



**A CRISIS ON THE THAI-BURMA BORDER:
THE SHAN WOMEN'S ACTION NETWORK
ON THE FRONTLINES OF EMERGENCY RELIEF**

SEPTEMBER 2022



Humanitarian
Aid Relief Trust

“If Burma received even a fraction of the international support that is given to other countries suffering from war, the immediate humanitarian crisis could be brought to an end.”

HART colleague based in Thailand

“When women and children arrive at IDP camps, they have to pretend that they are coming for work, not as refugees. This means that they cannot bring any belongings with them, otherwise it will show that they are fleeing Burma.”

Colleague at the Shan Women’s Action Network

“In our homeland of Burma, we don’t have access to education or freedom of movement. Our mother tongue is Shan, but we are not allowed to speak it at school or in public life. We are forced to learn, read, and write in Burmese. This is why there are not many ethnic minorities in the government sector or other influential positions.”

Shan refugee in Thailand

“Shan state is not like other parts of Burma; the violence was already happening here. Every school along the border has been forced to make sacrifices to help children displaced by conflict. We cannot absorb all of them.”

HART partner based in Thailand

“Migrant children and I share a similar life journey. I thought that the children might be hungry to learn and study, just like me. This was why I wanted to fulfil their wishes. I did not have perfect skills. Yet I still believed it was my responsibility to help.”

Colleague at the Shan Women’s Action Network

“My friends have been recruited by the Burmese military and different Shan armies. They are being forced to fight each other. If the situation ever improves, I want to return to Shan state to fight for education.”

Novice monk seeking refuge at a monastery in Thailand

“The Shan Women’s Action Network encouraged the participation of women in the 2020 elections and some of our alumni won seats. After the military coup, they had to escape. There has been a step back for women’s rights and it is very difficult to imagine real democracy. We are so far from it now; before, we could see a light – independence, freedom, and the opportunity to practice our basic rights.”

Colleague at the Shan Women’s Action Network

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PART 1: SUMMARY

Burma's return to military rule by coup has seen more than 800,000 people displaced by widespread human rights abuses, a deadly 'cut-off policy' used against civilians, and one of the world's most overlooked humanitarian crises spill out over international borders. Civil society and local relief networks are battling against the interlocking challenges of conflict, Covid-19, and military restrictions on aid. Among them are Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)'s partners at the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). SWAN operate on the frontlines of emergency relief in Shan state, along the Thai-Burma border, and in Thailand, where thousands of people are seeking refuge from military campaigns and a new escalation in armed conflicts. Through lifesaving aid, education, healthcare provision, and legal support for women and children in emergency situations, SWAN's programmes offer a lifeline to minority communities in one of the most isolated regions of Burma.

On 1 February 2021, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) and our in-country partners at the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) watched as Burmese military forces seized power from the National League for Democracy¹ and raised fears of another conflict in Burma. Subsequent peaceful protests were met with brutality from security forces and an internet blackout to hide military atrocities from the world's media. And in efforts to suppress the growing pro-democracy movement, the military adopted a cut-off policy that obstructed essential supplies and lifesaving aid from reaching civilians across the country. HART joined other UK-based aid organisations in calling for the transfer of immediate humanitarian assistance, including unimpeded cross-border access to internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Burma's ethnic states. Twenty months on, the international community has failed to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Burma: the inaction of governments around the world has left local actors abandoned, forcing them to respond without the necessary support, resources and security needed to manage a crisis of this scale.

Whilst Burma experiences another violent episode in its decades-long struggle for freedom, ethnic minorities are suffering doubly due to the systemic oppression they face. SWAN is one of few cross-border networks offering a lifeline to Shan IDPs and refugees; in north-eastern Burma, the fallout from the military coup has placed even greater pressure on their emergency relief programmes and has forced operations to adapt to new security risks. HART therefore urges the UK Government and UN agencies to take responsibility for providing immediate humanitarian assistance to north-eastern Burma and other ethnic states undergoing military offensives. This includes cross-border aid, as well as ensuring the right to protection for ethnic groups and NGOs working with them.

HART supports local partners in Shan, Chin, and Karen states, who believe that Burma's formal name, Myanmar, which was introduced by the military government in 1989,² represents state-sponsored policies of ethnic violence against minority groups. HART staff, alongside our in-country partners, refer to the country as Burma. The names of SWAN colleagues, as well as refugees who told us stories of their continuing search for safety, have been withheld for

¹ The coup that took place on 1 February 2021 led to the detention of most of the political leaders who were democratically elected in the November 2020 elections

² The State Law and Order Restoration Council seized control by coup in 1988 and remained in power until 1997

security reasons and to protect the anonymity of those we interviewed. All photos have been shared with the consent of SWAN and those with whom they work.

PART 2: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN SHAN STATE

HART met with SWAN colleagues in Thailand to receive an update on the security situation in Shan state. We were told that as life for almost every Burmese citizen was upended in 2021, the coup sent further shockwaves and “even more abuse” to minority communities who for decades have been subject to repressive military rule. Thousands of ethnic Shan people have been forcibly displaced in military clearance operations³ sponsored by the (now deposed) central government and its refusal to recognise their language, education system, political organisations and claim for autonomy. Today, as the military junta tightens its grip on Burma, there is greater understanding of the violent militarisation and suppression of rights that Shan nationals have long endured.

“Ethnic people have been struggling for 70 years. We have never seen positive change for our people. The only thing that has changed since the coup is that there is even more abuse. It is forcing Burmese people to understand what the ethnic groups have been facing for decades. Before they thought ethnic groups were the enemy but now, they understand what we have been dealing with.” – SWAN colleague.



Aerial attacks, scorched earth policies, and the use of landmines and artillery in civilian areas are not new declarations of war, but escalations of conflict in a state already under siege. Shan communities have been living under the double threat of military offensives by the State Administration Council (SAC) and counterattacks by armed resistance groups – including the United Wa State Army (UWSA); Shan State Army (SSA); Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA); Shan State Progress Party (SSPP); and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS). As SAC military offensives claimed more lives in the aftermath of the coup, conflict also surged between the SSA (North) and the RCSS, extending into Mounk Kung, Pekon, Kyaukme and Hsipaw regions. As a result, more than 28,000 civilians have been forcibly displaced from their

³ Security raids and scorched earth policies carried out against civilian populations in Shan state

homes. HART learned that among the abuses inflicted on Shan civilians, women, school-aged children, and the elderly are abducted into armed conflicts:

“The Burma Army arrived in my village during the middle of the night. They came with many soldiers and many guns. I was so afraid. They passed by my home, entered my neighbours’ house, and abducted them. The Army takes women and the elderly hostage when they can’t find men in the village because they know that the men will surrender themselves to get them back. Sometimes they take boys as young as nine. There are many more female-headed households since the coup. Even if husbands remain in the house, they are scared to go outside in fear of being recruited into the army. So, women have stepped up. Men are seeking work in Thailand or China, leaving the women behind to take care of the children and elderly family members. Women are left to pay for everything and act as the primary caregiver.” – SWAN colleague.

The international community is doing far too little to help civilians in one of Burma’s most militarised states. HART was told by trusted sources that, in cases where international aid is delivered to Shan communities, frontline responders often receive basic first aid kits to treat major trauma and injuries sustained in conflict. HART’s Founder President, Baroness Cox, continues to call on the UK Government to provide immediate humanitarian assistance and resources for aid workers who, like our in-country colleagues, are risking their lives to stem the tides of destruction in Burma. During a debate⁴ on International Women’s Day, Baroness Cox paid tribute to SWAN’s invaluable contributions to emergency relief and raised concerns for its Community Health Workers (CHWs) who, despite personal danger, receive “no support from within Burma and almost no international support.”

PART 3: CHALLENGES FACING THE SHAN WOMEN’S ACTION NETWORK

The international community must take immediate action to address the security risks facing aid workers, including women within the SWAN network who are working tirelessly on the frontlines of emergency relief. In Shan state, frontline responders and CHWs face harassment, threats of abduction by military forces, and other threats to their personal safety when responding to crises in areas where peacekeeping organisations are not present. SWAN expressed deep concern for CHWs who operate in the epicentres of conflict and are viewed with suspicion by the Burmese military:

“One unnamed SWAN Community Health Worker is in real danger in a village in Shan state. The village is held under suspicion of the Burmese Army for working with the Shan State Army. As a result, the local chief has said that no one is allowed to leave because it will arouse suspicion. If one household leaves, every household must leave. The Army suspect foul play if one household flees, they assume the whole village is complicit in something. The health worker is unable to leave. She is therefore assisting the pregnant women with post-natal care and delivery because they are not able to leave and access hospitals. The health worker fears the

⁴ *International Women’s Day and Protecting the Equality of Women in the UK and Internationally Debate*, March 2022, <https://www.parliament.co.uk/lord/baroness-cox/debate/2022-03-17/lords/grand-committee/international-womens-day-and-protecting-the-equality-of-women-in-the-uk-and-internationally>

repercussions for carrying out her work inside Shan state, but she knows that the villagers rely on her.” – SWAN colleague.

As the rest of the world turns a deaf ear to requests for assistance – and military forces continue to obstruct medical aid by seizing pharmaceuticals and other lifesaving provisions – the delivery of SWAN’s health care services is more important than ever before. In recognition of these demands, HART facilitated a remote training programme for CHWs in July 2022, covering the management of acute burns, resuscitation, triage and management of multiple casualties, acute trauma life support, vector borne diseases, women’s health, childhood nutrition, and management of health in displacement and refugee camps. The programme participants reported increased confidence in their abilities to provide medical assistance in areas where there is a severe lack of health services. Following the training, CHWs conducted awareness-raising sessions, sharing what they learned among other health care providers in conflict areas and displacement camps:

“After I returned from training, I helped a villager who was bitten by a snake. Without the training, I would not have been able to effectively help that villager.”

“I learned more about how to use my skills in the area of pre and post-natal care, and now I am more aware of specific hygiene practices which could lead to danger.”

“I learned how to make homemade ORS (Oral Rehydration Solutions) at home, as all the prices are higher in Burma now. It is useful for us to make on our own, and it costs less.”

– Personal reflections from SWAN CHWs

Despite heightened security risks and aid-related challenges, SWAN CHWs successfully delivered medical assistance and emergency relief to many of their target areas following the military coup. The generous support of HART donors – including Jo and Jonathan Russell; Roberta, Howard and David Ahmanson; Pippa and Rob Gerhard; Ian Roberts; Jefferies Group; and many regular givers who recognise the importance of SWAN’s lifesaving work – enabled CHWs to provide humanitarian assistance to some of the most isolated Shan communities.

PART 4: CRISIS SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

In the last year and a half, SWAN women have fought for women’s rights and advanced humanitarian action through the HART-supported Women’s Wellbeing Programme (WWP). The WWP provides family planning and reproductive health education, undertakes nutrition assessments of children in remote communities, and delivers crucial services to women during pregnancy. In 2021, 86 women received ante-natal or post-natal care, 174 villagers attended reproductive health sessions and 1,198 children had their nutrition level measured. These services are relied upon by many Shan women who have been cut off from their support networks. As Burma slides backwards on its path to democracy, it is much harder for those who have suffered sexual violence in contexts of armed conflict, or as they become forcibly displaced, to seek crisis support and medical treatment.

For decades, conflict-related sexual violence against Shan minorities has been prolific. As Burma’s legal system becomes “overwhelmingly subservient to the military [losing] even the

modest gains it had made in independence and effectiveness over the last decade⁵”, repercussions are being felt among minority communities as perpetrators of such crimes are able to commit them with greater impunity. SWAN provides lifesaving support for victims of conflict-related and gender-based violence through the operation of safe houses, emergency medical treatment, and collaborating with other local organisations to provide legal advice and counselling. Two rape cases recently handled by SWAN reflect the impact of the immediate crisis on Shan women with disabilities, who are at greater risk of harm in armed conflict:

“A SWAN CHW transferred a 49-year-old woman to Mong Nowng Hospital to deliver her baby because of her high-risk pregnancy condition. The woman, who was born mute and deaf, had been raped while she was working in the rice field. She did not know how to seek legal support as she was living with her elderly mother and had no outside help. SWAN provided her operation costs, including fees for meals and nutrition during her 10-day hospitalisation, and the cost of transportation to hospital. She is now healthy and being protected by the village leader. The perpetrator has been detained in the village prison. We do not know how long he will be held there – he could be recruited into an armed group where he will remain a threat to women and girls.”

“We found a woman with disabilities under a bridge who had been abandoned by her family. She had been raped many times by someone she thought was her friend. The baby died inside her because of her trauma. She has been pregnant many times through rape – but has never had any live births. SWAN transferred her to a shelter and administered the implant for 5 years’ protection against pregnancy. She is now being looked after by the village leader.”

– Director of SWAN’s Women’s Wellbeing Programme.

Many pregnant women and girls are fleeing to Thailand, either because they have been abandoned by their partners, raped by military/ non-state armed actors, or forced into marriage at a young age. At a time when the defence of human rights has collapsed⁵ in Burma, and sexual violence is routinely deployed as a weapon of war, access to crisis support for victims of conflict-related trauma is needed as a matter of urgency. SWAN repeatedly emphasised the need to address the psychological consequences of the crisis:

“When there is a conflict, we visit the affected areas and refugee camps to identify the needs and support the delivery of aid. We are also there to comfort people who have suffered from violence. Sometimes when we sleep, we can think only of them – especially women who have suffered rape. I always think of ways to comfort them.” – SWAN colleague.

An omission has emerged in the humanitarian response to the Burma crisis: support for mental health is rarely implemented as emergency relief. HART witnessed first-hand the impact that the crisis is having not only on its victims, but on our resilient colleagues who work overtime to address mass trauma. We were told that if Burma received even a fraction of the resources and humanitarian aid allocated to other global conflicts, the immediate crisis could end. Local organisations like SWAN, who have proven track records of identifying and meeting the needs

⁵ Myanmar: A year after military takeover, no rule of law or judicial independence, February 2022, <https://www.icj.org/myanmar-a-year-after-military-takeover-no-rule-of-law-or-judicial-independence/>

of their target communities, deserve our unwavering support and immediate assurances of protection.



PART 5: EDUCATION FOR DISPLACED CHILDREN

“Can you imagine what it is like for us to fear living in both Burma and Thailand? Living inside Burma, we are scared of the Burmese military because of the light we shine on the gender-based violence committed by the Burmese Army. Twenty years ago, when we published the ‘License to Rape’ report, highlighting the use of rape as a weapon of war by the Burmese Army, the leader of the army said that he will never forget SWAN for what we have done. In our own motherland, we were not safe. Now in Thailand, we don’t have to worry about who is following us or encountering conflict, but we do worry about the Thai authorities finding those of us who are undocumented. We are always worrying about something. We never have peace. Can you imagine this feeling?” – SWAN’s Education Director.

Many displaced communities are crossing the Thai-Burma border in search of safety. In Thailand, they face new challenges as humanitarian assistance is blocked by the Thai authorities, refugees are recognised only as economic migrants, and threats of forced repatriation loom over those seeking asylum. 90,000⁷ refugees currently live on the Thai side of the border. Behind the statistics are many infants and school-aged children who, having been torn away from their family members and homes, are now unable to access their right to education. SWAN supports five schools and two nurseries along the Thai-Burma border, unique in their acceptance of undocumented students. Since 2011, SWAN’s education programme has been supported by Planet Wheeler, an Australian-based foundation whose funding will cease in April 2023.

⁷ *Paths of Assistance: Opportunities for Aid and Protection along the Thailand Myanmar Border*, July 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/7/11/paths-of-assistance-opportunities-for-aid-and-protection-along-the-thailand-myanmar-border>

SWAN is therefore seeking financial support for Lak Taeng Primary School, Kuong Jur Nursery and Loi Htat Nursery. The HART team travelled with SWAN's Education Director to monitor the needs of refugee children at Lak Taeng Primary School. The school, which was built by Shan community leaders in 1996 following military clearance operations in Shan state, currently supports 184 students. Over half the student population lives in Kuong Jur Refugee Camp, where many are responsible for elderly relatives while their parents work informally on nearby farms. Each month, teachers from Lak Taeng Primary School visit students to assess their living conditions and provide food for those living in particularly challenging circumstances.



Whilst Lak Taeng joined with the local Thai Government school in 2009, enabling students to receive official graduation certificates, the school does not receive the same benefits as Thai Government schools. For example, where Thai Government schools spend 21 Thai Baht for a student's daily meals, Lak Taeng has an allowance of just 10 Thai Baht. Since the arrival of Covid-19, a lack of funding has seen the SWAN-supported student farming and income-generating project for the school cease. SWAN expressed their concerns for the students and the impact on the wider school community:

"If children receive food, their brains can develop, and they can learn to support themselves. Donating buildings and equipment is no use to the students if they cannot get to school or there are no teachers. The number one need at our schools is food, followed by teacher salaries and transport to help the students get to and from school. If we don't have funding for this, how can the students use the donated buildings?" – **SWAN's Education Director.**

HART also visited the only nursery accepting undocumented students in the region. Kuong Jur Nursery is currently understaffed with five teachers supporting 120 infants, including ten children with disabilities. Each month, approximately five new students arrive from Shan state. We learned that the undocumented infants and their families cannot live in the local villages due to fear of the Thai authorities. Instead, they are forced to live in the jungle or local farms where they work illegally. Refugee families are doing all they can to support the education of

their children, but a 10,000 Thai Baht annual fee for a formal work permit leaves families without money for school fees.



Through the generosity of our supporters, HART was able to provide food supplies and educational materials for all students at Loi Htat Nursery in 2020 and students at Kuong Jur Boarding House in 2021. In response to SWAN's priorities for support, we are now seeking further funding for the 2023-24 academic year to provide food, school transportation and teacher salaries for Lak Taeng Primary School, Kuong Jur Nursery and Loi Htat Nursery. HART remains grateful to all those who are helping SWAN to safeguard children's right to education.

PART 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"It seems the rest of the world has forgotten us. People were watching the protests but help never arrived. Now things are even worse than before. There are no laws to protect civilians – especially for women and children. We don't know who to rely on. 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 SWAN's survival and the survival of those we support." – **SWAN colleague.**

Global outcry over the military takeover and subsequent crisis has been short lived. When Burma won the attention of the world during the first wave of pro-democracy protests, the international community failed to co-ordinate a humanitarian response or take any meaningful action to stop the crisis from spilling over international borders. Shan state, a flashpoint of conflict in Burma, remains out of sight of the mainstream media and has received hardly any humanitarian assistance following the coup. The weak international response to the crisis, especially in Burma's ethnic states, has forced many local actors and relief networks to respond without the necessary protections and support. HART's urgent recommendations echo those detailed in the Refugees International *Paths of Assistance: Opportunities for Aid and Protection*

along the Thailand Myanmar Border report⁸, which addresses the needs of displaced communities on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) calls on:

1. The UK Government to facilitate and provide cross-border food and medical aid to IDPs in ethnic states – engaging directly with in-state community leaders and the NGOs working with them. The UK should take responsibility for providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by cut-off policies on lifesaving aid and health care services.
2. Sympathetic governments and UN agencies to allocate more resources to Burma's ethnic states, which are suffering a crisis of displacement and ongoing military offensives.
3. The UK Government to abide by its obligations under international humanitarian law, including Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, to protect persons taking no active part in the hostilities and halt the use of weapons against the civilian population, including aid workers and all ethnic minority groups.
4. International NGOs and donors to consider how educational support and trauma counselling can be implemented as emergency relief. This includes access to education and trauma healing for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups too often forgotten in times of crisis.
5. The UK Government to make representations to the Thai authorities for the recognition of Shan and Burmese refugees in Thailand. We urge the Government of Thailand to work closely with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in assessing and meeting the needs of refugees and protecting their right to asylum.

PART 7: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

HART is grateful to all who met us and shared testimonies and experiences. We are particularly thankful for those who told us their personal stories and concerns following the military coup in Burma.

A special thank you to HART Trustee, Prakash Patel, for sponsoring the visit, to our colleagues at SWAN who arranged our programme, and all who offered us traditional generous Shan hospitality.

For more information about Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) and the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), visit: www.hart-uk.org.

⁸ *Paths of Assistance: Opportunities for Aid and Protection along the Thailand Myanmar Border*, July 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/7/11/paths-of-assistance-opportunities-for-aid-and-protection-along-the-thailand-myanmar-border>