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THE WAY

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A threat to
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Regional hluttaws
under scrutiny

A SAD STATE

Impoverished. Segregated. Miserable.
Can Rakhine ever move forward?



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STATE AND REGION HLUTTAW UNDER SCRUTINY

Early signs from the Yangon Region Hluttaw suggest that the state and region legislatures may do a better job of holding governments to account than their predecessors. Photo: Teza Hlaing



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KEEPING WATCH

Activists say they are still subject to surveillance by the authorities, despite the recent change of government. Photo: Teza Hlaing



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BETTER PROSPECTS

Job opportunities for young people in a range of sectors are improving as a result of economic reforms and lifting of sanctions. Photo: Theint Mon Soe (aka J)

COVER PHOTO: **MARO VERLI**



MOVING RAKHINE FORWARD

Development is regarded as key to resolving the complex situation in Rakhine State, and a recent report says greater sensitivity by international actors will also help to reduce tension and misunderstandings.

By Oliver Slow

IN 2012, U Khin Htwe Maung was building a house in downtown Sittwe, paid for with the pension he received for decades of military service.

When sectarian violence erupted in Rakhine State in June that year, he was in Yangon visiting family. He returned to his hometown three weeks later to find his under-construction home burned to the ground.

“I felt like not only my home had been torn down, but my life,” Khin Htwe Maung

told *Frontier* in an interview at the Sat Roe Kya displacement camp, on the outskirts of Sittwe, where he has been living since 2012.

Sat Roe Kya is one of the few internally displaced persons camps for ethnic Rakhine who lost their homes in the violence four years ago. The UN says there are 3,482 people living in the camp, which also has a small Hindu population.

Residents of IDP camps for Rakhine have freedom of movement – something denied to those in camps for Muslims –

but most are unable to move out because they can’t afford to rebuild their homes or buy land.

Using some remaining savings, Khin Htwe Maung established a small generator business in the camp. He earns about K15,000 a day but has not been able to save enough to return home.

“I don’t like it here. The conditions are poor. I want to go back to where I was before but I cannot afford to,” he said.

He said the violence had come as a



CHILDREN AT Muslim IDP camps in Rakhine State. Photos: Maro Verli

“surprise” and expressed a widely held view in Rakhine State that it was instigated by elements in the U Thein Sein-led government.

“Before [2012], relationships between the communities were good. I have friends in the [Muslim] camps who I have not seen since 2012,” he said.

Most residents in Sat Roe Kya who spoke to *Frontier* said conditions in the camp were poor. Many lamented the state of the roads, as well as the limited access to drinking water.

Although the camp’s residents have received some aid from international organisations, they said they felt that those in camps for Muslims received preferential treatment.

“Very few international communities come to the camp, they only go to the Bengali camps,” Khin Htwe Maung said, referring to the camps of the Muslims who self-identify as Rohingya, a term the government rejects.

“Both communities lost things, you have to remember that,” he said.

The issue is a common grievance among the state’s ethnic Rakhine population and could be exacerbating tensions in the state, said a report published in May by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, a US-based non-profit organisation.

“In the aftermath of the 2012 violence, townships in central Rakhine State saw a rapid increase in the presence of international agencies,” said the report, entitled *Reshaping Engagement: Perspectives on Conflict Sensitivity in Rakhine State*.

“Ethnic Rakhine actors explained the high expectations which had accompanied this expansion; namely, that international agencies’ resources and expertise would contribute to evident improvements in development standards for the state as a whole,” the report said. “The realisation that the majority of international programming would support displaced persons exclusively – a population largely comprised of Muslim groups – constituted a significant disappointment.”

U Nyan Lin*, an ethnic Rakhine living in Sat Roe Kya, works as a sub-con-

tractor for an international organisation operating in the state. He has attended several meetings hosted by the organisation and said international agencies rarely recognised the complexities of working in Rakhine.

“The international community, they come here, they see the Bengali community and that they are very poor, and that they do not have citizenship. Then they go back. But from our point of view, we are poor too. We are one of the poorest countries in the world, in one of the country’s poorest states, but the NGOs do not come here and listen to us,” he said.

A 2010 national household living conditions survey found Rakhine to be Myanmar’s second poorest state or region, after Chin State. However, the UN Development Programme said in a 2015 report that a reinterpretation of the data by the World Bank suggested that Rakhine State’s poverty rate was 78 percent, which would make it the poorest state or region in the country.

Although Nyan Lin said he had many Muslim friends he had not seen since

2012, he became emotional as he spoke of conflicts between Rakhine and Muslim communities more than five decades ago, that he had been told about by his grandparents.

“Our land has been taken. It has happened so many times. So, if this happened to you, if your land was taken, how would you feel?” he said.

The other side

A 20-minute drive from Sittwe is a cluster of IDP camps for Muslims, many of whose residents self-identify as Rohingya. Unlike those living in the camps for Rakhine IDPs, none of the Muslims can leave. Although they receive aid from humanitarian agencies, the restriction on movement means that most of the estimated 120,000 people in IDP camps throughout Rakhine have limited access to health, education and livelihoods.

Ko Hla Win* lived in Sittwe before he became a resident of the sprawling Thae Chaung camp in 2012. The camp is home to 11,633 people. In some camps, he said, there’s a black market, with Rakhine businessmen who have freedom of movement bringing in goods to trade with Muslim IDPs who have money. Most IDPs earn money from doing casual work or selling food rations. Many also receive remittances from relatives living abroad.

In some camps visited by *Frontier* there were lively markets, for food, electrical appliances, medical supplies and jewellery.

But those who are destitute have no use for the markets.

U Maung Kyaw Oo, who lives in Thet Kae Pyin camp, of 5,656 residents, lost all his savings in the 2012 violence and has no means of earning income. He relies on food rations distributed by the UN World Food Programme.

“Life was quite good before 2012, but now we have nothing,” said Maung Kyaw Oo. “As you can see, we are very reliant on the international community. We hope they will put pressure on the government to change what is happening,” he said.

“For how many years can the food distribution support us? We’re very grateful but we don’t want this forever. I want to go back to where I lived before and earn money. The situation is desperate here. We have a healthcare crisis, an education crisis,” Maung Kyaw Oo said, adding that his children do not go to school and have nothing to do. “We have nothing to do here except wait for the food rations. We

need basic rights, that’s all we’re asking for,” he said.

Unregistered IDPs

For those without access to food rations, the situation is even more desperate.

Dar Paing is a Muslim camp holding an estimated 8,000 IDPs. When *Frontier* visited at the start of Rakhine’s relentless rainy season, heavy rain had created a small stream on one side of the camp. On the other side of the stream was a group of displaced villagers who were not registered on food ration lists.

They told *Frontier* they had not received food rations for seven months and relied solely on financial support from private donors.

A mother showed her son, his bloated belly an apparent symptom of malnutrition. Later, *Frontier* learned he had been diagnosed with severe anaemia and discharged from hospital three weeks previously. Other villagers said their flimsy shelters, often nothing more than a tarpaulin held up by a bamboo pole, would not survive the rainy season.

The government regards the unregistered villagers as opportunists who moved to the area in the hope of being able to receive food rations.

“We are hardly surviving here,” said Daw Lailar Begun, an elderly resident of the unregistered camp. “Our children cannot go to school. If someone is sick, we have no money to take them to the doctor. We are thankful for those who have donated to us, but we need something more,” she said.

Mr Arsen Sahakyan, partnerships officer for WFP Myanmar, told *Frontier* the villagers were so-called “economic IDPs” who lost their jobs and “sold all their possessions and moved to camps in pursuit of humanitarian assistance”.

He said the WFP prioritised its “scarce resources” to assist IDPs who were genuinely affected by the events of mid-2012 and were registered with the government.

“In the meantime, people from Dar Paing in question are considered by the government ‘livelihood affected people’. The government is now making efforts to return some of them to their villages of origin through assistance from the local donors,” Sahakyan said.

Another issue, said sources working in Rakhine, was that household registration lists had not been updated for years and the result was the incorrect distribution of food rations.





Sahakyan said the UN agency and its partners had planned to review the lists last year but had been asked by the Rakhine State government to postpone the exercise until after the election.

“WFP and partners are currently working together to update the beneficiary lists as soon as possible,” he said.

The way forward

The situation in Rakhine State is one of the most complicated and closely watched issues that the National League for Democracy government has inherited from the previous regime. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has faced criticism from foreign governments and international media due to perceptions she is not doing enough to improve the situation in the state, particularly for its stateless Muslim community.

However, she needs to balance these expectations with the opinions of those within Myanmar. The dominant view – one strongly held in Rakhine State – is that most of those who self-identify as Rohingya are illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

“The Rakhine people believe that they are treated differently [from the Muslim community],” said a specialist on Rakhine who spoke to *Frontier* on the condition of anonymity. “Comparing the conditions of one against the other is polarising; nit-picking over who is worse off isn’t helpful. It is much more important to focus on the real issues that can be changed, such as access to education, healthcare and livelihoods,” she said.

A key question – and one that has divided the international community, particularly the UN – is whether economic development or human rights should be prioritised.

In late May, Aung San Suu Kyi was named as the chair of a 27-member committee for implementing peace, stability and development in Rakhine. As its name suggests, development is the priority, but it is also moving forward cautiously with measures aimed at restoring some citizenship rights to Muslims – provided they give up, at least for now, on their demand to self-identify as Rohingya.

A MAN and his son at their home in an IDP camp on the outskirts of Sittwe, Rakhine State. Photo: Maro Verli

“Comparing the conditions of one against the other is polarising; nit-picking over who is worse off isn’t helpful. It is much more important to focus on the real issues that can be changed, such as access to education, healthcare and livelihoods.”

A MUSLIM man rides his bike through an IDP camp in Rakhine State. Photo: Maro Verli

The Rakhine specialist added that although calls for the government to allow freedom of movement for the Muslim population were understandable, such a decision could exacerbate the situation.

“It would be dangerous because there are still tensions. It needs to happen step-by-step,” she said.

Ms Gabrielle Aron, CDA’s deputy country director in Myanmar and author of the *Reshaping Engagement* report, said international groups working in the state needed to be better at explaining their activities to be able to build trust with local communities.

“The lack of communication between international and local groups has been a major issue driving tensions in Rakhine,” Aron said. “An international presence of the scale seen in Rakhine since 2012 has no precedent in Myanmar; local communities

therefore need to be engaged in order to avoid misunderstandings and a build-up of negative perceptions,” she said.

CDA’s report was based on interviews with Myanmar and foreigners in Rakhine between September 2015 and March and focused mainly on the centre of the state. Aron said the situation in northern Rakhine would need a separate report.

She said that although the international community needed to do more to communicate its activities, the message being highlighted in many foreign media reports, of a Muslim versus Rakhine dynamic, was not fully representative of the situation and could have dangerous consequences.

“It is quite clear that the situation today has been impacted negatively by the international media,” said Aron. “This common narrative of aggressor versus victim – with the Rakhine as the former and

the Muslims the latter – has contributed to redirecting Rakhine grievances away from the former government and instead towards both international actors and the other conflict group,” she said, referring to the state’s Muslims. “The Rakhine see themselves being demonised in the international media and in statements by foreign governments, and this adds a new layer to the population’s long-running experience with marginalisation. International messages insufficiently acknowledge that the policies on Rakhine State, and the decisions regarding the ongoing situation, fall solely under government mandate and are not the responsibility of the Rakhine population.”

However, she said she was not advocating that the Muslim community’s problems be downplayed or ignored.

“It’s not about not talking about it; it’s



about talking about it in the right way," she said.

"We have a situation where all groups feel backed into a corner and positions have become entrenched. Let's look at measures that can also lessen the grievances of the ethnic Rakhine; to give that population the space to feel that they are being fairly represented and treated. Only then will steps to move things forward be likely to succeed without a significant risk of renewed tensions.

"The international community will have a far greater positive impact if advocacy shifts to focussing more on practical measures that lessen grievances and calm the situation. Recognising that changes need to happen, continuing to push on contentious issues as a first step will only incite the Rakhine to push back harder in the opposite direction. The situation will continue to

stagnate and that's not what anyone wants."

A potent influence on the situation in Rakhine is the role of Buddhist nationalists. They have been reasonably quiet since last year's election but have become more active in recent weeks.

"The more extreme voices on the ethnic Rakhine side are a serious problem," said Mr Ronan Lee, a specialist on Myanmar at Australia's Deakin University who has been studying the situation in Rakhine. "Political leaders have a responsibility to improve the material circumstances of everyone in Rakhine rather than seeking to apportion blame," he told *Frontier*.

But Lee warned that the human rights of Muslims should not be ignored in the process.

"The Muslim community should immediately be given access to their human rights. Freedom of movement is a must.

Trust will return once both communities have access to their human rights," he said.

There are no easy solutions to such a complex and longstanding issue, but many argue that economic development in one of Myanmar's poorest areas can bring positive change.

During a sometimes tense interview at the Sat Roe Kya camp with Nyan Win, he smiled when asked if development in Rakhine would contribute towards rebuilding trust between communities.

"International development is key," he said, raising a thumb in the air. "People do not have jobs, so we need to see investments. If people from all these communities can work together every day, can eat together every day, then maybe we will see this problem solved." **F**

**some names in this report have been changed.*