

# Burma Briefing

## Aviation Fuel Sanctions: Questions and Answers



February 2022

### Why is Burma Campaign UK calling for sanctions on aviation fuel?

Since the attempted coup on 1st February 2021 there has been unprecedented resistance to the military. In a desperate attempt to try to control the country, the military are resorting to ever more brutal tactics of repression, but their tactics are not working.

Air power is now one of the main ways they are trying to establish control, indiscriminately bombing civilian targets as well as attacking ethnic and other armed resistance forces.

Indiscriminate bombing by the military, mainly in ethnic states and Sagaing Region, has forced

hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes. Regular flights by jets, drones and helicopters prevent them from returning home because of the threat of more bombing if they did. This has created a humanitarian crisis.

The majority of the more than 400,000 people who have been displaced from their homes since the attempted coup are displaced because of air strikes or the threat of air strikes.

In addition, dozens of people have been killed by air strikes, with many more injured. Schools, hospitals, medical clinics, a library and many homes have also been damaged or destroyed.



Comment, briefing & analysis from Burma Campaign UK

## **Do Myanmar organisations support aviation fuel sanctions?**

Many civil society organisations in and from Burma support aviation fuel sanctions, and we were asked to campaign more on this issue. The Karen Peace Support Network, Karenni Human Rights Group, National Unity Government (NUG), Karen Women's Organization, International Karen Organisation and European Karen Network have all made calls for aviation fuel sanctions and more organisations are planning campaigns.

## **What kind of sanctions are you calling for?**

We are calling for sanctions on Burmese companies involved in the supply of aviation fuel to the military, and sanctions from governments to stop companies from their countries being involved in any aspect of aviation fuel supply. This includes sales, shipping, ports, equipment, services, insurance and certification and accreditation services.

## **Why does all aviation fuel to Myanmar need to be sanctioned?**

The Burmese military have jets and helicopters mainly bought from Russia, China, Pakistan and Serbia. They use ordinary Jet-A1 grade aviation fuel, the same as normal commercial aircraft, rather than military grade aviation fuel.

As long as any aviation fuel is supplied to Myanmar, the military will be able to access it and use it.

## **Can't the military make its own aviation fuel?**

Burma has no domestic oil refining capacity. It can't manufacture aviation fuel. The Thanlyin Refinery, which was built in 1955, closed in 2017 as it needed very significant repairs and upgrading work. In 2020 India proposed providing assistance to build a new refinery but there has been no apparent progress.

The fact that the military are dependent on imports provides more leverage and opportunities to cut their supply of aviation fuel.

## **Won't sanctions on aviation fuel hurt ordinary people?**

The main impact of aviation fuel sanctions on ordinary people could be the grounding of domestic flights in Burma. However, only a very small proportion of the population of Burma can afford to use domestic airlines. The inconvenience

of travelling by road instead of air is very small compared to the humanitarian crisis being caused by airstrikes.

## **Why don't you campaign to stop bombs being sold to the military instead of aviation fuel to the whole country?**

Burma Campaign UK has been campaigning for a United Nations mandated global arms embargo since 1991, but Russia and China are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and will veto any UN Security Council resolution imposing an arms embargo. Both countries are major suppliers of arms and equipment to the Burmese military. We continue to campaign to persuade more countries to impose arms embargoes, but at the current time we can't stop the supply of bombs. However, we can impact the supply of aviation fuel. If they can't fly, they can't bomb.

You can read more about our campaign to stop the flow of arms to the Burmese military here:

<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/take-action/arms-embargo/>

## **Won't you isolate the people of Myanmar by sanctioning aviation fuel?**

Most international airlines don't refuel in Burma because the cost of imported aviation fuel is high, so there won't be an impact preventing them flying to Burma. It is possible some long-haul flights could be impacted, but there are very few at the moment because of the impact of the coup and the Covid pandemic. Passengers may have to fly to neighbouring countries like Thailand and then fly on to Burma.

## **How are the military able to use air strikes so much now compared to before?**

During the so-called reform period and transition to democracy after the 2010 elections, sanctions were lifted and the military was able to significantly expand its business interests. The annual budget of the military also increased significantly almost every year. At the same time, Min Aung Hlaing was even invited to European countries where he visited defence manufacturers, as well as regularly visiting China, Russia, India and other countries to purchase modern military equipment. The military used the past ten years to expand and modernise its air force.

### **How can humanitarian aid be delivered if aviation fuel is sanctioned?**

Domestic airlines are not used by the United Nations to deliver humanitarian aid, although staff do use domestic airlines. They will have to travel by road but this inconvenience is small compared to the humanitarian crisis caused by airstrikes. The World Food Programme flies in aid from Malaysia and these flights may refuel in Yangon, but we don't have confirmation on that yet. If they do, there will be extra costs and inconvenience in having to stop over and refuel in Bangkok, but again, compared to the humanitarian crisis caused by airstrikes, this inconvenience is a small price to pay.

### **Only western countries impose sanctions. Are western companies supplying aviation fuel?**

We are in the process of researching the companies involved in the supply of aviation fuel, and companies from Asia, Europe and the USA appear to be involved in different areas of supply. We will publish a briefing paper with more details once research is complete. Many Asian companies avoid being involved with companies in Burma which have been sanctioned by western countries. Since the attempted coup, Japan and South Korea have imposed sanctions on the supply of arms and military equipment.

### **Won't China just supply aviation fuel if there are sanctions by western countries?**

The operations of shipping and ports are all vulnerable to western sanctions. If China uses tanker trucks to bring in supplies by land across the border, this will be more expensive for the military and cause problems in supply chains. The tankers will also be vulnerable to attacks by Ethnic Armed Organisations. In the past year, the Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Liberation Army have attacked tankers they suspected were bringing aviation fuel across the border from China and Thailand.

### **Is it realistic to think western countries will sanction aviation fuel?**

Western countries sanctioned the supply of aviation fuel to Syria for the same reasons as we are asking for sanctions on aviation fuel to Burma. The Syrian regime was using air power to indiscriminately bomb and kill civilians, which also caused a humanitarian crisis.

### **What about Asian companies that don't care about western sanctions?**

There are many potential pressure points on Asian companies involved in the supply of aviation fuel, including their government, western governments, members of Parliament from their country, media attention, shareholders and/or owners, their business consumers, members of the public who are customers, their business partners, business suppliers, providers of insurance and of accreditation and certification services, business interests and subsidiaries around the world, and boycott campaigns. Over time, we can apply systematic pressure in these areas.

### **The Burmese military also attacks civilians with heavy artillery, with or without air power, so won't people be displaced anyway?**

Not on this scale. The military are using so many airstrikes because they are losing control on the ground. New heavy artillery used by the military is also causing death, destruction and forcing people from their homes, but not as many as are being displaced by airstrikes and unable to return home because of the threat of air strikes.

Airpower is also being used to transport soldiers to areas they are otherwise unable to access by road, enabling them to carry out more attacks and cause more death and displacement. Domestic commercial passenger airlines are also being used to transport soldiers around the country.





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