



Community Analysis Support System



MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE

10-16 September 2020

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COVID over Conflict for NLD

Pressure on the civilian government before elections will take western Myanmar off their radar, and do little to open humanitarian space. **p.2**

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IN FOCUS

As confirmed cases of COVID-19 skyrocket throughout Myanmar, opposition political parties are calling for the Union Election Commission to postpone nationwide general elections scheduled for 8 November. Twenty-four political parties including the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party signed a letter to that effect on 15 September, while other prominent parties including the Arakan National Party have submitted, or plan to submit, similar requests.

The nationwide COVID-19 death toll now stands at 40, an increase from just three one month ago. While the outbreak started in Rakhine State in mid-August, the epicentre is now Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon, where hundreds of cases are reported daily. Myanmar's total cases have now reached 3,821 — at least 774 of which are in Rakhine State — meaning Myanmar now has more cases than neighbouring Thailand. The Ministry of Health and Sport, which previously provided detailed information on the locations and status of patients twice a day, is now mostly reporting raw numbers only.

The virus has also increasingly penetrated Myanmar's corridors of power. This month officials from the President's office and the State Counsellor's office have tested positive — sending dozens of officials and staffers into quarantine.

Electoral headache

While the numbers in Myanmar are still low compared to other countries, the rapid spread ahead of elections will be causing more than a headache for the civilian government. The Union Election Commission has banned electoral campaigning in townships under stay at home orders, while a variety of other social distancing restrictions are in place for campaigning elsewhere. Campaign vehicles are only allowed at half-capacity, while hand-shaking and hugging is banned. Restrictions are likely to hit smaller parties the hardest — large parties like the National League for Democracy have the established infrastructure to mitigate some restrictions. There are serious questions about the feasibility of free and fair elections under these conditions.

Conversely, the postponement of polls past mid-January 2021 would bring Myanmar's young democracy into uncharted territory and potentially a constitutional crisis. The 2008 constitution mandates that a new term of government must begin exactly five years after the previous one — 31 January. A failure to do so would have unknown consequences, and the civilian government and military would have to negotiate a constitutional amendment or an informal deal of some kind. Sources report that there are concerns among the government of the military taking advantage of the crisis to strengthen its hand.

These are all reasons for the National League for Democracy — from whom the election commission largely takes its cues — to avoid any long-term postponement. Party spokesperson Doctor Myo Nyunt told media this week that there is “not yet enough cause to postpone” — suggesting the government expects things to get worse before they get better. A delay of approximately two months is on the cards, but the indications are that the ruling party's appetite is to push the elections through in November while possible, then return to governing. Indeed, it is widely expected that the ruling party will be returned in November, albeit with a reduced share of parliament.

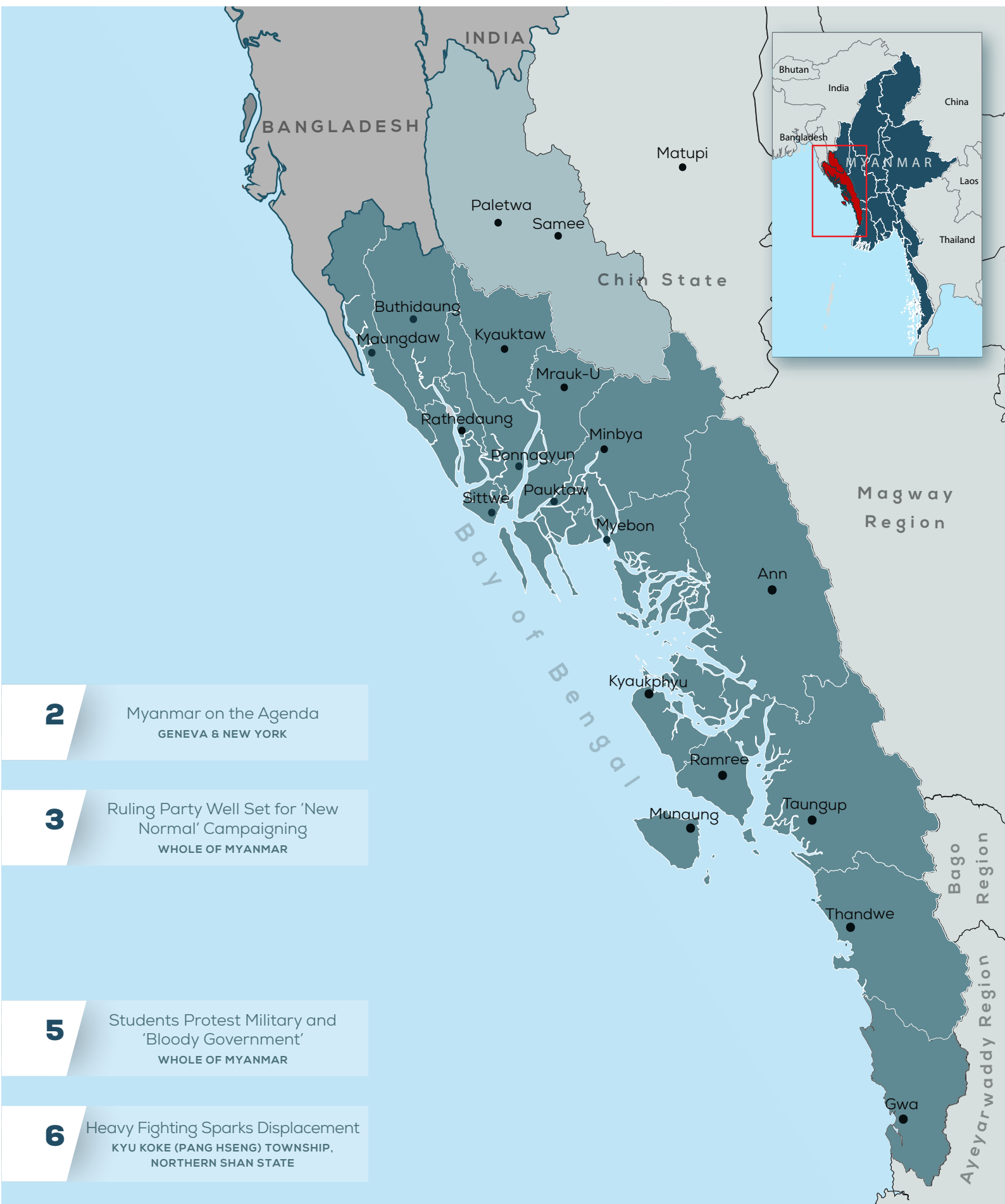
Rakhine reverberations

The government's preoccupation with COVID-19 and its electoral changes also means it has little time or energy to push for any political settlement or ceasefire in Rakhine State over the next few months — if indeed it ever had the capacity to do so. The ruling party stands to win very few seats in western Myanmar and probably considers elections a write-off in many areas of the state.

As noted in [CASS' Rakhine and southern Chin State Scenario Plan](#), even before the outbreak polls were highly unlikely in conflict-affected areas of western Myanmar. While they may have been possible in urban areas under government control, the outbreak and strict restrictions on movement suggest township-wide postponements are more likely. Polls were previously more likely in southern Rakhine State, but questions are now being raised about their practicality there too. Cancellations or postponements may prompt accusations of 'poll-rigging by pandemic' and add fuel to the ethno-nationalist flames in western Myanmar.

As such, the civilian government's collective mind is far from western Myanmar. With little attention given to the issue, there will be limited opportunities to negotiate opening the humanitarian space, despite deepening needs. The political sensitivities of Rakhine State also provide few motivations for the government to allow international agencies expanded access.

Over the next month, clear indicators will become apparent. The nationwide postponement of elections would likely require an admission from the National League for Democracy's top leadership that polls are impractical. The electoral commission has made little secret of its partisanship and willingness to take direction from the ruling party. As such, indications of postponement are likely to first be seen from the top leadership of the civilian government. Any postponement or cancellation will be announced in October. //



1 Rumours Swirl Over Border Troop Buildup

NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

Late last week, under cover of darkness, an estimated 1,000 Tatmadaw troops were deployed from Sittwe, before commanding civilian boats in southern Rathedaung to transport them north to the Myanmar-Bangladesh border where they have maintained positions since. It is notable that the troops took the sea route, rather than the overland road, most likely due to concerns of Arakan Army attacks which have been frequent on that road. The deployment has surprised residents of Maungdaw Township who question the motivations for the deployment. Bangladeshi authorities have also been alarmed and [called in the Myanmar ambassador](#) to explain. With no explanation from the Tatmadaw, rumours have spread through communities in Rakhine State.

Accountability mechanisms hit home

While the Bangladesh media have [linked the troop buildup](#) to the potential for new Rohingya displacement across the border and election security, communities are sceptical. Rumours on the ground in Rakhine State are instead tied into narratives of international justice mechanisms. There is a perception that the Tatmadaw is deploying to prevent deserters fleeing to Bangladesh and reporting to the International Criminal Court, or that the Tatmadaw is transferring troops with knowledge of the 2016/17 atrocities out of Rakhine State. In that version of the rumours, the Tatmadaw is fearful that soldiers may again be captured by the Arakan Army and sent to the Hague. As such, the Arakan Army has now successfully weaponised these international accountability mechanisms against the Tatmadaw. The use of these processes to weaken the Tatmadaw's morale may also build support for international mechanisms among Rakhine communities. It is important to note, however, that no sure reason for the deployment has been confirmed, and there is no indication that the deployment is related to any one reason. Last week in Maungdaw Township one Border Guard Police officer was [found dead while another remains missing](#). Growing insecurity and the spread of COVID-19 in refugee camps in Bangladesh has also sparked concerns of large numbers of Rohingya attempting to cross back into Myanmar. Reports of the emergence of a new armed Rohingya insurgency, as reported in [last week's CASS Weekly Update](#) may also

have sparked concerns. Regardless, the fact that international courts and human rights organisations are increasingly a part of conflict narratives, potentially fuelling ongoing clashes in western Myanmar, should be cause for pause to consider how initiatives which may seem remote do interact with a very immediate conflict context. //

2 Myanmar on the Agenda

GENEVA & NEW YORK

With the 45th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council continuing this week in Geneva and the Security Council sitting in New York last week, the situation in Myanmar — and western Myanmar in particular — has frequently been on the agenda. In Geneva, the High Commissioner for Human Rights [warned](#) that targeting of civilians in western Myanmar in the context of the ongoing conflict there may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar also [reported to the council](#), and [confirmed](#) the mechanism is sharing information relevant to proceedings at the International Court of Justice with both the Gambia and Myanmar. In New York meanwhile, following Security Council briefings by the United Nations Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, and Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Director of the UN Development Programme Kanni Wignaraja on 11 September, eight Security Council member states released a [joint statement](#) regarding Rakhine and Chin states, calling for (among other things) an immediate cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access, the implementation of the camp closure strategy, and steps towards durable solutions for the return of refugees. While observers have pointed to [China as the barrier](#) to progress on engaging Myanmar at the Security Council, the reality is not so black and white.

Regional balance

While patience will be needed for the longer-term objectives of accountability and durable solutions in Myanmar, a nuanced understanding of Myanmar's relationship with its northern neighbour may suggest further opportunities

for engagement. Swinging between regional superpowers, Myanmar seeks to balance its relationships strategically. In the three years since the atrocities which drove the Rohingya into Bangladesh in 2017, Myanmar has swung further into China's orbit, while abuses against civilians continue and there has been little improvement in conditions for the Rohingya's potential return. In China, Myanmar does have a viable option for avoiding the worst international censure. Indeed, China's protection at the Security Council has meant an inability of the council to issue any resolution about the situation in western Myanmar. More broadly, the regional superpower does offer huge economic potential in the face of Western sanctions and the severance of economic ties. However, there is also a reluctance among decision-makers about going all in with Beijing and falling under its shadow. A deal to develop the port at Kyaukphyu, central Rakhine State, was massively downgraded in 2018 amid fears of a Chinese debt trap similar to that which recently befell Sri Lanka. It is easy to assume that the door to change in Myanmar is closed. But it is important to remember that Myanmar does seek a range of international partners, and as such does care about international opinion. //

3 Ruling Party Well Set for 'New Normal' Campaigning

WHOLE OF MYANMAR

Against the backdrop of strict COVID-restrictions during the 60-day official election campaign period, alternative strategies and forms of campaigning have emerged and taken greater emphasis due to restrictions against traditional campaigns. The most common 'new normal' campaigns include on-vehicle rallies and attention-grabbing convoys of boats, trishaws, horse riders and cards, and candidates dressed up in ancient Myanmar costumes parading through towns and villages. In parallel, political parties are making heavy use of social media, especially the most popular online platform in Myanmar: Facebook. To reach a larger audience, politicians and parties are increasingly using paid 'boost' services offered by Facebook and relying on existing social media 'influencer' accounts, pages and public groups to troll and hoax the political opposition. YouTube is an increasingly popular platform

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too, although many YouTube links are simply shared on Facebook rather than on the platform itself. Other increasingly popular online platforms are Tik Tok, VK (a Russian social media platform), Instagram and Twitter. These platforms, however, are rarely mobilised by political parties or politicians, but rather for individual expressions of support to political parties. The exception is VK, which is typically used by vocal Buddhist nationalist actors who have been 'de-platformed' from Facebook.

Reasons for grievances

One political motivation behind opposition parties' requests for a delayed election is to show a collective solidarity against the dominance of the National League for Democracy. Opposition parties consider the ruling party to have an unfair advantage in campaigning for two main reasons. First, the National League for Democracy's centrepiece for its campaign is Aung San Suu Kyi — their iconic figurehead. Her privileged access to state-owned media — including newspapers, TV channels and Facebook pages — has become even more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, there is a strong feeling among competitors that the National League for Democracy has been conducting election campaign-like activities since the International Court of Justice hearing at the Hague in December 2019 and throughout the first and second waves of COVID-19. As such, they have strong grievances against the ruling party for being so well resourced, while restricting the ability of other parties to campaign. Some online media agencies are also widely perceived to be biased toward the National League for Democracy. Smaller ethnic political parties in Myanmar's border regions are not immune from these dynamics, and electoral discontent risks feeding into both armed clashes and social cohesion concerns, as noted in last week's CASS Weekly Update in the context of Northern Shan State. Agencies with diverse staff bases should ensure that

codes of conduct are well understood among staff, and should not hesitate to open discussions about personal safety and organisational security risks — while ensuring personal freedom for political expression is respected. //

4 Needs at Quarantine

SITTWE TOWNSHIP, RAKHINE STATE

With the rapid surge in COVID-19 cases in Rakhine State and ‘stay at home’ orders restricting movement, many organisations including international humanitarian groups are now in lockdown mode. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi **insists the outbreak is now “under control”** in Rakhine State because residents have obeyed restrictions, but civil society leaders say there is still a high risk of further outbreak. Worrying rumours are also spreading that the current outbreak of COVID-19 is fake, and has been fabricated by the government and the military as an excuse to exercise authority, and to prevent election campaigning by opposition parties. This has encouraged people to abandon facemasks, break the curfew, and congregate on the streets near the Kaladan river each evening. Local CSOs are also suspicious about the rapidly falling numbers of confirmed cases in Rakhine State, which have continued to drop despite the massive numbers of people continuing to be quarantined for contact with COVID-19 patients. Meanwhile, resources for running quarantine centres are scarce.

Essential supplies needed

Quarantine centres in Sittwe Township are now struggling to cope with the rising number of people who need to be quarantined. On 9 September, the Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Group **reported** that the two quarantine centers under the supervision of civil society organizations are Sittwe University (old) and the Basic Education High School No. 4. Thirteen more are being managed by government departments, and there are a further eight hotels quarantining nearly 600 people. The World Food Programme has now been collaborating with CSOs and authorities to provide cash for people in quarantine centres across Rakhine State – providing 5,000 Myanmar Kyat per person per day since 8 September. According to local CSO leaders, Personal Protective Equipment including face masks, hand sanitizers and gloves are needed for volunteers at quarantine centres and laboratories. Supplies such

sanitation and hygiene are also needed for quarantine centers in Sittwe and other townships. Quarantine centres in Sittwe are currently in need of more volunteers, and agencies should consider dispatching staff to support needs. Meanwhile initiatives by local or international organisations to fight misinformation about COVID-19 are welcome. International agencies’ engagement with local authorities, CSOs and *parahita* groups is essential to respond to the current COVID-19 outbreak. //

5 Students Protest Military and ‘Bloody Government’

WHOLE OF MYANMAR

On 9 September, authorities in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, **arrested three students** from the Arakan Students’ Union who staged a protest in front of the Rakhine State government office, holding placards that read ‘oppose murderous fascism’, ‘no bloody government’, ‘no murder army’, ‘to restore 4G internet’, and ‘no trust on the state government’. The protest was calling for the full restoration of internet access, objecting against the Myanmar military’s extrajudicial killing of civilians, and criticizing the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the protest, the Arakan Students’ Union organized a poster campaign across 15 townships in Rakhine State, but many posters were destroyed by the police. Meanwhile, in other parts of the country, students participated in poster campaigns in Yangon, Mandalay, Kayah State’s Loikaw, and Northern Shan State’s Lashio and Hsipaw. On 10 September, students from the Arakan Students’ Union staged **another protest** in front of the No.1 Police Station in downtown Sittwe demanding the authorities free the arrested students after 24 hours of detention. The three students were reportedly charged under sections 25 & 26 of the Natural Disaster Management Law. Furthermore, on 10 September, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions staged a **protest** in Mandalay demanding an end to armed conflict, human rights violations, and full restoration of internet access in Rakhine State, demonstrating their solidarity with the student protesters and the people of Rakhine State, and condemning the authorities for the arrest of the three students in Sittwe. A **statement** released by the All

Burma Federation of Student Union on 14 September threatened to continue the protests across the country unless the students were released and all sides ceased hostilities and stopped civilian killings under the cover of COVID-19 restrictions.

Oppression of expression?

Authorities' arrests of students illustrate the repression of freedom of expression under the cover of COVID-19 restrictions. The authorities have arbitrarily arrested, detained, and imprisoned students participating in protests and poster campaigns under repressive laws such as the Section 19 of the Peaceful Assembly Law, Section 505 (b) of the colonial-era Penal Code and section 25 and 26 of the Natural Disaster Management Law. The use of repressive laws against activists, human rights defenders, and students reflect an increasing trend of authorities using the law to suppress speech they don't like. Lawyers' organisations in Rakhine State have [condemned the charge](#) of the students under the Natural Disaster Management Law, as being irrelevant. With little indication of armed conflict de-escalating in western Myanmar, the students' campaign may be expected to spread as tensions between students and local authorities continue. Further prosecution of students' involved in the protests, meanwhile, is more likely to spark escalation. Arrests of student protesters have also prompted social media users to point out authorities double-standards. Political parties' election campaigns have drawn large crowds onto the streets in violation of COVID-19 restrictions with no legal repercussions. With many challenges to elections already in place, student protests will add another political and human rights dimension to the political storm. It is crucial that international agencies continue to advocate both for dialogue in western Myanmar, and for freedom of expression for all communities in Myanmar. //

6 Heavy Fighting Sparks Displacement

KYU KOKE (PANG HSENG) TOWNSHIP,
NORTHERN SHAN STATE

Between 11 and 14 September the Tatmadaw clashed with the Kachin Independence Army in Northern Shan State. It was also reported by media that the Kachin Independence Army's Northern Alliance allies, the Arakan Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, also [joined in the heavy fighting](#). Local sources suggest other Federal Political and Negotiation Consultative Committee members were also active. The Kachin Independence Army and Tatmadaw have rarely clashed through 2019 and 2020, despite the breakdown of a 17-year bilateral ceasefire in 2011 and subsequent heavy fighting then. This week's clashes resulted in approximately 300 IDPs fleeing to Mang Pying village where 230 [remain sheltered in a church](#).

Access restrained

Both national and international humanitarian responders face significant barriers to accessing this area to support displaced persons. This is a contested area where the Myanmar state holds little authority. National responders including *parahita* organisations also face security concerns and are reluctant to access the area. Some local culture and literature groups are providing emergency relief, but COVID-19 prevention equipment, hygiene kits and food items remain in short supply. The small space available for IDPs is also an issue and poses protection risks for women and children as well as COVID-19 concerns among the IDPs and host community. While direct access for international agencies is difficult, local organisations with contextual knowledge and local networks have reported they can support international agencies to overcome access constraints. //

// Other Developments

- Following initial blanket denial, the Tatmadaw has **admitted** that its troops raped a woman in Rakhine State in July. The Tatmadaw has promised that trials will follow. The Tatmadaw has historically scapegoated low-level troops for such abuses while avoiding reform of the structural conditions which promote impunity within the ranks, and there is little reason to expect change in this case.
- Suspicions have grown among communities in Northern Shan State that authorities in some townships are raising the prices of swab tests for people in home quarantine and pocketing the difference. With prices rising into hundreds of thousands of Myanmar Kyats, it is the most vulnerable who are likely to suffer from any corruption.
- The Arakan State Election Observer Committee **will send monitors** to at least 500 pollings stations to oversee elections expected for November. The committee says it will mostly send observers to southern Rakhine State, in anticipation of election cancellations in the centre and north of the state.

// What to Watch This Week

- Student protests against the ‘bloody government’ may spread further across Myanmar this week. Arrests will likely only fuel the movement, and put more pressure on the civilian government to respond.
- There may be more clarity on the rationale behind the deployment of Tatmadaw troops to the Myanmar-Bangladesh border this week.
- The National League for Democracy top leadership and Union Election Commission may give some indications of potential election postponements in the coming week, but the final decision will be announced in October.

// Key Readings

- The Asia Foundation’s new report **Navigating at the margins: Family, mobility and livelihoods amongst Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh** provides valuable insights into debt accumulation, remittances, incarceration and women’s mobility among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The report also features useful quantitative findings.
- Amnesty International has released a **new report** linking Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and military units implicated in crimes under international law. The report draws on resources released by activist group Justice for Myanmar earlier this month. Frontier Myanmar notes that the numbers in the report should be taken with a grain of salt, as the report calculates figures between 1990 and 2010 using Myanmar’s official exchange rate, when the actual rate was significantly lower.



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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