

Burma: resistance and resilience

In Burma, civil society is innovating in dire circumstances while preserving hope in the future. The country has long suffered under military dictatorships and civil war. But since the military initiated a coup in 2021, systematic human rights abuses and mass displacement have only gotten worse. For 30 years, Inter Pares has worked with local organizations toward a democratic future for Burma. In this *Bulletin*, we share a small sample of our more than 40 local counterparts' tireless work.



A health worker, supported by Inter Pares, measures a child's height at a routine visit to a remote community in Burma.



Innovating sexual and reproductive health services in conflict areas

When Nang Shwe Yin* was eight months pregnant, she started showing signs of pre-eclampsia — a condition that could put her life, and pregnancy, at risk. Living in a remote community of displaced people in northeastern Burma, hospital care seemed beyond her reach. But she would need to deliver in hospital to ensure the best outcome for her and her baby. ►

◀ Health workers, supported by Inter Pares, confirmed Yin's condition during a routine visit to her community. They transferred her to hospital where she and her baby could receive the care they needed.

"At first, I was very afraid to ... be hospitalized," Yin shared. Health workers helped put her at ease. "Without their advice and help, I dare not think what would happen to me and my child."

In remote areas of Burma, routine check-ins by local health workers have long been a way our counterparts provide sexual and reproductive health services to Indigenous communities.

But the intensifying conflict makes travel in remote communities harder: soldiers block roads, detours are treacherous and the price of gas is ever rising. Even if travel is possible, urban health infrastructure is deteriorating, making remote and locally provided services more critical.

Through all this, counterparts are rethinking and adapting some well-established practices.

For example, Indigenous health organizations worked together to create online how-to videos for health workers. The videos train health workers on procedures like administering contraceptive implants, so no one needs to risk travelling to learn new skills.



At the same time, conversations about sexual and reproductive health continue to be sensitive, especially in Indigenous communities. Stigma around family planning and sex education is deeply rooted and some religious leaders staunchly discourage their practice. At a time when conflict threatens whole Indigenous

populations, some community leaders are focused more on population growth.

Indigenous women's health organizations have also continued their community engagement on sexual and reproductive health — albeit in quieter ways. Instead of meeting with youth in large groups, they started a system of teen peer-to-peer sex education. Trained youth meet with small groups of their peers in private settings to share sexual health information. This creates safe spaces for youth to discuss sensitive issues, while circumventing security challenges.

These examples of adaptation are just some of many. As the conflict continues, we expect to rally behind more. Inter Pares works with health counterparts that support nearly 600,000 people, like Yin and her baby, living in 2,000 villages in Burma. While we are outraged by the military's attacks against civilians, we are proud of our counterparts' ability to continue serving their communities. 

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Nang Shwe Yin, mother in remote Burma

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Scaling mountains to report the news

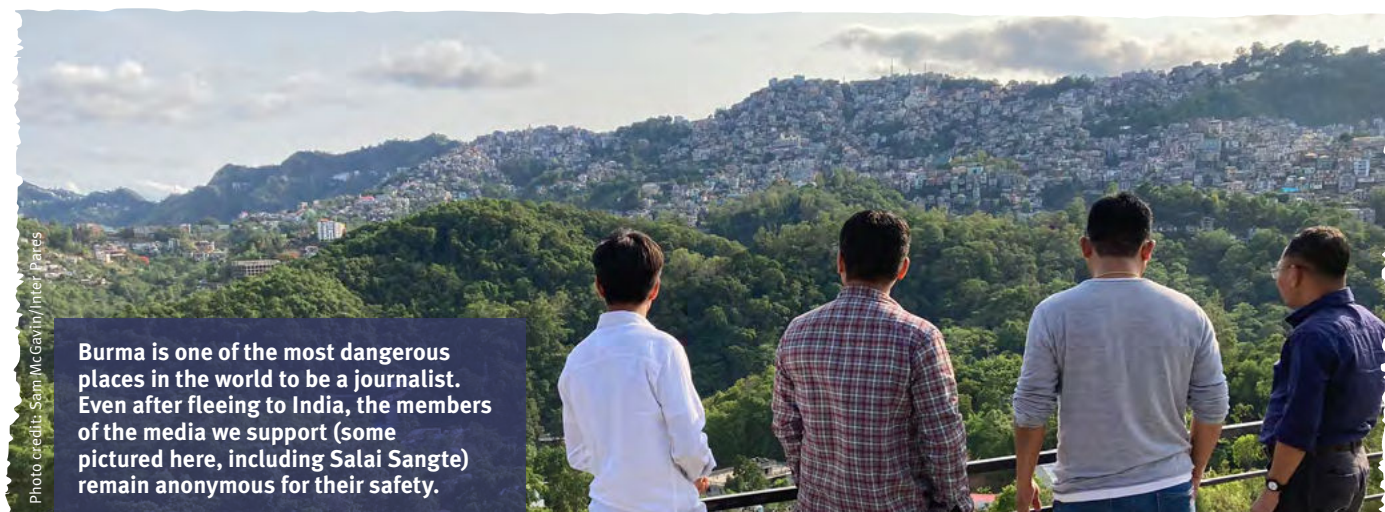


Photo credit: Sam McGavin/Inter Pares

Burma is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist. Even after fleeing to India, the members of the media we support (some pictured here, including Salai Sangte) remain anonymous for their safety.

“Under the military council, we cannot go back.”

Salai Sangte* is an editor at an Indigenous news outlet Inter Pares supports in Burma’s Chin State.

A month and a half after the military’s attempted coup in February 2021, Salai Sangte and most of his colleagues fled to India. Near the border with Burma, they now run the online news outlet remotely.



Today, Burma is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist, according to Reporters Without Borders. Since the coup, four journalists have been killed and at least 176 arrested. Just a handful of Salai Sangte’s reporters remain

in the country. He fears for them and hopes someday he’ll be able to rejoin them in Chin State.

“If the federal democracy is established ... we’ll surely move back to the country — our country.”

But in southern Chin State, the military has had all communication services shut down for over a year.

“In the southern side, it’s very, very difficult to communicate,” says Salai Sangte. That doesn’t stop journalists in the area from working — they use the cell signal that bleeds across the border from India to send information. “The reporters go to where they can get it on top of a mountain. One or two hours they spend [travelling] to get the signal.”

Like Salai Sangte’s news outlet, six other Indigenous news organizations Inter Pares supports are adapting to the

conflict while informing the world about the military’s atrocities. They are recruiting and training citizens to gather news that professional journalists can’t. With our counterparts, we’ve supported training for nearly 200 citizen journalists throughout Burma.

Through the hardship, many outlets rely on donor funding to operate. But funds are drying up as the conflict escalates, says Salai Sangte. Of more than 20 media outlets in Chin State pre-coup, he estimates only six are left.

“We have to struggle more and more to survive,” he says of the media in Burma. “That is our future.”

We are proud to support this Indigenous news outlet and others as they work for democracy in their country. 

Building a federal democracy from the ground up

Amidst the chaos of conflict in Burma, people like Khu Lay* are finding hope in structures many in other countries take for granted: local governments.

“I believe that if there are strong [Indigenous] states, the union will be strong,” says Khu Lay.

Since the military’s attempted coup in 2021, and throughout the ensuing war it has waged on the people of Burma, much work has been done at the national level toward this union. But critical to a successful future federal democracy are its foundational blocks: local Indigenous governance structures. And these are becoming stronger.

Each region, or state, has its own governance body — a de facto Indigenous-aligned regional government that provides services to its population.

In Karenni State, where Khu Lay is from, the Indigenous government collaborated with local political parties, civil society and the civil disobedience movement to form the Karenni State Consultative Council.

The council led the development of a new policy outlining the governance, legal and administration systems of Karenni State. But beyond laying out how the state will run, this policy represents a common vision of a future federal democracy they are all struggling toward.

“We have agreed to the same political goal,” says Khu Lay. He is a council member. “So, it’s easier for us to cooperate.”

For a year while drafting the policy, council members held consultations with people from all walks of life in the state. Inter Pares and our counterparts supported some of these, including sessions with women’s and youth networks.



In early 2023, the council formally adopted the policy. It is a massive collaboration between

many Indigenous Karenni groups: civil society, women’s groups, health workers, teachers, bureaucrats and elected politicians.

“We need unity, legitimacy and to address root causes [of conflict],” says Khu Lay.

This policy will help with all three. And Inter Pares is proud to support steps along the way toward a federal democracy built atop a foundation of Indigenous self-determination. 



The Burma military routinely targets civilians in Karenni State, as they did here in Ou Khu Ri village in 2022. Defiant, members of diverse communities across the state are building the governance structures of a future free federal democracy.

**For safety and security reasons, names in this Bulletin have been changed.*

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