

Navigating Change: Crisis and Crossroads in the Rakhine State Context

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to assess the implications of the post-October 2016 crisis in northern Rakhine. The analysis and recommendations presented below complement and build upon CDA's May 2016 report, *Reshaping Engagement: Perspectives on Conflict Sensitivity in Rakhine State*.¹

This report will:

- Analyze changes to key conflict factors and relationships since October 2016;
- Outline the impacts of these changes on local and international implementing agencies, international donors, diplomatic and human rights advocacy bodies – and the efforts made by these actors to navigate the changed context;
- Propose concrete measures to facilitate conflict sensitive engagement in the changed context.

The current situation is fluid, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. As such, this report seeks to narrowly assess the consequences of the crisis to date, both on dynamics in Rakhine State and the actors engaged in the context. It is intended as a capturing of the conflict as it stands presently – at a crossroads.

Changes in Conflict Dynamics Since October 9

The crisis sparked by a series of attacks on Border Guard Police (BGP) posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)² in October and November, 2016 has exacerbated existing negative relational dynamics in the broader Rakhine State conflict context. Divergent interpretations of the causes – and responses to – the crisis have amplified mistrust and raised threat perceptions between some national and international actors, raising barriers to constructive engagement and compounding the challenges to pursuing sustainable solutions to the crisis. Despite these obstacles, the crisis has also revealed a surprising degree of conflict resilience among local communities, and has illuminated broader shared interests in preventing future violence. If actors engaged on the situation in Rakhine State can successfully lower barriers to collaborative crisis management through improved conflict sensitive approaches, it may be possible to leverage such opportunities for broader positive change.

The overall level of fear and misunderstanding between the ethnic Rakhine and Muslim populations in Rakhine State increased markedly following the attacks. While Muslim communities have been principally preoccupied with the actions of the government and military, and the ethnic Rakhine concerned about extremism and the potential targeting of ethnic Rakhine communities by ARSA, both communities fear that deepened mistrust will trigger a return to intercommunal violence similar to that which occurred in 2012. While the absence of violent spillover into central or southern Rakhine has resulted in a largely peaceful, if uneasy, status quo across much of the state, mutual mistrust and feelings

¹ See, Aron, Gabrielle, [Reshaping engagement: Perspectives on conflict sensitivity in Rakhine State](#), CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. May 2016.

² Formerly known as Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement).

of insecurity will continue to generate tense conditions in which a small spark could set off high levels of violence.

Despite these concerns, interviewees cited cases of violence prevention actions taken by adjacent Muslim and ethnic Rakhine communities since October; these examples are encouraging, and may mitigate such a risk. There is a critical need for a more common understanding among both groups of the grievances that motivated the attacks and its aims – not as a means of justification but rather as a means of confidence-building.

The current situation has prompted the emergence of increasingly divergent narratives that have reinforced pre-existing grievances and divisions among groups. Official government and military narratives of the crisis, which have been reflected in national media and ethnic Rakhine discourse, have highlighted national security threats and imperatives. In contrast, international statements have largely focused on advocating for increased humanitarian access and independent investigations into human rights abuse allegations. While recognizing that a continued focus on these concerns is critical, it is also important for international actors to publicly recognize the legitimate security interests of national actors, in order to promote collaborative rather than antagonistic national-international engagement on the crisis. Building common understanding on the causes and potential solutions to the crisis among actors with distinct but legitimate priorities will be critical moving forward.

The attacks and the subsequent security response have deteriorated already low levels of trust between the Muslim community and government and military forces. Human rights reports suggest that the Muslim population in northern Rakhine feels that it has been the victims of an unprecedented military response which has unlawfully targeted the entire population for the actions of only a few.³ By contrast, military statements indicate that they view the Muslim population as having either directly or indirectly perpetrated an unjustified attack, which the military is called upon to defend against. Both sides view the crisis in an entrenched and opposing offender/victim binary, making constructive engagement unlikely in the current environment.

There is a need for a dramatic reshaping of engagement in a gender- and conflict-sensitive manner that acknowledges and addresses the roles of ARSA, security forces, and government policy in creating and perpetuating the crisis. Failure to effectively respond to long-standing – and newly formed – grievances of the Muslim community may not only serve to instigate further violence, but would prove an obstacle to collaborative efforts towards countering the influence of ARSA among Muslim communities moving forward.

Relations between the ethnic Rakhine, military and central government have also been affected by the crisis. Ethnic Rakhine support for the military and its operations in northern Rakhine has significantly increased; however, this increase appears to be borne of pragmatism rather than indicating meaningful gains in trust. Further, though the ethnic Rakhine nationalist agenda is currently aligned with and supportive of the military agenda, there is a possibility that such support could enable expanded military

³ [Report of OHCHR Mission to Bangladesh: Interviews with Rohingya fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016](#), Flash Report, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), 3 February 2017.

powers to become ingrained over time, weakening the position of the ethnic Rakhine nationalist movement.

For the NLD-led civilian government, attempts to manage the crisis and to seek solutions for Rakhine State have been less effective in earning favor with the ethnic Rakhine. These efforts are seen as exclusive of ethnic Rakhine voices, and have been further tempered by ongoing grievances pertaining to the NLD's citizenship verification initiative and the lack of clear plans or progress on federalization, among issues. The ongoing ethnic Rakhine resistance to initiatives such as citizenship verification despite the crisis indicates that support for the security response does not translate into willingness to give ground on broader issues – potentially setting the ethnic Rakhine, military, and government on a collision course.

Since the crisis, perceptions of international bias among the ethnic Rakhine have solidified, largely due to international narratives that fall short of holistically representing the negative impacts felt by all communities. Some local actors have sought to perpetuate divisions between ethnic Rakhine and international actors through increased anti-international rhetoric in this period. Despite such attempts, space for engagement between international and local humanitarian and development agencies has been preserved, demonstrating that the initiatives taken prior to October towards greater collaboration and transparency between these actors have had at least provisional peace dividends. These efforts helped to swiftly normalize relations and programming in central Rakhine following the October attacks. Space for social cohesion and conflict prevention initiatives, which had been most negatively affected by the crisis, has also reopened in recent months.

Scenarios such as a surge in humanitarian assistance to northern Rakhine or a spillover of violence to central Rakhine may risk these nascent relational improvements, however. Whether fragile relational gains made to date endure these or other challenges will be determined by local and international actors' capacity to anticipate and manage such scenarios in a conflict sensitive manner. To continue building this relationship resilience, international actors must broaden their engagement with the ethnic Rakhine population beyond civil society partners – and must continue providing support for both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities.

The crisis has served as a clear testing ground for the relationship between the military and civilian branches of government, painting a picture of a dynamic that is still in flux. Although civilian-military responses to the crisis have appeared to be broadly aligned, each side has had to negotiate distinct pressures, including domestic anti-Muslim sentiment and intense international criticism. The civilian government in particular has been pulled by diametrically opposing forces, attempting to allay concerns about human rights while simultaneously vocalizing support for heavy-handed military operations. As these pressures continue to evolve, it remains to be seen whether they will serve to further divide or connect the two branches of state, and how this will affect crisis management moving forward.

Navigating the New Conflict Context in Rakhine State

Access restrictions, contextual complexities and low communications transparency have created an environment characterized by uncertainty in which most local and international actors have unreliable and insufficient information about the conflict in northern Rakhine on which to base their responses.

While the absence of high-profile attacks since November has allowed actors to regroup and process the effects of the crisis, there remains an overall lack of clarity about the broader sociopolitical impacts and the future direction of the crisis. This uncertainty has led to a reactive approach to strategic planning by many actors and has hindered the development of responses based on accurate, nuanced context analysis.

The government and military' responses to the crisis have been interpreted by some not only as counterproductive to national interests, but as evidence of low political will to recognize the conditions that are driving some members of the Muslim population towards desperate measures. There are concerns among some actors that current approaches will further radicalize the Muslim population, obstructing an already-challenging path towards a sustainable resolution of the broader Rakhine State conflict. International political and human rights responses to the crisis have clearly reflected these concerns.

The crisis has underlined the importance of leverage in efforts to influence change. The lack of engagement between some international actors and the Myanmar military, for example, has reportedly presented a fundamental obstacle to achieving advocacy objectives, as relations are maintained largely between international actors and the civilian government – which itself may have limited leverage over military decision-making. The extent to which this remains a blockage will largely depend on whether national and international interpretations of the conflict – and of the necessary ways forward – can begin to converge.

Despite attempts by some international actors to account for the delicate political realities that define the Myanmar political context, international efforts to advocate for the protection and rights of the Muslim population may amplify threat perceptions and exacerbate grievances held by the government, military and local communities, raising the cost for these actors to engage collaboratively with international actors. It is important for international actors to assess and mitigate the negative relational impacts of advocacy messages to avoid unintended consequences that can further divide groups rather than achieving positive change.

Among both local and international actors, there continues to be a gap between conceptual understandings of conflict sensitivity and of concrete conflict sensitive practice. While most actors interviewed recognized the need for conflict sensitive approaches to navigating the changed environment, few had taken steps to critically analyze the rapidly evolving conflict dynamics, nor to assess the ways in which their own actions may cause harm. Moving forward, it will be critical to build upon the conflict sensitivity conversation, and ensure that it translates into conflict sensitive practice.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are targeted towards those actors that the report may reasonably reach. As such, recommendations do not target local Muslim or ethnic Rakhine communities more broadly, but rather focus on local and international stakeholders with the capacity to take concrete actions towards improving conflict sensitive engagement within the changed Rakhine State context. These include local and international implementing agencies, donors, and international media, diplomatic and human rights advocacy bodies.

The objective of these recommendations is to promote conflict sensitive engagement in the changed Rakhine State context. They build upon those presented in *Reshaping Engagement*.

To improve readability, the target for each recommendation is color-coded and listed above the recommendation text. The use of the word "agency" refers to development and humanitarian organizations.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

DIPLOMATIC ACTORS

HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of outgoing communications for conflict sensitivity prior to release, ensuring that situation analysis and advocacy messages take a holistic view, representing the grievances and negative impacts felt by all communities.

LOCAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

2. Conduct a series of facilitated dialogue meetings for the purposes of (a) building understanding of the reasons for differing international and ethnic Rakhine perspectives on the conflict, and (b) identifying means of engagement that ensures continuation of constructive collaboration despite differences. This dialogue should aim to ensure at a minimum that both sides feel better heard and understood.
3. Prepare risk mitigation plans for scenarios whereby assistance given inadvertently supports violent action or violence-promoting individuals/groups.

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

4. Given that anti-international sentiment among ethnic Rakhine communities stems largely from grievances related to international support for the Muslim population in Rakhine State, international agencies should build an interagency conflict sensitive communications strategy that aims to address concerns about international programming. This strategy should be based on consultation with ethnic Rakhine agencies and communities, to better understand the nature of their concerns, and should be disseminated broadly.
5. Incorporate a mechanism or dedicated personnel capacity for technical support on conflict sensitivity within the Rakhine Coordination Group and other collaborative forums.

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

6. Provide funds for a Rakhine State conflict sensitivity facility responsible for providing regular, updated conflict analysis as well as technical and strategic support to local and international implementing agencies and/or donors on conflict sensitive communications, community engagement, program design and implementation.
7. Promote local capacities for peace by providing funding and technical support for the Peace Working Group Committee; seek to identify opportunities for conflict sensitive support to other locally-owned peace initiatives that may emerge.
8. Request contingency and conflict sensitivity plans from implementing partners for conflict-related risks in the current Rakhine State context. These contingency plans should span operations as well as proactive communications and community engagement.

9. Fund an assessment and community consultations to identify (a) risk factors for intercommunal conflict, and (b) opportunities for violence prevention initiatives particularly in northern Rakhine. Consider entry points for preventing violent extremism (PVE), dispute resolution, rumor management, and media literacy programming, among others.
10. Develop a more robust strategy for maintaining accountability among implementing partners on conflict sensitive practice, ensuring that conflict sensitivity is effectively embedded in all parts of each implementing organization's development or humanitarian intervention.

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

11. Prepare a proactive, conflict sensitive strategy for a scenario of full scale resumption of humanitarian access to Maungdaw. It is critical to ensure that any increased humanitarian aid for Muslim communities is balanced with increased humanitarian and/or development assistance to ethnic Rakhine communities, and that efforts are made to prepare and seek government permissions for such a broad-spectrum package of assistance in advance. The strategy should incorporate a communications plan to ensure full understanding of international assistance in northern Rakhine among local communities in Rakhine State. More broadly, ensure that new humanitarian needs do not result in de-prioritization of development funding.
12. Explore opportunities for increased collaboration with Rakhine State and township officials and security forces as possible, for example through the provision of dispute resolution and violence prevention capacity support at institutional levels. Consider avenues for linking these activities to implementation of the Rakhine State Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP).

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

DIPLOMATIC ACTORS

13. As security stabilizes and access increases, commission a neutral analysis of potential risk factors for increased support for violent action among the Muslim population in Rakhine State, to use as a strategy planning tool with government and security forces.

LOCAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

14. Conduct a scenario planning workshop which reviews conflict-related risks in the current Rakhine State context, and identifies proactive steps which can be taken to avoid conflict insensitive approaches.

LOCAL AGENCIES

LOCAL OFFICIALS

15. Reach out to international agencies to help them to better understand ethnic Rakhine concerns pertaining to international assistance in the current crisis. Provide support to international agencies in disseminating accurate information and messaging about international assistance to the broader ethnic Rakhine community.
16. Initiate a widespread communications campaign discouraging both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities from engaging in violent acts. This is particularly important for communities in northern Rakhine, in order to avoid the risk of ARSA targeting the ethnic Rakhine population in the future as a response to incidents of anti-Muslim violence.

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1. Introduction

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) established its Myanmar country office in May 2015, in response to requests from partners and donors to support conflict sensitive⁴ practice among international and local actors operating in Myanmar. This need was identified as particularly acute in Rakhine State, where conflict dynamics have become closely intertwined with interventions by government, local and international humanitarian and development actors and the international community more broadly.

The purpose of this report is to assess the implications of the post-October 2016 crisis in northern Rakhine. The analysis and recommendations presented below complement and build upon CDA's May 2016 report, *Reshaping Engagement: Perspectives on Conflict Sensitivity in Rakhine State*.⁵

This report will:

- Analyze changes to key conflict factors and relationships since October 2016;
- Outline the impacts of these changes on local and international implementing agencies, international donors, diplomatic and human rights advocacy bodies – and the efforts made by these actors to navigate the changed context; and
- Propose concrete measures to facilitate conflict sensitive engagement in the changed context.

The current situation is fluid, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. As such, this report seeks to narrowly assess the consequences of the crisis to date, both on dynamics in Rakhine State and the actors engaged in the context. It is intended as a capturing of the conflict as it stands presently – at a crossroads. The report is not intended as a comprehensive conflict analysis, and as such does not delve into the historical or root causes of the conflict. The analysis and recommendations may be used as tools to further understanding of changing dynamics and guide conflict sensitive engagement at this critical juncture.

2. Situation Overview

On October 9, 2016, a group of several hundred men attacked three Myanmar Border Guard Police (BGP) posts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships, Rakhine State, resulting in the deaths of nine BGP officers, eight attackers, and the theft of 62 guns and more than ten thousand rounds of ammunition. The Myanmar military responded to the attack by deploying a significant number of troops, creating a “security zone” in Maungdaw district, and conducting clearance operations in coordination with the BGP. A subsequent attack on November 12, 2016 resulted in the death of one military Lieutenant-Colonel and additional attackers.

⁴ Conflict sensitivity may be defined as: (a) Understanding the context in which an intervention operates; (b) Understanding the interaction between an intervention and the context; and (c) Acting upon the understanding of this interaction, to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts between the intervention and the context. See: *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: A resource pack*, International Alert, London, 2004.

⁵ See: Aron, 2016.

The attackers are reported to belong to a recently-formed resistance group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), formerly Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement). The group has denounced the treatment of the Muslim population by government and security officials and has stated its aims as preventing the persecution of persons who self-identify as Rohingya,⁶ and securing political and human rights of these individuals through citizenship. The group has specified Myanmar's security forces as its target, and has pledged not to target civilians.^{7 8} To date, this commitment has been largely upheld – with the critical exception of alleged government and military informants from among the Muslim population in northern Rakhine.⁹

The military has asserted that the aim of its clearance operations is to identify and remove all members of the resistance group from the area and to protect the national security of the country. The attacks and subsequent clearance operations have led to significantly increased restrictions on humanitarian access and movement, and have further disrupted the conduct of social and economic affairs in an already highly vulnerable region.¹⁰ Humanitarian agencies have estimated that as many as 74,000 Muslims have fled into Bangladesh, with another 20,000 Muslims and ethnic Rakhine displaced internally, potentially having long-term impacts on the demographics of northern Rakhine's townships.¹¹

There are allegations of significant abuses¹² perpetrated against Muslim civilians by security forces and, to a lesser degree, by local ethnic Rakhine community members accompanying security forces during clearance operations. Most of these claims have been disputed by the central government and military. However, in early 2017 the release of additional evidence by the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR),¹³ the release of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's interim recommendations¹⁴ and the approval of a resolution calling for deployment of an international fact-finding mission by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council¹⁵ have resulted in commitments by central government and military officials to further investigate the claims. Continued access restrictions for external observers have added further difficulty to verifying alleged abuses.

⁶ There are multiple ethnic groups practicing Islam within Rakhine State. This includes, for example, the Kaman Muslims and the largest Muslim ethnic group, many of whom self-identify under the term "Rohingya." This latter ethnic designation is not accepted by the majority of the ethnic Rakhine population, and is not recognized by the central government as one of the 135 official nationalities of Myanmar. This topic, and the term "Rohingya" itself, are highly contentious, linking on the one side to concerns among the ethnic Rakhine of demographic change and political and economic marginalization, and on the other, to the desire for increased individual and collective rights by unrecognized Muslim groups. In order to preserve neutrality on the issue, this report will not utilize an ethnic designation, referring instead generically to the "Muslim" population.

⁷ [Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State](#). Crisis Group Asia Report N°283, 15 December 2016

⁸ *Situation Update No. 52*, Early Warning and Early Response Program, Center for Diversity and National Harmony, 30 March 2017.

⁹ International Crisis Group, 2016.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, 2016.

¹¹ [Myanmar: Northern Rakhine Flash Update No. 1 \(as of 8 March 2017\)](#). United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 8, 2017.

¹² These include arbitrary arrest and forced disappearance, indiscriminate killings, torture, destruction of property, forced displacement, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

¹³ UNOHCHR, 2017.

¹⁴ [Interim Report and Recommendations](#). Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 16 March 2017.

¹⁵ [Human Rights Council decides to dispatch a fact-finding mission to Myanmar to establish facts on violations, especially in Rakhine state](#), UN Human Rights Council, 24 March 2017.

3. Methodology and Scope

Methodology

The data collection and consultation process for this report incorporated qualitative field and desk research carried out between October 2016 and March 2017. Primary field research included key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). KIIs and FGDs conducted with a range of relevant stakeholders in Yangon and in Rakhine State, including individuals from:

- Ethnic Rakhine civil society organizations
- National and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, including humanitarian, development, and human rights-focused organizations
- Donor agencies
- Foreign diplomatic missions in Yangon

FGDs were also held with Muslim and ethnic Rakhine individuals displaced since 2012, in three internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sittwe township. Gender-disaggregated groups were created where possible.

In total, 113 persons (46 women and 67 men) participated in the analysis consultation process. KIIs and FGDs were semi-structured and utilized CDA's listening methodology. This approach encouraged participants to speak freely on the issues they deemed most important and relevant, rather than to cover a narrow set of pre-identified topics. Data was analyzed using grounded theory methodology, which emphasizes the use of deductive reasoning in the construction of theory from raw data. Constant comparative analysis and thematic coding were used throughout the data collection and analysis process; interviews were transcribed and input into an analytical framework, from which themes emerging from the data were identified and further lines of inquiry developed in an iterative fashion.

To ensure the analysis remained abreast of changing developments in the context, particularly in northern Rakhine, the research team continued collecting secondary data from national and international media sources, monitoring reports and analyses from other agencies, and conducted follow-up KIIs throughout the research and analysis drafting process. Findings were validated through bilateral meetings and an interagency workshop with relevant ethnic Rakhine and international partners in Sittwe, respectively.

Limitations

This report is not intended as a comprehensive conflict analysis. The research carried out and the findings presented do not explore grievances or root causes of the conflict. The report also does not seek to validate or refute the human rights abuse allegations that have emerged from northern Rakhine. It does, however, explore the relational – and by extension programmatic and strategic – impacts of those allegations.

Inaccessibility was a major constraint limiting primary data collection in northern Rakhine. The research team mitigated the effects of this limitation through KIIs with contacts working in the area; however,

security restrictions significantly affected the information these contacts could provide. Government statements and reports from organizations which documented the experiences of persons recently displaced into Bangladesh were used to gain a better understanding of events in northern Rakhine; however, these accounts could not be independently verified.

Given organizational constraints and heightened sensitivities surrounding the crisis, government and military officials were not directly interviewed. While the research team mitigated this limitation by interviewing individuals familiar with government and military perspectives and analyzing government and military statements, it remains a notable constraint.

4. Changes in Conflict Dynamics Since October 9

The analysis presented below explores key conflict factors and relationships relevant to the broader Rakhine State conflict, where significant changes have emerged as a direct consequence of the current crisis. As a result, this is not an exhaustive account of all dynamics contributing to the Rakhine State conflict.

Conflict Narratives

Trends in the evolution of conflict narratives prior to October 9

- *Ongoing perception of unified, pro-Muslim and human-rights focused international agendas by ethnic Rakhine population and Myanmar government, e.g. perceptions that UN/INGOs in Rakhine State promote pro-Muslim human rights narratives abroad.*
- *Continued ethnic Rakhine grievances towards international human rights and conflict narratives that do not equally highlight the perspectives and hardships faced by the ethnic Rakhine population.*
- *Continued emphasis on intercommunal over center-periphery dimensions to the conflict in international narratives, thereby reinforcing the intercommunal divisions locally.*
- *Continued divergence in narratives across communal groups and sub-regions, particularly pertaining to views on the grievances of each group and the most critical conflict factors, diverging roughly across Muslim/Rakhine and northern/south-central lines.*

Changes in conflict narratives since October 9

In the aftermath of the attacks, two competing narratives have emerged. One narrative, used by the central government and military and reflected by ethnic Rakhine interviewees, frames the crisis using national security rhetoric. The second narrative, used by international media, key regional and international political leadership, Muslim diaspora¹⁶ advocacy groups, and some international agencies, has used a human rights and humanitarian lens to emphasize the human costs of the crisis.

National security discourse has previously been used by the central government and the military to frame the Rakhine State conflict, focusing on fears of Muslim migration into northern Rakhine. In the months after the attacks, this language has markedly increased. Government statements and

¹⁶ These diaspora groups self-identify as Rohingya originating from Rakhine State.

government-sponsored media outlets have characterized the attacks as terrorist in nature, a framing that justifies a heavy-handed military response as necessary to protect national security and sovereignty.

Similarly, the government and military have used national security rhetoric to respond to international criticism of its handling of the crisis, downplaying abuse allegations through both a government-appointed investigatory commission headed by former general and current Vice President Myint Swe and through national media sources. These media outlets have seldom differentiated between members of ARSA and the rest of the Muslim population in northern Rakhine, instead assuming widespread support for ARSA among Muslims and conflating the group with Muslim identity writ large. This has exacerbated intercommunal fear, glossing over ARSA's stated aims and the targeting of the attacks, which to date have not been intercommunal in nature.

This framing has increased the threat perception and fear among ethnic Rakhine and other groups in Myanmar, expanding blame beyond the perpetrators of the attacks. This heightened – and broadened – fear has in turn engendered a desire for community watch groups and other protection mechanisms, and critically, has justified and facilitated the expanded military presence in Rakhine State. Ethnic Rakhine actors interviewed agreed with this description, stating that other concerns, including human rights, must be secondary to national security.

National security discourse in this context is thus seen by international actors as manipulative of both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim populations, and has increased previously held perceptions by many international actors that the central government and military are not genuinely committed to finding a sustainable solution to the conflict.

While international actors interviewed did not contest the security issues at stake, the discourse used by many emphasized the impact of military operations on the Muslim population within the security zone. Focus has fallen particularly on access restrictions which have worsened the humanitarian needs of already-vulnerable communities, as well as the reported grave human rights violations. Human rights narratives have also refocused international attention on the central government's role in perpetuating the statelessness of the Muslim community.

International narratives have provoked backlash among government and military actors, who feel that human rights organizations and international media have minimized the presence of an extremist threat to the country and dismissed the military's duty to respond to that threat. **While recognizing the importance of human rights and humanitarian concerns, it is also important for international actors to publicly recognize the legitimate security interests of national actors, in order to promote collaborative rather than antagonistic national-international engagement on the crisis.**

Tenuous levels of trust in government and military information by international actors have led to a reliance on first-hand accounts coming out of the security zone, particularly from Muslim refugees in Bangladesh, an approach which has inadvertently excluded the fears and negative impacts of the crisis on ethnic Rakhine communities. International advocacy seen as solely supportive of the Muslim population is particularly frustrating for the ethnic Rakhine population, given that the attacks are viewed as validation of their preexisting fears of Muslim extremism, which had not previously been

acknowledged by international actors. **As a result of these intensified grievances, there has been space for some nationalist groups to propel anti-Muslim as well as anti-international sentiment among the ethnic Rakhine**, for example through social media posts equating humanitarian support for the Muslim community with sponsorship of terrorism.

The divergence in these narratives compounds pre-existing grievances and competition among ethnic Rakhine, Muslim and international framings of the conflict. Because the divergence falls along these particular identity lines, a sense of “otherness” is reinforced, impeding mutual understanding and creating a more complex operating environment. **The assuredness with which each side perceives its own narrative serves to delegitimize other narratives, and raises the costs of engagement.** Misinformation has further amplified each narrative, with cases of false and misinterpreted information published both nationally and internationally. Such practices have bolstered popular acceptance of rumors – and conversely, dismissal of facts as rumors – and have further amplified and polarized this narrative dissonance.

While the set of international actors comprising the “international community” do not in fact have a unified perspective, they are nevertheless perceived by local populations as a monolithic bloc. Thus, even as international actors within Rakhine State have sought to be more conflict sensitive in their approach, there remains a significant need for increased communication and coordination between international and local actors on conflict issues– and between international actors themselves. **Without such engagement, international press coverage and advocacy will continue to be attributed to international actors in Rakhine State and in Yangon, exacerbating existing divisions.**

Intercommunal Relations

Trends in intercommunal relations prior to October 9

- *Gradual normalization of economic relations between Rakhine and Muslim communities, including incidence of employer/laborer relationships, trade and other business links.*
- *Increased intercommunal interaction in non-segregated areas, such as in northern Rakhine, in mixed villages in south and central Rakhine, and through slowly expanding space for dialogue and social cohesion initiatives.*
- *Refocusing of Rakhine grievances towards central government, as the pre- and post-election period highlighted center-periphery relationships and created opportunities for renegotiation of key grievances.*
- *Continuation of key conflict grievances and mistrust, due to ongoing segregation in some areas, the ongoing presence of rumor and conflict-driving rhetoric, and lack of clarity on government plans for the citizenship verification and relocation/resettlement processes.*

Changes in intercommunal relations since October 9

The state of intercommunal relations in Rakhine State has broadly deteriorated, an effect which has been echoed across Myanmar in the form of heightened anti-Muslim rhetoric. Both Muslim and ethnic Rakhine communities report fearing that small incidents may spark intercommunal conflict similar to that which transpired in 2012. To date, however, eroded relations have not resulted in a trend towards intercommunal violence across Rakhine State.

Muslim IDPs interviewed stated that they had been previously unaware of ARSA's activities, expressly condemning the attacks and citing concerns that violence would be counterproductive to their interests, serving to increase hardship for the Muslim population. These individuals voiced renewed fear of the ethnic Rakhine community, particularly of hardline groups who they feared may seek to instigate anti-Muslim violence.

Among many ethnic Rakhine interviewed, the October-November attacks were seen as evidence confirming pre-existing suspicions of Muslim links to terrorist groups. Although the attacks thus far have targeted security forces, some interviewees felt that the attacks nonetheless sought to target the ethnic Rakhine population indirectly. One interviewee described seizure of ethnic Rakhine lands as the rationale for the attacks, citing widespread fear and temporary displacement of approximately 3,000 ethnic Rakhine individuals in Maungdaw township. While many ethnic Rakhine interviewed considered the Muslim population to be complicit in the attacks through alleged support for ARSA, others interviewed in central Rakhine interpreted the conflict as a product of negative relations between the Muslim population and security forces, indicating the lack of a universal understanding about the crisis among the ethnic Rakhine.

Though there appears to be a near-universal increase in mistrust and fear across communal lines as a result of the crisis, the lack of a single interpretation of the conflict may allow space for constructive engagement. **There is a clear need for a more common understanding among both groups of the grievances that motivated the violence and its aims – not as a means of justification but rather as a means of confidence-building.** If ARSA remains true to its stated aims and does not target ethnic Rakhine communities, then it may be possible to allay ethnic Rakhine fears of being directly attacked or of having their land or political rights appropriated by the group and its allies.

To date, fears of violent spillover into central and southern Rakhine have not manifested. This relative stability has likely been driven by elements of both negative peace and positive peace.¹⁷ The heavy-handed security sector response in the north may be viewed as sufficient by the ethnic Rakhine population in south and central Rakhine, and as a deterrent to further attacks elsewhere. **If this is a major component of the current calm, a reduced military presence may create a perceived security vacuum that, combined with high levels of mistrust and insecurity, could set the stage for intercommunal violence.** Community watch groups which have surfaced in some areas of Rakhine State since October could become mechanisms for such violence.

However, interviewees also cited cases of violence prevention actions taken by adjacent Muslim and ethnic Rakhine communities since October; these examples of positive peace are encouraging, and may mitigate this risk. Interviewees cited cases of ethnic Rakhine staff members of international agencies seeking to support Muslim colleagues following the attacks; leaders from ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities in central Rakhine successfully meeting and speaking out to

¹⁷ Negative peace is defined as the absence of physical and structural violence, while positive peace is defined as an environment in which individuals and groups are managing conflict in a manner that respects the rights and interests of all parties. For more information, see: Galtung, J: *Peace by peaceful means: peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Sage Publications, 1996: 32.

diffuse provocations to violence; and collaborations between police and Muslim IDPs to ensure maintenance of calm in the central Rakhine IDP camps, among others.

In the absence of widespread violence, intercommunal engagement across the state has largely continued. In southern and central Rakhine, intercommunal trade ceased in some areas immediately following the attacks, and international agencies noted some reduced willingness amongst beneficiaries to engage in joint activities. However, these trends appear to have rebounded with surprising rapidity towards the status quo prior to the attacks.

In Maungdaw township, allegations that ethnic Rakhine community members accompanied security forces and committed abuses during clearance operations would indicate that the crisis has expanded to incorporate intercommunal violence in some villages.¹⁸ If these allegations are substantiated, it could indicate a significant local-level deterioration in intercommunal relations. However, one interviewee noted that despite these challenges, trade and other economic activities have begun to resume in Maungdaw during the first quarter of 2017, indicating some recognition that interdependence warrants at least a basic level of relationship maintenance.

Nonetheless, the allegations of ethnic Rakhine civilian involvement in clearance operations are a matter of concern for intercommunal relations over the long term. By engaging in violence alongside security forces, the ethnic Rakhine may come to be seen as associated with security forces – and could therefore be viewed as legitimate targets by ARSA in the future. **Given that the stated grievances of ARSA lie with the security forces and central government, rather than the ethnic Rakhine population, it appears that the best protection the ethnic Rakhine people can offer themselves is to remain uninvolved in violence.**

Within northern Rakhine, more significant barriers to improved intercommunal relations exist. From the ethnic Rakhine side, the uncertainty regarding ARSA's membership and support among local Muslims represents a significant obstacle to intercommunal trust. From the Muslim side, widespread movement to Bangladesh means that those remaining are likely to be wary of any actions which would lead them to come under scrutiny, given ongoing military and BGP presence – including outreach to ethnic Rakhine communities.

Muslim-Center¹⁹ Relations

[Trends in Muslim-center relations prior to October 9](#)

- *Lack of improvement since NLD accession in policies viewed by the Muslim population as asymmetric or discriminatory, leading to deterioration of trust and failed expectations for improved conditions under the NLD-led Union and Rakhine State governments.*
- *Continued militarization of northern Rakhine under the Myanmar military and Border Guard Police, and increasing reports of abuse cases perpetrated by security actors against Muslim community members.*
- *Mixed perceptions, halting progress and lack of clarity on citizenship and returns processes.*

¹⁸ UNOHCHR, 2017

¹⁹ Central government and military power-holders.

- *Decreasing opportunities for emigration due to boat migration crisis and regional crackdown starting from May 2015.*

Changes to Muslim-center relations since October 9

The key impact of the crisis on Muslim-center relations has been an increase in threat perceptions and deterioration of trust. Human rights reports suggest that the Muslim population in northern Rakhine feel that they have been the victims of an unprecedented military response which has unlawfully targeted an entire population for the actions of a few.²⁰ By contrast, military statements suggest that it views the Muslim population as having either directly or indirectly perpetrated an unjustified attack, which the military is called upon to defend against. Both sides view the crisis in an entrenched and opposing offender/victim binary, making constructive engagement unlikely in the current environment.

Negative perceptions of the Muslim population among military and government officials appear to have intensified as a result of the attacks. Official narratives and indiscriminate targeting during military actions indicate that the Muslim community in northern Rakhine is increasingly viewed – or at a minimum treated – as a security threat. This approach assigns blame on the basis of identity, rather than individual actions, and has been reflected in the dismissive treatment of human rights abuse allegations in official statements.

The civilian government has outwardly aligned its political and crisis management strategy with the military, releasing statements in support of clearance operations and in many cases mirroring the military's responses to international criticism. In light of the government's support for military operations, the Muslim population's perception of abandonment by the NLD government is likely to have increased since the crisis – and any lingering expectations of political protections against abuse correspondingly diminished.

Though small steps have been made to appeal for calm, there remains a gap in public recognition by the government of the grievances which purportedly led to the attacks. The government's commitment to seek implementation of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's interim recommendations, many of which address development and rights challenges for Muslims in Rakhine State, may constitute implicit acknowledgment. Whether implementation of the recommendations is carried out in a genuine, conflict sensitive manner will be a critical signpost of the government's willingness – and capacity – to address these grievances.

While ARSA could not have emerged without some base of support, the degree to which the majority of Muslims in Rakhine State support the group remains unclear. Muslim IDPs interviewed in central Rakhine eschewed violence as counterproductive to their interests, suggesting that increasing support for violent action is not a universal trend among Muslims in Rakhine State. Other interviewees noted that in northern Rakhine, perceptions of broad support for ARSA among the Muslim population may be misleading. While military reports suggest that a minimum of several hundred individuals were directly involved in the attacks, **indirect involvement of Muslim communities via support to ARSA-**

²⁰ UNOHCHR, 2017.

affiliated friends and family members must be not be assumed as indicative of broader societal support for violent approaches to address political grievances.

Furthermore, mistrust in security forces has been linked to intra-communal tension within the Muslim population, with several reports indicating that ARSA and/or its followers have used violence, intimidation and threats against Muslims suspected of collaborating with security forces.²¹ **This pattern indicates some possibility of coercion as a means to ensure support – thereby raising the possibility that ARSA may falsely appear to have widespread backing. There remains a critical need to better understand the interplay between intra-communal and Muslim-center relations in the aftermath of the crisis.**

The effect of the military operations on Muslim support for ARSA moving forward remains unknown. Following the operations, support may have significantly diminished, given alleged widespread abuses which were directly provoked the attacks. Conversely, it is possible that military action has further entrenched grievances, increasing the appeal of ARSA's call to arms and the potential for future attacks. In either scenario, the emergence of the group indicates that at least some portion of the Muslim population in northern Rakhine have concluded that improvements to their circumstances cannot be achieved by peaceful means.

There are a number of newly-formed risk factors which could compound pre-existing grievances and contribute to a higher likelihood of further violence. These include the deterioration in living conditions and access to livelihoods for newly displaced and conflict-affected communities, potential impunity for perpetrators of alleged human rights violations, the possibility of continuing human rights abuses, and an increase in fear and resentment against Muslims among other groups in Myanmar. The continued presence of a heavily armed security or police force that have not been trained in conflict- and gender-sensitive conflict management may also further antagonize the Muslim population. **If unaddressed, these factors may instill a sense of despair among Muslims in Rakhine State that may strengthen the push and pull toward organized violence.**

Further attacks by ARSA would likely provoke a similarly heavy-handed security sector response, potentially galvanizing support for ARSA and giving weight to pro-violence arguments among the Muslim community. Such a cyclical descent towards entrenched violence is possible, and would have devastating consequences. Local and international actors must proactively adapt engagement with local populations to account for such scenarios.

If reports of widespread human rights abuses are eventually verified, the government and military's early dismissal of the allegations will have served to further minimize common ground with the Muslim population. **Unless perpetrators of abuse are fully held to account, it is unlikely that members of the Muslim community in Rakhine State will be willing to cooperate with officials in efforts to counter the influence of ARSA.** Such collaboration would be essential for the reestablishment of security and stability, and would require the support of local Muslim community members in order to

²¹ International Crisis Group, 2016.

be successful. Further down the line, restoration of trust between Muslim and central actors will be a prerequisite to progress towards any broader sustainable government-brokered solutions to the crisis.

Ethnic Rakhine-Center Relations

[Trends in ethnic Rakhine-center relations prior to October 9](#)

- *Increased grievances and political opposition towards NLD-led central government given the appointment of an NLD Chief Minister, citizenship verification, and the lack of clear steps towards federalizing governance, among others.*
- *Limited engagement or consultation by central government with ethnic Rakhine political or civil society actors on issues impacting Rakhine State, further fueling grievances.*
- *Increasing popular support for the Arakan Army among ethnic Rakhine, as a symbol of the group's struggle against marginalization by the central government.*
- *Changing perceptions of the 2012 conflict, with some ethnic Rakhine narratives increasingly framing the conflict as an orchestrated political manipulation by the former military-affiliated USDP government.*
- *Increasing focus on natural resource benefit-sharing as a critical Rakhine-center flashpoint.*

[Changes to ethnic Rakhine-center relations since October 9](#)

One of the most notable secondary effects of the military clearance operations has been a major increase in popular support for the military. **There is a firm sense among ethnic Rakhine that the scaled-up military presence and clearance operations are essential to protect ethnic Rakhine land and security**, and military efforts are consequently both valued and appreciated.

For the same reasons, according to some ethnic Rakhine interviewees the Arakan Army (AA) has suffered a drop in standing since October. The AA's popularity to date has been based on their status as a champion of ethnic Rakhine interests. That status has now somewhat faded into the background, as the group has been unable to defend the ethnic Rakhine in Maungdaw against a threat seen as more immediately critical than the politically-motivated skirmishes with the Myanmar military. In a time of crisis, the military has shown itself as more capable of responding to ethnic Rakhine fears and needs. However, several ethnic Rakhine leaders consulted noted long-term concerns over an expanded military role in the state, stating that this would ultimately prove detrimental to ethnic Rakhine interests.

The increased ethnic Rakhine support for the military appears to be borne of necessity, rather than indicating meaningful gains in trust. Historical grievances carry significant weight in ethnic Rakhine society, and therefore it is unlikely that the military's intervention and increased popularity will sustainably improve relations unless other grievances are addressed. **Furthermore, though the ethnic Rakhine nationalist agenda is currently aligned with and supportive of the military agenda, there is a possibility that this support could enable expanded military powers to become ingrained over time. The military would then have even greater capacity to disempower the nationalist movement in the future**, including by potentially hampering ethnic Rakhine appetite for armed conflict between the AA and Myanmar military. Despite risks to the ethnic Rakhine nationalist movement, however, it is likely that any future attacks by ARSA would again bolster support for the military among ethnic Rakhine.

The relationship between the ethnic Rakhine and the NLD-led central government has evolved in a different manner. The NLD's handling of the crisis at Union-level does not appear to have increased its popularity among ethnic Rakhine – despite the party's public statements defending the military's presence and conduct. Efforts by the central government to address human rights allegations, such as the trial of police convicted of assaulting unarmed Muslim men, are seen by many as bowing to foreign interests instead of protecting ethnic Rakhine security.

The NLD's attempts to seek solutions for Rakhine State, such as the establishment of the government Central Committee on Implementation of Peace, Stability and Development of Rakhine State and the independent Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, continue to be met with skepticism by ethnic Rakhine. **These efforts remain highly centralized and are portrayed by Rakhine nationalist narratives as being insufficiently inclusive of ethnic Rakhine voices.** Broader grievances pertaining to the NLD's citizenship verification efforts and the lack of clear plans or progress on federalization persist, with protests on this issue continuing largely unabated despite the crisis.

The differing success of the military versus the NLD in currying ethnic Rakhine favor since October demonstrates that the two branches of government are being judged distinctly by the ethnic Rakhine. Rather than maintaining a perception of marginalization from an amalgamated Bamar "center", the population has evaluated and managed their collective relationship with the military and civilian bodies separately following the NLD's accession. This both reflects a diarchic political system, and perceptions that while the military shares ethnic Rakhine views on Muslims in Rakhine State, the civilian government does not. **The ongoing ethnic Rakhine resistance to initiatives such as citizenship verification despite the crisis indicates that support for the security response to the crisis does not translate into willingness to give ground on broader issues – potentially setting the ethnic Rakhine, military, Union-level civilian government on a collision course.**

By contrast, the NLD-led Rakhine State Government (RSG) has had limited success in utilizing the crisis as a relationship-building tool with the ethnic Rakhine community. Several ethnic Rakhine interviewees noted that frustration over the appointment of an NLD Chief Minister has faded in some areas.²² The Chief Minister has made efforts to show solidarity with ethnic Rakhine concerns following the crisis – including by avoiding peace-promoting public rhetoric. These small relational gains have not necessarily carried over to the political space, however. One interviewee noted that members of the Arakan National Party (ANP)²³ remain staunchly opposed to the RSG, in part due to grievances surrounding citizenship verification processes for Muslims. Recent by-elections are also likely to have played a role in maintaining inter-party tensions.

²² The ethnic Rakhine population has strongly objected to the NLD's appointment of its Rakhine State Chair U Nyi Pu as the state's Chief Minister, given the Arakan National Party (ANP) victory during the November 2015 elections, where it won 44 of 77 seats in Rakhine State.

²³ The ANP, an ethnic Rakhine political party, formed in advance of the 2015 elections following a merger between the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). The party's platform centers around ethnic nationalism; it has taken a strong stance against the Muslim population. In March 2017, internal divisions split the party, leading to the re-establishment of the ALD by a breakaway faction.

The RSG will likely seek to capitalize on the diminished levels of antagonism they have earned from the ethnic Rakhine population. As such, RSG leadership may be reluctant to take an active role in promoting intercommunal reconciliation if it risks the fragile RSG-ethnic Rakhine relationship. Complicating the picture is the central government's March 2017 commitment to implement many of the Rakhine State Advisory Commission's interim recommendations²⁴, some of which are likely to be unpopular among the ethnic Rakhine population. Implementation will require heavy involvement of the RSG, whose position within the governance hierarchy holds insufficient autonomy to challenge Union-level authority. **As a result, the RSG may struggle to maintain constructive relations with both the Union-level and the ethnic Rakhine people.** Such a balancing act may result in renewed disintegration of RSG-ethnic Rakhine relations on the one hand, or tokenistic ground-level implementation of the recommendations on the other.

Civilian-Military Relations

*The current crisis has served as a testing ground for the new working relationship between the civilian and military branches of Myanmar's government. Because these relations are conducted behind closed doors, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty the nuances of how civilian-military dynamics have evolved as a result of the crisis. Given these limitations, the following captures observable events to date, with analysis of potential relational implications.*²⁵

The NLD currently enjoys widespread popular support, particularly among Myanmar's Buddhist majority. Since the crisis, this constituency has been increasingly exposed to narratives that portray the Muslim population as a critical threat to Buddhist culture. The NLD therefore finds itself supported by an electoral base that has grown increasingly likely to fear Muslim minorities – and thus, to support military operations in northern Rakhine that are seen to address such fears. Under the 2008 constitution, the military maintains control over key ministries such as Home Affairs and holds 25% of parliamentary seats through direct appointment, effectively circumscribing the civilian government's authority.

Since the crisis, the NLD-led government has faced intense, diametrically opposed pressures from domestic and international actors. In the aftermath of the attacks, the government appeared to align their communications and political strategy with the military, releasing public statements in support of clearance operations, painting the attacks as terrorism that threatened national security, and dismissing allegations of human rights abuses as false or exaggerated – while still attempting to allay international concerns. Some interviewees noted that the civilian government appeared to be heavily reliant on information generated by the military to inform its understanding of the situation, and others cited civilian government concerns that the consequences of pursuing a divergent political path would result in attempts by the military to further curtail civilian government power.

Though the true rationale behind this strategy is a matter of speculation, some interviewees suggested that the government's limited national security mandate and its role in overseeing foreign affairs have

²⁴ Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017.

²⁵ This analysis based on secondary source information, in particular from thematic experts more directly engaged with government and military actors.

created in a situation where the civilian government must communicate military actions they have not had direct control over, while also bearing the brunt of international criticism for those actions.

Paradoxically, the civilian government has also suffered some degree of national backlash. Military officials have reportedly viewed the civilian government as being too accommodating of international demands on human rights, and as depriving the clearance operations of legitimacy by refusing to convene the National Defense and Security Council in order to declare a state of emergency. The government has therefore been criticized both by key national and international stakeholders, while the military has avoided the same degree of domestic backlash, given heightened popularity and a lesser degree of direct engagement with international actors. Even within the military, however, there appears to have been a gradual realization of that its security approach may have been counterproductive to the military's own security objectives, with reports of internal investigations into human rights abuse claims and a purported end to clearance operations.

In early 2017, a rare meeting between the State Counsellor and the Commander in Chief occurred the day after the release of the UNOHCHR²⁶ report; the military announcement to form a commission to investigate the allegations came soon thereafter. Several weeks later, the National Security Adviser announced the formal closure of operations in northern Rakhine and a handover of control to police forces.²⁷ This announcement preceded consideration of the situation in Myanmar at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2017, which included in its agenda discussions on the situation in northern Rakhine. These events may indicate that military and civilian government's agendas and relative influence may not be as divergent or uneven as initially perceived by external observers.

Though the inner workings of civilian-military governance are much obscured, the events described above paint a picture of a relationship still in flux, with the boundaries of each entity's relative hard and soft power still being explored. Beyond the constitutional framework, the central leverage point influencing this relationship appears to be the balancing and weighing of opposed national and international pressures. As these pressures continue to evolve, it remains to be seen whether they will serve to further divide or connect the two branches of state, and how this will affect crisis management moving forward.

International-Ethnic Rakhine Relations

[Trends in international-ethnic Rakhine relations prior to October 9](#)

- *Increasing recognition of international assistance for ethnic Rakhine communities among some ethnic Rakhine leaders, with overarching grievances and rhetoric related to perceived aid bias continuing at a reduced level.*

²⁶ UNOHCHR, 2017.

²⁷ National Security Advisor U Thaung Tun delivered the statement about the end of clearance operations to members of the diplomatic corps and UN agencies on February 15; however, the military has not confirmed the National Security Advisor's statement or issued its own regarding its operations in northern Rakhine. For the statement, see: [Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor Introduces National Security Advisor To Diplomatic Corps And UN Agencies In Yangon](#), Ministry of the Office of the State Counsellor, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 16 March 2017.

- *Improving engagement between ethnic Rakhine and international agencies, given increased coordination on disaster risk reduction and other initiatives to build trust and communication.*
- *Continuing gap in outreach to the broader Rakhine population and explanation of international approaches, perpetuating vulnerabilities to anti-international rhetoric.*
- *Some increasing anti-international sentiment in months leading up to October, for example linked to cases of international usage of the term "Rohingya" in diplomatic statements.*

[Changes in international-ethnic Rakhine relations since October 9](#)

Since October, there have been both positive and negative developments in relationship dynamics between ethnic Rakhine and international actors. As noted above, there has been a marked divergence in understandings of the conflict.²⁸ Divergent narratives have been accompanied by a restoking of anti-international sentiment among the ethnic Rakhine population by some national actors, both by reiterating long-standing perceptions of aid bias and by equating humanitarian support for Muslim communities with support for terrorism.

International actors expressed concern and frustration about this latter trend, noting that **international agency efforts to support conflict-affected ethnic Rakhine communities have gone unrecognized or have been actively blocked**. In one case cited by an international interviewee, a group of ethnic Rakhine IDPs from Maungdaw received material support from an international humanitarian agency in Sittwe on the day of their arrival. When the international agency staff arrived to provide additional support the following day, they were confronted by ethnic Rakhine activists who refused to allow the agency access to the IDPs. The incident was later portrayed as a refusal by international agencies to provide aid to ethnic Rakhine IDPs on social media, exacerbating anti-international sentiment.

Further, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, barriers to engagement by ethnic Rakhine CSOs and individuals working for international agencies increased. Rakhine CSOs, some of which had already faced significant social costs for carrying out social cohesion work prior to the attacks, were immediately disinclined to continue engagement with Muslim communities, citing high levels of anti-Muslim sentiment within the ethnic Rakhine community. Similarly, international agency interviewees reported that ethnic Rakhine staff had expressed concerns of recrimination from their own community if they continued to work in the Muslim IDP camps.

Despite these early consequences, there has now been a swift normalization of international-ethnic Rakhine relations towards pre-October levels in central Rakhine State. Both ethnic Rakhine and international agency representatives noted that their relationships had been strengthened in the period leading up to the attacks, for example through increased humanitarian and development support for ethnic Rakhine communities as well as initiatives to build trust and coordination. There have been no reported cases of discontinued partnerships or coordination between ethnic Rakhine and international agencies as a result of the attacks. In Maungdaw, a protest planned against an international

²⁸ See Conflict Narratives section, page 4

humanitarian agency was called off, and there have been no protests against international actors elsewhere in Rakhine State since October.²⁹

While the continued efforts of some local actors to perpetuate divisions between ethnic Rakhine and international actors is concerning, it is encouraging that space for engagement between international and local agencies has been preserved despite such attempts. **This development demonstrates that the initiatives taken prior to October towards greater collaboration, communication and transparency between these actors have had at least provisional peace dividends.** In the post-October environment, it is critical that these efforts are continued and expanded.

There continues to be a risk of a deterioration in relations with the broader ethnic Rakhine population. Grievances related to the attacks, ongoing citizenship verification efforts and slow progress on federalization by the central government have recently taken center stage. Depending on how these and other issues evolve over time, focus could again shift towards the international community, threatening relational progress made to date.

Scenarios such as increased international assistance to northern Rakhine or a spillover of violence to central Rakhine could instigate this change. **Whether the fragile relational gains that have been made to date endure these or other challenges will be determined by local and international actors' capacity to anticipate and manage such scenarios in a conflict sensitive manner.** Mishandling or neglect on either side will damage trust and will likely undo prior progress. Given these considerations, there remains a need for further engagement between ethnic Rakhine and international actors that reaches beyond civil society and government representatives. **The lack of engagement with the broader ethnic Rakhine community leaves the relationship vulnerable to continuing anti-international rhetoric and without the resilience to withstand future shocks.**

Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention Initiatives

[Trends in the social cohesion and conflict prevention space prior to October 9](#)

- *Gradually increasing willingness towards intercommunal engagement via direct or indirect dialogue and social cohesion initiatives, particularly in the twelve months prior to attacks.*
- *Reducing proclivity for violence among the populace, given greater incentives for peace as a product of normalizing relations.*
- *Decreasing efforts of vested interest groups towards driving intercommunal conflict in light of post-election power shifts and an increased focus on central government-Rakhine relations.*
- *Continuing intercommunal threat perception perpetuates pressure especially within the ethnic Rakhine population to remain averse to reconciliation initiatives.*

[Changes to the social cohesion and conflict prevention space following October 9](#)

One immediate implication of the first wave of attacks was the cessation of local and international efforts towards social cohesion, peacebuilding and related initiatives within Rakhine State. Agencies engaged

²⁹ In Yangon, anger at against perceived Malaysian interference in Myanmar politics as a result of the crisis led to protests against a Malaysian aid shipment in February 2017. See: Lewis, Simon and Aye Win Myint, [Aid ship to help Rohingyas arrives in Myanmar, greeted by protest](#), Reuters, 9 February 2017.

in such activities noted that it was no longer possible for ethnic Rakhine partners to engage in activities that directly or indirectly addressed intercommunal tensions and/or sought increased interaction between communities. In some instances, this reluctance appeared related to security concerns and intensified grievances towards the Muslim population, and in others the predominant concern was reprisal from the ethnic Rakhine community for participating in such engagements.

Despite these effects, **the restriction of space for social cohesion engagements in central and southern Rakhine State appears to have been temporary, with some activities resuming in recent months. While ethnic Rakhine actors involved in these initiatives continue to face pressure, concerns of recrimination from their broader community appear to have diminished.** This is evidenced by the formation in December 2016 of the Peace Working Group Committee, a collaboration among five ethnic Rakhine CSOs seeking to engage in and coordinate peace-focused activities. This group was granted short-term pilot funding and is seeking additional funds to continue moving forward.

Northern Rakhine has seen the greatest ongoing limitations towards the continuation of social cohesion-focused efforts across the state. This is due both to increased hesitancy of community members and increased scrutiny of communities and agencies by local officials. Development and social cohesion activities in some rural areas have been able to resume at a low level, but many remain restricted. Agencies engaging in activities with members of both communal groups in Maungdaw have reported that bringing the beneficiaries into town is at times the only feasible means of implementation.

There is a dearth of accessible, reliable information and analysis on risk factors for further intercommunal violence in northern Rakhine and across the state, making it difficult to assess the likely success of social cohesion or conflict prevention activities. **Effective approaches for improving relations may lie outside the realm of traditional social cohesion or peacebuilding programming, as such activities are unlikely to sufficiently address the concerns, grievances and incentive structures for local and national actors impacted by the conflict.** Furthermore, the cyclical nature of conflict in Rakhine State and significant structural barriers to peace have meant that the success of these activities has typically mirrored the level of tensions in the broader context at a given time. These tensions are usually due to macro factors lying beyond the influence of programming. **Without addressing the structural and underlying causes of conflict, social cohesion and conflict prevention programming outcomes will continue to be limited with regards to peace writ large.**

Some international actors have discussed possibilities to support new initiatives utilizing Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) methodologies. However, there has been no dedicated assessments or other outputs from these discussions to date. **Examples of conflict resilience demonstrate that there may remain a shared interest in violence prevention among actors affected by the crisis, which should be further explored as a possible leverage point in future initiatives.** It is also likely that some government and security sector actors are likely to share this interest, though the attitudes of particular officials and local departments must first be more widely understood. **It will be critical to build mutual understanding that clearance operations alone are unlikely to prevent violence in the long term.**

Any interventions seeking to address the conflict moving forward will have greatest likelihood of success if they are designed, owned and driven by local communities, agencies, and officials, with support provided by international actors as needed.

5. Navigating the New Conflict Context in Rakhine State

The information presented below provides an overview of efforts made to date by key stakeholders to analyze and respond to the changing environment in Rakhine State. The purpose of this section is to outline the impacts of the crisis on local and international humanitarian and development agencies, donors, diplomatic and advocacy actors, and to provide a baseline from which to identify remaining opportunities for conflict sensitive engagement in the changed context.

International Political Response

A number of foreign governments have increased their political engagement and advocacy on the Rakhine State conflict as a result of the recent crisis. International political actors have navigated their engagement in the crisis variably, however. Several critical issues have molded the shape of differing international political responses.

Western³⁰ countries have focused on the human costs of the crisis, advocating for humanitarian access and independent investigations into alleged human rights violations. Although the government and military have made efforts to keep international actors abreast of events in northern Rakhine and to address emerging human rights issues, discrepancies in official accounts, continued difficulties in obtaining access to the security zone, and a perceived lack of transparency have reduced trust in official sources on matters relating to the crisis.

Strategic engagement on the crisis has been highly coordinated among Western foreign missions in Yangon, and between foreign missions and home offices, signaling the importance with which foreign missions see the situation. Representatives interviewed described challenges faced by embassy staff, however, in balancing demands for vocal human rights advocacy from their home constituencies, with their own understanding that applying pressure on the civilian government was unlikely to yield any substantial change in the military's approach. Advocacy efforts with the civilian government have come up against structural barriers related to the scope of the civilian governance mandate, and channels for advocacy with military actors have been limited.

While many foreign missions have publicly affirmed that responding to national security threats falls within Myanmar's rights as a sovereign nation, human rights abuse allegations and differing interpretations of the crisis have impeded national-international diplomatic collaboration. As such, the precise impact of the ongoing engagement between diplomats and the government is difficult to ascertain. Collectively, however, it is likely that international pressure has contributed to the gradual increase in humanitarian access to Maungdaw, the civilian government's decision to revise the first Myint Swe Commission³¹ investigation report, the military's launch of its own investigation into abuse

³⁰ The term *Western* refers to countries including, but not limited to those in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

³¹ See, [MOFA Issues Press Release](#), Office of the President, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 8 February 2017.

allegations,³² and its ready commitment to implement many of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's interim recommendations.

Regional actors engaging in the crisis have been driven by a broader spectrum of considerations. As in the past, the ASEAN bloc has taken limited collective action, in line with the organization's principle of noninterference. Discussions at the December 2016 ASEAN Foreign Minister's meeting resulted only in commitments to discuss the Rakhine State issue further – something which the Myanmar government appears keen to avoid in advance of the April 2017 ASEAN Summit. The Advisory Commission on Rakhine has urged Myanmar to continue to hold regular briefings on Rakhine State for ASEAN countries, and to establish a joint commission with Bangladesh to address bilateral issues.

Muslim-majority ASEAN members Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as non-ASEAN member Bangladesh, have offered strong – though distinct – individual responses to the crisis. Each of these countries has had to grapple with complex identity politics domestically, given the religious commonality between their constituencies and the conflict-affected Muslim population in northern Rakhine, as well as some nations' own historical experiences with sectarian violence.

The Malaysian government has responded to calls among its population for transnational Islamic solidarity, resulting in a number of strong public condemnations and calls for greater intervention by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Malaysia's response to the crisis was perceived negatively in Myanmar, raising diplomatic tensions between countries and leading to protests by Buddhist nationalist groups against perceived foreign interference.

By contrast, the Indonesian government has been involved in behind-the-scenes efforts to broker solutions to the crisis. Seeking to establish itself as a leader of ASEAN, and building on positive relations between Indonesia's Foreign Minister and Myanmar's State Counsellor, Indonesia has provided mediation and political advisory support that has been perceived as both necessary and neutral. This has largely taken the form of shuttle diplomacy between the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments. Furthermore, during the December 2016 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting, Indonesia led the effort to block Malaysia's call for establishment of an ASEAN commission on the situation in Rakhine State. By several accounts, Indonesia's diplomatic strategy has been among the most successful, as it has avoided alienating Myanmar's civilian government.

Bangladesh has long sought to engage the Myanmar government on the Rakhine State conflict, for the purposes of security cooperation and establishing systems for repatriation of refugees and undocumented Myanmar nationals living in Bangladesh. According to interviewees, the Myanmar government views Bangladesh primarily as a demographic and security threat, leaving limited scope for constructive diplomatic engagement. Tension between the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments has spiked since the October attacks, with Bangladeshi officials reportedly offering a broad range of concessions in order to secure Myanmar's agreement to allow repatriation, to no avail.

³² See, Nyein Nyein, [Burma Army Forms Team to Investigate Allegations of Abuse in Arakan State](#), The Irrawaddy, 10 February 2017.

The current crisis has greatly increased the number of refugees in Bangladesh, an issue which may pose a security risk both for Bangladesh and Myanmar moving forward, as neither government has offered the displaced population political support. Deepened engagement between the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments will be a likely prerequisite for pursuing sustainable solutions for the Muslim population in Rakhine State.

Finally, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has increased its advocacy and other efforts to engage in the situation on Rakhine State in response to the crisis. However, the Myanmar government has denied the OIC's request to open offices in Myanmar, meaning that such engagement must play out through mechanisms outside the country.

Humanitarian and Development Sector Response

Ethnic Rakhine humanitarian agencies and other civil society organizations have provided assistance across the state, largely to ethnic Rakhine communities affected by the crisis. This support has included evacuation assistance to ethnic Rakhine communities fleeing northern Rakhine after the attacks, as well as food and non-food item distributions to ethnic Rakhine IDPs and ethnic Rakhine communities remaining in the security zone whose livelihoods and standard of living have been considerably affected.

Several local agency representatives voiced concerns over the lack of international attention being given to conflict-affected ethnic Rakhine communities; to date, impacts on the ethnic Rakhine have been little-recognized in international statements about the human costs of the crisis. Some local organization representatives expressed further frustration at not having been consulted by Rakhine-based international agencies prior to those agencies' advocacy campaigns for security zone access. This gap is seen as another failure by the international community to engage the ethnic Rakhine in matters that critically impact Rakhine State, and to bridge differences in interpretation and approaches to navigating local conflict.

The operational response of international humanitarian agencies to the crisis has been significantly impeded by access restrictions, cutting off access to conflict-affected populations and preventing the undertaking of a comprehensive needs assessment. Humanitarian agencies have responded to the crisis primarily by lobbying for increased access to the security zone with state and Union-level government officials, and liaising with donors and foreign missions in Yangon in order to share information and request advocacy support. Apart from a brief period immediately following the attacks, existing humanitarian programming has continued largely unabated in central Rakhine. In the north, limited access to some sections of the security zone has now been granted to local staff members of international agencies already operating in the area, though restrictions on international staff remain.

International agencies working in Rakhine State cited increased friction with state-level government since the crisis, citing unproductive and at times confusing exchanges about access restrictions and additional government controls exerted over existing humanitarian programming. Several actors also described how international assistance to ethnic Rakhine IDPs had been rejected in several instances by government authorities or ethnic Rakhine activists following the crisis; international agencies were later accused of only providing support to the Muslim population. These factors have contributed to

heightened frustration and weakened confidence in government by international agencies on the ground.

The government itself has distributed food to select villages in the security zone, though the scale is likely to have fallen well short of needs. A significant expansion in humanitarian aid will likely be necessary to assist the conflict-affected population sufficiently, particularly in light of anticipated crop shortfalls in the upcoming harvest season, and to resume service provision to communities whose prior access to services has been disrupted. The government has indicated that full access to the security zone will resume soon, though to date this has not manifested.

In the face of this uncertainty about the scale of humanitarian need, some international agencies have developed contingency plans that seek to estimate levels of assistance that would be necessary given different conflict scenarios. While such program planning will enable smoother resumption of assistance if access restrictions are lifted, international humanitarian agencies admitted that little effort has been dedicated to analyze changing conflict dynamics, which will necessarily have substantial impacts on assistance scenarios. Furthermore, there has reportedly been little consideration given towards the potential for future humanitarian response to inadvertently stoke preexisting local grievances, leading to increased tensions between communities and/or intensified resentment towards international agencies. The critical need for conflict sensitive scenario planning is clear.

Local and international development programming in central and southern Rakhine has been relatively unaffected by the crisis, where the main impact has been cases of heightened sensitivities in adjacent Muslim and ethnic Rakhine beneficiary communities. Development programming in northern Rakhine has been slow to resume given access constraints.

In the two years prior to the attacks, development programming in Rakhine State had increased substantially, partly in response to criticism by ethnic Rakhine communities and government that international assistance unevenly benefitted the Muslim population. A recent survey of international assistance found that funding for development programming currently exceeds funding for humanitarian assistance in Rakhine State, with the result that ethnic Rakhine communities now receive the highest degree of support in the state. Despite the trend towards increased development funding, development practitioners fear that their programming may be de-prioritized in light of new humanitarian needs resulting from the crisis. Decreased funding for development may reignite previous grievances and rhetoric about international assistance, whereas a balanced approach that addresses both the continuing need for development as well as new humanitarian needs may avoid these impacts.

Despite the crisis, constructive engagement on development has continued between some international and local actors. The Rakhine State Social and Economic Development Plan (SEDP), a government-led initiative which sets out objectives for development across the state, has received technical support from local and international agencies since mid-2016. Progress on the release of the plan has slowed since the crisis, however, given the need for government officials to balance prioritization of the SEDP with crisis management. Given the support it has received from international partners, the RSG has high expectations that international donors will step forward to fund implementation of the plan. Meeting or managing these expectations will be necessary both promote inclusive implementation of the SEDP, and to ensure conflict sensitive international support to the development of Rakhine State.

Human Rights Sector Response

Human rights organizations have responded to the changed Rakhine State conflict context primarily through local and international advocacy, and through adaptations to existing programming.

Human rights abuse allegations have become the focal point of many international – and several local – actors' engagement on the crisis. International media and advocacy statements have largely focused on detailing allegations, providing testimonies collected from conflict-affected Muslim refugees in Bangladesh, and issuing strong condemnations of military action and government inaction to prevent atrocities. This advocacy has also served more broadly to renew international focus on the statelessness condition for many Muslim individuals in northern Rakhine. The scope and severity of the abuse allegations has been reflected in the scale and tone of the human rights community's responses.

Ethnic Rakhine actors interviewed felt that this renewed but narrow scrutiny of the conflict in Rakhine State has reiterated previous international narratives that were seen by the ethnic Rakhine as exclusive and marginalizing. Within the broader conflict context, this differential focus on the suffering of ethnic Rakhine versus Muslim groups has unwittingly contributed to increased anti-international sentiment, and has further polarized the two communal groups. This dynamic has deepened as a result of human rights advocacy interventions following the crisis.

Difficult questions also remain about the direction of future human rights programming in Rakhine State. The broad inconsistencies between investigation findings published by international human rights organizations those released by the Myanmar government have created an atmosphere of distrust and reduced space for establish a common working understanding of the situation. Furthermore, the precedent set by the lenient sentences handed to soldiers caught on video abusing Muslim community members is seen by the human rights community as an indication of a potentially grim outlook for achieving justice for other victims of abuse. However, pressure in the form of public criticism from human rights advocates is likely to continue to provoke antagonistic or dismissive responses by government and military officials. This cycle of reciprocal criticism may risk further restrictions on access and worsening conditions for populations remaining in northern Rakhine.

For many international actors on the ground, the crisis has also underscored the complex relationship between humanitarian and human rights principles. In efforts to advocate for access to the security zone, humanitarian agencies have been primarily driven by the humanitarian imperative to meet the greatest humanitarian needs. Addressing political matters is seen as a violation of the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. As a result, most humanitarian agencies operating in Rakhine State have historically avoided direct engagement on human rights issues. The current crisis is sharply political, however, and humanitarian needs are closely intertwined with the degree to which the rights of conflict-affected populations have been respected – or violated – by parties to the conflict.

Human rights organizations have criticized humanitarian agencies' reluctance to support human rights work, asserting that the two fields are not mutually exclusive, and that at a minimum, incorporating human rights monitoring into humanitarian programming is critical to understanding the source of humanitarian needs in the Rakhine State context. In a situation where humanitarian needs and human

rights concerns have both increased, it is likely that there is a need for ongoing reevaluation of the nexus between these two fields moving forward.

Analysis

Access restrictions, contextual complexities and low communications transparency have created an environment characterized by uncertainty in which most local and international actors only have unreliable and insufficient information on which to base their responses. While the absence of high-profile attacks since November has allowed actors to regroup and process the effects of the crisis on their own programming, there remains an overall lack of clarity about the broader sociopolitical impacts and future direction of the conflict. **This uncertainty has led to a reactive approach to strategic planning by many actors and has hindered the development of responses based on accurate, nuanced context analysis.**

The government and military's crisis management approach has calcified preexisting concerns among many international and some local actors, and has altered previously positive perceptions among others, particularly towards the civilian government. The government and military's responses to the crisis have been interpreted by some not only as counterproductive to national interests, but as evidence of low political will to recognize the conditions that are driving some members of the Muslim population towards desperate measures. **There are concerns among some actors that current approaches will in fact further radicalize the Muslim population, obstructing an already-challenging path towards a sustainable resolution of the broader Rakhine State conflict.** International responses to the crisis have clearly reflected these concerns.

Strategic planning among concerned international actors post-October 9 has generally treated northern Rakhine as distinct from central and southern Rakhine, based on the rationale that new dimensions to the conflict in the north will warrant unique responses. While this delineation may provide opportunities for more tailored approaches, there also exists an underlying risk that treating the north separately – particularly in international rhetoric – may encourage international perceptions and local fears that the north is a separate conflict silo meriting only humanitarian aid and not development support. **It will be critical to ensure that development needs for all communities in northern Rakhine and across the state continue to be addressed, given the heightened attention given internationally to humanitarian and peacebuilding needs during moments of crisis.**

The crisis has underlined the importance of leverage in efforts to influence change. The lack of engagement between some international actors and the Myanmar military, for example, has reportedly presented a fundamental obstacle to achieving advocacy objectives, as relations are maintained largely between international actors and the civilian government – which itself may have limited leverage over military decision-making. The extent to which this remains a blockage will largely depend on whether national and international interpretations of the conflict – and of the necessary ways forward – can begin to converge.

Despite attempts by some international actors to account for the delicate political realities that define the Myanmar political context, **international efforts to advocate for the protection and rights of the Muslim population may amplify threat perceptions and exacerbate grievances held by the**

government, military and local communities, raising the cost for these actors to engage collaboratively with international actors. It is important for international actors to assess and mitigate the negative relational impacts of advocacy messages to avoid unintended consequences that can further divide groups rather than achieving positive change.

Among both local and international actors, there continues to be a gap between conceptual understandings of conflict sensitivity and of concrete conflict sensitive practice. **While most actors interviewed recognized the need for conflict sensitive approaches to navigating the changed environment, few had taken steps to critically analyze the rapidly evolving conflict dynamics, nor to assess the ways in which their own actions may cause harm.** Moving forward, it will be critical to build upon the conflict sensitivity conversation, and ensure that it translates into conflict sensitive practice.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are targeted towards those actors that the report may reasonably reach. As such, recommendations do not target local Muslim or ethnic Rakhine communities more broadly, but rather focus on local and international stakeholders with the capacity to take concrete actions towards improving conflict sensitive engagement within the changed Rakhine State context. These include local and international implementing agencies, donors, and international media, diplomatic and human rights advocacy bodies.

The objective of these recommendations is to promote conflict sensitive engagement in the changed Rakhine State context. They build upon those presented in *Reshaping Engagement*.

To improve readability, the target for each recommendation is color-coded and listed above the recommendation text. The use of the word "agency" refers to development and humanitarian organizations.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

DIPLOMATIC ACTORS

HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of outgoing communications for conflict sensitivity prior to release, ensuring that situation analysis and advocacy messages take a holistic view, representing the grievances and negative impacts felt by all communities.

LOCAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

2. Conduct a series of facilitated dialogue meetings for the purposes of (a) building understanding of the reasons for differing international and ethnic Rakhine perspectives on the conflict, and (b) identifying means of engagement that ensures continuation of constructive collaboration despite differences. This dialogue should aim to ensure at a minimum that both sides feel better heard and understood.
3. Prepare risk mitigation plans for scenarios whereby assistance given inadvertently supports violent action or violence-promoting individuals/groups.

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

4. Given that anti-international sentiment among ethnic Rakhine communities stems largely from grievances related to international support for the Muslim population in Rakhine State, international agencies should build an interagency conflict sensitive communications strategy that aims to address concerns about international programming. This strategy should be based on consultation with ethnic Rakhine agencies and communities, to better understand the nature of their concerns, and should be disseminated broadly.
5. Incorporate a mechanism or dedicated personnel capacity for technical support on conflict sensitivity within the Rakhine Coordination Group and other collaborative forums.

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

6. Provide funds for a Rakhine State conflict sensitivity facility responsible for providing regular, updated conflict analysis as well as technical and strategic support to local and international implementing agencies and/or donors on conflict sensitive communications, community engagement, program design and implementation.
7. Promote local capacities for peace by providing funding and technical support for the Peace Working Group Committee; seek to identify opportunities for conflict sensitive support to other locally-owned peace initiatives that may emerge.
8. Request contingency and conflict sensitivity plans from implementing partners for conflict-related risks in the current Rakhine State context. These contingency plans should span operations as well as proactive communications and community engagement.
9. Fund an assessment and community consultations to identify (a) risk factors for intercommunal conflict, and (b) opportunities for violence prevention initiatives particularly in northern Rakhine. Consider entry points for preventing violent extremism (PVE), dispute resolution, rumor management, and media literacy programming, among others.
10. Develop a more robust strategy for maintaining accountability among implementing partners on conflict sensitive practice, ensuring that conflict sensitivity is effectively embedded in all parts of each implementing organization's development or humanitarian intervention.

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

11. Prepare a proactive, conflict sensitive strategy for a scenario of full scale resumption of humanitarian access to Maungdaw. It is critical to ensure that any increased humanitarian aid for Muslim communities is balanced with increased humanitarian and/or development assistance to ethnic Rakhine communities, and that efforts are made to prepare and seek government permissions for such a broad-spectrum package of assistance in advance. The strategy should incorporate a communications plan to ensure full understanding of international assistance in northern Rakhine among local communities in Rakhine State. More broadly, ensure that new humanitarian needs do not result in de-prioritization of development funding.

12. Explore opportunities for increased collaboration with Rakhine State and township officials and security forces as possible, for example through the provision of dispute resolution and violence prevention capacity support at institutional levels. Consider avenues for linking these activities to implementation of the Rakhine State Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP).

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

DIPLOMATIC ACTORS

13. As security stabilizes and access increases, commission a neutral analysis of potential risk factors for increased support for violent action among the Muslim population in Rakhine State, to use as a strategy planning tool with government and security forces.

LOCAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

INTERNATIONAL DONORS

14. Conduct a scenario planning workshop which reviews conflict-related risks in the current Rakhine State context, and identifies proactive steps which can be taken to avoid conflict insensitive approaches.

LOCAL AGENCIES

LOCAL OFFICIALS

15. Reach out to international agencies to help them to better understand ethnic Rakhine concerns pertaining to international assistance in the current crisis. Provide support to international agencies in disseminating accurate information and messaging about international assistance to the broader ethnic Rakhine community.
16. Initiate a widespread communications campaign discouraging both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities from engaging in violent acts. This is particularly important for communities in northern Rakhine, in order to avoid the risk of ARSA targeting the ethnic Rakhine population in the future as a response to incidents of anti-Muslim violence.

Annex I: Scenario Planning Tool

The following list of scenarios have been developed as a practical tool for the purpose of stimulating discussion about ways in which the crisis may evolve and facilitating an assessment of the extent to which actors using the tool have planned for various eventualities. The list is not exhaustive, nor are the scenarios within it mutually exclusive. Although the tool can be used to foster thinking about plausible futures, it should not take the place of a proper conflict analysis. Each of these scenarios would have substantial impacts on broader conflict dynamics in Rakhine State, and would require preventive and follow-up countermeasures by actors working on the context to maintain conflict sensitive engagement and avoid doing harm.

- **Scenario A.** There is a further round of attacks by and/or increase of local support for ARSA, leading to further militarization and the creation of new “security zones” with restricted access.
- **Scenario B.** An attack or isolated incident sparks widespread intercommunal violence in central Rakhine, leading to increased militarization of the central part of the state and new access restrictions for development and humanitarian agencies.
- **Scenario C.** The small- or large-scale return of refugees from Bangladesh inflames intercommunal and Muslim/security sector tensions and creates significant protection risks for both communities. Risk of ARSA members returning.
- **Scenario D.** Future attacks by ARSA target ethnic Rakhine communities.
- **Scenario E.** A full-scale resumption of humanitarian access to Maungdaw creates risk of significant backlash from the ethnic Rakhine population.
- **Scenario F.** A lack of refugee returns leads to demographic engineering initiatives and/or land grabbing by government, security sector and/or local community actors.
- **Scenario G.** The central government announces plans to convert remaining Muslim IDP camps across Rakhine State into permanent settlements.
- **Scenario H.** A strategic recalibration leads government and military officials to seek increased engagement with Muslim communities to reduce risks for radicalization.
- **Scenario I.** Government and/or military actors exert increased control over international and/or local assistance.
- **Scenario J.** Misappropriation of local or international assistance by security forces and/or ARSA results in aid resources inadvertently funding continued conflict.
- **Scenario K.** The Rakhine State Government is tasked with simultaneous implementation of the SEDP and interim recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.