

## **The use of heavy explosive weapons in Myanmar is having horrific humanitarian consequences for civilians and must cease**

**INEW statement, 30 April 2021**

**The use of explosive weapons cause deaths, injuries and suffering for the people of Myanmar.** After 3 months of protests, violent crackdowns and escalating clashes between the military and non-state armed groups, there are few signs of a decrease in the use of air and ground-launched attacks, including the widespread use of mortars, affecting villages and other populated areas. More than 750<sup>1</sup> people have been killed during crackdowns by security forces across the country, and many more have been injured while access to emergency medical assistance and rehabilitation is lacking. This new round of violence following the 1 February 2021 military coup is exacerbating needs and vulnerabilities in a country that was already facing pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, armed violence, wide-spread humanitarian needs, as well as a healthcare system<sup>2</sup> struggling to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Explosive weapons have been used by security forces in purported attempts to disperse protestors and clear protester-erected barricades, while the military has deployed air and ground-launched explosive weapons, such as mortars, in populated areas during renewed fighting in areas where armed groups and government forces have long fought for territorial control. Following the crackdowns on 9 April in Bago, one of the bloodiest days since the coup when more than 80 people died, local outlets reported the repeated use of grenades by Myanmar security forces to disperse protests and clear barricades.<sup>3</sup> Explosive weapons, such as mortars and air-launched munitions, have been used in populated areas in Karen and Kachin states by the Myanmar military where fighting has killed and injured dozens of civilians and displaced thousands.<sup>4</sup> Explosive weapons, such as grenades, have also been used to attack government forces and buildings.<sup>5</sup>

**Explosive weapons and violence will have a long-term, damaging impact on health-care facilities.** Reports document that restrictions to movement and fear of coming under attack is preventing civilians from reaching emergency clinics or hospitals. While few private medical facilities and local

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<sup>1</sup>Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), <https://aappb.org/?p=14700>; Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, 21 April 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/db210421.doc.htm>: “As of Monday [19 April], the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said that at least 741 women, and children and men have been killed since 1 February.”

<sup>2</sup>The Lancet Global Health, “Progress towards universal health coverage in Myanmar: a national and subnational assessment”, 25 July 2018, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(18\)30318-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(18)30318-8/fulltext)

<sup>3</sup>UN News, “Myanmar heading towards a ‘full-blown conflict’, UN human rights chief warns”, 13 April 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/un-rights-chief-warns-of-full-blown-myanmar-conflict/2207632>; The Irrawaddy, “Myanmar Regime Disputes Protest-Related Death Toll Compiled by AAPP”, 20 April 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-disputes-protest-related-death-toll-compiled-aapp.html>

<sup>4</sup>Al-Jazeera, “Myanmar has never been a nation. Could it become one now?”, 10 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/10/myanmar-has-never-been-a-nation-could-it-become-one-now>; The Irrawaddy, “Fighting continues between KIA, Tatmadaw in Northern Myanmar”, 17 April 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/fighting-continues-kia-tatmadaw-northern-myanmar.html>

<sup>5</sup>The Irrawaddy, “Resistance Forces Kill At Least 18 Myanmar Soldiers in Sagaing Border Town”, 11 April 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/resistance-forces-kill-least-18-myanmar-soldiers-sagaing-border-town.html>; The Irrawaddy, “Bomb Blasts Injure at Least Three Myanmar Regime Troops in Yangon”, 17 April, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/bomb-blasts-injure-least-three-myanmar-regime-troops-yangon.html>

charities continue to be operational, testimonies describe military troops occupying hospitals,<sup>6</sup> healthcare facilities being attacked by security forces,<sup>7</sup> doctors and care providers being targeted.<sup>8</sup> Bomb blasts were reported from military hospitals in Yangon.<sup>9</sup> The supply of medicines is depleting. Those not receiving the appropriate trauma management support are more likely to suffer from the complications of injuries. This situation makes the response to COVID-19 even more difficult.

**The use of armed violence and explosive weapons has exacerbated dire pre-existing conditions<sup>10</sup> of people impacted by the conflict.** A local aid organisation reports that up to 24,000 people have been forcibly displaced in Karen State.<sup>11</sup> More than 100,000 people were already displaced in Kachin and Shan State before the escalation of violence<sup>12</sup> and now face the threat of renewed airstrikes.<sup>13</sup> Some fleeing from airstrikes have had to seek refuge, medical treatment, and humanitarian aid in neighbouring countries, including in Thailand.<sup>14</sup>

**The use of explosive weapons and violence is hampering humanitarian access in Myanmar.** As a result, people are facing difficulties accessing the services they need. Destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools<sup>15</sup> and homes is widely reported.<sup>16</sup> The situation is getting more and more dangerous for humanitarian workers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> CNN, "Myanmar military occupies hospitals and universities ahead of mass strike", 8 March 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/08/asia/myanmar-military-hospitals-mass-strike-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, 23 April 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/db210423.doc.htm>: "According to the World Health Organization (WHO), since 1 February, the date of the coup, there have been 120 recorded attacks on health-care facilities, resulting in 11 deaths and 48 injuries. This comprises three quarters of all attacks on health care worldwide in the same period. The UN team is also deeply concerned over the reported continued occupation by security forces of at least 38 health facilities across the country. Many of these sites have reported a drop in the number of people seeking, voluntarily, medical help."

<sup>8</sup> The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar junta charges and arrests striking doctors and senior medical staff", 14 April 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-charges-arrests-striking-doctors-senior-medical-staff.html>

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, "Myanmar security forces kill 15 protesters, junta leader says 'opposition aims to destroy the country'", 7 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-idUSKBN2BU0F3>

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the humanitarian needs in Myanmar and the situation of displaced persons pre-dating the coup, see: OCHA, "About OCHA Myanmar", <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar/about-ocha-myanmar>

<sup>11</sup> Free Burma Rangers, "Burma Army Wounds 11-year-old Girl, Kills Man, Wounds Five Others in Continued Attacks, With 24,000 Now Displaced in Northern Karen State", 13 April 2021, <https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2021/04/13/burma-army-wounds-11-year-old-girl-kills-man-wounds-five-others-continued-attacks-24000-now-displaced-northern-karen-state/>

<sup>12</sup> OCHA, "Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 3 | 27 January 2021", 27 January 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-3-27-january-2021>

<sup>13</sup> Myanmar Now, "Thousands of people in Shan State face 'grave threat' of junta airstrikes", 5 April 2021, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/thousands-of-people-in-shan-state-face-grave-threat-of-junta-airstrikes>

<sup>14</sup> CNN, "Thailand pushes back thousands fleeing Myanmar as death toll surpasses 500", 30 March 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/30/asia/thailand-myanmar-refugees-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> For example, in Southeastern Karen State, a high school in the Dwe Lo Township was destroyed in an airstrike, see: CNN, "Children among the dead and injured in Myanmar military airstrikes, say activists", 31 March 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/31/asia/myanmar-airstrike-children-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Karen state, the military forces launched airstrikes where a house was destroyed and a resident inside was burned to death in March 2021, see: The Irrawaddy, "Three Karen Villagers Killed in Myanmar Military Airstrike", 28 March 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/three-karen-villagers-killed-myanmar-military-airstrike.html>

<sup>17</sup> For example, Myanmar Red Cross workers have been arrested, intimidated, and injured while carrying out their duties, see: Channel News Asia, "Myanmar aid workers arrested, intimidated, hurt, Red Cross says", 1 April 2021,

**INEW calls on all parties to conflict to stop using explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas due to the impact on civilians**, including death, injury, displacement, lack of access to medical care and aid, and the destruction of essential infrastructure and vital services. The bombing and shelling in these towns and cities highlights the needs for new international standards against the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in towns and cities. This includes weapons that produce a large blast area or spread fragments widely, weapons that deliver multiple munitions that saturate a large area, such as multiple-launch rocket systems, and inaccurate weapons where the effects of the weapon extend beyond the target. When used in cities and towns where there are concentrations of civilians, the risk of harm to civilians is great.

[Over 100 countries have recognised the harm caused to civilians](#) from the use of explosive weapons in cities, towns and other populated areas. INEW is working with States, led by Ireland, to develop an international political declaration to help prevent the human suffering from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and to ensure support to victims. INEW calls upon States to include in the elaboration of a political declaration, a commitment to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas.