



SITUATION UPDATE

# The Potential for Renewed Armed Violence in Rakhine and Southern Chin States

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## Current Situation

Nearly one year after the November 2022 ceasefire ended months of armed hostilities in Rakhine State and Paletwa Township, southern Chin State, tensions are again rising between the Myanmar military and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA). Since September, Rakhine State has seen events reminiscent of those that led to the breakdown of a previous ceasefire. Tit-for-tat arrests were [reported](#) in Kyaukpyu Township, and the SAC has sought to arrest other ULA/AA members in southern Rakhine State. Uniformed SAC troops have [conducted](#) inspections of civilians in [Sittwe](#) and [Thandwe](#) townships, and the SAC has continued to [reinforce](#) its troops and [conduct](#) military exercises, including practising heavy weapon fire from navy vessels. On 14 September, the ULA/AA reportedly [instructed](#) residents in 10 villages in Kyauktaw Township to dig bomb shelters, and on 28 September an SAC [airstrike](#) in northern Myanmar killed one AA officer based in Kachin Independence Organisation/Army territory, where the ULA/AA was originally formed and continues to have a presence. ULA/AA spokesperson Khaing Thukha [told media](#) that the group would respond “appropriately”, but also [noted](#) that it would not yet start fighting in Rakhine State due to the ongoing humanitarian pause.

**These recent signs of tension — mutual arrests, airstrikes hitting AA members in other regions — were also present before the rapid [escalation](#) in fighting in 2022, suggesting a similar trajectory that may culminate in a resumption of armed violence.** However, it appears to be in the ULA/AA’s interest to present an ongoing level of tension in western Myanmar. This may serve two purposes for the ULA/AA. First, the ULA/AA may leverage the appearance of tension to manage relations with allies and potential allies, including the NUG and other anti-coup armed actors, that are involved in intense fighting with the SAC and have demonstrated no inclination to engage in dialogue at present. Without tensions — or the appearance thereof — the ULA/AA may appear too comfortable in its arrangement with the SAC, thereby straining its relations with other EAOs and anti-coup actors. Secondly, while the ULA/AA has demonstrated effective military force, it has faced difficulties transitioning to a governance role. Although the ULA/AA has substantial support in Rakhine State, allegations of corruption in its administration and courts, and of violent abuse against civilians, have somewhat weakened its standing among communities. Tensions, and the possibility of renewed armed violence, draws media and attention away from those allegations against the ULA/AA, or allows the ULA/AA and its supporters to justify them as unfortunate necessities during the early stages of revolution.

It is also important to note that the most serious abuses against civilians are conducted by the Myanmar military, and take place across Myanmar, including a range of incidents alleged to constitute atrocity crimes.

Reasons for both sides to avoid clashes are also present; the SAC is engaged in heavy fighting on several fronts across Myanmar, while the ULA/AA continues to prioritise administrative expansion. However, these factors were not enough to stop both from picking up arms again in 2022. Neither the ULA/AA nor SAC appear content with the status quo, suggesting that a return to armed violence in Rakhine and southern Chin states is a question of “when” rather than “if”. The differences are irreconcilable: while the ULA/AA apparently seeks to expand its administrative and military footprint in western Myanmar, the SAC is not only pushing back against this expansion of influence, but also likely wants to sever ULA/AA support to anti-coup armed groups in the central and northwest Myanmar.

In addition to the similarities to events that led to violence in 2022, there are two additional key factors emerging in 2023 that may push western Myanmar into renewed fighting: post-cyclone SAC expansion, and unconfirmed rumours of SAC collaboration with Rohingya insurgents.

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## Post-cyclone SAC expansion

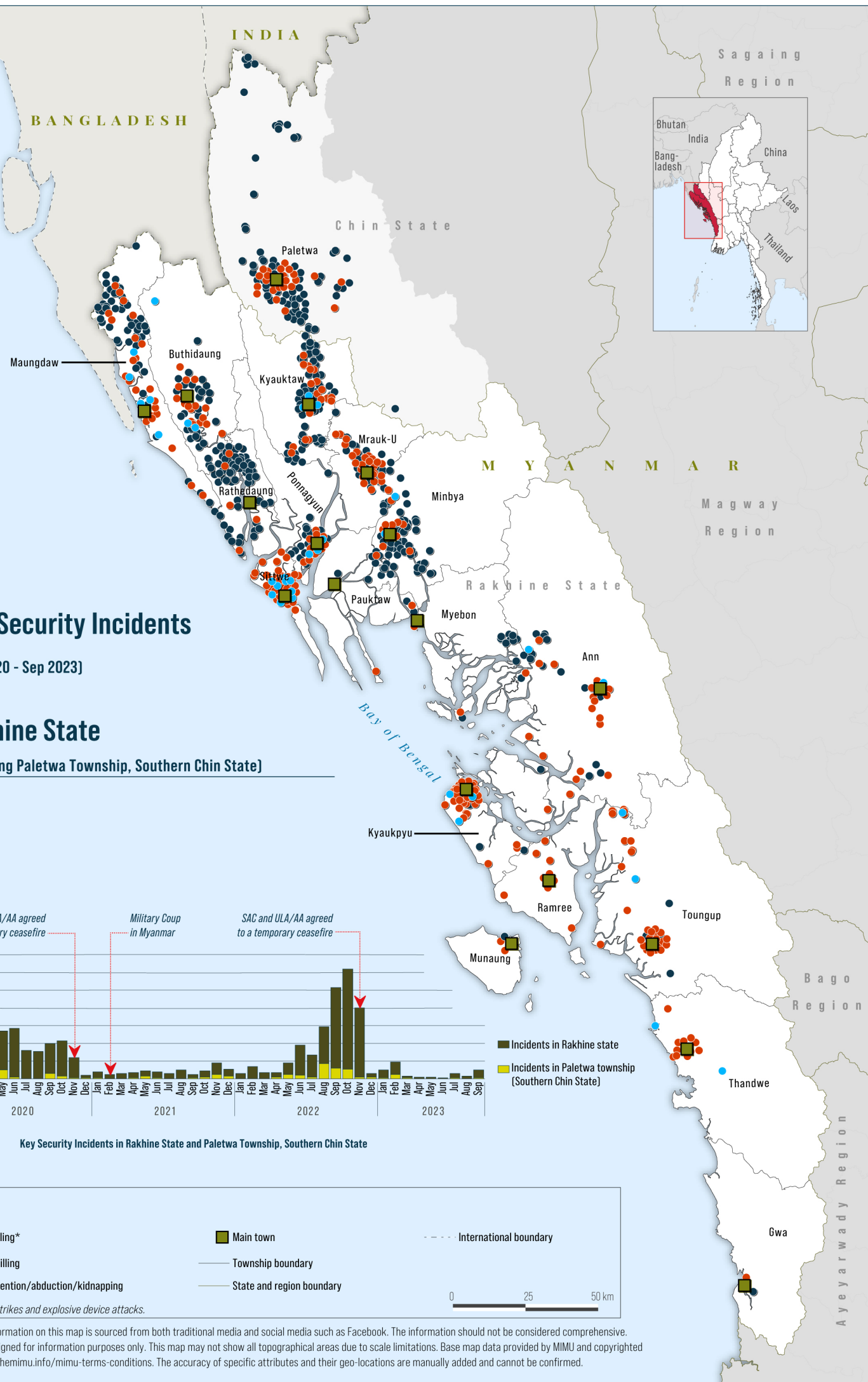
Community members have consistently reported perceptions to this analytical unit that the military leveraged Cyclone Mocha as an opportunity to expand its footprint in rural areas of the state, under the guise of providing relief. In the wake of the devastating impact of Cyclone Mocha, which hit Rakhine State on 14 May, the SAC [restricted](#) humanitarian relief from local and international organisations and increased its troop movements through rural areas. Efforts by the SAC to restrict the provision of cyclone assistance to affected communities, and its attempts to control the distribution of assistance, may be seen as an attempt to instrumentalise aid to further its political objectives.

The military's response to the cyclone appeared designed to increase its presence and control of territory against the ULA/AA's. The opportunity to do so stemmed from both the flooding of resources into the state that it could seek to control, and from the reduced capacity of the ULA/AA. The ULA/AA is highly reliant on the civilian population for support, including for shelter and food; if the population is struggling to survive, this can significantly impact the ULA/AA's ability to operate. Moreover, the ULA/AA relies on popular legitimacy. Following the cyclone, the ULA/AA invested a high proportion of its resources into humanitarian response and recovery in support of local communities. With ULA/AA attention and resources diverted from its competition with the SAC, the SAC capitalised on the opportunity to expand its reach in Rakhine State. The SAC increased troop movements, conducted some (limited) humanitarian distributions, and organised well-publicised high-profile visits to Rakhine State, including [repeated visits](#) by SAC leader Min Aung Hlaing, to highlight its response to the crisis.

## Rumours of SAC support to Rohingya armed groups

Since August, rumours have been spreading online that allege that the SAC is channelling support to Rohingya insurgents with the objective of disrupting the ULA/AA, adding heat to already simmering tensions. There are various incarnations of this rumour, including one in which the Rohingya insurgents in question belong to one of four reported factions of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA); in another, they are from the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), a group reportedly deeply involved in the illicit drug trade and has recently increased activity. Rumours have [alleged](#) that the SAC is supplying the insurgents with arms and allowing them to move freely into areas of ULA/AA activity. While rumours of SAC support are unsubstantiated, unlikely, and need to be treated with caution, there is certainly evidence of greater activity among Rohingya insurgents in northern Rakhine.

A more likely scenario is that the SAC presence in northern Rakhine State is deliberately ignoring the movements and activity of Rohingya armed actors. This may be driven by an expectation that this will disrupt the ULA/AA's ability to govern, especially by destabilising ethnic relations; but could also stem from a reluctance to start a firefight with any armed actor in a region where AA members have considerable movement, and where the local SAC leaders may feel that reigning in armed Rohingya actors is the responsibility of the ULA/AA. In contrast to the hands-off approach of the SAC, the ULA/AA has intervened against this recent activity of Rohingya armed actors. In August, the ULA/AA spokesperson [told](#) media that they were closely monitoring the activities of ARSA and the SAC in northern Rakhine State, and between 19 and 21 September [detained](#) at least six Rohingya men in villages in northern Rakhine State on charges of supporting Rohingya armed actors.



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## Background

Numerous underlying factors that previously delayed tensions in Rakhine State from spilling over into armed violence remain present. The SAC is heavily engaged on several fronts across the country. Militarily, the ULA/AA is among the most powerful EAOs in the country, and the conflict would require a large amount of SAC resources. At the same time, the SAC has few allies. It appears to have been [seeking](#) a more formalised ceasefire with the ULA/AA and allied groups in northern Myanmar, and allowing its current informal ceasefire to falter would appear to be a step backwards. The channels of communication established between the SAC and ULA/AA in negotiations in late 2022 have proven effective in de-escalating some points of tension over the last year. For example, following the arrests of each others' personnel in Kyaukpyu Township in early September, an arrangement for their release was quickly negotiated. At the same time, sensitivities around rising intercommunal tensions remain a potential flashpoint for fighting to resume.

The primary driver of increased activity among Rohingya armed actors in northern Rakhine State appears to be deteriorating conditions and rising violence in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, where ARSA — which also attacked Myanmar military and Border Guard Police outposts in 2016 and 2017 — has lost influence. Following the [targeted killing](#) of high-profile Rohingya community leader Mohib Ullah in September 2021, which was widely attributed to ARSA members, tolerance has eroded for those claiming any affiliation with ARSA in the camps. Bangladeshi authorities have arrested and used violence against those suspected of belonging to ARSA, while other Rohingya actors have also taken this opportunity to strike against ARSA in the Bangladesh camps, including a resurgent branch of the longstanding Rohingya armed actor, the Rohingya Salvation Organisation (RSO).

Suggestions that the SAC is overtly supporting ARSA or the ARA in northern Rakhine State are unlikely to be true. The Myanmar military appears deeply suspicious of — if not outright antagonistic towards — the Rohingya community in general, especially armed actors extending from that community. That said, across the country, the military has a long history of brokering alliances of convenience with ethnic armed groups in the form of people's militias, Border Guard Force, or other breakaway factions of larger EAOs. These often capitalise on existing inter- and intra-communal tensions, and occasionally foment these divisions by arming and supporting smaller ethnic minorities to form militias, many of which ultimately act as SAC proxies.

As recently as 2021 in Rakhine State, the SAC had forged a stronger alliance with a faction of the Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan Liberation Army in an apparent attempt to use the group to threaten ULA/AA influence. However, there is no precedent of such deals being made with Rohingya armed groups. Instead, the military has for decades [promoted](#) itself as a guardian of Myanmar's "western gate", protecting Buddhist-majority Myanmar against the perceived threat of alleged Islamic expansionism in the form of the Rohingya population; **arming or otherwise supporting Rohingya armed actors would be a stunning U-turn in terms of policy and principle.** Rohingya residents in northern Rakhine State who spoke to this analytical unit also expressed doubts about the rumours.

The recent rumours do fit into a longer-term narrative of Myanmar military manipulation in northern Rakhine State propagated by some segments of the Rohingya community; this theory alleges that the military organised ARSA to orchestrate attacks in 2016 and 2017, which the SAC then used to justify the devastating "clearance operations" in 2017. However, despite the considerable [evidence](#) of forward planning by the military for the attacks of 2017, there is no evidence suggesting that ARSA was an invention of the military.

In addition to the ongoing historical tension and contextual sensitivities, Cyclone Mocha hit Rakhine State in May 2023, raising significant humanitarian needs as it devastated shelters, farmland, and infrastructure across central and northern Rakhine State. The duelling administrations of the ULA and SAC broadly agreed on the scale of loss of life, citing [figures](#) of 164 and 148 deaths, respectively. SAC figures stated that 117 of the 148 people killed by the cyclone were Rohingya, reflecting the lack of protection afforded to the region's Rohingya population. The ULA estimated that some 1.5 million people were affected, and that more than 400,000 buildings were severely damaged. The cyclone also had a massive impact on food security in the state, as food stocks and seeds were destroyed, and estimated [thousands](#) of livestock were killed. The annual rice-planting season begins in July, with the onset of the monsoon, but the cyclone meant that many households were unable to plant. Western Myanmar's annual paddy harvest is due to begin in the coming months, and the ULA/AA — significantly more beholden to the sentiment of local populations than the SAC — is likely acutely aware that armed violence would prevent the harvest in many areas, dealing a further blow to food security and recovery from the cyclone.



## Armed Clashes and Ceasefires: Cycles of Violence in Western Myanmar

2018	
DEC 2018	The AA escalates fighting in western Myanmar
2019	
DEC 2019	ULA village-level governance established
2020	
8 NOV 2020	Nationwide elections take place (but polls are cancelled in most of Rakhine State)
12 NOV 2020	The Myanmar military and ULA/AA announce an informal ceasefire agreement
2021	
FEB 2021	Military coup
MAR 2021	The SAC lifts the ULA/AA's designation as a "Terrorist Organisation", but not as an "Unlawful Organisation"
AUG 2021	The ULA/AA announces its judicial functions The SAC begins disrupting ULA administration
2022	
JUN 2022	The SAC and ULA/AA escalate tit-for-tat arrests
4 JUL 2022	SAC airstrike kills six ULA/AA members in Karen State, eastern Myanmar
13 AUG 2022	The AA launches new offensives against the SAC in northern Rakhine and southern Chin states
SEPT 2022	The SAC introduces harsh restrictions on the movement of food, medicine, and humanitarian assistance
26 NOV 2022	The SAC and ULA/AA agree to a "humanitarian pause"
2023	
14 MAY 2023	Cyclone Mocha causes massive damage to central and northern Rakhine State
18-19 JUL 2023	The AA and ARSA reportedly clash in Buthidaung Township
6 SEPT 2023	The SAC and ULA/AA arrest one another's personnel in Kyaukpyu Township; they are later released
8 SEPT 2023	The SAC attempts to detain ULA/AA members in Taungup Township, southern Rakhine State
14 SEPT 2023	The ULA/AA instructs Kyauktaw villagers to dig bomb shelters
19-21 SEPT 2023	The ULA/AA detains several Rohingya men on allegations of supporting ARSA
28 SEPT 2023	SAC airstrike kills one AA officer in Kachin State, northern Myanmar

## Impact

Any ULA/AA attempt to increase offensives or arrest campaigns against Rohingya armed groups may threaten social cohesion. Relationships between Rakhine and Rohingya communities have already begun to show signs of strain as the ULA/AA investigates Rohingya communities on allegations of supporting Rohingya armed actors, and Rohingya community members in northern Rakhine State noted an uptick in discrimination, even physical abuse, against members of their community following reported clashes between the ULA/AA and ARSA in Buthidaung Township in July. Increased activity by ARSA, and any response by the ULA/AA, risks further straining relations between communities in all areas of western Myanmar.

While the movement of Rohingya armed groups through northern Rakhine State may threaten the ULA/AA's control over territory and population to some extent, it is worth noting that neither ARSA, the RSO, nor the ARA have even a fraction of the ULA/AA's resources or organisational capacity. These are small entities with limited access to arms and funding, while the ULA/AA is a well-resourced organisation with thousands of armed personnel. The ULA/AA may, in some respects, even be able to take advantage of the current situation. The narrative that the SAC is supporting Rohingya armed groups paints the SAC as desperate, deceptive, and manipulative, aligning with messaging that the ULA/AA has promoted for several years, which asserts that the military is chiefly responsible for driving tension between communities in western Myanmar. These narratives, and the current allegations of military support to Rohingya armed groups, provides the ULA/AA with an opportunity to deepen its presence in Rohingya communities, where it has made some inroads, but generally struggles to gain popular acceptance.

## Forecast: Prolonged Tension or Renewed Clashes?

Some level of renewed clashes are possible in western Myanmar in the coming months. A resumption of clashes would likely wait until the harvest is complete (usually by the end of December), and be limited to certain geographic areas. The key factors driving the renewed clashes include the shelling in Kachin State, which has placed the truce under stress. The ULA/AA may fear that a failure to respond to the shelling will make it look weak, or further embolden the SAC. Longer term, the ULA/AA has stated ambitious goals for its administration in western Myanmar, which the SAC has continued to attempt to block.

To sustain fighting, the ULA/AA would likely have to reduce its reliance on traditional trade routes, which could easily be closed by the SAC. During clashes in 2022, the SAC introduced wide-ranging restrictions on the movement of food, medicine, humanitarian assistance, and other goods into and within western Myanmar, through restrictions on imports at land and air borders and the maintenance of checkpoints throughout the state. The restrictions appeared [designed](#) to create unbearable hardships for populations, and to starve the ULA/AA of resources. Combined with increasingly violent atrocities being committed against civilians, the SAC used these measures to bring the ULA/AA to the negotiating table in November 2022 to agree on a “humanitarian pause”. To avoid falling victim to the same pattern in 2023, the ULA/AA would either have to stockpile supplies — a challenge, given the impact of Cyclone Mocha over the last six months — or develop alternative routes to access supplies.

A new phase of armed fighting would not necessarily affect the whole of western Myanmar; both sides may have an interest in keeping the clashes contained to specific geographic areas. During fighting in 2022, the ULA/AA made significant territorial advances in Maungdaw Township, and it may seek to continue expanding its presence along the border. This would also enable the ULA/AA to contain the expansion of Rohingya armed actors without inflaming intercommunal relations, by framing this around fighting with the SAC. The Kaladan River route between Rakhine State’s Kyauktaw Township and southern Chin State also continues to be heavily contested, with checkpoints from both armed actors controlling movement of civilians and trade along the key waterway. This location may be particularly affected.

Southern Rakhine State may also be a key battleground. Located along the border between southern Rakhine State and Magway Region, the ULA/AA has reportedly been training some anti-coup armed groups there, while the SAC has recently been [searching](#) for ULA/AA members to detain in southern Rakhine State’s Taungup Township. The ULA/AA has been attempting to expand its administration to southern Rakhine State under the current ceasefire, but has faced pushback from the SAC; new armed clashes may be an opportunity to forward this agenda. Furthermore, southern Rakhine State was only marginally affected by Cyclone Mocha, making it a more sustainable battleground for the ULA/AA.

There is also a possibility that the ULA/AA will choose not to retaliate in western Myanmar, but do so in other parts of the country. The ULA/AA has had a longstanding presence in Kachin State and northern Shan State and, since the coup, has also increased its support to Chinland Defence Forces in southern Chin State and other anti-coup armed groups in Magway and Sagaing regions. The ULA/AA may escalate its involvement in active fighting in these locations, rather than exposing its constituents in western Myanmar. On 2 October, the AA and Kachin Independence Army [reportedly](#) killed a number of SAC soldiers and detained five in a joint ambush in Kachin State. In the scenario that the ULA/AA escalates armed violence outside western Myanmar, this would still likely influence dynamics in Rakhine State. Increased military scrutiny of civilians and restrictions on the movement of humanitarian assistance and basic commodities is likely.

## Response Implications

In the event of armed clashes, the SAC will likely restrict aid, as well as food, medicine, and other commodity transportation. In 2022, the SAC's stringent restrictions on the transportation of food, medicine, humanitarian aid, and other goods had dire consequences for communities. In the present context, a repeat of these restrictions would exacerbate the needs of a population made more vulnerable by COVID-19 and the collapsing value of the Myanmar kyat while also contending with the effects of armed violence. As the SAC's military strategy hinges on harm to civilians — an attempt to undercut the ULA/AA by reducing access to resources and eroding support among its constituency — the SAC would again likely seek to further limit humanitarian actors. In any scenario of increased armed violence, the Myanmar military will certainly remain the key perpetrator of human rights abuses throughout western Myanmar. As a result, the SAC can be expected to be the largest driver of displacement and humanitarian need amongst the civilian population.

## Key Recommendations

1. **Expect fighting between the AA and SAC to resume in the near- to medium-term.** The 2022 truce appears fragile, and recent developments are a notable departure from the standard pattern of rising and falling tensions.
2. **Prioritise social cohesion programming to mitigate some of the growing tensions between Rakhine and Rohingya communities.** Community feedback suggests that intercommunal tensions have been on the decline following the emergence of the ULA/AA's administrative structure in 2019, and responders should work to ensure that this trend does not reverse by supporting local initiatives already working in this space.
3. **Examine both current and planned projects to ensure they will not contribute to tensions between Rakhine and Rohingya communities,** in particular by ensuring that communities do not perceive themselves as being excluded from assistance. While Rohingya people continue to be among the most vulnerable in Myanmar, all communities are affected by western Myanmar's ongoing crises, and disproportionate allocation of response resources can serve to worsen tensions between communities. Responders should also closely monitor local partner interactions and affiliations to understand the socio-political context of partner portfolios.
4. **Pre-position response materials in areas most likely to be affected by a resumption of violence, particularly in locations that are difficult to access.** While a resurgence of armed clashes would affect all areas of western Myanmar in some way, the most serious impacts are likely to be found in the borderland areas of Maungdaw Township, in areas along the Kaladan River through Kyauktaw and Paletwa townships, and in the southern Rakhine township of Taungup.
5. **Strengthen relationships with local partners and develop strategies and protocols to work on a low- or zero-visibility basis.** With already limited access likely to constrict even further, local actors will be critical to any response activities. Local partners should be supported to navigate and mitigate risks as much as possible, which may involve security training, reduced reporting requirements, or other risk reduction measures.
6. **Ensure that protection and human rights monitoring efforts continue,** especially in the event of renewed armed violence. The ULA/AA has set itself apart from other recent Rakhine political movements in its apparent understanding of the sensitivity and priority of the Rohingya crisis for the international community. This should be seen as an opportunity to hold them accountable to their own commitment to providing equal treatment for all communities. Any armed actors using tensions to justify abuses against civilians should be closely monitored by protection actors, and criticised by partners with the mandate to monitor human rights, including both national and international partners.



