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The Arakan Army and Tatmadaw’s Tenuous Truces in Myanmar’s Rakhine State; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 20 Issue: 24

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The Myanmar junta and the Rakhine nationalist Arakan Army (AA) have agreed on an informal ceasefire in Rakhine State ([Mizzima](#), November 29). This truce, which came into effect at the end of November, occurred despite a sharp escalation in fighting in the months following the collapse of the ceasefire that the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and the AA concluded in late 2020. The AA has officially stated that the “difficulties and troubles” that the Rakhine people are suffering on account of restrictions and blockades imposed by the Tatmadaw prompted it to agree to the latest ceasefire ([Narinjara News](#), November 27). Although the truce is providing Rakhine’s war-weary people with some respite, the question still arises around whether it will last.

Rise of the Arakan Army

Founded in April 2009 in Kachin State, the AA, which is the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA), was established with the objective of restoring the sovereignty of the Rakhine (Arakanese) people. Its rise was rapid, with arms and training from other ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which helped the AA to grow from a poorly armed group of only a few dozen youths in 2009 to a well-equipped army of 7,000 fighters by 2019. Initially, the AA fought alongside the KIA against the Tatmadaw. In early 2015, its fighters moved to Rakhine State and Paletwa township in neighboring Chin State to fight the Tatmadaw ([Mizzima](#), July 21).

Fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw escalated from 2018 onwards, with the AA showing an increasing capacity to strike at security installations and inflict heavy losses on the security forces ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 4, 2019). This led to the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) government designating the AA as a terrorist group in March 2020 ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 24, 2020). Then, in November 2020, the AA and the Tatmadaw entered into an informal ceasefire ([Frontier Myanmar](#), December 2, 2020). [1]

AA’s Expansion During the First Ceasefire

On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw staged a coup. Overwhelmed by dealing with the mass protests and armed insurgencies that had erupted to protest the coup and its rule, the junta leaders, who were keen to avoid opening another front in Rakhine State, adopted a conciliatory approach to the AA. This resulted in the junta withdrawing the designation of the AA/ULA as terrorist entities ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 11, 2021). With the organization and its activities declared legal, AA’s fighters and activists could now operate openly.

As for the AA, in a joint statement with the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army issued a month after the coup, it warned the junta that if it continued to “kill the people” then the AA would “cooperate with the protesters and fight back” ([Al Jazeera](#), March 30, 2021 and [The Irrawaddy](#), April 10, 2021). However, it largely avoided confronting the Tatmadaw. This is because AA’s leadership saw the ceasefire, especially in the context of the junta’s preoccupation with fighting resistance elsewhere in the country, as an opportunity for the AA to build up its own military strength and consolidate control over areas by setting up administrative mechanisms.

In the months following the coup, the AA’s writ extended to around two-thirds of Rakhine State and parts of southern Chin State. It appointed administrators and judicial and police officers, including into hitherto neglected rural communities. As a result of its separating its military and administrative wings into two distinct parts, the group transformed itself from simply “an army into a parallel government,” according to a Sittwe-based Indian businessman. Support for AA among the Rakhine people accordingly grew during this period. [2]

Causes of Rupture and Renewal of the Ceasefire

The junta was uneasy with the AA’s growing clout in Rakhine, which led the Tatmadaw to begin to reinforce its military presence in the region, with new security checks on roads and the detaining of people with suspected ties to the AA ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 9). Clashes between the AA and the Tatmadaw, therefore, mounted, with battles

sometimes extending over several days ([Mizzima](#), February 9). In early April this year, the AA warned that if the Tatmadaw continued to interfere in its administration, then fighting would escalate ([Development Media Group](#), April 5).

In June, the AA not only rejected a junta invitation to join peace talks, but also revealed that the AA was in touch with the National Unity Government (NUG), which is the anti-junta shadow government comprised of legislators of the deposed NLD government and representatives of ethnic groups and activists ([Myanmar Now](#), June 15). The conflict escalated sharply in July when the Tatmadaw launched aerial strikes on AA bases. Air strikes and shelling by the Tatmadaw in Rakhine state increased in the months thereafter, even as the AA attacked and even captured Tatmadaw bases ([Mizzima](#), October 13). However, amid this escalation in fighting the two sides finally agreed upon a second ceasefire.

Both the junta and the AA stand to gain from the ceasefire. It provides fighters on both sides with the time and space to regroup and replenish their weapons. During the first ceasefire, the AA was able to consolidate its control over territory through its administrative mechanisms and it is now keen “to re-establish the control it lost in recent months.” [3] As for the junta, it does not want to deal with another front in Rakhine State at a time when the armed resistance to the junta’s rule is intensifying across the country.

Conclusion

The ceasefire between the junta and AA may not hold ([The Irrawaddy](#), December 7). Not only may both sides seek to disrupt the others’ period to replenish supplies and fighters, but also roads and waterways that were to be reopened as part of the ceasefire to facilitate travel and the transport of relief supplies remain closed, which is a sign of mistrust ([Myanmar Peace Monitor](#), December 1). The AA has warned that if the Tatmadaw does not end blockades and travel restrictions in Rakhine State, it will walk out of the ceasefire. As for the Tatmadaw, it will watch the AA’s next steps with regard to collaborating with the broader anti-junta resistance. Should the AA join hands with the NUG and the other anti-junta rebels, the junta could soon return to hostilities against the AA.

Whether or not to work with the NUG, meanwhile is a difficult decision for the AA. While weakening the Tatmadaw is in the AA’s interest, its past experience with the NLD government, which previously designated the AA as a terrorist organization, will now make it wary of co-operation with the NUG. Foreign powers like India and China, which have invested heavily in Rakhine State, will also put pressure on both the junta and the AA to keep the ceasefire alive. Whether the Tatmadaw and the AA respond to that pressure remains to be seen.

Notes:

[1] Relations between the NLD and the military on the one hand and the NLD and the Arakan parties on the other were deteriorating rapidly in 2020. It is likely that the military pushed for a ceasefire with the AA to pave the way for elections in the Rakhine state that would undermine the NLD’s presence in the state and national parliament ([Mizzima](#), July 21).

[2] Author’s Interview, Indian businessman based in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, December 10, 2022.

[3] Ibid

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