



Living with Fear, Working in Silence

Situation of Human Rights Defenders
in Kachin and Northern Shan States
after the Coup



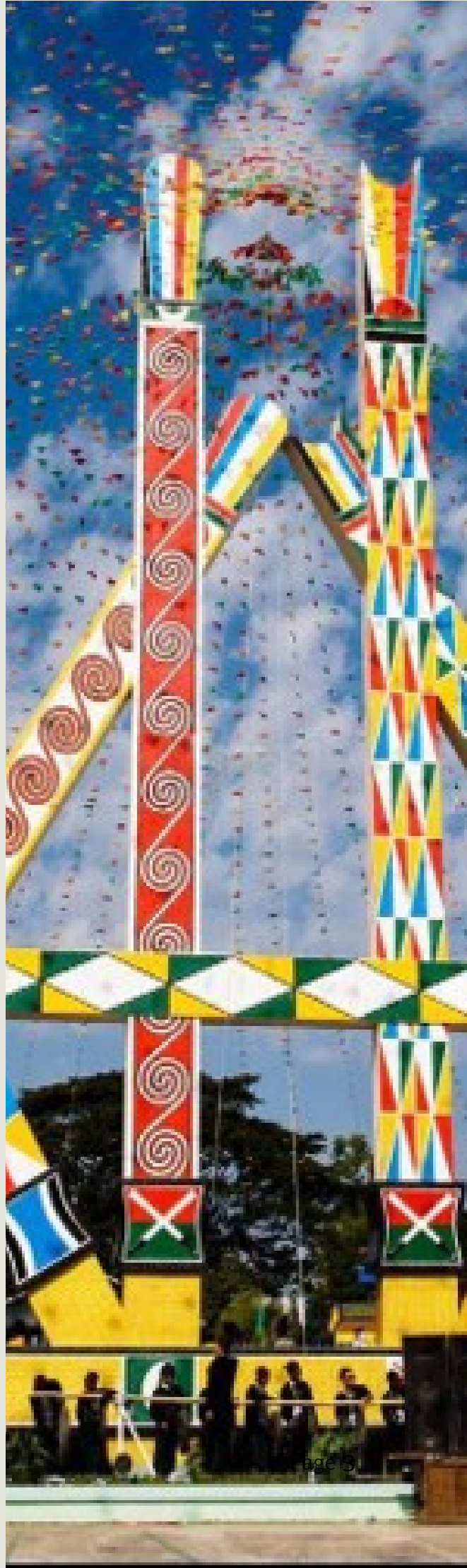
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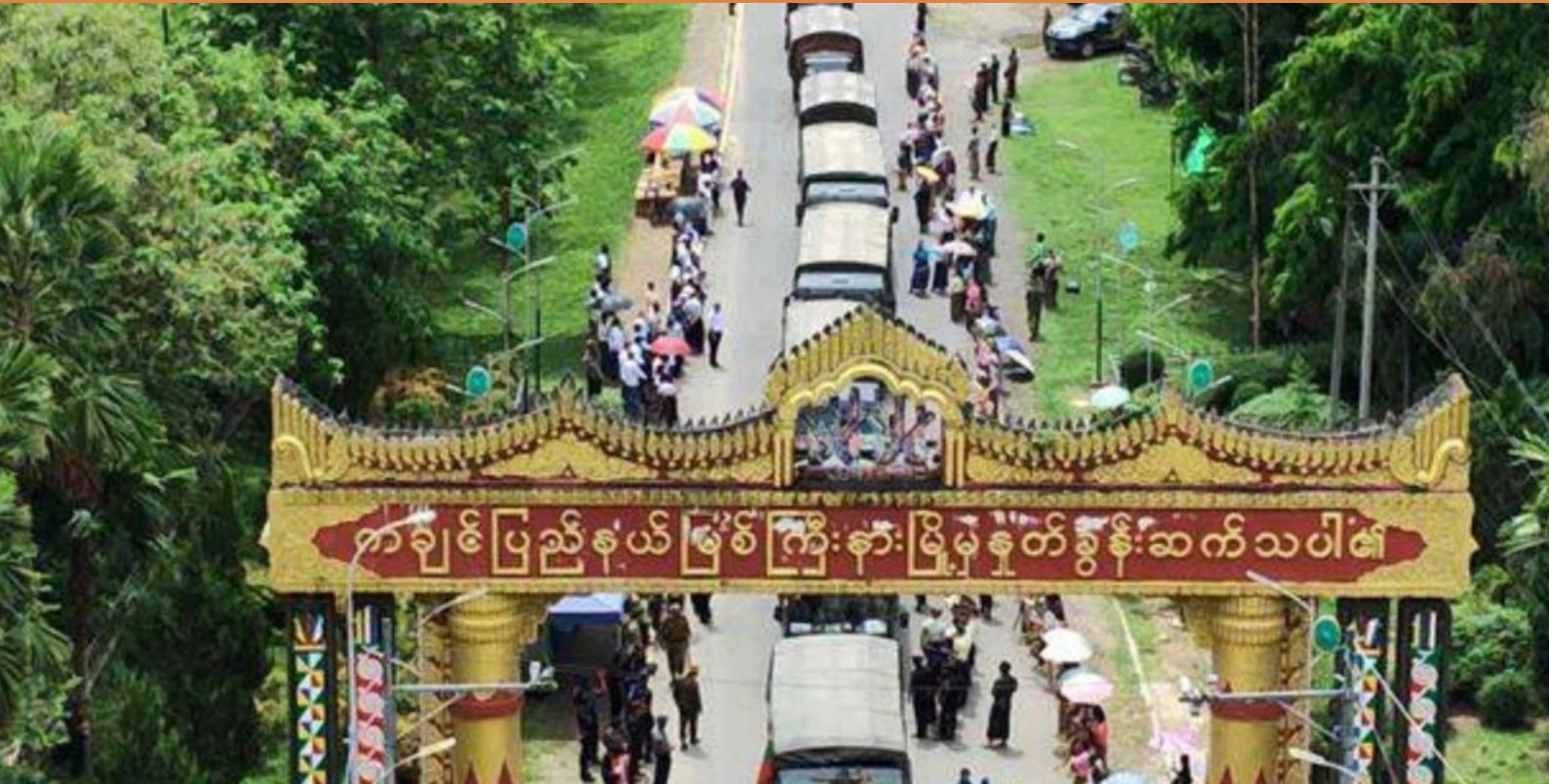
Executive Summary

Since the 2021 coup, human rights defenders (HRDs) in Kachin and Northern Shan States have operated in an increasingly restrictive environment marked by surveillance, movement restrictions, arbitrary arrest risks, digital monitoring, social stigma, and psychological stress. KHRW interviews indicate that HRDs are no longer threatened solely by the Myanmar military but also face pressure from multiple armed actors, local authorities, militias, business interests, and community mistrust. These challenges reflect broader national trends of shrinking civic space and heightened risks for civil society and human rights work.

Despite these pressures, HRDs continue their work through low-profile operations, trusted peer networks, digital security practices, and careful travel planning. However, protection mechanisms remain uneven, short-term, and often inaccessible to frontline, women-led, environmental, and community-based defenders. Interviewees identified urgent needs for emergency relocation, safe houses, mental health support, digital and physical security training, flexible funding, and family-inclusive protection assistance to sustain their work and well-being.



Methodology



Between February and May 2026, Kachin Human Rights Watch (KHRW) conducted remote consultations and in-depth interviews with more than 25 human rights defenders and civil society representatives from Kachin and Northern Shan States. Participants included environmental defenders, youth activists, lawyers, CDM members, women human rights defenders, education, and disability rights advocates to capture diverse experiences. Most interviews were conducted through one-to-one conversations using secure voice or text communication. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and identifying information has been withheld to protect their safety and confidentiality.

Introduction



Human rights defenders in Kachin and Northern Shan States operate within a shrinking civic space shaped by militarization, fragmented territorial control, and pervasive fear. Across Myanmar, HRDs continue to face harassment, arbitrary detention, torture, surveillance, judicial harassment, and violence, while thousands of activists, political prisoners, and civilians have been arrested or killed since the 2021 coup[1].

KHRW interviews show how these broader patterns are experienced locally: checkpoint inspections, social media monitoring, travel restrictions, intimidation, funding insecurity, and trauma have pushed many HRDs to work discreetly, remotely, or through trusted networks.

4. Contextual Overview

4.1 Protection Environment for HRDs in Kachin State

Since early 2024, intensified offensives by the KIA and allied resistance forces have increased militarization and displacement across Kachin State. Escalating clashes and insecurity along key transport corridors have heightened checkpoint scrutiny, surveillance, and risks for defenders working on documentation, women's rights, and environmental issues. [2]Expanding unregulated resource extraction has increased pressure on land and environmental defenders. Women HRDs reported additional concerns related to family safety and social expectations, while prolonged insecurity, economic hardship, and repeated displacement have contributed to fear, burnout, and shrinking civic space.



Source: Irrawaddy



Source: SHAN

4.2 Protection Environment for HRDs in Northern Shan State

Northern Shan State presents a particularly complex environment for HRDs, shaped by overlapping authorities and shifting control among the Myanmar military, Ta-ang's National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), militias, and local administrations following Operation 1027[3]. Changing frontlines and competing governance systems have fragmented access and increased pressure from multiple actors.[4] Frequent checkpoint inspections, inconsistent regulations, and political sensitivities have weakened coordination among defenders, forcing many to rely on discreet networks, remote communication, and low-profile documentation practices to continue their work safely.

- KHRW Report 2026

[2] A/80/490: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar | OHCHR

[3] [M2026-021_Eng.pdf](#)

[4] [A/80/490: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar | OHCHR](#)

4.3 Protection Environment for HRDs after the Sham Elections

Despite the formation of a new government where military rebranded itself as a civilian government without meaningful reform, HRDs in Kachin and Northern Shan reported little improvement in security conditions. In Kachin, intensified airstrikes, military reinforcements, and recurring road closures have disrupted access and increased risks for defenders. In northern Shan, Chinese pressure has reduced large-scale fighting, but tensions among alliance members, fragmented authority, and rising criminal activities, including online scam networks, continue to create an unpredictable environment. Respondents described persistent displacement, surveillance, and psychological stress, relying on low-profile approaches and trusted networks to continue their work.

“I have not seen any major changes. A new government has been formed, but it is not the kind of change people had hoped for. It feels like change has happened only in name, not in reality.”

— Nong, pseudonym, women HRD, Shan State



Source: CNN

5. Key Findings

5.1 Movement, Access, and Operational Constraints have become major risks for HRDs

Movement and operational constraints have become some of the most pervasive threats facing human rights defenders (HRDs) in Myanmar. Checkpoints, surveillance, arbitrary inspections, forced recruitment, and restrictions on freedom of movement have increasingly constrained the ability of defenders and civil society actors to operate safely. [5] Changing territorial control and shifting conflict lines have made it harder for HRDs to reach communities and carry out their work safely.

HRDs interviewed described travel as one of the riskiest aspects of their work. Checkpoints, document inspections, phone searches, airport screening, and road closures limit their ability to conduct documentation and provide support. Several reported constant anxiety during travel, while one linked a previous arrest to phone tracking. Even humanitarian-related movement can attract suspicion, leading many to reduce public events, limit social media activity, and maintain a lower profile.

Compounding these risks, recurring power outages, fuel shortages, and rising commodity prices have increased operational costs and disrupted communications, making it harder for HRDs to travel safely, maintain digital security practices, and sustain their work amid growing economic pressures.

“People think I am brave, but every time I pass through airport and immigration checkpoints, I am overwhelmed with fear. The trauma runs so deep that I no longer want to travel abroad.”

— Htoi, pseudonym, Women HRD, Kachin State



Source: KNG

- KHRW Report 2026

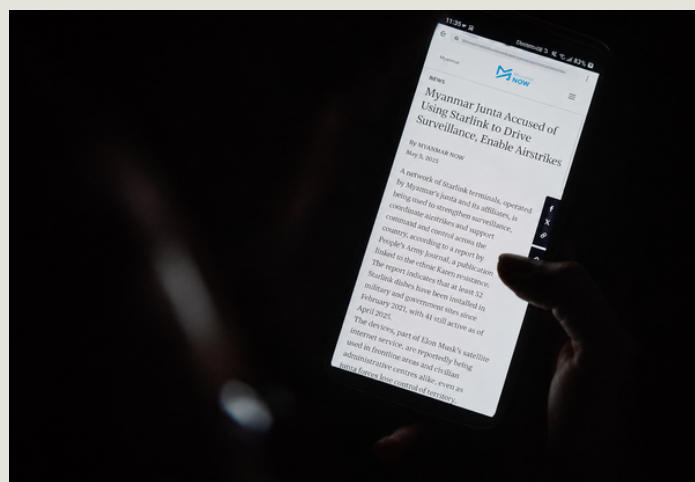
5.2 Digital repression

Digital repression has become a defining feature of Myanmar's post-coup environment. Expanding online surveillance, censorship measures, arrests linked to social media activity, and the growing use of technologies that enable authorities to monitor communications have significantly narrowed digital civic space. [6]. Continued restrictions on online expression and increasing scrutiny of digital activities have reinforced concerns that Myanmar is evolving toward a more tightly controlled digital authoritarian environment.[7]

Interviewees reported on social media monitoring, scrutiny of financial transactions, and fears that their names may be on watchlists. Multiple HRDs described changing their online behavior, restricting political posts, deleting sensitive information before travel, uninstalling secure messaging applications prior to checkpoint inspections, and using VPNs and Starlink selectively to reduce risks. As a result, digital security is no longer viewed as optional but as a basic survival requirement. These precautions increase workload, limit public engagement, and make documenting human rights violations more difficult and risky.

“I can no longer travel or organize activities freely. Before every trip, I clear my phone and leave sensitive documents behind. We have learned to live with the feeling that someone may always be watching.”

— Naw Naw, pseudonym, environmental HRD, Kachin State



Source: Myanmar Now

5.3 Arrest and fear of re-arrest

Arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and fear of re-arrest continue to shape how HRDs operate in Myanmar. Widespread arrests, deaths in custody, and the continued use of detention and ill-treatment against perceived opponents have made imprisonment a central tool of repression.[8] Since the coup, more than 31,000 civilians and pro-democracy activists have been arrested, while arbitrary detention and torture remain persistent concerns.[9]

[6] 2025 Yearly Report on Digital Repression in Myanmar

[7] HRM-AI-and-counter-terrorism.pdf

[8] AnnualUpdateontheHumanRightsSituationinMyanmar2024.pdf

[9] coup.aappb.org/data-dashboard

Interviewees described previous arrests, interrogations, prison experiences, and the lasting fear of being detained again. Even where torture did not occur, the threat of interrogation, prolonged imprisonment, and political charges created long-term insecurity. Several former detainees reported remaining under surveillance or facing restrictions due to confiscated identity documents and blacklist categories.

As a result, many HRDs described limiting their movements, avoiding carrying sensitive documents, practicing self-censorship, and reducing their activities because they felt they could be arrested “at any time.”



Activists delivering food and essential supplies to HRDs detained in Myitkyina Prison. (Photo: KHRW)

“In June 2021, I was arrested while in hiding. They blindfolded me and interrogated me for days without proper food or sleep. I was eventually sentenced to prison and only released in early 2025. Since my release, life has not returned to normal. I live under constant surveillance and know I could be rearrested at any time.”

— Yi Yi, pseudonym, CDMer, Kachin State

“After spending 105 days in prison, the fear never really left me. I still avoid air travel because I worry my name is on a watchlist. I choose road travel instead, but the memories of interrogation and the constant fear of being arrested again still stay with me.”

— Peter, pseudonym, Youth HRD, Kachin State

5.4 Gendered risks

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Myanmar face intersecting risks arising from conflict, gender norms, and caregiving responsibilities. Women's rights organizations have documented how women defenders are exposed not only to surveillance, arrest, and insecurity, but also to gender-based stigma, reputational attacks, and family pressures that are less commonly experienced by their male counterparts.[10] Women interviewed reported fear during travel, concerns for family safety, stigma after detention, and scrutiny linked to male relatives. One WHRD from northern Shan described being questioned about her morality and reputation because her work required frequent interaction with men, adding social risks beyond physical threats.

Many WHRDs also shoulder a “double burden” of human rights work alongside childcare, household responsibilities, and supporting displaced families, political prisoners, and survivors. Working from home often provides little relief, contributing to exhaustion and highlighting the importance of financial, healthcare, childcare, and psychosocial support to sustain their engagement.

“As a woman HRD, I faced not only threats from armed actors, but also judgment from my own community. People questioned my work, my reputation, and even my morality, leaving me feeling isolated and exhausted.”

— Shayi, pseudonym, Aid Worker, Northern Shan State



Source: Facebook

[10] Gender Equality Network (GEN) Myanmar and Women's League of Burma (WLB) reports on women defenders and gendered impacts of conflict.

5.5 Protection Gaps and Wellbeing Challenges

Although protection support for human rights defenders (HRDs) has expanded since the coup, significant gaps in access, livelihood stability, and long-term sustainability remain. Interviewees acknowledged the value of digital security training, VPN and Starlink access, emergency relocation, psychosocial support, and legal aid, but noted that assistance often fails to reach defenders in hiding or those working on environmental and land rights. Weak mental health support, funding instability, and concerns over misuse of assistance have also undermined trust in protection mechanisms.

Psychological stress, burnout, and isolation were common themes across interviews. Many HRDs described living with fear, trauma, sleep disturbances, and shrinking social connections. Rising criminality and economic hardship have further heightened insecurity, forcing some to reduce documentation and advocacy activities or withdraw from public engagement altogether, raising concerns about the sustainability of frontline human rights work. [11]

“There is no sense of security. I constantly worry about my family members. Since my younger brother is a young man, I become anxious whenever he goes outside. Theft and robberies have become more common.”

— Mai, pseudonym, women HRD, Northern Shan State

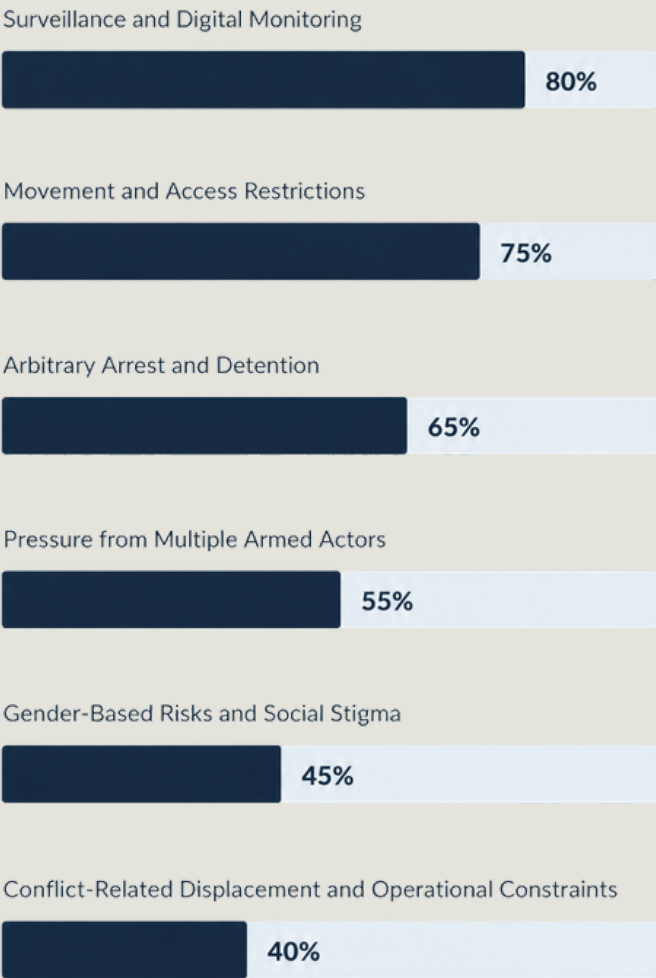


6.Threat Landscape for Human Rights Defenders

Surveillance and Digital Monitoring	. Surveillance and online monitoring drive self-censorship and lower visibility. . HRDs delete data, limit online activity, and avoid sensitive communications.
Movement and Access Restrictions	. Checkpoint inspections, document checks, and phone searches restrict movement. . Access restrictions limit community engagement and increase travel-related stress.
Arbitrary Arrest and Detention	. Fear of arrest, detention, and re-arrest remains widespread. . Former detainees report lasting trauma and surveillance concerns.
Pressure from Multiple Armed Actors	. Environmental defenders face questioning, monitoring, and pressure from armed actors. . Competing authorities create additional risks and uncertainty
Gender-Based Risks and Social Stigma	.Women HRDs face community scrutiny, rumors, and reputational attacks. .Women defenders and former detainees experience stigma and social exclusion.
Conflict-Related Displacement and Operational Constraints	. Conflict and militarization have caused displacement and communication disruptions. . Shrinking civic space limits documentation, advocacy, and community engagement.

HRDs Reported Risks: Most Frequently Reported Risks

Figures show the percentage of respondents who mentioned each risk.



Note: Respondents could report multiple risks; percentages do not total 100%.

7. Protection and Coping Strategies

7.1 Existing Support and Protection Gaps

HRDs in Kachin and Northern Shan rely heavily on trusted networks, women's organizations, and informal support channels for protection. Interviewees reported receiving digital security training, VPN access, psychosocial support, relocation assistance, legal aid, and financial support. Networks such as the Kachin State Human Rights Defenders Network (KHRN) provide solidarity through case monitoring, capacity building, and joint advocacy.

Despite these efforts, protection support remains uneven and often depends on personal connections. Interviewees highlighted shortages of safe houses, relocation funding, mental health services, and family-inclusive assistance. Grassroots, unregistered, and hidden HRDs often struggle to access support, particularly those without NGO connections.

“The network cannot manage to organize scenario-based and incident-based contingency planning exercises that could provide protection action plans for network members.”

— KHRN Network member

7.2 Security Practices and Coping Mechanisms

HRDs have adopted various self-protection measures to manage increasing risks. Many maintain a low profile by limiting public visibility, reducing social media activity, and avoiding sensitive events. Digital security practices such as using VPNs, encrypted communication, and deleting sensitive data before travel have become routine. HRDs also carefully manage travel by screening participants, selecting safer locations, and avoiding sensitive documents.

To cope with stress and trauma, many rely on trusted friends, peer networks, exercise, and self-care. However, these informal coping strategies are often insufficient, particularly for former detainees, displaced women HRDs, and those facing prolonged insecurity.

SECURITY PRACTICES USED BY HRDS IN KACHIN & NORTHERN SHAN STATE



8. Case Studies

Continuing Quietly Behind the Scenes

Location: Kachin State

Role: Land and Environmental Rights Defender

Pseudonym: Nong

Before the 2021 military coup, Nong (pseudonym), a Shan ethnic land and environmental rights defender based in Kachin State, worked openly with communities on land rights and environmental protection. Much of her work focused on supporting community advocacy and helping local people protect their natural resources and livelihoods. Following the coup, shrinking civic space and increasing security risks made it impossible for her to continue this work openly. To avoid unwanted attention, she publicly presented herself as a make-up artist while quietly continuing her human rights work behind the scenes.

Despite maintaining a low profile, Nong remained involved in documenting human rights violations and supporting affected communities. The constant pressure and fear gradually took a heavy emotional toll, leaving her exhausted and struggling with stress and trauma. With support from local organizations, she was able to access counselling services, which helped her process her experiences, understand her own limitations, and cope with feelings of guilt. Today, she continues her work through trusted friends and networks while carefully managing her visibility. Although the risks remain, she remains committed to supporting her communities and believes the work is still necessary.

“Counselling helped me understand my own limits and deal with feelings of guilt. I continue this work carefully because I know it is still important for our communities.”

Living with Trauma, Continuing to Resist

Location: Kachin State

Role: Youth Activist and Human Rights Defender

Pseudonym: Zau Bawk

Before the 2021 military coup, Zau Bawk (pseudonym) was active in youth movements and humanitarian work. As a university student, he worked on issues affecting displaced communities and later joined campaigns calling for the protection of civilians trapped by conflict. In 2019, he was arrested for his advocacy activities and spent more than three months in prison. Even then, he recalled that there was still some space to speak out.

Following the coup, the risks increased significantly. As arrests intensified, public protests shifted to smaller demonstrations and many activists went into hiding. Although he has since returned home, concerns about surveillance remain. He avoids air travel after being warned that his name may be on a watchlist and continues to assess security risks in daily life. To reduce exposure, he avoids carrying sensitive documents, uses separate phones when travelling, and carefully screens participants before activities. The experience of imprisonment and years in hiding continue to affect him, but support from trusted friends and local organizations has enabled him to continue his work.

“I am always thinking about security and what could happen if I make a mistake. Despite the risks, I still believe it is important to continue standing up for our communities.”

Standing by Others Despite Constant Fear

Location: Kachin State

Role: CDM (former legal practitioner)

Pseudonym: Thidar

Before the 2021 military coup, Thidar (pseudonym) worked in the judicial department for nearly two decades. During the democratic period, she viewed public service as a responsibility and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement after the military takeover. In June 2021, she was arrested while in hiding, blindfolded, and interrogated for several days without adequate food or sleep. She was later sentenced to prison and released in early 2025.

Since her release, Thidar has continued to live under constant surveillance and fears rearrest. While some people have distanced themselves out of fear, others have quietly supported her. She now assists political prisoners by sending supplies and providing basic legal support whenever possible. To reduce risks, she maintains a low profile and avoids discussing political issues in unsafe settings. Support from women's networks and protection training has helped her regain confidence and continue supporting others despite ongoing concerns about her own safety.

“Despite everything, I still believe we need to stand by one another and continue helping those who are suffering.”

Finding Strength Through Community

Location: Northern Shan State

Role: Humanitarian Worker and Disability Rights Advocate

Pseudonym: Shayi

Before the 2021 military coup, Shayi (pseudonym) worked openly on youth issues, disability rights, and documenting human rights violations in northern Shan State. Although conflict had long affected the area, there was still some space to engage with police and judicial institutions on social justice concerns.

Following the coup, operating conditions became increasingly difficult. In addition to concerns related to the military, Shayi also faced pressure from armed groups, militias, and at times members of her own community. False accusations, social criticism, and financial insecurity added to the challenges. During this period, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, further affecting her wellbeing and limiting her support networks.

To reduce risks, Shayi adopted a lower profile and avoided unnecessary public exposure. Rather than approaching authorities directly, she increasingly relied on trusted women's organizations and community networks for support. Despite ongoing challenges, she continues humanitarian and disability rights work through informal channels and local relationships.

“I believe I have come this far because of God’s grace and the kindness of people around me. Despite everything, I continue this work because there are still many people who need help.”

9. Recommendations

To Donor Organizations

- Provide flexible, long-term, and locally accessible protection funding for HRDs inside Myanmar, including emergency relocation, legal aid, medical care, digital security, psychosocial support, and livelihood assistance. Funding mechanisms should prioritize frontline, women-led, environmental, grassroots, and unregistered groups, including HRDs in hiding and former detainees.
- Invest in sustainable wellbeing and resilience support, including mental health services, peer networks, income support, and gender-responsive assistance such as childcare and healthcare for women HRDs and caregivers.
- Strengthen capacity and protection for HRDs facing evolving risks, including regular security training, legal awareness, and tailored support for environmental and land rights defenders working in sensitive contexts.
- Expand cross-border and remote support channels for HRDs who cannot safely register organizations, travel, or use formal banking systems, while ensuring assistance reaches those operating discreetly inside the country.

To UN Agencies, INGOs, and Protection Organizations

- Strengthen localization by partnering with trusted community networks and reducing barriers that prevent informal and unregistered groups from accessing support.
- Develop flexible, low-visibility support mechanisms and referral pathways that can safely reach HRDs inside Myanmar.
- Support regular training on digital security, checkpoint preparedness, safe documentation, and risk assessment.

To Embassies and Diplomatic Missions Supporting Myanmar Civil Society

- Publicly recognize HRDs, journalists, lawyers, women HRDs, environmental defenders, CDM participants, and community leaders as groups at heightened risk, and ensure that protection and accountability remain part of diplomatic engagement and efforts to preserve evidence for future justice.

10. Conclusion

Human rights defenders in Kachin and Northern Shan States continue to operate under increasing pressure from conflict, surveillance, and shrinking civic space. Despite fears of arrest, displacement, economic hardship, and psychological stress, many continue their work through trusted networks, careful adaptation, and collective solidarity. Their experiences demonstrate both the resilience of local defenders and the urgent need for more accessible, sustainable, and context-sensitive protection support to ensure that frontline human rights work can continue.



About KHRW

Founded in 2021. Kachin Human Rights Watch (KHRW) is a non-governmental organization to document human rights violations in Kachin and Northern Shan States following Myanmar's military coup. The organization strengthens local protection through human rights documentation, capacity-building, and training on federalism, youth engagement, and evidence-based advocacy, particularly in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach communities.

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