

Indigenous peoples under new attacks in Myanmar: An open letter and call to action

5 April 2021 – Malaysia/Switzerland

The ICCA Consortium is a global association that recognises and supports Indigenous peoples and local communities as the guardians and caretakers of the diversity of life on Earth.¹ We are deeply concerned by the illegal seizure of power by the Myanmar military on 1 February 2021, which installed a junta after detaining duly elected civilian leaders. Since that date, the junta has violated the rights of the citizens of Myanmar, including Indigenous peoples' right to live in freedom, peace and security and to not be subjected to any act of genocide or violence (UNDRIP, Article 7). We condemn all violence and use of force and tactics of oppression and suppression against innocent civilians. We stand in solidarity and support with our Indigenous sisters and brothers and all Indigenous and ethnic groups in and from Myanmar whose rights are being violated by the Myanmar military junta.

We have received reports that on 27 March 2021, the Myanmar military began launching a series of deadly airstrikes on Day Bu Noh and surrounding villages in the heart of the Salween Peace Park in the Mutraw (Hpapun) District in Karen State, as well as in other Karen areas outside of the Peace Park in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District. As of 1 April 2021, the military has carried out several aerial bomb attacks, killing at least 19 people, injuring at least 27 more and forcing several thousands to flee their villages in seek of refuge and shelter. Around 3,000 Karen refugees have attempted to flee across the border into Thailand, with some being turned back by the Thai government.



Figure 1 (L-R): People fleeing into the forest to escape airstrikes in the Salween Peace Park, Mutraw district; villagers gathered along the banks of the Salween River after being forced back by the Thai Army. Via Salween Peace Park.

¹ Registered in Switzerland as a non-profit association, the ICCA Consortium (www.iccaconsortium.org) promotes appropriate recognition of and support for territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (abbreviated as "ICCAs" or "territories of life"). At the time of publication, it is comprised of 170 Member organisations (Indigenous peoples', community-based and civil society organisations) and 415 Honorary members (individuals) from 80 countries around the world. Within Southeast Asia, the membership includes 22 Members from six countries and 44 Honorary members.

At least 20,000 villagers remain internally displaced, scared for their lives and hiding in the mountains and forests of the Salween Peace Park. The attacks are known to have destroyed and damaged many homes and buildings such as schools and a hospital. The extent of the damage to agricultural areas, cultural sites and the local environment is currently unknown.

These horrific attacks on innocent civilians within the Salween Peace Park are an assault on Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and peace. The Salween Peace Park is a powerful, award-winning² Indigenous initiative that was declared by nearly 350 Indigenous Karen villages in December 2018 to bring peace and harmony after 70 years of armed conflict and to provide a safe haven for Indigenous peoples to sustain their culture and nature. However, the cloud of military occupation continued to hang over the area.

Attacks on Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, especially in remote rural areas, often go unreported and unnoticed by global media, contributing to a lack of accountability and culture of impunity for human rights and environmental violations. The attacks since 27 March came after four months of intensifying Burmese artillery assaults on Karen villages in the Mutraw and Kler Lwee Htoo Districts. When the military staged the coup d'état on 1 February, their artillery attacks had already forced more than 5,000 Karen villagers to flee.

"For Indigenous Karen people who bear the trauma of decades of violent conflict and human rights abuses, the current attacks represent their worst nightmares. Since 2016, they have been developing the Salween Peace Park. They dreamt and believed there would be peace in the future, and they were busy doing their part to build that future. Now the Burmese military is bombing the Salween Peace Park... More than anything, the people of Mutraw long to live on their own ancestral lands in peaceful co-existence with other ethnic peoples and communities in Burma. The peace park offers a way to build true peace, reconciliation, and a shared future." – Salween Peace Park statement, 2 April 2021³



Figure 2: Salween Peace Park in Karen State, Myanmar, before the military coup. Saw Doo Plout Soe / KESAN

² The 5,400-km² Salween Peace Park received the prestigious Equator Prize in June 2020 from the UNDP Equator Initiative in recognition of outstanding community efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. See: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/11th-equator-prize-.html>. Saw Paul Sein Twa (chairperson of the Peace Park's governing committee) also received the Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia in 2020. See: <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/paul-sein-twa/>.

³ Salween Peace Park, 2 April 2021. "Salween Peace Park Under Attack! Burmese military violence undermines Indigenous Karen conservation for peace". Available online at: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/salween-peace-park-under-attack-report.pdf>.

Across the country, citizens of Myanmar have responded to the 1 February coup with unprecedented demonstrations and mobilisation. Thousands of people in the Salween Peace Park also held demonstrations expressing solidarity with anti-coup protestors while reiterating Karen aspirations for equality, self-determination, peace and communal harmony. The junta has responded with brutal force, limiting citizens' access to the internet, cracking down on peaceful protests, arresting activists, journalists, civil servants and students, and torturing and killing several detained people. The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide said that since the junta seized power, thousands have been arbitrarily arrested, with many subjected to enforced disappearance. Nearly 550 people have been killed since the coup began. On 27 March 2021 alone, security forces killed at least 107 people, including seven children, with hundreds more injured and detained.⁴ On 31 March 2021, the UN Special Envoy for Myanmar told a closed session of the UN Security Council that "the urgency for a solution to this crisis could not be clearer" as the most serious crimes and violations of international law appear to be "happening in plain sight" and warned of "the possibility of civil war at an unprecedented scale".⁵

Given the gravity of the current situation, including the deadly airstrikes on Indigenous peoples in the Karen State and within the Salween Peace Park starting on 27 March 2021, we call on the following:

1. The Tatmadaw (junta) to immediately stop killing, attacking, harassing, arresting, subjecting to enforced disappearance, and injuring Indigenous peoples who are residing peacefully in their traditional lands and territories and human rights defenders, journalists and peaceful protesters who are engaged in peaceful protest and civil disobedience. All military officials and soldiers responsible for these violations of human rights must be held accountable.
2. The governments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to review any tacit support they are giving the military regime that seized power in Myanmar, issue targeted sanctions against the regime, investigate any national companies that currently have ties to Myanmar's military regime and restrict these commercial ties until the legitimate, democratically elected government has returned to power.
3. The Thai Government to allow those fleeing the recent air attacks in northern Karen State to take shelter on the Thai side of the border and allow access for humanitarian aid to be delivered to these persons.
4. The UN Security Council, the European Union and the governments of powerful member states to impose a global arms embargo against the military regime so that the regime loses access to weapons and equipment they have been using to violate the rights of Indigenous peoples and other citizens.

⁴ Joint Statement by Alice Wairimu Nderitu, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, and Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, on the situation in Myanmar (28 March 2021): "Myanmar: Top UN officials condemn "systematic" attacks on peaceful protesters, and flag international responsibility to protect the people from atrocity crimes". Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26954>.

⁵ UN News (31 March 2021): "Myanmar: 'Significant action' needed by Security Council to prevent 'bloodbath'". Available online at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088822>.

5. The international community to: deny recognition of the military regime; support Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities of Myanmar, including those seeking refuge and urgent humanitarian response, and the citizens of Myanmar more broadly who are peacefully protesting the coup by the Tatmadaw (junta) and seeking the return of democracy and peace; and take all steps to bring to justice and hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations under international law.
6. Individual citizens concerned by this situation to extend your solidarity and support to the Indigenous Karen of the Salween Peace Park through social media⁶ and by writing to defending@iccaconsortium.org.

Only immediate concerted action can address the current situation in Myanmar, and prevent more human rights violations. We urge all parties to act without further delay.

⁶ Salween Peace Park on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Salween-Peace-Park-105819057562017/> and on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/salweenp>.