

# Myanmar's militarisation of education

Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Education – January 2025

## Introduction

The Myanmar military has followed its coup of 1 February 2021 with a profound violation of fundamental human rights, including the right to education. States, including those managed by unlawful military regimes, have an international obligation to take positive measures to ensure that schools, colleges, and universities provide a secure learning environment free from threats of violence and discrimination and to ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn in a safe and supportive environment.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's schools have been transformed into instruments of control, sites of violence, and recruitment grounds for military purposes. Human Rights Myanmar's submission addresses the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Education's inquiry into the militarisation and securitisation of schools, colleges, and universities, focusing on the impact of the military's attacks on education, teachers, and educational infrastructure and the consequences.

## Education as a political battlefield

The Myanmar military has historically viewed the education system—including schools, universities, and the educated individuals it produces—as a critical threat to its grip on power. Under previous military regimes, students spearheaded various movements advocating for democratisation and challenging the military's dominance. In response to the student-led protests of 1988, the military regime shut down all universities for two years. Similarly, after protests in 1996 and 1998, universities were closed for an additional three years.

Following the 2020 elections, the military accused 200,000 teachers involved in overseeing polling stations of enabling so-called fraudulent elections, which resulted in a landslide victory for its opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD).<sup>2</sup> The military launched its 2021 coup, claiming that the NLD was unwilling to address the fraud. The Myanmar Teachers' Federation and Yangon University of Education became central to anti-military protests<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Under Art. 26 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), Art. 19 of the Convention of the Rights of the child (CRC) and Art. 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), quality education is not limited to mere access but includes the environment in which it is provided. International commitments under the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) include ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. This encompasses the provision of safe, non-violent and effective learning environments where safety is seen as integral to achieving quality education and reducing inequalities in education.

<sup>2</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2020), "[USDP lawsuits target teachers who risked it all](#)".

<sup>3</sup> Salem-Gervais N., Aung S., and Spreelung A. (2024), "[Education in Post-Coup Myanmar](#)".

teachers formed one of the largest contingents of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), with 100,000 educators joining initially.<sup>4</sup> Within a month of the coup, 75 per cent of the nation's 450,000 educational staff had joined the CDM.<sup>5</sup> The battlefield had been drawn with educators and education regarded as opposition to the military and its objectives,

## Violence against students and teachers

The military has systematically targeted schools, children, and educators with violence as part of its strategy to suppress opposition and instil fear. Many have also fallen victim to indiscriminate or reckless military force during protests and opposition crackdowns.

The first anti-coup protester killed by security forces was Mya Thwe Khaing, a 19-year-old Grade 11 student, on February 9, 2021, in the capital city, Naypyidaw.<sup>6</sup> By December 2024, at least 460 children aged between newborn and 14 years had been killed, including 187 girls.<sup>7</sup> An additional 970 youths<sup>8</sup> aged 15 to 24 years were killed, including 177 girls and young women.<sup>9</sup> Many of these victims were killed while attending school or while unable to attend school due to the military's crackdown on education.

Tragic incidents illustrate the military's brutality. On January 12, 2022, soldiers in the Sagaing Region shot and killed 8-year-old student Aung Kyaw Hein after he asked them to return a confiscated mobile phone.<sup>10</sup> On September 16, 2022, military helicopters attacked a school in Sagaing Region for almost an hour, killing seven young children and injuring 20 more students and teachers.<sup>11</sup> In Mon State, on December 24, 2023, 14-year-old Eain Zin Phyo was shot for no apparent reason while cycling home from school.<sup>12</sup> On February 5, 2024, military planes bombed a school in a peaceful Kayah State village, killing four children and injuring more than ten others.<sup>13</sup>

Teachers have also been victims of the military's targeted killings. By December 2024, at least 37 teachers had been killed, including 17 women.<sup>14</sup> Eight of these teachers were killed while in military detention.<sup>15</sup> For example, physics teacher Soe Paing was detained for unknown reasons and tortured to death over two days of interrogation in August 2021.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Kyaw Naing Win, a teacher from the Mandalay Region, was detained in September 2022 for unknown reasons and died after four days of torture.<sup>17</sup> On 6 June 2023, the military shot and killed two primary school teachers, mother and daughter Thae Mar Lar Win and Saung Thazin Oo, in Yangon Region.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2021), "[Teachers, students join anti-coup campaign as hospital staff stop work](#)".

<sup>5</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2021), "[Parents, teachers and students boycott 'slave education system'](#)".

<sup>6</sup> BBC (2021), "[Myanmar coup: Woman shot during anti-coup protests dies](#)".

<sup>7</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>8</sup> The United Nations defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth: United Nations (1981), "[Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly A/36/215](#)".

<sup>9</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>10</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>11</sup> Radio Free Asia (2022), "['Risking their lives to go to school': Myanmar teacher who survived junta raid](#)".

<sup>12</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>13</sup> The Irrawaddy (2024), "[Myanmar Junta Warplanes Bomb School in Karenni State, Killing 4 Children](#)".

<sup>14</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>15</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>16</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>17</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>18</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

## Detentions and imprisonment

Beyond physical violence, the military has detained and sentenced numerous students and educators to lengthy, arbitrary imprisonment for opposing the coup. By December 2024, at least 191 children aged newborn to 14 years, including 61 girls, had been detained.<sup>19</sup> Of these, 65 children, including 10 girls, remained in detention at the time of submission.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, 3,741 youths aged 15 to 24, including 525 girls and young women, had been detained, with 2,957 still imprisoned.<sup>21</sup>

A minority of detentions are clearly intended to target students. For instance, some children have been detained for possessing textbooks, which the military associates with schools run by opposition groups.<sup>22</sup> However, many detentions are simply arbitrary and without any clear reason, apart from instilling fear among the young. For instance, 15-year-old Ayeyarwady Region student Hmue Thwet San was detained in 2022 for unknown reasons and sentenced to five years' imprisonment in April 2023 under the draconian Counter-Terrorism Law for the crime of "financing terrorism."<sup>23</sup> On April 11, 2024, the military detained two families in Bago Region, including 6-year-old schoolgirl Chit Myat Thadar Phyo, who remains in detention for unknown reasons.<sup>24</sup>

Teachers have faced similar repression. By March 2024, at least 500 educators had been arrested,<sup>25</sup> with 396, including 224 women, still detained at the time of submission.<sup>26</sup> Notable cases include Kyaw Win Naing, a high school principal from Chin State, who was detained in October 2022 and has been missing since.<sup>27</sup> On 15 September 2023, teacher Thet Aung was sentenced to seven years of hard labour under the Counter-Terrorism Law for teaching a curriculum resembling the opposition National Unity Government's program,<sup>28</sup> which closely mirrors the military's curriculum.<sup>29</sup>

## Military use of schools

Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's military has routinely commandeered schools across the country for use as barracks and operational bases, particularly in conflict-affected areas. This practice has disrupted educational activities, transformed learning environments into sites of danger, and placed students and teachers at significant risk.

Within the first month following the coup, at least 60 schools and university campuses in 13 States and Regions were occupied by military forces.<sup>30</sup> Between February 2021 and March 2022, the United Nations documented 320 instances of schools being used for military purposes.<sup>31</sup> Although precise figures are unavailable at the time of submission, the number of

<sup>19</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Detained](#)".

<sup>20</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Detained](#)".

<sup>21</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Detained](#)".

<sup>22</sup> Salem-Gervais N., Aung S., and Spreelung A. (2024), "[Education in Post-Coup Myanmar](#)".

<sup>23</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Still detained](#)".

<sup>24</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Still detained](#)".

<sup>25</sup> Than Lwin Times (2023), "[Children's rights diminished during Military Council's rule](#)".

<sup>26</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Still detained](#)".

<sup>27</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Still detained](#)".

<sup>28</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Still detained](#)".

<sup>29</sup> Both the military-controlled Ministry of Education and the National Unity Government's Ministry of Education use a curriculum developed before the coup started in February 2021: Salem-Gervais N., Aung S., and Spreelung A. (2024), "[Education in Post-Coup Myanmar](#)".

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF (2021), "[Occupation of schools by security forces in Myanmar is a serious violation of children's rights](#)".

<sup>31</sup> United Nations (2022), "[Myanmar: Crisis taking an enormous toll on children, UN committee warns](#)".

schools being used in this manner is likely in the hundreds. By November 2023, military forces were reported to be stationed in schools even in urban areas, including Yangon, Myanmar's largest city.<sup>32</sup>

These occupied schools have also been repurposed as temporary detention and interrogation centres, with torture being a common practice. For example, on 1 August 2022, the military attacked a village in Sagaing Region, killing at least eight people in the village school. Among the victims was Kyaw Hlwan, a local farmer whose throat was slit during an interrogation conducted on the school premises.<sup>33</sup>

## Military destruction of educational infrastructure

Myanmar's educational infrastructure has been systematically targeted by the military, leaving countless children without safe spaces to learn. Since the coup, at least 200 airstrikes have been conducted on schools, destroying 146 educational facilities, including universities, public schools, and monastic schools.<sup>34</sup> These attacks have affected regions such as Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay, as well as Kayin, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, and Kayah States. Karenni State alone has witnessed the destruction of 22 schools.<sup>35</sup>

There is compelling evidence that the military deliberately targets schools. A report noted that the military had attacked schools established under previous governments, suggesting intentional targeting of pre-identified locations.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the military often conducts follow-up drone reconnaissance, striking schools that survive initial attacks.

In addition to physical destruction, the military has intercepted and confiscated educational supplies and teaching materials sent by aid organisations and individual benefactors to rural areas.<sup>37</sup> This deliberate obstruction exacerbates the challenges faced by students and educators, further denying access to education in already vulnerable communities.

## Compulsory military training

The military has increasingly imposed mandatory military training in schools, particularly at the high school and university levels. These programmes, formalised through the reactivation of the 2010 People's Military Service Law, include drills, combat training, and ideological indoctrination aimed at fostering loyalty to the regime.<sup>38</sup> This law has also allowed the military to gather additional data on teachers and other civil servants; data later used to identify individuals for potential conscription.<sup>39</sup>

Reports suggest that civil servants, including teachers, could be mobilised as auxiliary forces to bolster the military's ranks, which have been significantly depleted by ongoing armed conflict.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The Irrawaddy (2023), "[Parents Pull Children From Schools in Yangon as Myanmar Junta Troops Move In](#)".

<sup>33</sup> AAPP (2024), "[Killed](#)".

<sup>34</sup> Radio Free Asia (2024), "[Nearly 200 schools in Myanmar hit by junta air strikes since military coup](#)".

<sup>35</sup> The Irrawaddy (2024), "[Myanmar Junta Warplanes Bomb School in Karenni State, Killing 4 Children](#)".

<sup>36</sup> Radio Free Asia (2024), "[Nearly 200 schools in Myanmar hit by junta air strikes since military coup](#)".

<sup>37</sup> Radio Free Asia (2023), "[Self-help schools thrive in Myanmar's Chin state despite military attacks](#)".

<sup>38</sup> United Nations (2024), "[Myanmar: Military junta even greater threat to civilians as it imposes military draft, warns UN expert](#)".

<sup>39</sup> The Irrawaddy (2024), "[Myanmar Junta Takes Aim at Civil Servants as it Races Ahead With Conscription](#)".

<sup>40</sup> The Irrawaddy (2023), "[Myanmar Regime to Arm Civil Servants](#)".

In 2024, a rising number of university teachers and students were conscripted into military training programs.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the military has made similar training, including instruction in “shooting to kill,” compulsory for its own children once they reach the 9th grade, typically around the age of 14.<sup>42</sup>

## Promotion of military ideals in education

The military has attributed resistance to the coup to a purported lack of literacy among the general population, using this narrative to justify regressive changes to Myanmar’s education system.<sup>43</sup> These changes echo policies implemented after the 1962 and 1988 coups, which prioritised societal control at the expense of educational standards.<sup>44</sup> The military has adopted the slogan, “National discipline starts from the school,” to underscore its authoritarian approach.<sup>45</sup>

In a deliberate effort to weaken education and punish dissent, the military has dismissed thousands of teachers from their positions. By May 2021, at least 125,000 basic education teachers (31%) and 19,500 higher education teachers (69%) had been suspended for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).<sup>46</sup> The military has sought to replace these teachers by hiring daily wage earners, many of whom are supporters of the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).<sup>47</sup> These new hires typically have lower educational qualifications and lack the rigorous training and examinations traditionally required for teaching positions.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, all new trainees under this system pass their certification exams.<sup>49</sup>

The impact of these changes is expected to significantly erode educational standards. The reintroduction of rote memorisation, rather than critical thinking, is likely,<sup>50</sup> along with an increased emphasis on military ideologies that reward obedience.<sup>51</sup> All newly hired teachers are also required to pledge allegiance to the military, signing statements that read: “I promise that as soon as I start performing duties as a civil servant, I will not share false information on Facebook pages, avoid party politics, refrain from engaging in political activity, and adhere to civil servants’ ethics and rules.”<sup>52</sup> These measures reflect a calculated effort by the military to consolidate power through the education system, further undermining its role as a space for learning, critical thought, and democratic values.

<sup>41</sup> The Irrawaddy (2024), “[Myanmar’s Depleted Military Takes Aim at Professors, Students to Beef Up](#)”.

<sup>42</sup> The Global New Light of Myanmar (2021), “[Myanmar Regime Makes Military Training Compulsory for Soldiers’ Children](#)”.

<sup>43</sup> Eleven Media (2023), “[နိုင်ငံအတွင်း မြို့နယ်အချို့နှင့် နယ်စပ်အချို့တွင် ဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသည့် အကြမ်းဖက်မှုများသည် စာမတတ်ခြင်း၏ နောက်ဆက်တွဲအကျိုးဆက်များကြောင့်ဖြစ်ကြောင်း နှစ်ကုသုတိယဥက္ကဋ္ဌ ပြောကြား](#)”.

<sup>44</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2022), “[By the book: Junta’s education policy follows 60 years of military strategy](#)”.

<sup>45</sup> The Global New Light of Myanmar (2021), “[Education and Schooling](#)”.

<sup>46</sup> Reuters (2021), “[More than 125,000 Myanmar teachers suspended for opposing coup](#)”.

<sup>47</sup> The Irrawaddy (2021), “[Myanmar Junta Looks to Replace Striking University Staff](#)”.

<sup>48</sup> The Irrawaddy (2021), “[Myanmar Junta Looks to Replace Striking University Staff](#)”.

<sup>49</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2023), “[Bad education: Inside the junta’s classrooms](#)”.

<sup>50</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2023), “[Bad education: Inside the junta’s classrooms](#)”.

<sup>51</sup> The Irrawaddy (2023), “[Myanmar Junta Gets an ‘F’ for Education as Schools Spiral into Chaos](#)”.

<sup>52</sup> Transcript of a pledge of allegiance asked to a newly hired teacher: Salem-Gervais N., Aung S., and Spreelung A. (2024), “[Education in Post-Coup Myanmar](#)”.

## Impact: Childhood disrupted

The compounded effects of Myanmar's economic crisis, widespread job loss, deepening poverty, political polarisation, and a pervasive climate of violence have devastated childhood and education. Among the many violations of children's rights,<sup>53</sup> child labour is on the rise, with children often working for wages that are only a fraction of what adults earn.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, child trafficking has increased, along with the emergence of numerous health problems exacerbated by the dire socioeconomic conditions.

The omnipresent violence and insecurity have also had a profound impact on the mental health of students and educators. Many suffer from trauma due to direct or indirect exposure to military attacks, making it even more challenging for them to participate in or provide education.<sup>55</sup> Addressing these psychological wounds is essential to restoring hope and stability for Myanmar's future generations.

## Impact: Declining enrolment rates

Enrolment in Myanmar's basic education system has plummeted since the coup. The number of students enrolled dropped from 9.2 million in 2019–2020 to 5.3 million in 2021–2022, a staggering decline driven by widespread boycotts of the regime-controlled "slave education system" and parental fears for their children's safety.<sup>56</sup> These figures highlight the military's failure to safeguard children's right to education.

The decline in enrolment remains severe. While 9.2 million students were enrolled before the coup, the number fell to 2.3 million during the 2020–2021 school year due to the combined impacts of the pandemic and the coup.<sup>57</sup> Enrolment partially recovered to 5.3 million in 2021–2022<sup>58</sup> but has seen only marginal increases since, reaching 5.8 million in 2023–2024.<sup>59</sup> In 2024, the military claimed that 6.2 million students enrolled, but despite these official figures, one-third of school-age children are still not attending school.<sup>60</sup>

Exam pass rates further illustrate the educational collapse. In 2023, only 160,000 students took the matriculation exam, marking the end of basic education.<sup>61</sup> This is a sharp decline from 280,000 in 2022 and a devastating drop from the 910,000 who sat for the exam in 2020.<sup>62</sup> In conflict-ridden Karenni State, no students took the matriculation exam in 2024.<sup>63</sup>

Myanmar's higher education sector has also suffered catastrophic declines. Before the coup, 260,000 students who passed the matriculation exam in 2019 enrolled in universities.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, of the 110,000 students who passed the matriculation exam in 2023, only 24,000

<sup>53</sup> The Irrawaddy (2021), "[Myanmar Regime Makes Military Training Compulsory for Soldiers' Children](#)".

<sup>54</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2022), "[Myanmar's desperate families are sending their children to work](#)".

<sup>55</sup> Frontier Myanmar (2022), "[An entire generation at risk: Myanmar's children traumatized after a year of violence](#)".

<sup>56</sup> Myanmar Now (2021), "[Junta reportedly eyeing November reopening of schools](#)".

<sup>57</sup> Eleven Media (2023), "[Over 5.8 million students enrolled across Myanmar on May 23-29](#)".

<sup>58</sup> Mizzima (2022), "[Forty per cent drop in Myanmar student enrollment for 2022-23](#)".

<sup>59</sup> Eleven Media (2023), "[Over 5.8 million students enrolled across Myanmar on May 23-29](#)".

<sup>60</sup> Global New Light of Myanmar (2024), "[Over 6 mln students enrolled for 2024-2025 academic year as of 2 June](#)".

<sup>61</sup> Radio Free Asia (2023), "[Myanmar's school system in shambles since coup as high school exam-takers plunge 80%](#)".

<sup>62</sup> Radio Free Asia (2023), "[Myanmar's school system in shambles since coup as high school exam-takers plunge 80%](#)".

<sup>63</sup> Kantarawaddy Times (2024), "[War Prevents Junta-Organized Matriculation Exams from Taking Place in Karenni State](#)".

<sup>64</sup> University World News (2023), "[Enrolment in state-run universities down '70%' since coup](#)".

enrolled in higher education institutions.<sup>65</sup> This represents a dramatic 91% decrease in university enrolment since the coup.

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<sup>65</sup> Radio Free Asia (2024), "[University student population has plunged 90% since coup](#)".

## Conclusion

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The militarisation of education in Myanmar, exemplified by the military's presence in schools, compulsory training programs, recruitment of students, and ideological indoctrination, represents systematic violations of children's rights and international legal standards. Schools, traditionally safe havens for learning, have been transformed into sites of violence, recruitment, and propaganda, undermining their fundamental role in society.

The Myanmar military has entrenched itself in the education sector through a range of practices, including using schools as military barracks, conducting mandatory military training for students and educators, integrating military-related subjects into the curriculum, and recruiting students for combat roles. Simultaneously, the military's deliberate targeting of schools and educators in conflict zones and its enforcement of loyalty pledges from newly appointed teachers reflect a broader strategy of social control and suppression of dissent. Specialised military schools, governed under the military regime, operate with the explicit aim of producing loyal soldiers and administrators, further embedding militarisation into the fabric of Myanmar's society.

These actions violate Myanmar's obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, which mandate the protection of children and their right to education, even in times of conflict. Addressing this crisis requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder response to dismantle the militarisation of education, ensure the protection of children, and rebuild the education sector as a foundation for peace and democracy.

## Recommendations

To the international community:

- Impose targeted sanctions on military leaders and entities responsible for the militarisation of education while supporting accountability through international justice mechanisms.
- Provide financial and technical assistance to alternative education programmes led by the National Unity Government (NUG) and grassroots organisations.
- Increase diplomatic pressure to enforce compliance with international norms protecting education during armed conflict.

To the United Nations:

- Expand monitoring and reporting on the militarisation of education in Myanmar, ensuring inclusion in Security Council deliberations and mechanisms on grave violations against children in armed conflict.
- Support cross-border educational initiatives and advocate for safe havens for displaced students and educators.

To the educational sector:

- Develop and implement trauma-informed educational programs that address the psychosocial needs of students and educators affected by conflict and violence.



- Train teachers in safety protocols, inclusive pedagogy, and crisis management, enabling them to navigate the challenges of teaching in conflict settings.

To civil society organisations:

- Document violations against educational rights and disseminate findings to raise global awareness and mobilise international action.
- Establish community-based networks to safeguard schools and educators, focusing on advocacy, safety planning, and resilience building.