



Community Analysis Support System



MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE

27 August – 2 September 2020

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IN FOCUS

Together with the confirmation of numerous new COVID-19 cases in Myanmar, operating conditions for humanitarian agencies in western Myanmar have changed – perhaps irreversibly. Concerns among response actors about government suggestions of new response modalities may be overblown, but the conversation reflects the urgent need to review the infrastructure of the Rakhine response for a ‘new normal’.

The centre of Rakhine State’s COVID-19 outbreak is the humanitarian response hub and state capital of Sittwe, but the virus has increasingly been identified in all surrounding townships. At the time of writing, there have been 938 confirmed cases and six deaths nationwide. Of these, 413 cases have been reported in Rakhine state. To that end, on 26 August authorities extended a ‘stay at home’ order to [all townships of Rakhine State](#). People are allowed to leave their homes for work, shopping for necessities or to seek medical attention. The presence of the virus has now also been confirmed in Yangon, where the same ‘stay at home’ order was released for [seven Yangon townships](#) on 1 September.

Moreover, as noted in [last week’s CASS Weekly Update](#), further restrictions have been put on international agencies operating in Rakhine. The Rakhine State government has cancelled multiple international agencies’ travel and activity authorisations after staff members were diagnosed with the virus. The government has also restricted the activities of all other international humanitarian agencies to only ‘essential assistance’ of food, health, water and latrines – although there is some flexibility in these limitations.

Critically, authorities have also floated the suggestion that all humanitarian support may need to be delivered through ward or village tract administrators (VTAs) or Camp Management Committees (CMCs). In other words: through the arms of the government. Naturally, this has broad implications for humanitarian actors, especially with regards to monitoring, program design, beneficiary selection, and program quality. This suggestion has thus opened discussions about whether agencies can accept these conditions, or whether working directly through VTAs and CMCs is at odds with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

It is not yet clear what this modality would look like on the ground. Here it is also worth noting that many agencies already do distributions through or in the presence of VTAs or CMCs. Additionally, while risks of corruption and the potential for abuse are certainly a major concern, they may also be overstated. As in all contexts, there is some reluctance among response actors to admit that some level of corruption and or aid divergence already inevitably exists within current direct programming modalities.

Additionally, modalities for monitoring and complaint/feedback mechanisms do exist that agencies can adopt in these settings. ‘Remote programming’ mechanisms have been created in other humanitarian crisis contexts that are arguably as restrictive as Rakhine. Local civil society actors – whether formalised organisations or less formal religious or village welfare groups – are active throughout Rakhine, and can possibly be leveraged to monitor distributions. Many agencies already employ camp or village-level staff who may be able to take part in monitoring distributions at the field level. Direct beneficiary feedback mechanisms can be developed as a complement to community monitoring systems. It is difficult, but not impossible, to send images of activities from many 2G internet accessible areas.

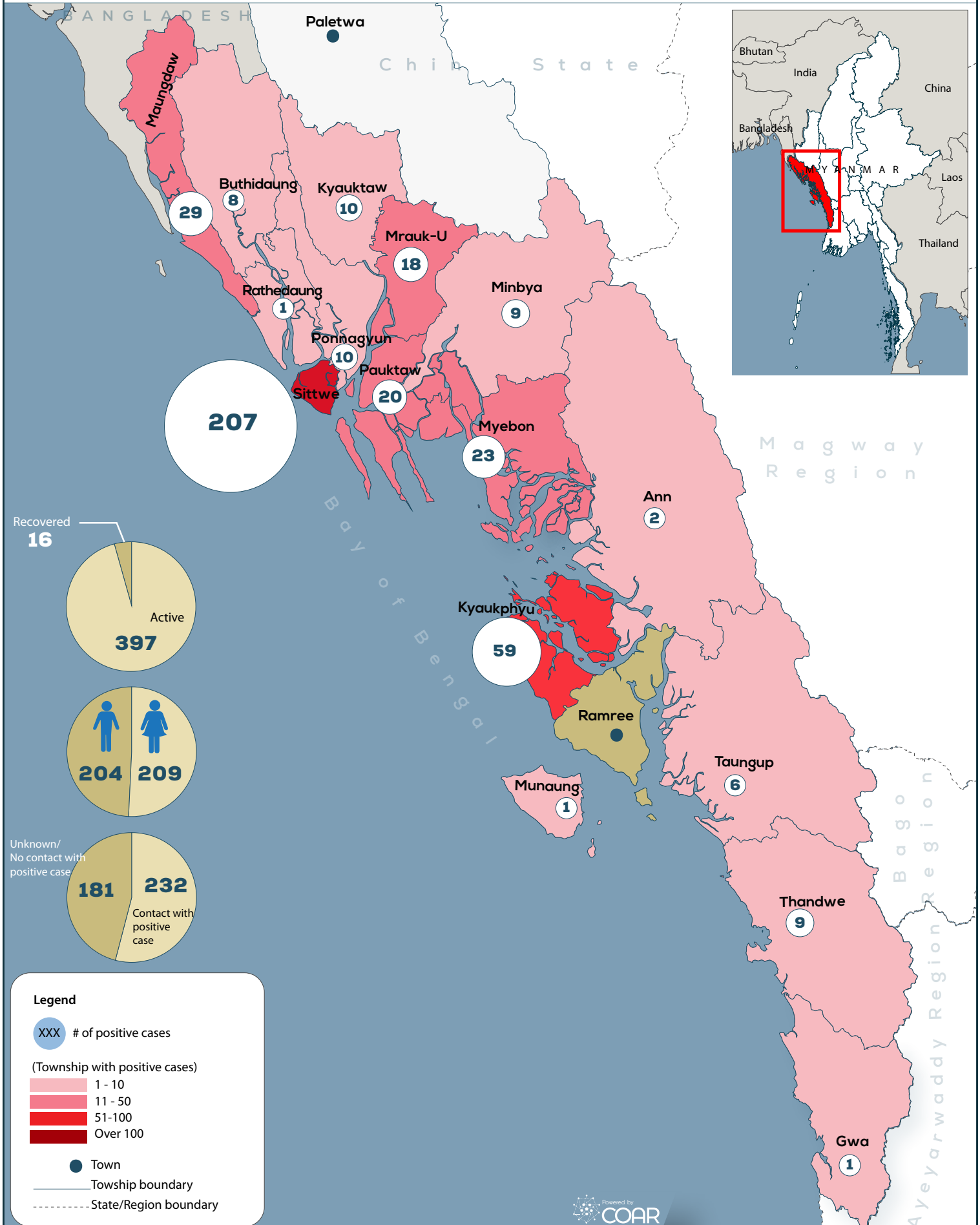
A way forward?

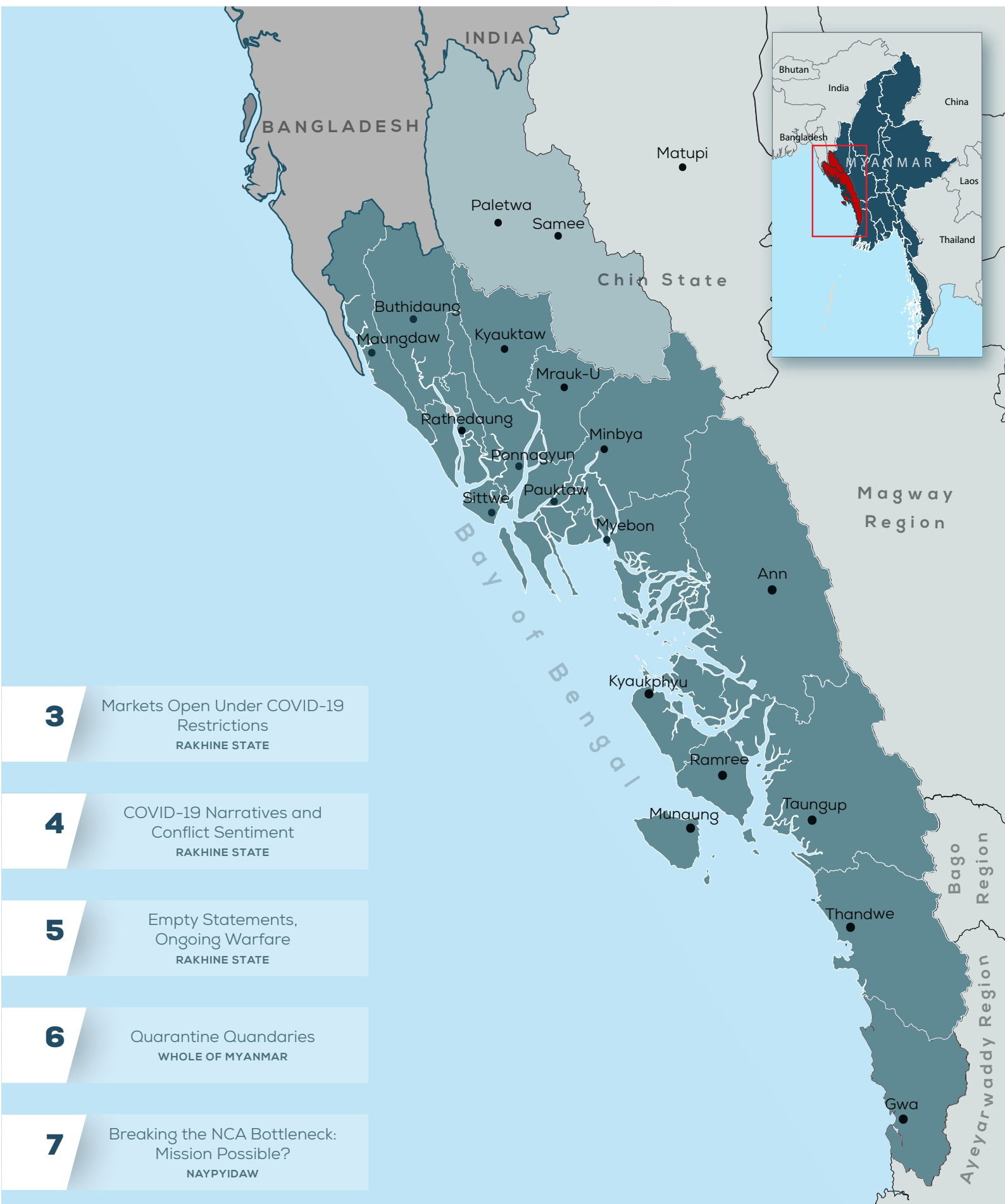
More broadly, the concerns regarding new restrictions are also a reflection of the need to find new ways to programme in western Myanmar. Since the international response in Rakhine State scaled up in 2012, authorities have restricted humanitarian access a mile at a time – leaving agencies clambering to reclaim inches. This has for the most part been a reactive approach, with few initiatives to define ‘access’ as anything outside its most direct definition of government-bestowed Travel Authorisations. While the new COVID-19 restrictions are indeed of massive concern, they are fundamentally another new access impediment in an environment of already quickly shrinking humanitarian space for international agencies.

More broadly, the gradual loss of access to field sites reflects the fact that the Rakhine response is lagging when it comes to localisation. Local actors have not faced the same level of restrictions that international actors have – for example, CSOs are not having to quarantine all staff the same way that international agencies are – and were the government’s original preferred partners for managing community quarantine centres. An international response will remain critical in Rakhine State, particularly to respond to mass vulnerability among the Rohingya, and international technical expertise and funding is likely to remain a staple for all response actors. But the international response in Rakhine has also done little to transfer knowledge or resources to support building local organisations who have been running a parallel response since 2012.

In short, international agencies in Rakhine State have not put the necessary preparations in place to be able to navigate greater access restrictions. It is also likely that these new restrictions are here to stay: COVID-19 is likely to be a concern for the foreseeable future, and international agencies should prepare for current restrictions to be the new norm. Moreover, the rapid tightening of humanitarian space should also raise red flags for response actors elsewhere in Myanmar. If COVID-19 cases are confirmed in northern Shan State, Kachin State, or southeast Myanmar, international agencies should prepare for similar restrictions.

As COVID-19 presents new access challenges and highlights current access failures, international organizations must begin to examine how the aid architecture in Rakhine can transform itself to best reach people in need. There is a need to bring innovative approaches to donor organisations and propose new ways of working. It is clear that the current access paradigm is unsustainable. The primary question is: what will the ‘new’ aid architecture look like in western Myanmar? //





1 Access to Health Further Limited in Camps

CENTRAL RAKHINE STATE

Rohingya in internment camps in Sittwe, Pauktaw and other townships have varying levels of restrictions on their access to basic healthcare, but COVID-19 is presenting new challenges. While the main Thet Kay Pyin hospital remains functioning in that village in the camp complex, other camp-based clinics have closed down due to COVID-19 concerns. Combined with restrictions on movement, which affect women disproportionately, there are increasing barriers to access to healthcare in the camp area.

Access to health concerns

Smaller clinics in the camp area represent important hubs for communication between the Rohingya community and the Sittwe Health Department, and are now increasingly important for quarantine for COVID-19 control. Closures to these facilities are worrying in terms of access to health, and advocacy needs to be maintained towards the government to increase Rohingya communities' access to these basic services. There should be a recognition that lockdowns and movement restrictions may be the most effective methods to combat an outbreak of COVID-19 – but this cannot come at the cost of basic healthcare. National medical response actors who are working in the camp complex may be better positioned to withstand the government's tightening access restrictions, and international agencies should ensure these groups are involved in all coordination. //

2 Local Response Innovates as Rural Sites Shutdown

CENTRAL AND NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

After nearly two years of armed conflict, some 300 civilian casualties, immense disruption to livelihoods and civil society reports of more than 200,000 armed conflict generated

IDPs, the 'second wave' of COVID-19 has added another layer of complexity to the local response in Rakhine State. There are major concerns among the community that the virus may spread within IDP camps and affect the most vulnerable people there. At the same time, the internet shutdown, rumours and misinformation have contributed to a lack of accurate information about COVID-19. Adding to the challenges, IDP sites in Mrauk U Township have put in place restrictions on entering and exiting sites since a humanitarian aid organization staff member tested positive for COVID-19 on August 21 after visiting the sites. Most villages in rural areas of Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships have also instituted village lockdowns, although a small number of people leave for essential visits to markets. The Mrauk U main market remains open, with hours shortened to 6am to 1pm each day.

New modalities

In the face of an invisible illness and increasing digital and physical barriers to communities, local responders are having to innovate their responses. Rakhine Ethnic Congress is now distributing portable radios to IDPs for the purpose of increasing awareness about COVID-19, while the Mrauk U Youths Association (MUYA), Free Blood Association and COVID-19 Prevention and Coordination Committee (CPACC) in Mrauk U Township are working to prevent the spread of the virus in collaboration with authorities. Most people from Mrauk U, Myebon and Minbya townships now rely on physical signboards erected by civil society groups downtown to find news of COVID-19 updates. The more remote an area is, the more difficult access to information and humanitarian support is. IDP camp leaders from Myebon Township report that the only news they have heard about the virus has been from radio and people who have returned from urban areas, while most camp residents have no information on how to prevent transmission. The lockdowns have also worsened food shortages in IDP sites in Minbya and Rathedaung townships, which local responders and the government alike cannot access. In this context, international agencies should scale up remote programming to monitor protection concerns, and expand cash transfers to displaced and non-displaced communities to allow for the procurement of food and PPE. Meanwhile, advocacy to the government to restore 4G internet services during the pandemic should continue. The civilian government has no interest in taking the blame for the spread of the virus – particularly when it comes to vulnerable Rohingya populations ahead of its mandated reporting to the International Court of Justice in November. //

3 Markets Open Under COVID-19 Restrictions

RAKHINE STATE

The flow of goods from Yangon to Rakhine State has been disrupted as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. On 28 August, officials reportedly opened a main gate on the Minbu-Ann highway for cargo trucks and express buses after three days of closure. In order to maintain trade while following the COVID-19 prevention measures, the Department of Transportation has implemented a driver exchange system for transporting goods to Rakhine State – drivers are required to swap at trading gates. This system has, however, added extra transportation costs for traders that have contributed to rising prices for basic goods, and local sources in Sittwe report that prices have increased. Meanwhile, opening hours at all markets are restricted under the stay at home order, curfew and movement restrictions. The Sittwe main market is open only from 6am to 9am, while two main markets in the Rohingya internment camps, Thae Chaung and Thet Kay Pyin markets, operate from 6am to 11.30am. Local sources report that prices of basic goods have increased slightly in these two markets, although there is no reported shortage of essentials such as rice, cooking oil, onion or garlic.

Maintained trade flows

Restrictions have contributed to rising prices, and agencies need to monitor IDP and other vulnerable communities' access to markets. Agencies involved in food and cash distributions should monitor market prices in and outside of camp areas. In addition, fear of food shortages is another real concern among communities in Rakhine State, despite the Union Government guaranteeing sufficient food supply and financial support for Rakhine State. Vendors and communities fear that the spread of COVID-19 to other locations in Myanmar will mean more restrictions on transport and access to markets. It is important to note that while access to markets remains, there is a need to continue to monitor prices. Over the coming weeks the spread of the virus to Yangon risks further blocks to supply lines and price instability. Conflict actors may take advantage of the restrictions and empty routes to further violent attempts to take control of key roads and waterways within Rakhine State. All of this combined may have implications

for both camp and non-camp communities' access to markets, as well as for the supply lines that agencies rely on themselves. //

4 COVID-19 Narratives and Conflict Sentiment

RAKHINE STATE

While initial blame for the August outbreak of COVID-19 was directed in part towards the Rohingya and international organisations in Rakhine State, a dominant narrative of government neglect has now emerged. This week, an audio recording of a bus company staff member refusing to sell a ticket to a Rakhine man due to restrictions on Rakhine people entering Naypyidaw went viral on social media. At the same time, social media users expressed outrage against the Rakhine State Chief Minister after he suggested that enough money had already been spent on preventing COVID-19 in Rakhine State. There have also been numerous reports from Yangon and elsewhere of angry mobs demanding that people thought to have recently returned from Rakhine State be forced into quarantine.

Pandemic warfare

Perceptions, either real or imagined, of both government neglect and popular discrimination against Rakhine people since the 16 August COVID-19 outbreak in western Myanmar have the potential to exacerbate, rather than diminish, conflict dynamics. Dominant narratives online and offline fit into an existing story about Rakhine State, and align with pre-existing and deeply held convictions. In this case, this is a story of government neglect of Rakhine State, and of the majority Burmese population treating the Rakhine as second-class citizens. This resonates with the calls for greater autonomy and for the people of western Myanmar to be in control of their destiny, calls now led by the Arakan Army. In such a polarized context, international actors should be careful not to feed into narratives which are driving conflict. Raising awareness of the fact that the virus does not discriminate can be helpful in this context. Activities may include sharing audio files aimed at reducing stigma around COVID-19. Such files are available online in multiple languages, including Rakhine. //

5

Empty Statements,
Ongoing Warfare

RAKHINE STATE

The Brotherhood Alliance, which consists of the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, has extended its unilateral ceasefire from 1 September to 9 November “to facilitate the election, peace process and the prevention of the COVID-19’s second wave”. The statement also calls upon Beijing to facilitate dialogue. The Tatmadaw last week extended its own unilateral ceasefire up to 30 September, but continues to exclude ‘terrorist groups’ from its ceasefire, thereby excluding western Myanmar. Meanwhile, armed conflict continues. While there was a slight decrease in conflict incidents after the 16 August outbreak of COVID-19, this week the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw clashed in Rathedaung, Kyauktaw and Minbya townships. Clashes in Kyauktaw injured three Rohingya men, and a [civilian’s audio recording of firing](#) indicates how close to civilians clashes take place. While the Arakan Army last week said it was willing to cooperate to combat COVID-19, the Tatmadaw continued its offensives and both sides now appear to have given up any idea of restraint.

Redundant words

The Tatmadaw appear to remain committed to a military solution in Rakhine State, regardless of the new COVID-19 outbreak. It appears the National League for Democracy is also set to the position reportedly articulated by Aung San Suu Kyi in January 2019 when she called for the Tatmadaw to [‘crush’ the Arakan Army](#). The Tatmadaw has continued its push to reduce the Arakan Army’s area of influence in lowland Rakhine State and limit its control of water routes and highways. As such, armed conflict appears to be on a trajectory to continue in western Myanmar – regardless of COVID-19 or unilateral ceasefires. There may be some openings, however. It is in no party’s interest to suffer a pandemic, or to be seen as responsible for a pandemic, in western Myanmar, and this may be used by international stakeholders to bring actors to the negotiating table. Otherwise, western Myanmar will continue to witness the hollow symbolism and endless repetition of unilateral ceasefire extensions. //

6

Quarantine
Quandaries

Whole of Myanmar

Reports across Myanmar this week have documented the tribulations that volunteers at quarantine centres across Myanmar are undergoing. With few resources available for the volunteers, many are having to supply their own masks and hand sanitisers in order to follow the government’s basic COVID-19 precaution measures. Volunteers at quarantine sites also report that quarantined persons are often given no time to prepare for their stay in the centres and are given no information about conditions. As a result, many attend the sites with the necessary items such as pillows or sufficient changes of clothes. Other challenges are more difficult to mitigate – in Kyauktaw Township this week [people in a quarantine centre had to flee](#) when gunfire erupted nearby.

International donors or implementing agencies may approach civil society actors who are running quarantine centres to offer even basic PPE support.

Collaborative opportunities

As cases of COVID-19 continue to be confirmed and new restrictions on travel are instituted, the numbers of people in quarantine is set to rise. International agencies or donors asked by the government to support quarantine centres can consult with the civil society groups and volunteers already managing the centres to better understand what additional support is required. At the same time, the basic conditions and dramatic needs at these centres makes international support very welcome. International donors or implementing agencies may approach civil society actors who are running quarantine centres to offer even basic PPE support. //

7 Breaking the NCA Bottleneck: Mission Possible?

Naypyidaw

The fourth round of the Union Peace Conference concluded on 21 August after three days of discussions. Several rounds of negotiation meetings led to public agreement on 20 points and a broad ‘work programme’ to be taken forward after the 2020 general election. Of these, 15 agreed points signed as part of the **Union Accord Part III** relate to the “framework agreement on implementing the **nationwide ceasefire agreement**”, the NCA. Effectively, Myanmar’s peace process contains two interrelated components: the ceasefire component and the political dialogue component. The first component seeks to facilitate the settling of violent conflicts while the second component provides a political space for negotiating parties to seek consensus and compromises for collectively agreed political settlements for a future federal democratic union. Until now, the **Framework for Political Dialogue** rules that only NCA-signatory Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) are eligible to participate in the second component – including any participation in formal committees and meetings for political dialogues and in a series of symbolic Union Peace Conferences. Critical observers of the process have noted that many of the agreed points are too broadly defined or mere repetition of previous agreements and the **2008 Constitution** – lowering

expectations. It is undeniable that the exclusion of several EAOs – who refrain from signing or are not invited to sign the NCA – is problematic. Numerous points have now been signed in the Union Accord parts I to III, despite the exclusion of those groups. That being said, more optimistic observers remark that the conference represents a rebooting of political space and will to improve implementation of the NCA. To this end, at least five newly agreed points may pave the way for key specific reforms or a kickstart to delayed NCA initiatives.

Cautious optimism

Despite the undeniable limitations, some of the results of the last Union Peace Conference may pave the way for improvements in the peace process. First, one of the agreed points (point 15), allows to amend “the framework of the political dialogue... as necessary”. This may open the doors for the inclusion of EAOs who have yet to sign the NCA in some mechanisms or meetings. All key stakeholders in the peace process – including the government, the Tatmadaw and the NCA-signatory EAOs – have recognised that non-signatory EAOs need to be included in the broader NCA process, even if they have not yet signed the NCA. Without this, the process may indeed collapse. Second, other agreed points (points 7, 8, 11 and 14) basically give a green light and legal push for the following: further negotiation and clarifications on vague terms for consistent interpretation; starting delayed action points in the NCA; (re)forming Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committees (JMCs) at state/region and local levels; and holding JMC meetings across all levels for more responsive actions so that they can perform their mandated ceasefire monitoring and dispute resolution role fairly, transparently and responsively. The peace process may be on the ropes, but it remains the largest game in town. //

// Other Developments

- The Myanmar government has [reportedly instructed](#) telecommunication providers to block the [Justice for Myanmar website](#). A group of activists, Justice for Myanmar, have been documenting instances of corruption and abuse in Myanmar's military-dominated economy. This is the latest case of internet censorship by the National League for Democracy government, and some observers say there's [no coming back up that slippery slope](#)
- The Tatmadaw this week arrested a rice mill owner in central Rakhine State's Ponnagyun Township this week and [accused him of storing rice for the Arakan Army](#). The story has raised concerns online regarding the apparent arbitrariness of the arrest and the lack of evidence presented. This is also a reminder of the Tatmadaw's ongoing efforts to cut the Arakan Army's access to food, information, funds and recruits.

// To Watch This Week

- Authorities will collect blood samples from 1,000 random Sittwe residents before 5 September to [test for COVID-19 antibodies](#). This is the first random testing in Myanmar to date and should give us a better idea of how widespread the virus is.
- The official campaign period for Myanmar's 2020 election is expected to begin on 8 September. It is yet unclear if authorities will allow campaigning to continue as usual in the midst of an outbreak. Any further restrictions will likely hit smaller parties disproportionately, and may prompt allegations of bias against the Union Election Commission.
- Maung Saungkha, the director of free speech activist group Athan, will be sentenced in Yanogon's Kyauktada court on 4 September on charges related to a June protest in Yangon marking the one year commemoration of the internet shutdown in western Myanmar.

MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE / TO WATCH THIS WEEK / KEY READINGS

// Key Readings

- In Asia Times, David Mathieson takes the peace process and donor community to task and asks who is really '[selling dog meat while showing a goat head](#)'?
- Prominent Myanmar public intellectual Khin Zaw Win has recently returned from Rakhine State and is publishing a series of vignettes detailing his experiences with IDP sites, monasteries and histories. [Parts one, two and three](#) are now available.
- Crisis Group have published a new report on [ethnicity and conflict in Myanmar](#), highlighting the connections between the two, and suggesting how policy makers may shift the narrative.



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