outside of the village at their family's hut, which was built in their family's plantation field.”*

Saw Ak---, a local KYO leader from Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, testified: *“Back in the day [on October 21st 2022], air strike and shelling happened. Children who were four to five years old were shivering due to fear. [...] They felt fear, and they didn’t know what to do. It became a big problem. One child could not breathe due to fear.”* Similarly, a mother from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, named Naw Aq---, explained about her children’s somatic reactions while hearing the sound of aircraft flying: *“My daughter was very afraid. Her body was shaking as she was afraid. So, she covered her ears because she was afraid that another shell might land and explode again.”*

b) Protracted psychological impacts after violent attacks

Such attacks on communities not only threatened children’s physical safety but also had longer-term effects on their emotional wellbeing. Amidst the protracted and ongoing armed conflict, psychological impacts persisted for months (and even years) after the attacks, affecting children’s ability to learn, socialise, and feel secure in their daily lives. A headmaster from Db--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, named Naw Ah---, reported that children suffered from lingering fear after a past attack: *“They still feel frightened. Different children have different feelings. Some children even got trauma. They start to feel afraid whenever they hear a big noise. The fear has been rooted in their mind because they saw and experienced the conflict. Some children are shaking like crazy whenever they hear the sound of shelling and aircraft flying because they are too afraid. Even school teachers are too afraid when they hear a sound of aircraft flying. Even after the aircraft went away, they were still shaking. [...] It is difficult to heal our fear. We would be feeling at ease if we didn’t hear a sound of shelling or aircraft flying.”*

Saw Ax---, father and the KDHW Township coordinator, from Dz--- village, Buh Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“My son once had to flee from the aircraft when he was around nine or ten years old [in 2021]. The things I see are, he is always shaking whenever he hears the sound of aircraft, then he is also afraid. I saw a few children acting the same as my son. They are no longer able to stay in their house whenever they hear the sound of aircraft. They go down under their [stilted] house and run randomly.”* The SAC air strike occurred near Ea--- village, Buh Ah Der village tract, on April 30th 2021, at 1 am.

Due to the conflict and violations, some children also suffered a loss of willingness to eat. Naw Ay---, a mother from Bf--- village, Klay Loh Mu Htaw (Klay Wah Mu Htaw) village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, described: *“We feed him food that is high in nutritional value after the incident [air strike on May 18th 2025 on Be--- school], but he does not like to eat it. [...] He just eats a little. I told him to eat a lot so he will get more energy, but he cannot eat a lot because he does not like to eat food [anymore]. It seems like he lost his appetite.”*

Naw Ku---, a local teacher from Es--- village, Klay Loh Mu Htaw village tract, reported school dropout due to the loss of concentration and motivation after a shelling attack conducted by the SAC in 2024, near Et--- school in Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract: *“She [a student] was very shocked and afraid. Since she experienced the shelling, she got trauma. She always feels like it is difficult to breathe. After she experienced the shelling, her mental situation is not normal as before. She cannot concentrate on her studies as before. Because of these situations, she dropped out of school.”* Likewise, a child participating in a focus group discussion in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, expressed: *“We heard the sound of aircraft flying. We are afraid of it. We have to hide [in a safe place] when aircraft are coming to our area. Sometimes we have to flee to the forest, and we have to sleep in the forest. [...] We felt upset. Sometimes we feel like we do not want to go to school anymore.”*

The threat of attacks also makes it hard for children to sleep. At least 20 interviewees reported children having difficulty sleeping. The local headmaster from Db--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Naw Ah---, explained: *"They [children] cannot get to sleep very well. Sometimes, they are angry in their bed [because] they have to get up anytime when an aircraft comes. Some [of the students,] we have to call them [when aircraft come, as they are asleep]. When we called them [to wake them up], they were angry. They cannot get to sleep well, so we have to get them to sleep in a safe place and [face] mosquitoes. They cannot get to eat and sleep well."*

Many children reported not feeling safe in their villages, houses, and schools, due to SAC aircraft attacking their villages. Thus, they choose to flee to the forest and hide under leaves, hidden from aircraft. Children in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, also expressed during group discussions with KHRG their terror of air strikes, shelling, and other violations in their villages, which have resulted in casualties, displacement, and constant fear after experiencing attacks. They also reported feeling unsafe, frightened, anxious, and sad when they hide in bunkers. This situation is widespread and an ongoing issue in many areas across Karen State, like Dd--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, where all girls participating in the group discussion with KHRG reported having taken shelter in the bunker more than twice for their safety.

Twelve children (aged between nine and 13) from the focus group discussion in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, also expressed that they felt afraid when they saw strangers in their village, especially people speaking Burmese. One of the children explained: *"I saw some strangers travelling here. [...] They were wearing ordinary clothes. [...] Because they look different from people here, and they speak Burmese. So I am afraid of them."* Because they had experienced and witnessed abuses committed by Burma Army soldiers who spoke Burmese, community members often felt unsafe around strangers speaking this language, fearing they might be spies for the Burma Army and would commit further violations against them. In that area, children had also experienced air strikes by the SAC. For this reason, they avoided making noise while playing, studied in the forest, and lived in constant fear of attacks.

Some children from the group discussing in Br--- village also reported being afraid when PDF or KNLA soldiers were passing through the village, or were temporarily stationed in the village, as they worried that the SAC would then attack. However, teenagers in several areas, including Mu Traw and Dooplaya districts, stated feeling relieved to see KNLA soldiers in their area, as they believed they would protect them. Naw KI---, a teenage girl from Em--- village, A'Kyoo village tract (Taw Naw Mu Nu area), Kaw T'Ree Township, expressed: *"I am not afraid [of armed resistance groups]. [...] I am happy because they are good. They do not give us trouble, but they defend us. [...] I am afraid [of the SAC]. I run if I see them."*

c) Other deprivation of emotional wellbeing due to attacks

Due to the conflict and violations, children also reported feeling low energy and less motivation to continue their lives as usual. Some were unhappy living in the community due to attacks on their village and struggled to focus on their studies. At least four children raised feeling hopeless and worried about their future as a result of the conflict. Saw O---, a schoolteacher from Bo--- village, Khaw Hpoe Pleh village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, reported: *"Every time!! They [children] feel unsafe all the time. They have to be afraid during nighttime, and they also have to be afraid during daytime. There is no safe time for them. [...] They feel sad and unpleasant. These [air strikes and shelling] caused fear for them. When air strikes happen, they could not do anything [to respond to the attack], they might do something in return if they can. Since they could not do anything in turn [to respond to attacks], they feel deeply [pain] inside*

their heart, so they feel unpleasant.” He continued: “When children grow up, they do not like to live in the village because they always have to be in fear and cannot fully enjoy happiness. Therefore, they would like to go to other countries.”

Saw Kc---, the 13-year-old boy from Bf--- village, Klay Loh Mu Htaw village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, who sustained a physical disability caused by a landmine explosion, in Ee--- village, Klay Loh Mu Nu La village tract, expressed that he wanted to help his mother, but after the incident he stated: *“I feel like I cannot do anything.”*

On some occasions, children’s behaviour also showed an increase in aggressive behaviour. Naw Z---, a mother from Ch---village, Ler Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained: *“They [children] got angry. They said ‘p’yaw’ [‘Bamar’; refers to Burma Army soldiers]. They got angry at ‘p’yaw’ because they had to flee. They did not get to attend class at the school [in the village]. They were afraid of ‘p’yaw’ conducting an air strike. Sometimes, they get angry. Children also have their own understanding [of the conflict].”* Similarly, Saw Kv---, a teenager from Dg-- - village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, expressed: *“We got angry [due to SAC attacks], but we can’t do anything.”*

Given their long-term experiences of violence and conflict, some children consider the violations and struggles in their daily lives in conflict areas as ‘normal’, showing emotional numbness or desensitisation to abuse. Saw Ax---, the KDHW Township coordinator from Dz--- village, Buh Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, explained: *“Now, as the incident [of air strike] has been happening for a little bit long, so children are more still [not afraid]. [...] Presently, as aircraft had come for several times, and it’s been many years that aircraft came already [since 2021], so children are back to normal [not as afraid]. They feel a little bit like it is normal for them.”* In the same way, Saw Km---, a 12-year-old boy from Ch--- village, Ler Muh Plaw village tract, Mu Traw District, expressed: *“I have seen it with my own eyes [air strikes on his village on April 8th 2024]. [...] As for me, I was not scared.”*

4.2. Alterations to family unity and wellbeing

The family is a main foundation of care and shelter for children, contributing to their fundamental wellbeing and development. Young children reported to KHRG that home, where they are under the care of parents and close relatives, is the safest place for them. However, the ongoing violence inflicted on villagers and their villages in Southeast Burma is eroding the wellbeing of children and their families. The SAC indiscriminate attacks cause safety and security risks, death and injury of loved ones, destruction of homes and daily routines, and poverty.

a) Death and injury of caregivers and loved ones

The death and injury of parents, relatives, and caregivers amid the conflict and attacks impacted children’s family wellbeing and led many to lose care and protection. Orphaned children are often taken care of by aunts or grandparents.⁶⁵ Some humanitarian organisations, such as KWO, or religious organisations, also manage dormitories and orphanages in several areas.

For instance, in Dooplaya District, Naw Kp---, the mother of the three children (aged nine, two, and three months), from Hy--- village, Noh Poe village tract, Taw Naw Mu Htaw area, Kaw T’Ree Township, whose husband died on May 19th 2025 due to an SAC air strike, expressed: *“My*

⁶⁵ See, for instance, KHRG, *“Kler Lwee Htoo District Incident Report: SAC mortar shelling killed two villagers and injured three children in Moo Township (July 2024)”*, March 2025.

young children cried when their dad died. [The children said,] ‘Daddy doesn’t love us anymore.’ People ask my child, ‘what happened to your dad?’, [and] my child responded, ‘my dad died. An air strike killed my dad’. My child spoke like that and cried.”

The death and injury of parents also impacted the financial situation of families. Naw Kp--- also expressed: *“As soon as me and my two children went inside the bunker, it [her house] was burned down because a bomb fell and hit it. I got bruises; [but] I wasn’t even aware of it. My youngest child also could not open his eyes. Our eyes, noses, and heads were blocked by dust. My husband was not at home. He was at the hut. [...] When the air strike happened, he was hit. His chest was opened up, and his organs exploded everywhere. We were not even able to collect all of his organs, because there were many small pieces. [...] The paddy and rice were burned along with the house. The house has everything, as we already have two kids. Everything inside the house, equipment, food, and goods were burned.”*⁶⁶

Family livelihood challenges and food insecurity impact children’s mental wellbeing. Naw Ag-- , a displaced parent who is also a teacher in Da--- village area, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, explained: *“Some children who do not have sufficient food feel sad. They faced sadness. [...] It is because they ran out of food, and they felt sad. Some children whose parents can afford it are happy. Some children with insufficient food feel upset. As a parent, I understand.”*

Other conflict-related events also cause the separation and suffering of families. A 12-year-old boy named Saw Kq---, from Eo--- village, T’Maw Daw village tract, Tha Htoo (Thaton) Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, expressed: *“When I could live with parents, friends, older brothers, older sister, and other siblings, I felt secure, happy and pleasant. [...] I am afraid when I have to be alone at home, when the aircraft dropped bombs and when the SAC conduct mortar shelling. [...] I worry about dying.”* Saw Kq---’s mother passed away due to an illness, and two of his siblings migrated to Thailand to seek out job opportunities.



This photo was taken in March 2025, in Eq--- village, Kheh Der village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. On March 25th 2025, an SAC fighter jet dropped an incendiary bomb onto the village, setting fire to a villager’s house. The photo shows villagers trying to put out the fire that burned down the house.

[Photo: KHRG]

b) Family separation and impacts on family ties

The ongoing conflict also separated families by forcing people into displacement, increasing poverty, and leading children to study away from home at boarding schools. Saw Av---, living in Bj--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, whose six sons and daughters (three of them underage) were displaced to another area, reported: *“They [his children] are not happy because they have to live with their aunt and uncle, separately from their mother and father, so it is impossible for them to be happy. [...] Because aircraft are dropping bombs. They were afraid and crying very hard in fear. As they are children, they had a lot of problems [during the air strikes] while they were living away from their parents.”* The family separated due to the

⁶⁶ KHRG, “Dooplaya District Incident Report: an SAC air strike killed two villagers in Kaw T’Ree Township (March 2025)”, May 2025.

bombardment of Thay Baw Boh village tract, beginning on 25th May 2025, which destroyed many houses and injured two villagers.

Naw Aq---, the mother of three underage children from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, and mother of three underage children, expressed: *“In their [her children’s] mind, they see the SAC as an armed organisation that harms humanity, because people lost their rights and freedom because of the SAC. Since the coup, I have not been able to stay together with my sons. As they [her sons] cannot stay together with their parents, it negatively affects their mental health.”*

Students who are forced to study in villages away from their homes also experienced difficulties. For instance, a 13-year-old Naw Kr---, from Ep--- village, P’Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, was in another village, studying Grade 8 away from her parents when she heard a mortar shell explode nearby the village in November 2024. She said: *“I felt really afraid. I thought I might die if I was hit by the shelling. I really missed my parents at that time. I cannot imagine how my parents would feel if something happened to me.”* She added: *“I feel sad when I have to stay far from my parents. [...] During school days, I miss my parents.”*

A few interviewees also reported domestic incidents during the conflict impacting children’s safety. For instance, a 17-year-old boy named Saw Ks---, from Cl--- village, Kaw Wa Hlaing village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooطلا District, migrated to Thailand in search of job opportunities to support his family. Due to the family’s poverty, he had been living with his grandparents in a separate house to access education. However, in 2022, when he was 14 years old, he dropped out of school after experiencing domestic violence, when his grandfather attempted to attack him with a knife. Following the incident, he migrated to Thailand to help secure his family’s livelihood and support his siblings’ education. His mother, Naw Aa---, explained: *“He didn’t take the exam [when he attended Standard 8]. The problem is that no one takes care of him. He didn’t receive any care as he didn’t stay with his parents. He stayed with his grandfather. His grandfather is consuming things [drugs]. [...] His grandfather tried to cut him [Saw Ks---, with a knife] at night. He had to flee from his grandfather and sleep [somewhere else].”*

4.3. Community ties and social wellbeing impacted

Children in Karen State have also lost the sense of safety needed to play and attend social gatherings, important to their cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing. The repeated violations and attacks on villages have severely impacted children’s physical and mental welfare, affecting their ability to sustain strong motivation, maintain hopes for the future, build healthy relationships with peers, and communicate effectively within their communities.

a) Impacts on children’s right to play

Interviewed children mentioned play as a source of release and happiness. Typical games mentioned include ‘Htoh See Doh’ (a game where two teams try to block each other as they run along a grid), ‘Saaa Yeeee’ (a game where two teams try to run between two points without being tagged), or play ‘buying and selling’. Children mentioned using sticks, stones, seeds, coconut shells, leaves, flowers, or mud to play such games. In some areas where villagers can access sports equipment from the towns, children also play caneball (‘chinlone’), football, and volleyball, and video games on their phones.

However, most of the time, children in Southeast Burma were unable to enjoy their rights to play due to the risk of conflict-related violations. During the years prior to the 2021 coup

(particularly during the ceasefire period⁶⁷), children would cry out joyfully when they played together. However, now, the sound of children playing and of people gathering raises the risk of attacks by SAC air strikes or shelling. Hence, interviewees reported not allowing children to make loud noise while playing. In some areas, such as places close to SAC army camps, children were not allowed to play outside of their homes at all. Naw R---, a displaced teenage girl from Br--- village, Keh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, reported: *“We did not have full security. Some people said that the aircraft can see [students] because the roof of the school building was not covered well. The students were also playing and making some noise, so it was not safe. Actually, we have to be quiet when we are studying in the jungle [as well]. It was not safe when the students were playing and making noise.”*

Play is also constantly interrupted by military attacks or the threats of attacks.⁶⁸ Naw Aq---, the villager from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, and mother of three underage children, reported: *“I feel like my children’s mental health has been greatly affected by the conflict because they cannot play freely. If they see an aircraft flying over our area, they stop playing. They already understand that an air strike will happen if they see an aircraft flying around. They stop playing, and they flee somewhere to hide. Shelling also happened in our area. Whether my children are studying or whether they are playing, they stop playing or studying, and they flee whenever they hear the sound of shelling.”*

Furthermore, due to economic hardships created by the conflict and constant attacks by the SAC, children are also asked to help parents secure their family’s livelihoods, including by caring for their younger siblings; collecting water, firewood, and vegetables; hunting and fishing; and working on the farm.



This photo was taken in July 2024, in a displacement site named Er---, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. In March 2024, fighting happened between SAC troops and KNLA troops in Bu Tho Township, and the SAC also conducted air strikes and shelling into villages in the township. Therefore, many villagers from Jn--- and Jo--- villages, Meh Klaw village tract, fled to Er--- displacement site. The photo shows children playing ‘Htoh See Doh’ in the displacement site. ‘Htoh See Doh’ is a game in which teams of players try to run past each other along lines on the ground.

[Photo: KHRG]

⁶⁷ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the Karen National Union (KNU). It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional armed ethnic groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma government.

⁶⁸ See also: KHRG, *တပ်မတော်က လေကြောင်း လာနေပြန်!* Aircraft coming!, above, p. 28; KHRG, *“Doo Tha Htoo District Incident Report: SAC mortar shelling injured two children and damaged property in Hpa-an Township (January 2024)”*, October 2025.

b) Impacts on social and community life

The erosion of children's physical and mental wellbeing also affects their social development as well as the overall cohesion of the community. During the ongoing conflict, villagers are at great danger when gathering and organising community events.⁶⁹ Saw Ak---, the local KYO leader from Noh T'Kaw Township, Doolaya District, reported on the restriction of community events and social gatherings: *"Now, it seems like they don't have [time to be] happy. [...] We celebrate our special days [cultural ceremonies] with fear. We did not even dare to do the [Karen] New Year⁷⁰ celebration. [We] heard that air strikes happened somewhere, and we all got scared. Children dare [play]. But we dare not organise [community celebrations] for them."*

Some children reported negative emotions and behaviour changes, including aggressiveness and social withdrawal within the family and the community. Those behavioural changes may result in difficulties in building healthy relationships and socialisation. Naw Al---, a teenage girl from Dg--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *"After 2021, children didn't play and didn't have freedom. They lost their happiness. Some children just stayed quietly without going out. They were angry when people talked to them. It was painful in their hearts. They are not happy. It impacts their health too."*

It is part of Karen culture to share food and resources, help one another with farm work, and even take care of children as a community. However, due to the current hardships caused by military attacks, a few interviewees mentioned that the nature of such community relationships is changing, as villagers are no longer able to help each other as much as before. Cultural celebrations have also decreased, with some even scared to attend others' funerals.

c) Rising exposure to and use of illicit drugs

Since the reinvigoration of the armed conflict in 2021, children have also faced increased exposure to drugs. Villagers reported to KHRG that underage children in Southeast Burma are using both soft and hard drugs, including tobacco, betel nut, alcohol, and 'yaba' (methamphetamine). The 'extensive' use of drugs by children in the village was mentioned by 23 interviewees. The sale of illicit drugs was mentioned as particularly occurring in Doolaya and Hpa-an districts, in the border areas, and was linked to SAC-allied armed groups' activities.

The local KYO leader from Noh T'Kaw Township, Doolaya District, Saw Ak---, reported: *"The drug use started after the [2021] coup as well. [...] Drugs were also spread widely around that time as well. They [drug sellers] just sell drugs like fried beans. [...] It becomes a big problem for all children. It [drugs] is also a way of attempting [to kill villagers], and we try to explain it to children for them to understand."* Saw Kt---, a teenage boy from Dk--- village, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, expressed: *"As young people at my age are sensitive [to drugs], when they are asked to do them and then they also want to do it, so they are [addicted] if they do more and more."*

As reported by villagers, drug abuse impacts the mental and social wellbeing of children and of families and makes it hard to maintain friendships and relationships with the community. Naw

⁶⁹ See also: KHRG, *Community spaces under fire*, above.

⁷⁰ The Karen calendar is lunar, and Karen New Year generally falls between 15 December and 15 January on the English calendar. This year Karen New Year, the first day of Thalay month of the year 2764, fell on 30th December 2024. Karen villagers throughout Burma, Thailand and other countries celebrate with ceremonies, speeches, giving gifts to elders, music, Don Dance competitions and feasting. Sometimes the celebration is held on a later date based on villagers' availability.

Al---, a teenage girl from Dg--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, reported: *"The difference is they [drug users] are not patient when talking to us. Their brains don't work properly."* Daw Nj---, a villager originally from Bago Region, displaced to Hz--- village, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, and mother of a teenager, testified: *"People who use drugs end up abnormal due to the negative impacts on their health. They will have mental health problems. [...] They also have problems with socialising."*

Similarly, Naw Ah---, the headmaster from the school in Db--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Mu Traw District, reported: *"The situation of the [underage] drug users is not good anymore. It causes family problems. They don't want to listen to their parents. They are not interested in studying and working. They don't want to listen to what we say, and they don't respect us. As we know, children and young people are the energy for the country, but if they act like that, they will not be useful anymore."* Saw Y---, a pastor from Cd--- village, S'Tein village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, raised: *"The main thing about the bad consequences that will affect [children] is that, if they use drugs, they do not have [proper] brain development. [...] They will be depressed, and it will harm their health. Another thing is that it will harm their family's financial situation. Another thing is that, because it harms their family's financial situation, their living standards will fall. So, when they need something, their ability to think will decrease. As a result, it [drug use] will be a [type of] destructive behaviour for them."*

4.4. Emotional comfort and coping mechanisms for children

Some villagers mentioned that children try to find spaces to play, be happy, and enjoy the small aspects of daily life, like eating and sleeping. Even though children in Southeast Burma are living under military conflict, they continue to pursue ways of ensuring their welfare.

Some children find contentment in playing with friends, playing on the farms, walking around, and playing games on their phones. Other children highlighted their education and ability to learn as a source of happiness, while others mentioned attending church or spending time with family as bringing them comfort and wellbeing. Going hunting, fishing, and collecting vegetables with friends were also mentioned by interviewees. Naw Q---, a mother from Bt--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, described what it is like for children when aircraft do not fly over their village for one or two weeks: *"If aircraft do not come, they are very happy and travel around. They are happy, like we said to them, 'you guys are very happy, travel around, and play, do you think you guys already got freedom?'. We worry about them, but they are very happy. If the sound [of aircraft] does not appear for one or two weeks, maybe they will think the aircraft will not come anymore."*

Overall, spending time with friends and joining in social activities were mentioned by children as making them happy. For instance, a girl participating in a focus group discussion in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, explained she is happy whenever she goes to church, as she gets to practice songs with her friends, dance, and learn new gospel words and songs, which comfort her. Similarly, Naw Kl---, a displaced teenage girl from Em--- village, A'Kyoo village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, said: *"I chat with my friends and then I am happy. [...] We chat for fun and about funny things. We also went out, and sometimes we go out to buy snacks."* Naw Nk---, a 13-year-old girl from Ja--- village, T'Hka Kloh village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, expressed being happy: *"When I go to school. If I can study, I am happy. [...] I always dance on Sunday [church] or at concert events."*

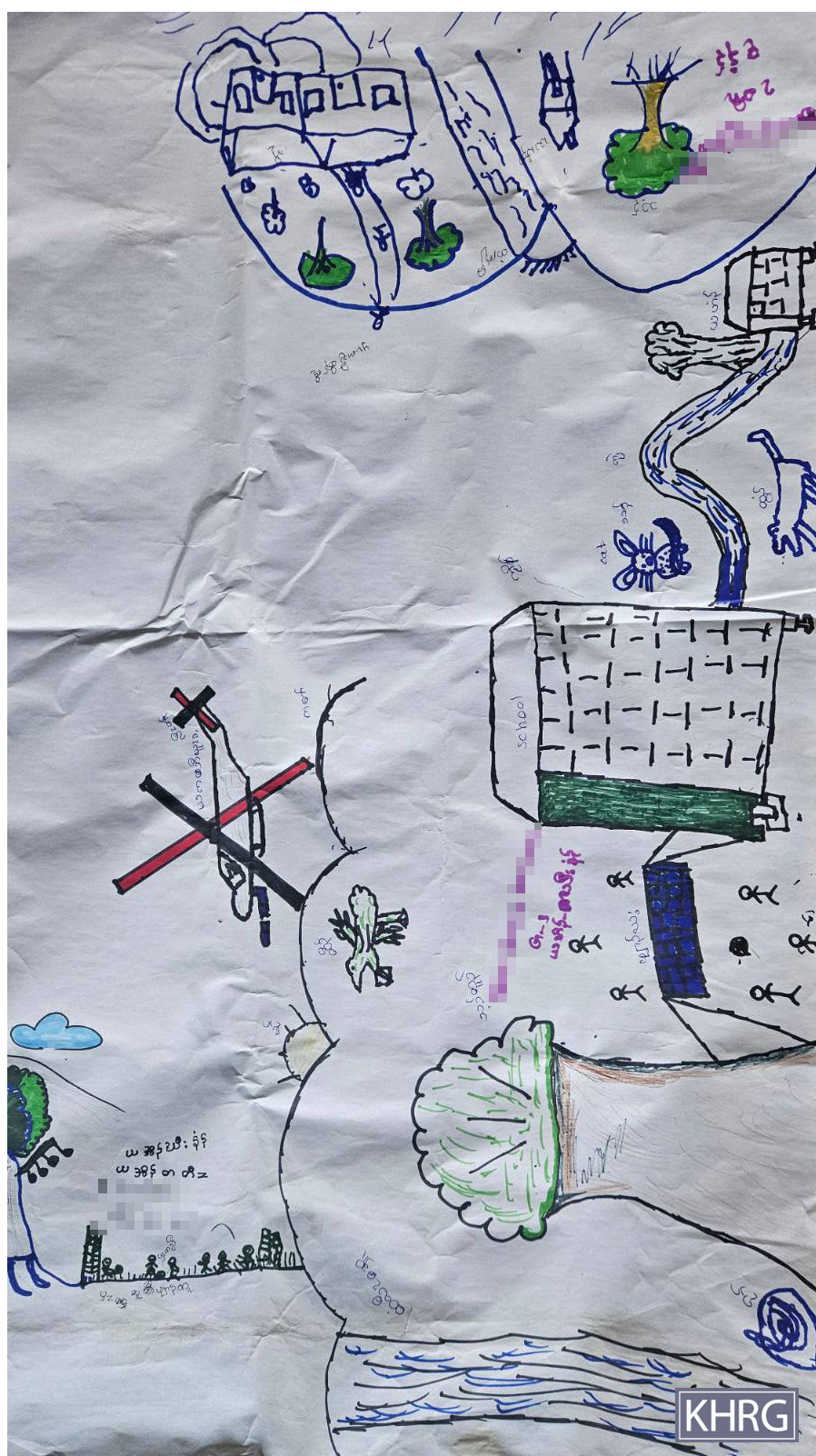
Parents, teachers, local leaders, KWO members, friends, and children themselves help by providing encouragement. Naw Aj---, a mother from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Hta Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, said: *“I try to encourage them. I try to show them the right way. I teach them to be a good and religious person.”* Saw Kv---, a teenager from Dg--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, testified: *“When we feel sad, our teacher comforts and encourages us when we come to school. At home, our parents encourage us, and we feel happy.”* Emotional care was mainly provided by women in the villages. Whenever safe, adults also encouraged children to continue engaging in community activities. Naw Am---, a mother and teacher also from Dg--- village, said: *“We encouraged them to reorganise it [the concert] again together after the shelling [by the SAC] stopped. We have to give them a motivational speech. If we tell them about the dangers, they [their feelings of fear] are getting worse. We have to say, ‘it is okay, do not be afraid, because we have the bunkers’.”*

Children’s mental and emotional personal strength was also mentioned as an important factor in overcoming the current challenges. Saw Kj---, a teenager from Cc--- village, Wa Ka village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooطلا District, also said: *“It [conflict] impacts me. I feel down, but I have to keep my motivation up. However, it hurts me.”*

Nevertheless, children can only fully enjoy their fundamental rights when they live in a safe environment, where there is no armed conflict, attacks, or violence. Naw Kw---, a mother from Eu--- village, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, testified that children looked very happy when they could go to school without any threat, explosions, or other military sounds. Naw Al---, a teenage girl from Dg--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, explained: *“The children were playing happily when the military junta’s aircraft didn’t come. The children lost their happiness when air strikes and shelling happened.”* Naw T---, another teenage girl from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, a KNU-controlled area in Dooطلا District, said: *“We do have safety. Because there is no more Burma Army camp [there]. And we can live in peace. There is nothing that will make us afraid.”*



This photo was taken in May 2025, in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. It shows children playing a game before they participated in the focus group discussion with KHRG. The game involved dancing and singing along to a song. The children are primary students from a school in Br--- village. [Photo: KHRG]



This photo was taken on May 4th 2025, in Dd--- village, Noh T'Kaw village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District. It shows a drawing collectively made by six boys who participated in KHRG's focus group. In this drawing, children drew a school, houses, a mountain, a waterfall, as well as a caneball (chin lone) ground and a football field, imagining the village that they would want to live in. A boy from the focus group also drew a helicopter conducting reconnaissance over their village and mentioned they do not want air strikes to happen in their village. Children also mentioned they want to live in a village that is free from the fear of air strikes, shelling, and displacement. [Photo: KHRG]

Chapter 5. Violent abuses against children

Children in Southeast Burma continue to face violent forms of abuse that endanger their lives, dignity, and future. They are not only deprived of opportunities for welfare, education, and healthcare, but are also exposed to killings, maiming, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence, forced recruitment, and other violations committed by armed actors. These abuses take place in the broader context of armed conflict and entrenched impunity. The widespread and indiscriminate use of heavy weaponry by the SAC armed forces in civilian areas also inflicts devastating physical harm on children.

Between January 2024 and June 2025, at least 30 children were killed and 103 injured due to violent abuses. Most incidents occurred during attacks by the SAC armed forces, particularly through shelling, air strikes, and the use of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Shoot-on-sight practices have also claimed children's lives. The overwhelming majority of incidents were perpetrated by the SAC, with a small number perpetrated by unknown actors or armed resistance groups. These abuses reflect SAC practices that consistently place children at risk, treat civilian areas as military targets, and expose children to direct harm. In spite of this, children's resilience is evident in the ways they, together with their communities, find ways to protect and support one another in the face of violence.

This chapter first examines killings and injury of children (5.1.), caused by (a) air strikes and shelling, (b) landmines and UXOs, and (c) shootings. It then addresses arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and other abuses that occurred while in detention (5.2.), showing how children are subjected to ill-treatment. The chapter then covers sexual violence (5.3.) and child recruitment (5.4.) by armed forces. Finally, it highlights children's agency and coping strategies in response to these ongoing violent forms of abuse (5.5).

5.1. Killing and injury of children

Children continue to be killed and injured by the attacks of SAC armed forces on their villages. Incidents have been documented in all seven districts of locally-defined Karen State, with children often harmed while engaged in ordinary daily activities. Documentation specifically mentioning impacts to children received by KHRG included at least 85 incidents of shelling, 122 of air and drone strikes, and 11 of landmine/UXO explosions or contamination across Southeast Burma. Not all of these incidents directly resulted in child casualties, as villagers commonly employ agency strategies to reduce suffering. However, they profoundly endangered children's lives. These attacks were often indiscriminate, with many bombardments striking villages without warning, both day and night. In other cases, attacks appeared targeted towards villagers themselves. Many also took place in the absence of fighting. In addition, at least five shoot-on-sight incidents in which children were killed or injured were documented.

As a result, children are repeatedly exposed to lethal violence in their homes, schools, farms, and places of worship. From the reports received by KHRG, artillery shelling was the leading cause of child injury, while air attacks were the main cause of child death. Almost all documented incidents were perpetrated by the SAC armed forces.⁷¹ These attacks often left children with lifelong disabilities, trauma, or the loss of parents and caregivers.

⁷¹ One landmine incident was recorded as planted by the PDF, and four other perpetrators remained unknown.

a) Air strikes and shelling on villages

Air strikes and shelling conducted by the SAC armed forces have constantly struck villages across Southeast Burma, consistently causing the death and injury of children. Shelling killed 10 children, including at least three girls, and injured 50 children, including at least 23 girls. SAC air strikes and drone attacks also inflicted serious harm, killing 13 children, including at least 8 girls, and injuring 38 children, including at least 18 girls.⁷² Incidents occurred inside villages and community areas, underscoring that children everywhere in Southeast Burma remain at risk of SAC's deadly attacks. Beyond immediate deaths and injuries, shrapnel wounds had lasting consequences on many children, ranging from chronic pain to amputations, psychological harm, and livelihood difficulties.

In this context, several children were killed or injured when no clashes were taking place nearby.⁷³ For instance, on May 20th 2025, SAC mortar shelling struck near Ev--- village, Htwa Ni Koh area, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, despite the absence of nearby fighting. Nine-year-old Saw Kx--- was hit in the head by shrapnel while collecting firewood near their hut and later died in the hospital. His sister, Naw Ky--- (11 years old), was injured in her back, buttocks, and thigh, leaving her in pain and with difficulty walking. Their mother, Naw Kz---, was also wounded. According to the children's father, Naw Ky--- now walks with a limp and has lost confidence in herself, while her mother cries daily following the death of the son.

Incidents also occurred while children were engaged in routine tasks. On November 6th 2024, SAC mortar shelling struck Ew--- village, Yaw Ku village tract, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, at around 3:30 pm, severely injuring a displaced 9-year-old girl named Naw Lv---. She was coming back from the water well after bathing when a shell exploded nearby. The explosion blew off her right hand almost completely. Villagers explained that she had to be transferred to a clinic for urgent surgery. Daw La---, the administrator of internally displaced people in the village, recalled: *"The explosion was so loud that air even came up into my ears. When the child was calling for help, I could not hear clearly, it sounded very far away."*



This photo was taken on November 7th 2024, in Ew--- village, Yaw Ku village tract, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District. It shows the 9-year-old girl injured by SAC shelling in Gl--- village, on November 6th 2024. She was injured on her head and hands. She was later transferred to Jp--- hospital (in Thailand's Tak province) and needed multiple follow-up appointments after being discharged. [Photo: local leader]

⁷² The gender of thirteen child casualties was not reported to KHRG.

⁷³ See, for instance: KHRG, "Taw Oo District Incident Report: SAC shelling killed four villagers and injured two, including a 15-year-old boy, in Htaw Ta Htoo Township (May 2024)", February 2025.

Furthermore, attacks also struck villages during communal events. For instance, on March 7th 2024, SAC shelling struck Ex--- village, P'Ya L'Ha village tract, Moo special area, while a wedding ceremony was taking place. The shells landed on a family home, killing several relatives, including 15-year-old Maung⁷⁴ Lb--- and his eight-year-old cousin, as well as their mother, aunt, and grandmother. His younger brother, 12-year-old Maung Lc---, was seriously wounded. After multiple surgeries, his leg was amputated, and injuries to his shoulder left him unable to move his arm, resulting in a long-term disability. He explained: *"When I hear the sound of shelling, I'm scared. [...] My leg was amputated. [...] [The happiest time was] when I lived together with my whole family. [...] When my mother and my aunt passed away, I felt sad."* His father, U Ld---, highlighted: *"Because his legs and hands are not good, the other students take care of him and they are friendly to him."* Villagers believe the SAC conducted the attack.

Children were also harmed inside homes and within religious compounds.⁷⁵ On July 1st 2024, SAC soldiers from LIB #590 and LIB #599, based in Ey--- village, Taung Laing village tract, Moo Township, shelled Ez--- village, Moo village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. A mortar round struck the home of Maung Le--- and Ma Lf---, killing them both. Their three children were also injured: Ma Lg-- (16 years old), Ma Lh--- (8 years old), and Maung Li--- (2 years old). All were wounded by shrapnel and required medical treatment; the younger children were hospitalised in Toungoo Town hospital (Taw Oo District), while Ma Lg--- was treated at Ga--- clinic (a self-funded clinic run by CDMers). The children's relatives had to cover medical expenses themselves due to the lack of external support. Local villagers believe that the shells were aimed at a monastery near the village, where people were gathering for a Buddhist ceremony.⁷⁶

Similarly, on October 8th 2024, SAC soldiers shelled Gb--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, when no fighting was taking place in the area. Mortar rounds landed between two houses, injuring two children, their mother, and their grandparents, while they were at home. Six-year-old Maung Lj--- sustained a minor shrapnel wound to his abdomen, and 18-months-old Maung Lk--- was grazed on the head. Both children moved to a relative's home the following day and received treatment there, as their injuries were not severe. The shelling also damaged both houses. On December 12th 2024, further SAC shelling into Gc--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, damaged and destroyed multiple houses and injured eight-year-old Maung Li--- while he was near his home. He also received treatment for a minor shrapnel injury to his thigh at home and later recovered.⁷⁷

In some incidents, children were killed and injured when there were ongoing clashes in nearby areas, or in what appeared to be reprisals against civilians by SAC armed forces after attacks by armed resistance groups. In such contexts, the use of heavy weaponry by SAC troops devastated entire families and communities and caused numerous child casualties.⁷⁸ On January 28th 2025, the SAC air force dropped four bombs (believed to be 500-pounds bombs) on Ge--

⁷⁴ 'Maung' is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁷⁵ See, for instance: KHRG, "Doo Tha Htoo District Incident Report: SAC air strikes injured two villagers and damaged monasteries and farms in Hpa-an Township, April 2024.", December 2024.

⁷⁶ KHRG, "Kler Lwee Htoo District Incident Report: SAC mortar shelling killed two villagers and injured three children in Moo Township (July 2024)", March 2025.

⁷⁷ KHRG, "Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC indiscriminate shelling killed one villager and injured six, including children, and destroyed villagers' property in Daw Hpah Hkoh and Htaw Ta Htoo Townships (October and December 2024)", February 2025.

⁷⁸ See, for instance: KHRG, "Hpa-an District Short Update: SAC shelling caused casualties and damages in T'Nay Hsah Township (April 2025)", May 2025; KHRG, "Kler Lwee Htoo District Incident Report: SAC conducted mortar shelling that injured six villagers, including an 8-year-old child (March 2025)", September 2025; KHRG, "Hpa-an District Short Update: SAC shelling injured villagers, drug issues and livelihood challenges in T'Nay Hsah and Luh Pleh Townships (March to November 2024)", May 2025.

- village, Kyaw Pah village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, killing four villagers, including Saw Lq---, a three-year-old boy, and injuring six others, among them Saw Lr---, a 10-year-old boy, and Naw Ls---, a four-year-old girl, both struck by shrapnel. The attack also destroyed homes and forced the entire village to flee into forests and caves. On the same day, a second strike on nearby Gf--- village destroyed a monastery and other buildings, displacing villagers who managed to escape. Sai Ac---, a villager who was at the place after the attack, expressed: *"[W]hen I saw the child, mother, and father were burned to death and could not even be recognised by their face, my heart was very sad. After I returned from the incident [place], I always see them in my eyes. That thing should not have happened, but it did. [...] Nobody wants death. But if a person dies, they want to die in a good way, with dignity."*⁷⁹ Local villagers believed the strikes to be a reprisal for a KNLA/PDF attack on an SAC army camp based in K'Ter Tee village tract, Dwe Lo Township.

On May 11th 2024, SAC Artillery Unit #314, based in Kya T'Raw army camp, Shwe Yaung Pya village tract, Tha Htoo Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, indiscriminately shelled Shwe Yaw Pya village tract, after KNLA/PDF troops attacked the SAC army base beside T'Peh Koh (Kyon Aeik) bridge. The explosions killed two villagers and injured seven others in Gd--- village, including Naw Lm--- (11 years old), who sustained shrapnel wounds to her elbow, Naw Ln--- (four years old), also wounded on her elbow, and Naw Lo--- (five years old), who suffered minor injuries to her arm. The two villagers killed were the parents of two young girls, aged around 10 and three, who survived but were left orphaned. According to Naw Lp---, another villager from Gd--- village: *"When she [the 10-year-old sister] was about to carry her younger sister, she said, 'We do not have mommy and daddy anymore!'"* Sixteen houses were destroyed in Gd--- village, and all villagers fled in fear of further shelling.⁸⁰

Many children who survive shelling and air strikes are left with lifelong disabilities, chronic health conditions, and require long-term medical treatment. Shrapnel injuries caused lasting pain, amputations, and disrupted schooling, while families struggled with medical costs and loss of livelihoods. On February 8th 2024, SAC mortar shelling landed near Gg--- village, Law Mu Thaw village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, even though there was no fighting in the area. Two mortar shells struck, with the second one exploding while villagers were collecting firewood. Saw Lt--- (14 years old) was hit on his back by shrapnel. The metal fragment remains lodged close to a tendon, causing chronic pain. The boy was first carried by his father to Bb--- hospital, and later transferred to Gh--- and Gi--- hospitals, but doctors could not remove the shrapnel due to the complexity of the required procedure. The boy expressed to KHRG that playing with friends made him happy, but he could not play or attend school after the incident, due to chronic pain. He explained that when the incident happened, his body was shaking from fear, pain, and anger. His father, Saw Au---, described the security situation in the village: *"As we are living in our Kaw Thoo Lei [Karen State], we have to stay alert as much as possible. We have to avoid the 'government' [military junta] because they fired mortar shells in the villages, on the farm, and even when we are travelling. So, we could not travel for our livelihood. We are seen as the enemy to them."*

Similarly, on February 1st 2025, a Burma Army air strike hit Gj--- village, K'Ter Tee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, injuring three siblings. Naw Lu---, a 13-year-old girl, sustained severe injuries to her chin and abdomen and required follow-up treatment at Gk--- hospital. Her younger sister (six years old) suffered a severe head injury. After initial treatment at Gk--- hospital,

⁷⁹ KHRG, *"Mu Traw District Incident Report: SAC air strikes cause death, injuries, displacement, and destruction in Bu Tho Township (January 2025)"*, December 2024.

⁸⁰ KHRG, *"Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Indiscriminate shelling causing 11 casualties, destruction, and mass displacement in Tha Htoo Township, May 2024"*, November 2024.

she was referred to a hospital in Jc--- city (in Thailand's Chiang Mai province), where she remained unconscious for some time. Another sibling (also underage) received a minor leg injury. Two of the children continue to require regular medical check-ups, while the family received little support and have to bear most transport and medical costs themselves, including for the ongoing monthly check-ups.

b) Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs)

Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) pose a constant and deadly threat to children across Southeast Burma. Between January 2024 and June 2025, at least three boys were killed, and two boys and four girls were injured in mine- or UXO-related incidents. Most incidents impacting children were attributed to ordnance from SAC armed forces and unknown armed actors, with one incident involving a mine laid by the PDF. Children are particularly vulnerable as they encounter mines and UXOs while playing and conducting daily tasks, often mistaking them for objects to play with or useful tools. Landmine and UXO incidents have enduring consequences for children, from lifelong disabilities to the loss of educational and livelihood opportunities.⁸¹

The Burma Army continues to actively deploy landmines as part of its military attacks and strategies, placing them in areas where civilians live and work. Since the 2021 coup, the planting of new mines has intensified, adding to decades of contamination.⁸² Other armed groups, including the KNLA and PDF, have also used landmines. At the same time, UXOs left after artillery shelling pose an additional source of contamination. Together, these hidden hazards are scattered across civilian areas and place children at heightened risk. The danger is exacerbated by the absence of systematic marking. While the KNLA sometimes provides oral warnings and conducts deactivation operations, these are often insufficient. Local organisations provide some mine risk awareness training, though conflict, displacement, and distance between villages prevent wide coverage.

Landmine and UXO incidents frequently occurred while children were carrying out daily routines, such as collecting firewood, fishing, or travelling. For example, on May 29th 2024, a 14-year-old girl named Ma Lw---, from Gm--- village, Nat Than Kwin village tract, Moo Township, stepped on a landmine while disposing of tree branches with her mother near the village school. The explosion, caused by an M14 landmine, severely injured both of her legs. Her right leg had to be amputated, while her left leg sustained serious injuries but could be saved through surgery. Her uncle, named U Lx---, who helped carry her to the hospital, recalled: *"We heard the sound of screaming come from the riverbank and, when we remembered [that the child was near that area], we ran to the riverbank. [The injured girl] said, 'My leg is gone. My leg is gone.'"* With the support of KNLA soldiers, the girl was transported to a KNU-administered hospital in Hplee Hta village tract, Moo Township, which provides free treatment, where she underwent surgery. This

⁸¹ See, for instance: KHRG, *"Mu Traw District Incident Report: One teenager was killed and another was severely injured by a UXO explosion, in Lu Thaw Township (July 2024)"*, September 2024; KHRG, *"Taw Oo District Short Update: A landmine explosion severely injured two villagers, including a 13-year-old, in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township (May 2025)"*, July 2025.

⁸² See: KHRG, *Danger Beneath Our Feet - Landmine contamination in Southeast Burma and its impacts on villagers since the 2021 coup*, December 2023.

incident occurred after SAC troops from LIB #439, LIB #307, and Light Infantry Division (LID)⁸³ #77 entered villages in Moo Township in February 2024, where they burned down houses, fired mortar rounds, and planted landmines. When villagers later returned to the area, after the SAC's retreat, multiple landmine incidents occurred, leaving them unable to farm or move safely.⁸⁴

Similarly, on July 25th 2024, a 14-year-old girl from Gn--- village, K'Pyaw area, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, was injured in an explosion while collecting firewood. The blast caused her to lose one of her legs. She was transported to a hospital run by the SAC in Myeik Town, with villagers from her community helping to cover part of the costs. According to her father, villagers believe the landmine was planted by the PDF, which operates more frequently in that area than the Burma Army. He noted that his brother-in-law collected remains of the device, including a screw, a spring, and gunpowder, suggesting it was an improvised explosive device (IED).

In other incidents, children encountered unexploded ordnances and, unaware of the danger, mistook them for harmless objects or potential sources of income.⁸⁵ On January 28th 2025, in Go--- village, Taw K'Lay village tract, Noh T'Kaw Township, Doooplaya District, four children –a four-year-old, a seven-year-old, and two six-year-olds– found a UXO while playing beside the village. The children attempted to take the object to sell at the local market, but it fell and exploded. Two of the children were killed instantly, while the other two sustained injuries. The injured children were transferred to Jb--- hospital (in Thailand's Tak province) for treatment.

c) Shootings of children

Shoot-on-sight practices by SAC troops have also resulted in child casualties, even in areas where no clashes were taking place. Between 2024 and mid-2025, at least one girl and two boys were killed, and two children were injured in shooting incidents perpetrated by SAC troops. These practices particularly affect teenage boys and are often accompanied by arbitrary arrest or torture of companions and family members, reinforcing a pervasive climate of fear and impunity.

In one instance, on May 22nd 2024, at around 7 pm, SAC soldiers from IB #39 opened fire on two villagers travelling by motorbike in front of their army camp in Gp--- village, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District. The villagers were travelling home after finishing work, although at the time, a curfew had been imposed by the SAC prohibiting movement between 6 pm and 6 am. One of the victims, 17-year-old Maung Ly---, was shot in the back and died on the spot. His companion, Ko⁸⁶ Lz---, was arrested, detained overnight in IB #39 camp, and subjected to severe torture. The SAC soldiers initially refused to return Maung Ly---'s body to his parents

⁸³ A Light Infantry Division (LID) of the Burma Army is commanded by a brigadier general and consists of ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, search and destroy operations against ethnic insurgents. They were first incorporated into the Tatmadaw in 1966. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, three battalions each and one reserve, one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units. Each division is directly under the command of the Chief of Staff (Army).

⁸⁴ KHRG, “Kler Lwee Htoo District Incident Report: A landmine explosion severely injured a 14-year-old girl in Moo Township, May 2024”, September 2024.

⁸⁵ See, for instance: KHRG, “Taw Oo District Short Update: fighting, SAC looting and burning of villagers' houses, and two children killed by an UXO explosion, in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township (February and March 2024)”, July 2024.

⁸⁶ ‘Ko’ is a Burmese male honorific title used before a person's name.

and only returned it after the family and local elders signed a document absolving the perpetrators of responsibility.⁸⁷

Similarly, according to the testimony of Naw Mb---, a 17-year-old girl from Ep--- village, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, SAC soldiers arrested an underage boy from her village while he was travelling to attend his sister's wedding in Shel Tho Maing ('13 Miles') Town. When he attempted to escape, the soldiers shot and injured him before capturing and detaining him at their army camp. He was later released after a local leader intervened and paid his bail. Villagers reported that the boy, who had just completed Grade 10 and lived with his widowed mother, now avoids leaving the village out of fear.

5.2. Detention, disappearance, and related abuses

Children and youth in Southeast Burma continue to face other forms of serious abuses at the hands of the SAC armed forces. From January 2024 to June 2025, KHRG documented eight incidents of arbitrary arrest and detention of children, and two of enforced disappearance of children by the Burma Army. Arrests were often based on minimal or fabricated suspicion of teenagers, mostly accused of supporting armed resistance groups, or in the aftermath of armed clashes. Once in custody, children faced torture and ill-treatment. One other incident involving detention and abuse was attributed to the KNLA.

a) Arbitrary arrest and detention

Children are often subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention by the SAC armed forces, sometimes alongside adults. In several cases, children were detained simply for being present in areas of military operations and were subjected to beatings and other forms of ill-treatment in the process. These incidents highlight not only the arbitrariness of the arrests of young villagers in Southeast Burma, but also the heightened risks faced by adolescent boys.

On February 14th 2025, SAC soldiers attacked PDF and KNLA forces near Gq--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township. After the fighting, the SAC soldiers arrested three civilians working on a nearby turmeric plantation, including two 12-year-old boys. Villagers believe they were suspected of collaborating with local resistance groups simply for being near the site of the clash. After the intervention of a local monk, the two boys were eventually released. However, the third villager, identified as Saw Mc--, from Gr--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, was beaten during the arrest and never released after being taken away by SAC soldiers. Local villagers believe he was killed in custody.⁸⁸

Teenage boys in particular face heightened risks of arbitrary arrest and punishment. According to Saw Md---, a community member from Gs--- Town, Taw Oo District: *"If children encounter SAC soldiers, they arrest them if they think they look suspicious. Then, they ask the children to kneel down in the sun as a punishment. Most of those arrested are between 16 and 20 years old."* Nevertheless, girls are not spared and also face violence when detained by SAC soldiers. For instance, on November 25th 2024, around ten SAC soldiers arrested a 17-year-old girl named Ma Mh--- on the road near Gt--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township.

⁸⁷ KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC shot dead a minor and arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured a villager in Htaw Ta Htoo Township \(May 2024\)](#)", July 2024.

⁸⁸ KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC troops conducted shelling, causing casualties, and carried out arbitrary arrests, physical violence, and explicit threats in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township \(January to March 2025\)](#)", July 2025.

The soldiers, who were carrying rifles but not wearing uniforms, were reportedly from the nearby Pa Leh Wa army camp. They stopped the car in which she and another villager were travelling, and confiscated all their belongings, including money, phones, and ID cards. When the girl raised her head to look up at the assailants, she was dragged from the car and physically assaulted. They grabbed her by the hair, beat her head, and stamped on her neck as she lay on the road. Several other cars were also stopped and at least four other villagers were beaten.

In some incidents, large-scale arrest operations swept up entire communities, with children detained alongside adults.⁸⁹ In Jq--- village, Kaw Nweh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, more than 30 villagers, including children, were arrested by SAC soldiers from LID #55 on April 12th 2025. The incident occurred when over 300 SAC soldiers in around 70 cars entered the village, including the monastery compound, and conducted mass arrests. They also looted villagers' property and questioned them. The villagers were released after one day.

KHRG has previously documented the use of hundreds of villagers, including children, as human shields by SAC soldiers. Field reports from 2021 to 2023 gathered incidents of underaged boys and girls forced to walk at the front of military columns to deter, or provide cover against, potential attacks from armed resistance groups.⁹⁰ In many incidents, they were also compelled to serve as porters and navigators, and they also faced mistreatment, including physical abuse, threats, denial of healthcare, and a lack of food and hygiene. According to community members in Southeast Burma, intensified armed resistance attacks and the capture of several SAC army camps during 2024-2025 have led SAC troops to diminish ground operations, particularly in Dooplaya and Mu Traw districts. Some villagers believe this has led to a reduction in the number of human shield incidents involving children in the past year. However, the lack of recent testimonies does not necessarily indicate that the practice has ceased, and KHRG continues to receive reports of villagers being used as human shields. Past patterns suggest that whenever SAC soldiers resume movements through villages, civilians—including children—remain at risk of being arrested and used as cover.

b) Enforced disappearances

In some instances, children are forcibly disappeared after arrest. Unlike short-term detentions, disappearances leave families and communities clouded in uncertainty, unsure about the fate and whereabouts of their children. The fear generated by these incidents has led parents to restrict children's movement and discourage them from travelling alone.

In one instance, on July 22nd 2024, following clashes between the Shar Htoo Waw Team ('Polaris Star Team')⁹¹ and SAC forces in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, SAC soldiers from Kon Nit Maing ('Seven Miles') army camp arrested Saw Mj---, a 16-year-old displaced villager, and his friend. They were travelling by motorbike to Toungoo Town, on the Toungoo-Thandaunggyi road located close to the army camp. Local villagers believe that they were accused of being involved in the fighting, and taken to the SAC IB #39 army camp, due to a photo of Saw Mj--- wearing camouflage

⁸⁹ See : KHRG, "Mu Traw District Incident Report: SAC arbitrary arrest, use of villagers as forced navigators and human shields, mistreatment, and looting in Bu Tho Township (April 2024)", January 2025.

⁹⁰ KHRG, *Shadow of Death: Use of civilians as human shields by the State Administration Council (SAC) in Southeast Burma since the coup*, July 2023.

⁹¹ Shar Htoo Waw Team (or 'Polaris Star Team') is a military unit consisting of combined PDF and KNLA troops specialised in developing fixed-wing drone technology and drone warfare, also called 'Kloud Team'. They operate remotely out of Karen State and are informally part of the KNLA military structure. Shar Htoo Waw Team also provides drone technology to other PDF units that operate outside of Karen State.

clothing. However, their families and villagers explained to KHRG that the teenagers did not have any links with the PDF or armed resistance forces. According to local villagers, the two boys were interrogated and tortured during detention. When their families attempted to visit them at the IB #39 army camp, they were denied access. As of September 2025, their whereabouts and condition remained unknown.⁹²

A local KYO leader from Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, noted that cases of children going missing after arrest by the SAC have become more frequent since the 2021 coup.⁹³ He stressed that children who disappeared in this way did not return, and that families and community members remain unaware of their whereabouts. Out of fear, villagers now discourage children from travelling, especially in the late afternoon.

5.3. Sexual violence against children

In Southeast Burma, sexual violence against children persists in the context of armed conflict, committed both by armed actors and civilians. The fear of retaliation and the protection afforded to perpetrator soldiers by their commanders often prevent survivors and their families from seeking justice.⁹⁴ This lack of accountability not only denies survivors redress but also perpetuates abuse and insecurity within communities. Past abuses against young girls and the prevailing climate of impunity have left villagers fearful of Burma Army soldiers entering their villages.

In 2024, one incident of rape committed by SAC soldiers against a child was reported. On September 5th 2024, at about 2 pm, two Burma Army soldiers, who had escaped their platoon, arrested a 13-year-old girl named Nan Mk---, in Gv--- village, Htee Hpoe Naing village tract, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, while she was watching over her family's cows as they grazed on pasture land near the village. They detained her for two days in different places, threatened to kill her, and raped her twice during detention. On September 7th, a woman who was harvesting on a farm with other villagers saw Nan Mk--- and helped her to escape from the perpetrators. Then, a local woman took her to an SAC-administered clinic in Ho--- Town for medical treatment, where she stayed for one night. KWO provided primary psychological support and offered her a room in a safe house afterwards.

Although outside of the timeframe of this report, other sexual violence incidents committed by soldiers against girls have been documented by KHRG since the 2021 coup.⁹⁵ Multiple sexual violence incidents by armed actors against adult women have also been documented.⁹⁶ In all instances, the soldiers escaped justice, often due to the support of their commanders.

Beyond the abuses committed by soldiers, the difficulties getting accountability amid the conflict have also allowed civilian perpetrators to exploit children with little fear of consequences. KHRG received three incidents of civilian-to-civilian sexual violence against children in 2024 and 2025.

⁹² KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Short Update: SAC soldiers arbitrarily arrested and detained two villagers, including a 16-year-old, in Daw Hpah Hkoh Township \(July 2024\)](#)", August 2024.

⁹³ See also: KHRG, *[In the Dark - The crime of enforced disappearance and its impacts on the rural communities of Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup](#)*, November 2023.

⁹⁴ Read more in: KHRG, *[Neglected Suffering : Sexual violence and barriers to justice faced by villagers in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup](#)*, December 2024.

⁹⁵ See: KHRG, "[Mu Traw District Incident Report: An SAC sergeant sexually abused a 7-year-old child in an army camp, March 2023](#)", November 2023. Read more in: KHRG, *Neglected Suffering*, above.

⁹⁶ See: KHRG, "[Dooplaya District Incident Report: SAC soldiers killed five villagers, torturing two and raping a pregnant woman, in Kaw T'Ree Township, in May 2024.](#)", November 2024; KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Incident Report: An SAC soldier committed conflict-related sexual violence against a 90-year-old villager in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township \(November 2023\)](#)", September 2024.

5.4. Child recruitment into armed forces

Amidst the conflict, children continue to be recruited into armed forces in Southeast Burma. KHRG has collected testimonies indicating that the SAC forcibly recruits children through coercion, threats, arrests, and violence in the broader context of their enactment of the People's Military Service Law in 2024.⁹⁷ These practices have generated widespread fear, displacement, and disrupted education and livelihoods.⁹⁸

Interviewees also reported the recruitment of teenagers under the KNLA, while one interviewee noted the presence of children among the ranks of the PDF and other armed resistance forces not under the authority of the KNU. Some villagers' testimony portrays participation in the KNLA as voluntary, motivated by anger at SAC abuses. Others stated villagers were pressured to join due to recruitment practices carried out by ground troops, poverty, or community pressure.

a) Child recruitment by the Burma Army

Recruitment by the SAC primarily takes place in areas under SAC control or in mixed-control zones, where villagers already fear travelling due to the risk of arrest or abuse at checkpoints. This climate of insecurity compounds the threat of forced recruitment, making teen boys particularly vulnerable.⁹⁹ Although the SAC-enacted conscription law sets the minimum age for recruitment at 18, testimonies reported that children as young as 15-17 were nevertheless conscripted and sent to the frontlines. This disregard for age was also highlighted by community members from different districts.

Testimony from conflict areas confirms that children were indeed present among SAC troops. On April 27th and 28th 2025, KNLA and PDF forces attacked SAC troops stationed along Nan Thar Kone road, between Moo and Ler Doh townships, in Kler Lwee Htoo District, as they were securing transport routes for food rations to their army camp in Ler Doh Town. According to a local village tract leader from Jr--- village tract, Ler Doh Township, some of the SAC soldiers captured during the clashes were under 18. These boys had reportedly been sent to the frontline after only minimal military training and with little understanding of combat.

Delving into the reasons behind SAC child recruitment, Saw Ml---, a community member from Gw--- village, Gw--- village tract, Moo Township, explained: *"They arrest people who they think are physically strong enough to join the army. It does not matter about their age. And then they force them to be their soldiers because they need more soldiers at the current time. [...] I think they need more soldiers. Also, they cannot call people to be recruited [voluntarily]. That is why they enact the mandatory military service law."* Similarly, Saw Mn---, a community member from Gx--- village, Gy--- village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, argued: *"I think they [the SAC] want to recruit more soldiers in their army because they need more soldiers as they lost their soldiers in the battlefields. Therefore, they arrested children, and they forced children to be their soldiers. They forced children to be their soldiers because many people do not support the SAC."*

⁹⁷ KHRG, "Statement of condemnation of the enactment of conscription law by the military junta in Burma/ Myanmar", March 2024.

⁹⁸ KHRG, *Forced to Harm: Impacts of the State Administration Council (SAC)'s forced recruitment and enactment of the conscription law in Southeast Burma (January 2024 – February 2025)*, March 2025.

⁹⁹ KHRG, *Forced to Harm*, above.

After arrest, some children were transferred to recruitment centres, where the SAC detain people until quotas are met, and then sometimes sent on to military training camps. One of them, a 17-year-old boy named Maung Mo--- from Do--- village, Gz--- village tract, Moo Township, was arrested in December 2024 at a checkpoint in Nyaung Pin Thar Town, Pyu Township, by SAC soldiers from LIB #439, who also detained other children that day. He was transferred to a recruitment centre in Phyu Town, where he was interrogated and held in poor conditions. His phone was confiscated, leaving his parents unaware of his whereabouts. According to Maung Mo---, the mother of another detainee paid 20 million Kyat [USD 476] for her son's release, but the soldiers kept the money and did not free him. After a week, Maung Mo--- was sent to a training camp in Shan State, where both children and adults who had been forcibly recruited were undergoing military training. He noted that many trainees were under 18 and that they were to be deployed to the frontline once training ended. Maung Mo--- described the ill-treatment faced at the training centre: *"I was suffering. We only got to bathe once a week, and I developed rashes on my thighs. I also have injuries on my feet here. I couldn't bathe because the water was so cold. It was at 12 am. We didn't really get any rest time. They [SAC soldiers] whistled again and again. After about five minutes of sitting, I was falling asleep while sitting. Then suddenly the whistle would blow, and we would have to run and line up. If we were late, they made us lie prone and beat us. I got beaten twice for falling asleep like that."* He eventually escaped with other detainees during a troop rotation, with the help of local villagers in the area, and managed to return to his village.



This photo was taken in February 2025, in Hc--- village, Hc--- village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. It shows a villager named Maung Mo---, from Do--- village, Gz--- village tract, Moo Township, who was forcibly recruited by the SAC when he was 17 years old. In November 2024, Maung Mo--- was arrested by SAC soldiers at a checkpoint in Nyaung Pin Thar Town while he was travelling to work. He was sent to a recruitment centre in Phyu Town, Kler Lwee Htoo District, and detained there for one week. Afterwards, he was sent to a military training centre in Shan State, where he managed to escape after five weeks. At the centre, he was beaten with rubber sticks and subjected to sleep deprivation. He also developed a skin rash on his thigh, as he was only allowed to shower once per week. The photo shows the rash on his thigh, months after the injury. [Photo: KHRG]

SAC recruitment is usually carried out through coercion, violence, and arbitrary arrests. Children are directly pressured into recruitment, with threats extending to their families. Several villagers explained that the danger of forced recruitment by Burma Army soldiers is greatest in SAC-controlled towns, such as Toungoo, Thandaung, Ka Nyut Kwin, or Thaton, where teenagers risk being arbitrarily arrested. In Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, villagers reported that SAC soldiers stop children who go out after 8 pm unless they can provide a student card from an SAC school. While arrests occur most frequently in towns, evidence was also reported of such actions taking place in villages. In some instances, families were extorted for money to secure the release of their children. However, payments did not always guarantee freedom. The sums demanded were often far beyond what rural households can afford, as most villagers depend on subsistence farming and plantation work for their livelihoods.

b) Child recruitment by the KNLA

Although KNU policies prohibit the recruitment of underage children in Southeast Burma, KNLA troops and other armed resistance groups have also recruited underage teenagers in their forces. Villagers stressed that teenagers who join the KNLA often do so voluntarily. Saw Mp---, a teacher from Hd--- village, Noh Hpa Htaw village tract, Waw Ray Township, Dooplaya District, explained: *"Nobody forced underage children to join armed groups, but they volunteer to become soldiers."* Villagers and teenagers linked this decision to anger at the Burma Army's abuses. For instance, 17-year-old Naw Mb--- from Ep--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, recounted: *"They [teenagers] do not like the Burma military's actions. So they left schools and joined armed resistance groups."* Similarly, 17-year-old Naw Al--- from Dg--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, explained: *"They joined the army because they hate the military junta."*

Villagers in several districts also explained that KNLA ground troops in some areas applied a practice requiring *"one person per household"* to contribute to its forces. Although not formally codified, this expectation was reported as known at the community level in several areas in Mu Traw and Dooplaya districts, and households with several siblings were expected to provide at least one recruit. In some areas, the names of children as young as 16 were already recorded in preparation for future service, and when no adult was available, underage boys were pressured to go in their place. Naw Mq---, from Hf--- area, Jd--- village tract, Lu Thaw Township, recounted how her underage cousin, who was eager to continue studying, was instead recruited by the KNLA troops under this arrangement while his father was seriously ill. Similarly, Naw Mt---, a teacher and mother of two from Je--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, explained: *"In some cases, one son has to go [join the KNLA] in a family, but that son got married and has kids, so the younger brother was pressured to go as a substitute for his brother."* A schoolteacher from Jf--- village tract, Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, also expressed: *"Some of them go [join the KNLA] because their older brothers will have to go [under the recruitment practice], but their older brothers did not go, so it is their time to go and they [children] are also willing to join, so they go [on behalf of their older brother]."*

In some instances, children were also pressured into joining the KNLA because their families could not afford to pay money to exempt them from service. Families without resources are particularly vulnerable, as poverty prevents them from negotiating exemptions or protecting their children. Saw Kt---, a 17-year-old from Dk--- village, Ha T'Reh village tract, Hpa-an Township, recounted: *"The incident happened to one of my friends who is now under 18, his mother has to let him [join the armed group] because his mother does not have sufficient money to keep him from being a soldier."* After being recruited, this boy was sent back to school by the KNLA, instead of being used as a soldier, since he was still a minor.

After being recruited, children were usually not deployed in combat roles. Villagers reported that underage recruits were sometimes assigned administrative or support duties or placed in training (for about five to six months) without being formally enlisted. Saw Ak---, a local KYO leader from Noh T'Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, clarified: *"The children just follow the soldiers. But the children were not signed yet [are not official soldiers]. They will only get to sign [as a soldier] when they are 18 years old."* According to several interviewees, girls in particular are kept away from the frontlines. Some argued that teenage girls are not being recruited at all, while others reported that they may be assigned to support functions rather than being directly involved in fighting, such as serving as teachers, nurses, or doctors. In some instances, villagers regarded enlistment as a way for children to continue their studies. As Naw NI---, a mother from Eb--- village, P'Ya Raw village tract, Bilin Township, explained: *"We think about sending underage [children], so they can access education. The people [KNU] will send them to school."*

Several parents and community members highlighted the impact on teenagers rights and their worries about children's engagement within the armed forces. As a teacher in Htee Ler Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, put it: *"Some [students] still want to study but had to stop their studies. If I had to say it all, they had to be soldiers [for the KNLA]. That's a big challenge."* Likewise, Naw Am---, a teacher from Dg--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, expressed: *"I want to say, in the future, I want the children under 18 years old to study. We did not want children under 18 years old to join the soldiers. We want the leaders to help underage children continue to study. [...] I want the leaders to prioritise education."*

These ground recruitment practices contradict the KNU's policy and the Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call, which prohibits the recruitment of minors into its ranks. The KNU spokesperson P'doh¹⁰⁰ Saw Taw Nee, Head of the Foreign Ministry and member of the Central Standing Committee, explained there is no 'one person per household' policy, and that drafts depend on the district-level needs. He identified monitoring the age of recruits as the main challenge to preventing child recruitment: *"We do not allow that [child soldiers]. We have a strong policy that we do not allow people who are under 18 years old. So, if we know they are underage, we inform them [about the age limit], and we let them out. If we do not know, it will be another way. So, it depends on monitoring; it must have exact monitoring. If we do not have exact monitoring, this incident will happen. [...] The challenge for us is that we do not have [identification] documents. Not all children have a document to show their age. [...] But we confirm it with other people, like their village leaders, who say whether that person has turned 18 or that person has not turned 18."* P'doh Saw Taw Nee also stated that the KNU is currently working with the UN to sign a Joint Action Plan to ensure the end of the recruitment of children, and to establish a monitoring mechanism and a reintegration plan for former child soldiers.

5.5. Agency against violent abuses

Villagers and children find ways to resist violence in their everyday lives. From an early age, many children are taught how to react when the Burma Army attacks. One of the most common protective measures is the use of makeshift bunkers, to which families immediately flee at the sound of aircraft or shelling. Naw Aq---, a mother from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, explained the situation of her children (aged 11 and nine): *"My daughter also wanted to sleep so much. But I worried that shelling might happen again. So I asked my daughter to go and sleep in the bunker. She did not complain about it. She just grabbed a pillow and followed me to the bunker. This is something like she learned things from us. She is now already aware that she has to go and sleep in the bunker if shelling happens. My daughter cannot sleep well if shelling happens. She feels afraid. If she sees Burma Army soldiers, she automatically thinks that they are bad guys."* Nevertheless, while bunkers offer some shelter, local villagers and leaders admit that bunkers can only reduce the risk of death and injury, not fully protect their lives.

Villagers also described other protective measures, such as turning off lights, generators, and other machines, when SAC aircraft flew over the village in an effort to remain unnoticed, or avoiding SAC soldiers when travelling. When attacks occur, children and their families often resort to flight as a protective strategy. Villagers flee during airstrikes or shelling, running into forests, plantations, or ditches until the danger ceases. Parents reported that such escapes are usually temporary, with families returning once the shelling stops. In some cases, however, displacement becomes more prolonged, with families moving to neighbouring villages or relatives' homes to protect their children.

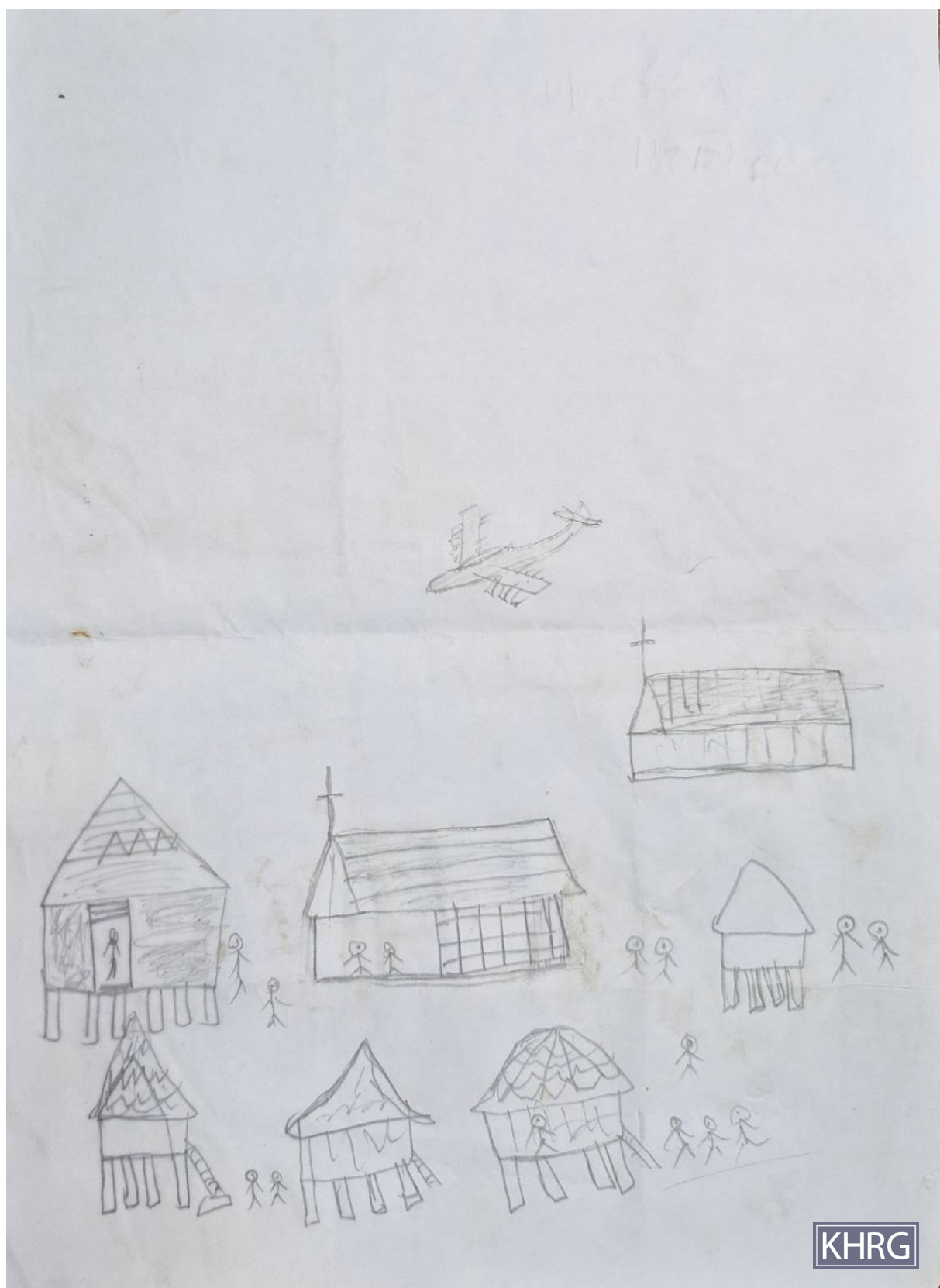
¹⁰⁰ P'doh is a title, in Karen language, meaning 'governor' or 'minister' within the government or military.

The same strategy is also employed by teenagers to avoid forced recruitment. For instance, Saw Mw---, a pastor from Hg--- village near Hh--- Town, Ayeyarwaddy Region, reported fleeing to Win Yay Township, Doooplaya District, under KNU control, to avoid SAC conscription: *“At first, they [SAC] announced that they would recruit people starting from 18 to 30 years old, but later they said 18 to 45 years old. And finally, they said, ‘if people can carry a gun, it’s fine’, so we fled for that reason.”* He further explained: *“I can say that even students cannot escape it.”*

Some young people also flee across the border to escape SAC conscription pressures. As Sai Ac---, from Cr--- village, Cs--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“The other thing is many youth started going abroad. Some are [going] due to the conscription law, which was released by Min Aung Hlaing¹⁰¹.”* Others engage in pre-emptive displacement to protect children before their names appear on recruitment lists. Naw Mx---, from Hj--- village, Nyaunglebin village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, was displaced with her son and niece to Hk--- village, to avoid SAC conscription. She recounted: *“We arrived here because I heard people talk about forced recruitment [by the Burma Army soldiers]. We escaped from that and came here, but our name hasn’t been enrolled yet. I called my son, a 16-year-old, and my niece, a 17-year-old, to escape. Some of my children are still living in the village.”*

Families and teachers also invoke students’ commitment to education to plead their case and delay or prevent recruitment by the KNLA. For example, Naw Ad---, a school principal in Cu-- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htao Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, petitioned local KNU leaders to allow one of her students to continue studying despite being enlisted: *“He is already 18 years old, but he has not finished Grade 12. So I wrote a recommendation letter, like a petition letter, in order for him to be able to continue his studies. Then, I sent the letter to our leaders. Then, the leaders gave him a chance to continue his studies this year.”* In the context of recruitment, other strategies included local leaders prohibiting the enlistment of minors, and, in some cases, households paying money to prevent children from being taken.

¹⁰¹ A Senior General in the Burma Army who has served as Chairman of the State Administration Council, in Burma/Myanmar since February 2021. He has also served as the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar’s Armed Forces since March 2011. Min Aung Hlaing seized power after overthrowing the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1st 2021, ending a nearly ten-year period of civilian rule. He has appointed himself as Prime Minister of Myanmar on August 1st 2021, and became Acting President of Myanmar on July 22nd 2024.



This drawing was made in May 2025 by a 10-year-old student named Saw Mz---, in a forest near Cj--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Taw Township, Mu Traw District. The picture depicts the children's village, including villagers' stilted houses and two churches. There is also an aircraft flying over the village. The child explained that his village and school were attacked by an SAC air strike on January 12th 2023. [Photo: KHRG]

Chapter 6. Gaps in humanitarian support available for children

Children in Southeast Burma are facing critical gaps in the availability of humanitarian aid, particularly in areas heavily affected by SAC attacks and the ongoing armed conflict. The SAC restrictions on transportation of aid are also blocking access to essential medicine, food, and educational materials in rural areas, leaving nursing mothers, children, and other vulnerable groups facing severe threats. Dedicated Karen Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) work tirelessly to meet the needs of children, coordinating amongst each other under the Karen Emergency Relief Team (KERT).¹⁰² However, health and community workers face severe risks at the hands of SAC armed forces, including at checkpoints, which limit and hinder their operational scope. Additionally, nowhere is safe from SAC attacks, especially air strikes. A few other international aid and religious organisations also venture into the area, operating secretly.

Due to the severe SAC-induced humanitarian crisis, existing support mechanisms in rural Southeast Burma are insufficient. As a result, young children are vulnerable to long-term harm and deficiency. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions to restore the baseline for their wellbeing. Bridging these gaps requires sustained foreign assistance, active engagement and collaboration with CBOs and civil society organisations (CSOs), inclusive local policies, and community-driven solutions that prioritise children's wellbeing at every level.

This chapter identifies where support systems are most lacking. As such, this information is essential to inform humanitarian strategies that strengthen local efforts and prioritise child-centred recovery and resilience. It presents gaps in the support of basic needs (6.1.), including food, water, and shelter, and constraints on aid delivery. It also specifies the struggles of healthcare workers and maps out the most impacted areas (6.2.), including shortages of clinics and medicine, and the lack of support for sexual and reproductive health, recovery from drug abuse, and mental health. Finally, it covers gaps in support for education (6.3.), including the building of safe facilities, the provision of pedagogical materials, and the training of teachers.

6.1. Basic needs support gaps

In Southeast Burma, the basic needs of many children are not being met due to the intensification of SAC attacks and the ongoing conflict. As a result, families struggle daily to secure essentials such as food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare resources. Food insecurity is especially severe, as conflict-induced poverty, displacement, and violence disrupt access to nutritious meals. Without stable housing and sanitation facilities, individuals are exposed to insecurity and harsh weather conditions. Although aid from local CBOs/CSOs, and some foreign humanitarian organisations is present in Southeast Burma, support in 2024-2025 has been inconsistent and insufficient, due to threats to humanitarian work by the SAC, as well as foreign funding cuts. Several villagers from all districts mentioned severe gaps in the support for children in their areas and asked for regular assistance due to the ongoing shortages and hardships.

¹⁰² Since the 2021 coup, the local response is coordinated under the network of the Karen Emergency Response Team (KERT). The main local CSOs/CBOs operating in rural Southeast Burma are the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), the Karen Women Organisation (KWO), Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), Mae Tao Clinic (MTC), Burma Medical Association (BMA), Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), Karen Student Network Group (KSNG), and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG). Ethnic service providers include the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW).

a) Fighting against hunger and malnutrition

For children enduring conflict and displacement, food support remains a vital lifeline. Thirty-one interviewees reported not having enough food, including in Bilin and Maw S'Ko townships (Doo Tha Htoo District); Htaw Ta Htoo Township (Taw Oo District); Moo and Ler Doh townships (Kler Lwee Htoo District); Ler K'Saw Township (Mergui-Tavoy District); Lu Thaw and Dwe Lo townships (Mu Traw District); Kaw T'Ree and Waw Ray townships (Dooطلا District); and T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships (Hpa-an District). Mergui-Tavoy faced the most significant gaps in food support due to constant skirmishes between multiple armed groups and travel difficulties to the area.

The Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), primarily provides support such as food, water, financial aid, and materials for shelters. In the past, KWO also provided 'emergency packages', including tarpaulins, mats, blankets, and mosquito nets, and some dried food, but such support decreased in recent years. The distribution of such aid falls far short of meeting the escalating needs of children. Nan L---, from Lay Kay Kaw Town, now a teacher at Jh--- displacement site in P'Loo village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooطلا District, explained: *"Though they [NGOs, local leaders, and individuals] help us, we must not always depend on them. The distributed supply is enough to go through for five days. If so, how would you survive the remaining days?"*

Proper nutrition is essential for child development. However, as families struggle to meet basic survival needs, children's nutritional requirements are often unmet in Southeast Burma. Displaced children, particularly those sheltering in forests or remote areas, frequently miss regular meals. To address this urgent gap, targeted nutritional support should be prioritised and delivered in ways that directly meet their needs. Greater attention must be given to the specific needs of young children, as early childhood is a critical period for physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Recognising this condition, Saw Kelly, the Deputy Director of CIDKP, added: *"Some people were struggling for their food. Sometimes, the food is not enough for them. There were some trainings [provided by CIDKP] regarding what type of food a person should eat. Yet, some families might have only rice. As we know, if we only eat rice, it can impact our health. This kind of challenge has an impact on the children's health to grow. The children need to grow. Their brain, thoughts, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual need to grow. If you stop this kind of growth, it is the same as killing people. So, this kind of thing cannot wait."*

Despite the availability of some assistance, it could not reach many children. Several factors contributed to this gap, including security risks, transportation challenges, and funding cuts. Saw Kelly, from CIDKP, added: *"There are many areas that we cannot provide support, and are facing support gaps. [...] CIDKP can help some, but not all. [...] However, our focus is primarily on emergency relief. Therefore, we must share our limited resources and prioritise those who are in greatest need."* Echoing this, a local village tract leader named Saw Nb---, who lives in Hl--- village, K'Ter Htee village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, highlighted: *"As villagers have been displaced, they [CIDKP] gave some money to them to have enough food. [...] That's not enough, but it is helpful for some people who don't have enough food."*

A few villagers mentioned receiving one-time cash or food donations from religious international organisations, including specific support for children. However, some interviewees mentioned these lacked coordination with the locally-led response.



This photo was taken in May 2025 in a displacement site near Hm--- village, Kaw Ler village tract, Tha Htoo Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. In the past, in June 2022, the SAC burned down villagers' houses in Hn--- village, Kaw Ler village tract, driving villagers from the area to flee. The photo shows food distribution to displaced children near Hm--- village, where some of them had fled. [Photo: KHRG]

b) Ensuring clean water and sanitation

Villagers resort to collecting water from the river, the rain, or water wells, and using traditional methods to purify it, such as boiling it, storing it in sedimentation tanks, or using alum. However, displaced villagers face immense challenges in obtaining clean water at the locations where they have sought refuge, usually in the jungle and in caves. Young children are more vulnerable to health complications caused by drinking contaminated water as their immune systems are still developing. Building fires at displacement sites also put villagers at risk of SAC air attacks.¹⁰³ During the rainy season, the difficulty of obtaining clean water becomes severe for communities, and water wells often become polluted. Several villagers also mentioned struggling with water scarcity during the summer.

Although local KNU leaders, CBOs/CSOs, and international organisations are making efforts to provide clean water or filtering systems to displaced villagers, they are often unable to reach all remote and isolated areas. The absence of proper toilets and hygiene facilities also poses serious health risks for children, particularly in rural and displacement settings. Communities face serious risks of water contamination and disease outbreaks, and individuals are vulnerable to diseases such as diarrhoea, urinary tract infections, and other hygiene-related illnesses. The headmaster named Naw Ah---, from Db--- village, Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, said: *"Children need so many things currently. Children need hygiene items such as soap, toothbrushes, and toothpaste. Children also need umbrellas and raincoats so they can travel in the rainy season. Children also need shoes and school bags. Children also need torchlights."*

Children, especially teenage girls, need safe and private sanitation facilities. Saw Kelly, the Deputy Director of CIDKP, explained: *"For example, in one site, there were about 100 households but only one toilet, which was unsafe and inappropriate for girls. The bathrooms were not secure either."* Naw Nc---, a teacher living in Es--- village, Klay Loh Mu Hta (Klay Wah Mu Hta) village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, highlighted: *"We also need support for school buildings, including school toilets. [...] We don't have enough toilets."* Teenagers using common toilets in displacement areas are more exposed to harassment and have difficulty managing their periods. Reportedly, 'dignity kits', delivered in all seven districts by CIDKP, KWO, and KECD, were not enough in many areas. Packages delivered by KWO include underwear, reusable and non-reusable sanitary pads, soap, and washing powder.

¹⁰³ KHRG, *တပ်မတော် Aircraft coming!*, above, p. 48.

c) Providing shelter and safety

Ongoing SAC attacks and armed conflict in Southeast Burma have left civilians, especially children, without safe refuge. Villagers, displaced families, and local leaders revealed a dire lack of safety measures, communication, and shelter options. A local KYO leader named Saw Ak---, from Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District, explained: *“When fighting happened very close to us, we felt fear and did not dare to live in the village. There is no safety [for children]. [...] We heard that [local KNU leaders] have prepared a place for us, but we don’t know where that place is. We also didn’t ask. It would be good if there is a prepared place to stay temporarily. Because sometimes it takes three to four months [for armed resistance groups] to capture an army camp.”*

However, there is no area in Southeast Burma where full safety can be guaranteed, especially from the threats of SAC bombardment. Given the uncertainty of safety, a villager named Saw Av---, from Dy--- village, Kya K’Wa village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Dooplaya District, stated: *“We were asked to flee, but I do not know where to flee anymore. I fled from Dy--- village to here [Bj--- village] to escape bullets [bombing/shelling by the Burma Army], but it is also happening here, so I don’t know where to flee anymore.”* Karen CBOs and local authorities are also providing support in terms of communication by giving warnings to communities about the possibility of SAC air strikes. Although such warnings were reported as being too general and imprecise, this was also noticed as the most effective mechanism for villagers to flee their villages before air attacks were conducted.¹⁰⁴ Safety is also not available in areas affected by Burma Army ground operations and fighting, as villages continue to be the target of SAC military attacks.

For displaced villagers, organisations such as CIDKP provide essential sheltering materials, particularly roofing tarpaulins, which enable families to construct temporary shelters in forests or other remote areas. Many noted that the tarpaulins offer limited protection against unstable weather, leaving them vulnerable and insecure. Local organisations also supported villagers with materials or money to help them build makeshift bunkers.



This photo was taken in March 2024 near Hq--- village, Paw Hkloh Area, K’Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. On March 4th 2024, between 10 and 11 am, SAC fighter jets dropped more than 20 bombs on Way Tah Eh (Myitta) Town and Way Tah Eh area, between K’Ser Doh and Ler Doh Soe townships. Following the attack, on March 6th 2024, an SAC aircraft conducted air reconnaissance in the same area. Due to the air strikes, villagers from twelve villages and from Way Tah Eh Town fled to Dawei Town and to the Thailand border area. Air strikes occurred again on March 12th 2024, on K’Moh Thway area, Ler Doh Soe Township. The photo shows some villagers from Hq--- village taking shelter under a bridge during the March 4th 2024 attack. [Photo: KHRG]

¹⁰⁴ KHRG, *တပ်မတော်လေကြောင်း လာနေပြီ!*, above, p. 64.

Given the urgency, action is immediately and collaboratively needed to restore safety and dignity to children. This includes helping to build temporary shelters and providing essential shelter materials through joint efforts with local organisations. Jh--- displacement site, in Kaw T'Ree Township, and Hp--- displacement site in T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District, both bordering Thailand, are two of the most populated semi-formal displacement camps in Southeast Burma, established by villagers and local CBOs in collaboration with the KNU. However, SAC attacks have also occurred in or near IDP camps.¹⁰⁵

d) SAC constraints on aid delivery

The struggles faced by displaced populations are intensified by intentional barriers to humanitarian assistance placed by the SAC, depriving villagers in rural Karen State of critical support. Actions carried out by the SAC armed forces (such as attacks on humanitarian workers, heavy militarisation and establishment of checkpoints, confiscation of supplies, threats, and denial of free passage for villagers) create severe constraints on the delivery of aid, including food and medicine. These constraints do more than obstruct operations. They are actively producing gaps in humanitarian coverage, leaving entire communities without essential services like food, healthcare, and shelter. When access to rural areas is denied or humanitarian workers are targeted, aid cannot reach those in most need.

The SAC has signalled multiple local human rights and humanitarian organisations as illegal organisations, including CIDKP. Saw Kelly, the Deputy Director of CIDKP, explained: *"We have to be careful when we travel and work. In the past, our staff had been arrested and killed. There were some [staff] injured by weapons. [...] It happened three or four years ago in Brigade 1 [Doo Tha Htoo District]. One of our staff members was arrested and killed while going to buy food for IDPs. [...] Although we are helping civilians, the military junta considers us their enemy."* As explained by Saw Kelly, two more CIDKP staff were injured by SAC shelling in 2024.

A community member from Kaw Ler village tract, Tha Htoo Township, in Doo Tha Htoo District, named Saw Nm---, reported critical health challenges stemming from a lack of clinics, medical supplies, and healthcare workers, worsened by poor transportation across two rivers. Attempts to build a bamboo bridge to improve access were violently blocked by the Burma Army, who shelled the area during construction.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Naw Af---, the Social Welfare Program Coordinator from KWO, also mentioned the difficulty of delivering support due to the presence of SAC checkpoints: *"We need to be afraid of the enemy [Burma Army soldiers], they check and interrogate us when we pass through them [their checkpoint], so it caused fear."*

With the decrease in aid availability, villagers find it even more difficult to support their families. A villager named Naw Ag---, displaced in Da--- village, Saw Muh Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"There's no more [support]. In the past [2021-2024], there was support available. It has disappeared. Now, people struggle to work under the crisis. They have to try to work. Some people do not get to eat rice, and they eat 'takapaw' [porridge]. Some people only get to eat 'takapaw'. There are so many people. People [organisations] cannot provide support anymore because of the difficulty [travelling due to security risks]. They cannot 'pull' [funds] anymore. It is really difficult for the people who lead [to send support]."*

¹⁰⁵ KHRG, *တပ်မတော်က လေကြောင်း လာမည်! Aircraft coming!*, above, p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline*, p. 9.

6.2. Healthcare support gaps

Hospitals and clinics have been damaged or destroyed by SAC shelling and air strikes, and there are not enough trained doctors or nurses to care for the sick and injured. The SAC's refusal to allow passage of food and medicines through checkpoints in rural areas in Southeast Burma has made it extremely difficult to bring in medical supplies.¹⁰⁷ This situation is especially dangerous for pregnant women, mothers with newborns, and children, who face serious health risks. Taw Oo and Mergui-Tavoy districts are areas where access is the most difficult for ethnic healthcare providers. Mental health support is also extremely limited, even though many people are suffering from trauma.

a) Severe shortage of emergency healthcare

Interviewees specifically reported a severe shortage of medicines and medical supplies in their communities, most from Mu Traw District. Other villagers emphasised the urgent need for clinics, particularly in remote areas in Ler K'Saw Township, in Mergui-Tavoy District, and Ler Doh Township, in Kler Lwee Htoo District, which lacked healthcare facilities. A few highlighted the importance of providing training to health professionals concerning the needs of children.

While primary healthcare services are available in more accessible regions in KNU-controlled areas, especially in areas located near the border, there is still limited child-centred healthcare support: services such as immunisations, nutrition programs, and paediatric diagnostics remain underdeveloped in several areas, as KDHW services mainly focus on general primary care. Prenatal and postpartum care is also scarce. Naw Integer, who oversees the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) program at KDHW, explained: *"The challenge is that we do not have donors to support the program. [...] The food to treat malnourished children is expensive, which is why our donors cannot afford to support the nutrition program in all seven districts and in all places with KDHW-run clinics. They [donors] can only afford to support [the nutrition program] in a few places."* For maternal health support, the most needed areas in Doo Tha Htoo District reported to KDHW this year were Ta Meh Hkee, Ler K'Sar, and Lay Gher Kler village tracts.

At local clinics, villagers face significant challenges in accessing medical care due to the lack of essential medicines. Despite the presence of healthcare providers such as KDHW and the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), or independent clinics run by CDMers, and international donor-supported services, all seven districts face significant gaps in healthcare provision, particularly due to a shortage of supplies. A community member named Sai Ac---, from Cr--- village, Cs--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"BPHWT also built clinics for us. [...] If a person does not have money, they go to the BPHWT clinic. But, lately, BPHWT has been unable to provide support efficiently."* On the other hand, SAC healthcare facilities in towns are often better equipped, but highly expensive. As well, villagers must face the dangers of travelling to SAC-controlled areas to reach these care centres, making treatment impossible for many.

School pharmacies also play a vital role in treating common illnesses, and teachers become key caregivers, stepping in to support students' health while they are away from home. While some schools have access to a pharmacy, the supply of essential medicines remains largely insufficient. A teacher named Naw Ad---, in Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta

¹⁰⁷ See also: KHRG, *Emergency Lifeline*, above; KHRG, *Resilience and Resistance*, above; KHRG, *Denied and Deprived: Local communities confronting the humanitarian crisis and protection challenges in Southeast Burma*, June 2022.

Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, highlighted: *“We want local [KNU] authorities to manage and provide our students with health awareness trainings in different seasons. We want the medicine that our students need in our school. Otherwise, we will have to send students to the clinic, even if they get a headache.”*

Healthcare workers also face significant challenges in delivering consistent healthcare support given the reliance on foreign aid organisations and donors. Limited resources, unpredictable funding changes, and logistical constraints make it difficult to meet the growing needs on the ground. Due to the cut of USAID funding, several local organisations are struggling to provide adequate care for both outpatients and inpatients, as available medicines remain insufficient. Saw Kelly, from CIDKP, explained: *“We tried to provide as much support as we could, but it will decrease due to the US funding cut. It has an impact on our work. We tried to save donations from other places. We also tried to maintain our staff.”* Naw Nd---, the Education Program Coordinator from KWO, also explained: *“The challenges that the organisation faces are that, in this present period, due to the tough situation, there are challenges for us because USAID’s funding stopped. [...] Presently, we have difficulties that we cannot provide financial donations [cash assistance] as we planned.”* Recently, other foreign aid agencies, such as those from the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Sweden, announced future reductions in their external support for the region,¹⁰⁸ raising deep concerns among local CBOs.



This photo was taken in June 2024, in a forest near Cd-- village, S'Tein village tract, Ler K'Saw Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. It shows villagers, including children, fleeing Cd--- village to seek safety after fighting broke out in their village. Villagers required food and medicine during displacement. [Photo: KHRG]

¹⁰⁸ OECD, *“Cuts in official development assistance”*, June 2025; Government Offices of Sweden, *“Sverige fasar ut biståndet till Myanmar”*, September 2025.

b) Lack of vaccinations and birth certificates

For displaced children living in rural and underserved regions, access to vaccines remains inconsistent. Healthcare providers asked to be supported in deploying mobile vaccination units, training community health workers, and designing targeted outreach strategies to address the vaccination gap and safeguard vulnerable children. Interviews noted that some children received vaccinations for diseases including tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis B, chickenpox, smallpox, and polio.

Similarly, a birth certificate is a child's gateway to recognition, and opportunities. In Southeast Burma, where conflict and displacement have disrupted access to basic services, the absence of birth registration can leave children legally invisible, unable to access certain services. A villager named Naw Kh---, in El--- village, Htee Ghu Thaw village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooplaya District, explained: *"Not everyone has a birth certificate. We have to go to faraway places to make the birth certificate. We mostly go to Hpa-an and Mawlamyine."*

Birth records are issued by various healthcare providers, including KDHW and BPHWT, while birth certificates are available only in mixed-controlled or SAC-administered areas. Naw Integer, who oversees the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Program at KDHW, explained: *"There are only 'delivery records' provided. Delivery records are for the newborns in the KDHW-supported areas. [...] When we started providing delivery records, our aim was to provide this in our Karen area for the children who did not receive birth certificates from the Burma government. [...] Likewise, Backpack [BPHWT] also has similar provisions to us. [...] Now, we know that the KNU Ministry of Home Affairs will begin to provide birth certificates. [...] It will also be important for them to have the delivery record provided in the KDHW healthcare support areas."*

KDHW collaborates with Mae Tao Clinic, BPHWT, and the Burma Medical Association (BMA) to support areas and standardise 'delivery forms'. Records are issued within three months of birth. Beyond that, responsibility shifts to village-level authorities: healthcare workers and midwives are tasked with reporting births to ensure every child receives documentation. Both birth records and Burma government birth certificates are recognised across rural Karen State. However, some children faced difficulties enrolling in Burma government schools with only KDHW birth records.

c) Demands for sexual and reproductive health support

Several villagers interviewed by KHRG emphasised the importance of raising awareness about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) among children. While some communities have access to SRHR education, primarily delivered in schools by KWO and local teachers, others remain without any such support. A few clinics run by the KDHW also contribute by providing SRHR awareness to pregnant women and teenagers. Naw Af---, from KWO, explained: *"We provide training related to reproductive health. For children not to get married at a young age, we provide training in schools and communities. Also, we conducted women's discussions; there would be only women included in this group. [...] The percentage of children getting married is increasing continually."* KWO also manages safe houses for survivors of forced marriage and sexual violence.

Given the critical role this knowledge plays in safeguarding children's health and development, all children must receive comprehensive SRHR education, regardless of whether they attend school. Fulfilling these healthcare gaps requires not only humanitarian aid but also long-term investment in infrastructure and training to ensure that healthcare is a right, not a privilege.

d) Support against drug abuse

Rising drug use, now alarmingly common among children, is fuelling a serious social and health crisis in Southeast Burma. This situation demands urgent action to protect the youth. Several interviewees emphasised the need to educate children about the dangers of drug use, highlighting the importance of drug awareness programs. A 15-year-old boy named Saw Ni---, from Cl--- village, Kaw Wa Hlaing village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Doooplaya District, shared: *“I just learned about drug awareness from my cousin. There’s no formal training.”* Given these conditions, it is essential to strengthen education initiatives to minimise drug use among children.

In areas where the KNU exercises control, local laws have been implemented to reduce drug-related activities, although harsh sentences have been reported. The headmaster named Naw Ah--- from Db--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Mu Traw District, explained: *“The [KNU local] authorities are trying as much as they can to reduce the [amount of] drugs. [...]. Because the authorities are taking action, the situation [of the village] is improving and getting better. The children also dare not use the drug when they know the authorities are taking action. It’s kind of like a warning for the children not to do it anymore.”*

Support for underage drug users is vital, specifically youth-centred rehabilitation programs. A teacher named Saw V---, living in Cb--- village, Noh Nya Lah village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, noted: *“There are no programs or support available in our area.”* According to Naw Integer, from KDHW, there are generally no recovery centres or services available for people struggling with addiction in the districts. Severe cases are referred for cross-border support through existing networks, including facilities at Jg--- refugee camp, and Hr---, near Jp--- Town, both in Thailand. DARE Network runs one recovery centre in Hs--- village, Meh Th’Moo village tract, Lu Pleh Township, Hpa-an District.

e) Mental health support gaps

Mental health support remains among the most needed yet least visible services in Southeast Burma. Children, survivors of violence, and displaced populations are particularly at risk of mental distress, often grappling with trauma, anxiety, and depression. Access to trained professionals, counselling services, and psychiatric care is severely limited, if not entirely absent, especially in conflict-affected areas. KDHW reported there was a mental health program previously active in Day Buh Noh area, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District in 2011–2012, but it ended due to funding cuts. At present, KDHW can only offer limited mental health support at the central level and through clinic staff, with no capacity to continue case management at the village level.

The BPHWT and Free Burma Rangers (FBR) provide some counselling and mental health support to children by identifying appropriate interventions and facilitating hospital referrals in certain areas, such as Kler Lwee Htoo and Mu Traw districts. FBR and KWO staff often travel to informal displacement sites and conduct games and activities with children. One interviewee in Lu Thaw Township also mentioned encouragement activities provided by a religious international organisation. Teachers and parents try their best to comfort children, although still recognising the need for trained professionals. Naw Ah---, the headmaster from Db--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *“I don’t see that children receive counselling or psychological support. It would be better if someone could provide psychological support to children.”* A mother named Naw Aq---, from Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, added: *“I want stakeholders to motivate our children and to boost our children’s spirits. I need them to provide our children*

counselling, or I want them to provide children's parents with knowledge on how to give psychological first aid. [...] We need counselling training."

6.3. Education support gaps and needs

In many conflict-affected regions in Southeast Burma, particularly in Doo Tha Htoo, Taw Oo, and Mergui-Tavoy Districts, the education support gap has continued to widen in 2024-2025, leaving numerous children without access to quality learning opportunities. Despite the efforts of parents, personnel from the KECD, local KNU authorities, and some international groups in providing alternative schooling for conflict-affected children, significant educational needs persist.

a) Rebuilding destroyed school buildings and fitting temporary shelters

School buildings in Southeast Burma should be safeguarded as safe havens, yet they are continuously destroyed by SAC attacks. Saw Ax---, the KDHW Township coordinator from Dz-- village, Buh Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, explained: *"Safety is the most important thing [for children] as they will be able to study freely. They will be less anxious and will not worry. If they continually need to study in fear, and need to be cautious, it disturbs them mentally."*

Schools are also focal points where children in Southeast Burma receive education and awareness training, provided by different CBOs. Such programs include vital knowledge like Mine Risk Education (MRE) or sexual education. While constant SAC destruction of school facilities makes it difficult to deliver lessons, civil society actors have adapted by creating mobile programs to train teachers and students.



This photo was taken in June 2025, in a school compound in Htee Th'Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District. The photo shows health workers from the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) providing anti-worm medication and Vitamin A to students in the school. [Photo: KHRG]

Villagers demanded external support to rebuild school buildings. For students who have been displaced and are currently studying in forested areas, proper education facilities are also needed. Temporary shelters are also not well-suited for children with disabilities, as they are located in hidden places and thus difficult to access. KWO conducts some training for families and teachers on how to care for children with certain mental disabilities, although their access to resources has become infrequent in recent years.

b) Lack of school materials, pedagogical resources, and teachers

Many interviewees shared that economic struggles prevent them from consistently sending their children to school, although all interviewees mentioned the importance of children's education. Teachers and mothers from Mergui-Tavoy and Mu Traw districts mentioned in particular that they cannot afford to send their children to school and need support with their children's education. Reportedly, girls from large families were more prone to leave school. KWO provides specific support for girls to continue their education, including three dormitories only for girls in Dooplaya and Mu Traw districts.¹⁰⁹

Teachers play a crucial role in providing education to the students, and, in Karen State, they are responsible for all students' needs. However, many communities face a severe shortage of educators due to many challenges. This sentiment was a widespread concern among displaced communities. Teachers are supported financially once a year by the KECD and monthly by villagers in some communities.¹¹⁰ However, both amounts are insufficient to fulfil their basic needs, and teachers are increasingly leaving schools. In 2025, USAID funding cuts also limited the amount of funds that teachers received from local CBOs. Naw Nd---, the Education Program Coordinator from KWO, explained: *"In the local area, sometimes we face difficulties with [buying] food for the students, due to the increase in the price of goods. We cannot afford food for them as we had planned. I mean, we do not have enough money to buy for them. [...] We also need to reduce our activities for schools. And due to the price increase, we also need to reduce food rations for the students as well, especially for dormitory students. [...] Some places face security risks, so some of the teachers went back to their houses to stay with their families."*

Interviewees also mentioned the lack of school materials, including writing implements and engaging learning resources. Moreover, although the KECD curriculum is generally implemented without issue, some independent schools also face challenges adopting it. According to the KECD's Communication and Advocacy Manager, Saw Thaw Thi, the curriculum written in S'gaw Karen can sometimes be less accessible in certain districts, especially those with Burmese speakers or Mon communities, where differences in linguistic backgrounds create challenges for students to fully engage with the material. A mother named Naw Ku---, currently displaced in Dq--- village, Klay Loh Muh Nuh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, explained: *"My two older sons are receiving online schooling, so they need good internet. [...] They are attending a school run by the NUG [National Unity Government] online."* However, online schooling is not a viable solution in most regions, as the SAC has cut phone and internet connections in many areas of Southeast Burma.

¹⁰⁹ Currently, KWO runs 13 dormitories in Southeast Burma, hosting around 1,700 students.

¹¹⁰ For the 2024-2025 academic year, KECD supported 1,671 basic education schools and 11,192 teachers, and registered about 140,732 students.

c) Lack of opportunities to seek further education

Aside from the abovementioned difficulties in accessing high schools, teachers and students also reported a lack of opportunities to seek further education after Grade 12. A teacher named Naw Ad---, from Cu--- village, Kaw Thay Der village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District, explained: *“We face a challenge that we do not know what to do if our students finish Grade 12. The students do not have a choice to learn what they want to learn if they finish Grade 12. They just go to the Junior College¹¹¹ in Ht--- village, if they finish Grade 12. There are not many opportunities for them.”* Another teacher named Daw N---, from Bn--- village, Pyin Yay village tract, Hsaw Htee Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, explained: *“Children always think about where they would go and study Grade 10, 11, and 12 after they finished Grade 9.”*

Although some students intend to continue their education, they need someone to support them financially as they have to move to other areas, like Day Bu Noh area or across the border, where higher education is available. This gap not only deprives children of knowledge but also undermines their future prospects, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality across generations. Supporting education organisations at the border is urgent.

¹¹¹ In Karen State, KECD operates 11 Junior Colleges for students who have finished their high school education. Junior Colleges provide two-year diploma programs and serve as preparation for students to continue their studies at colleges. In 2025, 916 students graduated from Junior Colleges run by the KECD.

Chapter 7. Children's voices and perspectives on the conflict

"I wish to have more happiness in the future."

"I want to see that children can go to school peacefully."

"I hope the situation will be getting better. I wish to see my aunt, uncle and cousins."

"I hope to see peace and I wish to have more happiness."

"I don't want to see aircraft coming anymore."

— children in a focus group discussion in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District.

In interviews with KHRG, children across Southeast Burma expressed their hopes for their future and the future of their communities, mostly the absence of violence and conflict. Children reported having their own dreams and expectations for the future, such as pursuing further education or becoming health workers or teachers in the villages. Others would like to migrate to Thailand for job opportunities. Some mentioned steps that local leaders and outside stakeholders can take to increase their ability to attend school, access healthcare, and live peacefully.

Seeking out freedom from conflict and peace

Children in 40 out of the 44 interviews mentioned feeling afraid or desiring freedom from conflict. Naw Kr---, a displaced 13-year-old girl from Ep--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District, stated: *"I want freedom. I want to live freely. I want to go to school freely and safely. I want to play with my friends freely."* Saw Nf---, a 16-year-old boy from Hu--- village, Buh Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, called for justice: *"I wish to have a country that is just and a country filled with peace and justice."* Naw An---, a 17-year-old girl from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooطلا District, elaborated on why she believed that the Karen people needed peace: *"If not, villagers always need to live lives full of anxiety and caution. When the aircraft came it also disturbed our lives and impacted the education of the children as well. We also have to flee [from our village]."*

Discussing the lack of external action to prevent SAC attacks, Saw Kj---, a 16-year-old boy from Cc--- village, Wa Ka village tract, Kruh Tuh Township, Dooطلا District, argued: *"If we look back at the past [shelling and air strikes], we could not do anything. It is good if someone can do something for us. If nobody does anything for us, we will just have to find a way by ourselves."*

Gaining access to education and healthcare

All children repeatedly emphasised their desire to see better quality education available for them. Naw R---, a displaced 17-year-old girl from Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, stated: *"I want to see the improvement of healthcare and education in my village. I want to see that the students can study in freedom and have enough teachers."* Naw Ai---, a married 17-year-old girl from Dc--- village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District, also shared her aspirations to gain an education in the future: *"We need to be healthy, have food and clothing. [...] I wish for peace to return. [...] I want to be educated. [...] When I grow up, I will do something that gets money and something that gets knowledge."*

Naw Ng---, a 17-year-old girl from Hv--- village, Pan Kon village tract, A'Paw (Maw S'Ko) Township, Doo Tha Htoo District, discussed the risks of missing out on education: *"If we do not have access to education, we are like those who cannot see in front while walking."* Naw T---,

a 16-year-old girl from Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District, shared a similar sentiment: *"If we received education, we can teach the new generations. So, it is important for us."*

Extra support was demanded for other students to be able to attend school. Naw KI---, a 17-year-old girl displaced to Bs--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, said: *"[We need] support to have no more [school] dropouts. [Support] for the students who face difficulties so they can access education and do not leave school. I want the reduction of difficulties in families."*

Children also mentioned their healthcare needs and lack of essential support. Naw Mb---, a 17-year-old girl from Ep--- village, P'Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, added: *"Currently, children do not get vaccinations. Pregnant women do not receive good healthcare. I want stakeholders to provide more medical supplies and resources."* Naw Kr---, the displaced 13-year-old girl also from Ep--- village, expressed: *"I need a place to stay. I need food to eat. I need clothes to wear. I mean, we need livelihood support. This is very important for me to grow well."*

Fighting back against the Burma military regime

Some teenagers also expressed their own political views and desires for the conflict. One of the children who participated in the focus group discussion in Br--- village, Kheh Pa village tract, stated: *"I feel good when I heard about Karen soldiers fighting Burmese [Burma Army] soldiers. [...] I feel good [about it] because Burmese [Burma Army] soldiers oppress our Karen people."* At least three other children expressed a desire to fight back against the SAC, *"to defend the people from the Burma Army attacks."*



This photo was taken in May 2025, in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows children creating a 'map' of their village with coloured clay, representing how they would like it to look in the future. These children have experienced air strikes in their village, which caused damage and injuries among villagers. They participated in a focus group discussion with KHRG after they created the map. [Photo: KHRG]

Conclusions and discussion

During 2024 and 2025, the State Administration Council (SAC) has continued to spread violence and destruction in villages across locally-defined Karen State, further increasing the vulnerability and suffering of children in the conflict. The documentation presented in this report shows how these attacks contribute to the longstanding challenges that generations of children have faced in accessing their most fundamental rights. In particular, it examines the impacts of the current conflict and abuses by armed actors on children's access to education, healthcare, and mental and social wellbeing, as well as the different forms of violence committed against them. These attacks not only constitute clear violations of international law but also demand urgent action from stakeholders to protect children's lives and futures, and to alleviate the devastating impacts of the SAC-made human rights and humanitarian crisis in Karen State.

Attacks and violations against children by armed actors

Children in Southeast Burma continue to live under both immediate violence and the enduring consequences of a conflict that has dismantled the very systems meant to protect them. Abuses by the SAC in villages and communities include killings and injuries of children through air strikes, shelling, landmines, UXOs, and shootings, as well as arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, and child recruitment. SAC attacks on schools and hospitals have deprived children of education and medical care, while checkpoints and road blockages have prevented them from accessing essential supplies and services, particularly food, medicine, and humanitarian assistance. As a result, children face preventable illness and rising infant mortality linked to the denial of healthcare, high medical costs, and shortages of supplies and personnel. Conflict-related displacement and the destruction of livelihoods have further aggravated the situation, driving families into food insecurity and forcing many children out of school or into unsafe shelters. Other armed resistance groups have also committed some violations. Altogether, these repeated abuses upend the emotional worlds of children, inducing trauma and fear.

Gender roles shape how children experience the conflict. Girls face rising rates of early marriage and underage pregnancy, which endanger their health, force them out of school, and expose them to childbirth with limited or no access to medical care. They also face heightened risks of sexual violence. Young boys, on the other hand, face increased risks of arbitrary detention and forced recruitment, as they are often perceived as holding links with armed resistance groups.

In this context, local humanitarian actors continue to make efforts to support communities; however, funding gaps and constant attacks mean that most needs of children remain unmet. All the while, communities continue to work tirelessly to protect their wellbeing. Villagers build bunkers and forest schools and clinics, travel great distances to reach hospitals, encourage one another, and send children away to escape abuses. As children repeatedly stress, they long for an end to conflict, the opportunity to access education, and the space to pursue a better future. Their demands provide a clear message about the urgency to act for children's protection.

Legal implications of the findings

These findings go beyond individual testimonies, revealing a consistent pattern of abuses against children that amount to grave violations under the UN framework, repeated breaches of Burma's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other human rights treaties, and serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) that, in many instances, rise to the level of war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Under the Six Grave Violations (SGV)¹¹² framework, incidents documented by KHRG include killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children as soldiers, rape and sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. Key findings show a credible, reliable, and verifiable pattern of all SGV across the seven districts of Karen State, with the Burma Army identified as the only actor responsible for committing all six, accounting for 219 violations. Taken together, these findings establish a sustained pattern of SGV against children in Southeast Burma. Other armed forces have also been implicated in the use of landmines that have led to the maiming of children, use of school buildings, and child recruitment, with three violations attributed to the KNLA and three to the PDF.

The abuses also constitute breaches of international human rights law (IHRL), particularly under the CRC.¹¹³ The junta's actions violate children's rights to life, survival, and development, as well as the rights to health, education, an adequate standard of living, and play.¹¹⁴ They also contravene protections from torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, sexual abuse and exploitation, and abduction.¹¹⁵ Children are further denied freedom from harmful practices such as child marriage.¹¹⁶ In addition, special protections for children in armed conflict, including the prohibition of child recruitment and the right to recovery and reintegration,¹¹⁷ have been actively violated by practices of the Burma Army and KNLA, both of which have been found to use boys under 18 among their ranks. The ongoing conflict and SAC attacks have gravely undermined these rights, depriving children of access to schooling, medical care, sexual and reproductive health, and safe spaces for rest and play, among other essential aspects to their development and wellbeing. Burma's obligations under these treaties remain binding in times of armed conflict, yet KHRG's findings demonstrate persistent non-compliance.

IHL likewise prohibits the abuses committed by armed actors, mainly the Burma Army, as documented by KHRG. Under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary IHL, civilians must be protected from attacks, and children are entitled to special protections.¹¹⁸ Murder, torture, and cruel treatment are strictly prohibited, as are sexual violence, enforced disappearance, and arbitrary detention.¹¹⁹ Schools, medical facilities, and medical transports are regarded as civilian objects that must not be targeted unless being used for military purposes and, in cases of doubt, must be presumed civilian.¹²⁰ Parties to the conflict are also obliged to ensure care for the sick and wounded without adverse distinction, allow and facilitate unimpeded humanitarian relief, and refrain from attacking objects indispensable to the survival of civilians, such as food, crops, or medicine.¹²¹ Overall, they must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives, and ensure that attacks

¹¹² The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has identified and condemned six grave violations against children in times of war to monitor, prevent, and end attacks on children. See, for example, UNSC Resolution 1261 (1999).

¹¹³ Burma has ratified the CRC and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) are also relevant, as they reflect universally recognised human rights standards.

¹¹⁴ CRC, Arts. 6, 24, 27-29 and 31; ICCPR, Art. 6; ICESCR, Arts. 11-13.

¹¹⁵ CRC, Arts. 34-35, 37; ICCPR, Arts. 7, 9.

¹¹⁶ CRC, Art. 24(3); CEDAW, Art. 16(2).

¹¹⁷ CRC, Arts. 38 – 39; OPAC, Art. 2.

¹¹⁸ ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 6 and 135.

¹¹⁹ ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 89 – 90, 93, 98 – 99.

¹²⁰ ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 28, 29, 35, and 38.

¹²¹ Common Art. 3 of the Geneva Conventions; ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 54 – 56.

are neither disproportionate nor indiscriminate.¹²² Although Burma is not a party to the 1997 Mine Ban Convention, anti-personnel mines are inherently indiscriminate and inhumane weapons that violate the fundamental IHL principles, including distinction and proportionality.¹²³ Furthermore, the recruitment and use of children under 15 years old is explicitly prohibited.¹²⁴ KHRG's documentation, including evidence of SAC air and ground attacks on villages, shelling of schools and medical facilities, the use of landmines in civilian areas, and the obstruction of humanitarian assistance, demonstrates a consistent disregard for the obligations to protect civilians and civilian objects. These patterns reflect a systematic failure to distinguish between civilian and military targets, central to the SAC's implementation of its '*four cuts*' strategy. While the KNLA and PDF have also been implicated in certain violations, these appear considerably more limited in both scale and scope.

Under international criminal law (ICL), as codified by the Rome Statute,¹²⁵ many of the documented violations may amount to war crimes in a non-international armed conflict. These include killings and mutilation, cruel and inhumane treatment, intentional attacks against civilians, schools, and hospitals, and rape and other forms of sexual violence.¹²⁶ If shown to be widespread or systematic, these incidents also constitute crimes against humanity, such as murder, unlawful imprisonment, torture, rape, enforced disappearance, gender/ethnic persecution, and other inhumane acts.¹²⁷ KHRG's findings, including killings resulting from air strikes, shelling, and shootings, as well as abuses during detention, indicate that in many cases the SAC commanders and soldiers may bear individual criminal responsibility¹²⁸ for multiple war crimes and, given the large-scale nature of attacks across districts, for crimes against humanity.

At the national level, Burma's 2019 Child Rights Law provides further protection for children. It recognises their rights to survival, development, protection, and participation, and prohibits all forms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence.¹²⁹ The law also establishes specific safeguards for children in armed conflict, requiring authorities and armed groups to prevent and protect children from violence; treat those affected by armed conflict as victims, implementing their best interests as a priority; and take effective measures against child recruitment.¹³⁰ It further guarantees children protection from detention and torture, rights to rehabilitation and reintegration, and prohibits recruitment or use in combat roles of anyone under 18 by both the Burma Army and other armed groups.¹³¹ KHRG's documentation shows that the Burma Army has engaged in conduct explicitly prohibited under domestic law. The law mirrors the international prohibitions contained in the SGV framework, reinforcing that these acts are criminal not only under international law but also under Burma's own legal framework.¹³² Such conduct demonstrates a blatant and pervasive disregard for legal obligations and underscores the urgent need for accountability and the protection of children's rights.

¹²² ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 7, 11, and 14.

¹²³ ICBL-CMC, "[Why the Ban on Landmines Must be Protected](#)", January 2025.

¹²⁴ ICRC, Customary IHL Study, Rules 136 – 137.

¹²⁵ While Myanmar is not a State Party to the Rome Statute, the Statute codifies crimes recognised under customary international law and thus remains a relevant legal benchmark for assessing accountability.

¹²⁶ Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(c)(i) – (ii); Art. 8(2)(e)(i), (ii), (iv), (vi).

¹²⁷ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(a), (e) – (i), (k).

¹²⁸ Rome Statute, Art. 25(3)(a); Art. 28(1).

¹²⁹ Child Rights Law, Arts. 18–19, 56.

¹³⁰ Child Rights Law, Art. 60(a) – (c).

¹³¹ Child Rights Law, Arts. 62 – 64.

¹³² Child Rights Law, Art. 61(a) – (f).

Photos: Front and back cover

Front cover photo:

The photo was taken in May 2025 in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows children drawing a picture as a group. They drew a picture of their village, including the school, clinic, monastery, and church. In the picture, it is explained that their village was attacked by an SAC airstrike. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Back cover photos:

Top row, left to right:

The photo was taken in May 2025, in Hw--- village, Waing Pyin Yin village tract, Hsaw Htee Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District. On May 11th 2025, an SAC fighter jet dropped a 500-pound bomb into Hw--- village. The bomb landed and exploded behind a high school, heavily damaging the school building and five villagers' houses. The bomb also injured a villager. Before this incident, in February 2025, an SAC aircraft had dropped two 300-pound bombs behind the school. The first bomb slightly damaged the building, while the second bomb did not explode. Previously, PDF soldiers had temporarily stayed in Hw--- school compound. However, no soldiers were staying at the school compound when the SAC air attacks happened. The photos show the destruction caused to the school building by the air strike on May 11th 2025. *[Photo: KHRG]*

The photo was taken in September 2024, in a displacement site near Bs--- village, Thay Baw Boh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. The photo shows children reading a book at the displacement site. Approximately 606 villagers are staying at this displacement site. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Bottom row, left to right:

The photo was taken on July 30th 2024, by a local villager. On July 1st 2024, SAC soldiers conducted mortar shelling into Ez--- village, Moo village tract, Ler Doh Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, killing two parents and injuring their three children, including a 2-year-old baby named Maung Li---. The photo shows Maung Li--- at home after receiving treatment at Toungoo hospital. *[Photo: a local villager]*

The photo was taken in May 2025 in Ca--- village, Poh Yay village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows children creating a map representing what they would like their village to look like in the future with coloured clay, as part of a focus group discussion with KHRG. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This report examines the many ways in which armed conflict and SAC abuses are undermining children's safety, integrity, and development. Bombings of schools, clinics, and community spaces have deprived children of education, healthcare, and safe environments to learn and play, while the destruction of livelihoods, movement restrictions, and repeated displacement have left families struggling to secure food, medicine, and shelter. As a result, children grow up without stability or safety: some drop out of school to avoid further attacks, while others face preventable diseases and acute hunger that puts their lives at risk, with little access to the support they urgently need. These conditions have undermined family and community life, leaving children fearful, traumatised, and uncertain about their future. At the same time, children are also being subjected to direct forms of violence by the Burma Army, including killings, torture, sexual violence, and injuries from shelling, air strikes, and landmines. Adding to these hardships, SAC restrictions on the transportation of humanitarian aid in rural Southeast Burma have deprived children of essential support for their education, health, and basic survival, particularly food, medicine, and school materials.

Serving as an entry point to understanding villagers' perspectives across a wide range of issues concerning children, this report should help inform stakeholders on the steps necessary to ensure access to fundamental rights for children in Southeast Burma. By amplifying the voices of children and their communities, this report not only documents the harms they endure but also highlights their demands and aspirations for a safer future. Ensuring the protection of children in Southeast Burma is not secondary to resolving the conflict but is a necessary step toward any meaningful and lasting peace.

KHRG

Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) was founded in 1992 and documents the situation of villagers and townspeople in rural Southeast Burma through their direct testimonies, supported by photographic and other evidence. KHRG operates independently and is not affiliated with any political or other organisation.