

Hundreds of older people victims of military violence

Submission to the UN OHCHR independent expert on older persons in armed conflict – March 2025

Introduction

Older people in Myanmar are suffering immensely due to the military coup and the ongoing conflict, just like others. However, they face distinct and often overlooked challenges. Limited mobility, chronic health problems, and specific vulnerabilities mean they often bear a heavier burden.

This report, originally submitted to the UN's Independent Expert, highlights the experiences of older people in Myanmar's conflict. It uses the standard definition of older persons as those over 60,¹ while stressing that this threshold should arguably be younger in Myanmar due to the country's low life expectancy.² Based on civil society monitoring data³ and detailed investigations, this analysis reveals the severe human rights violations impacting older individuals.

Hundreds executed, tortured, and unlawfully killed

The right to life, a fundamental right under international law, is under severe threat for older people in Myanmar. They are not merely accidental casualties or "collateral damage" in the military crackdown, but are systematically exposed to violence, resulting in high death rates.

Over the four years since the coup, almost 700 older people have been unlawfully killed. An unlawful killing can be intentional, like an execution, or unintentional, such as deaths resulting from the indiscriminate use of force.

The 678 victims spanned all older age groups: 56% were aged 60–69, 28% were 70–79, 13% were 80–89, 3% were 90–99, and two were over 100 years old. The oldest killed was 105. These figures starkly illustrate that military violence does not spare older people, but reveals a pattern where all older age brackets are at risk.

¹ The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) generally considers 60+ as the benchmark for "older persons." The UN conventions and reports on aging, which frequently use 60+ but also sometimes 65+ when referring to retirement-age policies.

² The World Health Organization often uses 60+ in global discussions but sometimes adjusts this based on regional life expectancy. For example, in lower-income countries and countries experiencing conflict, such as Myanmar, 50+ may be considered "older".

³ For more information on individuals arbitrarily killed and detained in Myanmar, see the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners www.aappb.org

For example, in 2022, soldiers from Infantry Battalion 301 entered a village in Sagaing Region, detaining eight older people. Two men, both in their early sixties, were tied up and beheaded, while six others were beaten to death. Their bodies were discovered nearly a month later, highlighting the deliberate targeting of older persons.

All older persons documented as unlawfully killed were civilians. There were no clear cases where the victim was a combatant.

37% killed by extrajudicial execution, lethal torture, or excessive force

A closer look at how older people were killed reveals the nature of these violations. Contrary to assumptions that they might be accidental victims, all experienced arbitrary killings that violate the right to life.

At least 229 of these killings (37%) were extrajudicial executions, defined as intentional, unlawful killings by military forces or their agents, and without any legal process. Methods used against older people included beheadings, being burned alive, or execution by gunshot. In one instance in 2025, a 93-year-old woman in Magway Region was shot dead for trying to prevent soldiers from burning her village. This directly violates the absolute prohibition against arbitrarily taking a life under international law.

Furthermore, 26 older people (4% of those killed) died as a direct result of torture or other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Torture involves deliberately inflicting severe physical or mental pain for purposes like punishment or coercion, and is a gross violation of the absolute international ban on torture.

Sometimes, death caused by torture was swift, as in the case of an 85-year-old woman in Sagaing Region who could not flee and was set on fire by soldiers in 2022. In other cases, death was slow, involving denial of essential healthcare, a prolonged form of torture. An older man in Yangon, for example, was denied cancer treatment in detention until he died in 2023. Though a smaller proportion of overall unlawful killings, these deaths highlight an intent not just to kill but also to inflict prolonged suffering.

Other unlawful killings

The remaining 372 deaths (59%) resulted from other forms of excessive or indiscriminate force, leading to unlawful, arbitrary killings. Many occurred during actions that constitute clear war crimes, such as artillery shelling of civilian areas, air strikes, bombings, landmine explosions, or being caught in crossfire. For instance, in 2022, a military convoy in Sagaing Region fired heavy artillery into civilian areas, burning five older people to death. One victim, Kyaw San*, had limited mobility and was trapped in his home. Such incidents underscore how indiscriminate attacks disproportionately affect older individuals unable to flee quickly.

Half killed were in detention

Many older persons were killed while detained. Of those subjected to extrajudicial killings, nearly half (149 individuals, or 49%) were in detention at the time of their death. Detention here means any situation where a person's liberty is restricted, even briefly. In 2025, for example, soldiers in Magway Region held a 60-year-old man for hours, attempting to force information from him about opposition members, before slitting his throat. Detention in these contexts becomes a tool for intensifying violence against an already vulnerable group.

Two-thirds were tortured before being killed

While 4% died directly from lethal torture or prolonged cruel treatment, a further 175 (65%) of those executed extrajudicially showed clear signs of torture before death. An older man in Sagaing Region in 2022, for instance, was “stretched” with ropes to inflict pain before later being shot. This indicates torture is pervasive, even if not always the immediate cause of death. Torture compounds the violation of the right to life, inflicting severe trauma before death and breaching the absolute prohibition under international law.

Unknown number subjected to sexual violence

Older persons have also been subjected to sexual violence. Although documented cases of rape before killing are few (1%), this figure is likely a significant underestimate due to reporting challenges and social stigma. Even this small number reveals a complete disregard for the rights and dignity of older people, showing no age group is safe from such crimes in this conflict.

Hundreds arbitrarily detained

Older people in Myanmar face systematic violations of their right to liberty and fair trial, worsening the impact of the military's conflict.

Since the coup, almost 500 older people have been arbitrarily detained: 83% aged 60–69, 15% aged 70–79, 2% aged 80–89, and one individual aged 90. The vast majority of the 448 individuals were civilians with diverse backgrounds, including political affiliations (25%), former public roles (4%), or religious associations (1%). These arbitrary arrests flagrantly disregard the right to liberty.

59% charged with political crimes

Legal harassment frequently follows detention. Of those detained, 263 (59%) were charged with [political crimes](#). Half (50%) were charged under the Penal Code for acts like “spreading false news” or “inciting unrest”. Another third (31%) faced charges under the Counter-Terrorism Law, often for alleged support of opposition groups.

Others faced politically-motivated charges under various laws, including the Anti-Corruption Law, Arms Act, Official Secrets Act, Explosive Substances Act, Natural Disaster Management Law, Public Property Protection Act, Telecommunications Law, and Unlawful Associations Act.

It remains unclear why the remaining 41% detained were not eventually charged, potentially due to local power dynamics, lack of capacity, or bribery.

Up to 49 years in prison

The [military's legal "system"](#) almost always convicts defendants, imposing harsh and punitive sentences.

Of the 448 older persons detained, 180 (40%) were convicted and sentenced. Most (63%) received sentences of 1–5 years, mainly for political crimes. Others received longer terms: 9% got 6–9 years, usually based on consecutive sentences, 19% got 10–19 years, often under the Counter-Terrorism Law, and 8% received 20–49 years on multiple consecutive charges, including high-profile figures like the leader of the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Sentences were handed out regardless of the person's age, with young and old facing similarly disproportionate terms. The legal framework, therefore, inflicts profound long-term consequences on older persons, deepening the violation of their human rights.

For example, in Magway Region, several older people seeking refuge from the conflict in their ancestral villages were arrested and faced politically-motivated charges ranging from minor infractions to serious allegations. They received sentences of 5–15 years despite their age and low threat level. Such severe sentencing violates international law on fairness and proportionality.

Paradox shows military war crimes

A striking paradox exists in how the military treats older persons. They account for only 3% of arbitrary arrests, compared to 60% for ages 18–35 and 33% for ages 36–59. Older individuals are rarely combatants or key political figures, so the military generally shows less interest in detaining them unless they are prominent opposition members. However, older persons make up 12% of all arbitrary killings – four times more than detentions – with many being extrajudicial executions.

This discrepancy strongly suggests the military does not exercise restraint or discriminate based on combatant status, which is a key indicator under international law. If the military's use of force was targeted, necessary, and proportionate, far fewer older people would be unlawfully killed. Instead, the military appears to intentionally use disproportionate force to broadly instill fear, including among older people. The willingness to kill older individuals, who have minimal capacity to resist, is a war crime and reflects a blatant disregard for international laws protecting non-combatants.

Factors increasing risk for older people

Several factors converge to place older persons at uniquely high risk during the military's conflict. Mobility constraints, difficulty accessing information, cultural attachment to homes, and pre-existing health conditions all play a role. The situation is worsened by economic collapse, with rising prices and poverty leaving many older adults unable to afford food and medicine. Their plight often remains invisible internationally, even amidst mass displacement and community destruction.

Limited mobility

Many older people cannot flee quickly or far during military raids. An 83-year-old woman in Sagaing Region, for example, repeatedly needs to be carried by her family to escape military advances, placing her in life-threatening situations and rendering her dependent on others for basic survival.

No access to information

Communication barriers also hinder access to vital information. With State media pushing propaganda and independent news [suppressed](#), people rely on digital platforms for safety warnings. However, many older individuals lack the digital skills or access needed, subject to a “digital divide” that leaves them isolated and uninformed during emergencies.

Social factors

Cultural and social factors add complexity. While Myanmar traditionally reveres elders, this report shows the military disregards this, killing and injuring many older people indiscriminately. Furthermore, older individuals often choose to stay in their homes due to deep attachments to land and community. This connection becomes dangerous when homes become targets. In Rakhine State, soldiers were documented beating and beheading elderly residents unable to flee—a stark example of cultural attachment turning into a lethal liability.

Poor health

Pre-existing health conditions and scarce accessible transportation further undermine survival prospects. Myanmar's healthcare system has deteriorated drastically since the coup, making routine medical care difficult to access. Older people with chronic conditions face huge barriers to getting life-saving medications or hospital care. Lack of accessible emergency transport or nearby functioning clinics forces many to endure perilous journeys or abandon homes entirely.

Capture

The conflict reveals unexpected patterns, challenging assumptions about the vulnerability of older people. Rather than age offering protection, the incidence of extrajudicial killings seems to increase with age. While 34% of victims aged 60–79 were executed extrajudicially, this rises to 46% for those 80–89, and 78% for those over 90. It appears that while younger older persons might be killed while being caught in chaos while fleeing. Whereas the oldest and least mobile are more likely to be left behind and then deliberately killed by the military.

Intersectional vulnerabilities

Older persons also face overlapping vulnerabilities related to gender, disability, and displacement. While men constitute 60% of older victims killed, the relatively high proportion of [women](#) (40%) is significant, as men typically dominate more general conflict casualty statistics in Myanmar. This suggests age, combined with other factors like disability or caregiving roles, may put older women at greater risk than younger women.

[Disabilities](#) further compound risk. At least 4% of older persons killed had severe disabilities not solely related to age, likely an underestimate due to data collection challenges. A further 13% had documented mobility issues preventing escape. For example, in 2023, soldiers raided a village in Magway Region, detaining and later executing several older people with disabilities. In 2022, soldiers attacked another village, detaining, torturing, and killing an older man who was mute.

Older internally displaced persons (IDPs) face even more acute risks. At least 4% of older victims were IDPs, also likely an undercount. Their lack of stable support networks amplifies vulnerability during raids or when seeking aid.

Conclusion

Older persons in Myanmar are caught in a cycle of targeted violence and arbitrary detention. They are not incidental victims but are often deliberately singled out due to perceived political affiliations or their inherent vulnerabilities. Mobility issues, health conditions, and cultural ties make them unable or unwilling to flee, turning them into prime targets during military operations.

Even when detained, they face disproportionate sentences under politicised laws, often without adequate medical care. The violations range from extrajudicial executions and torture to forced disappearances. These patterns indicate a systematic assault on their rights. Urgent international intervention is needed to protect Myanmar's older population and ensure accountability.

Recommendations

- **Call for immediate protections:** The Independent Expert should urge all parties in Myanmar to ensure older persons' safety, including ceasefire measures near civilian areas.
- **Demand humanitarian access:** Advocate for unimpeded humanitarian assistance tailored to older people's mobility, health, and communication needs.
- **Accountability mechanisms:** Press for international investigations into arbitrary killings, torture, and extrajudicial executions targeting older persons.
- **Legal reforms:** Recommend the repeal or amendment of politicised laws used to detain and convict older individuals without due process.
- **Monitoring and reporting:** Strengthen documentation of violations against older persons, emphasising intersectional vulnerabilities such as disability and displacement.

Annex

Forms of unlawful killing			
	Extrajudicial Killing	Arbitrary Killing	Prolonged torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment
Definition	Intentional killing by state agents without legal process.	Any unlawful killing violating international law, including excessive or indiscriminate force.	Intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, physical or mental, for a purpose such as punishment or coercion.
Intent	Deliberate targeting of individuals.	May result from reckless actions or disproportionate force.	To cause suffering (not necessarily to kill).
Legal Process	No due process—executions without trial.	Could involve improper or unlawful state action but not necessarily an execution.	No legal justification—violates absolute prohibition under international law.
Examples	Political assassinations, summary executions, death squads.	Airstrikes on civilians, police killing unarmed protesters, deaths due to medical neglect in detention.	Beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, stress positions.