



Women Peace Network<sup>1</sup>

July 2019

## CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE CONFLICT IN RAKHINE STATE

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### Concerns

After displacing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Rakhine State, the Myanmar military has engaged in yet another round of mass violence in the state. Civilians from all ethnic communities in Rakhine State are suffering as a result of the current conflict between the military and the Arakan Army (AA) and conditions could deteriorate further. Women Peace Network would like to highlight the following concerns:

1. **Violence and abuse toward local communities.** The Rakhine State government estimates that the conflict between the AA and the Myanmar military has led to the displacement of around 7,800 people since December 2018, but Human Rights Watch estimates the number to be as high as 33,000.<sup>2</sup> The military is indiscriminately targeting civilians, including people from Buddhist ethnic groups residing in Rakhine State, namely the Mro, Khami, Daingnet, and Rakhine, as well as the Rohingya.<sup>3</sup> Extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture by the military is commonplace in Rakhine State: The targets are mainly Rakhine men of fighting age, but some women and civilians from other ethnicities have also been targeted.<sup>4</sup> In early April, Myanmar security forces shot and killed six civilian Rohingya boys and men who were cutting bamboos in Rakhine State.<sup>5</sup> In early July, the military allegedly detained and interrogated around forty villagers from a village in the state.<sup>6</sup> Looting of villages is also widespread.<sup>7</sup>
2. **Critical conditions for civilians.** Civilians are suffering from increasing food and water insecurity due to the authorities' blockage of food supplies and humanitarian aid to some parts of Rakhine

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<sup>1</sup> Women Peace Network is a Myanmar-based organization founded by a group of Rohingya women in 2012. It is dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of women from marginalized communities in Arakan State and elsewhere in Myanmar and empowering them so that they can enjoy justice, equality, and peace.

<sup>2</sup> Ye Mon, *The Arakan Army and the 'storm of the revolution,'* FRONTIER MYANMAR (Mar. 29, 2019) <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-arakan-army-and-the-storm-of-the-revolution>; *Myanmar: Deaths in Army Custody Need Independent Inquiry*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (May 6, 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/06/myanmar-deaths-army-custody-need-independent-inquiry>.

<sup>3</sup> *Myanmar: Fresh evidence of violations amid ongoing military operation in Rakhine State*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: MYANMAR: ARMED CONFLICT (Feb. 11, 2019) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/myanmar-fresh-evidence-violations-military-operation-rakhine-state/>; Amnesty International, *No One Can Protect Us: War Crimes and Abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine State* 8 (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *No One Can Protect Us: War Crimes and Abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine State* 8 (2019).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> ဘူးသီးတော့မိန့်နယု ကံပူပင်ကော်း(ရှာသား ၄၀ ကော်းအား တပေတော့က ဝေခယုစုစုဆေးခေ့, DEVELOPMENT MEDIA GROUP (July 2, 2019), [https://www.dmgburmese.com/သတင်း/kanpyin.html?fbclid=IwAR2aKv0c85tav9hd5McpdAMhfOeBFswatij2XzqfFtG\\_QkkPWih4PxNczL8](https://www.dmgburmese.com/သတင်း/kanpyin.html?fbclid=IwAR2aKv0c85tav9hd5McpdAMhfOeBFswatij2XzqfFtG_QkkPWih4PxNczL8).

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, *No One Can Protect Us: War Crimes and Abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine State* 8 (2019).

State since early 2019.<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Transport and Communications ordered an internet shutdown in parts of Rakhine and Chin States on June 21.<sup>9</sup> Since then, the internet has been blocked in these designated areas, and communities affected by the conflict have very limited information regarding ongoing crossfire and other dangerous situations occurring outside of their immediate vicinity.<sup>10</sup> This shutdown has also burdened humanitarian agencies that operate in disaster-stricken areas and rendered contemporaneous reports of human rights violations extremely difficult.<sup>11</sup> Rakhine State has so far not been included in the zone of the unilateral ceasefire declared by the military in December 2018.<sup>12</sup> The Myanmar military is drawing upon its infamous “four cuts” strategy once again to make life unlivable for civilians. This strategy, which consists of “cut[ing] off food, funds, intelligence, and recruits in locations where insurgents were said to be operating,” has been used by the military for decades against ethnic civilian populations.<sup>13</sup> Similar tactics were also recently used against the Rohingya in the “clearance operations” of 2016 and 2017 to devastating effect.<sup>14</sup> The situation could further deteriorate in the coming months.

3. **Perilous Situation for Rohingya in Rakhine State.** Although the 2017 “clearance operations” against the Rohingya have long since ended, the Rohingya have continued to flee to Bangladesh to escape violence in Rakhine State.<sup>15</sup> It thus seems that voluntary and secure repatriation and resettlement of the Rohingya population to their homeland will be almost impossible under current conditions and the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh and in “displaced person” camps in Rakhine State will continue. Moreover, the AA insurgency may provide an opportunity for the military to further attack the Rohingya and Rakhine populations. Representatives from the Myanmar government and military have previously suggested links between AA and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a much smaller and newer resistance group claiming to represent Rohingya interests.<sup>16</sup> An AA spokesperson denied any links, stating that they do not cooperate with ARSA, which he called a “terrorist group.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, such alleged connections might serve as a pretext for the Myanmar military to commence further attacks.

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Beech and Saw Nang, *The Government Cut Their Internet. Will Abuses Now Remain Hidden?*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, (July 2, 2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/world/asia/internet-shutdown-myanmar-rakhine.html>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, *Internet Shutdown Risks Lives*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (June 28, 2019) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/28/myanmar-internet-shutdown-risks-lives>.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, *No One Can Protect Us: War Crimes and Abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine State* 12 (2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic, *LEGAL MEMORANDUM: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in Eastern Myanmar*, 25 (November 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Richard C. Paddock, *For Myanmar's Army, Ethnic Bloodletting Is Key to Power and Riches*, *The New York Times* (Jan. 27, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Daniel P. Sullivan, *Abuse or exile: Myanmar's Ongoing Persecution of the Rohingya*, REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL, 4 (April 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Ye Mon, *The Arakan Army and the 'storm of the revolution'*, FRONTIER MYANMAR (Mar. 29, 2019) <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-arakan-army-and-the-storm-of-the-revolution>

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

## *Recommendations*

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All communities in Rakhine State deserve to live in peace without threat of violence or persecution. The Myanmar military and government therefore need to fundamentally change their tactics. Women Peace Network calls for:

1. The immediate cessation of the killing, arbitrary arrest and detention, and all other forms of abuse against civilians.
2. A peaceful resolution to the conflict between the Myanmar military and the AA.
3. Protection of civilians and access to conflict areas for human rights monitors, including the establishment of a UN OHCHR office.
4. Political dialogue between all stakeholders, including Rohingya representatives.
5. Accountability for human rights violations and international crimes committed by all parties in Rakhine State.
6. Voluntary, safe return of all displaced persons, including all internally displaced persons and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and other countries, to their places of origins, and the guarantee of favorable conditions upon return and continued protection of vulnerable communities.
7. Recognition of the right of Rohingya to full citizenship and the human rights of all people residing in Myanmar.