

Monthly Arakan Review

Center for Arakan Studies

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Arakan in Crisis: Unraveling the Political Turmoil of December

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



The Arakan Army seized arms, ammunition, and military equipment from the operational base of Myanmar's junta forces in Rakhine (Photo/AA Info Desk)

Key Remarks

- The rise of armed conflicts in Arakan politics during December is evident. The offensive attacks by the Arakan Army (AA) against military outposts increased simultaneously, leading to the military zone expanding into more urbanized areas. Pauktaw, Rambree, and Mrauk-U stand out as the most conflict-intensive towns, with a considerable percentage of the urban population in various townships being displaced or affected.
- The economic state in Arakan has entered its worst phase in years. Trade, travel, and communication have been disrupted, and banks have either closed or reduced their transition activities. Additionally, the prices of commodities have tripled or quadrupled, exacerbating the shortage of available goods. This economic downturn disproportionately affects the poorest members of the communities, rendering them the most vulnerable.
- The cruel implementation of the 'four cuts tactic' by junta authorities in Arakan has inflicted disproportionate harm on the civilian population rather than the AA soldiers. Civilians face a constant risk of being arrested by withdrawing junta soldiers, while the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) population is at a greater risk of losing lives due to the inability to access proper medical treatment. The frequent incidents of looting, robberies, and thefts have further increased community insecurity.
- The reported total number of IDP population in Arakan since the resurgence of armed conflicts exceeds 200,000 across numerous townships. Unlike past displacements, even the elderly IDP individuals residing in urban areas are now displaced again into rural areas due to armed clashes in urban zones. The junta's heavy blockage on humanitarian assistance imposes additional hardships on the local IDP population, compounding the physical and psychological threats to the local residents.

Political Affairs

During the month of December, political news in Arakan primarily revolved around military conflicts and their impact on the civilian population. Notably, these reports detailed the outbreak of armed conflicts between the junta forces and the Arakan Army (AA), AA's attacks on the junta forces, junta's targeting of the civilian population, and the significant repercussions on the civilians.

Commencing with the junta's activities in Arakan, on December 1, reports indicated that locals discovered the abandonment of the Tin-Nyo police station in Mrauk-U township by the junta council's soldiers and policemen. Simultaneously, fierce fighting ensued between the AA and the military as they contested control over Pauktaw.

Two days later, in Ponnagyun township, approximately six houses in Kamaungtaw and Rerowpyin villages [were set ablaze](#) by junta soldiers. On December 5, there were widespread expressions that the junta was engaging in a war on the information space in the Arakan military battlefield. Consequently, a day later, it was reported that the junta was preparing to mobilize the Muslim population in the Maungdaw district by [providing bags of rice](#).

By December 8, reports surfaced that the junta soldiers extorted money under the guise of a 'guest list.' Three days later, the junta distributed propaganda posters in Thandwe preempting an AA offensive. On December 19, it was reported that the junta spread false news about the AA's involvement in the drug trade. In the southern part of Arakan, the junta prepared for military action in Kyaukphyu, Manaung, Thandwe, Taungup, and Gwa on December 20.

Four days later, reports indicated that the junta extorted civilian properties after [a gunshot incident](#) in Mrataung port, Buthidaung township. As of December 27, it was widely mentioned that the junta was [fostering ethnic and religious conflicts](#) in Maungdaw District. On December 31, the junta added about a hundred soldiers to its posts in Maungdaw.

On another front, on December 5, the AA accused the regime of using chemical weapons in Paletwa township. The AA statement [highlighted](#) the regime's continuous commission of war crimes, including launching airstrikes on civilian areas, burning public property, and killing innocent people. A day later, the AA sought recruits [to escalate offensive attacks](#) in the state.

On December 14, the United League of Arakan (ULA) reported that, throughout the 45 days of "Operation, 1027," 142 military bases in Rakhine State were taken over. As of December 25, the AA captured the Thudawmataung military outpost in Mrauk-U and discovered numerous dead bodies.

Other news pertaining to Arakan's politics encompassed the impacts on the civilian population, the decline of media freedom, the observance of the '49th Anniversary of Rakhine State Day,' the peace talks of the Three Brotherhood with the junta under China's initiative, and the arrival of a pro-military social organization known as the 'Young Men Buddhist Association' (YMBA) in Rakhine state, among others.

Economic Situations

The economic news from Arakan in December encompasses challenges to livelihoods, escalating prices of general commodities, shortages of essential goods, the impact on the agricultural sector, and the postponement of border trade, among other issues.

In the realm of rising commodity prices, a report on December 7 highlighted a surge in food prices in Rakhine State. A small grocery owner expressed the difficulties faced by common people, [stating](#), "If the larger stores start selling goods with elevated prices, we are bound to buy and later sell with the higher rates. Now, common people hardly afford to buy these items. So, the sales dropped almost three times. Everyone is facing a difficult time here."

Subsequently, on the following day, it was reported that residents urged authorities to take action against those selling products at exorbitant prices. By December 21, it was mentioned that even the price of sanitary pads had increased fourfold in many parts of Arakan. On the same day, the closure order of junta-controlled gas stations in Sittwe caused hardship for residents. A Sittwe resident [explained](#), "Even though fuel is available in every gas station, the military junta has asked not to sell to customers. The military officers have checked the reading of available fuel stock in the gas stations and asked them to maintain it till further notice."

On another front, reports on the shortage of commodities were prevalent. On December 6, it was reported that filling gas stations shut down across Arakan. Five days later, [a shortage of medical supplies](#) was also mentioned. The lack of sufficient fuel supplies impacted the funeral sector, with reports on December 22 highlighting [the weight of fuel shortages](#) on funerals in several townships.

Concerning livelihood difficulties, on December 2, it was mentioned that dance troupes in the state struggled amid fighting and travel restrictions. Nine days later, locals in Manaung township were reported to be starving due to the regime's [blockade of surrounding waterways](#).

A woman from Zayat Kone Khin village expressed, "We made a living by fishing previously. We have run out of money as we can't fish now. We have been forced to borrow money. So we sometimes have to skip meals to feed our children." Additionally, the junta blockade had [a financial impact](#) on sugarcane farmers, and fuel shortages forced [motorbike sidecar drivers](#) to suspend services. As of December 29, [the threat of arrest](#) led port workers in Sittwe to halt operations.

Other significant economic news includes challenges in the agricultural sector, where farmers in Rakhine struggled to harvest rice due to the military council's heavy-handed firing. Regime soldiers were accused of torching paddy fields in Rathedaung township, and reports [suggested](#) that the soldiers planted landmines in nearby paddy fields in Ponnagyun township. Additional news covered the regime's persistence with the Kyaukphyu SEZ despite intense fighting in the region and limitations on bank money withdrawals in Rakhine state.

Social Issues

In times of the resumption of armed conflicts between the junta forces and the Arakan Army, the junta's implementation of the "Four Cuts" strategy has led to situations of tremendous rises in commodity prices, community insecurity, and deprivation of healthcare.

Throughout December, the junta enforced transportation blockades in Buthidaung township and Paletwa township. A resident of Paletwa township [reported](#) to local media on December 13 that, "After the Nonebu military strategic base fell, junta troops deployed near Abaungthar village withdrew on December 1 evening. They have been deployed at Battalion 289 and Zeditaung. Soldiers are going around the town at night, and residents are concerned that they might be arrested."

Additionally, travel bans have been extended in the southern part, including Ann, Manaung, Kyaukphyu, and Taungoke townships. A Manaung resident stuck in Taungup [told](#) local media on December 29, "Previously, we could travel using health documents. But since December 4, only those close to junta personnel are allowed to leave Manaung, but no one can return."

The most devastating vulnerability due to blockages and conflicts poses detrimental impacts on access to medical care. On December 6, [an IDP woman and her newborn baby](#) in Ponnagya township, and on December 27, two students from Kyaukkphyu township [lost their lives](#) due to a lack of medical emergency treatment caused by travel restrictions and arbitrary shelling by the junta. IDPs are the forefront victims. According to local media reports on December 16, at least ten IDPs in Kyauktaw, Pauktaw, Rathedaung, and Maungdaw townships have [lost their lives](#) due to a lack of healthcare services since the junta's road blockades were instituted on November 13. Furthermore, the increasing number of people injured by the junta's artillery shelling has faced financial hardship for proper treatment in addition to travel restrictions. The medical services intended for pregnant women and children are also at a halt.

Moreover, the restraints have resulted in skyrocketing prices of oil and basic goods, and the consequent fuel shortage drove random and frequent disruptions in telecommunication services in most townships in Rakhine State. Subsequently, the local people have replaced the communication mode by using bicycles and trishaws as their daily coping mechanism.

Community insecurity has also been heightened by frequent incidents of lootings, robberies, and thefts. During the third week of December, [three robbery incidents](#) were reported, and one incident happened in the afternoon on December 25, where a group of robbers holding guns with their faces showing invaded a house in Aungmingalar Ward in Sittwe. However, the irresponsibility of the junta police forces worsened the insecurity.

On the contrary, junta authorities have taken advantage of India's Kalandan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project to deliver construction materials to its battalions in Sittwe. "Ships carrying various kinds of commodities from Yangon are not allowed to come to Sittwe. The ban has been in place for [almost] two months. Ships loaded with cement and construction materials and owned by authorities are allowed to dock at the India-funded port," a local businessman [told](#) the media on December 30.

Humanitarian Issues

According to local sources assisting the IDP populations, the number of IDPs during the 27 days from the resumption of armed conflicts in Rakhine State on November 13 reached at least 201,000 people on December 9. Reportedly, there were over 80,000 IDPs in Pauktaw, over 40,000 in Ponnagyun, and at least 20,000 in Minbya. Additionally, [an increasing number of people](#) from Sittwe, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Myebon, and Ann townships are fleeing into villages not affected by current conflicts.

On December 14, a local aid group called Arakan Responders for Emergency (ARE) disclosed that [more than 130,000 people](#) had been displaced in Pauktaw, Minbya, Myebon, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, and

Buthidaung townships. A report from UNOCHA released on December 15 stated that more than 111,000 people had been newly displaced due to ongoing fighting, in addition to more than 205,000 Rakhine and Rohingya IDPs displaced by previous armed conflicts across Rakhine and Paletwa township in southern Chin.

Famine has become a major issue in December. IDPs and residents living in the villages of Rathedaung, Pauktaw, Myebon, Ponnagyun, Kyauk Phyu, and Paletwa townships are facing [famine](#) due to the junta's restriction of freedom of movement and the consequent surge in commodity prices. An official from Kyauktalone IDP camp in Kyaukphyu Township [reported](#) on December 2 that they had not received rice supplies from the World Food Programme (WFP) for one month due to the junta's blockade of land and water routes to Arakan State. Another Ponnagyun resident expressed concerns about the lack of job opportunities and food shortages at the displacement camp.

Moreover, local charity organizations, serving as core local aid groups, are facing a temporary halt in operations due to travel bans and a shortage of fuel. The Ponnagyun Township Development Youth Organization (PDYO) and the Phyu Sin Yin Khwin Foundation, local charities in Ponnagyun, have both stopped operations since December 1 due to fuel shortages.

The current denial of freedom of movement also has adverse effects on the mental health of the local population, particularly vulnerable groups like children above four years and youths below 28 years. A Rakhine woman activist commented on the intensified conflicts, [stating](#), "As the conflicts become intensified, we don't dare to go out in fear of detainment and random artillery. The lack of recreation and the heightened insecurity have increased our anxiety."

Tragically, it was reported that [a 72-year-old man](#) at the Gutarpyin camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rathedaung Township died by suicide around 9 am on December 30, with the family attributing his despair to the increasingly dire circumstances facing the civilian population in Rakhine State.

About the Report

This report is part of the CAS's monthly series, which delves into four key areas of the state of Arakan. 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, 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 and related issues within Myanmar and beyond. Through rigorous research and reporting, the Center seeks to address the policy gaps with analysis and recommendations to support democratic change and collective solutions.

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