

# MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE

# CASS

Community Analysis Support System

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| 20-26 August 2020 |

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- p. 6** [COVID-19 and Rohingya Rights](#)
- p. 6** [COVID Disinformation Breeding Distrust of Responders](#)
- p. 7** [Food in Shortages in Conflict Zones](#)



## IN FOCUS

# Corona in the West

*International agencies are increasingly affected by the rapid spread of COVID-19 in Rakhine State. The emergency demands a response, as does the civil war.*

According to reports from Myanmar's Ministry of Health and Sports, COVID-19 has decisively spread to western Myanmar. At the time of writing, 171 locally transmitted cases had been reported in Rakhine State in the previous 10 days, and 176 cases are now active. Cases are clustered around the state capital of Sittwe, but with further cases confirmed further south and north. With dozens of new cases confirmed each day, and armed conflict continuing in the north of the state, western Myanmar may be on the precipice of a full-blown humanitarian emergency.

Cases have spread to staff of international humanitarian agencies and national responders. As a result, many agencies are increasingly demobilised, despite the emergency. The Rakhine State government has cancelled at least three international agencies' travel and activity authorisations indefinitely. The government has also restricted the activities of all other international humanitarian agencies to only 'essential assistance' of food, healthcare, water and latrines.

The government has put a lockdown into motion. In Sittwe, the authorities instituted a 9pm to 4am curfew and a 'stay at home' order on 20 August, and announced the same 'stay at home' order for four more townships on 25 August. In the Rohingya internment camps of central Rakhine State a similar lockdown is in place and sources in the camps report that armed police patrols have prompted further anxiety among camp residents. Opening hours at all markets are restricted. Panic buying and restrictions on movement for all communities have contributed to rising prices for basic goods in some areas. Private transportation contractors that agencies previously relied on for supply lines are now refusing to make deliveries to Rakhine State, citing fears of infection.

According to authorities, there is a capacity to test up to a modest 75 samples per day in Sittwe. The capacity to test locally arrived only in early August. Government staff have suggested this may be a strain of Coronavirus not yet seen in Myanmar, but this is yet to be confirmed by medical teams.

Deepening this crisis, armed conflict between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw has continued. While the government has requested the Arakan Army to cease its offensives, the Tatmadaw continues its operations. The Tatmadaw on 24 August announced that it will extend its 10 May to 31 August unilateral COVID-19 ceasefire for another month up to 30 September, but western Myanmar continues to be excluded from the unilateral ceasefire.

On 22 August, four villagers were injured as the Tatmadaw fired artillery from Navy vessels and the two sides clashed in northern Rathedaung township. COVID-19 related restrictions prohibited the injured from reaching essential healthcare in Sittwe. Further jeopardising access to healthcare, information and livelihoods, artillery damage to power lines in northern Rakhine State has plunged Maungdaw and Buthidaung into an ongoing power blackout. No Arakan Army offensives have been reported for at least one week, and the group has said it is 'willing to cooperate' for the control of the virus. Regardless, dialogue remains decisively stalled.

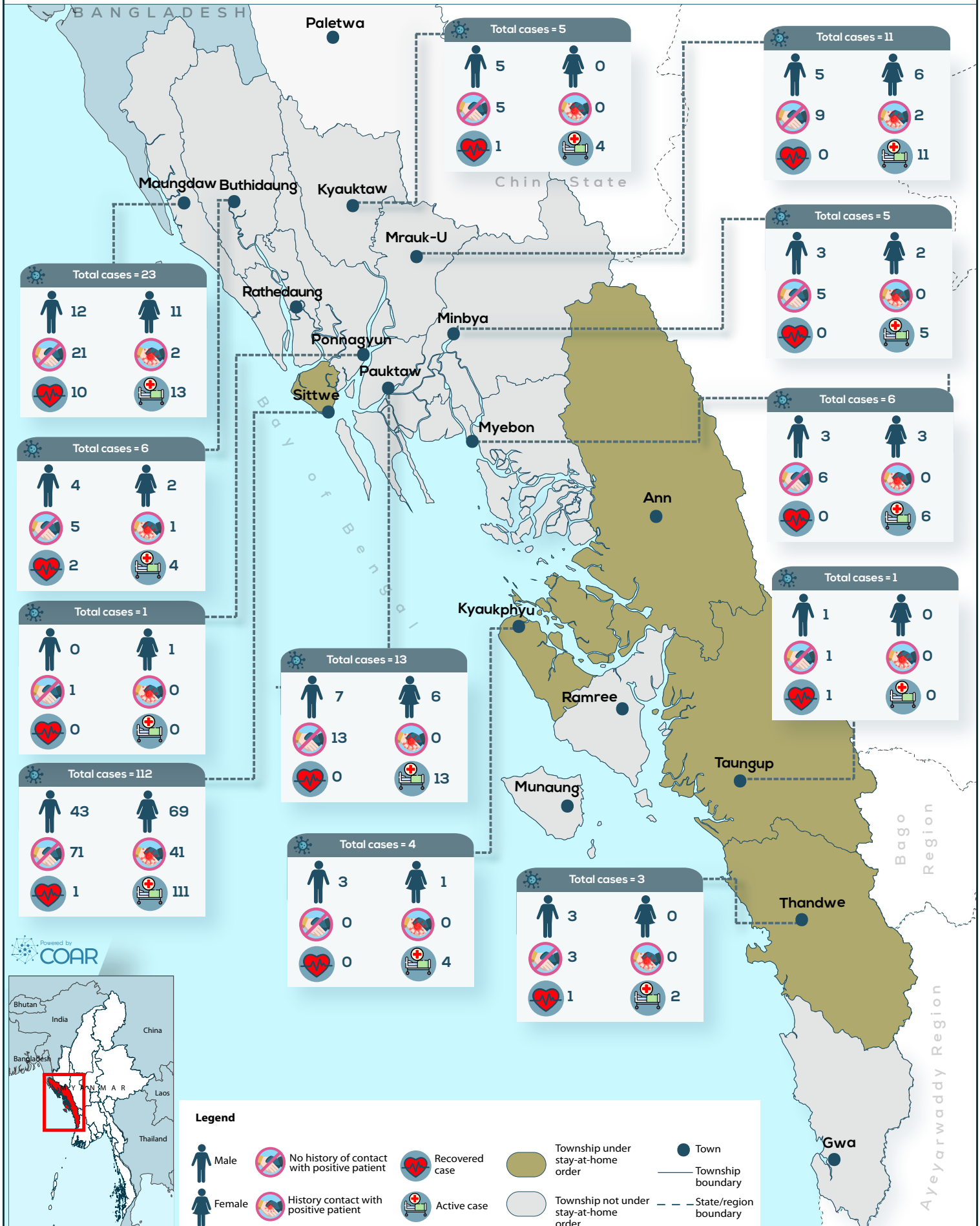
Positively, Myanmar has had relatively few fatalities from COVID-19 to date. Of total 574 confirmed cases since 23 March, only six cases have been fatal. The minimal impact of COVID-19 in mainland Southeast Asia (despite its proximity to China) to date has generated a number of theories about existing immunity within the population. However, this is no time for complacency.

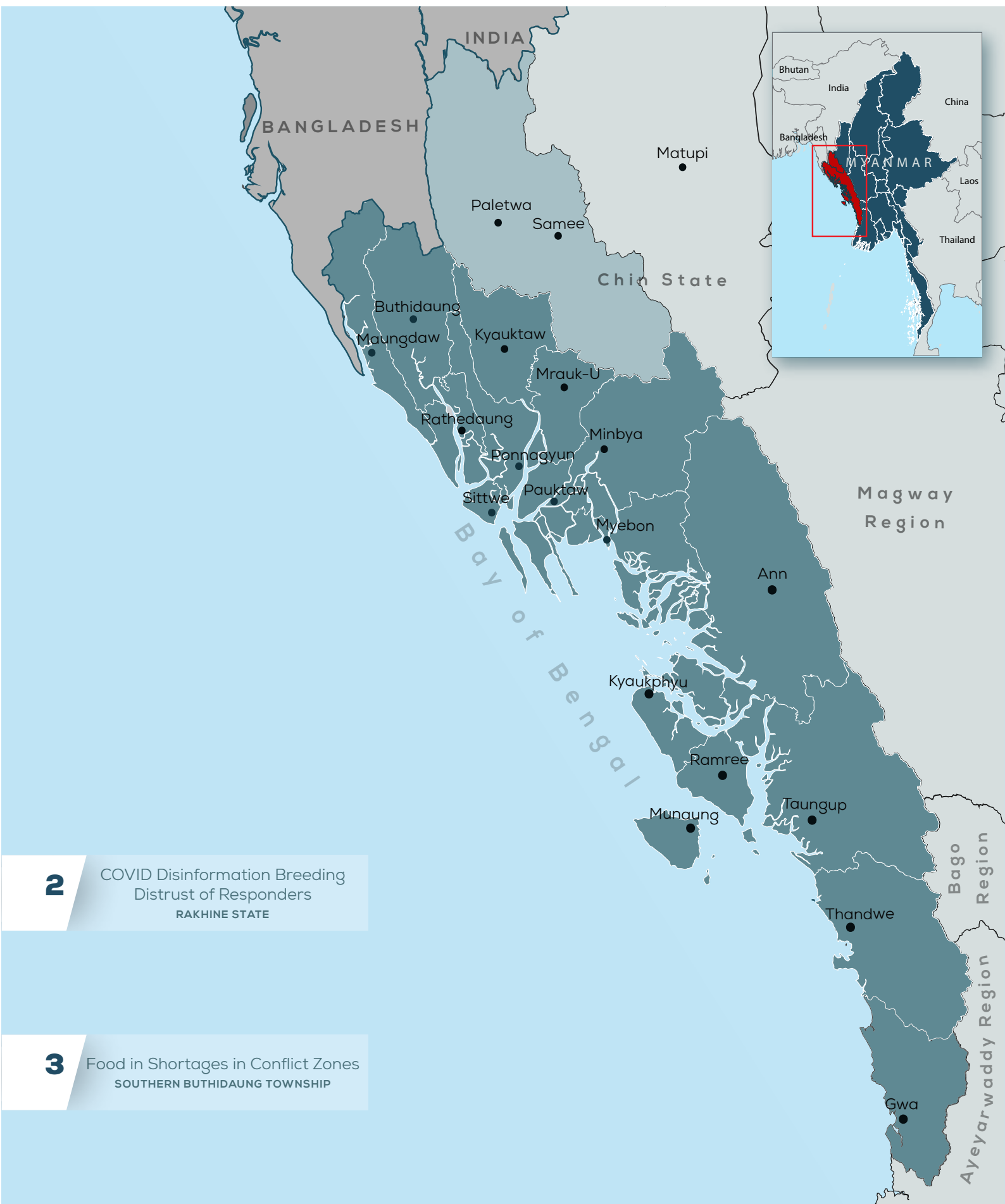
The hundreds of thousands of IDPs across central and northern Rakhine State are most at risk. Cohabiting in cramped shelters with limited access to clean water and basic healthcare, the spread of the virus in these sites will be near impossible to manage. International agencies are providing baseline services in these areas and will inevitably be affected or called on by communities to respond to any further spread of the virus.

With two locally transmitted cases also reported in Yangon this week, and COVID-19 scares as far away as northern Shan State, there is a considerable risk that reports of the virus will spread, prompting new quarantines, travel restrictions and strain on supply lines. Agencies need to move quickly to pre-position aid, staff and other resources. On 26 August, the government announced the temporary closure of high schools nationwide.

Access for humanitarian agencies was already heavily restricted before COVID-19 and the implication of agencies in the spread of the virus will likely result in further restrictions. Meanwhile, national agencies – both formal and informal – are continuing to spread awareness in both internet-able and internet-disabled areas, are running quarantine centres collaboration with authorities, and are providing masks and other PPE to communities. A shift of resources to these local groups will only strengthen the response, although an international response will need to continue in Rohingya internment sites particularly.

Finally, while a response to the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 is imperative, humanitarian agencies must not let this drag resources away from existing life-saving medical referrals, mine risk education and the response to armed conflict-generated displacement and blockages of food and essential aid to rural locations. //





## 1 COVID-19 and Rohingya Rights

### RAKHINE STATE

Governments across the world have imposed restrictions on people's movement and access to livelihoods in order to stem the spread of COVID-19. Some governments have acted in better faith than others, but all have made judgements on the balance between rights and health. In Rakhine State, this judgement is most tenuous when it comes to the most vulnerable – including Rohingya and other Muslims interned in camps since 2012. Social distancing is impossible here. People live in cramped conditions, are under strict restrictions on movement, and have extremely limited access to livelihoods, healthcare and education. Since the confirmation of the spread of the virus over the last 10 days, the camps have been subject to further lockdowns and movement restrictions. In the camps, quarantine centres remain rudimentary and testing is limited. How can agencies protect communities from the virus while also advocating for their basic rights?

#### Prisoners or protected?

Authorities have shown little interest in protecting the rights of the Rohingya for decades, but agencies must continue to lobby for greater protections. COVID-19 may be cited to lever longer-term policy changes. Prior to COVID-19, long-term discussions regarding how to best protect the Rohingya have included the prospect of agencies distancing themselves from the camps altogether. For the time being, a humanitarian imperative to save lives in the face of COVID clearly trumps these concerns. Any COVID-19 outbreak and mass deaths would provoke allegations that the government had failed to protect the Rohingya, or even knowingly allowed the virus to spread through the camp area – not a good look for a state already accused of genocide at the Hague. Ahead of reporting to the United Nations' Human Rights Council in September, the civilian government has an interest in avoiding such blame. At the same time, the government usually is quick to act when policy makers believe the potential for inter-communal violence has been raised. Discussions with authorities about online and offline narratives and how to combat hate speech and disinformation may open new opportunities for policy change. //

## 2 COVID Disinformation Breeding Distrust of Responders

### RAKHINE STATE

While the dominant narrative online and offline is one of government neglect, poor border security and insufficient preparedness, a narrative which blames international agencies for the spread of the virus is also prevalent. This narrative stems from the fact that many international agency staff have been infected, and a widespread belief that the virus entered Rakhine State from Bangladesh via the Muslim community which international agencies are responding to. Increasing numbers of active cases in Rakhine State are staff of international agencies, although no cases have been reported among Muslim communities in central Rakhine State. These narratives have also transformed into action. On 24 August a staff member of a prominent national NGO was followed home and verbally abused, with the attackers referencing organisations' role in the spread of the virus. Many other rumours of harassment of staff have spread through the humanitarian community. There are precedents from the recent past which agencies should look to to challenge disinformation.

#### Agencies' response

International agencies have fought disinformation about their role in Rakhine State since at least the response to displacement in 2012. While disinformation since then has concerned accusations of aid bias and complicity in an perceived global Islamist conspiracy, the response to accusations of complicity in spreading COVID-19 should take a similar approach. First, there is a need for better communication. Agencies or representative forums should designate staff to liaise regularly with thought-leaders and online influencers including CSOs, religious leaders, political leaders and authorities. This represents a clear opportunity to share information and clear misperceptions. Personal relationships, trust and familiarity will also encourage stakeholders to think twice before spreading disinformation. Better online communication is also needed. Facebook pages which can answer questions and concerns have been used by some agencies to date. An [online statement](#) from one INGO this week was well received by online users and displayed transparency. Second, any response



should be inclusive. A focus on one community over another will be bait for online and offline agitators who seek to mobilise communities or demobilise agencies. Including civil society actors in the response will ensure greater access while combatting disinformation. Finally, agencies should have open discussions with staff who may be facing stigma in the community. Discussions about the feasibility of vis-ibility, for example, may be welcomed by staff. //

### 3 Food in Shortages in Conflict Zones

#### SOUTHERN BUTHIDAUNG TOWNSHIP

Thousands of people from 25 villages in the Sin Din Creek area of southern Buthidaung Township are currently **facing food shortages** due to authorities' blockades on the transportation of rice bags during the conflict between the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw. Civilians in this area for the most part rely on mountains, farming and plantations for their livelihoods. However, landmines are a concern for villagers, and so many are unable to access usual livelihoods. Tatmadaw troops and Border Guard Police have deployed since 2019 at a bridge near Hpon Nyo Leik village that all communities must pass to access Buthidaung town. Attempts to go outside of that area have resulted in

Tatmadaw troops turning civilians around or inspections. There are fears among the community for arbitrary arrest and violence at checkpoints. The checkpoint also restricts the transportation of rice and other food – part of the Tatmadaw's strategy to starve Arakan Army insurgents in the area of food. People from some villages take bamboo shoots from the nearest mountains and exchange rice with Muslims who usually come to Rakhine villages for trade.

#### Food crisis

The combination of landmine risks, food blockades and a weakening economic situation in the face of conflict and COVID-19 has severely destabilized the southern Buthidaung area. According to village leaders, people from some villages have resorted to rice gruel for daily meals due to food shortages. Villagers are relying on assistance from the ICRC, but needs reportedly remain. The area is also off-limits to local aid groups due to the main checkpoint, frequent armed clashes and egregious transportation in the rainy season. There is a water route but attempts to pass the bridge while carrying rice bags may result in attacks from security forces. In the immediate, foodstuffs are most important. Humanitarian agencies should reach out to the Township General Administration Department and local Tatmadaw operations officers to negotiate access to these areas. As humanitarian access is likely to remain limited due to ongoing armed-conflict and tight government policies, agencies should reach out to authorities through designated experienced staff who act as counterparts for engagement with local government and armed forces. //

## // Other Developments

- The limited concrete agreements reached and the absence of some of Myanmar's most active and largest ethnic armed organisations at the Union Peace Conference in Naypyidaw last week highlighted the weaknesses in the floundering process. Both observers and participants will be hoping for a more effective approach in the next elected government's term.
- Illustrating the deadly impact that armed conflict continues to have for civilians, a man was killed by an explosive this week as he was searching for his cattle outside his village in Minbya Township. While a response to COVID is crucial, it is also imperative to continue life saving mine risk education activities.
- As Myanmar's election draws closer, communities on the ground in Shan State report growing tensions between communities as their political representatives clash. A [murder](#) case has inflamed tensions in Kuktai Township, while the discovery of the [bodies of two missing men](#) in Muse has mobilised support against the Tatmadaw.

## // What to Watch This Week

- While National League for Democracy flags and stickers are already turning Yangon red, the official campaign period only starts two months before the 8 November election. As such, agencies on the ground can expect attempts to mobilise support to escalate over the coming weeks. If it wasn't already in doubt, questions are being asked about the feasibility of both campaigning and voting in western Myanmar if COVID-19 continues to spread.
- New cases of COVID-19 in IDP sites, Yangon or further into Myanmar need to be closely monitored. The spread of the virus will anticipate huge health, economic, social and political ramifications.

MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE / TO WATCH THIS WEEK / KEY READINGS

## // Key Readings

- In a new [short briefing paper](#) on 'How Have Myanmar's Conflicts Been Affected by Covid 19 and What Should be Done About it', the Asia Foundation calls for donors to resist shifting funds away from peace-building, and concludes that the crisis reflects the urgent need for localisation.
- Joe Freeman in Frontier Myanmar takes a deeper look at [China's role](#) in resolving or prolonging the Rohingya crisis on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.





This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



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