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MYANMAR

Displacement continues in context of armed conflicts

In November 2010 the first national elections since 1990 were held in Myanmar. While the party set up by the previous government and the armed forces retain most legislative and executive power, the elections may nevertheless have opened up a window of opportunity for greater civilian governance and power-sharing. At the same time, recent fighting between opposition non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and government forces in Kayin/Karen, Kachin, and Shan States, which displaced many within eastern Myanmar and into Thailand and China, is a sign that ethnic tensions remain serious and peace elusive.

Since April 2009, armed conflict between the armed forces and NSAGs has intensified, as several NSAGs that had concluded a ceasefire with the government in the 1990s refused to obey government orders to transform into army-led border guard forces.

Displacement in the context of armed conflict is not systematically monitored by any independent organisation inside the country. Most available information on displacement comes from organisations based on the Thai side of the Thailand-Myanmar border. Limited access to affected areas and lack of independent monitoring make it virtually impossible to verify their reports of the numbers and situations of internally displaced people (IDPs). Although the conflicts in other areas of Myanmar have probably also led to displacement, the only region for which estimates have been available was the south-east, where more than 400,000 people were believed to be living in internal displacement in 2010. More than 70,000 among them were estimated to be newly displaced.

People displaced due to conflict in Myanmar lack access to food, clean water, health care, education and livelihoods. Their security is threatened by ongoing fighting, including where conflict parties reportedly target civilians directly. Although the limited access of humanitarians to most conflict-affected areas has hampered the provision of assistance and protection, the Government of Myanmar took a positive step in 2010 by concluding an agreement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the provision of assistance to conflict-affected communities.

Source: UN OCHA
More maps are available at www.internal-displacement.org

Background and causes of displacement

Myanmar has been affected by armed conflict and related displacement since independence from Britain in 1948. More than 30 ethnic insurgent non-state armed groups (NSAGs) have been active against the government (ICG, December 2008). Eastern areas of the country have been particularly affected. Civilians belonging to ethnic minorities have borne the impacts of the conflict, including human rights violations and displacement. All parties to the conflict have sought to exploit civilians under their control as a source of food and labour and as a recruitment base.

In the 1960s the Myanmar Armed Forces (or *Tatmadaw*) introduced the “four cuts” counter-insurgency strategy, which has consisted in cutting off NSAGs’ access to food, money, information, and personnel (Chatham House, September 2010, p.21). Especially since the late 1990s, it has combined the “four cuts” with a “self-reliance” policy under which *Tatmadaw* units must find their own ways to meet their operational needs, and supplement low salaries and meagre rations. This they do by confiscating food and agricultural land, and by requisitioning civilian labour (TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.12; UN GA, 15 September 2010, p.12; Chatham House, September 2010, p.43). While there are some reports that the self-reliance policy may recently have changed, this has so far not had any impact on the ground (TNI and BCN, 26 May 2011, p.6).

As part of the counter-insurgency strategy, civilians are forcibly moved from NSAG-controlled “black” to contested “grey” areas and finally to relocation sites in government-controlled “white” areas. Relocation orders are usually given at short notice, making it difficult for people to take all their belongings with them before houses are burned down. Villages to be relocated are declared “free-fire zones”, and people staying on beyond the relocation deadline face serious pro-

tection risks (Chatham House, September 2010, pp.21-22).

NSAGs opposed to the government continued in 2010 to project their image as protectors of minority groups, while relying on the presence of the civilian population in their areas of operation as a source of food, information, and personnel. Civilians provided such goods and services either voluntarily or involuntarily. In turn, NSAGs such as the Karen National Union (KNU)/Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) provided limited social and welfare services to civilians in areas under their control (Chatham House, September 2010, p.48).

All parties to the conflicts, including the KNU/KNLA and other opposition NSAGs, have committed human rights violations, although the majority have reportedly been perpetrated by the *Tatmadaw* and the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA), a government-allied NSAG. There has been no independent monitoring of human rights violations in the conflict areas. However, since the elections in November 2010 there have been reports that some opposition NSAGs’ armed actions against government forces have been intended to prevent post-election stability. Civilians have been caught in the cross-fire or targeted directly (TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.15; Chatham House, September 2010, pp.19, 48; IDMC interview, 13 July 2011).

During the 1990s the Myanmar government agreed ceasefires with most NSAGs, enabling them to pursue economic activities and to control territory. Some such NSAGs have reportedly heavily exploited natural resources in areas under their control without benefit to local civilians (TNI, July 2010, pp.9-10; CPCS, June 2010, pp.99-100, 147, 270-271).

In April 2009 the government ordered all NSAGs which had agreed ceasefires to transform into *Tatmadaw*-led “border guard forces”, which was a de facto condition for their political wings to contest the November 2010 elections. Some of

them refused to transform, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)/Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the 5th Brigade of the DKBA (also known as Golden Drum), and the government therefore considered their ceasefires to have ended (TNI and BCN, February 2011, pp.6, 9; Chatham House, September 2010, p.16; TNI and BCN, 26 May 2011, p.7).

The issue of border guard forces resulted in new tensions and fighting between these NSAGs on the one hand and the *Tatmadaw* and government-allied NSAGs on the other, while non-ceasefire groups, including the KNU/KNLA, also continued their armed opposition against the government (IRIN, 29 November 2010; TNI and BCN, 26 May 2011, pp.6-7; CPCS, June 2010, p.69).

In recent years the *Tatmadaw* created ethnic militias in ceasefire areas to reinforce the government's fighting capacity should ceasefires come to an end. There were more than 50 such militias as of January 2011. Opposition NSAGs, for their part, continued working with their own militia (TNI and BCN, February 2011, pp.5, 10; KHRG, 31 August 2010, pp.84-87).

Recent political developments

On 7 November 2010, parliamentary and regional elections were held in Myanmar for the first time since 1990. The new government under President Thein Sein took office in March 2011 (AP, 30 March 2011).

Many observers reported flaws in the election process, including significant manipulation of the vote count (ICG, 7 March 2011, p.2). The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), created by the previous government, continued to dominate politics in Myanmar along with the armed forces. The USDP has majorities in both houses of parliament, and members of the *Tatmadaw* occupy 25 per cent of the seats, as provided for in the 2008 Constitution. The Commander-in-Chief will

hold a dominant position in the yet-to-be-formed National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), which is expected to be the most influential executive body, and he has independent decision-making power in the area of military justice and all other military issues (ICG, 7 March 2011, pp.4-5, 7, 18; TNI and BCN, December 2010, pp.1-2).

On the other hand, power is now divided between different office holders and power centres. Some limited political space for opposition and ethnic minority parties has also opened up (ICG, 7 March 2011, pp. 5-7). In all states with non-Burman majority populations except Kayah/Karenni State (but including other conflict and ceasefire areas in eastern Myanmar) some representatives of ethnic minority parties are members of state or regional legislatures. Self-administered areas below state level have been created in Shan State for the Danu, Kokang, Palaung, Pa-O and Wa ethnic groups and in Sagaing Region for the Naga ethnic group. However, some ethnic parties were excluded from the elections (TNI and BCN, 26 May 2011, p.7; ICG, 7 March 2011, pp.2, 6; 17; TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.3; TNI and BCN, February 2011, p.11; TNI and BCN, December 2010, p.7).

While the new president acknowledged the importance of a resolution to ethnic armed conflict and while there were reports about an end to the "self-reliance" policy, the *Tatmadaw* appeared to have continued its counter-insurgency strategy in ethnic areas (TNI and BCN, 26 May 2011, pp.2-3, 6). It remains to be seen whether the conflict parties will seize the opportunity for reconciliation and true power-sharing in the ethnic minority areas, or whether ethnic and political divisions will continue to increase, as indicated by the resurgence of fighting in some of these areas since the elections (TNI and BCN, February 2011, pp.5, 10, 14; TNI and BCN, December 2010, p.5).

Recent fighting

Fighting between opposition NSAGs and government forces in recent months affected Kayin/

Karen, Shan and Kachin States and reportedly displaced thousands of people within Myanmar and across the border into Thailand and China.

In November 2010, one day after the elections, fighting between the DKBA-5th Brigade and the Myanmar Armed Forces in the town of Myawaddy in Kayin/Karen State led to new displacement, with an estimated total of up to 20,000 people fleeing into Thailand within two days (NYT, 8 November 2010; UNHCR, 9 November 2010; IRIN, 9 November 2010). Later clashes between NSAGs and the *Tatmadaw* involved the DKBA-5th Brigade and the KNU/KNLA in Kayin/Karen State, and the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA) and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) in southern Shan State. In both States, fighting was ongoing in June 2011 (KIC, 18 June 2011; Shan Herald Agency for News, 13 June 2011).

In February 2011 several opposition NSAGs formed a military and political alliance, the United Nationalities Federal Council (Union of Burma) (UNFC-UB). The alliance includes the KNU/KNLA, the KIO/KIA, the NMSP, and the SSPP/SSA, and also the Chin National Front (CNF) and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), both based in western Myanmar (Shan Herald Agency for News, 17 February 2011; TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.44).

Scale of internal displacement in Myanmar

There are no comprehensive figures of the number of people internally displaced due to armed conflict or human rights violations in Myanmar, and it is very difficult to assess the scale of such internal displacement in the country. The available figures only cover those internally displaced people (IDPs) who live in rural areas of south-eastern Myanmar controlled by or accessible to various NSAGs that facilitate the collection of data, and there is no way of verifying them independently. Very little or no information exists

on the impacts of armed conflict, human rights violations and displacement on civilians for areas controlled by the government or by government-allied NSAGs (TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.30; Chatham House, September 2010, p.6).

UNHCR used an estimate of 451,000 IDPs in Myanmar as its planning figure for 2010, while the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) estimated that in July 2010 at least 446,000 IDPs were living in the 37 surveyed townships (administrative sub-districts) in southern Shan, Kayah/Karenni, Kayin/Karen and Mon States and Bago/Pegu and Tanintharyi/Tenasserim Regions. Of those IDPs, it was believed that 125,000 were living in relocation villages in government-controlled areas, 115,000 dispersed in hiding areas in the jungle, and 206,000 living in areas administered by ceasefire NSAGs. The TBBC also reported that an estimated 73,000 of the IDPs in south-eastern Myanmar were newly displaced between August 2009 and July 2010, including some 26,000 people in northern Karen areas and some 8,000 in southern Mon areas (UNHCR, January 2010; TBBC, 28 October 2010, p.20).

Information on internal displacement resulting from recent fighting was scarce, although available reports indicate that thousands were displaced in Kayin/Karen, Shan and Kachin States and into Thailand and China between November 2010 and June 2011 (IRIN, 29 November 2010; Shan Herald Agency for News, 13 June 2011; ReliefWeb, 17 June 2011).

It was believed that more than 500,000 IDPs were living in eastern Myanmar, including in urban areas and mixed administration or "grey" areas (TBBC, 28 October 2010, p.20). An unknown but significant number of IDPs were believed to be living in other parts of Myanmar. Estimates of the total number of IDPs in the country – including many long-term IDPs who had not reached a durable solution – went up to several million (RSC, February 2007, pp.5-6).

Humanitarian and protection issues

Myanmar ranks 132nd among 169 countries in UNDP's Human Development Index, making it one of the "least developed countries" and one of the poorest countries in Asia. While the percentage of the population below the poverty line fell from 32 to 26 per cent between 2005 and 2010, inequality and disparities between regions have augmented. The country is rich in natural resources and receives significant revenues from their extraction, but these reportedly do not appear in the national budget. Investment is low, and productive assets are lacking (WFP, January 2011; UNGA, 7 March 2011, p.16). Against this backdrop, IDPs in conflict areas of eastern Myanmar are particularly likely to be experiencing extreme poverty.

Access to food and water

Food insecurity was particularly high in 2010 in Northern Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Shan States and in Magway Region. Almost nine per cent of children under five were acutely malnourished (WFP, January 2011). Internally displaced children were likely to be particularly affected.

IDPs in hiding in the south-eastern parts of conflict zones have constantly been moving, making agricultural activity difficult and limiting their access to safe drinking water. Some IDPs have reportedly raised crops on several fields in different locations, to maintain their access to food in case some crops were destroyed or confiscated. There have been reports of authorities confiscating food from IDPs in relocation sites, which was then rationed and distributed among all IDPs in the site (Chatham House, September 2010, pp.34, 36).

Health issues

According to a survey in late 2008 and early 2009, health indicators for Bago/Pegu Region, Kayah/Karenni State, Kayin/Karen State, Mon State, Shan State and Tanintharyi/Tenasserim Region, including conflict-affected areas where large numbers

of IDPs live, were significantly worse than for the rest of the country (BMA, NHEC and BPHWT, 19 October 2010).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 240 women were estimated to have died from a maternal cause for each 100,000 live births in 2008 in Myanmar (WHO, 2010, p.25). By contrast, the maternal mortality rate for south-eastern Myanmar was believed to be three times as high (BMA, NHEC and BPHWT, 19 October 2010, p.22). The estimated infant mortality rate for Myanmar was 54 deaths for each 1,000 live births in 2009, while the under-five mortality rate was 71 deaths per 1,000 live births (UNICEF, 2010, p.13). For south-eastern Myanmar, however, both rates were estimated to be significantly higher, with an infant mortality rate of 73 deaths per 1,000 live births and an under-five mortality rate of 138 deaths per 1,000 live births (BMA, NHEC and BPHWT, 19 October 2010, p.22).

Malaria was reported to be the cause of almost a quarter of deaths among the surveyed population in south-eastern Myanmar and for more than a quarter of deaths among children below the age of five, followed by diarrhoea and acute respiratory infection. The risk of severe acute malnutrition was said to be 4.8 times higher for internally displaced children than for non-displaced children (BMA, NHEC and BPHWT, 19 October 2010, pp.22, 30, 36).

Education

Among all households covered in a recent survey in rural south-eastern Myanmar, fewer than half of all children between the ages of five and 13 were regularly going to school. Reasons for dropping out included insecurity due to ongoing conflict, and the inability to pay school fees (TBBC, 28 October 2010, p.29; UN GA, 7 March 2011, p.14).

Primary education all over Myanmar – with the exception of monastery schools – has been associated with significant informal costs. Like other poor families, displaced families in conflict-affected areas were particularly affected. In addition, it was

reported that many schools in conflict areas were not functional, and there was a lack of teachers, as many were unwilling to move to remote areas (UN GA, 7 March 2011, pp.13-14).

Landmines

The widespread use of landmines in areas affected by armed conflict in Myanmar continued to endanger the physical security of civilians including IDPs. Landmines were regarded by various actors as both a danger and a means of protection (Chatham House, September 2010, p.51). While comprehensive information on mine contamination and numbers of people killed or injured were not available, some contamination, mainly with anti-personnel mines, was identified in 33 townships in Chin, Kachin, Kayin/Karen, Kayah/Karenni, Mon, Rakhine/Arakan and Shan States and in Bago/Pegu and Tanintharyi Regions, with all townships in Kayin/Karen and Kayah/Karenni States affected. Available information on mine incidents comes from the government publication *New Light of Myanmar* as well as from various NGOs and other sources (ICBL, 27 October 2010).

Both the *Tatmadaw* and NSAGs, including the KIO/KIA, the KNU/KNLA and the DKBA, laid antipersonnel mines in 2009 and 2010. New laying of mines was linked to the government's order to ceasefire groups in April 2009 to transform into border guard forces and the resulting increase in fighting (ICBL, 27 October 2010; GC/DCA, January 2011, p.13; UN GA, 15 September 2010, pp.14-15).

National and international responses

Myanmar does not have a national IDP policy or legislation, and there has been no official recognition of the existence of internal displacement caused by armed conflict or human rights violations in the country. The access of UN agencies and international humanitarian organisations to most areas in south-eastern Myanmar affected by

armed conflict and displacement has improved somewhat since early 2010, but remains restricted.

In a situation of limited access, two different approaches to the provision of humanitarian relief in Myanmar have prevailed. Humanitarian organisations based on the Thai side of the Thailand-Myanmar border have been able to provide humanitarian relief, mainly to ethnic Karen IDPs in conflict-affected border areas of south-eastern Myanmar. IDPs of other ethnicities and in other conflict-affected areas have received less or no support. The work of border-based organisations has included data collection and public advocacy, including for greater support by international donors. Many of them have had to rely on more or less strong ties with opposition NSAGs, which have provided them with access to IDP areas, security and logistical support. However, this raises concerns about the independence of such assistance and the extent to which it may contribute to war economies (TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.30; Chatham House, September 2010, pp.7, 40-41, 63-64; FMR, 22 April 2008, p.17).

The approach taken by international humanitarian organisations and national and local NGOs based inside Myanmar has been to cautiously engage in humanitarian operations in conflict-affected areas. International organisations have been able to reach conflict IDPs in south-eastern Myanmar sometimes in collaboration with local community-based organisations, and sometimes directly (TNI and BCN, March 2011, p.31). In 2010, the Government of Myanmar and UNHCR signed a two-year memorandum of understanding about assistance to conflict-affected communities in the south-east of the country, covering the provision of health services, education and water, shelter, livelihoods and skills training. At the end of the year, UNHCR was providing assistance and protection to about 62,000 IDPs (UN GA, 7 March 2011, p.17; UNHCR, December 2010, p.233; UNHCR, 20 June 2011, p.39).

Note: This is a summary of IDMC's internal displacement profile on Myanmar. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.

IDMC aims to support better international and national responses to situations of internal displacement and respect for the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are often among the world's most vulnerable people. It also aims to promote durable solutions for IDPs, through return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country.

IDMC's main activities include:

- Monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalised violence and violations of human rights;
- Researching, analysing and advocating for the rights of IDPs;
- Training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs;
- Contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

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