

New report shows junta is losing its hold over southeastern Myanmar

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More than 637,000 people displaced by military attacks in the region are in need of aid that should be provided through existing border-based channels, ethnic Karen network says

The junta has lost more than 60 military camps in southeastern Myanmar since the February 2021 coup, a civil society report revealed on Tuesday, as the Karen National Union (KNU) and its allies reclaim greater territory in the region and isolate regime outposts' access to Yangon and Naypyitaw.

"A Shifting Power Balance: Junta Control Shrinks in Southeast Burma," [published](#) by the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), outlined the junta's deteriorating military and administrative influence throughout six of the KNU's seven districts known collectively as Kawthoolei. This land spans from Taw Oo—Taungoo—in Bago Region, throughout Karen (Kayin) State and into parts of Mon State; information was not available for Tanintharyi, where the ethnic armed organisation is also active.

KPSN said that resistance forces had overrun some 24 military posts in the region as of July and had compelled the junta to abandon an additional 38 camps by cutting off supply lines to the sites.

Just eight of these locations had reportedly been repossessed by the regime at the time of reporting.

KPSN director Naw Wahkushee said in an online press conference on Tuesday that the changing dynamics in the region indicate that the international community, including the governments of neighbouring countries such as Thailand, should "reassess their relationships with the junta" especially when confronting issues such as human trafficking, the drug trade, crime, and security.

"There is a need to look into developing a working relationship with the ethnic resistance groups along the border, particularly along the Salween and Moei rivers... not just with Naypyitaw," continued Naw K'nyaw Paw, general secretary of the Karen Women's Organisation and KPSN member, at the event, referring to two waterways that separate Karen territory from Thailand.

"They need to rethink their strategy and develop relationships along the border."

Of note, KPSN's report said, was the "accelerating rate of loss" associated with these military withdrawals: two-thirds had occurred in just over the last 18 months.

The network pointed out that in 2021, seized or abandoned junta camps were limited to Mutraw (Hpapun) and Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) districts in central Karen State and northern Mon State; this year, that spread north into Bago Region, and to areas near southern Karen State's border with Thailand.

"The most striking strategic gain by the KNU is its increased control over the western and eastern

boundaries of its northern territories—including the Salween River borderline with Thailand—as well as over the main transport routes from central [Myanmar] into these territories,” the report stated.

This limits the military’s ability to resupply its bases, carry out offensives, or travel without threat of attack along the main highway and railways connecting Yangon with the junta capital of Naypyitaw, or on the Asia Highway, which links to Myawaddy on the Karen-Thai border.

It has also largely restricted the regime’s administrative capabilities in the region, as well as contributed to the collapse of its educational infrastructure. According to KPSN, at the time of reporting, there were no longer any schools under the junta-controlled ministry of education in KNU-administered areas, or in those of mixed control. Meanwhile, schools operated by the KNU’s education department have nearly tripled in recent years, from 382 during the 2019-2020 school year to more than 900 at the time of reporting, as former regime-run schools come under KNU control and large numbers of former government school teachers opt to join its system.

However, the KNU expansion has been accompanied by an increase in junta assaults involving heavy weapons, and which frequently target civilian infrastructure including schools, religious buildings and clinics. Since the coup, there have been nearly 1,178 artillery attacks in Karen territory, causing some 88 casualties, as well as 417 airstrikes that have killed more than 40 people.

The only district where artillery assaults have decreased is Mutraw, where the rate of the attacks has dropped by around 25 percent in the last 15 months compared to the previous period of the same length. This “reflects [the junta’s] shrinking control there,” according to KPSN.

Aerial attacks have been most frequently deployed in Dooplaya District in southern Karen State—which includes parts of Kawkareik and Kyainseikgyi townships—and where the flatter landscape provides fewer hilltops from which the junta can fire artillery.

“Airstrikes and artillery attacks are the main reasons Karen communities are being displaced,” Naw Wahkushee said in the briefing.

Using data provided by KNU governance mechanisms and Karen community-based organisations directly assisting fleeing populations, KPSN placed the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Karen territory at 637,414—a number that has nearly [doubled](#) in the last year.

These figures have consistently been markedly higher than those provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The UN aid agency [said](#) in its September 8 Humanitarian Update that there were a total of 354,600 people displaced throughout all of eastern Bago and Tanintharyi regions and Karen and Mon states since the coup.

Naw K’nyaw Paw said that Yangon-based UN agencies “continue to significantly underreport the number of IDPs in southeastern Burma.”

A UNOCHA representative told Myanmar Now in October 2022 that they had “serious access challenges and funding shortfalls in Myanmar, including in the country’s Southeast.”

To address the ongoing crisis, on Tuesday KPSN appealed for US\$43m in international humanitarian funding over the next year to meet the basic food needs of the displaced population, emphasising that aid must be distributed through border-based humanitarian aid networks and not through coordination with the coup regime that continues to assault Myanmar’s public.

Since the mid-1990s, groups within KPSN’s network have delivered \$32m worth of food, mostly rice, to some 1.7m people, the organisation’s representatives pointed out.

“We don’t need anyone to set up another humanitarian aid channel. We need to use the infrastructure that is already in place,” Naw K’nyaw Paw explained.

She added that border-based aid providers remain severely underfunded, backed largely by the overseas Karen diaspora and ad-hoc donations rather than through firm financial commitments from international agencies.

“We have formed a network and delivered aid across the border. We have been doing that for 30 years. We are able to do it. We just need support.”

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