



**Humanitarian
Aid Relief Trust**

BURMA CRISIS

**HART scales up humanitarian response
in Shan state amid escalating conflict**



Many ethnic Shan people suffer human rights violations and forced displacement. Thai-Burma border, 2024.

Visit Report March 2024

By Beth Stephens, Programmes Manager at HART

Summary

Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) is scaling up its humanitarian response in Shan state, eastern Burma, where the military has intensified its campaign of terror against the country's pro-democracy movement.¹

More than 100,000 people have been forced to flee their homes since October 2023.² Displaced families have limited-or-no access to healthcare and education. They suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition. Protection risks include aerial bombardment, arbitrary detention, forced recruitment and landmines.

“Innocent civilians are caught in the crossfire. As the Burmese military ramps up its indiscriminate attacks, there is now an urgent need to tackle a deteriorating humanitarian catastrophe.”

Sam Mason, CEO of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust

This report of a brief visit is unable to address all the complexities of the conflict. It does, however, seek to reflect the priorities of all those with whom we met, including witnesses to atrocities, emergency first responders and local human rights activists.³



Women and young children are among the rising number of Shan refugees. Thai-Burma border, 2024.⁴

¹ HART's local partners use the names 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' interchangeably. For the sake of consistency – and on the basis that the military had no mandate to change the name of the country – we use 'Burma' throughout this report.

² An estimated 600,000 civilians in Burma (including 100,000 people in Shan state alone) have been forcibly displaced since October 2023.

³ HART is sensitive to the security concerns of our partners and ensures anonymity where it is needed.

⁴ The asylum status of Shan refugees is rarely recognised by the Thai Government or authorities. Displaced families are often refused assistance and can face forced repatriation to Burma.

Background

A coalition of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) launched a successful offensive against the military in October 2023. The offensive, known as Operation 1027, prompted the military's first public acknowledgement of the challenge it is facing.

Operation 1027 represented a glimmer of hope to the wider pro-democracy movement. However, it provoked a brutal response from local military commanders, who doubled down on their efforts to suppress the opposition. The escalation of conflict in Shan state represents the heaviest clashes in Burma since the military coup in 2021.

Risks facing civilians

- Killings, disappearances, systematic rape, arbitrary detention, and instances of torture continue to occur in Shan state – as elsewhere in Burma. Perpetrators are rarely, if ever, brought to justice.
- Military attacks and opposition counter-offensives are expected to escalate further in Spring-Summer 2024.
- The military has activated a decade-old conscription law to contain Operation 1027, enlisting civilian men and women to compulsory military service.⁵
- Military forces deploy scorched earth tactics and stand accused of committing war crimes. Their cache of weapons include automatic weapons, drones, cluster munitions, landmines, and incendiary chemicals used to burn houses.⁶
- We heard accounts of the deliberate targeting of Shan villages by military forces. Indiscriminate aerial bombardment near Chinese-owned gas and oil pipelines have killed dozens of civilians and put hundreds more lives at risk.
- We heard reports of human trafficking in Chinese-mafia-run fraud compounds in northern Shan state, where citizens from Burma, China and other countries are forced to engage in online scamming activities.⁷
- Military forces target hospitals and medical facilities in non-state-controlled areas. They aim to prevent EAOs and ethnic Shan civilians from accessing medicines and other survival necessities.⁸
- Military forces strategically restrict humanitarian access. They forbid the provision of relief to areas not controlled by the military.

⁵ It is not yet known whether this will result in mass conscription, mass disobedience, or a mixture of both.

⁶ The military has reportedly invested \$1 billion in imported weaponry since the coup d'état in 2021.

⁷ Chinese mafia operate in areas under the control of Burmese military-allied EAOs.

⁸ Targeted attacks on hospitals, doctors and nurses have led to a public health crisis in Burma, especially in remote border regions.

- Some EAOs abduct and forcibly recruit civilians. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), for example, is accused of unlawfully recruiting young men and women in an effort to bolster Operation 1027 offensives.
- We are told by the Director of Education for Shan state that only 80 out of 300 schools remain open. Classrooms are abandoned due to insecurity.

HART's response

HART has worked in Burma since 2006. We partner with indigenous cross-border networks to provide food, sanitation, health services, education and other forms of humanitarian assistance. In the first quarter of 2024, HART committed a further £118,000 to support conflict-affected people in Shan state who are beyond reach of major aid organisations.⁹

“It seems the rest of the world has forgotten us. There are no laws to protect civilians – especially women and children. We have not been able to rely on the central government, the military or armed groups, but we can rely on HART. It is crucial for our survival and the survival of those we support.”

HART Partner in Shan state

Our local partners treat traumatic injuries sustained in attacks (such as gunshot wounds and burns), provide emergency obstetric care and birth delivery services, combat malnutrition and disease among displaced populations, and deliver trauma counselling to those recovering from conflict. They provide education and legal assistance to communities inside Shan state and to Shan families displaced along the Thai-Burma border.



HART's local partners deliver emergency healthcare in conflict settings and displacement camps.

⁹ We raise funds for our local partners through fundraising campaigns, grant aid awards and charitable donations.

HART advocates for local partners on the basis of sustained engagement and first-hand experience. We call on the UK Government, US Government, EU member states and UN's Special Envoy and Resident Coordinator to strengthen their efforts on Burma. We urge them to partner with indigenous networks – either ad hoc groups or established ethnic community-based organisations – to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance, immediately and to scale. Urgent action must be taken to prevent further catastrophe.

“HART is not ‘just another aid organisation.’ Our local partners reach people who are trapped behind closed borders, beyond the reach of major aid organisations and ignored by the international media.”

Baroness Cox, Founder of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust

Recommendations

We call on international powers to:

- **Take bold steps to address impunity.** Bring the military regime before the International Criminal Court.
- **Impose further targeted sanctions,** not only against individuals in the military, but against lucrative military-owned enterprises. As airstrikes continue, ensure the absolute suspension of shipments of aviation fuel.
- **Ensure equitable, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance.** Identify indigenous networks – either ad hoc groups or established ethnic community-based organisations – and partner with them to increase cross-border aid. It will save thousands of lives.
- **Scale up resources and protection measures for health workers** who risk their lives to treat victims of conflict and other casualties, especially in areas where health services have collapsed.
- When issuing press statements or hosting meetings, **avoid words or actions that could be construed as legitimising the military’s right to rule.**
- **Do not let Burma slip from your agenda.** Play your part in drawing international attention to the plight and resilience of the Shan, Rohingya, Karen, Chin and other minority groups.

Operation 1027

A coalition of three Ethnic Armed Organisations – the Arakan Army (AA), Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) – has given momentum to the wider opposition movement in Burma. It represents the greatest challenge to military rule so far.¹⁰

¹⁰ Spring Revolution pro-democracy protests – the largest demonstrations in Burma since 2007 – were brutally suppressed by security forces following the military coup d’état on 1 February 2021.

The coalition launched their joint offensive (known as Operation 1027) against military forces in northern Shan state on 27 October 2023. They have since overrun several hundred military bases and outposts near the Burma-China border, inspiring coordinated offensives to overturn military rule elsewhere.¹¹

Burma's resistance movement is at a critical juncture; many geo-political analysts predict that Operation 1027 marks the 'beginning of the end' of the regime's stranglehold on power. However, the offensive incited a brutal response from local military commanders. The scale and nature of their attacks have escalated fear and uncertainty among the local population in Shan state, especially in the north.



The violence has resulted in massive levels of displacement and disruption to education. Shan state, 2024.

Mass conscription and forced recruitment

Military operations and opposition counter-offensives are expected to escalate further in Spring-Summer 2024. The military regime plans to enact the 2010 People's Military Service Law in mid-April, enlisting civilian men (18-35 years) and women (18-27 years) into compulsory military service. The plans have sparked widespread panic among Burma's youth who "fear they may be forced to carry out atrocities or be used as human shields" by military forces, and are attempting to flee the country.¹²

These concerns were emphasised to HART during meetings with leading figures in the Shan state education system. We are told that both the military and opposition forcibly recruit civilians into combat; some EAOs impose quotas on families to supply a recruit, e.g. the

¹¹ Offensives have also taken place across Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, and Karenni states. The People's Defence Force (the National Unity Government army) has mobilised in support of anti-coup offensives.

¹² *Myanmar conscription law unleashes wave of fear*, The Guardian, 28 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/28/myanmar-military-conscription-law-details>.

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) abducts young men into combat and young women for forced labour (as cooks or porters).¹³ They violate human rights by abducting civilians and depriving them of their liberty. The protection risk has increased in our areas of operation since October 2023; HART met several children and young adults who fled to the Thai-Burma border to escape forced recruitment and other forms of human trafficking.

“The threat of forced recruitment is worse than ever. We worry that all our youth could be lost if they are forced into combat. The Burmese military will do anything to keep itself in power.”

HART Partner in Shan state

Ethnic minorities targeted in military operations

The military regime enforces an ultra-nationalist agenda that ‘to be Burmese is to be Burman and Buddhist’. This impacts ethnic minorities (non-Burmans) and religious minorities (non-Buddhists) in particular, who have suffered decades of repressive military rule.

A significant number of population displacements and casualties (post-Operation 1027) have occurred in Burma’s ethnic borderlands. More than 660,000 people are estimated to be newly displaced in Shan and Rakhine states, and the southeast and the northwest regions. At least 378 civilians have been killed and 505 injured.¹⁴ HART is told by local human rights activists that these figures may be an undercount due to communication blackouts in conflict areas.

The escalation of conflict in Shan state represents the heaviest clashes in Burma since the 2021 coup. Military forces deploy scorched earth tactics and stand accused of committing war crimes in response to Operation 1027. They take control of natural resources, lay landmines to restrict movement, and use rape as a weapon of war. Military offensives have compounded internal displacement and record levels of humanitarian need.

“The failure to hold perpetrators of atrocities to account emboldens the military to wield further violence and continue their killings with impunity. Systematic rape, arbitrary detention, arson, and instances of torture continue to escalate in Shan state, as elsewhere in Burma. HART calls on international powers to demand an end to military impunity.”

Sam Mason, CEO of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust

The cache of weapons employed by the military include automatic weapons, drones, cluster munitions, landmines, and incendiary chemicals used to burn houses. Internationally-banned cluster bombs are ‘inherently indiscriminate’; they disperse extensively and without singular targets. Meanwhile, unexploded submunitions act as landmines. The use of cluster bombs poses immediate and long-term threats to ethnic Shan civilians and the areas they encompass.

¹³ Myanmar: Armed Group Abuses in Shan State, Human Rights Watch, 21 December 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/21/myanmar-armed-group-abuses-shan-state>

¹⁴ Myanmar Country Office Humanitarian Situation, UNICEF, December 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media/9741/file/UNICEF%20Myanmar%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2010.pdf>

HART endorses calls for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate war crimes committed by the military in response to Operation 1027. Ordnance scrap – which has been identified as “consistent” with previous cluster munitions used by the military – was recovered on 1 December 2023, while satellite imaging has exposed attacks on Shan civilian infrastructure, including a hospital compound in the region of Pauktaw.¹⁵

On 7 March 2024, the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) reported to HART that cluster munitions have since been deployed by the military to areas close to their bases. We are told that lifelines of communication have been severed to many areas. Aerial bombs and artillery shells continue to land in close proximity to Chinese-owned oil and gas pipelines, killing dozens of civilians and putting hundreds of lives at risk.



6,000 civilians fled devastating attacks in Mong Mit, northern Shan state, 2024 (Photo credit: SHRF).¹⁶

“The military does not care about the devastation it causes. It does not have any regard for human life. Pipeline explosions are capable of causing catastrophic damage to civilian homes, livelihoods and infrastructure.”

Sai Hor Hseng, Shan Human Rights Foundation

Systematic violence against ethnic minorities precedes the recent escalation and 2021 military coup. Burma’s ethnic minorities have suffered years of oppression at the hands of the military regime. Its campaign of genocide against the Rohingya in Rakhine state (2016-present), which

¹⁵ Myanmar: Military should be investigated for war crimes in response to ‘Operation 1027’, Amnesty International, 21 December 2023, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/myanmar-military-should-be-investigated-for-war-crimes-in-response-to-operation-1027/

¹⁶ Shan Human Rights Foundation, 27 February 2024, [Over 6,000 flee SAC airstrikes, shelling, arson, extrajudicial killing and gang-rape in Mong Mit, northern Shan State - Shan Human Rights Foundation \(SHRF\)](https://www.shrf.org/over-6000-flee-sac-airstrikes-shelling-arson-extra-judicial-killing-and-gang-rape-in-mong-mit-northern-shan-state)

resulted in more than 10,000 deaths and a mass exodus to Bangladesh, remains unanswered before the ICC.¹⁷

Deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid

The military employs a ‘four-cuts’ doctrine to deprive EAOs of funding, food, intelligence and recruits. The strategy relies upon indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery shelling, the razing of homes and key infrastructure, and denial of humanitarian aid. It limits the possibility for armed coordination in non-state-controlled areas, as well as the chances of survival for civilians caught in the crossfire.

Despite successive military defeats under Operation 1027, the junta maintains control of key transport routes in Shan state. Armed troops enforce roadblocks to disrupt the flow of aid and essential supplies to non-state-controlled areas. These obstructions pose multiple challenges to UN and international humanitarian agencies, which are either deterred from operating within the region or are forced to suspend their life-saving operations. Their inability to overcome these challenges has resulted in the people’s loss of faith in the United Nations, according to Sir Charles Petrie, former UN assistant secretary general.¹⁸



HART’s partners are trained to deliver life-saving maternal and neo-natal health interventions.

Civilians are increasingly dependent on indigenous networks for emergency relief. This is especially true in the border regions; remote jungles and forests where access to basic services is severely restricted. Community Health Workers (CHWs) operating in these settings are key

¹⁷ Gambia filed a case before the International Court of Justice that Myanmar military’s acts against the Rohingya violated the Genocide Convention, in 2019.

¹⁸ *The UN Has Failed the People of Myanmar, Says Former Country Head*, The Irrawaddy, 1 March 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/the-un-has-failed-the-people-of-myanmar-says-former-country-head.html>

actors in any humanitarian response. They speak local dialects and are frequently relied upon to respond to new population displacements and aftershocks of violence.

HART's partner network spans several locations across Shan state and the Thai-Burma border. Since October 2023, field staff have observed increased incidents of miscarriages and stillborn births (as many women give birth in unsafe conditions or displacement camps), and rape cases which are not referred to nurses for treatment.¹⁹ Infants cannot access life-saving vaccinations against disease. Children suffer from injury or malnutrition. Meanwhile, the price of medicine has skyrocketed due to the obstruction of aid.

Few international NGOs are able to reach conflict-affected communities, especially in high risk or hard-to-access areas. When applying for licences to conduct operations, organisations like HART are faced with many layers of bureaucracy and a labyrinth of legal injunctions. The registration process has become so complicated, and the penalties for inadvertently violating the rules so severe, that many aid agencies are reluctant even to try.²⁰



The obstruction of aid drives many Shan families across international borders. Thai-Burma border, 2024.

Targeted military attacks on hospitals, doctors and nurses have engineered a public health crisis.²¹ Reports from our in-country partners suggest that medical professionals and humanitarian actors face frequent intimidation, and in some cases detention and arrest. HART urges international powers to scale up resources and protection measures for health workers

¹⁹ HART's partners have reported a rise in incidents of rape and sexual violence committed by military actors and EAOs. Due to fear of reprisal, many rape cases go unreported, and there is little recourse or redress for survivors.

²⁰ HART overcomes this obstacle by administering cross-border assistance via indigenous partners, who are perfectly placed to reach people with life-saving humanitarian interventions.

²¹ *A Tragic Milestone: More Than 1,000 Attacks on Health Care in Myanmar Since the February 2021 Military Coup*, Relief Web, 15 November 2023, [A Tragic Milestone: More Than 1,000 Attacks on Health Care in Myanmar Since the February 2021 Military Coup - Myanmar | ReliefWeb](#)

risking their lives to treat victims of conflict and other casualties, especially in areas where health service delivery is fragmented or ceases to exist.

HART's partner-led humanitarian interventions

In the first quarter of 2024, HART committed a further £118,000 to scale up our humanitarian response in Shan state.

- 72 percent of funds will strengthen frontline medical care and health services.
- 28 percent of funds will support displaced children on the Thai-Burma border.

A grant from The Aall Foundation, coupled with funds raised in a public campaign – supported by the Coles-Medlock Foundation – ensures the continuation of our partner-led health worker training programmes and services during 2024-25.²²

“We are often the only healthcare providers in our catchment areas. Our communities rely on us to save lives and treat the sick. There is so rarely any other help.”

HART Partner in Shan state

Health worker training and services

- i. First responders are trained to address the direct health effects of armed conflict. Training modules include essential first aid as well as triage for emergency cases, including CPR; airway management (use of ventilator); diabetic shock; seizures and strokes; and the management of mass casualty situations.
- ii. Refresher training programmes enable health workers to identify and resolve any gaps in healthcare provision and services. The courses focus on reproductive health, family planning, maternal and child health, neonatal services, HIV support, and nutrition and hygiene. Doctors in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and Taunggyi (Shan state) assess the coping capacities of health workers.
- iii. Community Health Workers who specialise in obstetric and midwifery services conduct vital health checks on pregnant women and new mothers, intervening where appropriate and informing women when they need to seek further medical help. They also provide preventative services where needed, such as contraceptive implants. Field staff travel and assist in these sessions, as well as in the outreach to new communities.
- iv. Our partners battle malnutrition in infants, a life-threatening issue that has deteriorated under military repression. Health workers monitor children under five years of age for malnutrition, to identify those in need of bespoke care. Parents receive nutritional food supplies and medicines to enable their children to regain their health during critical stages of development.

²² We remain grateful to The Aall Foundation, the Coles-Medlock Foundation, Project Longhurst, and HART's Big Give Christmas Challenge supporters for their generous support.

- v. Community Health Workers deliver life-saving support to survivors of sexual or conflict-related violence, and provide counselling to patients experiencing chronic depression or other mental illness. Health workers are frequently exposed to the impacts of conflict, which can place pressure on their own health and wellbeing. This training equips them to identify and cope with symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Education

Children bear some of the worst consequences of the conflict. They suffer mental health and psychosocial impacts from witnessing or experiencing violence, as well as new or prolonged displacement.²³ HART is supporting local educators to provide food security, relief and rehabilitation services, and continuity of education to the children under their care.

- i. Local partners in Shan state assist students to meet their daily nutritional needs. They provide education, a greater sense of security, and survival training (in case students are forced to flee into nearby jungles and forests). Our partners promote lifelong learning opportunities for children who receive little-or-no assistance from local authorities or any international agency. Teachers are equipped with skills and tools to ensure their students have access to quality and inclusive education.
- ii. Children displaced along the Thai-Burma border are taught the national language to help them assimilate into host communities. This increases their chances of pursuing a formal education in the Thai school system. Most children live on orange groves; they cohabit a single room with other families and are exposed to harmful chemical pesticides on an almost-daily basis. Our partners provide legal advice to families and other forms of assistance, such as replacing or washing clothes.



Local partners deliver neo-natal care to infants and vital support to families. Thai-Burma border, 2024.

²³ *Myanmar Country Office Humanitarian Situation*, UNICEF, 10 January 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media/9741/file/UNICEF%20Myanmar%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2010.pdf>

Advocacy in action

HART is committed to shining a light on the humanitarian and security crises in Burma, particularly among minority groups in the border regions. They are targeted by the military yet denied access to humanitarian assistance. In many cases, their urgent needs are not met by international aid organisations.

“We feel like Myanmar is forgotten or ignored among the conflicts of the world.”

Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the UN, speaking to HART in November 2023

Without meaningful humanitarian assistance, vulnerable communities are left to fend for themselves. We therefore call on policymakers to use their diplomatic influence to encourage border countries, such as Thailand and India, to allow cross-border aid and healthcare along displacement and cross-border routes. There is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of indigenous networks – either ad hoc groups or established ethnic community-based organisations – who are perfectly placed to locate entry points along the border for the informal delivery of aid.

We commend the imposition of restrictive measures against military officials and army-linked firms. Sanctions are an effective means of limiting access to fuel and finance, which curtails the military’s ability to perpetrate atrocities. However, we agree with Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, who has emphasised to HART that “more action is needed”. We support further targeted sanctions, not only against individuals in the military, but against lucrative military-owned enterprises. As airstrikes continue in Shan state, we call for the absolute suspension of shipments of aviation fuel.

Conclusion

HART’s local partners provide a lifeline to their communities. We remain committed to strengthening their capacity and championing their solutions for sustainable change. We will continue to provide aid and advocacy for persecuted ethnic minorities, as well as for Burmese refugees who have been forced across international borders.

We remain gravely concerned for the civilian population of Burma as violence is expected to escalate to an alarming level in Spring-Summer 2024. We wish to emphasise our deep gratitude to all those who enabled HART to reinforce our partners’ life-saving interventions in response to the scale of the crisis, including **The Aall Foundation**, the **Coles-Medlock Foundation**, **Project Longhurst**, and generous **HART supporters** via the 2023-24 Big Give campaign.

HART Visit Reports are made widely available to the UK Government and Parliament, national and international media, other governmental and non-governmental organisations and a broad cross-section of the public, particularly through faith groups, schools and universities. Please contact beth.stephens@hart-uk.org for enquiries.