

New Crisis Brewing in Burma's Rakhine State?

February 15, 2019 (IN11046)

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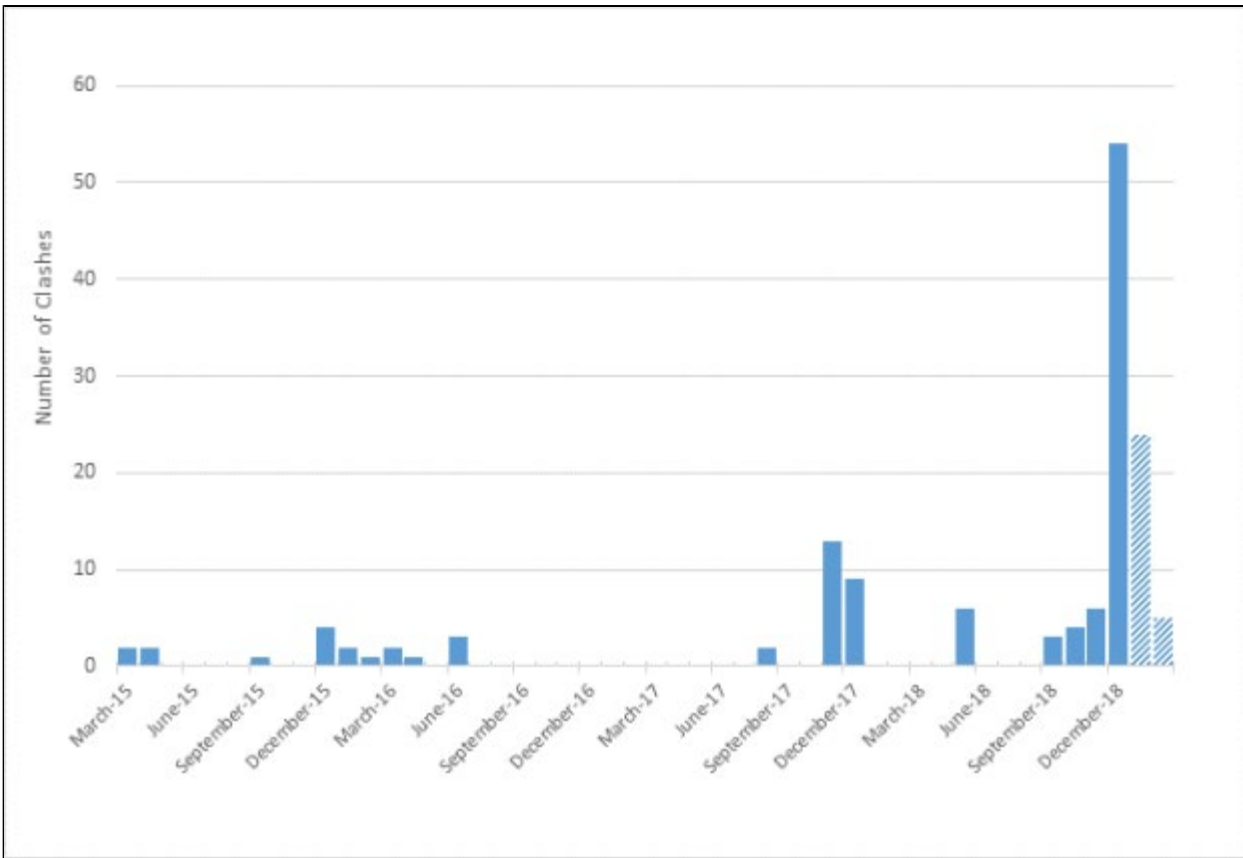
[Approximately 250 Chin and Rakhine refugees](#) entered into Bangladesh's Bandarban district in the first week of February, trying to escape the fighting between Burma's military, or Tatmadaw, and one of Burma's newest ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the Arakan Army (AA). Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Abdul Momen summoned Burma's ambassador Lwin Oo to protest the arrival of the Rakhine refugees and the military clampdown in Rakhine State. Bangladesh has reportedly closed its border to Rakhine State.

U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar [Yanghee Lee released a press statement](#) on January 18, 2019, indicating that heavy fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw had displaced at least 5,000 people. She also called on the Rakhine State government to reinstate the access for international humanitarian organizations.

The Conflict Between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw

[The AA was formed in Kachin State in 2009](#), with the support of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). In 2015, the AA moved some of its soldiers from Kachin State to southwestern Chin State, and began [attacking Tatmadaw security bases in Chin State and northern Rakhine State](#) (see [Figure 1](#)). In late 2017, the AA shifted more of its operations into northeastern Rakhine State. According to some estimates, the AA has [approximately 3,000 soldiers](#) based in Chin and Rakhine States.

Figure 1. Reported Clashes between Arakan Army and Tatmadaw



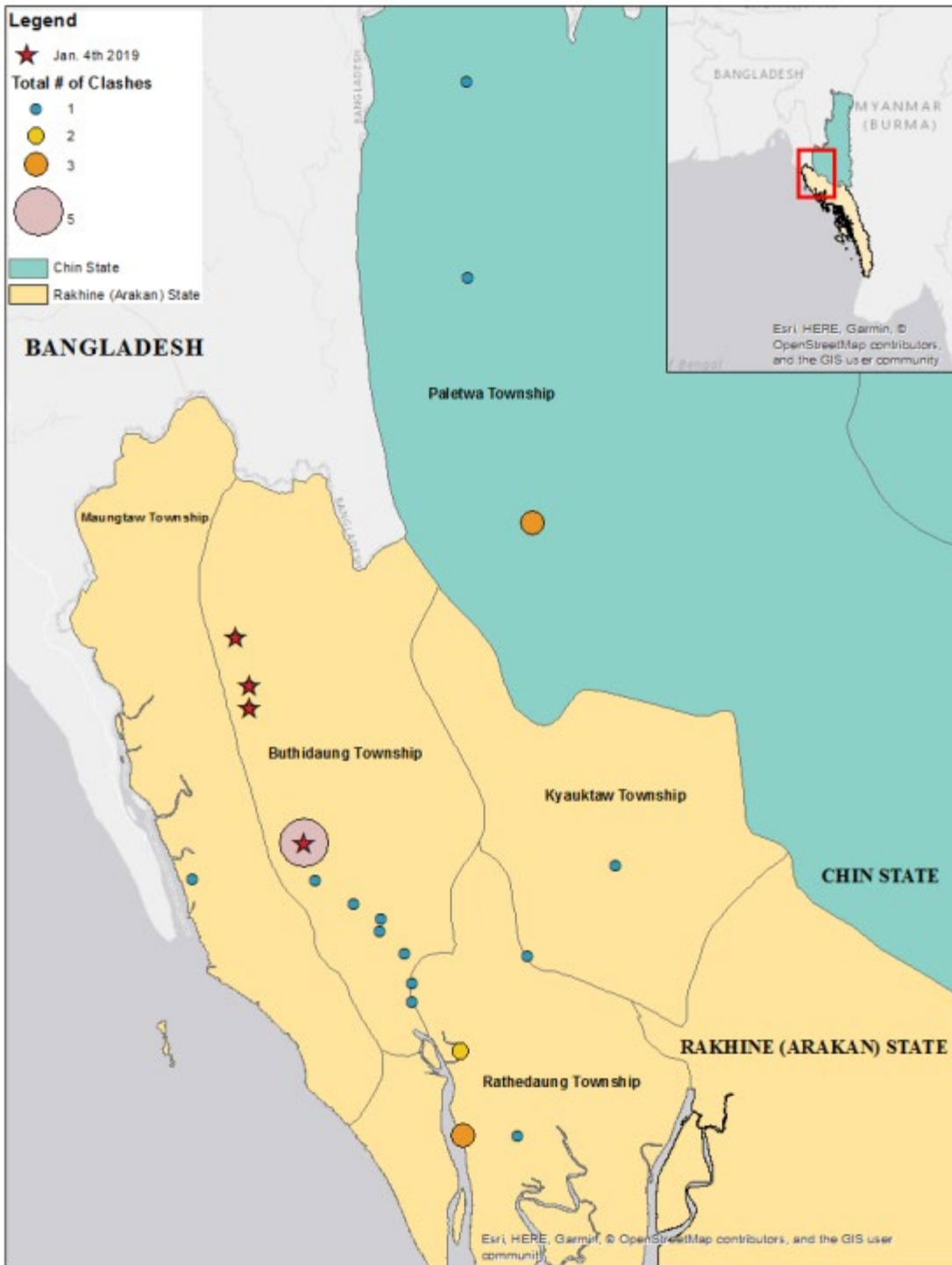
Source: CRS, utilizing data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).

Notes: January and February 2019 (shaded bars) are preliminary figures.

On January 4, 2019—Burma's Independence Day—[an estimated 300 AA soldiers attacked four border posts](#) in Rakhine's Buthidaung Township, killing at least 13 Board Guard Police officers (see [Figure 2](#)). On January 7, 2019, President Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, and Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing agreed to categorize the AA as a "terrorist organization," and [approved clearance operations](#) to "crush the terrorists." The [Tatmadaw also warned journalists](#) not to refer to the conflict in Burma as a "civil war."

Figure 2. Location of Arakan Army-Tatmadaw Fighting

Since January 4, 2019



Source: CRS, utilizing data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).

Since the approval of the "clearance operations," fighting has spread to several townships, resulting in the [displacement of approximately 7,000 Rakhine villagers](#). Some of the displaced Rakhine report that the Tatmadaw shelled their villages, causing civilian casualties; others recount stories of [Tatmadaw soldiers looting and burning down villages](#). [Previous allegations](#) had been made that Tatmadaw soldiers were using Rakhine villagers as "human shields" on the battlefield. The United Nations, the Red Cross, and humanitarian organizations have stated that the [Tatmadaw is blocking the shipment of humanitarian assistance](#) into northern Rakhine State.

The Arakan Army's Cause

The AA, and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), advocate "the Way of Rakhita," a form of Rakhine nationalism that recalls centuries of Arakan independence before their defeat by the Bamar kingdom in 1784. According to the AA, Bamar oppression has made Rakhine one of Burma's poorest states despite its abundant natural resources. AA leader, Major General Tun Myat Naing, says the AA and ULA support the transformation of Burma into a ["confederation of states"](#) in which the ethnic states have a high degree of autonomy with a common defense system.

The AA has also distinguished itself by both its cooperation with other EAOs (such as the KIA) and its reassurances to Rohingya still living in Rakhine State, including support for granting Rohingya citizenship. General Tun Myat Naing has repeatedly denied [Tatmadaw allegations](#) that the AA is involved in illegal drug smuggling or has ties with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, [the EAO that attacked 30 border posts in August 2017](#) to which the Tatmadaw responded with "clearance operations" that resulted in a reported over 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh.

Popular Support for the Arakan Army

Many younger Rakhine reportedly support the AA, which has helped recruit new soldiers. The [AA has also benefitted from Rakhine resentment of the Bamar](#), Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Tatmadaw.

Many Rakhine oppose the Tatmadaw for its history of mistreating Rakhine and/or for its failure to prevent the illegal influx of "Bengalis" (Rohingya) into Rakhine State. Following the 2015 elections in which the Arakan National Party (ANP) won a majority of the seats in the Rakhine State parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi appointed a member of her own political party to be [Chief Minister of Rakhine State](#), despite ANP calls for one of its leaders to be selected. In addition, General Min Aung Hlaing's decision in December 2018 not to include Rakhine State in a [four-month unilateral ceasefire](#) was viewed by some Rakhine as an attempt to block AA participation in the peace process and sow discord among the various EAOs.

Implications for Congress

At this stage, it is uncertain if the exodus of Rakhine will expand or how long the fighting will continue. Escalating fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw has several implications, including:

- *Further reducing already minimal chances for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya to Rakhine State.* As the continued fighting in the homeland threatens resident and returning civilians, the United States and other nations will be asked by Bangladesh to continue to provide assistance to support the estimated 1 million Rohingya in Bangladesh at a cost of about \$1 billion per year.
- *Creating a need for humanitarian assistance to the Rakhine refugees and displaced.* While the Rakhine refugees are currently relatively few, the international community, including the United States, will be asked to provide humanitarian assistance for the displaced Rakhine in Bangladesh and in Rakhine State.
- *Hindering ceasefire and peace negotiations.* Given the AA's alliance with the KIA and other EAOs, the continued fighting in Rakhine State may undermine efforts to negotiate a ceasefire in Kachin and Shan States. U.S. efforts to support Burma's transition to a democratic government that respects the human rights of all its citizens will continue to face serious challenges.