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Myanmar: Indiscriminate airstrikes kill civilians as Rakhine conflict worsens

- *Airstrikes kill civilians, including children*
- *Arbitrary detention and torture in crackdown on insurgents*
- *Residents unprotected against COVID-19 amid internet blackout*

Amnesty International has collected new evidence showing that indiscriminate airstrikes by the Myanmar military have killed civilians, including children, amid worsening armed conflict in the country's Rakhine and Chin States.

These attacks and other serious human rights violations by the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw, are taking place in townships where internet has been cut off for more than a year. Residents have been in the dark over the threat from COVID-19 and deprived of information about humanitarian assistance. Rakhine State has been largely spared a major COVID-19 outbreak, although cases [were on the rise](#) in June.

“While Myanmar authorities were urging people to stay at home to help stop COVID-19, in Rakhine and Chin states its military was burning down homes and killing civilians in indiscriminate attacks that amount to war crimes,” said Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Regional Director.

“Despite mounting international pressure on the military's operations in the area, including at the [International Court of Justice](#), the shocking testimonies we have collected show just how deep impunity continues to run within Myanmar military ranks.”

In May and June 2020, Amnesty International remotely interviewed more than two dozen ethnic Rakhine and Chin people affected by military operations, including airstrikes and shelling; analyzed fresh satellite imagery of burned down villages; and verified video footage showing violations carried out by the Myanmar military.

The conflict has escalated since the 4 January 2019 attack by the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic Rakhine armed group, against several police posts in northern Rakhine State. The incident prompted a retaliatory order from the government to ‘crush’ the AA and marked a turning point in the escalation of the conflict, which has since displaced tens of thousands.

In recent days an additional 10,000 people fled their homes as a result of heavy fighting and warnings of advancing military operations, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [estimated](#).

Myanmar officially labelled the AA an unlawful organization on 23 March 2020. Fighting surged between March and May 2020, while Myanmar also grappled with its first COVID-19 cases. Over 30 civilians were killed or injured in May alone as a result of the conflict, [according to the UN](#).

The victims are predominantly from Buddhist and some Christian ethnic minorities in Rakhine and Chin States, though media reports have also documented violations against Rohingya civilians.

‘The whole village saw the plane’

The Myanmar military's airpower has inflicted enormous damage and human suffering. In Chin State, three people from a cluster of ethnic Chin villages called Meik Sar Wa in Paletwa Township described airstrikes which they said took place on 14 and 15 March 2020.

“The whole village saw the plane ... the sound was so loud,” one resident said, adding that the attack happened at around 11am.

After hearing explosions, he ran to his father's house and found his brother with a fatal stomach wound, as well as the body of his brother's 16-year-old friend. He said his uncle, who was in a different house at the time, was also killed in the same airstrike.

Two people from another family in the same village cluster told Amnesty International that an airstrike killed nine people in their community, including a seven-year-old boy. “Our family is destroyed,” the boy's father said.

An ethnic Rakhine farmer from Lel Hla village tract in Paletwa Township, Chin State, said fighting erupted around a nearby village called Hnan Chaung Wa on 7 April 2020. He said airstrikes killed seven and injured eight people, [corroborating news reports](#) of these incidents. After helping move dead bodies and injured people, he later witnessed two fighter jets launch another round of attacks closer to his own village and saw two columns of smoke rising from burned property.

He fled to the town of Paletwa the next day but airstrikes followed there as well.

Under customary international humanitarian law, an indiscriminate attack is a war crime if it leads to civilian deaths.

Detention, torture and other violations

Witness testimonies also show that Myanmar soldiers arbitrarily detained civilians in Rakhine State for perceived connections with the AA, sometimes resorting to torture and other forms of ill-treatment.

Two former residents of Mrauk U Township in Rakhine State told Amnesty International their family member was detained and tortured after Myanmar soldiers started shooting on 29 February 2020.

One of the women, the detained man's wife, visited her husband in detention and said that he told her he had been tied up and beaten for four nights and five days. As a result of the beatings he now has trouble breathing.

“He wasn't given food or water...They kicked and hit him with rifles in the back and kicked his chest as well,” she said. “Before this, he was tall and big, but when I saw him ... he was visibly thin.”

Soldiers held a knife to his throat and obtained a forced “confession” about his supposed links to the AA. He was charged under the Counter Terrorism Law, which has been increasingly used in recent months against journalists reporting on the conflict, and people perceived to be linked to the AA.

The beating of detainees appears to be widespread. In May the military admitted its forces punched and kicked blindfolded detainees [after a video of the disturbing incident](#) went viral.

Arbitrary detention was documented in several townships. A villager from Rakhine State's Kyauktaw Township witnessed Myanmar soldiers arrest ten villagers, including her husband, on 16 March 2020. She told Amnesty International that soldiers punched, kicked and used guns to hit the detainees who resisted. These troops were said to be from the 55th Light Infantry Division, which Amnesty International has previously documented as carrying out violations in Rakhine State.

“Until now I have no news about my husband, and I'm devastated,” she said.

Myanmar soldiers also appear to regularly confiscate or destroy civilian property and commandeer monasteries as temporary bases. Amnesty International similarly documented the use and confiscation of civilian property by soldiers in Rakhine State and [northern Shan State](#) in 2019.

Residents said soldiers took rice, firewood, blankets and clothes, mobile phones and personal documents, gold bracelets and necklaces. Livestock was slaughtered or taken. Myanmar soldiers also knocked down doors, broke windows, and damaged small Buddhist shrines kept at home.

Amnesty International also documented incidents of the burning or destruction of villages in different townships in Rakhine and Chin States.

Satellite imagery of several conflict-affected villages shows widescale burning consistent with Myanmar military tactics. Both the military and the AA have blamed each other for the village burning.

In one village tract in Minbya Township, a displaced person said that on 29 March Myanmar soldiers burned down around 10 houses and one school building, adding that two villagers died in the incident.

In Chin State, a 41-year-old ethnic Rakhine man who tried to return to his old village, Sein Nyin Wa in Paletwa Township, after being displaced for nearly two months reported seeing only ash from a vantage point on 24 May.

Amnesty International was not able to document operations and abuses by the Arakan Army in the reporting period due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and limited access to conflict-affected areas and witnesses. However, reports suggest the Arakan Army has continued a pattern of abuses [previously documented](#) by Amnesty International. This includes endangering the lives of civilians during attacks, intimidation of local communities, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.

‘We’re becoming deaf and blind’: internet blackout during a pandemic

In June 2019, Myanmar authorities shut down the internet in nine conflict-affected townships in Rakhine and Chin States: Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, Ponnagyun, and Rathedaung in Rakhine State, as well as Paletwa in Chin State.

The shutdown was lifted in five townships in late August 2019, but reinstated in February 2020. At the time of writing, only Maungdaw has regained mobile internet access.

The government has said the internet blackout is necessary because the Arakan Army uses mobile internet to coordinate attacks against officials, plant anti-personnel mines, and incite hatred against the authorities. However, the blackout has limited access to information about COVID-19.

“There are only a few people who are aware of COVID-19 in the camps,” one relief worker told Amnesty International, estimating that about five percent understand the threat.

One displaced resident from Minbya Township said people had to learn about COVID-19 from television, print newspapers and illegal satellite dish connections.

“I’m worried because for war you can hide in the bush or nearby, but for the virus you can’t hide,” he said. “It’s like we’re becoming deaf and blind, and there’s nobody to report on what’s happening in Minbya.”

While serious violations by the Myanmar military continue, Amnesty International reiterates its call for the UN Security Council to refer the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

“The reliance on airstrikes and internet blackouts may be new, but one constant is the military’s remorseless neglect for civilian life,” said Nicholas Bequelin.

“The atrocities have not stopped – in fact, the Myanmar military’s cruelty is only getting more sophisticated. This relentless pattern of violations is clearly a matter for the ICC. The Security Council must act.”

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Rakhine State: Civilians killed in indiscriminate air strikes by Myanmar armed forces; residents in the area have no access to information on the COVID-19 pandemic due to state-imposed internet blackout

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