

PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 15 September 2023

Responses to Humanitarian Needs in Western Myanmar after Cyclone Mocha

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A woman sits in her destroyed house at Basara refugee camp in Sittwe on 16 May 2023, after cyclone Mocha made landfall. (Photo by SAI Aung MAIN/AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Category 5-level Cyclone Mocha made landfall on 14 May 2023 in western Myanmar, killing more than 100 lives, causing significant damage and loss in many townships across Rakhine State, and leaving approximately 1.5 million people in urgent need of humanitarian aid.
- The State Administration Council (SAC) military regime restricted United Nations agencies in Myanmar and other aid organisations access to the cyclone-affected communities in Rakhine State. The United League of Arakan (ULA), the political wing of the Arakan Army (AA), had called on the UN agencies and its partners, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to work with the ULA for cyclone response even before Mocha hit Rakhine.
- The SAC requires UN agencies and INGOs to deliver assistance and supplies through the SAC's cyclone relief centre in Yangon for further distribution by the SAC. The ULA/AA, on the other hand, has opened several cyclone relief centres in at least six townships in Rakhine State, including northern Rakhine, bordering Bangladesh. The ULA/AA proactively evacuated communities in several townships before the cyclone hit, and provided early post-cyclone assistance to communities.
- The ULA has also leveraged its links with the Rakhine diaspora, civil society organisations (CSOs), and its political and military allies to receive aid for cyclone victims.
- The SAC's restrictions on humanitarian aid agencies and actors to access western Myanmar have escalated the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State, even as the SAC publicises its collaboration with neighbours and external partners, and state/region-level authorities in Myanmar for the Cyclone Mocha response. In such a situation, the most practical and direct ways to reach cyclone-affected communities may exist in theory, but not in practice.

INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian impact of Cyclone Mocha, a Category 5 storm that hit Myanmar on 14 May 2023, has added to Myanmar's ongoing humanitarian needs and challenges, including those that arose after the 2021 coup.

In March 2023, the United Nations estimated that 17.6 million people in Myanmar required humanitarian assistance, 1.6 million were internally displaced, and 55,000 civilian buildings had been destroyed since the February 2021 coup.¹ More than two years after the coup, communities are left coping with numerous socio-economic setbacks and concerns for safety. Violence has escalated but neither the regime forces nor resistance groups seem to be fully in control.²

Rakhine State in western Myanmar, however, had seemed relatively stable. The SAC and the Arakan Army (AA) agreed on a humanitarian ceasefire in November 2022.³ This was the second truce, as the AA and the Myanmar military had agreed to an informal truce in November 2020 after being at war since late 2018.⁴ After the 2021 coup, the Myanmar military removed the AA from the list of terrorist organisations, and the AA began expanding its administration and judiciary role in Rakhine.⁵

Established in 2009, the AA is a relative latecomer to the ethnic armed organisations or EAOs in Myanmar but is considered one of the country's most powerful ethnic armed groups.⁶ The AA has established nine military bases across Rakhine State, and its political/administrative wing, the United Arakan League (ULA), exercises the AA's judiciary and administrative reach. The AA's role and reach were tested with Cyclone Mocha. Approximately 1.5 million people in Rakhine are believed to have been affected by the storm and more than 400,000 buildings, including hospitals, schools and IDP camps were partially or completely damaged, and 65 to 90 per cent of townships in northern Rakhine State, such as Sittwe, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U and Pauktaw townships were destroyed by Mocha.⁷

Before Mocha made landfall, however, the ULA had been taking the lead role in evacuating communities from areas in the cyclone path, and putting into place emergency rescue and rehabilitation activities in many townships.⁸ In contrast, the SAC controlled the final agreement or approval of travel authorisations for UN agencies and partner organisations, and international NGOs to access cyclone-affected areas.⁹ This paper compares the different responses of the SAC and the AA/ULA to the devastation wreaked by Cyclone Mocha, to describe how the SAC's restrictive measures had escalated humanitarian needs.

PREPARATION FOR RESPONSE TO CYCLONE MOCHA IN WESTERN MYANMAR

Cyclone Mocha made landfall at lunch time between western Myanmar's Sittwe and Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar on 14 May 2023 (Fig.1). Hours before its predicted landfall, it intensified into a category 5 storm.¹⁰ The winds were estimated to be as high as 250 km/h, carrying it up to 195 miles per hour. Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, suffered extensive damage to houses and infrastructure, including telecommunications towers and power lines.¹¹

The last memory of a devastating cyclone was of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, which took almost 140,000 lives and affected millions in the Ayeyawady delta.¹² Even so, people in western Myanmar did not heed early warnings of Cyclone Mocha's impending landfall. Communities in Rakhine State had not been affected as much by the Nargis aftermath. They were complacent, as coastal communities usually experience storms and floods when monsoon rains start in Myanmar around end-April/early-May each year. There was also an element of distrust in the SAC regime announcements. However, people started paying attention when, on 7 May 2023, the ULA/AA's Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO) issued public early warning announcements.¹³ The HDCO also released a series of "dos and don'ts" regarding cyclone preparedness and a slogan "listen, be alert and prepare" in both Rakhine and Myanmar languages in its Telegram channel.¹⁴

Figure 1. Cyclone Mocha Observation Points



Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), Dedicated page and resources for Cyclone Mocha, 14 May 2023. (<https://themimu.info/news/dedicated-page-and-resources-cyclone-mocha?fbclid=IwAR1fVHaqia24hltvPIDVD6OY3510oqplTcqY4FJ3yukkur8m3lKNpVo5ZSY>)

On 9 May, the ULA/AA evacuated people from Myebon, Pauktaw and Ponnagyun townships, areas under its control and in the cyclone’s potential path.¹⁵ On the same day, the ULA/AA began distributing cyclone awareness posters, and “dos and don’ts” pamphlets. From 9 to 13 May, the ULA/AA reportedly evacuated more than 102,000 people including Rohingya and other minorities from Myebon, Pauktaw, Minbya, Taungok, Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Rathedaung, and Mrauk-U townships.¹⁶

The SAC's cyclone-preparedness moves in Rakhine State took a different approach. On 9 May, SAC troops reportedly destroyed the ULA/AA's cyclone awareness posters in Kyauk-phyu township.¹⁷ On 12 May, the SAC designated seven townships – Sittwe, Pauktaw, Maungdaw, Rathedaung, Myebon, Kyaukphyu and Manaung – as “red-level” areas at high risk of disaster from the cyclone, and reminded communities that people who remained in the red alert areas would face prosecution under the Natural Disaster Management Law.¹⁸

Local SAC officials in Rakhine State performed a series of preventative rituals to divert the cyclone from the Rakhine coastline. Three Buddhist monks, including the Shwezaydi Sayadaw (head of the famous Shwezaydi Monastery in Sittwe), and Rakhine State SAC officials, performed a ceremony on Sittwe Beach to change the storm route.¹⁹ In Ayeyarwady region, chief minister U Tin Maung Win and the head of the Southwestern Command Brigadier-General Kyi Khaing led a dragon-feeding rite to divert the cyclone.²⁰

Human rights activists and Rakhine netizens have criticised the SAC's lack of pre-cyclone preparations for many communities in Rakhine, including displaced Rohingya in SAC-controlled areas such as Basara, Dar Pai, Thè Chaung, and Thet Kae Pyin in western Sittwe township. UN agencies and INGOs did not escape public criticism either. Despite these criticisms, there were some efforts made to prepare for Mocha's impact on communities in Myanmar. The ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) issued a briefing on 12 May that it was coordinating with SAC officials to deliver essential supplies from ASEAN.²¹ Likewise, the World Food Programme (WFP) stated on 13 May that they had prepared food for over 400,000 people in cyclone response.²²

COMPARING RESPONSES

The SAC, the ULA/AA and the NUG have separately released differing tallies of casualties and damages. On 17 May, the NUG stated that Cyclone Mocha killed 455 individuals in Myanmar, with 431 fatalities being in Rakhine State alone.²³ On 20 May, the SAC released a much lower death toll, stating that at least 145 people lost their lives in the cyclone,²⁴ while the ULA's HDCO claimed 164 dead²⁵ on 14 June (Table 1). On 14 May, a day after Cyclone Mocha made landfall, local news agencies had reported 400 deaths and hundreds missing in the Rohingya IDP camps in Sittwe.²⁶

Table 1. Different data on of fatalities and damages caused by Cyclone Mocha

No.	Categories	SAC Number	NUG Number	ULA Number
1.	Death of People	145	413	164
2.	Houses	183,024	-	288,320
3.	Religious building	1,711	-	1906
4.	School	1,397	-	2,142
5.	Hospital and Clinics	227	-	194

The ULA’s HDCO reported on 14 June that there were at least 2,068 villages damaged, and 288,320 houses destroyed by Mocha. Seven townships in northern Rakhine bore the brunt of the cyclone (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Extent and Percentage of Damage in Cyclone-affected Townships in Rakhine

No.	Township	Type of Damage	Percentage of Damage
1.	Sittwe	[Red]	60% - 95%
2.	Rathidaung		
3.	Buthidaung		
4.	Pauktaw		
5.	Pannagyun		
6.	Kyauktaw		
7.	Mrauk-U		
8.	Minbya	[Yellow]	30% - 60%
9.	Maybone		
10.	Kyauk-phyu		
11.	Manaung	[Green]	<30%
12.	Taungok		
13.	Ranbree		
14.	Ann		
15.	Gwa		
16.	Thandaw		
17.	Maungdaw		

Source: ULA-HDCO report, 14 June 2023.²⁷

The ULA/AA troops were the first responders on the ground in western Myanmar after Mocha hit Rakhine on 14 May. Starting on the morning of 15 May, ULA/AA soldiers were seen in many townships of northern Rakhine, cleaning roads, helping residents, and removing fallen trees and debris. On the same day, the ULA/AA appealed to the international community, ASEAN countries, and other international actors to urgently assist with shelter, food, medicine, and other basic needs for the affected communities.²⁸ The ULA's HDCO also urged civil society organisations, UN agencies, and INGOs to work with the ULA/AA in responding to the humanitarian needs arising from Cyclone Mocha.²⁹

Several local CSOs also pitched in. The All-Arakan Youth Organization Network (AAYON), Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Tam (AHCD), and Arakan CSOs Network and Arakan Responders for Emergency launched fundraising campaigns for emergency assistance. Local CSOs were also among first responders, travelling to affected areas and assisting survivors there, in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone.

On 16 May, AA leader Major-General Twan Mrat Naing appealed to civil society organisations and INGOs for shelter, drinking water, food, and medicine assistance for storm-hit communities.³⁰ On 17 May, the ULA announced the formation of a seven-member 'Cyclone Mocha Emergency Response and Rescue Committee for Arakan' (ERRCA), chaired by AA deputy commander Dr Nyo Twan Awng.³¹ The ERRCA has opened a series of relief and rehabilitation centers in Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Pannagyun, Kyauktaw, and Mrauk-U townships, and is also working with the Rakhine diaspora and local civil society organisations.³²

The ULA/AA also received support from its political and military alliances. On 17 May, the ULA-ERRCA announced receiving donations from the National Unity Government (NUG), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The KIO donated MMK300 million, while the NUG and the MNDAA donated MMK100 million each.³³ Likewise, the FPNCC and UWSA contributed MMK500 million each for storm victims in Rakhine³⁴ while PSC/NDAA, PSLF/TNLA, SSPP/SSA donated MMK200 million, MMK100 million, and MMK50 million respectively. In total, the ULA has received MMK1.85 billion in donation from its military and political allies. However, there are no reports of UN agencies and international organisations openly working with the ULA/AA in Rakhine.

The SAC has sited its aid-coordinating centre for Rakhine's cyclone victims in Yangon. Since 14 May, the SAC has restricted access to the cyclone-affected areas.³⁵ On 15 May, the SAC declared all townships in Rakhine State as Disaster Affected Areas³⁶ but did not grant authorisation for UN agencies and INGOs to travel to cyclone-affected areas.³⁷ Also on 15 May, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Sittwe and presented MMK7 billion as assistance for Rakhine State.³⁸ Two days after his visit, the SAC announced the assignment of 18 higher ranking-military officers to townships in Rakhine State to carry out relief and rehabilitation activities.³⁹

Through May and up to mid-June, however, the UN and partner agencies were still waiting for the SAC's approval for delivering humanitarian aid to Rakhine, despite "high-level

engagements” with authorities at both Naypyitaw and regional levels.⁴⁰ On 8 June, the SAC suspended transportation for aid groups operating in Rakhine State, effectively reversing the authorisation order given by local SAC authorities.⁴¹ The SAC’s letter to aid organisations required the UN agencies and INGOs to channel relief supplies through Yangon, which the SAC would further distribute to the “concerned state” and then inform the organisations after delivery.⁴² On 11 June, however, the Rakhine State Minister for Security Affairs reportedly issued a notification allowing “some selected NGOs” to resume operations in Rakhine State.⁴³ Table 2 summarises and compares the different responses by the SAC, the ULA/AA and members of the international community including the UN and ASEAN.

Table 2. SAC, ULA and the international community’s responses

Date	SAC	ULA/AA	International Community (including ASEAN, UN, INGOs)
May 15	SAC declared Disaster Affected Areas of all Rakhine State’s townships. SAC denied the INGO and UN agencies access to cyclone affected areas.	ULA issued a statement asking for international aid for cyclone-hit people in Rakhine State. ULA/AA uniformed soldiers are seen helping people, removing the destruction of trees, and cleaning the roads.	
16 May	SAC leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, along with some of his ministers, visited Sittwe carrying some humanitarian assistance on his flight.	Maj. Gen Twan Mrat Naing, commander in chief of Arakan Army, spoke via a short-video seeking support from civil society organisations and international NGOs to provide shelter, drinking water, food, and medicine to storm-hit communities, in cooperation with the ULA-Arakan People Government (APG).	ASEAN AHA Center reported aid would be delivered once approved by SAC. ⁴⁴ The UN refugee agency country director for Myanmar, Noriko Takagi presented her credentials to SAC foreign minister Than Swe in Naypyidaw and then met with Ko Ko Hlaing, the international cooperation minister. ⁴⁵
17 May		The ULA formed a new committee called ‘Cyclone Mocha Emergency Response and Rescue Committee for Arakan’ (ERRC).	

Date	SAC	ULA/AA	International Community (including ASEAN, UN, INGOs)
18 May	SAC released a statement mentioning the assignment of 18 military officers to respective townships to carry out rehabilitation activities.	The AA thanked the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) for their donations. The KIO donated 300 million kyats, while the NUG and MNDAA donated MMK100 million each.	The country director of the UN's World Food Programme met with SAC foreign ministry in Naypyitaw on 18 May, to discuss cooperation in the delivery of aid to those impacted by the cyclone, ⁴⁶ but the WFP is still not allowed to go into the cyclone-affected areas.
19 May		PSLP/TNLA donates k500 million to ULA-ERRCA. ULA-ERRCA opens two Cyclone aid-Center in Minbya township.	The Indian government announces the donation of 25 tons of food with medicines to cyclone-affected Myanmar. three navy ships brought the assistance to Yangon port. ⁴⁷ The UK Embassy in Myanmar announces that the UK would provide around £2 million for the cyclone-affected communities, especially clean water and shelter up to around 175,000 people. ⁴⁸
May 21		ULA-ERRCA opens two cyclone aid centres in Buthidaung township, and four cyclone aid centres in Mrauk-U township.	
May 22		SSPP/SSA donates K1000 million to ULA-ERRCA. ULA-ERRCA opens two cyclone aid centres in Pannagyun township.	The AHA Center announced ASEAN's donation of about USD 60,000 worth of humanitarian aid. ⁴⁹

Date	SAC	ULA/AA	International Community (including ASEAN, UN, INGOs)
23 May	SAC forces arrest Rakhine writer and social worker Wai Hin Aung, his daughter, and some youths, in Sittwe township, who were attempting to deliver relief supplies to cyclone-affected families. ⁵⁰	ULA-ERRCA opens five cyclone aid centres in Rathedaung Townships.	The head of UNOCHA requests USD333 million to assist 1.6 million of the most vulnerable people, many of whom lost their homes as the cyclone hit Rakhine State.
24 May		PSC/NDAA donates MMK2,000 million to ULA-ERRCA.	UN Human Rights Commissioner Volker Turk calls for the SAC to allow assessments, and life-saving aid to cyclone-affected areas. The US announces it will provide an additional \$17 million to restore damages caused by the cyclone. ⁵¹
8 June	Naypyitaw reportedly bans local and international NGOs' access to Rakhine, reversing an earlier approval granted by Rakhine State officials. ⁵²	ULA- ERRCA announces that the FPNCC and UWSA contributed K500 million each for storm victims in Rakhine State.	
15 June			OCHA updates that “The approval of the distribution and transportation plans for the Cyclone Mocha response in Rakhine and Chin remains pending.” ⁵³

CONCLUSION

The SAC's reluctance to allow humanitarian agencies and actors access to Rakhine State amidst its uneasy truce with AA has only added to the acute needs of cyclone-hit communities. Following the SAC's ban on aid agencies' travel plans to Rakhine, AA leader Twan Mrat Naing tweeted that the ULA/AA would use diplomatic means rather than force to solve the problem.⁵⁴ The ULA/AA seems to be focusing now on cyclone relief and recovery rather than opening a new war front in Rakhine.

The SAC's travel ban on the UN and international aid organizations suggests reluctance to allow any opportunity for these entities to work with the ULA/AA on cyclone response. The SAC's reach in Rakhine State cannot match that of the ULA/AA. SAC troop presence was visible mostly in Rakhine State's capital Sittwe, in cleaning debris after the cyclone, while ULA/AA troops could reach many other parts of Rakhine. The ULA/AA has also opened humanitarian centres in five townships in the state.

The SAC has also sought to use the humanitarian response for Cyclone Mocha as a political tool of sorts in its engagement with UN agencies, INGOs and ASEAN, as well as with neighbours such as China, Thailand, and India. For example, the SAC allowed the AHA Center to conduct emergency response and assessments in Rakhine State prior to Mocha's landfall, and the AHA Center has also coordinated with various officials in Myanmar and ASEAN member states to transport essential supplies to Myanmar from ASEAN and to work with relevant departmental officials in Myanmar on cyclone information.⁵⁵ India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar tweeted the donation of emergency food items, tents, essential medicines, water pumps, portable generators, and clothes to cyclone-affected Myanmar on May 18.⁵⁶ Three ships from the Indian Navy transferred these supplies to Yangon port though Sittwe was geographically closer.⁵⁷ Thailand has delivered humanitarian assistance to Myanmar through SAC-facilitated channels, on 23 May, 1 June and 12 July.⁵⁸

The post-Mocha situation in Rakhine State requires aid agencies to consider alternative means and arrangements to reach the cyclone-affected communities in remote or conflict-prone areas. A constructive and pragmatic approach would necessitate balancing between adherence to the current requirements of sending assistance through the SAC, and identifying local partners and networks who can provide a more effective and timely response to communities in need. The ULA/AA response has shown its capacity and the trust that it enjoys on the ground in Rakhine State, while the SAC's response has shown up the gaps in trust and the Myanmar military's overwhelming need to maintain control. This has further compounded the needs arising from the natural disaster, adding to the other consequences the 2021 military coup.

ENDNOTES

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country. In early February 2023, State Administration Council (SAC) chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing also stated that at least 132 out of 330 townships are not under the military’s control. See “Myanmar, two years after the coup: Entrenching the Quagmire,” Institute of Strategy and Policy

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