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Hospitals under fire amid widening Myanmar conflict

By RFA Burmese

At least three hospitals were damaged in clashes between Myanmar's military and armed resistance groups in the third week of November alone, according to rights groups and residents, further straining a healthcare system already reeling from dwindling resources and widespread conflict under junta rule.

The attacks took place on Nov. 17 in northern Shan and Rakhine states, and the following day in Sagaing region – three hotbeds of resistance since the military seized power in a Feb. 1, 2021, coup d'état and launched a scorched earth offensive targeting the armed opposition.

A resident of Rakhine's Minbya township who, like others interviewed for this report, spoke on condition of anonymity citing security concerns, said the military "intentionally attacked" the hospital with heavy shelling that destroyed the facility's laboratory.

"Military columns randomly fired as they entered the town, causing some fatalities and injuries, but the injured were not allowed to receive medical treatment at the hospital," the resident said.

An exchange of fire between the military junta and local resistance forces in Sagaing's Butalin township on Nov. 18 hit a hospital, damaging the site. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

A resident of Butalin told RFA that junta soldiers set up camp at the hospital complex in the aftermath of the fighting.

"The superintendent of the hospital surrendered [control of the hospital] in the morning, followed by two assistant practitioners and two nurses," the resident said. "All the healthcare staff left their jobs."

The hospitals in Shan state's Pangsang township and Rakhine state's Minbya township were targeted in part by military drone attacks, Paris-based Doctors Without Borders, or MSF, said in a statement.

MSF said the resumption of armed conflict in Rakhine state, where the ethnic insurgent Arakan Army broke a year-long humanitarian ceasefire with the junta on Nov. 13, interrupted healthcare services it provides to around 1,500 patients per week there via mobile clinics.

MSF runs projects in both Shan and Rakhine and said that while its staff members remain in the areas, they have no access to medicine due to junta travel restrictions. Fighting and access restrictions mean only a fraction of the number of people in need of assistance can be reached, it said.

Residents of Rakhine's nearby Pauktaw township told RFA that the local hospital ceased operations recently after its health workers fled fighting for safety.

Similarly, MSF said in its statement that the hospital that came under attack in Shan's Pangsang township had been shuttered at the end of October, when the "Three Brotherhood" Alliance of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army launched an offensive on Oct. 27 dubbed "[Operation 1027](#)."

The rebels have made notable gains against the military in several key cities in Shan state and claim to have captured more than 170 military outposts since the start of the campaign.

Allowing access to treatment

An official in charge of the document department of the Ta'ang Women's Organization, which provides aid to people displaced by conflict in northern Shan state, told RFA that people sheltering there lack access to crucial medical services.

"Some internally displaced person camps received healthcare services from the Red Cross Society and local NGOs, while others have no access to medical treatment, such as camps in remote areas," the official said. "The prices of medicines have skyrocketed due to the blockage and restriction of roads."

She urged all armed organizations to refrain from targeting medical facilities in conflict zones.

In its statement, the MSF also asked all parties to ensure the safety of patients and healthcare workers in conflict areas, and to allow safe and

unimpeded access to people who have been left without life-saving services while their communities are caught in the crossfire.

Sit Min Naing, an official with the Civil Disobedience Movement, or CDM, Medical Network, said both sides need to allow access to healthcare services during the conflict.

"I request and suggest to both sides that every human being has rights to healthcare services, which are not concerned with conflicts," he said. "They should be allowed to receive medical treatment."

Zaw Win, with the Southeast Asia-based NGO Fortify Rights, echoed Sit Min Naing's concerns over the junta's infringement on civilians' right to healthcare.

"From a human rights perspective, people have full rights to medical treatment, so it is unacceptable to target healthcare facilities," he said. "Neither the junta nor the [armed resistance] should be targeting hospitals or clinics."

Health workers at risk

Switzerland-based Insecurity Insight, a group researching human security, has documented nearly 1,100 attacks on health workers and facilities in Myanmar since February 2021.

It also reported that junta troops have damaged healthcare facilities more than 180 times, killed at least 97 health workers, and arrested at least 880 others.

Insecurity Insight has called on all conflict parties to uphold international humanitarian law and protect health workers, while working to hold perpetrators accountable.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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