

# MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE

## CASS

Community Analysis Support System

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| 18-24 June 2020 |

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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

On 23 June, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Rakhine State capital, Sittwe. Reportedly, the patient is an ethnic Rakhine trader who returned from Bangladesh on 21 June and submitted himself to quarantine in a downtown hotel. Eight of his colleagues were quarantined in a different location, while the small boat driver who transported the patient from the port to a hotel on 21 June is reportedly yet to be located.

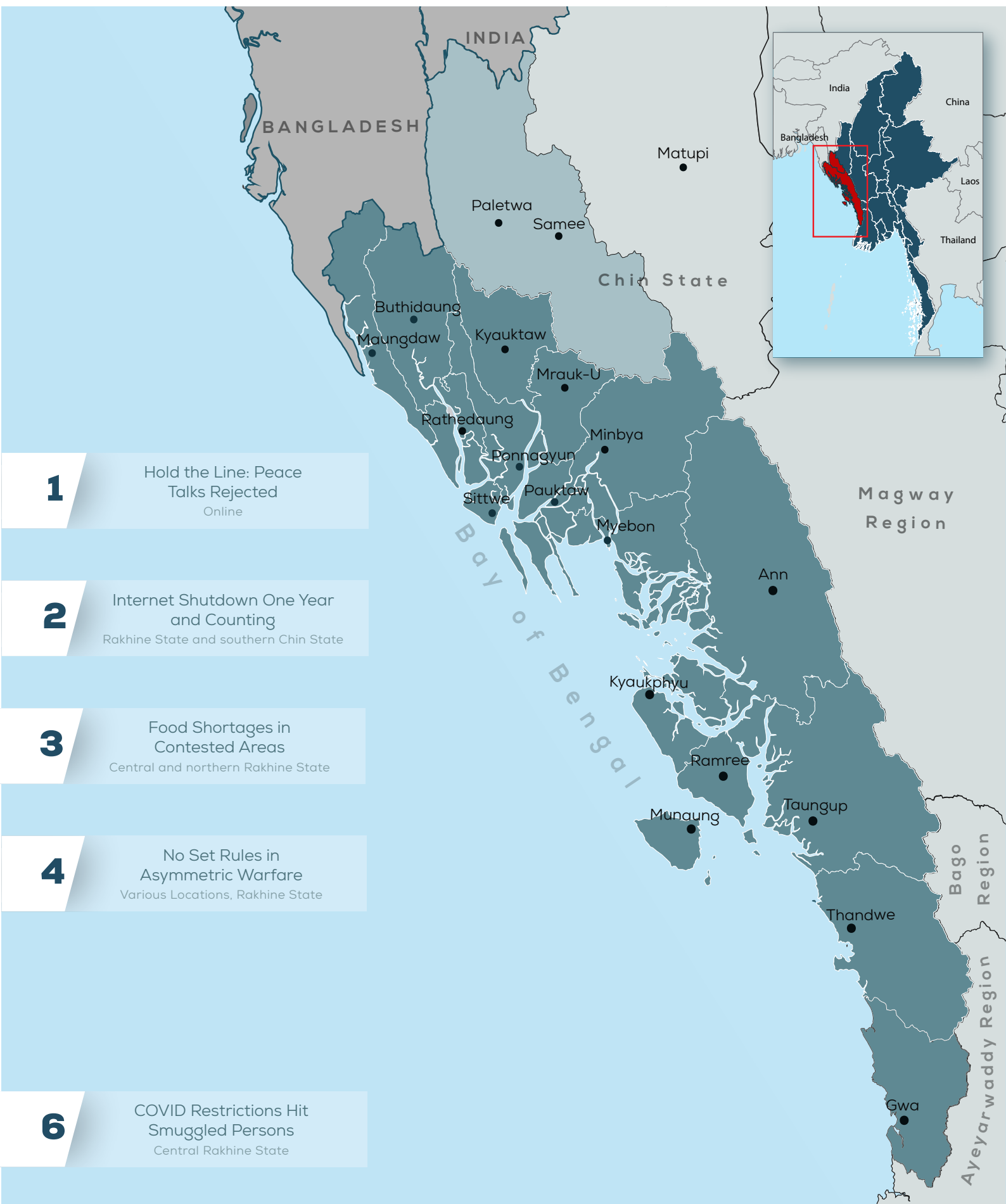
The confirmation of a COVID-19 presence in Sittwe should prompt agencies to ensure that all staff are following preventative measures as outlined by the [World Health Organisation](#). It is also clear that COVID-19 will have a devastating economic impact for Rakhine State. A lockdown will seriously affect urban families who rely on daily labour, and will restrain rural communities who are now preparing to plant monsoon paddy. Other industries will also be affected. This year is expected to be the worst on record for Myanmar's fisheries industry due to a drop in global demand. Humanitarian agencies should seek to alleviate some of these impacts for the most vulnerable among both rural and urban communities. Concerns among communities that international agencies may spread the COVID-19 virus should be addressed proactively. To alleviate these concerns and improve communication channels, some international agencies have approached ward administrators near their office or guesthouse locations to explain their activities and measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus.

Notably, the [first case of local transmission](#) in Rakhine State was confirmed on 18 June. The patient is the wife of the first confirmed case in Maungdaw, who returned from Bangladesh earlier this month. Despite attempts to reinforce the border, informal returns continue to be reported. Five Muslim men reportedly entered from Bangladesh as recently as 20 June before one was [apprehended and quarantined](#). The whereabouts of the others reportedly remains uncertain. Presidential spokesperson U Zaw Htay this week publicly acknowledged that security forces are involved in the [smuggling of people and drugs](#) across the border. The virus is now widespread in Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh, where there are now [1,600 cases confirmed](#) – just 38 cases of them reported in the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps.

In total, 293 cases are now confirmed in Myanmar, after 66,353 total tests. However, [according to the Myanmar Times](#), by mid-June some 53,000 tests had been done on returnees to Myanmar from foreign countries, meaning that testing of non-returnees has been very limited. This raises serious questions about the actual presence of the virus in the country, and – as noted by Frontier Myanmar – the accuracy of the government's reporting. By 22 June, [only 1,258 samples](#) had been sent from Rakhine State to Yangon for testing. CASS will continue to seek clarity on figures in future updates.

Despite the spread of the virus, the Arakan Army have continued their assaults on Border Guard Police in Rathedaung Township. On 22 June the armed group [attacked a Border Guard Police column](#) near Rathedaung Township's coastal Koe Tan Kauk village. The police were on patrol from their outpost at Inn Din village, the site of a [notorious massacre](#) of Rohingya Muslims in 2017. The Arakan Army previously attacked Border Guard Police in nearby Done Paik village on 2 May and 13 June, and also attacked the Thazin Myaing border police outpost on 29 May. The Tatmadaw's usual reaction is a targeting of villagers suspected of collaboration with the group. The recent attacks have taken place on the Maungdaw-Angu Maw road, a crucial access route to Maungdaw Township used by humanitarians, civil servants and the private sector.

Active clashes in rural areas are continuing, despite a trend towards more urban targeted violence as discussed in more detail below. Civilian casualties continue to follow clashes closely. On 21 June a Muslim woman and two Rakhine civilians were injured in Tatmadaw fire following a mine attack on their convoy near Ah Pauk Wa village, Kyauktaw Township. Clashes have been frequent in the area in recent weeks – even prompting the evacuation of the Ah Pauk Wa station hospital as detailed in last week's [CASS Weekly Update](#). The Tatmadaw continues to open fire into civilian areas when attacked by the Arakan Army, highlighting security considerations for humanitarian actors. //



# Hold the Line: Peace Talks Rejected

Online

1

The Northern Alliance has rejected an invitation for an online dialogue from the government. As noted in the previous CASS Weekly Update, on 5 June the government invited the four member alliance – consisting of the Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar Democratic Alliance Army – to restart peace talks for the first time since dialogue broke down in September 2019. The Northern Alliance reportedly retorted that no dialogue will be possible until after the COVID-19 pandemic. President's office spokesperson U Zaw Htay further remarked that the Tatmadaw and government will “fully guarantee the security of Northern Alliance delegates in peace talks” and that informal peace talks online could be followed by a formal dialogue. However, these comments drew online criticism, as communities online deemed them insincere in light of the Arakan Army's designation as a terrorist organisation in late March.

## Over before it begins

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Active conflict, a non-inclusive peace process and electoral competition all suggest little hope for a negotiated settlement in western Myanmar before general elections still expected for November. Despite a lull in active conflict in recent months, tracking the indicators identified in CASS' Rakhine State and southern Chin State Scenario Plan highlights that there has been no structural shift to foster deescalation. The Northern Alliance's continued absence from the peace process and western Myanmar's exclusion from the Tatmadaw's unilateral ceasefire reflect the fact that dialogue remains stalled, while no obvious third-party mediator has emerged. Security incidents continue to occur in urban areas, where the Arakan Army's influence is reportedly growing. In many urban areas police (whether Rakhine or not) are afraid to venture outside of their stations, and reportedly lock themselves inside after dark. The government's insistence to hold elections in November will put it at odds with the Arakan Army, who are attempting to consolidate their control over rural areas. As such, all parties can be expected to continue talking over each other – at least until November.

# Internet Shutdown One Year and Counting

Rakhine State and southern Chin State

**2** The one year anniversary of the mobile telecommunication network shutdown in Rakhine and southern Chin states was marked on 21 June. Civil society organizations, political parties, media, international organizations and embassies urged the government to immediately lift the internet shutdown via statements, open letters, online campaigns and protest. [An open letter](#) from Rakhine political parties, civil society organizations and media groups highlighted a lack of logic behind the shutdown, noting that there had been no decrease in conflict after the shutdown. In addition, 116 local and international civil society organizations [demanded](#) the government amend the 2013 Telecommunication Law to be in line with human rights standards. They condemned the impact that the shutdown has had on some 1 million people, noting “the ongoing violation of their economic, social, cultural, developmental, political, and civil rights.” Fourteen embassies and the European Union also released a [joint statement](#) on the shutdown, highlighting the importance of access to information for health, safety and security. Activists and rights groups also organized a [virtual protest](#) to mark the ‘world’s longest’ internet shutdown, while many students and activists also joined an online campaign wearing t-shirts reading “Oppose Internet Oppression” and posting pictures on Facebook.

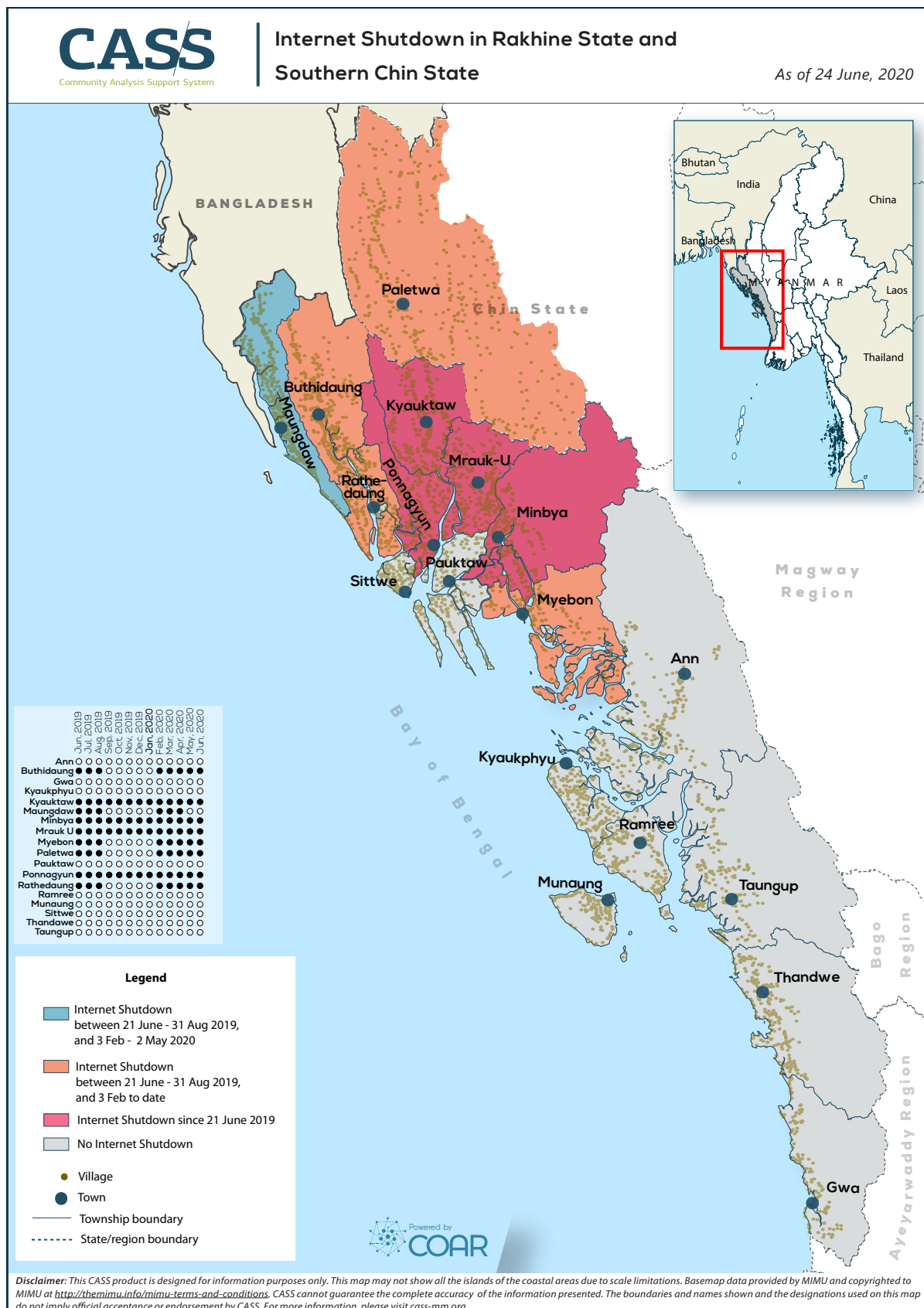
## Dissent disconnect

Despite the mobilisation to draw attention to this issue, the likelihood of the government reopening networks anytime soon remains low amid ongoing armed conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and early campaigning for the 2020 general election. Indeed, on 23 June Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun, the Secretary of the Tatmadaw True News Information Team, informed his audience that the Tatmadaw has [no plan to restore the internet](#) shutdown due to the risks of “military secrets, hate speech, and extreme nationalism” spreading online. Instead of re-opening communication lines, authorities have sought to silence those who object. For their roles in organising protests, authorities have filed charges against activists from the [Ramree Youth Network](#) in central Rakhine State, Executive Director of Athan [activist Maung Saung Kha](#), and four other activists in Yangon under section 19 of the Peaceful Assembly and

Peaceful Procession Law. Freedom of expression remains limited under the civilian government. On 24 June, Arakan CSO Network released a [statement expressing their disappointment](#) with the government’s decision to press charges. On the ground, local communities are struggling with the most immediate impacts of the shutdown. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, civilians from internet shutdown areas are the most vulnerable and have little access to timely and reliable information to prevent transmission or access humanitarian assistance. Sources note that the shutdown has halted remittances from people working abroad, blocked digital payments, and closed opportunities for education. They also raised concerns that they would not be able to participate in the upcoming election due to both armed conflicts and lack of access to information. A local source from Mrauk U Township noted that one of the greatest impacts was

the stifling of news regarding human rights abuses, violations and war crimes committed by soldiers. Humanitarian responders and donors should highlight these adverse impacts on communities and the economy in advocacy to the government.

The map below illustrates the areas of Rakhine State and southern Chin State affected by the internet shut-down. Eight townships remain offline.





# Food Shortages in Contested Areas

Central and northern Rakhine State

3

Thousands of villagers and internally displaced people are currently facing food shortages in Ann, Myebon and Rathedaung townships. According to the [Chin Human Rights Organization](#), thousands of villagers in Da Let Chaung Village Tract, Ann Township, are facing food shortages (also detailed in the [CASS Weekly Update 18 May-3 June](#)) due to ongoing clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army and a blockade of roads and waterways since January 2020. On 13 June, a total of 431 people from Mingaladon village in Ann Township [fled due to a lack of food](#) after the Tatmadaw blocked supplies and armed clashes occurred. Furthermore, on 16 June, DMG [reported](#) that others from that same village left temporary shelters in Alae Kyun village to relocate to Ann town – again due to food shortages. Meanwhile, in Rathedaung Township on 20 June eight Buddhist monks led a group of locals coordinating with the town administrative body to [rescue 54 trapped villagers](#) from Sauk Khat village after 12 days of shortages of food and medical supplies. Some 2,000 displaced people in six displacement sites in Myebon township also [face food shortages](#) due to access restrictions, although local organisations and monks are ready to respond.

## Continuing food crisis

Many communities in these areas are facing severe food shortages, but the military continues to restrict access. Although local sources in Myebon report that the Ministry of Social Welfare provides some support, specifically a can of uncooked rice per person per day, it is unclear how widespread this is and food needs clearly remain unmet. Thousands of internally displaced people from six sites in Myebon are in an emergency state in need of rice. At this point, the role of local organizations and religious leaders is vital in providing assistance. International responders should work closely with local organizations and religious leaders to identify access points and to advocate to urge the government to allow access for badly needed assistance as soon as possible.

# No Set Rules in Asymmetric Warfare

Various Locations, Rakhine State

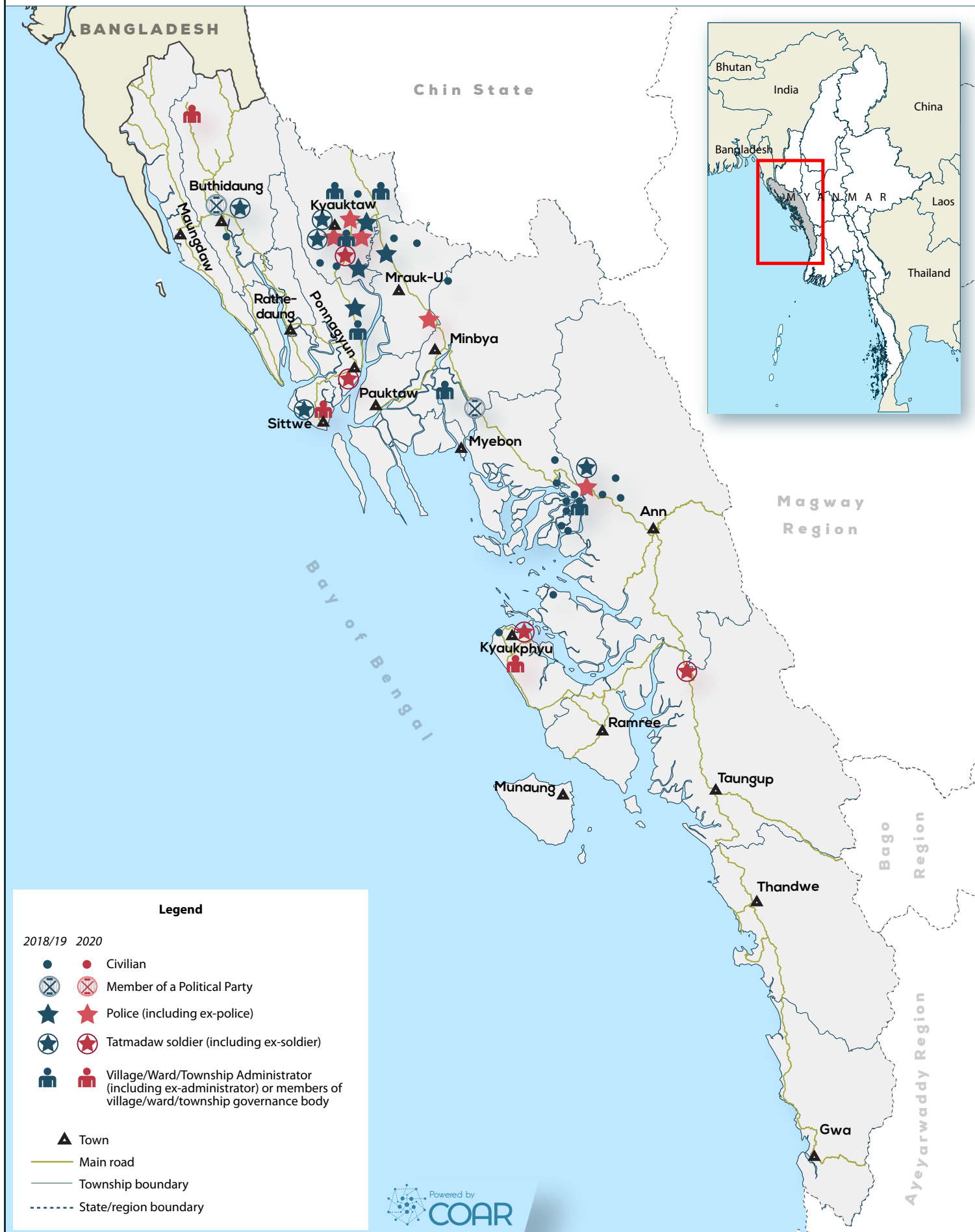
**4** Targeted killings of security forces and civil servants were widespread in 2019, but dropped rapidly in 2020. In recent weeks, this trend has re-emerged. At approximately midnight on 16 June, the Village Clerk of Saing Chon Village Tract, Kyaukpyu Township was abducted at his home by an unknown group of masked men and **found dead** the next morning in an urban ward of Kyaukpyu town. The Tatmadaw **released a statement on 17 June** alleging that the murdered clerk was killed by some 20 Arakan Army members. The Arakan Army has not publicly responded. In late May, a ward administrator from Sittwe town was also killed when he was **violently stabbed** in broad daylight. Protection from security forces has been minimal, since they themselves have also been the targets for violent activities. As reported in last week's **CASS Weekly Update**, Tatmadaw and police officers were recently attacked – abducted or stabbed – in downtown Ponnagyun and Kyauktaw. The dangers faced by administrators were reflected in the mass resignations of administrators in numerous Rakhine townships in 2019 and 2020. Civil servants and administrators face pressures and threats from both the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw.

## Shifting contest

As active clashes have seemingly reduced in intensity in recent months, both the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw have strategically shifted towards non-traditional targeted violence to achieve their military and political objectives. For the Arakan Army, highly symbolic resistance activities such as the assassination and abduction of current and former security forces can challenge the Tatmadaw's morale to operate in many areas, and this in turn builds confidence among the Arakan Army's support base. On the other hand, the Arakan Army's use of such tactics are partly why many among non-Rakhine communities in Myanmar are sympathetic towards civilian and military authorities' labelling of the Arakan Army as a drug trafficking terrorist organisation with little consideration of civilians. Of course, many in Rakhine State are highly opposed to such propaganda, and instead reserve strong suspicions toward the Tatmadaw. Rumours circulate among Rakhine

communities that the Tatmadaw or its lackey groups are conducting these assassinations to tactically attribute abuses to the Arakan Army. In a context of low trust and polarized opinions, targeted violent activities are hugely effective for the information war being waged by both sides. As such, response actors should expect targeted killings to continue for the time being. Humanitarian organisations in Rakhine and southern Chin are advised to implement stronger safety and security policies, and provide training on risk reduction to staff, partners and volunteers.

The following map looks at targeting killings of security forces, civil servants and civilians in Rakhine State between 2018 and 2020. While armed groups did not take responsibility for all of these incidents, all cases with evidence suggesting a link to armed conflict and shifting governance trends are included on the map.



# Displaced Persons Face Flooding Threat

Yet Chaung IDP site, Myebon township

5

Following recent incessant rainfall and high tides last week, 14 sites hosting persons displaced by armed conflict in Rakhine State **were flooded**. Among those most affected was the Yet Chaung IDP site, Myebon Township, which lies on the edge of a creek. High tides reportedly submerged some 400 shelters, as displaced persons evacuated to the Lay Taung village monastery. Civil society organisation Rakhine Ethnic Congress note flooding in the sites have exacerbated seasonal health problems among children in sites in Buthidaung Township in particular. Flood waters have now subsided but communities are facing food shortages, although authorities continue to restrict humanitarian access.

## Support needed

Flooding at this time of year is not unexpected. In July 2019, some 150,000 people in Rakhine State were **affected by flooding** and some 70,000 acres of **paddy fields were destroyed**. As the rainy season continues, floods can only be expected to recur. Weather reports in Rakhine State are usually shared by the government via the internet, radio, TV, and newspapers. However, as most of the flood-affected areas are rural, there is little access to information from radio, TV and newspaper, while the internet shutdown prevents access to the popular Department of Meteorology and Hydrology reports on Facebook that many previously relied on. The internet shutdown also inhibits awareness raising and contributes to delayed preparation and response to disasters. In the immediate, food and shelter needs are most important. Some national and international agencies have responded, but needs remain. New shelters need to be built on higher ground, but the camp management committee is lacking funding. Humanitarian agencies should reach out to displacement sites through monastic actors and camp leaders to support these needs. Advocacy is required to encourage authorities to cooperate with local civil society and international humanitarian agencies to build shelters on higher land, create disaster preparedness plans, raise public awareness on emergency response, and issue warnings on the dangers of floods. Additional cash payments would also support displaced persons to access food and build new shelters.

# COVID Restrictions Hit Smuggled Persons

Central Rakhine State

6

COVID-19 related restrictions on movement and gatherings have temporarily halted the smuggling of Rohingya from central Rakhine State, compounding the impacts of armed conflict to the trade. Illustrating this, a group of 16 Muslims from northern Rakhine State were arrested in Irrawaddy Region on 23 June. The group, having entered the region by boat, was found sheltering in a hut after their travel plans were disrupted by COVID-19. Prior to the restrictions put in place to stem the spread of the virus, a nationwide network smuggled dozens of people overland out of Mrauk U and Kyauktaw townships each month. Prices averaged around 2 million Myanmar Kyat (approximately 1,440 USD) to get to Yangon and more to reach Thailand or Malaysia. At the same time, the fate of more than 200 Rohingya refugees who were permitted to land in Malaysia earlier this month remains uncertain. The Malaysian government is reportedly considering repairing the refugees' boats to send them back to sea. Many countries have closed their borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and human traffickers are reportedly holding Rohingya who remain on boats to ransom.

## Vulnerabilities exposed

While the trade is on standstill for now, demand will remain post-COVID. Freedom of movement restrictions mean that a large proportion of Rohingya detained outside of Rakhine State are held for travelling without papers which are notoriously difficult to obtain. Despite awareness of a new government policy to no longer detain Rohingya found travelling without documentation, communities report that this is unlikely to result in more smuggling given the high cost of movement for most families. A large proportion of smuggled persons are underage. In April, when the government released detained Rohingya from prisons across the country, one Muslim village in central Rakhine State village reported that 28 of 30 people returned there were under the age of 18. Most smuggling inside Myanmar is a service delivered for a fee – but sometimes smuggling turns to exploitation. Groups of underage victims can be held while their families are extorted for money. As the root causes of the informal movement of people will take longer to address, humanitarian agencies should focus on safe migration awareness raising while directing advocacy towards the government to deter traffickers.

## // Other Developments

The suspected [sexual assault and murder](#) of a 13 year old girl in Sittwe this week prompted [crowds to gather downtown](#) outside the Sittwe No. 1 Police Station and demand justice. Some Sittwe residents have turned their blame to the police, who they believe have failed in their job to make Sittwe secure. Some social cohesion concerns are also prevalent here, as the suspected killer is thought to be from outside of Rakhine State, although there have not yet been any arrests made in connection to the case.

Displaced persons in Kyauktaw Township are being [re-located from schools](#) to monasteries and community halls in anticipation of the school year starting in mid-July. Popular actor Nay Toe – originally from Rakhine State and well known for his devout Buddhism – has donated cash for the construction of tents for displaced persons in Sittwe, Rathedaung and Mrauk U.

In Kyaukphyu Township, the Kyauk Ta Lone camp was also [flooded in heavy rain \(pictures\)](#) last week, together with the proposed relocation site. Camp residents continue to object to the proposed site – citing the risk of floods among other concerns.

Police have [lodged complaints](#) against four journalists to the Myanmar Press Council for alleged breaches of

media ethics. The journalists include Khaing Mrat Kyaw, editor of Sittwe-based Narinjara media, who went into hiding after police filed charges against him under section 50(a) of Myanmar's Counter Terror law on 31 March. The blocking of news agency's web pages and attempts to charge journalists under Myanmar's Counter Terror Law and Unlawful Association Act have an information deficit in western Myanmar. This has implications for the humanitarian agencies who previously relied on local outlets for up-to-date reportage.

Finally, last week the controversial ethnomusicologist cum anti-Rohingya activist Rick Heizman, [released a video](#) claiming to highlight activities of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Heizman has previously been [banned from both Facebook and Twitter](#) for producing hate speech. While Heizman has historically enjoyed good relationships with authorities and local Rakhine elites – he was allowed into northern Rakhine State when other observers were barred in 2018 – no notable politician or influencer has shared his new video online. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army continues to be seen by many in Myanmar as an Islamist 'boogey man', and hate speech against them can inflame tensions between ordinary Myanmar residents of different religions. //

## // To Watch This Week

- The Union Election Commission will meet with political parties in Yangon on 27 June to discuss elections slated for November. While attendees reportedly know little of the agenda, some discussion of the practicality of elections in Rakhine State and southern Chin State may be expected. The commission has reportedly requested the **support of the Tatmadaw** to hold elections in western Myanmar and the Wa special region.
- The **winning videos of the film contest** hosted by local activist campaigners Rakhine Lives Matter are now available to watch online.

## Key Readings

- Khin Khin Mra highlights a disturbing spike [domestic violence against women](#) during the COVID-19 'lockdown'.
- In their most recent report Crisis Group highlights the dangers that Myanmar's expected election poses to the peace process, and urges stakeholders to take the electoral and COVID-19 related down-time to reflect on [how to reboot the process](#).
- Youth activist organisation Generation Wave take a deep dive into the [barriers faced by ethnic and religious minorities](#) in accessing identity documents. The report is also available in [Myanmar language](#).
- The ICRC has released a two-page briefer on [COVID-19 and international humanitarian law](#).



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