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Myanmar Military Column, Artillery Firings Displace Rakhine Villagers

Large numbers of civilians have been forced to flee their homes in rural Rakhine state after a Myanmar military column deployed in three villages fired artillery into a forested area where it believed rebel Arakan Army camps were located, residents said Thursday.

Local residents from three villages in northern Rakhine's Minbya township said that Myanmar Army soldiers were deployed in schools, a monastery, and a community hall in the area.

“A government military column placed big guns in front of the elementary school in Min village and started firing in the direction of the eastern mountains until about 9 p.m.,” said a local resident who declined to be named for safety reasons.

“Also this morning, they fired about 20 times,” the villager said. “They are staying in the school, a monastery, and in houses around the school.”

Another resident, who also requested anonymity for the same reason, said after government soldiers deployed in three villages, they warned villagers not to support or communicate with the AA. The rebel force was declared a terrorist group by the Myanmar government and banned in March.

“At first, the government military was stationed on the hill, firing all day long,” the person said. “A huge mortar shell fell on the village, [and] the villagers had to flee. After that, no one dared to remain in the village. Today there's no one left.”

RFA was unable to verify how many villagers had fled from the Myanmar Army.

Local activist Arn Tha Gyi told RFA that the villagers are more afraid of columns of Myanmar soldiers than they are of clashes between the two sides.

“Whenever they enter a village, everyone in the village [knows] they are in for trouble,” he told RFA. “They threaten villagers, loot [their homes], and create problems, so that we Rakhine people are more afraid of army columns than of battles.”

Myanmar military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun disputed the villagers' accounts, saying soldiers did not set up heavy weapons in the villages.

“First of all, it is not true,” he said. “Artillery is not the kind of weapon that needs to be carried around and fired. It can be fired from anywhere.”

Zaw Min Tun added that it was impossible for government troops to take positions in ethnic Rakhine villages because they contain many AA sympathizers who could easily ambush the soldiers.

He denied reports that the military was digging trenches around homes and schools in the villages and suggested that AA soldiers were employing this as a battle tactic so they could attack Myanmar forces from civilian positions.

Zaw Min Tun also said that there had been no fighting in Minbya township in recent days.

AA spokesman Khine Thukha was not available for comment.

Shelters need in Chin state

The Myanmar military and AA have engaged in intense hostilities in northern Rakhine state and in Paletwa township of adjacent Chin state for the past 16 months, as the Arakan force seeks greater autonomy for ethnic Rakhine people in the region.

The fighting has killed dozens of civilians and displaced more than 160,000 others, according to a

tally by the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, a local relief group.

Nearly 10,000 displaced villagers in Chin's remote Paletwa township say they are in urgent need of shelter before the start of the annual monsoon season later this month.

The internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been living temporarily in community halls and in the homes of relatives, though local officials have pledged to build modest bamboo structures for them.

“We have been living in a high school for a month,” said Hsin Koe, an IDP from Paletwa's Nanchaungwa village. “There are more than 100 people in this school, so it's not convenient to live here. It's a four-hour walk from Paletwa to our village, but right now is not a good time to return home.”

The nonprofit organization the Relief and Rehabilitation Committee for Chin IDPs (RRCCI) has been collecting donations to build shelters for IDPs before the monsoon season, which runs from late May through October.

A 10-by-12-foot room will cost about 200,000 kyats (U.S. \$140) to build, said Mine Nang Wai from RRCCI.

“They will be in trouble during the rainy season,” he said about the IDPs. “They can now stay in the schools because of COVID-19, but if it wasn't for that, then they couldn't stay there.”

“The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement has agreed to help them as a policy,” he said. “The committee is going to talk with the Chin state government and work on it. If we only rely on the government, then it would be a burden for the government. That's why we are doing as much as we can [to help].”

On May 4, the RRCCI met with members of the Union government, Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye, and Chin state government spokesman Soe Htet, who also serves as the state's minister of municipal affairs, to discuss the IDP situation in Paletwa.

“We are going to receive 12 million kyats [U.S. \$8,400] from the National Disaster Management Committee for these IDPs,” Soe Htet said, adding that the funds will be used to build 48 tents in the towns of Paletwa and Samee and in Meza village.

Each tent will measure 100-by-30 feet and will house 960 families, he added.

About 4,000 IDPs are in Paletwa, 3,000 are in Samee, more than 2,000 are in Meza village, according to officials. Another 200 displaced persons have already moved to Yangon.

Additional funds for shelters will be needed because there are 1,600 households in Paletwa township, Soe Htet said.

Lawmakers in Rakhine's Rathedaung township have collected donations to build shelters for IDPs there before torrential rains begin, but the state government has barred local humanitarian relief groups from erecting the structures, saying they did not obtain permission to build from state officials.

The more than 800 displaced civilians currently in Rathedaung town have sought shelter in Buddhist monastery compounds and in the homes of friends and relatives.

The IDPS must rely on humanitarian assistance from civil society organizations amid a dearth of relief supplies from the state government.

Reported by RFA's Myanmar Service. Translated by Maung Maung Nyo and Khet Mar. Written in English by Roseanne Gerin.

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