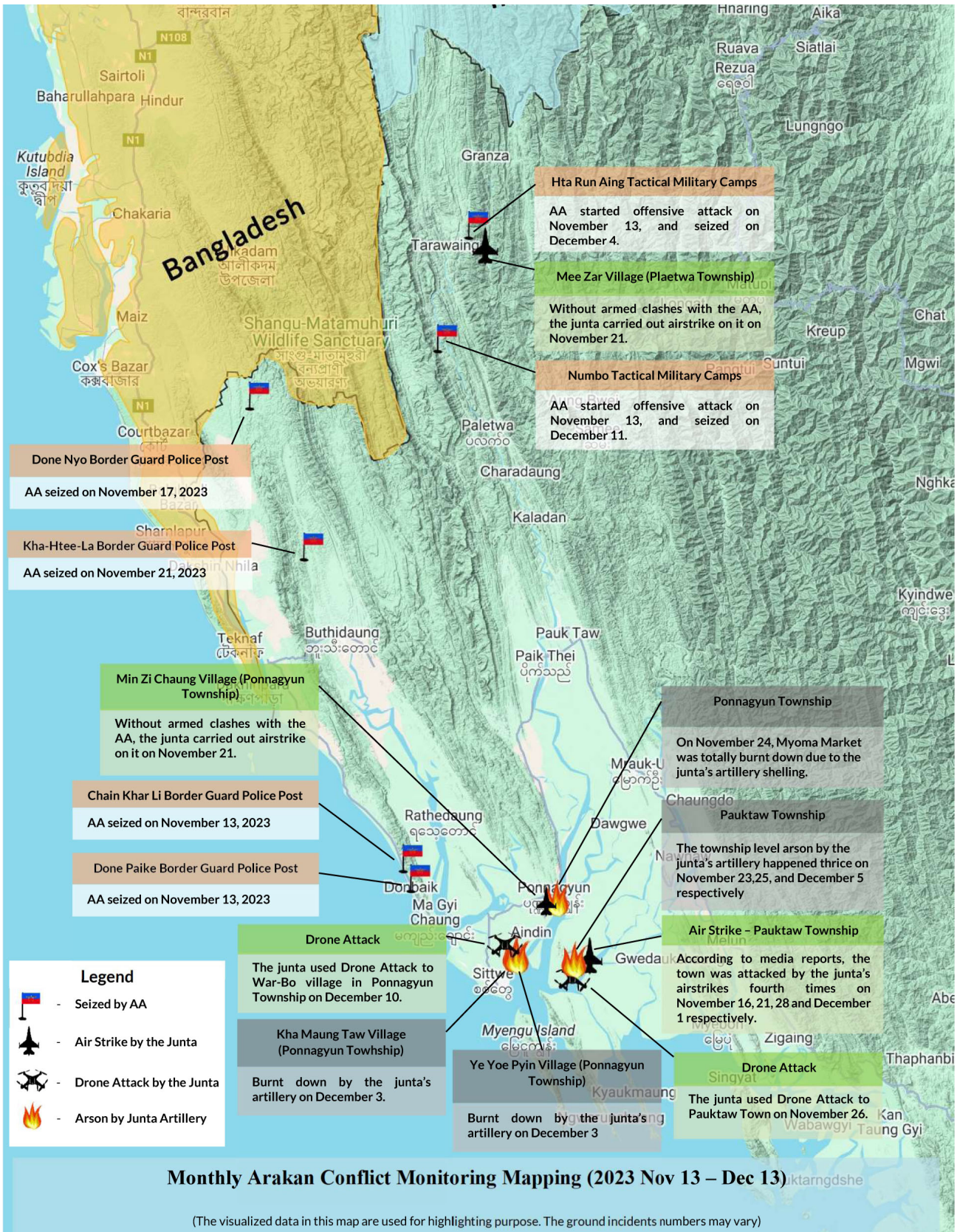


Monitoring of Arakan Conflict

An overview of November 13 to December 13, 2023



Background of the Conflicts

The previous de facto ceasefire, also known as the ‘humanitarian ceasefire’, introduced on November 25, 2022, between the military junta and the Arakan Army (AA) in Arakan, lasted almost a year. The impact of Cyclone Mocha and its humanitarian consequences also contributed to the longevity of the truce, as the United League of Arakan (ULA), the political wing of the AA, hesitated to renew armed conflict while the local population was in great need of assistance.

However, since the two parties lacked not only non-negotiable political stances but also the political will to march towards sustainable peace in the region, the return of armed confrontation seemed inevitable. The questions were only about when and how. By October 10, the AA, along with two other ‘Three Brotherhood Alliance’ (3BTA) groups, MNDA and TNLA, released a statement about the death of one AA soldier and injuries to 10 others near the KIA-controlled town of Liza on the China border. The statement also mentioned their solidarity with the KIA in the fight for justice and truth.

Two weeks later, on October 27, the 3BTA announced their plan to stage ‘Operation 1027’, based on various objectives such as the protection of civilian lives and properties, self-defenses, suppression of online gaming and fraud, and the eradication of military dictatorship, among others. Analysts soon remarked that this military operation was a ‘long-arranged’ effort with nationwide coordinated actors and movements. Consequently, on November 13, the AA in Arakan initiated a new round of offensive military attacks, especially in Rathedaung and Minbya townships. The de facto ceasefire introduced in late November 2022 was broken just a week before its anniversary. In response, the junta authorities in Arakan imposed a total blockade of travel and trade, not just between Rakhine state and other areas but also within towns and villages, leading to a humanitarian emergency across the region. Despite this, armed conflicts continued in several parts of the state.

A. Monitoring the Conflicts

The key actors in the armed conflicts in Arakan are the Myanmar junta military and the Arakan Army. As a state’s armed force, the junta military possesses ground, navy, and air forces, which are used in attacks against the AA, in addition to the Border Guard Police (BGP) and the conventional Myanmar Police Force (MPF). For the AA, guerrilla tactics based on revolutionary ground troops are the key fighting forces, as it apparently does not yet possess air and navy powers.

Within a month, there were at least approximately 65 reported incidents in Arakan. The military operations were mostly offensive actions conducted by the AA. In terms of location, the armed clashes were primarily concentrated in the Pauktaw, Paletwa, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung townships.

Regarding the types of battles, around four BGP posts in Rathedaung, Buthidaung, and Maungdaw townships were seized by the AA. In Rathedaung township, the Chain Khar Li and Done Paik posts were captured on November 13, while the Done Nyo and Kha Htee Hla camps were eradicated on November 17 and 21, respectively. Additionally, according to the data, at least 7 police stations in Kyauktaw, Rambree, Taunggoke, and Mrauk-U townships were impacted, with 6 being abandoned and 1 seized by the AA.

Most notably, two key ‘tactical military camps’ known as Hta-Run-Aing and Numboo were seized by the AA in Paletwa township along the Kaladan river. The first camp was reported to be seized by the AA on December 4 after 23 days of military attacks, while the latter was captured on December 11 after 27 days of operations. On another front, in terms of geography, local media also reported that attacks in urban areas occurred at least 25 times. Other kinds of attacks by the junta forces include heavy artillery shelling, air strikes, drone attacks, small arms fire, and more.

B. Key Events of the Armed Conflicts

1. The AA has seized two ‘Tactical Military Commands’ (TMC) in Paletwa township.

One of the most noteworthy armed incidents on the Arakan front within the last month is the seizure of the ‘Hta-Run-Aing’ and ‘Num-Boo’ tactical military commands by the AA on December 4 and 11, respectively. The AA troops initiated offensive military attacks on these two posts starting November 13, 2023. On December 4, the AA announced that the operation against Hta-Run-Aing lasted 21 days, during which the junta forces resisted by using air strikes, heavy artillery shelling, and chemical warfare agents. The AA also seized some dead bodies of

the junta forces, along with ammunition and military equipment. Regarding the capture of 'Num-Boo' on December 11, the statement mentioned the discovery of the dead body of the local commander, a position typically held by a colonel.

2. Four Border Guard Police (BGP) posts have been lost by the junta.

Besides the TMCs, the junta has also lost four BGP posts within a month, namely Chain-Khar-Li, Done-Paika, Done-Nyo, and Kha-Htee-La, in Rathedaung, Maungdaw, and Buthidaung townships, respectively. The first two posts were seized on November 13, while the third one was captured on November 17. Finally, the fourth post was lost to the AA four days later.

3. The junta authorities retreated its military and police stations.

In line with some reports, the junta authorities withdrew from at least 40 stations across the state within just a week of the resumption of armed conflicts. According to CAS reporting, it was found that police officers and members from the Sa-Ne and Aung-Hla-Pyin police stations in Kyaukphyu and Rambree townships moved into urban areas on November 13. Subsequently, the police stations such as Tan-Hlway-Ywar-Ma, Tin Nyo, Ywar-Ma, and La-Muu in Mrauk-U and Toungup townships followed suit on November 14 and 15, respectively.

4. The junta used drone attacks and set fire to the two villages.

It was also found that the junta used drone attacks at least twice in the previous month. The first attack was carried out on November 26 in Pauktaw town, where at least four civilians were injured. Then, on December 10, the second attack occurred in War-Bo village in Ponnagyun township, where one young man was injured and a civilian house was damaged.

Then, there were at least six times of burnings that happened within a month of the conflict and the actions of the junta forces caused all these incidents. In Ponnagyun, the town's marketplace was reportedly burnt due to the artillery shelling by the junta on November 24, and the two villages of Yo Yoe Pyin and Kha Maung Taw were arsoned by the junta on the same day, December 3. The town of Pauktaw was also fired upon due to the artillery shellings of the junta on November 23 and another twice happened on November 25 and December 5 respectively.

5. Armed Clashes in urban Pauktaw

As of November 16, when the AA captured the town's police station in Pauktaw, the junta forces responded by firing on several locations using helicopters. Subsequently, the residents of Pauktaw fled due to the naval bombardment. The military tension in Pauktaw town continued, and by November 20, it was reported that more than 100 civilians in the urban areas of Pauktaw had been detained by the junta forces. On November 21, fighting resumed in Pauktaw town, and the AA rescued approximately 100 civilians from the junta's custody. By November 29, it was reported that around 70 junta soldiers remained in Pauktaw, after approximately 100 had been killed by the AA. The armed clashes in the urban areas of Pauktaw continued, while the AA claimed to eradicate all the junta troops from the area.

C. Key Remarks

As the AA initiated armed attacks in Arakan, in coordination with other offensive military operations in different parts of the country, it usually had the upper hand in choosing where and when to fight. The AA's offensive operations and seizure of two TMCs in the upper parts of Paletwa township along the Kaladan River have been widely reported and are viewed as strategic due to their locations. These military camps are also among the two largest junta command posts in Arakan. The AA's capture of these bases has several implications for its military and political efforts. Firstly, it could allow the AA more de facto control over the broader territories in Paletwa township from a military perspective. Additionally, the AA leadership could circumvent the junta's trade blockade, potentially yielding long-term economic benefits. Diplomatically, stronger control along the Kaladan River means more leverage in implementing the 'Kaladan project' initiated by neighboring India. Militarily, to gain complete control of the township, the AA needs to seize additional junta camps, such as 'Chinletwa' near the India border and Mee-Wa near the town of Paletwa.

The AA's gains over the four BGP posts in Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung townships could also enable expansion of border trade with Bangladesh and more influence over the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. The

junta's decision to withdraw many police stations across the state appears to be a strategy to conserve forces and strengthen urban centers. This withdrawal also means that the AA now has more administrative territory and space to maneuver its forces and administrative capacity.

The use of drone attacks by the junta in Arakan, whether against AA or civilian targets, is not entirely new but is somewhat unconventional. In Myanmar's conflict landscape, drone attacks are mostly carried out by resistance forces, but the AA reportedly has not used drone attacks like other forces in the country. The outbreak of armed conflicts in the urban area of Pauktaw is unusual in Arakan's military front, as the township was previously a low-conflict area. Many observers question whether the AA truly intended to capture the town, considering it captured the police station and maintained control with only a few dozen troops. As armed fighting continued in the town, Pauktaw became the first town to be significantly affected by the clashes, particularly due to the junta's heavy artillery, naval bombardments, and air strikes.

Conclusion

The recent developments in the Arakan region, marked by the end of the de facto ceasefire between the Myanmar junta military and the Arakan Army (AA), have led to significant shifts in the regional conflict dynamics. The AA's strategic offensive operations, particularly the seizure of two major Tactical Military Commands (TMCs) and four Border Guard Police (BGP) posts, signify its growing military and administrative strength in the region. These gains not only underscore the AA's tactical prowess but also highlight its potential to exert greater control over key territories, particularly along the Kaladan River, thereby influencing significant projects like the 'Kaladan project' with India.

The junta's response, characterized by the withdrawal of police stations and the use of unconventional warfare tactics such as drone attacks, indicates a strategic repositioning and an attempt to consolidate forces. This move, however, has allowed the AA to expand its administrative reach and maneuverability within the state. The situation in Pauktaw town, with its unprecedented level of armed conflict, marks a new phase in the regional tensions, reflecting both the junta's intensified military response and the AA's potential shift in strategic objectives. Overall, the evolving conflict in Arakan, with its complex blend of military engagements, territorial control, and political maneuvers, presents a challenging landscape. The AA's recent actions suggest a more assertive stance in both military and political arenas, potentially reshaping the future of Arakan's conflict and its broader implications for Myanmar. The junta's tactical changes, while aimed at preserving its forces, might lead to further escalation and complexities in the region's already volatile environment.

About the Report

This report is a monthly conflict monitoring publication by the Center for Arakan Studies (CAS). Its objectives are to document timely updates on Arakan conflict situations and to describe the information and data based on conflict narratives and analysis. The data in this report are derived from both primary phone communications with ground sources and local media agencies. It presents conflict scenarios based on the actors involved, locations, types, and targets of the incidents.

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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