

## BEHIND MYANMAR'S FRONT LINES: HOW THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CAN HELP

by  
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In February 2021, the Myanmar military overthrew the democratically elected government following an election that signaled a populace increasingly interested in civilian rule. The military installed the State Administration Council (SAC), expecting a compliant citizenry with trouble confined to the border regions. What it encountered was nation-wide resistance.

Today, the SAC control [less than 50 percent](#) of Myanmar, which includes [77 percent](#) of the major towns and cities. Growing coordination between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the People's Defence Force, loyal to the exiled National Unity Government (NUG), saw swathes of territory change hands, including several large townships. This is a process that is ongoing, most recently in Rakhine and Kachin.

The continued and sustained success of forces opposed to the SAC, and their unprecedented coordination, caught Myanmar's neighbors by surprise. China saw [almost all](#) official trade posts with Myanmar fall outside SAC control, as did [India](#). Myanmar's land border with Bangladesh is now controlled by the Arakan Army in its entirety. Even Thailand, long familiar with EAOs controlling parts of the border, saw the major crossing of Myawaddy fall to the Karen, only for it to [return partially to SAC control](#) under the eyes of a loosely allied Karen faction.

The response to these changes has been inconsistent. China has [significant investments](#) in Myanmar, as well as a vested interest in border trade. It sees cutting border trade as a tool of influence, one it has [already wielded](#), but is also wary of harming its own investments. India's response is [reactive rather](#)

[than proactive](#), reflective of its more decentralized governance structure, with different policies applied to different parts of the border. Bangladesh is faced with waves of Rohingya refugees, and a growing Rohingya insurgency based within these displaced communities. Its approach to the border has been [one of security](#). Thailand, with long experience of changes in border control, maintains its [border management approach](#). Laos is the only neighbor to experience no changes of control.

### Who Can Deliver Services?

Much of the population of Myanmar now finds itself in EAO controlled areas or in townships on the front-line, experiencing tight SAC control. In order to place pressure upon EAOs allied with the NUG, and reduce the flow of arms to NUG affiliated People's Defence Force (PDF) units operating in Myanmar's previously unaffected low-lands, the flow of people and goods is severely restricted. This has led to heightened pressure upon aid agencies operating across front lines as well as ordinary civilian commercial and private traffic. Coupled with this, the SAC are increasingly viewing civil society as a risk that needs to be contained. Radio Free Asia [reported](#) that since June, 20 aid workers were arrested under counter-terrorism provisions in Mon State alone, whilst four were murdered in the Mandalay Region in the same period. Similar experiences are being reported across the country. The result is a collapse of the vital services that civil society groups were providing in place of state failure.

The Special Advisory Council – Myanmar reported in September on the difficulties of using the SAC as a partner in [providing cyclone support](#) in areas it does not control. This is a recurring issue, where the SAC absolves itself of responsibility for civilians in regions it does not control—which raises the issue of the capacity of EAOs to run civilian administration in the absence of the state.

Whilst some established EAOs have affiliated civil administrative capacity and experience, such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Organisation, for most the control of a large civilian

population is a new phenomenon. There is a dearth of understanding of civil administration, leading many of the EAOs to adopt policies and practices that damage local economies whilst hindering outside support. An example is the Arakan Army, highly successful in the field but, according to a recent report from the UNDP, administering a civilian population on the brink of [economic collapse](#). Another is the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, who in a few months transformed from a fringe resistance movement to administering [swathes of Northern Shan State](#), a task they were [unprepared for](#).

This issue extends into [human rights abuses](#), where EAOs lack the policies and mechanisms to adequately protect civilian populations from their own troops. EAOs need to better understand the duty of care they inherit when civilian populations come under their administration.

### Methods, Tried and Tested

In previous eras of military control, much of the broader international community adopted a practice of funding multilateral agencies and international NGOs that worked with local partners to deliver services. This was coupled with funding to agencies working outside of the country in the border regions, primarily Thailand and later Bangladesh. These agencies provided support to areas outside of Junta control through programs ostensibly for refugee communities, but which overflowed into areas occupied by the internally displaced.

This provided the international community with an avenue to provide support to areas outside of Junta control whilst providing a veneer of compliance. As long as funding remained limited in both its scope and reach, it was in the interest of all parties to allow the practice to continue.

This approach was possible due to the limited area under EAO control, and its proximity to international borders. Most IDPs were within manageable distances, primarily along the Thai border, and those in difficult to access areas retained the capacity to move to and from Junta-controlled regions where

services could be offered.

During these past eras, borders were relatively open. The flow of goods and people across the various borders were at such a rate that in 2003, the Thaksin government in Thailand declared a ‘war on drugs’ to stem the cross-border trade in narcotics whilst at the same time approximately [1.6 million](#) Myanmar citizens were working in Thailand, both legally and illegally.

Goods from the neighboring countries, both legal and illicit, flowed in the opposite direction. The economies in the border areas functioned despite the Junta’s policies, and in some areas such as the Wa Self-Administered Division, positively [thrived](#).

Now the broader international community is in a flux. The tried and tested approach of grudgingly accepting military rule was based upon an ineffective and largely illegitimate government in exile proving an impractical partner and a resistance that was both limited and fragmented. This time, they are presented with the NUG, an organization with a stronger in-country presence and public acceptance than its forebears and EAOs with unprecedented coordination.

### Enter the NUG

The NUG consists of a [broad range](#) of ex-government officials and representatives from different ethnic organizations. A majority 53 percent are of non-Bamar ethnicity and only 38 percent members of the National League for Democracy who led the coalition which won the 2021 elections. It is not an elected government in exile, but a body aiming to reflect representation whilst running a shadow administration.

The PDF is the military arm of the NUG, operating in areas outside of the reach of the EAOs, and allied with them when operating within their traditional range. The PDF lacks both the experience and equipment of the EAOs, however their operations deep inside SAC controlled territory enables the NUG to operate far beyond the border regions. Recent successes in Mandalay and Sagiang Regions has

brought traditional strongholds of the SAC under the control of the NUG.

Whilst thinly spread, the PDF provides the NUG with a national presence, and hence a national mandate that the EAOs are unable to achieve.

Importantly, the NUG know how to administer.

The NUG's Ministry of Finance created innovative fund-raising techniques, from raising [digital bonds](#) to [running a lottery](#). Education programs, health programs, justice services, all are offered by the NUG. Whilst their capacity to implement programs is limited by resource constraints and disjointed areas under PDF and allied EAO control, the potential remains.

There are questions to be asked of the NUG, not least being their legitimacy. However, in the current environment they remain the only actor with national-reach and administrative capacity.

### The Economic Life-line

Yet for all the aid that may funnel through EAOs or the NUG, nothing can replace the economy. Closed borders are wreaking havoc upon fragile economies, from driving inflation in [Shan State](#) through to undermining agricultural output in [Rakhine](#). Almost half of Myanmar's 54 million citizens are [reportedly](#) living below the poverty line. In areas of SAC control, [ill-conceived policies](#) are causing further economic hardship.

Where the state fails, the private sector may offer solutions. However, it cannot do so without open borders. This would not be such an issue if goods and services could move from SAC controlled areas to areas of opposition control. [Restriction](#) of such movement by the SAC leaves much of the Myanmar economy in isolated pockets, bereft of access to essentials and forced into subsistence.

### A More Active Approach

Whilst there are difficulties for the international community in maintaining a working relationship

with the SAC whilst supporting the provision of essential services across the country, they are not insurmountable.

There are two distinct areas where enhanced investment from the international community can yield greater returns than current practices.

The first is strengthening the capacity of the NUG to delivery services within Myanmar, including the capacity of the NUG to provide administrative systems and training to those EAOs who request it. This will enhance administrative cooperation between organizations, allowing for an improved flow of goods and services in areas outside of the SAC's control. This should extend to human rights training and services.

The second is to increase pressure upon Myanmar's neighbors to ease restrictions on cross-border trade. Without imported essentials, key components of the economy falter, bringing the rest of the economy to a halt with them. Punitive economic actions such as border closures punish civilian populations more than armed forces, something that needs to be made clear.

Ultimately, the fate of Myanmar is up to the citizens of that country. Yet it remains in the interest of all parties to minimize the suffering of civilian populations. Statements and sanctions have important roles to play, but so does action..

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