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During 2012, Burma continued to re-engage with the international community following years of isolation. The government continued its gradual release of political prisoners, touted tenuous ceasefire agreements with armed ethnic militias and lifted aspects of its once crippling media censorship.

In April, the country held by-elections to fill vacant parliamentary seats. Opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi ran and won her seat, less than 18 months removed from long-term house arrest. Critics charged that the government was using a by-election – in which its control of power was never in doubt – as a modest show to encourage the lifting of international sanctions. Indeed, the United States and European Union began to ease sanctions following the vote. Observers such as the Alternative Asean Network on Burma noted 'widespread irregularities, threats, harassment, vote-buying and censorship'.

In three constituencies of conflict-ravaged Kachin state, authorities postponed the vote altogether. Nevertheless, the international community responded positively to the by-election. Still, the well-being of Burma's diverse and numerous ethnic minority groups is necessarily a measure of the extent of the country's reforms.

Throughout the year there were worrying developments, including anti-Muslim demonstrations and violence, the continued persecution of ethnic minorities in conflict zones, and the marginalization of minority communities in tenuous ceasefire areas. In each case, the instability had detrimental effects on the health of already marginalized populations. In eastern Burma, for example, the maternal mortality rate is triple that of the country as a whole, making this statistically among the most dangerous places in the world to be a pregnant woman. At the same time, drug-resistant malaria is spreading along this eastern border heavily populated by minority groups. It now means that Burma accounts for more than half of all malaria-related deaths in South East Asia, according to *The Lancet* medical journal.[6]

The dire health situation in such areas is exacerbated by long-standing conflicts, which displace and destabilize civilian populations. Fighting continued between the Burma Army and the Kachin Independence Army through the year, following the crumbling of a 17-year ceasefire in 2011. Numerous attempts at peace talks failed to produce an end to the violence. In the meantime, civilians caught in the crossfire continued to suffer. A March report from HRW accused

government soldiers of blocking needed humanitarian aid, torching villages and firing on innocent civilians. Rights groups say the conflict has displaced as many as 75,000 civilians. A further 10,000 who attempted to flee to China were denied basic care, including safe water supplies, food, sanitation and health care, HRW reported in June.

Also in June, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) said it had documented cases in which 43 women or girls were raped or sexually assaulted in the 12 months leading up to June 2012. Burmese soldiers, the report stated, 'have used rape systematically as a weapon of war'. A later report documented the killings or injuries of 26 civilians between September 2012 and February 2013.

In Karen state in eastern Burma, the government touted its ceasefire with the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). But a May report by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) detailed abuses post-ceasefire, either at the hands of the Burma Army or the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a splinter faction of former KNLA fighters. These included allegations of arbitrary arrest, physical violence and forced labour.

In Shan state, a short-lived ceasefire with the Shan State Army North (SSA-N) broke down in June as the rebel group clashed with the Burma Army. In December, the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) said civilians were frustrated by the continuing violence despite a more than year-long peace process.

One of 2012's most worrying developments was the surge in violence between Buddhists and minority Muslims. This was centred in troubled Rakhine state, where tensions between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims spilled over into bloodshed. Though violence often grew from back-and-forth retaliations, it quickly developed into a humanitarian crisis with tens of thousands of mostly Rohingya Muslims driven from their homes. In May, a Rakhine woman was raped and murdered; the assailants were reported to have been three Muslim men. A week later, an incensed Rakhine mob attacked a bus and beat to death 10 men perceived to be Muslim. The violence sparked a series of retaliatory attacks. According to official estimates, the attacks left 80 people dead and displaced a further 90,000, mostly Rohingya, by the end of the month.

Aid workers warned of a burgeoning 'humanitarian crisis' for Rohingya Muslims fleeing the violence. Conditions in temporary camps were described as 'alarming', with health experts expressing particular concern over malnutrition rates among displaced Rohingya. The violence saw many Rohingya attempt to flee Burma in boats, only to be turned back by neighbouring Bangladesh, where tens of thousands of displaced Rohingya already live in official and unofficial refugee camps. In a June report based on interviews with fleeing Rohingya, the UK-based Equal Rights Trust charged that the military had not only turned a blind eye to the violence against Rohingya, but that it had actively participated in 'state-sponsored violence' against them:

'The military became more actively involved in committing acts of violence and other human rights abuses against the Rohingya including killings and mass-scale arrests of Rohingya men and boys in North Rakhine State. This has caused an increased proportion of men and boys to flee the country, resulting in increased incidences of rape of the women left behind, committed by Myanmar security personnel.'

Violence again erupted in October, leaving more than 100 people dead, according to official estimates. HRW suggested that the death toll could be far higher. While there has been violence on both sides, human rights groups warn that many of the consequent attacks have been focused on Rohingya communities, often with the complicity of a government unwilling or unable to protect them. For example, HRW released satellite images following the October attacks showing whole villages belonging to Muslim families burned to the ground.

The stateless Rohingya are often called 'the most persecuted people on earth' – refused citizenship by Burma, and unwanted by neighbouring Bangladesh. While the antipathy in Burma has been cultivated by outspoken extremist Buddhist monks, ordinary citizens have also participated in large anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim gatherings. This was highlighted by an October demonstration in the capital, Yangon, when thousands of monks marched in the streets to protest the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's stated plans to help the Rohingya. Violence between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims flared elsewhere in Meikhtila in central Burma in March 2013. Media and rights groups reported on a massacre of at least 25 Muslims in late March.

The future prospects for long-term peace in Burma's disparate ethnic regions are inextricably tied to the government's renewed push for the development of the country's natural resources. But critics say the push for development in these still sensitive areas has brought with it increased militarization. A November report by the Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization (TSYO) highlighted problems associated with the controversial Shwe Gas Pipeline, which will allow the shipment of oil and gas between China and the Bay of Bengal. Burma has deployed additional military units to guard the pipeline route, amid pressure from armed ethnic militias. The pipeline's construction has led to land confiscation, forced labour and other rights abuses, the report states.

A February 2013 report by the Transnational Institute warns that the sudden development rush sparked by Burma's political changes has actually fuelled ethnic conflict. The authors estimated that 65 per cent of approved foreign direct investment had been injected into three conflict-ridden states alone: Rakhine, Shan and Kachin.

The report states:

'Instability and the lack of effective regulatory mechanisms has provided opportunities for rapacious, large-scale resource extraction, such as mining, hydropower dams and logging, as well as illegal cross-border trading. The impact on local communities has been severe, and the benefits few and far between.'

Notes

6. 'Early appraisal of China's huge and complex health-care reforms', *The Lancet*, vol. 379, no. 9818, 3 March 2012, pp. 1880-1.

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