

Open Letter to the President and the State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Regarding the Internet Shutdown in Seven Townships of Rakhine State and Paletwa Township of Chin State

From Arakan Political Parties, Civil Society Organizations and Media

Date: June 19, 2020

Dear Mr President and Madam State Counsellor,

1. We are humbly writing this letter to you bearing in mind that as Myanmar continues to transition from military dictatorship to democracy, this is a time when efforts are still being made to bring about national reconciliation, sustainable peace and economic development. As the motto “People matter most” suggests, we believe that these aims could be achieved only with the full participation of all the ethnic nationalities and citizens of our country. Freedom of speech and access to information about such crucial aspects of life for the citizens as the economic, social, education and health care matters are the cornerstones of democracy. In today’s world, access to the internet has become essential for all citizens, and it has thus been recognized as a key democratic standard.

2. The Internet has been shut down in Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Kyauk Taw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Buthidaung, Myebon townships in northern Rakhine State, where approximately 800,000¹ people including Rakhines, Khamis, Mros, Chakmas, Dainets, Maramagyis, Kamans, Hindus, Muslims and Christians live, and Paletwa Township in Chin State. The shutdown has been imposed by the instruction of the Ministry of Transport and Communications due to the “disturbances of peace and use of internet services to coordinate illegal activities.”²

3. It is the local populations who are bearing the brunt of armed conflict. Currently, there are an estimated 160,000³ internally displaced people, which constitutes nearly 20% of the total population in the area, and they are struggling to make a living, having been forced to flee their homes and livelihoods. Without access to the internet, local populations are finding it increasingly difficult to exercise their rights such as the right to humanitarian assistance, health care, education and economic services. On 21 June 2020, the internet shutdown enters its first year. We are deeply saddened to see that the economic, social, educational and health care needs of the people continue to go unmet right on the watch of the NLD government, which is taking the lead in democratic transformation of the country.

¹ The total number of populations in these eight townships combined is 1,078,207 according to the 2014 Myanmar population and Housing census. It is estimated that the total number of forced migrations to Bangladesh from Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships is about 300,000.

² Telenor Myanmar, “Network shutdown in Myanmar, 21 June 2019”, <https://www.telenor.com/network-shutdown-in-myanmar-21-june-2019/>

³ Number of war affected Internal Displaced People -IDP issued by Rakhine Ethnic Congress (REC) on June 20, 2020

4. Therefore, in order that citizens may fully exercise their rights and internally displaced people may access desperately needed humanitarian assistance, your government may live up to basic democratic values by action and with the intention of aiding in your endeavor to bring about national reconciliation and peace in the country, we the undersigned, comprised of 3 political parties, 71 civil society organizations, 3 media organizations and 2 individuals, take the liberty of sending you this open letter.

5. The internet ban, imposed by the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, is proving to be ineffectual on the ground. The period June 2018 to May 2019, prior to the internet shutdown, saw a total of 129 clashes and during the period June 2019 to May 2020 following the internet shutdown, the number of clashes increased to 273, which clearly demonstrates that the shutdown has not calmed but inflamed the situation.⁴ The number of civilians killed and injured due to the conflict has been mounting. During the period from December 2018 to December 2019 spanning 13 months, 199 civilians have been injured and 101 killed. The short period spanning from January to May 2020 saw 151 civilians killed and 344 injured.⁵ Therefore, the internet shutdown, far from serving its original purpose of maintaining order and protecting lives and property of the people, has only had detrimental consequences for them. Lifting the internet ban, however, would serve the people by helping protect their lives and property.

6. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Sadly, local people are being denied this fundamental human right. In addition, as the websites of local media outlets have been blocked and their editors face charges under the Unlawful Associations Act, the ability of local and foreign journalists to gather information is being severely curtailed. As a consequence of this, local populations cannot access timely information, nor can they fully exercise their freedom of expression, which undermines public trust in the government’s endeavour to promote human rights and bring about national reconciliation and peace.

7. Section 349 of Chapter VIII Citizen, Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Citizens of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), guarantees that “Citizens shall enjoy equal opportunity in carrying out the following functions:

- a. public employment;
- b. occupation;
- c. trade;
- d. business;
- e. technical know-how and vocation; and

⁴ Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, “Annual Peace & Security Review 2018”. These numbers of incidents are estimated based on MIPS’ Peace and Security Monthly Brief and monthly dashboard of Burma News International (BNI)’s Myanmar Peace Monitor Website <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org>. In reality, the number of incidents may be higher than this.

⁵Radio Free Asia (RFA), “Civilian casualties in Rakhine and Chin States”, 2:00 pm, May 30, 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/rfaburmese/photos/a.10150522560153128/10159991451308128>

- f. exploration of art, science and technology.

Much as the government has the constitutional right to suspend, by decree, certain rights of citizens in the time of foreign invasion or insurrection, it is of vital importance that local authorities, Members of Parliament and the media have internet access to obtain and disseminate timely information in order that properties and personal integrity of citizens and ethnic nationalities including the IDPs, women and children and people with disabilities and their right to humanitarian assistance could be protected. The longer the government-imposed internet ban remains in place, the stronger the public sentiment that the government itself is persecuting the people.

8. As this part of the country has become the poorest region as a result of decades-long military rule, employment opportunities are extremely scarce. The young and the able migrate to neighbouring countries in search of jobs and they support their families back home by means of remittances, which is greatly facilitated by the availability of internet services on both ends. However, the outbreak of armed conflict and the internet ban have upended lives and disrupted these remittances, further aggravating the precarious existence of many impoverished families. Compared with other states and regions, Rakhine State ranks at the bottom in terms of educational attainment with 81% of the population having attended only primary education or below.⁶ Despite State Counsellor emphasizing the need to build the country by developing human resources, young people of this region cannot avail themselves of all the resources available on the internet such as studying subjects of their interest, attending online courses and applying for scholarships. Therefore, internet access must be restored sooner rather than later in order to avoid all the unnecessary negative consequences.

9. In May 2020, State Counsellor announced the “No one Left behind Policy” to combat Covid-19 in the country. The policy states that health related information will be sent to everyone through the short message service (SMS). However, unlike those in other parts of Myanmar, communities in northern Rakhine State and Paletwa Township in Chin State cannot access the the Facebook live programmes, where the state counsellor and officials from different government departments educate and inform public about Covid-19, nor can they join other Facebook and Viber groups created by the government for similar purposes. Informing the public in these areas through only the SMS is hardly adequate, which means they are poorly educated about the deadly Coronavirus. Nor do they know how to protect themselves against the virus. Civil society organizations are doing their best to raise public awareness about the disease, however, restrictions on their movement are severely limiting the effectiveness of their work. People in these areas are not even informed about Covid-19 cases which have been discovered in their vicinity such as Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. We would thus like to notify you that your policy of leaving no one behind is in fact leaving behind those in Rakhine and Chin states.

10. Therefore, with a view to bringing about national reconciliation and long-lasting peace, maintaining law and order and promoting human rights and citizens’ rights regardless of their

⁶ The United Nations Development Programme. “Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Socio-Economic Report.” February 2020. www.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/Publications/mlcs-2017-socio-economic-report.pdf

racial or regional origins for equitable development for all regions, we call on you Mr President and Madam State Counsellor to:

- a. Immediately end the internet shutdown, which has been in place for one full year now,
- b. Relax movements of NGOs and INGOs in order that the IDPs, who have been displaced by war, could access adequate humanitarian assistance,
- c. Drop all the Unlawful Associations Act charges against editors of local media outlets and reinstate internet access to their websites and
- d. Allow local and international journalists unlimited freedom to gather information in order that citizens of Myanmar and the international community may learn about the situation in Rakhine and Chin states.

Respectfully yours,

Political Parties

1. Arakan National Party (ANP)
2. Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)
3. Arakan Front Party (AFP)

Civil Society Organizations

4. Arakanese Students' Union (Universities of Rangoon)
5. Literature Garden (Buthitaung).
6. Rathedaung Township Youth Network
7. Rakhine Youth New Generation (RYNG)
8. Mro Youths Development Organization
9. Rakhine Women's Initiative Organization (RWIO)
10. Mrauk-U Youths Association (MUYA)
11. Force of Life Association
12. Kan Htaung Gyi Youth New Generation
13. Green Lives
14. Ohnn Taw Charity Foundation
15. Thandar Runthwee Youth Charity Association
16. RamBray Youth Network (RYN)
17. Students' Union of Taung Goke Degree College
18. Maramagyi Youths Network (MYN)
19. Chakma Youth Network
20. Taunggoke Youth Network
21. Charity Youths Organization
22. Ann Youth New Generation
23. Rakhine Women Network (RWN)
24. Maungdaw Township Karuna Network
25. Myat Dana Blood Donation Association
26. Rakhine Social Network

27. Youth's Force
28. Western Gate Humanitarian Relief Association
29. People for People (PFP)
30. Rakhine Ethnic Congress (REC)
31. Peace and Development Initiative (PDI)
32. Community Empowerment and Resilience Association
33. Myanmar Youth Network for Humanitarian Relief Organization
34. New Youth Generation
35. Mayyu Runthwee Humanitarian relief Association
36. Ko Bakker and his Partners Foundation
37. Rathedaung Township Humanitarian Relief Association
38. Rakhine State Persons with Disabilities Association
39. Kyauk Taw Funeral Relief Association
40. Kyauk Taw Social Network
41. Maygga's Force
42. Gentleman Social Development Association
43. Kyaukphyu Rural Development Association (KRDA)
44. Mro Ethnic Literature & Culture Association
45. Ponnagyun Development Youth Organization (PDYO)
46. Khami Force Group Foundation
47. Future Light Education Cater (FLEC)
48. Women Empowerment Organization
49. Taung Goke Social Network
50. Rakhine Social Network (Thandwe Beach)
51. Holding Hand Social Network
52. Our Land Our Water Organization
53. Farmer Union of Ann Township
54. Rakhine Social Organization
55. Thingaha Helping Hand Organization
56. Rambree Township Development Organization
57. Ar Rakha Organization
58. Rakhaing Women's New Generation Association
59. Arakan National Network (ANN)
60. Western Gate Youth (WGY)
61. Mayyu Region Charity Organization
62. Arakan CSO Network (ACN)
63. Tin Tun Aung Social Welfare Organization (Paletwa)
64. Arakan Club American Center (ACAC)
65. Wan-Lark Development Foundation
66. Ramree Blood donation Association
67. Arakan Students' Union
68. Myanmar Nationwide Arakan CSO's Network

International Arakanese Associations

- 69. Arakan Information Center (USA, Malaysia, and Thailand)
- 70. Arakanese Community-Vancouver (Canada)
- 71. Arakanese Community (India)
- 72. Arakanese Community (Australia)
- 73. Arakanese Community (Bangladesh)
- 74. International Campaign for Arakan

Media

- 75. Narinjara News Agency
- 76. Development Media Group (DMG)
- 77. Arakan Journalists Association (AJA)

Individuals

- 78. Thein Tun Zan (USA)
- 79. Than Zaw Maung (Mrauk-U)

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