

MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE

3-9 September 2020

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Red Flames, Red Flags

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IN FOCUS

Following Aung San Suu Kyi's 6 September announcement of Myanmar's 2020 general election campaign period – from 8 September to 6 November – Facebook users across Myanmar uploaded red National League for Democracy flags across their profile pictures. In western Myanmar, Facebook users were uploading images of red flames engulfing villages.

Residents, activists and media allege that on the evening of 3 September Tatmadaw troops entered two populated villages alongside the Yangon-Sittwe highway in Kyauktaw Township and burned down at least 100 houses in Hpa Yar Paung village and another 60 in Taung Pauk village. Both villages were populated at the time and residents fled to nearby areas for shelter.

It is unclear exactly what triggered the arson. The Tatmadaw [report that security forces were attacked](#) by explosive devices and Arakan Army 'terrorists', and [allege](#) that the Arakan Army later burnt down the villages because local residents refused to support them. The bodies of two young men were found nearby. The Tatmadaw alleges they were Arakan Army fighters, but [villagers say](#) they were civilians.

This reported breach of international humanitarian law falls into a pattern of arson of villages, in whole or in part, in conflict-affected areas of Rakhine and southern Chin State over the last year. Incidents of reported intentional burning of villages typically follow Arakan Army attacks on Tatmadaw troops. Yet these incidents are relatively rare – the vast majority of Arakan Army attacks do not result in village arson. Since July 2019, there have been only 10 incidents of reported deliberate arson, in comparison to hundreds of Arakan Army attacks. Instead, arson is likely used as a 'shock tactic' to inhibit Arakan Army operations in an area by exerting extreme costs on the rural communities the insurgents rely on. The unpredictability, whether by design or simply on the whims of certain troops on certain days, serves to terrorise villagers further.

Observers and even a [government spokesperson](#) have optimistically suggested that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Rakhine State since 16 August may be an opportunity to bring the Arakan Army to the negotiating table, but the reality has been a continuation of offensives by both sides. This week, officials from both the military and civilian government admitted that elections, currently scheduled for 8 November, are unlikely to go ahead in parts of Rakhine State. On 4 September, the Tatmadaw True News Information Team Secretary Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun [suggested](#) that elections should not go ahead in northern Rakhine State and parts of the Wa Self-Administered Division because the military could not provide security. On the same day, government spokesperson Zaw Htay [told media](#) that elections were likely only in five of Rakhine State's 17 townships, although they may be held in stable urban areas of the 12 conflict-affected townships. Both noted that it is the Union Election Commission who will make the official announcement in October – but the commission has so far relied heavily on the recommendations of the military and civilian government.

These comments are just the latest nail in the coffin for elections in western Myanmar. The election commission has been unable to post voter lists in many areas, and conflict-affected rural areas remain inaccessible for government officials. The large-scale outbreak of COVID-19 in many areas of Rakhine State has made the election commission's job even more difficult.

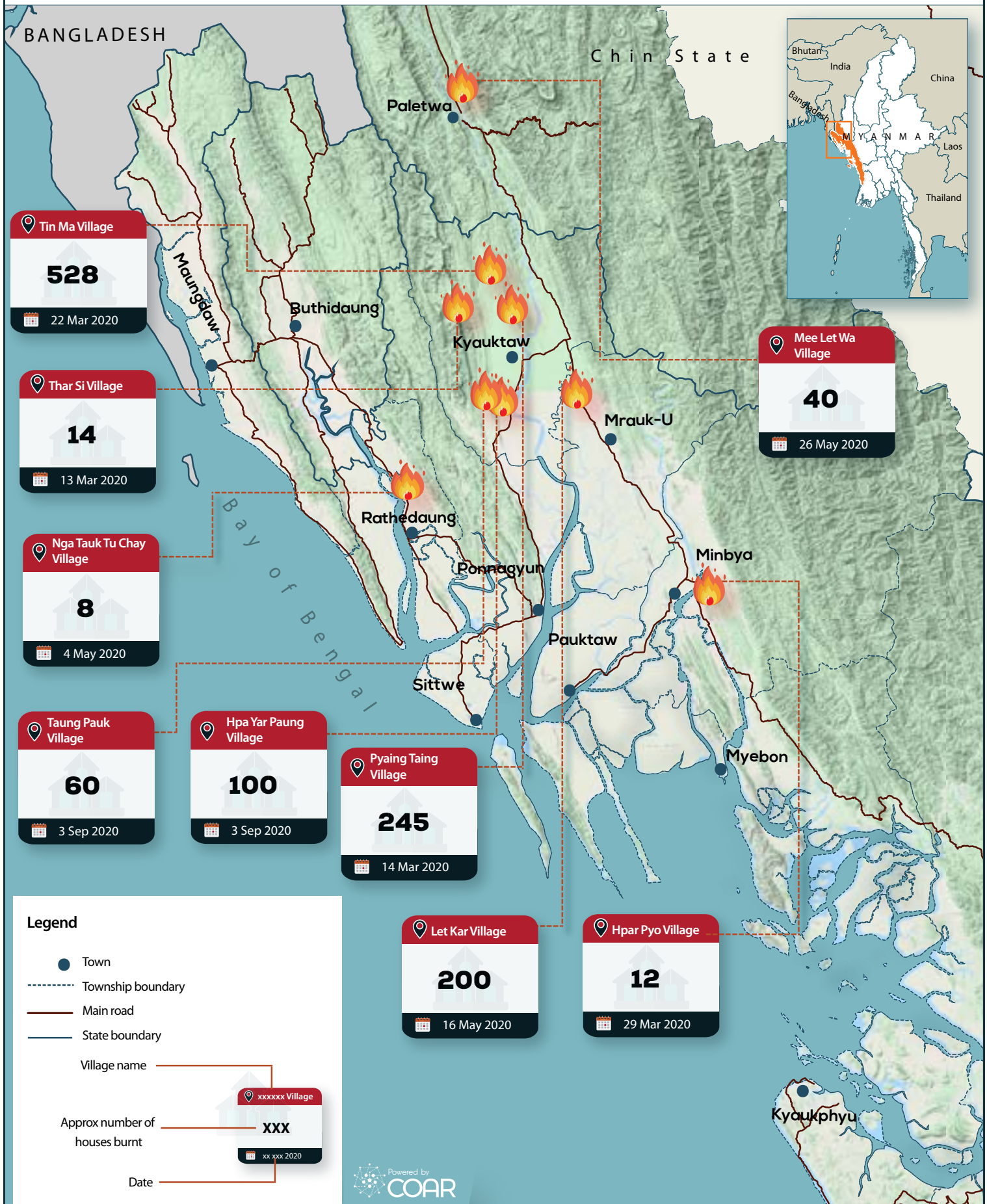
Reflecting the perils for civilians and administrators alike, armed clashes have moved increasingly close to civilian areas this week. According to media reports and other ground sources, gunfire

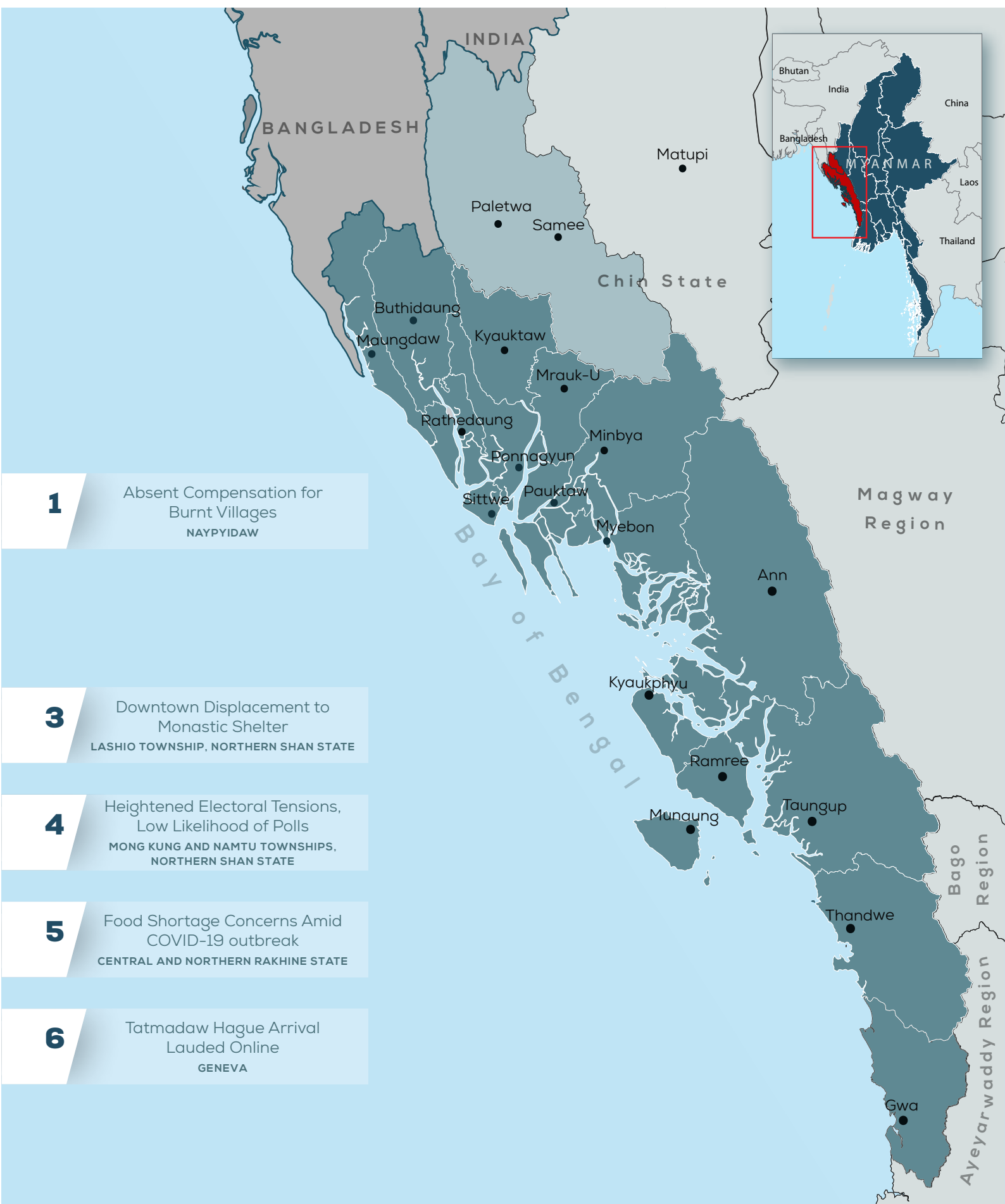
killed at least six civilians and injured 10 more in Rakhine State this week. In the most serious incident, four civilians including two children were killed and at least ten others injured when a [shell landed on their village](#) in Myebon Township. A local lawmaker [reported](#) that there was no active fighting in the area at the time. One Rakhine woman and a Rohingya youth were also severely injured in landmine explosions in separate incidents in Buthidaung and Ponnagyun townships respectively.

Rakhine State is now all but declared a war zone up to November. But the postponement of polls will also have implications for the post-election period. Disillusionment with Naypyidaw's electoral democracy is widespread in Rakhine State, and the postponement of polls and further violence against civilians will almost certainly feed into feelings of central government neglect. Following previous elections in 2015, the National League for Democracy government refused to let the Arakan National Party – the largest party in the state legislature – have any real decision-making power. This bolstered the desire for greater autonomy and support for armed insurgency. The constituencies in which polls will be postponed this year are all Rakhine political party strongholds. While the election commission has little choice but to cancel this year's polls, perceptions of the deliberate disenfranchisement of the Rakhine people may drive discontent. Meanwhile, the exclusion of the Rohingya from the electoral process was completed in 2015, and the vast majority remain disenfranchised.

Finally, the Arakan Army's top leader Tun Mrat Naing took to YouTube on 2 September to speak about the crisis. He accused the Tatmadaw of exploiting the COVID-19 outbreak to expand operations. Positively, he made attempts to quell any rumours which blame the Rohingya for the COVID-19 outbreak. The speech ended with a call for unity to withstand the crisis and to move forward with "the revolution against the colonisers."

For response actors in Rakhine State, these red flags cannot be ignored, just as armed conflict can not be expected to let up any time soon. While the current focus on COVID-19 is understandable, eyes cannot be taken off the ongoing active conflict. //





1 Absent Compensation for Burnt Villages

NAYPYIDAW

After artillery shells sparked a fire which destroyed over 500 homes in Kyauktaw Township's Tin Ma village in May this year, the Department of Disaster Management, which sits under the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, reportedly compensated Tin Ma villagers a total of 92,500,000 Myanmar Kyat for the damage. Residents from the area confirmed the compensation had been paid. However, villagers from other sites of deliberate arson report they have yet to receive any compensation. Authorities have made no comment regarding whether or not the residents of Taung Bauk and Hpayar Paung villages will be eligible for compensation following the arson in those villages this week.

Civilian-military relations

In addition to prompting serious concerns about human rights and the protection of civilians, the regular arson of village structures in western Myanmar has led to a paradox in civil-military relations. While the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement is left to pay the bill for damaged structures, it clearly has little to do with the original destruction of these structures. Meanwhile, in the 2019-20 fiscal year, the Defense Services budget sat at 3.385 trillion Myanmar Kyat (approximately 2.5 billion USD), while the social welfare ministry's budget was 121 billion Myanmar Kyat (approximately 90 million USD) – some 28 times less. There is also a question of culpability. Does the payment of compensation reflect an admitted guilt on the part of the state, or at least a tolerance from the civilian government of the crimes committed by the military? Such analysis may fall short, given the reported deficit of communication between the civilian and military wings – which effectively operate as two parallel governments. However, while the civilian wing may be frustrated by developments, it has yet to rebuke the Tatmadaw for reported atrocities. //

2 Rising IDPs in Contested Areas

KYAUKTAW TOWNSHIP

About 20,000 people from ten villages along the Kaladan River in Kyauktaw township are currently displaced due to ongoing armed clashes and Tatmadaw operations, and displacement has continued to rise over the previous fortnight. On 31 August, the Tatmadaw entered Shwe Pyi village where they detained and interrogated over 100 people, including young women, at a village monastery. On the same day, a 40-year-old man from Kyauk Gu Su village was killed by Tatmadaw troops, resulting in 500 people fleeing their homes. On 3 September, another two young girls were injured by artillery shells, and about 2,000 people fled to nearby villages. While this displacement is often temporary, these developments have raised concerns among the community about the increase in civilian casualties, arson attacks and rising numbers of IDPs.

Urgent support needed

The 20,000 IDPs in Kyauktaw Township are in need of food and other aid. Local responders from the host community have provided them with shelter and food, but needs still remain. The IDPs are concerned about the absence of precautions in place for COVID-19, with one local responder noting that “it is very difficult for IDPs to make social distancing at crowded displacement sites”. The COVID-19 restrictions have also affected the local response to displacement. Travelling to Kyauktaw on the highway road from Ponnagyun may result in Tatmadaw troops turning civilians back, inspections, and risks of arbitrary arrest. Following the 4 September arson, IDPs are prevented from returning home to Hpar Yar Pong village due to the risks of landmines, unexploded artillery shells and fears of abuse by Tatmadaw troops. There is a need for international agencies and donor countries to direct advocacy towards civilian and military authorities to protect civilians and their property, allow access to humanitarian aid, and for them to abide by the universal principles of human rights. International response actors should consider engaging parahita organizations, CSOs, and religious

groups to assist conflict-affected people in this area. Advocacy is also required to encourage the authorities and ground-based military operations staff to allow humanitarian aid into IDP sites. Additional cash payments should also be provided to civilians to help rebuild their houses in Hpar Yar Paung and Taung Pauk villages. Support is also needed for COVID-19 response equipment. //

3 Downtown Displacement to Monastic Shelter

LASHIO TOWNSHIP, NORTHERN SHAN STATE

More than 200 villagers from Pankham village fled to urban Lashio's Mansu Buddhist monastery this week in northern Shan State. The villagers fled following a phone call from an anonymous source warning them that an armed group would arrive in their village to forcibly recruit. This occasion of temporary displacement is usual – the village is very close to the urban area and a large Tatmadaw base, while there is no known non-state armed group presence in the area. The villagers have now returned to their homes. However, the immediate reaction to displace reflects a widespread concern about recruitment in Northern Shan State.

Recruitment crisis

While this occasion was reportedly triggered by a false alarm, forced recruitment is a massive protection concern for communities across Northern Shan State. Some armed ethnic groups do not forcibly recruited based on ethnic identity alone – people of any ethnic or religious identity within a group's perceived area of influence are at risk. These practices are in clear violation of international humanitarian law. While young men of fighting age are most at risk, in extreme cases other family members are sometimes taken in lieu, and sons must report to local commanders and submit to years of service in return for the release of their parents. In other cases, drug users are sometimes forced into rehabilitation and have to spend years in armed service. It is also worth noting that the Mansu monastery in urban Lashio has often been a sanctuary for all communities facing

temporary displacement. In 2013 over 1,000 Muslims took shelter in the monastery after anti-Muslim violence took over Lashio for several days. In 2016 and 2017, up to 8,000 mostly Burmese migrant workers filtered through the monastery after they were displaced by armed clashes in Lawkkaing Township, Northern Shan State. This week, international agencies were among the responders supporting displaced persons in the Mansu monastery. //

4 Heightened Electoral Tensions, Low Likelihood of Polls

MONG KUNG AND NAMTU TOWNSHIPS, NORTHERN SHAN STATE

On 20 and 22 August, Ta'ang National Party (TNP) signboards in at least four villages of Namtu Township were violently destroyed. The TNP and Ta'ang (also known as Palaung) communities suspect the perpetrators to be Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) members. Meanwhile, in Mong Kung Township an official from a local RCSS battalion reportedly warned the local branch of the TNP against competing in the township in upcoming elections. During the 2015 election, the RCSS similarly restricted the TNP from contesting Mong Kung Township and even detained two TNP officials for a month – leading to the TNP's withdrawal of its two candidates there. The TNP has raised these issues in the media as well as to the local election commission. On 1 September, the RCSS responded with a statement noting that parties can campaign freely under RCSS administered areas as long as they inform the RCSS beforehand. However, local media also report that the TNP in Mong Kung Township continued to receive threats from the RCSS even after following RCSS requirements. This inter-ethnic tension in Mong Kung and Namtu townships is also reportedly affecting communities further north, including in several conflict-affected townships of Northern Shan State, where polls may be postponed ahead of the 8 November election. These townships may see few polls in the case of electoral postponement, yet will still be significantly impacted by election dynamics.

Own rules on home ground

Heightened social cohesion ahead of elections concerns reflect armed groups' forays into electoral politics under an electoral system designed to divide. Since 2018, when the RCSS and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) went into active conflict in Northern Shan State, tensions have run high between Shan and Ta'ang communities. Namtu, Namkhan, Kyaukme and Muse townships have witnessed the strongest Ta'ang – Shan tensions, due to the significant population numbers of both communities there. While the TNP is the dominant party representing the Ta'ang ethnic group, the two main Shan parties – the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) – risk a 2020 repeat of the 2015 splitting of the ethnic Shan vote. The consequences of vote splitting for Shan parties are considerable in townships where Ta'ang are numerous – including the RCSS stronghold Mong Kung Township. The Ta'ang party stands to win seats as a result of Shan vote splitting. In Namhkam Township in 2015 the TNP was successful, despite a Shan population numerically larger than the Ta'ang, and the combined vote of the SNLD and the SNDP larger than that of the TNP. As such, the RCSS now appears to be planning to **limit the chance of Ta'ang parties' success** in at-risk townships. Organisations with contextual experience and strong specialisation in social cohesion work should prioritise identifying and supporting local social cohesion initiatives in Northern Shan State. Local organisations and individuals concerned about the rising tensions have already begun work to improve social cohesion, but face a multitude of challenges including funding, technical constraints and community buy-in during this highly sensitive period. //

5 Food Shortage Concerns Amid COVID-19 outbreak

CENTRAL AND NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

The number of new COVID-19 confirmed cases has been consistently increasing in western Myanmar since the outbreak began on 16

August. At time of writing, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Rakhine State has reached 626. The stay at home orders imposed in all townships of Rakhine State have prompted concerns among both IDP and non-IDP communities about food shortages. Movement restrictions and blocks on humanitarian aid have left displaced communities vulnerable to a COVID-19 outbreak. Local news **outlets reported** this week that CSOs are unable to send basic food supplies to IDPs in Pazun Phay IDP site in Mrauk U Township. In addition, Go Daung and Pyar Chuang IDP sites in Rathedaung Township **re-reported** that they are facing food shortages and have not received any food supplies from the government.

COVID-19 relief gap

The COVID-19 relief from the government has a limited reach, and is likely to be inadequate. Thereby, agencies should step in to provide longer-term support. The Rakhine State government is providing 20,000 Myanmar Kyat per household for COVID-19 relief, with 40,000 Myanmar Kyat supplied to IDP households. However, a gap exists between those eligible and those receiving the support in every community. Rohingya IDPs at Ohn Taw North IDP camp in Sittwe **reported** that they have not received any cash assistance from the government yet. Meanwhile, local sources reported that some urban Kyaukphyu residents received only 17,000 Myanmar Kyat. On 8 September, all households from Kyauktalone IDP camp received cash support of 40,000 Myanmar Kyats per household – but these families reportedly missed previous rounds of support. Despite the continuation of COVID-19 relief from the Rakhine State government, it is clear that some areas are left behind due to ongoing armed clashes, COVID-19 restrictions, or both. In this context, it is important for humanitarian agencies to expand cash transfers and food supplies to displaced or nondisplaced communities to close this gap. International agencies and local implementation organisations may approach camp leaders and civil society actors to find possible ways to reach support for IDPs in need. More support is needed, because the COVID crisis is set to continue, and this one off payment is unlikely to be fully sufficient. //

6 Tatmadaw Hague Arrival Lauded Online

Geneva

On 8 September human rights organisation [Fortify Rights](#) and the [New York Times](#) broke the news that two Tatmadaw soldiers, previously in the custody of the Arakan Army, had been transported to the International Criminal Court via Bangladesh. While in the custody of the Arakan Army in May this year, the [two soldiers were filmed](#) saying they were deserters from the Tatmadaw, and that they had witnessed and taken part in atrocities – including mass killings and sexual violence – against Rohingya in northern Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017. [Fortify Rights has said](#) that their video testimony, although perhaps filmed under coercion, can be taken as credible because the details noted by the soldiers aligns with victim and witness testimony. However, an International Criminal Court spokesperson told media this week that the soldiers were [not in the custody of the court](#). In November 2019 the International Criminal Court authorised an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity against the Rohingya in Myanmar. Several questions do remain about the transportation of the two soldiers to the Hague, including their whereabouts, their circumstances between their recorded testimony in May and their arrival in Bangladesh in August, and the security of their families in Myanmar.

Welcome news for some

Reports of valuable witnesses ready to speak to international prosecutors at the Hague will be highly concerning to the upper echelons of the Tatmadaw, but so far have had little impact on the ground. In Rakhine State, meanwhile, news of the lapping tides of international justice was well-received online. The development was reported during a spike in civilian casualties in western Myanmar, and Rakhine Facebook users [urged for action](#) against the armed forces. However, there is a need to inject some realism regarding expectations of international accountability mechanisms. While justice and accountability is undoubtedly crucial for the both the victims of these atrocities and for the wider Myanmar population to move on from these traumatic episodes, the proceedings at both the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice will take years and perhaps even decades. In the meantime, abuses continue to be committed against civilians in

western Myanmar almost daily, despite the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. Urgent advocacy to decision makers at the highest levels within the military and civilian governments needs to continue, in order to offer at least a basic level of protection to civilians. //

7 A New Rohingya Insurgency?

Northern Rakhine State

On 1 September a Myanmar language statement [appeared online](#), apparently released by an emergent armed group calling themselves the Arakan Rohingya Army and [describing their rationale](#). The statement emphasised that the group will not use the territory of neighbouring countries, and that they will strive for ‘peaceful coexistence’ with other minority communities. The group has no other visible public profile and has not claimed responsibility for any attacks on Myanmar security forces or other groups.

Questions remain

Despite the few sources of information on the Arakan Rohingya Army, there are several considerations about the newly emerged group and some immediate implications. It should be noted that very little is widely known about the new armed group, and even the legitimacy of the statement may be in question. There is a long tradition of international intelligence agencies planting misinformation in the region. However, there are also good explanations for the absence of primary sources about the group. It may be no surprise if the group does not want a public profile given the historical treatment of the Rohingya population by the Myanmar state – armed outfits may face better survival odds if they are not in the spotlight. If the group is legitimate, there are substantial questions about how it fits into western Myanmar’s increasingly complicated mosaic of armed groups. While it can be assumed that the group is distinct from the existing Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army – what relationship does it have, or seek to have, with the Arakan Army? The news about the group may also have immediate ramifications, and may be used by the Myanmar government or Tatmadaw to further characterise the Rohingya as a security threat.

// Other Developments

- The Union Election Commission's [announcement](#) of the official 2020 general election campaign period – from 6am on 8 September to 12am on 6 November 2020 – was announced hours after National League for Democracy chairperson Aung San Suu Kyi [announced via Facebook video](#) that her party would begin campaigning the same day – raising further questions about the impartiality and independence of the Union Election Commission, whose chairperson is appointed by the President.
- Following the last arrival in June, another boat carrying Rohingya refugees has [arrived in Aceh](#), Indonesia. The group of some 300 people were reportedly at sea for over six months, and some 30 people died during the voyage. The boat was pushed away from Thai and Malaysian shores by those authorities before landing in Aceh, again reflecting how COVID-19 impacts the most vulnerable disproportionately.
- [Random testing](#) for COVID-19 has found 20 cases of the virus amongst a sample of 1,165 people in Sittwe, suggesting the virus is more widespread than known.
- Rohingya refugee leaders have said Bhasan Char island is a suitable resettlement site after touring the island facilities. Rohingya already settled on the island, however, [wish to return](#) to the sprawling borderland camps.

// What to Watch This Week

- On Monday 14 September the High Commissioner for Human Rights [will brief](#) the United Nations Human Rights Council on the implementation of the recommendations of the International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar. The council will also consider the report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. On 24 September the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar will present an oral progress report.
- Students from the Rakhine Student Union launched a demonstration in Sittwe on 9 September to protest the internet restrictions and the 'murdering fascist ideology' of the government. The students protested without prior permission, and three were reportedly arrested. Charges may be pressed this week.

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

// Key Readings

- Frontier Myanmar [considers the future](#) of the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his presidential ambitions, concluding that it is likely he will seek the military appointed vice-presidency following the 2020 elections.



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