



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## **Tactics of Control: The Burma Army's systematic use of deprivation of liberty and ensuing human rights violations in Southeast Burma – New Report**

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New briefing paper from KHRG details the widespread arbitrary deprivation of villagers' liberty by the Burma Army and what happens after: extortion, torture, enforced disappearance, forced labour, forced recruitment, and killing.

The Burma military regime is collectively punishing villagers in Southeast Burma by torturing and committing other acts of severe violence against them after arbitrarily depriving them of their liberty under baseless accusations of affiliations with resistance forces, said Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) today in a new briefing paper. Over the last 18 months, KHRG has documented the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of 520 villagers in Southeast Burma, averaging to nearly one case per day. This includes the enforced disappearances of 17 villagers, 11 of whom are still reported missing as of July 2026. Nearly all survivors describe experiencing significant violence and humiliation while being held.

*"Since the military's 'four cuts strategy' was first used in the 1960s, the Burma Army has deliberately targeted civilians for collective punishment to try to expand their military control over ethnic territories," said Saw Albert, Research and Advocacy Director at KHRG. "After the coup, we have seen both the amount and severity of this tactic of control increase with impunity. There is an urgent need for the international community to follow through with the accountability mechanisms at their disposal, such as Security Council action and effective sanctions to stop this reign of terror."*

Based on analysis of 132 reports submitted by community field researchers living in Southeast Burma from October 2024 to March 2026, the 13-page briefing paper demonstrates that the Burma military regime uses detention as a targeted attack against civilians and that these attacks follow similar, systematic, and widespread patterns. It often follows military offensive operations or skirmishes with the Burma Army, and it often involves falsely accusing villagers of being affiliated with armed resistance groups at checkpoints. Taken as a pattern, these tactics are used as collective punishment to instil fear in villagers and expand control over ethnic territories.

On 15 July 2025, during a Burma Army military offensive in T'Naw Th'Ree (Tanintharyi) Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, Saw W--- was arbitrarily arrested, physically assaulted, and detained by the Burma Army while he was fishing on his plantation. Saw W--- reported to KHRG that a Burma Army leader told him: *"We arrested you because you kept looking at us. We got permission to kill [your] villages' villagers. I can kill you. I will not do anything to you. I tied you with rope to prevent you from running away."*

Two months later, on 16 September 2025, the Burma Army released Saw W--- but he was first forced to apologise to the Burma Army soldiers and beg for their forgiveness. On that same day, the Burma Army arrested and killed two other villagers from the same village who had left to seek medicine for their sick children. Local village security members found their decapitated corpses near the village, demonstrating the Burma military regime's willfulness to use extreme violence for intimidation and control.

The report also details the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of villagers by Burma Army soldiers at checkpoints. Soldiers are reported to stop and arrest villagers under the pretext of: 1) being without legal documents recognized by the Burma military regime; 2) being with documents issued by local authorities such as the KNU; or 3) carrying unauthorized goods and humanitarian aid such as medicine, rice, oil, and petrol. Villagers reported to KHRG that this targeting occurs most frequently in rural, ethnic areas where Burma Army soldiers are aware that villagers are unlikely to have required documents due to language and administrative barriers to obtaining them. These arrests are done extrajudicially and without due process, and villagers have reported paying bribes amounting to thousands of US dollars to secure their safety and release while their goods are rarely released with them. If unable to pay, villagers face wrongful detention, forced labour, and forced recruitment into the Burma Army.

KHRG has documented the Burma Army's use of civilians for forced labour, including forced recruitment, since its founding in 1992, and this new briefing paper demonstrates the Burma Army's continued use and reliance on this strategy to fight resistance groups in the current post-coup conflict. In most reported instances, the Burma Army first enters villages to set up a temporary base, before apprehending villagers, including children, and forcing them alongside or in front of their soldiers to act as human shields to deter resistance groups from attacking them. This practice is especially common in mixed- or KNU-controlled areas. In some cases, KHRG has received reports of the Burma Army killing or forcibly disappearing villagers after they no longer have a use for them.

After the Burma military regime began enforcing the People's Military Service Law, commonly known as the conscription law, in 2024, villagers report to KHRG the increasing use of arbitrary arrest to forcibly recruit people, including children, into their forces. Besides the significant danger this exposes villagers to, many villagers shared their grave concerns of being forced to commit human rights violations against their own people.

*"I cannot follow this law because I understand that I would not do good things for other people if I join the [Burma Army] military," said Saw C---, a 28-year-old villager from Htaw Htoo Township. "If I join them, I will be ordered to do as SAC [Burma Army] soldiers do. For example, they torture people. [...] I know that military conscription is practiced in other countries, but I thought that it is a reason to defend the nation and country. However, in our country, we will be asked to harm our people if we join the military. Therefore, many young people, including me, do not want to accept this situation. Many people were taken to be recruited as SAC soldiers. Most of them were forced to go to battlefields. Many of them died in battlefields as they lack experience in fighting. If I join the SAC, they will ask me to go and fight against our people and armed resistance groups such as the PDF. This situation is unacceptable."*

The new report reveals the long-lasting and wide-reaching impacts that arbitrary deprivations of liberty have on communities and individuals in Southeast Burma. Survivors reported living with chronic physical disabilities and mental health issues without access to treatment or rehabilitation services. This can significantly impact their ability to work. In turn, this puts their families and wider community at greater risk of food and housing insecurity while decreasing access to healthcare and education, especially when the survivor or victim was the primary income-earner of their household.

Because these human rights violations are being committed by the authority that is also supposed to be responsible for justice, KHRG has received no reports over the last 18 months of

investigations or other accountability processes by the Burma Army for arbitrary deprivations of liberty.

Saw Ah--- was reportedly forcibly disappeared by the Burma Army in August 2023 from Mu Traw District. More than two years later, he remains missing as of October 2025.

*“Nobody [no local leader] has searched for him or asked about him,” explained Saw Ai---, a religious leader from his community. “The parents, aunts, and uncles have been searching for him, but nobody could help them. One human person should have value and should be searched for when they disappear, and [we should] get to know about them, how they disappeared, whether they were arrested or killed by the Burma Army. At least, people should do all the possible things they can do to search, and it is [understandable] when it is not possible to do something for the disappeared person. But now, [there has been] no investigative action or documentation about the incident at all. The family members are searching for him and asking everywhere around here. [...] They also went to the Meh Pray Hkee [Burma Army] military camp commander, but the camp commander also said they did not arrest him, and they would release him if they had arrested him. We could not find any clue and do not get to know whether he is alive or was killed [by the Burma Army].”*

KHRG’s new briefing paper, *Tactics of Control: The Burma Army’s systematic use of deprivation of liberty and ensuing human rights violations in Southeast Burma*, is another piece of evidence demonstrating the Burma Army’s complete disregard for the rights, freedoms, and lives of the people of Burma. There is an urgent need for the international community, especially neighboring countries, to hold the Burma military regime accountable by refusing to engage them as legitimate authorities, prosecuting them via international courts and universal jurisdiction, and providing direct political and financial support to the people of Burma as they reclaim and rebuild their lives.

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