

## Is Myanmar Unraveling? Security Fallout of the Current Insurgent Actions in Myanmar

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### **Introduction**

The ongoing civil unrest in Myanmar has intensified with the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), the tripartite military alliance made up of Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army (AA) is gaining the upper hand and seizing control of different towns from the military.<sup>2</sup> Operation 1027 has so far been effective as it has changed the course of the war and resulted into the surrender of the military in many places or in some cases, they backed away and found shelter in the neighboring country. The junta regime, in response, has become more aggressive; however, their strategy of counter-insurgency has not proved fruitful. The effect of this civil war is not limited to the border of Myanmar; rather, it has spread to its neighboring countries, especially Bangladesh. Besides, there are international stakeholders, such as China and India who playing a significant role in this war. In recent times, due to increased activities, the Rakhine state is in focus.

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<sup>2</sup> "What Is Myanmar's Three Brotherhood Alliance That's Resisting the Military?," Al Jazeera, January 16, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/16/what-is-myanmars-three-brotherhood-alliance-thats-resisting-the-military>.



*Source: The Irrawaddy*

This article will first analyze the heightened activities of the 3BHA and the response from the government with a particular focus on the Rakhine state. Secondly, it will focus on the international stakeholders and their response in this civil war. Lastly, it will discuss about the impacts on Bangladesh and how these events are playing a role in the bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

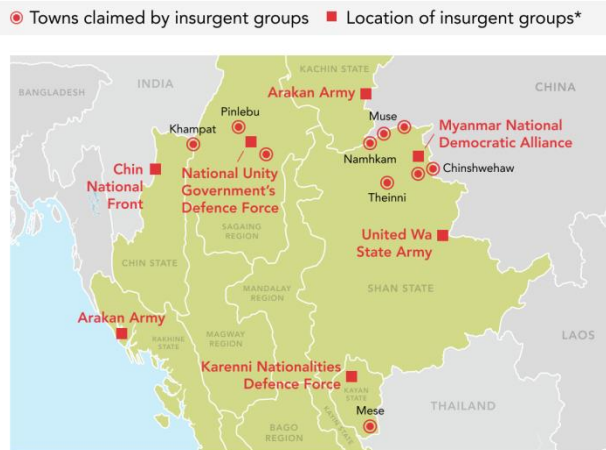
## **The insurgent movement of the 3BHA and the responses from the government**

The 3BHA's aggressive response to the military regime of Myanmar that conducted a coup back in 2021 and has withdrawn democracy from the country has marked a new era of pro-democratic movement in Myanmar. Each of the three allies on the 3BHA has their own goals and interests, for example- the Arakan Army (AA) is fighting for the sovereignty of Rakhine, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army's (MNDAA) vision is the autonomy of the Kokang people. The alliance of these parties with more than 50,000 soldiers has enabled them to capture villages like- Hpawng Hseng, Pang Hseng and Hsenwi. Lashio which is the biggest town in Shan state is also under the rebel attack. The rebels have caused destructions in bridges and highways that connected China with Myanmar and as a result, the civil war is hampering the trade routes of Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "What Is Myanmar's Three Brotherhood Alliance That's Resisting the Military?," Al Jazeera, January 16, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/16/what-is-myanmars-three-brotherhood-alliance-thats-resisting-the-military>.

### Locations of offensive fronts and rebel-controlled towns



Source: Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

The MNDA and TNLA have taken control of the Northern Shan state. The alliance has also collaborated with the People’s Defense Force (PDF) that has increased the strength of the alliance. “The Arakan Army has captured 5 towns out of the 16 in Rakhine state and one is in its neighboring Chin state.”<sup>4</sup> The increasing conflict is directly affecting Bangladesh and India due to their close proximity.

In November 2023, the military has undergone their first defeat under the Operation 1027.<sup>5</sup> Their responses against the pro-democratic parties are brutal. Since the initiation of the Operation 1027, the military have not only targeted the troops of the 3BHA, but there are also reports of attacking the civilians, targeting hospitals, schools and religious institutions. As a result, as of the end of January, according to Al-Jazeera, 4,400 people have been killed and 20,000 people have been detained by the military. The junta, at the same time, claims that their opponents have killed more than 6,000 civilians.<sup>6</sup> The junta has extended the emergency rule to another 6 months which has delayed the national elections of Myanmar. As a result, the number of the displaced people keeps rising. According to the United Nations, more than 2 million people have been

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan, “Dealing with Myanmar’s Civil War Requires Delicate Deliberation,” The Daily Star, February 14, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/dealing-myanmars-civil-war-requires-delicate-deliberation-3543511>.

<sup>5</sup> “What Is Myanmar’s Three Brotherhood Alliance That’s Resisting the Military?,” Al Jazeera, January 16, 2024

<sup>6</sup> “Myanmar Military Extends State of Emergency, Vows to ‘Crush’ Opposition,” Al Jazeera, February 1, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/31/myanmar-military-extends-emergency-rule-for-another-six-months>.

displaced as of February.<sup>7</sup> Thus, with the aggressive moves of the ‘insurgents’, the junta government has chosen the path of brutality in response.

### **Rising Tensions in Rakhine**

The violence in Myanmar has moved further west to Rakhine which is the domain of the Arakan Army (AA). After 18 days of the initiation of Operation 1027, AA broke the ceasefire that was made earlier with the State Administrative Council (SAC) and started fighting for the complete independence of the Rakhine state. AA has tried to capture four major cities: Pauktaw, Ramree, Mrauk-U and Minbya.<sup>8</sup> AA has captured weapons like artillery, rocket system and other heavy weapons. This has enabled them to fight the junta regime fiercely and thus, they have captured all of northern Rakhine. One of their most significant activities was to capture Paletwa which is a river port city.



*Source: Fulcrum: Analysis on South East Asia*

Besides, the AA has also attacked naval bases like the Danyawaddy Naval Base. The aggression from the AA has forced the SAC to go defensive in Rakhine and as a result, SAC has deployed huge amount of military in Rakhine. There were airstrikes from the government which has resulted in the displacement of more than 50,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Out of the roughly 100 battles that

<sup>7</sup> “Myanmar Military Extends State of Emergency, Vows to ‘Crush’ Opposition,” Al Jazeera, February 1, 2024

<sup>8</sup> KYAW HSAN HLAING, “New Battlefield Emerging in Western Myanmar,” FULCRUM, February 19, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/new-battlefront-emerging-in-western-myanmar/>.

<sup>9</sup> Zachary Abuza, “Battles Raging across Rakhine Have Big Ramifications for Myanmar and Its Neighbors,” Radio Free Asia, January 27, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/myanmar-rakhine-01272024103343.html>.

have been fought in Rakhine, 40 of those were “fierce battles”.<sup>10</sup> This includes the fierce battle between the AA and the junta in Ramree where the junta conducted airstrikes which killed many civilians.<sup>11</sup>

Not only it has affected the government’s position about Rakhine but it has implications in the overall civil war in Myanmar. The fierce battles have shifted the junta’s attention towards the Rakhine state while they need to concentrate on other regions too, such as the Shan state. But the AA has kept them busy in the Rakhine which has been impacting the overall scenario of the civil war. At the same time, the battles in Rakhine have also altered India’s and China’s position in the war.

It is noteworthy that although the AA is fighting with MNDAA and TNLA with the alliance of the three groups who are fighting against the junta and are in favor of establishing democracy in Myanmar, the AA does not want democracy in the Rakhine state. Rather, they want to establish a one-party state in Rakhine. The political wing of the AA which is the United League of Arakan has eliminated all of its rivals and showed no interest to share power with any other party.<sup>12</sup>

### **The International Stakeholders and their Positions**

**China:** China has long been engaged with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) of Myanmar. In 2016, China established ties with three EAOs.<sup>13</sup> Also, recently, China has mediated talks between EAOs and the junta. China has a lot of interests in Myanmar including their gas and oil pipelines and to protect them, China served in interest by mediating between EAOs and the government.

The Chinese project in Myanmar covers almost 800 kilometers and includes 2 pipelines. It goes from Kyaukpyu port to the northern borders of Shan state reaching China.<sup>14</sup> Although China has huge vested interest in Myanmar, the country has not played any significant role in the ongoing

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<sup>10</sup> KYAW HSAN HLAING, “New Battlefield Emerging in Western Myanmar,” FULCRUM, February 19, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> “Myanmar Junta’s Assault on Rakhine Escalates with Devastating Bombardment,” Dhaka Tribune, January 22, 2024, <https://epaper.dhakatribune.com/epaper/details/88469>.

<sup>12</sup> Zachary Abuza, “Battles Raging across Rakhine Have Big Ramifications for Myanmar and Its Neighbors,” Radio Free Asia, January 27, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan, “Dealing with Myanmar’s Civil War Requires Delicate Deliberation,” The Daily Star, February 14, 2024

<sup>14</sup> Laura Zhou, “China, Myanmar Renew Hopes for Kyaukphyu Deep Water Port under Belt and Road Plan,” South China Morning Post, December 29, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3246551/china-myanmar-revive-hopes-bay-bengal-deep-water-port-kyaukphyu-under-belt-and-road-initiative>.

civil war except attempting to make a ceasefire which has not yet worked out. Any resolution in Myanmar would need the support of China.

**India:** India also has significant stakes in Myanmar. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is a hugely invested project. India has invested almost half a billion already in this project. The transport project would “connect the Indian seaport of Kolkata to northeast India’s Mizoram state via Sittwe and Paletwa ports.”<sup>15</sup>



*Source: The Print*

This project would enhance India’s connection with South East Asia. But the project is “almost dead” after the Arakan Army (AA) has captured Paletwa township. Thus, the activities of the AA are heavily affecting India’s interest in Myanmar.

**Bangladesh:** Bangladesh has been feeling the heat of the civil war in Myanmar and even directly getting affected because of it. Two individuals were killed in the Ghumdum union of Bandarban by stray mortar shells coming from Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> Again, 330 members of the Myanmar army entered Bangladesh seeking refuge which increased the burden of the country that is already burdened with more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees.<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh successfully repatriated those military personnel to Myanmar. Bangladesh’s interest is basically lies in what happens to the Rakhine state.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan, “Dealing with Myanmar’s Civil War Requires Delicate Deliberation,” The Daily Star, February 14, 2024

<sup>16</sup> “2 Killed inside Bangladesh by Myanmar Mortar Shelling,” The Business Standard, February 5, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/2-killed-mortar-shell-myanmar-lands-bangladesh-border-787602>.

<sup>17</sup> “330 Enter Bangladesh from Myanmar in Five Days,” The Business Standard, February 8, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/330-enter-bangladesh-myanmar-5-days-789546>.





*Source: India Today*

Bangladesh's concerns are the refugees, asylum seekers, the concerns in Rakhine and how to negotiate and renegotiate with Myanmar. Although the government of Bangladesh does not want to support any insurgent groups, Bangladesh may need to open a channel with the AA for their long term interest. At the same time, Bangladesh needs to engage more with Myanmar and Myanmar does not mean the Myanmar government only, rather the other stakeholders who are related to Bangladesh's interest in Myanmar. Lastly, despite Bangladesh was engaged in talks of repatriation of the Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has not yet used any national power yet. Bangladesh can use its political power and engage in negotiations and talks with India and China.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing conflict in Myanmar may have taken a twist in the recent days and the burning question is- will Myanmar crumble or not. Considering the situation so far, the answer is no, Myanmar will not crumble. The fall of the northern Shan state does not mean the fall of entire Myanmar. Tatmadaw will remain the central power in this conflict and among the international players, China will play the central role. Bangladesh will be facing the consequences of this civil war further because of its close proximity. Also, from the Bangladesh side, there is a growing concern if Myanmar wants to engage in a war with Bangladesh. That would bring new dynamics in this ongoing crisis. About the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, they may share the same fate as the Palestinians. The lack of democracy for a longer period can be resulted into severe challenges and Myanmar is a glaring example of that.