

The Lost Future and Forgotten Children of Myanmar

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Background

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a Southeast Asian country with a population of around 54 million. It is bordered by China on the north and northeast, India on the northwest, Bangladesh on the west, Thailand on the southeast, and Laos on the east. The total land area is 261,228 sq mi (676,578 sq km).



Image © ICEF monitor (2015)

Myanmar has been a member of the United Nations (UN) since April 19, 1948, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since July 23, 1997. Despite being the second-largest country in Southeast Asia, it is one of the poorest countries in the region. Myanmar gained independence from British colonial rule on January 4, 1948.

Since the declaration of independence, the civil war in Myanmar has held the world's longest-running record of armed conflicts, which continues to the present day (Lost Footsteps, 2023). Moreover, Myanmar was isolated from the rest of the world from 1962 to 2011 under a repressive military regime. Although political instability and armed conflicts are not uncommon in Myanmar's history, the current military rule is opposed by the majority after experiencing a democratic transition from 2011 to 2021. There was a certain level of press freedom and free speech, international trade and investment, educational and economic empowerment, law, and infrastructure development throughout the country. Therefore, people's widespread resistance against military rule continues. The fight for democracy became an act of patriotism to liberate Myanmar. Many professionals joined the civil disobedience movement (CDM) across various sectors and government ministries to demonstrate collective disapproval of the coup. The symbolic three-finger salute is also used throughout peaceful protests and CDM in Myanmar.

Current Political Development

Over two years ago, Myanmar experienced a significant setback on its track to democracy that had detrimental impacts on the country's economic and social development. On February 1, 2021, the military staged a coup d'état, overthrew the democratically elected civilian government, and detained numerous political leaders, including State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint.

Following this, people are forced to live under military despotism with continuous armed violence, enforced disappearances, displacement, torture, arbitrary arrests, and sexual violence. These violations and crimes are not limited to adults but also involve children in many reported cases. The UN special rapporteur's report (2022) shows that in the 16 months of military rule since the coup, at least 142 children in Myanmar were killed, over 250,000 children have been displaced by the military junta's attacks on civilian infrastructure, and over 1,400 children are detained. The junta forces also use human shields in fighting, and at least 61 children, including some three-year-old children, are held hostage, and 142 children were reportedly tortured.

Moreover, air and land attacks by the military junta's forces on schools, religious buildings, and residential areas had also resulted in children's deaths. These attacks infringe on human rights, including the right to life, the right to self-determination, and the right to education. Additionally, damaging educational facilities in conflict imposes severe and long-lasting consequences that are difficult to reverse. The disruption of learning leads to a loss of human capital that has a generational impact, undermines social cohesion, causes cultural and historical loss, and impedes post-conflict recovery.

The Disruption of Learning

Most children in Myanmar are having difficulty accessing education. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar's public education sector has been disrupted. The 2021 military coup exacerbated this to an extreme level with air and land attacks on schools, monastic educational facilities, and residential areas. Reports indicate atrocities are common everywhere. The civilians are targeted by the military junta. Schools are no longer a safe learning space for children in Myanmar, and parents fear sending their kids to school due to frequent attacks by the military (Pann, 2023).

Children Killed in Armed Conflict

According to Save the Children, there is an escalation in armed violence in schools—around 190 in 2021 compared to 10 in 2020 (Reuters, 2022). Although the UN has been condemning the actions of the military junta, the deliberate use of airstrikes and indiscriminate attacks have increased since February 2021. In June 2022, the U.N. Child Rights Committee documented 260 attacks on schools and educational personnel since the current coup (Peck, 2022). Most often, children are the victims of these attacks (Head & Young, 2023). The following are a few examples of the many atrocities committed by the military junta with impunity.

In September 2022, the military helicopters opened fire on a school in a Buddhist monastery with students from kindergarten to young teenagers in Let Yet Kone village, Sagaing Region, in northern Myanmar (BBC, 2022). UNICEF reported at least 11 deaths among schoolchildren and 15 more missing in this case.

Teachers who joined CDM and are opposing the junta are facing arrest, torture, and even death. On October 16, 2022, the military burned down a school in Taung Myint Village in Magway Region in Central Myanmar. This time, the troops left a gruesome reminder to intimidate civilians resisting military rule. A decapitated body and severed head of a high school teacher, along with the symbolic severed three fingers from his right hand, were left at the burned-down school.

In early 2023 alone, DW reported at least 25 airstrikes by the military, excluding the following Pazi Gyi attack, with the civilian death toll rising to 47, including three children (Walker, 2023). On April 11, 2023, the junta deployed the deadliest airstrike since the coup to a community event in Pazi Gyi village in Sagaing Region, killing at least 171 civilians, including 40 children and 24 pregnant women (Kyaw & Ratcliffe, 2023).

"How many Myanmar children need to die before world leaders take strong, coordinated action to stop this carnage?" **UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews**

Long-term Impact

Children have specific rights under international law, especially as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including the right to life, education, and protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse. Targeting children in armed conflicts not only inflicts immediate harm but also has dire consequences in the future. Impaired physical and mental development, disrupted education, and loss of family and community support can hinder their potential to contribute to society but instead perpetuate the cycles of violence and instability.



Image © Kayah State Teachers' Union. Displaced children in Kayah State attend a makeshift school.

Moreover, education promotes critical thinking and freedom of thought. It is a crucial factor in developing character and human capital and fostering economic growth. With educational facilities destroyed and children's lives under attack, the inevitable result would be the loss of human capital, which would have long-term implications. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and limited social and economic mobility, which can impact communities and undermine social cohesion for years to come. It can deepen divisions, create grievances, and lead to long-standing conflicts as generations grow up without the opportunity to learn about tolerance, empathy, and understanding. In these atrocities, irreplaceable cultural and historical identities could also be erased, jeopardizing an important part of a nation.

Additionally, rebuilding educational facilities in a post-conflict environment is often a challenging and time-consuming process that requires substantial financial resources, infrastructure reconstruction, and investment in human resources to restore educational systems. Delayed recovery in the education sector further hampers overall societal recovery and stability.

In summary, children should not be targeted in armed conflicts due to their vulnerability, their rights to protection, and the importance of creating a peaceful future. The protection of children is not only necessary under the international legal framework but also a moral obligation for maintaining a just and humane world. Education and educational facilities also should not be politicized. The protection of educational facilities during conflicts is essential to eliminating long-term irreversible consequences. The right to education and the right to life are fundamental human rights and principles of sustainable development and peacebuilding. Children in Myanmar should not be reduced to collateral damage, and the international community should take action before the future of Myanmar is lost forever. The military junta is committing these crimes against humanity with impunity. It seems the world has turned a blind eye to the suffering of the children in Myanmar, and they are forced to struggle in an uncertain future.

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