

## February Newsletter

### *Rising tensions exacerbating conflict in Western Burma*

Conflict in Burma has reached a level of desperation for civilians, particularly those living in northern Rakhine State, who have been forced to flee clashes taking place almost daily. As humanitarian aid workers struggle to meet needs of communities, their operations have been compromised by the world's longest information blackout in several townships in Rakhine and Chin States. In response, local people challenged the authorities in protest. ND-Burma member organizations have expressed fears for civilian safety as they work to ensure their narratives are heard. Based on [information](#) from local aid groups, over the last 42-days, of the 15 people who have been killed, ten were children. Displaced populations are increasing, but shelter basics are seriously lacking. In Rathedaung IDP camp, space is limited and there is not enough tarpaulin to provide for everyone. Community-based organizations are also feel [strained](#) in their capacity to meet the basic needs of all the civilians. A Rakhine Parliamentarian has [appealed](#) to the Burma government to also amplify their efforts to support IDPs.

To date, the conflict has displaced over 100 000 people in need of basic food and survival materials in Rakhine State. The militarized tactics are grounded in the well known '4-cuts strategy,' as the Burma Army attempts to undermine the operations of the Arakan Army by denying them access to food, money, information and new recruits. Clashes remain constant and violent, despite a Rakhine delegation with the Burma Army Senior General, Min Aung Hlaing where discussions [took place](#) on how to 'stop clashes in order to achieve peace.'

### *Repression of Rights & Media Freedom in Midst of Information Blackout*

Crackdowns on media freedom worsened this month when on 3 February, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, [ordered](#) a shutdown of Internet services in five townships in Rakhine, and one in Chin State. The move came shortly after the Arakan Army [released](#) a statement claiming it would soon provide GPS locations and concrete evidence of massacres and mass graves of the Rohingya by the Burma Army.

The crackdown has been met with fears from civil society and activists who are calling for access to be reinstated as human-rights violations are continuing to take place, with local aid groups struggling to reach communities and meet needs with limited communications.

### *Ethnic Celebrations Mark History*

The 59<sup>th</sup> Kachin Revolution Day was celebrated on 5 February, and followed by the Kachin, Manau festival from 5 to 12 February, where a felicitation letter was [read](#) from the President. State Counselor, Daw Aung Suu Kyi and Commander in Chief of Defense Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing [sent](#) a statement to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Mon National Day celebration on 9 February. Karen National day was [recognized](#) on 11 February to commemorate demands made in 1948 including requests for freedom, equality and democratic rights, communal harmony and peace. Chin National Day was also [commemorated](#) this month on 20 February. High ranking military representatives traveled to the headquarters of the Restoration Council of Shan State to [celebrate](#) the 73<sup>rd</sup> Shan National Day on 7 February. In an analysis by David Mathieson in Asia Times, he [suggests](#) the NLD's current efforts to celebrate diversity and ethnic traditions are not as genuine as they appear, but rather part of a strategy to garner election support.

### *Charter Proposals Met with More Opposition from the Burma Army*

Military Members of Parliament continue to [object](#) any proposals to change the 2008-Constitution. Two military generals said they disagreed with merging proposals that would

move oversight of the armed forces from the Defense Services Ministry to the President, and move to eliminate the military-appointed law makers. There have so far been 114 proposed changes to the Constitution submitted by the NLD and seven other political parties, which also includes a [reduction](#) in the proportion of seats reserved for the Burma Army. The bills have been drafted over the last-year and signed by 351 out of 650 lawmakers. With the bills open for discussion, military lawmakers are making every effort to discredit the recommendations.

### *Prospects for Peace*

For the armed groups, one of the biggest challenges in the peace process is the [six principles for peace](#) established by the Burma Army – which notably includes moving towards a democratic country ‘in accordance with the 2008 Constitution.’ This has prompted long-held criticism that the lack the principles show a lack of will in negotiating.

Meanwhile, the Shan State Progressive Party has [said](#) it is considering signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement after a meeting held from 4 to 18 February. However, the decision is set to first be discussed with members of their alliance with the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee who includes the United Wa State Army, Mong La’s National Democratic Alliance Army, the Kachin Independence Army, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, Kokang’s Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army.

At the upcoming Union Peace Conference-21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong expected to be held in April, the rights of States to [draft](#) their own charters is looking like it will be discussed further. Civilians meanwhile continue to be caught in the crossfire of armed clashes between various armed groups against the backdrop of negotiations and expired ceasefire agreements.

### *Rakhine State*

#### **Civilians from 20-Rakhine Villages Flee as Fighting Increases | 2 February 2020**

The Internet ban in war-torn Rakhine [resulted](#) in over 1000 residents from various villages to seek shelter. The Social Welfare Ministry is providing assistance to 600 IDPs, although there are many more who need more support. According to Radio Free Asia, the IDPs are from Konedan, Kularchaung, Zeyarmaing, Oophauk, Thameehla Ywathit, Thameehla Ywa Haung, and Ohnchaung villages in Rathedaung township and from Kyaukpyin Seik and Seikkhu villages in Buthidaung township.

#### **Artillery Strike Wounds Three, Young Mother Killed | 4 February 2020**

A young mother of two children was [killed](#), and three men were injured when artillery shells fell in Kyauktaw township. The Burma Army has justified their presence by informing residents that the townships need more security, and have since deployed more troops in pagodas and stupas – and yet continue to fire relentlessly with no regard for civilian life.

#### **Schoolteacher Sustains Serious Injuries from Artillery Shell | 5 February 2020**

In Rathedaung Township, a primary school teacher was [struck](#) by shrapnel after an artillery shell landed on her home. The armed groups denied military action in that area. Upper House lawmaker, U Khin Maung Latt of Rathedaung Township urged the armed groups ‘to not shoot recklessly at civilian areas – it is illegal.’

#### **NLD-Member Abducted by Unknown Group | 10 February 2020**

An NLD member from Rakhine State’s Ramree Island was [abducted](#) at gunpoint by 8 armed men when he was on his way home from a sawmill. The Arakan Army has denied any involvement in the abduction.

Previously, the Arakan Army had detained an NLD Upper house parliamentarian from Chin Sate who was released on 21 January. They also detained U Ye Thein, an NLD Chairman who was allegedly hit by a heavy round of fire in captivity.

#### **Rohingya Teenager Killed by Shelling | 11 February 2020**

A young teenager was killed, and four others were [injured](#) when several shells struck Kyauktaw townships with fighting between the Arakan Army and the Burma Army continuing. Two separate incidents saw two women, aged 52 and 25, also struck and injured by artillery shelling.

#### **Shelling Wounds Children in Rakhine | 13 February 2020**

ND-Burma member, the [All Arakan Students' & Youths' Congress](#), confirmed that 21 school children were injured when a mortar [struck](#) a primary school during clashes between the Arakan Army and the Burma Army. On 15 February, 111 civil society organizations [condemned](#) the attacks and called for an official apology by the government and those responsible from either the Burma Army or Arakan Army. Several ND-Burma members joined the statement including the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), Future Light Center and Kachin Women's Association Thailand, (KWAT).

#### **Exams Delayed, Students & Educators Appeal for Halt to Fighting | 17 February 2020**

The consequences of fighting have also impacted students who have had their exams delayed. Twenty matriculation exam centers were [temporarily closed](#) and moved to a safer location amid rising security concerns. In response, educators and Members of Parliament [appealed](#) to the armed groups to halt fighting so students could focus and prepare. Clashes in Chin State's Paletwa township has also [forced](#) school closures.

#### **Muslim Youth Murdered, Rakhine Youth Beaten | 22 February 2020**

Following the [murder](#) of a Muslim youth who traveled from his village to try and reach an Internet signal, angry villagers went back to the village he was murdered in retaliation. Communal tensions have given villagers more reason to worry about further conflicts between the two communities.

#### **Mother and Son Injured by Gunfire in Kyauktaw Township | 23 February 2020**

A mother and her son were injured as a convoy of Burma Army soldiers [fired](#) while traveling towards the Kisanpanadi River. Both were brought to the hospital immediately with serious injuries. Another family member sustained less serious wounds.

#### **Woman Dies of Heart Attack Following Artillery Shelling | 26 February 2020**

During an artillery shell blast a woman from Mrauk-U Township [died](#) of a heart attack. A local resident spoke of the fear they are living through: "Residents in the village are so afraid. We don't want the shells to land in and around the village. Just shoot at your enemies — don't hurt the public."

#### **Landmine Kills Man in Buthidaung Township | 26 February 2020**

A 28-year old local man was [killed](#) by a landmine as he was taking his cattle to graze near the Nyaung Chaung border police checkpoint. Since the end of 2018, over 130 civilians have been killed and more than 360 injured by stray gunfire, landmine explosions and artillery fire, according to the Arakan Students Union (Universities – Yangon) as a result of clashes between the Burma Army and Arakan Army.

## *Shan State*

### **Abuses Documented by Shan Human Rights Foundation | 24 February 2020**

The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) [released](#) an update including a case where hundreds of villagers were forced to build a new tactical command base east of Lashio. The expansion of Burma Army operations is nothing new – and yet it continues to exploit communities with no accountability. According to SHRF, one person from each of the approximately 500 households in the tract has been forced to spend up to six days a month cutting wood and bamboo, carrying it to the base, and building spiked fences around the base. Civilians were also subjected to forced labor.

SHRF [demanded](#) the ‘Burmese military stop confiscating land and relying on locals for forced labor in northern Shan State.’

### **Civilian Arrested & Detained for Carrying Portable Radio | 26 February 2020**

A villager in Southern Shan State was [detained](#) and questioned for carrying a portable radio transceiver and falsely accused of being a Shan soldier when the device made a sound. His family appealed for his release where his eye was swollen, likely from interrogation.

### **RCSS and Burma Army Clash | 27 February 2020**

Clashes between the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Burma Army [escalated](#) as an attack on Loi Tawng camp took place at the end of February. The RCSS is a signatory of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.

## *Karen State*

### **Karen Villagers Flee Shelling | 11 February 2020**

Despite reports of Karen civilians [fleeing](#) shelling in Hpapun District, the Burma Army has denied firing artillery. Tensions between the Karen National Liberation Army and the Burma Army have been escalating as the Burma Army rebuilds a road in the area.

Aid-workers on the ground have also reported displaced people’s in urgent need of medicine, shelter and materials. The clashes have taken place despite a ceasefire pact, which forced many to flee indiscriminate gunfire. From January 29th to the 11th of February, the Burma Army shelled more than 126 mortars into villages in Mutraw areas. Burmese soldiers were also responsible for burning down more than 40 farms belonging to innocent civilians.

The KNU [called on](#) the Burma Army to stop doing road work and rejected an appeal by a General of the Burma Army who [claimed](#) that the KNU ‘should have an open mind regarding the military’s expansion of an old road in Karen State.’

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the fighting, Aung San Suu Kyi [toured](#) Karen State.

### **Freedom of Speech**

*A devastating month for Burma and the continued decline of access to safe spaces for freedom of expression*

### **Prominent Political Activists Granted Bail | 3 February 2020**

Political activist, U Kyi Myint and poet, Saw Wai, were [granted](#) bail on the basis of their health status. The Burma Army sued both of them for defamation after speeches they made on amending the Constitution.

In response to the charges, in November, U Kyi Myint [stated](#), “We had to stand and raise [issues] for our country’s sake. There was no support from another country. We cannot stay silent. If everyone is silent, our country will further deteriorate. We must speak out about what needs to be done.”

#### **Burma Army Requests Government to Punish Minister for Comments | 4 February 2020**

The Union Minister for Religious Affairs [suggested](#), ‘high-profile nationalist fugitives remain at large because the government does not have authority over the military-controlled Home Affairs Ministry, which oversees the police force.’ In response, military spokesperson, Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun called the statement ‘baseless’ and said a complaint would be filed.

#### **Buddhist Nationalists Threaten Media Over Protest Coverage | 10 February 2020**

After a pro-military rally in Yangon on 9 February, [demands](#) were made for the media to remove reports from websites that suggested hate speech about State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma’s religious affairs minister. In response, a journalist from 7 Day TV commented, “we have stated in the narration that some of the speakers at the event made speeches that could possibly incite religious riots, so they complained about our coverage - they actually used hate speech during the event,” he said. “We all heard it, but we have removed the part about the speeches possibly inciting religious riots.”

#### **Peacock Generation Face More Charges | 17 February 2020**

In yet another sweeping series of censorship and closing spaces of press freedom, three members of the Peacock Generation poetry troupe were [convicted](#) and sentenced to 6-months for sharing their performances on social media.

ND-Burma reacted to the charges of online defamation as a reflection of the backsliding on fundamental freedoms by the NLD. Charges should be dropped and they should be released immediately.

#### **Karen Activists Sentenced & Charged Under Peaceful Assembly Act | 20 February 2020**

The Karen Grassroots Women’s Network (KGWN) condemned the arrest of Karen human rights defenders Naw Ohn Hla, U Maung Oo, U Nge (aka) U Hsan Hlaing and Daw Sanda Myint who were charged under the Peaceful Assembly Act 19/20. The activists joined demonstrations with residents of the Shwe Mya Sandi Housing Project after occupants lost their land and temporary houses. The group released a statement [here](#).

#### **Student Groups Demand End to Rakhine Internet Blackout | 18 February 2020**

The Myanmar National Student Union, the Rakhine State Student Union and the Rakhine Student Union issued a statement [calling](#) for an immediate end to the Internet blackout and for media groups to be able to freely access information in 8 townships in Rakhine, and one in Chin State. The groups also questioned the integrity and legitimacy of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, expressing doubt ‘that it offered a genuine pathway towards a political solution to the conflict.’ On 24 February, nine students from Yangon were [charged](#) for their activism against the Internet shutdown. The youth have asked to stop the shutdown, for accountability in the primary school shelled and for access to information for local and international media in Rakhine State. If convicted, the students face a fine or up to three months in jail or both.

In July 2018, Affiliate member Progressive Voice [released](#) a briefing paper on the shortcomings of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law which many activists continue to be charged under.

## **UN Experts Express Concern in Security Following Internet Shutdown | 18 February 2020**

Independent experts at the Human Rights Council [expressed](#) alarm and concerns over the deteriorating security situation in Rakhine as civilians are killed and displaced – and has only been worsened by the Internet blackout.

ND-Burma echoed these concerns: “the shutdown of mobile Internet access in townships in Rakhine & Chin by the Transport and Communications Ministry violates rights & freedom of expression. The shutdown poses a threat to civilian safety & is not in line with democratic principles. It must be reinstated immediately.”

## **Six-pro Military Facebook Pages Show Efforts to Spread Nationalism & Hatred Against Muslims in Burma | 20 February 2020**

In a fascinating read, it was [revealed](#) that six pro-military Facebook pages have administrators who are living in Russia. Combined, the pages have more than 4.4 million followers and alarmingly, their content has been shared widely across Burma. Reporting from Aung Kaung Myat reveals the actions and content on the posts (cross-promotion) were coordinated and attempted to look like news outlets.

## **Filmmaker, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, Released from Prison | 21 February 2020**

After his [release](#) from prison, filmmaker, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, called for reforms to the law that allow individuals, such as himself, to be imprisoned for practicing free speech. Last year, he was jailed for being critical of the military on Facebook.

## **Rape and Sexual Violence**

### **‘Victoria Case’ to Rejects Appeal to Review Release of Suspect, Aung Gyi | 18 February 2020**

The Mandalay Region’s Advocate General Office rejected an appeal by the police and Dekkhina Thiri District Advocate General Office to review the release of former suspect, Aung Gyi in the case of the young toddler dubbed ‘Victoria,’ who was raped at her nursery school in Naypyidaw. The family of Victoria do not wish to appeal Aung Gyi’s release, putting an end to court procedures with his involvement for now.

A timeline from The Irrawaddy shares the events that have [taken place](#) in the high profile case to date.

## **Justice Update**

### **UNSC EU Member States Make Calls to Bring Burma to Justice | 5 February 2020**

European Union members of the United Nation’s Security Council, France, Estonia, Germany and Belgium [urged](#) Burma to comply with measures by the International Court of Justice to take the urgently required steps to prevent genocide.

### **United Nations Security Council Fails to Agree on Statement Urging Burma to Adhere to ICJ Measures | 5 February 2020**

During a closed door meeting China and Vietnam [objected](#) to a statement with the United Nations Security Council that would have called on Burma to commit to the four provisional measures related to compliance with the Genocide Convention issued by the International Court of Justice.

### **Burma Army to Hold More Courts-Martial for Alleged Abuses Committed Against Rohingya | 22 February 2020**

After the government-appointed commission [said](#) soldiers committed war crimes, the Burma Army will hold more court courts-martial trials. In the government appointed commission, the

findings from the report justified the actions of the Burma Army as part of a counter-insurgency campaign against militants who attacks security posts in northwestern Rakhine State.

**Amnesty International Releases Oral Statement on ‘Ending Impunity & Discrimination against Minorities in Myanmar’ at 43<sup>rd</sup> Session of the UN Human Rights Council |**

27 February 2020

Amnesty International addressed human rights violations against ethnic minorities in Burma living in conflict-affected areas and noted the dangers of ‘us versus them’ narratives being stroked by the authorities. The statement can be read [here](#).

**The Karen Women’s Organizations Calls for Boycott for Companies Linked to Burma Army |** 27 February 2020

The Karen Women’s Organization [called](#) for a ban on products made by military companies and for donors and embassies to ‘make sure their money does not reach military companies.’

For decades, the Burma Army has profited from lucrative businesses that have funded their military operations across the country.

**Member Update**

**Chin Human Rights Organization Release Updates on Human Rights Violations**

Affiliate member, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), shared two news releases on the civilian impact of clashes between the Burma Army and the Arakan Army with several cases of human rights violations. View the release and subscribe to regular updates [here](#) and [here](#). CHRO’s 2019 annual report is also [available online](#).

**Joint Op-ed by Advocacy Manager Highlights Injustices for Survivors of Sexual Violence**

Renowned human rights activist, Wai Wai Nu and ND-Burma Advocacy Manager, Maggi Quadri, co-authored an [editorial](#) in The Diplomat addressing serious challenges in Burma’s legal systems - which too often deny and dismiss justice to survivors of gender-based violence.

**The Reparations Working Group (RWG) successfully conducted workshops on reparations in Naypyitaw from 21 to 22 February 2020.**

Participants from respective committee from Pyithu Hluttaw and Amyothar Hluttaw (upper and lower house) and RWG members openly and actively discussed the kind of reparations that RWG should have for victims of human rights violations, and how to create a strategy that ensures the Reparation bill goes through parliament. We also discussed what types of human rights violations the reparation program should cover, the time frame and advantages and challenges of the implementation of the reparation process in Myanmar.

There were 49 participants who attended the workshop, including 21 representatives from respective committees from Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyothar Hluttaw, ethnic parties and RWG members.

To implement the government-initiated reparation program for victims of human rights violations in the past, ND-Burma and its alliances of civil society organizations established the Reparation Working Group (RWG) in 2015.

**Photos:** <https://www.flickr.com/photos/153289972@N06/49577620173/in/album-72157713236478958/>

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**ND-Burma is a network that consists of 13-member organisations who represent a range of ethnic nationalities, women and former political prisoners. ND-Burma member organisations have been documenting human rights abuses and fighting for justice for victims since 2004. The network consists of nine Full Members and four Affiliate Members as follows:**

**Full Members:**

1. [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma](#)
2. [Human Rights Foundation of Monland](#)
3. [Kachin Women’s Association – Thailand](#)
4. [Ta’ang Women’s Organization](#)
5. [Ta’ang Students and Youth Union](#)
6. [Tavoyan Women’s Union](#)
7. [Association Human Rights Defenders and Promoters](#)
8. [All Arakan Students’ and Youths’ Congress](#)
9. [Future Light Center](#)

**Affiliate Members:**

1. [Chin Human Rights Organization](#)
2. East Bago – Former Political Prisoners Network
3. [Pa-O Youth Organization](#)
4. [Progressive Voice](#)