



SITUATION UPDATE

Arakan Army Attacks SAC in Northern Rakhine and Paletwa

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| August 2022 |

Current Situation

On 13 August, the Arakan Army (AA) launched a series of attacks against State Administration Council (SAC) military positions in northern Rakhine State and southern Chin State, at times surrounding positions and cutting off food and supply routes before launching assaults with light weapons.¹ The attacks, staged in three separate locations, prompted a retaliation from SAC forces, which returned fire with heavy weapons, including at an additional AA position along the Myanmar–Bangladesh border. The AA claimed to have killed 37 SAC soldiers, including a battalion commander and two officers.² The AA also posted photos online of substantial military equipment seized from the SAC, including light and heavy weapons, drones, and a ‘jammer’—a device used by the SAC to block mobile telecommunications. The SAC continued to fire shells into AA positions up to 17 August, and deployed helicopters to the scene of fighting in Maungdaw Township, but did not appear to use these in battle.³ The attacks on 13 August followed exchange of heavy weapons the previous week in southern Chin State, and armed encounters have become an almost daily occurrence in western Myanmar.

The sustained, intense nature of the attacks this week mark a shift in the tense Rakhine context, and may indicate the resumption of full scale armed conflict in western Myanmar.⁴ While recent hostilities have remained lower in intensity and more geographically isolated than the violence that characterised the Rakhine armed conflict in its most active period from 2018–2020, events this week do suggest the onset of a new phase in the conflict. From November 2020 until the 13 August offensives, the AA seemed to prioritise the avoidance of armed confrontations with the SAC, except where SAC forces entered areas the AA considered under its control.

The AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), has already publicly warned that renewed armed conflict could easily spread, and reach greater intensity. On the ground, they have instructed community members to stockpile food and medicine in anticipation of more fighting and blockades.⁵ For its part, the Myanmar military has now reinforced its troops in northern Rakhine State, especially along Myanmar’s border with Bangladesh in Maungdaw Township, and on the western bank of the Mayu river in Rathedaung Township, suggesting an expectation of further escalation.⁶

Many residents of western Myanmar now expect a further escalation. A well-informed former parliamentarian from Myebon Township told media that intense fighting between the SAC forces and the AA would resume, and that it would trigger large-scale displacement and economic crisis as a result of SAC transportation restrictions.⁷

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¹ <https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/%E1%80%9B%E1%80%80-%E1%80%81-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%8A-%E1%80%94-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%95%E1%80%9C%E1%80%80-%E1%80%9D%E1%80%92-%E1%80%9E-%E1%80%90-%E1%80%80-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84>

² <https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/pfbid02s3FrNbn8SP83iSKb21SLG4hJRZoMF3qJKvUKM88kuzSbziTbe4P66qhFuM56vUzWI>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/pfbid02s3FrNbn8SP83iSKb21SLG4hJRZoMF3qJKvUKM88kuzSbziTbe4P66qhFuM56vUzWI>

⁴ The precise categorisation of violence and conflict in western Myanmar lies outside the scope of this Situation Update. For in-depth discussion of the definition of ‘armed conflict’, please see: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *How is the term “Armed Conflict” defined in international humanitarian law?* 3 March 2008. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/armed-conflict-article-170308.htm>.

⁵ <https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/%E1%80%9B%E1%80%80-%E1%80%81-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%8A-%E1%80%94-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%95%E1%80%9C%E1%80%80-%E1%80%9D%E1%80%92-%E1%80%9E-%E1%80%90-%E1%80%80-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/narinjara.info/posts/pfbid02zAwj155K63suct7nYHFMFXXPquv2oqz7eBi3j2X3oN3XfgX96x9nZsxtmNMoiy8I>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/akmedia2/videos/1512910935809122>

Background

In November 2020, the ULA/AA and Myanmar military struck an informal truce, which underpinned a fragile negative peace for approximately one year. While armed engagements were absent, conflict drivers were left unresolved and tensions remained high. In this time, the ULA/AA took advantage of the relative calm to substantially expand its administration and influence. For its part, the SAC appeared more concerned with tackling anti-coup resistance elsewhere in the county, rather than engaging in hostilities with the AA—however, it maintained a significant presence of armed forces in Rakhine State and consistently pushed back against ULA/AA expansion to the degree possible while avoiding armed conflict. However, on 11 November 2021, the AA attacked SAC forces who had entered its zones of ‘control’, and this was then followed by numerous intermittent engagements. Over recent months, these incidents have begun to increase in frequency and intensity.

In early 2022 the Myanmar military began to exert further pressure on the already tense situation, when it began arresting civilians on allegations of ties to the ULA/AA, including individuals associated with the ULA/AA’s governance structures. While such arrests had been a staple of conflict dynamics before the 2020 truce, these were the first such arrests since that truce. The ULA/AA reciprocated in kind, and has now detained dozens of Myanmar military and police personnel in tit-for-tat arrests across western Myanmar. The SAC has reportedly viewed the ULA/AA’s bold governance roll-out with deep concern, and attempts in recent months by the ULA/AA to expand its presence in the state capital, Sittwe, and along the commercially important Myanmar-Bangladesh border region, are another factor pushing the two sides closer to a resumption of sustained, active fighting. Essentially, both the SAC and the AA now face a dilemma. While both are reluctant to engage in higher-intensity armed violence, neither is happy with the status quo: the ULA/AA seeks more influence, while the SAC’s continues to dissipate.

Impact

The recent hostilities have thus far already caused civilian casualties: one civilian was killed and another two were injured during fighting in Rathedaung Township, where more than 700 residents of nearby villages fled and remain unable to return, likely expecting further armed violence.⁸ Two children, fifth grade students, were also killed when the boat in which they were commuting was shot during an exchange of small arms fire between the SAC and AA in Paletwa Township as tensions escalated earlier this month.⁹

Economic impacts have also compounded difficulties for communities still suffering the devastation wrought by COVID-19 and the coup. The Myanmar military has now blocked the main transportation and trade route between Sittwe and northern Rakhine State, and halted cross-border trade with Bangladesh.¹⁰ Business people have stopped their trade to Bangladesh and those from rural areas have been unable to access the healthcare facilities in towns. Commodity prices have already risen in Maungdaw Township as a result, as northern Rakhine State is heavily dependent on markets from Sittwe and central Rakhine State, and is already prone to food shortages and malnutrition.¹¹ Sources in rural areas of Rathedaung Township reported to this analytical unit that residents were stockpiling food and medicine after ULA/AA commanders warned them that fighting would almost certainly escalate. Residents of the state capital, Sittwe, also report increasing insecurity and rising violent crime, and attribute these at least in part to economic suffering and a lack of law enforcement amid a system of dual governance.¹²

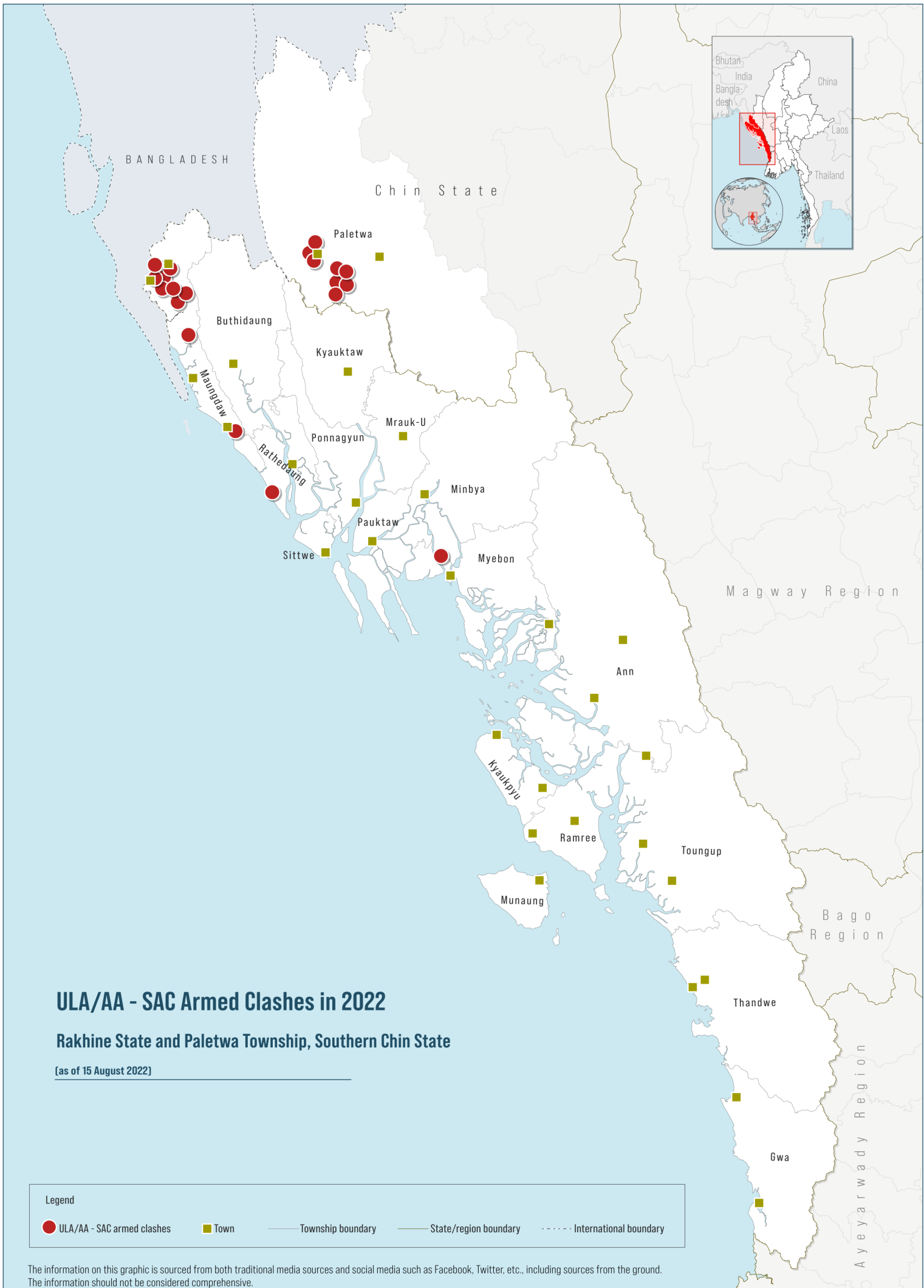
⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/pfbid02MCGzvkEHnHXzdydsvgeouqb5XX2qjVjyVwZEjRv81iwWoU5Fwn7TmMskrkNyM8Sbhl>

⁹ <https://www.narinjara.com/news/detail/62ea22e521f2d423422dc7e6>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/narinjara.info/posts/pfbid02zAwj155K63suct7nYHFMFxxPquv2oqzh7eBi3j2X3oN3XfgX96x9nZsxtmNMoiy8l>

¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02YvSHbJ52pw9JelUG9dJFyKrpUGFfwLH37svUsKUYqwZC1XR62yht9EaJQfPqGwl6id=107469705028678

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/narinjara.info>



ULA/AA - SAC Armed Clashes in 2022

Rakhine State and Paletwa Township, Southern Chin State

[as of 15 August 2022]

The information on this graphic is sourced from both traditional media sources and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., including sources from the ground. The information should not be considered comprehensive.

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Forecast

Looking forward, the most likely scenario is an increase in armed violence between the AA and SAC; however, considering that both the SAC and the AA still appear reluctant to resume hostilities at the levels seen prior to November 2020, this increase in armed violence is likely, for now, to remain limited in geographic scope. Specifically, it is likely that the growing conflict will be centred in rural hill areas of Rakhine state, as opposed to more central locations. The AA, acting on the offensive, holds an advantage in these areas where the military struggles to deploy air and sea power, at least during the rainy season. Despite this, the SAC has deployed greater naval resources to the region's inland waterways, suggesting they wish to mitigate the demands on ground troops.

In this most likely scenario, areas such as Paletwa Township, southern Chin State, from which armed actors can launch attacks into northern and central areas of Rakhine State, and the commercially important Myanmar-Bangladesh border area will be especially contested. Indeed, Paletwa Township and the Bangladesh border have already been the site of multiple military engagements ranging from ambushes to artillery exchange in 2022. Anti-coup armed groups who have some ties to the ULA/AA, including those in neighbouring Magway Region and Chin State, may also increase the intensity of their attacks against the SAC alongside the AA.

Another, less likely, scenario involves a rapid return to high-intensity conflict, in which armed conflict encompasses numerous townships and threatens urban areas, with dire impacts for communities. In this scenario, urban areas are heavily affected by armed violence, and it is worth noting that the AA has deployed troops around towns in Rathedaung, Buthidaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Myebon, and Minbya townships. While both the AA and SAC both have the resources to sustain armed violence at a higher intensity, their key objectives currently lie elsewhere. However, low-intensity armed violence also carries a risk of escalation, as the intentions of the opposing side are second-guessed and tensions can spiral into extreme responses.

In the current context, any resurgence of armed violence in western Myanmar presents a high likelihood that the military's behaviour will be characterised by willful disregard for international humanitarian law and the perpetration of severe human rights violations against civilians, especially given the high level of brutality it has levelled against communities it perceives to be supporting opposition forces across Myanmar since the coup—and the apparent widespread support for the AA in Rakhine State. Furthermore, while patterns suggest that the AA will concentrate largely on military targets, its forces have also at times committed abuses against civilians, particularly against members of certain ethnic minority populations, including the Rohingya and the Khumi Chin. While these dynamics have been shifting as the ULA/AA puts a greater emphasis on intercommunal harmony and builds alliances with ethnic Chin anti-coup resistance groups, AA abuses against civilians are likely to continue to some extent. However, there is no indication that the AA would direct any deliberate attack against a civilian population, as the Myanmar military stands accused of doing across numerous states and regions in a range of incidents alleged to constitute atrocity crimes.¹³ The Myanmar military will certainly remain the key perpetrator of human rights abuses throughout western Myanmar, and the resumption of armed conflict will likely see it expand the scope of its harmful conduct to encompass serious violations of international humanitarian law,¹⁴ in line with its activities elsewhere throughout Myanmar. As a result, the SAC will be the largest driver of displacement and humanitarian need amongst the civilian population.

It is likely that the growing conflict will be centred in rural hill areas of Rakhine state, as opposed to more central locations.

¹³ <https://cijaonline.org/news/cija-myanmar>
<https://iimm.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/A-HRC-51-4-E.pdf>
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/myanmar-soldier-atrocities/>
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/myanmar-military-onslaught-in-eastern-states-amounts-to-collective-punishment>
<https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-soldiers-massacre-and-burn-11-including-teenagers-during-raid-on-village-in-sagaing?page=10>

¹⁴ ICRC, What are "serious violations of international humanitarian law"? Explanatory Note, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/2012/att-what-are-serious-violations-of-ihl-icrc.pdf>

Response Implications

Shelling poses an immediate danger to residents of targeted villages, but also threatens those living or passing through affected areas. Meanwhile, the risk to civilians grows daily as the ground becomes littered with unstable UXO, including a likely proliferation of landmines in addition to unexploded artillery and other ordnance. All forms of movement are becoming increasingly dangerous, including for farmers travelling to and working in their fields and paddies or others foraging in hills and forests. Where humanitarian distributions or response activities are possible, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education should be included in planning and delivery to help farmers and other civilians mitigate the risks of navigating an increasingly explosive landscape. Increased awareness of international humanitarian law among armed actors may also mitigate abuses and risks for communities, and this may be conducted with civil society groups, who can hold armed actors to account, or directly with armed actors, although this will be most feasible for agencies without an operational presence in western Myanmar. Regardless, in any scenario of escalation response agencies on the ground can expect growing protection needs, and should ensure that resources are allocated to scale up monitoring and support.

Communities are also likely to suffer severe economic difficulties amid movement restrictions, SAC restriction on trade routes and humanitarian access, and limited access to livelihoods. Western Myanmar's economy relies heavily on commodities imported from central Myanmar, and the military has consistently blocked this supply during armed confrontations in an attempt to starve its foes of resources. Resiliencies are already under pressure as a result of COVID-19 and the nationwide economic crisis following the military's 2021 coup. These factors, combined with heightened security concerns, could trigger growing displacement. Sittwe and other urban areas are likely to be destinations for vulnerable people displaced by conflict and crises due to the greater access to commodities and assistance. Risky migration to third countries including Malaysia and Thailand by all communities will likely increase further, as youth in particular seek livelihood opportunities abroad. Rohingya youth and women in particular are at risk of trafficking given their severe vulnerability and the few formal migration paths available to them.

In the absence of armed conflict in Sittwe and Pauktaw townships, efforts by SAC authorities to 'close' camps in central Rakhine State hosting mostly-Rohingya communities interned since 2012 may continue along similar trajectories as that established with respect to Kyauk Ta Lone camp, Kyaukphyu Township, which featured little to no community consultation. However, in the event that intense armed violence should arise in Sittwe and Pauktaw townships, 'closure' may be delayed. In either case, international actors should coordinate an action plan to better understand communities' desires and identify space for advocacy. Returns for most of the 80,000 people displaced by armed conflict between 2018 and 2020 will continue to be challenging even in the absence of new fighting, given the ongoing contamination by landmines and other unexploded ordnance in their places of origin.

The ULA/AA's Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO) has sought to engage with national and international actors for the coordination of assistance throughout 2022. Should humanitarian needs rise, the HDCO is poised to attempt to expand its role, especially in the coordination of national response agencies' activities, and to continue to push for coordination with international responders. Engagement with the HDCO will continue to carry risks, especially vis-a-vis SAC retaliation. Agencies should continue to advocate to the HDCO, perhaps via a third party, to ensure that these arrangements and ongoing discussions do not impede the delivery of assistance to vulnerable communities.

Finally, any safe repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, under these circumstances, despite increased SAC attention to the issue in recent months. In a striking illustration of the unsuitable conditions they would return to, refugees in the camps this week filmed military reinforcements moving between battlefields on the Myanmar side of the border, adjacent to camps and just miles north of the Taungpyo Letwe repatriation centre.¹⁵ While deteriorating conditions in the Bangladesh camps has reportedly increased interest in returning to Myanmar, repatriation will be very difficult in light of the escalating conflict, and without cooperation from the ULA/AA who have warned that repatriation may spark 'unrest'.¹⁶

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/shafiur/status/1559595244471083015?s=21&t=90_c1PQw0_fdZn21bFhsnw

¹⁶ <https://asiatimes.com/2022/01/rebel-yell-arakan-army-leader-speaks-to-asia-times/>

Key Recommendations

- 1. Increase the allocation of resources to humanitarian in-kind and cash assistance and scale up distributions to vulnerable populations across western Myanmar.** Humanitarian needs are likely to increase, even in the absence of armed conflict, as the SAC tightens restrictions on movement and trade. Monitor rising commodity prices and ensure that cash assistance remains commensurate with this. Adjust vulnerability, and assistance eligibility criteria to ensure that support reaches a larger group of people, to ensure fewer individuals pursue negative coping strategies such as risky migration.
- 2. Allocate funds and increase activities to respond to growing protection needs among all communities,** including to mitigate risks of extortion and abuse related to greater assistance provision and anticipate a sharp rise in protection incidents as a result of any escalation in armed conflict. Coordination between protection, livelihood, and safe migration actors should emphasise awareness of risks and channels available for assistance.
- 3. Preposition aid in central locations, such as Sittwe, where communities affected by conflict and crises are likely to seek shelter.** This could also mitigate the impact of transportation restrictions on communities who rely on markets in Sittwe Township and may otherwise lose access to food items and other essential commodities, such as those in Maungdaw, Rathedaung, and Paletwa townships.
- 4. Partner with civil society actors to develop capacities for human rights reporting,** which can be used by local actors to hold armed actors to account. While these capacities are well developed elsewhere in Myanmar, the relative novelty of armed conflict in western Myanmar means these skills are less refined. Agencies with a protection mandate can explore opportunities for partnerships with organisations in Rakhine State and facilitate cooperation between Rakhine organisations and those from elsewhere in Myanmar. Agencies without an operational presence in western Myanmar are best placed to engage the ULA/AA directly on international humanitarian law issues, to mitigate risks for communities on the ground.
- 5. Prioritise landmine and unexploded ordnance risk awareness training,** as explosive contamination remains high and reported incidents of civilian casualties due to landmines or other UXO are increasing. Western Myanmar's civil society actors have developed strong capacities in this area in recent years. International agencies should partner with these organisations to ensure wider coverage in rural, hard-to-reach areas, which are most at risk.
- 6. Prepare for the likelihood that conflict escalation in western Myanmar will likely prevent refugee repatriation through at least in the medium term.** In addition to continued efforts to develop short and long-term solutions to ensure dignified lives for Rohingya people, not dependent on repatriation to Myanmar, donors should invest in further research and analysis on cross-border economic, social and political dynamics, to strengthen advocacy and long-term planning.
- 7. Recognise that the ULA/AA's HDCO will likely remain a feature of the response landscape in western Myanmar.** While risks must be mitigated, and coordination with the centre may best be conducted by actors based outside of western Myanmar, there are also opportunities for engagement, including joint action on shared issues of concern such as camp closures.

