

Monthly Arakan Review

Center for Arakan Studies

No.11. September. 2023

Skirmish and Instability in Arakan Rise

Monitoring of a brief situation of political tension, economic issues, social issues, and humanitarian issues in Western Myanmar in September 2023.



(Photo/Western News)

Key Remarks

The politics of Arakan during the month of September become more unstable compared to the previous months in the year. Political instability comes from two key sources such as the political tensions between the junta and the ULA authorities and secondly, the AA-ARSA clashes and operations in the Northern part of the State. More importantly, since the AA's support and involvement in the anti-junta movement in other parts of the country continues, the junta's arrests and imprisonment against the suspicious ULA/AA members also still go on. Many observers have expected more and more military tension in the coming months and years.

The economic hardships released by the political crisis and Cyclone Mocha still continue while the recovery actions against these impacts are still minimal. Migration and human trafficking are still highly active while farming communities across the state are facing more challenges. Border trade with Bangladesh is now in the decline while trading restrictions between Arakan and other parts of the country remained in high scale. The MSEM sectors also face increasing challenges especially due to the lack of technical and financial capitals. Special attention is more than in need for those ordinary and lower economic classes living under extreme poverty.

Community insecurity especially for the women and girl populations in Rakhine State is on the rise due to the lack of rule of law in addition to the social and economic hardships. Violence against the female population appears more frequently on the local online media platforms and public outrage against these incidents also become stronger. Besides, more cases of burglary and theft also come out in many parts of the State. On another front, the Kaman Muslim community faces increasingly more restrictions on the freedom of movement and travel due to the suspension of the passports for them.

In the humanitarian sectors, two key issues such as situations of recovery from the Mocha Cyclone impacts and refugee repatriation from Bangladesh have dominated the local media coverage. In the first sector, although it is noted that the Chief Minister of Rakhine State has claimed the accomplishment of the first phase of the recovery, the Cyclone victims on the ground are still under massive livelihood and survival conditions due to the lack of effective implementation. Then, in the repatriation issue, the junta officers in the support of China seems to try to accelerate the repatriation process despite the concerned Rohingya community and international observers warned the situations on the ground to be quite premature and fragile.

Part- I: Political Affairs

During the month of September, the political news in Arakan included the cases related to the armed conflict, peace process, ARSA, SAC activities, external affairs of the country, election, and political freedom, etc. Starting with the news concerning the armed conflicts, on September 2, 2023, ICRC [warned](#) the local population to be careful about hidden explosive devices surfacing after heavy rain and flood. Five days later September 8, the ULA arrested the junta officer and policeman in return for detaining one ULA member but later the detainees were released by both sides. One-week later September 14, the ULA authorities asked some Kyauktaw villagers to dig a bomb pit within a week.

"The villagers were asked to dig bomb pits in their villages. The AA's village governors have informed every family. If it is not done within a week, they have to face fines. I don't know what kind of fine they will impose," said [a resident](#) from Kyauktaw township.

As of September 25, it was reported that AA was taking action to curb ARSA infiltration, according to the villagers. One day later, another news reported that AA was conducting operation to clean up terrorists in Buthidaung. On the other hand, on September 29, one AA officer killed, and injured others after a junta's

shell fired on KIA Laiza headquarters. One day later, the junta forces also attacked again on Laiza's AA camps with heavy weapons.

In the news related to the ARSA, on September 2, it was reported that [the military junta is trying to create armed unrest](#) in Rakhine. Two days later, it was also said that the ARSA members were active in Maungdaw District, according to the locals. Consequently, one-week later September 11, a Rohingya villager abducted by ARSA, found dead in Buthidaung Township. On the same day, one of two men abducted by ARSA in Maungdaw Township was said to be released in line with his family members.

On account of the news about the SAC activities, then, on September 1, the Junta administration started inspecting visitors' lists in Maungdaw town. Two days later on September 4, the military junta continued the drone surveillance operations in Northern Arakan. On September 9, two border guard police deserted into the AA in Maungdaw Township. Junta forces continue searching for AA camps, suspected locals in Taunggup Township.

"They came with weapons and looked at my farm hut. Later they went to the direction of Nat Thet Chaung creek. The junta column entered into another farm hut and talked to the residents, and asked, where are the AAs? Do you know the camp?," [one villager](#) said to the news.

Besides, Major Khaing Soe Lwin, a rank with the battalion commander of Arakan Liberation Party was reportedly [shot dead in downtown Sittwe](#) in the afternoon of 15 September, and the related news or responded interviews have been uncovered. On the coincidental occurrences of those criminal incidents, on the other hand, SAC member Dr. Ba Shwe and others visited to Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U and Kyaukphyu townships and Thandwe on September 16 and 19 respectively; urging [departmental officials and residents](#) to cooperate with the authorities in the peace and stability of Rakhine State, rule of law and development process.

On September 18, the junta conducted an extensive search in Thandwe under the cover of the alleged PDF presence. Then, the junta council troops also entered Rakhine towns during night hours. As of September 21, the junta checkpoints continued checking passengers with photographs. Then, on September 23, the junta threatened legal action against unauthorized construction of religious buildings in Paletwa. One day later, the junta conducted a navy exercise near Mayu lighthouse in Rakhine sea. One day later, Rakhine Coastal watchers witnessed the junta's series of artillery drills. On September 30, the junta military council troops entered Sittwe city and checked the pedestrians.

On the news for the peace process, as of September 1, a faction of ALP [announced](#) halting of all the NCA Processes. And, for the sector of external affairs, on September 4, Bangladesh-Myanmar signed an agreement on some points including maritime security. One day later, the Myanmar defense minister received the Indian Ambassador to Myanmar to talk about defense collaboration. On September 10, Bangladesh-Myanmar border guard also held a commander-level meeting. These news were reported by the junta owned media. As of September 19, the UK Government advised the British Citizens to avoid 9 conflict -regions in Myanmar. Other related news on the political freedom included hardship situation abound for families of Arakan State's [political detainees](#), the imprisonment of the photojournalist around 20 years after arrest on trip to cover Cyclone Mocha aftermath, the call of Arakan Front Party (AFP) on Arakan Army to release two senior party leaders, and the increasing number of arrests at military gates in Rakhine state, etc.

Part- II: Economic Situations

In September, the economic news in Arakan covered border trade, export, foreign direct investment, loan provision, low price of commodities, illegal trade and low demand for the commodities, etc. Firstly, the news related with the border trade with Bangladesh said that Myanmar-Bangladesh border trade valued

cross US\$7 millions over the past five months on September 17, 2023. And, on September 7, it was reported that the betel growers in northern Arakan State were forced to quit business due [to the dramatic decline in production](#). For employment opportunities, the soft-shell crab farming brought a rare economic bright spot in Arakan State.

On the news for export, on September 5, it was said that the [‘Trade Department’](#) allowed exports of only agricultural produce, fisheries at the Sittwe border. One day later, another news reported that five types of exports to Bangladesh are restricted from Maungdaw trade station. The restricted export items include agricultural products comprising rice/broken rice, pulses, sesame, peanut, onion and fisheries. On the other hand, on September 27, it was said that the junta earned [USD 993.94 million in 8 months](#) from export of Arakan gas to China.

News related with the foreign direct investments also mentioned that the domestic coastal ships were allowed to dock at India’s new port in Sittwe on September 21, 2023. One week later, it was also reported that the junta authority and Chinese representatives discussed new Muse-Mandalay railway, Mandalay-Kyauk-phyu railway projects. Next, the Sittwe-Chittagong coastal shipping plan is yet to be implemented, mentioned in a news article on September 28. On human rights and human trafficking fronts, some news on September 8 reported that around 80 LWF Myanmar staff, who demanded full salaries, got fired.

“When we are being paid at the rate of Kyats 2,200 by the central bank, we are deprived of extra money. It is now difficult for us to live with the salaries,” said a former LWF staff. “They do not listen to the employees. So altogether 92 employees participated in a silent protest. The management clarified that Burmese employees will be paid in Kyats only,” he [added](#).

On the same day, another news said that the Sittwe trafficking victim expected to return home. Four days later, reports of human trafficking at Arakan State camps for Muslim IDPs were said to be on the rise on another news.

For the illegal trade sector, the rise in illegal wildlife killing and trade following the military coup happened in Rakhine State and the authorities in Arakan State seized scores of smuggled cattle destined for Bangladesh on September 12. One day later, around 18 drug peddlers along with 12 lakh pills were caught in Rakhine for 9 months, another news claimed. Another news on September 29 said that the junta planned to collect 10% income tax from Myanmar citizens abroad and a large number of Rakhine workers were also trapped. On September 13, the May Yu shopping complex is said to open next month in Sittwe.

Then, the junta’s promise to provide loans to Mocha affected families vanished in thin air, a [news on September 6 said](#). Two days later, news from the junta controlled media says that the support for [loan services continued](#) in Rakhine State. On the issue of lower demand, a news on September 19 mentioned that the ‘Aung Bar Lay state lottery’ sales dropped about 70% in Arakan State. In the next day, another news also reported that the MSMEs in Arakan State report declined in demand.

The Vice-Chairman U Soe Win Naing of MSME Association Rakhine said, *“Producers [can’t make packaging attractive](#). They also can’t produce good quality. Even the producers do not eat their products, and they can’t therefore penetrate the market.”*

Additionally, the power abuse induced corruption becomes prevalent among the SAC officials reportedly by the local residents and businessmen in Arakan. All products imported into Rakhine State must have a permit issued by the Minister of Border Affairs and the fee for obtaining the necessary permit documentation is a minimum of fifty thousand to one hundred thousand kyats requesting up to ten lakhs for restricted items. A Rakhine businessman stated, “If you offer more money, you can import [without limitations](#).” Moreover, the junta has restricted the transport of essential food items (such as rice, oil, salt, dry fish, paste, betel nut, and onion) and construction materials (including roof zinc, iron, nails, and

cement) to Maungdaw township in Rakhine State. These items cannot be transported from Sittwe to Maungdaw via Anug Maw and the motorable road without permission from Rakhine's security and border affairs ministry and the relevant departments.

"Before resuming fighting with the Arakan Army last year, the junta did the same in earlier occasions too. Regular inspections, checking of transported materials and overall increased vigils indicate the preparedness of the junta forces," said [Rakhine political analyst U Pe Than](#).

Finally, other economically related news in Rakhine included rising price of commodities and civil servants' hardship with the constant salary, not-mentioning the Mrauk-U in the lists of tourist destinations and online sale restrictions of the junta, etc.

Part- III: Social Issues

In September, insecurity of community particularly for the women population and junta's persistent and more restrictions have been incremental. September seems to start with a news of a child being raped and to end with alike news to another underaged victim. According to residents, a horrific incident occurred on September 4 in a village located on the outskirts of Buthidaung township. It has been reported that a 10-year-old girl was subjected to [a despicable act of rape](#). Moreover, [a 4-year-old girl was raped](#) on the way back from the shop after going to buy snacks in Sin Cha Seik Ward of Mrauk-U Township on September 29. The local authorities have taken swift action and arrested the alleged perpetrator in connection with this heinous crime, however, notably, the first case is tackled on by the SAC police station (Buthidaung) and the latter is by the ULA/AA investigative agencies.

In addition to reporting child rapes, another insecurity occurrence happened to a female junior assistant teacher who was found dead with stab wounds to her neck with her clothes torn and slashed supposedly on her way from Panphawpyin to Pauktaw villages in Rathedaung township on September 16. The locals widely assumed as a case of rape, however, this controversy has been obscured by the lack of proof resulting from the undetected burying the body. Regarding this news, an apparent distinction based on the reactions of the news audiences is greatly observed. The news by the [Development Media Group](#) on September 15, with the heading "A Female middle school teacher found dead with the cut in the throat in Rathedaung township" was shared by over 18,00 audiences while the following news with the heading without mentioning the word cut in the throat were shared by less than 500 audiences.

Amounting cases of burglary and theft were encountered day by day, a total of 30 cases in eight urban wards in Kyaukphyu town from August to the second week of September, and undeniably prevailing across the Arakan. Regarding the SAC's persistent restrictions, since September 2022, Kaman ethnic group has not granted eligibility to apply for passports at the Passport Office in Sittwe and thus being arrested illegal travel to abroad for the sake of job opportunities and in some cases, apply in Myawaddy, border area, with significant cost.

"They told us that being Kaman-Islam, we are [not eligible for passports](#), referring to Nay Pyi Taw's suspension of passport issuance to our community. When I requested them to provide evidence of this suspension, they were unable to produce anything," explained U Min Chay from Thet Kae Pyin (Kaman) Village, Sittwe Township.

Part- IV: Humanitarian Issues

The intriguing humanitarian issues in this month are mainly related to the aftermath implications of the Cyclone Mocha and Rohingya repatriation.

According to the report launched by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) on September 8 that despite the reinstatement of the authorization to extend [assistance](#)

to individuals impacted by Cyclone Mocha in Rakhine, the demand for humanitarian aid remains substantial and continues to require immediate attention.

On the other hand, Junta minister Lieutenant General Yar Pyae urged NGOs and INGOs to register for conducting humanitarian operations during a workshop on facilitating the registration process held in Naypyitaw on September 14, as reported by junta media. Notably, a member of a Sittwe-based charity, however, responded that “We submitted an application for registration some two years ago, and it has not yet been approved. And [the regime] bars even [documented charities](#) from travel when people need help”. Then, on September 20, Rakhine State Chief Minister U Htein Lin announced that [the initial phase of recovery](#) in Rakhine State following Cyclone Mocha has concluded at the State Military Council office.

Highlighting the remaining vulnerability, “It is not safe if it rains. The makeshift tent is made of tarpaulin sheets, so if the sun is hot, it will be very hot and if it rains, it will be wet. We are struggling to make ends meet,” said [Daw Harzolain, a Hindu IDP woman](#).

In regard to the issue of Rohingya repatriation, a delegation led by Union Minister U Ko Ko Hlaing of the Military Council showcased the preparations made by the Military Council in the Maungdaw region for the returning refugees to the heads of 16 embassies and diplomats from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, etc, stationed in Myanmar on September 2. The initial pilot plan in this year intends to accept about 7,000 Muslim refugees, who are taking shelter in Bangladesh declared by his statement in a junta-sponsored newspaper. The projected processes are that all the refugees returning from Bangladesh will be screened by the immigration department for security reasons. After the e-ID verification, they will be offered citizenship scrutiny cards. They will be temporarily housed at the reception centers for some days and then they will be sent to Hla Phoe Khaung inter repatriation camp and finally the refugees will be allowed to move to permanent settlements. The military council will provide food items for three months and those associated with fishing will be given [boats and nets](#).

This initial project, however, is criticized by the UN and political analysts. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said there were reports that Bangladeshi authorities were using deceptive and coercive measures to compel Rohingya refugees to return to Myanmar. Additionally, the UNHCR – the UN refugee agency that so far has been largely excluded from the pilot scheme. The UHCR insists that [without verification that the 7000 refugees](#) have voluntarily consented to repatriation, the pilot scheme would violate the UN Charter on refugee rights. Political observers also commented that if the military council is working on repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh without any discussion with the United League of Arakan (ULA), it [may not be successful](#).

Negligence of those critiques, Union Minister Lt-Gen Tun Tun Naung, Chairman of the Rakhine State Stability, Peace, and Development Work Coordination Committee, delivered a speech in Nay Pyi Taw on September 14 that Myanmar is ready to start reception and resettlement of displaced persons at any time, adding that development undertakings in the state have achieved success to some extent. Then, his team and international diplomats including those from the Chinese Embassy visited Rakhine State two times to observe preparations for the pilot project of repatriation of displaced persons under the bilateral agreement between [Myanmar and Bangladesh](#).

Last but not least, the junta soldiers continue demolishing houses in Tinma village, which comprises over 500 houses, in Kyauktaw township to make space for a military camp. The villagers reported that several houses in Tinma village were built in Rakhine culture style many years ago and [are now being raised](#) by the SAC forces.

About the Report

This report is a part of the 'Monthly Report' series released by the Center for Arakan Studies (CAS). For the month of 'September', the CAS has developed this new report based on the four key sections such as 'politics', 'economics', 'social issues' and 'humanitarian context' mainly focusing on the state of affairs happening in Rakhine State (Arakan).

Readers of this report can observe the key trends tending in Arakan politics despite being a de facto ceasefire between the political authorities: the junta and the ULA. Since the strike of Cyclone Mocha on the Arakan coast in the mid-May impacted huge destructions on the socio-economic lives of the local population, the concentration of the local community is much on the rehabilitation and recovery activities. In addition to that, the rising political tension between the junta and ULA authority and frequent clashes between the AA and ARSA also brought more public attention during that month.

The key sources of the information and data in this report are from the key local media agencies such as the 'Development Media Group (DMG)', 'Western News' and 'Narijara', etc. The key news presented in the report as the also ones presented in these various media platforms.

More importantly, the report also invites the reader to read a special look on the humanitarian part as it has mainly focused on the updates of the post-Mocha Cyclone time and refugee repatriation issues. Local concerns on the rise of violence against the women population are also worth noting.

About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center is an independent, non-partisan and research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals including journalists, political analysts, researchers, social workers. The Center aims to advocate the understanding of the situation of human rights, politics, economic, and social dynamics in Arakan/Rakhine, and issues related to Arakan affairs in Myanmar and beyond, through rigorous research and reports. The Center also intends to perform the task of fulfilling the policy gaps through analysis and recommendations in favor of democratic policy change and common solutions.

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