

Monthly Arakan Review

Center for Arakan Studies

No.17. March. 2024

Amidst Intensifying Battles, the Arakan Rebels Gain Momentum in Arakan

Monitoring of a brief situation of political tension, economic issues, social issues, and humanitarian issues in Arakan in March 2024.



In Early March, it is reported that the Member of Parliament from Mizoram State met with officials from the Arakan Army (AA) to discuss the construction of a road between Mizoram State and Paletwa Township. (PHOTO/WESTERN NEWS)

Key Remarks

- In the politics of Arakan, the ULA/AA has successfully captured nine major towns, and military tension is still rising. AA's offensives reportedly continue in several areas like Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Ann, and Taunggyoke. Meanwhile, the junta shifted the regional commander and continued frequent bombings of the villages and wards in the AA-controlled areas. No signs of the cessation of hostilities are seen.
- While all trade and transportation activities with Myanmar side and Bangladesh halt, economic situations in the state are deteriorating. Some basic goods and commodities flowing from the Indian side of the border could be found. ULA meanwhile invites foreign direct investments, claiming to guarantee the security of the project operation and personnel. The state's tourism sector is broken down, signifying a reduction in tourist numbers.
- Grade-10 students sat limited matriculation exams amidst growing threats to their safety and security. In some cases, parents, along with students coming from rural areas, are also arrested by the junta authority on the way back to their homes. More importantly, Rakhine with ID number 11 are reportedly hindered from traveling from one place to another. On the other hand, ULA proclaimed to draft a new educational curriculum for the students in Rakhine state.
- IDP women on International Women's Day urged the assistance groups to support women-related facilities, especially for the IDP population. HDCO, a branch of the ULA, released that the total number of IDPs in the state increased to more than 3 lakhs since the armed clashes on November 13, 2023. The group also said that only 30 percent of the total IDPs are receiving enough humanitarian aid. On the other hand, the junta minister also reportedly met with the UN Interim Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar. Yet, the situations in humanitarian difficulty remain the same."

Political Affairs

In March, the politics of Arakan were primarily dominated by news related to armed conflicts, including casualties, surrenders, atrocities, displacements, inspections, military exercises, reinforcement, recruitment, and propaganda from the junta council (SAC authority). Additionally, there were inspections, landmine clearance operations, seizures, warnings, and public relations activities from the ULA/AA, along with intense armed clashes between the two-armed parties.

To start with the junta's activities, on March 1, the junta forces launched airstrikes on Tat Taung town of Rakhine State. The next day, the junta's navy [conducted shelling](#) near the Korean port bazaar in Sittwe. On the same day, it was also reported that as the junta had only 12 battalions in five northern townships in Arakan, they [tried to recruit](#) the locals. As of March 6, intense armed [clashes erupted](#) between the AA and junta in Taungup of southern Rakhine. One day later, it was mentioned that an intense clash erupted in Rathedaung; AA may capture the town at any moment. On March 8, the Myanmar Junta [provided Military Training](#) to Muslims at Sittwe Regional Command Headquarters. The next day, the Myanmar Junta's Chief Minister Htain Lin led the Militia Recruitment Team in Rakhine.

Two days later, it was also reported that the AA stepped up the offensive at the battalion headquarters in Rathedaung. As of March 14, it was also said that the AA is unable to confirm the reported [deaths of 100 Muslims](#) at the battlefield. The next day, the staff families relocated as the junta decided to establish an artillery base in the Sittwe immigration office premises. Then, as of March 19, all village tract administrators in Thandwe resigned due to the military service law. On the same day, the junta [threatened to arrest relatives](#) of Muslims who fled displacement camps to avoid conscription.

On March 20, Major-General Htin Latt Oo, Commander of Rakhine Western Command, was [reportedly removed and transferred](#) to reserve force. On the same day, the junta [launched](#) airstrikes between Thandwe and Taungup in southern Rakhine. The next day, it was reported that junta troops and AA have clashed nearly 180 times since October 2023. Two days later, the Muslims in Sittwe [were coerced](#) into joining the anti-AA protest.

As of March 25, the junta [reinforced troops and deployed](#) artillery at the Tha Htay hydropower project in Thandwe. Three days later, the families of the 372nd battalion and supply unit retreated due to fear of an AA offensive. Four days later, it was reported that the junta families shifted from Buthidaung due to military escalation. On March 30, another round of Myanmar's 177 border guard personnel, seeking refuge in Bangladesh, is said to be sent back by the first week of April.

Economic Situations

The economic news covered during March in the local media mainly revolves around trade, migration, foreign direct investment, and tourism issues. On March 8, 2024, it was mentioned that local trade between Rakhine and the Indian border, under the ULA-controlled areas, is ongoing. A local trader [stated](#): "For us, we transport gasoline, bread, food products, and radios by boat. The journey is lengthy, and profits are minimal. I believe conducting business will be more convenient in the future."

Another local commented: "We sell various Indian cooking oils from Myeikwa to Kyauktaw. It has become more convenient to travel after passing through the AA's territory."

Two days later, on March 10, 2024, another news report stated that about 20 Rakhine individuals, including approximately 18 women who traveled to work in China, were arrested and went missing without contact. The report continued that a group of approximately 20 individuals, including [around 18 Rakhine women](#) who boarded a bus from Yangon to work in China, were detained and unaccounted for.

On March 25, another news report mentioned that the AA invited new investors, urging existing foreign investors to cooperate with them. "Any foreign investment that benefits and contributes to the development of Arakan State is welcomed," reads a statement [issued](#) by the AA.

The report further states that potential investors whose investments will bring mutual benefits are warmly welcomed for the betterment of Arakan State. The AA has pledged to ensure the safety of investors and has called upon existing foreign investors in Arakan State to collaborate with it and its political wing, the United League of Arakan, to continue their businesses and development projects. The AA is committed to systematically restoring stability in Arakan State and striving for public interests and regional development, as stated in the announcement.

The final news report of the month, on March 31, was about tourism. It noted that due to travel restrictions and conflict, there are significantly fewer visitors to Ngapali Beach during Thingyan this year. The report continued that during a typical Thingyan festival, approximately 80 percent of people visit, but this year only about 30 percent are coming. In previous years, almost every hotel was fully booked by now, indicating a substantial decline in tourist numbers.

Additionally, a hotel manager mentioned, "They haven't arrived yet, but by the 10th of this month, there is a Thingyan tourist. About 2 or 3 hotels are already fully booked. The rest of the hotel is open. There are no guests. 'I have been ordered to open from above,' said another hotel manager."

Social Issues

During March, the matriculation examination was conducted in a limited capacity due to security concerns. The exams [took place in 69 centers](#) across Paletwa, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Pauktaw, Ramree, Myebon, and Ma-Ei townships in Arakan. According to the military junta's Myanmar Alin newspaper, a total of 146,523 students from Rakhine State registered for the exams. However, only 128,801 students sat for the 10th standard examination under the 2023-2024 academic year, as reported in the March 17 issue of the newspaper. The State Administration Council [promised to reconvene](#) the exams in April for the absent students, numbering 17,722, as declared on March 30.

These students in the exam rooms were also subjected to artillery shelling by the junta and faced difficulty returning to their homes due to transportation blockades. On March 11, one male and one female student, who were sitting in the first day's matriculation examination, [were injured](#) by an artillery shell fired by junta forces at Par Da Leik village in Sittwe. Moreover, on March 13, a classroom in a Basic Education Primary School in Shwe Pyi Thar village [was hit by artillery shells](#) fired by junta navy forces, according to a resident interviewed by local news. On March 23, fourteen villagers,

including students who had returned to their village after sitting exams in Kyauk Phyu town, were [reportedly arrested](#) by junta navy forces, and news of their release remains unconfirmed.

Meanwhile, the de facto parallel government, the United Leagues of Arakan, disclosed that they have been drafting curriculums for the Arakan Education Center at their 8th press conference convened on March 4. Furthermore, they affirmed that they are [preparing for their own matriculation exam](#) and plans for freshmen to continue to higher education.

Regarding the junta's transportation ban, on the morning of March 19, piles of earth blocked the main road stretching from the checkpoint near Taungup University to Mahaw Thadar Private High School, rendering it impassable for cars. Furthermore, the road near the checkpoint was excavated and rendered unusable, with large pits dug along the main road adjacent to the university checkpoint. These actions signify the junta forces' efforts to dismantle vital transportation routes, likely due to fear of potential infiltration by AA soldiers into Taungup township, [disrupting](#) usual travel routes for the people.

Not only is there a travel ban, but Rakhine people are particularly targeted to deter freedom of movement by the junta from Yangon to Sittwe. According to a travel agent, bus stations have received directives from the military junta to refrain from selling tickets to individuals carrying 11/National Registration Cards (NRC) issued to Rakhine people. This restriction was enforced by the junta following the Arakan Army (AA)'s takeover of nine Rakhine townships following intense conflict. Consequently, numerous young Rakhine travelers have been detained by junta authorities at airports and bus stations in Yangon, Mandalay, Kyauk Phyu, and Sittwe. "The junta has issued instructions to prohibit the sale of tickets to any 11/NRC holder. As for other NRC holders, they are asked to present their original NRC, along with recommendation letters from the police station and ward administrators," [said a travel agency employee](#) from Yangon to local media on March 21.

In the health sector, the general hospital in Maungdaw township has been closed to the public to accommodate a group of junta soldiers. As the hospital premises turned into a temporary military base, health workers [were relocated](#) to the Sittwe locality, according to news published on March 4. Additionally, due to the possibility of armed conflicts in Sittwe, the Sittwe General Hospital has experienced a substantial staff exodus, causing a shortage of personnel. A female staff member, who requested anonymity, disclosed on March 27 that the hospital once boasted over 300 doctors and nurses. However, the current count [has plummeted](#) to a mere 40, severely hampering the delivery of healthcare services to patients.

Humanitarian Issues

After more than four months of resurgent conflict, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Rakhine State are experiencing difficulties due to food shortages, lack of safe shelters, and inadequate access to sufficient water, exacerbated by the increasing temperature and overcrowding of IDPs in villages controlled by the ULA/AA.

On International Women's Day (March 8), internally displaced women from Rakhine State called for attention to their health, safety, and support. An IDP woman from Minbya expressed, "I believe women face heightened challenges. We reside in crowded areas with insecurity. Clean toilets are scarce, and we resort to makeshift sanitary pads. Additionally, financial constraints prevent us from purchasing proper sanitary products, adversely impacting our health. The absence of support complicates our struggles for survival. Therefore, on International Women's Day, we, the IDPs from Rakhine, urge [international and social aid organizations](#) not to overlook our safety, health, and livelihood. I appeal to everyone to extend as much support as possible to us," to local media on March 8.

According to the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO) of the United League of Arakan (ULA/AA), the total number of IDPs as of March 21 has been recorded as 358,200. At their 8th press conference, a ULA spokesperson [urged international and domestic humanitarian agencies](#) to pay attention to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Arakan.

On March 26th in Nay Pyi Taw, Mr. Sajjad Mohammad Sajid, Head of Office for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Myanmar, [met](#) with Union Minister for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Dr. Kan Zaw, UN Interim Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator to Myanmar Mr. Marcoluigi Corsi, and his delegation, along with Union Minister for Immigration and

Population U Myint Kyaing, and State Administration Council Member, Deputy Prime Minister, and Union Minister for Defense Admiral Tin Aung San on March 27th, as [published](#) in the junta media Global New Light of Myanmar.

About the Report

This report is part of the CAS's monthly series, which delves into four key areas of the state of Arakan. The first section addresses political concerns, including the armed revolution, junta activities, and issues of political freedom. The second examines the state's economic climate, focusing on rising prices, declining demand, foreign direct investment, and border trade. The third and fourth sections cover social and humanitarian issues, respectively; these include education, health, migration, and the internally displaced persons (IDP) population.

Key data in the report are sourced from local media outlets, such as DMG, Western News, among others. The aim of this report is to shed new light on the situation for observers endeavoring to comprehend the dynamics at play in the region.

About Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

The Center is an independent, non-partisan research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals, including journalists, political analysts, researchers, and social workers. The Center aims to promote understanding of human rights, political, economic, and social dynamics in Arakan and related issues within Myanmar and beyond. Through rigorous research and reporting, the Center seeks to address the policy gaps with analysis and recommendations to support democratic change and collective solutions.

Contact: info@arakanstudies.org
www.arakanstudies.org