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A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State

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What's new? Arakan Army attacks on remote police outposts in Myanmar's northern Rakhine State left thirteen officers dead, prompting the government to order military "clearance operations" against the ethnic Rakhine insurgents. The looming violent escalation will be difficult to reverse – and will complicate efforts to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

Why did it happen? Despite the main ethnic Rakhine party's election victory in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi installed a minority National League for Democracy government in the state and the government imprisoned a popular Rakhine politician on high treason charges. These actions fuelled the belief among ethnic Rakhine that politics is failing them.

Why does it matter? Rising violence in Rakhine State will deepen the longstanding political crisis there and undermine prospects for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. It will also impede Myanmar's broader peace process and political transition.

What should be done? The military, government and insurgents should exercise restraint and seek a negotiated solution to the violence to avoid further inflaming ethnic tensions. China should work to bring all sides to the negotiating table. The government should initiate dialogue with ethnic Rakhine representatives over key political, economic and social issues.

I. Overview

On 4 January – Myanmar's Independence Day – the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic Rakhine group, launched coordinated attacks on four police outposts in northern Rakhine State, killing thirteen officers and injuring nine others. The attacks followed months of low-grade violence in the state, including a roadside bomb attributed to the AA that struck the chief minister's convoy but did little damage. The government has directed the military to launch "clearance operations" against the group, which will likely precipitate further violence and civilian casualties. Thousands of civilians have already fled villages near the raided outposts. The attacks signify a dangerous shift from politics to insurgency as the means of addressing ethnic Rakhine grievances. The state is already afflicted by the Rohingya mass flight; an escalated fight between ethnic Rakhine and the government would represent a blow to Myanmar's political transition to civilian rule and be difficult to stop. All sides should step back

from confrontation and instead discuss how best to address Rakhine grievances through political channels.

The spotlight on the emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in 2016-2017, and the subsequent persecution and exodus of more than 800,000 Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh, has obscured the three-way nature of the conflict in Rakhine State. The ethnic Rakhine, who are often portrayed as aggressors toward the Rohingya, have themselves been victims of neglect and oppression by ethnic Burman-controlled central governments for generations. Rakhine grievances against the ethnic Burman majority run deep, yet often go unacknowledged in assessments of the conflict in Rakhine State.

Historically, the Rakhine have not had a powerful ethnic Rakhine insurgent group to give expression to their political aspirations, but since 2014 the AA has emerged to fill this perceived void in Rakhine State. A series of developments in Rakhine State over the past five years, including the ARSA attacks against state security forces in northern Rakhine State in 2016-2017 and political tensions between leading ethnic Rakhine figures and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) government, has allowed the AA to gain a foothold in Rakhine, both militarily and politically.

The consequences of the Independence Day attacks are likely to be serious. Renewed violence in northern Rakhine State will further diminish prospects for large-scale repatriation of Rohingya refugees. The attacks may also jeopardise prospects for progress in the peace process just weeks after Myanmar's military announced an unprecedented unilateral ceasefire. Although that ceasefire did not cover Rakhine State, ostensibly because of operations against ARSA, the AA had recently made a significant peace overture to the government. The violence is also likely to heighten tensions between ethnic Rakhine and Burman political actors at both the state and national levels. The NLD government's immediate response, to declare the AA "terrorists", has only exacerbated these tensions.

The military should exercise restraint in its response to the attacks, avoiding the violence against civilians that precipitated the flight of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh, while the AA should refrain from further aggression targeting either the military or civilians. China ought to try to use its influence over the peace process to bring the AA and the government to the negotiating table. It should also encourage the military to expand its unilateral ceasefire to explicitly include Rakhine State. The government should initiate a dialogue about how best to address current tensions and future political aspirations with ethnic Rakhine political parties and other communal representatives.

II. Raising the Stakes

Shortly before 7am on 4 January, the AA launched coordinated attacks on four Border Guard Police outposts in a remote area of northern Rakhine State's Buthidaung township, close to the border with Bangladesh. Government reports state that the AA sent around 350 heavily armed fighters to raid the posts, which were only lightly defended. The defenders were forced to abandon two of the outposts but held out for several hours at the other two with the help of artillery and air support. They were

eventually relieved by Border Guard and army reinforcements, after which AA fighters withdrew. The raiders killed thirteen officers and injured nine; they also seized 40 weapons and more than 16,000 rounds of ammunition.¹ A day later, the group released fourteen police officers and four civilians whom it had captured in the fighting.

The military and police had received warnings that attacks were planned, but appeared unprepared for the scale of the offensive.² One Border Guard Police commander described it as “stabbing us in the back”, suggesting that the AA should view ARSA as the common enemy and refrain from undermining government efforts to contain the Muslim group.³

Rather than leave the response to the military, the government took the initiative by calling a rare high-level meeting of senior military and civilian officials on 7 January.⁴ It ordered “clearance operations” targeting the AA – the first time the NLD administration had publicly issued a command to the military regarding military operations. Speaking to the media after the 7 January meeting, government spokesman Zaw Htay said President Win Myint had directed the military to “crush the terrorists”.⁵ In an apparent attempt to discredit the AA among ethnic Rakhine, Zaw Htay accused the group of having links to ARSA, saying it was operating two bases inside Bangladesh. He suggested foreign powers were behind the fighting, warning the Rakhine people:

Do they want to see a cycle of violence lasting decades? ... I want to tell the Rakhine people who are supporting [the AA]: Don't think about yourself, but think about your next generation.⁶

Although similar language has been deployed in the fight against ARSA, it is highly unusual in the context of an armed organisation like the AA that is affiliated with a recognised ethnic group such as the Rakhine.⁷ The government's response risks inflaming an already tense situation, widening ethnic divisions between the Rakhine and the Burmans and encouraging increasing numbers of ethnic Rakhine people to voice support for the AA. It is also a risky strategy to order the military response, as it means the government will be to some extent responsible for the conduct and consequences of military operations against the AA.

¹ “AA launches massive coordinated attacks on four border police outposts in Buthidaung township, leaves 9 injured, 13 police personnel killed”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 5 January 2019.

² Crisis Group interviews, political analysts involved in the peace process, Yangon, January 2019.

³ “AA backstabbed gov't forces in Jan 4 attacks: Border guard officer”, *The Irrawaddy*, 7 January 2019.

⁴ Although this meeting featured all eleven members of the National Defence and Security Council, the NLD government did not publicly describe it as a council meeting. It also included additional actors, including four government ministers, the head of the Peace Commission and the chief of Military Affairs Security. The government has yet to call a council meeting since taking office, something for which the military has criticised it.

⁵ At an 18 January press conference, a military spokesman claimed that during the 7 January meeting Aung San Suu Kyi “instructed us to effectively crush the AA and if not, there will be finger-pointing that [the Myanmar military] does not crush the AA as it is an ethnic group, but it crushed ARSA, who practice a different religion.” See “AA must give up goal of confederation: Myanmar military”, *The Irrawaddy*, 18 January 2019.

⁶ “Myanmar's civilian, military leaders meet, vow to ‘crush’ Rakhine rebels”, Reuters, 7 January 2019.

⁷ The government officially recognises 135 ethnic groups as indigenous. This category does not include most people of Chinese or South Asian descent, including the Rohingya.

The Myanmar military has reportedly moved troops from two light infantry divisions to the conflict zone and captured one AA temporary outpost in Buthidaung township.⁸ The military claims that it killed thirteen AA soldiers between 5-16 January, but refused to divulge its own losses.⁹ While further conflict is expected, the AA is anticipated to pull back in the coming months because its supply lines are stretched and the dry season will be drawing to a close.¹⁰ The military may instead focus its attention on civilians, seeking to undermine support for the AA by making large-scale arrests.¹¹ In a further concerning development for stability in Rakhine State, a 16 January ambush on Border Guard Police in Maungdaw township that left six officers injured was initially blamed on the AA but later attributed to ARSA after a video of the incident was posted to social media, apparently by the Muslim group.¹² If ARSA is indeed responsible, as appears likely, it would be the group's first significant attack in more than a year.

The immediate trigger for the AA attacks is not entirely clear. One factor may have been the Myanmar military's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire on 21 December that covered five regional military commands in Kachin and Shan states through 30 April 2019. Although the military said it did not include Rakhine State because of the need to continue operations against ARSA, the AA appears to believe that the purpose was instead to redirect troops from Shan and Kachin states against it. AA leader Tun Myat Naing said his soldiers had targeted police posts because the Border Police had been working with the Myanmar military to carry out its "four cuts" counter-insurgency strategy against AA forces.¹³ The goal of the AA attacks seems to be to establish a foothold in northern Rakhine State and solidify support among Rakhine people, thus strengthening the AA's position in any future peace negotiations. "They feel this is their moment to push", said one source involved in the peace process with close ties to AA officials.¹⁴

In response, the EU's Myanmar delegation issued a statement "deploring" the attacks but also acknowledging the "deep-rooted historical grievances in Rakhine State [that] can only be solved through dialogue and an inclusive political process". The EU representatives called on the Tatmadaw to expand its unilateral ceasefire to Rakhine State.¹⁵ China said it "supports the efforts by the Myanmar side to maintain peace and stability" and called for restraint and the resolution of "relevant issues through dialogue and consultation".¹⁶

⁸ "A new war rages in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 15 January 2019.

⁹ "AA must give up goal of confederation: Myanmar military", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 January 2019.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, political analyst involved in the peace process, Yangon, January 2019.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Fresh ARSA attack injured six police officers", *The Irrawaddy*, 20 January 2019.

¹³ The authorities developed the "four cuts" strategy in the 1970s, with the aim of cutting off insurgents' access to food, funds, recruits and intelligence.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, source close to the AA, Yangon, January 2019.

¹⁵ "Local EU Statement on the Escalation of Violence in Rakhine State", Delegation of the European Union to Myanmar, Yangon, 10 January 2019.

¹⁶ "Chinese Embassy's Statement on the Violence in Rakhine State", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 5 January 2019.

The toll on civilians has been steep, with at least 4,500 people forced to flee their homes and seek shelter in monasteries, where they are receiving aid from the government, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), civil society groups and local residents.¹⁷ On 10 January, the Rakhine State government issued an order banning all UN agencies and international and local NGOs from visiting five conflict-affected townships, except for the ICRC and World Food Programme.¹⁸ Local media has also reported that the military has blocked attempts by Rakhine NGOs to send food shipments to displaced people.¹⁹

III. A Building Storm

The attacks underline the Arakan Army's growing military capability, which is built on rising popular support among ethnic Rakhine that has helped fill its coffers and swell its numbers with new recruits. Its growth has occurred in a short time. The AA was formed in 2009 at the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) headquarters in Laiza. In 1994, the KIA had signed a ceasefire with the military government, but fifteen years later it sensed that the accord was on the verge of collapse.²⁰ It had expected to keep its arms and autonomy under the truce, but the government was pressing it to become a Border Guard Force under the military's command. As an insurance policy in the event of renewed fighting, the KIA sponsored the establishment of two proxies, the AA and Ta'ang National Liberation Army, supplying them with arms from its weapons factory.²¹

The AA mostly confined itself to KIA territory until around 2014, when it began to infiltrate southern Chin State and, later, far northern Rakhine State, resulting in sporadic clashes with state forces. From these remote areas its soldiers have reportedly encroached southward over the past year, into the fringes of Buthidaung, Pon-nagyun, Rathedaung and Kyauktaw townships.²²

A number of factors, both historical and recent, are fuelling this support for the AA. The Rakhine have grievances against the ethnic Burman majority that date back centuries, to the fall of the kingdom of Mrauk-U in 1784, and they blame central government neglect and lack of political autonomy for the state's deep poverty. Many Rakhine view the Burmans as the bigger enemy than Muslims in the state, something that the government and many other Burman political actors do not acknowledge or are unwilling to address. The Rakhine are perhaps less wary of open war than other ethnic groups in the country, having no recent experience of armed conflict with the

¹⁷ "Asia and the Pacific: Weekly Regional Humanitarian Snapshot (1-7 Jan 2019)", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 7 January 2019.

¹⁸ "Aid groups barred from Rakhine conflict zones", *The Myanmar Times*, 14 January 2019.

¹⁹ "Concern mounts for IDPs in northern Rakhine as army blocks aid shipments", *The Irrawaddy*, 9 January 2019.

²⁰ See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°140, *A Tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict*, 12 June 2013, Section III.C.

²¹ The ceasefire did break down in June 2011, and the KIA remains in conflict with the Myanmar military. Ibid.

²² "Analysis: Arakan Army – A powerful new threat to the Tatmadaw", *The Irrawaddy*, 8 January 2019.

government, due to the lack of a strong ethnic armed group. In some quarters, there is even a palpable sense of excitement about the AA's exploits.²³

The NLD's ascension to power has only aggravated the underlying grievances. Under President Thein Sein, the government made some effort to consult Rakhine political leaders and include them in decision-making. It also used economic concessions strategically to create alliances. In contrast, the NLD ignored demands from the Arakan National Party – which won a clear majority of elected seats in the state in 2015 elections – to be given the chief minister position, instead appointing a relatively weak NLD member to the post. Following the ARSA attacks in 2016-2017 and subsequent flight of 800,000 Rohingya Muslims, the central government has moved to assert further control over executive functions in Rakhine, rendering the state government largely powerless and sidelining the legislature.

Several events in 2018 proved particularly significant. On 16 January, police opened fire on a group of protesters in Mrauk-U, seat of the ancient Rakhine kingdom that fell to the Burmans, killing seven people and injuring a dozen more. The protest came after the township administrator cancelled a planned ceremony to mark the anniversary of the fall of the Rakhine kingdom, incensing the large crowd that had gathered in the town. Two days later, the state's leading politician, Dr Aye Maung, was arrested in Sittwe together with a popular writer and civil society activist, Wai Hin Aung. Aye Maung remains on trial and faces a potential death sentence for high treason and incitement, after giving a speech shortly before the 16 January clash in which he allegedly said the Burmans consider the Rakhine slaves and expressed support for armed struggle to establish greater sovereignty for the Rakhine people.

The arrest of Aye Maung and infighting within the Arakan National Party has left a leadership vacuum that the AA has quickly filled. With no clear political path to addressing their grievances, many Rakhine people increasingly see armed struggle as the more effective response to perceived Burman oppression.

The AA has cleverly sought to leverage grievances through both online and other activities, such as the #ArakanDream2020 social media campaign and t-shirts emblazoned with "The Way of Rakhita", the name that the group has given to its project of nationwide armed "revolution".²⁴ Videos on social media tout the group's growing military prowess, including expensive weaponry that gives the AA greater operational capabilities.²⁵ In addition to generating grassroots support, the AA political leadership, particularly Tun Myat Naing, has used social and mainstream media to articulate sophisticated political positions that appeal to educated Rakhine. The group has also used fear as a tactic, threatening township administrators and other government officials seen as obstructing AA activities.²⁶

²³ This sentiment is very clear on social media. For more detailed discussion of Rakhine grievances, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°261, *The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014.

²⁴ "Myanmar's Rakhine torched anew by insurgent fire", *Asia Times*, 3 January 2019.

²⁵ See, for example, "Welcome to the 9th anniversary of Arakan Army Day", video, YouTube, 6 April 2018.

²⁶ Photos of threatening letters accompanied by bullets sent to government officials regularly circulate on social media. The AA does not deny sending them. See, for example, "AA issues threatening letters to Rakhine police, village head", *The Irrawaddy*, 22 December 2018.

The AA also has been actively recruiting in Rakhine State, where young men who would once have opted to migrate from the area in search of work opportunities are instead enlisting.²⁷ The large Rakhine communities in Kachin State and Yangon are another important source of fighters; the militia is quite openly using some Rakhine Buddhist monasteries and Rakhine-owned businesses in Yangon, for example, as recruiting offices.²⁸ Meanwhile, migrant workers in Thailand and Malaysia are sending money to the AA, either through relatives in Rakhine State or bank accounts in China, and the group often boasts of donations from Rakhine business people.²⁹

Although the AA denies it, the group – like nearly all armed groups in Myanmar – appears to be profiting from the drug trade. In early 2016, the government said it had arrested an AA officer in Yangon, impounding large quantities of weapons, ammunition and drugs.³⁰ A record drug seizure of 2.67 tonnes of methamphetamine tablets the previous July had been linked to Rakhine merchants.³¹ Most of the drugs are destined for Bangladesh, but in Rakhine State, methamphetamine pills known as *yaba* have also become much more widely available over the past two years. In some areas, powdered *yaba* is now sold openly in a package with areca nut for as little as 25 U.S. cents.³²

The 4 January attacks and government response have changed the dynamic of armed conflict in Rakhine State by activating previously latent support for the AA and bringing such support more into the open. Although Rakhine communities may eventually tire of conflict and the negative consequences it brings, in the short term such conflict and the military abuse of civilians that invariably accompanies it will likely spur further backing for the AA. The conflict has entered a dangerous new phase in which ethnic divisions have more clearly been brought to the fore.

The consequences of a rift between Rakhine and Burman people could be far-reaching, given that there is a quite prominent Rakhine elite within national institutions, including military, government and civil service as well as civil society and the Buddhist monkhood. Specific examples of how this is already playing out are starting to be seen. When the upper Myanmar branch of the influential Buddhist nationalist organisation MaBaTha issued a statement condemning the 4 January attacks, the Rakhine branch responded by questioning why it had said nothing when police shot seven Rakhine demonstrators in Mrauk-U a year earlier.³³ And as one ethnic Rakhine

²⁷ Studies report that up to 80 per cent of young people in some Rakhine State townships have migrated to other states and regions in Myanmar or abroad, mostly to find jobs. See “IOM appeal (Myanmar/Rakhine State) (April 2016–April 2018)”, International Organization for Migration, 15 March 2016.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, political analyst involved in the peace process, Yangon, January 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Rakhine journalist and political analysts involved in the peace process, January 2019.

³⁰ “How to fund a war – Arakan Army officer arrested with guns, drugs in Yangon”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 28 February 2016.

³¹ “Police searching for six suspects over record US\$106 million drug haul”, *The Myanmar Times*, 19 August 2015.

³² A whole tablet costs 4,000 Myanmar kyat, or around \$2.50. Crisis Group interview, Rakhine journalist, Yangon, January 2019.

³³ “Opinion statement”, MaBaTha (Upper Myanmar), 6 January 2019, and “Objection statement”, MaBaTha (Rakhine State), 11 January 2019.

journalist explained, even Rakhine in Yangon who interact with ethnic Burmans on a daily basis are now publicly expressing their anger toward the majority group, “so you can imagine what the feeling is like in areas that are almost exclusively Rakhine”.³⁴

IV. Peace and Repatriation

The 4 January attacks present a fresh challenge for both Myanmar's national peace process and government plans to repatriate some of the more than 800,000 Rohingya who have fled from Rakhine State to Bangladesh since 2016. The most immediate impact will be on the long-stalled peace process, particularly the government's efforts to convene a 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference in February. This series of conferences would bring together non-state armed groups that signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, the military, the government, members of parliament, representatives of political parties and civil society leaders in political dialogue aimed at drafting a Union Peace Accord that would create a federal political system. A conference is supposed to be held every six months, but since the NLD took office nearly three years ago only three have taken place. Non-signatories, such as the AA, can only attend as observers – if invited at all – and are not able to participate in decision-making.

Prior to 4 January, new momentum appeared to be developing, largely as a result of Chinese efforts to push the process forward in support of its economic ambitions, manifest in the Belt and Road Initiative. On 12 December, the AA and Ta'ang National Liberation Army – together with a third group, the ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – said they would halt military operations and wanted to solve their political conflicts through dialogue. The government's peace commission immediately accepted this overture and shortly afterward the military announced its unilateral ceasefire. Observers considered this development an important step forward, because for several years the three groups had been on the fringes of the peace process due to the military's insistence that they surrender and disarm.³⁵

Myanmar's ethnic armed organisations can be broadly split into two groups: those that have signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and those that have not. Of the latter, seven (including the AA) are in a coalition known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee that the United Wa State Army set up in 2017.³⁶ The groups within this bloc exhibit a high degree of solidarity and are unlikely to proceed with peace negotiations if the AA is excluded as a result of the 4 January attacks. Despite the government's rhetoric about crushing the AA, it thus has little choice but to seek negotiations with the group in the longer term.³⁷

Whether the AA will be willing to refrain from further attacks in the short term is unclear. Tun Myat Naing's increasingly bold statements will make it politically diffi-

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Rakhine journalist, Yangon, January 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, political analyst involved in the peace process, Yangon, January 2019.

³⁶ For detailed discussion, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017.

³⁷ A similar scenario played out after the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army's offensive in the Kokang region of Shan State in February 2015.

cult for him to agree to do so; if he is seen as having been forced to back down it could undermine the AA's growing support. In recent weeks, Tun Myat Naing has also articulated a vision for Rakhine State that the government could find difficult to accommodate within the peace process. The nationwide ceasefire aims to establish a democratic federal union, with more political power devolved to ethnic minority areas. But Tun Myat Naing has called for what he describes as "confederate" status for Rakhine State, under which it would have almost complete autonomy, except in defence, trade regulation and foreign affairs.³⁸

The 4 January attacks will also further complicate the government's hopes for beginning the long-delayed repatriation of thousands of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.³⁹

Despite the strong negative sentiment the Rohingya issue arouses among the ethnic Rakhine, the AA has taken a relatively moderate line, suggesting that the government promptly grant citizenship rights to those who are repatriated if they are found to be eligible under the 1982 Citizenship Law.⁴⁰ Citizenship rights would in theory allow the repatriated Rohingya to move freely around the country, for instance migrating to large cities in search of jobs. For decades, most Rohingya have been issued only temporary identity papers instead of citizenship documents, conferring them fewer rights and strictly limiting travel within Myanmar. Many ethnic Rakhine consider this restriction on the Rohingya to be an unfair burden on themselves as well, because it means the Rohingya have no option but to compete with them for employment and resources in Rakhine State. The AA's line thus reflects the formal position of many Rakhine politicians.⁴¹ The subtext is that both the Rakhine and Rohingya are victims of the Burman-controlled state, and that focusing on each other plays into the central government's divide-and-rule tactics.

The instability generated as a result of the 4 January attacks and any subsequent fighting in the months ahead will diminish the already slim chances of repatriation getting underway. Security restrictions, particularly on access for UN agencies and NGOs, will alarm any Rohingya possibly considering returning under the repatriation scheme, and could result in further hardship for the estimated 200,000 who have stayed behind in northern Rakhine State. Regardless of the AA's position, the ethno-nationalist sentiment whipped up among ethnic Rakhine will also create further caution among potential returnees, many of whom have already objected to coming back due to security concerns and lack of clarity over citizenship.⁴²

³⁸ "Confederation the only option for Arakanese people, AA chief says", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2019.

³⁹ See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°153, *Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Repatriation*, 12 November 2018.

⁴⁰ "AA leader dismisses 'ridiculous' claim that his group has ties to ARSA", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 April 2018. For detailed discussion of the 1982 Citizenship Law, see Crisis Group Report, *The Politics of Rakhine State*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

⁴¹ See Crisis Group Report, *The Politics of Rakhine State*, op. cit., pp. 14-18.

⁴² "Repatriation plan stalls as Rohingya refuse to return to Myanmar", Catholic News Service, 15 November 2018.

V. Conclusion

The AA attacks on 4 January were a provocative step that asserted the group's growing military capabilities and popular support among Rakhine people. There is a serious risk that an escalatory dynamic takes hold, which could plunge the state deeper into armed conflict. Preventing escalation will require the AA to refrain from further attacks, and the government and military to resist the urge to retaliate politically and militarily. Escalation would fuel support for the AA and reinforce ethnic divisions between the Rakhine and the Burman majority. The military should exercise restraint in its "clearance operations", avoiding the harm to civilians that regularly mars its counter-insurgency activity, and expand the unilateral ceasefire to encompass Rakhine State. The government should make overtures to the AA through informal channels and encourage other peace stakeholders with leverage over the AA to bring the ethnic Rakhine insurgents to the negotiating table. Further, all sides should avoid rhetoric that could further inflame ethnic tensions.

China has an important role to play. Its growing influence within the peace process became increasingly clear through 2018, and in December it helped convene a meeting of the AA, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army at which they expressed support for dialogue with the government. Its ability to pressure the AA may be limited because of the lack of cultural ties between the Rakhine and Chinese, and Rakhine State's distance from China's border, but it can still exercise influence by proxy through the AA's key allies, including the Kachin and Wa armed groups.

Most importantly, the government needs to begin a genuine and inclusive dialogue with the Rakhine people, including the state's political actors, regarding the state's future political, economic and social trajectory. In particular, this dialogue should cover the repatriation process, rebuilding Rohingya communities, economic development and power sharing between the central and state governments.⁴³ As a gesture of good-will, and to kick-start this dialogue, the government should consider releasing Aye Maung and other ethnic Rakhine political prisoners. It is only through political inclusion that Myanmar can avert a further strengthening of the ethnic Rakhine insurgency.

Brussels, 24 January 2019

⁴³ The importance of including the Rakhine community in state-level decision-making was emphasised in the final report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State chaired by the late Dr Kofi Annan.

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar





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