

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.

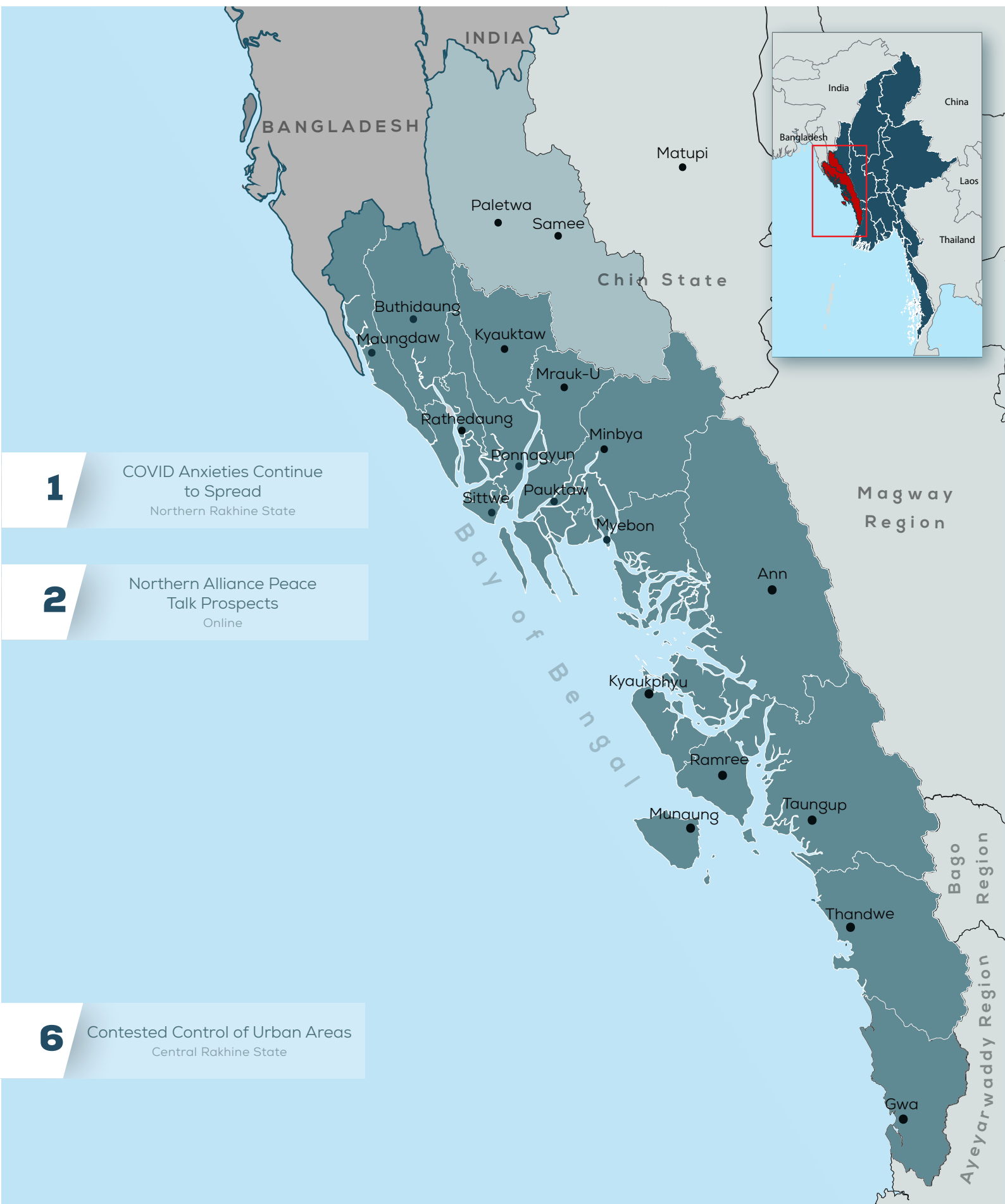


Overview

Displacement remains difficult to track, with significant secondary and multiple displacements recorded. The Rakhine State Government reports that 70,897 people remained displaced in Rakhine State as of 8 June. The most recent displacement figures from [Rakhine Ethnic Congress](#) note that as of 8 June 59,643 people were in displacement sites in Rakhine State, and another 96,813 also affected by conflict outside of formal displacement sites. Humanitarian partner organisations report 7,655 persons displaced in southern Chin State's Paletwa Township as of 9 June, while civil society relief organisation the Relief and Rehabilitation Committee for Chin IDPs reports that 10,072 persons are [currently displaced in Paletwa Township](#).

Approximately 7,000 people fled villages in Minbya Township on 10 June before returning. Further displacement was [reported](#) this week in northern Rathedaung Township after the Arakan Army attacked another police station in the township. Among the estimated 1,000 displaced were farmers who had returned from displacement sites to their villages over the past three months to plant paddy. The 500 persons who returned to Kyauk Tan village in late May as reported in a previous [CASS Weekly Update](#) were again displaced. Over the past two weeks, the Arakan Army has decisively increased its assaults on police and security forces, and Myanmar analysts reported to Radio Free Asia this week that they [expect](#) the conflict to intensify.

As borders remain shut due to COVID-19, human traffickers are [changing their business model](#) and demanding money from the families of Rohingya refugees stuck at sea since February in return for the release of passengers on the shores of Malaysia. On 8 June a boat carrying some 260 Rohingya refugees [arrived](#) on Malaysia's tourist destination Langkawi island. Human Rights Watch says up to 100 [may have died](#) on the vessel at sea. There is an urgent need to ensure that the boats are allowed to land as soon as possible to avoid unnecessary loss of life, and donor countries and agencies should direct their advocacy to this issue. //



1 COVID Anxieties Continue to Spread

Northern Rakhine State

There are now eight confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Rakhine State – all among returnees from overseas. Two cases in the south of the state were returnees from Malaysia, while the remainder in the north were from Bangladesh. Rakhine COVID-19 watch [reports](#) that 396 samples from Rakhine State have been tested as of 15 June, out of a total of 53,351 samples nationwide on 16 June. Naypyidaw has reacted to the reports of COVID-19 among informal returnees from Bangladesh by [promising legal action](#) against those who enter the country ‘illegally’ or those who facilitate such entry.

Borderline

The arrival of COVID-19 in northern Rakhine State has for the most part prompted harsh criticism of authorities, rather than of the returnees or the communities they hail from. Influential figures have criticised both Naypyidaw and local level officials for allowing border crossing to continue despite the threat of COVID-19. Such rhetoric resonates with the current anti-Naypyidaw narrative dominant in Rakhine State now. However, calls for tighter borders and action against ‘illegal Bengalis’ are difficult to separate from a historically widespread narrative of Muslims as illegitimate residents of northern Rakhine State. While some influential figures have taken to Facebook to stoke communal tensions, these narratives remain secondary to anti-Naypyidaw explanations for the imported virus. Regardless, agencies in central and northern Rakhine State should continue to monitor communal tensions. Further transmission of the virus or attempts to manipulate dynamics for political gains may change the narrative around COVID-19 in Rakhine State.

2 Northern Alliance Peace Talk Prospects

Online

On 9 June, U San Aung, spokesperson of Peace Talks Creation Group, told [media](#) that the government offered the Northern Alliance an opening to resume peace talks via video conference. The alliance — consisting of the Arakan Army, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, the Kachin Independence Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army — [has been accused](#) by the government of not wanting peace, after it previously rejected offers to have talks in either Myitkyina, Kachin State or Kyaingtong, Shan State. The announcement comes amid ongoing tensions between the Tatmadaw and the Northern Alliance, evidenced by continued armed conflict despite the announcements of unilateral ceasefire agreements from both sides. Notably, the Tatmadaw recently [rejected a ceasefire](#) proposal from the parallel Brotherhood Alliance (the Arakan Army, Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army).

A chance for peace?

The proposed peace talk should be seen as an opportunity for the National League for Democracy-led government to convince the Northern Alliance to participate in the upcoming Union Peace Conference, and potentially to sign the [ceasefire agreements](#) discussed in prior peace talks. Inclusiveness is also essential for [the Union Peace Conference](#), as only 10 ethnic armed organisations signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015. The omission of armed groups involved in the country’s heaviest fighting is glaring. However, the civilian government faces one major obstacle in its overtures to the Northern Alliance: the fact that both signatories and non-signatory of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement continue to clash with the Tatmadaw in Rakhine, southern Chin, and northern Shan states. It will thus be challenging for the civilian government to claim that signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement guarantees a sustainable peace process.

3

Protecting or Protected? Suspensions in the South

Taungup Township, southern Rakhine State

The National Security Organization, a newly formed group based in Taungup Township, announced its establishment on 8 April and it [set up its public facebook page](#) on the following day, but has only gained national interest in recent weeks. Two initial statements ([here](#) and [here](#)) from the National Security Organisation targeted local National League for Democracy officials, but attention on the group peaked after its announcement that it had [abducted and killed](#) a member of the Arakan Liberation Army/Party (a National Ceasefire Agreement signatory) without warning. The National Security Organisation has warned of further violence. While the Arakan Liberation Party has [blamed the Arakan Army](#) for the killing, the Arakan Army has [denied any link](#) with the National Security Organisation. There are concerns among communities in Taungup and elsewhere in Rakhine State regarding the activities of the group and its potential to spark viral hate speech. Neither Myanmar authorities nor Facebook have evidently made efforts to censor the page or the group, and suspicions against the organisation are widespread.

A closer look at the mysterious NSO

While little is clear about the origins or goals of the National Security Organisation, locals are increasingly suspicious that the group is backed by powerful national interest groups such as the Tatmadaw or Union Solidarity and Development Party. The objectives of the group appear to undermine the National League for Democracy, and to even challenge the Arakan Army by establishing a local militia group with the potential for scaling up. There is a significant Tatmadaw presence in Taungup, while nationwide the Tatmadaw and its ally the Union Solidarity and Development Party are widely known to mobilise [vigilante plainclothes thugs](#) to do their dirty work. Additionally, there remain local suspicions about the mysterious mob that killed 10 Muslim pilgrims in Taungup in 2012 – one of the key trigger points of the 2012 intercommunal conflict. While perceptions of the National Security Organisation in Rakhine State have been largely aligned with the Arakan

Army's rhetoric, the possibility of a connection with the group cannot be discounted completely. The Arakan Army has been establishing underground 'Arakan Authority' bodies across the state since early 2020 to act as 'interim governance bodies'. These likely act varying-ly in different areas as localised personalised interests may trump the Arakan Army's limited oversight and control. Regardless of who is behind the group, the fragmentation of violent politics in Taungup reflects the power vacuum now in place in southern Rakhine State as armed conflict increasingly affects the region. Whether or not the National Security Organisation becomes a mainstay of the scene, instability can be expected at least up to the November 2020 elections. Further deteriorations in conditions may furthermore prompt greater restrictions on humanitarian actors in southern Rakhine.

4 Negotiable Returns for IDPs

Ponnagyun Township, central Rakhine State

Some 2,300 persons have returned to their villages from the Zay Di Pyin displaced persons site after negotiations on 2 May between village leaders, village elders, monks, and the Rakhine State Security and Border Affairs Minister. The villagers had been displaced by armed clashes in March 2020 and could not return to their villages because of Tatmadaw troop deployments. The negotiations followed the submission of a letter from camp leaders and monks to the state security minister. Displaced persons cited poor conditions in the displacement site and a need to prepare to plant paddy for the upcoming season. As a result of the discussions, the state security minister directed local military troops to arrange for the return after two days of inspections of household members lists. The villagers returned to their homes in Pauktaw Pyin, Ah Baung Taw, Hpet Kya and Pein Hne Taw villages.

Going home (for now):

The negotiations reflect the tactical use of displacement in this conflict. The inspection of household lists before permitting returns suggests a suspicion that Arakan Army members had infiltrated the village, and a policy to control communities in displacement sites. However, the development also shows that authorities are open to negotiation regarding returns from displacement sites. While villagers have been able to return for now, however, they face a number of ongoing concerns and fears of repeated displacement. Further clashes may result in a return to displacement sites, as was the case in Rathedaung Township this week. There are also anxieties about the presence of landmines around the village and paddy fields. The returnees also have concerns about the absence of precautions in place for COVID-19, with one monk noting that “there are a lot of people here who have never seen a mask.” International response actors should consider engaging Parahitta organizations, CSOs, and religious groups to assist conflict-affected people in remote areas. Support is needed in terms of COVID-19 response and agricultural equipment including paddy seeds and equipment.

5 Security Concerns Force Hospital Evacuation, Displacement

Kyauktaw Township, central Rakhine State

On 11 and 12 June, some 1,930 people fled Kyauktaw’s Ah Pauk Wa village tract following the arrests of two villagers and the deaths of three more as armed groups fired heavy weapons near the village. Ah Pauk Wa is a sprawling village tract incorporating Rakhine, Rohingya and Mro villages. Health staff and patients from the Ah Pauk Wa station hospital were evacuated and relocated to Kyauktaw town on 14 June.

Access to health

The closure of the station hospital will have implications for access to health for rural Kyauktaw communities. Travel for all civilians has become increasingly difficult since civil war escalated in Rakhine State, but Rohingya will be particularly affected by the closure of a rare rural health facility. Rohingya are rarely admitted to Kyauktaw hospital but can access the Ah Pauk Wa station hospital. Humanitarian agencies should continue to advocate to civilian and military authorities for both increased access to healthcare for Rohingya, and for a reduction in armed clashes near health facilities and civilian areas more generally, particularly in the context of the increasing spread of COVID-19.

6 Contested Control of Urban Areas

Central Rakhine State

A group of Arakan Army members **stabbed one military officer and abducted another** in downtown Ponnagyun on 11 June, and unknown assailants **stabbed and killed** a police officer in downtown Kyauktaw on 13 June. Police officers have repeatedly been subject to knife attacks in urban Kyauktaw.

Trouble in town

Urban areas of central Rakhine State are increasingly contested – Arakan Army members have a known presence in many of these towns and Myanmar security forces are fearful of moving through urban areas in uniform. Reflecting this insecurity, the Tatmadaw soldiers attacked in Ponnagyun this week were in plainclothes, although this offered them little protection. Both civilian and military authorities will see urban areas as their strongholds. As such, the ongoing control shift has massive implications for the state's governance and development objectives, and will factor massively in decisions regarding the feasibility of elections this year. Civil society groups can be supported to fill the gaps in service delivery – including around COVID-19.

7 Detained for Facebook Messages

Sittwe Township, central Rakhine State

Authorities **detained** two teenage women after authorities saw 'suspicious' Facebook message notifications on a mobile phone during home inspections in Kway Taw Peik Seik village, Sittwe Township on 12 June. During the inspections by police, Tatmadaw and immigration officials, authorities sighted a message from one woman to another asking if it was truly the case that a number of people had been arrested from the village. The two women (aged 16 and 18 years old) were held in police detention in Sittwe town before being released without charge.

Anti-social media?

These detentions reflect security forces' suspicion of social media, as well as the conflation between combatants and civilians in the Rakhine conflict. There has been a crackdown on mobile telecommunications in Rakhine State since at least June 2019, when civilian authorities shutdown mobile internet connections in nine townships of Rakhine and Chin states. Security forces often search mobile devices at checkpoints and have been reported to fire on civilians seen using devices in rural areas. Authorities are clearly concerned about the Arakan Army using the internet to communicate and recruit, but also about the potential for sensitive information regarding abuses to reach a broader audience. As noted last week by Crisis Group, the Arakan Army's unprecedented use of asymmetric tactics has **blurred distinctions** between combatants and civilians – resulting in harsher impacts for civilians. Humanitarian Agencies should take these risks into account in security protocol for all staff.

// Other Developments

At the national level, the National League for Democracy is [seeking to convene](#) the Fourth Union Peace Conference in July. The government is powering ahead to hold elections in November, and a successful conference will represent a significant boost before official campaigning begins in August. The conference, the 21st Century Panglong Conference, was scheduled for April, but was postponed due to COVID-19. On 11 June, however, signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement requested the government to [postpone the peace conference](#) to August. They have agreed to reduce the number of delegates to one third according to the government's request to follow social distancing guidelines. The fourth conference is significant: the last under the National League for Democracy's five-year term.

Regardless of fears that polls will be postponed, the Arakan National Party this week [announced](#) the formation of township committees to select candidates. While the party chairperson refused to comment on whether or not elections were feasible in the current climate, many stakeholders have already concluded that without a significant deescalation of the conflict in Rakhine State, the Union Election Commission will be unable to hold elections in many areas of the state. As noted in the [Rakhine State and Southern Chin State 2020 Scenario Plan](#), polls will likely be cancelled in areas that the Union Election Committee cannot access for necessary preparations by late August.

The Union Election Commission has announced they will post voter lists online, citing COVID-19 and a desire to avoid large crowds assembling. The commission has not explained how voters in internet shutdown areas of Rakhine State and southern Chin State can check their voter lists, although many expect elections to be cancelled in those areas anyway. On the other hand, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Transportation and Communication has indicated that the [internet may be restored](#) on 1 August 2020, providing there are “no more threats to the public or violations of the telecommunications law” – an unlikely prospect in the current climate.

Reflecting the insecurity which makes Rakhine State elections unpredictable, unknown assailants armed with knives [robbed a bank](#) in downtown Sittwe in broad daylight on 10 June, taking some 200 million Myanmar Kyat (approximately 143,000 USD). One assailant was captured by police but the cash has not yet been recovered. Allegations were quickly spread on Facebook that authorities confiscated the security footage before bank staff were allowed to view it, sparking rumours of conspiracy. For many, the robbery prompted concerns regarding growing insecurity in the town, and movement on the streets of Sittwe was noticeably reduced for some days. For others, the robbery took on a conflict narrative, with both the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw [trading blame](#) for the crime.

The Tatmadaw's True News Information Team has reopened a Facebook page, and immediately joined the online information war with the Arakan Army by claiming the Tatmadaw [received two Arakan Army deserters](#) in Kyauktaw Township. In August 2018 Facebook [removed](#) 18 accounts and 50 pages linked to the Tatmadaw, including the page of the Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, following the release of a report by the UN's Fact Finding Mission which recommended prosecution of Tatmadaw leaders for genocide. In February 2019, Facebook also [banned](#) the four members of the Northern Alliance (the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army). For now, Facebook has evidently decided to allow the Tatmadaw to establish its presence again. While the social media platform certainly has limited influence over what happens in Myanmar, it can choose to elevate some voices over others. This may be particularly decisive in this election year.

Following the 6 June press conference held by residents of the Kyauk Ta Lone camp in Kyaukphyu Township, there remains no further construction on the proposed relocation site. However, dialogue between camp residents and authorities has progressed little. Reportedly, Chief Minister U Nyi Pu visited the site on 16 June, but did not interact with camp residents.

Finally, a ‘Rakhine Lives Matter’ online campaign to highlight civilian casualties has been launched in Rakhine State. A part of the campaign, the Rakhine Youth New Generation Network is [holding a](#)

[competition](#) and calling for submissions of videos which highlight impacts to civilians in Rakhine and southern Chin states and offering a cash prize. //

// What To Watch This Week

- 21 June marks the one year anniversary of the internet shutdown in parts of Rakhine State and southern Chin State. While a public demonstration may be off the cards due to COVID, an online campaign has begun to commemorate the shutdown.

// Key Readings

- Noting failures by humanitarians to recognise heterogeneity, Nursyazwani and Elliot Prasse-Freeman [consider](#) ‘[Rohingya-ness](#)’ and the diverse identities amongst Rohingya communities in various contexts.
- On the Lowy Institute’s Interpreter blog, Rebecca Barber and Sarah Teitt [advocate](#) for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to engage with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue before the 26 June semi-annual summit is held online.



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