

Report Briefer

October 2025

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

Children are central to peace and at the heart of the futures of their communities, yet they are disproportionately impacted by the armed conflict in Southeast Burma. Since the 2021 military coup, the Burma Army, under the command of the State Administration Council (SAC), has carried out widespread attacks on villages in an effort to crush dissent, continuing a long history of repression against civilians in the region.

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. 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 State continue to live under direct and constant threat to their existence, development, and dignity.

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 impacted family and community life, leaving children fearful, traumatised, and uncertain about their future. At the same time, children are 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 continues to militarise children further and expose them to grave danger.



The full report is available in English and Burmese at www.khrg.org

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. 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, and require greater support from international stakeholders to sustain their work.

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, including 54 adults (35 women and 19 men) and 39 children (21 girls and 18 boys). These interviews were conducted by KHRG field researchers: local community members trained by KHRG to document issues affecting children in their communities. Additionally, KHRG conducted five focus group discussions with children in Mu Traw and Dooplaya Districts in May 2025.

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 reviewed 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).

Background of the conflict in Southeast Burma

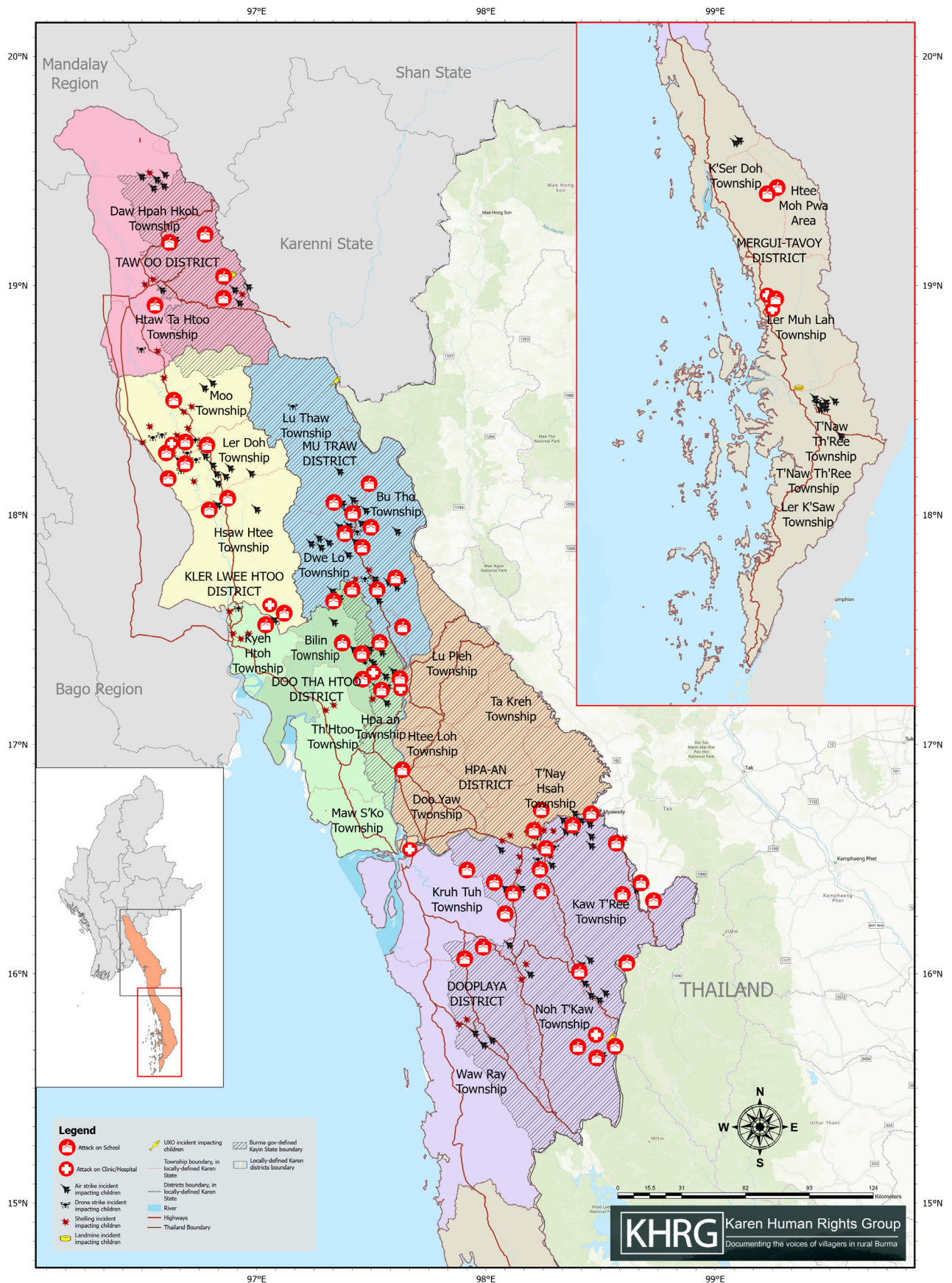
Since Burma's independence in 1948, villagers in Southeast Burma have faced decades of Burma Army violence. From the 1960s onwards, the Burma military implemented the "four cuts" (or *pyat lay pyat*) counter-insurgency strategy, designed to sever resistance forces from access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits.

In 1992, the junta tried to limit international pressure by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, it did not take any steps to guarantee compliance and continued to violate children's rights at high rates.

Child rights mildly improved following the ceasefire period. Burma signed several international treaties protecting child rights and, in 2019, passed the Child Rights Law. However, these commitments were unevenly implemented and threats to child rights continued. Villagers in Karen State still faced discrimination, land confiscation, and exploitation. 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.

After the Burma Army's coup in February 2021, 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. Children continue to be used as porters, forced labourers, human shields, and forced recruits. By September 2025, more than one million people were displaced in Karen State.

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



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. 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 mothers, children, and other vulnerable groups without the support needed to survive. Moreover, the SAC also threatened humanitarian workers, causing great difficulty in reaching 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.

Overview of chapters

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, 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's right to a safe and free education.

- From January 2024 to June 2025, the SAC armed forces attacked at least 48 schools, killing five students and one teacher, and injuring nine students. SAC soldiers also confiscated school property and used school buildings for military purposes.



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]

- Children in Karen State are constantly afraid of air strikes, shelling, and fighting while at school. 62% (71 out of 114) of interviewees reported to KHRG that villagers faced challenges to access education due to fear of attack in their communities.
- Villagers also reported challenges accessing education due to conflict-related travel difficulties and road closures. Many children in rural areas drop out after finishing middle school (Grade 9), as secondary schools are scarce and difficult to reach.
- 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.



This photo was taken in June 2024 at a villager's plantation in 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]

- Some displaced villagers reported difficulties in studying due to language barriers when schools followed different curricula.
- 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.
- 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.

“Students and teachers just hold pens, but they [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?” – Nan L---, a schoolteacher from P’Loo (Palu) village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Doolaya District.

- Villagers also reported that children dropped out of school when they got married at an early age. Twenty-nine interviewees mentioned knowing about children in their communities who got married or became pregnant while underage.
- Children are also unable to continue their education in their communities because of recruitment by different armed groups in Southeast Burma.
- 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.

Chapter 3: Challenges to the right to health and healthcare

In Southeast Burma, the SAC was the primary actor undermining determinants of health during the reporting period and driving up rates of illness amongst children. They do this through attacks on villages, the imposition of travel restrictions, and high treatment costs at clinics.

- SAC attacks on clinics 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.

“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.” – Naw Ah---, from Db--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District.

- 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 routine sources of food and thus increases the likelihood of hunger amongst children. Concerns over malnutrition were especially pronounced among Mu Traw District interviewees.

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

"There is no way to transport medicines. They [SAC] did not allow transporting medicines here." – U Ke--- from Ei--- village, Za Yat Gyi Tuang Chan village tract, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Taw Oo District.

- The risk of SAC attack or confiscation of materials along roads has curtailed the ability of healthcare workers to carry out vaccination campaigns for children in villages across rural Southeast Burma.
- 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.
- Interviewees in areas with SAC clinics vastly reported struggles with paying for healthcare, compared to those who discussed accessing healthcare 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.



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, on May 29th 2025. [Photo: KHRG]

- 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.

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

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.

- 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 had trouble breathing, body tremors, and temporary mutism.
- 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.

“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.” – A 12-year-old boy named Saw Kq---, from Eo--- village, T’Maw Daw village tract, Tha Htoo (Thaton) Township, Doo Tha Htoo District.

- 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.
- 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.
- The ongoing conflict also separated families by forcing people into displacement, increasing poverty, and leading children to study away from home at boarding schools. Some children reported negative emotions and behaviour changes, including aggressiveness and social withdrawal within the family and the community.
- Interviewed children mentioned play as a source of release and happiness. 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.

“After 2021, the 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.” – Naw Al---, a teenage girl from Dg--- village, Htee Th’Bluh Hta village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District.

- 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.
- Some villagers mentioned that children try to find spaces to play, be happy, and enjoy small aspects of life, like eating and sleeping, even though they are living under military conflict.



This photo was taken in July 2024, in a displacement site named Er---, Hkay 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]

Chapter 5: Violent abuses against children

Children in Southeast Burma continue to face violent forms of abuse that endanger their lives, dignity, and future. These abuses take place in the broader context of armed conflict and entrenched impunity. In spite of this, children's resilience is evident in the ways they, together with their communities, seek to protect themselves in the face of violence.

5.1. Killing and injury of children

Between January 2024 and June 2025, at least 30 children were killed and 103 injured due to violent abuses. 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. Incidents have been documented in all seven districts of locally-defined Karen State, with children often harmed while engaged in ordinary daily activities.

- Air strikes and shelling conducted by the SAC armed forces have constantly struck villages across Southeast Burma. 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. Incidents occurred inside villages and community areas, including in their homes, schools, farms, and places of worship, 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.
- These attacks were often indiscriminate, with many bombardments striking villages without warning, both day and night, while children were engaged in daily routine tasks or during communal events. Several children were killed or injured when no clashes were taking place nearby. Others casualties occurred when there were ongoing clashes in nearby areas, or in what appeared to be reprisals against civilians by SAC armed forces. In such contexts, the use of heavy weaponry by SAC troops devastated entire families and communities and caused numerous child casualties.

"When 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." – Sai Ac---, a villager from Ge--- village, Kyaw Pah village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District.

- 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. 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.
- These hidden hazards are scattered across civilian areas and place children at heightened risk. Children are particularly vulnerable as they encounter mines and UXOs while playing and conducting daily tasks, often mistaking them for objects to play with. The danger is exacerbated by the absence of systematic marking and mine risk awareness training.
- Shoot-on-sight incidents by SAC troops have also resulted in child casualties. These practices particularly affect teenage boys and are often accompanied by arbitrary arrest or torture of companions and relatives, reinforcing a pervasive climate of fear and impunity.

5.2. Detention, disappearance, and related abuses

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. One other incident documented involving detention and abuse was committed by the KNLA.

- Arrests by the Burma Army 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.
- In some instances, children are forcibly disappeared after arrest. 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.

"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." – Saw Md---, a community member from Gs--- Town, Taw Oo District.

5.3. Sexual violence against children

- The fear of retaliation and the protection afforded to perpetrator soldiers by their commanders often prevent survivors and their families from seeking justice for sexual assault cases. In 2024, one incident of rape committed by SAC soldiers against a girl was reported.

5.4. Child recruitment into armed forces

- The SAC conscription law sets the minimum age for recruitment at 18, but testimonies reported that children as young as 15–17 were conscripted and sent to the frontlines. SAC recruitment is usually carried out through violence and arbitrary arrests. These practices have generated widespread fear, displacement, and disrupted education and livelihoods.
- Recruitment by the SAC primarily takes place in towns under SAC control or in mixed-control zones. After arrest, some children were transferred to recruitment centres, where the SAC detain people until quotas are met, and then sent on to military training camps.

"They [SAC] 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." – Saw MI---, a community member from Gw--- village, Gw--- village tract, Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District.

- KNU policies prohibit the recruitment of underage children in Southeast Burma, but KNLA troops and other armed resistance groups have recruited teenagers into their forces.
- 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. In some areas, the names of children as young as 16 were recorded in preparation for future service.
- Some villagers stressed that children who join the KNLA often do so voluntarily. Others reported that underage recruits were assigned administrative or support duties, sent back to school, or placed in training without being formally enlisted.

5.5. Agency against violent abuses

- One of the most common protective measures against military attacks is the use of makeshift bunkers, to which families immediately flee at the sound of aircraft or shelling. Other measures include turning off lights, generators, and other machines when aircraft fly over the village; or fleeing into forests, plantations, or ditches until the danger ceases.
- Some young people also flee to other areas or across the border to escape SAC conscription pressures. Other strategies included local leaders prohibiting the enlistment of minors, and, in some cases, households paying money to prevent children from being taken.

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 armed conflict. The SAC restrictions on transportation of aid are blocking access to medicine, food, and educational materials in rural areas, leaving nursing mothers and children facing severe threats.
- Dedicated Karen Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) work tirelessly to meet the needs of children. However, support in 2024-2025 has been inconsistent and insufficient, due to threats to humanitarian work by the SAC, as well as foreign funding cuts.

“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?” – Nan L---, a teacher at Jh--- displacement site in P’Loo village tract, Kaw T’Ree Township, Dooplaya District.

- Health and community workers face severe risks at the hands of SAC armed forces, including at checkpoints, which limit and hinder their operational scope.
- Bridging these gaps requires sustained foreign assistance, active engagement and collaboration with CBOs and civil society organisations, inclusive local policies, and community-driven solutions that prioritise children’s wellbeing.



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]

Chapter 7: Children’s voices and perspectives on the conflict

- All 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. They also repeatedly emphasised their desire to see better quality education available for them.

“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.” – Naw Kr---, a displaced 13-year-old girl from Ep--- village, P’Saw Loh village tract, Daw Hpah Hkoh Township, Taw Oo District.

Conclusions and discussion

- During 2024 and 2025, the 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. 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.
- 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.
- The Burma Army was identified as responsible for committing all Six Grave Violations (SGV) under the UN framework, accounting for 219 violations. Other armed forces have also been implicated, with three violations attributed to the KNLA and three to the PDF.
- These findings go beyond individual testimonies, revealing a consistent pattern of abuses against children by the SAC armed forces that amount to grave violations under the UN framework, repeated breaches of Burma's obligations under 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.

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 aid, while explicitly avoiding any legitimisation of the junta or its processes and institutions.
- Implement a comprehensive arms and aviation fuel embargo and coordinated targeted sanctions against the military junta to weaken their capacity to attack civilians.
- 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 community-led social services, including education, health, nutrition, and shelter, delivered by local CBOs to conflict-affected children.
- Condition all aid and diplomatic engagement on measurable benefits for children and ensure it is not diverted to the junta, guaranteeing protection from exploitation and harm.
- Collaborate with local CSOs to monitor and publicly report grave violations against children, including attacks on schools and clinics, recruitment, and denial of aid.
- Strictly uphold the principle of *non-refoulement* in light of mass displacement and forced recruitment by the 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.
- Urgently refer the situation in Southeast Burma to the ICC under Article 13(a), exert diplomatic pressure for a UN Security Council referral under Article 13(b), and provide support for investigations, evidence collection, protection, and meaningful 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 schools, providing essential learning materials, and offering bursaries for children to continue their education.
- Urgently address adolescent health, mental health, and substance use prevention, and significantly increase funding to build the capacity of local humanitarian actors and first responders to better respond to children's experiences of violations and trauma.
- Provide support to Thai-based actors, especially border schools and clinics, recognising that many displaced children 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 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' dignity and participation.
- Develop reparations frameworks, in collaboration with local civil society, addressing education, healthcare, psychosocial support, and livelihoods for affected children.

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

- Uphold and enforce existing policies to end the recruitment of child soldiers, and strengthen transparent, accountable processes for their demobilisation, release, and reintegration.
- Provide safe, unimpeded humanitarian access for local actors, 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.



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. Examples of our work can be seen online at www.khrgh.org or printed copies of our reports may be obtained subject to approval and availability by sending a request to khrgh@khrgh.org