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Aid needs grow in Myanmar as resistance advances put more civilians at risk

‘We’re trying to empty a pool with a spoon and the water keeps coming.’



Over the past month, resistance groups battling the Myanmar military have made unprecedented gains, seizing back control of several towns. This has given way to hopes the junta could one day be ousted, but experts fear it will only exacerbate the war in the shorter term. This means greater casualties, more displacement, and increased needs in a country where the humanitarian aid response is already badly hampered.

Thomas Kean, senior consultant on Myanmar for the International Crisis Group, told The New Humanitarian that the effects of more conflict are already being felt across the country, and he fears this new phase will have “a devastating impact” for civilians caught in the crossfire.

• At a glance: What’s new in Myanmar’s conflict

- Resistance groups have made unprecedented gains in recent weeks.
- Observers warn that escalating conflict will mean more humanitarian needs.
- Conflict is moving closer to big cities, and some towns are under blockade.
- The junta has long restricted access for international aid groups.
- Calls are growing for local aid groups to be given more support.
- Myanmar has the least well-funded UN humanitarian response plan.

On 27 October, the Arakan Army, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – a collection of ethnic resistance organisations known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance – carried out a coordinated attack in northern Shan state.

Operation 1027, as it was known, quickly triggered other groups to take similar action. The Karenni Army, the Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (KNPLF), the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), and the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) – volunteers under the civilian National Unity Government (NUG) – also launched operations to wrest back control of areas in southern Shan and Kayah states. Other forces have stepped up attacks in the states of Chin, Kayah, and Rakhine.

Kean said the “cascading effect” of these simultaneous operations has hindered the military’s ability to respond, which flies in the face of the perceived wisdom about Myanmar’s conflict: that the anti-junta forces – composed of some [250 different groups](#) – are too disparate and, as individual pockets of resistance, likely to remain outnumbered and out-resourced.

The military is also weak on morale with many troops deserting, said Phil Thornton, author and founder of Karen News – a media outlet centred on reporting by Karen journalists on issues that shape Karen communities.



Reports earlier in the year estimated that the military government, known as the State Administration Council, had stable control over [17%](#) of the country's territory – a figure no doubt reduced by the recent fighting.

Recent resistance gains mark the first potential turning point in a conflict that began in February 2021 when the military usurped the sitting government, installing army general Min Aung Hlaing as leader.

The junta has been accused of the mass detention and killings of dissenters – responsible, according to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#), for 4,200 deaths and the arrests of nearly 25,500 people, including more than 700 children, since it took power.

Increased risk to civilians

Shortly after Operation 1027, Min Aung Hlaing [vowed](#) in a cabinet meeting to launch a counter-attack, and the junta has since engaged in intense fighting with several of the ethnic minority armed groups, including with the Arakan Army in western Myanmar.

Thornton said the junta won't "go quietly", as it acts more like a group of gangsters than an actual government. He warned that an escalation in fighting will no doubt mean more harm to civilians: "Desperate, despot regimes do desperate things. You might end up with lots of booby traps and sinister stuff like that happening, retaliation, hit squads etc."

But it's not just the junta's response that could lead to more civilian harm.

More fighting, in general, simply means more civilians caught in the crossfire, while others, in certain regions, will be trapped and cut off from essential goods, said a spokesperson for a local research organisation in Myanmar, who asked for anonymity for security reasons.

This is already the case for those in Laukkai, a town in Shan state where the alliance has blockaded areas off from the military, but in doing so has limited residents' access to basic supplies, the spokesperson explained.

"People are facing shortages of food," they said, adding that resistance forces have also destroyed bridges that connect major highways. "Crippled transportation sent commodity prices to the sky. The poor face more predicaments under the current circumstances."

Cutting the military off from key roads may also see the junta retaliate by ramping up its airstrikes, Laetitia van den Assum, a former member of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State – set up in 2016 to ensure the well-being of the Buddhist and Rohingya communities – told The New Humanitarian. These airstrikes kill indiscriminately, she said.

"You shouldn't be bombing somewhere that has schools, that has hospitals, that has any civilian infrastructure," said John Quinley, director of Fortify Rights, which probes civilian abuses in Myanmar. "You should always be trying to mitigate the destruction of civilians."

That's not a message the junta has been heeding, however. Over the past few years, even just in the last few months, there have been several reported strikes on [displacement camps](#), [schools](#), and other civilian targets by the military.

Recently, on 17 November, [11 civilians](#), including eight children, were killed in an airstrike on a village in Chin state. Two weeks before that, a cultural centre in Laiza, a remote mountainous town in Kachin state, was targeted, according to Quinley.

These same rules around protecting civilian life apply to the resistance too, "but what we've seen so far is they are helping those displaced and providing aid," he added.

As the many resistance groups move through the country, Aung Kyaw Moe, deputy minister for the ousted NUG's ministry of human rights, said the NUG is providing these different factions with training on international humanitarian law.

"Most of them are far better aware and abiding of the Geneva convention," Kyaw Moe said, adding that as members of ethnic rights organisations, for many their "default" is to respect and protect civilians rather than intentionally cause further harm. "PDFs are also well-instructed to facilitate humanitarian aid to save lives in line with international humanitarian principles," he added.

Yet more fighting, regardless of the intent, means more bullets and more rockets that could take the lives of more civilians. And as the fighting moves to more populated areas, this will automatically trigger a rise in displacement to "an unprecedented level", said the spokesperson for the research group.

Previously, the majority of the war has been waged in Myanmar's more rural areas. Bringing it to the cities will force larger numbers to relocate. This kind of encroachment is already happening around the city of [Mandalay](#), which is home to around [1.5 million](#) people.

According to the UN, [as of 1 December, more than 500,000 people](#) have been newly displaced since 27 October, driving the total number displaced since the start of the coup to 2.5 million. They too require food, water, and medicines. "We're trying to empty a pool with a spoon and the water keeps coming," said an international aid worker working in Myanmar, speaking on condition of anonymity.

What this means for aid access

While many local organisations have been able to continue operating, most international NGOs have been forced to watch the war from the sidelines, hands tied by [arbitrary legislation](#) imposed by the military that limits how and who they provide aid to.

"As Western NGOs especially, we've been pushed further out of the appeals and the population we serve... to a point where we were almost wondering what our added value was, and if we had a role," said the international aid worker.

While attempts have been made by some to negotiate with the military, these have so far proved fruitless and there has been no agreement to open up a humanitarian corridor, said Thornton.

"If you're dealing with an enemy prepared to break all the important international rules to maintain control, what hope do you have of even trying to think of starting negotiations?" said van den Assum. "There's no way of working with them."

To bolster this case, observers point to the fact that the military initially blocked aid from reaching those affected by a [cyclone](#) that killed close to [150 people](#) in Rakhine state in May.

As resistance forces take control of more of the Southeast Asian nation, there's a big question mark over whether that will improve international aid delivery.

"Localisation is the key in delivering aid, given the complexity of humanitarianism and access to the space. Those organisations need to be given resources."

Aung Kyaw Moe, deputy minister for the ousted NUG's ministry of human rights

Kean doesn't believe so, explaining that even if the military is driven out of a particular region, it will likely either blockade it or launch counterattacks, both of which will hinder aid operations. The military's standard operating procedure is to restrict access to conflict areas in order to deny resources to its opponents, he said, adding: "That will almost certainly continue to be the approach."

In Rakhine state, Quinley said Fortify Rights had received reports from displaced people that they're not now getting the assistance they had been "because the junta has really fortified their soldiers there and is trying to block major roads and access points".

On [X](#), [formerly known as Twitter](#), Meredith Bunn, founder of the Yangon-based non-profit Skills For Humanity, said it was "running drastically low on supplies" as it works to evacuate civilians and establish shelters for those trying to escape the violence.

Earlier this year, the NUG also [asked aid organisations](#) to seek prior permission before entering the areas they control, citing the need to ensure safety. This was met with the criticism that an additional layer of bureaucracy would only serve to hinder rather than help aid delivery.

Renewed push to support local aid

Given the changing war dynamics and the continued restrictions and difficulties facing the international response, [calls are growing](#) for more support to be given to local aid groups.

Already based within the affected communities, they are best placed to offer assistance, however they may not conform to the rigid partnership models that international donors and aid organisations require.

Now is the time for donors to provide more flexible funding that will allow international NGOs to work with local organisations in different ways, said Kyaw Moe.

Thornton said many international NGOs won't work with armed groups, even though some of them are arguably the best way of getting assistance into the hands of those who need it.

“Localisation is the key in delivering aid, given the complexity of humanitarianism and access to the space,” Kyaw Moe said. “Those organisations need to be given resources. They know the context dynamic and the conflict sensitivity, but when the benchmarks are so high to access resources being allocated by the international community, it is so difficult.”

Many donors are still putting up requirements that are very hard to meet, because of the perceived lack of transparency they have about the context, said van den Assum.

Yet the international aid worker insisted it is possible for international NGOs to operate in Myanmar. “We know we have an impact, and we have the systems to demonstrate that,” he said. But right now, he added, the impetus isn’t there to act, with Myanmar somewhere near the bottom of the world’s crisis list.

Myanmar’s current UN [humanitarian response plan for 2023](#) is less than 30% funded, and the most underfunded of any. Plans for [Ethiopia](#), [South Sudan](#), [Sudan](#), [Syria](#), and [Yemen](#), for example, all sit above 30%.

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Thornton suggested the UN, the United States, and other “big players” should try to bypass the junta to establish a humanitarian corridor. “They don’t have to negotiate with the Burmese government,” he said, adding that they should negotiate with neighbouring countries instead.

In October, prior to Operation 1027, Tom Andrews, the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, [called](#) for UN member states to take more coordinated action to weaken the junta, saying “the runaway fire of brutality and human rights violations... burning in Myanmar” was “threatening the lives of millions and eroding regional stability”.

In the meantime, Kyaw Moe said the progress being made by resistance groups was improving the NUG’s ability to deliver public services and that he remains positive. Van den Assum agreed. It’s hard to say what the situation will be weeks or months from now, she said, but “the prospects of change have never been better”.

Edited by Ali M. Latifi.