

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	305
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Myanmar: Villages burned, civilians injured and killed as Rakhine State conflict escalates
Udgivet:	12. oktober 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. januar 2021

Document #2038869

AI – Amnesty International

Myanmar: Villages burned, civilians injured and killed as Rakhine State conflict escalates

- *Civilians, including children, killed or injured*
- *Remote sensing analysis confirms ethnic Rakhine villages ablaze on 3 September*

Amnesty International has gathered new evidence of indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Rakhine State, amid serious escalations in the ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army (AA).

This evidence is based on firsthand testimony, photographs and video obtained from inside Rakhine State, and analysis of satellite imagery as well as media reports and civil society sources. Witnesses' names have been changed.

“There are no signs of the conflict between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military abating – and civilians continue to bear the brunt,” said Ming Yu Hah, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for Campaigns.

“The Myanmar military’s utter disregard for civilian suffering grows more shocking and brazen by the day. The UN Security Council must urgently refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.”

Amnesty International is also concerned at [recent reports](#) of an increased presence of Myanmar military troops along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Images of antipersonnel landmines recently found in a civilian area were analysed by Amnesty’s weapons expert and identified as the MM2 type landmine often used by the Myanmar military. This device is larger than most anti-personnel landmines, and typically inflicts severe damage.

Both the Arakan Army and Myanmar military use antipersonnel devices, and as such definitively establishing provenance is not always possible. Current restrictions on access preclude on-the-ground documentation efforts by Amnesty International.

Several incidents involving civilians injured or killed by landmines have been credibly reported in Rakhine and Chin States in recent months by local civil society and media outlets.

One of the most recent instances was on September 18, when a 44-year-old Chin woman stood on a landmine while collecting bamboo shoots near the Myanmar military’s Light Infantry Battalion 289 base in Paletwa. She died of her injuries a short time after.

Amnesty International also notes with alarm recent local media reports of the Myanmar military using Rohingya children for forced portering in Buthidaung Township, in an area where clashes with the Arakan Army are ongoing.

‘I didn’t think it could be our village’

On the morning of 8 September 2020, Maung Soe* was at work near his village of Nyaung Kan in Myebon Township when he heard heavy weaponry, which he describes as sounding like thunder.

“I didn’t think it could be our village. I thought it was somewhere else. I tried to call my wife and she wasn’t answering. I heard it two times — *jain, jain* — within one minute.

“I went to the village and I heard some people got injured. When I got home, my wife and my daughter were laid down on the floor. [My wife] was not saying anything. I tried to check my [seven-year-old] daughter and she was still alive. I picked up my daughter and tried to get out.

“I didn’t see [any soldiers]. The weapon came from very far. And when I tried to run by hugging my daughter’s body, there was more shooting. I tried to lay over my daughter’s body, near the stream. Within two minutes, my daughter passed away.

“Even after my daughter passed away, I could still hear the weapons coming... I had to run away, leaving my daughter’s body. I came back later when they stopped shooting.”

Maung Soe says there were no Arakan Army fighters in Nyaung Kan. Villagers believe the heavy weaponry was fired from a Myanmar military base near the border with Ann Township.

The shelling at Nyaung Kan village in Myebon Township claimed the lives of five people, including Maung Soe's wife and daughter. All were from the Rakhine ethnic group, and two were seven-year-old children. Ten others were wounded in the attack.

By one local civil society group's estimate, the number of civilians killed in this conflict since December 2018 in Rakhine and Chin States stands at 289, with 641 injured.

The true figure cannot be independently verified, as a mobile internet shutdown and broader government crackdowns on media reporting have impeded documentation efforts in conflict-affected areas. However, in July 2020, Amnesty International was [able to document](#) indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling by the Myanmar military, killing or injuring civilians, including children.

On 14 September, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet told the Human Rights Council that in some recent cases in Rakhine State, civilians “appear to have been targeted or attacked indiscriminately, which may constitute further war crimes or even crimes against humanity.”

Maung Soe is now displaced, and says he wants to see the Myanmar military withdraw from Rakhine State to prevent further harm: “As I suffer, and as I have lost my family, I don't want any other Rakhine people to have a similar experience in the future.”

‘One from the road and one from the mountain’: Burned village attacked from two directions

Remote sensing analysis and new witness testimony gathered by Amnesty International suggest that Myanmar soldiers burned a village in central Rakhine State's Kyauktaw Township in early September.

One witness, villager U Kyaw Tin*, who lives in the area, told Amnesty International that he was walking with his cow when the Myanmar military launched an assault on Hpa Yar Paung began on 3 September.

“[They] started shooting, they entered the village. I didn't know exactly where the shooting came from ... We were trying to run to the other side. We didn't really see what exactly was going on, because we all were running.”

He said that it appeared the village was closed in on by the Myanmar military from two directions: “Two [sets of] troops, one from each side – one from the road and one from the mountain. There was also shooting from [a remote location], but there was also something from the roadside, coming in by car.”

A spokesperson for the Myanmar military, Major General Zaw Min Tun, told journalists a police vehicle was attacked by the Arakan Army with a remotely detonated improvised explosive device (IED) near the village.

According to information supplied to Amnesty International, the Myanmar military were seen arresting two Rakhine men from the village that evening. Their bodies were reportedly found near the river with gunshot wounds the next morning.

Their bodies have since been transported by the military for postmortem in Kyauktaw. The Myanmar military told the media “two enemy bodies and a gun” were seized from the site.

“[The Myanmar military] started the arson attack around 9pm,” U Kyaw Tin told Amnesty International. “After they finished the arson attack they went to another site near the hill and they started to also attack there.”

Satellite image analysis conducted by Amnesty International has found that over 120 structures in the ethnic Rakhine-populated villages of Taung Pauk and Hpa Yar Paung villages in Kyauktaw Township appeared burned to the ground, in imagery captured on 10 September 2020.

Amnesty International also examined satellite sensor data from 3 September which showed thermal anomalies. Additionally, Amnesty International analysed a video of the charred village of Hpa Yar Paung, recorded on 4 September from a passing vehicle, which revealed a ground-level snapshot of the extensive destruction. All three information sources appear consistent with reports of the blaze on the night of 3 September 2020.

U Kyaw Tin said around 80 houses were completely destroyed, and over 90 damaged. Hpa Yar Paung's 500 residents are now displaced inside Kyauktaw Township, dependent on aid from Rakhine civil society groups in Kyauktaw town.

New figures from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) indicate that 89,564 people were displaced to 180 sites in Rakhine State between January 2019 and 7 September 2020.

These figures are based on numbers provided by the Rakhine State government and UNOCHA's humanitarian partners. Local civil society groups indicate the true displacement figure is likely higher, as villagers have fled to areas now only nominally under government control.

This adds to the existing mass displacement crisis in Rakhine, where over 130,000 Rohingya have been [interned in camps since 2012](#).

‘We didn’t know anything’: Internet shutdown amid the pandemic

The mobile internet shutdown that had been in place across parts of Rakhine State and neighboring Chin State for the last year was partially lifted in August; however, the authorities have throttled network speeds to 2G in some of the areas most affected by armed conflict.

The Myanmar government had stated the mobile internet blackout was necessary to prevent “incitement” and remote detonations of anti-personnel explosive devices by the Arakan Army.

However, the blackout has impeded the delivery of critical humanitarian aid and access to crucial information about the conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, with the virus increasingly spreading across Myanmar since mid-August, including and particularly in Rakhine State.

In Maung Soe’s case, the lack of connectivity meant his village has been kept in the dark about the scale and location of fighting.

“We don’t have any connection and we don’t know anything about what’s going on, about the conflict and the attacks in other places,” said Maung Soe.

In addition to the internet blackout, humanitarian access remains severely curtailed by government edict across much of Rakhine State and a township in Chin State.

Healthcare access in Rakhine State remains abysmal, and particularly so for the Rohingya population, who have long been subject to severe movement restrictions and, often, extortion by police and military.

The Myanmar government should ensure full, unfettered access to humanitarian actors and allow all people in the state to access healthcare.

Amnesty International is concerned that the sweeping powers granted under COVID-19 orders are ripe for abuse – particularly in conflict-affected areas.

Impunity and secrecy mar military sexual violence scandal

On 11 September 2020, the Myanmar military [admitted](#) that three of its soldiers had raped an ethnic Rakhine woman during operations in Rathedaung Township on 30 June despite their [outright denials](#) when the allegations were first raised in July.

Last week, in a statement on the incident, the military publicly [named the survivor](#) but not the perpetrators.

“Even when the Myanmar military are compelled to admit wrongdoing, their handling of this appalling sexual violence case shows a complete neglect for accountability,” said Ming Yu Hah.

“These shocking events speak volumes about the Tatmadaw, and how deep the assumption of impunity runs within its ranks.”

“The international community must raise the alarm about the situation in Rakhine State now, or face questions later about why they failed to act – again.”

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ecoi.net summary:

Rakhines State: According to photos, videos and testimonies, civilians continue to be targeted in armed conflict between Aarakan Army and armed forces of Myanmar

Country:

Myanmar

Source:

[AI – Amnesty International](#)

Original link:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/myanmar-villages-burned-civilians-injured-rakhine-state-conflict/>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Published:

12 October 2020

Document ID:

2038869

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

