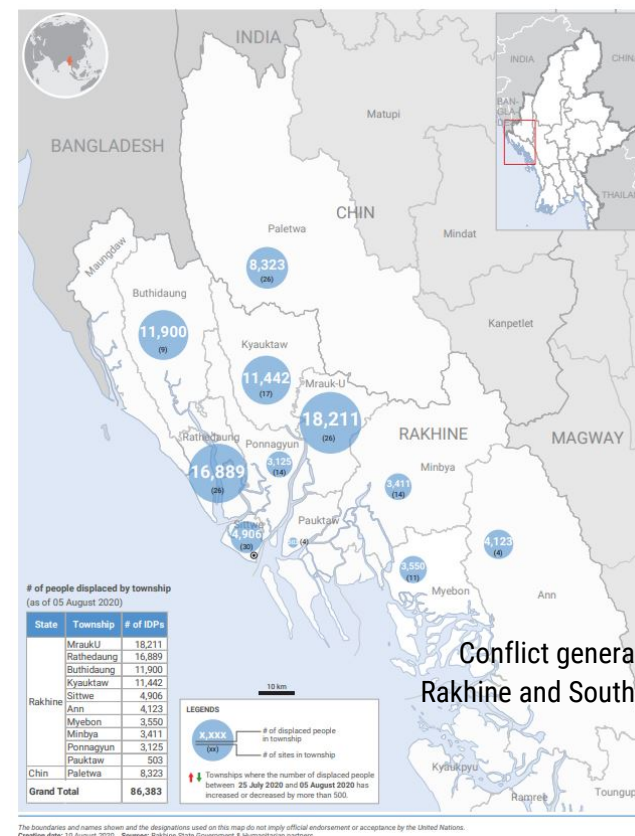


# MYANMAR

## Internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states

- Since 21 June 2019, an internet shutdown has been in place across eight townships in Rakhine and Southern Chin states. The internet shutdown is part of the central government's response to conflict between the Tatmadaw government forces and the Arakan Army (AA).
- On 1 August 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to maintain the internet shutdown but allowed 2G services, now available in seven townships (Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung) in Rakhine and one township in Chin (Paletwa). The extension to the internet shutdown was made on the basis that the AA continues to use mobile internet technologies to carry out attacks, including detonating IEDs and landmines remotely and inciting ethnic tension (Telenor 01/08/2020 Ministry of Foreign Affairs 08/07/2020).
- Some 86,000 people are internally displaced across the two states because of conflict. The internet shutdown heavily impacts information on ongoing violence in the region which is important for villagers and village leaders. This allows them to coordinate and determine whether displacement can be expected. From a humanitarian perspective, the shutdown makes sourcing information to and from IDP sites particularly difficult.
- National elections are set for 8 November 2020. The internet shutdown limits people's access to information regarding the elections, their ability to provide feedback on outdated voter lists, and heightens the governments control of digital spaces.
- The internet shutdown has increased protection concerns for those across the two states. Villagers who want to communicate with family or loved ones are forced closer to unstable areas, such as military bases, due to better connection. Protesting the shutdown also carries the risk of jailtime.
- The internet shutdown severely impacts information on COVID-19. The local population in Rakhine and Chin states are largely unaware of containment measures related to COVID-19.



### Key priorities



**79,000**

People in Need in Rakhine and Chin states



**Access to information**

regarding COVID-19, conflict, and elections

### Info gaps & needs

Information gaps persist due to the internet shutdown. The evaluation of humanitarian needs is difficult given the high-level access constraints in Myanmar even prior to the internet blackout.

### Humanitarian Access



Humanitarian access across the region remains extremely limited because of sporadic violence and instability. Internet access has worsened the already poor access for humanitarian organisations.

## Crisis Context

### Internet shutdown

The conflict between Tatmadaw government forces and the AA has resulted in an internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states since 21 June 2019. The shutdown has been extended numerous times, most recently on 1 August until at least 31 October (Myanmar Times 12/06/2020 Telenor 01/08/2020). The affected areas include eight townships in Rakhine (Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung and Maungdaw), with Maungdaw no longer affected, and one township in Chin (Paletwa). Under article 77, Myanmar's telecommunication law allows the Ministry of Transport and Communication to limit and even suspend telecommunication services for "emergency" purposes (Telenor 30/03/2020). According to the government, imposing this law allows the Tatmadaw government forces to maintain security, law, and order in the conflict-affected Rakhine and Chin states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 08/07/2020). A government spokesperson also stressed that this move dampens the ability to promote speech online that incites ethnic tension (Radio Free Asia 27/07/2020).

Since 1 August, 2G services are available for the first time since the original shutdown of June 2019 across the eight townships. Text messaging is also available, with the government stressing that communication is therefore possible (HRW 19/06/2020 Telenor 01/08/2020). Access to 2G services offers some opportunities with cash transfers, micro-financing and sharing of low-resolution infographics (CASS 06/08/2020).

## Ongoing crises and pre-existing humanitarian conditions

### Conflict

The most recent conflict in Rakhine state is between the Tatmadaw government forces and the AA with sporadic fighting heightening instability in the Rakhine region. On 23 June 2020, the Tatmadaw announced "clearance operations" in 43 villages across the Kyauktan village tract, home to some 30,000 people. The announcement was officially retracted on 28 June, following international and national outcry as it was similar to previous announcements, including the lead-up to the 2017 campaign led by government forces that directly targeted Rohingya villages, resulting in more than 700,000 Rohingya fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh (CASS 22/07/2020 CFR 23/01/2020). Despite the latest operation being downplayed, the operation was still carried out in and around Rathedaung township, resulting in as many as 10,000 civilians fleeing to villages in

southern Rathedaung township, extending the need for humanitarian assistance further south (CASS 24/06/2020). It remains unclear which villages were subject to these "clearance operations" and the exact location of current IDPs.

The situation in Rakhine and Southern Chin states remains dire with 86,000 people displaced as a result of violence, as stated by the Rakhine state government as of 25 July (OCHA 25/07/2020). 750,000 people are in need of multi-sectoral humanitarian assistance in Rakhine and over 4,000 in Chin state (OCHA 12/2019). With an estimated 600,000 stateless Rohingya in Rakhine living in camp settings there is still high restriction on their freedom of movement. Since 2012, 23 camps have been established across Rakhine state with new operational constraints as a result of COVID-19 and varying levels of access.

### Food Security

Conflict in both Rakhine and Chin and limited access to food, land, and resources has led to severe food insecurity. Chin is the poorest state in Myanmar with limited roads, electricity, health facilities, and high rates of food insecurity (OCHA 12/2019). More than 100,000 people in Paletwa township at risk of running out of food, of whom 7,000 are IDPs (Myanmar Times 03/03/2020, WFP 21/07/2020). Access to Paletwa has been blocked by the AA since February, substantially limiting the entry of commodities, meaning available foods are scarce and prices are inflated in some instances by as much as 70% for basic goods (Frontier Myanmar 10/03/2020). In Rakhine state, active fighting in 2020 has severely affected food security. For example, in Kyaukme township, villagers have been prevented from accessing their paddy fields. This may have lasting effects on food security as agricultural production is hindered (CASS 22/07/2020). There is no clear assessment of the rates of food insecurity in the two states and people potentially in need of food assistance. Estimates suggest that Rakhine has some 583,000 people in need of food and 4,300 in Chin state (OCHA 12/2019).

## Impact of the internet shutdown

### Internal Displacement

The internet shutdown has further marginalised those internally displaced by limiting information on conflict in the area, which is important to coordinate expected displacement and reach agreements between villagers and village leaders. The information that is available is often sourced by the AA who publish content that is anti-government and sympathetic to their cause and fails to outline ongoing violence. Those displaced generally do not trust state media or armed groups, preferring local news agencies and radio news (CASS 08/2020). There has been a rise in the use of radio including

Radio Free Asia, BBC and Voice of America. However, its access is constrained to those who speak English which raises questions relating to power dynamics and agency within marginalised communities (CASS 08/2020).

Conflict in Rakhine and Chin states has resulted in both short-term and long-term displacements. Some displaced communities have avoided settling in sites constructed by the central government due to distrust, with fears over entering and exiting the sites freely, safety within the site, and access to humanitarian aid (CASS 08/2020). In the event of sudden displacement, coordinating between villagers, leaders, and neighbouring villages is very difficult given its immediacy and due to the lack of information networks, including the internet. There is limited time to consult neighbouring villages of arrivals and other important updates, including conflict in the area (CASS 08/2020). Undermining the coordination process risks heightening inter-communal tensions.

In Buthidaung township, where the internet shutdown is in place, 2,000 Rohingya IDPs have been displaced in Hpon Nyo Leik village and the surrounding area for the past eight months (CASS, 24/06/2020). As of 21 July, there are two COVID-19 cases in the township, one of whom is Rohingya (Department of Public Health 20/07/2020). The internet blackout has marginalised those displaced with strict checkpoints, cutting off the displaced populations access to the outside world (CASS 08/2020). More generally, in Buthidaung township there is limited information on COVID-19, the elections, and ongoing conflict.

From a humanitarian perspective, accessing and assessing these sites is particularly difficult given the internet lockdown (CASS, 24/06/2020). International actors should continue to source information from local responders and response should assist and reflect the needs they identify (CASS 08/2020).

## National Elections

General elections are scheduled to take place on 8 November 2020, with an estimated 37 million people eligible to vote (The Irrawaddy 13/07/2020). Given the current internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states it is unclear whether the elections will move forward in these two states. There is limited information regarding the general elections and people's eligibility, resulting in a lack of interest and dismissive attitude towards the process (CASS 08/2020). Concerns have also been raised regarding how voters will be able to provide feedback after the Union Electoral Commission (UEC) took the unanimous decision of posting voter lists online (Frontier 16/07/2020). Given the internet shutdown in several townships, the local population are unable to provide feedback, undermining any attempt to decentralise the feedback process to local authorities. The UEC tried to reassure voters by stating that the lists would also be posted on billboards, however, a recent CASS survey in villages and camps in Rakhine suggests that voter lists were not physically visible (CASS 06/08/2020). Furthermore, the National League for Democracy is having

difficulties fielding willing political candidates, with past cases of targeted attacks and kidnappings by the AA (Myanmar Times 27/07/2020).

The government's control of the internet also has potential repercussions on information campaigns run during the elections. The country has an estimated 20 million Facebook users, or 40% of its population, with growing evidence that government forces control digital spaces by backing certain telecom companies and creating fake accounts (Facebook 05/05/2020 Myanmar Times 23/01/2020). Recently, a coordinated campaign was launched to shift public opinion in favour of MyTel, a telecommunications company backed by Tatmadaw forces (.coda 23/07/2020). Freedom House ranks Myanmar's internet Freedom Score 36/100 making it "not free", raising concerns regarding the democratic process of the upcoming elections. The official campaign period begins 60 days before election day, but with current instability and COVID-19 containment measures it is unclear whether this timeline will be followed (Frontier 16/07/2020).

## Protection Concerns

Three activists were charged in Southern Rakhine state and five in Yangon over protesting the internet shutdown. They were charged under section 19 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Profession Law, with their sentence yet to be announced (CASS 01/07/2020). This raises wider concerns related to campaigning.

Hilltops, bridges, and pagodas are carefully watched by Tatmadaw soldiers, aware that the signal is of better quality at these sites (CASS 06/08/2020). A Tatmadaw military base in Buthidaung offers better connection, but civilians must balance need for information and an unstable area which is particularly unsafe for civilians (CASS 06/08/2020). Furthermore, the internet shutdown has placed an unnecessary burden on those who can access certain social spaces, including midwives and medical practitioners. They are considered reliable sources of information, which heightens their visibility and places an unnecessary burden on them. As a result, they could be the target of attacks.

The fighting has displaced hundreds of thousands of people who have faced sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking, and extortion (Security Council 23/01/2020). In the case of displacement, decision-making is concentrated in the hands of religious leaders and village administrators, exclusively men. The decisions taken rarely reflect the needs and concerns of women in displacement sites where there is a lack of WASH facilities or limited access to healthcare (CASS 08/2020). More generally, Rohingya communities continue to face discriminatory policies and segregation, limiting their right to citizenship and access to basic services. Rohingya IDPs also face animosity from the local population (Global Protection Cluster 2020).

## COVID-19

As of 25 August, the country has recorded 504 cases and only six deaths since its first registered case on 23 March (Myanmar Times 25/08/2020 OCHA 04/2020). Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, registered the highest number of cases. However, across the country cases are spread fairly evenly in part due to a strict nationwide lockdown, which included compulsory facemasks, strict entry restriction measures, and quarantine periods (OCHA 10/08/2020 ACAPS 16/07/2020). In Rakhine and Chin states, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Northern Rakhine on 4 June with an unclear picture on the exact number of cases and health needs, given limited testing capacities in Rakhine and Chin (Department of Public Health 20/07/2020). A recent surge in cases between the 16 and 25 August in Rakhine state, has raised concerns regarding the spread of the virus to IDP camps (UNCT 26/08/2020). 80 cases were registered during this timeframe alone.

The lack of available information on COVID-19 to communities in Rakhine and Chin states as a result of the internet blackout is particularly concerning. In September 2019, the United Nations stressed the importance of internet for their work in Myanmar, to ensure coordination and up-to-date information (UN 09/2020). The sudden rise in the number of cases in Rakhine between the 16 and 25 August, mainly within Muslim communities, makes internet access vital for people to gain reliable information on COVID-19 related measures and for humanitarian responders to assess any needs resulting from COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch 27/07/2020). The government is seen as negligent by blocking information of the ongoing pandemic. This has increased distrust towards the central government by the affected population, further fracturing the country. In some cases this has the adverse effect of putting more power in the hands of the AA through the power of information (CASS 08/2020).

If you would like to know about the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh please see the [COVID-19 Explained series here](#).

## Humanitarian Access constraints

As ranked in the ACAPS July 2020 humanitarian access report, Myanmar has very high access constraints that are worsened by the internet shutdown. Therefore, it is very difficult to assess what the displaced people need. Sporadic fighting across the state affects humanitarian access to varying degrees. For example, at the end of July in Minbya township, active conflict disrupted transport along the Yangon-Sittwe main road (CASS 22/07/2020). Humanitarian agencies regularly operate along this route. In Chin state, Paletwa has been totally cut off since February as a result of clashes between the AA and Tatmadaw forces. International and local responders have to request permission before

transporting goods and/or use local responders who have access to the area (CASS 16/07/2020 CASS 15/07/2020). There are also reports of armed forces using schools as headquarters, limiting viable options for emergency facilities. Landmine fatalities continue to be an issue for the local population and limit humanitarian organisations' access to certain areas. Myanmar is not a signatory of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. Rakhine state accounts for 53% of countrywide casualties related to explosive devices, with a substantial rise in the total number of deaths each year from 29 in 2019 and 77 in 2020 (UNICEF 30/06/2020). The most affected towns are Rathedaung, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Buthidaung and Kyauktaw (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor 12/11/2020). On 1 August, two boys were killed and four injured after an unexploded ordnance set off in Rathedaung township (CASS 06/08/2020).

## Aggravating factors

### Natural Hazards

Myanmar is fourth in the world of countries with the highest level of exposure when it comes to natural hazards (OCHA 12/2019). Every few years, the country suffers from a range of events including cyclones, storms, floods, landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, and drought. With the monsoon season beginning at the end of June, rates of displacement are likely to rise with the needs of IDPs already high.

### Union Peace Conference

Several boycotts were observed in respect to the three-day Union Peace Conference beginning on 19 August, providing insight into the underlying political tension that could manifest at the time of elections (The Irrawaddy 06/08/2020). The peace process, which is supposed to be inclusive, is being boycotted by the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) and the Brotherhood alliance, after the government did not extend its invitation to the AA, deeming it a terrorist organisation. The AA has a strong hold over whether the elections go ahead, which will depend on whether they are willing to decentralise power to Rakhine politicians and whether they want to disrupt governance more generally (CASS 16/07/2020).

### ACAPS Risk Report, March 2020

In March 2020, ACAPS reported a heightened risk of deteriorating humanitarian conditions due to escalating conflict and government restrictions in Rakhine. The risks identified in the report have arguably materialised with violence extending south, displacing thousands and stretching the need for humanitarian assistance.

Find the original report [here](#).