KYAW HSAN HLAING

Dispatches from Arakan

Reporting on War, Coup, and Rebel Rule in Myanmar

RAKHINE STATE, MYANMAR

Collected Journalism, 2020–2023

DISPATCHES FROM ARAKAN

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Reporting on War, Coup, and Rebel Rule in Myanmar, 2020–2023

KYAW HSAN HLAING

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Author's Note

I first went online in 2014, when I was eighteen and living in my family's home in Rakhine State. Until then I had never traveled more than twenty miles from my village. Five years later, the place I came from was cut off again by what became the world's longest internet shutdown, and my family called me in Yangon to ask whether the smoke they could see on the horizon meant they should run. They could not search for the answer themselves. Much of the reporting in this book grew out of that gap: between what was happening in Rakhine and what the world, and sometimes even the people living there, were able to know about it.

The articles collected here were written between 2020 and 2023, a period in which Myanmar lived through a pandemic, a disputed election, a military coup, a nationwide uprising, and the return of war to my home state. They are arranged in seven parts. The first follows Rakhine State through war, a pandemic and a cancelled election in 2020. The second covers the coup of February 2021 and the uprising that met it. The third turns to the people who carried that uprising: medics, LGBTQ+ activists, women, lawyers and ordinary citizens. The fourth is about my own profession, and what it meant to report from a place where the internet could be switched off and journalists were hunted. The fifth follows a country coming apart, from diplomacy to jade mines to death squads. The sixth traces the rise of the Arakan Army's own administration in western Myanmar, and the seventh the return to open war and the question of what

kind of union Myanmar might become. Each piece appears largely as it was first published, with its original byline and date, so that readers can see what was known, and what was feared, at the moment it was written. Some events have since moved in directions none of us could have predicted. I have not tried to correct the past with hindsight.

None of this work was mine alone, and it is a pleasure to finally thank the people who made it possible.

Above all, I thank Emily Fishbein. We reported and wrote many of these stories together, often across closed roads, curfews and internet blackouts, and her care for accuracy and for the people we interviewed shaped how I understand this profession. I am also grateful to everyone else I was fortunate to write or report with during these years: Andrew Nachemson, David Pierson, Fuadi Pitsuwan, Hkun Lat, Thu Ra Kyaw, Nu Nu Lusan, Naing Lin, Laura Haigh, Verena Hölzl and Laetitia van den Assum. Each of you made the work sharper and braver than it would have been without you.

I also owe a great deal to the editors who took a chance on a young reporter from Rakhine, and who pushed every one of these pieces to be clearer, fairer and better sourced. My thanks go to the editors at *Foreign Policy*, *TIME*, Al Jazeera, VICE World News, *The New Humanitarian*, *The Diplomat*, *Frontier Myanmar*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the United States Institute of Peace, and every other publication that gave these stories space. Thank you also to the Pulitzer Center, whose support helped bring several of these stories to a wider audience.

This book belongs most of all to the people whose voices fill it: displaced families in camps and monasteries, farmers and fishermen, health workers, monks, students and activists, parents still waiting for news of the disappeared, and the many others who described their lives to me at real risk to themselves. Many of them cannot be named, and some appear here under changed names to protect their safety. I hope I have told their stories faithfully. Whatever value this book has comes from their courage in speaking at all.

I am grateful to the mentors, teachers, fellow journalists, researchers and friends who answered my questions, read early drafts, corrected my mistakes, and told me honestly when a story was not ready. Your guidance taught me how to report responsibly in a place where a single error can put people in danger.

Finally, I thank everyone who trusted me: the sources who shared what they knew, the communities who welcomed me, the editors who published an unknown name, and my family in Rakhine, who never stopped believing in this work even when it worried them. Trust is the foundation of journalism, and it was given to me generously. I have tried to deserve it.

Any errors that remain in these pages are my own.

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing
August 2023

PART ONE

Rakhine at War

1

To Fight the Coronavirus, Myanmar Needs a Cease-Fire in Rakhine

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With humanitarian aid and internet services restricted, the conflict-torn state could soon face a public health disaster.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, Foreign Policy Magazine, Sept 3, 2020

YANGON, Myanmar—On Aug. 16, Myanmar's health ministry announced the country's first locally transmitted COVID-19 case in a month in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state. By September 1, the number of confirmed cases across the state had risen to 393, while as of Sept. 3, the whole country has recorded 1,111 cases since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Myanmar has reported only six deaths from COVID-19 so far, but its limited health infrastructure raises concerns about its potential ability to control a larger outbreak. Three years ago, a brutal military campaign pushed more than 700,000 members of the Rohingya Muslim minority to flee across the border to Bangladesh. Since late 2018, the state has faced another crisis: the escalating conflict between the rebel Arakan Army, which seeks autonomy for Rakhine, and Myanmar's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw.

By July, the violence—which has spread to a neighboring state, Chin—had displaced nearly 200,000 people, according to the Rakhine Ethnics Congress, an organization monitoring the conflict. The pandemic has not slowed the fighting: The Rakhine state government reported that nearly 82,000 people were displaced between March 16 and July 6, 2020.

Coronavirus cases are now rising alongside civilian casualties and displacement, and Rakhine state's health infrastructure could easily become overwhelmed. The state government has limited access for humanitarian organizations to some conflict-affected populations since early 2019. And for more than a year, the national government has blocked high-speed internet in eight townships in Rakhine and Chin states—restricting access to information for more than 1 million people.

In response to the Rakhine outbreak, the Myanmar government has imposed strict prevention and control measures and sent doctors to Sittwe. But in the context of the ongoing conflict, the response may fall short of what is needed to avert a public health disaster.

Rakhine state has experienced conflict and instability for much of the last decade. In addition to the violence against the Rohingya in 2017, for which Myanmar now faces genocide charges at the International Court of Justice at the Hague, sectarian violence in 2012 resulted in the confinement of around 130,000 Rohingya to internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Sittwe, where they remain without freedom of movement.

The Arakan Army, established in 2009, seeks self-determination for the Arakanese, a predominantly Buddhist population in Rakhine state. Arakanese grievances toward central governance date to the late 18th century, when the Burmese empire invaded the Arakan kingdom based in Mrauk U, which for three centuries was a prosperous trading hub. Today, Rakhine state is one of Myanmar's poorest according to the World bank 2019 report.

The armed conflict between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw has taken a high civilian toll. On Aug. 31, Radio Free Asia reported

that 620 people had been injured and 282 killed since December 2018, when the fighting escalated. An Amnesty International briefing, based on data collected in May and June, documented ongoing indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling of civilian areas, the destruction of villages, and the arbitrary detention and torture of civilians.

Myanmar's government has made it difficult for non-state actors to monitor the conflict and alleged human rights violations. In addition to the internet restrictions, the government has blocked access to several websites, including two ethnic Rakhine media outlets reporting on the conflict, for allegedly distributing "fake news". In March, the government also designated the Arakan Army as a terrorist organization, after which two local media editors were charged with violating a counter-terrorism law for publishing interviews with the group.

The increase in violence in Rakhine comes as most of the world is focused on fighting COVID-19. On March 23, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres issued an appeal for a global cease-fire, citing the vulnerability of conflict-affected and displaced populations to both the effects of violence and the virus. Civil society organizations, foreign ambassadors, and ethnic parties called for the Tatmadaw to heed Guterres's appeal, while several ethnic armed organizations, including the Arakan Army and its allies, extended cease-fire offers.

The Tatmadaw did not declare a nationwide cease-fire until May 9, which was recently extended to the end of September. But it excludes areas where state-designated terrorist organizations including the Arakan Army operate—effectively leaving out Rakhine and southern Chin state. The Arakan Army and its allies extended cease-fire offers to the Tatmadaw on June 1 and Sept. 1, with the stated aim of initiating political dialogue toward a lasting peace agreement and combating the coronavirus outbreak. The Tatmadaw rejected the June bid and has not yet issued a response to the September request.

The ongoing conflict presents severe obstacles to the COVID-19 response in Rakhine.

While domestic air travel was suspended in April, all test samples from Rakhine state were sent to Yangon via car. On April 20, a marked World Health Organization (WHO) vehicle transporting samples came under fire, killing the driver and injuring another WHO staff member, and the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw blamed each other.

Now most test samples are sent to Yangon on commercial flights—but the flights do not run daily, creating obstacles to timely testing, a government health care professional in Rakhine told *Foreign Policy* on the condition of anonymity. He said that despite their best efforts, health care workers are struggling to manage contact tracing in the state.

The government restored 2G internet in August, but a shutdown of 3G and 4G services in eight townships still leaves conflict-affected populations with scant access to real-time information about the pandemic. In a statement published in April, the government said that in areas with suspended internet data, it was providing information via SMS and audio announcements, "with a view to ensuring that no one is left uncared for."

Meanwhile, the government has sought to silence dissent over the restrictions. On Sept. 4, a court will deliver a verdict for an activist charged in relation to a banner hung in June reading, "Is the internet being shut down to hide war crimes and killing people?" Nine other student activists were briefly jailed following demonstrations in February.

Kyaw Lynn, one of the jailed students, said a full restoration of services is urgently needed to protect the health and safety of civilians in Rakhine. "Especially in conflict-affected areas, the lack of transparency created by the internet shutdown causes insecurity," he said.

Citing security, the Rakhine state government has restricted most non-governmental organizations and U.N. agencies from traveling to rural areas and six conflict-affected townships since early 2019. The Tatmadaw has also at times blocked aid shipments to displaced populations. Local organizations and volunteer

groups have stepped up to fill the void, and monastery compounds and other informal sites have taken in large numbers of IDPs.

Khine Murn Chun, the president of the Mrauk U Youth Association, told *Foreign Policy* that locals are running several IDP camps in Mrauk U, which hosts more than 18,000 IDPs. Yet community donations to provide this support are diminishing, and IDPs have few options to support their basic needs, he said. In addition to government restrictions on aid, the pandemic has further disrupted the flow of aid to the region, and local media have recently reported food shortages in some IDP camps.

Conflict-displaced populations are particularly at risk of contracting the coronavirus. Overcrowded conditions in IDP camps make social distancing difficult, while soap and clean water are in some cases in short supply. While testing among IDPs remains limited, aid workers from international humanitarian organizations who had recently traveled to IDP camps in three townships in Rakhine state have tested positive for COVID-19.

On Aug. 28, the Rakhine chief minister said the state government had so far spent 1 billion kyats, or around $748,000, on fighting the spread of the coronavirus, while Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi guaranteed sufficient food and financial assistance across the state.

But Min Bar Chay, the director of the Arakan Civil Society Organization Network in Sittwe, said he hoped to see more from the government. Civil society organizations are taking an active role in the response, providing quarantine facilities, collecting food and blankets for those under government-run quarantine, and raising awareness about virus prevention, he said.

"We are taking responsibility and action for the COVID-19 response due to the government's insufficient accountability and responsibility," Min Bar Chay said.

In addition to the ongoing restrictions on humanitarian access and the internet, Myanmar excluded the Arakan Army from national-level peace talks held in August, extinguishing optimism for constructive dialogue in the near future.

But it is not too late to work toward sustainable peace in Rakhine. The government should engage in public messaging that shows an unequivocal commitment to ending the conflict, allow journalists to report freely on the situation in Rakhine without fear of arrest, and grant independent rights monitors unrestricted access. Both sides of the conflict should also condemn violence against civilians and commit to protecting civilian lives. For the Myanmar government, this includes holding the Tatmadaw accountable for abuses.

The government has emphasized its efforts to ensure no one is left behind in its COVID-19 response in Rakhine state, highlighting the importance of ending the armed conflict to address humanitarian needs. To slow the spread of the coronavirus, the warring parties should agree to a cease-fire, and the government should restore full internet services and allow humanitarian access. There is no time to lose in halting the violence in Rakhine state.

While lasting peace and reconciliation may be a distant hope, this should not stand in the way of the pandemic response.

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in Foreign Policy on September 3, 2020, and supported by the Pulitzer Center, original link, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/myanmar-coronavirus-covid-rakhine-ceasefire/.

2

For Those Displaced in Rakhine State, COVID Adds Another Layer of Fear

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People displaced by conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine state fear they will "never be safe."

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, VICE Word News, Sept 7, 2020.

Before a COVID-19 outbreak hit Myanmar's Rakhine State in mid-August, Thiri Kyaw, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, already had a lot to worry about. Displaced by civil war between the Myanmar military and the rebel Arakan Army, she has faced uncertainty about her daily survival since fleeing her village in March of last year. On top of this, she now fears what could happen if the coronavirus reaches the displaced person camp where she shares a small room with four of her family members.

"The virus can spread easily to the whole camp if someone gets infected," she told VICE News.

On August 16, Myanmar announced its first internal COVID-19 transmission in a month in the Rakhine State capital of Sittwe. Since then, the number of cases across the state has swelled to 393

as of September 1, 2020. The conflict between Myanmar's armed forces, or Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army has only exacerbated challenges to the pandemic response in Rakhine, which is among Myanmar's least-developed states.

In a report released in March, Human Rights Watch described Myanmar's displacement camps as "COVID-19 tinderboxes," and called on the Myanmar government to take urgent steps to reduce the risk of transmission among the estimated 350,000 conflict-displaced persons across the country.

Rakhine, Myanmar's westernmost state, gained global attention in 2017 when the Tatmadaw conducted a campaign of mass killings, violence and arson against the state's Rohingya Muslims, which U.N. investigators say was carried out with genocidal intent. More than 730,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, according to the UNHCR, where they remain in refugee camps.

A further 128,000 Rohingya remain in internally displaced person camps near the Rakhine State capital without freedom of movement since fleeing their homes following sectarian violence in 2012. Since late 2018, the conflict between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw has engulfed Rakhine State, displacing approximately two hundred thousand people, mostly ethnic Rakhine, a predominantly Buddhist population. The Arakan Army, established in 2009, is one of many autonomy-seeking ethnic armed groups across the country, and its primary support base is ethnic Rakhine.

The recent fighting between the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw is some of the fiercest Myanmar has seen in decades, and the conflict's outcome on civilians is devastating. It includes Tatmadaw airstrikes on villages, disappearance, arrest, torture, burning of property and instances in which the Tatmadaw blocked aid or medical care. The conflict has also spread to neighboring Chin state, where the civilians also fear bombs more than COVID-19.

In response to the conflict, the government has blocked humanitarian access to rural areas in six of the state's townships since early 2019, leaving those displaced by conflict largely dependent on assistance from local volunteer groups. Living conditions in dis-

placement camps are cramped—most internally displaced persons (IDPs) live one family to a room in bamboo or tarpaulin shelters or sleep in open halls. Meanwhile, government-imposed internet restrictions have limited access to information for an estimated 1.4 million people.

The coronavirus pandemic has heightened fear in IDP camps in Rakhine State. Prior to the civil war, Thiri Kyaw, who is Rakhine, was a rice farmer in her village of Auk Thar Kan. In March 2019, artillery strikes hit the village, killing one and injuring four. Thiri Kyaw fled with her husband and son by foot and have not returned since.

They now live in Tain Nyo, one of the numerous camps sheltering what are now estimated to be more than 18,000 IDPs across Mrauk-U township. Like many Rakhine IDP camps, Tain Nyo is run by the local community—outside support from NGOs consists of irregular distributions of rice, oil, and salt. The pandemic has further hindered the movement of goods, and in August, not even rice arrived. For basic income, Thiri Kyaw forages for bamboo shoots to sell in the nearest village and sews clothes.

Thiri Kyaw did not find the security she sought in Tain Nyo camp. In March 2020, gunfire hit the camp and a nearby hospital, killing three, while in June, Tatmadaw soldiers entered the camp searching for Arakan Army members. But with nowhere else to go, Thiri Kyaw has stayed.

"I feel safer here than in my village, but sometimes I feel like I will never be safe as long as I live in Rakhine," she said.

Phyo Aung, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, is a healthcare worker at a village hospital in Mrauk-U township. He told VICE News that he, too, worries about what could happen if COVID-19 spreads to the township's IDP camps. The hospital where he works, which services both IDPs and local villagers, has shut down at times due to the conflict. He said that last year, during a period of heavy fighting, the staff evacuated for a month.

In early August, the hospital's only doctor resigned, and no one has yet been announced to replace him, according to Phyo Aung.

He said internet restrictions add another challenge. In June 2019, the government cut off internet access to nine conflict-affected townships in Rakhine and Chin, later restoring access to one township. Although 2G services were restored in the remaining townships this August, the government continues to block 3G and 4G networks, maintaining that the restrictions are a necessary security measure in the public interest, and at times prosecuting and jailing those who dissent.

Among other consequences of the internet restrictions, Phyo Aung said they have hindered the capacity of the hospital where he works. To send monthly medical reports to his superiors, he must drive eleven miles by motorbike, despite the volatile security situation. Meanwhile, he said hospital workers lack basic information about the virus' spread.

"There were some positive cases [in Mrauk-U township], but we don't know much about it," he told VICE News. "We are preparing as best as we can."

A monk in Mrauk-U township, who goes by the name of the Mra Tazaung Sayadaw (monk) after the monastery where he lives, said that despite limited outside assistance, he is doing his best to protect over 1,000 conflict-displaced persons who stay on his two-acre monastery compound. But taking an active role in the community carries risks, he said, and he fears the Tatmadaw or Arakan Army could mistakenly accuse him of supporting the other side.

"These days, I can't sleep well," he told VICE News. "The security situation is getting worse and worse."

A few shipments of masks and hand sanitizer have reached his monastery, but information about the virus remains scarce, he said. Although the government sends SMS messages with health prevention information, issues converting the Burmese alphabet's Unicode and Zawgyi fonts make it difficult to decipher the messages, while internet restrictions leave IDPs climbing hills outside the camp to try to get a brief signal.

"As camp leaders, we are raising awareness regarding the virus as much as we can, but we are not professionals, and I doubt if peo-

ple will understand well," said the monk.

U Mrat Tun, a man who manages Mra Taung IDP camp in Rakhine State's Buthidaung township and whose name has been changed to protect his identity, shared similar concerns. With his township also under internet restrictions, he relies on daily phone calls from the Rakhine Ethics Congress, a local civil society organization, for information regarding the pandemic. He then disseminates the updates verbally.

He questioned the accuracy of this approach but said he has not found an alternative.

"When someone calls me, I learn and share the news, but I don't know if it's true or not," he said.

No one in the three camps where VICE News conducted interviews was aware of any COVID-19 testing in their camps, but they are constantly concerned about when the virus may arrive—if it hasn't yet already.

Thiri Kyaw learned about virus prevention measures when some NGOs visited her camp in March and April. Still, she said her ability to follow daily news updates is limited.

"It takes a long time to get any information," she said. "I want the war to stop and the internet restrictions to end."

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in VICE on September 7, 2020, and supported by the Pulitzer Center. Original link,

https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgx9vd/rakhine-state-myanmar-coronavirus-civil-war-risks-photos

3

Rakhine State: Where the military is more feared than the coronavirus

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People in Myanmar's troubled western state are battling a surge in coronavirus in the midst of escalating conflict.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, Al Jazeera News, September 14, 2020.

Yangon, Myanmar – On the night of September 3, Thar Hla* was restless, and it was not just because he was sharing a concrete floor with approximately 70 people. "After hearing loud firing, I felt like the quarantine centre wasn't safe," the 32-year-old told Al Jazeera by phone from his hometown in Kyauktaw in Myanmar's western Rakhine State. "That night, no one could sleep."

In the morning, even though some had still to get their coronavirus test results, they all left. "Everyone in the quarantine centre went home," Thar Hla said.

Nearby, local villagers counted the cost of the night's violence. U Yet Thee,* from one of the two villages that had been attacked, told Al Jazeera that nearly everyone from his village – less than three miles (4.8 kilometres) from the quarantine centre – fled. "The Tat-

madaw [Myanmar's military] fired indiscriminately around our village. Then, they burned our houses and we ran in different directions. We didn't know where to go to save our lives," he said.

Local media reported that 166 houses in the two villages had been razed, and two men shot dead. Some 8,000 villagers had fled their homes, according to Development Media Group, a Rakhine-based media organisation. Al Jazeera was unable to independently verify the details.

As Myanmar grapples with its worst coronavirus outbreak since the start of the pandemic, the three million people of Rakhine are facing not only a pandemic, but an intensifying conflict between the military – known as the Tatmadaw – and the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed group. While villagers have blamed the armed forces for the September 3 violence, a Tatmadaw spokesperson denied the allegations during a press conference the following day, instead accusing the AA of attacking a military vehicle.

One of numerous ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, the AA wants self-determination for the people of Rakhine State and derives most of its support from the ethnic Rakhine. Conflict between the AA and Tatmadaw, which began escalating in late 2018, has displaced around 200,000 people, according to the Rakhine Ethnics Congress, a monitoring group on Rakhine conflict, and has spilled over into neighbouring Chin State.

TROUBLED HISTORY

The recent conflict is the latest in a state with a troubled history. Myanmar's 2014 census data on ethnicity was never released due to political sensitivities. In addition to the Rakhine, a mostly Buddhist population that is commonly seen as making up the largest ethnic group in the state, the mostly Muslim Rohingya have a long history there, too, but have faced progressively systematic discrimination as well as the denial of citizenship and other rights.

Sectarian violence in 2012 left 130,000 mostly Rohingya segre-

gated into camps near Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, where they remain. Five years later, Rakhine was also the site of a brutal military campaign of violence against the Rohingya, which led to an exodus of 730,000 people across the border to Bangladesh that United Nations investigators say was carried out with genocidal intent.

Myanmar reported its first case of local coronavirus transmission in a month on August 16, in Sittwe. At the time, the country had recorded less than 400 COVID-19 cases nationwide and Rakhine less than 20.

By September 13, the number of cases in Rakhine State had reached 735, spanning all 17 townships, nearly a quarter of the country's 2,932 cases, according to the Ministry of Health and Sports. A partial lockdown has been in force across Rakhine since August 26, and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has called for a "union spirit" to fight the outbreak in the state, promising sufficient food and necessary financial assistance for an effective response.

But the government continues to block 3G and 4G networks in eight townships in Rakhine and Chin for what it says are reasons of security and has imposed limits on humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas despite concerns about the impact on efforts to curb the spread of coronavirus. Al Jazeera contacted both a government and Ministry of Health and Sports spokesperson by phone but did not receive a reply.

THOUSANDS DISPLACED

Nearly 82,000 people were forced from their homes by the fighting between March 16 and July 6, according to government figures, while Development Media Group reported that nearly 19,000 people from more than 10 villages in Kyauktaw township fled their homes between August 31 and September 4.

In addition to the violence on September 3, artillery fire allegedly injured civilians in two villages on September 2 and 3. Kyauktaw

township is just one site of conflict-related violence in the state. On September 8, at least four civilians including two children were killed by artillery fire between the townships of Ann and Myebon.

Valijon Ranoev, head of the Reporting and Public Information Unit at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Myanmar, told Al Jazeera that civilian casualties and those displaced this month are a "stark reminder of the unacceptable risks people in Rakhine face".

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appealed for a global ceasefire on March 23, and numerous groups have since called for an end to the fighting in Rakhine. Yet the Tatmadaw has rejected three ceasefire offers from the AA, and excluded areas where the AA operates from a nationwide ceasefire announced in May and since extended until the end of September. Last month, the government excluded the AA, which it has designated a "terrorist organisation" since March, from national-level peace talks.

"In addition to [the] direct humanitarian impact and human toll, the hostilities continue to impact our ability to deliver assistance, with most of our humanitarian partners facing challenges to access communities," OCHA's Ranoev told Al Jazeera. "The insecurity, combined with the recently introduced COVID-19 preventive measures, have curtailed our efforts to continue and scale up [the] humanitarian and COVID-19 response."

UNDER FIRE

The conflict also poses risks to those involved in the pandemic response. In April, a vehicle transporting swab samples came under fire, killing the driver, even though it was clearly marked with the World Health Organization's logo. Neither the AA nor Tatmadaw have claimed responsibility. The driver was one of 289 civilians killed by conflict in Rakhine between December 1, 2018 and September 8 of this year, according to Radio Free Asia.

Thar Hla returned home from Yangon on August 21 and – as

the law required – was sent to a community quarantine facility for three weeks. It was here that he found himself sharing floor space in the town's football club with men, women and children who had returned to Rakhine from elsewhere in Myanmar. The centre also served as a one-night transit hub, he says, for those travelling within the state. Maintaining social distance was impossible.

After fleeing the centre on the morning of September 4, Thar Hla and the other quarantined people returned the same evening, but two days later the quarantine manager, who is also a local administrator, closed the facility because of the conflict and residents were advised to quarantine at home.

The next day, swab tests for nine people came back positive for the coronavirus, but only six immediately reported to the township's main hospital, its superintendent told local media.Thar Hla, who tested negative, is now self-quarantining at home. But for those displaced by the recent attacks, social distancing is not an option, while food scarcity remains an increasing concern as local community's struggle to accommodate new arrivals.

U Yet Thee told Al Jazeera that coronavirus was far from his mind. "I am not worried about the virus," he said. "I am only worried about the Tatmadaw attacking our village again."

* *Pseudonyms have been used for Thar Hla and U Yet Thee to protect their safety.*

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https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/14/rakhine-where-the-military-is-more-feared-than-the-coronavirus

4

Vote cancellations trigger outrage among Myanmar minority voters

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, Al Jazeera News, October 20, 2020.

More than 1.5 million people in Myanmar's conflict-ridden areas have been politically disenfranchised after the country's election commission scrapped voting in those areas in next month's general election, deepening concerns about the credibility of the country's first poll since Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in 2015.

The vast majority of those affected are in Rakhine State, where the conflict between the autonomy-seeking Arakan Army and Myanmar's armed forces has intensified since late 2018. Now, 1.2 million people in Rakhine will no longer be able to go to the ballot box on November 8, 2020.

Experts worry the move will further alienate ethnic Rakhine people in the troubled western state and feed into support for armed groups. "The Union Election Commission's procedures to cancel elections in conflict-affected constituencies are not transparent or consistent," Min Zaw Oo, Executive Director of the Myanmar Insti-

tute for Peace and Security, told Al Jazeera.

"The cancellation will lead to the disenfranchisement of 73 percent of Rakhine voters and inevitably push them to more radical approaches, making it harder for national reconciliation," he said.

The election commission said in a statement on October 16 that security concerns in those areas made it impossible to guarantee free and fair elections there. While some cancellations had been expected – and had happened in 2015 – many have questioned the commission's opaque decision-making processes.

MINORITIES DISILLUSIONED

Ninety-two parties are contesting in the elections. The NLD and the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party are the largest two parties participating. While the NLD remains popular among the country's majority ethnic group and is expected to win, many ethnic minorities have become increasingly disillusioned with the party. Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's 2015 campaign promise to make peace a priority, the past five years have seen a stalled peace process, mass displacement and the continuing political marginalisation of minority ethnic states.

In 2015, the NLD suffered its greatest defeat in Rakhine, where it lost to the Arakan National Party (ANP), whose electoral base is mostly ethnic Rakhine. Despite losing, the NLD used its constitutional powers to appoint a party member to lead the state cabinet, exacerbating a long-standing sense of exclusion among many Rakhine people.

The cancellations will also mostly affect other ethnic minority areas where support for the NLD is weak. Five ethnic parties have already questioned the election commission's impartiality, transparency, integrity and fairness in a public statement.

More controversially, cancellations are taking place in several areas of Rakhine State where there is no active fighting, such as Pauktaw township which the ANP won in 2015. Meanwhile, in neigh-

bouring Chin State's Paletwa township – a flashpoint in the conflict – voting is set to take place in five constituencies which the NLD won in 2015, according to an October 27 government announcement.

The commission told the media last week that its decisions were based on recommendations by the government, defence and home affairs ministries, military and police, but did not elaborate on the criteria it used.

Aung Kyaw Htwe, an ANP candidate who had been running for a seat in the state legislature in Pauktaw township voiced concern that the situation could worsen if people's grievances about a lack of political representation remain unresolved.

"The result of the cancellation of elections in most parts of Rakhine State will be more intense conflict," he said. "[The cancellations] will impact the stability of the state, trust and reconciliation. Beyond the elections, I am really worried about a worsening political and economic situation."

Since September, more than a dozen activists have faced charges for protesting against the military and government's approach towards the Rakhine conflict, including four who were arrested three days after the election commission's announcement on October 16.

ELECTION CHALLENGES

But preparations for the elections in parts of the state have been problematic due to the unrest there. During the past two years, civil administration facilities have deteriorated. Voter registration in displacement camps has faltered and the security situation remains volatile in many areas.

The government has imposed internet restrictions over large parts of the state since June 2019, making campaigning in these areas near-impossible as the coronavirus pandemic grows. On October 14, the Arakan Army abducted three NLD candidates who were campaigning in the state's Toungup township. The Arakan Army is demanding the release of imprisoned activists in exchange

for freeing the candidates.

"While parts of Myanmar are facing serious security problems, the authorities should do all they can so that eligible voters can cast their ballots," Human Rights Watch's Deputy Asia Director Phil Robertson said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Union Election Commission should consult with political parties and local groups in affected areas to validate the security concerns and consider options that would safeguard people's right to vote."

The election commission has not offered an alternative date or way to vote in constituencies where the elections have been cancelled. And any by-elections can only take place after the first year of a government's term, according to the country's electoral rules.

Human Rights Watch says the preparations for the elections have been riddled with "systemic problems and rights abuses that will deprive people of their right to fairly elect their government."

DENIED VOTING RIGHTS

Approximately 600,000 Rohingya have been denied voting rights under restrictive citizenship laws and the applications of several Rohingya candidates have been rejected. The election commission has also faced questions over its decision not to postpone the elections despite a worsening coronavirus outbreak. Cases in Myanmar have jumped from a few hundred to more than 40,000 since August.

Htoo Htet Naing, who heads Accountable Actions for Arakan, which facilitates political dialogue between candidates in Rakhine State, is disillusioned with the electoral process and the cancellations.

"I can't accept the government which will come out after the elections. If our right to vote isn't recognised, we won't recognise the government," she said. "The people have lost their rights and [ethnic] parties have been excluded and marginalised. It destroys people's expectations for a democratic transition and negates people's

efforts to reform governance structures."

Mra Thuzar, who lives in a village in Mrauk-U township, had been planning to vote for the ANP before the cancellations. "I had hoped our representatives would speak out on our behalf regarding rights abuses and humanitarian issues," she said. Now, she is concerned for her safety. "I am really worried for the people in Rakhine State including me, because I can't predict how the situation will change due to the cancellations," she told Al Jazeera.

"The main loser is the Rakhine people. They lost their rights as citizens to choose their representatives, and we lost our ability to serve as their legitimate voice regarding politics, conflict and development," said Aung Kyaw Htwe, the former ANP candidate.

"The election commission's decision kills the voices of conflict-affected people... I think a representative government will not be achieved in Rakhine State."

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in Al Jazeera on October 28, 2020. Original Link, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/28/vote-cancellations-trigger-outrage-among-myanmar-minority-voters

5

In Myanmar's Rakhine State, trust in armed group grows as election hopes fade

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'People are less interested in electoral politics and increasingly interested in military actions.'

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, The New Humanitarian, November 4, 2020.

Many Arakanese in Myanmar's Rakhine State were optimistic in the lead-up to the country's first openly contested elections in a quarter of a century, in 2015. There's a stark difference five years on, as 8 November polls are clouded by an escalating civil war and voting cancellations across most of the state.

Conflict between the military, known as the Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army – one of several ethnic armed groups pushing for political autonomy within Myanmar – has displaced roughly 227,000 people since late 2018. Citing insecurity, the government has cancelled voting for approximately 1.2 million, or 73 percent, of the state's voters.

Frustrated by years of marginalisation, many Arakanese – also known as Rakhine – say they've lost faith in a political process that

has failed to address long-held grievances, while the conflict has exacerbated animosity towards the government.

"The actions and decisions of the government haven't improved anything in my life," said La Pyae Htun, 28, a rice farmer from Kyauktaw, a northern township hit hard by the conflict. "After the war started, I lost my trust in the government."

There's a growing belief that the Arakan Army is more likely to deliver change than the electoral system – which many say is stacked in favour of the military and Myanmar's majority Bamar population.

"People think the Arakan Army needs strength in weapons and soldiers, and then it will have equal political opportunities when negotiating with the Tatmadaw and [the] government," said Khaing Kaung San of the Rakhine State CSO Peace Committee, which includes civil society organisations involved in government-led discussions on ending Myanmar's conflicts. "People are less interested in electoral politics and increasingly interested in military actions."

In interviews with The New Humanitarian, Arakanese described feeling disconnected from a wider Myanmar nation and distrustful toward the ruling government, headed by de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy. They want to resolve the civil war, and believe the first step is for the government to promote dialogue with the Arakan Army and consult the Arakanese people.

For many, however, peace feels increasingly distant after two years of mounting violence and little compromise in a crisis that has worsened during the coronavirus pandemic. The Tatmadaw has repeatedly refused calls to extend a nationwide coronavirus ceasefire to Rakhine. The government, in March, designated the Arakan Army a terrorist organisation and, in August, left the group out of peace talks aimed at reconciling Myanmar's myriad conflicts.

"When we talk about the peace process, we are very far from sustainable peace," said Arkar Maung, a 21-year-old university student in the state's central Myebon township.

OPTIMISM TURNS TO DISTRUST

Distrust in elections and the central government, and disappointment in the government-led peace process, have grown as the conflict has spiralled. But the aftermath of the 2015 national vote also helped fuel today's misgivings.

A celebratory mood swept much of the country when the NLD overwhelmingly won nationally, marking the end of military rule and bringing Suu Kyi, a former political prisoner, to power.

There was optimism among Arakanese as well – but for different reasons. The Arakan National Party (ANP), which promoted self-determination for Arakanese people as well as improving development in the state, one of Myanmar's poorest, took 22 of 35 seats in the state legislature, compared to eight for the NLD.

Yet hopes were darkened when the NLD-led government appointed its own party member to lead the Rakhine State cabinet. "Even though the ANP won in 2015, nothing changed for the people," said La Pyae Htun.

Oo Aung Than, founder of the Thazin Community Development Institute, a peace and development organisation, draws a direct link between the 2015 election's shortcomings and support for the Arakan Army. "During the past five years, the people became interested in armed revolution because the authority of members of parliament was very limited," he said. "The people came to believe that armed revolution would be the best way to get back their rights."

Bo Murn, 24, a civil society worker in the state's northern Buthidaung township, supports this view.

"The political process didn't offer any opportunities. But since the revolutionary process emerged, we have had a small chance to do something," he said, referring to the Arakan Army's fight for self-governance.

NOWHERE SAFE

As the conflict intensifies, so does its humanitarian toll, while aid restrictions and a blockade on high-speed mobile internet have left many civilians feeling stranded.

Rights groups accuse Myanmar's army of war crimes, including airstrikes, arbitrary detention, torture, and the burning of villages. Arakan Army forces are also accused of endangering civilians, intimidation, and abductions, including the recent kidnapping of three NLD candidates, for which they took responsibility.

Although his village has so far been spared direct attacks, La Pyae Htun's township, Kyauktaw, has seen some of the worst violence. In September, for example, civilians in two villages were struck by artillery fire and more than 160 houses were burned, causing thousands to flee, according to the Development Media Group (DMG), a local news outlet. Villagers blamed the Tatmadaw for the violence.

Most people in La Pyae Htun's village depend on seasonal agriculture to survive, but he doubts he'll be able to work his rice fields during the November harvest season. "I hear artillery fire on a daily basis," he said. "Even when I stay at home, I never feel safe."

Many Arakanese also worry they can be arrested on suspicion of supporting the Arakan Army. DMG has counted at least 40 such arrests since July; some never returned home. Arkar Maung, the student in Myebon township, told TNH he lives in constant fear. "Even though I haven't done anything wrong, I never know when, where, and who might come to arrest me by labelling me one way," he said.

Criticising the military or the government is also risky. Dozens of activists have been prosecuted or arrested in Rakhine State this year for protesting abuses or internet restrictions, according to Athan, rights group. The use of a law that criminalises online defamation has also surged under the NLD.

"I don't fully trust anyone," Bo Murn said. "Under this government, one word can send you to jail."

May Thazin, a civil society worker, said she doesn't feel secure even in the state capital, Sittwe. "If I see soldiers stationed as security forces, I feel uncomfortable," she said. "They can confiscate our phones anywhere, anytime."

Chief among grievances, however, are internet restrictions beginning in June 2019. The government said the restrictions – initially a total blackout across eight townships affecting more than one million people – were aimed at preventing terrorism. It restored 2G services in August, but continues to block faster 3G and 4G connections.

Arakanese say they depend on the internet for potentially life-saving information about military clashes and the coronavirus, as well as online cash transfers and vital business and education opportunities. "Access to information is dark," said Arkar Maung. "When someone shares some news, I don't know if it's true or not."

BREAKING THE DEADLOCK

Gaining a foothold in national politics is an uphill battle for the many parties representing Myanmar's ethnic minorities.

The military still plays an outsized role in politics: One quarter of seats in Myanmar's national and state legislatures are reserved for military appointees. Suu Kyi's NLD is widely expected to win the most votes of any party nationwide, though several ethnic parties have floated the idea of forming a coalition to increase their influence.

But the October decision to cancel elections in select townships disproportionately affects ethnic minorities. In addition to nine of Rakhine's 17 townships, voting has also been scrapped in parts of Kachin, Chin, Karen, Mon, and Shan states, which are home to other minority communities. The International Crisis Group has warned that the cancellations – and the election results themselves – are likely to add to minority grievances with electoral politics, worsening ongoing conflicts. The Arakanese who spoke to TNH won't be

able to vote. Those who had planned on voting said they supported Arakanese parties, hoping for a broader coalition or local representation. Others had already given up on the electoral process.

After seeing little change since the 2015 elections, La Pyae Htun said he's no longer interested in politics. "I don't expect anything to change here if Arakanese parties win," he told TNH in an interview before the cancellations were announced. "It will again be meaningless for us."

Oo Aung Than, the civil society worker, planned to run for office under the ANP banner, but had to end his campaign when voting was cancelled in his constituency, leaving the seat empty. "The NLD, which was once fighting against dictatorship, is hoarding power like a precious stone," he said. "Only the people [in power] changed, but the system stayed the same."

In order to break the deadlock, many Arakanese say it's crucial for the government to include the Arakan Army in the peace process. "By focusing on eliminating the Arakan Army and increasing Myanmar troops in Rakhine… there will not be positive change, but military operations will expand and the political framework will narrow," said Khaing Kaung San of the Rakhine State CSO Peace Committee.

Htoot May, a prominent Arakanese politician, said the government should remove the Arakan Army's terrorist designation, release political prisoners, and "listen carefully to the voices of ethnic people."

"Without recognising ethnic armed organisations, if the Tatmadaw keeps doing counterinsurgencies, neither short- nor long-term peace will be achieved," she said.

As the conflict smoulders, many Arakanese see a widening gap between themselves and their country.

"When we talk about a Myanmar nation, I feel one group of people is in control," said Arkar Maung.

"Myanmar history is Bamar history; Myanmar language is Burmese language," he added, recalling an education not inclusive of his native Arakanese culture.

"I'm living as a Myanmar citizen," said La Pyae Htun. "But I don't feel like one."

Arkar Maung, Bo Murn, La Pyae Htun, and May Thazin are pseudonyms for interviewees who asked that their real names not be used due to fear of reprisal.

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6

"Like Ants Fighting Elephants": Student Activists in Myanmar Speak Out

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Despite dozens of arrests this year, some student activists are determined to raise their voices on behalf of vulnerable civilians in Rakhine State.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, November 30, 2020

Toe Toe Aung knew he would be arrested when he stood in front of Myanmar's Rakhine State government office on 9 September with two fellow university students. They held signs reading "No Murder Army" and "No Bloody Government", and one waved the red flag of the Arakan Student Union.

They were protesting the military's attacks on civilians, and government policies, including prolonged internet restrictions, which many feel endanger civilians and fail to protect their rights in Toe Toe Aung's native Rakhine State. The state, and neighbouring southern Chin State, have seen intense fighting between the Arakan Army and Myanmar's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, since late 2018.

Within 10 minutes of protesting on 9 September, Toe Toe Aung and the two fellow student activists were arrested and jailed for 10 days for causing "negligent acts" during the pandemic, which is classified as a natural disaster. Those charges have since been dropped and the three have been charged with staging a protest without notifying authorities 48 hours in advance. As of late November, they are awaiting trial.

"The more they oppress us, the more we will resist and fight for justice, freedom and equality for our people," says 20-year-old Toe Toe Aung in early November. "We are like ants fighting against elephants, but we will never give up."

Toe Toe Aung, who chairs the Sittwe University Student Union in the Rakhine State capital, is one of at least 51 activists, mostly students, who have faced charges in relation to protests against the Tatmadaw's actions in Rakhine and the government's handling of the conflict, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). More than 20 have been imprisoned, while the remainder await sentencing or are in hiding while facing arrest warrants, AAPP's joint secretary Bo Kyi tells *New Naratif*.

On 23 November, 10 human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and AAPP, released a joint statement calling on Myanmar authorities to immediately end criminal proceedings and release students and other activists charged for participating in recent protests. They also called for the Myanmar government to lift internet restrictions in Rakhine and Chin states and reform laws to comply with international standards for the protection of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

"Peaceful demonstrations should not be a crime. Placing students behind bars means killing the future of our country," Bo Kyi tells *New Naratif on November 23, 2020.*

Despite dozens of arrests this year, some student activists are not staying quiet. Although they lack mainstream support in a country which has overwhelmingly backed Aung San Suu Kyi's government, they are taking to the streets and speaking out for vulnerable

civilians whose voices have largely been silenced by internet and media restrictions.

"AS ARAKANESE, WE HAVE A LOT OF GRIEVANCES"

Over the past two years, an increasingly brutal civil war has engulfed Myanmar's westernmost state, which is among the country's poorest. Following mounting grievances under a highly centralized government dominated by the country's Bamar ethnic majority, many Arakanese, also known as ethnic Rakhine, have turned their support toward armed rebellion. The conflict is the latest of numerous struggles for political autonomy waged in the country's ethnic borderlands over the past seven decades.

Since December 2018, local monitoring groups have counted more than 240,000 people displaced and nearly 1,000 seriously injured or killed in Rakhine and neighboring Chin, where the conflict has spread. The Tatmadaw has applied patterns of violence long exercised in ethnic areas, including indiscriminate attacks, arson, landmines and the detention and at times torture and killing of those it alleges to be ethnic armed group supporters, according to local news reports. In April, a United Nations human rights expert said the Tatmadaw's actions against civilians in Rakhine and Chin "may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity".

In 2015, the National League for Democracy, headed by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, won landslide elections, marking the end of a half-century of military and military-backed rule, although the government still shares power with the military according to the military-drafted 2008 constitution. While the NLD pledged upon coming to office to make peace with ethnic armed groups its "first priority", the ensuing years have led some to question its sincerity. In January 2019, the government instructed the Tatmadaw to "crush" the Arakan Army (AA) and in March 2020, labelled the AA a terrorist organisation. The government has also restricted aid to conflict-affected areas, and in August,

excluded the AA from nationwide peace talks.

Drawing attention to human rights abuses in Rakhine is particularly sensitive. The government has restricted international media access to areas affected by conflict, and, since June 2019, blocked internet services to more than 1 million people. Allegedly a counterterrorism measure, the restrictions also curb the flow of information out of the state. The government also included two Arakanese ethnic media in a group of websites which it has ordered telecoms operators to block since March, according to HRW. The government has labelled the sites as fake news sites, while local media have faced a range of charges for their reporting on the conflict.

"As Arakanese, we have a lot of grievances against the government's actions toward our people. They really oppress us economically, politically and socially," says Mrat Hein Twan, general secretary of the Arakan Student Union, which represents Arakanese students across 23 universities in Yangon. The 19-year-old was among nine students imprisoned for a month for holding protests in February without advance government permission.

The student demonstrators were calling on the government to lift internet restrictions in Rakhine and Chin states, hold accountable those responsible for violence against civilians in Rakhine, including for firing artillery which struck a primary school and injured 21 students in mid-February, and give international media access to conflict-affected areas in Rakhine, according to the NGO Fortify Rights.

The arrest of students protesting the Rakhine crisis comes amid a broader decline of freedom of expression since the NLD came to power, advocates say. As of March, the government had opened 251 lawsuits against those who allegedly criticized the state, according to the Yangon-based rights group Athan. Among the laws used to charge activists are one which requires protestors to provide detailed advance notice to authorities of their planned activities, or potentially face up to six months in prison, and one criminalizing speech deemed likely to cause "fear or alarm to the public" or to cause military personnel to mutiny, disregard or fail in their duty,

for which those convicted may face up to two years in prison. Some protestors have also been charged for committing allegedly "negligent acts" during the coronavirus pandemic, under Myanmar's Natural Disaster Management Law, for which they may be punished with up to three years imprisonment.

In October, two student union protestors in the city of Mandalay received sentences from multiple courts totalling seven years in prison for putting up posters accusing the Tatmadaw of being "fascist" and "murderers".

A HISTORY OF ROBUST STUDENT ACTIVISM

Despite the risks, Toe Toe Aung says staying silent is not an option. "We [students] saw daily injustice, innocent civilians killed, and the torturing and arrest of our people," he says. "Historically, students in Myanmar have stood with oppressed civilians...if we are silent in the face of injustice, it is like supporting it."

Student unions have played a central role in the country's activist movements since shortly after the establishment of the first university in British colonial Burma in 1920 in the city of Rangoon, today known as Yangon. The Rangoon University Student Union's earliest leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San, and the country's first prime minister, U Nu, are considered the fathers of the country's independence movement.

Student unions were also at the forefront of pro-democracy protests, at times with deadly results. Months after General Ne Win seized power in 1962, initiating what would become a 50-year military junta, authorities gunned down student protestors at Rangoon University, killing dozens and blowing up the student union building. Student dissidents went underground, re-emerging during the historic uprising of 1988, when they led hundreds of thousands in taking to the streets and thousands were killed and imprisoned.

Since the NLD came to power, although many senior NLD mem-

bers were once student dissidents themselves, speaking out against the government has become unpopular, with many seeing it as a personal affront to Aung San Suu Kyi. She maintains fierce loyalty among much of the public, many of whom see her as the antidote to the military rule that preceded her.

"Before 2015, people widely protested against the government when they saw injustice," says Mrat Hein Twan of the Arakan Student Union in Yangon. "After the NLD gained power, most young people were influenced by Aung San Suu Kyi and supported the government blindly."

The former Rangoon University Student Union, now called the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), is one national-level student group that has vocally challenged the NLD, leaving it at odds with the government and its supporters. Months after coming to office, the government promoted the creation of a new student union - called the National Students Union League, running parallel to the ABFSU.

In April, eight student unions, including the ABFSU, released a statement condemning the Tatmadaw's actions in Rakhine and the government's "unaccountability and irresponsibility" toward the conflict.

"Every day in Rakhine, the Tamadaw is killing, torturing and arresting innocent civilians," Wai Yan Phyoe Moe, ABFSU vice-chair, tells *New Naratif* in early November. "There is no equality or peace under the government or Tatmadaw, and they are hiding the root cause of ethnic armed revolution.... They are asking ethnic armed organisations to participate in the current peace process without giving [ethnic people] equal rights."

In September, Wai Yan Phyoe Moe distributed leaflets and stickers with the messages "No bloody government. No murder army" and "Oppose murder and fascism and stand together with the Arakanese people." Two days later, police conducted a night-time house raid under the guise of a COVID-19 health check. Wai Yan Phyoe Moe and fellow activist Paing Min Khant now face charges for failing to notify authorities 48 hours in advance of "holding an

assembly".

"The current government talks about reconciliation," says 22-year-old Wai Yan Phyoe Moe. "I understand that reconciliation is for all people in the country to stay together peacefully, and to help, support each other, and listen to voices within all ethnic groups.... But now, the government is trying to reconcile with the Tatmadaw more than ethnic people."

SOLIDARITY

Aung San Suu Kyi's international image as a human rights icon shattered when the Tatmadaw committed widespread atrocities against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in late 2017 and she failed to condemn the violence, instead traveling to the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019 to defend Myanmar against charges of genocide. Yet domestically, where many consider the Rohingya as illegal interlopers from Bangladesh despite their long history in Myanmar, thousands rallied to support her decision. Within the local activist community, scant few spoke out against the Tatmadaw's attacks on the Rohingya or the government's response, and those who did speak out faced harassment.

Now, student activists say few are standing with them to condemn the Tatmadaw's violence against Arakanese civilians. "There are few people talking about human rights abuses in Rakhine State," says 19-year-old Thor Zurn Twan, a central executive committee member of the Arakan Student Union of Rakhine State. "It's really difficult to start a national protest movement now, because a majority of youth support the NLD."

Yet Wai Yan Phyoe Moe of the ABFSU still hopes that more activists can come together. "It's possible to bring people together across ethnicity and spark a national protest movement, because there is a mass of youth and students who are standing with justice and anti-fascism, especially in ethnic areas," he says.

While within Myanmar, support for the student protestors re-

mains limited, some Rohingya living in camps in Bangladesh have raised their voices in solidarity. In September, approximately 50 Rohingya refugees demonstrated against the arrest of Toe Toe Aung and his two fellow activists, declaring that the activists "stood up for the truth".

As youth activist movements in Thailand and Hong Kong have swelled, student activists in Myanmar have taken note. On 16 October, the ABFSU released a statement of solidarity with demonstrators in Thailand, and when ABFSU activists were sentenced a week later, they held up a three-finger salute which has become a protest symbol during Thailand's pro-democracy uprisings. Wai Yan Phyoe Moe says the ABFSU students used the salute as "a sign against organized or legal oppression of the people."

He says the ABFSU had made contact with activists in other countries in years past, but the group is not currently in communication with Thai or Hong Kong activists. "Although they are also protesting against oppressive governments, the purposes, contexts and actions aren't the same, so we didn't make an alliance, but we support them," he tells *New Naratif*.

Thor Zurn Twan says the Arakan Student Union in Rakhine had connected with student activists in Thailand and Hong Kong to share their experiences and offer suggestions, but had not made any formal alliances.

The three Arakanese activists interviewed by *New Naratif* said that looking forward, their student unions will take action according to the will of the Arakanese people.

Frustrations among Arakanese toward the government only worsened in the lead-up to national elections held on 8 November. Weeks before, the government-appointed election commission, citing security concerns, cancelled voting across most of Rakhine State, especially in areas with strong support for Arakanese ethnic parties—causing widespread outcry among the Arakanese public.

Analysts have expressed concern that the cancellations are likely to exacerbate disillusionment with electoral politics and may contribute to intensifying fighting in the coming years. "The

Arakanese youths' political passion was stifled," says Mrat Hein Twan of the Arakan Student Union. "It pushes people to seek self-determination or independence."

During the elections, the NLD won even more legislative seats nationally than in 2015, taking 920, or 82 percent, of elected seats compared with 859 seats in the previous election . Although Arakanese ethnic parties beat the NLD in Rakhine, they came short of a majority of seats in the state legislature. The AA has since called for fresh voting to be held in cancelled areas, but practical obstacles remain.

Arakanese student activists tell *New Naratif* that in the coming year, they plan to organize a referendum among the public across the state to learn more about their political aspirations. "We have a responsibility to implement what the Arakanese people want and dream," says Mrat Hein Twan.

"We are speaking out on behalf of our people who fear talking about human rights abuses in Rakhine," adds Toe Toe Aung. "We will keep going as long as there is injustice in our state."

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7

In Myanmar's Rakhine, families of the disappeared seek answers

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The families of 18 people taken by the military nearly a year ago are still waiting for news of their loved ones – and justice.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, Al Jazeera (1.20.2021).

One evening, as Ma Nway* and her family were having dinner, soldiers from Myanmar's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, came to her house and asked for her husband. According to her account, they blindfolded him, took out their guns and beat him in front of her.

"At the time, I could only cry," said Ma Nway, an ethnic Arakanese from Myanmar's westernmost Rakhine State, who prefers not to reveal her identity for fear of reprisals. "I feared they would shoot me, so I held my tongue ... I felt like they were the most brutal people in the world."

It was March 16 2020 and the last time she saw her husband. He is among 18 people from the neighbouring villages of Tinma Thit and Tinma Gyi in Rakhine State's northern Kyauktaw township who were arrested in March and have not been seen since. Their

families' relentless search for information has been met with silence, rejection and threats. Ten months later, they are still looking for answers – and justice.

Three witnesses, whose testimonies align with those published by other media, told Al Jazeera that on March 13 and 16, uniformed soldiers wearing the badge of the Tatmadaw's Light Infantry Division No. 55 went door to door arresting dozens of men it suspected of having ties to the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group seeking autonomy.

Most of those arrested were released the same day, but 18 were not. The missing includes a 16-year-old, three people over the age of 65 and one person who is deaf. Al Jazeera has used pseudonyms for the three witnesses to protect them from possible reprisals.

The missing includes a sixteen-year-old, three people over the age of 65, and one deaf person. On March 18, four bodies were seen floating in the Kaladan River near the villages. One of the bodies was identified by family members as among the missing villagers. The family told local media that soldiers shot at them when they approached the body, which the US-government funded broadcaster Radio Free Asia reported was riddled with bullet holes. The three other bodies were never identified.

All of the missing are Arakanese, also called Rakhine, a predominantly Buddhist ethnic group thought to make up the majority in the state. Frustrated with political marginalisation and perceived domination under Myanmar's ethnic Bamar majority, increasing numbers of Arakanese have in recent years joined the Arakan Army (AA). Since conflict escalated in late 2018, nearly 1,000 civilians have been killed or seriously injured in violence including indiscriminate air raids, gunfire, and landmines and more than 230,000 have fled their homes.

'HOUSE TO HOUSE'

The arrests in Tinma Gyi and Tinma Thit occurred following two weeks of intense clashes near the villages. "Tatmadaw soldiers went house to house, calling the men," said Tun Hla,* who was among those arrested and released. "I don't know why we were arrested by the Tatmadaw. At the time, the soldiers didn't give any reason … 10 people were tied and beaten with guns in front of me."

Days later, the villagers fled. Zaw Win, a local advocate helping the families of the missing to seek justice, told Al Jazeera that three elderly men stayed in Tinma Gyi to watch over the monastery and have also not been seen since. Shortly after the villages were deserted, the houses were razed. Villagers blame the Tatmadaw, which has denied responsibility.

Myanmar's police forces sit under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is under the jurisdiction of the Tatmadaw. On March 23, a group of family members of the missing, now scattered in different displacement camps, filed a case regarding the disappearances with township police. Letters were also sent to the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission and the offices of the commander-in-chief, president, and state counsellor, calling for an investigation.

No updates came until June, when a Tatmadaw spokesperson denied anyone had been arrested in the two villages in September 2020. Five more months of silence followed. On November 27, the Tatmadaw spokesperson announced that the families could open a case at the relevant police station and that if the police reported any suspicious information, the Tatmadaw would decide whether to conduct its own investigation.

The families returned to the township police station on December 8, but Ma Nway told Al Jazeera the officers on duty warned them against opening a case. "Regarding the initial case, the police told us their paperwork disappeared," she said. "Then, they threatened us several times that we could be detained and sent to jail."

"They said this case doesn't concern them, and we should go to the Tatmadaw station to inquire," added Zaw Win, who accompa-

nied the villagers to the police station. "When we replied that the police had a responsibility to seek justice, they said they could immediately detain and send us to jail."

The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, which has faced criticism for not intervening in other high-profile cases, has also done little to support the Tinma villagers.

Kyauktaw township legislator Tun Win, who submitted the request to investigate the case, told Al Jazeera the commission responded in November that the Tinma villagers were not detained by the Tatmadaw. Its chairperson told local media on December 30 that the pandemic prevented an on-site investigation and that the commission had closed the case after inquiring with the defence ministry, which denied the Tatmadaw's involvement.

A police investigation finally began on December 29, when district police in the nearby town of Mrauk-U called the villagers in for questioning. Ma Nway stayed behind out of fear. "I feel like my children and I are not safe since my husband disappeared. I am really worried we could be attacked because we filed charges," she said. According to Radio Free Asia, the police took statements from 15 people.

The next day, the Tatmadaw spokesperson stated that concerned persons could file reports and present credible evidence with the local military division office or regional military commanders.

Al Jazeera's calls to the Tatmadaw spokesperson, township and district police stations, Myanmar National Human Rights Commission and Rakhine State government spokesperson went unanswered. Media are only allowed to report from Rakhine with permission and official escorts and the government has restricted mobile internet services across conflict-affected townships including Kyauktaw since June 2019.

Local lawyer Zaw Win told Al Jazeera he was frustrated by an apparent lack of political will to address the case. "All authorities have to take responsibility," he said. "Those in power need to know the situation, follow human rights standards and seek justice."

HISTORY OF IMPUNITY

The Tatmadaw is notorious for committing rights abuses with impunity, most notably following a brutal 2017 crackdown on Rakhine State's mostly Muslim Rohingya that sent 740,000 fleeing to Bangladesh. A UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission stated in a September 2019 report that Myanmar was failing in its obligation to prevent, investigate or enact effective legislation criminalising and punishing genocide in relation to its treatment of the Rohingya.

The Fact-Finding mission also, in an August 2018 report, identified enforced disappearances among crimes against humanity committed in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan States for which Myanmar's top military generals must be investigated and prosecuted.

The Tinma villagers' cases are not the only enforced disappearances to have occurred in Rakhine State since the report was released. Between January and June 2020, at least 30 civilians disappeared in the state after being arrested by the Tatmadaw, according to a tally by the Rakhine-based Development Media Group. As of October, Radio Free Asia counted 32 more who died after being taken into Tatmadaw custody from the start of 2019 to October 12.

In April 2020, UN human rights expert Yanghee Lee said accountability was critical to ending the conflict between the AA and Tatmadaw. "Having faced no accountability, the Tatmadaw continues to operate with impunity," she said in a statement. "They are now targeting all civilians in the conflict area ...Their alleged crimes must be investigated in accordance with international standards, with perpetrators being held accountable."

Myo Myat Hein, the chair of the Arakan Lawyers Council which is providing legal aid to the families of the missing Tinma villagers, also emphasised the importance of accountability. "It isn't acceptable just to say the villagers are missing, because several people saw the Tatmadaw detain them," he told Al Jazeera. "Conflict actors need to build trust beyond just talking about the national peace process."

Since mid-November, fighting between the AA and Tatmadaw has eased and an informal ceasefire is in place.

Dialogue is now taking place for the first time since December 2019. Tun Win, the Kyauktaw township legislator, emphasises the urgency of achieving justice for the Tinma villagers and others affected by human rights abuses in the state. "I welcome peace negotiations," he said. "But if the perpetrators have impunity, it will be difficult to achieve sustainable peace."

For the families of the missing, the current absence of clashes offers little solace. "Although the AA and Tatmadaw have stopped fighting for two months, we haven't heard anything about our villagers' case," said Bo Aung,* whose son is among the missing.

Ma Nway said she lies sleepless at night, worrying about her husband and fearing for her and her children's safety and survival. They were unable to harvest their paddy fields this season and are living on 15,000 kyats ($11) a month in food aid. Ma Nway wants to go home but still fears the soldiers stationed near her village. "As long as they are staying there, we won't be safe," she said.

**Pseudonyms have been used to protect the security of witnesses.*

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in Al Jazeera on January 1, 2021, and supported by Pulitzer Center. Original link, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/20/in-myanmars-rakhine-families-of-the-disappeared-seek-answers

8

As conflict drags on, women in Rakhine State place their hopes in the Arakan Army

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing Emily Fishbein (1.21.2021)

Yangon - One night in early April, Soe Sandar lifted her two daughters into a small rowboat, holding them close as her husband pulled the oars through the still water. Their ears ringing from the artillery explosions of just hours before, they were careful not to leave a trace as they disappeared into the darkness.

Now crowded into a bamboo shelter in a community-run displacement camp in Myanmar's westernmost Rakhine State, they are among more than 240,000 people civil society groups estimate to have been displaced since late 2018 by fighting between the autonomy-seeking Arakan Army and Myanmar's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw. Since mid-November, fighting has gone quiet as the warring parties engage in dialogue for the first time since December 2019, but the situation remains delicate, according to the International Crisis Group.

Soe Sandar wants peace as soon as possible. She is also among many Arakanese, also known as ethnic Rakhine, placing her trust in the Arakan Army. "I want to get the state back in our own control,"

she said.

Until fleeing her village in Rakhine State's central Ann township, Soe Sandar, 32, passed the seasons farming rice and fishing in a nearby stream, while raising her two daughters, now 7 and 4. Her life abruptly changed in January, with the arrival of Tatmadaw soldiers.

The soldiers set up camp in the school and monastery and announced a 5PM to 7AM curfew. Soe Sandar and her family retreated to a makeshift dugout next to their home, not daring to emerge even during the day, and eating only rice. "All the time, we watched the soldiers carefully, and hid to save our lives," she said. At night, they huddled sleeplessly as artillery thundered, praying that by morning, the soldiers would be gone.

The soldiers stayed for several weeks though, and returned later in the month, staying for another two days. Even after that, life didn't go back to normal. Nightly artillery fire continued, while jet fighters crossed the sky during the day. Villagers stopped fishing in the stream or going outside after dark, and, fearing landmines, stopped foraging in the hills too. Relatives phoned, advising Soe Sandar to leave.

"I wasn't safe physically or psychologically," she said. "But I love my home and village, and we didn't have money to live anywhere else, so we stayed."

In April, as Soe Sandar and her husband sat talking, artillery fire ripped through the evening, hitting a nearby home. She gathered her children and ran to the monastery, joining others taking shelter. "I saw light all around us and felt like our eyes and ears would explode," she said. "People were crying and praying it would stop. That night, I thought I wouldn't be alive when the sun rose." Soe Sandar didn't wait to find out. At 4 AM, the family crept through the dark, boarded their rowboat, and left.

The incident cemented her hatred of the Tatmadaw. "We didn't have arms and they bullied us with weapons," she said. As rice runs out in the camp and the conflict drags on, she doesn't expect the government to protect her, either. Instead, she wants to see the

state governed by the Arakan Army.

The AA, established in 2009, is the latest of numerous ethnic armed organizations which have rebelled against the central government over the past seven decades. Several factors have accelerated support for the AA, but Arakanese resentment toward a government dominated by the country's majority ethnic Bamar traces back to the Burmese empire's eighteenth-century conquest of a prosperous Arakan kingdom on the Bay of Bengal.

While since 2011, Myanmar has undergone a political opening following a half-century of military rule, Rakhine State has been torn by violence and left underdeveloped, despite its strategic location and its offshore oil and gas reserves. As Myanmar and China move forward on multibillion-dollar deals supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative, Rakhine remains among Myanmar's poorest states, and large swathes lack electricity.

The state has also seen successive waves of violence over the past decade. Deadly 2012 clashes in central Rakhine between Arakanese, who are predominantly Buddhist, and Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslim, resulted in the state-sponsored confinement of more than 100,000 displaced Rohingya into camps, where they remain today. In 2017, more than 730,000 Rohingya fled northern Rakhine for Bangladesh following a Tatmadaw campaign of rape, arson and killing, for which Myanmar now faces international charges of genocide.

Historic democratic elections in 2015 saw a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. But in Rakhine State, boosted by ethnonationalism, the Arakan National Party swept most of the votes. When the NLD appointed its own member to lead the Rakhine State legislature, many Arakanese felt the ANP had been robbed of its electoral success.

Tensions intensified in January 2018 when the government cancelled a march to commemorate the fall of the Arakan Kingdom, and police opened fire on those protesting the cancellation, killing seven. Two months later, a prominent Arakanese politician

received a twenty-year sentence for treason and incitement, in relation to a speech in which he accused the Bamar people of treating the Arakanese like slaves and declared his support for armed rebellion.

"The actions of the government toward Arakanese people haven't changed when comparing the prior administration with the current one," said civil society worker and activist Htoo Htet Naing. "Burmese leaders haven't sufficiently tried to understand our history, values or identity."

In January 2019, the AA launched coordinated attacks on police posts in northern Rakhine. In response, the government ordered the Tatmadaw to "crush the terrorists." Rights groups and the media have since documented indiscriminate airstrikes, landmines, arson and forced disappearances, while Radio Free Asia has counted nearly 1000 civilians killed or seriously injured.

Although the Tatmadaw has not claimed responsibility for civilian casualties, it has long attempted to deprive ethnic armed organizations of food, funds, intelligence and recruits through directly targeting civilians.

Thandar Khaing, 22, wants to join the AA to protect herself and stand with the Arakanese people -- and also, to avenge Tatmadaw violence. "If I die, I want it to be fighting against [the Tatmadaw]. I want to be proud of my death," she said. Since 2015, when she was a university student, she has enlisted in the AA three times, but relented following her mother's pleading. She said she plans to try again.

She joins increasing female interest in joining the AA, according to a 2020 November article in The New Humanitarian, which notes poverty, physical insecurity and experiences with military violence as key drivers.

Although fighting has not yet reached Thandar Khaing's village in the state's central Ponnagyun township, she said the village was being administered by the AA. In the past two years, government administrators across the state have resigned en masse, allegedly due to fears of being accused of supporting the AA.

Thandar Khaing said that until mid-November, she heard artillery fire nightly, and that Tatmadaw soldiers sometimes camped in her village. "At those times, no adult girl stayed. We fled before they arrived," she said. "I don't want to see any Burmese Soldiers. I really hate them."

She also feels the government has neglected the Arakanese people. It has restricted internet services to more than one million people in conflict-affected areas since June 2019, allegedly as a counter-terrorism measure, and placed curbs on humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas for nearly two years.

Weeks before national elections on November 8, the government-appointed election commission cancelled voting across most of the state, citing the conflict. Although the NLD repeated its 2015 national victory, it again lost to the ANP in Rakhine State, even though voting did not occur in most ANP strongholds.

Helped by diplomatic engagement by Japan's special envoy to Myanmar, the AA and Tatmadaw have expressed a shared interest in holding elections across the state by the end of 2020. Although this goal was not achieved, no clashes have been reported since mid-November, and the two sides have since engaged in several rounds of discussions.

On January 1, the AA released six hostages and extended a two-month unilateral ceasefire, but also mentioned it would take "decisive defensive actions" if attacked. Meanwhile, the government has not lifted a terrorist designation it placed on the AA in March, leaving the AA excluded from the Tatmadaw's coronavirus ceasefire across the country.

Thandar Khaing said the exclusion of most of her state from voting pushed her farther from interest in electoral politics and closer to the AA. "I hope to get back our state, and for the AA to govern all aspects of our affairs," she said. "The AA is defending our people daily and working for our people. I trust that they can govern every sector better than the Burmese government in our state."

Hnin Phyu, 25, shares a similar faith in the AA -- and hatred of the Tatmadaw. Her husband was killed earlier this year, leaving her

alone with a young child. While no one claimed responsibility for her husband's death, his body appeared at the hospital mortuary a day after he was allegedly arrested by the Tatmadaw and police. No investigation into the death has occurred to her knowledge.

"After my husband died, all my hopes became meaningless," she said. "I don't know how to survive, and I am especially worried about our child's future."

According to a tally in October by Radio Free Asia, Hnin Phyu's husband is among 32 people who died in custody since early 2019, with some of the bodies handed over to hospitals and police stations by the military's interrogation center.

Hnin Phyu hopes the AA will protect and represent the Arakanese people. "I trust the AA...They are working for our people to escape from Burmese government and Tatmadaw control," she said. "I believe the AA can bring peace, prosperity and freedom for our people."

Support for the Arakan Army is criminalized in Myanmar. Soe Sandar, Thandar Khaing and Hnin Phyu for their security were anonymized. This was originally written for The Economist, but due to the military coup, and the changing political climate of Myanmar, canceled for publication.

PART TWO

The Coup

9

Myanmar's Military Didn't Just Overthrow Aung San Suu Kyi's Government. It's Cracking Down on All Forms of Dissent

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By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, TIME, 2.2.2021.

Just before 5 a.m. Monday, three officers from Myanmar's national police force showed up at Po Po's home in Yangon. The officers, two of whom carried rifles, asked for her husband Min Thway Thit, a former leader of a prominent dissident student union. "They said they wanted to ask some questions," says Po Po. "I asked whether they had a search warrant to enter his room, and they told me it wasn't necessary."

Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, staged a coup against the democratically elected government of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday, February 1, 2021. She and more than 40 government officials from her National League for Democracy were arrested and the military declared a yearlong state of emergency under the leadership of Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The military did not stop at arresting politicians associated with

the ruling government, however: Min Thway Thit is one of 16 members of civil society, including prominent dissident activists, writers, a musician, a filmmaker and two monks, who were also detained, according to a list compiled by U.S. government-funded Radio Free Asia.

Po Po says she doesn't know where police took her husband, and she has not heard from him since police took him away. "They didn't tell me anything about why [my husband] was arrested," she says. "They told me they had some questions to ask him, and they said that I should prepare some clothes for him and other personal items."

For many activists and journalists, these arrests were a sign that the coup went beyond unseating Aung San Suu Kyi and her party—it is an attempt to crush the fragile political liberalization that the military junta itself had opened the door to following its oppressive rule from 1962 to 2011.

ACTIVISTS LIVING IN FEAR

After Aung San Suu Kyi was released from 15 years of house arrest in 2010, young activists pushed to expand freedom of expression and fought to improve civil rights and the rule of law, hoping to move the country on from the decades of censorship and arbitrary detention enforced by the military. Now, they fear what comes next.

Thet Swe Win, an activist who works to promote peace and interfaith harmony, says that he and most fellow activists in Yangon have left their homes and gone into hiding. "This is a really threatening situation for human rights defenders and all political activists. We will be the first targets," he says.

Others have already ended their work, at least temporarily. "I resigned from my position, since the work I am involved in is sensitive from the perspective of the military," says a civil society worker advocating on human rights issues in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. He spoke to TIME on the condition of anonymity, fearing ar-

rest. "We are like birds in a cage; anyone can be arrested....anything can happen under this military regime."

The military's seizure of power came just hours before parliament was set to convene for the first time since national elections in November 2020. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won by a wide margin, but the military has repeatedly alleged voter irregularities and contested the results—even though international observers have said the election was without major irregularities.

Bo Kyi, Joint Secretary of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a rights organization based in Yangon and Thailand that was founded by former political prisoners, says that it is the "military's nature" to restrict civil society and the media. "Later [the military] will target civil society and impose more restrictions. We cannot expect much from them regarding respecting human rights and the rule of law."

Media workers are also concerned. "I am really worried about freedom of expression, because it will be the first thing the military will attack," says a Yangon-based filmmaker who spoke to TIME on the condition of anonymity because she feared arrest. Some of her friends, she says, have moved to undisclosed locations for their safety, while she had lost contact with others.

Hours after the coup, a photojournalist was beaten up in downtown Yangon while he was filming a pro-military celebration. A freelance journalist who works under the pseudonym Cape Diamond tells TIME from the capital Nay Pyi Taw on Tuesday that he was concerned for the safety of journalists working in the field. "It will be a big loss for all of us if journalists don't continue their reporting due to fear of action against them," he said. "I am afraid journalists might censor themselves."

MYANMAR'S FLAWED POLITICAL TRANSITION

Aung San Suu Kyi became a global human rights icon following pro-democracy uprisings in 1988, but her reputation fell interna-

tionally when she defended military atrocities committed against the mostly-Muslim Rohingya population of Rakhine State—which United Nations investigators say were carried out with "genocidal intent." Although the majority of people in Myanmar are fiercely loyal to her—her party won 80% of the popular vote in November, with many seeing her as the antidote to military rule—some activists have protested the erosion of civil liberties and human rights during her term.

As of December 2020, there were more than 600 political prisoners across the country, including 42 serving prison sentences, 196 awaiting trial in jail, and 363 awaiting trial outside according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). Although the NLD had vowed in 2016 to formally define the term political prisoner and refrain from arresting anyone for political activities, it did not deliver on these promises, and itself filed more than 250 lawsuits against those who criticized it.

The government also failed to hold the military accountable for systematic violence against civilians from ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya. Since June 2019, the government also imposed the world's longest internet restrictions over areas of Rakhine and Chin States.

"We have already been facing ongoing human rights violations, and now we will continue to face them," says Thinzar Shunlei Yi, one of the country's leading youth activists and the host of a TV youth dialogue series. "Human rights defenders were always targeted and activists arrested. The group who arrests them will change, but the arrested people will remain the same."

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Thinzar Shunlei Yi hopes the coup would draw attention to the flawed military-drafted 2008 constitution that enshrines the military's dominant role in Myanmar's politics . The constitution gives unelected members of the military 25% of seats in national

and state legislatures, making amendments impossible without military support. It also mandates that the Commander-in-Chief appoints key ministerial positions and allows the military to take over in times of emergency. Although the NLD government had made constitutional reform one of its key campaign promises in 2015, it was unsuccessful at pushing through meaningful results.

As of Tuesday, streets remained quiet, while activists told TIME they were assessing the situation carefully. On Tuesday afternoon, a group of youth activists known as the Yangon Youth Network released a statement announcing the launch of a civil disobedience campaign in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar's two largest cities. Youth activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi tells TIME it will be a "non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaign launched by youth in Mandalay and Yangon to attack the military junta nonviolently." It remains to be seen, however, whether the kind of large-scale protests seen in 1988 and 2007 will follow.

Many activists interviewed by TIME issued a plea for solidarity from the international community, and swift actions to condemn the coup and punish the perpetrators.

"We need support, including emotional support, because the situation is really devastating. For us, the younger generation, it is the first time [to experience a coup]...It is shocking," says the Yangon-based filmmaker.

Ye Wai Phyo Aung, founder and research manager with the freedom of expression group Athan, said he is determined to push forward as an activist. "I am still hoping for democracy, freedom and human rights," he said. "I will not give up in the struggle. We must believe in ourselves that we can overcome this hardship."

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in TIME Magazine on February 2, 2021. https://time.com/5935193/myanmar-coup-crackdown-democracy/

10

Myanmar Minorities Fear Renewed Violence After Military Coup

Armed forces are notorious for their brutality and their chief led the brutal 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein (Al Jazeera, 2.5.2021)

The Myanmar military's coup on Monday sent shockwaves across the country, bringing back memories of half a century of crushing isolation under direct military rule. Perhaps nowhere was the fear more intense than among the country's persecuted ethnic minorities.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, a man UN experts have said should be investigated for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity along with other senior officers, is now the country's leader and has declared a state of emergency for one year.

"Now, those in power are holding weapons," said Moe Moe Htay*, 28, an ethnic Arakanese mother who fled fighting between the military, known as the Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group, in 2019. "I worry we will return to the past military era."

Under the military regime, which ruled from 1962 to 2011, the Tatmadaw ruthlessly went after civilians in areas where ethnic armed organisations were fighting rebellions. Systematic rights abuses including extrajudicial killing, sexual violence, torture and forced recruitment led millions to flee the country.

In 2011, Myanmar began a transition towards semi-civilian rule and in 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won the elections by a landslide, allowing her to become the country's de facto leader.

Under a military-drafted 2008 constitution, her civilian government was left sharing power with the Tatmadaw, but across the world, many had faith the global icon would stand firmly on the side of human rights.

Instead, Myanmar experienced what UN experts have called a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". In 2017 the Tatmadaw launched "clearance operations" against the mostly Muslim Rohingya of Rakhine State which left at least 6,700 dead and 740,000 seeking refuge in Bangladesh.

Just a month later, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing told the media that the Tatmadaw's operations against the Rohingya were "unfinished business.

A UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission report released in August 2018 recommended Myanmar's top military generals, including Min Aung Hlaing, be investigated and prosecuted for genocide over the Rohingya crackdown and for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States.

"Military necessity would never justify killing indiscriminately, gang raping women, assaulting children, and burning entire villages," the report found.

"They are shocking for the level of denial, normalcy and impunity that is attached to them. The Tatmadaw's contempt for human life, integrity and freedom and for international law generally, should be a cause of concern for the entire population."

As of January 2021, the UN considered more than 300,000 civilians to be internally displaced in the country, including 129,000

Rohingya forcibly confined to camps in Rakhine State since 2012 and more than 100,000 ethnic Kachin and Shan who fled conflict in Myanmar's north beginning in 2011.

FORCED OUT

A local civil society group estimates that around 180,000 remain displaced by conflict between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army in Rakhine State, many uncounted by UN agencies, while since mid-December 2020, fighting between the Tatmadaw and Karen National Union led to at least 4,000 ethnic Karen people to flee their villages.

They remain stranded in the jungle and in urgent need of food and supplies, according to Zoya Phan of the Burma Campaign UK.

"Ethnic people have always been suffering grave human rights violations," she told Al Jazeera. "Now with the coup, it will be even harder for ethnic voices to be heard."

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government did little to stop the Tatmadaw or hold it accountable and at times even stood by its side, including in late 2019, when she defended the armed forces against charges of genocide at The Hague.

Her government also backed the Tatmadaw's counterinsurgency against the Arakan Army which began in late 2018. In addition to blocking aid to conflict-affected areas, authorities ordered the world's longest internet shutdown over parts of Rakhine State beginning in June 2019, leaving more than a million people without the ability to access or share information as the Tatmadaw committed widespread abuses against civilians.

Yet as bad as things were for ethnic minorities under the civilian government, many fear rule under the Tatmadaw could be worse.

"Before the coup, we were staying under the influence of the military in Rakhine State and I was really afraid when I saw Tatmadaw soldiers," said Khaing Linn,* an Arakanese IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camp leader. "Originally, we ran here because

we were afraid of the Tatmadaw. Now, they have full power. How will they react to us?"

RISKS TO AID

In addition to the prospect of escalating violence, IDPs' basic needs are also in peril. Less than a week before the coup, the UN and humanitarian partners had released their annual Humanitarian Response Plan, which called for $276m during the next year to support more than one million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Yet since the coup, several international aid groups have suspended operations while governments, including the United States, are reviewing assistance to Myanmar.

A United Nations spokesperson in Myanmar told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity that the UN "will continue to seek all possible ways to ensure that our humanitarian and COVID-19 related efforts continue to reach almost one million people" as outlined under the Humanitarian Response Plan. They said it was too early to comment further on the potential effect of the coup on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Even under the civilian government, aid was tightly restricted: according to UNOCHA, more than one-third of camps in Rakhine and Chin State were off-limits to all but a few aid groups while areas of Kachin State under the control of ethnic armed groups were also blocked.

Local civil society organisations, largely funded by international donors, have played a key role in accessing hard-to-reach populations, but the secretary of a Rakhine State-based civil society organisation, whose name has been withheld for his protection, said he fears that organisations such as his may now be extinguished, face difficulty reaching vulnerable populations or see their international donor funding dry up.

"I am concerned that if international assistance stops due to the military coup, it will have a big impact on displaced people," he

said.

"I am also concerned about the role of civil society, which has been working under the democratic culture. Now civil society organisations will only work according to [the Tatmadaw's] will. It depends on where they allow us to work ... we face an uncertain situation."

Moe Moe Htay, the 28-year-old Arakanese IDP, says the already meagre food aid she was receiving stopped abruptly with the coup.

"We are facing a worsening situation. Normally, some international NGOs support us with food, health and essential items ... they haven't come since the coup," she said. "I don't know what will happen next."

When it came to power in early 2016, the National League for Democracy pledged to make peace with ethnic armed organisations its "first priority", and over its five-year term, held four union-level peace talks aimed at bringing ethnic armed organisations into a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

FALTERING PEACE PROCESS

Although 18 ethnic armed organisations attended the first conference in 2016, the process faltered and several of the country's most powerful ethnic armed organisations boycotted the latest round of talks in August 2020.

The situation was further complicated by the Tatmadaw itself, which days after its proxy party suffered a crushing defeat to the NLD in November's election – a result it continues to challenge – announced its own peace negotiation committee running in parallel to the government-led peace process.

The Burma Campaign UK's Phan is calling on international donors to halt their funding to Myanmar's peace process, and instead demand the Tatmadaw immediately end its attacks in ethnic areas, allow humanitarian aid to displaced civilians and withdraw its troops from ethnic territory.

"The situation in ethnic areas never got proper international attention," she told Al Jazeera. "Peace can never be achieved under a military dictatorship. Displaced people in conflict-affected areas will continue to suffer under a military dictatorship and the civilian government, but the road to genuine peace is even further now."

She urged "strong international action" to pressure the Tatmadaw, including by sanctioning military companies and building support for a global arms embargo. "Lack of action from the international community has allowed the military to act with impunity. This must be stopped," she said.

For Hpung Ding*, a 23-year-old man in northern Kachin State on the China border, nearly 10 years of displacement has been enough.

"I have no idea about politics, but I worry that our situation as IDPs will be worse than ever," he said. In addition to concern that humanitarian aid will not reach his camp, which houses more than 8,000 people, he is also concerned that fighting could resume.

"How many more years do we have to stay in an IDP camp? How many years do we have to flee our villages?"

**Pseudonyms were used for Moe Moe Htay, Khaing Linn and Hpung Ding for security reasons.*

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in Al Jazeera on February 5, 2021.

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/5/myanmar-minorities-fear-renewed-violence-after-military-coup

11

Myanmar military tries 'divide and rule' in bid to cement power

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Ethnic minorities say they feel betrayed by politicians who have taken positions with the military's State Administration Council.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein (Al Jazeera, 2.15.2021)

Since seizing power from the elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, has been working to entice rival ethnic political parties into its new administration, in a sign of the divide-and-rule tactics it has long used to control the country.

Saw Mu Daw*, an ethnic Karen youth in the central Ayeyarwady Region, feels betrayed by the ethnic party he once supported.

Leading up to national elections in November, he and his friends went door-to-door campaigning for Mahn Nyein Maung of the Kayin People's Party, who was running for a seat in the national legislature.

Mahn Nyein Maung lost, but he has now joined the administration of the new military government.

"After he was listed under the new State Administration Council (SAC), [my friends and I] didn't dare to go out because we were so ashamed," said Saw Mu Daw. "Before the election, I wholeheartedly supported him, but I feel like he betrayed our Karen people."

So far, four ethnic party leaders who competed against the National League for Democracy (NLD) and were not aligned with the Tatmadaw's proxy party have accepted positions in the new military administration, of whom one has since resigned from his party. The SAC was formed the day after the Tatmadaw arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and dozens of elected party officials and declared a one-year state of emergency.

Since then, mass protests have erupted across the country. Hundreds of thousands have demonstrated and government workers across every sector have gone on strike. With few allies, the Tatmadaw has swiftly sought to win the favour of ethnic parties whose constituents tend to have strong dissatisfaction with the NLD.

"WE WANT BENEFITS FOR ALL PEOPLE."

Like many people from Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationalities, Saw Mu Daw supported the NLD during national elections in 2015. Many, including Karen, had hoped the NLD would advance their cause after decades of fighting for self-determination under a federal system.

The hope was not unfounded: Leading up to the 2015 elections, the NLD had pledged to advance peace with ethnic armed organisations and to reform a 2008 military-drafted constitution. But it was not to be.

"We strongly supported the NLD, but we didn't get anything back from them," said Saw Mu Daw. "That's why in the 2020 elections, we believed in our Karen people."

His dislike of the NLD, however, did not convince Saw Mu Daw that the Kayin People's Party, one of several Karen ethnic parties, would represent the Karen people by joining the military adminis-

tration. "We want equality. We don't want benefits for only a few people; we want them for all people," he said.

Since the coup, the majority ethnic Bamar, thought to make up more than two-thirds of the country's population, have largely focused their protest demands on freeing Aung San Suu Kyi and senior NLD officials and restoring the elected government.

Many non-Bamar ethnic people, in contrast, are demanding the overhaul of the 2008 constitution in place of one which is based on federalism. Even though they share a desire to bring down the military government, many feel that the coup underlines a problem between the NLD and Tatmadaw, and overlooks ethnic peoples' desire for federalism.

"Currently, I think Bamar and Bamar are fighting. They shout"People", but it doesn't represent the whole public...They shout "Democracy", but what kind of democracy do they mean?" asked Au Non,* an ethnic Mon youth.

On February 7, the Mon Unity Party (MUP), one of two large ethnic Mon parties, accepted the Tatmadaw's offer to join the SAC. The selected representative, Banya Aung Moe, told the local Mon News Agency that "no one accepts the military dictatorship," but that the party needed to "find a political solution at the political table for the federal union that the ethnic nationalities want."

He added that the party made its decision "by reviewing the attitude of the previous NLD government toward the Mon people."

Aun Non, who has been protesting with fellow Mon youth in Yangon against the coup, despises the Tatmadaw and looks with suspicion at its advances towards the Mon Unity Party. "I think they're trying to play the Mon party by focusing on Mon nationalism," he said.

Nonetheless, Au Non supports the MUP's decision to join the new military administration. "If the military succeeds in this coup, having a position is good, because we will be playing under the rules of the military constitution," he said.

"The military is powerful in Myanmar; therefore, joining with the military could be a strategy to give Mon people hope of federal

democracy and self-determination. For that reason, I support the Mon Unity Party joining with the military."

Thiry-one-year-old Mi Hong Chan, in contrast, firmly rejects the MUP's decision. "They should be standing with the other elected members of parliament and condemning the military coup, but now, they are acting like cowards," she said. At the same time, she acknowledges the party's rationale for accepting the seat. "I feel as if we are being betrayed, but it's also somewhat understandable. They were not prioritised or even given a chance by the NLD…[the NLD] had the attitude of winner-takes-all; it also became like a dictatorship."

'USING US'

Perhaps the fiercest opposition to the NLD in recent years has come from Rakhine State, in the country's far west. In 2015, the Arakan National Party won more seats than any ethnic party across the country and overwhelmingly defeated the NLD in the state.

The party's popularity fell further when the president appointed an NLD party member to the position of Rakhine State Chief Minister on coming to office in early 2016.

Animosity towards the NLD among Arakanese, also called Rakhine people, has increased even more in the past two years, which have seen intense armed conflict between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw.

The fighting has displaced more than 200,000 civilians, who have also experienced indiscriminate air raids, arson and numerous other human rights abuses.

Although the Tatmadaw committed the attacks, the NLD had given the order in early 2019 to "crush" the Rakhine rebels, and in June of that year also imposed internet restrictions affecting more than one million people across much of the state.

Leading up to November's elections, a government-appointed election commission cancelled voting across large parts of the state,

disenfranchising nearly three-quarters of eligible voters. Since coming to power, the Tatmadaw has jumped on the opportunity to use its power to try to win over the Arakanese people. On February 2, it lifted internet restrictions in Rakhine; 10 days later, high-profile Arakanese political prisoners were among thousands released in an amnesty.

On February 2, ANP spokesperson Aye Nu Sein accepted a position with the SAC and two days later, the ANP released a statement announcing that it would work with the Tatmadaw to resolve certain crises in the state.

An ANP Central Executive Committee member, who requested his name be withheld, told Al Jazeera he soon plans to resign from the party. "The ANP may think they can do something for the Arakanese people if they accept a position under the Military Council. It's a huge risk," he said. "The military is using us for the short term, but there won't be benefits for the Arakanese people."

On February 7, 47 Arakanese civil society organisations released a joint statement urging the ANP to cancel its decision and called on all parties, organisations and individuals not to cooperate with any administration that lacks political legitimacy and was formed without the people's consent.

"Previously, I thought I wanted the ANP to represent the Arakanese people toward a federal union. I realise now that the party that represented me is fake," said Aye Mrat Kyaw, director of the Arakan Civil Society Organization Network, one of the statement's signatories.

Although Aye Mrat Kyaw does not support the NLD government, she expects the situation for Arakanese people to be much worse under the military. "All people must stand as citizens without holding onto their parties," she said. "All people need to realise our common enemy."

**Pseudonyms have been used for Saw Mu Daw, Au Non and Mi Hong Chan at the interviewees' request due to the crackdowns on freedom of expression under the new military government.*

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12

"We Shall Not Surrender": Myanmar Rises Up Against the Junta

As the protests in Myanmar continue to spread, people are uniting against the military dictatorship.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, The Nation, February 15, 2021

YANGON—After five years of democratically elected governance, the people of Myanmar are not ready return to military dictatorship. Despite a curfew and martial law, hundreds of thousands of protesters are filling streets across the Southeast Asian country. From the largest city, Yangon, to the delta, mountains, and coasts, people from all backgrounds are shouting "Let the military fall!" and waving the three-finger Hunger Games salute that has become a symbol of resistance across Southeast Asia.

On February 1, the military seized power; arrested Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's civilian leader; and declared a one-year state of emergency. At first, people seemed shocked and afraid: They stocked up on food, withdrew cash, and stayed indoors. The next evening, they started banging pots and pans from their doorways

and balconies. A day later, a song—"Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" ("We Shall Not Surrender Until the End of the World")—reverberated through the streets of Yangon. A relic of the country's 1988 student uprisings, the lyrics are sung to the tune of Kansas's "Dust in the Wind":

We shall not surrender until the end of the world
For the sake of history written with our blood
Revolution
For the sake of the fallen heroes who fought for democracy

On February 6, activists began marching. By February 8, more than a hundred cities and towns had joined the movement. Protesters are braving not only sweltering heat, the coronavirus, and Internet blackouts but also armed police. Demonstrators have faced down water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Police have shot and killed one protester with a live round.

The people we interviewed span a range of ages, ethnicities, and political views, and in ordinary circumstances, they might struggle to agree on politics. Yet the desire to overthrow dictatorship has evoked a rare unity among the public.

"I don't want my children to grow up like I did in this country, to be afraid of people in uniform," said peace and interfaith activist Thet Swe Win. "I don't want to go back to the dark age."

By taking a leading role in the current protests, Thet Swe Win knows he is putting himself in danger. Like many other activists, he has gone into hiding. We interviewed him by phone without knowing his location. "No matter what risks I face, I will keep going for my children, the next generation, and the future of this country. I don't want to wait 20 or 30 years under the military. We must take action," he said.

From 1962 to 2011, the former military junta monitored people's speech and movements, silenced independent media, and suppressed the arts. In 1988, university students led hundreds of thousands in nonviolent protests against the regime, and in 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks peacefully demonstrated in a "saffron revolution." The military responded to both uprisings with killings and arrests, forcing thousands to flee.

"If we don't protest against military rule, the next generation will grow up with poor education, health, and governance systems like ours did," explained Su Chit, a 29-year-old human rights activist in Mandalay, who said she was demonstrating to prevent the country from sliding back into poverty and autocracy.

For La Doi in the Kachin State capital, the feeling was more visceral. "I have headaches just to imagine our future under the military regime," he said. "We will have to live in poor and desperate conditions, with no rule of law or human rights, access to justice, or decent livelihoods. We will live under coercion, forced labor, and structural violence. We don't want to return to that nightmare."

Zaw Htike, a trans man and LGBTQ rights activist for whom we're using a pseudonym for his protection, said the overthrow of the civilian government shattered his hopes as an activist. "Our efforts vanished like water falling onto the sand," he said, offering an old Burmese proverb.

Many protesters have rallied around Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been widely popular across the country since emerging as a pro-democracy figure during the 1988 protests. The military kept her under house arrest for 15 years, but facing global isolation, sanctions, and international pressure, it released her in 2010 and began a series of political reforms, eventually holding elections in 2015. The military-drafted Constitution, passed hastily in 2008 while the country was still reeling from Cyclone Nargis, bars those with foreign spouses from serving as president, a rule designed specifically to exclude Aung San Suu Kyi. Nonetheless, the landslide victory of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party enabled her to assume de facto leadership.

In 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi's international reputation fell in the wake of the military's campaign against the Rohingya in northern Rakhine State. Amid mass killings, sexual violence, and arson, about 740,000 fled to Bangladesh, but rather than condemn the violence, Aung San Suu Kyi defended Myanmar against charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice in 2019. The case had little impact on her domestic popularity, and her party was easily

reelected in November 2020. The military seized power just hours before the new government was supposed to be sworn in.

Some protesters have goals that go beyond restoring Aung San Suu Kyi as head of the civilian government. Many want to overhaul the entire political system. When the military drafted the 2008 Constitution, it gave itself oversight over key ministries and veto power over constitutional amendments. The NLD had pledged to push through constitutional reforms during its five-year term, but military-appointed parliamentarians blocked the proposed amendments.

"The civilian government tried to face the military under the 2008 Constitution, and they lost. We must abolish the Constitution and create a new one based upon full democratic principles," said Wai Yan Phyo Moe, vice chair of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, which also played a central role in the 1988 protests.

Many among Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationalities, who largely live in seven ethnic states in the country's border areas, seek a new Constitution that would grant them federal rights. On the eve of Myanmar's independence in 1948, Aung San Suu Kyi's father had promised ethnic leaders a path to self-governance under a federal system if they agreed to join the new Union of Burma. He was assassinated months before independence was achieved, and the failure to realize his promise has sparked some of the world's longest-running civil wars. Aung San Suu Kyi's party pledged to prioritize peace and advance a federal system during its term, but made little progress.

Marching in the Kachin State capital, La Doi is among those demanding a new Constitution. Like many people pushing for federal rights for ethnic states, he wore black rather than the red associated with the NLD.

Naw Esther Chit, a Karen youth, said during the February 7 protests in Yangon that she sees the demonstrations as the extension of a 70-year struggle against military dictatorship which the Karen people have been fighting.

"I don't want oppressive nationalism. I don't want the major-

ity to oppress other ethnic groups," she said. "I want [the protest movement] to include our ethnic nationalities' demands.... I want the whole country to live in harmony and understanding with ethnic people."

For the more than 300,000 people who fled violence and live in camps, peace and safety are of critical importance. Demonstrating is not an option for many, already vulnerable and often living in isolated areas, but they are protesting in their own ways. Htu Bu, a Kachin youth who fled military attacks on her village nearly a decade ago, reached out to us from her displacement camp near the China border with a written statement and a request that her voice reach international readers.

"We want a true democracy, with justice and real peace," wrote Htu Bu. "It's been over 60 years that we [Kachin people] have been living with fear, suffering and hopelessness."

The Kachin, along with the Rohingya, are among several ethnic populations to have experienced extrajudicial killing, sexual violence, and torture at the hands of the military. In 2018, a United Nations fact-finding mission called for Myanmar's top military leaders—including Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who now holds power—to be investigated for war crimes and crimes against humanity in three states, including Kachin.

Now, people are demonstrating across more than 300 towns and cities, and a civil disobedience movement of striking government workers is rapidly spreading, bringing energy and hope to the public.

In the town of Tachileik near the Thai border, Ye Yint Thu, who requested we call him by his nickname, hopes to be the first in his family to grow up under a democratic system. In addition to joining the street protests, the university student, whose parents were jailed for their participation in the 1988 protests, has been banging pots and pans every night with his grandmother. "My grandma is very angry because she experienced the [1962] military coup, the 1988 protests, and now this. She despises military dictators," he said. "I am protesting, because I don't like dictators either."

13

Myanmar Politics Must Be Re-made, Not Restored

The growing democracy movement needs to look beyond Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD and listen closely to ethnic voices.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Frontier Myanmar Magazine (2.24.2021)

On the morning of February 1, my hopes disappeared when I learned that the civilian government had been overthrown in a military coup. Growing up under army rule, I did not have access to quality education or healthcare and couldn't use the internet until 2014. Terrified of the military, my parents always warned me to stay away from politics or activism. Now, I don't want the next generation to grow up like I did.

Yet while I strongly condemn the military takeover, I do not support the National League for Democracy, or a return to the way things were before. During the NLD's term, non-Bamar ethnic people like me continued to experience political and socio-economic exclusion, as well as human rights abuses from the military.

Fighting in my native Rakhine State over the past two years between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw was particularly severe,

and my family spent many nights hiding in a bunker next to our house. Sometimes they ran away from our village when soldiers were nearby.

Since the coup, the whole country has suffered the dangerous consequences of blocked internet access, but in my village in Mrauk-U Township, we were under an internet shutdown from June 2019 until recently. While living in Yangon for my studies, my family would call me daily for news and information they could not access due to the shutdown.

Although conflict between the AA and Tatmadaw escalated in recent years, civil wars between ethnic armed organisations and the Tatmadaw have gone on for more than 70 years in Myanmar. These conflicts have many roots, but one of the reasons they haven't been solved is the central government's failure to respect the demands of the ethnic nationalities, particularly for self-determination.

While many ethnic communities trusted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 2015 campaign promise to pursue peace during her term, and were optimistic that we would be listened to and our histories and identities celebrated under her leadership, many of us feel betrayed. Instead of respecting our diversity, her government built statues of General Aung San in non-Bamar areas, appointed its own party members to chief minister positions in all states and regions including Rakhine, where the Arakan National Party won the most seats, and engaged with China on mega-projects on our land, including the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone. These actions left many of us feeling like we were living under another form of dictatorship.

On top of this, the NLD failed to speak out against human rights violations committed by the Tatmadaw. I strongly disagree with Aung San Suu Kyi's defence of the military at the International Court of Justice against charges of genocide for their violent campaign against the Rohingya, and I also felt abandoned when she remained silent as the military committed alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Kachin, Shan, and my own Rakhine peopl.

In Rakhine, the NLD government took several actions that further alienated ethnic Rakhine people. It called for the Tatmadaw to "crush" the AA, imposed the world's longest internet shutdown, designated the AA as a terrorist organisation, excluded the AA from its landmark peace conference, and blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people. These actions did not only affect the AA but put the entire civilian population, including my own family, in danger. I cannot support a government that does such things.

Following the coup, I have joined many pro-democracy protests in Yangon. I believe the current moment offers not only a chance to fight against military dictatorship, but also to bring better understanding between the Bamar and other ethnic groups, so that we can join together to end the decades-long civil wars and build a federal democratic union.

I want to participate wholeheartedly in these protests. But when I stand amid the crowds, I feel a distance between us. Around me, people shout, "Release Mother Suu! Our cause! Our cause!" and, "Accept the 2020 election results! Our cause! Our cause!"

My ethnic nationality friends and I want more.

We want to end not only military dictatorship, but all forms of dictatorship. We want to abolish the 2008 Constitution, which allows the military to play a major role in politics and does not promote ethnic people's right to self-determination. We want to establish a federal democratic union. We want all political prisoners to be released. But when we shout for the causes, we believe in, I sometimes see fear and distrust on people's faces.

When I look online, I also at times feel disappointed. On February 17, the prominent activist group 88 Generation Peace and Open Society posted on Facebook that "hundreds of thousands are gathering to free Mother Suu". I agree that she should be released, but by focusing so much on this at the expense of the many other problems our country is facing, I fear that even if the protests succeed, our country could continue to suffer from civil war for decades to come and may again fall back under military rule.

There is cause for hope, however. Within the broader protest movement, some activists and protest leaders, including from student unions and labour groups, are standing with the ethnic nationalities; and since February 11, a General Strike Committee of Nationalities representing more than 24 ethnic groups have come together to protest.

If the coup fails and the elected government is restored, I hope the NLD will start on a new path towards a genuine federal democratic union. As long as they privilege the interests of the majority, our country will continue to suffer militarisation, violence and civilian displacement.

The current upheaval is devastating, but it also offers a great opportunity. As we join together in opposing military rule, we must also unite under a positive vision that values the rights of all. It is a critical moment in our history, and it must not be squandered.

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14

Myanmar's military sows fear and terror in nighttime raids

By David Pierson, Los Angeles Times, March 12, 2021. Special correspondent Kyaw Hsan Hlaing in Yangon contributed to this report.

SINGAPORE — Aung Ko Ko trembled with fear as the nighttime curfew wore on. He could hear the soldiers and police outside his window firing gunshots and ransacking his neighbors' homes in a Muslim enclave in the center of Myanmar's largest city, Yangon.

The uniformed gunmen skipped his door, but they didn't miss that of his longtime friend Khin Maung Latt. Security forces smashed their way into the 58-year-old's home, beat him and dragged him away.

The next morning, authorities told Khin Maung Latt's family to recover his body from a hospital. He lay draped in a bloodstained sheet. Deep wounds marked his hands and back, suggesting he had been tortured.

"No one feels safe," Aung Ko Ko, a Muslim activist, said of the recent raid. "Even if we stay at home, we can be arrested at night and dead by the morning."

Khin Maung Latt was the first of two civilian government officials to die in custody since Myanmar's military seized power in a coup Feb. 1. The other, Zaw Myat Linn, was killed after he was detained last week.

Their deaths are part of a growing campaign of terror by the junta to frighten and quell a widespread opposition movement at a time of deepening international condemnation against military rule. The generals have shown no signs of backing down even as the nation is gripped by unrest and its economy is in turmoil.

Each night, residents of towns and cities across the country of 54 million hunker down as security forces roam the streets like an occupying force firing their weapons indiscriminately and seizing suspects from their homes.

"Myanmar's military seems sadistically intent on breaking the nation's spirit," read an editorial written by staff at the English- and Burmese-language news site Myanmar Now, which was raided by soldiers last week in a crackdown on independent media.

People now refer to security forces as "terrorists," responsible for nearly 2,200 arrests and more than 126 deaths since the coup. Each day brings a deluge of images on social media of unarmed anti-coup protesters with gruesome fatal wounds. On Sunday, nearly two dozen civilians were killed in Hlaing Thar Yar, an industrial suburb of Yangon, after security forces fired live rounds at protesters.

Amnesty International said the country's military, known as the Tatmadaw, and the police, which are controlled by the generals, are increasingly unleashing battlefield tactics to suppress peaceful demonstrators.

The group released a report that examined dozens of videos shared on social media showing soldiers and police firing on civilians with combat weapons.

"The weaponry deployed by the Tatmadaw reveals a deliberate and dangerous escalation in tactics," Joanne Mariner, director of crisis response at Amnesty International, said in a statement. "Not content with indiscriminately using less-lethal weapons, each new day shows an apparent order to deploy semiautomatic rifles, sniper

rifles and light machine guns in increasing numbers. Make no mistake, we are in a deadly new phase of the crisis."

The United Nations Security Council condemned the military's deadly crackdown in a statement Wednesday, but fell short of threatening more action because of opposition from China, Russia, India and Vietnam.

Protesters in Myanmar, which is also known as Burma, have been calling on the U.N. to send forces, citing the organization's Responsibility to Protect principle to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. But analysts say opposition from two of the permanent members of the Security Council — China and Russia — will doom that prospect.

The Tatmadaw, whose origins date to Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, has a long history of brutality, engaging in civilian massacres and mass rapes. It crushed popular uprisings in 1988 and 2007 and drove hundreds of thousands of minority Muslim Rohingya into neighboring Bangladesh in 2017, killing thousands in clearance operations.

Many of those atrocities occurred out of sight. But the current crackdown is being captured on cellphones and posted online despite nightly internet blackouts.

"These Myanmar military tactics are far from new, but their killing sprees have never before been livestreamed for the world to see," Mariner said.

Violence is expected to grow as the crisis devolves into a war of attrition between security forces and an increasingly enraged populace, including feuding ethnic and religious groups, all united in hatred for the Tatmadaw. Protesters are torn between remaining peaceful and being more confrontational toward security forces, fearing the latter will spur a more violent response.

Residents of Yangon, which is also known as Rangoon, describe a city of increasing paranoia as soldiers, police and plainclothes security forces snatch people in the night. Authorities appear to be targeting officers belonging to the deposed ruling National League for Democracy party, protesters and members of the civil disobedi-

ence movement, which has stalled the country's economy and government functions.

The likelihood of de-escalation remains remote. The Tatmadaw views itself as the rightful defender of the nation's sovereignty and disdains the civilian government, with which it briefly shared power after democratic reforms in 2011 until last month's coup that led to the arrest of elected leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

"They believe only men in uniform can rule the country," said the son of a former Burmese diplomat who has family members who served in the Tatmadaw.

He spoke on condition of anonymity to protect relatives living in Yangon. Friends with links to the army told him Tatmadaw families have been ordered to move into military compounds. This is partly for safety as animosity toward them grows, he said.

Still, many children of military officers are supportive of the protests and have appeared at demonstrations, he said.

"These are war fighters," he said of the Tatmadaw. "They don't understand politics or a hearts-and-minds strategy. They only understand combat. They want people to fear them because they believe they will have peace if they can stop the defiance."

Maung Saungkha said that strategy will fail. The 28-year-old protest leader said the more the Tatmadaw resorts to terror, the more he'll resist.

"They're arresting people at night because they know what they're doing is illegitimate and unjust," said Maung Saungkha, who barricaded himself with others in the Sanchaung district of Yangon last week during a tense standoff with security forces.

The nighttime raids have been especially harrowing for members of the Burmese diaspora, many of whom feel powerless as loved ones are arrested, their fates left uncertain.

Ivy Nyo, a 25-year-old nurse in Peachtree City, Ga., learned from family members in Yangon that her uncle was taken by authorities from his home there March 6.

She said 20 armed men stormed her uncle's apartment building,

knocking on every door, looking for him. When they arrived at the fourth and final floor, they threatened to knock down the door because Nyo's aunt refused to let them in.

"My uncle went willingly because he was scared they would harm his family if he didn't go," Nyo said. "They let him take a jacket and his medication."

Nyo's uncle, who she said was approaching 70, was a low-level official for the NLD who helped count and verify votes in the November general election, which the Tatmadaw dismissed as fraudulent, without providing evidence.

"My uncle knew people in the NLD were in hiding, but he said he was so low on the chain that he didn't matter and didn't need to hide," Nyo said.

A cousin eventually found him at Insein, the infamous prison where scores of political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, have been kept. No one knows what Nyo's uncle has been charged with or if he'll be released.

Nyo, who left Myanmar for the U.S. when she was 10, has stayed in touch with elementary school friends in Yangon who now keep her abreast of developments in the protests and crackdown. At the end of each day, they erase their texts in case they're arrested and forced to reveal their conversations.

"It's devastating," Nyo said. "I can't stop crying. I just want someone to help. Please. People are being slaughtered."

15

The Myanmar Military is Trying to Divide and Terrorize the People. We Must Resist

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From the perspective of democracy and universal human rights, the common enemy is clear.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat, 3.19.2021

Since seizing power on February 1, Myanmar's military has inflicted terror across the country. As a youth, seeing my country fall under military rule is not only psychologically disturbing, but crushing when I consider the potential impact on my future and that of my generation.

Military and police forces have shot dead more than 200 people as of March 16, 2021. Soldiers are firing teargas, water cannon, and slingshots at protesters and beating people up, while some have been tortured. At night, they are arresting people from their homes, so we cannot sleep soundly.

In Yangon, where I live, citizen patrol groups ward off police and soldiers, but state forces have shot one night patrolman dead and arrested others on February 21, 2021. On March 7, authorities arrested a Yangon administrator at night; the next morning, he was

dead at a military hospital. A 17-year-old medical student was shot in my neighborhood on March 16; authorities beat those trying to help him and dragged away his body. Since March 7, martial law has been declared in several neighborhoods, including Hlaingthayar, where at least 38 people were killed on March 14 alone, amid mass gunfire and the burning of Chinese-financed factories.

The current situation is a replay of a nightmare from the recent conflict in my native Rakhine State, which I began documenting from Yangon in August 2020 as a freelance journalist. From December 2018 until November 2020, my state was locked in a civil war which killed more than 300 people and displaced more than 200,000. The military said it sought to destroy the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organization, but it used indiscriminate airstrikes and gunfire, among other forms of violence, on civilian populations.

During those two years, soldiers occupied schools and monasteries and arbitrarily arrested people, some of whom disappeared or later turned up dead, leaving locals afraid to engage in farming, fishing, or foraging for their livelihoods. Thousands of students were unable to sit for government exams, dashing their hopes of attending university. The government backed the military's actions by imposing the world's longest internet shutdown in much of the state, from June 2019 until February of this year, making it difficult for people to access information for their protection. Youth were arrested for protesting against the internet shutdown and the military's human rights abuses.

The horrors that the military inflicted in my state are now being unleashed across the country. As of March 16, the military junta has detained more than 2,100 people. Most of my friends demonstrate during the day and hide at night, sleeping in different places to evade arrest. Internet shutdowns have occurred nightly since February 15, and sometimes occur during the day, too, leaving us even more isolated and unprotected. Since March 15, the military has ordered telecoms operators to block all mobile data services indefinitely, and since March 18, has blocked public wifi networks as well.

I used to lament Yangon's noisy streets, but the current silence worries me more. Even the dogs aren't barking. When I go to the nearby market, I am always looking over my shoulder in case someone is following me. I used to meet my friends at the neighborhood teashop to catch up on the local news, but now, I don't know who might be listening in so I avoid it.

Trust is rapidly deteriorating as we fear that our own friends and neighbors could be military informers. We feel unsafe to make calls or send text messages in case the military might intercept them, and we avoid talking easily with strangers. Recently, I interviewed a woman in a rural area who told me she was primarily communicating by written notes.

Amid mass worker strikes and demonstrations, shops and businesses are closed, schools, hospitals and transportation services have shut down, and local administrators have resigned. My neighborhood market, once bustling with activity, is now nearly empty; the vendors who remain say they can barely afford the climbing costs of transporting their goods.

The military is also resorting to divide-and-rule tactics that have had deadly consequences in my state. It has long used propaganda and disinformation to sow hatred between the ethnic Rakhine Arakanese – my own people, who are predominantly Buddhist – and the mostly Muslim Rohingya. In 2012, when I was 16 years of age, clashes broke out which displaced approximately 140,000 people, mostly Rohingya, who remain in apartheid conditions today.

In 2017, when the military committed ethnic cleansing against Rohingya people in my state, the military fed us disinformation which contributed to many blaming the Rohingya for what was happening or accusing them of faking their victimhood, while the government blocked independent media access to the area.

During the conflict between the Arakan Army and military, the military and government used some of these same tactics to foster distrust between the majority Bamar people and we, Rakhines.

Since the coup, the military has again been spreading disinfor-

mation and hate content and has detained at least 39 journalists, of whom 22 have been released, 10 face charges of incitement, and five remain in custody without charge. It has also taken advantage of ethnic people's vulnerabilities to foster divisions and distrust and consolidate its power, such as by offering positions in its administrative council to ethnic political parties, including the largest party in my state.

While the military's preferential treatment of certain groups may offer some short-term benefits, in the long term, military rule will unequivocally harm the whole country, including both ethnic Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic peoples. From the perspective of democracy and universal human rights, the common enemy is clear.

As the military attempts to try to terrorize and divide us, the people across Myanmar have shown creativity and courage in fighting back. During the conflict in my state, Arakanese people banged household items to ward off military violence in our villages; now, the practice has become a nightly occurrence across the country, accompanied by songs of resistance against our oppressors. In Rakhine State, students bravely led protests against military violence and a government-imposed internet shutdown; now, students and youth across the country are on the front lines of the pro-democracy protests.

People are showing incredible generosity as well. In Rakhine, community members would commonly offer a safe place to stay or share meals with those in need. When I joined the protests recently in Yangon and the military threw teargas into the street, a family invited me into their home, offered me water and a place to wash my face, and told me I could stay as long as I needed.

The military has decades of experience killing, torturing, and arresting innocent people. We must not let these tactics break us down or fall to the hatred and distrust they are attempting to foster. To overcome this dark period, we must unite in our quest for democracy and must work tirelessly to establish a new society – one that includes the voices of all people and promotes equal rights and justice without discrimination.

This article was written with support from Emily Fishbein, originally published in The Diplomat on March 19.2021.

16

Idle businesses, uncollected taxes. How Myanmar is tumbling toward a 'failed state'

BY DAVID PIERSON, KYAW HSAN HLAING, MARCH 28, 2021 11:17 AM

YANGON, Myanmar — The roads were clear of cars, restaurants sat empty behind metal gates, and convenience stores, the nerve center of so many neighborhoods, remained silent and dark.

It was a scene repeated across Myanmar on Wednesday as anti-coup protesters called for a "silent strike" to increase pressure on the military government, which seized power last month and, since, has killed more than 420 civilians, including at least 114 Saturday in a spasm of violence that also left several children dead. The strike, part of a widespread civil disobedience movement that includes rail workers, bank employees, doctors, factory laborers and even diplomats, is designed to cripple Myanmar's economy in hopes of fracturing the junta and denying it legitimacy.

Taxes are being left uncollected. Many banks are unable to send and receive funds. Trade has been paralyzed by a lack of customs agents and striking truck drivers. The country of 54 million is spiraling closer to a "failed state" or "civil war," analysts for Eurasia

Group said.

Whether Myanmar collapses could depend on the staying power of the civil disobedience movement, which has been condemned by a flustered military that has responded by arresting and targeting those involved. Earlier this week, striking railway employees and their families were evicted from state housing.

The walkouts and economic disruption are born of desperation. But the campaign is a risky gambit in one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in Asia, a nation that was already reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Push too hard, and the movement not only punishes the junta but also civilians struggling to survive.

The United Nations World Food Program warned this month that rising food prices triggered by the crisis might increase hunger among the millions who live meal-to-meal. Migrant workers are reportedly fleeing factory districts in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, in droves because they can no longer find work and are being terrorized by security forces. The World Bank said Friday that Myanmar's economy was set to contract 10% this year, a reversal from its last forecast, in October, of 5.9% growth.

Opponents of the military dictatorship, including remnants of the deposed civilian government, see choking the economy as their best weapon. It is highly unlikely the U.N. will intervene with force despite rising international condemnation over the junta's brutality.

Sanctions have proved ineffective in the past. Powerful neighbors such as China and India are more concerned with their regional influence than restoring democracy in Myanmar. And the military, known as the Tatmadaw, has shown no significant signs of rifts within its ranks that could reverse its power grab.

"It's better to die than live under a military regime," said a foreign ministry official supportive of the civil disobedience movement who spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect his family. "We have nothing to lose. We've already lost everything. We have no education system, no healthcare, no economic equality. What future is there?"

That's not how things looked a decade ago when democratic re-

forms ended nearly 50 years of military dictatorship in a country ravaged by civil war, ethnic strife and the painful legacy of British colonialism. Foreign brands like Coca-Cola and KFC poured into Myanmar, which is also called Burma, viewing it as one of the last frontier markets left to tap in Asia. The garment industry sparked a boom in exports. With access to the internet, a generation was being raised free from isolation.

Progress was slow. Armed conflict still marred swaths of the country. Infrastructure such as roads and electricity remain woefully inadequate. The civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since the Feb. 1 coup, often prized loyalty over expertise. And the Tatmadaw's leadership carved out business empires to enrich their families and cronies, partnering with foreign companies such as Chevron and Hilton.

Yet hope persisted. The country's economy grew apace, providing migrants such as Soe Soe New a way out of poverty.

The 26-year-old left her war-torn state of Rakhine in western Myanmar five years ago and found steady income as a garment worker in Yangon, earning more than $200 a month, enough to support her parents back home. The pandemic put an end to her good fortune. As foreign brands canceled orders, jobs began to disappear. Her monthly income dwindled to $85. Things have only gotten worse since the coup. She's now trying to make $34 last until she can find a new job.

"I'm upset because I came here to work for my survival, and now there isn't any work," Soe Soe New said. "Most of my friends have had to go back to their villages. I may also have to go back home if the situation continues getting worse."

Soe Soe New said she'd had little time to reflect on the civil disobedience movement, which is known more commonly as CDM. "I have to consider myself first," she said. "If we don't work, we don't get money. I need to support my parents."

Kyaw Nyant, a 67-year-old street vendor in Yangon who belongs to a generation of migrants from the Irrawaddy delta who fled the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, sympathizes with the anti-

coup protesters defying the junta's violent crackdown. But the fruit and vegetable seller declined to share his views on the CDM.

"When I was young," he said, "I saw many people who were killed just for talking politics."

His concern is securing enough food and medicine. He earns only $3 a day, about half of what he needs to make ends meet. Gone are the donations of rice and cooking oil from the former civilian government. He's had to rely on help from his children and older brothers to get by, though he's unsure how long that can last.

"I don't feel much of anything for the political movement because I have faced many difficult situations," said Kyaw Nyant. "The young people are protesting against the military regime to change their future and their destiny. They believe they are doing it to build a better society."

If that fails, Myanmar could face a crisis that resembles Syria's implosion, said a nongovernmental expert on conflict management speaking privately to avoid jeopardizing his staff in Myanmar.

"The worst case scenario would be a civil war," he said. "We could see the establishment of a parallel government that holds territory so that humanitarian relief assistance reaches some parts of the country but not others."

Such collapse does not appear imminent. Myanmar's thriving underground economy fueled by smugglers and traders along the border regions could allow the country to muddle through, he said. Others say the Tatmadaw will likely try to circumvent the damage to the economy by exploiting the country's abundant natural resources such as oil and gas, timber and jade. The military government already hastily organized a gems auction for next month to raise badly needed revenue.

"If we look at how the Tatmadaw ruled the country, it was by pillaging resources for funding," said Kevin Woods, an environmental expert on Southeast Asia at the University of Hawaii.

Foreign companies and organizations that gambled on Myanmar's resurgence over the past decade are now torn on whether to recognize the junta by paying taxes. Growing scenes of civilians be-

ing gunned down, tortured and beaten have made remaining in the country increasingly untenable.

Global Guardian, a McLean, Va.-based security services company with several major foreign corporate clients in Myanmar, has been organizing evacuations, first on commercial flights and, now, charter flights. Those journeys have been sporadic, delayed at times because there haven't been enough air traffic controllers or staff working at airport X-ray scanners, said Dale Buckner, the firm's chief executive.

One of Global Guardian's most coveted services amid the disruption to banking involves sending money through a broker in Singapore who has cash on hand in Myanmar so that employees can be paid. The deterioration of the economy and the rise in violence in the past two weeks prompted Buckner to warn his clients the crisis wouldn't resolve itself anytime soon.

"The panic is starting to truly set in," he said.

This story was written together with David Person, originally published in the Los Angeles Times on March 28, 2021.

17

Protests Unite Myanmar's Ethnic Groups Against Common Foe

The shared experience of military violence has shifted political objectives among the ethnic majority.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein, Foreign Policy 3.30.2021

Before the military seized power from Myanmar's civilian government in February, Wai Hnin Lae Phyu, a medical student in Yangon, didn't give much thought to her country's persecuted ethnic minorities. She had even dismissed their plight, including when the military launched a campaign of killing, rape, and arson against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state in 2017. But during the protests against the coup, Wai Hnin Lae Phyu has apologized for her apathy. "Many youths were sleeping before the military coup. Since Feb. 1, we woke up," she said.

Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, has killed at least 510 people and detained more than 2,500 others as of March 29, since it took power on Feb. 1 2021. Now terrorized by the military themselves, many people from the Bamar ethnic majority are developing a sense of solidarity with the country's numerous minor-

ity groups. Public apologies for years of indifference and denial of minority people's experiences have proliferated. "We have learned day by day, and our point of view has changed. We feel really sorry," said Yin Yin, a Bamar youth who worked as a hotelier in Yangon before the coup.

Many Bamar people also seem to be shifting their political objectives. Early in the protests, a split emerged between groups led by an older generation of protesters from the 1988 student uprisings who called for the release of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi and elected officials and a return to the previous system of governance and a diverse group of protesters who united under the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN) with more ambitious demands. The GSCN advocates for the abolition of the military-drafted 2008 constitution and the establishment of a new one based on federalism. These calls have rapidly gained momentum, especially among a young generation eager to make amends for past injustices and build a more equitable society.

Before the coup, military violence and government oppression of ethnic minorities evoked only weak responses from the Bamar public. Mass denial followed the 2017 campaign against the Rohingya, and only a few activists spoke out. When the Tatmadaw launched airstrikes in Kachin state in 2018 and the government blocked displaced people from safe passage or access to humanitarian assistance, there was little outcry beyond activist circles. The same was true when the government shut down the internet in Rakhine state and parts of Chin state from June 2019 until February 2021.

But the shared experience of suffering under military violence has contributed to shifting views among Bamar demonstrators. "Since the coup started, we all faced the same thing, the same tragic incidents all over the country," Yin Yin said. "It doesn't matter if we are Burmese, Kachin, Chin, or any ethnic group. As long as we are living in Myanmar, we have the same rights and we need the same freedom, so federal democracy is a must."

Under the 2008 constitution, the central government owns all land and natural resources across Myanmar and has the author-

ity to pass laws regulating their use and extraction. The president appoints the chief ministers of all seven ethnic states, excluding minorities from political decisions affecting their states and making them vulnerable to land and resource grabs. A new constitution rooted in federalism would begin to remedy these inequities, putting power in the hands of local residents. "Apologizing alone is not enough; we need to establish justice. For that, federalism is the most essential," Wai Hnin Lae Phyu said.

Ethnic minorities' struggle for federal rights dates to 1947. Eleven months before Myanmar gained independence from the United Kingdom, Gen. Aung San—the father of Aung San Suu Kyi—convinced ethnic leaders to join the Union of Burma with the promise of a path to federal autonomy. Aung San was assassinated in July 1947, and that pledge was never realized. Instead, ethnic armed organizations began fighting for federal rights shortly after independence, and they haven't stopped. The conflicts displaced hundreds of thousands of people as the military committed human rights violations against its civilians.

The government has long branded some ethnic armed organizations as unlawful associations or terrorist groups. Many in the Bamar majority bought into this narrative, bolstered by propaganda and disinformation. Under the military regime that ruled until 2011, independent media was heavily censored. Although press freedom improved relatively under Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the government still restricted media access to conflict-affected areas, including Rakhine state, and harassed and arrested journalists reporting on human rights abuses. The Tatmadaw continued to propagate false information and hate speech.

"Before, federalism was seen as the disintegration of the Union. … People in Burma proper perceived that federalism was not related to them, and it was only the concern of non-Bamar ethnic people," said Tayzar San, a protest leader in the city of Mandalay, which has a predominantly Bamar population. "Now, we have experienced arbitrary arrest, torture, killing, and beating under the military dic-

tatorship. We came to understand and develop more compassion for ethnic people's feelings."

Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's pledge to prioritize peace with ethnic armed organizations when she took office in 2016, her government's peace negotiations faltered. For the past five years, Myanmar's borderlands have seen clashes, displacement, and human rights violations. In 2017, the Tatmadaw indiscriminately targeted Rohingya civilians under the guise of counterterrorism operations, killing thousands and causing around 700,000 people to flee across the border to Bangladesh.

Following the Rohingya crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi's government blocked human rights investigators and dismissed survivors' allegations as fabricated . In September 2018, a United Nations fact-finding mission reported that the Tatmadaw had committed "massive violations" in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states and called for the prosecution of Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing—now leading the junta—and other top military generals for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The NLD government rejected the report, and in 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi defended Myanmar against charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice.

Until recently, the Bamar public largely rejected or ignored the mounting documentation of the Tatmadaw's abuses against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities in Kachin, Shan, Karen, and Rakhine states. When Aung San Suu Kyi appeared at The Hague, her supporters held large rallies back home. But since the coup, calls are growing for the international justice system to hold the Tatmadaw accountable for its current and past actions. "We were all brainwashed since we were very young," Yin Yin said. "The military did countless dirty acts and cruel things in the past 70 years. The [non-Bamar] ethnic groups have fought and faced it, and now we are all facing it."

Bamar people are also increasingly joining minorities in supporting ethnic armed organizations, hoping these groups can help counter the military regime through the establishment of a federal army, including combined ethnic forces. Representatives

from two of the country's largest ethnic armed organizations, the Kachin Independence Organization and the Karen National Union, have backed the idea of a federal army. In recent weeks, Bamar people have demonstrated alongside Kachin people with signs reading "We support KIO/KIA." On March 29, two days after the Tatmadaw launched airstrikes in Karen state, the GSCN called on ethnic armed organizations to collectively protect unarmed civilians.

Many members of ethnic minority groups have welcomed societal shifts toward ethnic unity and acknowledgment of minority people's experiences. "Kachin people have been protesting for more than 60 years," said a young entrepreneur in the Kachin state capital, who requested anonymity out of fear for his safety. "Most non-Kachin people didn't understand our protests. Now, since the coup, they [have] experienced for themselves the brutality of the military dictatorship."

Some young activists hope the protest movement shapes a more inclusive view of politics in Myanmar and believe the opportunity to build a federal democratic union is closer than before. Mi Vijaya, a civil society worker in the Mon state capital, initially did not participate in the protests against the coup because she doubted the majority would stand for ethnic minority rights. Since joining the GSCN, however, her hope has grown. "I believe the current demonstrations have brought unity among us," she said. "I believe we can bring systematic change if we work together."

As the Tatmadaw continues to commit mass violence with alarming inhumanity, this newfound ethnic unity remains a bright spot on an otherwise dark horizon. If the people of Myanmar succeed in restoring democracy, it will be with a greater sense that everyone deserves a share in it.

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in Foreign Policy on March 29.2021.

https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/29/myanmar-protests-coup-ethnic-groups-military-federal-democracy/

18

As Myanmar's Junta Intensifies Its Crackdown, Pro-Democracy Protesters Prepare for Civil War

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By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Emily Fishbein (04.6.2021). TIME

Before the Feb. 1 coup, Zarni Win* worked for a United Nations-funded committee that monitored a ceasefire between Myanmar's junta and ethnic armed groups. Today, the 27-year-old from Yangon, the country's largest city, is getting ready to enlist in one of those groups herself. "Now is the time to start preparing to eliminate the terrorist military," she tells TIME. "I am ready to join the armed revolution."

Myanmar is veering dangerously toward all-out civil war as the military, known as the Tatmadaw, terrorizes the public, and attacks restive ethnic territories. The U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, warned on Mar. 31 that "a bloodbath is imminent." In an online presentation cited by the Associated Press, she said civil war "at an unprecedented scale" was a possibility and spoke of Myanmar's deterioration into a "failed state".

Protesters in Myanmar have maintained a largely peaceful resistance to dictatorship since the coup ousted a democratically elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Millions of people have taken to the streets, and hundreds of thousands of government workers have gone on strike. On March 25, Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement was nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize—and just weeks ago, protesters were using creativity, humor and the arts to inspire solidarity and mock the junta.

Now, they feel compelled to take up arms against the junta's brutality. Since the coup, soldiers and police have shot dead more than 560 people, including at least 43 children, and more than 2,600 remain in detention according to the Assistance Association for political prisoners (AAPP) on April 4, 2021. Other detained people have been found dead with torture wounds. State forces have also exhumed and dragged away bodies and beaten people on the streets; on March 28, they burned a man alive.

Against this backdrop, the formation of a "federal army" among Myanmar's many ethnic groups is said by ousted lawmakers to be imminent, driven by the growing numbers of people who have given up hope of foreign intervention or a nonviolent domestic solution.

"Now, people are starting to realize we cannot wait for anyone; we will just have to continue moving forward by ourselves," says a national staff member with a U.N. agency, who spoke on the condition of anonymity as he is not authorized to talk to the media. "We can't just keep sending our young people out there to their deaths without any proper self-defense mechanisms."

To overthrow the generals, the country's ethnic minorities and the majority Bamar people would have to effectively overcome decades of mistrust and learn how to fight together. Longstanding promises of self-determination for minorities will also have to be honored if anti-coup forces manage to defeat the Tatmadaw. Increasingly, these are the bottom lines in Myanmar's struggle.

ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN MYANMAR'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE JUNTA

The Bamar comprise roughly 68% of Myanmar's population—with the rest made up of more than 100 ethnic groups—and have dominated politics and the military since the country's independence in 1948. Almost from the beginning various minorities took up arms against the Bamar, seeking self-determination under a federal union that promised them independence. The Tatmadaw responded by killing, raping, and committing other gross human rights violations against civilians.

Successive governments have cast the conflicts in ethnic areas as threats to national unity. When Aung San Suu Kyi, who is Bamar, came to power following democratic elections in 2015, she pledged to prioritize peace with ethnic armed groups and advance a federal democracy. But during her five-year term, she succeeded at neither.

As her government backed the Tatmadaw's actions and imposed restrictions on aid and Internet access in conflict-affected areas, the Bamar public largely remained loyal to her and silent to the plight of minorities. In fact, protesting the Tatmadaw's human rights abuses against the non-Bamar population became unpopular and controversial, especially if it meant taking a stand against Aung San Suu Kyi. The public made little effort to learn about minorities, either during her tenure of before. Doing so was difficult, in any case. Under the previous junta, which ruled from 1962 to 2011, there was little access to information outside of military propaganda.

But the Tatmadaw's use of violence across the entire country since the coup has sparked a flood of apologies from Bamar for prior attitudes and there has been an unprecedented outpouring of ethnic solidarity and appreciation for ethnic armed organizations, as people come together against a common enemy. In a major shift, Bamar youth, like Zarni Win, are traveling to border areas to join some of the largest ethnic armed groups.

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of ousted lawmakers attempting to run a parallel government to the junta, has helped pave the way for these changes. On

March 17, the CRPH released a statement announcing the public's right to self-defense. Two days later, they removed the designations of "terrorist group" and "unlawful association" from all ethnic armed organizations in the country, allowing for legal support of, and enlistment in, these groups.

"Now is the right time for armed rebellion, because the majority Bamar people have faced the military's brutal actions against protesters," says Seng Zin,* an ethnic Kachin youth. "Before, they didn't care about us, and sometimes even supported the Tatmadaw, but now, they've learned."

Not everyone is in favor of the apparent drift to civil war. Khun Thomas, an ethnic Karenni activist, fears that taking up arms will only worsen the situation. "Armed revolution would only shed blood and result in much damage," he tells TIME, calling for a continuation of nonviolent resistance. But such views have been increasingly pushed to the periphery—especially since March 27, when state forces killed at least 117 people in a single day.

Khin Sandar Nyunt, an ethnographer who has researched nonviolent protest in Myanmar, says the nation's bloody past must be taken into account when evaluating the tactics of passive resistance. In 1988 and 2007, the generals violently cracked down on pro-democracy uprisings. The bloodshed did not stop during Aung San Suu Kyi's term: in 2017, the Tatmadaw killed at least 6,700 Rohingya people, committing mass rape and arson.

"I believe in a nonviolent movement, but at the same time, in the Myanmar context, we need to be aware of the history and characteristics of the brutal military armed forces," she tells TIME. "We are rethinking again: 'Will only nonviolence be effective?' The armed forces we are facing now are really terrorists."

RESISTANCE BUILDS IN MYANMAR'S ETHNIC TERRITORIES

Until now, much of the battleground for Myanmar's struggle against the junta has been in its large cities, like Yangon and Man-

dalay. Bhone Kyaw,* 22, is among thousands of "frontliners" who have used their familiarity with the streets to launch guerrilla-style attacks on police and soldiers. Wearing helmets, gas masks and shields, they have been hurling homemade projectiles from behind makeshift barriers made of sandbags and debris.

But these days, Bhone Kyaw, who lives in Yangon, says the risks are becoming unbearable and he has stopped going out. "[Police and soldiers] use real bullets and attack brutally," he tells TIME. He is also worried that the strangers he sees on the streets could be informers. "I have shifted my housing to avoid detection, and I am trying to be strong."

Clashes, however, are rapidly escalating on the country's borderlands—even in areas that have not seen bloodshed for years—as the push against the junta converges with decades-long struggles for self-determination. More than 20 ethnic armed organizations are based in these areas, with their own territories and administrative structures. Collectively, they have troops numbering in the tens of thousands.

On Mar. 29, the General Strike Committee of Nationalities, one of the country's largest protest groups, released an open letter to ethnic armed organizations, calling on them to protect unarmed civilians with "collective leadership".

In a Mar. 30 interview with Reuters, the CRPH's international envoy confirmed plans for the announcement of a "federal army" to protect the people and ensure the establishment of a federal democracy. He said that if the international community failed to take action, civil war was "unavoidable" and a federal army was "the way we achieve democracy and freedom." A day later, the CRPH released a federal democracy charter and announced the abolishment of the military-drafted constitution that was in place since 2008.

Representatives from the Karen National Union and Kachin Independence Organization, two of the country's largest ethnic armed organizations, have voiced their support for the establishment of a federal army, while other formidable armed groups have threatened to take action if junta forces continue to kill protesters.

On the southeastern border with Thailand, fighting between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Tatmadaw has exploded. Since the KNU's armed wing captured a Tatmadaw base on Mar. 27, Tatmadaw airstrikes and attacks on areas under KNU control have displaced more than 15,000 civilians. On Mar. 30, the KNU announced that it had "no options left" but to confront the junta's threats in order to defend its territory, the Karen people, and their right to self-determination.

"Now is the time for a national-level armed resistance," says Karen activist Naw Esther Chit. She warns of "many casualties" but says: "We don't have another viable option."

A fragile stasis is also falling apart on Myanmar's northeastern border with China, where the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is based. After more than two years of relative quiet, the KIO's armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Tatmadaw have been clashing daily since Mar. 11, with local media reporting 28 Tatmadaw casualties on Mar. 28.

After the coup destroyed her plans to apply to international graduate degree programs, Seng Zin* recently followed in the footsteps of her father and brother and enlisted in the KIA.

"I wanted to be a professional in the education sector. In my township, a lot of people couldn't attend school and spent their whole lives fleeing [conflict] and working for their survival," says the 20-year-old. "I wanted to use my education to serve them, but now, my hopes and dreams are gone."

She says she will be fighting not only for the Kachin, but to end dictatorship and advance a new constitution based on federalism. Although wary of fully trusting Bamar people, she hopes that recent changes in Bamar perspectives can be channeled for the benefit of all and welcomes their participation in the struggle.

The ethnographer Khin Sandar Nyunt is meanwhile optimistic that the national upheaval can result in lasting ethnic reconciliation and political change. "One day, we will completely defeat the military junta," she says. "This will be a completely new and golden political future."

The U.N. worker also sees brighter days ahead. "Every now and then, I catch myself smiling because once this is over, we can actually rebuild a nation that is more socially conscious," he says.

"When we win the revolution, we are going to have a nation that is truly, federally democratic."

**Zarni Win, Bhone Kyaw and Seng Zin asked TIME to use pseudonyms, out of consideration for their safety.*

This article was written together with Emily Fishbein, originally published in TIME on April 6.2021. https://time.com/5951727/myanmar-military-protests-civil-war/

PART THREE

Faces of the Revolution

19

Medics risk lives to treat injured in Myanmar anti-coup protests

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Mobile clinics have been set up to treat the sick and those wounded in protests, but healthcare workers say their own lives are at risk.

By Nu Nu Lusan, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, Al Jazeera, March 3, 2021

Aye Nyein Thu finished medical school in Myanmar's central city of Mandalay less than a year before the military seized power in a coup on February 1.

Now, the 25-year-old is providing emergency medical assistance as state forces crack down on mass protests.

"Most [victims] had head injuries because police are using batons to beat protesters. Some people were shot as well," said Aye Nyein Thu, who estimated she had responded to 10 emergency cases as of March 1. "We are facing the most terrible situation."

Since the military arrested civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 40 elected officials and declared a year-long state of emergency, millions have taken to the streets across the country, while

approximately three-quarters of government workers are estimated to have gone on strike as part of a nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement.

With the demonstrations showing little sign of abating, authorities have turned increasingly to force.

They have fired live and rubber bullets, deployed water cannon and used tear gas and stun grenades on the crowds. The crackdowns have so far killed about 30 people and injured at least 200 more, according to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (AAPP), a monitoring group. At least 18 people lost their lives on February 28, a day the demonstrators have now dubbed "Bloody Sunday".

The Civil Disobedience Movement has hampered the formal health system across the country – one official from the Yangon General Hospital told Radio Free Asia on February 9 that as many as 80 percent of government hospitals had shut down.

To meet the public's medical needs, healthcare providers are now offering services voluntarily outside of government facilities, but the increasingly violent crackdowns mean many healthcare workers are risking their own lives to deliver life-saving treatment to those joining the protests.

"The biggest challenge is not to get shot when we help on the ground," said Ze Nan,* a volunteer nurse in the Kachin State capital, Myitkyina. "The bullets can hit us, too; we can also die anytime."

In Mandalay, which has seen some of the worst violence since the coup, Aye Nyein Thu is part of a team of about 30 volunteer healthcare professionals providing emergency response throughout the city. She has been walking among demonstrators with a backpack containing some basic supplies to stop bleeding and disinfect wounds.

So far, she has offered emergency first aid, to approximately 10 people and arranged for a volunteer ambulance service to transport victims to a clinic, also run by volunteers, for further treatment.

MEDICAL TEAM ATTACKED

Her group is one of at least six medical teams that are operating mobile or stationary healthcare services across the city, according to Kaung Khant Tin, a doctor who is volunteering on another medical team, which focuses on primary care.

He said that only one team has the facilities and human resources to offer stitches and critical care for those with serious injuries, while military-enforced road closures have hindered the emergency response.

On the morning of February 28, state forces fired at medical support cars, injuring one volunteer from the team which had been treating the most serious cases, a local journalist familiar with the situation told Al Jazeera. The team has since ceased its operations. "If the violence continues, we don't know where we should send our patients," said Kaung Khant Tin.

In the Kachin State capital Myitkyina, approximately 100 striking government nurses are providing first aid and basic services through mobile teams and are running a referral network to volunteer ambulances and doctors.

Ze Nan, leads a nursing team of approximately 40 volunteers, who walk along with the demonstrators – wearing white wristbands and stickers so they can be easily identified – and are followed by motorbikes carrying medical kits.

On February 28, as protest numbers swelled, Ze Nan's group bought its own phones and SIM cards and began distributing pamphlets around the city with their contact information in case of any emergency. Within hours, the team was treating head injuries from baton-wielding police beatings.

Along with the three other first responders interviewed by Al Jazeera, Ze Nan expressed concern about the high risk of physical danger. "They don't discriminate when shooting people. We can be shot to death whether we wear our badges or not," she said. "All the protesters can be injured or killed at any time, including me."

Pyae Zaw Hein, who runs a volunteer ambulance and first re-

sponder team in the southern city of Dawei, also worries he and his team members could be caught in the crossfire. With a supply of five vehicles, they maintain contact with the various medical volunteer groups to transport patients to facilities around the city where they can receive treatment.

On February 28, authorities shot and killed three protesters in the city, and one person remains in critical condition. Paye Zaw Hein and his group have continued to work, but he said they face a minefield of dangers and dilemmas, including whether to respond to emergencies during the night when the military has imposed a nationwide curfew.

"We don't know how to continue doing our jobs. If there is an emergency at night, we are so confused about whether we should go out to help or not," he said.

SURVEILLANCE

In the Mon State capital of Mawlamyine, Nai Aung,* a private-practice doctor, helped establish a makeshift health facility as strikes picked up the week after the coup.

But within days, he and other participating volunteers heard that authorities had obtained a list of their names and were monitoring their movements and activities. The volunteers immediately closed the facility and began moving from place to place, providing services at vacated medical facilities across the city, while volunteer ambulances began running between the protests and the temporary clinics.

"We are fine with all necessary facilities and equipment. The only difficulty is our safety. We could not find a base to treat patients. If we were able to build a base, [authorities] could destroy it any time," said Nai Aung.

He also fears that he could be arrested from his home at night or caught during the day. "We can't treat patients publicly; we have to move around and hide. There is no guarantee for our safety as our

names were disclosed and we are being watched by the police."

On February 28, authorities started firing live rounds in the city, killing one 21-year-old man. As of March 1, Nai Aung estimated that his team had treated approximately 50 patients with injuries sustained during the protests, including two police officers.

"We are treating everyone without any grudges or personal biases," he said.

Without access to proper medical facilities, however, Nai Aung says his team cannot effectively respond to patients shot in the head or neck, and is currently trying to coordinate referrals to hospitals in Yangon.

Crackdowns on protesters began escalating in Yangon on February 25, and on February 28, the Yangon General Hospital, which had been closed since February 8 due to the continuing strikes, announced it had opened its emergency department "out of necessity" to treat the wounded.

Doctors at the hospital treated 16 people, most with gunshot wounds, that day, while three people were pronounced dead on arrival.

In Mandalay, doctor Kaung Khant Tin said he planned to continue to provide medical services in whatever circumstances.

"We feel unsafe while treating patients. We worry about when [authorities] might threaten us or a gun may be pointed at us," he said. "Although police are getting more violent, we are still going to the demonstration sites with the mindset that we have to treat patients whatever happens."

"The fight is not over yet. The protests will continue and we will always support the protesters with the medical knowledge that we have," he added.

"I haven't seen any unity like this before. With this unity, we will definitely win."

**Nai Aung and Ze Nan are pseudonyms for those who felt unsafe to speak to Al Jazeera using their real names due to the military's targeting of those expressing dissent. All other interviewees have requested their real names be used.*

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"We Are Like One Group": How Myanmar's Pro-Democracy Protests Are Giving a Voice to LGBTQ+ People

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, TIME, March 5, 2021

Sue Sha Shin Thant, a transgender woman, has experienced a lifetime of discrimination and social exclusion in Myanmar, where LGBTQ+ people have no recognized rights or protections and the only words used to describe them in their own language are derogatory. Now, the Mandalay-based activist is among thousands of LGBTQ+ people marching under rainbow flags as they join mass protests against dictatorship.

Millions of people, according to some estimates, have demonstrated since Myanmar's generals seized power on Feb. 1, arresting civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 40 elected officials. The army has responded with violence, gunning down at least 61 people including at least four children. State forces have also beaten medics responding to the wounded, and arrested 1,500 people as of Mar. 3, taking many from their homes at night.

But, as protesters across the country join together to stand for

democracy, an opening has emerged to advance the long-term social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. In Yangon and Mandalay—Myanmar's largest and second largest cities—LGBTQ+ people are marching by the hundreds, and in other cities and towns smaller contingents are waving rainbow flags as well.

Before the coup, Sue Sha Shin Thant says she and other members of the LGBTQ+ community were often harassed and jeered at on the street. But during the protests, some members of the public have given her group flowers of appreciation.

"People see that LGBTQ+ people are brave and they applaud and encourage us," she says. "We receive love."

Maung E.B. is a transgender man who, like many people in Myanmar, goes by an abbreviated name. He leads around 15 LGBTQ+ people protesting in Monywa, a central city of 372,000. University protest groups have welcomed his smaller LGBTQ+ group into their fold and the protesters have shared meals together.

"Some people are interested to know what the [rainbow] flag is and some people are proud of us," he says. "We are like one group; we are not different. I am proud of being LGBT and I am proud of myself for participating in the protests. Our participation will be a landmark event for the next generation."

The protests have also given confidence to some who were not formerly connected with the LGBTQ+ activist community.

"While transgender people are the most visible," says Sue Sha Shin Thant, "hidden communities also supported the demonstration from behind and some joined in public protests as well."

Maung E.B. says he has seen many new faces. "When we hold our flag, some people have come to us and said that they are also LGBT, and asked to join us."

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MYANMAR'S LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Under the junta that ruled from 1962 to 2011, Myanmar suffered from severe isolation and underdevelopment, while civil society

was silenced and free expression forbidden. International media access was also blocked and SIM cards were kept prohibitively expensive, leaving LGBTQ+ people disconnected from each other and unable to access educational resources about sexual orientation and gender identity. Harassment and discrimination were commonplace.

"Before [free and fair elections in] 2015, people really couldn't accept the diverse expression of LGBT people; they would just say we were [living] unnaturally," says Ye Linn, a gay man who is a human rights advocate in Yangon. "Most LGBTQ+ people internalized the idea of being wrong people and accepted it; they thought they were abnormal."

Maung E.B. was derided and scorned by his family and community during his childhood and adolescence because he identified as male.

"My family told me that my being was shameful to them, that my behavior shamed our family's reputation," he said. "My teacher would tell me that I wouldn't pass the examination and that my type are not successful people. I cried but I tried to pass the examination without giving up."

Things began to inch forward after the country began its political transition. In 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy was voted into power. Civil society emerged, and LGBTQ+ people were newly able to organize awareness campaigns and community events and run training sessions across the country.

But discriminatory laws and policies and harmful social norms still linger today. Advocacy efforts to repeal a colonial-era law which criminalizes gay sex were unsuccessful, as were efforts to strike down a "shadow law" that allows police to detain anyone they accuse of acting suspiciously after dark. Police beatings, intimidation and harassment of transgender women has been extensively documented.

From schools to workplaces to religious institutions, no formal protections or accommodations exist for LGBTQ+ people. Jobs are commonly posted for a specific gender; students are required to

wear gendered uniforms at schools and formal ceremonies; and the rite of passage of becoming a monk or nun leaves no room for those who do not identify with their birth sex. Transgender women are heavily mocked in Myanmar cinema, and informally denied access to most professions beyond roles as makeup artists, sex workers and spirit mediums known as *nat kadaws.*

MYANMAR'S LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY VOWS TO FIGHT ON

During the first weeks after the coup, LGBTQ+ people were among many sub-groups of protesters marching under diverse banners, including those of professional, ethnic and other communities. Despite their grim predicament, many protesters wore colorful costumes and enlivened the streets with dance and music, bringing reverberations of hope. Some drew signs with humorous messages. Read one: "I want a relationship, not a dictatorship."

The situation has increasingly darkened, however, as the military and police become more and more callous in their use of violence. Between Feb. 9 and 20, state forces killed four people, including a 19-year-old girl in the capital city, Naypyidaw, and a 16-year-old boy in Mandalay—both shot in the head. Since Feb. 28, the bloodshed has rapidly escalated, with at least 57 people killed within four days.

Many activists around the country, fearing surveillance and arrest, have now fled their homes and are moving from place to place, staying with friends. LGBTQ+ activists are no exception. Sue Sha Shin Thant in Mandalay said authorities have called her friends asking for her whereabouts and visited her home, which she had already vacated. Ye Linn is also in hiding.

"This is our life. We are not secure anymore," he says.

But LGBTQ+ activists interviewed by TIME remain optimistic that if the pro-democracy struggle succeeds, rights and social acceptance for LGBTQ+ people will increase.

Protesting together has taught people "to see each other as humans regardless of sex, gender, religion or other factors" says Ye

Linn. "I don't know how this journey will go or how long it will take, but if we can win this fight, it will have a huge positive impact on diverse minority groups."

Sue Sha Shin Thant believes that when democracy returns to Myanmar, LGBTQ+ people will be rewarded for protesting against the coup. "In developing policies and laws, I am sure the government will consider LGBT people, and if not, we will fight for our rights."

In Monywa, Maung E.B. is also hopeful, but he cautions that a long road lies ahead. He says that he and his fellow activists are taking care not to do anything that could draw too much attention, emphasizing that their present aims go no further than the restoration of democracy. "We aren't demanding LGBT rights in this situation. We want to show that we have the same goal [as other protesters]."

He adds: "For the short term, the public is acknowledging LGBT participation in the movement, but in the long term stereotypes and discrimination against LGBT people will still exist. I think they will recognize us for awhile, but in the long run we still need to fight in order to eliminate stereotypes and discrimination."

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Sarong Revolution: Women Smash Gender Taboos to Fight Myanmar Junta

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By Nu Nu Lusan, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, VICE World News, March 8, 2021

Smashing a long-held cultural taboo around women's clothing in Myanmar, protesters opposing the coup waved flags made of traditional skirts on the streets of cities and towns across the country on Monday in an unprecedented rebuke to patriarchal norms in the Southeast Asian country.

As pro-democracy protests sweep the nation, women have been on the front lines, where they have developed increasingly creative approaches to challenging the male-dominated junta. An old tradition maintains that a man's *hpone*, or masculine essence, can be lost if he passes under a woman's lower clothing items, including the sarongs known as *htameins* in Burmese.

So in recognition of International Women's Day, demonstrators turned the items of clothing into protest emblems, tying them to sticks and waving them as flags to challenge superstitious security forces while declaring "our htamein, our banner, our victory" in protest slogans on a day they named the Htamein Revolution.

"We want to show that the htamein is our success flag," said Coretti, who goes by one name and is the general secretary of the Kayan Women's Organization in Kayah State. "An unjust power grab should not be born under a htamein."

At least 50 people have been killed since the military under commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing seized power in the Feb. 1 coup. Women have used their gender to mock and shame the senior general; some have taped photos of him to sanitary pads strewn on the ground. In recent days, the public have also hung clotheslines of htameins on streets to deter or shame military officers from walking under them.

"Some people consider sanitary pads and [women's] underwear as dirty things, but for us, those things are not dirty...they protect us, unlike the harmful military dictatorship," said Coretti. "Some believe that a woman's htamein is less glorious, but now, we are able to make htamein flags...This pressures people to reduce harmful cultural beliefs towards women's things, and also to use [htameins] as a tool to revolt against military rule."

Naw Hser Hser, general secretary of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), an umbrella organization for thirteen ethnic women's organizations, added that by waving htameins, women are claiming agency over the protest movement. "We use our htameins to show evidence that women are fighting this revolution using the thing that we own."

Across the country, ethnic people have put forth four protest objectives: to end military dictatorship, abolish a military-drafted 2008 constitution, establish a constitution based on federalism, and release all political prisoners. But in recognition of International Women's Day, ethnic women's organizations have added three more demands: to end disrimination against women, achieve full rights for women's participation and decisionmaking, and hold perpetrators of gender-based violence accountable.

In Kayah State, Coretti said that men had taken up these objectives during their protest speeches. "This revolution can significantly impact social norms against women," she said. "Now, men

willingly accept women's participation and leadership, and chant together for women's demands. Men encourage women."

She hopes that the changes will translate into increased women's participation in a new society if the military dictatorship is overthrown. Though Myanmar's civilian government was led by Aung San Suu Kyi before she was arrested, women's participation in politics remained low. In 2019, just 11 percent of parliamentarians—including one-fourth of seats reserved for military appointees—were women, compared with 25 percent on average globally. But that number was still a dramatic increase compared with previous military regimes in Myanmar.

In 2010, the last year before the country began a transition toward civilian rule following nearly five decades under military dictatorship, women held less than 4 percent of seats in national parliament. A March 8 statement from the Karen Women's Organization said that improvement in gender attitudes, recognition of women's contributions to society, changes to laws, and increased justice for women has been incremental thus far.

Women are also fighting for freedom from sexual and gender-based violence. A UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar reported in August 2019 that soldiers "routinely and systematically employed rape, gang rape and other violent and forced sexual acts" and called for the military to stop using sexual and gender-based violence to terrorize and punish ethnic minorities.

"Our ethnic women have been suffering from war for more than 70 years, during which [the military] raped women as a weapon of war," said Naw Hser Hser from the Women's League of Burma. "We will fight with these—our own htameins—against the military dictators until we win."

Although still small in number, a handful of men have taken the extra step to break social taboos by wearing htameins on their heads; a Facebook hashtag #htameincampaign has growing numbers of posts from men.

"The two patriarchs of my family are a grandpa who is ex-military and another who is hyper-religious," said Lynn, 25, who

goes by one name and is currently studying abroad. He said he wanted to differentiate himself from generations past and challenge the military's archaic thinking. "I think when people see its extreme manifestation of patriarchal power, they will realize its beliefs are outdated," he said.

A Rohingya woman in Rakhine State who requested anonymity for her security said that for her community, it was not safe to protest against the military coup in any way due to a history of persecution by security forces. During the military's operations in Rakhine State in 2017, sexual and gender-based violence were factors indicating its genocidal intent to destroy the Rohingya population, according to a UN Fact-Finding Mission report.

Although unable to wave a htamein herself, the Rohingya woman said that she felt happy when seeing photos of the gestures across the country. She and several of her friends had posted their support on Facebook. "Maybe if I wasn't in the camp, I would celebrate with them," she said. "I think most Rohingya youth already know about this revolution and its positive impact, because they use social media and their minds are changing."

She was also pleased to see the military's avoidance of walking under the htamein clotheslines. "The military are afraid of htameins. In this revolution, I think their fear of htameins means they are afraid of women and girls."

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Five voices from post-coup Myanmar

Insights into life under the military regime.

By Emily Fishbein and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Nikkei Asia, 2021

BANGKOK -- Since Myanmar's military seized power on Feb. 1, the country has been in turmoil and economic decline. Hundreds of thousands of people have demonstrated, while government and private sector workers have joined a Civil Disobedience Movement seeking to strangle the military's economic and infrastructural base.

The ruling junta is acting swiftly to erase a decade of reforms and drag Myanmar back toward a dictatorship like that under which it languished from 1962 to 2011. Hotspots of resistance have been placed under martial law, regular curfews and internet blackouts have been imposed, and mobile data networks and broadband WiFi have been intermittently blocked.

More recently the junta has moved to establish a "whitelist" of websites, mainly commercial, in what analysts warn is part of an effort to build a highly restricted national intranet. Surveillance -- both electronic and physical -- has soared. People must register

overnight guests, and security forces have the authority to search, seize and arrest people, without warrants.

Soldiers and police have also unleashed waves of extreme violence, killing more than 840 civilians [as of May 30], while more than 5,530 have been arrested, according to a local rights group. Many people have died in detention, some bearing signs of torture.

We spoke with five people about life under the junta. Here are their accounts, in their own words, edited for length and clarity. Given the deteriorating security situation, and the risk of arrest for speaking out against the ruling junta, we have used pseudonyms and removed identifying details.

SENG LU, BUSINESSWOMAN-TURNED-ACTIVIST, 31, IN KACHIN STATE

"I had never participated in any activism before the coup. First, I joined the protests because everyone from my ward was protesting. Later, I continued every day.

In my protest group, many people faced [financial] challenges, so I often filled their [motorbike] tanks and topped up their phone bills. Eventually, I became the leader of this protest group.

Sometimes, we needed to avoid the police. We didn't dare to call the media, because when the media followed us the police knew our location and came to crack down. So we just took photos by ourselves and sent them to the media.

When members from my protest group got arrested, one of them mentioned that I was the leader. More than 30 police with seven military trucks came to my house to search for me and asked my family members where I was hiding. After they threatened my family members, my family pressured me not to participate in protests. The police watched my house from a nearby teashop.

I don't feel safe at all. [In March] I felt so depressed that I wanted to give up. I got angry and I told myself that I wouldn't hide or run anymore. My life was not worth either living or dying. I posted on Facebook that I put my life in God's hands. Then, some of my

friends wrote me encouraging messages.

To those people who say negative things about my revolution against the junta and that I should stay quiet, I would like to say: After we win this revolution, don't praise me."

AYE WIN, WIFE OF A MAN IN CUSTODY, 32, IN A VILLAGE IN CENTRAL MYANMAR

"[My husband] was arrested on March 14. I heard that he was shot in the thigh.

I got an update from a messenger that he was in Obo prison [in Mandalay], that he was not seriously injured. I got this update two days after his detention. I haven't heard anything further. I am not sure if he got treated for his injury, but I think that no one would treat him like at home.

I can't keep calm. I will be able to live in peace after his release. But now, I can't even call him. I have two children, a six-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. I told my son. He asks if his dad is coming back, and he prays for him.

I tried to stop [my husband] from joining the protests, but I couldn't, so I just told him to take care of himself. My son reminded him to wear a bulletproof vest."

LINN HTET, PHOTOJOURNALIST, 29, IN MANDALAY

"I became a journalist under the democratically-elected government. As soon as the military coup happened, I knew that we lost our freedom. In Mandalay, security forces cracked down with water cannons and rubber bullets beginning on Feb. 9.

When security forces began shooting at the protesters, we were also there. They targeted journalists by beating and shooting at us. To tell you the truth, we don't have any experience with gunfire. We were running everywhere. But if we didn't do our jobs as journalists in this situation, I feel like we wouldn't be fulfilling our duties.

We bought helmets, like the ones which firefighters use. Initially, we wore logos that said PRESS. But wearing press shirts became more dangerous, so we removed all the logos.

I saw someone shot in front of me and bleed to death. One of my fellow journalists was shot in the hand. If I quit my job, is there anyone who would replace me? I must do this job for my country and for the revolution."

NAW LAI, UNEMPLOYED YOUTH, 25, IN YANGON

"I moved to Yangon from my village in 2014. I like living here in Yangon. I can taste the street and city things and have the experience of freedom.

I was working at a hotel until COVID. When the hotel closed, at first I sold seasonal fruit, but after the season, I didn't know what to do. My former manager and I started a [design] business and I put all my money into it.

But now, who is going to buy this stuff and where will they wear it? Everything stopped. Now, it is very risky and scary on the street. So we only stay home and we don't know until when it is going to be like this.

Before, for the young people, we didn't have many opportunities like other countries. Now, because of the coup, we are just stuck inside the house. And living inside the house is so scary. Even at night, we turn off the lights, and we don't make any sounds. Because you don't know when they will come to knock on the door. You have fear in your heart.

Sometimes the depression is so bad. Sometimes I even want to do suicide. One time I wrote a letter for my family, and I felt alone, and the next morning I had a different feeling again and I stopped doing that.

I wish that I could get out of Myanmar. Not only me, I think most young people who have a big dream. The more you dream, the more you hope, the more you suffer.

For now, I don't really have a future. I think I am just still alive because I am scared to die. It is like I am already dead, like a dead body is living in the house. I try to do anything that I can to have a reason why I am alive. I try to have fun, looking at TikTok. I just try to relax myself and release my feelings and stress.

We [youth] look fine physically but mentally, we are in big trouble. Now everything is destroyed. But after we win, we will feel alive again."

ZAW ZAW, PUBLIC HOSPITAL SURGEON, 54, IN YANGON

"When the Civil Disobedience Movement started, all the junior doctors left and I was alone in my ward. I stopped admitting new patients and took care of those who were left. After discharging them, I joined the CDM around Feb. 7.

Our hospital was already exhausted from COVID-19. When we started joining the CDM, we faced a problem of where to treat patients. We started treating them at their homes, although they weren't ready to be discharged. There have been many new cases as well, including vehicle accidents and trauma. For some patients who needed daily care, we arranged other places where we could treat them. We didn't take any money and sometimes we covered their costs from our own pockets.

[The junta has] arrested, beaten and abused many doctors. I have been in hiding since I joined the CDM; I haven't gone home since.

We treat cases who were injured during protests secretly, because if the junta knew, they would detain both patients and doctors. They don't make us afraid so much as to make us hate them.

The reason I joined the CDM is to fight injustice. If they try to fire me, I am ready to resign. I am not worried; I will just work in another field. The main thing is that I cannot work under their control."

23

Myanmar military targets lawyers defending political prisoners

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Lawyers in Myanmar say the situation is becoming 'very, very difficult' as the regime steps up arrests.

By Andrew Nachemson and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera, June 28, 2021

As Myanmar's military struggles to consolidate its control over a country in revolt, it has increasingly targeted a different type of resistance: lawyers defending political prisoners. In the past month, at least five lawyers have been arrested across Myanmar for defending politicians and activists, an escalation of the military's assault on the judicial system.

First, in late May, police arrested Thein Hlaing Tun, the lawyer for deposed Naypyidaw Council chairman Myo Aung, a co-defendant of Aung San Suu Kyi. The former elected leader of Myanmar was overthrown by army chief Min Aung Hlaing in a military coup on February 1 after her National League for Democracy party won November's election in a landslide.

Since the coup, the military regime has killed some 883 civilian protesters and arrested, charged or sentenced more than 6,000 opponents according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which has been monitoring the situation.

Thein Hlaing Tun and five other lawyers were with their clients on May 24 when he was arrested and charged under section 505A, an incitement charge that carries a three-year prison sentence and has emerged as the favourite tool of the generals. Khin Maung Zaw, the head of Aung San Suu Kyi's defence team, said Myo Aung was not informed of the arrest until he met the other lawyers on June 7.

"Then he appointed new lawyers among us," Khin Maung Zaw said in a text message. "We're worried about other lawyers," he told Al Jazeera, saying the situation has become "very VERY difficult" due to the danger of "being harassed or arrested" and internal disagreements about how to proceed in a skewed legal system.

Soon after, on May 28, a lawyer from Ayeyarwady Region was arrested during a trial while defending a political dissident. According to local media, she had taken on a few high-profile clients, including the superintendent of a hospital who had gone on strike rather than work under the military regime. She too was charged under section 505A.

On June 2, lawyer Thet Tun Oo was arrested in Kachin state while attempting to attend a trial. He was reportedly representing more than 100 political prisoners, including detained members of the Kachin state government. One of his colleagues spoke to Al Jazeera on the condition of anonymity, for fear of reprisals, and said the arrest has escalated the climate of fear that already existed.

"After he was arrested, we went into hiding places, but we are also still trying to continue defending the cases," she said. When lawyers go to defend cases, she said uniformed police often photograph and videotape them in an intimidating manner, and female lawyers have become too afraid to go into court alone.

The lawyer said before she went into hiding, she felt like she was constantly under surveillance, often noticing "strangers looking around my home". She has also received suspicious phone calls

from unknown numbers demanding to meet her for legal advice in person immediately, requests she is too afraid to accept.

"We know that we could be arrested, but I can't avoid that. Because if we stop doing this, who will defend these cases?" she said.

'NO REAL JUSTICE'

On June 12, two lawyers were arrested in Kayin state while attempting to cross the border into Thailand, after finding out they were wanted by the military. Nilar and Phone Myat Thu were both part of the legal team for the Kayin state chief minister, who was removed from his post and charged along with most of the civilian leaders in February.

A close friend of both lawyers said he received a call from another mutual friend around midnight, telling him about the arrest.

"Both lawyers had been hiding in Myawaddy since they heard they will be detained soon ... Until today, we haven't seen them or met them," he said. Like the others, they have been charged under section 505A.

"We feel like there isn't any rule of law. If the lawyers were arrested like that, we should have a chance to meet and see them. Now, no one can protect us, even the law can't protect our rights," he said.

Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division, said the targeting of lawyers might also cut off a vital source of information about other detained prisoners.

"[R]estricting this relationship with clients through intimidation of lawyers will also mean there is less information coming from the prisons about what is happening to people inside," he said, adding that such information has helped rights organisations document "torture and ill-treatment" inside the prisons.

Just last week, the deputy chairman of the Naypyidaw Council was able to reveal through his lawyer that he suffered a broken rib during interrogations. Lawyers are also often the only way for fam-

ily and friends to communicate with their loved ones, and the only way for high-profile detainees to get messages out to the public.

"Arresting lawyers, and interrogating them about their activities and their clients, will ensure that no one wants to provide legal counsel to activists – which is probably the real intent of the junta's actions here," Robertson said, warning that "no real justice" will be found as long as the judicial system is "under the thumb of the military".

The military takeover and subsequent pressure on the judicial system is also a blow to Myanmar's younger generation, who came of age during a time when the country was opening up, and believed that things could be different.

A law student in Yangon said the coup has destroyed the hope she once had for her chosen profession and is making her question whether she should even finish her degree.

"Even though my hopes were up for the future ... on February 1st, it all went down the drain," she said. While she believed there were "a lot of flaws and defects" in the legal system before the coup, the situation has now "become even more dreadful".

"What is [the law] if the junta is arresting everyone who disagrees?" she asked.

She said she wanted to become a lawyer to "give me strength, voice and confidence to help the society I live in" but instead she was beginning to feel "powerless".

But she is not giving up.

The pressure on lawyers is also making people in the legal community "furious and motivated to fight this unfair and unjust system," she told Al Jazeera. "Our generation should and must be the last one to experience a coup."

PART FOUR

Signal Lost

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The World's Longest Internet Shutdown Ruins Lives in Myanmar

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, TIME Magazine, November 16, 2020.

I first accessed the internet in 2014. I was 18 years old and living in my family's home in Myanmar's westernmost Rakhine State. After a half-century of isolation during the military junta, my country was finally opening up.

At the time, I had never traveled farther than 20 miles from my village. But when I bought my first cell phone and SIM card, I could see images of distant places and access international news sites for the first time. I realized how little I knew about the world.

Thanks to the internet, my childhood friend Nyi Htay and I dreamed of new opportunities for ourselves. We vowed to study abroad and return to open a school in our township.

Instead, in December 2018 I took a bumpy 24-hour bus ride to Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, to continue my education. Nyi Htay stayed to work on his family's farm.

Our lives have continued to diverge since, due in part to the world's longest internet shutdown. Today, as I advance my studies of political science, Nyi Htay's hopes are diminishing under

government-imposed restrictions and escalating conflict.

Violence has long scarred my home state. When I was in high school, inter-communal riots erupted between the Buddhist Rakhine community to which I belong and the Muslim Rohingya, resulting in mass displacement, primarily of Rohingya communities.

Rakhine again caught global attention in 2017 when the military committed a campaign of arson and violence against the Rohingya, sending more than 740,000 fleeing across the border to Bangladesh. I strongly condemn these atrocities, for which Myanmar is now facing charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice.

Since late 2018, another conflict has flared—this time between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group fighting for greater autonomy. It is the most recent of more than seven decades of civil war in Myanmar, as various ethnic groups have sought self-determination. In the last two years, this conflict alone has displaced over 240,000 civilians and hundreds have been wounded or killed by gunshots, landmines and airstrikes, according to a local civil society group.

As the military turned its attention toward my ethnic group, the government headed by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi imposed an internet blackout on nine townships. Beginning on June 21, 2019, it affected more than 1.4 million people living in the middle of a conflict zone.

Although 2G services were restored in August 2020, 3G and 4G networks remain blocked in all but one of the affected townships, leaving people unable to perform a basic internet search. The government says these restrictions aim to hinder the activities of the Arakan Army, but it has also imperiled the safety of many civilians who lack access to vital information. This became apparent to me in May, when more than 190 homes were burned seven miles from my village and my family called me, afraid. They saw pillars of smoke but lacked access to quick, verifiable information. They wanted to know where to go for safety.

With the internet, people can disseminate group messages or

post on social media to alert others of danger. But these potentially life-saving measures are not currently available to my family and friends back home.

During the pandemic, online connectivity has also become evermore important. When I call my family, I am always surprised by the widening gap in our awareness of the situation. I share updates I am able to easily access from Yangon, including information from the health ministry page and international news sites. But people in my village have to rely on word-of-mouth, and rumors spread quickly.

Not long ago, they asked me if alcohol and garlic could ward off the virus and whether the outbreak rapidly spreading across the state had been fabricated by the military to scare the public.

The pandemic also forced political campaigning for this year's election to go online. The Nov. 8 nationwide poll was the first held since the historic 2015 elections transferred power to a civilian government after decades of military rule. While I could closely follow the candidates, those from my village hardly took notice. Even if they had been able to access the internet, they were among the more than 1.5 million people—mostly ethnic minorities—disenfranchised this year. Voting was cancelled in most of my state, including my village, due to the conflict.

Another consequence of the internet restrictions is that victims of human rights abuses are silenced. Unable to post on social media or send photos or videos, they cannot fully share with the world what is happening. It compounds the other steps authorities have taken to hinder reporting on the conflict, including limiting travel access for international media, arresting local journalists and blocking local media websites.

When I recently spoke to Nyi Htay, he told me life is getting harder in our village. While we once dreamed about going abroad, these hopes have all but disappeared for him as he focuses on his survival. Hearing gunfire every day, he fears going outside and doubts he will be able to harvest his rice crop, making food security an increasing concern. It's harder for him to check the market

value of rice or shop for seeds or farming supplies without the internet. Even if he is able to continue farming, the outlook for earning a sustainable livelihood is bleak.

Because the internet restrictions have placed onerous barriers on transferring money, local business and commerce are struggling.

For my generation, online connectivity has been critical to our educational and professional development. Because of the internet, I have been able to apply for scholarships, attend online classes and report on what is happening as a freelance journalist. It is painful to see my family and friends in Rakhine left in the dark.

"Internet restrictions have killed my dream," Nyi Htay told me. "I don't know how to move forward in my life."

He isn't alone. I hope the day will soon come when the Myanmar government reopens full internet services and condemns the military's abuses against civilians in my home state. Until then, many people's dreams and ambitions will fade.

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In Myanmar, one blackout ends, another begins

The Burmese military government turned off the internet in most of the country. But in Rakhine and Chin states, the coup brought the world's longest internet shutdown to an end.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, Rest of World, February 10, 2021

Early on the morning of February 1, Myanmar's military seized power from the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, but Swe Pann, a university student in the country's westernmost Rakhine state, didn't know until more than a day later.

"I couldn't access the internet, so I didn't have much information," says the 22-year-old. "It felt like a normal day."

For the past 18 months, Swe Pann was living under the world's longest internet shutdown, a near-total internet blackout across much of Rakhine and Chin states. Her name and those of the other Arakanese people interviewed for this piece have been changed for their protection. Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, had been engaged in conflict with the Arakan Army

— an armed rebel group seeking autonomy for the Arakanese. Nearly 1,000 people have been killed or injured, and 230,000 have been displaced, since an escalation in late 2018. In June 2019, amid intense fighting, the government blocked internet services in nine townships, claiming it was necessary to "maintain stability and law and order." Since then, the restrictions ended in one township and have been partially lifted in the other eight, but with 3G and 4G services blocked, the internet remained effectively unusable.

On February 2, the day after the coup, the military abruptly restored services.

"People in my camp told me they could access 4G internet services," says Thar Htoo, who was displaced by the conflict and serves as an informal leader of the camp where he now resides. "As soon as I heard the news, I checked my phone, and I saw there was 4G internet. At that time, I felt like I was equal with other people, and I was really happy."

More than a million people were affected by the blackout in Rakhine and Chin States. An Arakanese human rights activist, whose name has been withheld altogether for their safety, said that during the internet shutdown, affected populations were "in the dark."

"Local news couldn't reach national and global audiences, and local people didn't get any timely updated news," the activist said. "There was a lot of misinformation, disinformation, and rumors."

Those restrictions created a dangerous situation for people living in an active conflict zone, who were unable to find out quickly where fighting was happening, how to reach humanitarian assistance, and how to flee to safety. "Conflict-affected people have an acute need for timely information, which can literally make the difference between life and death," said Matthew Bugher, head of the Asia Program at Article 19, a U.K.-based freedom of expression and information organization.

The internet blocks also hampered civilians' ability to document and share information about human rights abuses. "By cutting off reliable mobile connections in Rakhine and Chin States, Myanmar

authorities created a black box, in which it was difficult to monitor the conduct of the military and non-state armed groups," Bugher said.

Most Arakan Army supporters are Arakanese, also called ethnic Rakhine, a predominantly Buddhist population. Rakhine State is also home to a large mostly Muslim Rohingya population, of whom more than 740,000 fled to Bangladesh in 2017 amid a Tatmadaw campaign of murder, rape, and arson, for which Myanmar now faces genocide charges at The Hague.

In April 2020, a U.N. Special Rapporteur said the Tatmadaw should be investigated for allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in relation to its conduct against civilians during the conflict with the Arakan Army in Rakhine. The U.N. official also noted that the Arakan Army had conducted its hostilities in a manner that had negative impacts on civilians, including by kidnapping local authorities and parliamentarians.

Swe Pann, who is Arakanese, is familiar with the military's brutal tactics. "When Myanmar soldiers are walking on the street, I don't dare to look outside," she said. "In areas of my township, the Tatmadaw has violated villagers' rights."

Alongside the internet restrictions, the government also prohibited reporters from traveling independently to conflict-affected areas, blocked the websites of local media outlets which it alleged were producing "fake news," and prosecuted journalists for covering the conflict.

"To get news and information, I climbed a hill where I could access some internet services," said Htun Hla, a mobile shop owner. That was a common way for people to try to connect to the network during the conflict, until the Tatmadaw banned the practice. Others would attach bamboo poles to their roofs with their phones in bags hanging from the poles to try to access a signal, according to a report by *Frontier Myanmar*.

The economic impact of the shutdown was severe. Businesses were unable to communicate with customers and suppliers, and mobile money transactions were all but impossible. According to the

internet research firm Top10VPN, internet restrictions cost Myanmar $75.2 million in 2019 and $189.9 million in 2020.

Htun Hla, the mobile phone shop owner, says sales dropped and his business faltered. He considered learning a new skill but lacked access to online resources. "Due to the internet shutdown, my skills became useless, and I wasn't able to learn anything new," he says.

In August 2020, Rakhine state was at the epicenter of a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, and its poor health infrastructure, combined with the ongoing conflict, plunged the state further into crisis. The blackout hindered access to health prevention information and left people relying on word-of-mouth and phone updates. While students in other cities were able to take classes online, Swe Pann was left unable to study. While the Ministry of Health provided detailed Covid-19 updates on its website, those in shutdown-affected areas were unable to access it and had to rely on SMS and audio announcements from the government.

"I felt like a blind man because I couldn't access the news," said Thar Htoo, the leader of the displacement camp. He is usually a key source of information for other camp residents but told *Rest of World* that he has been unable to verify the information that he has been receiving and passing on. "I didn't know any news accurately and was poorly informed," he said.

The Tatmadaw has not said why it restored internet service in Rakhine and Chin, but the move came the day before it announced that a member of the Arakan National Party, which is popular among Arakanese voters, had accepted a role under the Tatmadaw's new State Council. The Tatmadaw had also been courting ethnic leaders in the months leading up to the coup, emblematic of its longstanding divide-and-rule tactics.

The Burmese military is the antithesis of a champion of free expression. During a junta rule that lasted from 1962 to 2011, the Tatmadaw aggressively spied on the public and maintained tight precensorship over all publications. On seizing power on February 1, it restricted access to the internet across the country. On February 4, it blocked Facebook access and access to virtual private networks

(VPNs), and on February 6, it shut down Twitter and Instagram as well. Many users circumvented the blocks using proxy links, but on February 6, even these went down.

"Since the coup, the junta has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to arbitrarily restrict internet access to advance its own nefarious goals. There is no reason to believe the lifting of restrictions in Rakhine and Chin States demonstrates a change in policy or values," Article 19's Bugher said. "Rather, the experience of the past week only underscores the military's contempt for internet freedom and access to information."

In Rakhine, the Arakanese activist interviewed by *Rest of World* was also skeptical. "I see the reopening of the internet as a way the military is trying to build trust with the [Arakanese] people," he said. But experience tells him that, now that they are in charge, the Tatmadaw will continue — and probably accelerate — their repression.

"[The Tatmadaw] will arrest and charge anyone who criticizes and writes about their actions, and they may eliminate all people who are against them," he said. "Now, they hold all power in their hands and can do what they want. Our speech and expression will be under watch and attack."

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As protests grow in Myanmar, so do crackdowns on the press

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, Columbia Journalism Review, March 8, 2021

From 1962 through 2011, a military junta ruled Myanmar. During that time, independent media reported in exile from neighboring countries or went undercover. The military imposed strict censorship, kept the price of sim cards prohibitively high, and isolated the southeast Asian country from the world.

When the democratically-elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in early 2016, it loosened some of its harshest restrictions on the press. But less than a year into its term, its relations with the press deteriorated. The government began suing and arresting journalists, and it blocked access to parts of the country where the military was committing widespread human rights abuses against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities.

This year, on February 1, the military arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and more than forty other elected officials, and declared a state of emergency. By the end of the month, millions of protesters had demonstrated against the military regime. In response, authorities

have fired live bullets, slingshots, rubber bullets, water cannons, teargas, and stun grenades into crowds. As of March 3, they've killed sixty-one people, according to Fortify Rights, and arrested more than 1,500 people, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Journalists reporting on the military's crackdown on civilians have come under increasing threats from state forces—-and from their supporters, who have beaten and intimidated journalists with escalating frequency and intensity. At least thirty-four journalists were arrested between February 14 and March 2, according to an AAPP tally; authorities beat at least five of them, according to CJR's analysis of media reports. Some are still being held in jail, without charges.

"This could turn back to a situation like before 2010," said Myint Kyaw, the former secretary of the Myanmar Press Council, a media adjudication body. The council, established in 2014 during the country's political transition, had worked to intervene in press disputes and uphold media ethics. Now, at least fifteen of its twenty-six members have resigned. Myint Kyaw said the coup had rendered the council's intervention on behalf of journalists impossible. "If we cannot protect them," he said, "there is no use in staying in the MPC."

In the first hours after the coup, Myanmar was under a near-total internet and mobile services blackout; as mass protests gained momentum, a second daylong internet shutdown ensued. Since February 15, the military has imposed nightly blackouts. The situation may worsen if a cybersecurity law passes: it would allow the military to shut down the internet, intercept data, and block certain websites.

On March 8, a Yangon-based news site, *Myanmar Now,* reported that soldiers and police raided its newsroom, taking computers, printers, and parts of the data server. The military junta also revoked its license to legally operate, along with four other prominent Yangon-based independent media outlets, according to a *Reuters* reporter.

CJR interviewed six journalists across six states and regions as protests against the military regime continue. They spoke about personal experiences with physical violence, fears of arrest, and the difficulties of reporting amid internet and mobile network shutdowns. Some were granted anonymity due to fear of reprisals from the authorities, while others requested to speak using their own names.

SHOOTING JOURNALISTS USING SLINGSHOTS 'HAS BECOME THEIR DAILY ACTIVITY.'

On February 15, as a group of journalists filmed authorities' violent response to demonstrations in the city of Mandalay, police officers and soldiers began to chase them. "They knew we were journalists and taunted and chased us while cursing at us," said one photojournalist. "They said, 'Come and take pictures of us, come!' and insulted us." The photojournalist escaped into a house. He climbed onto the roof and watched as a friend was caught and beaten.

"He was wearing a hat that said press, and he showed his staff identity card and shouted 'I am a journalist! I am a journalist!' " the photojournalist told CJR. In response, the beating intensified.

"What we are seeing is that they are targeting people who wear press uniforms," a photojournalist in the Kachin State capital said. On February 19, authorities cracked down on protesters in front of a teacher training college. The journalist said state forces used slingshots to shoot her and others covering the protest—-despite shouting that they were members of the media. Since then, she said, shooting journalists using slingshots "has become their daily activity."

J Paing, who heads the Yangon-based *Myanmar Pressphoto Agency*, said he is worried about continuing to give his staff t-shirts and hats that mark them as press, not only because of direct threats from the military, but also due to the potential of violence from regime supporters disguised as protesters. "There are invisible

hands such as military supporters who go around holding knives, iron rods and wooden sticks," he said. "They might stab us without anyone noticing because we are very visible with our press t-shirts and cameras."

Journalists across the country are hindered by police barricades that delay their movements, and a nationwide nightly curfew beginning at 8pm. Additionally, Mone Thant Mon, an editor with the *Mon News Agency* in the Mon State capital, said that the level of violence and arrests has made it increasingly difficult to find people willing to be interviewed.

One reporter in Kayah State, on Myanmar's eastern border with Thailand, said that their office had been closed since the coup; they're reporting minimally on the crisis. The least populous of Myanmar's seven ethnic states, Kayah has only one local media outlet with around a dozen journalists. They're afraid to travel to collect news, and worry they could be arrested from their homes. "The military already has information on all of us—-where we live and where we work," she said.

Mya Wun Yan, editor in chief of the *Thanlwinthwaychinn Journal*, said she has twice noticed people following her as she travels on her motorbike. Her journalists have been harassed, and have noticed what they suspect to be plain-clothes intelligence gatherers taking their photographs. The *Journal* has reduced its reporting capacity by around seventy percent, and several of its journalists are currently in hiding.

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Covering the Coup: A Myanmar Journalist Reports

Chronicling events on the ground in Yangon, an Arakanese freelance journalist documents an increasingly perilous situation for the media.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, as told to Emily Fishbein, The Foreign Correspondent (FCC Hong Kong), April 1, 2021

When my roommate woke me early on 1 February with the news that the Myanmar military had staged a coup, I knew that as a freelance journalist focused on human rights I could become a target.

I deactivated my Facebook account and requested the editor at an international news agency delete my byline from some sensitive articles. I then walked around my neighbourhood in Yangon to assess the situation. Everywhere I looked, I saw faces lined with fear and uncertainty.

The military had cut my phone connection, but I heard a rumour that one network was still accessible. I queued for two hours to buy a SIM card, but when I activated it, there was still no connection.

After the military, known as the Tatmadaw, arrested former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi along with more than 40 party

officials and declared a year-long state of emergency, everything has taken on a new urgency, including my work as a journalist.

I have been reporting around the clock as a freelance journalist for publications such as *TIME*, Al Jazeera, *The Nation*, *The Globe and Mail*, VICE News and Columbia Journalism Review in partnership with US-based freelance journalist, Emily Fishbein, who worked in Myanmar from 2015 to 2020. During the pandemic, we teamed up to write about armed conflict between the Arakan Army and Burmese military in my native Rakhine state, and we have been working together since.

As hundreds of thousands demonstrate and workers strike across every sector, the situation continues to intensify. On the weekend of 13-14 March, at least 51 people were fatally shot, bringing the total number of people killed by soldiers and police since the coup up to at least 126. According to *The New York Times*, more than a fifth of those killed have been teenagers.

More than 2,100 people have been arrested as of 13 March, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, and many of those arrested were seized from their homes at night without a warrant. At least 37 journalists have also been taken into custody, of whom 15 have not yet been released; some were beaten upon arrest while others have been forced to sign statements that they will cease reporting.

Five prominent Yangon-based media groups have had their licenses revoked and been banned from publishing on any platform, while the military has raided several media outlets, seizing computers, printers and data servers. The military is arbitrarily shutting down the internet and people, including me, are afraid to make phone calls in case the calls could be intercepted.

Living under an authoritarian state is all too familiar in Myanmar, which was run by a military junta from 1962 to 2011. During those years, we were surrounded by informers, the government heavily censored media, and SIM cards were kept prohibitively expensive (upwards of US$7,000 in 1998 and around US$625 in 2011), effectively cutting off our access to news and information.

In 2011, the military began a series of reforms, and in 2013, the price of SIM cards dropped hundredfold. I accessed the internet for the first time from my village in Rakhine, on the western coast, in 2014.

Myanmar held openly democratic elections in November 2015, bringing the National League for Democracy (NLD) to power. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi became the country's de facto leader, and although the country was still under a 2008 military-drafted constitution allowing the civilian government and generals to share power, many expected that the NLD would counter the military's influence and champion democracy and human rights.

Aung San Suu Kyi dashed expectations when she defended the military against charges of genocide for its treatment of the Rohingya at the International Court of Justice in 2019. Other ethnic groups in Myanmar, including my own Arakanese community (also called ethnic Rakhine), have also been bitterly disappointed by Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to condemn human rights abuses that the Tatmadaw allegedly committed, including war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Instead, her government backed the Tatmadaw's violent campaigns, blocked humanitarian access and, in parts of my home state and the neighbouring Chin state, imposed the world's longest internet shutdown. Since 21 June 2019, government restrictions on the internet left more than 1 million people without effective access for 19 months.

The NLD government also cracked down on press freedom, especially in Rakhine, where it blocked independent media access to conflict-affected areas beginning in 2016, with the exception of prearranged reporting tours in which journalists were accompanied by government minders.

During the first four years of NLD's term (2015-2018), 67 lawsuits were filed against journalists and media personnel. Of these, 31 were filed by the government; 11 by the military; and the rest by religious institutions, tycoons, employers, political parties, armed

groups and others, according to a report in May 2020 by Yangon-based freedom of expression organisation Athan.

More than three dozen journalists were charged with defamation, while others were charged with supporting an unlawful association or alleged terrorist group when they reported on conflict between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organisations or interviewed their spokespersons.

In 2018, the government imprisoned Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo for possessing classified information which police had planted on them, while they were reporting on the massacre of 10 Rohingya in Rakhine. They spent more than 500 days behind bars before being released in May 2019 under a presidential amnesty.

While the NLD severely curtailed media freedoms, sinking back under military rule is far worse. Almost immediately, journalism became significantly more challenging and dangerous, and the obstacles and risks are increasing by the day.

On 27 February, I went out to observe the protests. After being tear-gassed, I ran away from authorities only to come face to face with a soldier. He pointed a gun at my friend and me, and said: "Back up, I don't want to shoot you." I backed up and immediately left the area.

What's more, the social media landscape has changed dramatically. Facebook, which serves as the main source of news, information and communications in Myanmar, has long been used as a vehicle for hate speech and disinformation targeting ethnic minorities. After the military banned the platform on 4 February, users migrated to Twitter en masse. Two days later, the military banned Twitter as well, but users have continued to access both platforms using VPNs.

Since the coup, my Twitter followers jumped from around 400 to nearly 10,000 as of 14 March. I have not received any serious threats online, but I worry that malicious activity will increase; I have already seen a spike in trolling and disinformation on the platform.

Intermittent internet shutdowns have posed another major prob-

lem. While the hazards of social media are many, the lack of online access is even more dangerous. Unable to check reliable news sites or trusted sources to verify information, I have been calling my contact at a fact-checking civil society organisation for assistance. But now she sometimes replies that the group is unable to confidently make an assessment.

With arrests increasing, I have taken extensive precautions to protect myself. On the day of the coup,I wrote down important phone numbers in my notebook, using nicknames in case police confiscated it. Next, I deleted all contacts, audio files and messages from my phone. I began using VPNs to access the internet, and when I use phone data, I switch between four SIM cards to separate my personal communications, browsing history, and reporting work – a strategy I had also used when reporting on armed conflict in Rakhine.

It is now much harder to collect information as I do not trust anyone. When I go outside, I am constantly alert and carefully assessing my surroundings. Informers could be anywhere, and I often feel as though people are watching me, especially when I carry my camera. I don't talk openly with taxi drivers, and I am guarded even with my closest friends and family. I avoid talking deeply about my feelings and personal information as well, because people could take advantage of my vulnerabilities.

I see journalism as a tool to solve problems, and I am particularly motivated to promote human rights and social justice. I aim for in-depth coverage which prioritises the inclusion of diverse voices and especially those who are vulnerable and marginalised, such as displaced people, ethnic minorities and those living in remote areas.

Covering under-reported stories during an emergency, I feel an extra sense of responsibility to document what is happening accurately, informatively and effectively. Despite the risks and pressures, I feel strongly motivated to persevere.

The most important thing is to share what is happening in Myanmar with the world. My country has already gone to the dark side, and if we don't do anything, we may become trapped under mili-

tary control for a long time. We need to end this situation and find our way to the light. Each of us has our own role to play. For me, that role is journalism.

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The Military Coup Destroyed Independent Media in Myanmar, but in Rakhine State, It Wasn't There to Begin With

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By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, Tea Circle Oxford, April 13, 2021

Since the February 1 military coup, independent media has faced a crisis in Myanmar. Yet, even before the coup, journalists and rights advocates had decried a diminishing space for independent media, especially media reporting on armed conflict and humanitarian crises in Rakhine State.

In early January, we interviewed seven journalists and editors about the risks and challenges they faced when reporting on conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw. Some quotes have been anonymized due to the repressive and unstable situation under the military regime.

Those interviewed shared numerous barriers the government created with regard to the media's coverage of the conflict, which began escalating in late 2018. Some of these barriers were an extension of those already in place since October 2016, when the Tatmadaw began committing "clearance operations" against

Rohingya people in the state's northern townships.

At that time, the government refused independent media access to the area. By April 2017, journalists needed permission to visit anywhere in the state. The Ministry of Information organized reporting tours beginning that July but required that participants were accompanied by government "minders" and followed fixed itineraries.

One journalist we interviewed in January reflected on a time when they traveled to northern Rakhine without authorization, shortly after the Tatmadaw conducted its second and more sweeping wave of atrocities in August 2017, for which it is now facing genocide charges at the International Court of Justice. The journalist was detained by soldiers and forced to sign an agreement not to post or publish anything from their trip. *Radio Free Asia* also reported that journalists visiting northern Rakhine without authorization during the 2017 crisis faced threats, harassment, and confiscation of their cameras and laptops.

In January 2018, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Aung San Suu Kyi the world's biggest backslider in press freedoms, but the situation only worsened. That September, Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo received seven-year sentences for the possession of classified documents during their investigation of the massacre of ten Rohingya. Despite a police officer's confession that he was ordered to entrap the journalists, they spent more than 500 days in prison before being released by presidential pardon.

The AA began escalating its fight for autonomy in late 2018, and the Tatmadaw cracked down with a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. Violence—including indiscriminate airstrikes, gunfire, arson, and enforced disappearances—claimed around 300 lives, while the Rakhine Ethnics Congress, a local civil society group, estimated approximately 230,000 people were displaced. In April 2020, U.N. human rights expert Yanghee Lee documented the Tatmadaw's targeting of civilians and called for an investigation into allegations of ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Rakhine and neighboring Chin State.

As the conflict worsened, journalists faced increasing obstacles to reporting safely, accurately, and freely on human rights abuses that occurred. The journalists we interviewed described numerous ways authorities limited access to information and sources and left them vulnerable to arrest.

In June 2019, the government ordered telecoms operators to shut down the internet in nine townships, impacting more than one million people. Although the restrictions were at times partially lifted, the internet remained effectively inaccessible across eight townships until, a day after the coup, the new military regime restored full access as it scrambled to earn the favor of marginalized ethnic groups.

"For media workers to access facts and information has been difficult since the internet was blocked," Myint Kyaw, former Secretary of the Myanmar Press Council, told us during a phone interview in early January, when the internet restrictions were still in place. Before the coup, the Myanmar Press Council had served as a semi-independent media adjudication body whose members were appointed by the National League for Democracy government, media associations, and civil society; now, most of its members have resigned due to military directives since the coup. "Media are just using photos of signboards with village names for news coming from Rakhine; the photo quality really decreased. Also, villagers cannot post things on social media, so they cannot share what is happening," said Myint Kyaw in early January.

Internet restrictions impacted the ability to cross-check information as well. "When someone from an internet-restricted area tells me something, it's very difficult to verify," said a reporter with the Rakhine State-based Development Media Group (DMG) in a phone interview in early January. "I try to verify it by calling four or five people, but sometimes updates happen in the meantime. I also have to consider each person's background and whether what they say is likely to be accurate."

Without internet access, journalists were also unable to use encrypted messaging applications or send or receive emails from

internet-restricted areas, leading them to transport files by car and use phone calls and text messages to communicate with each other and with sources. "These challenges lead not only to delayed communication but also a massive risk for journalists, as they can be under surveillance," said a local media expert in an email on January 9. We have withheld their name due to security concerns since the coup,.

On March 23 of 2020, the government ordered telecoms operators to block 230 websites, including 67 websites it categorized as "fake news." Among the "fake news" sites were DMG and Narinjara, the only two Rakhine State-based media reporting in English. The local media expert said the block had both affected advertising revenue and hindered information access. "Blocking the websites of these media takes away the rights of people to know the situation of conflicts and human rights violations in conflict regions," she said.

Also on March 23, the government designated the AA a terrorist organization. In the ensuing weeks, authorities raided three media outlets and their journalists' homes and charged their Editors-in-Chief under the Counter-Terrorism Law for publishing interviews with the AA's spokesperson. Charges against Nay Myo Lin of the Mandalay-based Voice of Myanmar were later withdrawn, while cases against the Editors-in-Chief of Narinjara and Yangon-based Khit Thit Media remained ongoing as of the coup.

They are among 67 legal cases filed against the media during the first four years of the National League for Democracy's term, of which the government filed 31, the military filed 11, and the rest were filed by religious institutions, political parties, armed groups, private claimants and others, according to a May 2020 report by the Yangon-based freedom of expression organization Athan.

"If we write true news, we can get arrested anytime," said Thar Loon Zaung Htet, Khit Thit's founder and Editor-in-Chief, in a phone interview in early January. "We can't make balanced news about the conflict because we can't interview the AA according to the law … It's also difficult to follow media ethics if we don't know

the ground situation and can only get news from phone calls. It's like the situation in Rakhine is in the dark."

Two female journalists we interviewed in early January said they never went alone to conduct interviews in the field. "When I report on politics or human rights issues, I feel unsafe physically and psychologically," said one local reporter in a phone interview. "I don't feel safe being a woman journalist," said another. "I try to encourage myself not to fear because I'm working for the truth."

DMG, which has seventeen journalists focusing on each of the state's townships and was often among the first to break the news on the conflict between the AA and Tatmadaw, was a particular target of harassment. In April 2019, DMG received an email from an unknown sender that threatened its journalists' lives if they did not support the Tatmadaw in their reporting. DMG applied to renew its media license in March 2019, but the Ministry of Information never responded to the application. Nonetheless, DMG pushed forward in its reporting: a search for "IDP" [internally displaced person] on its website revealed 152 articles published from May 2019 to February 2021, while a search for "human rights" revealed 109 results.

As DMG continued to cover the conflict, however, it also came under increasing scrutiny. In May 2019, police charged Editor-in-Chief Aung Marm Oo with unspecified violations under the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Act, for which he faced up to five years in prison; the case was ongoing as of the coup. During the NLD's administration, the Unlawful Associations Act had been repeatedly used to charge people who allegedly had contact with ethnic armed organizations, including for journalistic purposes.

In the days following the charges, police raided Aung Marm Oo's office and house, questioning his family and two DMG staff. He went into hiding and, as of an interview in early January, had since been unable to see his wife or three-year-old son or receive medical care for a liver condition. He said that, fearing for his safety, he wouldn't return home until police withdrew the case.

On January 22 of this year, the Tatmadaw charged one DMG editor and one reporter with defamation under the Telecommunica-

tions Law, which outlaws defamation over a telecommunications network, in relation to an article that alleged Tatmadaw personnel had looted rice and forced locals to mill it. Neither the Tatmadaw nor the government had responded to DMG's requests for comment.

A local media expert emphasized to us the importance of local ethnic media in documenting armed conflict and promoting accountability for human rights violations.. "Local ethnic media can be a bridge that conveys the news from isolated conflict regions to the whole country and the world. It can eventually lead to a demand to end human rights violations in those areas," she said.

DMG's deputy editor told us three weeks before the coup that Rakhine State-based media were facing increasing difficulties to survive and that some of DMG's editors and reporters had resigned due to low salary and security concerns. "Local media are gradually becoming weaker in technology, funding, and human resources," he said.

The people we interviewed were disappointed in the NLD government's stance toward media freedoms. While the party pledged to support independent media in its 2015 election manifesto, this pledge was absent in 2020. "Related to the law, things really got worse during the NLD administration…The NLD weakened independent media," said Myint Kyaw, former Myanmar Press Council Secretary. When we called him on February 2, the day after the coup, he told us that the space for media freedoms would "narrow drastically" under the new junta.

His prediction was accurate. On April 11, the junta submitted a letter to the Myanmar Press Council warning journalists and media organizations not to refer to it as a "coup government," saying it violated media ethics.

The junta has also ordered telecommunications operators to block all mobile data as of March 15 and wifi broadband networks as of April 1. A nightly internet blackout has been imposed since February 15.

On March 9, the junta revoked the press licenses of five local

media outlets, including Khit Thit, which had been covering breaking news in the coup's aftermath, including livestream videos of protests. Editor-in-Chief Thar Loon Zaung Htet told *Radio Free Asia* on the day its license was revoked that all of Khit Thit's journalists had already resigned, but he would continue alone to produce news via social media channels.

The deputy editor of DMG told us that security concerns had dramatically increased for DMG staff since the coup. The entire team has gone into hiding, making it difficult for the media to collect information for its reports.

According to an April 1 article in the New York Times, at least 56 journalists had been arrested with half remaining in detention. Fifteen face charges under Penal Code Article 505(a), which criminalizes disseminating information that might cause members of the military to mutiny, disregard, or fail in their duties with up to two years in prison. Junta forces have beaten journalists on multiple occasions, and a least three have been shot and wounded.

When we started our reporting in January, the government's restrictions on journalists covering Rakhine State significantly hindered reporting on the human rights situation there. The military coup caused a further downfall, while similar restrictions — including internet and website blocks, denial of licenses, and threats of arrest — now affect media coverage across the entire country, and physical insecurity has become pervasive as well. These changes are among many ways the junta has expanded oppressive tactics once practiced predominantly in ethnic states to encompass all of Myanmar, to the detriment of all.

29

Facebook is still censoring groups fighting the military coup in Myanmar

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The social media giant said it would support free expression in Myanmar, then it blocked ethnic armed groups opposing the junta.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Rest of World, May 14, 2021

Nyo Twan Awng was an early adopter of Facebook in Myanmar. A doctor, he joined the social network in 2013, and said he used it to source medical information, as well as to share his poems and articles about art and literature. Alongside his artistic pursuits, he ran another channel: the Arakan Army Info Desk, a propaganda stream for the Arakan Army (AA), an armed group fighting for self-determination in Myanmar's western Rakhine state.

As the AA's conflict with the national military, known as the Tatmadaw, heated up in 2015, he posted reports and images from frontline clashes and recruitment videos. The battle reports were removed by the social network, but the page stayed up until 2019, when the government, by then led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National

League for Democracy (NLD), declared the AA a terrorist organization. Soon afterwards, Facebook banned the Arakan Army and its allies.

Now, Nyo Twan Awng, who is the AA's deputy chief, wants Facebook to reinstate the accounts. "I valued my account as a son of mine," he said.

Following the February 1 coup d'état in Myanmar, activists, pro-democracy campaigners, and even supporters of the remnants of the NLD government, are asking for that ban to be rescinded. After a dramatic reshuffling of the political landscape, the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are no longer opponents of the democratically-elected government, but core members of the resistance to the new government. They say that Facebook's moderation is now penalizing the broader anti-coup movement because of its loose association with groups proscribed by the last government, which in turn is limiting their ability to organize and communicate.

"We can't post and we can't show what is happening on the ground," said Min Bar Chay, the director of All Arakan Youth Organization Network, a human rights organization, who says his posts have been repeatedly taken down for allegedly violating community standards. "[Having] information is important for people who are under attack. It's like trying to close the people's eyes and ears."

Facebook declined to comment on the record.

The block on EAOs was controversial even in 2019. Activists said that as well as restricting content relating to the armed insurgency, the restrictions also limited their ability to talk about human rights violations targeting ethnic minorities in Myanmar — where a genocide against the Rohingya was allegedly fuelled by hate speech on Facebook, and where the NLD government had routinely denied the right of minorities to claim Burmese nationality. The government excluded the AA from national peace talks in August 2020.

"After [Facebook] restricted many things that related to ethnic armed groups, we [activists] and journalists ...couldn't post about

these issues," Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a human rights activist, told *Rest of World*. "Those restrictions stopped the flow of information to the public."

But the NLD was the legitimate government, and Facebook had to comply.

The situation is now far more complicated. After seizing power, the junta tried to divide the opposition by withdrawing the AA's terrorist label.

Parts of the former NLD government have now joined a so-called national unity government (NUG), which has included former political opponents and some representatives of minority ethnic groups. The NUG, too, has said that the EAOs are no longer terrorists.

Neither the junta nor the NUG are officially recognized as the government of Myanmar, but the NUG has broad support among the pro-democracy movement. "The NUG have already removed EAOs from the terrorist [list]. So, Facebook needs to follow this, and to remove restrictions," Yi said.

The EAOs' continued presence on the list of terrorist groups is creating problems for the anti-coup movement. Activists and journalists told *Rest of World* that they are finding their posts and pages taken down for violating community standards when they discuss the increasingly popular idea of a "federal army" comprised of ethnic militias in opposition to the Tatmadaw. They fear that the new alliance, which includes peaceful protesters, human rights groups and civilian politicians, is being restricted by association with the EAOs.

One, a journalist from Rakhine, posted an article on his Facebook page discussing the need for the EAOs to work together to overthrow the military junta that seized power in February. The piece was quickly removed by the social media platform. "Although it's purely about politics, it was removed by Facebook by simply saying that it did not meet its community standards," said the journalist, who asked to remain anonymous. *Rest of World* spoke to 15 people, and received reports from around 50 others, who said they had sim-

ilar experiences.

Facebook garnered qualified praise for its initial response to the coup. The company was quick to ban pages related to the Tatmadaw across its platforms. However, Yi said its failure to react to the subsequent political shifts show that it still needs to improve its understanding of the country.

"[Facebook should] immediately review their plan on designation of terrorism and replace the presence of ethnic armed armies on platform," she said. "And to assign a national level Facebook Oversight Board for Burma."

PART FIVE

A Country Unravelling

30

Democratic states should recognize Myanmar's National Unity Government

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International support would test ASEAN's commitment to resolving the crisis.

By Fuadi Pitsuwan and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Nikkei Asia, April 30, 2021

Just days after Myanmar's junta chief met leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Jakarta and agreed to their call to halt violence in the country, reports of fatal attacks on at least six protesters indicate that security forces are still targeting civilians. Clearly, this is a rebuff of ASEAN's modest five-point proposal for a peaceful solution to Myanmar's crisis. It also adds urgency to the crucial question of who holds legitimate political authority in Naypyitaw.

In mid-April, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, a body of elected lawmakers from the ousted civilian government, announced the cabinet lineup of their new National Unity Government, in a direct challenge to the generals who seized power on Feb. 1.

With mass protests in the streets of towns and cities throughout the country and most government workers on strike, it is clear that the people of Myanmar support the NUG, many of whose members are either in exile, in hiding or, in the case of State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, under house arrest. The formation of the NUG, with its diversity of ages, ethnicities and gender, not only challenges the junta but also heralds a new era: The CRPH had earlier agreed to abolish the military-drafted 2008 constitution, replacing it with a federal democratic system.

The NUG is already operating with some international legitimacy. For example, its representative attended an informal gathering of United Nations Security Council members in early April. And reports this week indicate that U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson is considering inviting the group to observe the Group of Seven summit to be held in the U.K. in June.

By contrast, the ASEAN summit proved a disappointment to the people of Myanmar. The NUG sought to send a representative, but coup leader Min Aung Hlaing was the only party to the conflict invited, inadvertently shoring up his legitimacy through state-sponsored propaganda. Worse still, the NUG's demand for the release of political prisoners was dropped from the ASEAN peace plan, which calls for dialogue and a peaceful solution but lacks a timeline for implementation.

It may seem far-fetched to suggest that ASEAN leaders will recognize the NUG in the near future, mainly because of the organization's long tradition -- based on the self-serving principle of non-interference -- of legitimizing military authority whenever a coup takes place in an ASEAN country.

But we hope that leaders of democratic countries who have already spoken out against the junta, including the U.S., Japan, Australia, New Zealand and various European states, will endorse the NUG as the rightful government. Indeed, to many observers, this is a moral obligation for any nation that considers itself part of the free world. It is also justified under the U.N.'s Responsibility to Protect, or R2P, principle, which legitimizes intervention in the domestic af-

fairs of states to prevent crimes against humanity. Recognizing the NUG would be a step toward such an intervention.

Recognizing this body would send the right message to the junta. It would also incentivize ASEAN leaders to engage the NUG and test their commitment to carry out the steps laid out in their statement. Furthermore, it would empower the NUG to work with leaders of the international community to begin the immense work of establishing the foundations of a new society.

At the very least, there should be a formal, public meeting between-a key NUG representative, such as Dr. Sasa, the body's minister of international cooperation, and the U.N. permanent representatives of nations that have expressed support. Such a step would put pressure on ASEAN envoys to the U.N. to follow suit.

If nations and international bodies start recognizing the legitimacy of the NUG, ASEAN leaders would be put on the defensive. But if they are diplomatically astute, they could preempt this shift in the international community's stance by acting quickly on the promises in ASEAN's five-point plan and find ways to hold the junta accountable for its crimes against humanity, which have already cost more than 750 civilian lives and resulted in more than 4,500 arrests.

In three staggering months, Myanmar has become a failed state. The health care system has stopped functioning, and economic activity has been brought close to a halt because of widespread strikes. Furthermore, most civil servants, and even some defectors from the security forces, have pledged allegiance to the NUG. Despite the summit, there is also a real danger that civil war -- already flaring up again in the country's border areas -- could spread. That risk could be mitigated if democratic nations work in conjunction with the NUG, which has the support of ethnic armed groups as well as a popular mandate, while ASEAN countries continue to engage in dialogue with the junta.

Accelerating this process demands that a democratic leader such as U.S. President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, or New Zealand

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern takes the lead. As the U.S. starts to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis -- and with both Australia and New Zealand regarded as global role models for their handling of the pandemic -- these countries can do more than just issuing tough statements.

Unequivocal recognition of the NUG by these democratic states could nudge ASEAN into giving real hope to the people of Myanmar. The free nations of the world should also remember that the coup-making process is not yet complete. They can help to ensure that it never is.

31

Myanmar's warring military and rebels find common ground in corrupt jade trade

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By Andrew Nachemson and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Mongabay, July 2, 2021

Jade mining is fueling conflict in Myanmar, channeling money into the coffers of the military and ethnic armed groups, according watchdog group Global Witness.

The industry buoys the weapons trade and enriches military officials, including the son of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, the group says.

"In Hpakant our investigation revealed that warring parties were collaborating to profit even as conflict between them escalated elsewhere in northern Myanmar," says a new report by Global Witness, which alleges that major armed groups worked side by side with the military in the jade mines.

The report also accuses Aung Pyae Son, the son of the general who seized power in a coup in February, of directly benefiting from corruption in the jade trade. Global Witness says he received a cut of payment for the import of dynamite and "also profited from arrangements to mine illegally in Hpakant" after the civilian govern-

ment suspended new licenses.

As the generals enrich themselves and war continues to rage, the environment and the people who depend on it pay the ultimate price.

"The mountains are becoming flat valleys and the valleys are becoming mountains. In Kachin history, there were many historic mountains, but all are gone now," said a researcher based in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin state. The researcher, who asked not to be named, said some residents don't even recognize the areas where they grew up.

An ethnic Rakhine jade miner, known as a *yemase*, agreed.

"All the trees are already destroyed. The rivers are filled up with land dug from the mountains," he said. When he arrived in Hpakant some 10 years ago, the miners "used handheld drills to dig." "There are much more big machines now and a lot of bulldozers," he said, explaining this has escalated the environmental damage.

While Myanmar's jade industry is estimated to be worth more than $30 billion, few local people reap the benefits, causing major grievances over issues of land and resource management. Some itinerant miners do strike it rich, but most risk their lives toiling under grueling condition for little pay. Deadly landslides are frequent, with three miners killed just this week.

Keel Dietz, policy adviser for Global Witness, said even before the coup there was "no sort of post-mining rehabilitation."

"Companies are supposed to put together mine closure plans, but it's just a check the box thing, they're not expected to actually do anything. They usually just abandon them and this causes big environmental problems, huge open pits that fill up with water and waste chemicals," he said.

In 2020, a landslide killed at least 174 miners. "Villages are perched on the precipice right on the edge of a mining site. There's going to be more landslides in the future," Dietz said.

Floods and landslides already plague villages in Hpakant. A flash flood in 2018 killed 11 people and destroyed 70 homes, while

the U.N.'s humanitarian office estimated nearly 7,750 people were displaced by flooding in July 2020.

When the National League for Democracy won election in 2015, it struggled to assert control over the jade industry, which had been controlled by the military for decades. "Myanmar's multi-billion-dollar jade industry is a paradigmatic example" of the country's "partial reform" which was always "resisted" by the military, Global Witness said.

Matthew Baird, an environmental lawyer with years of experience in Myanmar, said that when the NLD came to power, even "talking about jade and gem mining was very risky." He said the civilian government had made some progress, despite the "big challenge." "We know a lot more about the industry, its corruption and its hazards that was not possible under the previous administration," Baird said.

But with the military back in full control, Global Witness said it expects the situation to worsen, adding the coup has "crushed any hopes that these policies and regulations will be finalised, let alone improved."

THE CONFLICT ECONOMY

In 2019 and 2020, the Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army fought a brutal war in Rakhine state. As of June 2021, the U.N. estimated that more than 81,000 people, mostly ethnic Rakhine, remain displaced as a result of the conflict. Despite this, both armed groups were operating in the mines in Hpakant, and likely cooperating, as was the Kachin Independence Army, which was largely avoiding clashes at the time.

The Rakhine yemase confirmed to Mongabay that the AA, which is hugely popular with ethnic Rakhine people, is active in the mines and collects money from workers, but denied this was a form of taxation. "The yemase people from Rakhine voluntarily share profit with the AA," he said. He also said the AA settles disputes between

Rakhine people and other miners, adding that the AA will sometimes impose fines on troublemakers of up to 300,000 kyat ($225).

Global Witness reported that a "well-placed Rakhine businessperson" claimed that jade is the "primary income source" for the AA, and said the industry likely fueled the group's "rapid expansion and recruitment." It also found evidence of at least one company run directly by the AA active in the mines.

The Kachin researcher in Myitkyina said that the military, AA and KIA are all taking taxes from people working in the mines, with each group's business interests blurring into the others'. "Hpakant is brown, not black or white," he said. He added that sometimes when one group needs to transport jade stones, it goes through the other group's territory, requiring cooperation and payment.

A fourth armed group, the United Wa State Army, often pays the KIA in weapons, according to Global Witness, which also says a KIA intelligence official reported these weapons are then sold on to the AA for a profit.

Since the coup, however, this dynamic has been upended. The AA is now observing a temporary cease-fire with the Tatmadaw in exchange for political concessions, while the KIA has joined the pro-democracy movement, launching attacks on the junta. Fighting has even reached Hpakant, ending the informal agreement to avoid conflict in the mines. However, Global Witness said that "such cooperation could re-emerge in the future in a similar form."

WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION

The jade mines have long been a major source of income for the military and its generals. In addition to Min Aung Hlaing's son, other high-ranking military officers and former officials benefit either through their own jade mining companies or by taking bribes to allow other companies to mine illegally.

Two military-controlled conglomerates "collectively control more mining licences than any other entity," according to Global

Witness. Meanwhile, the Myanmar Gems Enterprise is tasked with regulating the jade industry, while also maintaining its own commercial interests in jade, a clear conflict of interest, especially given that MGE includes former military officials.

"Now there are serious concerns that the military will simply reopen the licensing process, reaping a windfall in bribes and doling out access to the best jade mining plots to allies in exchange for loyalty and political support," Global Witness said.

While some Western countries have imposed sanctions on MGE and the conglomerates, this may fail to significantly dent the junta's profits, as "the overwhelming majority of jade is in fact smuggled out of Myanmar directly into China without ever entering the formal system," according to Global Witness.

Baird said the Tatmadaw should not be recognized as a legitimate governing body, and called for it to be designated as a "transnational criminal enterprise" under the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

"The current illegal exploitation of gems and natural resources, and the complicity of the Tatmadaw and the commercial enterprises makes them liable for these criminal acts," Baird said, also appealing to China and Singapore to freeze any assets linked to military companies.

The Kachin researcher said military postings in the area are coveted, as they allow officials to build up connections in the industry. "When they were there, they built a good relationship with the local officials and they knew the local context," he said, adding they later leverage these relationships for financial benefits.

Dietz said that with the Tatmadaw back in power, "there is little chance for serious reform." "Why would the Tatmadaw reform an industry that it benefits from so much?" he said.

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"How Is That Fair?" The Silent Terror of Survivor's Guilt

By Verena Hölzl and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, VICE World News, September 9, 2021

Daniel Nyan had just picked up lunch and was driving home when a powerful wave of emotion forced him to pull over and start crying. "I have a car, I have a home and can buy myself food," he recalled thinking. "So many of our people can't." Daniel was born in Myanmar's remote Chin State on the border with India. He left the country years ago and is now running the operations of an international child protection organisation in Mae Sot, a Thai town where refugees from Myanmar have lived for decades.

Since independence in 1948, his homeland has rarely seen peace, with coups, military regimes and civil wars a steady feature of life. A brief period of democracy took hold in 2015, but that ended in February when generals arrested civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, sparking a nationwide revolt that continues seven months later.

More than a thousand people have died at the hands of security forces, according to one monitor that has kept track of deaths. Thousands are imprisoned, tens of thousands have lost their homes, and

a devastating third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has stoked a sense of despair.

But the lesser-known trauma of survivors' guilt has become a more silent terror, according to interviews with experts and members of a sprawling diaspora who are watching the events in Myanmar unfold with helpless horror.

"I have a car, I have a home and can buy myself food…so many of our people can't."

Because Daniel was trained in mental health for his work with children, the aid worker knows that he is affected by the condition, which became better understood after the Holocaust when those who escaped the Nazis displayed signs of distress.

"You are in a traumatic situation, you survive and other people do not—and then you ask yourself: Why did I deserve to live or get out when others don't," said Dr. Sheela Raja, a Chicago-based trauma researcher, explaining the nagging pain.

But even people who do not witness the events firsthand can experience it. Though it commonly occurs in the aftermath of conflict, natural disasters and major accidents, it is not limited to crisis contexts. "We have also seen it in health epidemics like HIV or COVID," Raja said.

Daniel knows he is not alone in his guilt. Even one of his U.S.-based colleagues shares feelings of shame and regret about not doing enough to help those affected by the coup, he said. His brother who lives in the U.S. is now working two jobs and eating out less, so that he can save money and donate it to the resistance movement back home.

Especially in the diaspora, which is spread out all over the world through previous cycles of violence in Myanmar, people feel guilty about being free and safe while those inside suffer, said Phyu Pannu Khin, a U.S.-based Ph.D. candidate in Psychology who has been supporting people in her home country through social media. "People wonder: Why me? Why was I given this chance?" she said.

Daniel at some point realised that his guilt about being okay wasn't useful for what he actually cared about: Supporting the

people who have to face the consequences of the coup. When a friend told him that a wounded person cannot help the wounded, he pulled himself together, he said. Spurred back into action, he organised teams in Myanmar who are reaching out to those in need.

"It's good that I can empathise with people. But the real question is: What is it that I can do for them?" he said.

Dealing with emotions brought on by the crisis differs from person to person. For Daniel's co-worker Tuang Hu Lai, who goes by the name Andrew, survivor guilt creeps in whenever he commits to care for himself.

When he couldn't stop scrolling through the dreadful news from Myanmar that made him feel exhausted and empty, he decided to delete a couple of social media apps from his mobile phone. But whenever he took those breaks, he started to feel guilty all over again.

"We are drinking coffee with friends or going on trips to relax from all the bad news, when in Myanmar people are running from the military," he said in an interview in July. "How is that fair?"

Andrew describes his guilt as a bottomless barrel. Even his cousin, who is a lookout for one of Myanmar's newly created resistance forces that recently declared war on the junta, thinks he's not doing enough for the movement. "He regrets that he is not fighting right at the frontline," Andrew said.

Nandar, a well-known feminist from Myanmar who goes by only one name, knows that feeling well.

"I am blaming myself constantly: I am not doing enough or not doing the right thing; I don't deserve the safety I have; I shouldn't be here," she said.

The wave of guilt hit her once she left Myanmar earlier this year. "Inside the country, you struggle to survive. And when you're out, your mind gets absorbed by guilt about being free," she said.

Soon after arriving in her new home country, which she prefers not to disclose out of safety concerns, she started addressing her guilt with a therapist. "Once I realised this feeling is a thing and it

has a name, it became easier," Nandar said.

Growing up in Northern Shan State, one of Myanmar's many conflict areas, she was no stranger to survivor guilt. Around her, people lost their homes and loved ones on a regular basis. Nandar has always been lucky throughout all the fighting – but more than feeling lucky, she felt guilty.

Myanmar's health system has been underfunded for decades, and mental health resources are even scarcer.

Some observers said it's more common to resort to religion instead of seeking help from barely available counselors, as stigmas around mental health remain.

"When I was younger, I had a lot of survivor guilt but couldn't name it because we didn't have the words in our language to talk about mental health."

Hoping to fuel the discussion about the collective pain Myanmar people are facing, Nandar rededicated her feminist podcast "G-Taw Zagar Wyne" (Boss Lady Dialogues) to a series called "Mental Health After The Coup." In the episode on survivor guilt, she advises her listeners to always ask themselves: Who is actually responsible?

"We glamourise pain as the only thing we are able to feel. But the truth is, no matter how unhappy our lives are, we are allowed to feel both pain and happiness," Nandar said.

She doesn't think that the feeling of guilt will ever go away. But ever since she has acknowledged it and learnt about tools to keep it at bay, it is not disturbing her life as much anymore.

"I can't stop the killing in Myanmar. But I will do what is in my control and what I am good at, and that will be enough," she said.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a human rights group in Myanmar, said they have seen people from inside and outside the country reach out to them, reporting feelings of guilt.

"Even as counselors, we are affected," admitted Kyaw Soe Win, a 53-year-old who has worked on mental health issues with former political prisoners. "Sometimes I am upset because I am old and I

can't do anything but watch young people get arrested and die."

But just like the people seeking help from his organisation, he reminds himself to stay focused. "We encourage them to never forget that contributing anything they can will be useful for the revolution," he said.

"Sometimes I am upset because I am old and I can't do anything but watch young people get arrested and die."

Lin Htet Aung, who was a Captain in the Myanmar military until March, adopted this mindset for himself. He defected, not able to accept the violence against civilians, although he claims he was never directly involved.

"In the past, when I was in this unjust organisation, I felt guilty," he said about the Myanmar military. "Now, I am trying to remove all this guilt by doing my best for the country."

Considered a traitor by the military, he thinks he is not safe. "But at least my spirit is finally free."

Daniel's focus, too, has started to shift away from his feelings of guilt. "We have to be tough," he said. "Or how else will you survive in Myanmar?"

33

Shadowy pro-military militias target Myanmar's anti-coup movement

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Lawmakers and activists are being killed amid concern that tit-for-tat retaliatory violence is spiralling out of control.

By Andrew Nachemson and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera, June 2, 2022

A month ago, the body of a man was found dumped by the side of the road in Myanmar's central city of Mandalay.

The victim had been stabbed multiple times, and his hands tied behind his back.

Attached to a lanyard around the neck of National League for Democracy (NLD) member Zaw Gyi the killers had left their calling card: a red circle depicting a warrior holding two swords.

The circle is the symbol of a new pro-military death squad terrorising Myanmar called Thway Thauk Apwe, which roughly translates to the blood-drinking group.

According to an NLD statement, Zaw Gyi was among 14 party members or supporters killed by Thway Thauk or similar groups between April 21 and May 5, including the brother of a party law-

maker and an NLD village administrator. Since then, the violence has continued.

"Those who openly advocated for the NLD before the last general election... are all now living with anxiety and fear because they could be victims of violence at any time," said a Mandalay-based activist who requested anonymity for safety reasons.

The NLD won a landslide victory in the elections of November 2020, but the military refused to recognise the result, instead seizing power in a coup. When the country erupted in mass protests, the new regime killed hundreds, and opponents of the takeover turned to armed revolt.

The military leadership, which calls itself the State Administration Council, is struggling to assert control over the country and is stretched thin fighting wars on multiple fronts. Amid the chaos, shadowy pro-military groups have begun emerging, like Thway Thauk and paramilitary militias known as the Pyusawhti.

The Mandalay activist said Thway Thauk is believed to be linked to the ultranationalist Buddhist hardline group Ma Ba Tha, which was banned under the NLD, and infamous anti-Muslim monk Wirathu. He said this "poses a great concern to those of other religions, especially the Muslim community".

Wirathu, a member of Ma Ba Tha, was one of the most vocal supporters of the military's violent crackdown on the mostly Muslim Rohingya, which has since been labelled a genocide by the United States and some human rights groups. Wirathu was arrested for sedition shortly before the 2020 election, but was released after the military seized power.

While Thway Thauk was launched in Mandalay, it appears to have become operational in Yangon as well, the country's largest city and former capital. The Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) said that on May 20, a Muslim girl and her uncle were killed by Thway Thauk "thugs".

Kyaw Win, executive director of BHRN, said the original target had been the girl's brother, whom they believed to be a supporter of the National Unity Government, an administration set up by

elected lawmakers in defiance of the coup. When the brother escaped, Thway Thauk decided to kill his relatives instead.

Kyaw Win told Al Jazeera he was afraid the groups could "trigger an anti-Muslim situation".

"We have received confirmation from on the ground teams that yes, these are the same people from Ma Ba Tha who are involved in Thway Thauk and Pyusawhti," Kyaw Win said.

The military's spokesman told the local Myanmar Now newspaper in late April that it supported the Pyusawhti militias as part of a "public security system", but denied any involvement in the Thway Thauk hit groups. Activists are sceptical.

Kyaw Win said he believes members of Thway Thauk have been "recruited" by the military. "They must have some kind of training to be able to use such lethal weapons," he said.

The Mandalay-based activist agreed.

"We assume there is a flow of money to those groups either directly or indirectly from the SAC, probably through SAC's stooges," the activist said, calling the groups "state-sponsored".

The military government did not respond to a request for comment.

'A LIVING HELL'

Myanmar has the world's longest running civil war, with decades of violence mostly concentrated in border regions where ethnic armed groups are fighting for political autonomy. But since the coup, violence has spread to the country's heartland, where anti-coup armed groups known as People's Defence Forces clash with the military in the regions of Sagaing and Magway.

Here, the military is often supported by the Pyusawhti.

Political analyst David Mathieson said the military relies on groups like the Pyusawhti and Thway Thauk to address a "long-standing weakness" in local intelligence.

He said these groups provide the military with "local contacts,

languages, geography and supplies" and are "instrumental in identifying local resistance actors, arms caches, tax collectors and support structures".

A 26-year-old woman said the Pyusawhti has turned her village in Sagaing's Kalay Township into a "living hell".

"I always feel like I am being watched. It's not only me, but the rest of the villagers who are against the coup and support the revolution," she said.

The International Crisis Group said the Pyusawhti militias were initially formed organically by pro-military networks that included Buddhist nationalists, members of the military's proxy political party and army veterans, before they were co-opted by the generals.

In December, Myanmar Now reported that 77 Pyusawhti militias were operating in Sagaing, armed with 2,000 guns supplied by the military.

The villager in Sagaing said Pyusawhti members extort money from villagers and harass women.

"As a woman, we cannot go out and have to be careful about everything during both the day and night. We can't even ride motorcycles alone at the moment," she said.

She said the Pyusawhti members also point out houses of PDF fighters or other supporters of the pro-democracy movement, which soldiers then burn. In April, independent research group Data for Myanmar said regime forces had burned down more than 11,000 civilian houses since the coup, around 7,500 of them in the Sagaing Region.

"Whether it is the Pyu Saw Htee burning homes in Sagaing, or Thway Thout Ah Pwe dumping bodies across Mandalay, these are classic terror strategies designed to provoke fear in the population who overwhelmingly support the people's resistance," activist coalition Progressive Voice said in a recent statement.

The villager said it was not just people engaged in armed resistance who were targeted, but even those just trying to provide humanitarian assistance.

"If we want to donate to internally displaced people, they don't consider that we are donating to IDPs, and accuse us of supporting PDFs. So, we could get arrested, or attacked at any time," she said.

The Kalay PDF declined to comment.

'JUNGLE LAW'

Mathieson said the military's reliance on proxies like the Pyusawhti and Thway Thauk may reflect "desperation" and also a "calculation that extreme violence will prevail".

He said some believe these groups existed in a "previous manifestation" and may have been involved in other violent incidents, like the Depayin massacre of 2003, the crackdowns on protesters in 2007, or the assassination of Muslim NLD lawyer Ko Ni in 2017.

In an interview spread on the messaging app Telegram, a supposed spokesperson for Thway Thauk said the group was created to counter a campaign of assassinations by the resistance.

Anti-military groups are believed to have killed hundreds of local regime administrators and military informers, known as dalan. While controversial, the tactic has been effective in preventing the military from setting up local governance administrations in many parts of Myanmar, which have instead been replaced by People's Administration Teams.

"We really want democracy," the Thway Thauk spokesperson said, even as he threatened to kill not just PDF members, but also NLD supporters, journalists and their families. "They say we should follow the law, but when there is no rule of law, the jungle law comes alive," he said.

True to their threats, the group took responsibility for the murder of an elderly man in Yangon in April, whose grandson had joined a PDF.

Mathieson warned such tit-for-tat retaliatory violence was spiralling out of control.

"Revenge becomes the driving factor and is more difficult to con-

trol than a hierarchical military force," he said.

Mathieson said PDFs and ethnic armed groups should commit to "not resort to death squad tactics", embrace "just war doctrine", and hold any perpetrators of crimes on their side accountable.

But he also said it was the military that caused the breakdown of rule of law, which created the violent atmosphere in the first place.

"It must be stressed that the ultimate responsibility for all this hell let loose rests entirely with the Myanmar military," he said.

PART SIX

The Arakan Way

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Arakan Army Accelerates Implementation of the 'Way of Rakhita' In post-Coup

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Despite its support for the national protest movement, various factors have contributed to the armed group's relative silence since the coup.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat Magazine (4.12.2021)

On March 11, 39 days after Myanmar's military seized power from the civilian government, it removed a terrorist designation from the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed organization in the country's westernmost Rakhine State, with which it had been engaged in violent conflict for most of the past two years. While many ethnic Rakhine people welcomed the step, many from the Bamar majority accused the AA of collaborating with the junta and blamed the Rakhine people. This response highlights a longstanding dissonance between the realities of ethnic nationalities living in areas affected by armed conflict along the country's borders, and the Bamar ethnic majority, largely living in central areas.

The AA is one of many ethnic armed organizations fighting for self-determination and with it, equality, justice, and freedom. An-

alysts described fighting between the AA and the military, known as the Tatmadaw, as the fiercest Myanmar had seen in decades. In the past two years, more than 230,000 civilians were displaced, while nearly 1,000 were seriously injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots, and landmine explosions, including more than 170 children.

The situation worsened throughout most of 2020. In March, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi designated the AA a terrorist organization, and in August, excluded it from national peace talks. The NLD government also maintained the world's longest internet shutdown, affecting more than 1 million people in Rakhine and Chin states since June 2019. While the Tatmadaw announced a unilateral ceasefire across the country beginning in May 2020 to fight the pandemic, the ceasefire excluded the AA. Tensions worsened when, weeks before the elections, a government-appointed election commission announced mass cancellations – allegedly due to the conflict – disenfranchising approximately three-fourths of Rakhine State's eligible voters.

Among Rakhine people, the cancellations, for which the decision-making process was not made public, and which were criticized by rights groups for lacking transparency, added to the widespread negative feelings toward the NLD government and contributed to support for the AA. Many Rakhine people felt that the newly elected government wasn't legitimate.

Analysts warned that the election cancellations in Rakhine State could worsen the fighting. Instead, the fighting paused beginning on November 12, when the AA issued a statement declaring its desire to hold elections in cancelled areas, and the Tatmadaw publicly welcomed the proposal. Several meetings were subsequently held. During a face-to-face meeting in early December, the AA and Tatmadaw discussed "ensuring a ceasefire from both sides," according to AA spokesperson Khine Thu Kha.

Since the coup, fighting in Rakhine State has remained quiet so far. Instead, the junta's State Administration Council (SAC) appears to be working to gain the favor of the AA and Rakhine people. On

February 2, the SAC lifted the internet shutdown, and on February 13, it released Rakhine nationalist and politician Dr. Aye Maung and Rakhine writer Wai Han Aung, two prominent political prisoners.

The junta's divide-and-rule tactics have already caused some tensions within Rakhine society. Immediately after the coup, the junta invited the Arakan National Party, the largest Rakhine ethnic party, to take up a seat on the SAC, an offer it also extended to other ethnic parties. While many parties rejected the offer, the ANP accepted it. On February 7, 47 Rakhine civil society groups issued a joint statement urging the ANP to reverse its decision.

The Rakhine public was a bit late to speak out against the military's brutal violence against protesters compared with civil society in other parts of the country, but on March 21, 77 Rakhine State-based civil society groups released a statement urging junta forces to stop cracking down on protesters with deadly force and to release all people detained since the coup. Two days later, the AA's spokesperson told Reuters, "It is a great sadness that innocent people are being shot and killed all over Myanmar," and that the AA was "together ... with the people".

On March 30, the Three Brotherhood Alliance of the AA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) released a statement warning that if the Tatmadaw didn't immediately stop cracking down on peaceful protesters or address the political solutions demanded by the public, the alliance would "support and cooperate with our oppressed brethren and multi-ethnic people who are waging the Myanmar Spring Revolution in self-defense against the Myanmar Army".

The alliance jointly attacked a police station in Shan State's Lashio Township on April 10, killing several police officers. The attack came the day after junta forces fired rifle grenades on protesters in the central city of Bago, leaving at least 82 people dead.

Some analysts have questioned the AA's initial silence after the coup, and whether it might intend to negotiate with the SAC in order to seek more territory or other concessions in Rakhine State.

These questions, however, overlook and oversimplify the situation on the ground. Although the AA was publicly silent for nearly two months after the coup, Rakhine sources in Kachin State told me that even before the AA spoke out, its troops were already attacking the Tatmadaw in collaboration with its allies in the north, including the Kachin Independence Army.

Ambitions to achieve an "Arakan Dream 2020" should be factored into analysis of the AA's current approach. The AA might now be working on its own to achieve this objective, building upon its efforts of the past two years. A concept that emerged in early 2017, the Arakan Dream includes the establishment of a Rakhine People's Authority to administer Rakhine State. During an April 2020 speech, AA Commander-in-Chief Twan Mrat Naing also spoke of the concept of the Way of Rakhita, which he described as "the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan's sovereignty to the people of Arakan".

During the conflict over the past two years, dozens of village administrators in northern Rakhine have resigned, allegedly due to fear of arrest by the Tatmadaw. One local administrator who resigned in March 2019 told me during a phone call on March 27 of this year that "due to preferring an AA administration, we decided to resign and support the AA administration at the same time."

In December 2019, Twan Mrat Naing reaffirmed his plans to establish a People's Authority, and also said the AA would start collecting taxes from the operators of large-scale projects in 2020, in areas of Rakhine and Chin States under its control. Local residents told me the AA also began collecting taxes from local businesses in early 2020, and by the end of the year, was collecting taxes systematically. Local residents and administrators also told me that in early November 2020, the AA introduced a temporary regional administrative law in some parts of Rakhine State, which designated civilian village administrators as the chiefs of its administration department. A village administrator in Mrauk-U Township told me on March 16 that the AA is now administering most of Rakhine State and implementing its own rule of law.

On April 11, the 12th anniversary of the formation of the AA, Twan Mrat Naing wrote in a statement that the AA was working "as fast as we can. We will help the people for their desired political demands, but we don't want the CDM [civil disobedience movement] and street protests in Rakhine State. We have a 'way of Rakhita.' We have a clear political objective".

He also said that while in the AA's "early revolutionary period," it "worked mainly on mobilization and war affairs for our political objectives," but that it is now "implementing a governance mechanism with strong institutions for public administrative affairs including administration, judiciary and public security."

Another possible reason contributing to the AA's initial silence after the coup is that it may have been expecting the release of more than 600 political prisoners, including the sister, brother-in-law, and brother of AA chief Twan Mrat Naing, charged under the Counter-Terrorism Law during the NLD's term.

While some people in Rakhine State have joined the national protest movement since the coup, there have been relatively fewer protests. In my view, having been the victims of years of military-perpetrated human rights abuses and experienced relatively few benefits under the NLD government, conflict-affected minorities including the Rakhine have many reasons to be more hesitant to jump into the national resistance movement against the Tatmadaw.

For one, tens of thousands of people displaced by civil war over the past two years remain in camps, where humanitarian assistance is dwindling, and their future is uncertain. The junta's state-level Administration Council announced on February 10 that it planned to facilitate the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rakhine State. The AA spokesperson told local media on March 31, however, that "IDPs are currently not ready to return to their villages". A major concern is ongoing landmine risks: Since the coup, at least 10 people have been injured or killed by landmine blasts, including eight children.

Among the IDPs encouraged to return were more than 3,300 from Mrauk-U township's Tain Nyo camp, which burned down on

March 17, destroying more than 600 shelters. Although the junta did not rebuild the camp, the IDPs haven't yet returned to their villages due to fear of landmines or renewed conflict and the fact that many of their original homes were destroyed. Instead, charity groups are building them new shelters in the camp.

In recent weeks, the Tatmadaw has been moving troops to Rakhine State, according to reports by Yangon-based Khit Thit media. Many residents of Rakhine State and especially its northern townships are growing increasingly worried about the possibility of renewed intensive fighting in the region. Even though many Rakhine people support the national protest movement's calls for the formation of a National Unity Government and a Federal Army to defeat the junta, in the current situation, Rakhine people are considering first of all how best to ensure their own survival.

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Food fears for displaced and locked down in Myanmar's Rakhine

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Lockdowns imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 have left villagers entirely reliant on donations.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera (7.30.2021)

Concerns are growing over the welfare of thousands of displaced people in Myanmar's western Rakhine State who are in lockdown after the discovery of COVID-19 in the camps and unable to get enough food to eat.

The Sin Bawkaing camp for internally displaced people (IDP), which is home to nearly 4,000 people, is the latest to be affected by the country's accelerating COVID-19 pandemic. The camp has been in lockdown since a woman was diagnosed with the virus on July 14, and more cases have since emerged.

"It was really shocking, and I don't know how to survive," Win Nu, a 33-year-old mother of three told Al Jazeera by phone from the camp where she shares a small room with four members of her family. "The virus can spread easily to the whole camp."

Six months after the military seized power from Myanmar's elected government in a coup triggering a political and economic crisis, the country is now facing a deadly new wave of COVID-19.

On Wednesday, the Health Ministry reported 4,980 new cases and 365 deaths but said it had conducted just 13,763 tests nationwide, suggesting the outbreak is much larger than officially reported. Funeral services and local media have shared higher numbers with cremations reported at 1,000 a day in Yangon, the country's biggest city, but Al Jazeera has been unable to independently confirm the figures.

"Once a person gets infected, it is easier to transmit to other people," said Mra Tazaung Sayadaw, a monk who has been supporting IDPs by collecting donations since the armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military that forced them to leave their villages began in 2018.

The AA, established in 2009 and one of Myanmar's numerous ethnic armed groups, wants self-determination for the people of Rakhine State, and has been fighting the Myanmar military for most of the past two years.

Before the coup, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government had called on the military, known as the Tatmadaw, to "crush" the AA, imposing the world's longest internet shutdown, and designating the AA a "terrorist organisation".

It also excluded the AA from its landmark peace conference and blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people.

The state had already been the location of bloody interethnic violence in 2012 when more than 130,000 mostly Muslim Rohingya were forced into camps within the state, and denied citizenship and rights such as education, freedom of movement, and healthcare under government policies.

In 2017, the military launched a brutal crackdown that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh – and is now the subject of international charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice at The Hague in the Netherlands.

A local civil society group estimates that about 180,000 people remain displaced in the state, including some Rohingya.

CONFLICT, COUP, COVID-19

Since the February 1 coup, little to no food aid or humanitarian assistance has reached the camps, and most IDPs have few, if any, other means of earning an income. Many are struggling to feed themselves and their families. There are also shortages of masks, and hand sanitiser.

"Because of the military coup in Myanmar, humanitarian aid from national or international organisations was delayed as the military limited international organisations' access to IDP camps," Aung Hla*, a social worker from Kyauktaw Township who has been supporting the displaced people since 2018, told Al Jazeera. "Because of that, it has become more difficult to raise awareness of the COVID-19 virus, and necessary items [such as mask, soap and sanitiser] for prevention in camps."

Across Rakhine State, there are more than 100 camps, with people often living in bamboo or tarpaulin shelters or sleeping in open halls. Conditions are crowded and social distancing is difficult.

The Sin Bawkaing IDP camp, one of the largest in Rakhine State's Mrauk-U Township, was built in March 2019 by people displaced from 20 villages in the area.

The move to lock down the camp has had a serious effect on daily life.

"Although organisations like WFP [World Food Programme] and ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] provide humanitarian relief for us, it is not enough for us now," Nyi Pu, its camp manager told Al Jazeera by phone from the camp. "The people in the camp are at risk for food, they can't find essential items such as fish and other ingredients including chilli, spice, and fish paste. That's why people are now struggling." Nyi Pu also says there is less support for COVID-19 prevention in comparison

with the first and second waves in February and August 2020.

"There is no support related to COVID-19 prevention right now, except some masks that were provided by local donors," he said.

On July 20, the United League of Arakan (ULA), a political wing of the AA issued a stay-at-home order for two weeks from July 20 to August 4 to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Rakhine State. "If anyone doesn't comply with the statement, the actions will be taken in line with COVID-19 procedures," the statement added.

The AA, which had declared a ceasefire since the November 2020 elections, has emerged as the de facto political power in the state since the military in March removed the group's terrorist designation and released jailed members.

"Even in the period before the coup, IDPs were more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection," Tun Tun*, a local humanitarian worker from Buthidaung Township, told Al Jazeera. "Since the coup, it has become far worse. If the military orders stricter rules on NGOs and INGOs, people may suffer from starvation and COVID-19 infection."

Tun Tun says the global spread of the coronavirus has already diverted attention from the Rakhine camps. "The local and international organisations have been giving more attention to the COVID-19 response, while people in IDP camps are starving," he said. Currently, only the WFP and the ICRC are allowed to provide support to the camps.

The Red Cross told Al Jazeera that its access to the camps in Rakhine was dependent on "travel authorisations" and that it had not been allowed into Sin Bawkaing since 2019.

Nevertheless it said it had adapted its operations to work with camp leaders and local authorities to ensure people were still receiving monthly supplies including food rations, medical items and materials such as bamboo and tarpaulin for shelter.

"Regular and reliable ICRC assistance to the population in the camp continues up to today," said Jurg Montani, the Acting Head of Delegation in Myanmar. He stressed that the Red Cross had been allowed to operate in most of the more than 50 IDP camps in Central

Rakhine, including 24 in Mrauk U township.

Before fighting broke out between the AA and the Tatmadaw, Win Nu worked as a daily wage labourer at a vegetable farm. After artillery attacks hit several times near her village one evening in March 2019, Win Nu fled in a boat with her son and two daughters and has not been back since.

In Sin Bawkaing, she has made a living by foraging for bamboo shoots to sell in the nearest village. But with the lockdown, they are no longer allowed to leave in the camp, and Win Nu and the hundreds of other families living there are reliant entirely on donations.

"We are in the worst condition right now," she said. "We eat only rice without any other dishes. We can't do anything right now under the lockdown, we are now trying not to die."

**Pseudonyms have been used for Aung Hla and Tun Tun for security reasons.*

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Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State

The Arakan Army and its political wing, the United League of Arakan, have unveiled a political dispute mechanism and plans for a judiciary in Rakhine State as part of their moves to "bring justice to all people living in Rakhine."

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Frontier Myanmar (8.6.2021)

The United League of Arakan is advancing steadily towards its objective of assuming administrative control in Rakhine State and has seen a high level of compliance from the state's residents with the stay-at-home order it issued on July 20 in response to the third wave of COVID-19. Since the coup, the ULA and its armed wing, the Arakan Army, have accelerated their effort to expand their ability to govern the state and be seen as its legitimate governing body.

About 75 percent of the population of Rakhine State is complying with the order issued on July 20, Brigadier-General Dr Nyo Twan Awng, deputy commander-in-chief of the AA, told *Frontier* on July 31. "It would be better if there was 100 percent compliance," he said, adding that the state's status as one of the least economically

developed areas of Myanmar leaves it vulnerable and a high level of compliance would help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In its statement announcing the stay-at-home order, the ULA had warned that legal action would be taken against anyone who did not follow the directive. Meanwhile, the Rakhine State Administrative Council has taken some minor actions like distributing food aid, but has not issued any stay-at-home orders or other restrictions.

The ULA is also making inroads on the legal system in the state. On August 1 it announced the establishment of a dispute resolution mechanism. A statement said all legal disputes, including over land, as well as cases involving violence and theft, should be submitted to the ULA. The Rakhine State Administration Council has also stepped up its plan to exert control in Rakhine. On August 5 it announced plans to implement household registrations throughout the state as well as for day and night patrols "as a response to COVID-19 outbreak and state's security."

DE FACTO ADMINISTRATION

The AA's campaign for greater autonomy resulted in heavy fighting with the Tatmadaw for two years until hostilities ended in an informal ceasefire after the November 8 election last year. The conflict caused significant disruption to lives, livelihoods and the economy, displaced more than 230,000 civilians, and left nearly 1,000 dead or injured, including more than 170 children.

As the fighting escalated, the National League for Democracy government called in January 2019 for the Tatmadaw to "crush" the AA. In June that year, the government imposed on Rakhine State what was to become the world's longest internet shutdown, which was justified as a necessary response to the insurgency. In March 2020 the NLD government designated the AA and the ULA as terrorist organisations. The NLD government also excluded the AA from the peace process, and blocked humanitarian assistance to people affected by the fighting.

When the Union Election Commission appointed by the NLD cancelled the 2020 election in much of Rakhine on the grounds of "security," it disenfranchised an estimated 73 percent of the state's voters. As a result many of the state's residents shifted their support to the AA. The armed group has been slowly building up its administrative capacity and began accelerating these efforts after the coup.

On April 11, the 12th anniversary of its founding, AA commander-in-chief Major-General Twan Mrat Naing said in a statement that it had turned its focus from the mobilisation and military affairs of its early revolutionary period, to implementing "a governance mechanism with strong institutions for public administrative affairs, including administration, a judiciary and public security".

The AA's local administrators, who have been gaining popular support since before the coup, are responding to an increasing number of residents seeking the resolution of legal disputes, and crimes ranging from robbery to murder.

Under the NLD government, local administrators were stuck between the central government and the AA's de facto administration. In early March 2019, hundreds of ward and village tract administrators in northern Rakhine resigned because they feared being accused of associating with the AA and being arrested by the military. Some said they quit because they preferred the AA administration.

The AA has influence over two-thirds of Rakhine State, claims Nyo Twan Awng. "We can mainly undertake rule of law issues and administration in these areas," he told *Frontier* on August 3. "AA is engaging executive and judicial responsibilities."

Nyo Twan Awng says the AA has already trained hundreds of administrative personnel. The administrative body, the Arakan People's Authority, says it has solved over 550 cases from more than 1,400 complaints received, ranging from petty quarrels to land disputes and murder.

"With as few weaknesses as possible, we are trying to bring justice regardless of race and religion for the people living in Rakhine

State," Nyo Twan Awng added. "Looking through the lens of international law, we might still have some weakness today, but we are developing for independent justice."

The AA said that although not all ethnic groups and religions are represented among Arakan People's Authority personnel, community leaders are involved in dispute resolution involving different communities. This was an issue under the NLD government, when members of minority religions and ethnic groups in the state were excluded from government positions.

"We intend to bring justice for all people living in Rakhine State, regardless of race and religion," Nyo Twan Awng said.

RETURN OF THE RULE OF LAW

The ULA's recent initiatives, including the dispute resolution mechanism, have largely been welcomed by civil society groups and prominent members of Rakhine political parties.

U Khaing Kaung San, director of the Sittwe-based Wan Lark Foundation, said the move was essential for the state because residents of some townships could not lodge complaints with the regime's judiciary and law enforcement departments.

"People need a place where they can file complaints for justice," he said. A senior member of the Arakan National Party, U Pe Than, has been quoted as saying that the ULA's administrative mechanism was working better than that of the regime council in Rakhine. The ULA announcement about dispute resolution marked the start of the return of the rule of law in the state after the fighting between the military and the AA, Pe Than told *DVB in 2nd August 2021*.

Ma Su Mrat Htwe, a founder of the Rambree Youth Network based in Ramree Township, said that even before the election last November, residents of the township were seeking assistance from the AA office.

She said that government township administrations answer to the ULA. "Even the public service departments are under control

of the ULA," she told *Frontier*. "After the coup in February, the people afforded the ULA more legitimacy than before." However, she expressed concern about the misuse of authority by AA members at the local level. "Solidarity prevails, but these power abuse issues must be dealt with," she said.

POTENTIAL FOR ABUSE OF POWER

Five days after the ULA issued its stay-at-home order on July 20, Twan Mrat Naing issued a speech via video clip on social media, in which he spoke of its attempts to acquire vaccines and also made the claim about 75pc of the population adhering to the order. Referring to reports from some townships, including in Sittwe, of people continuing to eat out at restaurants in defiance of the stay-at-home order, he warned that such behaviour was "absolutely not acceptable".

Nyo Twan Awng said that one of the challenges the ULA faced would be arranging the transport of vaccines to Rakhine because they would need to pass through checkpoints controlled by the SAC.

"When we overcome this problem, we will strive to provide vaccines to all people of Rakhine State regardless of race and religion," he added.

The ULA has been punishing people for flouting the stay-at-home order and beatings with sticks have been administered to miscreants in some of the state's northern townships, residents said. The ULA has also used stun grenades in Sittwe against people caught defying the order.

Khaing Thuka was quoted as saying in local media on July 31 that the AA detonated the stun grenades as a warning against gathering in groups and warned that those who continue to ignore COVID-19 restrictions would be punished.

U Khine Murn Chun, president of the Mrauk-U Youth Association, said the use by AA of physical punishment to enforce the

stay-at-home had enabled it to achieve 100pc compliance in rural areas.

"In Mrauk-U, the street gambling and alcoholic crowds are restricted by AA, even in downtown areas," he told *Frontier.* "Generally, it can be said that AA controls urban and rural areas in all of Rakhine," he said.

Kyauktaw resident U Zaw Win, 40, said the AA had earned the people's support because they preferred to have a government comprised of their own ethnic group. He complained that the state has not had a government that stood up for its people in recent years.

"As a result of bold action, the Arakan Army has earned the undeniable support of the people of Rakhine State," he told *Frontier*. "The people in Rakhine State have been hungry for a government that properly represents their interests or a government that derives its power from the people of the state," he added.

VACCINATION ROLLOUT

The third wave of COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on Myanmar since it began in late June, about a month after the Rakhine health department reported four positive cases among about 40 people involved in trade with Bangladesh. Since then, the state has been reporting about 100 cases a day and there have been dozens of deaths.

Civil society groups have established quarantine centres in the capital, Sittwe, and the AA has responded to plans by the military council for a vaccination rollout by promising to secure supplies of vaccines by any possible means.

The AA has been able to make a more effective contribution to COVID-19 prevention and control efforts in Rakhine as a result of the military's decision to remove the powerful ethnic armed group from its list of terrorist organisations in March, about a month after it seized power.

As the number of COVID-19 cases rose in Rakhine, so did the

level of dissatisfaction among the state's residents over the military council's response to the outbreak.

In early July, after about 150 border guard police and their family members at Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships in northern Rakhine tested positive for COVID-19, civil society groups accused military-controlled authorities of not doing enough to fight the coronavirus.

The military council has said that three million doses of vaccine arrived in Myanmar in July and another three million doses were due in August. Vaccination programs have begun in at least three Rakhine townships since the end of July.

However, moves by the military council to take control of privately-owned oxygen plants in Rakhine and to ban government health workers from talking to the media, have fuelled more anger among residents and civil society groups.

AHCT secretary Khaing Kaung San, from the Wan Lark Foundation, told *Frontier* that the SAC does not have a proper understanding of the situation and is trying to spread propaganda. "The government spreads propaganda that there is enough oxygen. As well as a shortage of oxygen there is also not enough oxygen cylinders," he told *Frontier*.

In Rakhine during the second wave, civil society groups joined forces to establish the Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Team, which set up quarantine centres for people who had been in contact with COVID-19 patients.

However, the AHCT says it has received no cooperation from the military during the third wave. With many of the sick unable to afford hospital treatment, many Rakhine infected with COVID-19 are struggling at home with relatives or friends desperately trying to secure medical oxygen for them.

Zaw Win, the Kyauktaw town resident, said people were not happy with the junta's response to COVID-19.

"If they think of themselves as a government, they must act like a government, but they are acting like an autocratic elite that oppresses people," he told *Frontier* on July 28.

"We don't really have faith in the military regime, because a real government does not act to destroy civilians; people throughout the country are at risk," he added.

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The Arakan Army Seeks to Build an "Inclusive" Administration in Rakhine

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The armed group's decision to include Muslim Rohingya representatives in local administration marks a sharp break with a succession of central governments.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing (The Diplomat, 08.3.2021).

Seven months since the military coup in Myanmar, the political wing of the rebel Arakan Army (AA) has significantly expanded its administrative and judicial mechanisms across Rakhine State in western Myanmar, with hundreds of its personnel now effectively administering the region independently of the military junta that rules in Naypyidaw. The group is also attempting to involve the state's entire population, including the Rohingya Muslims, in the governance of what it hopes will become an autonomous Rakhine State.

On April 11, 2020, the 11th anniversary of the formation of the AA, Gen. Maj. Twan Mrat Naing, the army's commander-in-chief, outlined the concept of the "way of Rakhita," which he described as "the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan's

sovereignty to the people of Arakan." This refers to the restoration of the independent Arakan kingdom that ruled significant parts of western Myanmar until 1824, when it was conquered by the Burmese kingdom based in Mandalay.

In an interview with the U.S-based Arakkha Media on August 15 of this year, Twan Mrat Naing said that in the pursuit of this long standing Arakan dream, there will be no compromise. "We never had a price tag in attempting to wrestle back our lost sovereignty for the Arakan people," he said. "There will not be in the future, either"

On February 1, the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, took over the country, ousting the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and arresting leaders including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. The military has said it took over the country due to rampant "voter fraud" by the NLD, and the junta's newly-appointed Union Election Commission has since annulled the result of the election.

The coup tipped the country into political turmoil. Immediately, nationwide protests broke out, which were followed by deadly crackdowns that have since claimed the lives of over 1,000 people, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners as of August 24, 2021.

Ethnic armed groups including the AA have condemned the coup and violence against civilians. A powerful ethnic armed group based in Rakhine State, the AA has been fighting for greater autonomy since 2018, and has become one of the most serious threats to the junta's hold on power. Indeed, in a bid to placate the AA's leadership and seek its support, the junta removed the organization from its list of terrorist groups in March, about a month after the coup.

Prior to the coup, intensive armed conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw had displaced more than 230,000 civilians, while nearly 1,000 were seriously injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots, and landmine explosions, including more than 170 children. The NLD government, led by Nobel laureate Aung San

Suu Kyi, called for the Tatmadaw to "crush" the AA, imposed the world's longest internet shutdown in parts of Rakhine State, and designated the AA as a terrorist organization in response to the conflict.

It also excluded the AA from its landmark peace conference, blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people, and canceled the November 2020 national election in large parts of Rakhine State for "security reasons," preventing an estimated 73 percent of Rakhine State's voters from casting a ballot. The cancellation of the election prompted many residents of Rakhine State to shift their support to the AA, which began establishing its own administration across large parts of the state – a process that it has accelerated since February's coup.

On April 11 of this year, the 12th anniversary of the formation of the AA, Twan Mrat Naing issued a statement recalling that in the early period of its struggle, the AA worked mainly on mobilization and armed resistance to obtain its political objectives, but is now implementing "a governance mechanism with strong institutions for public administrative affairs including administration, judiciary, and public security".

Khaing Kaung San, founder and executive director of the Rakhine State-based Wan Lark Foundation, said that the people of Rakhine State increasingly rely upon the AA's administration and dispute resolution mechanisms, increasing trust and support for the AA's performance after years of discrimination from successive central governments.

"People have been treated with discrimination by the previous successive governmental departments, including the police and the soldiers," he told The Diplomat. "Right now, the existence of the AA with its newly introduced Judiciary and Complaints System weakens the arbitrary acts. Not only among people but also the departmental officers serving the current authority do not dare to act arbitrarily like before. They, themselves, have trust in the AA and support the AA's performance."

On August 1, the United League of Arakan (ULA), the AA's po-

litical wing, officially announced that the people of Rakhine State can now file or submit their legal disputes including over crimes, land issues, and theft to the ULA's dispute resolution mechanism. It said that it intends to bring justice for all people living in Rakhine State, regardless of race and religion.

During a recent interview with Arakkha Media, Twan Mrat Naing, said that the AA has arranged to pay salaries for those who are working in its judicial department. "We are serious about the Department of Justice," he said. "We are trying to pay salaries to the staff members of the Department of Justice to ensure justice and to prevent mistakes".

Most notably, the Arakan Army is also planning to involve Rakhine State's Rohingya Muslims, the second largest group of the state's population of 3.2 million, in its administrative roles and the police work, Twan Mrat Naing told Arakkha Media. "We've planned for them to participate more in our administrative sectors and police work, and also plan to offer training for them on office work, management and law. We'll have to conduct this step by step," he said.

Lar Lar Myar, a prominent Rohingya Muslim from Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine State, told Radio Free Asia that he welcomed AA's statement, adding that the Rohingya community had never been allowed to participate in civil administration under the NLD administration, or any previous central government.

"We are very happy that the Arakan Army will now provide training to all of our people together. We accept them. Now, young people are registering, although the AA hasn't yet spoken directly to us. But we are compiling a list because of the AA commander-in-chief's announcement. We are making the list in advance so that it will be ready when AA comes," he said.

Lar Lar Myar also said that a liaison office for the Rohingya and AA had been established, adding that the state judiciary under the AA has "acted fairly, without discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity."

In 2017, the military launched a brutal crackdown that forced

hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh – and is now the subject of international charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Meanwhile, state-sponsored violence in 2012 forced more than 130,000 Rohingya into internal displacement camps within Rakhine State. They have since been denied citizenship and rights such as education, freedom of movement, and health care under successive governments. During his recent interview with Arakkha Media, Twan Mrat Naing said everyone living in the state were citizens of Arakan regardless of race or religion.

Khaing Kaung San of the Wan Lark Foundation said that Rohingya Muslims have never had the opportunity to take part in administering their villages under successive central governments but would welcome the chance to help govern under the ULA/AA administration. "Currently the community has been granted authority to administer their villages by their community leaders under the AA administration," he told The Diplomat.

Earlier this month, Brig. Gen. Dr. Nyo Twan Awng, the deputy commander-in-chief of the AA, told Frontier Myanmar that AA has de facto control over two-thirds of Rakhine State, and is now exercising effective executive and judicial authority in these areas.

Khaing Kaung San said that Rohingya communities were being "provided protection by the AA with regard to their well-being and health care. Not only in the AA-controlled areas, but also in other places including Sittwe, communication between the two communities exists."

In the AA's pursuit of its dream of an autonomous Arakan polity, an inclusive approach also makes pragmatic sense. Unlike previous rulers of the state, who have pitted its ethnic communities against one another, the Arakan Army's strategy of including community leaders from minority communities, especially Rohingya, into the administration of the state increases the likelihood that it will succeed in maintaining stability and peace.

Kyaw Win, founder and executive director of Human Rights Network for Burma, said that the lives of the Rohingya have gotten

steadily worse under a succession of central governments, and that they would no doubt welcome any AA administration that accepts them as legitimate members of the family of Arakan.

"AA should prove that they are different by their actions, and I believe that they are doing so," he said.

https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-seek-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/

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Relief Agencies Should Push for Independent Access to Myanmar's Rakhine State

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Since the February coup, the Arakan Army has reportedly gained effective control of much of Rakhine State.

By Laetitia van den Assum and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat, September 10, 2021

Since February, when Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, staged a coup against the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, Rakhine State in the west of the country has stood out. While other states witnessed massive peaceful demonstrations, followed by deeply troubling indiscriminate violence at the hands of the police and the military, Rakhine remained relatively tranquil.

In November 2020, three months before the coup, the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA), a powerful ethnic armed organization, agreed to an informal ceasefire, ending fierce fighting that had wreaked havoc on the people of Rakhine State for close to two years.

During the fighting, more than 230,000 civilians were displaced, while nearly 1,000, including more than 170 children, were seriously injured or killed by artillery shells, gunshots, and landmines.

The two long years of violent conflict were the culmination of the steadily worsening relations between Rakhine State's politicians and both the Tatmadaw and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) government. Even though the NLD was not popular among the state's voters, it tried to impose its will and chose to divert much of the control over the state to the faraway capital of Naypyidaw.

The AA has since used the informal ceasefire with the military to establish its own civilian governance systems, including in areas populated by Muslim Rohingya communities. It has condemned the military coup but has steered clear of open support of the National Unity Government (NUG), set up in April by former NLD lawmakers and opponents of military rule. Instead, it has stayed in contact with the military regime in order to implement its objective of greater self-rule in Rakhine State.

Although the AA has been advocating greater autonomy for Rakhine's people since 2009, it has only become a force to be reckoned with in the past few years. During that time, it has evolved into a motivated and powerful fighting force that has been able to take on the Tatmadaw. It can now also count on considerable popular support.

In response to the violent conflict that started in late 2018, the NLD government instructed the Tatmadaw to "crush" the AA, while it also imposed the world's longest internet shutdown on Rakhine State and designated the AA as a terrorist organization.

It also excluded the AA from the national peace dialogue, blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people, and disenfranchised an estimated 73 percent of Rakhine State's voters when it denied them the vote, notionally due to security concerns, in the national election of November 2020.

Not surprisingly, these harsh measures have mostly served to increase popular support for the AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA). The AA's commander-in-chief, Maj. Gen. Twan Mrat Naing, has long stated that the ULA/AA wants to establish inclusive governance structures in Rakhine and

that there is no place for discrimination based on ethnicity and religion in Arakan, the name that the AA uses for Rakhine.

The NUG has also made overtures to the Rohingya, particularly with a new policy plan that promises an end to their abject discrimination as well as the replacement of the 1982 Citizenship Law. This reflects the ULA/AA's desire to extend and consolidate its influence in Rakhine.

The ULA/AA is now said to control around 75 percent of Rakhine State's townships, mostly in rural areas where it has been establishing its own administrative and judicial systems. The group says it wants to include Rohingya in its training for administration and police functions. This is a welcome announcement, although some have pointed to the risk of Rohingya getting caught between the AA and the Tatmadaw as they vie for control of Rakhine state.

The ULA/AA is not alone in pursuing change. Even before the February coup, a group of Rakhine, Rohingya, and other minorities in Rakhine State issued a Declaration by the Diverse and United Communities in Arakan. Adopted in January 2021, the declaration expresses agreement on the importance of peaceful coexistence and the building of a new society based on respect for each other's identities and the promotion of peace, justice, equality, and human rights. It deserves to be built on.

The military coup has sparked a nationwide trend of transformation that acknowledges that democracy cannot flourish without respecting Myanmar's long persecuted minorities, including the Rohingya. Younger generations who are a vibrant force in the resistance movement are now openly rejecting the ethnonationalism embraced under decades of military rule.

While these developments are encouraging, the transformation will take a long time. Apart from lifting discriminatory restrictions and legislative measures, changing people's mindsets is also a major challenge. Successive military regimes have sowed ethnic and religious division as a divide-and-rule tool, stoking fear of various "others." Fear, once instilled, is difficult to overcome. But the growing rejection of ethnonationalism is a start, and those trying to take

inclusive policies forward deserve support.

Without independent access to Rakhine State it is difficult to determine to what extent serious restrictions on the Rohingya are being lifted, but in many parts of the state the apartheid-like situation continues. Rohingya in closed villages and displacement camps report not receiving relief assistance for close to four months. Food insecurity, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is now spreading rapidly, affecting other communities as well.

Moreover, the Tatmadaw used the month of August to bolster its troop strength in Rakhine, particularly in the northern part of the state and around the capital Sittwe. Given the history of intercommunal tensions in Rakhine State, the Tatmadaw may also see Rohingya communities as an opportunity to disrupt the AA's expanding presence in the state.

On September 7, local media reported that the Tatmadaw instructed 18 Rohingya village leaders appointed by the junta's Rakhine State Administration Council in Kyauktaw Township to avoid engagement with the ULA/AA administration, not to attend its police and administrative trainings, and reminded them of the risk of arrest for association with an unlawful group. The Tatmadaw last week also issued instructions to ethnic Rakhine ward administrators in southern Rakhine State's Kyaukphyu Township to report any ULA/AA activities to the junta.

However, Rohingya sources in Kyauktaw Township continue to report that ULA/AA presence in their villages has been generally welcomed and that communities rely on the ULA/AA more than on the coup government, in part because costs of accessing their justice mechanisms are much lower.

Given the febrile political context and deteriorating humanitarian situation, relief providers such as United Nations agencies, bilateral partners, international NGOs, and civil society groups should step up their efforts to reach affected communities. Much like what is happening along the border areas with Thailand, agencies should be prepared to work with entities that can reach and are trusted by communities on the ground. This includes the ULA/AA, which

should play its part by allowing civil society to operate in its areas.

Navigating the complex situation in Rakhine State will not be easy. It requires a pragmatic and detailed approach that acknowledges the considerable difference in challenges across the state's 17 townships. A patchwork approach must be pieced together to identify local actors with which to collaborate, even down to district and ward level.

This situation is not new. Civil society groups in Rakhine State have demonstrated capacity and experience. But donors and aid agencies should be called upon to be flexible enough to ensure the success of the relief operations that are necessary to alleviate food insecurity and unnecessary suffering in Rakhine.

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Rumbles in Rakhine amid strains between Myanmar military, rebels

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Recent skirmishes between the Arakan Army and the military have raised concern about the stability of an informal year-long ceasefire.

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera (11.24.2021).

Since Myanmar's military staged a coup against Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government on February 1, triggering mass unrest, the formerly restive far-western state of Rakhine has remained relatively peaceful.

But recent skirmishes have raised concern that an informal ceasefire agreed in the long-troubled area in November last year is starting to break down, even as armed rebellion surges in other parts of the country.

While fighting was reported on multiple days in the second week of November, Arakan Army (AA) Spokesperson Khaing Thu Kha only admitted that the rebel group was involved in one two-hour clash on November 9, after the regime's troops "intentionally" entered an AA-controlled area.

"There was a brief clash to defend the territory," Khaing Thu Kha said, adding that the situation had calmed, and that the military did not seem to want to continue its advance.

For its part, the military has denied any confrontation with the AA, saying it had instead fought with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the same Rohingya armed group that attacked a police outpost in 2017, sparking a brutal counterinsurgency that sent more than 700,000 Rohingya civilians fleeing across the border to Bangladesh. The crackdown is now the subject of an international genocide case.

"It did not happen with the AA," military spokesman General Zaw Min Tun told Radio Free Asia on November 10. On November 15, ARSA issued a statement that it had been involved in fighting with the military on November 7, 9, and 11.

The AA is a more formidable adversary than ARSA, having fought the Myanmar military to a stalemate after two years of brutal conflict, described by many as the country's fiercest civil war in decades.

Richard Horsey, senior adviser to the International Crisis Group, says while the ceasefire has mostly held for a year, the two sides' objectives remain deeply at odds. "The AA has used the ceasefire to reposition its forces and strengthen its administrative apparatus, and at some point, the military will step in to enforce its red lines," he told Al Jazeera. "The trigger for the recent clashes may have been a random event, but there is clearly scope for serious escalation."

TUSSLE OVER TRADE

The fighting reportedly took place in Maungdaw township, near the border with Bangladesh.

Khaing Kaung San, executive director of Rakhine-based human rights group Wan Lark Foundation, said it may have been triggered by a tussle over control of trade routes.

He also said while the military may hesitate to fully confront the

AA given it is facing "offensive attacks" from other armed groups throughout the country, it also cannot accept the AA's demand for "greater autonomy" within Myanmar.

"If the fighting that happened in 2018-20 resumes, there will be more destruction and more internally displaced people," Khaung Kaung San said. Horsey agreed that should the military take on the AA, it could become "seriously overstretched", allowing other resistance groups to make advances.

Although most analysts believe both sides in Rakhine hope to avoid a return to war, there are other signs that the ceasefire is under stress. While the military government has been releasing political prisoners who were charged with "terrorism" for allegedly being affiliated with the AA, it has begun arresting people accused of being connected to the People's Defence Force, a loose network of armed resistance groups that emerged after the coup.

Following the reported clashes in Rakhine, authorities have also reportedly begun hunting journalists and investigating local outlets Narinjara and Western News. Reporters from Western News have since gone into hiding. Crackdowns on local media were a common tactic deployed during the two-year conflict as well.

The AA, established in 2009 and one of dozens of ethnic armed groups operating primarily in Myanmar's border areas, mostly represents ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, who make up the majority of the state's population.

After the crackdown on the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, fighting intensified between the military and the AA in 2018, driven mainly by local grievances with the central government and a desire for greater political autonomy. The fighting forced tens of thousands from their homes, and nearly 1,000 civilians were seriously injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots, and landmine explosions, including more than 170 children, according to Radio Free Asia.

The violence only came to an end after the two sides had agreed to an informal ceasefire ahead of the 2020 election, amid a shared antipathy to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy

(NLD) government.

The NLD's government had designated the AA a "terrorist organisation" and had called on the military to crush the group. It had also excluded the AA from its landmark peace conference, blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people, and cancelled voting in many parts of the state.

Kyaw Lynn, a 24-year-old youth activist from Rakhine, told Al Jazeera that the NLD's stance on armed conflict and political problems in Rakhine made most people feel like they were not really losing anything as a result of the coup, despite the mass protests and rebellions elsewhere in the country.

AA EXTENDS INFLUENCE

In Rakhine, the turmoil has allowed the AA to further entrench its position while the military has been distracted.

Nyo Twan Awng, the AA's deputy commander-in-chief, told Frontier Myanmar in August that the group had de facto power over two-thirds of the state and was now operating its own administrative and judicial systems. The AA has also publicly committed to building an inclusive administration that incorporates the marginalised Rohingya.

Spokesman Khaing Thu Kha said that some of the group's political wing, the United League of Arakan, has been involved in COVID-19 prevention, the repatriation of displaced people and drug rehabilitation programmes. While the AA has avoided joining the anti-military revolution, it has condemned the coup and subsequent violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters.

"On the one hand the people could live peacefully without war for a year," said Khaing Thu Kha. "On the other, what is happening in Myanmar is disgraceful and disappointing."

Army chief Min Aung Hlaing detained Aung San Suu Kyi and many senior members of her government hours before the new parliament was due to convene in February.

The power grab has fuelled anti-coup protests in much of the country as well as a mass movement of civil disobedience. The military has responded with force and at least 1,270 people have been killed and more than 10,000 arrested, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which is tracking the situation.

The AA said as early as April that there should be no street protests or activities linked to the Civil Disobedience Movement in the state to avoid distracting from the primary goal of establishing administrative control. Kyaw Lynn said the AA has a "huge influence" over the local population and few would go against such a request.

A prominent Burmese political and military analyst who requested anonymity for fear of arrest, told Al Jazeera: "The ceasefire in Rakhine State was a benefit to both. For the Myanmar military the end of the fighting allowed them to stage a coup, while for the AA it allowed them to build their military status and their own administration in Rakhine State."

The analyst believes the military hoped the ceasefire would provide stability as it spun its voter fraud narrative and prepared to seize power.

But the generals would probably have hoped they could quash popular resistance before the AA was able to consolidate control over Rakhine. Nearly 10 months since the coup, the military government has been unable to bring the country completely under its control.

Shortly after the November clashes, Yohei Sasakawa, Japan's envoy for reconciliation in Myanmar, met coup leader Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw and travelled to Rakhine State.

As well as visiting Rohingya and Rakhine people displaced by the conflict, he held talks with AA leaders, urging them to avoid conflict. On November 16, the AA released a total of 15 police officers and soldiers.

But analysts say maintaining the ceasefire may prove increasingly tricky because the AA wants self-determination within Myanmar, and that is more than the generals are willing to accept.

"In order to achieve the AA's political goals, they must choose the armed path," the political analyst said. "It isn't possible to get that from negotiation with the Myanmar junta," he said.

The escalation in fighting elsewhere in the country might buy Rakhine some time.

But it might not take much to lead to renewed conflict in a region that has already endured years of violence.

"Whether the clash will intensify depends on the military," warned AA spokesman Khaing Thu Kha. "If they come into any of the AA's territory there will be war."

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/24/rumbles-in-rakhine-amid-strains-between-myanmar-military-rebels

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Myanmar's military coup prolongs misery for Rohingya in Rakhine

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Mostly Muslim minority find themselves target of renewed military intimidation amid accommodation with rebel armed group.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera (1.6.2022).

Bangkok, Thailand – In early August, military officials assigned to Rakhine State by Myanmar's generals summoned leaders from the mainly Muslim Rohingya community in Buthidaung township to a meeting on the banks of the Mayu River.

The officials came with a warning: Rohingya villagers should cut off any ties with the Arakan Army (AA), an armed rebel group fighting for self-determination for ethnic minorities in the country's northwest.

"Currently we are participating all-together in the AA's administration ... Because the AA is acting with equality and law for all of us," a village administrator from the Muslim community in Buthidaung told Al Jazeera, adding that the Rohingya have so far ignored the military's request.

Amid concern that the political crisis triggered by the February 1 military coup could descend into civil war, and as a ceasefire in the restive northwestern state begins to falter, the country's oppressed Rohingya minority is looking vulnerable once again.

In November last year, there were mass arrests of Rohingya trying to leave Rakhine, new draconian restrictions on their freedom of movement, and intimidation from military officials about the dangers of collaborating with the AA, which mainly represents ethnic Rakhine Buddhists.

"Currently our township is stable, but we don't know when fighting will start so we are always living together in fear," said a 47-year-old Rohingya resident of Buthidaung, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of arrest.

It has long been illegal for Rohingya to travel outside of the state, with those who breach the rules risking a two-year prison sentence. But the deteriorating situation means more are trying.

In late November, the Myanmar navy seized a boat near the state capital, Sittwe, that was travelling from Maungdaw to Malaysia, arresting the more than 200 Rohingya who were on board, including 33 children.

Earlier that month, 55 Rohingya were arrested after making it as far as Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city.

The military leadership appears to be introducing harsher punishments, with local media reporting on December 15 that a court sentenced the Rohingya arrested near Sittwe to five years in prison for breaching the law, rather than two.

In 2017, the Myanmar military unleashed a brutal crackdown on Rohingya civilians, sending at least 700,000 fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh amid reports of killings, torture, rape and arson. Most remain there, trying to survive in the world's largest refugee camp.

Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who was then the country's de facto leader until the coup, ignored appeals from rights groups and the international community to condemn the violence, even defending the military against accusations of genocide at the International

Court of Justice (ICJ).

But when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) government was overthrown in February, concern grew that the situation for the Rohingya could once again deteriorate.

'WE WERE REALLY AFRAID'

The AA wants greater political autonomy for the northwestern state.

Relations between Rakhine and Rohingya communities have historically been strained, with frequent outbursts of inter-ethnic violence. Some Rakhine civilians were implicated in attacks on Rohingya villages in the 2017 crackdowns, and the AA referred to a Rohingya armed group as "savage Bengali Muslim terrorists", using a common pejorative to imply Rohingya are undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh.

The AA agreed to an uneasy ceasefire with the military in November 2020, after two years of brutal civil war that left nearly 90,000 displaced and hundreds of civilians dead.

In March last year, the military removed the AA from its '"terrorism"' list, but the AA has now committed to building an administration that includes the Rohingya, and reports of recent skirmishes have raised questions about how much longer the truce will hold.

Another administrator, in Kyauktaw township, said armed military authorities summoned administrators from six Rohingya villages in September.

He said the officials did not explicitly threaten them or outline any consequences if they worked with the AA, but the fact they were armed meant the experience was intimidating.

"And then, they said 'don't work with the AA to solve any problems.' We were really afraid of them at the time because they have weapons. We couldn't tell them much. And they said again and again not to work with AA," he recalled.

Like the administrator in Buthidaung, he said the AA has been helping the Rohingya and treating them fairly. But he also noted that with the military distracted by a nationwide uprising against their rule, the AA had been able to quietly consolidate territory and expand administrative control over Rakhine.

While mainly urban areas remain under military control, most rural areas are under the AA's administration, and the armed group also has partial influence over Sittwe. Recent fighting has been focused in Maungdaw, near the border.

"Currently junta council members are afraid to come to our village district," the administrator said because it was under AA control.

AA spokesman Khaing Thu Kha said he was aware of the military's attempts at intimidation, accusing the military of trying to control the population via "oppressive mechanisms".

"Not only the Muslims but also all people in Rakhine state are still being threatened by the Myanmar military every day. As much as we can, we are trying to provide security, justice and harmony for all the people in Rakhine state," he told Al Jazeera.

Since the coup, ethnic Rakhine people have also been subjected to increased travel checkpoints and some have been arrested or questioned on suspicion of supporting anti-military resistance groups.

'MANY RESTRICTIONS'

After the 2017 crackdown, some 600,000 Rohingya remained in Rakhine, more than 100,000 of whom were confined to displacement camps which have been called open-air prisons. Human Rights Watch has described the camps as "squalid and abusive" with "severe limitations" on movement, education and healthcare.

Amnesty International has described the treatment of Rohingya in Rakhine as tantamount to apartheid and the harsh restrictions continued even under Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won the 2015 elec-

tions. Recently, however, they have become even more onerous.

While Rohingya could usually travel with permission from their village administrator, sometimes also a Rohingya, the 47-year-old resident of Buthidaung township confirmed to Al Jazeera that as of late November, Rohingya are required to get permission from local military officials in order to travel to neighbouring Maungdaw township.

The military claims that Rohingya travelling poses a danger to security and rule of law. But the administrator says the Rohingya are being forced to pay 10,000 Myanmar kyat (about $5.65) to travel to Maungdaw, a prohibitively expensive sum for people living on the knife-edge of poverty and a challenge for anybody with business interests outside of the township or health conditions that require travel to more well-equipped hospitals.

"If we have to go to Sittwe for our health problems, there will be many restrictions and it will take a lot of time. First, we have to go to the Buthidaung immigration office and then we have to go to the district immigration office in Maungdaw. If the district office refuses us, we can't go," he said, adding that it can take as long as a month to get approval.

He says Rohingya are not yet being openly threatened on the streets, but the situation feels unstable and many are "afraid to travel" or go outside for normal daily activities.

Human rights group Fortify Rights also confirmed that the military has been controlling the movement of Rohingya more strictly, condemning the measures as a violation of the ICJ's provisional orders for Myanmar to take steps to protect the Rohingya from genocide.

Fortify Rights argues that by preventing Rohingya from accessing jobs and healthcare, the military generals may be "deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of a group", a form of genocide.

For Aung Kyaw Moe, a US-based Rohingya activist, the restrictions are a "gross human rights violation". Aung Kyaw Moe serves as an adviser to the human rights ministry of the National Unity

Government (NUG), a parallel administration established by legislators elected in the 2020 polls and removed from office by the military's power grab.

While many senior NUG members hail from the NLD, the group has committed to reforms that the NLD previously refused to consider, saying it will recognise Rohingya citizenship and cooperate with international justice mechanisms. But despite the NUG and AA's official stance, the situation in Rakhine remains complicated, with many still not embracing the Rohingya.

Rakhine political analyst Kyaw Lynn says many ethnic Rakhine remain sceptical about the politicians' motives. "For the NUG, it seems they traded Rakhine people's support for the Rohingya declaration. Or they think it is better to have international recognition than Rakhine recognition," he said.

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Can the Arakan Army achieve its confederacy dream?

The AA's demand for confederacy status seems a bridge too far for either the National Unity Government or the junta, but the group says it will achieve its goal through any means necessary.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Frontier Myanmar ((05, 02, 2022)

More than a year since the military seized power in Myanmar, anti-coup resistance groups and their ethnic armed organisation allies continue to fight the junta with no victory in sight for either side. The military regime has been unable to crush the opposition or to take full control of administrative mechanisms in many parts of the country. But resistance groups have also been unable to overthrow the junta or fully expel it from their territory.

Few factors could break the impasse of the ongoing civil war more than the entrance of the Arakan Army – one of the country's most powerful ethnic armed groups. The AA fought a brutal two-year war with the military before agreeing to an informal ceasefire months before the February 2021 coup. And while many continue

to hope the group will throw its weight behind the broader pro-democracy movement, the question remains: which side can give the AA what it truly wants?

When the 2015 elections vaulted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy into power, there were high hopes despite the 2008 military-drafted constitution requiring a power-sharing arrangement with the military. There were expectations that the NLD would counter the military's influence and champion democracy, human rights, and self-determination for ethnic states. For many ethnic people, especially in Rakhine, those expectations were in tatters long before the coup.

Despite winning the most seats in Rakhine State, the NLD refused to allow the Arakan National Party (ANP) to choose the state's chief minister, a move that would have represented a key commitment to federalist reform. In 2020, the NLD vetoed a constitutional amendment that would have codified such a policy, and in 2021 was poised to again impose its own chief ministers on states where it was less popular, including Rakhine.

Rakhine people also felt that the NLD explicitly sided with the military during the war with the AA, even as the United Nations special rapporteur accused the military of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The NLD administration agreed to impose what was at the time the world's longest internet shutdown, labeled the AA a terrorist organisation, and canceled elections in large swathes of Rakhine State. Having been burned by the NLD, the AA has embraced the "Way of Rakhita" – a struggle for liberation and sovereignty characterised by operating independently of Myanmar's national politics.

In January 2019, the AA commander-in-chief Major General Twan Mrat Naing declared his commitment to achieving "confederation" status for the people of Rakhine, pointing to the Wa Self-Administered Division as an example. This is a step beyond the federalist system most other ethnic groups aspire to, as the United Wa State Army runs an almost entirely autonomous enclave in Myanmar.

PLAYING BOTH SIDES

The AA has discouraged mass protests against the coup, and Rakhine State has remained relatively peaceful even as other parts of the country are gripped by violence. Intense fighting has broken out in Chin, Kayah, Kayin and Kachin states and Sagaing and Magway regions. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said military crackdowns have killed over 1,700 civilians, including many unarmed protesters who were slaughtered in major urban centres like Yangon, Mandalay and Bago.

Ethnic armed groups including the AA condemned the coup and violence against civilians. But while some major groups, like the Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Union, have fully joined with the resistance, the AA still hesitates to commit to open warfare against the junta.

Instead, the AA's political wing, the United League of Arakan, has taken advantage of the fact that the military has been distracted by uprisings across the country to consolidate its power. The group claimed in August last year that it had administrative control over two-thirds of the state, formalising its own taxation and judicial systems.

For the junta's part, it seems keen to avoid antagonising the AA while it deals with a nationwide revolt. As part of its appeasement strategy, the internet blackout was lifted, and the AA was removed from the list of terrorist organisations after the coup. Many political prisoners linked to the AA were released, including Twan Mrat Naing's brother, Aung Mrat Kyaw.

While the public in Rakhine welcomed these steps, many from the Bamar majority accused the AA of collaborating with the junta. From the perspective of many in Rakhine, however, the NLD and its supporters had spent the previous five years collaborating with the military at their expense.

The National Unity Government, the civilian cabinet appointed by lawmakers elected in the annulled 2020 polls, has also taken steps to entice the AA. The administration held informal talks with

the armed group three times in the first year after the coup. But a source within the NUG told me the administration was unable to commit to granting the AA confederacy status in Rakhine State.

The NUG may be worried that other ethnic armed groups would demand similar treatment, precipitating a long-feared national disintegration into multiple ethnic micro-states.

The NUG seems to be hoping to prioritise overthrowing the junta first, saving political commitments for later. But this strategy doesn't appeal to ethnic armed organisations, some of which supported pro-democracy movements in the past, only to feel betrayed when the NLD came to power.

While the AA may not be fully cooperating with the NUG, it is increasingly openly helping to train and arm certain resistance groups. On the AA's 13th anniversary, five anti-coup armed groups expressed their gratitude for the AA's support. The AA and its allies also expressed support for the Bamar People's Liberation Army, an anti-coup armed group founded by poet Maung Saungkha, who was once arrested for protesting against the internet shutdown in Rakhine. On April 26, the Mindat Township branch of the Chinland Defence Force released footage of recruits returning from training with the AA.

Earlier this month, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing invited ethnic armed organisations to peace talks, offering to meet with representatives personally. He excluded the NUG and anti-coup armed groups known as People's Defence Forces, both of which have been labeled terrorist organisations.

It remains to be seen whether the AA will accept this invitation. While the group remains sceptical of military-led peacekeeping initiatives, it did send a delegation to attend the junta's Union Day celebrations and peace talks in February.

NO PRICE TAG ON LIBERATION

Since November of last year, sporadic small-scale clashes have broken out between the AA and the junta in Maungdaw Township, raising fears about the stability of the informal ceasefire. The military likely believed it would have crushed anti-coup resistance by now, allowing it to again shift focus to Rakhine State. But the unexpected level of opposition has left the junta with its hands full elsewhere.

As the AA expands its control over Rakhine, the military may not be willing to sit and watch as the entire state slips out of its grasp. But attempts to take back control of Rakhine could stretch the military beyond its capabilities, risking losing control of the country in the process.

It's unlikely that the AA could achieve the confederacy status it desires through negotiations with the military, which has a long history of breaking promises. If the AA were to receive such a commitment from the junta, it would only mean anything if the group could defend its territory with armed force if necessary.

On multiple occasions, the AA has made it clear there is little room for compromise. During an online press conference on March 5, a spokesperson said if Rakhine cannot achieve the political status it wants within the union of Myanmar, "we will have to create it ourselves". He added that the AA will "continue to build our government and our future nation-state in partnership with the international community".

In an interview with the US Based Arakka Media on August 15 of last year, Twan Mrat Naing had a similarly clear message. "We never had a price tag in attempting to wrestle back our lost sovereignty for the Arakan people," he said. "There will not be in the future, either."

This leaves the AA with two options. Throw its weight behind the NUG and other allied armed groups, but only with the guarantee of confederacy; or sit out the current conflict and continue reinforcing its administrative control and fortifying its defences, so that if and when fighting does return to Rakhine, it is well-positioned to

limit damage and emerge victorious.

With the NUG reluctant to grant confederacy status, and the AA hoping to avoid having Rakhine ravaged by war yet again, it comes as little surprise that so far, the group is pursuing the second path.

https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/can-the-arakan-army-achieve-its-confederacy-dream/

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In Rakhine State, a Fraying Truce May Hold Key to Anti-Regime Fight

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A potent ethnic armed group, tied to the resistance, appears to be inching away from a cease-fire and back to the battlefield.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The United States Institute of Peace (USIP). July 21, 2022.

Myanmar has been crippled by growing political turmoil and militant resistance since the army overthrew the elected civilian government on February 1, 2021. Today, most of the country is engulfed in a virtual civil war. In Rakhine State, however, home to one of Myanmar's most powerful ethnic armed organizations, a tenuous peace still prevails under a cease-fire reached with the pre-coup military in 2020. At the time, the truce benefited both the military and its adversary, the Arakan Army.

Now, under the pressures unleashed by the military's power grab, that deal is fraying. Should it collapse, the coup regime will face a vastly strengthened insurgency. The people of Rakhine, collaterally, will all but certainly suffer brutal counterstrikes from the air force and artillery of a military untroubled by its record of war crimes.

The ruling junta, whose coup sparked an immediate popular uprising, has lost considerable territorial control since it seized power. The generals face a threat on multiple fronts throughout the country from People's Defense Forces (PDFs), citizen groups that have armed and organized to fight the regime, and from battle-tested ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that have either joined with the PDFs or taken advantage of the chaos to advance their drives for long-sought autonomy.

So far, the Arakan Army (AA) and its claimed 30,000 troops in Rakhine have stayed out of the fight. But today, all eyes are on the force, which appears to be inching back toward the battlefield after having consolidated administrative control in much of Rakhine State, an area bordering Bangladesh. The AA's re-engagement would not only challenge the military's position on Myanmar's western frontier but could radically change the balance of military power by stretching the dwindling resources of the Sit-Tat, as the military is known, to yet another front.

Many analysts rightly argue that the junta is unlikely to be crippled until either pro-resistance EAOs — now called Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) — and PDFs better coordinate their military activities or another large ERO yet to engage enters the fray. Crippled or not, the generals have lost administrative power in large parts of the country over the past year, denying them control outside of urban areas.

THE SPRING REVOLUTION AND THE ARAKAN ARMY

The Arakan Army was formed in April 2009 by 26 Arakan youth in Laiza, a mountain town on Kachin State's border with China, under the guidance of the powerful Kachin Independence Army. After moving into Rakhine State in 2015 to gain greater autonomy, the AA expanded rapidly to become one of the military's most dangerous foes. Just three months before the coup, the Sit-Tat and AA agreed on an informal cease-fire. In addition to its ranks in Rakhine, the AA

says it also has at least 5,000 members supporting allies elsewhere. Its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), claims to administer over two-thirds of Rakhine State.

As the nationwide uprising against the coup regime intensified in early 2021, the AA issued a statement on April 10, the anniversary of its founding, urging the Rakhine public not to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement and street protests in Rakhine State and to focus instead on the strategic goal of achieving political autonomy.

Judging that AA involvement in the resistance movement could spell disaster, the junta's administrative council extended an olive branch. The 18-month internet shutdown in Rakhine was lifted and the Arakan National Party leader was offered a seat on the council. Rakhine nationalist politician Dr. Aye Maung and Rakhine writer Wai Han Aung were released from detention on February 13, 2021, followed by the AA chief's family members on June 9.

The AA's posture toward the junta has been ambiguous, providing considerable support to resistance forces outside of Rakhine State, even as anti-junta activity has remained low in Rakhine itself. Specifically, the AA has provided training or arms for a minimum of 11 resistance groups; at least five have disclosed AA support.

1. The Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA), led by a prominent human rights activist and poet, stated that the Arakan Army and its Brotherhood Alliance have supported them since their formation, and the AA and its allies have reiterated their backing.

2. The Student Armed Force formed by the University Student Union (Yangon), the People's Revolution Alliance (Magway) and Mara Defense Force disclosed that they had received weapons, training, military support and tactical guidance from the AA.

3. On April 26, 2022, the Mindat Township branch of the Chinland Defense Forces released footage of recruits returning from AA training.

In addition to AA support for PDFs, just a month after the coup, Rakhine sources in Kachin State indicated that AA troops were fighting the Sit-Tat together with the KIA and their Brotherhood allies in northern Myanmar.

On March 30, 2021, the Brotherhood Alliance, which includes the AA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army warned that if Sit-Tat didn't immediately stop brutalizing peaceful protesters and address the political solutions demanded by the public, the Alliance would "support and cooperate with our oppressed brethren and multi-ethnic people who are waging the Myanmar Spring Revolution in self-defense against the Myanmar Army". Ten days later — a day after troops killed at least 82 people with grenades launched at protesters in Bago city — the Alliance attacked a police station in Shan State's Lashio Township, leaving several officers dead.

The AA also maintains good relations with many of the country's most active EROs, including the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progress Party.

Politically, although it is not an active member, the AA has solid ties with the National Unity Government (NUG), comprised of officials ousted in the coup. Sources within the NUG and AA say they share the common objective of unseating the military regime.

A FEEBLE CEASE-FIRE

Recognition that discreet AA support for the resistance has not significantly weakened the junta has sparked debate about whether direct AA confrontation with the military in Rakhine State might potentially tip the scales in favor of the anti-junta forces.

The International Crisis Group, reflecting on the consequences of renewed fighting for the Rakhine people, recommended that the AA and the junta formalize their cease-fire. Others argue such a deal is unrealistic.

First, neither party is comfortable with the status quo. The junta

is increasingly intolerant of the ULA's expanding administrative control in Rakhine and has openly threatened or detained many ULA administrators. Most recently, junta forces launched an air strike on an AA base in Karen National Union territory in Karen State, killing at least six soldiers, injuring many others and destroying a garment factory.

Secondly, the ULA will not enter any agreement that fails to recognize its political autonomy — a demand the junta cannot and will not meet. An inclusive and sustainable deal would also need to include basic points regarding the rights of Rohingya in Rakhine State. This is unrealistic so long as the junta actively attempts to incite discord between Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

Finally, if an informal cease-fire has not brought peace, a formal one would not either. Although Rakhine State has remained comparatively stable since the coup, its people have suffered serious social and economic damage from junta restrictions and from the nationwide economic collapse caused by the coup.

RENEWED WAR IN RAKHINE STATE?

Since the AA publicly rejected the junta's invitation to a "peace talk" in early June, tensions between the AA and the military have escalated. On June 13, while visiting Rakhine's capital Sittwe, the vice chief of junta administration told his troops to be "ready to fight anytime".

A week later, the military began arresting people linked to the AA in Sittwe, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw and Panagyun, and blocked the gates of these towns and now conduct regular checks of hotels, guest houses and residences, searching for AA fighters and ULA governance officials. The AA has responded by arresting a naval lieutenant and several soldiers in Sittwe, Panagyun and Kyauktaw. Recently, the AA claimed to have welcomed hundreds of Sit-Tat defectors in Rakhine since the coup.

Rumors of resurgent war in Rakhine State have circulated since

last November when small-scale clashes broke out in Maungdaw and Paletwa township. But tensions eased each time war appeared imminent, suggesting neither side sees a benefit in returning to open conflict right now.

Even so, the rising tension between the AA and junta in recent months could lead to new fighting for three main reasons.

1. The junta is blocking further expansion of ULA/AA territorial control in Rakhine State.

2. Coup leader Min Aung Hlaing is thought to face growing pressure from within the Sit-Tat. Military analysts believe that senior commanders involved in past campaigns against the AA resent the commander's decision to continue the cease-fire while a group they identify as an enemy supports the resistance elsewhere.

3. The monsoon season reduces the military's air power advantage, so the time may be ripe for the AA to re-enter the fight.

If armed clashes do break out, they are most likely to occur first in areas where the AA and junta are unwilling to cede strategic territory. For example, if the AA attempts to capture positions near Maungdaw town, particularly the formal border gates to Bangladesh where the military collects considerable tax revenue, the junta will undoubtedly respond forcefully.

IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW FRONT IN THE CIVIL WAR

Renewed war in Rakhine State would have nationwide consequences. Fighting could spread quickly from rural areas controlled by the AA into urban zones of Rakhine State, which have never seen open warfare, as the AA seeks to push junta forces out of the state altogether. The fighting would likely migrate to allied areas, not only those controlled by the Brotherhood Alliance in northern Myanmar, but also in Irrawaddy, Bago, Magwe and Chin State, where the AA has supported PDFs.

Thus, resumption of war in Rakhine State could shift the conflict's balance of military power in favor of the resistance. The Sit-Tat could be stretched dangerously thin by diverting its resources to this new front, presenting resistance forces in Sagaing, Magwe, Karenni, Karen and elsewhere with an opening to expand their areas of control. Balancing this possibility with the prospect of a vengeful and brutal military assault on the population of Rakhine State is the dilemma now facing AA leadership.

https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/myanmars-rakhine-state-fraying-truce-may-hold-key-anti-regime-fight

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Myanmar's Rakhine State: Parties Split, Rebels Rise, and the Junta Schemes

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As the coup regime plots a sham election for next year, the volatile political and military conditions in Rakhine could decide its fate.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, United States Institutes of Peace (USIP), August 2022.

Myanmar's military regime has a plan for trying to establish its governing legitimacy next year: In August of 2023, the dictatorship, which overthrew a democratically elected government in early 2021, intends to hold sham elections. A critical piece of this strategy involves maneuvering Myanmar's welter of small ethnic parties into taking part in the electoral process. Nowhere are the risks and uncertainties inherent in the generals' plan more evident than in poor but economically strategic Rakhine State on Myanmar's western border with Bangladesh and India.

Long alienated from Burma's central government and majority population, Rakhine has complex political dynamics that with the coup have changed dramatically amid shifting public opinion and

the expanding influence of the Arakan Army (AA) — now one of Myanmar's most powerful ethnic armed organizations. The military has succeeded in luring some support in Rakhine but more broadly its efforts have triggered popular backlash and fragmentation within the state's political elite. The evolution of these trends is likely to weigh heavily on the regime's electoral plan. Consequently, understanding Rakhine's political landscape today — and the influence of its history — is critical to contemplating Myanmar's road ahead.

Rakhine's political parties are now divided by their vision of the future: Will they engage with the junta's election scheme? Or will they align with the popular new political power, the AA's United League of Arakan (ULA), which has wrested much of the state's local administration away from military control and will likely seek to block elections in the state?

The split follows years of rising resentment of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party and of wrestling with the NLD and the military for self-governance and against Burman hegemony.

NLD SQUANDERS RAKHINE SUPPORT

During its struggle against military persecution following Myanmar's 1988 rebellion, the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) was a years-long bastion of strength for its NLD ally and Aung San Suu Kyi.

When the previous military regime launched parliamentary elections in 2010, however, disagreement over the NLD's decision to boycott the vote split the ALD. While most of the ALD followed the NLD's lead, other Rakhine politicians, such as the Rakhine nationalists Dr. Aye Maung, Aye Nu Sein and U Hla Soe broke away to form the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). It competed in the balloting and won a majority of Rakhine seats in the national and state parliaments.

Ahead of national elections in 2015, the RNDP, led by Dr. Aye Maung, and the ALD, led by U Aye Thar Aung, agreed to merge into a single party, the Arakan National Party (ANP), to improve their position vis-à-vis the large national parties, including the NLD. The ANP thereafter became Myanmar's fourth largest party and dominated Rakhine State.

After the NLD's landslide national victory in 2015, it placed NLD parliamentarians as chief ministers in all 14 state and regional governments including Rakhine, where the merged ANP had won a majority of seats in the state parliament. The NLD's refusal to bend to the Rakhine public's demand for an ANP chief minister erased years of NLD-ALD alliance, exacerbating a long-standing sense of political exclusion among many Rakhine people and sparking bitter competition between the two parties.

After 2015, factional strife among the top leaders of the ANP led eventually to a three-way split in the party. In 2017, the ALD reconstituted itself under its previous name. Another segment remained as the ANP but its chair, Dr. Aye Maung, resigned in November 2017 and with some of his fellow MPs proceeded in 2018 to form a new party, the Arakan Front Party (AFP). Despite their internal differences, all three harbored grievances against the NLD and its government.

NLD POURS FUEL ON THE FIRE

Rakhine political antagonism against the NLD government over autonomy and perceptions of neglect rapidly accelerated with the government's response to the conflict between the Arakan Army and the Sit-Tat, as the military is popularly known, that broke out in 2018. The conflict displaced more than 230,000 civilians, and seriously injured or killed nearly 1,000, including more than 170 children.

The NLD government backed the Sit-Tat's effort to crush the AA and added the AA to its "terrorist list" despite credible evidence

of widespread Sit-Tat war crimes. The NLD-led government also excluded the AA from its landmark peace conference; blocked humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people; and instituted the world's longest internet shutdown in much of the state. In April 2020, NLD chair and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi expressed gratitude for soldiers fighting the AA.

Then, weeks before the 2020 November general election, the NLD's Union Election Commission cancelled voting in northern and central Rakhine State where support for Rakhine parties was strongest, a move that disenfranchised approximately three-fourths of Rakhine State's eligible voters. With much of the Burman public outside of Rakhine openly supporting the NLD and Sit-Tat on social media, division between Rakhine and Burman populations deepened considerably and popular support for the AA grew.

The result has been Rakhine indifference toward the resistance and support for the junta among some political elites. Many parties, including the ALD, condemned the military take-over; the ANP and AFP — the largest parties — remained silent.

CONFLICTING ATTITUDES TOWARD JUNTA REGIME

The junta has eagerly exploited these internal tensions, even offering positions on its governing council to some Rakhine parties on the very day of the coup. While the ALD and AFP spurned the offer, the ANP, Rakhine's largest, accepted and Daw Aye Nu Sein, the Arakan National Party vice chair, spokesperson and policy board member, joined the national-level coup council. Zaw Aye Maung, another top ANP leader, accepted a position on February 13 as a deputy ethnic affairs minister under the junta government, ignoring a February 7 joint statement in opposition by 47 Rakhine civil society organizations.

The Rakhine public protested that the ANP had lost credibility; the party contended it was acting to "protect Rakhine interests" by demanding ministerial positions, including chair of the Arakan

State Administrative Council. In June, with its demands ignored for months, the ANP announced that it would cease working with the junta's governing council. The ANP chair claimed that Vice Chair Aye Nu Sein's continued work with the junta reflected personal choice, not service for the party.

Although the Arakan Front Party, Rakhine's second largest, refused to join the council and took an ambiguous stance toward the coup in its early weeks, its position changed when Dr. Aye Maung, the AFP founder and chair who had been imprisoned by the NLD government, was freed on February 12. Dr. Aye Maung received public criticism in Rakhine for thanking the junta's leader for his release. In early March, on behalf of his party, he joined the ANP at a meeting of the junta's Union Election Commission (UEC), tacitly supporting the regime's electoral ambitions. Dr. Aye Maung has signaled the party's intention to participate in the junta's plan for a 2023 vote as Myanmar's only escape route from the current crisis. In May, the ANP, reversing course, and the ALD rejected the UEC's invitation to join its meeting.

SHIFTING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE NUG AND ROHINGYA

Like many Rakhine people, the ANP, ALD and AFP consider the National Unity Government (NUG) an extension of the NLD and refused to be involved with it.

In May and June, after the NUG pledged to work with the International Court of Justice to prosecute the military for Rohingya genocide and announced its policy on equal citizenship status for Rohingya, some Rakhine politicians and social influencers argued that the NUG had no authority over Rakhine State to make such decisions. They viewed the NUG as selling out to international opinion to gain recognition rather than protecting Rakhine's interests.

The AFP included among its seven party objectives a pledge "to constantly protect and fight against the illegal invasion of settlements in Rakhine State, which threatens not only the existence of

Rakhine people and Rakhine State, but also the sovereignty of the Union, and the efforts to plunder Rakhine territory and expand new territory." The statement used discriminatory language that refers specifically to Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

A few hours after the international court rejected Myanmar's preliminary objections last month, July 2022, U Ba Shein, a top leader of ANP, expressed support on social media for the team representing the coup regime in the Hague. He also posted a diatribe against the United States and the NLD for supporting the Rohingya.

Many Rakhine social media users, however, have criticized him and his ANP, accusing them of supporting those "who murdered the people alive".

A NEW TRAJECTORY FOR RAKHINE POLITICS

Though Rakhine's ANP, ALD and AFP continue to espouse the hardline nationalist and anti-Muslim views that worked for them in the 2015 elections, the political landscape has changed dramatically in recent years because of shifting public opinion and the ascendancy of the Arakan Army.

Structural discrimination against Muslims persists and Buddhist-Muslim relations remain tense, to be sure. Yet there are encouraging signs of greater openness toward Muslims, particularly among young people. Social media analysis by the author has found notably lower levels of anti-Muslim hate speech among Rakhine netizens since the coup. The analysis also found that much of the Rakhine public is less likely to equate the Sit-Tat with the Bamar public in general since the coup. These shifts clash with the narratives propagated by the Rakhine political parties, and could undermine their long-term viability, particularly if they continue to engage the junta's governing State Administration Council (SAC).

As support for Rakhine political parties wanes, the AA's campaign against the Sit-Tat in 2018 and 2019, and its successful ef-

forts to replace Bamar and military administration across much of Rakhine State has generated widespread support. Unlike the political parties, the AA has also maintained a constructive and open relationship with the NUG and provides substantial assistance to resistance forces across the country.

The junta government has ambitious plans to conduct an election next year, including in Rakhine State. With the AA and Sit-Tat on the brink of war, the SAC will be fortunate if it is able to run elections in just a handful of urban areas across Rakhine State. If elections move forward, even in just a handful of constituencies, and the ANP and AFP participate, as expected, the AA will be in a difficult position. It may push to gain full control of the state or coordinate more closely with the national-level resistance to cripple the regime entirely ahead of the elections to ensure they don't face this challenging prospect.

Either way, Rakhine State is likely in for another period of upheaval — militarily and politically.

https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/myanmars-rakhine-state-parties-split-rebels-rise-and-junta-schemes

PART SEVEN

The Return of War

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Fighting in Maungdaw: A Strategic Turning Point in Western Myanmar?

The return of conflict in northern Rakhine State has brought the Arakan Army's goal of autonomy one step closer to fulfillment.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat (9.21.2022).

On the morning of September 16, around two months after intensive clashes resumed between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military in northern Rakhine State, Bri. Gen. Dr. Nyo Twan Awng, the AA's deputy commander in chief, shared a message to the Rakhine people through his social media accounts. The message described the return to war against the junta as "a final war and decisive war" for building "the state of the Arakan."

The AA, the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA), was formed by 26 Rakhine youths in April 2009 in Laiza, in northern Myanmar's Kachin State, under the guidance of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). In early 2015, the AA moved to Rakhine and began engaging in clashes with the Myanmar military in Kyauktaw

township and Paletwa township in neighboring Chin State. Fighting escalated late in 2018 and raged until just before the national election in November 2020.

Just before the election, and three months before the Myanmar military overthrew the elected civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi in a coup on February 1, 2021, the AA agreed to an informal ceasefire in Rakhine, brokered by a Japanese peace envoy. After the coup, the AA initially avoided fighting in Rakhine, instead taking the opportunity to build up its military strength and extend its administration in the areas under its control. Six months later, the group claimed it had de facto control over two-thirds of Rakhine State, and to have 30,000 troops under arms, including at least 6,000 in areas controlled by its allies in Kayin, Kachin, and Shan states, as well as elsewhere in Myanmar.

In early June, the tensions between the AA and junta regime grew due after the military regime reinforced its troop presence across Rakhine State and the AA refused an invitation to take part in junta-brokered peace talks in the capital Naypyidaw. As the situation escalated, the deputy leader of the junta administration during a visit to Rakhine ordered his troops to be "ready to fight any time".

Soon after, junta forces began arresting dozens of people affiliated with the AA in Mrauk-U, Sittwe, Kyauktaw, and Ponnagyun townships, blocked the gates of these towns, and conducted regular checks of hotels, guesthouses, and residences in search of AA/ULA members. The AA responded by arresting at least 20 junta personnel in the areas of Rakhine State under its control.

These tit-for-tat moves culminated in the military regime launching an airstrike on July 4 against an AA base in a territory controlled by the Karen National Union in Kayin State, close to the border with Thailand, killing at least six soldiers and injuring many others. Twelve days later, the AA launched a retaliatory attack against junta forces in northern Maungdaw township close to the Bangladeshi border, killing at least four, injuring many others and capturing at least 14 alive. Since then, a series of armed clashes have taken place across Rakhine, especially in northern Maungdaw township

and neighboring Paletwa township of Chin State.

FIGHTING IN NORTHERN MAUNGDAW

Based on local news reports and statements from the AA, the author has identified at least 18 locations in Maungdaw township, including 16 in the northern part of the township, that have seen clashes between the AA and junta forces since July 16. The AA has killed at least 100 junta soldiers and seized dozens of weapons while at least 36 junta outposts and camps in Rakhine and Paletwa township, Chin State have been destroyed, including at least 31 in northern Maungdaw. Nearly 200 junta outposts and camps, including those of border guard forces, are estimated to have been stationed in Maungdaw alone, along with more than 8,000 troops directly commanded from a headquarters in Kyee Kan Pyin.

The AA also recently seized three tactical military camps, namely the Light Infantry Battalion No. 352 about three kilometers southeast of Jeitchaung village, a border police outpost nearby milestone 40 of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, and Mee Taik station near milestone 37 of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, two miles east of Taungpyo town. If the four remaining major Myanmar military camps were seized or overrun by the AA, the group could claim effective control over the entire township.

On August 23, the AA issued a statement, observing that "military tensions are escalating day by day and the theater of war is expanding in Rakhine," and asserting that the junta has been mobilizing its troops and bringing in reinforcements and additional weapons. The AA also urged people not to travel near junta and border guard outposts and checkpoints, indeed, not to travel at all except in cases of life-threatening and health emergencies. It said that people should notify the relevant AA and ULA offices in advance if they need to travel.

Since clashes with the AA, junta forces have launched both airstrikes and heavy artillery attacks against the AA in a bid to take

back their lost outposts and camps, and it has sent at least 800 additional troops to northern Maungdaw. Many of the residents who were arrested by the junta troops in the area are believed to have been used as human shields during attacks on nearby AA posts. Furthermore, the junta has warned Rakhine and Rohingya, as well as civilians of other ethnicities, to remain in their villages and to report on AA troop movements. They have also been warned nor to post anything on social media or record the movement of Myanmar military personnel.

During the fighting earlier this month, a number of mortar shells fired by the junta landed across the Bangladeshi border. Consequently, the Bangladesh government has issued at least three official protests to the junta-appointed Myanmar ambassador. On September 16, Myanmar mortars fell in Bindrabin District, Bangladesh, killing a 17-year-old Rohingya refugee and injuring at least five others.

The recent fighting between the AA and the junta has meanwhile displaced more than 7,000 people in northern Rakhine, mainly people from Maungdaw. The military regime has blocked the United Nations and international NGOs from accessing the northern part of Rakhine State. Likewise, the AA also issued a statement, mentioning that all vehicles moving along rivers and roads in Rakhine State will be checked in line with the military's needs.

A STRATEGIC TURNING POINT?

There are a number of reasons why the renewed fighting in Maungdaw could have outsized strategic impacts for the AA's long-term ambition of creating "an independent Arakan." To its east, the township borders Paletwa, Chin State, which occupies an important section of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, an infrastructure project which is being developed by the Indian government. The project will connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe by sea, and then to Paletwa township via the Kaladan

River, and then by road to Mizoram state in Northeast India.

On August 11, a ULA spokesperson said in an online press conference that the group had had some negotiations with the government of India on the Kaladan project. Two weeks later, Bibekananda Bhattamishra, India's consul-general in the state capital Sittwe spoke at a meeting with Rakhine State-based businessmen, during which he mentioned that the road component of the Kaladan project was almost complete. Control of Maungdaw would put the ULA in a good position to engage openly with the Indian government over the Kaladan development, something that New Delhi would likely be unable to avoid.

Second, if the AA established its control over Maungdaw, the group might decide to cooperate with the United Nations experts investigating the massacres and forced displacement of Rohingya civilians from the region. Maungdaw was once home to around 750,000 Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh after allegedly genocidal attacks by the Myanmar military in 2017. In September 2019, the AA sent two Myanmar soldiers who admitted to taking part in the allegedly genocidal killings of Rohingya families, including women and babies, to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague . The soldiers had been captured by the AA some months earlier. In November of that year, the AA and two allies issued a statement supporting attempts to prosecute the Myanmar military for abuses, including those committed against Rakhine State's "Muslim minority".

Finally, Maungdaw township is the main economic and trade conduit between Rakhine State and Bangladesh. Therefore, the AA's attempts to control the township reflects its desire to engage openly with the Bangladesh government in border trade, and for the possible future repatriation of Rohingya refugees. Through both of these interactions, the group might build a good relationship with the international community – an integral part of its ambition of being treated as the region's legitimate government. This week, the AA/ULA announced that it would cooperate in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, on the

condition that foreign governments recognize it as the legitimate government of Rakhine State.

For all of these reasons, the military junta will undoubtedly defend Maungdaw and fight fiercely to retake lost ground. But how long its remaining territories can be defended remains an open question. The Myanmar military is currently fighting a multifront war with the rest of the country 's resistance forces, creating an opportunity for the Arakan Army to establish its unchallenged control over Maungdaw – and notch a significant milestone on its path toward independence.

https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/fighting-in-maungdaw-a-strategic-turning-point-in-western-myanmar/

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Civilians in firing line as conflict returns to Myanmar's Rakhine

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An uneasy truce in the troubled western region appears to have collapsed with the military in open warfare against rebel groups.

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Al Jazeera (10.10.2022).

On the evening of September 25, in Nagara village in western Myanmar's troubled Rakhine State, Bu Wine and her family went to bed early. But a couple of hours later, she was awake. "After hearing loud firing at midnight, I felt worried," she told Al Jazeera, recalling how she planned to gather up her four children and take them somewhere safe.

But then, an artillery shell plunged through the thatch roof of their bamboo home. "My eyes went blurry," she remembered. "When I could open my eyes, I saw my youngest son lying on the floor and bleeding profusely."

Maung Ko Naing, just seven years old, was moaning in pain. He told his mother that his back and his stomach hurt. Bu Wine and her husband tried to get the boy to hospital, but it was too dangerous to

send an ambulance because of the heavy shelling. "We carried him by motorcycle to a rural clinic but there wasn't any health worker, and the child died without receiving any medical treatment," she said, sobbing.

Five days later, Myanmar's military attacked the village again, Bu Wine said, wounding at least four people. Following the shelling, everyone in the village abandoned what was left of their homes and fled to the town of Kyauktaw.

Maung Ko Naing is one of at least five children to have been killed since conflict between the armed Arakan Army and the Myanmar military resumed in early July, amid unrest that has worsened across the country since the generals seized power in a coup in February last year. Fourteen people are thought to have died in just over two months since fighting resumed in Rakhine, a long-troubled state where the mostly Muslim Rohingya were driven out in a brutal 2017 military crackdown that is now the subject of a genocide trial.

The United Nations in Myanmar said in an update on October 1 that the situation in Rakhine was "of particular concern" because some 17,400 people had been displaced since August and humanitarian aid was being disrupted by new movement restrictions.

"The use of heavy weapons, airstrikes, landmines and mortar shelling has been seen in multiple townships," the UN report said. "Amid fears about inter-communal tension, arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate attacks and destruction to private property, many people have left their villages."

The Arakan Army (AA), which is fighting for greater autonomy for the state, now claims to have 30,000 troops and is one of at least three armed groups, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), that are active in northern Rakhine.

Just before Myanmar's national election in November 2020, the AA agreed to a truce. After the military seized power, the AA's political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), took the opportunity to extend and entrench its power in Rakhine.

But, facing rebellions on multiple fronts across the country, and

with the AA thought to have grown closer to anti-coup forces, the generals have become wary of allowing the group a power base.

On July 4, tensions exploded into the open after the armed forces mounted an air raid on an AA base in territory controlled by the Karen National Union in southeastern Kayin state, killing at least six soldiers and injuring many others. Nearly two weeks later, the AA retaliated, attacking the military in northern Maungdaw township close to the Bangladeshi border, killing at least four, injuring many others, and taking at least 14 people captive.

SUPPLIES HELD UP

Since then, a series of armed clashes have taken place across Rakhine and in the neighbouring township of Paletwa in Chin State. Between August 13 and September 23, analysts have catalogued a total of 37 locations, including 30 in Rakhine and seven in Paletwa, where the two groups have been involved in armed confrontations.

On September 16, about two months after fighting resumed, the military regime blocked the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations from accessing six townships in northern Rakhine state for an unspecified period of time.

On that day, a local charity group led by prominent Rakhine social worker Ann Thar Gyi was shot at by Myanmar troops at a security checkpoint in the town of Mrauk-U as he was on his way to provide relief to people displaced by the fighting.

"At first, they [Myanmar soldiers] checked our identification cards calling through the phone to those higher up," the 42-year-old told Al Jazeera. As they sat there and the minutes ticked by, Ann Thar Gyi feared they would be arrested. They decided it would be better to try and drive off. "They shot directly at least two more times," the 42-year-old told Al Jazeera.

Ann Thar Gyi says he now faces charges of spreading "false news" and creating "fear". Anyone found guilty under the law

faces as long as three years in prison, and Ann Thar Gyi is now in hiding. "This is a targeted threat against social and humanitarian workers in Rakhine," he said.

Before the military blocked humanitarian agencies in Rakhine, displaced people in northern Rakhine were already struggling to find enough food or put a roof over their heads. The escalating conflict has made matters worse.

A 29-year-old from Maungdaw township said he and other residents had been unable to travel since the fighting resumed in earnest, while supplies of food had been hampered by the military's decision to close the road connecting Maungdaw with Sittwe, the state capital and the source of much of the township's food supply. "We are in a block like house arrest," a Maungdaw resident who requested anonymity for his own security, told Al Jazeera.

The approach is part of the military's notorious 'four cuts' strategy, which aims to cut off armed groups from their sources of food, funds, information and recruits, even to the detriment of civilians living in the area.

"Because of the blocked supply chain channel of commodities and local transportation, the local Rohingya and Rakhine are suffering tremendously, leading to hunger, starvation, and malnutrition," Aung Kyaw Moe, a Rohingya activist and adviser to the human rights ministry of the National Unity Government (NUG), established by the politicians the military removed from office, told Al Jazeera.

On September 29, local media reported that the military regime had also restricted the supply of medicines from Yangon to Rakhine state; at least two medical doctors have also been arrested by the military.

Dr Kyaw Thura, one of the detained medical doctors, has been charged under the Unlawful Associations Act. A 40-year-old medical doctor who has been working for the government hospital in northern Rakhine since 2015 said the military has stopped people from carrying medicines and similar items through their

checkpoints. "It has been for nearly two weeks on the ground although there isn't an official announcement, we are now like soldiers who are fighting in the battle without weapons," he said.

CIVILIANS TARGETED

The rising tension has also seen a wave of political arrests. In early June, soldiers began targeting the townships of Mrauk-U, Sittwe, Kyauktaw, and Ponnagyun, blocking the towns' gates and conducting regular checks of homes, hotels and guesthouses for AA/ULA members. Dozens of people were arrested and accused of having links with the AA.

As of September 20, at least 140 civilians had been arrested, according to local media, with at least 62 still in detention. The AA has responded by arresting at least 20 military personnel in the areas of Rakhine under its control.

A 29-year-old resident of Maungdaw said the military had told people "To report on AA troop movements" and warned them "not to post anything nor to post anything on social media or record the movement of Myanmar military personnel". He preferred not to give his name for fear of reprisals.

As the fighting continues, there is little respite for civilians. About 600,000 Rohingya, who faced discrimination long before the 2017 crackdown, are living in camps where their movements are restricted.

The new fighting has forced more of those who had managed to stay in their own homes to flee, and increased the risk for those who remain in their villages."Rohingya people are trapped between two armed groups," said Aung Kyaw Moe, the Rohingya activist.

"The AA is expanding its territory of control south of Buthidaung, which is a good thing so far as weakening the junta, but AA troops stationing near Rohingya villages offer an opportunity [for the military] to carry out indiscriminate attacks and continue their unfinished business of genocide."

Some Rohingya have also found themselves under attack by the AA, according to another Rohingya activist Nay San Lwin. He accuses the AA of laying landmines in the village Guda Pyin, where one man was killed on October 7, and of shooting dead a Rohingya man in the same village the next day.

For Rohingya and Rakhine alike, everyday life has become a battle for survival.

Hla May from Mrauk-U township said her three-year-old daughter was injured while playing with her friend after their house was caught in a military attack on September 28. "Two bombs fell to our house, and one hasn't exploded yet," she said, recalling the incident, which happened as she was cooking lunch. "We are not safe, my child wakes at midnight and cries every day now after [the house] was hit by the bombs."

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/10/civilians-in-firing-line-as-conflict-returns-to-myanmars-rakhine

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Myanmar's ethnic insurgents raise the pressure on military junta

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By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Andrew, Los Angeles Times, Nov. 7. 2022

CHIANG MAI, Thailand — The day her 4-year-old grandson was killed, U San Yee had taken him to their local market in rural Myanmar for sticky rice and his favorite fried banana snacks before coming home to play with his toy cars.

"We didn't know that the Myanmar military would fire artillery shells," U San Yee said. "That's why we were just going about and living our normal lives."

When the first explosions struck Kin Seik, a farming village of about 3,000 people, the two were watching "Tom and Jerry" cartoons. "We tried to run to another place, but on the way a shell fell on my grandson and his mother while they were holding hands," said U San Yee, who could only watch as the boy bled to death and his mother was wounded.

Three civilians were killed and eight others injured in the Aug. 28 attack on the community of bamboo houses on the fertile plains of the country's western Rakhine state. It was one of a series of deadly assaults that marked the collapse of an 18-month cease-fire between

the military and the Arakan Army, one of the country's most powerful ethnic insurgent groups.

Nearly 22 months after the country's military overthrew a democratically elected civilian government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, it is now fighting a war on multiple fronts.

More than 7,000 civilians have been killed since the coup, according to the Institute for Strategy and Policy, a Yangon-based think tank. Victims include protesters shot in the head, dissidents killed in detention and villagers bound and burned alive.

But as the renewed fighting in Rakhine reflects, the military, which has ruled Myanmar with an iron grip for much of the last half century, remains unable to re-consolidate power.

In one of the latest examples of violence, military jets bombed a concert in northern Kachin state on Oct. 23, killing at least 80 people, including civilians and members of the ethnic Kachin Independence Army.

Meanwhile, dozens of junta soldiers have reportedly been killed since late October in Rakhine, northwestern Karen state and the central city of Mandalay. The junta has increasingly resorted to air power because of growing losses to infantry on the ground from ambushes and roadside bombs.

"The military is getting desperate," said Kyaw Zaw, a spokesman for the National Unity Government, a parallel government filled with deposed civilian lawmakers working to dislodge the junta. "Their only strategy is to terrorize the population by targeting defenseless civilians."

The junta is now confronting newly formed rebel groups such as the disparate People's Defense Force aligned with the parallel government, and an increasing number of ethnic armed groups based in the country's border regions.

Western sanctions and diplomatic pressure have done little to stanch the bloodshed — a civil war raging in the heart of Asia on the doorstep of two geopolitical giants, India and China.

Immediately following the coup, the new junta was confronted by mass protests that were brutally quashed with a series of ur-

ban massacres, propelling many of Myanmar's youth to seek training and weapons from the country's myriad ethnic armed groups. In September 2021, the parallel government declared a "people's defensive war" to overthrow the military, forging formal alliances with some of the ethnic rebels.

Initially given little chance of resisting a military equipped with warplanes and heavy artillery, the insurgents have inflicted enough damage to keep the junta hopping. As a result, it is showing signs of stress. Casualties are rising and combat-ready replacements are scarce. Defections and poor pay are reportedly contributing to sinking morale.

If more ethnic armed groups like the Arakan Army join the fight against the military, known as the Tatmadaw, experts say it could eventually tip the scales in the civil war.

"The junta expected to readily subsume the country into its control with its brutal coercive power, but it has failed so far," said Ye Myo Hein, a political scientist at the Wilson Center. "It has lost its consolidated control over a vast swath of territory across the country."

"It's hard to predict what will happen next," he added, "but one thing is certain: the junta is losing ground."

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has long been fractured along ethnic lines and dominated by the majority Buddhist Bamars who reside in the largest cities. The Southeast Asian nation roughly the size of Texas is home to more than 100 different ethnic groups, some of whom were fighting for autonomy even before Myanmar won independence from Britain in 1948.

One of those groups is the Rakhine, also known as the Arakanese. Despite being overwhelmingly Buddhist and speaking a language closely related to the Burmese used by Bamars, the Rakhine have long maintained a fierce separatist streak. Rakhine existed as an independent kingdom until it was conquered by the Burmese in 1785 and is isolated from the rest of the country by a rugged mountain range.

"We want our Rakhine state to be independent — it is the dream

of every Rakhine person," said a 32-year-old farmer in Maungdaw township, which has also seen heavy fighting in recent months, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons.

That staunch Rakhine-Buddhist identity contributed to one of the worst chapters in modern Burmese history when many Rakhine supported the Tatmadaw's so-called "clearance operations" in 2017, forcing more than 750,000 Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine across the border into Bangladesh.

The United Nations said the crackdown was "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest by the military for 15 years before winning landslide election victories in 2015 and 2020, refused to condemn the attacks and defended the military at the International Court of Justice in 2019, leading to her disgrace as a human rights figure. Since the junta took back control in early 2021, she has been imprisoned in the nation's capital.

It was in the wake of the junta's campaign against the Rohingya that fighting between the Arakan Army and the military worsened. Formed in 2009, the self-proclaimed 30,000-member force seeks self-determination for the Arakanese people and is represented by its political wing, the United League of Arakan. The group's foot soldiers have fought a guerrilla war against government security forces, ambushing military outposts and police stations.

Weary of the attacks, the government agreed to a cease-fire in November 2020. Analysts speculate the agreement was struck so that the military could prepare for the coup. The Arakan Army used the lull in fighting to consolidate more territory.

The truce would prove fleeting. Heavy fighting returned to Rakhine in July of this year, when the Arakan Army ambushed a column of the paramilitary Border Guard Police. The strike was in response to the military's arrest of supporters and members of the Arakan Army's civilian administration. Clashes quickly spread across Rakhine, including in Maungdaw, near the Bangladesh border; Mrauk-U, the Arakan Kingdom's ancient capital; and Taungup, near a southern beach vacation destination. Paletwa, in neighboring Chin state, also saw fighting.

The Maungdaw farmer who spoke to The Times said there had been no fighting in his area for years. But since mid-August, he frequently goes to bed to the steady sound of shelling and fighter jets, wondering if his village will be bombed.

Kyaw Lynn, an ethnic Rakhine political analyst, said the fighting in Maungdaw underscores the Arakan Army's desire to seize control of the border with Bangladesh, which is important both for economic reasons and issues of sovereignty.

To burnish its legitimacy, the Arakan Army has tried to forge a better relationship with Bangladesh by presenting itself as a more reliable partner than the junta in handling the Rohingya refugee crisis. More than 900,000 Rohingya are living in squalid camps in Bangladesh, putting a massive strain on the impoverished country. An effort to repatriate many of the refugees has repeatedly faltered under the military.

"The international community, including the Bangladeshi government, has to recognize the United League of Arakan as a key stakeholder in trying to resolve this" crisis, Khaing Thu Kha, a spokesman for the Arakan Army, said at a news conference in September.

Whether the Arakan Army can achieve autonomy may hinge on its burgeoning relationship with the National Unity Government. Formed after the coup by a group of lawmakers elected in the 2020 polls, it includes many former National League for Democracy officials. While some of its officials are based abroad, other leaders remain in Myanmar where they've begun rolling out public services in anti-military strongholds. Schools, police forces and healthcare clinics are up and running, typically manned by civil servants who went on strike in protest of the coup.

Unlike other armed groups, the Arakan Army has refused to pledge loyalty to the opposition forces because of tensions in the past with Suu Kyi and her party. In 2019, a National League for Democracy official referred to the Rakhine insurgents as "terrorists." The following year, the Arakan Army justified abducting three National League for Democracy parliamentary candidates by accusing

the party of cooperating with the Tatmadaw.

Now presented with a common enemy, the relationship has thawed. The Arakan Army met with the National Unity Government in May, while rejecting an invitation for peace talks from the junta. At the meeting, Khaing Thu Kha said the Arakan Army would "open the door" to cooperation but reiterated the demands for autonomy — something the National Unity Government is reluctant to grant for fear that other ethnic armed groups will make similar demands.

As long as the junta remains in power, the people of Rakhine will likely struggle to reconcile their desire for self-determination with support for a shadow government stacked with Suu Kyi's acolytes.

"Yes, I want the NUG to overthrow the military. But personally, I want our people to control our state," the Maungdaw farmer said. "I want this to be the final war in Rakhine.

https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-11-07/myanmar-arakan-army

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Atrocities Mount Amid the Return to War in Western Myanmar

Once mostly immune from the country's post-coup turmoils, Rakhine State is beset by an increasingly devastating conflict.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat, November 22, 2022

About four months From August to November after fighting resumed between Myanmar's military junta and the Arakan Army (AA) in western Myanmar's Rakhine State, junta forces are increasingly resorting to airstrikes and artillery barrages against civilian populations, amid reported losses on the ground. One of Myanmar's most powerful and well-organized ethnic revolutionary groups, the AA, which was formed by 26 Rakhine youths in 2009 under the guidance of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to fight for greater autonomy for the people of Rakhine State, now claims to have 30,000 troops under arms.

The recent fighting shattered an informal ceasefire agreement that the AA signed with the Myanmar military in November 2020, just before that month's general election. This ended two years of intense fighting in northern Rakhine and southern Chin

State. Soon after the military seized power in a coup in February last year, the junta offered several favors to the AA and Rakhine people to maintain the ceasefire, releasing from its custody several people including Rakhine nationalist politician Dr. Aye Maung and the family members of AA leaders. It also ended the two-year internet restriction in northern Rakhine and removed the AA from its list of "terrorist" organizations.

During the lull in fighting, the AA's political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), focused on developing its administrative and judicial institutions across Rakhine State. As the ULA administration grew, the junta started making attempts to contain this administrative expansion and reinforced its troops in the area. Then, in early June, the AA refused an invitation to join junta-hosted peace talks in the capital Naypyidaw, soon after which junta forces began arresting dozens of people affiliated with the AA in northern Rakhine townships and blocked the gates of these towns. The AA responded by arresting at least 20 junta personnel in the areas of Rakhine State under its control.

On July 4, the tension between both exploded after the junta launched an airstrike against an AA base in a territory controlled by the Karen National Union in eastern Myanmar, killing at least six soldiers and injuring many others. A week later, the AA launched a retaliatory attack against junta forces in northern Rakhine, killing at least four, injuring many others, and capturing at least 14 alive.

In early August, a series of armed clashes between the AA and junta forces erupted in three locations in northern Rakhine, and another one in the southern part of neighboring Chin State.

THE RAKHINE WAR AT A GLANCE

As of November 17, based on local news and statements from the AA, the author has identified around 100 battles that have broken out between the junta forces and the Arakan Army since July, while

more than 15 clashes could be classified as fierce battles based on the intensity of clashes.

The four townships in which these clashes occurred are Maungdaw, Buthedaung, and Rethedaung townships in northern Rakhine and Paletwa township in Chin State. Other less frequent, small-scale armed clashes and mine explosions also happened in central and southern townships such as Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, Minbya, Maybone, Taunggok, and Ann. The most frequent clashes took place in Patetwa and Maungdaw, both of which possess international borders and thus have greater geostrategic significance.

During these clashes, more than 150 Myanmar junta soldiers are believed to have been killed, although the exact number is hard to determine. The exact number of casualties from the AA side is also hard to identify due to a lack of news reports, but at least 10 are reported to have died or been injured.

During the three months from August to October, at least 204 civilians were arbitrarily arrested by the junta, at least 62 of which remain in detention. The AA has responded by arresting at least 8 junta personnel in the areas of Rakhine State under its control.

Of those detained by the junta, at least 29 were members of its administrative apparatus, including schoolteachers, doctors, and people from the General Administration Department, who were accused of paying taxes or donating money to the ULA. They also include social workers accused of otherwise aiding AA members and civilians displaced by the conflict.

Apart from this, since the junta blocked the United Nations and international NGOs from accessing the six townships of northern Rakhine State on September 16, the residents, especially thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), have faced shortages in food, shelter, and other relief items. Last month, the United Nations noted that the situation in Rakhine was "of particular concern" and that more than 17,400 people, including Rohingya, had been displaced.

Since fighting resumed after a brief pause in early August, junta forces have also blocked highways and roads linking the state cap-

ital Sittwe to both the commercial center Yangon and Rathedaung to Maungdaw in northern Rakhine.

MOUNTING MASS ATROCITIES

As the junta forces have lost ground to the AA and other ethnic resistance groups across Myanmar, it has reportedly come to rely more heavily on airstrikes on its opponents, in particular through targeting populations of unarmed civilians believed to support them.

The Irrawaddy reported that from October 1 to 28, the junta launched a total of 28 aerial attacks in five regions including Rakhine, leaving 111 dead and injuring at least 126. In particular, the recent brutal junta airstrike on a concert in Kachin State in the north of the country, killing more than 60 people and injuring many more. As of October 31 in Rakhine, at least seven aerial attacks have taken place since July, killing at least 18 civilians, including seven children, and injuring at least 31.

In addition to airstrikes, the junta ramped up its artillery offensives in Rakhine State in the first two weeks of November. In the six days between November 10 to 16, artillery shells killed at least 17 civilians and injured at least 50 in northern Rakhine.

November 16 was a particularly deadly day. According to local media reports, at least 11 civilians including three children were killed and at least 27 others were wounded after four mortar shells were launched into Jeitchaung village in northern Maungdaw township. On the same day, in Kyauktaw township, at least four residents were killed and three people, including a grade 9 student, were wounded in an artillery strike on Chaungtu Village.

Ten days earlier, junta soldiers from the military's Ponnagyun-based Light Infantry Battalion No. 550 also shot and killed at least 11 civilians, mainly elderly people including a 92-year-old woman, and burned at least 10 houses in Hsininngyi village, Ponnagyun township.

To sum up, in just the first 16 days of November, the numbers

of junta atrocities in Rakhine State were greater than in the previous three months. From August to October, around 20 civilians were killed and 30 were injured due to artillery shells and airstrikes. Within 16 days of November, at least 36 including children and elders were killed, and at least 72 were injured. There were at least 12 civilian deaths and at least 39 injuries in Kyauktaw alone.

As the armed conflict between the junta forces and the AA escalates, and inevitably spreads to southern Rakhine – the latter issued a statement on November 11, vowing to retaliate against junta forces – the Myanmar military will undoubtedly launch airstrikes and artillery attacks on these areas as well. Despite nearly two years of relative peace in Rakhine, civilian casualties are once again on the rise and the humanitarian situation across the state is steadily worsening.

https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/atrocities-mount-amid-the-return-to-war-in-western-myanmar/

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How India Betrayed the Rakhine People – And Why It Matters Today

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25 years ago this week, India's army crushed an incipient Rakhine separatist force in the Andaman Islands. In western Myanmar, memories of the incident linger.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat Magazine, February 10, 2023

Twenty-five years ago this week, India's government betrayed the people of Rakhine State in western Myanmar, when its armed forces smashed a nascent Rakhine revolutionary group in a remote part of the Andaman Islands. In the years since, the Indian government has never referred publicly to the incident, but it continues to resonate among the Rakhine people, who remember it as Gen. Khaing Raza's Day, or Betrayal of India over Rakhine Revolution Day. In a 2009 book, the prominent Indian human rights lawyer Nandita Haksar described the incident as "infamous."

On the morning of February 11, 1998, the Indian military launched a brutal operation codenamed Leech, in which it raided

Landfall Island in the Andaman Sea, arresting at least 73 people, and killing at least six rebels. These included the Arakan Army commander Gen. Khiang Raza and Maj. Soe Tun and two leaders of the Karen National Union.

As the India-based news outlet Quint reported in 2019, 35 of the 73 people arrested were fishermen and were released after a year of detention on the island; two were Thai boatmen who were also released; two more reportedly tried to escape and went missing. The remaining 34 people were Rakhine and Karen rebels from Myanmar. Their trial took place in secret, and they were held in jail for 13 years, six-and-a-half of those years without charge. The 34 men were only released in 2011, when they were granted refugee status by the United Nations refugee agency and resettled in the Netherlands.

The violent incident brought to a premature end the first serious attempt to form a Rakhine nationalist resistance against Myanmar's military junta. The Arakan Army (AA) was initially formed in February 1991 by a group of patriotic Rakhines including Gen. Khaing Raza, with support from the Karen National Union (KNU), on the Myanmar-Thailand border. Shortly after its formation, at least 60 AA rebels attempted to travel from southeast Myanmar to Rakhine State on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in early May 1991. The group confronted clashes for a month with the Myanmar military, and only 40 of them arrived at the border safely. In 1992, and 1993, the group sent a couple more consignments of troops and weapons from the Myanmar-Thailand border to the Bangladesh border area.

In January 1994, at least four Rakhine revolutionary groups made the historic decision to merge into a single organization: the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), with an armed wing, also known as the Arakan Army (AA). The group's goal was home rule for the Rakhine. The AA was at this point re-formed under the leadership of seven commanders, including Gen. Khaing Raza and Maj. Saw Tun. By 1997, the strength of the army had grown to 500 troops armed with some 200 rifles, and it had established a

small naval force.

INDIA'S BETRAYAL

After the Arakan Army (AA)'s formation in 1991, Khaing Raza established a good relationship with officers from the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's foreign intelligence agency, with whom he regularly shared information. Three years after the Rakhine revolutionary groups merged in 1994, these relations improved further and RAW officers eventually introduced Khaing Raza to a number of Indian military commanders and intelligence officers. Chief among these was the military intelligence officer Lt.-Col. Biswajit Singh Grewal, who notably had been born in Myanmar and studied at the University of Mandalay and was fluent in the Burmese language. (He even had a Burmese name, Nay Win). In January 1995, Lt.-Gen. Pradeep Chandran Nair, commander in chief of the Assam Rifles, visited the NUPA/AA base along the India-Myanmar border, and met with Khaing Raza.

In early 1997, the NUPA/AA and KNU top leaders decided to establish a base in the Andaman Sea, to provide them access to the Ayeyarwady River delta in southern Myanmar. Maj. Saw Tun spoke to Lt. Col. Grewal, who initially allowed the NUPA/AA to set up a base first on Narcondam island, and then on Landfall Island, in the north of the Andaman Islands chain, around 300 kilometers from Myanmar's coast.

A month later, Saw Tun was taken to Landfall Island on an Indian Army flight, alongside Grewal. In May of that year, the NUPA/AA marine commander, Maj. Khaing Kyaw Khaing, and his group had attempted to reach the island by sea, but they gave up due to a heavy storm in the area. Next month, Grewal flew to Bangkok to meet with KNU and NUPA/AA leaders, and agreed that they could relocate to the island on February 11, 1998.

On February 8, 1998, a group of 40 men – 27 from the NUPA/AA and 13 from the KNU – led by Khaing Raza and Saw Tun departed

for Landfall Island in two ships from the coast of Tanintharyi Region in southern Myanmar. They arrived on the evening of February 10 and slept one night there.

Then, early the next morning, Indian military officers, including Grewal, launched Operation Leech, executing at least four leaders from the NUPA/AA including Khaing Raza and Saw Tun, two KNU leaders, and two other Myanmar rebels. As mentioned above, the remaining 34 were taken into custody.

The Indian military informed New Delhi that Operation Leech had smashed a group of "gunrunners" who had been aiding anti-Indian separatists in the country's northeast. However, former Khaing Kyaw Khaing, formerly one of seven founding commanders of the AA, told this author recently that the leaders aimed to fight the military regime in Myanmar, and went to Landfall Island trusting India's promise that it would allow them a safe haven there. He said that the Indian military completely destroyed the embryonic Rakhine revolutionary force, describing it as an unforgettable betrayal of "all of our Arakanese."

Indeed, DB Nandi, a former Indian intelligence officer and RAW deputy chief who worked in Myanmar, told The Guardian in 2007 that the Indian military operation was explicitly intended to destroy the Rakhine revolutionary movement. In 2019, Grewal, now retired, told local news outlets that the operation was not carried out on the army's own initiative, and that it had approval from New Delhi.

After the events on Landfall Island in 1998, few people in western Myanmar believed that a Rakhine rebellion against the Myanmar military could succeed, given India's evident hostility to the cause and the group's inability to establish a base along the Myanmar-India border. It was only since the rebirth of the Arakan Army in 2009 that these dreams of Rakhine home rule have stirred back to life.

THE NEW ARAKAN ARMY AND ITS RELATIONS WITH NEW DELHI

Fifteen years after the Indian army smashed the NUPA/AA on Landfall Island, another version of the Arakan Army was formed by Maj. Gen. Twan Mrat Naing and 25 comrades in April 2009 in Laiza, on the Chinese border in Kachin State, with support from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

In the years since, the AA has grown considerably. It now has 30,000 troops under arms, mainly in Rakhine State, though at least 6,000 troops are stationed in areas controlled by the AA's allies in the north and northeast of the country. Recently, the group's political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), claimed that it enjoyed de facto control over two-thirds of Rakhine. During 2018-2020, analysts described fighting between the AA and the Myanmar military as the fiercest Myanmar had seen in decades.

Relations between the New Delhi government and the ULA/AA during the armed conflict of 2018-2020 have been curious. Although India is the world's largest democracy, its government has traditionally maintained good relations with Myanmar's military. From February 17 to March 2, 2019, amid fighting between the AA and Myanmar military in Rakhine State, the Indian military took part in the joint Operation Sunrise with the Myanmar military against the AA in the India-Myanmar border area. Its operation was intended to eliminate the AA from the border region, where India is hoping to implement the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project connecting Mizoram to Kolkata via Rakhine State's capital Sittwe.

The Indian government seemingly believed that the armed movement of the ULA/AA was just a temporary uprising and that the Myanmar military would eventually be able to eradicate the insurgents. However, the armed conflict of 2018-2020 ended with AA still in control of its main strongholds in Rakhine, which seems to have shifted opinion within Indian decision-making circles about the need to negotiate with the ULA/AA. On August 11 of last year, for instance, the ULA/AA spokesperson said in an online

press conference that the group had taken part in negotiations with New Delhi on the implementation of the Kaladan project.

However, the Indian government still hasn't openly engaged with the ULA/AA, and in order to maintain good relations with the Myanmar military, has remained mostly silent about the atrocities committed by the military since its coup on February 1, 2021, despite the junta arresting over 17,000 and killing nearly 2,900 of its own citizens, including children according to the Assistance Association For Political Prisoners (AAPP) in January 17, 2023. Instead, the Indian government is trying to finalize and implement the Kaladan transport project. On January 9, India's Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal said the project was "ready to operate".

Overall, India's current approach toward Myanmar is puzzling. The local security apparatus in India's eastern provinces has frequently arrested not just the members of the anti-junta resistance but also refugees who have fled across the Myanmar-India border due to Myanmar military attacks. Another critical issue is the fact that the Myanmar junta forces have used Indian rebel forces to stage attacks against the resistance in the upper Sagaing Region, close to India's border.

However, the growing strength of the Rakhine movement for home rule, led by the ULA/AA, demonstrates that New Delhi's strategy toward the current junta is serving neither its national interest nor the interests of the Myanmar people. When it comes to the Kaladan project in northern Rakhine State, a priority for New Delhi, the government's current approach is mostly counterproductive, given the ULA/AA's influence over the Rakhine State.

Now is the time for New Delhi to remedy the mistakes in its policy toward the Rakhine conflict and the country's anti-junta resistance movement more broadly. A good place to start would be to acknowledge India's betrayal of the Rakhine revolution in 1998 and atone for its past mistakes by forging a new cooperative path with the Rakhine people.

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rakhine-people-and-why-it-matters-today/

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Is Myanmar's Civil War Pushing the Country Toward Fragmentation?

Resistance forces now face the challenge of building an ethnically inclusive federal union.

By Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, The Diplomat, December 12, 2023

Today, Myanmar stands at a critical juncture in its history. The escalating losses of the Myanmar military due to the coordinated attacks by resistance forces and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) throughout the country have ignited a pivotal debate, both nationally and internationally, about the country's future trajectory. Is Myanmar heading towards fragmentation and chaos?

Ye Myo Hein, a prominent Burmese military analyst, claims that the junta is now facing an existential threat. Concurrently, Professor Zachary Abuza of the National War College in Washington, D.C. states that it's time to begin "planning the postwar future of Myanmar's military," recognizing that effective rebuilding is contingent on comprehensive reform of the security sector.

Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that the weakening Myanmar

military faces potential collapse, which, unless carefully managed by both the National Unity Government (NUG) and leading EAOs, could lead "the country to disintegrate into a series of groups, lacking a common enemy, who could easily turn their guns on each other, creating total bloody chaos and completely gutting the remainder of the Myanmar state." Meanwhile, editorials in the Japan Times have raised concerns about Myanmar potentially becoming "a failed state."

In contrast, veteran journalist Bertil Lintner argues that despite the Myanmar military's current weaknesses and opposition gains, a decisive victory by either side remains unlikely due to factors like the resistance's disunity, the military's enduring cohesion, and China's strategic interests, leaving the civilian population to suffer in an unresolved conflict.

Concerns about the fragmentation of Myanmar have historically been raised by Myanmar's generals as a justification for their rule. A notable example was when Gen. Ne Win overthrew the U Nu government in a coup in 1962, claiming he was seizing power because the country was on the brink of breaking apart. Similarly, before the escalation of concerns about current fragmentation and chaos among political analysts, Myint Swe, the president of the junta's State Administration Council, issued a warning for the first time in early November. In a National Defense and Security Council meeting, he spoke about the risk of Myanmar's fragmentation, attributing this risk to the losses of the junta forces.

This warning came a week after the launch of Operation 1027 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, also known as the Kokang group, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Arakan Army. The operation, conducted in northern Shan State along the Myanmar-China border, aimed to combat the junta's armed forces and allied militias.

Similarly, on November 29, Dr. Tu Hkawng, the NUG's Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation wrote on social media that if the current crisis in Myanmar is not addressed, the country could divide into two entities: "The Federated States

of Myanmar (Ayeyarwaddy) and the Min Aung Hlaing Dynasty Myanmar." This scenario resembles a less violent separation akin to "South and North Korea." It considers those in major cities who desire peace and fear urban destruction. Without this separation, a more destructive conflict, potentially devastating cities, seems inevitable, leading to the eventual establishment of "a federal state."

Amid concerns about Myanmar's fragmentation and chaos, questions arise about whether Myanmar has ever been a "real union," particularly given that the country has experienced a considerable degree of "fragmentation" since gaining independence from the British in 1948, and about what possibilities exist for uniting all ethnic groups into a new, genuine union.

MYANMAR AS A "REAL UNION" OR "FRAGMENTED UNION"?

The idea that Myanmar has never been a "real union" and has long been a fragmented entity is deeply rooted in its historical, ethnic, and political context. This perspective is widely shared among scholars and ethnic minority groups within the country. If advocates of this position are asked whether Myanmar is a "real union," the responses would likely be unanimous. Scholars might say that Myanmar has never truly been a union, while ethnic minorities might argue that the country, based around a Bamar ethnic majority core, has never really belonged to them.

Thant Myint-U, a prominent historian, describes Myanmar as an "unfinished nation," highlighting the country's ongoing struggle to forge "a shared national identity." This challenge is compounded by the diverse composition of Myanmar, which includes numerous ethnic groups such as the Chin, Kachin, Karenni and Shan among many others. The failure to fulfill promises made in the 1947 Panglong Agreement, led by Gen. Aung San, has left deep scars of betrayal among these minorities. This agreement, which was supposed to grant certain degrees of autonomy to various ethnic groups, was not honored, leading to long-standing grievances.

The history of ethnic conflict in Myanmar further illustrates the fragmented nature of the nation. Following independence in 1948, various ethnic groups have continually fought for autonomy and self-determination, reflecting their sense of exclusion from the Bamar-dominated central state. For instance, the Karen National Union initially fought to establish a Karen nation known as "Kawthoolei," shifting later to a demand for greater autonomy. The Kachin Independence Organization also moved from an initial fight for "Wunpawng Mungdan" to a narrower aim of self-determination. More recently, the Arakan Army, representing Rakhine State in the west, has been fighting for the restoration of its sovereignty and the establishment of a "fatherland of Arakan," evolving its stance towards advocacy for a confederation.

These aspirations are not limited to ideological battles but are reflected in tangible governance structures. Across Myanmar, particularly in the east, northeast, west, and along the border areas, EAOs have maintained their own administrative and judicial systems for many years. These entities operate independently of the central government, further demonstrating the deep divisions within the country. These regions under EAO's control are effectively separate from the Myanmar state, operating with their own governmental mechanisms and often having little to no allegiance to the central regime. Indeed, some of these areas have never been under the direct control of a central Burmese state.

The two most prominent and arguably successful examples are the Wa and Mong La regions on the China border, where the United Wa State Party (UWSP) and the Peace and Solidarity Committee have ruled for decades. These two regions have specific boundaries and exercise total military and administrative control over their territories. This marks an ideal situation to which other non-state armed groups might aspire.

This fractured political landscape, marked by a lack of a unified national identity and ongoing struggles for autonomy among ethnic groups, underscores the argument that Myanmar has never truly been a unified nation-state. The continuous efforts for self-rule and

the existence of parallel governance systems in various regions of the country further reinforce the notion that Myanmar, for a significant part of its history, has been more a collection of disparate entities than a cohesive union.

A NEW CHAPTER FOR MYANMAR?

Despite their divisions, Myanmar's ethnic groups, including the Bamar people, have a shared grievance against the military regime that seized power in February 2021. Since then, it has indiscriminately killed people regardless of their race, gender, or religion across the country. As an example, the steep rise in nationwide coordinated attacks on the junta regime, which totaled 360 Degree Separate attacks in the month after Operation 1027, demonstrate this. These assaults have resulted in the seizure of over 300 military outposts and bases, as well as at least 17 towns across the country.

Yet, the road to unification is hindered by insufficient political commitment, particularly between the NUG and leading ethnic armed groups. The NUG's concerns mirror those of the junta regime, focusing more on the fear of the country breaking apart rather than on constructive, programmatic approaches to nation-building. The lack of a figure with the same unifying influence as Aung San, who once brought hope of autonomy and inclusion to various ethnic groups, is acutely felt. Aung San's legacy, particularly his promise in the 1947 Constitution offering ethnic groups like the Karenni and Shan the option to leave the union if they were dissatisfied with it, remains a symbol of unfulfilled aspirations for self-determination and autonomy.

Today's political climate demands innovative leadership from the NUG, akin to Aung San's vision but with greater accountability and firmer agreements. Meanwhile, the approach of the National League for Democracy (NLD), particularly its insistence on recognition of the 2020 election results under the 2008 Constitution, does not seem conducive to the opening of a new chapter for the

country. Another concern is about the potential political impact of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi's release. Based on her term in office, there are reasonable questions to be asked about what actions she will take and whether she will support the resistance, and the agreements between the NUG and EAOs, or choose a different path. Otherwise, the NUG still appears focused on toppling the junta first and deferring political commitments, a strategy that has failed to resonate with many EAOs. These groups, having previously supported pro-democracy movements, felt betrayed by the NLD after its subsequent rise to power in 2016.

In this revolutionary period, another significant initiative that the NUG should undertake is to begin planning some fundamental reforms. These should include a reevaluation of the country's name, national anthem, and flag as well as the reconsideration of the current seven states and seven divisions, each of which was imposed by the military without the people's consent. However, all these reforms must foster a sense of belonging among all ethnic groups in the country.

As long as the NUG remains unchanged, growing skepticism among EAOs regarding their role in this union, especially concerning the feasibility of swiftly overthrowing the junta, is likely. It is understood that overthrowing the junta would be a step toward a more inclusive Myanmar, but not a complete solution. In the event of an absence of a concrete political argument, EAOs might begin to consider alternative approaches, including fully committing to their political goals through fighting or adopting strategies similar to those of the UWSP and the Mong La group. As an example of alternatives, as the Arakan Army has articulated, if Rakhine cannot achieve the desired political status within the Union of Myanmar, they are prepared to create it themselves.

Although the EAOs are aware that the current international climate does not support separatism, this doesn't mean they will not strive for it.

Given the lessons of history, success will depend on how the NUG approaches these challenges, focusing more on creating so-

lutions rather than worrying about the country's possible disintegration. It is evident that the NUG has opportunities to lead the path towards a new, genuine union if it chooses to do so.

To conclude, Myanmar stands at a crossroads where the path to unification requires not just a cessation of conflict but a deep, structural transformation involving inclusive political strategies, genuine autonomy for ethnic groups, and a reimagining of how, and by whom, the nation is governed. The challenge lies in crafting a Myanmar in which diverse identities coexist under a shared national framework, moving beyond the decades-long legacy of division towards a future of peace, unity, and cooperation.