

Perceptions of Everyday Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar



Photo: UNDP

Executive Summary

This is the first of a two-part series of policy briefs to explore community perceptions of and coping strategies for violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. This policy brief examines years of civilian-targeted violence that occurred in central and northern Rakhine. At its core, the Rakhine conflict is an asymmetric conflict involving the national military (Sit-Tat) and factions of several local ethnic insurgency groups, prominently the Arakan Army. Contestation to assert local control across Rakhine has exposed the population of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to different facets of violence. This ranges from direct violence attributable to armed clashes to subversive forms of violence rooted in systemic discrimination and a culture of hostilities targeted at certain ethnic groups. Discussion with respondents reveals a population in distress, losing hope and feeling isolated.

Acknowledgment

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Overview

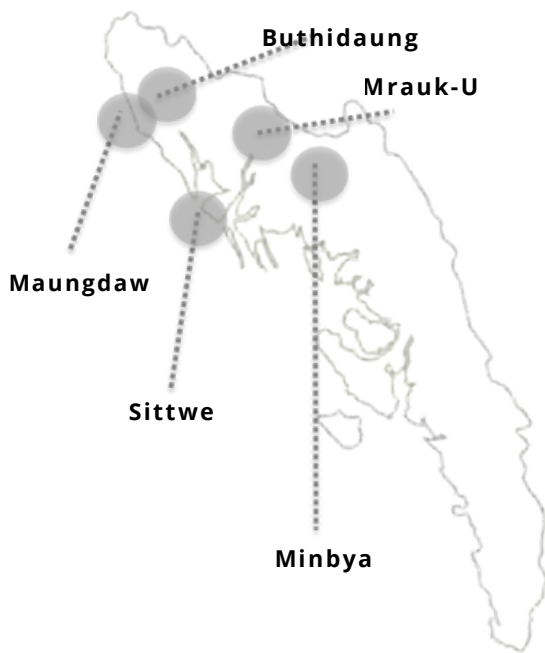
In Myanmar, region-wide violence has become a recurring experience for those living in conflict-ridden Rakhine state. In the span of two decades, there were at least three human rights crises that sparked violence across the region: the 2012 sectarian conflict between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in northern Rakhine [Burke, 2016], the 2016-2017 mass persecution of Rohingya people [United States Department of State, 2019], and the intermittent armed campaign between Myanmar's national armed force (Sit-Tat) and the local ethnic armed group Arakan Army (AA) [Hlaing, 2023].

Alarmingly, these crises have never been fully resolved but linger as the common drivers of likely violence in the future, thus creating the sense of 'neither war nor peace' for communities living in the region [Kramer, 2021]. The short periods of peace have furthermore been unsustainable due the short-lived ceasefire agreements enabling them. The first publicly known hostilities between AA and Sit-Tat took place in 2015. Since then, the parties have made at least two ceasefire agreements, but each lasting for less than 12 months only [International Crisis Group, 2020; Myanmar Now, 2022].

There were also attempts to halt conflict through unilateral truce declarations by the state forces, but these only brought a period of peace for less than 6 months [BBC, 2017; Radio Free Asia, 2018]. Moreover, it is worth noting that despite being framed by the Sit-Tat as its early attempt at a nationwide armistice, the declaration of truce in December 2018 did not include the AA among the parties it sought to negotiate a nationwide ceasefire agreement with [Nyein, 2019].

This policy brief is the first of a two-part series that explores community perceptions and coping strategies regarding the violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In this policy brief, we examine the violent events in Rakhine that have emerged since January 2015—the period of armed hostilities between Sit-Tat and AA—in the context of everyday violence encountered by civilians. We then identify the armed actors and their role in the different forms of violence (i.e., direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence) [Galtung, 1969]. We also reflect on how years of exposure to violence have distinctly affected local ethnic communities in the region.

The second part of the policy brief series will then provide a case study of the local conception of nonviolent protection in Rakhine State, Myanmar, by emphasising unarmed civilian protection (UCP) as part of the thriving protection strategies in the region.



Methodology

The research project started in October 2022. 28 local research volunteers were involved in collecting in-field data from over 200 local civilians, while also providing iterative feedback on some of the project's research decision-making (i.e., finalising research instruments, deciding data collection strategies, and contextualising collected responses). Data collection activities were conducted in five Rakhine townships—Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Minbya, Sittwe, and Mrauk-U—for three months, from March to May 2023 (and later extended to June due to operational hurdles caused by Cyclone Mocha in May 2023).

The project's respondents were given the opportunity to participate in a single or both of the offered data collection exercises, namely a semi-structured interview and artwork elicitation. Diversification of data collection methods was intended not only to explore the prospect of researching nonviolent protection beyond interviews, but also to encourage respondents' agency to determine the medium of information suitable to their personal preference and safety [Clark, 2021; Fairey et al., 2023].

For the interviews, the local research volunteers worked with several prompts centred around themes such as the role of armed actors in the respondents' vicinity, their violent encounters with armed actors, and how the community has reacted to the local violence, if applicable. Meanwhile, respondents who opted for art-based research were invited to participate in two artwork elicitation tasks: to draw a series of prompts into a panel of art-based narrative (storyboard) and to draw different shapes representing their different hierarchies of values based on assigned prompts (life domain method).

By the end of the data collection period, we gathered about 106 art-based research responses along with 102 interviews from 172 male and 37 female respondents. The discrepancy in the numbers of female and male respondents is a result of prioritizing the trust networks of consented volunteers to be interviewed by our research volunteers. Collected responses were analysed through content analysis, ensuring we could identify data-driven trends or themes among responses, while acknowledging the experiential depth of each single response. Local researchers were also tasked to translate the original transcript from Burmese to English with priority put on preserving the literal meaning, while also shedding light on the contextual meaning of the text where necessary. All these steps were deemed necessary to ensure proper alignment with academic standards and evidence-based advocacy.

CONTEXT

State of Violence in Rakhine State

Decades after its independence in 1948, some administrative areas in Myanmar remain perilous, known to be hotbeds of armed conflict between the Sit-Tat and the insurgency groups operating within the areas. One of those areas that became the centrepiece of this research project is Rakhine State. Formerly known as Arakan State, Rakhine State is located in the western part of Myanmar and is positioned as a bordering state between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The region is divided between central and northern areas, with the latter being slightly less economically developed with a higher frequency of reported violence incidents. While the 2021 military coup d'état sparked a series of civilian-related violent incidents associated with anti-coup protesters, this violent experience is largely seen in major urban areas in Myanmar populated by majority-ethnic Bamar people, such as Yangon and Mandalay [Bynum, 2021]. Seeing this as a 'Bamar fighting Bamar' issue, Rakhine people were initially refraining from taking any position in these anti-coup protests [Thawngmung and Paw, 2024].

The early hesitation to take part in what is dubbed the 'nationwide' civilian disobedience movement against the State Administration Council (SAC) demonstrates a potentially different conflict undertone experienced by Rakhine people. It can be argued that the conflict in Rhakine is driven by a number of unresolved grievances from before the February 2021 coup. Such grievances touch upon matters of ethnic violence and racial injustice, questions of inclusion and exclusion, and for certain ethnic groups matters of access to citizenship rights [Mckay, 2019, 12]. These issues are intrinsically unique to the Rakhine status quo, as it is demographically home to multiple ethnic groups with diverse religious ties. For context, the region is home to at least eight ethnic groups, seven of which are formally recognized by the government as Myanmar's ethnic nationalities (*taingyintha*, i.e., the Rakhine, Khamee, Mru or Mro-khimi, Thet, Chakma, Maramagyi, and Kaman), and the Rohingya, who are single-handedly excluded from said list [Burma Library, 2015].



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

Considering the formal status of ethnic nationality is conceptually linked to the enjoyment of citizenship rights under the 1982 Citizenship Law, the underlying assumption being that any of the excluded ethnic groups, which in this case is that if the Rohingya Muslims, may be more prone to non-national prejudice and its perceived violent treatments [Bain, 2015, 5].

“Understanding the role of ethnic exclusion is necessary to understand the history of systemic violence in Rakhine state.

Hence, understanding the role of ethnic exclusion is necessary to understand the history of systemic violence in Rakhine State. In the span of two decades, there were at least three human rights crises that sparked violence across Rakhine state: the 2012 sectarian conflict in northern Rakhine [Smith, 2013], the 2016-2017 mass persecution of Rohingya Muslims [Human Rights Council, 2018], and a series of mass displacements caused by armed hostilities stirred by Sit-Tat and the local ethnic insurgency groups such as the Arakan Army (AA) and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

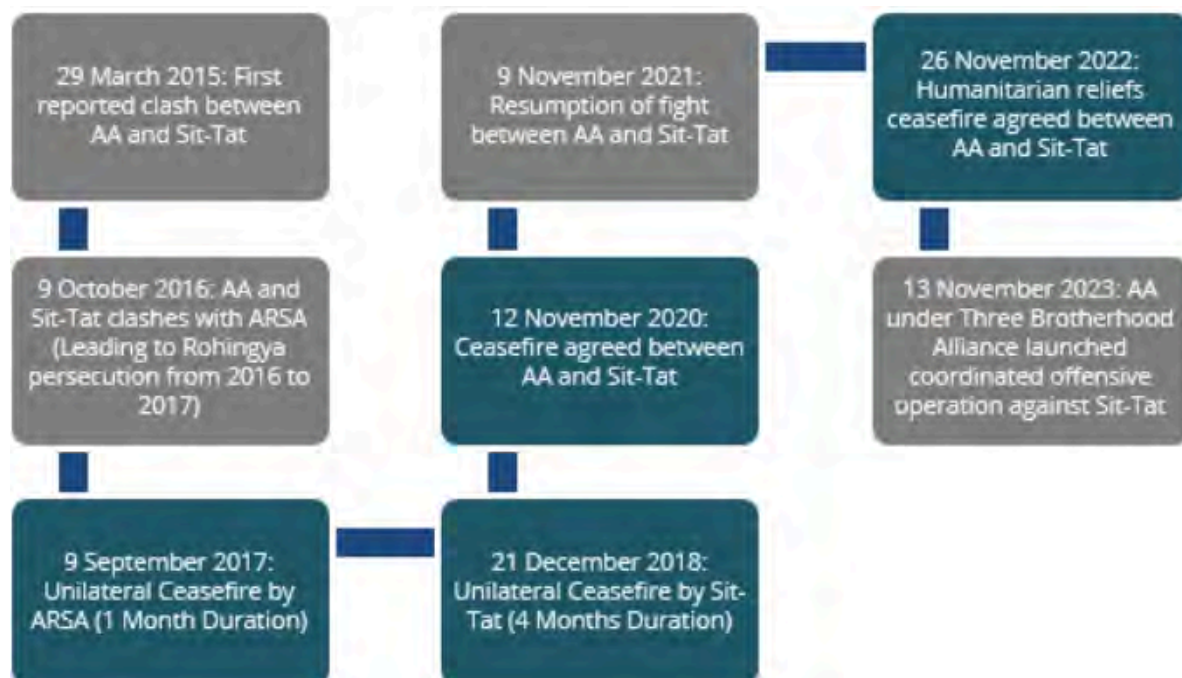
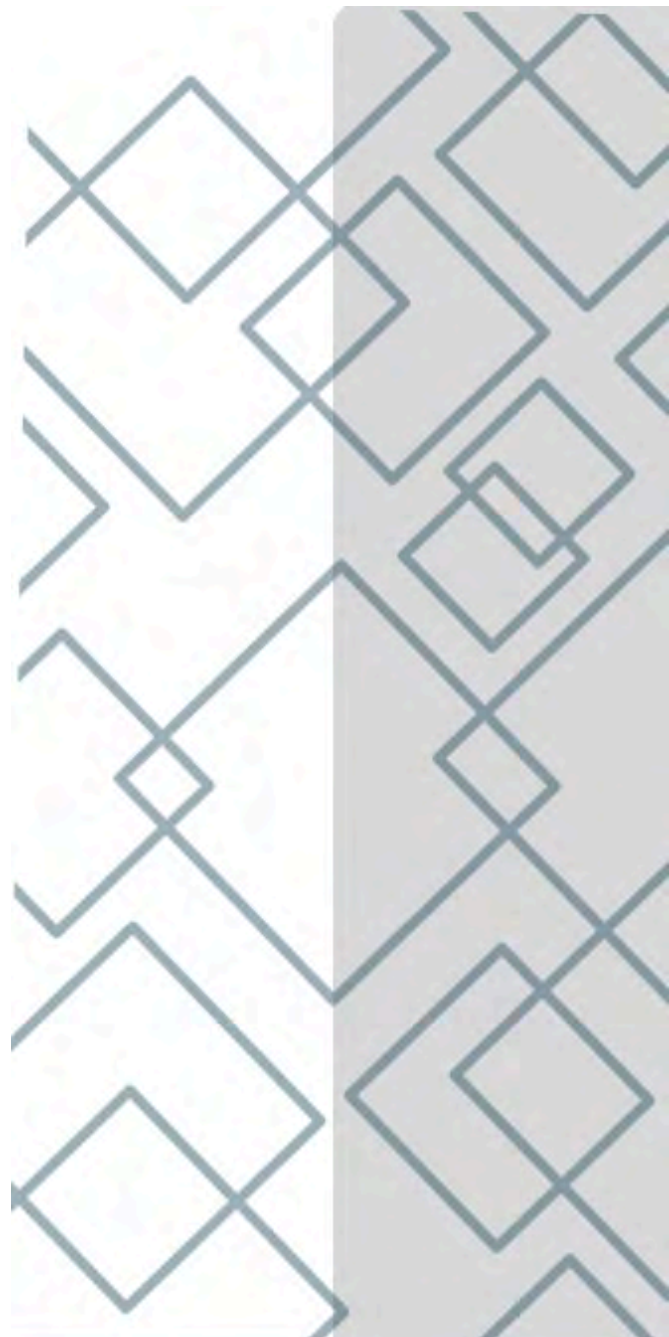


Figure 1 - Rakhine's Timeline of Violence and Ceasefires between Sit-Tat and local EIOs

The deeply embedded patterns of civilian violence caused by ethnic disunity are made worse by the local armed conflict recurring in the background. As shown by the timeline above, the tension between Sit-Tat and the local ethnic insurgency organisations (EIOs) initially started in 2015. Based on the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) database on violence incidents from January 2015 to May 2023, an aggregate of 139 events of violence was reported per annum in five major Rakhine townships: Sittwe, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Buthidaung, and Maungdaw. Some years reported significant numbers of violent events higher than the others, especially during active conflict periods in 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2022 [ACLED, 2024].

More recently, following the announcement of the AA counteroffensive operation in November 2023, the violent situation in Rakhine state has been constantly evolving at an accelerating pace. As such, when reading this brief, it is important to understand that much of the factual evidence presented in the brief is derived from the data collection phase and iterative discussion with the local volunteers throughout the first half of the project timeline, or roughly the first six months of 2023. As such, there could be gaps or potential inconsistencies between the information established in the report and the circulated news throughout November 2023 and onwards.



Local Armed Actors

The Rakhine conflict is described as a period of armed struggle involving Sit-Tat—the umbrella term used to describe Myanmar’s three branches of the military: the Army, Navy, and Air Force—and multiple ethnic insurgency groups. The first notable one is the Arakan Army (AA) and its corresponding political arm United League of Arakan (ULA). The groups share the ideological pursuit of restoring Arakan sovereignty to the Arakan ethnic communities in Rakhine [[Hlaing, 2023](#)]. By 2021, the groups had established a sizeable military presence of 15,000 troops to maintain territorial control in Chin and Rakhine states [[Graceffo, 2024](#)], hence directly challenging the presumed authority of the SAC and the Sit-Tat. The strong military presence of SAC in Rakhine also explains the noticeable absence of post-coup resistance movements such as the People’s Defence Forces (PDF). While ULA-AA never publicly opposed the presence of the PDF in Rakhine [[Clapp and Hein, 2023](#)], it also has never openly endorsed the legitimacy of the National Unity Government (NUG) [[Jap and Liu, 2024](#)], the civilian-led shadow government cabinet that many PDF movements consider as the legitimate authority of the central government.

Other EIOs, which are less prominent but often cited in local violence incident reporting, are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). The first group, which previously identified itself as Harakah Al Yaqeen, or the faith movement, seeks to liberate the often persecuted Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine [[Salehin, 2024](#)]. The RSO is another self-proclaimed Rohingya liberator with a history of associating itself with the Rohingya community since 1982 [[Olney and Ahmed 2024](#)]. In contrast to ULA-AA, both groups have maintained minimal to no territorial control in the region. Both instead carry out their operations within the Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine or abroad, such as in Cox’s Bazaar District in Bangladesh, one of the largest refugee camps housing Rohingya refugees [[McPherson, 2017](#)]. ARSA in particular gained its initial traction by claiming to have organized the attacks of 25th August 2017 on 30 police outposts in Northern Rakhine [[Kaladan Press Network, 2017](#)]. This violent incident was later claimed as the government’s premise to declare ARSA a terrorist group [[Lee, 2021](#)]. It was also inadvertently used as justification by Sit-Tat’s policy to resume the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya population, which started in October 2016 on the basis of a counterinsurgency campaign [[US Department of State, 2018; 2](#)].



Photo: Voice of America

Local Unarmed Civilian Actors

Rakhine is one of the regions in Myanmar with known multicultural presence. The majority of the civilian population consists of the Rakhine ethnic group, who are predominantly Buddhist and share cultural ties with the Bamar majority in Myanmar. However, the state is also home to a significant Muslim population, prominently of a Rohingya ethnic background, a minority ethnic group that has faced longstanding issue of statelessness, discrimination, and forced displacement. Other ethnic communities, such as the Kaman (a recognized Muslim ethnic group), Chin, Mro, and Thet, contribute to the region's cultural diversity. The demographic distribution varies across urban and rural areas, with Sittwe, the state capital, serving as a key administrative and economic centre.

As one of the designated conflict regions that continuously received humanitarian support from the international community, the presence of third-party NGOs and CSOs in the area is known by the local civilian population. While actively offering humanitarian support, these groups have also noticeably kept a low profile to avoid risk of violent encounters with the local armed groups - unless deemed necessary to proactively protect civilian populations. One example of such an organisation is the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) that promotes proactive civilian protection engagements in Myanmar and other countries. The organisation works with local CSOs, including those from Rakhine State, to identify local civilian protection needs and has in the past also played an active role in training local civilian conflict or ceasefire monitors, who monitor and act upon violent incidents during ceasefire periods across the country.



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

Between ULA-AA and ARSA, the former has been regarded as the predominant belligerent group in the local fights for secession, supported by the de facto political administration of ULA and active military records of the AA, which predate AA's first armed hostilities with Sit-Tat in 2015. From 2015 onwards, periods of peace in Rakhine has been rather sparse, with only two mutually confirmed ceasefire periods (12 November 2020 and 26 November 2022) and another two being declared unilaterally by the belligerent groups. These proclaimed peace periods were also short-lived, with no truce adhered to by both parties for more than 12 months [International Crisis Group, 2020].

When asked about the people or institutions in power to enforce 'rules' in their areas, the respondents identified two prominent armed groups. First, the State Administration Council (SAC), a cabinet name of the military-backed central government, which the locals referred to as the upper authority behind the national military (Sit-Tat), Border Guard Police (BGP), and the other allied armed agencies. The second prominent actor is the Arakan Army (AA), the military branch of the ethnic political organization United League of Arakan.

Respondents are relatively mixed concerning who holds the power to enforce rules. Those from Sittwe mostly view SAC as the sole governing authority in their areas, which not only imposes local rules but also collects taxes and manages civilian complaints, including facilitation of due process. Conversely, those living in Minbya and Mrauk U see AA as an authority—the de facto ruler. Then there are locals in Buthidaung and Maungdaw who separately recognize the two armed groups as the 'formal' rule enforcers in their areas. Meanwhile, a handful of Buthidaung respondents held the minority view that another ethnic armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, might also actively operate and enforce rules in their areas.

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Armed groups have separately employed violence or the threat of violence to force compliance of civilians.

Groups' premises of imposing violence can also be observed in the interviews. In the second part of the interviews, respondents were invited to recount how the armed groups have employed violence or the threat of violence to force compliance of civilians. The methods vary from barring citizens from gathering in groups, restricting travel without permits, and tax levies to smooth business deals, to merely showcasing the force of authority. In the stories shared by the Rohingyas, respondents mentioned their experience of being harassed by either AA or Sit-Tat. In addition, the Rohingya respondents are noticeably more descriptive, recounting the incidents in their stories with both armed groups.

"The SAC released an order of curfew where people cannot go outside ... and cannot meet five people together in one place. The police arrested some Rohingya people with no reason at the time and took money, and some people were jailed. [...] The government-related department took tax based on [business] activities. For example, shop tax, homestead tax, farmland tax. The tax has to be paid one or two times per year. Sometimes the government officials forced us to pay more extra tax. We will be punished if they do not pay the tax. [...] The SAC law enforcement and military also have a checkpoint in the area. They check the documents and often create different reasons to extort money.

Male Rohingya, NGO worker, Sittwe (Interview No. 12, April 2023)

The armed group [AA] blocked the easier road in our area and they [later] built a new road through the area where they are staying and then built a checkpoint on their road to check the people. Sometimes they take photos of the people who go through their road. They do not let people go to the mountain to cut wood and bamboo and do not issue permits even when people around here already face difficulties with their livelihood."

Male Khamee, Teacher, Buthidaung (Interview No. 19, April 2023).

Do note that the violent conducts of AA and Sit-Tat claimed by these respondents are a mix of first-hand accounts with variations of hearsay or observation through local news outlets. Hence, separate violent monitoring endeavours need to be made to confirm the information's validity.

Different Types of Local Violence

The notion of violence in Rakhine state is multifaceted. As we collected respondents' views on local violence from 2015 (the first known hostile encounters between AA and Sit-Tat) onwards, we learned that local violence in Rakhine does not merely revolve around clashes between the armed actors. Instead, it expands into different cycles of violence, affecting civilians at different times, through different means, and in different places. A practical starting point to understand this condition is by referring to Galtung's (1969) extended conception of violence. According to this, there are three dimensions of violence: direct, structural, and cultural.

Direct Violence

Direct violence is the manifestation of action or behaviour by a subject, the perpetrator, that could visibly cause harm or distress to the object, the victim. Under Galtung's (1969) theoretical framework, analysis of direct violence involves one's own 'actual somatic realisation' of who the victim is, who perpetrates the violent act, and through what means such harm was made [Galtung 1969]. In the Rakhine context, direct violence could be linked to any civilian-reported injuries caused by the armed clashes between Sit-Tat and the local EIOs (e.g., AA, ARSA, RSO, etc.) or premeditated violence carried out by these groups against the civilian population.

To varying degrees, most of the respondents are aware of instances of direct violence in their lives. They understand this by offering identifiers such as the affected victim(s) (e.g., themselves, relatives, or known members of the ethnic group), the perpetrator(s) of violence, and the anatomy of violence employed (e.g., pierced by bullets, crushed by physical altercation, or burnt by artillery shelling). Some respondents of Rohingya ethnicity were inclined to elaborate on their experience by describing the time and place the encounter took place. Others try to explain the violence's intensity using adverbs of frequency (e.g., sometimes, often, always) or by pointing out the events leading to the violent incident (e.g., assault may happen once soldiers enter the village, fighter jets may launch airstrikes during the nighttime, or harassment could happen during checkpoint inspection, etc.).



Rural residential areas such as villages or IDP camps are significantly exposed to direct violence in the form of indiscriminate attacks caused by the military's airstrikes. This is particularly the case if such residential zones are located in near proximity to checkpoints and military bases. Other than possibly dated aggregated data by Security Force Monitor (2018), there is no publicly disclosed information on the location of military bases released by either Sit-Tat or AA. Yet it is known by both volunteers and respondents that such military hotspots are spread across central and northern Rakhine, where each township could house more than one military base. For instance, in Minbya, the Sit-Tat maintains at least two large military camps, the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 379th camp and the IB 380th camp. In Mrauk U, the military operates border outposts in LIB 377th camp, LIB 379th camp, and LIB 540th camp. By contrast, fewer instances of direct violence were reported by participants living in the downtown area or the neighbourhoods positioned within the SAC-controlled region, such as Sittwe.

Reasons for direct violence are also seen differently by the different ethnic groups. Local groups with Buddhist ethno-religious backgrounds (e.g., Rakhine, Khamee, Chakma, Mru, and Maramagyi) consider violence as the consequence of the armed contact between Sit-Tat and AA, while also emphasising the role of the former as the main perpetrator of the civilian-targeted violence in their respective townships. Under such a premise, potential interruption or continuation of violence is tied to the public knowledge of the relationship between Sit-Tat and AA, usually made formal by a ceasefire agreement.

Rohingya respondents, on the other hand, see their violent encounter as going beyond the current and past tensions between the two armed groups. Their earliest accounts of civilian violence go far back as 2012, that is, the mass sectarian riots between the Rakhine Buddhist population and their [Rohingya] ethnic population. Some acknowledged the worsening relationships of these actors as signs of a more precarious situation in the future. Still, it rarely became the reason behind their exposed condition to violence. For them, the memories of violence started in 2012 during the sectarian crisis and hit the lowest point between 2016 and 2017 during the state-sponsored mass persecution of the Rohingya people. Since then, the cycle of violence has never truly ceased, regardless of the presence of a ceasefire agreed upon between Sit-Tat and AA.

Structural Violence

Less visible is the case of structural violence. It is violence without a clearly defined subject and object but that rather emerges from the different structures in society [Galtung 1969]. Galtung describes it as a state where people are deprived of the chance to organise and bring their power against the actors in power (or, in his words, 'top dogs'), making them vulnerable to the incoming act of violence. Hence, this concept of social restraint is usually observable in stories of exploitation, experiences of unfair treatment based on a civilian's identity, or any form of abuse of powers directed against the marginalised civilian population

From all the local ethnic groups, the Rohingyas immediately become a main exhibit of a community being conditioned to be vulnerable in various ways. The Rohingya community commonly views inspection at local checkpoints as a discriminatory practice that disadvantages them. Rohingya respondents recall seeing or experiencing themselves being distinctly stopped at the borders to receive further questioning, which, depending on the checkpoint, could be done by either AA or SAC. Once getting into such a predicament, respondents are convinced by the subsequent risks of being harassed, extorted, or directly arrested by the inspecting authorities.

Certain exploitative taxation also increases the likelihood of Rohingya locals being arrested. One respondent recalled a local order set by the AA in Buthidaung in 2018, which imposed an animal tax of approximately 20,000 MMK (10 USD) on every cattle sold for sacrifice in the Muslim ritual of Qurbani. Failure to comply with this tax scheme would lead to arrests, with the same respondent citing cases of arrest of at least four Rohingyas by the AA in Buthidaung under the claim of tax evasion.



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

Yet structural violence goes beyond the experience of the Rohingya population. As raised by ethnic Arakan Buddhist respondents, the ongoing conflict has restricted the space which civilians could safely traverse. Local forests, for instance, were frequently visited by the locals to gather bamboo, medicinal herbs, or timber to sustain their livelihoods. But occasional clashes in the areas have deemed the forest off-limits out of fear of stray bullets or interacting with unexploded mines or any other explosive remnants of war (ERW).

“The AA imposes tax in secret when we buy or sell something. For example, if I buy cows and buffalos and then transport them to my village. I remember I was stopped and asked to pay 5% of tax based on the price of the cattle I purchased. If I refused to pay that tax, they threatened to take it [the cattle] along with my other belongings.”

Male Rohingya, Community Teacher, Buthidaung (Interview No. 11, March 2023)

Using the exercise of Storyboard, as a safe-medium to communicate their opinion on day-to-day violent encounters, the respondents were instructed to describe, in painting, what they considered as a violent and somewhat unsafe situation. The exercise yielded some shared expressions of frustration for not being allowed to conduct their daily routines. For instance, some respondents expressed resentment for being barred from entering their local forest areas by either AA or Sit-Tat troops. On this, a few Rakhine respondents observed their fellow neighbours' insistence on entering forested areas as they are desperately low on money. While no casualties have been accounted for in said stories, there is a clear risk of violence in maintaining this conduct. By 2022, UNICEF, through the Mine Action Initiative, has tallied at least 39 landmine casualties in Rakhine, with 13 killed and 26 others severely injured [UNICEF, 2023]. Separately, Landmine Monitor Myanmar in December 2023 designated rural and mountainous areas across Myanmar to be ‘highly contaminated’ areas with landmines and ERWs [Yeshua Mosher-Puangsuwan, 2023]. As such, locals who desperately seek to hunt or forage in these areas are at high risk of becoming victims of indirect violence.

Some loosely implemented local orders have also catalysed subsequent violent encounters for respondents. An example of this would be the order to check overnight guest registration as required by Martial Law Order No. 3 of 2021. Under the law, civilians are required to register as overnight guests outside their registered place of residence. While on paper, the law is designed to monitor the presence of individuals who may compromise local security, in practice, the order is prone to abuse. SAC soldiers have been reported to exploit the order to legitimise household searches despite not having the formal competence to do so [Myanmar Now, 2021; Development Media Group, 2021]. As a result, stories of unwarranted search, extortion, and looting by visiting troops were commonly raised by the respondents, regardless of their ethnicity.

Cultural Violence

Another type of violence without clear attribution is cultural violence. This violence encompasses a prevailing attitude set to justify the use of violence (Galtung, 1990). The focus then is not to investigate every instance of violence akin to direct violence, but rather to see any enduring narrative used to normalise acts of direct violence or the very conditioning of structural violence. To observe this phenomenon, symbolic aspects of the culture—ideology, art, religion, etc.—were used as a framework of reference [Standish, 2015]. One of the most documented case studies on this relates to the hostile attitudes directed towards Rohingya, be it among AA and SAC or other local ethnic groups in Rakhine.

"Whatever we do, we can have nothing to influence the Rakhine communities. The Rakhine tell us we are illegal migrants, "Bengali," and insult us. The government does the same for us. We have no power to respond to the situation."

Male Rohingya, NGO Staff, Sittwe (Interview No. 12, April 2023)

To understand the Rohingyas history of local violence, we should briefly observe their history of origin. Historical discourse on their Burmese roots traced their existence in Arakan, or presently Rakhine, way back to the earliest Muslim settlement and the original population of Muslim converts in the region [Forster, 2011]. Whilst the claim has been echoed in studies on the emergence of Islam in Rakhine state [Charney, 2005], a minor assertion, which has been refuted on numerous occasions, deemed that they were migrant populations from Bangladesh mobilised by British colonisers to support its colonial labour industry in 1824 [Saw, 2011]. The challenged claim, however, persists. It has been further advanced by the government to identify the Rohingya as an ethnic group residing in the country only after the start of the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824 [Chessman, 2017]. Given how the 1982 Citizenship Law only grants citizenship to those ethnic groups living in Myanmar before 1824, Rohingya people are thus barred from advancing their citizenship claim.



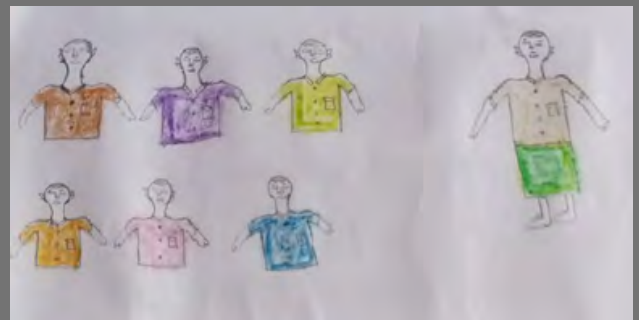
Photo: Murshid Khan

The claim inadvertently fuels years of xenophobic views of Rohingya in Myanmar that perceive them as a demographic threat to the existence of the Buddhist majority in the country. A public display of this sentiment could be observed since 2011 with a series of sermons prompted by extremist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu. In his years of delivering religious speeches, Wirathu openly endorsed anti-Muslim rhetoric and mob-directed violence against Rohingya people [TRT World, 2020]. While Wirathu's public sermon has been censured following his role in endorsing mass persecution of Rohingya people in 2017 [Gunasingham, 2021], his anti-Rohingya talking points thrived and evolved on today's social media platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, making Rohingya individuals prone to receiving online hate speech and threats of violence.

In the data collected, this norm-held justification for using violence was not immediately apparent. This attitude is potentially due to respondents' attempts to avoid less socially desirable remarks. Because of this, we turned to Rohingya respondents' narratives on other groups. There were indeed responses that indicated a less than favourable attitude toward the other groups. Statements such as "I do not get any help from other communities," "Other communities always hated Rohingya," or "Other communities discriminate against Rohingya" can be seen in a few of the Rohingya responses. Among these, one statement particularly highlighted this apathy towards other local communities:

"We feel very sad as we Rohingya are a minority group. Other people and the government do not recognise us as citizens; they insult us as Bengali, K—r (ethnic slur), so we feel angry. We feel very hurt in our minds when they hate us as Bengali and K—r. There is no freedom for us, and we are always facing violence physically and mentally."

Male Rohingya, Casual Labour, Minbya (Art-based Response No. 2, May 2023)



Violence and Changes in Everyday Lives

Years of armed conflict in Rakhine has profoundly disrupted the daily activities of the local population. Over the years unarmed individuals have been forced to prioritize safety over their routine tasks in times of peace. The warped sense of insecurity is further seen in the aftermath of the coup. Respondents predominantly expressed their fear of being separated from their families and the constant fear of seeing military presence in public spaces such as schools, hospitals, and houses of worship.



"Currently, I am facing so many troubles and stresses. The business cannot run normally as it is not easy to relocate somewhere. Now I am living here in an IDP camp where the density of population is very tight and there is no convenient access to education and health facilities."

Male Rohingya, Community Teacher, Sittwe (Art-based Response No. 11, March 2023).

Some prevalent responses to their emotional states are the sense of isolation and hopelessness. Upon further discussion, such a state of desperation was attributed to living factors such as the struggle to sustain a livelihood, the absence of government support to alleviate their hardships, or, for some younger respondents, the inability to pursue further education. Separately, other respondents expressed their frustration at being unable to relive their peaceful experience. Respondents of parental background described how in the past children were able to freely attend school or play together in public. Respondents of Rohingya ethnicity also emphasised distinguishable loss of livelihood options ever since the conflict broke out. One of them expressed his frustration as a Rohingya, whose farmland was confiscated and who was hence no longer able to achieve the degree of economic well-being he felt in the past.

"Before the conflict, I grew up on the farm, and when I can harvest its crop, I can earn some money, which I can use to fulfil my everyday needs. As I had steady income from agriculture, I had the convenience [to buy] anything. I had money to cover the cost of education for my children. I could even support my relatives who did not have a good income back then."

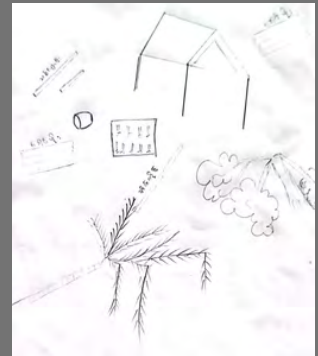
Male Rohingya, Farmer, Mrauk-U (Art-based Response No. 15, March 2023).



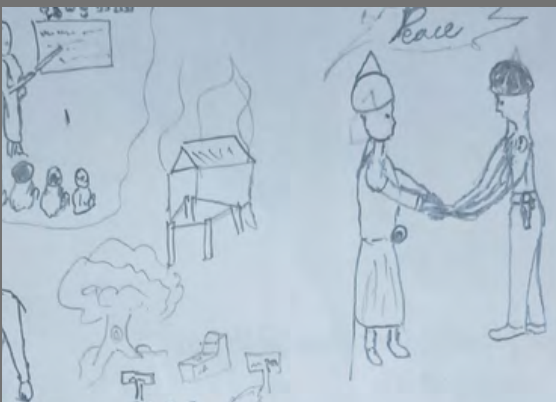
With regard to what is an unsafe situation, a recurring sub-theme among the respondents was to describe unsafe situations with a depiction of past violent events. This pattern could be seen across sketches illustrating the time when the village was burnt down, their imagery of civilians who got shot, or when they found out news about rising tensions between SAC and AA forces. An outlier to this is the reference to the situation surrounding the cyclone Mocha. In the responses we collected in May, some felt worries about their safety after cyclone Mocha by describing their damaged houses; some also expressed distress at not receiving government assistance or by the prospect of aid relief being interrupted after hearing news of aid workers being arbitrarily arrested by the SAC forces.

"Cyclone Mocha has completely destroyed my home again, which was partially damaged due to armed conflict. The roof was destroyed, and now it leaks raindrops in my home. It is not protected anymore from rain and wind. I feel unsafe and in a difficult situation now, so please help us."

Female Rakhine, Occupation Undisclosed, Mrauk U (Art-based Response No. 7, May 2023).



Another sub-theme we encountered was to associate violent and unsafe situations with images showing the process of displacement. This is prevalent among Rohingya respondents, who described their vulnerability living in IDP camps. For the Arakanese Buddhist respondents, there are recurring themes associated with violence in their interaction with armed actors, like seeing them entering the villages, witnessing nearby schools or monasteries being transformed into military compounds, or seeing ethnic minority groups being abused by the armed actors. Finally, parallel to the reply of respondents during the semi-structured interviews on little cues to predict looming fights, few respondents associated unsafe situations with situational or sensory details such as hearing the constant sounds of firearms, the burst noises of artillery shells, or seeing debris from the aftermath of armed contacts or landmine explosions.

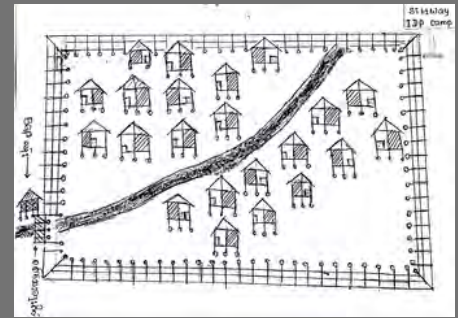


"Now, my life is like dead, full of difficulties when cyclone Mocha destroyed my home and I was cut off from the hardship allowance by the government. It feels hard to explain about my hard life. I feel sad as I am not with my parents when relatives go away in difficult situations. The price of commodities is only increasing."

Rakhine Male, Elementary School Teacher, Buthidaung (Art-based Response No. 19, May 2023).

There are so many unsafe and dangerous situations here. I think the people in the camp always feel unsafe because they did not sense any life improvement by staying in the camp: no clinic, no school, no peace; they cannot go wherever they want."

Male Rohingya, Community Teacher, Maungdaw (Art-based Response No. 1, May 2023).



As tangential as it may be, some of the artwork responses were also accompanied by specific visual cues. Artworks seeking to establish the author's emotional well-being often incorporated a portrayal of the self, either showing respondents in a standstill position or a headshot pose. When reminiscing, respondents tend to draw sketches of nature. The imagery could take the form of a whole landscape sketch or a partial object of nature, such as trees, flowers, or animals. Another defining feature is the incorporation of the main roads, which implies the convenience of past travel. Subsequently, illustrations of unsafe situations frequently coincided with artworks depicting a violent event—ranging from a sketch of someone injured or seriously wounded, dead bodies, or civilians being intimidated at gunpoint. Few would incorporate violent symbolism of graveyards or a liberal usage of red colouring to indicate bloodshed. Armed actors who are depicted as the perpetrators of violence were drawn with shared characteristics of wearing military attire, carrying guns or sharp objects, or being seen with military vehicles such as helicopters and fighter jets.



"As a school teacher, there is no safe place in this world, especially in Rakhine state. Whenever they go out of their home, nothing is secure. Armed clashes could have erupted anytime, someone is always at risk of being blasted by landmines, or the AA might shoot someone with life bullets [when we hide in the forest]. Such situations are called unsafe situations."

Male Rohingya, Elementary School, Mrauk U (Art-based Response No. 10, May 2023).

Conclusion

In terms of civilian encounters with violence, Myanmar citizens, including those living in Rakhine state, have lived amidst a widespread campaign of fear and violence. For years, armed violence has expanded from legitimised military targets of military bases or guarded military checkpoints to attacks on civilian spaces. At the centre of the region's conflict are the open hostilities of two forces, the Sit-Tat and the AA. Despite hostilities occasionally dying down with the enforcement of short-lived ceasefires, both armed actors have acted with a degree of impunity by resorting to abuse and intimidation to gain a tactical advantage over the civilian population in Rakhine.

From the respondents' point of view, violence against civilians is a means seen as necessary by armed actors to restrict the powerless, unarmed people from empowering themselves against direct and structured violence. This was apparent from the various schemes of public restriction. We recall the stories of the ban on gathering in groups, the loose interpretation of overstay laws, and the blockage of natural economic resources. To condition the civilian population into an impoverished and vulnerable state should not be the strategy to secure their unwavering support for the armed groups, be it under AA or SAC/Sit-Tat banners.

The consequence of the longstanding hostilities between the AA and the SAC/Sit-Tat is not only the creation of a perpetuating cycle of military and political violence on civilians, but also that the population has been left short of sustainable livelihoods and access to essential public services. As such, any initiative for nonviolent protection should consider people's limited resources and their vulnerabilities in developing their self-protection measures.



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the core, both Sit-Tat and AA should take responsibility and be accountable for their roles in instigating everyday violence against civilians in Rakhine state. The ‘tug-of-war’ to maintain the de facto authority of Rakhine cities should not be carried out solely by showcasing military strength. Both parties should take decisive action to redress different types of violence caused by the local presence of their troops. Sustainable support from the local population only thrives once authorities are willing to exert tangible measures to examine and further recognise civilian harm and losses. We therefore make the following recommendations:

- **Respect for humanitarian law to protect civilian lives.** It is important for local and international observers to constantly reiterate the Sit-Tat obligation, as the military extension of the SAC, to respect international humanitarian law. From a legal standpoint, Myanmar is bound by the Geneva Conventions that offer degrees of legal protection to civilians in times of armed conflict. This duty to preserve unarmed civilian lives should also be extendable to the AA, given the fact that it actively operates as an authoritative insurgency group within Rakhine state, controlling parts of its territory.
- **Encouragement of proactive civilian harm monitoring.** In the asymmetric warfare between Sit-Tat and AA, civilians are equally, if not more, prone to being victims of direct violence, with both parties exercising minimum restraint to conduct military operations in civilian-populated areas. Regardless, unconventional uses of warfare do not justify disproportionate harm suffered by the local civilians. As such, Sit-Tat and AA should openly collaborate with communities in areas they respectively control to track and monitor civilian harm, both the numbers of casualties and the approximation of property losses. This paves a much-needed starting point to develop a grievance mechanism for those civilians subjected to violence, whether it is in the context of direct, structural, or cultural violence.
- **Recognition of the vulnerable nature of local ethnic minorities.** Years of systemic discrimination faced by Rohingya and Kamen due to their religious and ethnic ties have left them bearing the highest risk of casualties in Rakhine’s internal armed conflict. Rohingya people currently face renewed hostility from the AA and the locals supporting them for their forced conscription into Sit-Tat military units. Simultaneously, their assumed ‘stateless’ status has made their attempt to escape ever more challenging compared to the other local ethnic groups.

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