

Monthly Arakan Review

Center for Arakan Studies

No.11. June. 2024

Mass Displacement: Over 185,000 Flee the Liberated Areas in Arakan

Monitoring of a brief situation of political tension, economic issues, social issues, and humanitarian issues in Arakan in May 2024.



Photo/Credit-DMG

Key Remarks

- The politics of Arakan during May were dominated by news of armed clashes and the AA's victory over Buthidaung town, along with subsequent political allegations and complexities. The armed clashes in May were mainly reported in the southern townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, the central township of Ann, and the southern township of Thandwe. Junta forces in Arakan continue to suffer more.
- The catastrophic economic situation in May persisted. Several thousand staff members in the junta administration received no salaries. Scarcity of goods and commodities, along with rising prices of general commodities, added more hardships for the general population, especially the most vulnerable segments of society. Armed clashes in Thandwe caused the construction of the hydropower plant to cease, stranding hundreds of workers in the area.
- The unavailability of electricity, internet, and phone communications continued in most areas of the state. Blockages in communication provided more opportunities for junta soldiers to commit war crimes in the shadows. Mounting challenges regarding health and education accessibility are increasing, not decreasing.
- The number of displaced persons in Rakhine State, according to UNOCHA, increased to nearly 200,000. During the month of May, the newly displaced IDPs were mostly in Buthidaung and Thandwe. However, due to the blockage in humanitarian delivery, the majority of them are not receiving emergency services. On another front, the junta authorities are urging INGO/NGO staff who escaped the possibility of armed conflicts to return to urban Sittwe.

Political Affairs

In May, the politics of Arakan were mostly dominated by news related to armed conflicts, including casualties, surrenders, atrocities, displacements, inspections, military exercises, reinforcements, recruitment, and propaganda from the junta council (SAC authority). Additionally, there were inspections, seizures, warnings, and public relations activities from the ULA/AA, along with intense armed clashes between the two armed parties.

To start with the news related to the activities of the ULA/AA, on May 1, 2024, the AA seized a pair of strategic military camps in Maungdaw township while intercepting a junta convoy carrying weapons and food supplies on the Ann-Yangon highway. On the other hand, the AA also accused the Rohingya organizations of weaponizing [the term 'genocide'](#). The next day, the AA seized the junta's No. 1 BGF headquarters in Kye Kan Pyin Village, Maungdaw township. On May 5, nine major military bases in Buthidaung and Maungdaw were captured by the AA. Clashes broke out in surrounding villages near Shwe Hlay bridge, which is located a mile away from the hometown of the junta chief's wife; artillery shells landed near her village on May 6. On May 14, the AA captured [4 junta battalions](#) at Buthidaung's entry point. Four days later, on May 18, the AA [captured all junta battalions](#) based in Buthidaung.

Military-AA clashes [escalated](#) in Ann township on May 20, 2024. One day later, the AA fighters launched [an offensive](#) on Maungdaw. On May 22, the AA announced that [326 cadets had completed](#) course number-3. Three days later, the group condemned the joint statement on the situation in northern Arakan. On May 30, junta forces dragged villagers in Byine Phyu village, near Sittway, and [forced them to kneel down](#). On the same day, the AA announced it would hold a press briefing regarding the current situation, especially about Buthidaung. Another news article mentioned that the AA [rescued 98 prisoners](#), including Muslims, from Buthidaung jail.

On another front, regarding the actions of the SAC, it was reported that on May 1, 2024, the junta's border guard officers and soldiers fled in disorder from Kye Kan Pyin headquarters. Next, on May 3, it was reported that around 1,500 houses were torched in Buthidaung by junta affiliates during April. One day later, the head of Maungdaw Myoma police station and an inspector fled with weapons and gold items. Two days later, 132 BGPFs fled to Bangladesh again. The junta reinforced its defense of Maungdaw on May 8, 2024. Three days later, facing casualties in Thandwe, junta forces [deployed Muslims](#) from Sittwe and conscripts from Ayeyarwady.

On May 18, it was reported that the junta asked to [form a 25-member village security team](#) in Gwa. Six days later, the junta boosted military reinforcements to Maungdaw once again. On May 24, it was reported that 50 bodies of junta soldiers were found floating on Lin Thi creek in Thandwe. Three days later, the AA said that the junta had detained 425 civilians in Arakan since the latest fighting began. Finally, as of May 31, 2024, it was reported that around 40 civilians in Byine-Phyu village near Sittway were killed by junta soldiers.

Economic Situations

The news related to the economic sector during the month of May includes the scarcity of job opportunities, rising prices of general commodities, the halting banking system, and livelihood difficulties.

To begin with the news on the issue of unemployment, on May 2, 2024, it was reported that the fighting exacerbated the joblessness crisis in the state. A fisherman from Kyaukphyu Township [said](#), “[The regime] has imposed a ban on fishing in the sea. How are we supposed to make a living when we can’t fish?” On May 30, it was also mentioned that even if the prices of commodities decreased relatively, many families go hungry as family members cannot find a job.

As of May 3, the news reported that government servants serving in the junta administration no longer receive salaries. Concerning the rise of commodity prices, on May 4, it was noted that the restriction on rice transportation in Kyaukphyu led to a rise in rice prices. On May 11, it was mentioned that food supplies purportedly for Sittwe civilians ended up with junta battalions. [A resident said](#),

“The regime said goods have arrived, but prices haven’t declined. Only the businessmen that are partnering with the regime are reaping benefits. Most of the food supplies ended up in battalions.”

On the other hand, livelihood difficulties were mounting. On May 10, it was mentioned that Sittwe residents, whether they fled or stayed, face livelihood difficulties. Three days later, another report [said](#) that landmines pose a livelihood threat to Rakhine ethnic minorities. Additionally, local residents who rely on forests for their livelihood [face difficulties](#). Some local families have to sell gold as livelihood hardships increase.

In the agricultural sector, the news mentioned that there could be a reduction in the amount of agricultural cultivation. On May 9, it was reported that junta forces [transferred money](#) from the Maungdaw branch of Myanmar Economic Bank to Sittwe via military vessel.

“As the bank is closed, I can't withdraw my money, which I deposited in Kanbawza Bank. The withdrawals from Kpay incur high fees up to 12 percent. The money deposited in Myanmar Economic Bank remains inaccessible due to its closure. Now I cannot get the money even in an emergency situation,” said a resident. Regarding foreign direct investment in Arakan, it was mentioned that hundreds of soldiers were trapped near Tha-Htay Hydropower Plant due to the armed clashes.

Social Issues

Over half a year since the resumption of intensive armed conflicts between the junta forces and the Arakan Army (AA), the month of May saw shortages reach significant levels. The main cause stems from the junta’s restrictions on transportation and trade to Arakan, in addition to the nationwide economic depression. Moreover, the junta attempted to open the school registration process in May.

In the context of intensive armed conflicts, hospitals are being targeted by junta soldiers, depriving people of much-needed treatment for serious ailments. On May 15, junta soldiers carried out airstrikes on Wea Gyi Daunt cottage hospital in Kyauktaw using a jet fighter. This resulted in the complete destruction of the hospital and caused injuries to 20 individuals, including medical staff, patients, and caretakers.

Shortages in food, medicine, fuel, water, and internet have been frequently reported on local media platforms. The inadequacy in health care has been particularly severe, and the lack of medicine has led to a higher incidence of deaths. Cases of malaria and diarrheal diseases are reported in Hsinthel, Gantgar, Hsinthiphay, Twinhsinthel, Auyama, Lunpu, Deikppa, Thaluchaung, Khwaythae, Pharkywel,

Kyetchay, Gyitchaung, Mupyin, and Hsingaung villages in Ponnagyun township, but these issues are widespread in the majority of townships affected by the conflicts. A local man from Deikppa village [died due to medicine shortages](#).

In addition to the medicine shortage, the scarcity of water has led to the spread of diarrhea, especially in rural areas and IDP camps. At least three internally displaced people (IDPs) in Arakan State have died of diarrhea after water scarcity forced them to use unclean water sources. Water scarcity is expected to affect tens of thousands of displaced people, raising the risk of disease, according to [a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(UNOCHA\)](#) Myanmar Office on May 7.

“We have no medicine when we are sick or have diarrhea. Even if we can find medicines, prices have increased a lot. We have no income, and we can’t afford to seek treatment for health problems,” said a displaced woman from Pauktaw Township. Furthermore, many newborn babies in various Rakhine townships [are deprived of vaccination](#) as there is no adequate supply of vaccines, according to local residents. Notably, ART treatment for HIV patients is also unavailable. The vaccination shortage is due to the junta’s restrictions as well as the fragile administration system [caused by the ongoing conflicts](#). According to UNOCHA’s report on May 24, around 1.6 million people have lost access to hospital care in central and northern Arakan.

As one of the severe implications of the conflicts, food insecurity and starvation have been heightened, reportedly impacting an additional 50 villages in Thandwe township, which had rarely been impacted before. Moreover, it has been two months since Sittwe lost access to electricity after fighting broke out in Ponnagyun, and residents have had to rely on firewood for fuel. The price of firewood has skyrocketed, with a bundle of 100 sticks selling for 10,000 kyats and a sack of charcoal for 12,000 kyats in Sittwe before the latest fighting, but prices have since [jumped to 20,000 and 45,000 kyats respectively](#).

Importantly, the internet shutdown in Arakan is significantly impacting the dissemination of accurate information and is contributing to the spread of hate speech and the obscuring of war crimes in conflicted areas. According to a social activist in Arakan who spoke to local news on May 7, “Shutting down the phone and internet seems like an ideal situation for the regime to commit war crimes. During this period, there was no information flow in Arakan State at all. The difficulties of displaced people [are not recognized by the international community](#), and it is difficult to get assistance.”

In May, the month when school registration reopened, the military junta opened schools in only seven townships in Arakan State, with over 38,000 school enrollments recorded as of May 26, according to the State education officer. Arakan State education officer U Ba Htwe Sein informed Narinjara News that [more than 38,000 students were enrolled](#) in seven Rakhine townships, namely Kyaukphyu, Taungup, Manaung, Thandwe, Ann, Gwa, and Sittwe.

Humanitarian Issues

The civilian displacement has increased incrementally since the six-month resurgence of armed conflicts, accounting for over 185,000 people [according to the UNOCHA report on May 21](#). The displacement is particularly significant in Maungdaw district and Thandwe township in May. Thousands of Muslims from several villages in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships [have fled to safer locations](#) since May 5 to avoid the possibility of conflicts near their villages. According to local news on May 8, around 7,000 Muslims in Buthidaung township sought refuge in territory controlled by the Arakan Army (AA).

“The AA authorized persons gave shelter and food to those who fled the battle zones to AA-controlled areas, without any discrimination to their religion or race. The AA officials have arranged their accommodation and food items with necessary care,” [said a person assisting](#) in the rescue operations of those Muslims from the conflict localities to the media on May 12. Despite the mass displacement, there is also a situation where over 1,000 people have reportedly been stranded in downtown Maungdaw as of May 13. Furthermore, as the conflicts have expanded to the southern Arakan, to Thandwe township, leading to half of its residents to flee, in addition to the nearly 20,000 previously displaced people from the junta’s targeted artillery attacks and airstrikes on residential areas, [reportedly on May 17](#).

Meanwhile, the junta regime is urging the NGO/INGO workers who had left Sittwe to avoid the possibility of armed conflicts in Sittwe to return and resume work. On the other side, the Arakan Army (AA) issued a statement on May 20 to international organizations based in Arakan State's Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Thandwe townships, where fighting with Myanmar's military regime is escalating, advising them to evacuate in advance of potentially volatile days ahead.

According to a staff member of an NGO to local media on May 13, "Many NGO and INGO workers were relocated from Sittwe to Yangon and other regions of Myanmar. Many workers received reduced salaries in Yangon. Hence they are expecting to come back to Sittwe following the junta's call. They hope that after returning to Sittwe they will receive full salaries," said an individual close to NGO/INGO activities. "The junta has blocked roads, tightened inspections, and restricted movement to other townships except Sittwe, thus posing difficulties for NGOs and INGOs. Now the junta is [recalling them to return](#), even though the question remains—who will ensure their safety and security?"

On the other hand, an employee from a CSO responded to local media on May 20, "If something happens to the employees of an international organization in the middle of the fight, it will not be good for the AA. Even now, the AA is being criticized internationally for misinformation. So, I see that the AA is handling everything cautiously at the moment," said [an official from a civil society organization](#) in Arakan 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.

Contact: info@arakanstudies.org
www.arakanstudies.org