

# Monthly Arakan Review

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Center for Arakan Studies

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## **A Month of Turmoil: Political Maneuvers and Civic Strain in Arakan**

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



*(Photo/CINCD5)*

## Key Remarks

Political instability and military tensions have increased in Arakan politics as of November. The junta military's weapon testing and the Arakan Army's (AA) involvement in attacks against the junta in Kachin and northern Shan State are key reasons behind this change. The continued imprisonment of Rakhine activists and individuals associated with the ULA/AA also indicates a dwindling potential for dialogue between the two parties. However, forecasting the timing and nature of any armed conflicts remains challenging.

Trade across the border between Bangladesh and Arakan has declined in both volume and value, primarily due to the junta's restrictions on export items and trading locations, shifting from Maungdaw to Sittwe. This change is purportedly to reduce exports of rice and other basic commodities to Bangladesh, although some claim it is an attempt by the junta to control all trade channels. Additionally, Chinese investments in Rakhine, extending beyond the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone and deep seaports, warrant specific attention.

Crimes against women and differently abled communities in Rakhine are reportedly on the rise. The local media's increased coverage of these issues has drawn more public attention. Many observers attribute the escalation of these social crimes to socio-economic hardships, a lack of adequate awareness, and the absence of the rule of law. In another development, the farming community in many northern townships of Rakhine State has also faced plant infestations, further challenging their profitability. Furthermore, basic public infrastructure remains inadequate for the residents of the newly formed sub-townships.

Humanitarianly, despite the ceasefire, the internally displaced person (IDP) population in Rakhine State continues to face an uncertain future regarding their livelihood and security. In recent months, junta authorities have implemented policies to force the IDP community to return home, using both coercive and incentivizing means. Without guarantees for security and livelihood at their original locations, many IDPs have chosen not to return, opting instead for neighboring villages and communities, or being forced to migrate abroad. Additionally, provisions for the remaining IDP community are insufficient due to rising commodity prices, while other humanitarian actors face legal restrictions imposed by the junta authorities.

## Political Affairs

News related to political issues in Arakan during November encompassed activities of the SAC, actions of the ULA/AA, aspects of the armed revolution, the peace process, the ARSA and Rohingya community, political freedom, research publications, and the country's foreign affairs. Regarding SAC activities, on October 1, 2023, authorities stated that Rakhine State has [a population of 3.4 million](#) and announced extra allowances for civil servants. The following day, junta forces began demanding one car daily from Myebon town motorists for patrols. On October 8, live-fire exercises were conducted by the junta in the southern parts of Rakhine State. A pilot census began in Maungdaw on October 9. By October 13, reports emerged that [two Rakhine youths had gone missing](#) after junta forces arrested them. Additional reinforcements and supplies were deployed by the junta in Rakhine State by October 16.

On October 19, extended [live-fire drills were conducted](#) by the junta's military training school in Minbya. Residents noted increased scrutiny at checkpoints within the state by October 24. Two days later, an announcement was made by the junta regarding a scheme to replace citizen ID cards with 'smart' alternatives. Despite tensions, the junta conducted a 3-day military exercise in the Andaman Sea on October 28. On October 30, further reinforcement of forces and supplies continued, and [the search for ULA members](#) across many townships in Rakhine State commenced on October 31.

In news concerning the ULA/AA, Buddhist monks appealed to the ULA on October 12 to release four detained abbots in Mrauk-U. On the same day, family members alleged a man [was beaten to death by ULA authorities](#) in Kyaukphyu township. The ULA announced recruitment for its judiciary department, and the next day, their police officers were investigated in connection with a custodial death. On October 25, the ULA's judiciary stated that over 2,500 complaints were [pending resolution](#). On October 27, it was disclosed that the ULA/AA and Brotherhood Alliance members were involved in '[Operation 1027](#)' in northern Shan and Kachin states.

Regarding ARSA, on October 2, reports indicated that ARSA leader Ataullah's assistant was detained by Bangladeshi security forces, and the junta arrested a Muslim administrator for alleged ARSA connections. On October 25, four Muslim children in Maungdaw Township were [arrested for illegal border crossing](#), according to junta authorities.

On the civic and political freedom front, two witnesses gave testimony in the case against a prominent Arakanese women's activist on October 2. By October 9, thirteen Arakan State residents had been charged for social media posts since the coup. A Man-Aung township businessman was arrested on October 14 for association with the PDF, charged under [section 505\(a\)](#). The protracted trial for two Paletwa residents charged under terrorism laws was still at a standstill six days later. Tragically, on October 21, a pregnant woman died at a military checkpoint in Sittwe while waiting for medical attention. A relative [recounted](#):

“She needed emergency care and was on her way to the hospital, but the army checkpoint delayed her significantly. They scrutinized all details of the woman and other passengers. It was too late.” Sadly, the attending doctors declared her and her unborn baby dead. Former Rakhine minister U Kyaw Lwin from the NLD government was released after completing his jail term on October 26. A Sittwe-based Rakhine news outlet, DMG, had its offices raided on October 29; two individuals were arrested and a journalist was charged under [section 65 of the Communications Act](#).

## Economic Situations

During November, economic news such as border trade, foreign investments, drug and human trafficking, and the fluctuating prices of commodities, including loan provisions, dominated the media landscape in Rakhine State.

The sole border trade with Bangladesh in Rakhine State experienced various fluctuations. On October 1, 2023, reports indicated that Rakhine State [had accelerated fish farming](#) to increase exports to Bangladesh, as per the junta authority. However, by October 10, as Bangladesh reduced its fish imports from Myanmar, border trades in Rakhine also declined. On October 13, it was mentioned that Myanmar-Bangladesh border trade totaled only US\$2 million in September. Consequently, on the same day, junta policy changes [were also blamed for the decrease](#) in border trade with Bangladesh.

“The decline in Myanmar’s trade with Bangladesh via the Maungdaw border trade camp is attributed to the junta’s restrictions,” commented a border trader from Maungdaw who preferred anonymity. Furthermore, U Aung Myint Thein, chairman of the Maungdaw border trade association, added, “Bangladeshi merchants are aware that some goods exported through the Sittwe border trade camp are of poor quality by the time they reach Bangladesh.”

Regarding drug and human trafficking news, four individuals were arrested [with 70,000 Yaba tablets valued at 1,400 lakh kyats](#) on the Buthidaung-Maungdaw road on October 4. On October 8, the ULA detained more than [a dozen drug dealers and users](#) in Minbya. By October 24, it was reported that over 80,000 WY pills were seized in Maungdaw in Rakhine State, but [the traffickers escaped](#). For human trafficking, two traffickers were apprehended in Buthidaung on October 2, and three days later, three Rakhine women trafficked to Iraq were rescued and were awaiting repatriation to Myanmar. On October 25, there were reports of a young Arakanese woman who narrowly escaped a trafficking attempt by a Chinese male.

In the foreign investment sector, there were [complaints](#) on October 6 that a Chinese firm’s Kyaukphyu power plant project failed to meet corporate social responsibility expectations with the local population. “They promised to construct a quality road linking us with Gone Chun village as compensation for the village’s loss. But the road improvements have not been made,” stated villager Ko Tun Soe of Ohntaw Village. Five days afterward, Chinese nationals [conducted a land survey](#) for the Kyaukphyu-Kunming railway track. By October 15, it was reported that China and junta authorities had agreed to renegotiate the \$1.3 billion contract for the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port. On October 25, Chinese firms were close to completing [the study phase of a wind power project](#) in Gwa Township.

Regarding commodity prices, on October 2, it was mentioned that stubbornly high commodity prices continued to exert an economic toll in Arakan State. By October 11, flower vendors were looking to mainland Myanmar for products, which contributed to raising market prices.

## Social Issues

Community insecurity has incrementally risen throughout October in Rakhine State. The majority of news was related to crimes, assaults on women—including those with disabilities, the state of agriculture, and environmental issues in the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha. Within the month, at least four individuals were killed by unknown assailants through shooting and stabbing, as reported in Sittwe. On October 5, a 51-year-old man [was shot dead](#), with a resident confirming to local media, “I heard the sound of gunshots near the Arakan Liberation Party office. I have no further details.”

Furthermore, on October 11, an unidentified body was discovered at a garbage dump near Mansi village, close to Sittwe. The locals expressed concern that the victim, who appeared not to be Muslim, was found near a Muslim village, raising fears of potential inter-communal conflict. “A person from another religion was killed and dumped at a garbage site near a Muslim village, which is alarming. We are worried about inter-communal conflict,” [said a local from Mansi Village](#).

Later, a 28-year-old pregnant woman and her 5-year-old daughter from a low-income household reliant on agriculture in Aung-dine village, Sittwe, were found dead in separate locations. The authorities [suggested](#) the case was due to drowning; however, locals suspect brutal murder.

In addition to the rising crimes, October's reports highlighted that disabled women are increasingly becoming victims of sexual assault. At least four cases involving three disabled women and one child were reported to local news, and the actual number may be higher due to potential underreporting. The victims, who are from rural areas in Rakhine State, are within the jurisdiction of the ULA/AA-controlled areas, which obscures the SAC regime's judicial system. The following chart details the rape cases that occurred this month.

<p><b>October 6, A 3-year-old girl, resident of Thayetchaung village, Pauktaw township was raped</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The alleged perpetrator has been detained by the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA).</li></ul>
<p><b>October 14, A 28-year-old paralyzed woman in Ngayinchaing village, Pauktaw township was raped</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The alleged perpetrator was arrested by local ULA/AA officials at around 5 p.m. on October 15.</li></ul>
<p><b>October 16, A 22-year-old woman with mentally impaired from birth in Leikma village, Kyauktaw township was reported as the victim being raped on September 30.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The local police force of ULA has taken the alleged rapist into custody.</li></ul>
<p><b>October 19, A 17-year-old disable girl in Konbaung village, Myebon township, was reportedly opened up as being raped on October 9.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The allegedly perpetrator is currently being interrogated by ULA/AA police.</li></ul>

In the agricultural sector, farmers have faced challenges growing groundnuts due to a shortage of local seeds that are well-suited to the climate and geography of Rakhine State. Farmers have traditionally preferred local peanut varieties for their superior crop yields and adaptability to various soil types, but the scarcity [has forced](#) many to use seeds from other regions of Myanmar. Additionally, farmers from Rathedaung, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, and Pauktaw townships have experienced severe infestations [affecting acres of ripe rice plants](#).

Furthermore, there is a pressing demand for the development of infrastructure projects such as schools, healthcare facilities, markets, roads, and garbage collection services in the State's sub-townships. Taungpyo Letwe, Khamaungseik, Laytaung, Kanhtaungyi, and Tettaung are particularly deficient in transportation, education, and healthcare infrastructure. Despite the presence of numerous government offices in Kanhtaunggyi, locals [are compelled](#) to repair roads and construct drainage systems independently.

### Humanitarian Issues

In regard to the repatriation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, a SAC-delegated group consisting of 34 members [visited Bangladesh and met with Rohingya refugees](#) on October 31. Meanwhile, the situation of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in Rakhine State has shown no significant improvement, with the trend of migration to foreign countries to support their families becoming increasingly evident. The impact of Cyclone Mocha has particularly



forced women into migrant labor. For instance, it is known that more than 20 IDPs, including some women from a displacement camp near a railway station in Kyauktaw, home to over 930 IDPs, have gone abroad following the storm. Many IDPs subsist on Kyats 30,000 provided by the World Food Programme (WFP). The junta's scant provision of aid exacerbates their hardships. "With the money from the WFP, we can only buy rice. We cannot afford meat or fish. We have tried to become self-sufficient in terms of food, but we have not yet succeeded," [said](#) Ma Hsan Hsan Nu from the Dhamar Yone IDP camp in Rathedaung.

Additionally, the SAC's mandate for compulsory registration under its governance is hindering the work of humanitarian organizations. "We have applied for registration with the military regime to form an association but have yet to receive approval due to various reasons such as amending the law and checking documents," stated [a representative from a civil society organization](#) in Mrauk-U. Moreover, IDPs in several camps under Kyauktaw Township are reportedly being coerced by junta authorities to perform unpaid labor in government offices, including cleaning tasks. "I felt humiliated working without compensation, especially having to clear wild taros along with grass and bushes. I dislike this work, but I cannot refuse. This has been the third time I've been forced to work there," [expressed](#) an IDP from the railway station camp.

The dangers from the explosive remnants of armed conflicts remain high. A child from an IDP camp near Yoe Tayoke Railway Station in Ponnagyun Township was [killed, and two others were injured](#) by such devices.

### About the Report

This report is part of the CAS's monthly series, which delves into four key areas of the state of Rakhine. The first section addresses political concerns, including the armed revolution, junta activities, and issues of political freedom. The second examines the state's economic climate, focusing on rising prices, declining demand, foreign direct investment, and border trade. The third and fourth sections cover social and humanitarian issues, respectively; these include education, health, migration, post-Cyclone Mocha recovery activities, and the internally displaced persons (IDP) population.

Key data in the report are sourced from local media outlets, such as DMG, Western News, among others. The aim of this report is to shed new light on the situation for observers endeavoring to comprehend the dynamics at play in the region.

### About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center is an independent, non-partisan research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals, including journalists, political analysts, researchers, and social workers. The Center aims to promote understanding of human rights, political, economic, and social dynamics in Arakan/Rakhine and related issues within Myanmar and beyond. Through rigorous research and reporting, the Center seeks to address policy gaps with analysis and recommendations to support democratic change and collective solutions.

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