

# MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE

# CASS

Community Analysis Support System

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With specific reference to Rakhine State, the **CASS Myanmar Weekly Update** is divided into three sections. The **first** section provides an overview of key dynamics and developments this week. The **second** section provides a detailed review of trends or incidents and analysis of their significance. The **third** highlights trends to watch, important upcoming events and key publications. Contributing information sources to this document include public and non-public humanitarian information provided by open traditional and social media sources, local partners, UN Agencies, INGOs, and sources on the ground. The content compiled by CASS is by no means exhaustive and does not necessarily reflect CASS's position. The provided information, assessment, and analysis are designated for humanitarian purposes only.



## Overview

Myanmar has now reported a total of 22 confirmed cases of COVID-19; to date, two have reportedly recovered and three have passed away. The Yangon regional government has asked residents to stay inside between 10-19 April, and to only exit their properties to purchase food or medicine. The dates coincide with Myanmar's Thingyan new year festival, during which much of the population traditionally crowds onto the streets to pour water over each other. Aung San Suu Kyi has asked people to "totally avoid crowds" to prevent the spread of the virus this year. To limit the impact these measures will have on the most vulnerable, the Union government has also pledged to provide rice, salt, oil, beans and onion to households without regular income during the Thingyan period from 10 April. The distribution will be supported by civil society organisations, community elders, and government departments. Additionally, households will only have to pay electricity costs after the first 150 units.

Reflecting the result of new research, the World Health Organisation has now said that the public wearing of masks can prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. The UN agency has said that surgical masks such as N95 should be reserved for health professionals, and home-made cloth coverings can be worn by the public. Humanitarian actors in Myanmar should take note and ensure that communities, including the most vulnerable in IDP camps and other displacement sites, have access to masks. There are opportunities to support IDPs to produce masks themselves, thereby overcoming the mask shortage while creating new opportunities for income generation and the learning of new skills.

At the time of publication of [last week's CASS Weekly Update](#), it was reported that a number of people in Kyauktaw's Tha Yet Oke village had been killed after Tatmadaw troops entered the village on 1 April. This report was incorrect. Tatmadaw troops arrested three men from the village, [accused them of affiliation](#) with the Arakan Army and reportedly seized detonators and food supplies, including WFP high-energy biscuits. On the evening of 1 April, the conflict came to downtown Kyauktaw – a rare occurrence – as navy vessels launched artillery into the urban area. Five civilians were killed and another eight injured in [the incident](#). On the night of 3 April the sounds of heavy weapons could again be heard near the town, but no casualties were reported. On 7 April, a large number of civilian casualties were also reported in Paletwa Township, southern Chin State, when [airstrikes on Nan Chaung Wa village](#) killed seven civilians and injured another eight. The rapid increase in civilian casualties throughout 2020 has not subsided, and instead gathers pace. The scale of civilian suffering remains largely underreported by national and international media, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate headlines. Yet, such high numbers are alarming, and concerns should be continually raised with both civilian and military authorities at the highest levels.

An estimated 2,000 people were displaced in Ponnagyun this week after clashes near Pauk Taw Pyin village prompted residents to flee to nearby Zay Di Pyin, Kan Chaung, Kyauk Pyin Seik and other nearby villages. Clashes have continued in Ponnagyun Township since then, as the Tatmadaw is thought to be targeting temporary Arakan Army camps in the hills. Some 2,500 villagers remain in their villages, from where they are reportedly unable to leave. Humanitarian agencies should expect further displacement over the next week. On the evening of 7 April, the Myanmar navy fired artillery from boats near Sittwe urban area, causing anxieties among residents. It is not clear where the navy was firing to.

📍 Rollover the Numbers to see location on the Map



# Conflict Dynamics Affect Supply Chains and Distributions

Paletwa township, Southern Chin State

**1** Last week, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) was finally granted access to operate in Paletwa Township and started delivering food items to Samee town – including rice, pulses, oil, salt and kitchen utensils. The WFP’s [statement released on 3 April](#) mentions that the agency “has also been trying to reach communities affected in Paletwa town and will continue to explore all options”. Indeed, IDPs in Paletwa township have been facing serious food shortages and price hikes for most essential food and non-food items in local markets. Such shortages and price hikes are caused as the flow of goods has ceased through the traditional Kyauktaw–Paletwa waterway route due to the heavy fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army and resulting restrictions. The much longer Matupi–Samee–Paletwa land route has become the main alternative to transport essential goods and aid items for the IDPs and indirectly affected civilians in Paletwa township – but remains far from being logistically optimal. Particularly along that route, the Paletwa–Samee part section bears high security risks and delays in transportation of goods due to checkpoints or clashes. Meanwhile, the movement of goods into Paletwa remains controlled by the Tatmadaw. This is part of the Tatmadaw’s four-cuts strategy, and also reflects the economic interests of some personnel in local Tatmataw battalions. Last week, a Chin local media reported that a Tatmataw battalion, stationed in Shin Let Wa village, [did not allow local civilians in Paletwa township to buy rice in Lalengpi town](#) of Matupi township – where it is 3 to 4 times cheaper – and bring it back to Paletwa township. Instead, the battalion pushed them to buy rice in Shin Let Wa village, where rice is reportedly supplied by that battalion.

## Warnings to humanitarians

While humanitarian agencies should obviously increase efforts to increase aid distribution activities in Paletwa Township, careful consideration is required. First, the Tatmataw is extremely sensitive to any actions which may risk allowing the Arakan Army access to food and non-food items – either through markets or aid distributions. Echoing other recent statements, on [3 April](#) a statement was released by the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services alleging that the Arakan Army had accessed “[rations, medicines, foods donated by NGOs for displaced people](#)” (sic). Serious communication and reporting efforts need to be conducted

to show the neutrality of aid distribution activities. The risk of staff and volunteers being arrested by the Tatmataw or the Arakan Army in suspicion of supporting their enemy is of high risk in areas like Paletwa. Operations managers, supervisors, staff and volunteers need to be well trained on how to respond in such a situation to ensure their own safety and security. Second, it is important for humanitarians to build working relations with key influential government officials — township administrators and deputies, social welfare officials, police, ministers in state level governments among others — and civil society leaders including influential religious

leaders and auxiliary institutions such as Myanmar Red Cross Society, who can indirectly bridge humanitarians with the Tatmadaw or other armed actors and help de-escalate unforeseen tensions. Third, significant inflows of essential food and non-food aid items may upset armed or unarmed actors involved in business in an increasingly monopolised market. Such actors need to be identified and

monitored, and/or to be engaged in certain situations. Finally, the upcoming wet season will make transportation of aid materials and goods even more difficult. Security risk assessments and cost-efficiency analysis need to be done in developing short-term procurement and logistical strategies with regard to the timing, volume, locations of warehouses.

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## 'Ownerless' Gwa Assault Creates Insecurity

Gwa Township, Southern Rakhine State

**2** It was reported by national media this week that the Arakan Army [launched an attack](#) against a Tatmadaw base in Rakhine State's southernmost township of Gwa on the evening of 3 April. This would represent the furthest reach of the Arakan Army to date, and a significant expansion of their area of operation. Gwa Township is also the seat held by Rakhine State Chief Minister U Nyi Pu, the survivor of several assassination attempts though to have been conducted by the Arakan Army. The Arakan Army took to Russian social media platform VK to deny that it had attacked the Tatmadaw in Gwa. The Arakan Army suggested that Tatmadaw troops in Gwa had fired their weapons in fear during the night, before pretending they had engaged with the Arakan Army.

### Conspiracy theory or Chaos theory?

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The tendency of the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army to trade accusations over battles – and even the existence of battles – reflects the important role that access to information and audiences plays in this war. Both sides have previously denied responsibility for incidents in Mrauk U and Kyauktaw urban areas, prompting social media users to refer to them as 'ownerless battles'. Social media users among Rakhine communities have suggested that the Tatmadaw faked the battle in Gwa Township in order to justify cancelling elections expected for November, or to preempt the Arakan Army and begin military offensives or monitoring operations in the south of the state. Indeed, the idea of a 'fake' Tatmadaw battle has taken hold on social media. One reason that this has gained traction, is because it aligns with what many people already believe. Levels of trust in the Tatmadaw have dropped

dramatically over the past three years, and many view the Tatmadaw as cunning and ingenuine. Whether the battle was real or false, increased security incidents in the south of Rakhine State will lead to greater Tatmadaw visibility and security operations. This may drive up support for the Arakan Army as residents face increased discomfort, inconvenience, or harassment from the Tatmadaw. The Arakan Army faces a challenge in southern Rakhine State, where people are much closer to the Myanmar mainland in terms of outlook and even language – there is much less fertile Rakhine nationalism for the Arakan Army to capitalise on. A strike on southern Rakhine State is thereby a message to both the military and the civilian government of the broad reach of the Arakan Army, and an outreach to potential supporters among communities in the south.

# Top-Down Actions Keep IDPs Alarmed

Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp, Kyaukphyu town

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On 2 April, excavation equipment arrived on the site proposed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR) for the resettlement of IDPs currently living in Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp, Kyaukphyu Township. This development dramatically raised concerns among the residents of the camp, most of whom identify with the Kaman ethnic group and were displaced from urban Kyaukphyu in 2012 violence. The IDPs object to the proposed site – it is far from the town and reportedly floods into mud in the wet season. The IDPs wish to be allowed to return to their original locations. As operations began on 2 April, camp leaders contacted the General Administration Department to register their objections, which prompted a visit from a group of authorities – including officials from the General Administrative Department and police. Operations subsequently temporarily stopped, although authorities allegedly threatened IDPs to accept the relocation. Operations by the digger reportedly resumed on 4 April. The permissions that camp residents previously had to leave the camp for daily casual work has now been revoked. Camp residents perceive this to be a coercive punishment for not accepting the relocation site.

## Lack of cohesion? or genuine consultations?

The NLD Government has been trying to implement the National Strategy for Camp Closure and Resettlement of IDPs. The resettlement of the IDPs living in Kyauk Ta Lone camp has been viewed by the Union government as the most feasible and least controversial first step in kick-starting its implementation of the Camp Closure strategy for a number of reasons: the Kaman's official indigenous ethnic status; the generally good relations between local Kaman and Rakhine in Kyaukpyu; and the limited forced occupancy of land and other property owned by Kaman people. According to local sources, several meetings/consultations organised by the MSWRR have taken place over the last few years involving camp leaders and Rakhine community representatives. Based on the dynamics in and results from such meetings, it was understood that most Rakhine in Kyaukpyu have no objections against the option of allowing Kaman to resettle into their original locations. Only a few actors oppose the Kaman's return to their original locations – including hardline

Rakhine nationalists; those with economic interests to take over ownership of Kaman's owned properties; and potentially some political parties keen to take political advantage of anti-Muslim sentiment. Sources informed that most local Rakhine and Kaman people in Kyaukpyu town had generally understood – before the recent unexpected controversial developments happened – that the government would shut down Kyauktalone IDP camp soon and allow its members to return to their original locations. It is not yet clear as of now whether the union government ordered the local level government authorities – meaning that all the past consultations were just for show – or whether the recent controversial move by the local authorities is just a snapshot demonstration of the government actors' coordination issues and/or conflicts/disagreements that exist both vertically and horizontally. Humanitarian actors involved in the camp closure process should raise concerns about ongoing consultations through relevant government channels.

## // Other Developments

This week, 250 digital rights organisations and other civil society groups from across Myanmar condemned the government's directive to telecommunication operators to block a long list of websites which included several media outlets, as discussed in last week's CASS Weekly Update. The directive followed the Arakan Army's designation as a 'terrorist organisation' by the government on 23 March, and the list of now-blocked sites includes the Arakan Army website as well as local Rakhine media organisations DMG and Narinjara. The editors of Narinjara, Voice of Myanmar, and Khit Thit news have subsequently had cases opened against them under the counter-terror law relating to interviews their outlets published with an Arakan Army spokesperson. Since then, Narinjara has not published any news

– further limiting the few sources of information for many communities in Rakhine State.

This week in Kyauktaw further damage was made to Rakhine State's heritage buildings when bullets were fired into the colonial residence which previously housed U Aung Zan Wai, an influential politician active during Burma's independence struggle. U Aung Zan Wai was a negotiator at the Panglong Conference, which he attended together with Burma's independence hero General Aung San in 1947. He was the only man in the room to survive when gunmen stormed Yangon's Secretariat Building on 19 July 1947, killing Aung San and six cabinet members.

## // To Watch This Week

- Fighting in Ponnagyun this week may result in a greater number of displaced persons above the 2000 already reported.
- Increased restrictions on movements out of Yangon, Mandalay and other regions of Myanmar may impact the supply of goods into Rakhine State.

## // Key Readings

- DEVEX looks at the COVID-19 response in Rakhine State under the internet blackout and ongoing civil war.



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