

# Struggle for Human Rights Education for the Mon People

Human Rights Foundation of Monland

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**M**ON STATE, in southern part of Burma/Myanmar, named after the ethnic people living there, is a lowland area with over two million people. The Mon people live not only in Mon State but also in Karen State and in Tenasserim Division.

The Mon people lost their right to self-determination more than two hundred sixty years ago. The Mon people were ruled by the British colonial government followed by the Burmese leaders, after Burma regained independence from the British.

After independence, the Burmese political leaders formed a Federal Union of Burma with ethnic people in frontier areas. The Mon people requested to have their own State in southern Burma. But it was rejected and the Mon people took up arms to fight back the Burmese Army. Then, in order to lead the political movement of the people for their right to self-determination, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) was formed in 1958.

During the wars between the NMSP/Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) and the Burmese Army, many Mon villages were burned down and were relocated in the main roads that were controlled by the government. In 1988, after the pro-democracy 8888 Uprising<sup>1</sup> in the country, the Burmese Army, under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), seized power and terrorized the people again.

From 1988 to 1995, during the period of civil war between the NMSP and the military regime (SLORC), Mon people in rural villagers were initially accused of being “rebel-supporters.” Because of this accusation, the villagers suffered from abuses and violations committed by the *tatmadaw* (Burmese army), such as arbitrary arrests and killings, torture, looting, forced relocation and dislocation, and rape.

On 29 June 1995, NMSP entered into a “gentlemen’s agreement” with SLORC to have a ceasefire. Because of NMSP pressure, SLORC promised to discontinue the conscription of forced labor and arrest of civilian porters, discontinuation of illegal taxation, allowing the operation of Mon National

Schools, and no political discrimination against the Mon people. However, the SLORC later changed its name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) which discontinued the talks with NMSP.

During the period of SLORC/SPDC, thousands of acres of lands belonging to Mon farmers were confiscated. The Burmese Army deployed more troops in Mon State, stayed on confiscated lands and put pressure on MNLA. After the Burmese Army deployed to many parts of Mon State, the Mon people again suffered from weak domestic and foreign direct investments, illegal taxation and extortion, land and property confiscation. In 2018, the NMSP signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), and had opportunity to be involved in political talks.

In February 2021, the Burmese Army, under the name of State Administrative Council (SAC), forcibly seized power from the democratically elected government led by National League for Democracy (NLD). After the military coup, the human rights violations in Mon State continued.

### **Human Rights Foundation of Monland**

Since the 1995 Ceasefire Agreement was not a political settlement, pro-democracy students from the 1988 uprising, activists and Mon community leaders and youth founded the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) on 10 December 1995 to monitor human rights violations by State authorities against the Mon and other ethnic people in southern part of Burma/Myanmar.

HURFOM primarily aims to help restore democracy, protect human rights and achieve genuine peace in the country.

It has the following specific objectives:

1. To monitor the human rights situation in southern part of Burma/Myanmar including areas where the majority Mon people are living; and
2. To empower and educate the people with human rights concepts to enable them to protect their human rights.

HURFOM focuses not only on the Mon state but also on Karen State and Tenasserim Division. It is a non-profit organization and all its members are volunteers who subscribe to the same aim.

Human rights monitoring and education constitute the major focus of the work being undertaken by HURFOM since its establishment. It developed projects on these two areas of human rights work.

### **Monitoring Initiative**

In order to both monitor the human rights situation and promote and protect the people's human rights in Burma/Myanmar, HURFOM adopted several projects, namely:

1. Human Rights Documentation and Dissemination Project;
2. Human Rights Data Management and Advocacy Project;
3. Woman and Child Rights Project;
4. Human Rights and Civic Education Project;
5. Human Rights Defending and Community Participation Project;  
and
6. Civil Society Development Project.

The Human Rights Documentation and Dissemination Project (HRD-DP) has the following objectives:

- To collect accurate information concerning human rights and fundamental democratic rights situation and disseminate information to Burma-interested groups and international organizations; and
- To raise awareness about the current human rights situation in Mon areas and southern part of Burma/Myanmar.

HURFOM human rights field workers collect information on human rights violations in both urban and rural areas in Mon State, Karen State and Tenasserim Division, such as collecting facts and SPDC orders to village leaders, taking photos of the places where human rights violations are committed and consulting with community leaders and victims. Most human rights workers reside in these villages and camps, keep contact with the main office and receive instructions from the main office about when and where to travel to document these cases.

HURFOM has documented human rights violations since 1995 such as the following:

- Conscription of forced labor in Mon areas that has continued in different ways – porters for the military offensives, guards for the

security of infrastructures (gas pipelines, bridges, road construction and other infrastructures), recruitment of militia force, etc.;

- Illegal taxation and looting by State authorities and troops of Burmese Army in many areas;
- Land and property confiscation by the military battalions of Burmese Army after 2000 following the militarization policy that caused great suffering to Mon farmers;
- After 2001, a new armed conflict broke up in southern part of Ye Township when a Mon splinter group disagreed with the cease-fire. As a result, Mon villagers in some parts of Mon State and Tenasserim Division suffered from various types of human rights violations – forced dislocation and relocation, arbitrary killing and arrest, massive arrest of civilian porters and sexual violations against women and girls.

The historical records on the SPDC and the Burmese Army take the following forms:

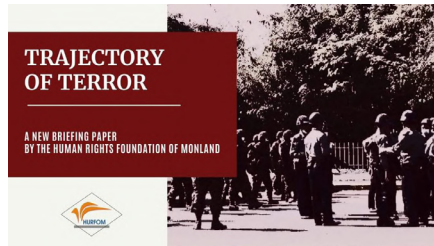
- Orders on forced labor, tax collection, extortion, etc.;
- Information and facts on human rights violations and abuses;
- Records and photos on human rights violations (conscription of forced labor and porter service, torture and inhumane treatment, etc.);
- Records and photos related to development projects (gas pipeline construction, road construction, etc.);
- Records and photos related to militarization (land confiscation, troops deployment, forced labor in military barracks, etc.); and
- Testimonies of human rights victims.

The Burmese Army and the local State authorities continue to commit human rights violations until the present. HURFOM took the responsibility of gathering information on human rights violations, documenting them systematically in a digital system, and disseminating information to the international community – United Nations and its human rights bodies, government agencies, international donor agencies, religious groups, organizations interested on Burma/Myanmar, diplomats, international and local human rights groups and others.

Currently, HRDP has three main activities:

- Monthly Production of “The Mon Forum” publication;

- Human Rights Documentation Awareness Workshop/Training;
- Production of special reports.



Reports on specific issues in Burma/Myanmar in 2021 and 2022.

HURFOM also releases information on the human rights situation through its website (<https://rehmonnya.org/archives/category/analysis/page/2>).

This tragic history should not be repeated in Burma/Myanmar when peace and unity have been attained in the future. To ensure that such information is preserved for dissemination purposes, a data management on human rights documentation project was created. The project supports mobilization, campaign and advocacy activities domestically (in Mon communities) and internationally.

HURFOM observed that although it has been involved in advocacy activities and collaborated in campaigns with other organizations, it has not adopted a systematic data management and effectively used it in advocacy activities. Additionally, in the current Information Age, it is a serious need for HURFOM to improve Information Technology and Communication skills



Mon and Burmese versions of *The Mon Forum*

in order to systematically document all human rights situations. This became the Human Rights Data Management and Advocacy Project.

### Education and Empowerment Initiative

Having been restricted from enjoying human rights and fundamental freedoms regarding expression, association and assembly, Mon people lack information and general knowledge about the concepts of human rights, peace, democracy, federal system of government and constitution, environment and community development. They do not understand well what their actual rights are according to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments. Thus, it is necessary to educate the young Mon generation and community leaders to know their rights according to international human rights standards.

In September 2019, HURFOM held an awareness-raising activity for Mon politicians, community leaders, and youth in Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, on the topic "Transitional Justice." This is part of the "Truth Seeking & Justice" Project.



(Above and opposite page, top photos) "Transitional Justice" awareness-raising activity, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, September 2019.



In celebration of the 71<sup>st</sup> International Human Rights Day, a commemorative ceremony was held in the evening of 10 December 2019 in Abo Village, Ye Township, Mon State. The celebration was organized by HURFOM along with the Mon Women's Association Model Community-Based Development Organization, Progressive Mon Youth Association Magadoo, Mon Region Community Development Association, the Mon Youth Education Association, other civil organizations. The event was held in collaboration with local youth organizations and villagers.



71<sup>st</sup> International Human Rights Day celebration, Abo Village, Ye Township, Mon State, December 10, 2019.



  
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**72<sup>nd</sup> INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY**  
 DECEMBER , 10, 2020  
 မွိတ်ကော့မွိတ် ဟဲ့ကိုပရေင်ပါခြာ  
 ပံင်ကောံနီဒွာ အန္တရာယ်ကပ်  
**Recover Better**  
 and Stand- Up for Human Rights  
 လူကိုလူချင်း ခွဲခြားမှုကင်း  
 စုပေါင်းကာကွယ် ကိုဗစ်အန္တရာယ်  
 Art by - United Nations  


72<sup>nd</sup> International Human Rights Day celebration, 2020



Human Rights Documentation and Reporting Training for youth in Mon State, Mawlamyine, January 2020.



Training of Trainers for youth, January 2020.



Awareness-raising activities on human rights for the youth in Ye Township, southern Mon State, May and September 2020.

Due to the chronic lack of freedom of the press and because of the traditional and systematic racist policy of the military dictatorship, there are no books in Burma/Myanmar about today's world affairs or the global struggle for human rights, peace, democracy, nationalism, federalism and self-determination.

In order to provide human rights and civic education to Mon people especially the younger generations in the communities, HURFOM produced a "journal" comprised of articles relating to human rights and other general knowledge. To have deep understanding of human rights and other concepts, HURFOM has also conducted workshops. Participatory workshop has proven to be the most effective way of providing general knowledge to community leaders, leaders of civil society organizations, youth and women and of making them discuss their suffering under the rule of military dictatorship and share political ideas.

### **Human Rights and Civic Education Project**

HURFOM started the Human Rights and Civic Education Project with the following objectives:

- To educate the Mon communities about concepts of human rights and general knowledge on democracy, peace, ethnic people's rights and federalism according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments;
- To introduce to the grassroots Mon communities the ideals behind the struggle for democracy and the important role of the international community;
- To raise the awareness of people at the grassroots Mon communities about health, education, environment, community development and other issues and to encourage them to actively participate in developing themselves and their community.

The project has several activities:

- Printing books on democracy, federal system of government, human rights (a human rights handbook and a Human Rights Defender book);
- Providing capacity-building opportunities such as Human Rights Training, Federal Study Training, Human Rights Defender Training, Human Rights Training of Trainers and Human Rights Defender Training of Trainers.

A Training of Trainers for the youth in Mon and Karen states and Tanintharyi region was held in Mawlamyine on 16 -21 January 2020. Four men and eighteen women attended the training which focused on the theme “Local youth as human rights educators.” The training course covered basic concepts of human rights and human rights violations, qualities of human rights educators, and how to design a teaching guide (module). This Training of Trainers course aimed at enabling the youth to carry out human rights education activities in their own area.

### **Human Rights Defending and Community Participation Project**

Although the Mon communities at present have become stable and suffer less violations compared to the period before the ceasefire, the Mon people still suffer from human rights violations such as conscription of forced labor, illegal tax and extortion, restriction on their livelihood activities, restriction against the ethnic nationalities’ right to education and culture, land and property confiscation, etc.

Since ethnic and democratic politicians and the NMSP revolutionary leaders could not protect people from human rights violations, the Mon villagers acted to protect themselves. The educated persons in the community and the Buddhist monks were involved in protecting the community against human rights violations and in obtaining justice. NMSP officials have behind-the-scene support in re-establishing “Civil Society” groups in the rural areas and in increasing the capacities of the communities.

With stronger communities and more human rights defenders, the members of the communities could be involved in many ways to defend their own human rights. But they require the techniques, knowledge and networking skills with individuals or organizations working for human rights protection. HURFOM’s Coordinator for this Project collected complete and accurate information for this project then arranged meetings/small workshops in the communities to discuss the information and provided support for subsequent activities.

This led HURFOM to start its Human Rights Defending and Community Participation Project with the following objectives:

- To strengthen the community participation and coordination for the defense against human rights violations through non-violent means, by learning the Burmese government’s existing regulations, legal system, laws and orders;

- To introduce the community leaders and civil society leaders to the techniques of defending against human rights violations that happen in their community and of lessening these violations;
- To encourage them to have practical involvement in the activities or movement related to their rights and defending against human rights violations happening in the communities.

Several activities are being undertaken in this project such as:

- Providing information about laws, human rights and human rights defense techniques (to the community people);
- Creating media contact and networks among the communities;
- Holding Mon CBOs (Community-based Organizations) Seminar on Networking for Community Empowerment.



Training on constitution and election-related information, Mawlamyine, January 2020.

On 5 March 2020, HURFOM led an open discussion on human rights at the Ko Lwin Family Motel in Rye, Mon State with twenty-three local people attending.

Naichon, Program Coordinator of HURFOM, explained the conditions of human rights violations. There were discussions about women's and child rights. Advocate Nyeg San Oo from the Rama Nyam Lawyers Network gave a presentation on human rights and existing legislations and ways of solving problems using law. Mima Lamon, the person in charge of the Mon commu-

nity development group, discussed the situation of human rights violations in the township.

There was also discussion regarding land and investments. The residents said that their land was confiscated due to the railway project in the Mon State South of Ye Township, Khoza Township Subdivision. They also presented and discussed the issue of violence against women and sexual assault that occurred after the Myanmar Gold Emperor Company acquired village-owned land in order to start its operations in Bale Khvai Mountain, near the village of Mantut and (outside) Thanisudhar village.



Discussion on human rights, Ko Lwin Family Motel, Ye Township, Mon State, 5 March 2020.

## Protecting and Promoting Women and Children's Rights

### Woman and Child Rights Project

The military regime, SPDC, ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, and agreed to guarantee women's rights in Burma/Myanmar. Similarly, the regime also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991 and agreed to guarantee child rights in the country.

After ratifying these two conventions, the SLORC and then the SPDC propagandized that they have followed these conventions' principles and fulfilled the rights of women and children in the whole country. They also formed GONGOS (government-supported non-governmental organizations) with the name Myanmar Naing-ngan Mother and Child Care Association (MNMCCA) and Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF). They are not independent organizations but government-controlled agencies that caused their failure to help improve the protection of the rights of women and children according to CEDAW and CRC.

In order to have an objective monitoring of the protection and realization of the rights of women and children according to CEDAW and CRC, the regime should allow the establishment of independent women's and child rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which should make alternative reports to CEDAW and CRC monitoring bodies. At the same time, many women should know their rights and the rights of their children through educational workshops and publications of these NGOs.

The Burmese regimes have not allowed any independent organization to do the needed monitoring work.

The violation of women's and child rights committed by authorities and the army continued in many parts of Burma, with ethnic territories—Shan State, Kayah State, Karen State, Mon State and Tenasserim Division—suffering terribly. When local government authorities or *tatmadaw* conscripts forced labor for development projects and military purposes, they never select only able-bodied men, but take all people including women and children to the construction sites. Additionally, during the massive offensives launched by *tatmadaw*, women and children are also used as frontline civilian porters to carry ammunitions and food supplies for soldiers in the battlefields. In the rural “free fire zones” declared by *tatmadaw*, some women were raped and killed by soldiers, while many children were conscripted for porter services and forced to become soldiers.

On the other hand, women and children in both rural and urban areas have less access to proper medical care that both government and competent authorities should provide. Although the regime and its GONGOS declared that they have been taking care and improving the health conditions of women and children in many parts of the country, many women and children in remote communities still suffer from inadequate health care facilities; women especially do not receive information, counseling and service in health care, health education and family planning.

While the regime has propagandized in their controlled media about its support for educational facilities such as equipping classes with computer system and teaching materials, in reality, they collected every cost of the facilities from the students. Because parents cannot afford to pay for schooling expenses, many children lose their chance to continue their basic education in both urban and rural areas.

Due to the violations of the rights of women and children and Burmese government's failure to address the socio-economic problems of women and their families, many women and children endured many issues:

- High dropout rate of students in schools and increased hard labor employment of many underaged or school aged children as well as worst use of child labor;
- Worsening of the nutrition situation among the children and women since many families could not generate sufficient income due to lack of employment in Burma/Myanmar;
- Human rights violations and harassment against women and children created "population displacement" and hundreds of families fled from their home and faced various problems due to food shortage and insecurity during their displacement. Some families also migrated to Thailand illegally in order to seek work for their survival;
- Under the economic mismanagement by the military regime, most civilians in Burma/Myanmar have no source of income causing many of them, including young women, to migrate to Thailand for work and regular income;
- The migration to neighboring countries like Thailand and Malaysia made the women and children vulnerable to trafficking by cross-border traffickers.

Under these conditions, HURFOM created the Woman and Child Rights Project that aims:

- To monitor the situation of the rights of women and children in Mon areas and southern part of Burma/Myanmar by collecting information about their real situation with reference to CEDAW and CRC, and distribute this information to its international network;
- To empower and educate women and children in the Mon communities by providing information on their rights according to CEDAW and CRC and encourage them to participate in the struggle for the protection of their own rights.

This project has several activities such as

- Capacity-building by providing Women's Rights Training, Child Rights Training, Women's Rights Training of Trainers and Child Rights Training of Trainers;
- Women internship program;
- Joining International Women's Day, International Children's Day, Violence against Women Day celebrations;
- Collecting news on women trafficking, violence against women, trafficking of children, child soldiers.



Campaign against domestic violence, 25 November - 10 December 2020.<sup>3</sup>

HURFOM supported the campaign against domestic violence organized by the Mon Women's Organization (WMO), Mon Centana Development Foundation, Mon Women Network (MWN), Jeepyah Civil Society Organization (JCSO) and other civil society organizations from 25 November to 10 December 2020. The campaign supported the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence, a global campaign.<sup>2</sup>

## **Engagement to Civil Society for Democracy and Ethnic Minority Rights**

### **Civil Society Development Project**

The people in Mon State and southern part of Burma formed non-political organizations and planned to protect their community members or organization's members from the serious oppression by the local authorities and Burmese Army's troops. The people in general avoided talking about politics; however, they gather and unite on religious, ethnic, social, cultural, livelihood, business and other concerns.

In Mon State, many organizations such as Mon literature and culture organizations, Buddhist monks associations, former students' organizations, magazine and journal production associations, (underground) labor organizations, (underground) farmers associations, trading associations and many others were formed after 1988 pro-democracy uprising. When many political parties were formed for the 1990 general elections, many types of these community organizations were also formed.

For example, many groups of Mon monks in Mon State formed "Mon Literature and Buddhist Culture Committees" and adopted the objectives of SLORC when they applied for government permission to form such committees. After receiving the permission, they mainly worked to maintain the Mon literature and culture, and teach (genuine) Buddhism (on how



(This page and next page) Human rights awareness activity focusing on land, housing and property rights with participants from Ye, Mon State, and Yebyu township, Tanintharyi Region, 10 – 13 March 2020.



Buddhism prefers peace, harmony and passion, etc.) to students in the villages. With an understanding of the genuine Buddhist concepts from the monks, the students could understand what actions of the regime were right and what were wrong.

This is just one of the many examples of civil society or people's organizations belonging to grassroots communities that have gradually been formed in Mon State. Some of these organizations approached HURFOM for capacity-building activity especially on organizational management, effective communication, networking, problem-solving and conflict resolution, etc. HURFOM coordinators and trainers, who had some of these skills, provided the leaders of civil society organizations with various types of training.

HURFOM also believes that the role of civil society organizations will become more and more important in the future and should also support the smooth democratic transition in Burma/Myanmar in the future. With more capacity, civil society organizations can operate their organizations more effectively and have less reliance on the regime.

HURFOM therefore created the Civil Society Development Project which has the following objectives:

- To build the capacities of the Mon civil society organizations regarding organizational management, strategic planning, networking and collaboration, advocacy, etc., using religious principles, literature and culture, and involving the youth and women;
- To create a network among the different communities and civil society groups to be able to share information, knowledge and technique on how they have been involved in empowering themselves at the community level.

The project has the following activities:

- Program & Organization Management School for Activists from Mon CBOs;
- English Upgrading Class for improving English language skill of the university students (youth), women, and activists;
- Management Workshop for people involved in community development movement, community leaders, religious and social activists to learn the concepts of organizational management and strategic planning, networking and cooperation, and advocacy;



Voter education held in a monastery, Mawlamyine, 12-13 July 2020.



Activity on human rights defenders held in Ye township, Mon State in March 2022.

- Alumni Meeting of training graduates to discuss and make future plans towards achieving a stronger society.

Under the Civil Society Development Project, voter education activities were held in a Monastery, Mawlamyine, Mon State, 12-13 July 2020.

HURFOM trainers held in the third week of March 2022 an activity on developing human rights defenders who can lead the local villagers in solving and arguing the issue of the high cost of electricity in their community.

### Mon Media Project

The military has restricted the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, and prohibited accessing correct information and knowing events that happened in many parts of the country.

The suppression of political activities, freedom of expression, and access to correct information is true in Mon areas like in many parts of the country. Arrest of political activists and supporters, restriction against the freedom of expression such as printing of books and reading materials, and restrictions by the regime's military intelligence agents against the people on accessing information from independent newspapers and foreign radios have been occurring.

The main Mon political party, Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF), was banned by SLORC in March 1992 causing the silencing of political expression of the Mon people. Some party leaders were imprisoned and were released after the NMSP-SLORC ceasefire. Some of them were re-arrested in

1998 for their political views supporting the formation of Committee for Representing People's Parliament (CRPP).

Politicians and community leaders were not the only ones who led the defiance against the government policies and actions. Youths and students in the community also wanted to do the same. But they need to share information through an independent Mon newspaper, to get access to reading materials and to exercise their freedom of expression for the democratization of Burma. This is the way for the community to break the restriction on freedom of expression and access information that would aid their non-violent struggle for democracy and self-determination.

HURFOM has been printing a Mon newspaper named *Guiding Star/North Pole Star* (literally – *Sanong-taing* in Mon language) since 1999 in collaboration with Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA). In August and September 2007, during the Saffron Revolution in Burma/Myanmar, the Mon newspapers were full of news and photos of students' and Buddhist monks' peaceful protests and then with bloody crackdown by SPDC's riot police and soldiers.

The Mon Media Project has the following objectives:

- To break the government's restriction on freedom of expression and assist information sharing on news and events happening daily in Mon areas and the other parts of Burma/Myanmar to Mon community in Mon language and other communities with Burmese language;
- To introduce to the grassroots Mon people the domestic and international struggles for democratization of Burma/Myanmar and restoration of national reconciliation;
- To encourage the Mon people to have their voice heard by expressing their situation through an independent newspaper as practiced in many democratic countries around the world.

The Mon Media Project includes the monthly printing of *Guiding Star* newspaper in Mon and Burmese languages which are distributed to (1) Mon activists including Buddhist monks, university students, youth and community leaders who lead the activities for



Guiding Star

Mon national struggles, (2) Mon students in Mon national schools, (3) Mon students in dry season Mon literacy training, (4) general Mon civilians and government servants in Mon State, (5) NMSP members and its supporters, (6) refugees along the border, and (7) Mon migrant workers in Thailand.

The *Guiding Star* has remained as the only print media in the Mon community.

## Continuing Task

Across the first two weeks of November 2022, HURFOM documented cases of murder, arbitrary arrests and abductions. Human rights violations by the junta over the last fourteen days (end of October to mid-November 2022) took place in Southeastern Burma/Myanmar. Civilians of all ages continue to be targeted by the military junta. The lack of accountability has only emboldened the *tatmadaw* to commit further acts of atrocity with impunity.

This situation emphasizes the need for appropriate human rights education and promotion activities in the country.

HURFOM has to continue undertaking educational and promotional activities in the Mon areas for human rights protection as well as enjoyment of these rights under the current difficult situation by the Mon people.

## Endnotes

1 This uprising occurred on 8 August 1988, thus the name “8888.”

2 Text from Voice 21, issue number 2, December 2020, published by the Women and Child Rights Project of HURFOM.