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Minorities under Threat, Diversity in Danger: Patterns of Systemic Discrimination in Southeast Myanmar

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) is pleased to announce the release of its latest report, “Minorities under Threat, Diversity in Danger: Patterns of Systemic Discrimination in Southeast Myanmar.” The report investigates how discrimination against ethnic minorities threatens their identity and limits their meaningful participation within Myanmar society. The Government of Myanmar, Karen National Union and local administrators must take active measures to ensure that the rights and identities of all ethnic people are protected.

Since 2015, the Government of Myanmar has enacted a series of laws that were meant to ensure that ethnic groups are respected in government programmes and policies. However, these laws were based on the fundamentally flawed conception that Myanmar’s multitude of ethnic people could be categorized within the 135 government-recognized *taingyintha* (national or indigenous races). This classification system is an oversimplification of Myanmar’s unique diversity and has served to sow division within communities and deny the rights of citizenship to millions of people whose ethnic affiliations were excluded from this list.

Without legal recognition, ethnic minorities are denied access to government documents, like the national ID card, necessary for the realization of basic human rights, including voting in elections, moving freely throughout the country, attaining education beyond the compulsory primary level, or owning and registering land titles. Obtaining the national ID card has been a challenge for people across every ethnic group in Southeast Myanmar, not simply those groups excluded from the government’s list. Strict requirements for extensive family trees and official records have severely affected rural villagers, especially IDPs and refugees whose documents were lost, destroyed or confiscated as a result of conflict. The Burmanisation of the names of people and locations has produced inconsistencies in records that also make it difficult for villagers to prove their citizenship eligibility.

The report also explores ongoing patterns that threaten the expression of ethnic identity in the public sphere, such as bans on the celebration of ethnic historical figures or the display of ethnic flags; and analyses, through the perspective of ethnic villagers, existing Burmanisation policies aimed at changing indigenous location names into Burmese and promoting Burmese culture and history in the public space and in classrooms. Finally, the report assesses whether the recent measures taken to introduce ethnic history, culture and language in the national curriculum live up to the promises laid out in the National Education Law.

KHRG hopes that this report will help allow national and international stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the experiences and concerns of ethnic minorities in Southeastern Myanmar. It includes a number of comprehensive recommendations on how the Government of Myanmar and other actors can better respect and protect the rights and identities of ethnic minorities.

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