

Growing humanitarian crisis in Arakan State

Following the renewed violence in Arakan (Rakhine) state in October, there is a growing humanitarian crisis. Many of those forced to flee the violence are living in squalid camps in desperate need of food and shelter. There is severe overcrowding, child malnutrition, totally inadequate water and sanitation, and almost no education available in the camps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has warned of a “growing humanitarian emergency”.



Credit: Refugees International

Since the violence started in June, an estimated 115,000 people have been displaced, including over 35,000 people that were displaced in October. Most of those displaced are Rohingya. According to the government, 89 people were killed and 5,351 houses burnt down, leaving 32,231 people homeless during the violence in October. However, there are fears that the death toll is much higher, with possibly hundreds killed. There were reports that security forces took part in systematic attacks against Rohingya.

Bangladesh has continued to keep its border with Burma closed and has been turning away boatloads of Rohingya fleeing Burma. On 7 November, at least 50 people went missing after a boat carrying 110 boat people, mainly Rohingya, sank in the Bay of Bengal.

While the international community has expressed concern about the situation in Arakan state, this has not been translated into practical action to pressure the government of Burma to take steps to stop the violence, allow full humanitarian access, and repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law, which denies citizenship to the Rohingya.

There have also been calls for an independent investigation into the violence. The government appointed commission set up to investigate the violence lacks independence and credibility. No Rohingya representatives were appointed to the commission and in November two Muslim members from the commission were dismissed, reportedly for their public criticism of the Arakanese government and alleged bias in favour of the Rohingyas. The commission's report has been delayed again and will now not report until March next year.

Facing increasing international pressure, President Thein Sein, who has previously called for all Rohingya to be put in camps and resettled to third countries, has started to moderate his language. In an open letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, he promised to “address contentious political dimensions, ranging from resettlement of displaced populations to granting of citizenship”, as well as to look at “issues of birth registration, work permits and permits for movement across the country”. However, no details of the proposals have been provided.

It was also reported that officials in Arakan (Rakhine) state have begun a registration process for residents. However, many Rohingya are refusing to cooperate with the process. Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, which works for Rohingya rights, told The Irrawaddy news magazine that local people have complained that the authorities erased the term ‘Rohingya’ from completed registration forms and replaced it with ‘Bengali’. Many Rohingya fear that if they are registered as ‘Bengali’ they will be declared illegal immigrants and face deportation.

Crackdown on copper mine protest

At 3am on 29 November, authorities launched a violent crackdown against protestors as they slept at protest camps at the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa, north west Burma. Over the last three months, local farmers, human rights activists and Buddhist monks have been protesting against the copper mine and its damaging impacts.

Riot police attacked the protest camps near the Letpadaung mine, firing water and an unidentified substance, possibly tear gas, which ignited on camp fires. Fires then tore through the protest camps. Many of the protestors, including Buddhist monks, suffered severe burns.

The Letpadaung project is a joint-venture between China's Wan Bao Company and the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. It has resulted in land confiscations and environmental damage, and peaceful protestors have been harassed and arrested. Protestors are calling for the project to be suspended and a thorough assessment of its impacts on local communities and the environment to be carried out, measures put in place to mitigate future negative impacts and compensation paid for damages already done.

Protests against the mine project have also been held in other cities in Burma. Six leaders of copper mine protests in Rangoon were arrested on 26 November. They were originally arrested under Article 18(b) of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law for protesting without permission. However, they have since been charged under section 505(b) of the penal code for committing or inducing others "to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquility."

Aung San Suu Kyi, who was scheduled to visit the protestors in Monywa just hours after the crackdown, went ahead with her visit. She visited the mine site, spoke to local villagers and visited victims at the hospital, where more than 50 monks and other injured activists are being treated for severe burns. Aung San Suu Kyi condemned the violent raid against the protestors.

The government has appointed a commission, to be led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which will investigate the protests, the crackdown and whether the mine should continue to operate. It is due to report by the end of December.

Obama visits Burma

On 19 November, President Obama visited Burma, the first time that a sitting US President has visited the country. President Obama met President Thein

Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi, and gave a speech at Rangoon University.

During his speech he acknowledged the reforms made so far but stressed the many challenges ahead, including the importance of a democratic constitution. He highlighted the conflict in Kachin State and the crisis in Arakan (Rakhine) State.

Some observers expressed concern that Obama's visit was too soon, given the limited reforms so far and the ongoing human rights abuses. As well as dropping most sanctions, the United States is also starting to restore military ties with Burma, backing Burma's participation as an observer at the US-Thai Cobra Gold joint military exercises in 2013.

More political prisoners released but credible review mechanism needed for remaining political prisoners

On 19 November, to coincide with President Obama's visit, the military-backed government in Burma released around 50 political prisoners.

Two of the released activists, Myint Aye and Zaw Zaw Aung, had been highlighted as part of Burma Campaign UK's campaign, No Political Prisoner Left Behind, which highlights a political prisoner case every month.

While the release of the political prisoners is very welcome, the release process for political prisoners has been extremely slow and hundreds of political activists still remain in jail. These latest releases are also conditional and not full pardons. President Thein Sein has been accused of using political prisoners as bargaining chips, only releasing prisoners at key political moments.

On 18th November President Thein Sein issued a statement which referred to the building of a mechanism to review the remaining prisoners' cases. Burma Campaign UK has been campaigning for a similar mechanism. However 4 key factors are needed to make this review mechanism credible:

1. To be credible the review board should be formed with the involvement of independent experts from the UN.
2. Thein Sein proposed the review process would be devised by the end of the year. Given the numbers of political prisoners, there should be a permanent mechanism to review cases. In addition, arrests continue and all the repressive laws under which political prisoners were jailed still remain in place.
3. The mechanism should be able to proactively investigate cases as well as be able to receive independent submissions from people or on behalf

of people who believe they are in jail for political reasons.

4. There should also be a full pardon with compensation for released political prisoners.

Fighting in Kachin State continues

Despite talks between the government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), fighting between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) continued throughout November.

In November, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee passed a resolution on Burma, expressing "deep concern about the continuing armed conflict in Kachin State and the associated human rights and international humanitarian law violations."

Since the Burmese army broke the 17-year ceasefire in June 2011, an estimated 100,000 people have been forced from their homes across Kachin state. There have been many reports of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Burmese army, including cases of rape and killings of ethnic women in Kachin State. Sumlut Roi Ja, an ethnic Kachin woman, was abducted by the Burmese Army on 28 October 2011. One year since her abduction, Sumlut Roi Ja is still missing and there are grave concerns that she has been raped and killed. Sumlut Roi Ja's husband, Dau Lum, took the case to the Supreme Court in Naypyidaw but the case was dismissed.

Conflict in ethnic areas continues despite ceasefire agreements

The ceasefire agreements signed between several of the armed ethnic groups and the Burmese government remain fragile. There have been reports that the Burmese Army has continued military operations and increased troop numbers in ceasefire areas.

The Karenni Civil Society Network (KCSN), a civilian based organisation observing the ceasefire agreement in Karenni state, says the government has failed to keep its promises.

According to KCSN, the Burmese Army has continued military operations against the KNPP. They are also concerned that despite the government's agreement that civil society groups could monitor large development projects in Karenni state, when the Ywa Thit Dam project started, KCSN weren't even allowed on the project site.

In Shan State, Lt-Gen Yawdserk, leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State / Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA), has warned that violations by the Burmese Army threaten the ceasefire agreement, saying that they had been attacked 32 times in the past year. He expressed disappointment that there had not been much progress since he first met the government's peace negotiator Aung Min on 19 November 2011 and called for political dialogue as soon as possible.

World Bank and IMF confirm their support to Burma

On 1 November, the World Bank announced that it had earmarked \$245 million in credit and grants to Burma.

It has pledged a US\$165 million loan for Burma under an 18-month work plan to "focus on budget, regulatory and private sector reforms". The loan will be made available once Burma has cleared its overdue debt to Bank. In October, Japan's Finance Minister Koriki Jojima said the state-owned Japan Bank for International Cooperation would provide a US\$900 million bridge loan to clear Burma's debt arrears with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The World Bank also approved a US\$80 million grant for rural development projects.

From 5-22 November, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) conducted a mission to Burma to hold discussions on macroeconomic policies with regime officials, parliamentarians, private sector representatives and donors. At the end of the visit, the IMF said that it may run a Staff-Monitored Program during January-December 2013.

**Published by Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT
www.burmacampaign.org.uk tel: 020 7324 4710 fax: +44 20 7324 4717**



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