HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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Myanmar: Military Abuses Against Civilians Intensify

UN Security Council Should Impose Global Arms Embargo, Jet Fuel Sanctions
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(Bangkok) – Myanmar's military junta has increasingly carried out unlawful airstrikes harming civilians in its military operations against a coalition of opposition and ethnic armed groups, Human Rights Watch said today. Governments that provide transfers or assistance of arms or materiel to the junta forces risk being complicit in war crimes.

Destruction at a school in Namsham, Shan State, after Myanmar military airstrikes on January 9, 2024.

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Three years since the February 1, 2021, coup in Myanmar, the junta's widespread and systematic abuses against the population – including arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians – amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. In 2023, Human Rights Watch investigations found that the military's unlawful airstrikes in Sagaing Region and Kachin State were apparent war crimes.

"Concerned governments should be doing more to curb the junta's capacity to commit appalling laws-of-war violations," said Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "United Nations member countries should urge the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Myanmar, including sanctions on jet fuel that facilitates unlawful air attacks on civilians."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said in a statement on January 30 that Myanmar's deteriorating human rights situation was now in "free fall."

"The people of Myanmar have been suffering for too long," Türk said. "Since the end of October last year, their situation has deteriorated even further as a result of the long-established tactics of the military to target them."

On October 27, 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance – an anti-junta coalition of the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army – began Operation 1027, an offensive that seized Myanmar military outposts in northern Shan State. The offensive also triggered opposition attacks on Myanmar security forces elsewhere in the country.

The junta responded to the attacks with military operations that have involved serious violations of the laws of war.

Amnesty International determined that junta forces most likely used cluster munitions during attacks on the town of Namkham in Shan State in early December. The use of cluster munitions, large weapons that include dozens of smaller weapons known as submunitions, is inherently indiscriminate and constitutes a war crime.

The renewed fighting within weeks displaced about 600,000 people across Myanmar. Humanitarian agencies and local organizations have struggled to respond to the surge in displacement.

An unknown number of civilians have been killed and injured in recent airstrikes. An aid worker in Muse township near the China border told Human Rights Watch that his friend fled from Namhkam after his wife was killed in a junta airstrike on December 1, an incident reported by the Shan Human Rights Foundation.

"He managed to hide their two children in the bunker when they first heard the sounds of a jet," the aid worker said. "But his wife was showering as it was morning. … She didn't make it to the bunker and died right there when the junta dropped the bomb. He was injured too, and luckily the children are safe but now they don't have a mother."

A spokeswoman from a local ethnic and women's rights group, the Ta'ang Women's Organization, said she fled Namhkam township on December 2 after repeated junta airstrikes in her village. "At first, I hid with my family in a dirt bunker we had dug near our home," she said. "There were so many explosions … it was hard to tell whether it was all the same attack or many planes dropping bombs. The planes came day and night, and they also circled around us repeatedly even if they weren't dropping bombs."

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, which reports data on the Myanmar military's air and drone strikes, found strikes to have substantially increased since early 2022. This data is compiled from media reports and may significantly undercount the military's total air and drone strikes.

Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States have imposed and expanded sanctions since the coup, but sanctions on jet fuel have been inconsistent.

Canada is the only country to have imposed comprehensive sanctions on the export, sale, supply or shipment of aviation fuel to Myanmar. In 2023, the EU, UK, and US also introduced some sanctions that targeted

private actors supplying fuel, arms and funds to Myanmar. However, five British companies are still providing insurance cover for deliveries of aviation fuel to Myanmar.

Governments in the region have not sent a clear message to Myanmar's junta concerning ongoing rights violations, Human Rights Watch said. Laos, as the 2024 chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), should work with other ASEAN member countries to take a more robust approach that pressures the junta to end its abuses and remove restrictions on humanitarian assistance.

The European Union, whose foreign ministers will meet with ASEAN foreign ministers on February 2, should urge ASEAN members, in particular Thailand and Singapore, to cooperate in enforcing sanctions in their jurisdictions.

The UN Security Council should meaningfully follow up on its December 2022 resolution on Myanmar by imposing an arms embargo, including jet fuel, and refer the country situation to the International Criminal Court. Russia and China, which both abstained from the 2022 resolution, should not block stronger measures by the council.

Russia and China have continued to sell weapons to Myanmar's junta since the 2021 coup, according to the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar.

"Myanmar's people have been suffering for years under a junta that shows them no regard," Pearson said. "A stronger international response is still needed to press for an end to the military's abuses."
Region / Country

- Asia
- Myanmar (Burma)

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