



Community Analysis Support System



MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE

10-16 December 2020

// IN FOCUS

Missing Link in Peace Talks

*Positive developments in talks between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army have drawn attention to their key weakness: civilian-military relations. **p.2***

// INSIDE

Rakhine Armed Groups Merge for Unity **p.5**

EAO Clashes Deteriorating Intercommunal Trust **p.5**

Activists Arrested on Human Rights Day **p.6**

Displaced Rice Farmers Face Poor Harvest **p.7**

IN FOCUS

Hopes for new elections in Rakhine State were raised on 15 December when Myanmar's President, U Win Myint, [requested](#) all stakeholders to assist in the holding of polls during his Rakhine State Day address. This raised several eyebrows, as just days before, a National League for Democracy (NLD) party spokesperson had [suggested to the media](#) that polls were unlikely.

While the civilian government's position on elections remains unclear, they have resisted engaging in broader peace talks between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army. Indeed, there is a need to differentiate the distinct, if linked, issues of elections and peace discussions.

Positively, on 9 December, representatives of the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army held bilateral, face-to-face, discussions for the first time -- encouraged by the mediation of the Japanese Special Envoy to Myanmar. The discussions [took place](#) for approximately one hour in Panghsang, the United Wa State Army-controlled city located on the China-Myanmar border, and followed a 30 minute online conversation on 25 November. This represents the first bilateral meeting between the adversaries, and follows two years of intense fighting in western Myanmar. The adversaries met previously on 31 August and 17 September 2019 during talks between the Tatmadaw and the Northern Alliance.

While the Tatmadaw did not release a formal statement, [Radio Free Asia reported](#) that the Deputy Chief of Military Security, General Toe Yi, led the delegation team, while General Nyo Htun Aung represented the Arakan Army. The Arakan Army spokesperson, U Khaing Thu Kha, [noted](#) that the two groups mainly discussed holding elections and ensuring a ceasefire in Rakhine State. Suggesting that the Tatmadaw continues to be optimistic, in a 15 December [statement](#) addressed to 'Rakhine indigenous siblings' to mark Rakhine State Day, the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief again referred to the group without the usual 'terrorist' label.

Missing link?

While welcoming the talks, a member of the Arakan National Party's Political Leadership Committee, U Pe Than, called on the civilian government to join. Indeed, since the start of this process, the NLD has been left outside. Its absence has the potential to feed into existing tensions and mistrust between the Tatmadaw and civilian government. The civilian government does not want to be seen to be following the Tatmadaw's lead, especially not in relation to a major national issue so soon after a general election.

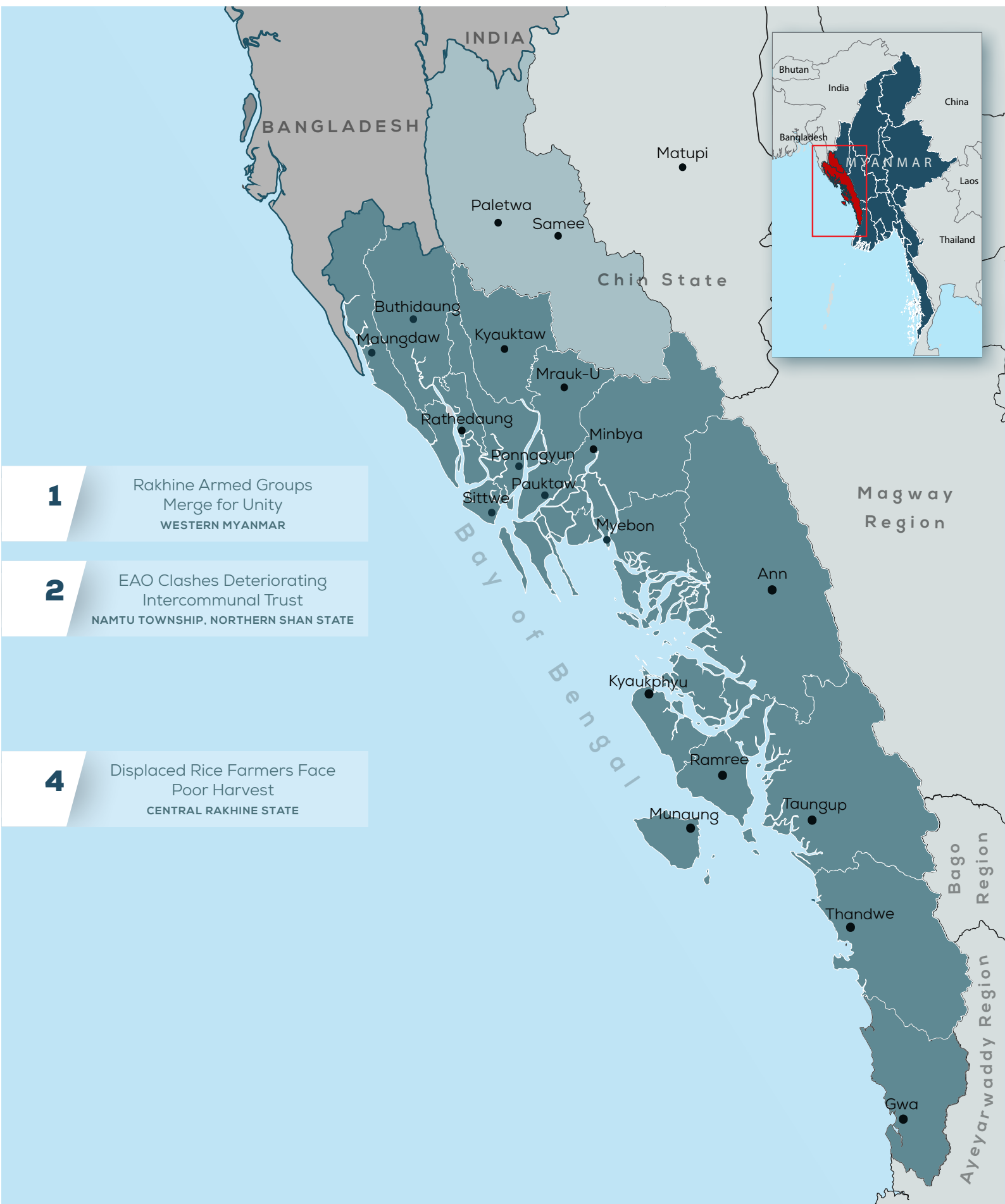
While an NLD spokesperson has encouraged a ceasefire and settlement, party supporters have criticized the fact that the talks did not cover the issue of the three NLD members who were abducted by the Arakan Army in October -- a key sticking point for the civilian government's engagement with the armed group.

The risk of new fighting emerging is also high. Intense armed clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army have significantly declined in Rakhine State and Paletwa Township since 12 November. However, while armed clashes have lulled, conflict dynamics remain active, as reported in the [CASS Weekly Update](#) last week. This week, locals from Paletwa Township continue to report new Tatmadaw movements, raising concerns of new clashes. In Ann Township too, [land-mine incidents](#) continue to be reported, and troop movements [prevent villagers' movement](#) around the Dar Lat village tract area, reportedly causing food security issues.

Cautiously optimistic

While the President's apparent support for new polls has fed optimism, this should be tempered. To settle a bilateral agreement, the Tatmadaw will have to step back from its no tolerance policy toward the Arakan Army, and recognise some presence of the armed group in western Myanmar in some form. The Arakan Army may have to step back from its demands for a 'Confederate State' in western Myanmar. These are heavy demands, and may precipitate an escalation of armed clashes again -- a not unlikely prospect, given the fact that progress on elections depends on the approval of the civilian government.

Sources close to the Arakan Army told [the media](#) this week that General Tun Myat Naing, the Commander-in-Chief of the Arakan Army, is expected to meet with the Chairman of the Tatmadaw's peace talks committee, Lieutenant General Yar Pyae, before the end of December. It is increasingly clear that for talks to be a success, inclusiveness will be key, and international actors should encourage all stakeholders to overcome the current barriers. //



1 Rakhine Armed Groups Merge for Unity

WESTERN MYANMAR

The NUPA-ULA/AA merger is likely to create room for restoring and strengthening Rakhine-Rohingya relations, while enhancing the legitimacy of the Arakan Army's presence in Rakhine State.

On 12 December, the National United Party of Arakan/Arakan Army (NUPA/AA) **released a statement** announcing it had merged with the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), the leading ethnic armed group in Rakhine State. The spokesperson for NUPA, U Soe Lin Tun, **said** that they had decided to merge with the ULA/AA now -- due to the death or poor health of some NUPA leaders -- at a meeting of the NUPA Central Committee on 11 November on the Bangladesh border. NUPA was formed on 4 January 1994, itself a merger of four Rakhine organizations -- the National United Front of Arakan (UNFA), the Communist Party of Arakan (CPA), Arakan National Liberation Party (ANLP) and Tribal Nationalities Party (TNP). Its key political principles were; uniting Rakhine people; striving for self-determination and political equality; and establishing a federal state. NUPA also established an armed wing, the Arakan Army. The well-known Khaing Razar served as the Commander-in-Chief of NUPA/AA and tried to establish a base on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. However, Khaing Razar **was assassinated by the Indian Navy** along with five other leaders on the Indian archipelago of Andaman on 11 February 1998. The remaining 36 field fighters and Karen cadres were arrested and imprisoned for more than a decade in India. On their release in June 2012, 31 of the insurgents were **granted asylum in the Netherlands** under a resettlement program organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As well as confirming the position of the ULA/AA as the predominant ethnic Rakhine armed group, the merger may have implications for social cohesion in western Myanmar.

Restoring Rakhine-Rohingya relations?

Unlike many other Rakhine political organizations, NUPA has a strong track record of advocating for and building relationships with Rohingya leaders during armed struggles. In 2000, NUPA and the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) formed the Arakan Independence Alliance (AIA), the first coalition between Rakhine and Rohingya leaders since independence in 1948. On 7 February 2001, NUPA **released** a statement raising their concern about the increase in sectarian violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine State, warning that the military government could stir up communal agitation to divide Buddhists and Rohingya by exploiting a violent dispute in a tea shop in Sittwe that month. They accused the government of enforcing discriminatory policies which worsened refugee outflows. **As documented by the Transnational Institute**, another NUPA leader Khin Maung again warned about the potential implication of communal division in Rakhine State at a 2006 peace conference in Bangkok. Sources say that NUPA leader's effort to improve Rakhine-Rohingya relations was marginalized due to pressure from other Rakhine leaders who were less conciliatory towards the Rohingya. The NUPA-ULA/AA merger is likely to create room for restoring and strengthening Rakhine-Rohingya relations, while enhancing the legitimacy of the Arakan Army's presence in Rakhine State. Since this relationship plays a crucial part in finding durable solutions in Rakhine State, international agencies should continue monitoring dynamics on the ground, which may be at odds with narratives shared by the top leadership. As noted by NUPA leaders, and many others since, it is also clear that social cohesion has a distinct vertical component, and international actors should continue to work with authorities to address divisive policies. //

2 EAO Clashes Deteriorating Intercommunal Trust

NAMTU TOWNSHIP, NORTHERN SHAN STATE

Four civilians were **injured** and over 300 others have been displaced from at least seven villages to Shwe Sagawar monastery in Mansan village, Namtu Township, in Northern Shan State as a result of clashes between rival ethnic armed organisations from 7-10 December. As of **13 December**, 212 displaced

people from five villages were still residing at the monastery, while the remainder have returned. Clashes began between the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), before intensifying when the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) reportedly entered the fray to fight alongside the TNLA. The involvement of the SSPP in the conflict may have been motivated by an RCSS attack on an SSPP base in neighbouring Hsipaw Township on 5 December – the first clash between those two Shan EAOs since April 2019. The 11 May 2019 ceasefire agreement between the RCSS and SSPP also had a cooling effect on the RCSS-TNLA conflict, due to the TNLA-SSPP alliance. Meanwhile, the RCSS and the TNLA have only met for discussions once, in 2017, despite armed clashes between the two starting in 2015. These recent clashes have left people in Namtu Township concerned about an escalation of sporadic fighting between the TNLA and the RCSS, which spiked in 2015, 2016, and again from late 2018 to mid 2019 when the SSPP and the TNLA joined forces. Some local civil society and religious leaders are attempting to engage stakeholders to prevent escalation.

Fighting for territory or public support?

For now, serious escalation is unlikely, given the lack of large-scale reinforcements, further clashes, or harsh public exchanges of words -- but the SSPP's return to conflict with the RCSS is alarming. The increasing rivalry between the two Shan armed groups – for territory and public support – may have significant implications. Recent clashes do not meet the intensity of previous years, although RCSS, TNLA and SSPP troops have maintained a presence and consistent movements. Indeed, the TNLA and SSPP seem to have interpreted the recent military assaults from the RCSS (especially the 5 December clash) as aggressive encroachment. Local sources confirm that the recent RCSS movement is unusual. In general, the Tatmadaw can be expected to resist deep involvement in this impasse, in order to maintain the relatively stable relationships it has with the SSPP and the RCSS, and to avoid escalation with the TNLA after several quiet months. However, the breakdown of the RCSS-SSPP ceasefire may force fighting to spill into nearby Kyaukme, Hsipaw and Lashio townships. Meanwhile, other side effects from these recent intergroup tensions have already been reported from the ground, including increased communal tensions within Shan communities, as well as between Shan and Ta'ang communities. Agencies should discuss with Ta'ang and Shan CSOs any opportunities to support existing efforts to mitigate inter-armed group and communal tensions in the area. //

3 Activists Arrested on Human Rights Day

SITTWE TOWNSHIP, RAKHINE STATE

Despite genuine efforts by decision-makers and civil society groups to move Myanmar away from the authoritarian systems which have defined its politics for decades, it is clear that old habits die hard.

On 10 December, three civil society activists were arrested in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, while taking part in a small peaceful event which they described as a 'commemoration' of Human Rights Day. Police have released the activists on bail, but are pressing charges under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law, which prescribes that peaceful assemblies and processions are only permitted if not contrary to vague notions of 'security, rule of law, community peace and tranquillity or public morality'. Organisers from the Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Team told CASS they did not realise that permissions were required to hold the commemoration, as it was not a protest.

Breaking the mould

Despite genuine efforts by decision-makers and civil society groups to move Myanmar away from the authoritarian systems which have defined its politics for decades, it is clear that old habits die hard. Freedom of expression activists have recently noted that defamation laws have increasingly been used by Myanmar's civilian government, corresponding to a decline in freedom of expression across the country. The Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession law is another of various tools frequently used by authorities to stifle voices deemed critical, even when those voices aren't directly criticising civilian or military authorities, as in this case. It has proven exceptionally difficult to reform the behaviour of civil servants and police raised and trained under the military-led regime, an institution which continues to oversee the police force alongside three key government departments. International actors should advocate

for the dropping of charges against the activists, and to allow space for domestic advocacy groups to continue targeted and informed advocacy for the reform of laws which can be used to stifle freedoms of expression, such as the type offered by human rights advocacy group [Freedom Of Expression Myanmar](#). //

4 Displaced Rice Farmers Face Poor Harvest

CENTRAL RAKHINE STATE

In most cases, farmers now have to spend more for lower-than-usual yields.

The overall rice production volume in central Rakhine State from the current harvest season is expected to drop significantly, due to the high number of acres of uncultivated farmland resulting from conflict and other related factors. Many farmers in Rathedaung and Kyauktaw townships in particular, and others in Mrauk U, Ponnagyun, Minbya and Myebon townships, were unable to plant paddy during the rainy season as a result of displacement or security concerns. Other farmers, who managed to plant paddy but were subsequently displaced, are now harvesting paddy during the [current lull in armed clashes](#). Many farmers and casual labourers have been returning to villages or travelling to other locations for livelihood opportunities, security

permitting. Conflict-vulnerable areas include farmlands on hilly areas where clashes have occurred previously, near Tatmadaw camps, or lowland farms near major waterways used by the Tatmadaw. Although many farmers and agricultural labourers can now engage in the harvest and transportation of crops in conditions safer than the 2019 harvest, they continue to face many challenges – fuelling concerns about making a viable return on crops.

Cost-return considerations

In most cases, farmers now have to spend more for lower-than-usual yields. This is due to several reasons. First, most displaced farmers have little or no access for the manual labour required for a successful season, including: applying fertilisers, weeding, adjusting irrigation or embankments, and other activities. Second, unfavourable weather and unreliable storm conditions have negatively affected paddy growth. Third, farmers report a scarcity of both manual and mechanised harvesting service providers, which mean both high labour costs and a high amount of waste due to delay (including overripe rice grains falling onto the soil). Due to low productivity in several areas, the local rice sector is [expecting](#) that the price of rice in Rakhine State during this harvesting season may be higher. However, it may be difficult for farmers to benefit from these higher prices, as they face continued displacement and little access to buyers. Rice prices in central Rakhine State vary, largely due to factors of quality, variety and logistics. Local security dynamics have also exacerbated these differentials, due to risk and the perceptions of poorer quality of produce -- raising the potential of food insecurity for the most vulnerable. International agencies should support local rice mills and wholesale rice traders to meet fair and favourable conditions for millers, traders and farmers. One way forward will be to procure rice locally, although longer term programmes, including [rice banks](#), are also worth exploring. //

// Other Developments

- On 11 December, a Myanmar military tribunal [sentenced](#) three soldiers to 20 years prison for raping a woman during military operations in a Rathedaung village in June this year. The sentencing fits a pattern in prosecutions in recent years, with low-ranking troops scapegoated for serious, institutionalised, abuses.
- A man was reportedly attacked in Maungdaw Township on 9 December. A local village leader has alleged that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army was behind the attack, but few further details are available. There are a number of Rohingya armed groups operating along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, although locals report that officials tend to brand them all with the name of the most notorious -- the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.
- The number of COVID-19 cases among Tatmadaw soldiers in Rakhine State has [risen dramatically](#) in recent weeks, again indicating that the presence of the virus in Myanmar is likely to be much more widespread than suggested by testing.
- A company in Kyaukphyu Township has begun [production of edible bird nests](#), a popular foodstuff formed by the saliva of swiftlets. Edible bird nests are naturally formed in various places in Myanmar, but are commercially produced in Myanmar's southeast, where the industry is [among the top tax-payers](#). The production may present new livelihood opportunities previously unexplored in Rakhine State.
- On 16 December, the Kaman Ethnic Social Network released a statement protesting the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief's exclusion of the Kaman ethnic group from his 15 December [Rakhine State Day statement](#). The statement only includes the names of six out of seven officially recognised indigenous ethnic groups in Rakhine State. The Kaman -- a mostly Muslim minority -- are predominant in southern Rakhine State, as described in this [CASS thematic paper on Information Ecosystems](#).
- Myanmar authorities have announced that domestic and international flights can resume operations on 16 December and 1 January respectively, although many restrictions are likely to remain in place.

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

// What to Watch this Week

- Arakan Army leader Tun Myat Naing and Chairman of the Tatmadaw's peace talks committee Lieutenant General Yar Pyae are [expected to meet](#) before the end of the month for peace discussions. As discussed above, outcomes are likely to be limited without involvement of the civilian government.
- Rumours have been swirling for weeks that Naypyidaw is preparing to re-open 3G or 4G internet lines in Rakhine State and southern Chin State. A reconnection may indicate a goodwill gesture from the military and civilian government towards the Arakan Army.

// Key Readings

- A [new report from RAFT Myanmar](#) explores how ethnic and religious identities have influenced attitudes, behaviours and relationships among different communities in central Rakhine State. The report takes a deep dive into relations between minority groups in western Myanmar.
- Médecins Sans Frontières has released a [briefing paper](#) considering its engagement with governmental health departments in various contexts, including Myanmar. Amongst other topics, the paper explores how operating in Rakhine State has raised concerns about impartiality and neutrality.



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.



COAR is an independent social enterprise that supports the international community to navigate and adapt policy, programs, and projects to emerging and progressively complex, fragile, and high-risk environments. Based on knowledge of affected populations and a deep understanding of their respective political, economic, social, security, and environmental systems and stakeholders, COAR builds a blueprint for humanitarian, stabilization, early recovery, social-cohesion, resilience and development-focused interventions.

© 2020 Center for Operational Analysis and Research
(COAR Global LTD).

The CASS Weekly Update is by no means exhaustive and does not necessarily reflect CASS's position. Contributing information sources include public and non-public humanitarian information provided by open traditional and social media sources, local and international agencies, and sources on the ground. The provided information and assessment is designated for humanitarian purposes only and is not for public distribution or quotation.

info@cass-mm.org
www.cass-mm.org