

Myanmar Risk: Very High/Ongoing

The risks of atrocities remain very high in Myanmar amidst the continuing global COVID-19 pandemic. Despite calls by the UN Secretary General for cessation of hostilities around the world, hostilities between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups in northern Rakhine continue. Over 250 civilians have been killed and injured 570 others in Rakhine between December 2018 and May this year. Most deaths were due to stray bullets, artillery fire, or killed while in military custody as fierce battle between the Arakan Army and military forces escalated in 2018 and 2019. More than 250 civilian homes were burned in May alone, which injured many civilians even as the Tatmadaw conducted air strikes and used heavy weapons against insurgents.¹ Although the Myanmar military declared unilateral ceasefire vis-à-vis other ethnic armed groups, it rejected ceasefire proposals from Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic armies composed of the Arakan Army (AA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).² In April, outgoing UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar Yang-hee Lee called for investigation of Myanmar's military for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Rakhine, even as she accused the Tatmadaw of disappearing, killing, and torturing AA suspects as well as blocking aid and stopping injured civilians from reaching hospitals.³

Meanwhile, with the onset of the monsoon season and the threat of pandemic, a number of Rohingya refugees took to the sea by boat and attempted to reach Indonesia and Malaysia. Since the start of May, Malaysian authorities have prevented 22 boats carrying 396 illegal immigrants that included Rohingya refugees. In April, Malaysia also prevented an attempt by a trawler carrying 200 Rohingyas from entering the country even as Bangladesh authorities rescued another 400 Rohingyas who were stranded at sea for two months after they were refused entry by Malaysia.⁴ Since the start of the pandemic, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, which number over 180,000, have been the object of hate speech and incitement. A number of local and international humanitarian organisations working for the protection of Rohingyas in the country have petitioned the Malaysian government in April to take steps to stop the proliferation of hate speech and threats of violence against the Rohingya community, activists, and their supporters.⁵ With at least 29 confirmed COVID-19 cases among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazaar, Malaysia and other countries in the region are likely to continue closing their borders to these people.

Recommendations:

¹ "Civilian Death Toll From Clashes in Myanmar's Rakhine Climbs to Over 250," Radio Free Asia online, 4 June 2020, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/clashes-06042020173131.html>, accessed on 8 June 2020.

² "Myanmar Army Rejects Cease-fire Proposal From Arakan Army And Allies," Radio Free Asia online, 2 June 2020, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ceasefire-proposal-06022020180245.html>, accessed on 8 June 2020.

³ Agence France Presse, "Outgoing UN rights expert calls for investigation into Myanmar military," Mizzima online, 30 April 2020, from <http://www.mizzima.com/article/outgoing-un-rights-expert-calls-investigation-myanmar-military>, accessed on 1 May 2020.

⁴ "Malaysia: Boat Carrying Rohingya Allowed to Land on Langkawi Island," Radio Free Asia online, 8 June 2020, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/malaysia-rohingya-06082020193704.html>, accessed on 9 June 2020.

⁵ "Stop violent threats against Rohingyas: Rights bodies to Malaysia," United News of Bangladesh (UNB) online, 11 May 2020, from <https://www.unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/stop-violent-threats-against-rohingyas-rights-bodies-to-malaysia/51430>, accessed on 8 June 2020.

1. Myanmar government should comply with its responsibility to protect vulnerable populations in Rakhine by providing assistance to internally displaced civilians who are caught in the crossfire between Tatmadaw and insurgent forces.
2. Myanmar and the international community should hold the Tatmadaw accountable for continuing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Rakhine. Myanmar should also comply with the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in January in protecting the Rohingya in Myanmar.
3. Malaysia and other ASEAN member states should rescue Rohingya refugees at sea and provide humanitarian assistance as they enter their borders. They should also take steps to prevent hate speech and incitement against the Rohingya community.