



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)
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Assistance Association for Political Prisoner's Submission
to
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Call for input: Comprehensive report on “Importance of casualty recording
for the promotion and protection of human rights”**

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Founded in 2000, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), also known as AAPP, is a human rights organization that advocates for the release of all political prisoners in Burma and for the improvement of their quality of life during and after incarceration. For AAPP, political prisoners represent the struggle for democracy, human rights, equality, and freedom for the people of Burma. This makes the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners an integral part of Burma's drive for national reconciliation. AAPP also promotes fundamental human rights for the people of Burma through its international and domestic advocacy campaigns, as well as civil society capacity building, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and mental health counselling.

The following describes the casualty reporting efforts of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) during the Spring Revolution in Burma, i.e., since the junta’s attempted coup on February 1, 2021.

1. Historical Context of AAPP’s Human Rights Documentation Work

Documentation has been a critical component of AAPP’s work from its founding in order to prove the existence of political prisoners in Burma and gain credibility both domestically and internationally. From its inception, AAPP has leveraged the support it gives to political prisoners to develop comprehensive lists of names and details of detained political prisoners, including those who have died in detention. Using this information, AAPP has documented casualties in detainment and shared that documentation with governments and international institutions to raise the issue of political prisoners and garner support for its advocacy. AAPP has also used this documentation to memorialize and recognize former political prisoners and the fallen heroes who sacrificed their lives and liberty during the fight for democracy.¹ In addition to documentation of political prisoner casualties, AAPP pre-coup, was recording and systematically documenting human rights violations outside of prisons, including those against land rights activists and ethnic nationalities.²

2. Historical Context of Casualty Recording in Burma

AAPP’s political prisoner and casualty recording is closely connected to the democratic uprisings against the junta, which have resulted in mass detainment and casualties in Burma over the last several decades. However, across decades of mass atrocities, ethnic conflict, and protest crackdowns, the casualties perpetrated by the military have gone drastically un- and under-recorded. For example, the student-led uprisings of 1988 were met with a brutal crackdown by the then-junta, of which no comprehensive casualty count exists. The junta has claimed there were only hundreds of casualties, while civil society estimates are in the thousands.³ Similarly, in 2007, the Saffron Revolution saw hundreds of thousands of people protesting the regime, followed by a violent junta crackdown and a huge increase in the number of political prisoners. But again, no comprehensive casualty figure is available for these events. These recording gaps have fueled the impunity with which the junta has committed crimes against humanity, e.g., murder, throughout

¹ AAPP, OF 20 YEARS, THE JOURNEY, at 64 (2020), <https://aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/20years-aapp-english-final-7apr2020.pdf> [hereinafter OF 20 YEARS, THE JOURNEY] (“In October 2013, AAPP and [Former Political Prisoners Society] jointly agreed to collect the individual former political prisoner’s demographic all across Burma, to date we have already documented over 3500 former political prisoners’ demographic.”); *Ceremony Honoring Fallen Political Prisoners and Family Members*, AAPP (Feb. 25, 2016), <https://aappb.org/?p=4128>.

² For AAPP’s human rights documentation efforts pre-coup, see *Chronology*, AAPP, <https://aappb.org/> (select “Press Releases”; then select “Chronology” in the drop-down menu, and follow the links to chronologies from 2008-2020) (last visited Feb. 28, 2023).

³ Eli Meixler, *How a Failed Democracy Uprising Set the Stage for Myanmar’s Future*, TIME (Aug. 8, 2018), <https://time.com/5360637/myanmar-8888-uprising-30-anniversary-democracy/> (“Across the country, the military violently put down the protesters. Estimates of the death toll range of 3,000-10,000, though the authorities claimed only 350 were killed.”) (citing *1988 Uprising and 1990 Election*, OXFORD BURMA ALLIANCE (Jan. 19, 2013), <https://web.archive.org/web/20130119081551/http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/1988-uprising--1990-elections.html>).

the country.⁴ Importantly, since its 2021 military coup, the junta has again continued to try to cut the free flow of information to hide its atrocities—just as it did in 1988, 2007, 2017, and all other previous decades.

3. Context in Which AAPP Deployed Casualty Recording Post-Coup

AAPP deployed its detainee recording on February 1, 2021, the first day of the junta’s attempted coup. At the onset of lethal crackdowns on peaceful protestors in mid-February 2021, AAPP recognized its capacity to conduct casualty recording because of its decades-long experience recording human rights violations and building networks with lawyers, counsellors, assistance providers, human rights trainers, civil society organizations, former political prisoners, and other political activists around the country. Within these networks, individuals located across Burma were either creating their own lists of detainees and casualties or sending information about specific cases directly to AAPP’s Documentation Department in Mae Sot, Thailand. Thus, at that time, AAPP was the only organization with the national networks necessary to record and verify arrests and casualties at very local levels in the immediate aftermath of the attempted coup.

Maintaining a satellite office in Thailand⁵ allowed AAPP to quickly implement robust casualty recording while ensuring the safety of its team and the continuity of its reporting after the attempted coup. With the capacities to record, verify, and publish data from Thailand, AAPP was able to function consistently and safely amidst both ever-increasing security threats to its Burma-based team and widespread internet outages in Burma on and after February 1, 2021. Further, prior to the attempted coup, the Documentation Department had gained robust experience—in relation to political prisoners—reviewing and cross-checking open-source media and obtaining additional information about prison conditions and prisoner health. This experience facilitated the quick development of procedures for recording detainments and casualties in the coup’s aftermath.

Evolving since February 1, 2021, AAPP has been using these capacities to collect and verify, *inter alia*, casualties, arrestees, detainees, injuries, disappearances, and property seizures across Burma. By mid-March 2021, AAPP became “the main source for the number of people killed in the violence despite the constraints on its work that does not allow for a full analysis of the data,” after demonstrating its ability to “keep pace” with daily detainee and casualty numbers⁶ by publishing updated lists every 24 hours from February to July 2021.⁷

⁴ Rep. of the Indep. Investigative Mechanism for Myan., para. 30, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/48/18 (2021); Rep. of the Indep. Investigative Mechanism for Myan., para. 7, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/51/4 (2022).

⁵ Following the democratic transition in the 2010s, AAPP maintained an office in Mae Sot, Thailand, because of the threat of the military again seizing power in Burma.

⁶ DAMIAN LILLY, INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE, THE UN’S RESPONSE TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS AFTER THE COUP IN MYANMAR: DESTINED TO FAIL? 15 (2021), <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/The-UNs-Response-Coup-in-Myanmar-Final.pdf>, (“OHCHR was the primary public source of the casualty figures from the violence referred to in the media at the start of the crackdown, but after the upsurge of violence in Hlaing Thayar on March 15, it was no longer able to keep pace with the daily deaths. The AAPP has since become the main source for the number of people killed in the violence despite the constraints on its work that does not allow for a full analysis of the data. Indeed, it has been local human rights organizations, not the UN, that have conducted most of the human rights monitoring since the coup.”)

⁷ From July 2021 to January 2022, AAPP published its lists six days a week, Monday through Saturday. From January 2022 to the present, AAPP has published its lists five days a week, Monday through Friday.

4. Methodology of AAPP's Casualty Recording

AAPP's casualty recording is done by documentation specialists trained in data triangulation theory, using more than one method and source type to collect data on the same individual or event. In AAPP's documentation system, the documentation specialists record each casualty with an individual identification number and additional information as available, such as their age; gender; parents' names; brief case history, including factual details of the casualty; occupation or sector, e.g., civilian or resistance group member; hometown and place of death, including town, township, and state/region; cause(s) of death and any known special conditions, e.g., taken as a hostage or human shield before death; arrest date (where applicable); and deceased date. For each case, information is recorded in Burmese to retain accuracy and in English to reach diplomatic and media audiences.

For all casualty reports, regardless of source, the data triangulation process is ongoing even once AAPP verifies the report.⁸ This process of gathering additional information about each casualty involves communicating with first-hand sources when available and reviewing additional verified second-hand sources such as certain media outlets. Lists of those killed,⁹ arrested,¹⁰ still detained,¹¹ and released¹² are updated daily by the Documentation Department and published online through Airtable, where they are freely accessible to the public.¹³ Every day, AAPP posts links to the Airtable lists on Twitter and Facebook, alongside graphs depicting updated casualty and detainment figures in both English and Burmese.

5. Impact of AAPP's Casualty Recording Following the Failed Coup

Since the 2021 military coup, AAPP's casualty recording has positively impacted the right to recognition for individuals killed by the junta, as well as the right to truth for the people of Burma. This recording has also strengthened local human rights groups which AAPP trained before the coup, as AAPP acts as a safe conduit for activists to communicate locally collected casualty data, as well as other human rights documentation, with international organizations and governments.

⁸ To verify casualties, the Documentation Department reviews and confirms reports from first-hand, second-hand, and unverified sources. The Documentation Department is frequently in contact with first-hand verified sources, i.e., individuals of AAPP's decades-long networks inside Burma. These first-hand sources include lawyers, counsellors, former political prisoner society networks, and former training participants, e.g., local human rights activists. If a first-hand source reports a casualty, AAPP considers this report verified. The team similarly monitors verified second-hand sources, such as selected independent media, other civil society groups, human rights organizations, regional political parties, and ethnic armed organizations. If a second-hand verified source reports a violation, AAPP will consider the report verified once it has been cross-referenced with other verified sources—either first- or second-hand sources. In addition, the communications team receives reports from unverified sources via AAPP email addresses and social media profiles, i.e., Twitter and Facebook; information received this way is assessed for relevance and responded to, if appropriate, before given to documentation specialists. If a report from an unverified source is corroborated through cross-referencing with verified sources, AAPP considers it verified.

⁹ For a list of those killed since the attempted coup, see AAPP, *Killed*, AIRTABLE, <https://bit.ly/3taCmp3>.

¹⁰ For a list of those arrested since the attempted coup, see AAPP, *Total Arrested*, <https://bit.ly/3t7IE90>.

¹¹ For a list of those still detained since the attempted coup, see AAPP, *Still Detained*, AIRTABLE, <https://bit.ly/3m3Z8Lm>.

¹² For a list of those released after arrest since the attempted coup, see AAPP, *Released*, AIRTABLE, <https://bit.ly/3MbC3kd>.

¹³ For security reasons, not all data that AAPP records for each case is shared publicly in the Airtable. However, AAPP intends to publish as much data as possible for every case it records.

Looking forward, AAPP’s casualty recording will continue to play a critical role in advancing transitional justice and advocating for meaningful international action against the junta.

5.1 Right to Recognition

It is a policy of Burma’s military to systematically deny deceased resistance supporters—whether perceived or actual—and their loved ones the right to recognition. The junta has continued this policy since February 2021 by, e.g., confiscating the deceased’s bodies and thus, denying families the opportunity to have proper funerals.¹⁴ In defiance of this practice, prior to the failed coup, AAPP engaged in upholding the right to recognition by holding commemorative ceremonies for families of fallen political prisoners, as well as families of fallen heroes of the 1988 and 2007 uprisings. Today, AAPP is determined to continue this role by recognizing those killed in the Spring Revolution.

Because AAPP is a trusted civil society organization and is widely known in Burma for its post-coup casualty recording, family members of persons who were killed by the junta have felt comfortable to participate in interviews with AAPP and recognize their loved ones’ memories in the process. During these interviews, these family members have noted the significance of the recognition conferred by AAPP’s casualty recording. One family member explained, “At first, he was not on the AAPP list. Later on, a friend from Japan helped to find his name and put [him] on the AAPP list,” indicating that being included on the list was an important step in recognizing and honoring their loved one’s death and legacy.¹⁵ The interviewee went on to say, “When we win, I can talk about [him], and I can tell my children to be proud of what [he] did.”¹⁶

5.2 Right to Truth

AAPP’s efforts have repeatedly put the junta on the defense, protecting the right to truth as a result. Because AAPP is a trusted civil society organization both domestically and internationally, its documentation has pressured the junta to respond. The specific impact of casualty recording on the right to truth was particularly apparent in the aftermath of the Bago Massacre, which occurred on April 9, 2021.¹⁷

On April 9, 2021, the junta killed at least 80¹⁸ people in the city of Bago—many of them by gunshot.¹⁹ AAPP also verified reports that the junta then burned many of the bodies in a clear

¹⁴ *Myanmar Security Forces Snatch the Bodies of Those They Have Slain*, IRRAWADDY (Mar. 24, 2021), <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-security-forces-snatch-bodies-slain.html>.

¹⁵ Interview with family member of deceased pro-democracy supporter, in Burma (2021).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Large Numbers Feared Dead in Bago as Soldiers Crush Protest Stronghold*, MYAN. NOW (Apr. 9, 2021), <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/large-numbers-feared-dead-in-bago-as-soldiers-crush-protest-stronghold>; *Mass Murders Reported in Bago as Troops ‘Drag Away’ Injured and Dead, Destroy Evidence of Crimes*, MYAN. NOW (Apr. 11, 2021), <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/mass-murders-reported-in-bago-as-troops-drag-away-injured-and-dead-destroy-evidence-of-crimes>.

¹⁸ AAPP initially recorded and reported that 82 people had been killed in the Bago Massacre; however, AAPP has since adjusted its casualty count to 80 after confirming that two individuals previously reported dead were still alive. The families of these two individuals reported their deaths to AAPP on April 9, 2021. The families later learned that both individuals were still alive—one under junta detention and one in a local hospital.

¹⁹ AAPP, *supra* note 9 (to filter for those killed in the Bago Massacre, select “Filter” and then “Add condition”; choose “deceased_date_view” and “is” for the first two fields, respectively; write “2021-04-09” in the third field; then select “Add condition”; choose “state_region,” “is,” and “Bago” to complete the three fields respectively). See *Death Toll in Myanmar Regime’s Latest Massacre Rises as Details Emerge*, IRRAWADDY (Apr. 11, 2021),

attempt to destroy evidence of their crimes. AAPP has since been able to verify the names of at least 27 individuals who were killed, as well as some of their personal details; however, it became increasingly clear that it would be impossible to confirm every victim's name. Nonetheless, without AAPP's recording, casualty numbers from the Bago Massacre would have gone unverified and widely unknown, as it is highly likely that the junta intended to commit this massacre and destroy the evidence with it going largely unreported. Further indicating this intention, AAPP was informed by sources inside the country that its casualty numbers infuriated junta leaders in the aftermath of the Bago Massacre.

Notably, AAPP's recording amplified the junta's killings in Bago internationally ahead of the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on April 24, 2021. In turn, the junta attempted to discredit AAPP's efforts in its ASEAN presentation entitled "The Current Political Situation in Myanmar."²⁰ In the report, the junta attempted to distort AAPP's casualty recording by providing its own "casualty recording" using junta-coined terminology in an attempt to excuse the death of protestors.²¹ The junta accused AAPP of using data from "fake and hoax news."²² The report specifically addressed AAPP's recording of the Bago Massacre, stating "sometimes, [AAPP's casualty list] includes an unidentified number of deaths, such as 76 deaths in Bago Township on April 9."²³ From this defensive and defamatory response, it is clear that the junta recognizes the influence of AAPP's casualty recording in holding them accountable for their human rights violations—so much so that they felt forced to respond directly to AAPP's internationally respected efforts in a presentation to ASEAN leaders.

As an additional impact of AAPP's recording of the Bago Massacre, two junta-operated media outlets—MWD and MRTV—announced on April 19, 2021, that AAPP is fabricating and exaggerating the list of protesters killed by the junta during crackdowns. The allegations made against AAPP were again an attempt to discredit and destroy the evidence of the atrocities committed by the junta. One week later, on April 26, 2021, the junta declared AAPP an illegal organization and asserted that AAPP's publicly reported casualty recording "was not only frightening civil servants and the public but also stimulating more riot cases and instigating instability in the country."²⁴ The junta's response to AAPP's work further indicates the power of credible casualty recording to pressure a brutally violent junta, while informing the domestic and international public of the reality of the junta's actions.

Today AAPP's recording continues to inform international news coverage and governments around the world in better understanding the relentless brutality of the junta against the people of

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/death-toll-myanmar-regimes-latest-massacre-rises-details-emerge.html>; Joyce Sohyun Lee et al., *Anatomy of a Crackdown: How Myanmar's Military Terrorized its People with Weapons of War*, WASH. POST (Aug. 25, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/myanmar-crackdown-military-coup/>.

²⁰ STATE ADMINISTRATION COUNCIL, THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN MYANMAR (2021) (on file with AAPP).

²¹ *Id.* at 62 (using "riot" instead of "protest" to describe civilian demonstrations opposing the attempted coup; claiming that protestors died due to, *inter alia*, "self-defense," "road block removing," "accidental death during detention").

²² *Id.* at 64.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Myanmar Regime Threatens Severe Action Against AAPP*, IRRAWADDY (Apr. 27, 2021), <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-threatens-severe-action-aapp.html>.

Burma.²⁵ International news coverage of the Bago Massacre specifically included an AP News story on April 11, 2021,²⁶ a Washington Post feature on August 25, 2021,²⁷ and a Vice News feature on July 22, 2021²⁸—all drawing heavily on AAPP’s recording. Since the coup, AAPP’s casualty recording has also been used and shared widely by local activist groups inside and outside of Burma,²⁹ expanding the public’s awareness of the nationwide scale of the junta’s killings and arrests, which would otherwise go unverified and underreported.

Today, the junta still appears to be closely watching AAPP’s efforts to share the truth. A recently leaked memo from a junta meeting in December 2022 reported “more than 17,000 cases of violence . . . logged since the February 2021 coup,” which aligned very closely with AAPP’s recording at that time of approximately 17,000 arrestees since the coup.³⁰ No other organization has published verified data close to that number. These similar numbers could indicate the accuracy of AAPP’s recording; it is also possible that AAPP’s credible and widely referenced recording has pressured the junta over the last two years to align with AAPP’s verified number that is trusted by the public. While this example does not refer to casualty recording, it provides a clear illustration of how AAPP’s recording efforts more broadly have moved the needle on the right to truth in Burma.

5.3 Engagement and Encouragement of Local Human Rights Activists

As a bridge between international institutions and local human rights activists, AAPP has leveraged its casualty recording to include and empower grassroots human rights documenters across Burma. Prior to the attempted coup, AAPP conducted more than 100 human rights trainings for 2,685 participants.³¹ These trainings covered how to identify and document human rights violations, including how to collect and record data systematically.³² Following the attempted coup, AAPP’s connections with these local activists reignited, and these activists began providing AAPP with casualty data and other information directly from their communities. AAPP’s capacity to share local data widely through AAPP’s lists and networks has been an ongoing source of motivation and encouragement for local activists to continue their own local casualty recording and human rights documentation.

²⁵ See, e.g., France en Birmanie, Official Account of the Ambassador of France to Burma (@FrancenBirmanie), TWITTER (Feb. 17, 2023, 6:20 PM), <https://twitter.com/FrancenBirmanie/status/1626542209947553792>.

²⁶ *Reports: Myanmar Forces Kill 82 in Single Day in City*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Apr. 11, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/aung-san-suu-kyi-yangon-myanmar-db0f248da7e3084123f4c86b9e4db36b>.

²⁷ Joyce Sohyun Lee et al., *supra* note 19.

²⁸ *Anatomy of a Massacre: How Myanmar’s Military Killed Dozens of Pro-Democracy Protesters*, VICE NEWS (July 22, 2021), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7exa8/myanmar-military-massacre-bago>.

²⁹ See, e.g., Robert Minn Khant (@minn_robert), TWITTER (Feb. 17, 2023, 10:31 PM), https://twitter.com/minn_robert/status/1626605372730384385; MiMi Aye (@meemalee), TWITTER (Feb. 1, 2023, 6:55 PM), <https://twitter.com/meemalee/status/1620752622318915586>; Burma Action Ireland (@BurmaActionIRL), TWITTER (Jan. 13, 2023, 5:21 AM), <https://twitter.com/BurmaActionIRL/status/1613662533956640773>.

³⁰ *Myanmar Junta Leaked Memo Shows Resistance Growing Beyond Control*, IRRAWADDY (Jan. 18, 2023), <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-leaked-memo-shows-resistance-growing-beyond-control.html>.

³¹ OF 20 YEARS, THE JOURNEY, *supra* note 1, at 61.

³² *Id.* at 58.

5.4 Supporting the Fight Against Impunity

AAPP's robust casualty recording and its related documentation are already playing a critical role in the fight against impunity in Burma, as AAPP has become an important source for international justice mechanisms. In this vein, AAPP regularly provides relevant and reliable information, including casualty data, to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM). This information sharing supports the IIMM's investigations and its preparation of case files for the eventual prosecution of the junta. Moreover, AAPP's widely publicized casualty recording—especially through its Daily Briefings³³—consistently and comprehensively promotes international awareness of human rights violations in Burma to push for an end to the junta's impunity.

6. Adjustments and Recommendations that Have Arisen During Recording

Since beginning its post-coup recording, AAPP has adjusted the data it collects and shares for each casualty.³⁴ These changes, among others, resulted from ongoing internal evaluations of AAPP's data collection and standardization, aiming to increase the data's usability and accessibility for its audiences. For example, AAPP amended its data collection to include the "sector" and "category" of the deceased individual when known, which is shared publicly instead of the deceased's "organization," as the field was originally called. In addition, AAPP previously shared both the place of incident and the deceased's full home address; today, AAPP shares the deceased's home township and state/region when known, but neither their full address nor the place of incident/death, even though this information is still collected by the Documentation Department.

Furthermore, AAPP has also changed its medium for sharing its casualty recording to increase accessibility for the public. From February 2021 to May 2022, AAPP's lists were published online through PDF files uploaded each day. During this period, it became clear that both international and domestic audiences were interested to access, filter, and use AAPP's casualty recording for advocacy purposes—made exceptionally cumbersome when the data was shared through static PDF files. Internal discussions led AAPP to search for a solution so that its audiences could more easily access and query its data for advocacy purposes. As a result, on June 1, 2022, AAPP began using Airtable to upload and share its casualty recording and other lists. Now, instead of PDF files, AAPP uploads and publishes its updated lists to Airtable every weekday, allowing users to filter and sort the lists more easily than before.³⁵ Moreover, this change also prompted AAPP to implement a more robust data standardization process to increase data accessibility.

Regarding external recommendations on its recording, AAPP has received external advice to be more confidential in the data that it publicly shares, specifically regarding the details of each case, whether killed or arrested. While AAPP considered this recommendation, AAPP ultimately decided to continue providing as much information as is reasonably possible to improve the credibility and transparency of its documentation, as well as to aid future transitional justice efforts.

³³ *Daily Briefing Since Coup*, AAPP, <https://aappb.org/?cat=109> (last visited Feb. 28, 2023).

³⁴ *Compare Total Fatality Lists Last Updated on 22 March 2021*, AAPP (Mar. 22, 2021), <https://aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Total-Fatality-Lists-Last-Updated-on-22-March-2021.pdf>, *with* AAPP, *supra* note 9.

³⁵ *See* AAPP, *supra* notes 9-12.

Indeed, AAPP's public sharing of the data increases the public's trust in AAPP's efforts to counter the junta's blatant lies to the people of Burma.

7. Concluding Remarks

Since the 2021 military coup, AAPP's casualty recording efforts have demonstrably supported the right to truth and recognition in Burma through extensive data collected on each casualty as available, daily updates about its recording, and interviews with victims' family members. Importantly, while the junta's human rights violations—including mass murder of civilians—have historically gone drastically unrecorded, AAPP's consistent and verified documentation now gives both domestic and international audiences critical data to push for accountability and an end to impunity in Burma. Moving forward, AAPP will continue its casualty recording efforts, alongside its other human rights documentation work, with the goals of holding the military junta accountable for its crimes and ensuring transitional justice for the people of Burma.