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Community Analysis Support System

RAKHINE STATE AND SOUTHERN CHIN STATE SCENARIO PLAN:

August Update

| September 2020 |

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This August Update tracks a set of indicators drawn from the **Rakhine State and Southern Chin State Scenario Plan**, published by CASS on 9 April, to document updates and consider implications for the humanitarian response. That scenario plan considered the trajectory of armed conflict in Rakhine State before nationwide elections currently scheduled for 8 November 2020, and anticipated the impact of armed conflict for communities and the humanitarian response in western Myanmar, with the objective of facilitating forward-looking programming for humanitarian responders. Please see the **Rakhine State and Southern Chin State Scenario Plan** for the full consideration of scenarios, conflict trajectories and humanitarian impacts.

// August Summary

The confirmation of a new COVID-19 outbreak in western Myanmar in August has prompted a severe shrinking of the humanitarian space for international agencies. Historical experience, and the ongoing outbreak and civil war, suggest that access will not be restored anytime soon. International responders need to find new modalities of working in western Myanmar, because current modalities are unsustainable.

While the COVID-19 outbreak in Rakhine has drawn attention to a deepening public health crisis and shrinking INGO access to vulnerable communities, there has also simultaneously been a continuation of armed clashes and their impact on communities. The war has continued despite the outbreak, which coincided with the government's exclusion of the Arakan Army from its Union Peace Conference, and the Arakan Army's allies' subsequent boycott of the conference.

The general trajectory of armed conflict in western Myanmar thus remains best reflected by scenario three, Status Quo, as laid out in the **Rakhine State and Southern Chin State Scenario Plan**. The humanitarian impact, however, is best reflected by the first scenario of Escalation. While the conflict remains stabilized, the spread of COVID-19 has resulted in a dramatic restriction of humanitarian access, increased vulnerabilities for all communities, and will likely have long term impacts for livelihoods and economic security.

// Indicators

COVID-19

An outbreak of COVID-19 originating in western Myanmar marks the country's most serious encounter with the virus to date. Within weeks the number of cases of the virus in the country have multiplied as the virus spread out of Rakhine State and across Myanmar. The new outbreak has a series of implications for communities and for the humanitarian response.

- On Monday 16 August the first locally transmitted case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Rakhine State capital Sittwe, marking a serious new outbreak of the virus. By the end of August, there were over 350 cases reported in Rakhine State, and the virus was increasingly reported in Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon.

- Preventative measures enforced by the government include a 26 August 'stay at home' order to **all townships of Rakhine State** and 9am to 4am curfews in all townships.

- Most clinics in the Rohingya internment camps in central Rakhine State have also been closed, leaving few healthcare options for the most vulnerable populations.

- Initial reports of some of the first confirmed cases as emerging among INGO staff presented concerns about new anti-INGO sentiment or anti-Rohingya sentiment amid a widespread rumour that the virus entered Rakhine State from Bangladesh via the Muslim community which international agencies are responding to. While the dominant narrative around COVID-19 in Rakhine State has evolved into one of central government neglect and even military exploitation of the crisis, agencies **can take steps to fight disinformation** through communication, transparency, and engagement with stakeholders.

- Beyond the clear public health and economic implications, the new outbreak of COVID-19 in western Myanmar presents a series of challenges for humanitarian responders in terms of supply and humanitarian access, as discussed in the next section.

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

In the wake of the latest COVID-19 outbreak in western Myanmar, the Rakhine State Government has placed new restrictions on international agencies' access. Previous experience suggests that after authorities' restrict access, it is rarely restored. International agencies in western Myanmar should review current operational modalities and prepare for a 'new normal' with even less direct access than in the past.

- In August, the Rakhine State government 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.

- Authorities also floated the suggestion that all humanitarian support may need to be delivered through ward or village tract administrators or Camp Management Committees. In other words: through the arms of the government. This has broad implications for humanitarian actors, especially with regards to monitoring, program design, beneficiary selection, and program quality.

- Local organizations and religious leaders are already providing a large part of the response to vulnerable communities in western Myanmar. However, humanitarian access for local responders has also tightened as a result of curfews, stay at home orders and new checkpoints.

- The rapid tightening of humanitarian space should 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.

DIALOGUE

Despite the outbreak of COVID-19 in western Myanmar, there remains little indication of any dialogue emerging between belligerents. The Arakan Army's exclusion from the government's symbolic fourth Union Peace Conference on 19-21 August reflected this analysis, and also highlighted the significance that the war in western Myanmar has for the country's broader peace process.

- On 5 August, Government spokesperson Zaw Htay announced that the **Arakan Army will not be invited** to attend the fourth Union Peace Conference – now confirmed for 19-21 August – due to "legal constraints".

- At a 13 August meeting in the United Wa State Party/Army's headquarters in Panghang, Northern Shan State, the ethnic armed organisations comprising the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultation Committee (consisting of the United Wa State Army, Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army, Mongla's National Democratic Alliance Army, Kachin Independence Army, Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army) agreed not to attend the peace conference. While the seven-member grouping cited COVID-19 precautions as their rationale, **it is no secret** that the decision not to attend hinges more on the exclusion of the Arakan Army.

- China was conspicuous in its absence during this conference. In previous years China served **to some extent as a broker**, encouraging non-signatories to attend or ensuring security guarantees for delegates. China may be taking a back seat due to recent **Tatmadaw allegations** of its role in Myanmar's internal conflicts.

- 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 due to the activities of groups declared 'terrorist organisations' by the state.

TARGETED KILLINGS AND URBAN WARFARE

There were no relevant targeted killings reported during the month of August. There were no active clashes reported in urban areas throughout August, although several security incidents did occur. The militarisation of urban spaces has continued with relevant impacts to communities.

- On 4 August clashes near the Mrauk U urban area resulted in urban markets closing and no civilian casualties.

- A reported Arakan Army attack on Tatmadaw troops occurred in urban Ponnagyun on 16 August, with no civilian casualties reported.

- Sources and media report that at approximately 10pm on 2 August four Rohingya men on a motorcycle were shot by police after failing to stop at a checkpoint. One man died and another was hospitalised. When **contacted by Radio Free Asia**, the Rakhine State Security and Border Affairs minister alleged the men were instead involved in a machete fight, dismissing the report and noting that "they always do these kinds of things".

- On 26 August a man was **reportedly killed** by security forces in downtown Kyauktaw during a night-time patrol.

- Facebook users in Rakhine State have accused security forces of taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak to deploy more troops into urban areas and to set up new checkpoints.

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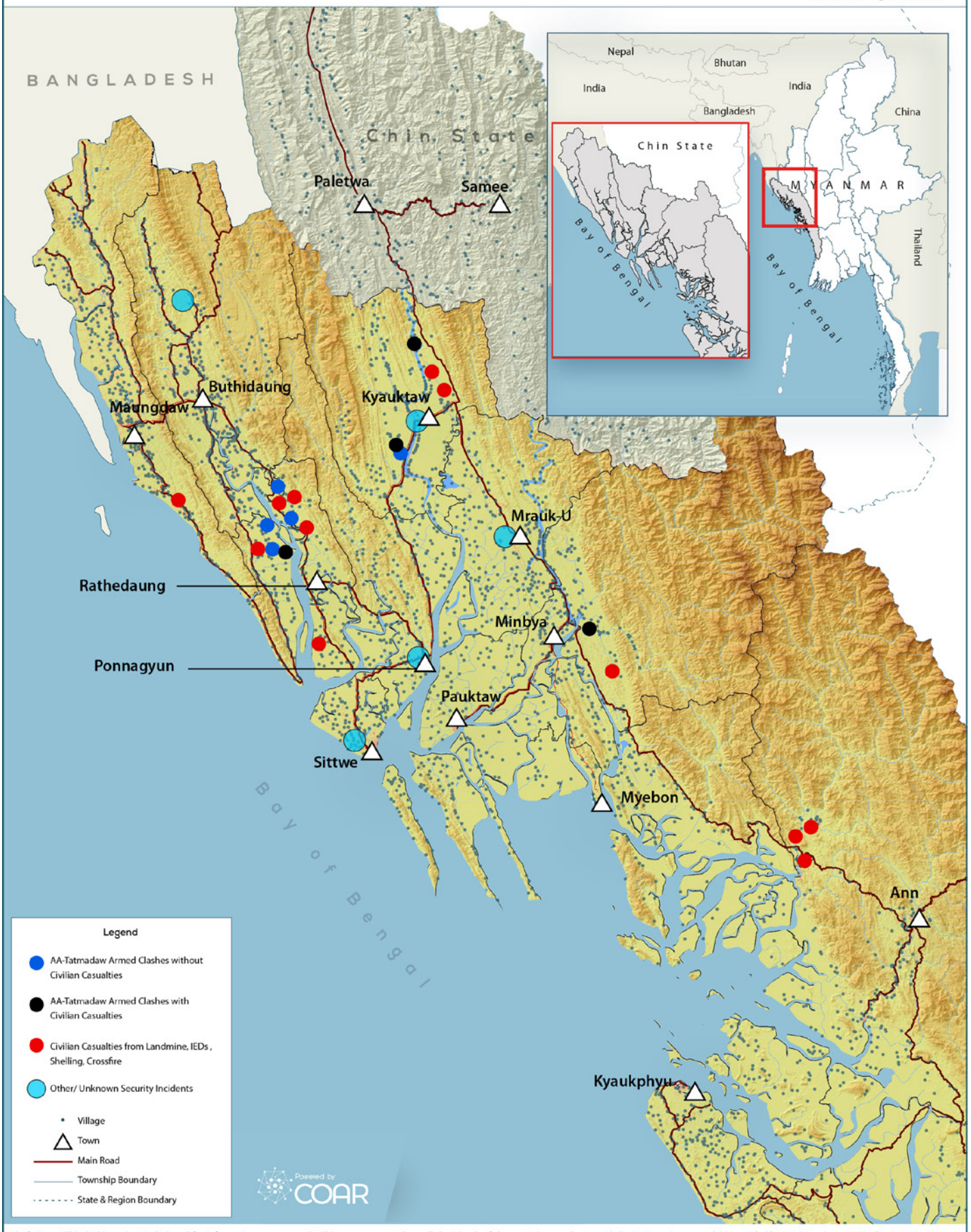
Security Incidents in Rakhine State and Southern Chin State
1 - 31 August, 2020

As of 31 August, 2020



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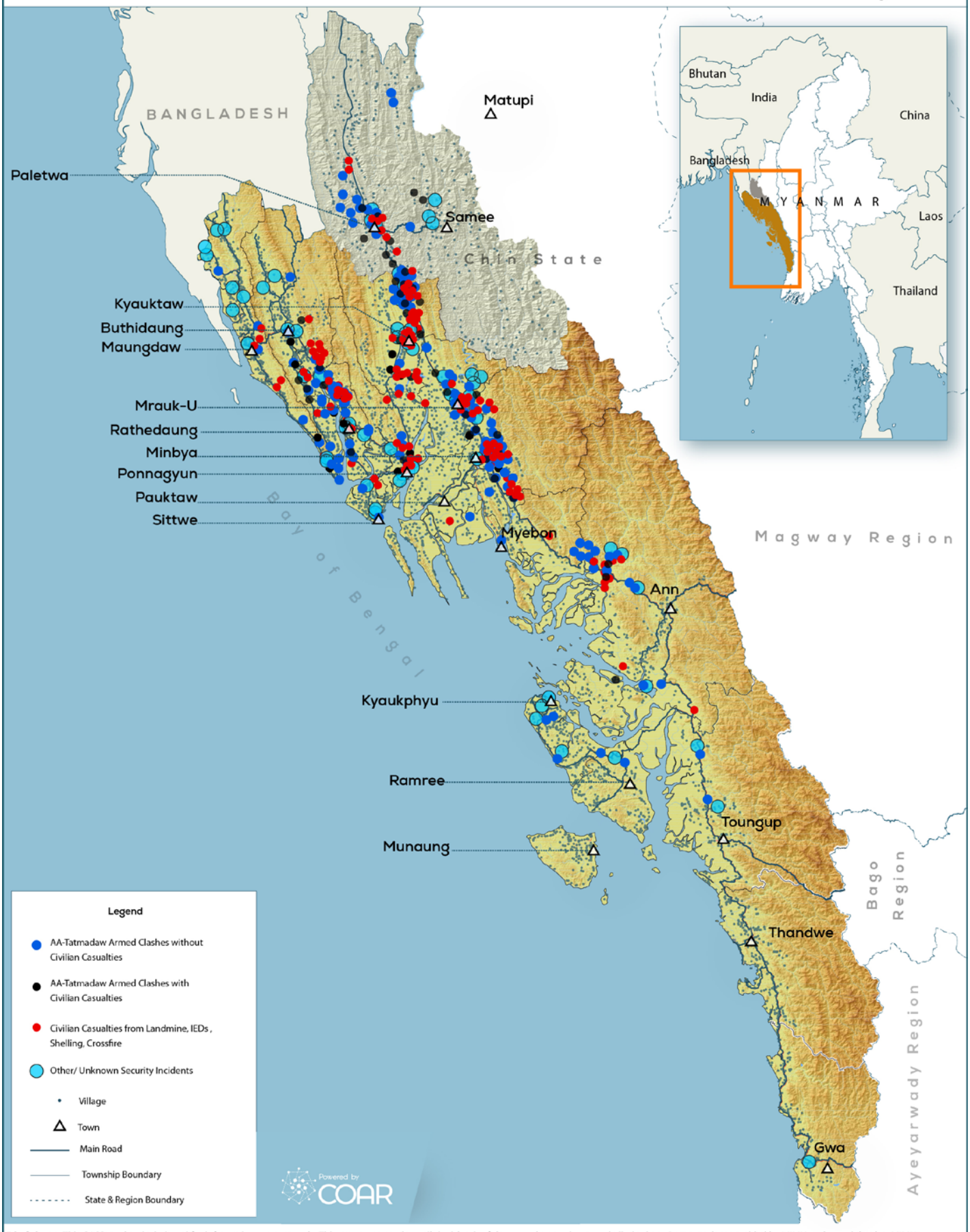
Security Incidents in Rakhine State and Southern Chin State
Jan - Aug, 2020

As of 31 August, 2020



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DISPLACEMENT

Experiences of displacement continue to be diverse. Some IDPs in the urban Sittwe area returned to their villages or moved to displacement sites in neighbouring townships during August due to concerns of COVID-19 spreading through Sittwe. While some displacement is elastic, a great deal remains long-term. Local civil society actors are facing difficulties collecting up-to-date displacement figures as a result of the current COVID-19 outbreak and restrictions on movement.

- Landmine and unexploded ordnance risks continue for communities in and outside of displacement sites. On 1 August in Rathedaung Township two boys aged 15 and 9 years old were **killed and four other children injured** after finding what was reportedly an unexploded shell.

- Several hundred IDPs remain in Ah Ngu Maw (Kone Tan) village, where they were displaced to during July Tatmadaw operations in coastal Rathedaung Township. Others have returned to their villages but continue to have concerns about troop movements and clashes. Nearly one hundred IDPs also relocated to this site from urban Sittwe sites as a result of COVID-19 concerns.

- The Tatmadaw continues to restrict the movement of IDPs and host communities in sites in Myebon Township. The restrictions have fed concerns among the community of food shortages. Meanwhile, camp leaders report little awareness of COVID-19 and a shortage of masks, soap and hand gel. Local responders have had difficulties reaching this site due to checkpoints and COVID-19 restrictions.

- Similarly, villagers in Ann Township's Dar Let village tract are also facing food shortages as a result of security forces' restrictions, and many villagers have resorted to rice gruel for regular meals. The area remains inaccessible for local responders.

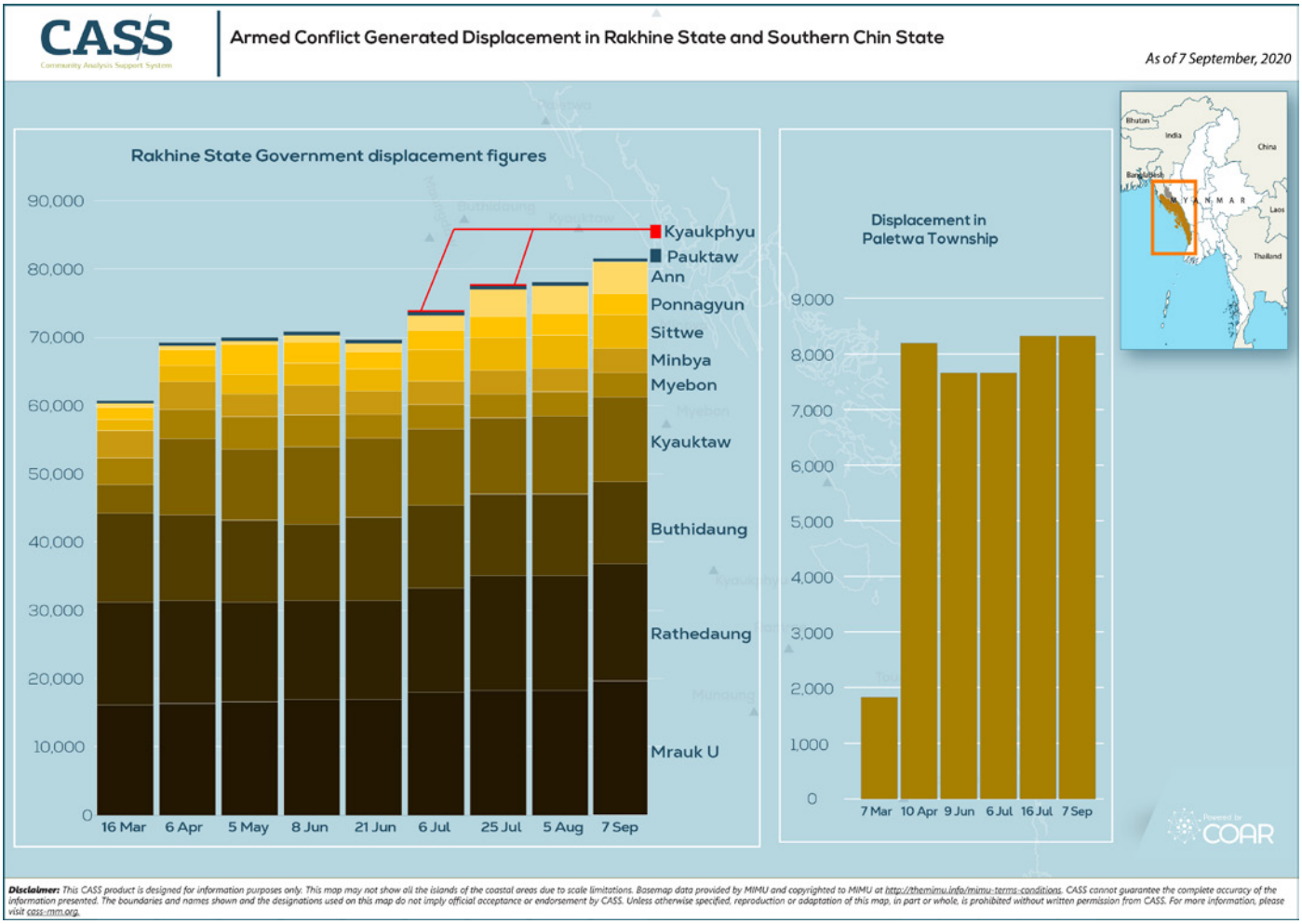

Table 1: Rakhine State government displacement figures

Township	16 March[1]	06 April[2]	05 May	08 June	21 June[3]	06 July[4]	25 July[5]	05 Aug[6]	07 September[7]
Ponnagyun	1,779	2,315	4,373	3,054	2,480	2,829	3,125	3,125	3,052
Kyauktaw	4,188	11,212	10,406	11,368	11,567	11,180	11,180	11,442	12,406
Mrauk U	16,089	16,344	16,609	16,888	16,888	17,944	18,211	18,211	19,518
Minbya	4,024	4,024	3,313	4,328	3,411	3,411	3,411	3,411	3,487
Pauktaw	365	433	498	503	503	503	503	503	503
Sittwe	1,641	2,422	2,819	3,211	3,170	4,636	4,782	4,906	4,945
Myebon	3,914	4,267	4,803	4,732	3,550	3,550	3,550	3,550	3,550
Ann	578	578	578	1,092	1,301	2,184	3,986	4,123	4,662
Rathedaung	15,061	15,061	14,575	14,575	14,575	15,305	16,889	16,889	17,159
Buthidaung	13,064	12,530	12,001	11,092	12,153	12,153	11,900	11,900	11,959
Kyaukphyu	_	_	_	_	_	287	287	-	-
Total	**60,703**	**69,186**	**69,975**	**70,843**	**69,598**	**73,982**	**77,824**	**78,060**	**81,241**

[1] Based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State Government dated 16 March.

[2] Based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State Government dated 6 April.

[3] Based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State Government dated 21 June. https://twitter.com/ochamyanmar/status/1276065411797139457.

[4] Based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State Government dated 6 July. https://twitter.com/ochamyanmar/status/1281549664647475201.

[5] Based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State Government dated 25 July. https://twitter.com/ochamyanmar/status/1288792401977344000?s=19

[6] https://reliefweb.int/map/myanmar/myanmar-myanmar-armed-forces-arakan-army-conflict-generated-displacement-rakhine-and-2

[7] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/7Sep2020_MAF%20AA%20Conflict-generated%20Displacement%20in%20Rakhine%20and%20Chin%20States.pdf

Table 2: Displacement in Paletwa, southern Rakhine State

	17 March	10 April	09 June	06 July	16 July
Paletwa[8]	1,823	8,196	7,655	7,655	8,323

[8] Paletwa figures are reported by humanitarian organisations.

Table 3. Rakhine Ethnic Congress displacement figures

Township	01 April[9]	01 May[10]	08 June[11]	07 July[12]
Ponnagyun	1,842	4,760	2,314	2,513
Kyauktaw	11,584	12,250	12,241	11,495
Mrauk U	16,415	17,027	17,193	17,383
Minbya	4,111	2,720	2,167	2,150
Pauktaw	410	698	598	594
Sittwe	3,454	3,548	3,895	5,316
Myebon	4,742	3,673	3,317	2,357
Ann	326	802	664	1,443
Kyaukphyu	-	-	-	311
Rathedaung	8,732	8,486	8,248	9,754
Buthidaung	8,606	7,955	8,374	8,821
Maungdaw	622	622	632	
Total	**60,844**	**62,541**	**59,643**	**62,137**

[9] Based on numbers provided by Rakhine Ethnics Congress dated 1 April. https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=810341739491020&id=250589055466294

[10] Based on numbers provided by Rakhine Ethnics Congress dated 1 May. REC also report that 101,670 additional people are affected by armed conflict outside of formal displacement sites. https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=832211237304070&id=250589055466294.

[11] Based on numbers provided by Rakhine Ethnics Congress dated 8 June. https://www.facebook.com/250589055466294/posts/859774027881124/

[12] Based on numbers provided by Rakhine Ethnics Congress dated 7 July. REC also report that 128,571 additional people are affected by armed conflict outside of formal displacement sites. https://www.facebook.com/250589055466294/posts/880124662512727/

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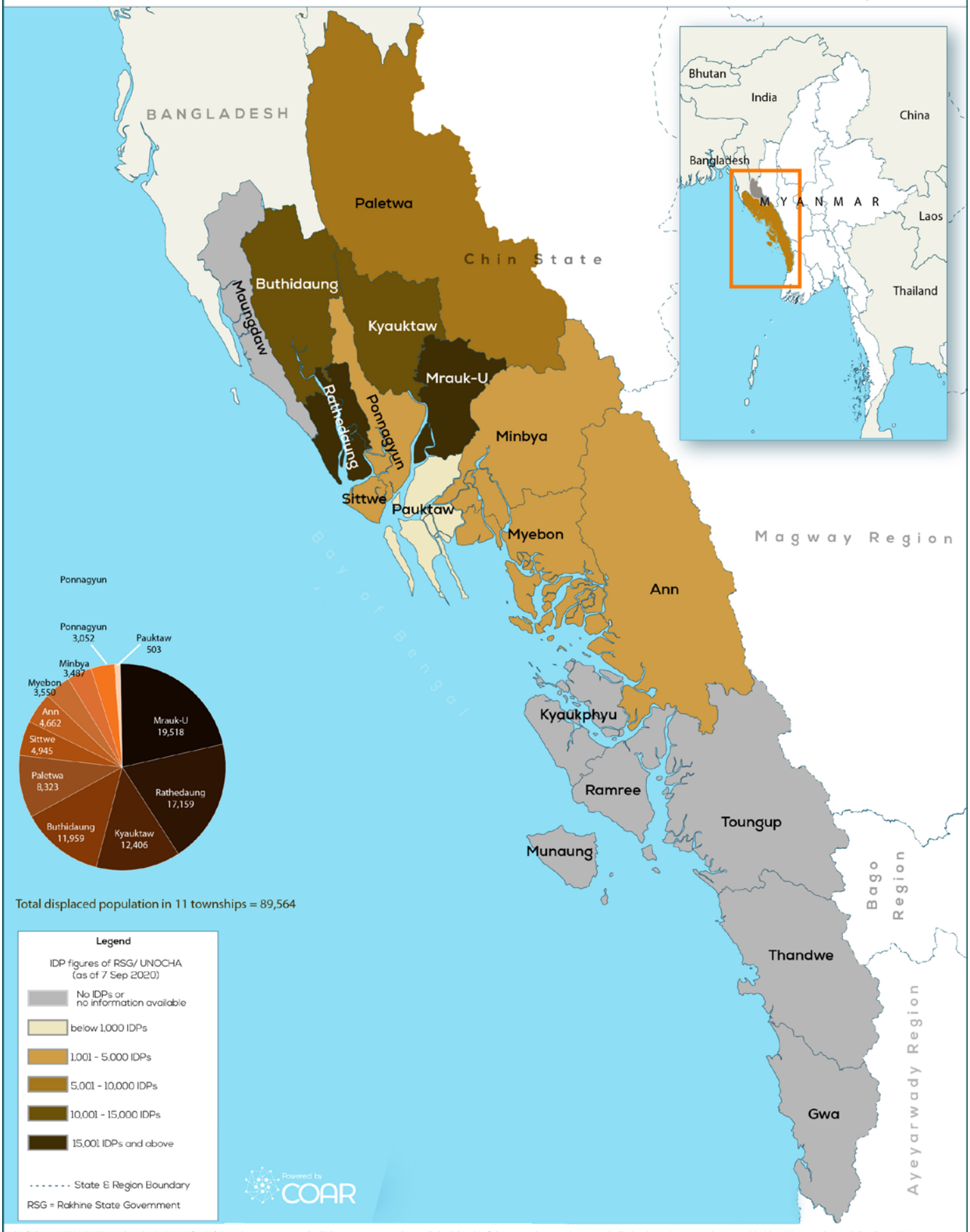
Armed Conflict Generated Displacement in Rakhine State and Southern Chin State

As of 7 September, 2020



Total displaced population in 11 townships = 89,564

Legend

IDP figures of RSG/ UNOCHA (as of 7 Sep 2020)

- No IDPs or no information available
- below 1,000 IDPs
- 1,001 - 5,000 IDPs
- 5,001 - 10,000 IDPs
- 10,001 - 15,000 IDPs
- 15,001 IDPs and above
- State & Region Boundary

RSG = Rakhine State Government

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ROHINGYA COMMUNITIES

The Rohingya in Rakhine State remain highly vulnerable, with extremely limited access to healthcare, education, livelihoods or basic rights. Many continue to live under harsh movement restrictions near or inside conflict zones. The third anniversary of the Tatmadaw operations which drove the Rohingya into Bangladesh (what has become known as 'Genocide day' for the Rohingya) passed on 25 August, with few public events as a result of COVID-19 concerns.

- The aforementioned **2 August shooting of Rohingya** by security forces reflects the immense structural barriers which exist to reconciliation between Rohingya and Rakhine communities. As reported in **CASS' previous scenario plan update**, engagement between Rakhine and Rohingya students is a positive development, but expectations need to be tempered.

- When the Arakan Army's top leader **Tweeted Muslims a blessed feast** on the occasion of Eid al-adha, hopes were raised among observers and the Rohingya for a conciliatory Arakan Army policy towards the Rohingya. **Reports** that local Arakan Army troops were taxing Muslims for the sacrifice of cattle suggested a continuation of the Myanmar government's policy. However, the Arakan Army has now suggested that those collected the taxes were **falsely using the Arakan Army name**.

SOUTHERN RAKHINE STATE

There were no security incidents in southern Rakhine State during August. The National Security Organisation appears to have limited its activity drastically following its **foray into abductions, threats and reported assassinations** in May and June of this year. All major political parties have now announced their candidates for southern Rakhine State, where competition is expected to be much fiercer than in the north. However, massive questions remain about the feasibility of polls in all of Rakhine State under the current pandemic.

FRAGMENTATION OF CONFLICT

On 10 August, Arakan Army members **abducted five Arakan Liberation Party/Army members** who were returning from a funeral in Ponnagyun Township. This is the **latest in a series of violent encounters** between members of the two groups. The Arakan Liberation Army is a small armed group who have signed the government's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, but retain little support among the Rakhine community. The abductions reflect both the Arakan Army's continued efforts to target actors linked to the government of Myanmar, and its ability to disrupt the peace process while remaining excluded.

GOVERNANCE

On 1 August, the Norwegian telecommunication operation Telenor announced that the government was **permitting operators to re-open** 2G internet provision in eight townships of Rakhine and southern Chin states. Myanmar's Myanmar Ministry of Transport and Communications had instructed operators to shut down the internet in nine townships on 21 June 2019. The internet connection was reinstated in full only in Maungdaw Township on 2 May 2020. Elsewhere 2G is available but has a severely limited capacity.

- On a 2G connection, sending and receiving images is difficult, and video exceedingly so. Voice and video calls are almost entirely out of the question.

- Stronger internet signals are available in certain areas, prompting people to climb trees or erect phones above houses on bamboo poles. This is not without risk. Tatmadaw soldiers question young people ascending hills or pagoda platforms, suspicious of their intentions. Similarly, these are often areas inaccessible to certain demographics. In Buthidaung Township, internet signals are strong near a Tatmadaw base, where all civilians are wary of moving through.

- In late August, the Myanmar government **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 with a focus on accountability for the 2017 atrocities against the Rohingya. This is the latest case of internet censorship by the National League for Democracy government.

ELECTIONS

Elections are now confirmed for 8 November, although the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak has raised further questions about their viability. In the meantime, the Union Election Commission has faced further questions about preparedness and impartiality. In western Myanmar, armed conflict and the Arakan Army's expanded influence, together with a combination of the above, have resulted in the failure of the election commission to post voter lists in many areas. While some Rohingya quarters and villages are not under the influence of the Arakan Army, the election commission has also failed to present these communities with lists. With several indications that elections will not be viable in many areas of western Myanmar, humanitarian actors should expect little de-escalation in armed conflict ahead of November polls.

- Voter lists were displayed across Myanmar from 25 July to 14 August. As noted in the **previous CASS scenario plan update**, voter lists were absent from many Rakhine villages under Arakan Army influence, and also from many Rohingya Muslim communities in rural villages and internment camps in central and northern Rakhine State. The absence of voter lists in Muslim areas of Rakhine State in part reflects the fact that Muslim voters remain disenfranchised. This has been the case since the Union Solidarity and Development Party abolished Temporary Identification Cards ahead of the 2015 election, effectively disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of people, most Rohingya Muslims.

- After initially leaving 12 constituencies in central and northern Rakhine State uncontested, the ruling National League for Democracy has announced **candidates for 12 more seats** in Rakhine State, meaning it will contest all Rakhine State seats in the 2020 election except for the Chin Ethnic Affairs seat. The military-linked **Union Solidarity and Development Party** and Arakan National Party have now both also announced candidates.

- The Union Election Commission has rejected the candidacy of **at least five Rohingya Muslim candidates**. Concerns around disenfranchisement and selective scrutiny processes are serious concerns that international actors should be raising with Naypyidaw officials. However, in this case closed-door advocacy will be more constructive than 'naming and shaming'. Loud-speaker advocacy for the Rohingya will play into widespread narratives of the Rohingya as backed by powerful international interests seeking to push an agenda onto Myanmar. Such narratives are used to justify the oppression of the Rohingya inside Myanmar, and as such may do more harm than good.

// September: Looking Forward

With humanitarian access further restricted and continued difficulties for agency staff to enter Myanmar, it is imperative that responders look for new modalities for programming in western Myanmar. COVID-19 restrictions will likely continue, and armed conflict in western Myanmar shows no indication of slowing down. International agencies should work closely with local organizations, parahita groups, and monastic leaders to identify points of collaboration while moving current modalities into remote management. Advocacy to authorities to allow access for both national and international responders should also remain a crucial part of strategies going forward.

The government and the Tatmadaw appear to remain committed to a military approach to weaken the Arakan Army's negotiating power, before ceasefire talks which are widely considered inevitable. As such, the Tatmadaw is likely to continue the current scale of its operations against the Arakan Army at least until the election is over. Similarly, the Arakan Army can be expected to continue attempting to expand its influence and establish governance structures. As such, agencies should be aware of the potential for escalation and prepare accordingly. Fighting may be expected to intensify at the end of the monsoon season in November, although any prediction is difficult because western Myanmar has not followed Myanmar's typical 'fighting season' calendar in recent years.

In preparation, agencies should preposition relief and build relationships with partners to ensure continued access to support communities in need, especially in light of the COVID-19 restrictions. The approach of the 8 November national election has the potential to further polarise communities, and perceptions of a biased electoral commission may also lead to a backlash from opposition political parties. The continued spread of COVID-19 through Rakhine and Yangon should also ring alarm bells, as the confirmation of the virus will prompt further strains on movement and supply chains, as well as potential new restrictions on agencies' operations in the north and southeast of Myanmar.

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