

Monthly Arakan Review

Center for Arakan Studies

No.16. February. 2024

Social Disruption: Junta Restrictions and Arakan Exodus

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



Photo/AA Info Desk

Key Remarks

- High levels of armed tensions in Arakan politics were evident throughout February. As of February 29, the AA had captured six major towns, including Paletwa, Pauktaw, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myebone, and Mrauk-U, along with several other small towns, particularly in the northern and central parts of the state. AA forces continued intensive fighting in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, and Rambree. Surrenders, retreats, and atrocities committed by the junta forces are ongoing.
- Due to the armed clashes and political instabilities, the Rakhine economy experienced a significant crisis. The banking system collapsed, cash scarcity worsened, productivity decreased, and the economy nearly collapsed entirely. Additionally, while Chinese investments continued to operate, the construction of India's Kaladan project was temporarily halted due to insecurity in the Paletwa region, stemming from air strikes by the junta forces.
- Rakhine ethnic communities outside of Rakhine state faced arrests and torture by junta authorities in Yangon and Mandalay while attempting to return home. Some were released after confessing not to return to Rakhine state, but many remain detained. Nearly half of the population in Sittwe attempted to flee to other parts of the state or major cities like Yangon and Mandalay, causing a surge in the price of air tickets in Sittwe and leaving many unable to afford them.
- The humanitarian demand in Rakhine state reached unprecedented levels. Many sources reported that the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had exceeded 300,000. Amidst this dire situation, junta authorities mobilized to recruit several hundred Rohingya youths into the military to fight against the Arakan Army. Meanwhile, the UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) providing humanitarian assistance began retreating from the northern parts of Rakhine state, especially towns like Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Sittwe.

Political Affairs

The politics of Arakan during February were primarily dominated by news related to armed conflicts, including casualties, surrenders, atrocities, displacements, inspections, military exercises, reinforcement, recruitment, and propaganda from the junta council (SAC authority). Additionally, there were inspections, landmine clearance operations, seizures, warnings, and public relations activities from the ULA/AA, along with intense armed clashes between the two-armed parties.

Regarding junta actions, on February 1, 2024, the junta [imposed a curfew](#) in Sittwe due to increasing military activities. The following day, the junta military launched attacks on AA forces in Rambree from the air, navy, and ground. On February 3, 2024, heavy shooting was heard from border guards at the entrance of Maungdaw. Consequently, the largest Taung Bazaar Border Guard Station, with [about 300 personnel](#) in Buthidaung township, surrendered to the Arakan Army (AA). Two days later, 106 junta border guard police personnel reportedly fled to Bangladesh. On the same day, it was reported that the military council was smuggling weapons under the pretense of sending food to Rakhine. Concerns also rose in Taungup regarding reports of houses being stolen from fleeing residents. On February 6, 2024, family members of the military council in Kyauk Phyu [were moved to Thandwe by cargo ship](#). On the same day, two navy ships sent to support Kyauktaw were hit by heavy artillery shells fired by the AA and forced to turn back.

On February 8, 2024, the junta [claimed](#) that reports of over 60 houses being destroyed by Tatmadaw airstrikes and artillery fire in Ramree were false. On the same day, Taunggoke Township was reportedly bombed by the military council for the first time using a jet fighter. One day later, the junta media stated that malicious media accused the Tatmadaw of using poisonous gas bombs. As of February 11, many temples in Rakhine were [reported](#) to have become areas free of junta soldiers. Additionally, Rakhine members of the military council and several Rakhine ministers arrived in Sittwe to hold talks to end the conflict. Furthermore, three warships of the military council were reportedly sunk by the AA in Kyauktaw, with

photo evidence, and the AA rescued those who swam to safety. On the next day, police and junta soldiers abandoned their stations in Myebon.

On February 14, the military council reportedly [launched](#) a sea and air attack to recapture Minbya, but retreated after two warships were sunk and damaged. The following day, 330 border guard police personnel fled to Bangladesh and were handed over to Myanmar. As of February 16, family members and military equipment from Maei City were moved to Ann by helicopter. On the next day, [a heavy fire broke out](#) in the city of Rambree due to aerial bombardment by the military council.

As of February 20, it was highlighted that soldiers of the Military Council from the Shwe Hla Police Station in Thandwe moved and strictly [checked pedestrians](#). Naval Forces also [increased patrols](#) in Rakhine-Bangladesh Territorial Waters. Three days later, in Buthidaung, military council troops were reported to be hiding in residential areas, causing fear and concern among civilians. On February 24, the director-general of UNESCO condemned the killing of a Rakhine journalist. The next day, the AA [attacked](#) a junta forces reinforcement column, reportedly killing 60 soldiers. On February 27, the junta launched airstrikes on Min Hpu civil hospital in Minbya. Two days later, as of February 29, four houses were destroyed by the junta jet fighter bombing in Minbya.

In the second section, regarding the ULA/AA's activities, on February 1, 2024, the AA chief stated in an interview that they had no intention to declare independence just yet. On February 5, a captured Taung Pyo Let Yar camp recovered soldiers' bodies and confiscated arms and ammunition. Two days later, it was reported that the AA had captured six towns, with two more awaiting their control. As of February 13, the AA captured another military vessel in a naval battle, with [nine vessels occupied](#). On February 16, the AA [cautioned](#) villages along the Taungup-Thandwe highway about the junta's airstrikes. Four days later, the AA informed and encouraged Rakhine people to move into its controlled areas. On February 26, the AA chief warned that Min Aung Hlaing must accept defeat and halt arrests and violence against civilians. Three days later, the ULA/AA [mentioned](#) that the war attack was killing a fascist spirit and that all those involved would be investigated and action taken.

Economic Situations

Due to the intensive armed clashes ongoing in the state, there was a limited amount of economic news during February. The key pieces of news expressed by local media outlets were related to foreign direct investment (FDI) and border trade. As of February 9, 2024, it was reported that the entirety of India's Kalatan Multi-Plan had been controlled by the Arakan Army (AA). According to the report, an observer stated:

"Since the AA has gained control over the entire Paletwa region, we can say that they have won the Kalatan project. The AA now controls the entire Kalatan River, as well as other adjacent areas."

On another note, on February 19, it was [mentioned](#) that oil tankers continued to navigate routinely in Kyaukphyu despite conflicts near Chinese projects in the famed Ramree island.

"Oil tankers are still arriving and departing despite the intense clashes in Kyaukphyu township amid heightened military tension," said a young resident who monitors Chinese projects.

On February 23, 2024, it was reported that due to border clashes, Bangladesh-Myanmar trade had completely halted. The news continued to state that due to ongoing fighting between the junta military and the AA in Maungdaw District, trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar centered on the Nat River had been entirely suspended. It was noted that tax collection for the Bangladeshi government had been greatly affected due to the [suspension of trade activities](#) at the Tekkent port in Cox's Bazar district.

Finally, as of February 29, it was reported that Indian Mizoram MP Valalvena had met with AA officials at the border regarding road construction. The news added that Indian Mizoram Member of Parliament Pu Valalvena met with Rakhine Army (AA) officials at the border to discuss the construction of a border road,

as reported by the local media outlet, The Lairam Time. This road serves as a communication route between Arakan and India.

Social Issues

The junta's SAC administration has inflicted harm on the Rakhine ethnic group by detaining passengers returning to Rakhine State from Yangon, thus restricting freedom of movement. Meanwhile, privately owned cars, including those belonging to military junta officials and departmental vehicles, [are being transported](#) to Yangon by a large cargo ship from Sittwe port.

Following the enactment of the conscription law on February 10th, all flight passengers arriving at airports in Rakhine have been detained for interrogation by SAC forces without explanation. On February 19th, [all 67 passengers who landed at Kyaukpyu airport](#) from Yangon were taken away by the general administrator and junta forces for questioning. Some were reportedly released, particularly residents of Sittwe, civil servants, and students, but many civilians remain detained. Moreover, Rakhine youths aged 18 to 35, the group [designated](#) for conscription, are being denied airline travel from Yangon to Sittwe, effectively preventing them from returning to Rakhine State.

In addition to restrictions on airline travel, the junta administration has barred passengers from using express bus transportation under threat of interrogation. On February 20th, [at least seven Rakhine people](#), including two young women, were detained by junta forces at Yangon's Aung Mingalar highway bus station. Reportedly, nine women out of 14 youths [were released](#) on February 25th, while one woman and four other youths remain in detention.

The junta has issued an order banning fishing in Kyauk Phyu township within coastal areas bordering the town and the Thanzit River, as well as water areas and boundaries, from February 20th to April 19th. While this measure may be related to the security of junta naval ships against attacks from the Arakan Army, it also [significantly impacts the livelihoods](#) of local residents who rely on fishing.

Humanitarian Issues

Two major humanitarian issues have been heightened this month. Firstly, the junta's conscription law is putting pressure on vulnerable people living in IDP camps. Secondly, international non-governmental organizations in Maungdaw township are being forced to withdraw from the area due to escalating conflicts.

On February 17th, [at least 150 men were forced into the junta's military service](#) from Kyauk Ta Lone Rohingya refugee camp in Kyaukphyu township, Rakhine State. Since the Rohingya community in the IDP camps lacks resources and documents to flee to other areas, they have no choice but to remain in the camps, [with nowhere else to go](#). On February 27th, the commander of Brigade 542, Wanna Aung, and a troop of 20 soldiers visited the camp and recorded the names of [107 Rohingya youths for military training](#). On February 29th, these [recorded](#) youths were taken by Brigade 542. Due to forced conscription, several Rohingya youths from the camp [have sought refuge](#) with the Arakan Army (AA).

As conflicts escalate, numerous INGOs/NGOs, including the UN, have evacuated their offices in Maungdaw township since February 12th. Reportedly, organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, UNDSS, WFP, ACF, BAJ, IOM, Malteser, DRC, CFSI, NRC, CSI, and World Vision have relocated their staff from Maungdaw, leaving only MSF, ICRC, and MRCS behind. To avoid junta airstrikes targeting residential areas, many residents have even painted their logos, including the [UN, on the rooftops](#) of their offices in Maungdaw.

Meanwhile, [more than 300,000 IDPs](#) are in dire need of food, shelter, clothing, and medical aid, according to a responsible person at an IDP camp in Rakhine. Refugees have been fleeing the Rakhine conflict since 2015, with significant waves during the conflicts in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The recent fighting has forced people in Rakhine to flee, resulting in the abandonment of some townships and widespread displacement.

The region is facing food scarcity exacerbated by Cyclone Mocha, while the junta blockade adds to the challenges. Intense clashes between the Arakan Army and the junta prompt a daily exodus, with reports of deliberate targeting of displaced camps using heavy weapons, resulting in casualties. The junta's use of drones and airplanes, and setting fires in residential areas, intensifies the crisis, leading to a continuous rise in people fleeing and prompting local residents to seek assistance.

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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