

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Department of the Senate

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

bfadt.sen@aph.gov.au

14 November 2023

Submission on the efficacy of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Due Diligence Framework

Dear Committee Secretariat,

Myanmar is experiencing an intense humanitarian crisis. The military junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), is undoubtedly creating the armed conflict from its coup; the consequence is the immense suffering of ordinary people. Especially in the broader areas, communities are suffering the “double whammy” of previous underdevelopment and renewed fighting between the illegal junta and the revolutionary groups.

The current ongoing conflict in Myanmar has resulted in 55 townships (Please see Annex A), most of which are in the border areas, out of 330 townships, under Martial Law as of November 2023. Our understanding is that there are many other townships experiencing similar armed conflicts. This current conflict shows no signs of slowing down, leading to an intensifying humanitarian crisis and a significant decline in service delivery across all parts of Myanmar, particularly in areas under the control of Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). With the collapse of the weak government services, the ordinary people in these regions have no economic means for livelihoods, no opportunity for health services, no chance for education, nor no support for basic infrastructure.

Since the coup in 2021, the diaspora communities have been informally supporting these communities. The formal international aid has been extremely limited. The EROs and other local organizations are providing some assistance to these organizations. However, their efforts have been limited due to the lack of resources and the broader international assistance. The direct and informal contributions from our overseas communities are also not adequate to scratch the surface of the immense and urgent needs in Burma,

The foreign governments, the United Nations and the large aid agencies have not really offered any meaningful assistance. We are told the UN agencies and large organizations would need permission from the junta. They will have their hands tied and will not be able to reach out to the communities most needed. The international donors are unable to support the local community organizations that have no registration or any formal documentation. The international aid agencies are also unable or unwilling to work in the ERO-controlled areas.

In the absence of a sustainable resolution, this situation continues to persist, leaving civilians and villagers to suffer from the ongoing crisis on the humanitarian, social, political, and economic fronts. This situation requires a resolute and alternative approach from Australia. We appreciate that the international community, including Australia, is working in concert to exert diplomatic pressure on the SAC to engage in meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders and to cease its use of violence against civilians. However, due to the limited impact of this formal approach and the urgent and immense humanitarian needs of the local communities, there must be innovative solutions to address these unique challenges Myanmar is experiencing.

Simultaneously, the international community must provide humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict, while also supporting efforts to build peace and reconciliation in Myanmar. It is also an opportunity for Australia to show leadership in finding ways to directly reach to the most needed.

Recommendation 1 – Prioritize Humanitarian Assistance in Conflict-Sensitive Townships

In Myanmar's conflict-sensitive townships where administrative services are disrupted, prioritize the delivery of humanitarian assistance through a coordinated and comprehensive approach. Focusing on service delivery local alternatives equipped with trained personnel and essential supplies to provide critical services such as food, medicine, sanitation, and mental illness support for the victims. Collaborate with local organizations and community leaders to ensure that assistance is tailored to the specific needs of affected populations. Employ conflict-sensitive approaches to minimize the risk of exacerbating tensions or causing harm to vulnerable communities. By prioritizing humanitarian assistance in conflict-sensitive townships, we can lessen suffering and promote resilience among those most affected by the ongoing conflict.

Recommendation 2 – Providing Cross-border Humanitarian Assistance

Providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in border areas through neighboring countries is a multifaceted and crucial initiative that demands coordinated efforts on both local and international levels. Collaborating with neighboring nations, humanitarian organizations can extend their reach and resources to address the pressing needs of displaced populations. This involves establishing cross-border partnerships, facilitating the delivery of essential services and ensuring that the displaced individuals receive the protection and support required for their well-being. Coordinated action with neighboring countries enables a more comprehensive response, leveraging the strengths and capacities of various stakeholders to navigate the challenges posed by displacement effectively. Moreover, this collaborative approach fosters a sense of regional solidarity in addressing the humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the importance of collective responsibility and global cooperation in times of dire need.

Recommendation 3 – Investing in Local Ownership for Delivering Essential Services

Establishing channels that can provide financial and technical support to civil society organizations in Myanmar to implement sustainable social and economic development programs that address the critical needs of local communities. These programs should focus on enhancing access to quality education, providing technical training and skills development, facilitating access to market information and resources, and promoting sustainable livelihoods. By supporting these initiatives, the international community can empower local communities to build an immediate better future and be ready for the reform process.

Recommendation 4 – Support Inclusive Dialogue and Support Civil Society Organizations: Encourage and facilitate inclusive dialogue among champions and stakeholders in Myanmar, including ethnic groups, civil society organizations, political leaders, and international organizations. This dialogue should aim to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict and establish a democratic and inclusive peace effort in Myanmar. Australia can also play a role in supporting the capacity and technical expertise of Myanmar's civil society organizations and institutions. These organizations and institutions will be crucial to any future reform efforts in Myanmar, and they need the support of the international community to build their capacity and expertise.

Recommendation 5 – Providing grants for local civil society organizations (CSOs) To foster grassroots development and empower local communities, it is essential to enhance the accessibility of grants for local civil society organizations (CSOs). This can be achieved by implementing a comprehensive strategy that addresses the challenges faced by CSOs in accessing grant funding.

Firstly, simplify grant application procedures by adopting clear and concise guidelines, using plain language, and offering translations into local languages to facilitate understanding. Secondly, encourage and support the development of capacity-building programs for CSOs by providing funding and resources to local organizations and institutions that specialize in training and technical assistance. This will enable CSOs to access the necessary training and expertise to strengthen their project management, financial management, and proposal writing skills. Thirdly, in light of the fixed exchange rate and the potential imposition of indirect taxes by the Myanmar government, the Due Diligence Framework should explore alternative methods of transferring funds to Myanmar programs.

About Us

We are a group of independent individuals who came to Australia to study under the Australia Awards Scholarship (AAS) program before the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. We possess diverse backgrounds and expertise in various sectors of Myanmar's development prior to the coup. We are a group of graduates from diverse academic backgrounds and experiences across Australia's universities in a wide range of social science disciplines, including public policy, peace and conflict studies, and development studies. We are deeply grateful for the Australian government's continued commitment to providing scholarships, which empower us to shape our futures and contribute meaningfully to our communities. Collectively, we also reflect the views of some former AAS students who have navigated the complexities of visa uncertainties with Australia Awards Scholarship obligation and residency in Australia in post-coup Myanmar. We bring a blend of academic knowledge, professional experience, and lived experiences, enabling us to offer local insights and perspectives on Myanmar's current situation and potential pathways forward.

Sincerely,

Aung Aung Tin

Htet Htet Aung

Rual Lian Thang

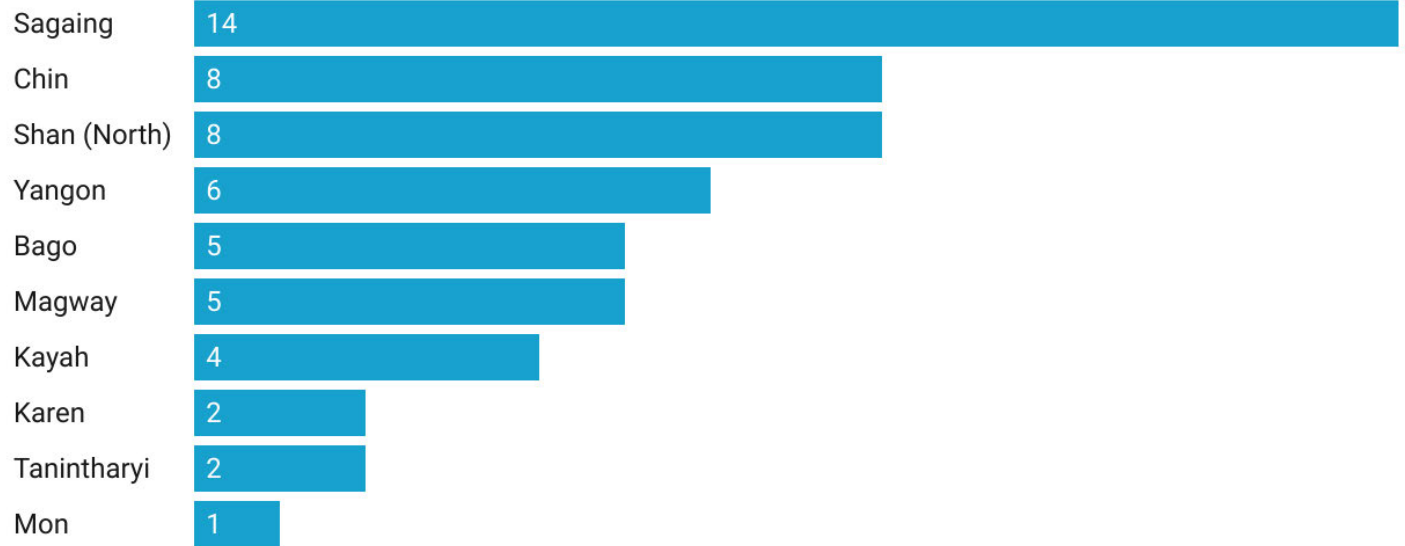
Khum Kham Kaung

Josephine

Zayar Win

Annex A: the extent of fighting currently experiencing in Myanmar/Burma

Number of Townships Under Martial Law in Myanmar

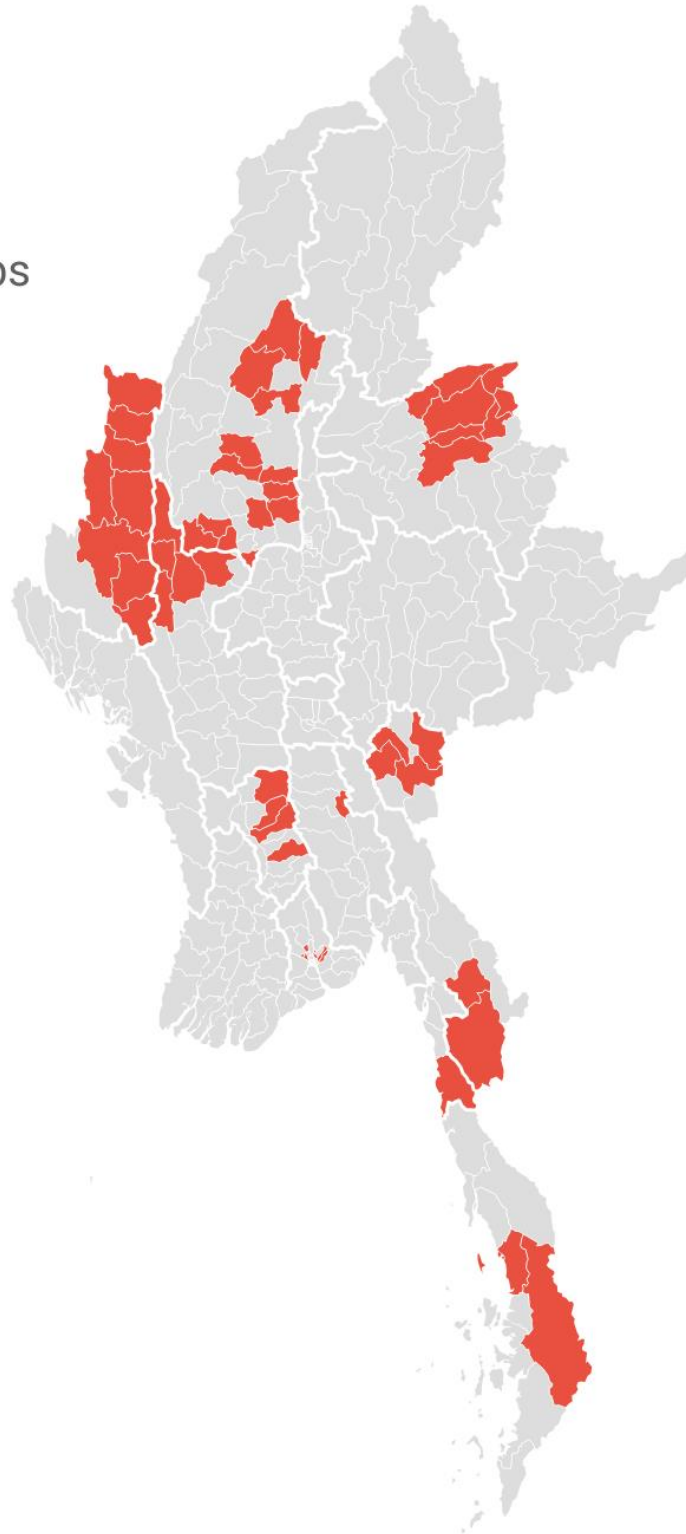


Created with Datawrapper

Myanmar: Townships under Martial Law

55

townships



Map: Data compiled by Data for Myanmar • Created with Datawrapper