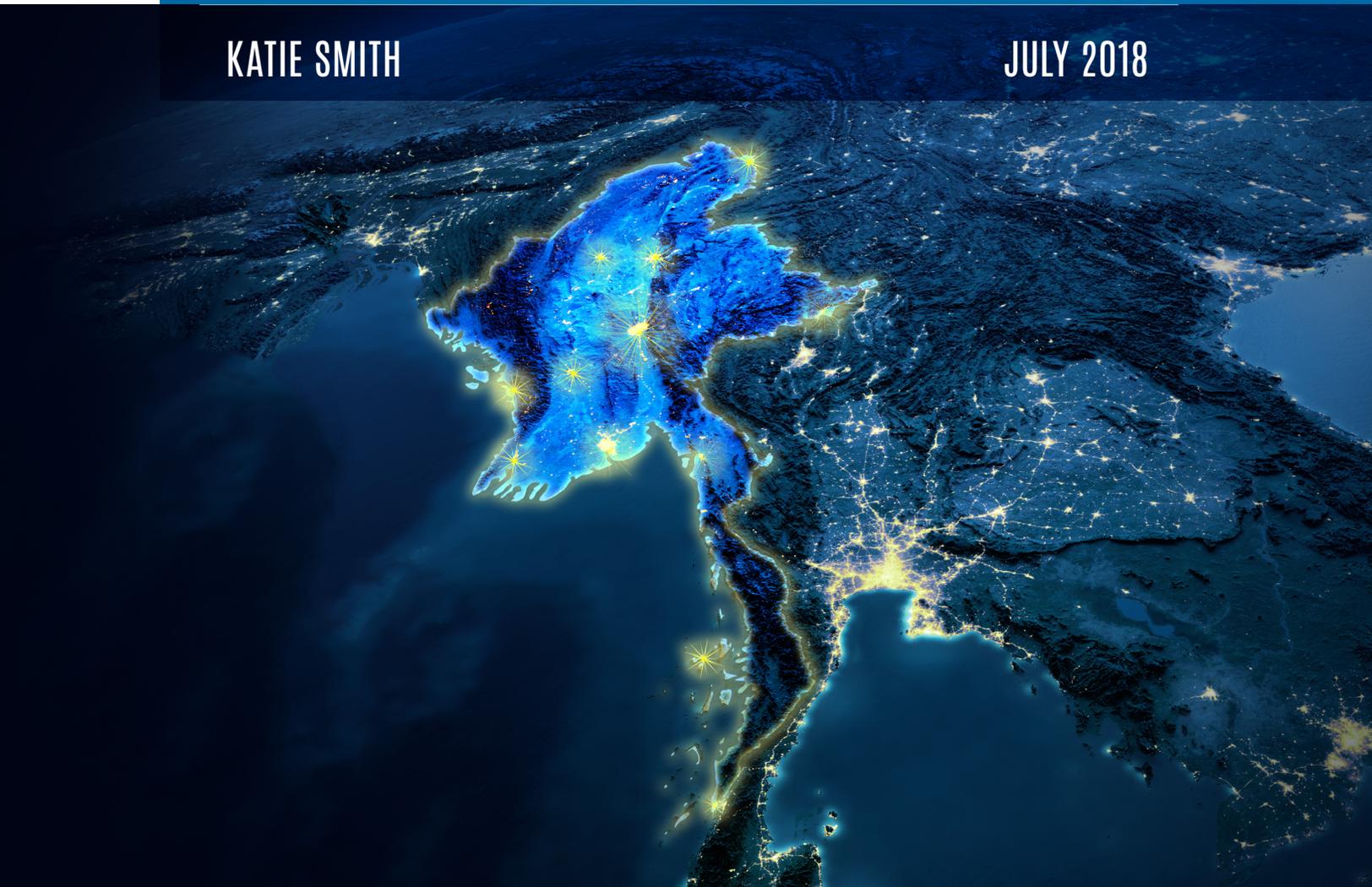


# TURNING THE TIDE: OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD PEACE AMID ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN MYANMAR

KATIE SMITH

JULY 2018



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## **Search for Common Ground**

Search for Common Ground (Search) is an international organization committed to conflict transformation. Since 1982, Search has led programs around the world to help societies transform the way they deal with conflicts, away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative solutions. With more than 600 staff and 1200 partners in 43 countries around the world, our programs reach more than 5 million people each year. Using our Common Ground Approach, we work in many of the world's most difficult conflict environments, including situations of widespread violent conflict, to prevent and mitigate violence, empower local and national actors to build peace, and support reconciliation. We do this by supporting inclusive dialogue and dispute resolution processes, developing media programs that promote fact-based public information and tolerance, and strengthening collective and community actions that solve local challenges.

## **Search for Common Ground in Myanmar**

Search for Common Ground has worked in Myanmar since 2014. Our long-term aim is to support the country to move towards sustainable peace and development and to build a safer, healthier, and more just society. We work with government, civil society, media actors, non-state armed actors, and the wider public to support trust-building and collaboration around shared interests across dividing lines.

## **Editorial Notes**

In this paper, we refer to the country as “Myanmar” and the people who live there as “people of Myanmar.” We also refer to various cities by their current names deemed by the Government of Myanmar. We acknowledge that these places have been referred to by different names at different points in time, including today, and that many people living within the borders of the country may not use or accept these names. Similarly, in this paper there are also references to the history of the country. We recognize that there are many historical narratives, and many narratives that have never been documented. This paper uses the word “Rohingya” to refer to those who identify themselves as such. We recognize that this is a contested name by many in Myanmar. These names and terms are used for the purpose of clarity and consistency in this paper and do not imply a value judgement regarding different perspectives about terminology relating to people and places in the country.

This paper was written with input from the research, expertise, programming, and analysis of Search for Common Ground in Myanmar. This was supplemented by interviews with civil society and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Yangon and throughout the country. While these sources were critical in the development of this paper, the views expressed are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of Search for Common Ground, its donors, or its partner organizations.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

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ARSA – Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

CDNH – Center for Diversity and National Harmony

EAO – Ethnic armed organization

EU – European Union

ICT – Information communications technology

INGO – International non-governmental organization

MCRB – Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business

MIDO – Myanmar ICT for Development Organization

MRTV – Myanmar Radio and Television

NCA – Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

NGO – Non-governmental organization

NLD – National League for Democracy

UNHRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2015, voters across Myanmar went to the polls in elections that were lauded as a “significant achievement in Myanmar’s democratic transition” and an important step forward in “the effort to forge a more peaceful and prosperous future.”<sup>1</sup> The 2015 elections brought civilian leadership to the government, after more than a century of colonial and militarized authoritarian rule. Those years were characterized by inter-ethnic grievances, clashes between government and ethnic armed organizations, structural inequities across ethnic and religious groups, and highly centralized control of resources. Discrimination and repression perpetuated divisions and mistrust between the government and the governed, including center-periphery divisions between leaders in the capital and people living in the rest of the country.

As the newly formed civilian government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), came to power in 2015, it inherited a country experiencing deep divisions and structural barriers to inter-group tolerance. At the same time, democratic transition prompted the emergence of new challenges, including the rampant expansion of information communications technology (ICT) across the country and tensions between the newly civilian-led government and the portions of government still commanded by the Myanmar Armed Forces, known as the Tatmadaw. A peace process, launched after President Thein Sein’s offer for peace talks in 2011 has continued in various forms, including the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) originated in 2015 and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong Conference in 2016. The peace process has mainly consisted of various meetings between the government and various ethnic armed groups, with some participation of civil society and international groups. Despite old and new challenges, the NLD and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, committed the country towards peace and development, declaring “we can do nothing without peace in our country.”<sup>2</sup> Three years into this democratic transition, Myanmar is still struggling to overcome these challenges. The society remains divided along ethnic and religious fault lines, and violence continues.

At the heart of these conflicts lie common grievances across ethnic groups of lack of representation, control of resources, and self-determination and identity that have existed since before the British colonial era and continue today. These grievances manifest in different ways at different times across the country and are particularly acute today. For instance, fervent anti-Muslim sentiments in Myanmar and neighboring countries, stoked by a Buddhist Nationalist movement, have created deep divisions and mistrust around the country, which has often led to violence against civilians. In Rakhine State, nearly 700,000 Rohingya,<sup>3</sup> who are pre-

1 United Nations. “Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the Elections in Myanmar.” News release, November 12, 2015. [Un.org](#) White House. President Barack Obama. “Readout of the President’s Call with Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma.” News release, November 12, 2015. [Obamawhitehouse.archives.gov](#). European Union Election Observation Mission Republic of the Union of Myanmar. “A Well-run, Competitive Election with Legal Reforms and Procedural Improvements Remaining.” News release, November 10, 2015. Election Observation and Democracy Support.

2 Shibani Mahtani and Myo Myo, “Aung San Suu Kyi Calls Securing Peace in Myanmar Her Priority,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/aung-san-suu-kyi-calls-securing-peace-in-myanmar-her-priority-1451899867>.

3 In 1982, the military regime passed a law that designated which ethnic groups in Myanmar would be entitled to citizenship in the country. The Rohingya were not included in this list, though they have a recorded presence in Myanmar for generations and had enjoyed rights of citizens since independence in 1948. This legal status complicates narratives of Rohingya as outsiders who do not belong in the country. Many in Myanmar refer to those that identify as Rohingya, as “Bengali.”

dominantly Muslim, have been displaced and nearly 7,000 have been since August 2017 due to a military response to armed attacks on military outposts by the armed group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, armed clashes between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the Tatmadaw have affected nearly 36% of Myanmar's townships from January 2014 to August 2017, primarily in areas heavily populated by ethnic minority groups.<sup>5</sup> Since 2016, fighting between EAOs and the Tatmadaw has been severe in Kayin, Kachin, and Shan states, on Myanmar's borders where hundreds of thousands have been displaced over the last three decades, though exact numbers are difficult to obtain.<sup>6</sup>

The international community has responded to such crises in a way that primarily treats symptoms of the violence as they appear, while leaving the underlying disease uncured. This approach risks leaving the core drivers of conflict in Myanmar intact and prone to the re-emergence of violence in the future. In the wake of the crisis in Rakhine State, over 50 governments and international bodies have condemned Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian government, and the Tatmadaw, accusing them of, at best, not doing enough to protect minorities in the country, and at worst, actively perpetrating genocide and crimes against humanity.<sup>7</sup> Many of these governments and bodies have responded with increases in humanitarian assistance and the renewal of punitive measures against the Myanmar Government and the Tatmadaw that were lifted during the beginning of the democratic transition, namely targeted economic sanctions and the cessation of military cooperation. However, these approaches are reactive in nature and fail to address core drivers or prevent violence. International condemnation has also caused a shift in Myanmar's willingness to engage with actors perceived to be adversarial. In a statement, Myanmar's de facto leader and State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, stated in defense of the Government that "no one can fully understand the situation of our country the way we do" and reportedly has isolated herself from some internal advisors as well as to Western influence.<sup>8</sup> Myanmar's growing rift with predominantly Western foreign governments and increasing isolation compounds the challenge to respond to humanitarian need and drivers of conflict around the country.

As the international community devises ways to respond to crisis, **it is important to ensure that short-term crisis response does not preclude the ability to prevent violence from occurring again or from achieving long-term objectives for a more peaceful and democratic future in Myanmar.** A holistic approach is needed. As international actors weigh responses to the current conflicts facing Myanmar, it is important to note that there are opportunities to constructively engage with Myanmar to prevent further atrocities, address underlying drivers of conflict, and promote peace across the country.

This report will focus on **these opportunities to build peace amid escalating violence across the country**

4 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar"

5 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar" The Asia Foundation, October, 2017. <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ContestedAreasMyanmarReport.pdf>.

6 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar" Fighting in Kachin and northern Shan States has escalated in 2018. In April 2018 alone, over 5,000 people were displaced from Kachin State.

7 "Rohingya Crisis," Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya-crisis>. "Who Are the Rohingya and Why Are They Fleeing Myanmar?," Amnesty International, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/09/who-are-the-rohingya-and-why-are-they-fleeing-myanmar/>.

8 "Report to the People By State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," Myanmar State Counsellor Office, December 10, 2017, <http://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1072>. Interviews with Yangon-based researchers, civil society, and peace practitioners (March 2018).

and provides recommendations for the United States, European governments, the European Union, international organizations, and the media, including:

**Support Myanmar's NCA and peace process.**

- **Continue support to and promote civilian participation in the peace process and communicate results achieved.** Enhance avenues for civilian participation and interaction with the government, including the development of improved communications strategies around the objectives, progress, and outcomes of the peace process. The communication strategy should utilize existing information and communication networks to showcase concrete results achieved back to people of Myanmar in local languages. This should also include opportunities for youth, women, and minorities to participate in key national processes. In order for national peace agreements to stick, communities must feel invested in the process and ready to accept and implement the results of the agreement in their own communities. Especially in formerly EAO-controlled territories, trust-building is paramount to securing gains made through the NCA and peace process.

**Promote initiatives to bridge center-periphery dynamics between government and civilians.**

- **Support inclusive and effective service delivery efforts to bridge center-periphery dynamics.** International actors can build infrastructure and capacity within union and local government to enhance service delivery capabilities, thereby bridging divides between the government and the governed. While doing so, it is critical that these actors conduct or are informed by thorough conflict analysis to avoid exacerbating or creating new divisions and grievances. When done well, service delivery has the potential to create common interests, demonstrate commitment to social cohesion, and reduce mistrust.
- **Encourage participation and consultation around any efforts to reform legislation and policies.** Lack of participatory governance has the potential to deepen rifts in an already divided society. Any efforts at institutional reform should be accompanied with larger efforts to authentically engage and empower all groups, shifting attitudes and behaviors at the local level by helping to create a unified vision for the future of Myanmar.

**Amplify and support non-adversarial voices in government and civil society to dismantle the enabling environment for violence.**

- **Invest in violence prevention, rumor management, conflict de-escalation, and social cohesion training of local leaders and key community influencers and amplify messages of citizen-led peace-building efforts and actors countering divisive rhetoric through popular culture and media programming.** Encourage and support media outlets, local leaders, and civil society groups that amplify non-adversarial stances, avoid stereotyping, eschew false reporting, and promote positive, non-violent messages in Myanmar. Resource media programming that promotes tolerance, diversity, and national unity as core themes and explore opportunities to bring community perspectives into content and discussion.
- **Engage with civilian and military departments of government who are willing to build positive**

**relationships between civilians and government.** Identify possible champions, whether they be individuals or government ministries, that have an interest in improved engagement with the people that they serve. Provide skills-building and resources to improve this relationship, bring others on board, and build a deeper constituency for peace within the government.

- **Create or promote activities that bring diverse groups together in safe environments.** Activities such as sports, art, music, and social services can begin to break down ethnic or religious borders, build relationships, and create shared experiences. Improved representation of different ethnic and religious groups in media to share stories of different experiences across the country can promote understanding of experiences around the country and build a sense of belonging and attachment to the country.
- **Encourage social media platforms to increase the number of employees monitoring flagged messages and reports of hate speech to improve response time for taking down dangerous content.** These companies should also ensure that monitoring agents represent the country's diversity, speak local languages, and are able to understand the context, sensitivities, and diversity of Myanmar culture and apply this understanding to the decision to remove potentially harmful content.
- **Support initiatives to improve digital literacy for people of Myanmar.** Support training for social media users, community leaders, and journalists on skills such as source checking, how to search information on the internet and use mobile phones effectively, especially in rural areas of the country. Community-based digital literacy centers can be effective tools to reach remote areas and improve community ability to identify false news stories and decipher sources of hate speech.

**Ensure crisis-response does not preclude the ability to achieve long-term peace objectives.**

- **Develop a long-term strategy to shape constructive institutional relationships with the Myanmar Government and Tatmadaw,** to engage actors on all sides of Myanmar's multi-layered conflicts to develop holistic, non-violent solutions to Myanmar's persistent security concerns.
- **Draw on previous experience from engagements with governments emerging from military authoritarianism and operating amid challenging human rights contexts around the world.** Use lessons learned and best practices from history to highlight possible solutions to engage constructively towards improving the protection of human rights and promoting national- and local-level peace. Governments and international bodies should ensure that policy statements and public engagements in or on Myanmar do not reinforce real or perceived grievances.
- **Increase diplomatic engagement with regional actors economically and politically invested in Myanmar,** such as China, India, Bangladesh, and Japan. Regularly engage with the Embassies and Foreign Ministries in Yangon and abroad about violence prevention, conflict response, and development.
- **Fully resource flexible funding, rapid-response mechanisms, and longer-term regional and country-specific funding streams to advance peace and stability in Myanmar.** In the U.S., this includes fully resourcing and mobilizing diplomatic and development resources such as the Human Rights Defenders Fund, the Complex Crises Fund, and the Reconciliation Fund for use in Myanmar. In the EU,

this includes fully resourcing the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, among others. The U.S. and EU should also institutionalize upstream conflict management training of foreign service officers and long-term engagement planning within government agencies to effectively implement atrocity and violence prevention.

- **Develop clear handover strategies from current short-term initiatives to more long-term support to peace and stability.** Short-term programs, such as those implemented by the Office of Transition Initiatives in USAID and other international rapid response efforts, should develop fully articulated learning and programming handover strategies to incorporate data, evaluations, and learning into long-term programming.

## INTRODUCTION

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Myanmar's society is layered with divisions, structural inequities, and competing attempts for influence and control that continue to provoke tensions between divided groups. Myanmar is an extremely diverse country, with over 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, each with its own distinct culture and language or dialect.<sup>9</sup> This ethnic diversity is compounded by religious diversity. While 88% of the people of Myanmar adhere to Buddhism, there are significant Muslim, Christian, and Hindu populations among others throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> Throughout its history, these divides have been utilized and exacerbated through “divide and rule” governance, often leading to violence and discrimination. The previous colonial and military regimes used structural discrimination to separate and destabilize groups and consolidate power in Myanmar, which solidly divided communities and set them against each other, spreading animosity and deep divisions. This led to serious human rights violations in the country and many ethnic groups to feel excluded socially and politically, especially in the ethnic states, areas along Myanmar's borders that are heavily populated by ethnic minority groups. Despite a landslide election for civilian-led government breaking 60 years of military rule in 2015, many ethnic and religious groups unsurprisingly still differ in their vision for the future of this changing country, including who they believe belongs within the state of Myanmar, if and how different groups should live side by side, and the governance structure for the future.

These tensions have erupted in different places across the country in a multitude of manifestations to release the pressure - in the most extreme cases, resulting in massive displacement, atrocities against civilians, and social conflict. Armed clashes between EAOs and the Tatmadaw have resulted from these tensions and have affected nearly 36% of Myanmar's townships between 2014 and 2017, primarily in areas heavily populated by ethnic minority groups.<sup>11</sup> Since 2016, violence has been most intense in Rakhine, Kayin, Kachin, and Shan states, on Myanmar's borders where hundreds of thousands have been displaced over the last three decades,

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9 This is the current number as identified in government documents, in previous years, this has been different.

10 The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Release of 2014 Census Data on Religion. Statement by H.E. U Thein Swe, Minister for Labour, Immigration, and Population at the Launch of 2014 Census Data on Religion. Nay Pyi Taw, 21 July 2016.

11 Adam Burke et al. “Contest Areas of Myanmar” The Asia Foundation, October, 2017. <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ContestedAreasMyanmarReport.pdf>.

though exact numbers are difficult to obtain.<sup>12</sup>



*Myanmar is divided into 7 Regions and 7 States. There is no constitutional difference between the two. The states are named after the seven largest minority ethnic groups, and the seven regions are inhabited primarily, but not exclusively, by Bamar.<sup>13</sup>*

At the same time, fervent anti-Muslim sentiments in Myanmar and neighboring countries, stoked by a Buddhist Nationalist movement, have created deep divisions and mistrust around the country, which has often led to violence against civilians. For instance, on August 25, 2017, ARSA, a non-state armed group self-reportedly in armed opposition to the oppression of Rohingya in Myanmar and led by Ata Ullah, attacked military outposts in Rakhine State killing approximately 20 military officials and seizing weaponry.<sup>14</sup> The attacks prompted an extensive response from the Tatmadaw throughout northern Rakhine State that has left 6,700 Rohingya civilians dead and approximately 700,000 Rohingya and other minority groups displaced.<sup>15</sup> Reports on the military operations following the August 25th attacks indicate extensive sexual

abuse, indiscriminate attacks, and whole villages destroyed.<sup>16</sup> Over 50 governments, international bodies, and international human rights groups have labeled the Tatmadaw response to the ARSA attacks as ethnic cleansing, genocide, and crimes against humanity.<sup>17</sup> The explanation of the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw, however, is diametrically opposed to that understood by many in the international community. After the August attacks, the Tatmadaw labeled ARSA a terrorist group and blamed ARSA attacks for “prompt[ing] hundreds of thousands to flee northern Rakhine.” It argued that the attacks were meant “to intentionally harm national security and turn global sentiment against the country.”<sup>18</sup> As the narratives of the violence diverge, and international pressure grows, common ground has seemed elusive. The United States, for

12 Adam Burke et al. “Contest Areas of Myanmar”

13 Bamar, also referred to as Burmans, maintain the largest total population size in Myanmar although they do not hold a majority population in every area. The majority of Bamar adhere to the Buddhist religion and have historically been placed in positions of political power throughout colonial and military rule.

14 ARSA claimed responsibility for the attacks on military outposts in Rakhine State. The ultimate objectives and categorization of ARSA is contested in Myanmar.

15 “Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF Surveys Estimate That at Least 6,700 Rohingya Were Killed during the Attacks in Myanmar.” Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International, December 12, 2017.

16 “Rohingya Crisis,” Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya-crisis>.

17 “This list of 57 countries was compiled using the countries that voted in favor of UN Human Rights Council Resolution S-27/1 (condemning gross violations of human rights in Myanmar) as a baseline and additional countries that have released statements during the UNHRC proceedings or other official statements.

18 “Tatmadaw Releases Statement on Rakhine Terrorist Attacks.” Myanmar President Office, October 24, 2017. <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-7837>.

instance, has reinstated some punitive measures such as targeted sanctions and down-graded military-to-military support. The Myanmar Government, in response to what it has perceived as adversarial statements from many Western countries, has leaned towards the support of countries they consider non-adversarial and has stepped backwards from the international spotlight.

Despite dueling statements and positions, Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian government, foreign governments, and international institutions have all stated that peace in Myanmar is their paramount objective.<sup>19</sup> In order to build on this common goal of peace, response must be situated within the broader context, history, and future of Myanmar. While the loss of life and human suffering resulting from the crisis in Rakhine is tragic, a myopic, reactive focus by the international community on any single area of crisis in Myanmar without a more holistic approach risks perpetuating a “whack-a-mole” approach leading to outbursts of crisis elsewhere in the future. Deep structural and social changes are required to support the country to move forwards towards peace, development, and democracy. Foreign governments and international bodies that are interested in realizing a peaceful future for Myanmar must target these underlying, structural drivers of conflict across the country and ensure that short-term crisis response does not preclude the ability to achieve long-term objectives of promoting peace and democracy. **Despite significant challenges, there are immediate opportunities to act now to prevent further violence against civilians and also pave the way for long-term peace, development, and democracy in Myanmar. This paper will explore these opportunities.**

## CURRENT MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

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The root causes of armed conflict and violence are hugely complex in Myanmar, with an intersecting set of factors, forces, and pressures. The legacies of militarized authoritarian policies, alongside continued inconsistent or non-existent state administration, have left deep fractures between the people of Myanmar and the Government, compounding deep social divides across many segments of society and at all levels based on ethnicity and religion gender, socio-economic, and age/generation. For decades, armed struggles between state and non-state actors for geopolitical influence, governance authority, and resource control have fostered inter-communal tensions and open hostilities between the Myanmar government and civil society, EAOs, and influential religious groups. Armed clashes between EAOs and the Tatmadaw remain a formidable threat to civilian safety today, as both sides have used heavily weaponized warfare and sometimes indiscriminate tactics against each other and civilian populations.

At the same time, harmful social norms perpetuated by stereotypes and divisive language against ethnic and religious minorities in the country have created an enabling environment for violence and in cases have sparked violence among everyday civilians in the country. Nationalistic attitudes and religious extremism are widespread and at times are echoed by government institutions and perpetuated through coordinated nation-

alist movements, trusted word-of-mouth networks, and social media.<sup>20</sup> This has solidified a fervent anti-Muslim sentiment that in its most extreme forms has triggered “Muslim-free zones” and intra-communal violence as seen in Bago Region, Mandalay Region, and Shan State between Buddhists and Muslims, as well as in Rakhine State where Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslims, and other ethnic and religious minorities have been the attacked, killed, and forcibly displaced.<sup>21</sup>

## Armed clashes between non-state actors and the Tatmadaw

Armed struggles between non-state actors and the Tatmadaw in various parts of the country reflect ethnic communities’ deep grievances with the state of Myanmar, including the lack of representation and self-determination, as well as the Tatmadaw’s efforts to maintain control and power. State-driven narratives promote the categorization of ethnic armed groups or non-state armed groups as rebels or terrorists. From the perspective of the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw, these non-state actors pose a real threat to national security and those perceived to be in support of these groups are considered to be in league against the state. An intense competition between both sides for control of land and resources, including teak, gems, and drugs, has intensified the violent clashes between non-state armed groups and the Tatmadaw.

While armed clashes between armed groups and the Tatmadaw date back to independence, the current clashes remain a major threat to civilian security, escalating and receding at various points in time. There is limited comprehensive information available about the extent of casualties and displacement over the decades in the ethnic states where armed conflict has been most present; however, available estimates suggest that well over one million people have been displaced since 2014 alone, though this number is likely much higher.<sup>22</sup> Three areas that have been particularly affected by widespread violence and conflict in recent years are the south-eastern area of the country, Kachin and Shan States, and Rakhine State.

- Southeastern Myanmar: In 2005-2006, intense fighting was experienced in the southeastern portion of Myanmar between the Karen National Union, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and the Tatmadaw. The clashes over control of land and infrastructure, including key roads and access to the location of the Hatgyi hydropower dam in Kayin State, included the use of extensive landmines which have displaced thousands and continue to remain a threat to civilians in these areas.<sup>23</sup> Recently, violence has broken out once again between the Karen National Union and the Tatmadaw in Hpapun district in March 2018.<sup>24</sup>

20 The Ma Ba Tha is a Buddhist Nationalist Movement responsible for perpetuating many stereotypes against Muslims in Myanmar. For more information on the Ma Ba Tha see the text box on Page 14.

21 Bernama, “Muslim Free Zones on Rise in Myanmar, Claims Human Rights Body,” New Straits Times, September 10, 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/2017/09/278367/muslim-free-zones-rise-myanmar-claims-human-rights-body>.

22 Mathieson David Scott, “Bridging the ‘Burma Gap’ in Conflict Studies,” *Tea Circle Oxford* (blog), May 7, 2018, <https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/05/07/bridging-the-burma-gap-in-conflict-studies/>. Adam Burke et al. “Contest Areas of Myanmar” “Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF Surveys Estimate That at Least 6,700 Rohingya Were Killed during the Attacks in Myanmar,” Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International, December 12, 2017, <https://www.msf.org/myanmarbangladesh-msf-surveys-estimate-least-6700-rohingya-were-killed-during-attacks-myanmar>.

23 Adam Burke et al. “Contest Areas of Myanmar”

24 Choudhury, Angshuman. “Myanmar’s Ethnic Armed Conflict: Emerging Trends in Violence.” ReliefWeb. June 12, 2018. Accessed July 16, 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmars-ethnic-armed-conflict-emerging-trends-violence>.

- Kachin and Shan States: Intense violence in Kachin and northern Shan States in the northeast took place between the 1960s and 1994. Cessations halted for a brief time when a ceasefire was signed; however, the fighting has resumed since 2014. Between 2014 and 2018, hundreds have been killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, though these numbers are believed to be much higher.<sup>25</sup> The sporadic rounds of fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army has escalated since April 2018, with increased aerial bombardments, mortar campaigns, land mines, heavy weapons and small arms, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians.<sup>26</sup> In April 2018 alone, over 5,000 people were displaced from Kachin State.<sup>27</sup>
- Rakhine State: As mentioned above, the recent violence in Rakhine State reached a new level when the ARSA, attacked military outposts in Rakhine State killing 20 military officials and seized weaponry on August 25, 2017.<sup>28</sup> In the following days, ARSA members reportedly executed dozens of Hindu civilians and other minorities in Rakhine State.<sup>29</sup> While the terminology categorizing ARSA is contested in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw response to the attacks conforms to a pattern of exploitation and repression across the country, with civilians caught in the crossfire. The attacks on the military outposts prompted an extensive and severe military response that has left 6,700 Rohingya civilians dead and nearly 700,000 displaced into neighboring Bangladesh.<sup>30</sup> Dozens of Hindus, Buddhists, and other ethnic minority members were killed following the August attacks, as well as an estimated 30,000 displaced.<sup>31</sup>

Efforts are underway by civilian and military government officials to engage non-violently with non-state armed groups. The NLD has continued pursuing the NCA with EAOs, which paves the way for participation in political dialogue with the Myanmar Government through the peace process.<sup>32</sup> The peace process has encountered numerous challenges and insufficient communications strategies and outreach have weakened the dissemination of the successes it has achieved. Despite two new signatories to the NCA in 2018 and the ongoing nationwide peace process and political dialogue, fighting continues across the country and common understanding of the objectives and successes of the peace process are not widely understood.

25 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar"

26 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar"

27 OCHA, "Myanmar: New displacement in Kachin," OCHA, April 29, 2018, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MMR\\_20180429\\_Kachin\\_Newly\\_displacement\\_April2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MMR_20180429_Kachin_Newly_displacement_April2018.pdf).

28 "Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF Surveys Estimate That at Least 6,700 Rohingya Were Killed during the Attacks in Myanmar," Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International.

29 "Myanmar: New Evidence Reveals Rohingya Armed Group Massacred Scores in Rakhine State," Amnesty International, May 22, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/myanmar-new-evidence-reveals-rohingya-armed-group-massacred-scores-in-rakhine-state/>.

30 "Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF Surveys Estimate That at Least 6,700 Rohingya Were Killed during the Attacks in Myanmar," Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International.

31 Annie Gowen, "We Are Going to Kill You': Villagers in Burma Recount Violence by Rohingya Muslim Militants," Washington Post, November 15, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/we-are-going-to-kill-you-villagers-in-burma-recount-violence-by-rohingya-muslim-militants/2017/11/14/409ff59b-849d-4459-bdc7-d1ea2b5ff9a6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/we-are-going-to-kill-you-villagers-in-burma-recount-violence-by-rohingya-muslim-militants/2017/11/14/409ff59b-849d-4459-bdc7-d1ea2b5ff9a6_story.html).

32 Adam Burke et al. "Contest Areas of Myanmar"

## Stereotypes and rumors are entrenched by hate speech

Myanmar has a history of rumors and manipulated information being used to reinforce stereotypes against various ethnic and religious minorities, to inspire vigilante mob mentalities, and to precipitate mass violence that has destabilized various parts of the country.<sup>33</sup> In particular, animosity towards Muslims has escalated in the last five years, during which nationalist and anti-Islamic narratives have been linked with violence against Muslim civilians in townships around the country. The increasing prominence of the Ma Ba Tha, a Buddhist nationalist movement that strives to “protect Myanmar from the encroachment of Islam,” has increased themes of “Muslim takeover of Myanmar” and a “Muslim threat to Burmese racial purity.” The Ma Ba Tha has grown in its socio-political influence, institutionalizing these themes into government policy and legislation, through updated national security laws (including the denial of voting rights to Rohingya) and the Race and Religion Laws passed in 2015.<sup>34</sup> These posts are also linked to outbreaks of violence. In July 2014, riots in Mandalay Region were reportedly triggered by a post by one of the Ma Ba Tha’s leaders, Ashin Wirathu, about an alleged rape of a Buddhist woman by two Muslim tea shop owners alongside his calls for Buddhists to prepare against the jihad.<sup>35</sup>

### *Fear of Muslim Takeover of Myanmar*

*Many people in Myanmar have a genuine fear that Islam poses an existential threat to Buddhism in Myanmar.<sup>36</sup> Nearby countries, such as Malaysia and Bangladesh, were formerly strongholds of Buddhist culture in Asia but have shifted, and Islam is now the official state religion of these countries. This experience of neighboring countries plays into the fear of Islamic takeover felt by many Buddhists in Myanmar. This fear has led to anti-Muslim narratives, which are particularly dangerous when combined with widespread rumors and fear-mongering and create an enabling environment for violence.*

Aggressively critical and suspicious attitudes against Muslims, specifically but not exclusively Rohingya, and the expansion of hate speech, including through ICT, has entrenched deep divisions and mistrust between a majority Buddhist population and a Muslim minority. A coordinated Buddhist Nationalist movement has perpetuated these stereotypes, rumors, and hate speech, which has rapidly spread through social media. Dehumanizing anti-Muslim imagery and language is regularly integrated into their social media posts and often transformed into memes and easily shareable images with calls to action. Some of these images are shared

33 Dangerous Speech and New Methods of Prevention: Prof. Susan Benesch, TSAS Security Policies and Community Relationships Summit, November 4-5, 2013.

34 “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SticksandStones.pdf>.

35 “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SticksandStones.pdf>.

36 Interviews with Yangon-based researchers, civil society, and peace practitioners (March 2018). “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SticksandStones.pdf>.

tens of thousands of times. The rampant national rhetoric of prejudice and fear towards Muslims is linked to global narratives of Islamic violent extremism and “Muslim invasion,” and has instigated outbreaks of violence against Muslim civilians in Myanmar, including intense inter-communal violence in north and central Rakhine State, Meiktila in Mandalay Region, and Lashio in Shan State.

Arduous terrain, poor infrastructure, and limited information channels limit opportunities for groups from different parts of the country to learn about the broader situation of other ethnic groups, contributing to the formulation of stereotypes and reliance on informal means of information transfer, where hate speech often goes unchecked.<sup>37</sup> Trusted word-of-mouth networks and community leaders continue to be crucial sources of information. Given Myanmar’s history of censored media and divide and rule community separation, many people rely on community leaders and trusted word-of-mouth networks for receiving information. However, when this reliance on unverified information is combined with the rapid introduction of technology and low digital literacy rates, it creates an environment ripe for negative rumors to spread quickly and for harmful stereotypes to entrench as “truth,” as seen in other countries such as Sri Lanka.<sup>38</sup>

### *Hate Speech, Rumors, and the 969 and Ma Ba Tha Movements*

*The 969-grassroots movement started in Mon state in 2001. Led by Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, it was composed of monks and community leaders and sought to “protect race and religion in Myanmar” from an “existential Muslim threat.”<sup>39</sup> The movement spread narratives within Myanmar arguing that there was a “population explosion” of Muslims that threatened to “capture” the country, as well as immediate threats to young Buddhist girls by Muslim men.<sup>40</sup> These narratives were similar to xenophobic narratives of “takeover” and “replacement” seen in other historical examples of mass violence against civilians.<sup>41</sup> Due to its inflammatory rhetoric, the 969 movement was banned by the government-appointed body that oversees and regulates the Buddhist clergy, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka, in late 2013. In its wake, the movement was followed by the Ma Ba Tha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) in 2014.<sup>42</sup> The Ma Ba Tha has been running a similar nationalist campaign based on social and religious issues, claiming that the country’s Buddhist identity is under threat from encroaching Islam.<sup>43</sup> These narratives, per-*

37 Shiva K Dhungana, “Final Evaluation: Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar,” Search for Common Ground, June 2016. [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/MYA001\\_Final\\_Evaluation\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/MYA001_Final_Evaluation_Report_FINAL.pdf)

38 Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, “Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match,” New York Times, April 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html>.

39 Andrew R.C. Marshall, “Special Report: Myanmar Gives Official Blessing to Anti-Muslim Monks,” Reuters, June 27, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-969-specialreport/special-report-myanmar-gives-official-blessing-to-anti-muslim-monks-idUSBRE95O04720130627>.

40 Kate Hodal, “Buddhist Monk Uses Racism and Rumours to Spread Hatred in Burma,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2013, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/buddhist-monk-spreads-hatred-burma>.

41 Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

42 Bethany Davis, “Religion, Hate Speech and Social Media in Myanmar: Analysing Methods of Intervention,” [https://www.academia.edu/29939461/Religion\\_hate\\_speech\\_and\\_social\\_media\\_in\\_Myanmar\\_analysing\\_methods\\_of\\_intervention](https://www.academia.edu/29939461/Religion_hate_speech_and_social_media_in_Myanmar_analysing_methods_of_intervention)

43 “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SticksandStones.pdf>.

*petuated and inflamed by hate speech and rumors on social and traditional media, have created a culture of dehumanization against Muslims, placing many Muslim populations at heightened risk of persecution and violence.<sup>44</sup> Members of these groups share social media posts, distribute pamphlets, and perpetuate narratives that include incendiary rhetoric and sensationalized stories calling upon Buddhists to defend their religion and their country to protect against Muslim “invaders.” These anti-Muslim campaigns play a crucial role in sustaining violence in Myanmar both by dehumanizing Muslims and validating attacks and anti-Muslim prejudice.*

The informal word-of-mouth information transfer is replicated and expanded via social media and Facebook in particular. Rapid introduction of technology into Myanmar has exposed and amplified pre-existing divisions and created platforms to share these views widely and quickly. Until 2011, Myanmar was cut off to the technological advancements of the outside world, with strictly censored communications platforms, restrictive laws preventing assembly, and harsh penalties enacted against those who dissented the former military government. In many ways Myanmar continues to struggle to overcome some of the vestiges of these restrictive communications policies. For instance, Yangon’s Chief Minister recently prohibited nonviolent assemblies in 11 of 14 Yangon townships, despite legal provisions under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law.<sup>45</sup> However, on the telecommunications front, internet and cellphone usage and coverage have exploded in just over three years. Today about 90% of the country’s 54 million people in Myanmar have access to phones with connection to the internet.<sup>46</sup> Of these internet users, 92% are under the age of 40. Facebook is the *de facto* internet for many in Myanmar, with 85% of the country’s internet traffic flowing through the site and 70% of users reporting they use Facebook daily.<sup>47</sup>

The lack of exposure to technological advances over time has created a tidal wave of new information into an environment with limited resources or understanding on how to digest and analyze information and news sources. Most people in Myanmar, especially those in rural areas, lack access to computer and digital literacy training.<sup>48</sup> Some cell-phone vendors pre-install social media apps like Facebook to emails they create and pre-like certain pages.<sup>49</sup> In these cases, users are not self-selecting into certain pages on social media or news aggregator apps, which can limit the types of information making it onto users’ newsfeeds. The proliferation of unverified information and hate speech online, alongside limited understanding of source checking and other digital literacy skills, creates an enabling environment for further outbreaks of violence and human

44 “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS.

45 “Burma: Withdraw Protest Ban in Yangon.” Human Rights Watch. November 15, 2017. Accessed June 20, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/15/burma-withdraw-protest-ban-yangon>.

46 Philip Heijmans, “The Unprecedented Explosion of Smartphones in Myanmar,” *Bloomberg.Com*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-07-10/the-unprecedented-explosion-of-smartphones-in-myanmar>.

47 Laignee Barron, “Could Facebook Have Helped Stop Hate Speech in Myanmar?,” *Time*, April 9, 2018, <http://time.com/5230474/facebook-myanmar-hate-speech-rohingya/>. “Survey of Burma/Myanmar Public Opinion.” Center for Insights in Survey Research, IRI, April, 2017. [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/8.25.2017\\_burma\\_public\\_poll.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/8.25.2017_burma_public_poll.pdf).

48 “Myanmar Internet Freedom Forum Report,” MIDO. <http://myanmar-startups.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MIFF-report.pdf>.

49 Interviews with Myanmar civil society organizations in Yangon, February 2018; “Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar,” C4ADS.

rights abuses against minorities.<sup>50</sup>

The sheer magnitude of accounts producing incendiary rhetoric compounds the problem. More than 150 Facebook pages are regularly creating and sharing text, images, or videos that express hatred towards a minority group in Myanmar.<sup>51</sup> The overwhelming majority of hate speech and attacks conducted on Facebook are directed at Muslims, and only 10% of the postings reported to Facebook as hate speech have been taken down.<sup>52</sup> The proliferation of technology and Facebook usage are not driving factors of rumors and hate speech, but rather they create a space where those messages can materialize and be shared without verification. Hate speech remains highly prevalent outside of digital spaces, including in pamphlets, sermons, and rallies, and various derogatory terms are common in everyday speech.<sup>53</sup> However, Facebook and other apps such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Twitter amplify and provide a layer of anonymity to provocative statements, increasing the rapidity and breadth of the audience reached by these messages. When rumors are shared on social media, local issues or conflicts have triggered emotional and physical responses regionally or nationally.<sup>54</sup> As such, rumors have shape public opinion and the conflict dynamics in the country in a broader and more accelerated fashion than ever before.<sup>55</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE CITIZENS AND BUILD PEACE

Despite the systemic nature of conflict drivers in Myanmar, there are clear opportunities today to prevent violence and promote peace, laying the ground work for long-term stability and systems change. There have been important examples of private civilians and public officials who have pushed back on violent and hateful narratives and have challenged the structural status quo to amplify messages of diversity, tolerance, and non-violence. It is essential to support and expand the space for these actors to amplify these messages and build bridges between different groups. The peace process also continues to attract EAOs as signatories and remains a promising avenue for national peace in Myanmar. Key opportunities to support positive efforts include:

### Support Myanmar's NCA and peace process

When the NLD came to power in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to stay the course of the NCA and peace

50 Shiva K Dhungana, "Final Evaluation: Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar."

51 "SFCG Myanmar Impact Toolkit - Dual Language," Search for Common Ground, [https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CFCG\\_Myanmar\\_Impact\\_Toolkit-Dual\\_language.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CFCG_Myanmar_Impact_Toolkit-Dual_language.pdf).

52 Interviews with civil society organizations in Yangon, March 2018. Megha Rajagopalan, "Internet Trolls Are Using Facebook To Target Myanmar's Muslims," BuzzFeed, March 18, 2017, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/how-fake-news-and-online-hate-are-making-life-hell-for?utm\\_term=.dnjY8QAPL#.afVdjxVz2](https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/how-fake-news-and-online-hate-are-making-life-hell-for?utm_term=.dnjY8QAPL#.afVdjxVz2).

53 "Sticks and Stones: Hate Speech Narratives and Facilitators in Myanmar," C4ADS.

54 "Let's Think, Let's Change: Promoting Diversity Through Popular Culture Rapid Conflict Assessment." Search for Common Ground, 2017. <https://www.sfcg.org/lets-think-lets-change-promoting-diversity-through-popular-culture/>.

55 Shiva K Dhungana, "Final Evaluation: Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar."

process. Since then, she has continually repeated her commitment to peace in Myanmar as her primary objective.<sup>56</sup> The ongoing conflict and the slow progress of the peace process to deliver and communicate results have tempered expectations for the country's future. Despite additional EAOs signing the NCA earlier in 2018, a number of the most active armed groups have not signed.<sup>57</sup> There are many competing interests that impede the Tatmadaw from ceasing military operations in the ethnic states and challenges to incentivize EAOs to lay down their weapons and join the formal process, but there are opportunities to use those that have signed as an example for others and showcase examples of the Government to compromise and show an ability to institute reforms.

The peace process shows particular promise in its potential to be participatory and consultative. Progress is slow but remains, and there are still opportunities to engage and push forward the peace process. The peace process has limited communications outreach on its objectives and the successes it has achieved. Especially in areas that were formerly controlled by EAOs, the relationship with the government is marked by resentment and mistrust. As the Government continues to highlight commitment to the peace process, it can create and implement communications campaigns to begin building trust with these communities. Aung San Suu Kyi stated, "support from the people and their active participation are *sine qua non* for bringing peace to [Myanmar]. Peace cannot be achieved without the participation of all communities."<sup>58</sup> Building on this acknowledgment, union- and local-level government actors could strengthen linkages between the national government and local people in places where many of the armed groups have signed by building trust with communities through effective communication about the objectives and progress of the peace process. Further ensuring that people in Myanmar have avenues to participate in the process itself will create buy in and support on their part.

## Promote initiatives to bridge divides between government and civilians

Myanmar has faced enormous challenges in overcoming legacies of military authoritarianism and building trust across dividing lines within its borders. Many people in Myanmar lack trust in the government, and the government itself struggles to engage with and represent all the groups living in the country. It is important to recognize that Myanmar is only three years into a new government, there are limited resources, and these types of challenges take time to overcome. Nevertheless, relationships between government and civilians must be strengthened if authentic representative government is to be achieved.

In the early phases of the country's transition, it is critical to build on the existing opportunities for change and highlight positive examples. There are some individuals and departments within the civilian government

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56 Shibani Mahtani and Myo Myo, "Aung San Suu Kyi Calls Securing Peace in Myanmar Her Priority."

57 The EAO signatories of the NCA are up to date as of July 2018: Chin National Front (CNF), the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (Peace Council) (KNU/KNLA PC), the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), and the Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) have signed the NCA.

58 "Message from State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to the Rally to Welcome and Support the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong," Myanmar State Counsellor Office, January 27, 2018, <http://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1659>.

who have proactively acknowledged and recognized the importance of improving relationships among different groups of civilians and seeking out opportunities to build trust between the citizenry and authorities. In one example, following an asocial cohesion training led by Search for Common Ground for over 1,000 people in 2016, over 75% of participants, including officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement, stated they had applied the lessons to their work on a variety of social issues, including drug rehabilitation, psycho-social support to victims of natural disasters, and the resettlement of victims of human trafficking.<sup>59</sup> By identifying possible champions, whether they be individuals or government ministries, that have an interest in better engagement with the people that they serve, there is the potential to build a deeper constituency for peace with the skills to make it a reality and the influence to bring others on board.

In many communities, especially those that are remote or are in formerly EAO-controlled territory, government services and presence have been absent, and needs have not been addressed. Some government officials looking to improve their ability to deliver services have recently capitalized on increased ability to reach communities and address their needs. For instance, in the mineral rich Kayah state, which has experienced intermittent and fluctuating levels of violence between competing EAOs for decades, villagers had continually requested irrigation support from the Ministry of Agriculture to sustain their rice fields. However, given the remoteness of the community and continued insecurity, Ministry officials had never visited or forwarded the requests to supervisors. The lack of response bred frustration within the community to the point the farmers threatened to destroy all the surrounding irrigation pipes and canals. However, after attending a social cohesion training in Yangon, a Ministry of Agriculture official visited the village, listened to the frustrations of the community, and channeled the feedback to the State Agricultural Manager, who released a budget to repair the irrigation canals. Since the reconstruction of the canals, the relationship between the community farmers and the Ministry has improved and tensions within the community reduced.<sup>60</sup> In Rakhine State, groups like Scholar Institute are working to bridge divides between state and township governments, as well as between civil society, government, and the private sector to respond to the ramifications of natural disasters and livelihood development.<sup>61</sup> It is important to showcase examples such as this, where engagement between marginalized communities and government has led to concrete results that benefited communities and populations in areas with high levels of mistrust or skepticism towards the government, both to demonstrate progress and also to build support for collaborative efforts to strengthen services.

## **Amplify and support non-adversarial voices in government and civil society to dismantle the enabling environment for violence**

Hate speech and rumors have been a major driving force and a trigger for violence against civilians across the country. Tackling the threat of hate speech will take a coordinated effort to improve perceptions of diversity and tolerance, as well as the development of community-based rumor management, conflict de-escalation, and digital literacy initiatives. Trusted word-of-mouth networks and community leaders have long been im-

59 “Social Cohesion for Stronger Communities: Stories from the Field.” Search for Common Ground, 2017.

60 “Social Cohesion for Stronger Communities: Stories from the Field.” Search for Common Ground, 2017.

61 *Every Youth Deserves a Quality Education*, Yangon: Scholar Institute, <http://scholarinstitute.org/Scholar-Institute-Brochure-Eng.pdf>

portant sources of information in Myanmar, but the rapid introduction of technology and low digital literacy rate have threatened carefully established local fact-checking and moderating mechanisms.

As extreme viewpoints flood social media and informal communication in Myanmar, local trusted actors who promote non-divisive dialogue in their communities are crucial players for de-escalating violence.

Some citizens and government officials have responded by identifying ways to protect and expand the space for those who reject divisive and extreme narratives, refraining from speaking in absolutes, and promoting positive interactions between divided groups. The government is not a monolithic unit: there are some civil servants who are willing and want to capitalize on new space developing in the civil service, as the government matures, to improve their job performance. Those individuals should be showcased as role models who have the potential to champion broader change, and initiatives that show promise should be scaled. For instance, the state-run information service Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) has adopted television and radio programming that promotes positive messaging of inter-ethnic relationships, challenges negative stereotyping, and fosters dialogue between the government and youth. For instance, the television drama series, *The Team*, designed and implemented between Search for Common Ground, Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, and the Yangon Film School followed the fictional storyline of a group of diverse youth from different ethnicities, religions, and gender all united around soccer. The show addressed core challenges and struggles of everyday life in Myanmar, including gambling, alcoholism, and migration, and included actors that were from the same ethnic and religious groups as their characters. One radio talk show, *Let's Think, Let's Change*, explored the impact of negative stereotyping through studio-based interviews with national celebrities and the public. The show invited individuals to highlight stories of inspiration and change drawn from the communities, based on the episode-theme developed through youth consultative workshops. The show has already shared common experiences and normalized conversations about tolerance and diversity: in surveyed communities in Lashio and North Okkalapa where this radio program was broadcast, over 90% of respondents stated that the program content inspired them to talk to persons from different religious or cultural backgrounds.<sup>62</sup>

*Over 90% of listeners to radio programs promoting tolerance and diversity in Lashio and North Okkalapa stated the program content inspired them to talk to persons from different religious or cultural backgrounds.*

As extreme viewpoints flood social media and informal communication in Myanmar, trusted local actors who promote non-divisive dialogue in their communities are crucial players for de-escalating violence. Despite the political risks, some leaders and citizens' groups are devising solutions to respond to conflict dynamics. Local civil society organizations, such as Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), Smile Education and Development Fund, and Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH), have worked with

communities to improve media literacy, counter hate speech, promote inter-faith tolerance, and identify and respond to early warning triggers of violence. Community-based committees in Shan State diffuse heightened tensions and dispel misinformation shared on social media in their communities and from other areas of the country. They follow up with training on information management, content development, and positive messaging. For instance, the *Panzagar* (“Flower Speech”) program works with media, political parties, and civil society to combine online and public events to spread peace and de-escalate inflammatory rhetoric through positive speech. While there is a need to amplify and support civil society and community-based organizations active in countering hate speech, there is also room to expand the diversity of actors promoting positive messaging. Political leaders, religious leaders, cultural icons, and those formerly involved in groups promoting hate speech can play a particularly salient role but are under-represented in current initiatives to counter hate speech.<sup>63</sup>

### *Community Platforms Diffuse Calls for Religious Violence*

*Historical and deep-rooted mistrust between religious groups is prevalent in Lashio city, Shan state, where armed conflict continues on its outskirts. Remnants of extensive sectarian violence in 2013 are still evident in the form of damaged and burned buildings. In this context, individuals have established local committees to verify and counteract rumors, stop the flow of misinformation, and promote positive messaging to de-escalate tensions triggered by rumors or hate speech.<sup>64</sup> Given the wide reach of social media, posts with dangerous calls to action originating outside the town and region for Buddhists to “defend themselves” have triggered violence. However, there are examples of community interventions that have prevented incendiary speech from becoming violent. In one example, a Facebook post in 2016 reported that many swords were seized from a Yangon Mosque near the time of the Water Festival. The post was shared by members of the Ma Ba Tha, declaring that Muslims had plans to capitalize on the festivities to further their agenda, and the posts were spread quickly across the country. In Lashio, the memories of intense violence between Muslims and Buddhists in 2013 colored the reception of this post and created high tensions between the groups. Recognizing the heightened tensions, the Lashio-based communities looked to verify the reports with news services, where they found no corroborating story. They then identified the original poster of the story who was posting from Indonesia and engaged him in conversation about the ramifications of posting unverified stories and the heightened tensions between religious groups in Lashio and asked him to remove it. He did. The committee then circulated the story via Lashio News, Radio Free Asia, and their Facebook page to inform community members that the story was unsubstantiated.*

63 “SFCG Myanmar Stakeholder Mapping,” Search for Common Ground, <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SFCG-Stakeholder-Mapping-Report-external-20Nov2017-FINAL-for-printing.pdf>.

64 “Social Cohesion for Stronger Communities: Stories from the Field.” Search for Common Ground, 2017.

Facebook is widely used as the primary way to access the internet in Myanmar and 90% of respondents indicated they receive some or most of their news through the site.<sup>65</sup> As more and more people are using Facebook to access information and news, digital literacy courses on identifying unverified information and altered news sources, as well as basic internet search skills and smart phone usage, can help to mitigate some of these exacerbating factors that social media plays on the proliferation of hate speech and rumors. One study showed that 60% of users reported think that all or most of the content they see on Facebook is true.<sup>66</sup> There are clear opportunities for civil society and the private sector to team up together to teach new users how to navigate the internet, check sources, analyze content, and report inflammatory posts. For instance, MIDO and Telenor, the primary provider of internet services in Myanmar, jointly run digital literacy “light houses” with local entrepreneurs in both rural and urban communities to provide mobile and computer trainings.<sup>67</sup>

Facebook and social media providers also have an opportunity to improve their response and management of hate speech on their sites through timely response and enhanced cultural understanding of derogatory phrases and images. Civil society organizations have stated that posts reported to Facebook as inflammatory took between 6 and 48 hours to be reviewed, and only 20% of reported content was eventually taken down.<sup>68</sup> In conflict scenarios, people are less likely to check posts that they fear might affect their security, thereby increasing the likelihood that they might be persuaded to act on a perceived threat and escalate an already tense situation.<sup>69</sup> This allows ample time for rumors and inflammatory rhetoric to spread extensively online.

## **Ensure crisis response does not preclude the ability to achieve long-term peace objectives**

Without a comprehensive and holistic approach that targets the structural and underlying drivers of violence in Myanmar, the international community risks employing a “whack-a-mole” effort where resources pour in to support one area only to see the problem immediately pop up in another. Despite the especially challenging human rights and security environment, it is critical that the international community create strategies to engage with Myanmar in the short- and long-term that are based on comprehensive and iterative understandings of conflict dynamics. There is extreme risk of doing additional harm to civilians if engagement is not done in an informed and conflict-sensitive manner. As many foreign governments and international bodies reconsider their approaches to human rights, development, and investment in Myanmar, it is a critical opportunity to look at conflict prevention in the short- and long-term.

The international response to the Rakhine crisis highlights the need to navigate a difficult balance between condemning human rights violations in a specific conflict area and seeking to build peace nationwide. In-

65 “Survey of Burma/Myanmar Public Opinion.” Center for Insights in Survey Research, IRI, April, 2017.

66 “Survey of Burma/Myanmar Public Opinion.” Center for Insights in Survey Research, IRI, April, 2017.

67 “Reaching out for Digital Literacy in Myanmar,” Telenor Group, August 2016, <https://www.telenor.com/reaching-out-for-digital-literacy-in-myanmar/>.

68 Interviews with Yangon-based civil society. March 2018.

69 Shiva K Dhungana, “Final Evaluation: Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar.”

ternational media, diplomatic, and advocacy attention on Myanmar in 2017 and 2018 has largely focused on aiding Rohingya refugees and ensuring their safe repatriation from Bangladesh. However, a widening chasm emerged between the West and the Government of Myanmar on the facts and intentions of various actors in the conflict.<sup>70</sup> This disagreement and division has impeded the ability of these international actors to effectively work together to protect civilians around the country. For instance, suspicion of foreign media and international organizations in Myanmar has increased, as these actors are seen as perpetuating fake news on the realities of conflict and tarnishing the reputation of the country and its leaders.<sup>71</sup> The international condemnation and prevalent on-the-ground perception of a “Rohingya threat” has fostered a resurgence of nationalism and support for the Tatmadaw. Many in Myanmar perceive that the Tatmadaw were responding to a real national security threat and were successful in eliminating the threat to the nation.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, some civil society groups in Yangon expressed that the international condemnation of Aung San Suu Kyi in her response to the Rakhine crisis has made her become more isolated in her decision-making.<sup>73</sup> The isolation removes her from the realities and dynamics on the ground, complicates the ability of her government’s ability to deliver on its promises of peace and development around the country, and may lead her to move more closely to foreign institutions that are perceived as non-adversarial to the Government.

As international attention focuses on the Rohingya, there are civilians around the country who face threats to their security.<sup>74</sup> The crisis in Rakhine warrants comprehensive action from the international community that responds to immediate need and places the drivers of this crisis in the context of the wider country. Unequal international investment in certain areas also has the potential to fan the flames, creating new grievances around those who benefit from assistance. **As international actors look to prevent further atrocities in Myanmar, myopic response to crisis in one area of the country risks their ability to transform long-term**

70 On the one side of the narrative, former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has followed the United Nations Human Rights Chief and others in labelling the Tatmadaw’s acts of violence “ethnic cleansing.” The United Nations Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide stated that “all the information I have received indicates that the intent of the perpetrators was to cleanse northern Rakhine state of [Rohingya] existence.” On the other, Myanmar officials have vehemently denied this claim. The Tatmadaw and Government of Myanmar have indicated that military operations in Rakhine have been in “response to a direct terrorist threat to national security and that security forces kept to rules and regulations of engagement and were assisting with food and medical assistance.” Robbie Gramer, “Tillerson Finally Brands Myanmar Crisis ‘Ethnic Cleansing,’” *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 22, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/22/tillerson-finally-brands-myanmar-crisis-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims-war-crimes-genocide-state-department-asia-refugees/>. Note to Correspondents: Statement by Adama Dieng, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, on His Visit to Bangladesh to Assess the Situation of Rohingya Refugees from Myanmar,” United Nations Secretary-General, March 12, 2018, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2018-03-12/note-correspondents-statement-adama-dieng-united-nations>. Hannah Beech and Saw Nang, “Myanmar Rejects U.N. Findings: ‘No Ethnic Cleansing or Genocide in Our Country,’” *New York Times*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/world/asia/un-myanmar-rohingya-genocide.html>. “Tatmadaw Releases Statement on Rakhine Terrorist Attacks,” Myanmar President Office, October 24, 2017, <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-7837>.

71 Interviews with civil society organizations in Yangon. March 2018

72 Interviews with civil society organizations in Yangon. March 2018

73 Interviews with civil society organizations in Yangon. March 2018

74 In one instance, exclusive international focus on the plight of the Rohingya risks alienating and further entrenching ethnic Rakhine feelings of isolation and abandonment from international assistance. Many ethnic Rakhine hold resentment for the lack of opportunities, shared prosperity, and perceived or real persecution from other ethnic groups, the international community, or from the government itself. Historic humanitarian interventions targeted Rohingya civilians living in protected camps in squalid conditions. Ethnic Rakhine feel their economic or social situation is also reprehensible and deserves attention and assistance from the government and the international community. Though international interventions are intentioned to alleviate suffering, interventions that do not consider historical grievances and many divisions between the Rakhine community, Rohingya community, INGOs, and the government risk entrenching feelings of marginalization and triggering violence.

### drivers of conflict.

To holistically address crisis throughout the country, international actors can marry humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts to address the multi-layered dimensions of conflict. When assistance is targeted solely at the latest manifestation of violence, without placing the flare-up into historical context, the support risks reaffirming real or perceived grievances, entrenching feelings of marginalization, and triggering violence within communities. For instance, Rakhine State is one of the poorest areas in the country despite vast natural resources and geo-political importance, where estimates suggest about 44% of the population is living below the poverty line.<sup>75</sup> Many ethnic Rakhine feel that their ethnic identity and way of life is under threat from all directions. Feelings of marginalization and neglect have fostered an aversion to the international community, including groups perceived to be aligned with international interests such as INGOs, among ethnic Rakhine. The influx of humanitarian and media attention on the plight of the Rohingya has intensified feelings of marginalization from the international community among the ethnic Rakhine.<sup>76</sup> As emergency assistance is channeled to address crisis throughout the country, strategies informed by community conflict analyses can help formulate approaches and strategies that do not deepen pre-existing divisions or threaten the international community's ability to achieve some of its long-term human rights, governance, and development objectives.

As international investors, both from the private and public sector, look to engage in Myanmar, they should seek to obtain a balance between investment interests, and human rights and base engagement within historical context and current conflict analyses. Initiatives like the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) provide advice to foreign investors about how to navigate the business and human rights landscapes of Myanmar in consultation with local stakeholders to encourage responsible business conduct.<sup>77</sup> In many of Myanmar's conflict-affected areas, illicit economies prevail, service delivery is insufficient and economic prospects are dim. As emergency assistance and development continues, migration and competition for scarce resources will continue to expose emerging tensions between previously unacquainted groups. Responsible investment will be essential for preventing new grievances around employment and economic improvements.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

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Despite ongoing conflict and significant human rights challenges, there are opportunities for the United States, European governments, the European Union, international organizations, and the media to constructively engage with the government, people, and institutions of Myanmar to protect civilians. Each of these actors must be dually focused to ensure that short-term crisis response does not preclude the ability to achieve long-term objectives of promoting peace and democracy. Many of these recommendations entail both short- and long-term opportunities to promote peace and prevent violence in Myanmar:

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75 "UNICEF Rakhine State Profile," accessed July 5, 2018, [https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/Rakhine\\_State\\_Profile\\_Final.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/Rakhine_State_Profile_Final.pdf).

76 Interviews with civil society, March 2018.

77 "Myanmar Center for Responsible Business," accessed July 5, 2018, <http://www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/pdf/trifold/en.pdf>.

### **Support Myanmar's NCA and peace process.**

- **Continue support to and promote civilian participation in the peace process and communicate results achieved.** Enhance avenues for civilian participation and interaction with the government, including the development of improved communications strategies around the objectives, progress, and outcomes of the peace process. The communication strategy should utilize existing information and communication networks and showcase concrete results achieved back to people of Myanmar in local languages. This should also include opportunities for youth, women, and minorities to participate in key national processes. For national peace agreements to stick, communities must feel invested in the process and ready to accept and implement the results of the agreement in their own communities. Especially in formerly EAO-controlled territories, trust-building is paramount to securing gains made through the NCA and peace process.

### **Promote initiatives to bridge center-periphery dynamics between government and civilians.**

- **Support inclusive and effective service delivery efforts to bridge center-periphery dynamics.** International actors can build infrastructure and capacity within union and local government to enhance service delivery capabilities, thereby bridging divides between the government and the governed. While doing so, it is critical that these actors conduct or are informed by thorough conflict analysis to avoid exacerbating or creating new divisions and grievances. When done well, service delivery has the potential to create common interests, demonstrate commitment to social cohesion, and reduce mistrust.
- **Encourage participation and consultation around any efforts to reform legislation and policies.** Lack of participatory governance has the potential to deepen rifts in an already divided society. Any efforts at institutional reform should be accompanied with larger efforts to authentically engage and empower all groups, shifting attitudes and behaviors at the local level by helping to create a unified vision for the future of Myanmar.

### **Amplify and support non-adversarial voices in government and civil society to dismantle the enabling environment for violence.**

- **Invest in violence prevention, rumor management, conflict de-escalation, and social cohesion training of local leaders and key community influencers and amplify messages of citizen-led peace-building efforts and actors countering divisive rhetoric through popular culture and media programming.** Encourage and support media outlets, local leaders, and civil society groups that amplify non-adversarial stances, avoid stereotyping, eschew false reporting, and promote positive, non-violent messages in Myanmar. Resource media programming that promotes tolerance, diversity, and national unity as core themes and explore opportunities to bring community perspectives into content and discussion.
- **Engage with civilian and military departments of government who are willing to build positive relationships between civilians and government.** Identify possible champions, whether they be individuals or government ministries, that have an interest in better engagement with the people that they serve. Provide skills-building and resources to improve this relationship, bring others on board, and

build a deeper constituency for peace within the government.

- **Create or promote activities that bring diverse groups together in safe environments.** Activities such as sports, art, music, and social services can begin to break down ethnic or religious borders, build relationships, and create shared experiences. Improved representation of different ethnic and religious groups in media to share stories of different experiences across the country can promote understanding of experiences around the country and build sense of belonging and attachment to the country.
- **Encourage social media platforms to increase the number of employees monitoring flagged messages and reports of hate speech to improve response time for taking down dangerous content.** These companies should also ensure that monitoring agents represent the diversity of the country, speak local languages, and are able to understand the context, sensitivities, and diversity of Myanmar culture and apply this understanding to the decision to remove potentially harmful content.
- **Support initiatives to improve digital literacy for people of Myanmar.** Support training for social media users, community leaders, and journalists on skills such as source checking, how to search information on the internet, how to use mobile phone effectively, especially in rural areas of the country. Community-based digital literacy centers can be effective tools to reach remote areas and improve community ability to identify false news stories and decipher sources of hate speech.

#### **Ensure crisis-response does not preclude the ability to achieve long-term peace objectives.**

- **Develop a long-term strategy to shape constructive institutional relationships with the Myanmar Government and Tatmadaw,** to engage actors on all sides of Myanmar's multi-layered conflicts to develop holistic, non-violent solutions to Myanmar's persistent security concerns.
- **Draw on previous experience from engagements with governments emerging from military authoritarianism and operating amid challenging human rights contexts around the world.** Use lessons learned and best practices from history to highlight possible solutions to engage constructively towards improving the protection of human rights and promoting national- and local-level peace. Governments and international bodies should ensure that policy statements and public engagements in or on Myanmar do not reinforce real or perceived grievances.
- **Increase diplomatic engagement with regional actors economically and politically invested in Myanmar,** such as China, India, Bangladesh, and Japan. Regularly engage with the Embassies and Foreign Ministries in Yangon and abroad about violence prevention, conflict response, and development.
- **Fully resource flexible funding, rapid-response mechanisms, and longer-term regional and country-specific funding streams to advance peace and stability in Myanmar.** In the U.S., this includes fully resourcing and mobilizing diplomatic and development resources such as the Human Rights Defenders Fund, the Complex Crises Fund, and the Reconciliation Fund for use in Myanmar. In the EU, this includes fully resourcing the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, among others. The U.S. and EU should also institutionalize upstream conflict management training of foreign

service officers and long-term engagement planning within government agencies to effectively implement atrocity and violence prevention.

- **Develop clear handover strategies from current short-term initiatives to more long-term support to peace and stability.** Short-term programs, such as those implemented by the Office of Transition Initiatives in USAID and other international rapid response efforts, should develop fully articulated learning and programming handover strategies to incorporate data, evaluations, and learning into long-term programming.

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