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HRW – Human Rights Watch

Burma: Ensure Unfettered Aid in Kachin State

(Rangoon) – The Burmese military should ensure that humanitarian aid reaches all civilians in need in northern Burma's Kachin State, Human Rights Watch said today. On February 5, 2018, approximately 5,000 people demonstrated in Myitkyina, the state capital, against the Burmese military operations in the state.

In recent weeks there has been increased fighting between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin State, including the use of heavy weapons and airstrikes by the military. Thousands of ethnic Kachin have fled their homes, leaving unknown numbers of civilians trapped, displaced, and without adequate assistance, according to aid agencies and media reports. United Nations agencies have not been granted access to the two townships most affected by fighting.

"The embattled civilian population in Kachin State should not be forgotten amid the dire humanitarian situation facing the Rohingya," said Brad Adams, Asia director. "Both the Burmese army and the KIA should do everything possible to ensure that aid reaches civilians in need."

The fighting in Kachin State escalated significantly in mid-January. Fighting has been especially intense in Tanai and Sumprabum townships, while there has also been fighting in Mansi and Waingmaw townships.

The media reported that on January 26 the Burmese military carried out airstrikes in areas around the town of Tanai near several amber mines. Heavy fighting and shelling continued for multiple days. The escalation in fighting has trapped thousands of civilians. Additional fighting was reported in several areas surrounding the town.

Humanitarian aid groups told Human Rights Watch that hundreds of civilians remain trapped near the amber mines. Those fleeing the fighting face a walk of several kilometers and an hours-long boat ride on waterways controlled by the Burmese military with multiple checkpoints. The aid groups said that they do not have access to the areas where people are fleeing, and the UN has not been granted access to the township. Local humanitarian groups are able to provide limited aid in Tanai town, where hundreds remain displaced from previous rounds of displacement.

There has been repeated fighting in Tanai Township since June 2017, when the military distributed leaflets by air calling for all civilians to leave the area or be considered "terrorists." The fighting left civilians trapped in Tanai, with the military blocking aid and escape routes.

In Sumprabum Township, hundreds of civilians have been forced to flee from their homes due to heavy fighting and shelling. Aid groups estimate that more than 900 people have been displaced and have sought refuge in the forests. According to the UN, 500 fled from the Ndup Yang internally displaced people's camp after mortar shells landed near the camps. According to humanitarian aid groups, roads to Sumprabum are rarely reliable. Additionally, in the past several days, the KIA has reportedly destroyed several bridges on the route to the township from the capital of the state to the south in Myitkyina. Aid groups told Human Rights Watch that the only way reliable way to reach the displaced people was through military-controlled waterways.

Since early February the KIA has attacked military posts and patrols in Mogaung and Myitkyina townships near Myitkyina.

Under international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, all parties to an armed conflict are obligated to facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need and allow civilians to freely leave conflict areas. It is unlawful to

attack civilians on the basis that they did not leave a conflict area.

“The blocking of humanitarian aid in Kachin State has put thousands of civilians at greater risk, especially those forced from their homes or trapped in combat areas,” Adams said. “Donor governments need to press the Burmese authorities to protect and assist civilians caught up in the fighting.”