

CAS is an independent, non-partisan and research-oriented group conducting research and analyzing issues related to Arakan Affairs.



An Arakan National Party Supporter (Photo/Development Media Group)

Table of Contents

<i>Key Remarks</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Arakan Politics is in Freeze</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Economic Livelihoods are under challenges.</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Local People are at risk of Livelihood.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The Junta Forces to Return Displaced People</i>	<i>8</i>

This paper is a part of Monthly Arakan Review Series, published by the Center for Arakan Studies (CAS) which seeks to monitor the situation on ground socially, economically, and politically in Rakhine State, aiming at a better understanding of Rakhine/Arakan affairs.

Key Remarks

- While the junta's forces and Arakan Army (AA) are now in an informal truce, the news of the registration of the political parties in Rakhine have become more prominent in March. As the two-armed parties are in a lack of trust toward each other, the reinforcements of the military force and silent confrontation become the affairs of politics. For example, neither the junta has a clear date for its sham election, nor the ULA has a decisive stand on election issues.
- The junta authority in Rakhine attempted to show the truce with the AA as a model for other parts of the country, especially for the ethnic armed groups. The repetitive visits of the junta chief to the state also showed off some political messages of so-called 'peace and development' in the region. The real changes in the local economic livelihoods are not yet seen now.
- Despite the trade and transportation relaxation after the informal truce in late November 2022, the junta imposed some restrictions on the movement of goods and commodities outside and inside the state, including for traders requiring the permission from the junta authority. Shortage of water due to the rising temperatures in the summer, on the other hand, becomes an issue for the local population.
- The junta authority attempted to engage in the relocation tasks of many thousand people in the Rakhine for all communities. Yet, the relocation of the domestic IDPs is questioned due to the lack of a security guarantee and the future livelihoods. Rohingya refugee repatriation from Bangladesh is, on other hand, still an uncertain task due to the lack of trust in the junta authority and other shortcomings.

Arakan Politics is in Freeze

During the month of March, the political news in Rakhine was mostly dominated by the affairs of the elections, the movement of junta forces and Junta leader's visit to Rakhine, the ULA/AA activities in the nationwide resistance as well as other noticeable issues such as restriction on the political freedom and affairs of the Rohingya community.

Firstly, at least six Rakhine based-political parties registered to contest for the Junta projected election¹. These parties, namely include Arakan Front Party (AFP) led by Dr Aye Maung, Arakan National Party (ANP), which was a key party in the previous elections in Rakhine and other small and ethnic minority political parties such as Mro Ethnic Party (MEP), Khami National Development Party (KNDP), Kaman National Development Party (KNDP), and Rakhine State National Unity Party (RSNUP).

“Being a minority group in Rakhine, we have little space to speak about our people. So, we need a legal political party to highlight our rights and challenges at the State level,”

The secretary of the Mro Ethnic Party told Narinjara News on March 25².

The ANP, the largest party of Rakhine, claimed that they have received overwhelming support from its party members at the township level that led the party leader to decide for party registration to contest for the sham election. However, there are also at least two parties: Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) and Daingnet Nationalities Development Party (DNDP) boycotted the re-registration and sham election.

On March 13, U Khin Ye, a chair of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) visited the southern part of Rakhine State to meet with his party members from seven townships: Kyaukphyu, Thandwe, Ann, Gwa, Taungok, Rambree and Manaung regarding the sham election³, while Mr. Chen Hai, a Chinese ambassador to Myanmar

¹<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid036ksSPZc3H2ghuxzNbfjB9H4cAXdHSpxduniy5YHv5r9h2XjTz5y7LY2SxxRqYkNYL/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid02d3x5C6baD1ogRrmJa7maT1YWVX4o7pTmf4zhDuUnizy2yKArug23G8Td32E86rYl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

³<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid0YzpOZro4JiJVeQMuwUZAyKk6AuCiyVbHKH7qKxH8dS3VwsqEpiAvotQjabpVziJl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

also met with U Soe Thein, a chair of the junta-appointed election commission in February 8 according to state-run media⁴.

Beyond the election issues, the junta authorities' reinforcements activities in Rakhine have fluently seen in Rakhine, which could probably lead a return to war, analysts said. Likewise, the junta forces in Kyauktaw township stored food items, and some thought it was a preparation for another war happening in other areas. At least Four Junta-Border Guard Forces are, on the other hand, said to defect toward the Arakan Army (AA) on March 6 in Maungdaw township⁵, whereas the junta authority has organized intelligence training for some Thandwe residents according to Narinjara news⁶.

In March alone, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, a junta chief, made a couple of visits to Rakhine state. On his visit, U Thar Tun Hla, a chair of the ANP, explained his view in local news⁷,

“In his previous visit, he said he came for the development of Rakhine State. We can say he is attempting to mobilize support in Arakan State.”

Apart from this, The ULA/AA presence in the FPNCC meeting could be seen while the AA issued a congratulatory statement on the 2nd year anniversary of the Magway Region-based People Revolution alliance (PRA-Magway)⁸. Other important news includes the split of ALP, the restriction on prisoner's rights by the junta authority and the local call for the withdrawal of the junta's military deployment from religious sites are also seen in this month.

Economic Livelihoods are under challenges.

The news related to the economic situation of Rakhine State in March is occupied by foreign investment issues, migration, rising prices of some commodities and agricultural sectors. For the sector of foreign

⁴<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid032qhqTJxoUbqbZCK6x4a2D7BGFmvT2Ko66h96fmSaC9h86kPvgLCqJSQUctr3NMCJl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

⁵<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0PmTxGo3jChyHhASTisJc8ekYsq5eQh4EuKcK1x1Wfj1BUkFXKPDdC9918tvd2WHfl/?mibextid=Nif5z>

⁶<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid02imBSKfx7Pxa21XQobVo5jCs5Vuq9mTE5CQG1vP8uHhZh4dtN6wsutYK7f8FNn6szl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

⁷<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid031rGYoQmMwoaANSRTfmw4eYxVBJHxAGBxeKRftjy34WN3BqS9HWMbY8XcDrkEreHl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

⁸<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbidorkEnyVt6sUWFa4pLjW2F2phosLfmiZMEq7tMucjkATHtCO8CU5xL2s5dzFrGZBVul/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

investment, Myanmar's junta and China governments are seen to jointly implement wind power projects in three townships of southern Rakhine: Ann, Thandwe and Gwa. In response to this, A local Gwa activist told the Development Media Group on March 14, stating the locals don't receive detailed information about the project.

“They went to conduct a survey in Daung Chaung, a settlement of ethnic Chin people, in the Rakhine Yoma mountains. We don't know the details⁹.”

And the locals have criticized that Chinese projects implemented under the junta could not benefit the Rakhine people. *“According to the guidelines, no specific provision is drafted in favor of Rakhine families even though the resources belong to their State. So, we expect no many benefits for local residents,”* A local analyst told Narinjara News on March 8¹⁰.

Similarly, the Develop Media Group reported on March 23, that Thailand has shown an interest in investing in rice milling and livestock farming in Maungdaw Township, northern part of Rakhine, bordering Bangladesh.

“Those projects sound great. However, we doubt if they can be implemented. Locals know nothing about the project. And Maungdaw is not that stable. So, we will wait and see,” a former township officer said¹¹.

Apart from this, over 100 Myanmar people, including many Rakhine imprisoned in Thailand, would be sent back to their original areas without prepared plans¹². And Rakhine workers who were set for release from Malaysia prison are seeking to contact the local families, and some are reportedly in bad health. The junta-run media propagandized that these Rakhine migrants were returning to home due to the Rakhine state

⁹<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0KGZkoGTrCp1c1RpDsS2WpxvqiGg69fcxNTzXpBcGbtYkIfA8q9o3zDaFMaiRnvKul/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹⁰<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid02jAfGC1aZA2YvCU64sQS2ZL9MxpAQuf3qnieSnZjC8zSPB1RUUaSk9YkX6oofp52wl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹¹<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0T3pumWhpJQLeHTpTxfwXFr6NqMnY9J5oBPCevPxWJH3Uqp2VEcYjhcUnh6Bvk4bFl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹²<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid02d6ZmiuPraPCXVrYndbk7XGKMTZqqx3LmMh2ie4APHFDJifo9GunnTwSjXSabEU2l/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

being stable and peaceful¹³. And there were at least two incidents in which Rohingya people who attempted to migrate into Malaysia were arrested in Gwa and Sittwe townships¹⁴.

In the agricultural-related news, Rakhine farmers have called on the regime to allocate reserve funds for agricultural development while the price of rice grains doubled, many Rakhine farmers were not getting benefits¹⁵.

“The fertilizer price has gone up as well as that of fuel. The farmers have to pay the interest on agricultural loans. So, no profit is left for them. However, the big farmers who could store rice grains are getting benefits,”

A local farmer told Development Media Group on March 2.

In overall, there have been cases including the registration affair of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), unlawful taxation by the junta soldiers, the rising price of commodities, shortage of fuel in some areas and the loan provision plan to the fishing community.

Local People are at risk of Livelihood.

The first day of March was covered by news about a man losing his leg in a landmine explosion in Rathedaung township¹⁶. Community insecurity is still prevalent consequently by the landmine explosion, social crimes, government repression and drug use. Unlike other parts of the country, Rakhine State, with no poppy fields or large-scale drug production, has seen the rise of drug business under the military council in the post-coup.

¹³https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02ZNtDx6wszqoMkjzeNj3ehTGSdv2wkvMXbqkQosbXi2arpiokCX3Hq5YUr4yujqKML&id=100087467443698&mibextid=Nif5oz&paipv=o&eav=AfZ6vWwMB6Qcrw-CkR2XOvScu_MXfVSoHNG9US4YIFfOw4v5Mv977RxQ-CEkOzh_koY&_rdr

¹⁴https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02GZdxwWoZVrUsnFER5fLZnDLUnsBGpCuK9kuMjBamQmc4G322FuWQ5ACmBuVqzue7l&id=100087467443698&mibextid=Nif5oz&paipv=o&eav=Afb_S85X-xfpmut4HRBIL-cD47Wq5heDB69vJPU1-54BM1dRE1st6q_2psPVHgEFq3w&_rdr

¹⁵<https://www.dmburmese.com/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84%E1%80%BA%E1%80%B8/tulnk.html>

¹⁶<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02FkfQ78swv310A2qNqH4tCRK7A2q87shFLDMwcaRsfH9tshaqRrxNCnzsLxnsYx3l/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

Locally known as ‘Asichay’ (small piece), the former price was at 1000 kyats per WY tablet, now dropped to around 500 kyats, causing far more affordable to be consumed by the local youths resulting in sequences of drug dealings and social crimes.

In spite of being an informal ceasefire in Rakhine, the military regime continues to impose tight checks at checkpoints along the Yangon-Sittwe road, where about seven checkpoints each passenger is scrutinized. Pharmaceutical deliveries are not permitted in a checkpoint in Ann Township unless there is prior approval from the junta’s security and border affairs minister at the state level.

Moreover, other various items, such as cooking oil, building material, furniture, electronic equipment, medicines etc., require the approval certificate. Even with an approval certificate, the large trucks transporting goods must pay some fees to the checkpoints along the Yangon-Sittwe highway¹⁷. This kind of unlawful taxation is also adopted by the junta’s maritime checkpoint in Paletwa township, Chin State, where approximately 40 tribal villages reside, putting the residents’ livelihoods into hardship.

“When cargo boats arrive from Kyauktaw in Rakhine state, they usually demand 500,000 kyats for each passage. If you pay the requested amount, they grant you permission to pass without any further issues. However, boats that refuse to pay may be delayed or prevented from passing through the checkpoint,” a boat owner said¹⁸.

Rakhine State council's plan, on the other hand, to extract underground water resources for the residents in Sittwe was widely covered by the local media. During his trip to Rakhine State, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing revealed plans to explore groundwater near Kandawgyi Lake with the use of modern equipment to ensure the lake always has water to provide a steady supply to wards in the town. Consequently, experts arrived in Sittwe during the first week of March to facilitate the extraction of

¹⁷<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid02VnWMD4WtGgJ6PeJEvJrbUUbRpVbRqEBZLEJYw4aWBP9LCZ3kjz5CbLgd94198PxQl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹⁸<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid024oHbeidBSzUbDjRnHHt1kxYchQniH4XwEAnP2CVQReJH4zxiRp5twgn59MgnHR9ol/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

groundwater, and the machinery needed to extract groundwater has also arrived in recent days¹⁹.

Similarly, the state council plans in Mrauk-U to pipe water from Anuma Lake into Let Sel Lake using pumps. Locals have, nevertheless, long complained about the quality of water supplied to households from Let Sel Lake. The two lakes are separated by an embankment, and some residents have called for demolishing the embankment to make the two lakes into one.

Locals have called on the regime to develop a lasting solution, rather than short-term fixes, to address the water shortage.

Furthermore, residents in Mrauk-U Township, whose farms were destroyed by the construction of a railroad linking Sittwe and Ann townships in Rakhine State with Minbu Township in the neighboring Magway Region, have demanded compensation for their farms²⁰.

In the education sector, the state-run matriculation exam for this year was held in March, and a total of 16,451 students sat for the exam in Rakhine for subjects including biology and economics, according to the Rakhine State Education Department. The inclusion of Mro literature in basic education schools is lacking in the ethnic literature sector. Hence, the community leaders establish self-learning schools for Mro ethnic children in villages in Maungdaw township²¹.

The junta-sponsored media- Rakhine Daily, on the other hand, reported the activities of the military medical team, which travels around Rakhine to provide free medical services, the arrest of the people on suspension of holding fake registration cards, and the murder and fighting among the residents in March.

The Junta Forces to Return Displaced People

In March, most of the issue in the humanitarian sector have been found that a large number of displaced people are forced to return home by the junta authority by both means of coercion and incentives. Since the informal truce between the Tatmadaw and the AA in late November last

¹⁹<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02i1d3cs9Hama4UtYFm9DcGP1tJEXBj1QnLsIUdBe2Xc7Dm2Pnfx6vZmhvBmYjipEl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²⁰<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0z1n5rStSi88Gogg7KFT4N5hYxAUgZ1pQbh9VkBgg1DKqBLupAG9LcwH2sVz5H6Lnl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²¹<https://www.facebook.com/151742128171206/posts/pfbid0X7ubSKvGKJCqA6RfN5ujWGUyDfEXbz6Bedn6nT2aYYzjKEhKwJiqQYSKEHpEmNifl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

year, some IDPs in various camps across the state have returned to their home, accounting for about 5,000, according to the local media on 4 March²².

Among them, there were over 200 from the township of Ann; more than 2,300 from Minbya; around 900 from Myebon; over 500 from Ponnagyun; and more than 800 from Chin State's Paletwa Township, according to figures released by the military council.

Later, about 3,000 IDPs of Kyauktaw township were compelled to return home on March 30²³. The junta authority gave the IDPs cash stipends ranging from K500,000 to K600,000 per household and food supplies for one month, telling them to return to their homes as peace and stability had ostensibly been restored²⁴.

"We are being forced to return home. We cannot go to our farmland due to the risk of landmines, so we are facing livelihood hardships,"

said Ma Zin Ngwe, an IDP returnee from Pharpyo Village.

About 2,000 IDPs sheltering in Samee town, part of Paletwa township in Chin State, have, however, been forcibly told by the regime to return home because the camps will be demolished by the end of March²⁵.

Despite that, residents of Tinma village in Kyauktaw township are not yet allowed to return home even though they have submitted repeated petitions to clear landmines and rebuild burnt homes in March 2020 for the sake of safety²⁶. The ULA/AA spokesman U Khaing Thukha, in a press conference on February 27, commented that,

"Without guaranteeing public security and social peace, forcing IDPs to return to their

²²<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02FJZqE7LR4wUgwEikRYnMEcPQJ27EaHTEp2us5SLaSpMoNgkRZwtokwDk3359Kqifl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²³<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02rpiV54CuBVTdj67MF4BzCBPDPj2v7ZuiaY9zxVQmkCGE6q44p4YkPPPh8zD26H7CHl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²⁴https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbidohgiiMVjhPupTpEnpcALza87uqbSXSmsjpcrFnGkoQcU5Udf8iADQM3N7Bmkuqmk&id=100087467443698&mibextid=Nif5oz&paipv=0&eav=AfYRx7arwxONy46LtKeMUJHesZBfaIZZdMrcoDDqicUqQlJ3XihqZ8fuVrSWwRyBVag&_rdr

²⁵<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0QLfqsEARW2cK7uEngNSSYzfEkqCjNZuMoF9BPnp7PaavvXtMo22pjWMaL7qTGjBql/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²⁶<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0xsAELpVvQPEmK8qVKv5EXu9xw0w3HBFJ8VrMZ5rHXZVprNvFATbf6EYtT3aQfnWl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

homes is causing more hardship to the people.”

The obvious and urgent force to return home and demolish the camps is assumed to be the regime's preparation for the forthcoming elections and attempt to show off to the international community. Besides, the junta has been silent on the issue of rebuilding homes that were destroyed by fire during the 2018-2020 fighting in Rakhine State.

At least 2,005 houses across 48 villages were destroyed by fire during the 2018-2020 fighting between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army (AA) in Arakan State and in neighboring Paletwa Township²⁷.

Interestingly, a foreign delegation comprising diplomats from China, India, and Bangladesh as well as representatives from the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance met in the second week with junta-appointed officials in charge of transit camps for Rohingya Muslim refugees in Maungdaw Township to observe the junta's preparations to bring back Muslims from Bangladesh.

They also visited camps for Rohingya internally displaced people (IDPs) in Sittwe on March 8. The regime's international cooperation minister, U Ko Ko Hlaing and Rakhine State chief minister U Htein Lin accompanied the foreign diplomats, according to March 9 issues of junta-controlled newspapers.

The regime plans to take back more than 1,000 Muslim refugees currently residing in Bangladesh in the first phase of its repatriation programme, according to the February 14 issue of the junta controlled Myanma Alin newspaper.

The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar said on March 10 that Mr. Chen Hai praised preparations to bring back the displaced people from Myanmar, adding that China is a friendly neighbor to both Myanmar and Bangladesh²⁸.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has handed over a list of more than 1,000 Rohingya refugees to Myanmar to verify for the purpose of repatriation

²⁷<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbidok6B3oJfBeju2MTTQ9aPEmzvq2zGtuBn6kv4sZuHqKSr3rbumKFtNZyV8jHuzCQwsl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

²⁸<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbidoUyYSHYqrGZhqQmqU2h8WjkbyBLh1qfYcXFSPKAXFUnXc1cUFTDC1fTB7328Rmjgl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

under a pilot project, said a Dhaka Tribune report²⁹. On 15th March, the junta-appointed ministers visited Muslim refugee camps in Bangladesh.

Rohingya Muslim refugees said they would not return to Myanmar unless they were guaranteed citizenship, safety, and settlement in their places of origin.

According to the military junta, the potential returnees must have lived in Myanmar and want to return to Myanmar of their own volition. In cases of children born in Bangladesh, both parents must have lived in Myanmar, and local Bangladesh courts must certify that the children were born after their parents arrived in Bangladesh.

The regime stated that it has prepared transit camps at Taungpyo Letwe, Nga Khu Ya and Hla Poe Kaung in southern Maungdaw Township for returnees from Bangladesh³⁰. On the other hand, the junta-controlled media platform has reported the arrests of Rohingya who aimed to go to foreign countries, in Rakhine and other parts of the country at least four times during month of March.

About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center for Arakan Studies (CAS) is an independent, nonpartisan, and research-oriented group established by a group of Arakanese youths who are journalists, political analysts, researchers, social workers, and activists. The Center aims to conduct research collaboratively with other institutions and organizations, and independently undertake research about human rights, political, economic, and social dynamics in Arakan, and issues to Arakan affairs in Burma and beyond through analysis and recommendations in favor of policy change and common solutions.

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²⁹ <https://burmese.narinjara.com/local-news/detail/640c2ef4be9d1e25d3afa9c3?fbclid=IwAR1SKSttjGdXE1b2Faw1CSskPSpXGiuLJDh2PPLVfTYNYH8UvtoXq2BdIsu>
³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbidoYxdddAs9ANwP4mWhAB5uMKQWU8qJ.JzgtUyHV6zGPW7FRCCqKdhPpteHQ1YU6nd7dl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>