

Helpdesk Research Report

Myanmar's stabilisation challenges

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Question

What communities are most at risk of violent conflict and displacement and what are the main sources of resilience that are mitigating tensions or preventing conflict from escalating? What role can the international community play in the above?

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1. Overview

Myanmar faces a number of significant stabilisation challenges including frequent natural disasters, environmental challenges and organised crime, in addition to the challenges associated with a nascent democratisation process. This report, however, focuses exclusively on violent conflict and displacement. Myanmar has been afflicted by armed conflict since independence. During the 1960s-1980s, a number of armed groups were able to establish 'effectively independent micro-states' (EC, 2016, p. 3). These had their own 'rudimentary' governments, service provision, and foreign policies (EC, 2016, p. 3). This situation persists in some parts of Myanmar (EC, 2016, p. 3). The communities currently most at risk of, and affected by, conflict and violence are those living in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone and in other parts of northern Shan State. Other affected communities include those living in Kachin, Rakhine, Chin and Kayin States. The community most affected by the threat of forced displacement is the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group, in Rakhine State. The nature of conflict in these areas ranges from occasional to frequent clashes between armed groups and government forces. In addition to armed conflict, Rakhine State suffers from tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist communities.

There were more than 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in Myanmar in 2016 (McConnachie, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, more than 128,000 refugees from Myanmar were living in Thailand in 2014

(UNICEF, 2014, p. 3). According to UNICEF, displacement can constitute a driver of conflict, depending on whether it is forced or not, and on the extent to which host communities are prepared for IDPs. Women and children are reportedly disproportionately affected by migration and displacement, and make up the majority of those who are IDPs and refugees (ibid).

The literature identifies a number of sources of resilience in Myanmar, which include:

- **Institutionalisation of peace-making:** Both the previous and current governments declared their commitment to ending conflict in Myanmar. A number of peace initiatives and inter-faith dialogues have taken place in order to mitigate tensions and conflict in the country.
- **Economy:** Myanmar's economy has considerable potential. A number of economic reforms have been undertaken and economic growth is strong, although it has been slowing recently.
- **Strengthened civil society:** The previous government's decision to allow issue-driven CSOs to operate in Myanmar has led to a proliferation of such organisations.
- **Education:** The previous government undertook steps to reform the education system in Myanmar in a bid to end discrimination against ethnic minorities.
- **Release of political prisoners:** A significant number of political prisoners have been released since the new National League for Democracy (NLD) led government came to power.
- **Increased press freedom:** Extensive media reform has resulted in a proliferation of 'alternative' information and has rendered the government subject to increased scrutiny.

The literature identifies a number of policy options for mitigating tensions in Myanmar. International actors could potentially provide support and assistance in a number of areas. These include technical support for the conclusion, implementation and monitoring of ceasefire agreements, and support for an inclusive national political dialogue. They also include various forms of assistance for recovery and development, as well as support for educational reform.

There is a sizeable body of literature on Myanmar's stabilisation challenges. This consists of a mixture of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, and reports by NGOs and international organisations. While gender is not addressed in all of the papers reviewed for the purposes of this report, a number of papers do look at gender, specifically in the context of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and in the context of peace-making and peacebuilding.

2. Communities at risk of and experiencing violent conflict and displacement

Myanmar continues to be beset by a number of armed insurgencies in Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, Chin, and Kayin States. Insurgency movements in Myanmar are largely motivated by ethnic divisions rather than by ideology (Behera, 2017, p. 36). The constitution of Myanmar does not provide full rights for ethnic minorities. Moreover, the government is not sufficiently representative of these groups (UNICEF, 2014, p. 4). According to UNICEF, 'the over-promotion of Bamar history, culture and language in the education system was criticized for promoting intolerance and inequalities, and inciting violence' (ibid.).

Lootable resources, including timber, jade, opium and amphetamine-type substances, are often exploited illegally, particularly in areas where the rule of law is weak (UNICEF, 2014, p. 4). Conflict actors,

particularly in Kachin, Kayin and Shan States, raise funds via the illegal trade of natural resources. This provides incentives to continue fighting and fuels violent competition between the government, militias, and non-state armed groups (UNICEF, 2014, p. 4).

SGBV is widespread throughout Myanmar. This violence has reportedly disproportionately affected minority women, 'whose subordinate gender status within and across groups deliberately targets their bodies as markers of ethnic, religious and/or political affiliation, and effectively constrains the few possibilities for reporting SGBV' (Davies & True, 2017, p. 17). Anyone attempting to report such crimes faces significant social, legal and economic obstacles. According to one peer-reviewed journal article, there is currently 'no incentive to end state-sanctioned immunity for SGBV crimes in ongoing peace agreements' (Davies & True, 2017, p. 10). Davies & True (2017, p. 17) argue that 'immunity for past and present crimes of conflict-related sexual violence by Tatmadaw and NSAGs¹ deepens structural inequalities in the transitional post-conflict state, perpetuating silence, grievance and inequality'.

Shan State

Shan State is one of the most insurgency-affected states in Myanmar (Behera, 2017, p. 43). The latest period of fighting between Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) troops and government forces in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone began in February 2015. This resulted in the displacement of around 80,000 people. The majority went to China, although most have now returned to their homes in Myanmar (ICG, 2016a, p. 5). The Kokang are ethnic Chinese, and operate close to the Chinese border (Ganesan, 2017, p. 204). In March 2017, about 10,000 sugar cane workers fled the Kokang self-administered zone after fighting erupted on 6 March between Myanmar armed forces and the MNDAA in Laukkai town. The sugar cane workers are reported to be returning to their places of origin in other parts of Myanmar.²

There have also been clashes between government forces and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). In addition, there has been fighting between the TNLA and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South). There have also been clashes between government forces and the SSA-North (ICG, 2016a, p. 4). At least 12,000 people were displaced in northern Shan State in the first six months of 2016 due to the aforementioned conflicts. The majority has now returned home, but around 3,000 people remain displaced (ICG, 2016a, p. 5).

Opium production in Myanmar is largely concentrated in Shan State, which accounts for 90 per cent of total production (Behera, 2017, p. 36). There are strong ties between drug production and insurgencies. As a result, any efforts to reduce opium production are difficult without first effectively dealing with the insurgencies (Behera, 2017, p. 36). Drugs have historically funded conflict and non-state armed groups as well as providing livelihoods. They have also perpetuated 'cycles of violence, poverty and lawlessness' (UNICEF, 2014, p. 3).

Rakhine State

There has been an outbreak of violence between the Rohingya and the Rakhine communities in western Rakhine State. Animosity between the two groups is historical (Ganesan, 2017, p. 207). Moreover, successive governments have refused to recognise the Muslim Rohingyas as native to Myanmar. They are generally regarded as immigrants, and often referred to as Bengali Muslims (Ganesan, 2017, p. 207). They face strict restrictions on their personal freedoms, freedom of association, property ownership and

¹ Non-state armed groups

² <http://www.internal-displacement.org/internal-displacement-updates/issue-13-9-22-march/>

freedom of movement (Ganesan, 2017, p. 207). The Rohingya also suffer from the inequitable distribution of resources and lack of political representation (UNICEF, 2014, p. 5). Anti-Muslim Buddhist organisations have emerged in Myanmar. The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) based in Mandalay and led by the 'firebrand' monk U Ashin Wirathu, has pushed for restrictions on religious conversion and inter-faith marriages (Ganesan, 2017, p. 207). Buddhist monks also inspired the formation of the 969 Group, a social movement, which vowed to stop patronizing Muslim owned businesses (Ganesan, 2017, p. 207). The Rohingya Solidarity Association (RSO) is an insurgent group, based in Bangladesh, responsible for cross-border violence. The Myanmar government views the group as a terrorist organisation. Cross-border raids perpetrated by the RSO have led to significant casualties among members of the Myanmar border police (Ganesan, 2017, p. 208).

A new round of violence began in October 2016, leading to more than 65,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border into Bangladesh. Some of those displaced reported Tatmadaw³ and other security personnel killing and raping Rohingya civilians, and destroying Rohingya villages (Martin, 2017, pp. 11-12). According to a report by the US Congressional Research Service, 'a UNHCR representative in Bangladesh reportedly said that he thought the "ultimate goal" of the recent violence was "ethnic cleansing of the Muslim minority in Myanmar"' (Martin, 2017, p. 12). Aung San Suu Kyi has denied that human rights abuses have taken place in Rakhine State on a number of occasions (Martin, 2017, p. 12). The Rohingya issue has reportedly not been factored into the ongoing peace process between the ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar government. This is in part because the Rohingya cannot be represented by an armed group or a political party at the peace negotiations, because they are denied citizenship (Kipgen, 2016, p. 23).

The Burmese (Arakan ethnic group) are accused of fuelling tensions and divisions between the Rohingya and the Rakhine communities in Rakhine State to 'maintain political advantage' (UNICEF, 2014, p. 5). Arakan and Rohingya tensions also persist (UNICEF, 2014, p. 5). Moreover, there have been occasional clashes between government forces and the Arakan Army (ICG, 2016a, p. 4). Fighting in Rakhine State in March-April 2016 resulted in the displacement of about 1,900 people (ICG, 2016a, p. 5).

Within Rakhine State, there are significant disparities in access and quality of education, particularly for Muslims and IDPs (UNICEF, 2014, p. 6). Discriminatory education policies against ethnic minorities have reportedly been a feature of the education system in Myanmar since the country achieved independence. Burmese-language policies in schools serve to marginalise non-Burmese-speaking ethnic groups. Moreover, curricula reinforce Burmese identities while marginalising minority ethnic group identities (UNICEF, 2014, p. 5).

Kachin State

The conflict in Kachin State is driven by a quest for political determination, ethnicity, and control over resources (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 7). Conflict between the government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) dates back to the 1960s (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 7). There has been renewed fighting between government forces and the KIO since 2015 (ICG, 2016a, p. 4). Competition for access to resources between the government and non-state armed groups is a significant conflict driver in Kachin State, where there are a number of mining and hydroelectric projects (UNICEF, 2014, p. 4). The KIO has a significant presence in south-eastern Kachin, and Hpakant and Tanai townships, controlling substantial areas (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 7).

As a result of the conflict, there are over 100,000 IDPs spread across more than 120 camps in Kachin and northern Shan State (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 7). IDPs in Kachin State face 'a poor

³ Myanmar Armed Forces

socioeconomic situation, widespread fears of armed violence, uncertainty about the future, lack of engagement with authorities, exclusion from the peace process and a strong desire to return home' (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 33). According to the Durable Peace Programme, this situation is likely to deteriorate further as the armed conflict continues (2016, p. 33).

Kayin State

There have been clashes between a 'renegade faction' of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and government troops together with Border Guard Force soldiers in recent years (ICG, 2016a, p. 4). Fighting in Kayin State displaced around 4,000 people in September 2016 (ICG, 2016a, p. 5).

Chin State

There have been occasional clashes between government forces and the Arakan Army in Chin State (ICG, 2016a, p. 4). However, the research undertaken for this report has not uncovered any further information about tensions and conflict in Chin State.

3. Sources of resilience

According to Kipgen, both the government and armed ethnic groups have shown a commitment to peace (2016, p. 18). Increased democratisation and measures aimed at national reconciliation, as well as economic developments, constitute sources of resilience in Myanmar.

Institutionalisation of peace-making

The Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) was opened in October 2012 in Yangon. The government used it for negotiating meetings with ethnic armed groups. Two peace committees were also formed, the Union Peace-making Central Committee, and the Union Peace-making Work Committee (Ganesan, 2017, p. 200). Under the new NLD government, the MPC has been reorganised and renamed the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC). Aung San Suu Kyi leads the NRPC (Ganesan, 2017, p. 209). The government's lead negotiator, Dr Tin Myo Win, has held a number of meetings with ethnic groups that had not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and three groups that the army had previously refused to deal with – Arakan Army (AA), MNDAA and the Ta'ang National Liberation Front (TNLF) (Ganesan, 2017, p. 209). Aung San Suu Kyi also hosted a meeting with the UNFC (United Nationalities Federal Council)⁴ in Naypyitaw as a confidence building measure. The outcome of all these meetings was the 21st Century Panglong Conference in late August 2016, which was to be a step towards consolidating the peace process. Future meetings are expected to take place once every six months (Ganesan, 2017, p. 209).

The government has also been hosting inter-faith dialogues to mitigate tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities (Ganesan, 2017, p. 208). The government has attempted to address the ethno-religious tensions in Rakhine State by using the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee to condemn the activities of MaBaTha. It sought to demonstrate that violence and hatred do not feature in Buddhist teachings and to make it clear that it does not support the organisation (Ganesan, 2017, p. 210). The government also reminded monks that they are prohibited from involvement in politics (Ganesan, 2017,

⁴ The goal of the UNFC was to represent all armed ethnic groups during peace negotiations with the government (Kipgen, p. 6).

p. 210). The government's efforts were successful and the MaBaTha ceased its activities as a result (Ganesan, 2017, p. 210). The Rakhine State Police Chief also warned monks that political discussions held in monasteries would result in legal action (Ganesan, 2017, p. 210). The government also announced the formation of a Rakhine Commission of Inquiry, which would be headed by former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and comprise two other foreigners and six locals (Ganesan, 2017, p. 210).

Economy

Myanmar's economy reportedly has significant potential. According to a House of Commons Library Briefing, it has abundant natural resources, fertile land which is suitable for agriculture, and an ideal geographic location for trade (Lunn & Harari, 2017, pp. 9-10). Economic growth remains strong, although it has been slowing recently. In the fiscal year April 2015 - March 2016, GDP growth stood at 7.3 per cent (Lunn & Harari, 2017, p. 10).

The government's '12 point' economic policy is aimed at the systematic development of a market-oriented system, while at the same time encouraging national reconciliation (Ganesan, 2017, p. 211). Its purpose is reportedly 'to address accusations that minority ethnic communities and peripheral regions have not benefitted from previous state directed development policies' (Ganesan, 2017, p. 211). The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is deemed particularly important in this regard.⁵ Moreover, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment announced that jade mining concessions that expire would not be renewed (Ganesan, 2017, p. 211). This decision was reportedly taken to counter criticism over environmental damage and the death toll from jade mining in Kachin State (Ganesan, 2017, p. 211). In addition to mitigating conflict, employment and economic development are also essential in mitigating the causes of displacement (UNICEF, 2014, p. 3).

Strengthened civil society

For many years CSOs were suppressed due to the military junta's fears that such organisations 'facilitate political dissent but also serve as beach heads for foreign interference in the country's domestic politics' (Ganesan, 2017, p. 201). However, the previous government relaxed its position and allowed the emergence of issue-driven CSOs (Martin, 2017, p. 11). As a result, there are now a large number of NGOs and CSOs operating in Myanmar (Ganesan, 2017, p. 201). However, relations between some CSOs and the NLD-led government are reportedly strained, as they wish to play a more active role in the peace process (Martin, 2017, p. 11).

Education

The previous Government undertook a curricula review to remove institutionalized discrimination against ethnic minorities, languages and cultures (UNICEF, 2014, p. 6). The government and ethnic minority and civil society stakeholders worked together to identify comparative politics, human rights, critical thinking and civic duty as subjects and skills that could be taught to support peacebuilding (UNICEF, 2014, p. 6).

⁵ The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) is a global standard for transparency and accountability in the oil, gas and mining industries. Its aim is to ensure openness and accountable management of natural resource revenues. For more information see: <http://myanmareiti.org/content/what-eiti-4>

Release of political prisoners

The NLD government has released political prisoners and students who had been detained for participating in demonstrations (Ganesan, 2017, p. 210). By August 2016, the NLD-led government had reportedly released 457 people facing trial for political activities (Martin, 2017, p. 12). However, despite this, the Myanmar Police Force reportedly continues to arrest, detain and try people for political activities (Martin, 2017, p. 12).

Increased press freedom

Extensive media reform has meant that information has become widely available and shared in Myanmar. Consequently, the government faces much more scrutiny than before. There has also been a significant increase in the use of social media, which has become a popular source of 'alternative' information (Ganesan, 2017, p. 201).

4. Potential role of international actors in mitigating tensions

The international community is currently engaged in a number of activities aimed at providing support to the peace process in Myanmar. These fall into two broad categories; support for negotiations between the government and armed groups, and humanitarian and development assistance in ceasefire and, to a lesser extent, conflict-afflicted areas (EC, 2016, p. 13).

The literature provides a number of policy recommendations, which are relevant to international actors seeking to play a role in mitigating tensions and conflict in Myanmar. However, the EC argues that external actors 'can support but should not lead transitions to peace and inter-communal reconciliation,' emphasising the importance of such processes being locally owned (EC, 2016, p. 11).

The EC identifies a number of possible activities in support of peace that it could undertake in order to achieve three key results. These are also relevant to other international actors.

In order to achieve the conclusion of ceasefire agreements which are honoured and effectively monitored by 'robust' ceasefire monitoring mechanisms:

- 'Support for establishing new institutions or strengthening existing institutions needed to monitor and sustain the ceasefires.
- Support for the activities of these institutions, including training of staff, monitoring, liaising, conflict analysis and dispute resolution.
- Provision of expert advice on the organisation and conduct of ceasefire monitoring.
- Provision of international monitors/observers.
- Conflict analysis.
- Collation and communication of relevant information to the public.
- Provision of mine action activities' (EC, 2015, p. 15).

In order to achieve a broad consensus on contentious issues via an inclusive national dialogue:

- 'Support for new or existing institutions required to guide, manage and support the national dialogue process.

- Support for activities of these institutions, including training of staff, meetings, research and consultations with constituencies.
- Training and broader capacity development of participants in the dialogue.
- Provision of expert advice on the organisation of national dialogue processes and solutions to substantive issues.
- Provision of international observers.
- Research supporting identification of solutions to substantive issues.
- Collation and communication of relevant information to the public.
- Support for inclusion and empowerment of women in the dialogue process and priority attention to issues of particular concern to women' (EC, 2015, p. 15).

In order to achieve the 'prompt, effective and efficient delivery of assistance for recovery and development in former conflict-affected areas or areas affected by inter-communal tensions and violence' (EC, 2016, p. 15) activities that could be undertaken include:

- 'Support for the establishment of new structures to manage needs assessments.
- Support for pre-assessment consultations with local stakeholders, data collection, analysis and validation, and the formulation of recovery strategies.
- Training of data collectors.
- Establishment of a funding mechanism to facilitate rapid implementation of priority projects identified by needs assessments, including in conflict-affected areas in the ethnic states.
- Projects in Rakhine State promoting inter-communal dialogue and interfaith cooperation.
- Funding of priority projects, including support for transitional governance arrangements in former conflict-affected areas, return of refugees and IDPs, reconciliation, empowerment of women, and oversight of development projects to ensure that negative social or environmental impacts are minimal' (EC, 2015, p. 15).

UNICEF identifies a number of areas, principally in the field of education, where support is required. International actors could provide support in relation to the following recommendations:

- Improving the Government's capacity to support policy reform using international standards. Particular emphasis should be placed on land and citizenship laws, dispute-resolution mechanisms, constitutional reform and public assembly. There should also be a focus on strengthening the rule of law and associated institutions in order to protect human rights and build trust both within and across ethnic groups (UNICEF, 2014, p. 7).
- The development of plans to discharge children from armed groups. Support could be provided for their reintegration and rehabilitation within education via accelerated learning programmes, psychosocial support, and vocational training (UNICEF, 2014, p. 7).
- Education services in ethnic-minority and conflict-affected areas, such as Kachin, could be increased to reduce inequality. Training and support to teachers and school administrators could also be provided. Moreover, there could be support for opportunities to bring together state and non-state education providers through initiatives like joint training programmes. Government capacity to provide management and oversight of all education services could also be

strengthened. In addition, support could be given to both state and non-state actors to deliver adequate education services to IDPs, refugees and migrants (UNICEF, 2014, p. 7).

- Support for youth peacebuilding efforts could be provided through coordination and strengthening of youth peacebuilding organisations and networks. Such groups and networks should transcend ethnic divisions. Leadership training could also be provided for youth and support provided for inter-ethnic youth exchanges. (UNICEF, 2014, p. 8).

The Durable Peace Programme provides a number of policy recommendations pertaining specifically to Kachin State:

- There is a need for both non-IDPs and IDPs to have more information about, and to play a more active role in, the peace process (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 35)
- There is a need for greater focus on improving health outcomes, as evidenced by poor health outcomes in Kachin State (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 35)
- Support for female IDPs, and addressing gender inequality, should be key features of all interventions (Durable Peace Programme, 2016, p. 35).

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Key websites

- IDMC – International Displacement Monitoring Centre:
http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/delivering-aid/budget-support/index_en.htm

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6. Appendix A: The Main Ethnic Armed Groups and their Ceasefire Status

Group Bilateral NCA- ceasefire signatory?		
1	United Wa State Party (UWSP) 6 Sept 2011	No
2	National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA, "Mongla group") 7 Sept 2011	No
3	Democratic Kayin Benevolent Army (DKBA) 3 Nov 2011	Yes
4	Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army- South (RCSS/SSA-South) 2 Dec 2011	Yes
5	Chin National Front (CNF) 6 Jan 2012	Yes
6	Karen National Union (KNU) 12 Jan 2012	Yes
7	Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North (SSPP/SSA-North) 28 Jan 2012	No
8	New Mon State Party (NMSP) 1 Feb 2012	No
9	Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council 7 Feb 2012	Yes
10	Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) 7 Mar 2012	No
11	Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) 5 Apr 2012	Yes
12	National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang 9 Apr 2012	No
13	Pao National Liberation Organisation (PNLO) 25 Aug 2012	Yes
14	All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) 5 Aug 2013	Yes
15	Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) (30 May 2012)*	No
16	Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) No	No
17	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA, "Kokang group")	No† No
18	Arakan Army (AA) No	No

* An agreement was signed on 30 May 2012. It was not a formal ceasefire, but contained inter alia a commitment to “efforts to achieve de-escalation and cessation of hostilities”.

† The MNDA’s 1989 ceasefire ended after an army attack in 2009, with one faction being routed (and its leaders fleeing to China) and the other agreeing to become a Border Guard Force unit under partial army control. The routed faction subsequently reactivated, with support from other groups.

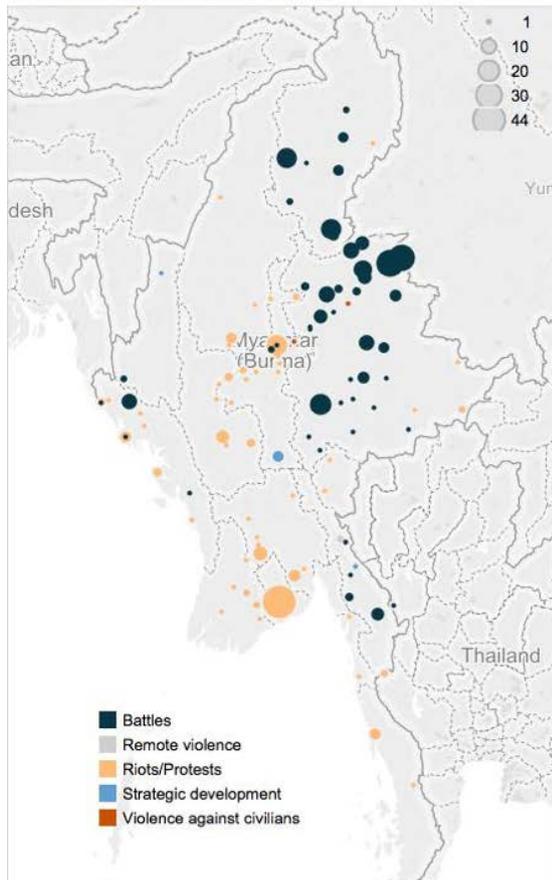
The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) is an armed group umbrella organisation, whose seven members have not signed the NCA: SSPP/SSA-North, NMSP, KNPP, KIO, Lahu Democratic Union, Arakan National Council, Wa National Organisation. The last three do not have significant armed forces, so have not been directly included in the ceasefire process.

Source: International Crisis Group (2016a). *Myanmar’s peace process: Getting to a political dialogue* (Asia Briefing No. 149). Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-s-peace-process-getting-political-dialogue>

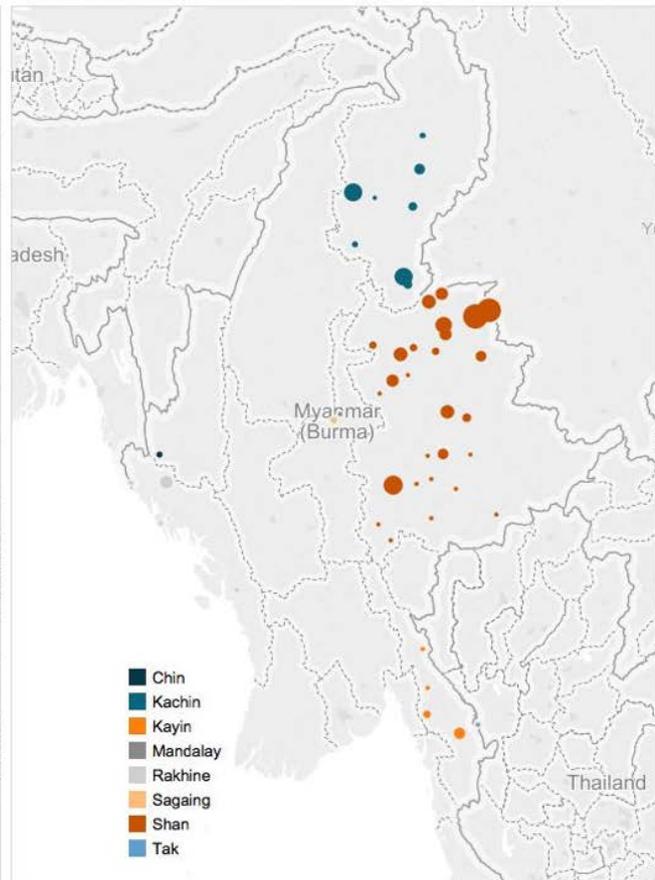
7. Appendix B: Conflict events in Myanmar in 2015

Myanmar’s Fragile Peace

Political Violence in Myanmar 2015



Battles in Myanmar 2015



Source: Armed Conflict and Event Data Project (ACLED). (2015). *Myanmar’s fragile peace*. Retrieved from: <http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Myanmars-Fragile-Peace.png>