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Response to Cyclone Mocha in Rakhine State

Monitoring of a brief situation of Stakeholders responses, ULA government, Junta regime, and International Community in Western Myanmar in May 2023.



*A local resident looks at broken boats in Sittwe, in Myanmar's Rakhine State, on May 15, 2023, after cyclone Mocha made a landfall.
(AFP)*

About report

This report aims to provide an update and comprehensive information regarding the strike of Cyclone Mocha on the coast of Arakan on May 14, 2023. But, as it is released as a part of the 'Monthly Report', the content of the work will only cover the cyclone-related information during the month of 'May'. The report has mentioned the actions of the local CSO organizations and their roles in both pre-and post-cyclone periods, the activities of the two leading political actors in the state: such as the junta and ULA authorities and finally, the responses of the regional and international actors including the UN and other related agencies.

This short report is designed to provide flash points regarding the perspectives of the local community as well, and it is also critical in addressing the post-cyclone problems in the region. All communities in Arakan still face a tremendous amount of destruction and damage due to the strike of the Mocha Cyclone, and systematic responses are also critical to address the neediest people first. Besides, effective collaboration with the key political and social actors is a must, and it will also increase the sustainability and resilience of the local community in preparation for the upcoming other humanitarian disasters, if any. Watching and reporting the 'abuse' and 'politicization' of humanitarian aid should also be brought to attention by the relevant organizations and actors in the coming days and months.

The negative consequences of the Mocha Cyclone are still ongoing, and minimizing both direct and indirect harm to various communities is essential. As the current cyclone warned of the vulnerability of the people in the coastal area of Arakan, it should also be changed into a more positive state in which the local communities and various stakeholders are more resilient and immune to various kinds of humanitarian disasters in the future.



Photo 1. "Rakhine State, Myanmar (as of 16 Jul 2013)," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, July 16, 2013.

Part- I: Actions of Local Civil Society Organizations

The role of the local CSOs, which were marginalized by the coup, has become significant when it comes to coping with the implications of the Mocha Cyclone. It was indistinct when the red alerts about the high destructive power of Mocha were louder before actually encountering them. However, its coping movement to emergency relief to the impacted areas has been more substantial in the aftermath of the Mocha Cyclone.

When the possible strike of the Mocha is undeniably tremendous, and the first and foremost response of some local CSOs, such as the Rakhine Ethnic Congress and All Arakan Youth Organization Network (AAYON), has been collecting data about destruction, property damage and ground situations of the impacted areas. At the same time, some CSOs, such as Arakan CSO Network and Arakan Responders for Emergency, have launched fundraising campaigns aiming to deliver emergency assistance. Additionally, most local CSOs and CBOs attempt to reach the affected areas directly in person after the first day of post-Mocha, while INGOs have been struggling with the travel authorisation approval from the SAC.

Meanwhile, some local NGOs and INGOs find a slow pace to act due to contradictions with the donor-regulated policy regarding data and detailed based standards of procedures. According to an interview with a staff from INGO carrying out the emergency relief task, “We can only deliver emergency assistance to our precedent project’s target areas and IDP camps which actually are not directly impacted areas. To deliver to those areas, we are in the process of collecting data and proposing to adjust, which normally takes time.”¹

It has been about half a month since the Mocha Cyclone; however, the emergency response by most of the INGOs and NGOs has been delayed in reaching the most affected areas, including villages of Sar Pyin Gyi, Pann Zinn Maw in Rathedaung, Nga Pree Kyun village in Pauktaw, Kalarchaung in Ponnagyun, and suburban areas of Sittwe where lowest income households are not able to afford to rebuild the shelter.

The post-Mocha consequences, including health problems and shelter requirements to face the heavy rainy season, however, cannot wait a long time.² Thus, local CSOs, CBOs and community-mobilized groups and individuals have coordinated with local residents from vulnerably affected areas to respond by delivering emergency assistance such as tarpaulin, rice, potatoes, peas and beans, chillies,

¹ Interview with a Communication Officer of an INGO on June 1, 2023.

²<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02wnWzhRptvJkzr7ARbZzbBpvr3GYvaDnQuoj29AndoRBT2DRReHKxefMfzv1pMDmzWl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

and medicine. More importantly, ponds and lakes in some villages cannot provide clean water anymore; this problem calls for an urgent response to act technically.

Additionally, they also face security concerns due to intense restrictions by the junta. A well-known charity worker, Wai Hin Aung, along with his daughter and others, was arrested and interrogated at the No.10 Military Affairs Security Force office in Sittwe while providing emergency food to storm-affected people in Ponnagyun Township on 23rd May. After a day at the interrogation centre, Wai Hin Aung and his daughter were released, though two other people were detained as suspects.³ Therefore, the responders tackle alternative strategies to avoid the multiple checkpoints by the junta forces. All of these localised activities, anyhow, are encountering insufficient resources of capital and technical assistance to be resilient for long-term rehabilitation.

On May 29, the Arakan CSOs called for unrestricted access to storm-hit areas. In the same news, the spokesperson of the Arakan CSOs said, “We need to have more caution, but the situation worsened after social activist Ko Wai Hin Aung was detained. We don’t feel safe both physically and mentally. We have to take extra caution when we transport relief supplies.”⁴

Part- II: Roles of Political Authorities

Among the two leading political actors in Arakan, both the junta and ULA authorities have carried out their respective activities since before the strike of Cyclone Mocha. But the effectiveness and perception of their actions are still different.

Actions of the Junta Authority

On May 12, the junta announced the possible prosecution of those people who remained in areas designated as a red alert for Cyclone Mocha. U Hla Thein, spokesman and attorney-general of the Arakan State military council, said that those people who fail to follow would be prosecuted under the Natural Disaster Management Law. “People are urged to watch weather news from MRTV and MWD and abide by the authorities’ instructions,” he added on the same day⁵.

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Four days after the strike of the cyclone on May 18, the junta authority released a statement mentioning the assignment of 18 military officers to the respective townships to carry out rehabilitation activities⁶. One day later, another statement by the junta said that they had evacuated 63302 people out of 125789 from the IDP camps and other areas in Sittwe township as preparedness for the storm⁷.

On May 20, the junta authority announced that around 145 people were killed by Cyclone Mocha in Arakan State. The same news said that until 19 May noon, a total of 183,024 houses, 1,711 religious buildings, 59 monasteries, 1,397 schools, 227 hospitals and clinics, 11 telecom towers, 119 lamp posts, five transformers, one market, two airport buildings and 340 departmental buildings were destroyed in respective regions and states including Rakhine State⁸.

But, until 11 days after the cyclone, a news on May 25 said that the Junta still blocked aid to cyclone-devastated areas in Rakhine State. In the same news, a resident of Thekon village, which is just 1 km from Sittwe, said, “Currently, we are mainly dependent on the support of individual donors. Their donated provisions sustain us. And we sheltered in makeshift tents crafted from aged tarpaulins. The government (Military Council) offers no assistance in rebuilding our homes or ensuring food security.” A well-known charity worker also said that “Right now, we’re doing all we can to help out since the international organisations cannot really step in effectively. It could also lead our local social aid groups to put in extra effort. But things have gotten rough lately.”⁹ On the same day, the same thing also happened in Kyaukphyu township, a local social worker said, “We submitted a proposal to the Township General Administration Office to initiate the collection of donations following the decision made during our meeting. However, we were informed by the authorities that Kyaukphyu Township is classified as a red-level area impacted by the cyclone. As a result, they expressed their inability to permit public donation drives. Additionally, they mentioned having a comprehensive list detailing the extent of the damage caused by Cyclone Mocha in Kyaukphyu.”¹⁰

On May 26, some news said that villagers fled as the junta soldiers entered Siningyi village in Ponnagyun Township. In the news, a villager from the same village said, “The village has an MPT

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⁷ <https://www.narinjara.com/news/detail/64670639b67e0c1998298d93>

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tower. Staff from the MPT came to the village to repair the tower destroyed by the cyclone and were accompanied by soldiers. I think the soldiers take security measures.”¹¹

Actions of the ULA authority

On May 7, the ULA issued a cyclone Mocha warning. In the statement, it is said that the people dependent on the rivers for their livelihood, including those users of fishing and marine vessels, have been asked to be careful from 10 to 13 May. The same statement also asked the international organisation to have an eye on the situation if there is an urgent need for humanitarian assistance, and they are also expected to cooperate with the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office for the mission¹².

On May 12, the ULA evacuated around 10,000 people from 21 villages. In some cases, the natural disaster management team of the group moved residents of several villages under Buthidaung Township to monasteries and government schools. Then, one day later, the ULA said that they had already relocated around 102,000 people from many townships across the path of the cyclone storm¹³.

One day after the strike of the Mocha cyclone on May 15, a statement by the ULA asked the international aid for cyclone-hit people of the Arakan State. “For the time being, cyclone-hit people in Arakan State badly need shelters, food and medicines but are receiving no help because communications are disrupted,” the same statement said¹⁴. Two days later, the ULA formed a new committee called ‘Cyclone Mocha Emergency Response and Rescue Committee for Arakan’ (EMERRC) with the chairpersonship of the deputy commander Dr Nyo Twan Awng, along with seven other members.

On May 20, the ULA said that they had donated around MMK 550 million to the people in the cyclone-affected areas in Rakhine State. In the news, a local interviewee said, “Such cash contributions can greatly help the Arakanese people and the ULA’s rehabilitation tasks. The ULA was seen working

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¹²

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02MYCjwbngDchQ9vW1jlvxbKHFB3KV9ugYqmuZndUngY2vmwktDoAfH9J7vMAhMEj5l&id=100064714144852&mibextid=Nif5oz

¹³

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0sWHKsp1pyMtACFeXMJ1XAfeoenSodM3dXCuwR5WmHEr7zmaJnrWpZ14k3n2vuqD4l&id=100064714144852&mibextid=Nif5oz

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<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0Y4U7M9wxBVN7JSWbvfuKuX28ofoUihqUuMknV7fnTEvjXRfQfRE5SGEPYhETv9Dcpl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

on the ground to help the Cyclone Mocha victims. These donations can benefit Arakanese people.”¹⁵ As of May 25, the ULA has received around MMK 950 million as specific donations from other ethnic armed organisations and NUG.¹⁶

Part- III: Regional and International Responses

On May 13, the World Food Programme (WFP) said that they had prepared food for over 400,000 people in cyclone response¹⁷. Three days later, the Power China company donated around MMK 50 million and other basic commodities to the disaster-affected communities. Then, on May 18, the news said that the Yunan International Solidarity Association (YISA) was about to send assistance worth around 0.1 million yuan¹⁸. In the next day, the Indian government announced the donation of 25 tons of food with medicines to cyclone-affected Myanmar. The assistance was carried by three navy ships and transferred to the port of Yangon. On the same day, the UK Embassy in Myanmar announced that they would provide around £2 million for the cyclone-affected communities, especially in the areas of clean water and shelter up to around 175,000 people¹⁹.

On May 21, the ASEAN Coordination Center for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) also announced that they were sending emergency relief for about USD 0.1 million as the first phase²⁰. On the same day, it was the Yunan Province Government in China stated the donation of around USD 70,000 worth of assistance to the disaster-affected communities. On May 22, in a news release, the Thailand government was said to support humanitarian assistance for Myanmar, but the exact amount of aid was not mentioned²¹. Subsequently, the AHA also released the announcement of giving around USD 60,000 worth of humanitarian aid. Then, on May 23, assistance from the Red Cross Society (Thailand) and other private donations were transported by the Royal Thai Air Forces. One day later, Red Cross Society (China) gave support of around USD 0.1 million worth of emergency relief.

¹⁵

<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0iibetj2YRrbkQrpg05h3hJx1MVvQWnRoVT4BAzkswsRU1fSfkwtDG1kHMmP1umbl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹⁶ <https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/ula-aa>

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<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid0297QzFpLdn56M1Z2YowGMPHd5AJrWRSSpJuoRsZUaNYMRvbStZKUGgNGAWoKYNf2dl/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

¹⁸ <https://www.ispmyanmar.com/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-announces-humanitarian-support-for-175000-affected-by-cyclone-mocha-in-myanmar>

²⁰ <https://www.ruetir.com/2023/05/asean-distributes-aid-to-victims-of-cyclone-mocha-in-myanmar/#:~:text=Quoted%20from%20the%20website%20of%20the%20Ministry%20of,on%20the%20ground%20and%20facilitating%20rapid%20needs%20assessment>

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<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.ispmyanmar.com/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1686158649269820&usg=AOvVaw3CtbICvRBiB-ano4pCr6l>

On the same day, the head of the UNOCHA requested \$333 million to assist 1.6 million of the most vulnerable people, many of whom have lost their homes as the cyclone hit Rakhine State. One day later, on May 24, UNOCHA released a statement to provide US\$333m to Cyclone Mocha victims in Myanmar. “After the cyclonic storm made landfall in Arakan State on May 14, we have not been able to eat or sleep enough, and we are facing various problems. The donors have yet to come to us,” said Daw Sandar Win, a local woman from Sabahtar Village in Rathedaung Township. In the same news, Wan Lark Foundation Director U Khaing Kaung San said that when international organisations provide relief items to storm victims, they really need to reach the people in a short period of time.

Then, on that day, the US announced to provide an additional \$17 million for restoring Mocha’s damages. A USAID official said, “We will continue to coordinate closely with our partners on the ground to provide vital assistance to the people affected by the devastating impacts of this storm in the days ahead.”²²

On May 26, UNICEF warned of the danger of landmines in cyclone Mocha-hit areas. The statement said, “Landmines and explosive ordnance may move from original places to other places due to heavy rain, flood and landslide during the cyclone.” In addition, it is said that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and international organisations working in the country have issued warnings about the risk of landmines²³. On May 29, the UNHCR declared an internal Level-2 emergency for Myanmar and Bangladesh to mobilise further internal capacity to respond to this new emergency. Finally, two days later, on May 31, the UNOCHA remarked that funding had been secured for 270 out of the 550 IDP camp longhouses that need immediate reconstruction in Rakhine. In addition, the statement said that a \$2.4 million funding gap remains to repair the remaining 281 longhouses as the monsoon season arrives.²⁴

²² <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-23-2023-united-states-providing-nearly-17-million-additional-humanitarian-assistance-response-tropical-cyclone-mocha-burma>

²³

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0FK3hM54MDCvqAz2WfY9UGDDqB9Z22a2xYGyhKRY8AnD5ehiCsrUjXNLqGvc2hb6DI&id=100064714144852&mibextid=Nif5oz

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<https://www.facebook.com/466648543487562/posts/pfbid02khGcYUoEz1utU3CN944rrSLXBfK1YrkBJfEuWdMNoPDqymzcDKhvEWGJ7W9Tdqeal/?mibextid=Nif5oz>

About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center is an independent, non-partisan and research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals including journalists, political analysts, researchers, social workers. The Center aims to advocate the understanding of the situation of human rights, politics, economic, and social dynamics in Arakan/Rakhine, and issues related to Arakan affairs in Myanmar and beyond, through rigorous research and reports. The Center also intends to perform the task of fulfilling the policy gaps through analysis and recommendations in favor of democratic policy change and common solutions.

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