

**World Peace Day Statement Release on the Status of Conflict-Affected Communities of Northern Shan State, issued by the Humanitarian Strategy Team-Northern Shan State (HST-NSS)**

**21 September 2020**

The Humanitarian Strategy Team-Northern Shan State (HST-NSS)<sup>1</sup> has issued the following statement on the status of conflict-affected persons of Northern Shan State, with respect to human rights violations and similar challenges, on the occasion of World Peace Day.

The HST-NSS has been providing ongoing humanitarian support to conflict-affected communities living in Northern Shan State and internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking shelter in forty IDP camps (total population: 13,600) since 2016-2017. We are also actively providing preventative and responsive support with respect to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

**Current local conditions and challenges**

1. *Impact of COVID-19 on people living in conflict-affected areas*

The citizens living in Northern Shan State are dealing with both the COVID-19 pandemic and internal armed conflict. Although Union level peace negotiations are being conducted, armed battles have not ceased. The IDPs are preparing to return to their homes, even though they do not have safety or security guarantees, which is the primary challenge with respect to return and/or resettlement of IDPs. The livelihoods of the IDPs are also under challenge in the immediate and future period, as IDP families have lost access to livelihood activities that require them to go outside IDP camps due to movement restrictions and have few opportunities to earn an income during the rainy season. They are also facing food supply shortages. As the IDPs are living in crowded living quarters in the IDP camps, social distancing is difficult for them; shared bathroom and toilet facilities also cause difficulties where observance of good personal hygiene practices is concerned. Furthermore, the IDPs are gravely affected as gaps in service delivery due to the decline in humanitarian funding. Migrant workers who have returned from where they have been working domestically or abroad remain jobless as there are no job opportunities in their home

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<sup>1</sup> The HST-NSS is composed of the following organizations: *Htoi Ninghkawng Foundation (HNF)*, *Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS)*, *Metta Development Foundation (Metta)*, *NeT organisation (NeT)*, *Northern Shan State Baptist Convention (NSSBC)*, *Shan State Kachin National Network (SKNN)*, *Ta-ang Students and Youth Union (TSYU)*, *Tai Youth Network (TYN)* and *Tai Youth Organisation (TYO)*.

communities and have no expectation of opportunities opening up to work in other regions/areas of Myanmar.

## 2. *Local armed conflict situation*

Although both the Myanmar military and the ethnic armed organisations under the umbrella of the Northern Alliance have each separately declared unilateral ceasefires in Northern Shan State, there are still armed battles in some areas, armed troop movements in different areas and continued tensions. Therefore, the civilians are at risk of not having livelihood security, have their human rights violated and are also vulnerable to landmine risk. Civilians, especially women and children, are being injured and are dying due to the ongoing armed conflict. Between February and August 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been over 23 deaths and over 20 persons injured from landmines and 25 deaths and 6 persons injured from bullets, in addition to 1,280 persons becoming temporary IDPs, 2 children being conscripted as child soldiers, 7 persons being tortured and 10 persons being imprisoned. Due to the ongoing human rights violations taking place, school-aged children and youth from the conflict-affected areas have had to seek shelter with religious organisations or relatives in nearby urban centres and youth have become migrant workers in urban businesses.

## 3. *Increasing external investment*

Northern Shan State, being located along the Myanmar-China border, is part of the main trade route between the two countries. It is also a region which is home to many different ethnic groups. Due to armed conflict which resumed in 2011, the majority of local communities and IDPs have had to leave behind their homes and property. Similarly, as there is no security in the workplace, many working-age youth have become migrant workers, leaving behind the lands and orchards they used to work. These lands, which were used for agriculture and livestock-rearing by their owners, have been infringed on and taken over by private investors through various means. Moreover, conflict-affected citizens are also facing the risk of losing their lands due to weaknesses in the current laws governing land use and ownership. The Union Government has entered into bilateral agreements with the Chinese government and have begun preparations to implement the Belt and Road Initiative; this includes site visits to measure land for infrastructure projects, but the conflict-affected citizens are afraid of losing their livelihood assets due to lack of information surrounding the project activities, which include large-scale industrial zones, livestock-breeding zones, railway systems development and mined extraction of natural resources.

#### 4. *Situation of the IDPs*

There are currently over 13,600 IDPs who have been living in 40 IDP camps located in Northern Shan State and the Manwin Gyi area of Kachin State for over nine years. They are now also having to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, as with the rest of the country. The government has initiated Union-level strategies to resettle IDPs and to close the IDP camps. The arrival of foreign business interest in the IDPs' home communities and the expansion of farmlands by residents of surrounding communities are major push factors motivating the IDPs to return to their places of origin. As time passes, the IDPs are preparing to return to their home villages.

The IDPs are facing increasing difficulties to engage in livelihood activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are also increasingly worried as humanitarian funding and assistance has been decreasing. Continued fighting and military tensions remain unabated; the presence of landmines and explosive remnants of war in former areas where fighting has taken place pose a safety and security challenge for returning IDPs.

#### 5. *China-Myanmar border situation*

Since the beginning of the pandemic, cross-border trade has become difficult. Myanmar migrant workers in China have had to return to their homes. Large-scale trading activities have continued but small-scale retailers, farmers, those making a living from harvesting and selling forest-based natural products and workers in the service industry are now jobless. As this unemployment period is prolonged, livelihoods are being lost and consequently, people's living conditions will be negatively affected.

#### 6. *Use of social media*

Northern Shan State is home to many different ethnic groups and has experienced both armed conflict and social tensions. Due to people sharing posts and opinions about the social situation, tensions have exacerbated/increased. As most are not very familiar with how they should conduct themselves on social media platforms, posts about vulnerable people/victims (including photographs and video recordings) are being shared carelessly on social media without the subject's permission; false news is being disseminated; and hate speech is being spread further afield. All of these affect human dignity.

## 7. Elections

There are unstable areas in Northern Shan State which will not be able to hold elections and comprehensive voter education cannot be carried out due to restrictions related to COVID-19 preventative measures. Moreover, independent campaigning cannot be conducted by candidates. Conflict-affected citizens are at risk of not being able to exercise their right to vote independently as some do not have their National Registration Cards (i.e., proof of citizenship) and those who are away from their home districts cannot cast advance ballots or in most cases, return home at all to cast their votes.

Given the situation and conditions as discussed above, the HST-NSS would like to make the following recommendations.

### **1. Ensure adequate provision of basic healthcare and associated preventative services with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic for IDPs and conflict-affected communities**

The Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS), World Health Organisation (WHO) and international humanitarian organisations must systematically provide basic healthcare services to IDPs and conflict-affected communities in line with international COVID-19 treatment and prevention standards and MoHS' COVID-19 Contingency Plan. Myanmar's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan must prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups, which include IDPs, returned migrant workers living in conflict-affected areas, the elderly, pregnant mothers and young children and the disabled.

### **2. Protect the human rights of IDPs and conflict-affected communities and the rights of IDPs to return to their places of origin**

The Union Government, Myanmar government armed forces and associated people's militias under their command, and ethnic armed organisations must respect international humanitarian laws and human rights laws. They must avoid targeting civilians, committing human rights violations, forced recruitment and forced labour, and enforcing illegal taxation. They must clear landmines and explosive remnants of war and must protect the civilians through the establishment of an interim period for rehabilitation.

### **3. Continue adequate provision of humanitarian assistance**

The dignity of IDPs can only be preserved if the Union Government and international humanitarian organisations continue to provide support in line with international humanitarian principles and

standards during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative that the Union Government permits humanitarian organisations to continuously provide humanitarian support in line with directives issued by MoHS.

**4. Protect the home, property and natural resources of IDPs and conflict-affected communities**

The Union Government, relevant ministries and departments, local authorities, private investors and companies must observe international humanitarian laws and the Pinheiro Principles. The housing, land and property (including agriculture lands and natural resources) of IDPs and conflict-affected communities must be protected from forced confiscation and exploitation; extraction of natural resources in the conflict areas must be avoided; and IDPs should not be prohibited from working the lands/forests to which they are able to access. These rights and access must be protected without exception.

**5. Ensure peaceful living conditions of conflict-affected communities during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Armed conflict should cease immediately. The Union Government, Myanmar government armed forces, ethnic armed organisations and organisations involved in the peace process should all especially prioritise the safety and peaceful living conditions of conflict-affected communities and IDPs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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