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Humanitarian Crisis Deepens Amidst Arakan Frontline Escalations

Monitoring of a brief situation of political tension, economic issues, social issues, and humanitarian issues in Western Myanmar in January 2024.



Photo/Western News

Key Remarks

- The armed fighting on the Arakan military front has escalated to a higher level of confrontation. The Arakan Army (AA) holds an offensive position and has gained the upper hand in the conflict. In January, the AA seized control of the entire townships of Paletwa and the town of Pauktaw, and on January 20, they declared their full confidence in capturing the towns of Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, and Minbya. The junta's administration and control in Arakan have collapsed completely, leading numerous families and properties to relocate to Naypyidaw, Yangon, and the southern part of the state.
- Due to the armed clashes and political turmoil, the economic situation in Arakan has worsened significantly. Beginning with the junta's blockade of transportation and trade on November 13, 2023, the shutdown of internet and phone communications, along with the suspension of the banking system, have added further challenges and burdens to business operations.
- Crimes and theft have surged in many parts of the state, particularly in areas under junta control in towns and urban areas. People are facing increasingly difficult social experiences stemming from economic hardships. Universities in urban Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, and Thandwe are closed, while hospitals, health clinics, and infrastructure in many parts of the state are either inaccessible or lack necessary medical supplies.
- The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region now exceeds 0.3 million, which is more than 10 percent of the state's population. However, the delivery of humanitarian assistance is more challenging than ever. Local civil society organizations (CSOs) play a more significant role than UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), as they are more adaptable and resilient to the shifting political landscape. Innovative and flexible policy adaptations are needed to facilitate more effective humanitarian and emergency aid delivery to the needy population.

Political Affairs

In January 2024, the political and military news reported in local media platforms mainly covered the situations of armed clashes, civilian casualties and arrests, and the activities of the ULA and SAC.

Regarding SAC-related news, it included surrenders, withdrawals, threats, attacks, arrests, reinforcements, and propaganda by the SAC military and police administration. On January 2, the regime conducted joint army, navy, and air force operations on Ramree Island. Subsequently, junta forces launched artillery shelling, triggering explosions in downtown areas of Minbya town. On the same day, 11 residents, including businessmen from Taunggoke, who were arrested by the military, were released, but there are reports among residents that they have to pay hundreds of thousands of kyats to the military council. Additionally, the junta [increased its military presence](#) in Kyaukphyu amidst escalating conflict near the Chinese project site.

The next day, Myanmar military reinforced urban positions in several townships such as Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, Ramree, Ponnagyun, and Myebon. Around 150 junta soldiers who fled to India were also sent back to Sittwe. On January 5, it was reported that junta offices in Paletwa closed for security reasons amid [fierce fighting](#). The Junta chief also met Chinese minister Sun Weidong in Naypyidaw. The following day, it was mentioned that the military council had increased the naval force to nearly three thousand in Arakan.

As of January 7, Thandwe fishermen were prevented from going to sea for three days as the junta's military exercise with Russia was planned. One day later, junta troops stationed near Mrauk-U town surrendered to the Arakan Army (AA) following an AA assault. The Myanmar military was reported to build new outposts in Kyaukphyu on the same day. On January 9, army families were moved to Yangon while the AA was occupying Paletwa. Two days later, the navy committed an arson attack on Taung Phu village of Pauktaw Township, and residents [were in fear as an unexploded shell landed](#) in Sittwe.

The following day, the Myo Thu Gyi's border guard battalion in Maungdaw [geared up for defense](#) with over a hundred bunkers and mines. As of January 13, it was reported that during the two months of war in Arakan, the Military Council Army [carried out more than three hundred airstrikes](#) and burnt down at least 700 homes in the latest Arakan fighting. Two days later, junta forces carried out an arson attack on Sittwe's Taw Kan village. On the same day, 124 junta soldiers surrendered to AA in Ma Nyin Taung of Rathedaung.

On January 17, it was also mentioned that [278 junta soldiers from Paletwa](#) fled to India again. Three days later, junta forces reportedly [relocated families](#) from the Western command in Ann, Sittwe to Naypyidaw. As of January 22, the entire Buhidaung's Nyangchaung border guard station fled. One day later, after two towns in the district [were attacked](#), additional bunkers were made at the police station in Myebone town. Two days later, junta forces intensified military preparations in southern Rakhine state.

As of January 25, it was reported that military training was conducted for policemen and family members in Kyauk Phyu and one day later, the junta forces destroyed 122mm howitzers before retreating from Myebon's Yaw Chaung base. On the next day, 12 fully armed junta soldiers fled from Taunggoke military stations. On the other hand, security restrictions have been increased by deploying military councils at two entrances and exits of waterways in Sittwe. As of January 31, more than 30 rotting dead bodies of military council soldiers were reportedly floating in the river near Minbya.

Apart from the above-mentioned SAC activities, the ULA/AA had also carried out numerous military offensive attacks. On January 1, Junta-AA clashes continued in Paletwa, and reportedly, the AA conducted its efforts to fully capture the junta's Taung Shay mountain tactical operation command base near Tinma Village in Kyauktaw while launching attacks on Chin Let Wa Camp, Mee Wa Tactical Command Base, and Point-313 Hill-Base Camp in Paletwa. The next day, the junta and AA clashed in Chinese-invested Kyaukphyu and Ramree townships. On January 10, the fighting between the military and AA intensified in Minbya.

As of January 14, the AA [claimed](#) full control of the Paletwa area. On January 20, the Arakan Army captured Pauktaw town after intense clashes, but it was only officially declared on January 25. Six days later, the AA announced that they were in full [confidence of completely](#) capturing the remaining battalions in Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, and Minbya.

Other critical political news expressed in local media contained civilian casualties and arrests, increasing border security restrictions by Bangladesh, and the state of political freedom for the civilian population in Arakan.

Economic Situations

Due to the escalating armed clashes in the region, the coverage of economic news in the media has become less frequent. The prominent pieces of news revolve around the limited supply of oil and gasoline, the agricultural sector, halting of bank operations, and unlawful taxation.

As of January 2, it was reported that approximately 50% of paddy went unharvested due to the conflict-torn situations. "In this situation, it will not be easy to obtain paddy seeds for the next year, and domestic food security may become a problem," [said](#) U Kyaw Zan, chairman of the Arakan Farmers' Union.

Ten days later, on January 12, it was mentioned that a startup group is regulating the sale of gasoline and fuel for cars and motorcycles, with a limited price of 3,400 kyats per litre allowed to be sold according to the type of vehicles. Related to that, another news article on January 13 stated that only licensed vehicles are permitted to purchase gasoline and fuel, while many others are restricted.

"Many of the cars and motorcycles here are unlicensed. Even if they sell fuel to all these vehicles, it will never be exhausted. Then, these will end up on the black market. Therefore, unlicensed rickshaws and tricycles need to buy fuel at the lowest price of 10,000 kyats per litre to sustain their businesses. As for the public, there will be no benefit as long as the price remains the same (higher)," [commented](#) a rickshaw driver from Sittwe to Border News Agency.

Then, on January 19, banking services in Sittwe were reportedly halted due to disruptions in phone and internet services. "Apart from Myanmar Economic Bank, all other private bank branches have ceased operations. Although there may be employees inside the banks, all doors are closed," [explained](#) a resident.

Six days later, as of January 25, another source [mentioned](#) that taking advantage of the instability in the region, some officials of the military council have been organizing gambling rounds in some villages near Man Aung, collecting illegal fees from the local people. "A card-playing gambling event is held in the village every day. The junta allows it so that they can influence the youths in the area. People from nearby villages also come to participate," [said](#) a local villager.

Social Issues

The first month of 2024 witnessed increasing crimes, communication breakdowns due to limited internet access, and dreadful public services, particularly in the health sector.

Within the first two weeks of the month, [five murder attempts](#) targeting Muslim residents in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships were reported. Four Muslim men were shot to death, three of whom [were seemingly targeted](#) by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on January 8 in Tat Ma Chaung village in Arakan. "ARSA entered the village during the night hours. Three villagers lost their lives on the spot, and three others sustained injuries," said an unidentified individual.

On December 31, residents of Tat Ma Chaung apprehended Mawlawi Uli, an alleged member of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), along with an unidentified individual. The villagers subsequently turned them over to the 353rd Light Infantry Battalion under the 15th Military Operations Command (MOC-15). There are suspicions among some residents that this incident may have triggered a retaliatory response from ARSA, leading to reported shootings in the Tat Ma Chaung village. Moreover, a group of people with guns and knives [robbed a house](#) located in Mingan Ward (6) in Sittwe, the capital of Arakan on January 28th.

Limited access to telecommunication and the internet has worsened the deteriorating socio-economic situation of the people. It is reported that the limitation is a consequence of the [shortage of energy for the generator](#), affecting townships such as Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauk Taw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, Ann, Kyauk Phyu, and Rambree the most. Since January 16th, all telecommunications except military-sponsored Mytel [have not been in service](#), reportedly due to wires

being hit by the junta's heavy artillery, as stated by a responsible member of an internet service operator in Sittwe. The implications are leading to a halt in banking and online financial transactions, [causing hardships](#) for operating businesses and receiving remittances from migrant workers abroad.

Importantly, the right to access information, freedom of the press, and speech are deliberately violated. On January 18, the Three Brotherhood Alliance [released](#) a statement expressing deep concern about the military junta's disruption of communication services in Rakhine State. Citing past experiences, intentional restrictions on internet communication have historically correlated with an increase in war crimes committed by junta forces against civilians in affected areas.

Pregnant women in rural areas of Arakan [are facing challenges](#) during childbirth due to travel restrictions imposed by the regime amid ongoing conflicts with the Arakan Army since November 13. The restrictions, coupled with a shortage of health workers and medical supplies, are contributing to adverse health conditions for rural residents, including pregnant women. Some women requiring cesarean sections are anxious about the timing of delivery.

Fuel shortages have also halted operations of local charities, exacerbating the suffering of civilians. The junta's blockade of land and water routes has led to shortages of medicines, limited access to healthcare, and disrupted regular vaccinations, resulting in maternal and infant deaths. Displaced pregnant women, numbering at least dozens among the 160,000 people displaced by the military-Arakan Army conflict, are particularly vulnerable. At least 10 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kyauktaw, Pauktaw, Rathedaung, and Maungdaw townships have lost their lives due to the lack of healthcare services since the junta's road blockades were implemented on November 13.

Humanitarian Issues

Regarding humanitarian issues, local organizations have become an integral part of effective delivery. The UN agencies are also experiencing difficulties in functionality due to armed conflicts and junta restrictions. Beyond the travel bans imposed by the junta on non-governmental aid agencies, the ULA/AA has been the primary agent for humanitarian assistance in its controlled areas.

In Arakan State, approximately 60,000 individuals [displaced](#) from earlier conflicts are still in displacement camps, according to a civil society organization assisting displaced people. Moreover, more than 300,000 civilians have been displaced in Arakan State due to renewed fighting between the Myanmar military regime and the Arakan Army (AA) over two months starting from November 13. Displacement has been widespread throughout Arakan State, excluding Thandwe, Manaung, and Gwa townships.

"Before, I could survive with my daily income. But now with the increasing commodity prices, people have to survive on porridge," [said](#) a Hindu IDP to local media on January 12.

"They are taking shelter in relatives' houses, as well as in monasteries and schools. The number of displaced people has increased as fighting has spread to many towns. The more people are displaced, the worse the food shortages they face," a member of the civil society organization [told](#) Development Media Group, a local media outlet, on January 13.

A social activist from Kyauktaw town [responded](#) to the local media on January 13, saying, "There is no humanitarian operation at all in our area. The junta-controlled Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement does not work, and organizations that intend to provide relief supplies to displaced people can't do so due to the junta's travel restrictions."

The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) [distributed](#) 24,986,500 Myanmar Kyats and rice rations to 121 families from Myeik Wa village, which was formerly located around military junta bases near the India-Myanmar border but is now under the control of the Arakan Army (AA) after their capture in the Paletwa region, as published by the ULA/AA on January 24. Furthermore, landmine [clearing operations](#) are underway by the AA in order to resettle the displaced persons.

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and the United Nations (UN) are reportedly considering leaving the Rakhine region due to escalating conflicts, according to a reliable source within an INGO. "UNOCHA is taking the lead and making arrangements for their departure. They are coordinating the exit of other INGOs, including WFP/UNHCR. Plans are also in place to withdraw from Buthidaung and Maungdaw localities," said the undisclosed source from an INGO to Narinjara News Agency on January 30. The source revealed that INGOs engaged in humanitarian aid and relief programs, particularly those based in Buthidaung and Maungdaw, [are planning](#) to relocate to Sittwe before departing for their respective destinations.

[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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