

Perceptions of Nonviolent Civilian Protection in Rakhine State, Myanmar



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

Executive Summary

This is the second of a two-part series of policy briefs to explore community perceptions of and coping strategies for violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. This policy brief presents our findings on local conceptions of nonviolent protection in Rakhine State. Participants' responses suggest that locals primarily need to invest in their capital as individuals (e.g., wealth, ethnicity, social standing, knowledge, and others) to gain access to different self-protection strategies. Yet access to such capital is largely driven by ethno-religious privilege, which puts the ethnic minority groups at the struggling end. Alternatively, there are chances of local protection efforts being provided by other stakeholders such as sangha, prominent local figures (i.e., village elders and local administrators), and locally operating humanitarian groups, but such efforts are currently limited and are highly context-specific. The policy brief concludes with some key recommendations on how to better expand access to civilian personal capitals for all Rakhine ethnic communities and what sort of support unarmed third parties may need in order to better prepare their interventions.

Acknowledgment

The policy brief is an output of the research project, 'Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar.' We extend our deepest gratitude to the research participants whose invaluable contributions and willingness to share their experience made this research possible. We are also profoundly thankful to the resilient research team on the ground, along with research volunteers, who were instrumental in safeguarding our communication with research participants. Finally, we also wish to express our sincere thanks to the funders: the Network Plus "Creating Safer Space," financed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).



Overview

In Southeast Asia, Myanmar stands out as one of the region's epicentres of violence and instability. Ever since the military interim government—the State Administration Council (SAC)—forcibly replaced the civilian-led government in February 2021 through a coup d'état, the country has subjected parts of its civilian population to arrays of violence and threats of violence. For the period between the enactment of the military coup in 2021 and the end of 2022, the Peace Research Institute Oslo documented at least 6,337 reported killings of civilians, with at least 2,614 other civilians being injured [Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023]. Simultaneously, decades of inter-ethnic disunity have contributed to recurring internal armed conflict waged between Myanmar's national military, Sit-Tat, and multiple factions of local ethnic insurgency organisations (EIO). These landscapes of violence are the lived realities for many local civilians across Myanmar.

Being at constant risk of becoming the target of violence, Burmese citizens are not idle in their vulnerabilities. Some have grown resilient to their precarious living conditions, developing strategies to actively protect themselves. For example, the post-coup era of Myanmar is characterised by a rise of nationwide civil resistance, where civilians, particularly young Burmese, took the initiative to defend themselves from state-sponsored violence by taking arms [Frontier Myanmar, 2022]. Stories were circulated on high numbers of urban citizens leaving their cities to join one of the 300 self-proclaimed armed resistance groups of the 'People's Defence Force' (PDF) [Thant, 2021, 8], or conscripting to their ethnically affiliated local insurgency groups [Radio Free Asia, 2021].

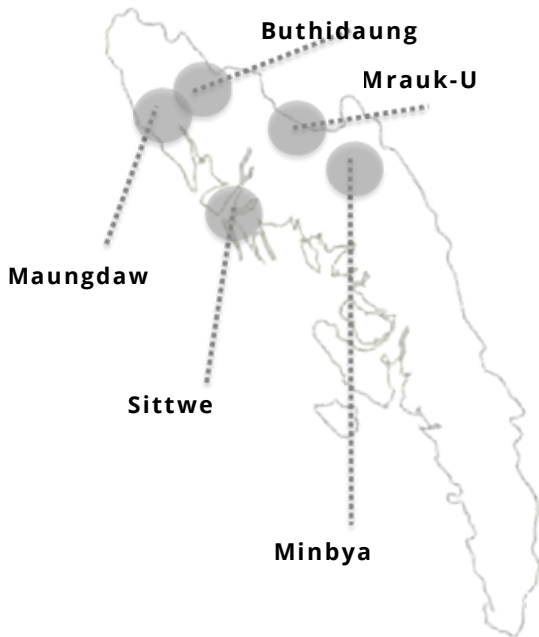
As a form of violent protection, the surge of armed resistance movements in Myanmar has been prominently discussed in conflict studies on Myanmar [Hein, 2022; Loong, 2023; Haar et. al., 2024]. Yet, the alternate to violent resistance is somewhat missing from the discussion, overlooking civilians who are willing to avert violence while actively promoting a nonviolent, peaceful environment. For instance, in the weeks following the coup in February 2021, there have been multiple reported instances of peaceful anti-government protests rallied by civilians living in major urban cities in Myanmar. While the protests predictably met with violent responses, observers have taken interest in the nonviolent strategies the protest organisers employed in reaction to the SAC's public intimidation.

As reported by Ford and Pinckney (2021), when SAC law enforcement unleashed water cannons to quell the protests, the organisers stood still with their prepared umbrellas and baby pools [Ford and Pinckney, 2021]. Subsequently, when military convoys were dispatched to the protesters' gathering points, other sympathising civilians, in turn, expressed their solidarity by sabotaging the convoy movements—from throwing onions all over the street to collectively slowing down the city traffic [International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law, 2021]. While these actions have mainly been short-term reactionary responses to the current systemic violence, they nonetheless raise the question of whether other segments of the Burmese population—who had already lived in continuous conflict settings before the rise of the SAC government—could offer us novel insights into their nonviolent strategies or support systems of civilian protection.

This is the second of a two-part series of policy briefs to explore community perceptions of and coping strategies for violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In this policy brief, we argue that, akin to people in various other parts of the world living in prolonged states of conflict, Burmese people are resilient and have developed certain nonviolent strategies to prevent violence and to provide direct physical protection to their community. In the literature on unarmed civilian protection (UCP), these strategies are commonly referred to as nonviolent protection [Oldenhuis et. al., 2021]. In this policy brief, we present the findings of our project 'Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar' regarding endogenous conceptions and strategies of nonviolent civilian protection in Rakhine State, Myanmar. This policy brief complements the first part of the series, which discussed the state of violence in Rakhine state since January 2015—the period since the first armed hostilities between the Sit-Tat and AA—in the context of everyday violence encountered by civilians.

Methodology

The research project started in October 2022. 28 local research volunteers were involved in collecting in-field data from over 200 local civilians, while also providing iterative feedback on some of the project's research decision-making (i.e., finalising research instruments, deciding data collection strategies, and contextualising collected responses). Data collection activities were conducted in five Rakhine townships—Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Minbya, Sittwe, and Mrauk-U—for three months, from March to May 2023 (and later extended to June due to operational hurdles caused by Cyclone Mocha in May 2023).



The project's respondents were given the opportunity to participate in a single or both of the offered data collection exercises, namely a semi-structured interview and artwork elicitation. Diversification of data collection methods was intended not only to explore the prospect of researching nonviolent protection beyond interviews, but also to encourage respondents' agency to determine the medium of information suitable to their personal preference and safety [Clark, 2021; Fairey et al., 2023].

For the interviews, the local research volunteers worked with several prompts centred around themes such as the role of armed actors in the respondents' vicinity, their violent encounters with armed actors, and how the community has reacted to the local violence, if applicable. Meanwhile, respondents who opted for art-based research were invited to participate in two artwork elicitation tasks: to draw a series of prompts into a panel of art-based narrative (storyboard) and to draw different shapes representing their different hierarchies of values based on assigned prompts (life domain method).

By the end of the data collection period, we gathered about 106 art-based research responses along with 102 interviews from 172 male and 37 female respondents. The discrepancy in the numbers of female and male respondents is a result of prioritizing the trust networks of consented volunteers to be interviewed by our research volunteers. Collected responses were analysed through content analysis, ensuring we could identify data-driven trends or themes among responses, while acknowledging the experiential depth of each single response. Local researchers were also tasked to translate the original transcript from Burmese to English with priority put on preserving the literal meaning, while also shedding light on the contextual meaning of the text where necessary. All these steps were deemed necessary to ensure proper alignment with academic standards and evidence-based advocacy.

CONTEXT

The Space for Nonviolent Protection in Rakhine

All civilians in Rakhine State deserve protection against collateral damage caused by the ongoing conflict. However, the local authorities are not offering formal humanitarian protection in Rakhine's current state of violent conflict. As both the State Administration Council (SAC) and the Arakanese Army (AA) primarily use their resources to defend their respective territories, unarmed civilians have few options to avoid becoming caught up in armed violence. Approaches developed by civilians to avoid violence can be conceptualised as 'civilian self-protection,' whereby civilians or groups of civilians act as the primary decision-makers in order to preserve their physical integrity during armed conflict [Jose and Medie 2015, 516]. This differs from the protection of civilians bestowed by the state, which is currently absent in Rakhine, or by non-state agencies, which are present but operate at limited capacity.

Through international advocacy on civilian self-protection, we have heard stories from groups of civilians around the world who are actively seeking to protect their physical and mental well-being amidst ongoing conflict. Like many other communities in conflict zones, ethnic groups in Rakhine have developed self-protection strategies as their primary defence mechanism [Ferris, 2011; Oldenhuis et al., 2021, p. 92]. For example, there are stories of Rohingyas deliberately taking the risk of crossing the Mayu Mountains on foot or the Naf River by makeshift raft to avoid contact with the Arakan Army (AA) and the Sit-Tat [Hammer and Ahmet, 2020]. However, few researchers have examined how ethnic groups in Rakhine have utilised nonviolent approaches to avoid violence potentially directed at their communities.



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

There are also reports of efforts by Rakhine people living in close-knit communities (i.e. small, mixed-ethnicity villages; ethnic-exclusive villages; or IDP camps) to appoint specific individuals in their communities as 'warners' — those who actively provide information about incoming risks — and 'responders' — those deemed competent to facilitate a violence prevention plan. However, we must also be aware of the potential risks that this type of 'grassroots' early warning system could pose.

In many cases, locals seem to have failed to actively verify early warnings, readily accepting any shared information 'as is', despite recurring cases of rumours or biased information being shared by each of the conflicting armed group, either to garner widespread support or to gain a tactical military advantage. UCP studies have shown that rumours require constant monitoring, as unchecked harmful rumours can cost lives by causing panic or violent responses [Oldenhuis et al., 2021, p. 174; Burgess & Maiese, 2004].

In the Rakhine context, there has been widespread evidence of rumours and narratives framing the actions of the Rohingya population as aligning with the collective interests of the insurgent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) or the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). More recently, such rumours have been fuelled by Rohingyas' involuntary clashes with AA troops as forced conscripts of the Sit-Tat [Fitzgerald, 2017; Latifi, 2024]. Consequently, when an early warning was based solely on AA attempts to inform their Arakan supporters of the possibility of Rohingya involvement in post-November 2023 operations, the Rohingya's forced conscription was deliberately overlooked. Treating such information as the basis for an early warning would be counterproductive as it provides little insight into where the armed clashes between the AA and the Sit-Tat may actually occur. Secondly, it eliminates any safe space for the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Rakhine, who have not yet recovered from the various inter-ethnic tensions and strained relationships since 2012.

FINDINGS

Spontaneous Evasive Measures

For most respondents taking part in artwork sessions, reactive avoidance or spontaneous evasive measures are the most commonly reported methods of self-protection, regardless of their ethnic background. These nonviolent protective measures are described as direct responses to violence or the threat of violence that respondents may encounter. Respondents often visualise 'approaching soldiers' from Sit-Tat or AA as a sign of imminent danger. When asked how they would respond to such a threat, some suggested retreating strategically to avoid interaction, i.e. stopping any outdoor activities and immediately returning home. However, in cases where hiding at home was felt to be less feasible, respondents would hide in the forest and wait for the soldiers to pass by.

"We meet them [the military soldiers] at the checkpoints whenever we travel. I try my best to avoid the military. I believe they provide security for other ethnic groups but not Rohingya. We fear the military and feel the need to follow them with obedience."

Male Rohingya, Community Teacher, Sittwe (Interview No. 11, March 2023)

Although evasive measures are considered the most instinctive response to violent threats, some respondents are also aware of their limitations. One respondent recalls that, when faced with the immediate danger of indiscriminate bombing by Sit-Tat's artillery or airstrikes, people in the neighbourhood barely had the opportunity to escape the attacks. Sit-Tat has frequently used airstrikes to combat AA ground troops in Rakhine (The Irrawaddy, 2022; The Defence Post, 2023), despite the nearest active military airbase being located over 200 kilometres away from Rakhine's capital, Sittwe. Locals may also be less capable of spontaneously protecting themselves from the less visible threat of landmines and improvised explosive devices, both of which have been placed throughout the region by Sit-Tat and AA during their protracted conflict [Fortify Rights, 2020].

[On the question of violent encounter] "My neighbourhood in Sittwe had never directly encountered violence by the SAC. But I learnt that in the [redacted] village nearby, the SAC would send quick airstrikes, and people barely had the opportunity to leave the village. The SAC [airstrikes] caused a lot of casualties in that village."

Male Rakhine, Merchant, Sittwe (Interview No. 6, April 2023)

Early Warning Early Response

As opposed to reacting to imminent threats, respondents also reflect on the approaches they used, or would have used, to avoid being caught up in the danger in the first place. In this regard, the respondents described strategies similar to the concept of Early Warning Early Response (EWER), which involves a series of actions taken by locals to disseminate information, designate mobilisation points, and coordinate response plans, all with the aim of preventing grassroots violence or vigilantism [Oldenhuis et al., 2021, p. 175].

For instance, during the height of the 2012 sectarian conflict, Rohingya respondents recalled that it was common practice for Rohingya villagers to appoint a few members of their community to monitor the area and alert the villagers to the presence of any incoming troops or vigilante mobs. Another example shared by the respondents was the intelligence provided by local government administrators who had first-hand knowledge from stationing troops, followed by relocation arrangements facilitated by community elders. A respondent living in an IDP camp described how working closely with NGOs operating in Rakhine allowed him to share situational alerts with people living in camps. These alerts about ongoing or forecasted conflicts are often shared among NGO and aid worker social circles using encrypted messaging services such as WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram.

At its best, EWER should enable locals to predict the shifting attitudes of local armed actors, who are central to their everyday violent experiences. During the interviews, a handful of respondents said that it is not always clear when a peace period had started, or how the conflicting parties would respond. While a ceasefire is designed to stop ongoing hostilities immediately, conflict observers also recognise that modern ceasefires are being used strategically as conflict management tools, without necessarily pushing conflicting parties towards complete peace [Clayton et al., 2022]. Since 2015, Sit-Tat and the local ethnic insurgent organisations (EIOs) have declared a ceasefire on separate occasions (i.e. September 2017, December 2018, November 2020 and November 2022). However, skirmishes have continued to be observed by some of our respondents, particularly in northern Rakhine.

MODALITIES OF NONVIOLENT CIVILIAN PROTECTION

Personal Capitals in Nonviolent Civilian Protection

The idea of unarmed individuals pulling together their personal resources to devise a plan for survival is not a new conceptual premise. In his work "The Forms of Capital" (1986), Bourdieu identifies such personal resources as 'personal capital', which is linked to various measurements of one's accumulated labour or inherited resources that contribute to an individual's social positioning [Bourdieu 1986, 16]. This concept is useful for understanding the precarious state of civilian protection in Rakhine. This is primarily due to the absence of active protection by the governing authorities. Interviews with respondents hinted at the lack of state-centric strategies to mitigate the civilian violence caused directly or indirectly by the ongoing conflict. Simultaneously, confidence in receiving protection from external parties is low, overshadowed by the assumption that no third party at grassroots level is capable of providing the protective space needed by respondents. Consequently, locals have had to rely on their personal capital — their wealth, social standing or ethno-religious identities — to devise their own strategies to avoid or mitigate potential violent encounters.

Bourdieu's concept of capital can be used to identify the intrinsic resources that people possess to protect themselves from violence in central and northern Rakhine. Most respondents instinctively rely on common protection approaches, such as hiding, relocating or avoiding direct communication, whenever armed actors are nearby. However, in many cases of direct violence, hostile interaction with armed group members is unavoidable. This is where factors such as wealth, ethnic or religious identity, personal networks and familiarity with the conflict area can pave the way for self-protection. These 'capitals' enable certain individuals to expand their self-protection strategies. These factors also determine the efficacy of their preferred protection strategy.

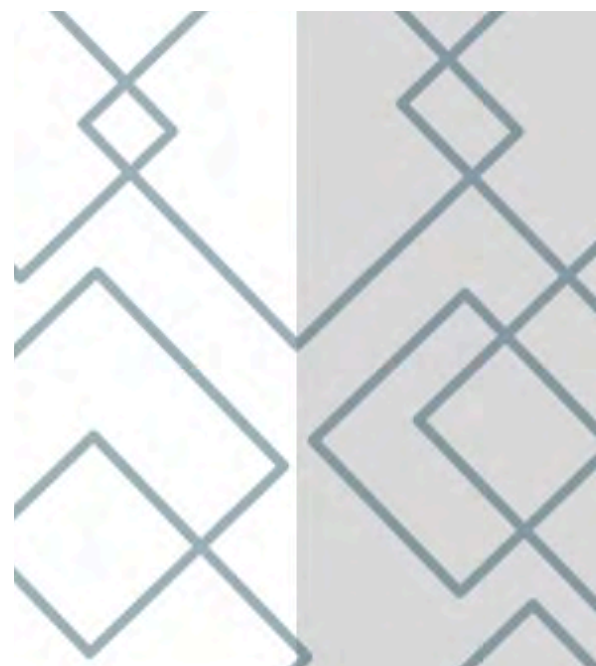


Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

For instance, in order to ensure their personal safety, some Muslim respondents, predominantly Rohingya, felt they had to resort to labour-intensive activities such as paying 'protection' tax or extortion fees following the arrest of their relatives. Often, offering bribes to stationed troops could also help to lift movement restrictions linked to their 'stateless' status, such as inspections at checkpoints or the quick issuance of travel permits. While none of our interviewed Rohingya respondents confirmed this, it has been reported that, for the sake of their safety, some Rohingya in Rakhine have paid 'brokers' to help smuggle them out of the country [Rahmane and Foyez, 2024]. However, reliance on accumulated wealth is not a sustainable form of convertible capital, given the impoverished state of the Rohingya community in Rakhine. Consequently, 'paying your way out of trouble' is regarded as an unfortunate consequence of the community having little to no political or legal protection against abuse and violence perpetrated by those in power [Parchomovsky & Siegelman, 2007].

Responses from Arakanese Buddhist respondents reveal a more diverse range of self-protection strategies. Aside from affirming the economic value of protection through bribery, some recounted how they secured the protective presence of stationed armed groups by supplying them with cultivated crops. This privilege of logistical cooperation may not extend to the Rohingya, at least 40 per cent of whom lost their homes and agricultural land in the aftermath of their mass persecution in 2017 [Ruser et al., 2019]. Some of the Arakanese Buddhist respondents also described receiving advance notice of any inspection by either AA or Sit-Tat officials from their village elders, who are of the same ethnicity. This advance notice has enabled them to avoid unwanted encounters with armed actors, at least temporarily. Some respondents who favoured the presence of the AA would also advocate severing ties with anyone they believed to be a Sit-Tat supporter in their neighbourhood, assuming that they could settle temporarily with relatives living outside their neighbourhood if necessary.

“*‘Paying your way out of trouble’ is regarded as an unfortunate consequence of the community having little to no political and legal protection against abuse and violence perpetrated by those in power.*”



***Nalehmu* - Civilian protection and local trust building**

We also observed local concepts of self-protection through an ethnographic lens. One notable cultural concept raised by our Rakhine respondents is 'nalehmu', which translates as 'understanding' each other when seeking protection support. *Nalehmu* encompasses a set of informal relational practices for negotiating power across different scales to access goods, services and recognition among Burmese locals [Roberts and Rhoads, 2022, p. 2]. *Nalehmu* has gradually received international attention as a potential explanation for the informal societal structure of the Burmese people and their pursuit of resilience amid limited government presence [Alshaaban et al., n.d.].

Currently, there is no specialised study seeking to explain the application of *nalehmu* in the context of civilian nonviolent protection. However, our conversations with respondents suggest that it is relevant to some of the self-protection strategies identified. Consider, for example, the previous example of village elders warning their respective village locals of an incoming military inspection. While our respondents confirmed the existence of coordinated EWER, not all of them had access to this collaborative initiative. After all, sharing intelligence about armed groups is risky. Village administrators and elders are constantly at risk of arrest and false accusations of being political dissidents or supporters of opposing armed groups [Zaman, 2022; Narinjana News, 2024]. Locals are therefore less incentivised to provide early warnings unless a degree of trust or long-standing cooperation has been established between those imparting the information and those receiving it.

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Another potential cause of *nalehmu* raised by the Rakhine respondents is the local community's recognition of monks (*sangha*) as potential supporters of local nonviolent protection efforts. For context, as in other parts of the country with a high concentration of Buddhist ethnic communities, Buddhist institutions play a significant role in the daily lives of people in Rakhine. They occasionally play a role in co-organising local peace initiatives, usually by collaborating with other actors such as village elders and local administrators, in their pursuit of social cohesion.

Those who claim that Buddhist monks have a protective role are convinced that they are morally bound to accept locals trying to escape escalating violence and seek shelter in their monasteries. Indeed, local media outlets have reported on Rakhine monasteries being turned into displacement shelters. For example, at least 1,000 civilians were sheltered temporarily in the Pauktawbyin monastery in Ponagyun Township in 2019 [Radio Free Asia, 2019]. By November 2023, local monasteries across Pauktaw had been transformed into shelters to accommodate those fleeing clashes between the AA and the Three Brotherhood Alliance and Sit-Tat [Frontier Myanmar, 2023]. Considering that Buddhist monasteries are often regarded as social hubs for local communities, this protective method has a risk of backlash from attacks on the site, which could result in a loss of popular appeal among locals and *sangha* communities across the country. Yet, across the country, local monks have shown a commitment to supporting those sheltering in their monasteries, even at the risk of being harmed by indiscriminate military attacks [MyanmarNow, 2022; The Irrawaddy, 2024].

Nalehmu came into the picture when we hypothesised that there was a subtle trust-building process taking place between the local population and Buddhist monks, who were working together to ensure their coexistence during violent times. Discussions with respondents suggested a belief that some monks, particularly those living in areas of conflict, shared empathy regarding the widespread violent targeting local laypeople. Consequently, some monks in their respective communities were keen to provide proactive protection for their local laity, despite the risk of being perceived as collaborating with the local power structure. However, such attempts at engagement are infrequent and must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Despite their moral influence at the grassroots level, local *sanghas* tread a cautious line of neutrality to avoid violent repercussions from both the Tatmadaw and local ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Monks enjoy the freedom to practise their religion even in politically contested areas such as Rakhine. However, this privilege is reputation-driven, as they must visibly distance themselves from appeasing certain conflicting parties. Failure to do so would challenge their internal commitment to the political neutrality dictated by State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee Directive No. 83 of July 1991.



Photo: David Stanley

Examining the overall narrative presented by the respondents, the involvement of the sangha in providing local protection is the result of a long-standing process of reciprocity between the local community and the community of monks. This is reminiscent of the monks' central involvement in the 2007 mass protest, known as the 'Saffron Revolution', in which monks across the country spontaneously protested against the military government's decision to remove subsidies for locals, as this could indirectly affect the regular food offerings provided by their local laity [Gil, 2008, p. 9]. Some respondents cited the close-knit ties between monks and the local laity, particularly prominent figures such as village elders and local administrators, as the reason for monks' inclination to support local protection. Therefore, *nalehmu* demonstrates a reciprocity whereby the locals continuously revere and support the growth of their local *sangha* in exchange for the *sangha's* subtle defiance of secular affairs.

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RELEVANT NONVIOLENT CIVILIAN PROTECTION STAKEHOLDERS

Village Administrators and Village Elders

As we discussed the potential role of the local sangha in facilitating nonviolent protection, we also need to recognise two other actors in unarmed protection identified by the respondents: ward or village tract administrators (WA/VTA) and village elders. These individuals are the local grassroots leaders for those living in wards or village tracts. WA/VTA are elected officials who are formally appointed by the Township Administrator after being elected by quasi-elections involving local household members. They are not civil servants of the central government, but are employed and paid by the General Administration Department (GAD) of Myanmar. They are therefore formally tied to the SAC regime. However, as the AA maintains de facto control over most rural areas in Rakhine State, it is commonplace for these officials to answer to orders issued by the ethnic armed group.

The roles of WA/VTA include collecting taxes, civil registration and issuing travel recommendations to locals wishing to travel outside their place of residence. In the context of this report, the administrators are known to be closely involved in local security matters, such as reporting local crimes and noting the presence of strangers (non-residents) in their village or ward. They are also responsible for communicating emergency plans in the event of armed clashes or other emergencies.

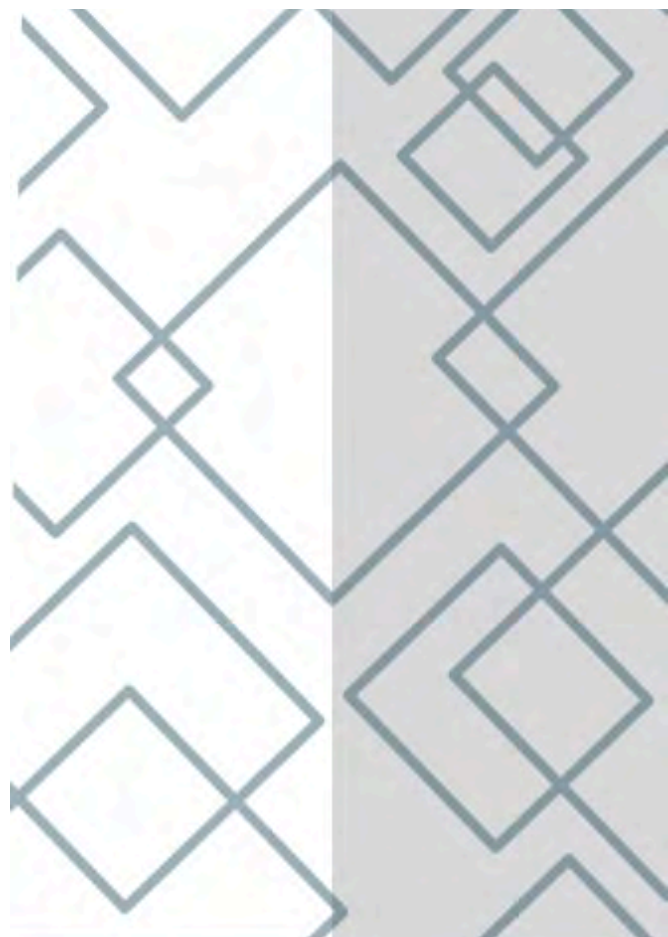
On the other hand, the village elders (or respected insiders) are senior members of the local community who advise and supervise the work of the WA/VTA, sometimes assuming leadership roles in their absence. As respected insiders, they are perceived as knowledgeable individuals with strong ties to the local population. Locals therefore designate them as mediators of local disputes. In cases of violent conduct by armed group personnel, they may encourage the higher-ups to implement disciplinary measures, provided they maintain strong social ties with the officials in question. Their respected positions have also enabled them to cooperate closely with local religious figures for early warning and early response protection, increasing the likelihood of coordinated efforts to evacuate civilians to the nearest religious sites when needed.

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In cases of violent conduct by armed group personnel, they [village elders] may encourage the higher-ups to implement disciplinary measures, provided they maintain strong social ties with the officials in question.

Third-Party Civilian Protection Organisations

The respondents are aware of the presence of third-party unarmed civilian protection organisations in the area, but they are less well-known. Their protective activities are also kept low-profile, but are often known among NGO workers operating in the region. One example of such an organisation is the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) that promotes proactive civilian protection engagements in Myanmar and other countries. The organisation works with local CSOs, including those from Rakhine State, to identify local civilian protection needs and has in the past also played an active role in training local civilian conflict or ceasefire monitors, who monitor and act upon violent incidents during ceasefire periods across the country.

Another locally operating civilian protection actor is the Global Protection Cluster, a network of humanitarian international NGOs, international organisations, and UN agencies represented by the Myanmar Protection Cluster. In 2021, it introduced the Protection Analytical Framework to help operating stakeholders understand the risks of violence in Myanmar. Following the AA counter-offensive in November 2023, we learned from our local volunteers that the Cluster had attempted to distribute a booklet containing instructions on how to prepare for an airstrike, plan an evacuation and access emergency relief.



Prominent humanitarian INGOs, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), also played a passive protective role. It is believed that they promoted less violent conduct by armed groups in order to avoid inciting an international backlash. However, the presence of these organisations should not be taken for granted. As was demonstrated during the persecution of the Rohingya in 2016 and subsequently during the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, the authorities or armed groups in control still have the final say on which NGOs and INGOs are permitted to access and operate in their region.

“They [SAC] did not give permission to the NGOs/INGOs for the cyclone Mocha response. They have taken control of all the funds from international organizations. In fact, they are not giving assistance to the people; they just take photos and videos for the showcase.”

**Male Rohingya, Undisclosed Occupation, Mrauk-U
(Interview No. 26, May 2023)**

“So many humanitarian organisations are trying to provide assistance in response to the Mocha Cyclone, but the government does not give permission, so people are in trouble. We get support from the government, some NGOs, and other Rohingya donors residing in Yangon. They provide us with some rice, biscuits, snacks, tarpaulin, and shelter items.”

**Male Rohingya, Village Tract Administrator, Sittwe
(Interview No. 20, May 2023)**



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

Conclusion

The lack of formal protection offered by either the Sit-Tat or the AA has led the locals to fend for themselves when it comes to formulating protection strategies. However, our collected responses revealed a segregated society with different capacities for accessing unarmed civilian protection. We learned that Rakhine civilians from Arakanese Buddhist backgrounds (e.g. Rakhine, Chakma, Khamee, Mru and Maramagyi) have a slight advantage when it comes to accessing certain local protection measures, such as coordinated early warning responses, temporary shelter and protective accompaniment by local religious figures. They believe that this privilege stems from their Arakanese Buddhist identity and their subtle mutual trust-building (*nalehmu*) with the influential local *sangha*.

Unfortunately, the nonviolent civilian protection structures, which are accessible to Arakanese Buddhist civilians, may not be as readily available to other local ethnic groups. Rohingya Muslims are at the forefront of this contrasting experience. For years, both the AA and the Sit-Tat have inflicted direct violence on the Rohingya community to varying degrees. Their stateless status also hinders them legally and administratively, preventing them from developing meaningful self-protection strategies. However, we also identified the active presence of third-party organisations willing to provide impartial protection to all ethnic groups, including the often-isolated Rohingya people. This support ranges from capacity building to avoid violent encounters to a more proactive protective presence. It should be noted, however, that such protection efforts are currently situational and lack the consistency required to prevent both conflicting parties from acting with impunity against unarmed civilians.

Ultimately, this project has identified the patterns of violence and abuse experienced by civilians of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as discovering localised self-protection strategies and networks of local stakeholders providing nonviolent protection to the people of Rakhine. In anticipation of a more intense armed conflict, stirred by the coordinated offensive launched by the AA and two other large ethnic armed groups in November 2023, supporting the existence of locally led, trustworthy UCP actors has never been more critical.



Photo: Knowledge Hub Myanmar

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an immediate need to improve the accessibility of nonviolent civilian protection initiatives for all ethnic communities in Rakhine. Campaigning for greater nonviolent protection for marginalised Rohingya communities could be a good starting point for addressing their lack of access to either self-prompted or third-party strategic nonviolent protection options. Ultimately, efforts to strengthen Rakhine's local protection network must be based on a deep understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of local actors and the limitations they currently face in organising their protection strategies. As such, we recommend the following:

- **Acknowledging local knowledge in nonviolent protection.** The collected responses demonstrate that the population is deeply familiar with everyday violence and how susceptible they are to violent abuse. Reflection on their own accessible resources of nonviolent protection also reveals certain preferable and non-preferable protection initiatives. Future advocacy should not be disconnected from this localised knowledge, but rather embrace its potential to inform the current protection of the Rakhine people.
- **Recognising and improving the capacity of grassroots actors to communicate nonviolent protection responses to armed groups.** Local responses, whether preventive or intended to mitigate the effects of violence on victims, should not be carried out in isolation, or away from the scrutiny of conflicting armed groups. According to our respondents, armed groups often frame local protection efforts as deceptive tactics to appease their adversaries. Therefore, grassroots actors such as the TVA, local elders and religious leaders should devise better ways to demonstrate the impartiality of their protection efforts.
- **Advocating for local non-violent protection responses that challenge systemic discrimination against marginalised ethnic communities.** While the current local protection network has demonstrated the potential to deliver impactful protective responses, it has been noticeably group-centric, favouring certain ethno-religious groups while marginalising others. This is an unsustainable network of protection, as it is prone to creating future horizontal conflict. Therefore, grassroots actors should be encouraged to devise cohesive protection pathways that include other ethnic groups.

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