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The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee and the Norwegian Refugee Council, which contributes to the development of solutions for displacement-affected populations in the region.

Drawing upon its members operational presence throughout Asia, and its advocacy networks in Europe and North America, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives to achieve improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities. As implementing agencies, ADSP members work closely with displaced populations and the communities that host them, and are therefore able to contribute to a distinctive, field-led, perspective to policy and advocacy processes.

By coming together under the aegis of the ADSP, the three member agencies – global leaders in innovative policy and programming – commit to collaboration in order to achieve improved outcomes for displacement affected communities in the region.

## Briefing Note: Humanitarian priorities in post-coup Myanmar

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, deposed Myanmar's elected government. Alleging widespread fraud in the November 2020 elections, which the Tatmadaw's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party lost to the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD), Tatmadaw leaders announced a one-year state of emergency. Anti-coup protests and an organised Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) began the following day, spreading across the country in general strikes, public marches, online campaigns and nightly 'pot-banging'.

As dissent has grown, the Tatmadaw, police and affiliated armed groups have escalated attacks on protestors, strikers, NLD officials, civil society leaders, journalists and other civilians. As of 19 June, 870 people are estimated to have been killed, and 5,000 are estimated to be in detention. Myanmar's de facto authorities have restricted freedom of movement; blocked popular social media platforms; and limited mobile data, satellite and broadband internet connections. Condemnation of the coup and violence against civilians has been widespread. A growing number of countries have suspended aid to the de facto authorities or imposed targeted sanctions on Tatmadaw leaders, their family members and companies connected to the military.

Myanmar's economy is failing, and public services are in collapse. Tens of thousands have been displaced as ethnic armed organisations (EAOs)—many of which had been party to a ceasefire agreement prior to the coup—resume fighting the Tatmadaw. Humanitarian actors expect conditions to further deteriorate, threatening additional displacement, deepening economic and food insecurity, and causing widespread shortages of health care and other essential services.

This Briefing Note highlights three key priorities for responding to Myanmar's worsening humanitarian situation: (1) scaling up support to meet to the needs of internally displaced and refugee populations; (2) removing or circumventing barriers to humanitarian access and services and (3) redirecting development assistance to support humanitarian activities while monitoring the humanitarian impacts of international sanctions.

### 1. Supporting internally displaced and refugee populations

Conflict and instability brought about by the coup have displaced entire communities, forcing tens of thousands to shelter in areas adjacent to fighting. Prior to the coup, there were more than 336,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Myanmar (UNOCHA, 27 January 2021). Since February, approximately 200,000 additional people have been uprooted by clashes between EAOs and the Tatmadaw (UNHCR-RBAP, 15 June 2021).

In the north-east, the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) has fought Tatmadaw soldiers in Kachin and Shan states, displacing an estimated 10,000 people since March (UNOCHA, 27 May 2021). Shan EAOs too have resumed fighting the Tatmadaw—and each other—forcing thousands to flee; around 8,400 remained displaced at the end of May. In the south-east, Karen National Union (KNU) fighters have attacked military installations, and Tatmadaw units have bombarded KNU positions. A top KNU official estimates that there were as many as 250 clashes between February and May. At least 100,000 people have been displaced in Kayah State (UNHCR-RBAP, 3 June 2021).

Myanmar's IDPs were underserved prior to the coup, and humanitarian assistance has not kept pace as the needs of existing and newly displaced IDPs have deepened. This is in part because much humanitarian programming in the country prior to the coup was designed to promote long-term solutions for displaced communities, not to respond to sudden, large scale movements of people.

Hostilities between EAOs and the Tatmadaw have likewise compelled civilians to seek safety in neighbouring countries. On 27 and 28 March, the Tatmadaw bombed KNU strongholds, sending 10,000 Karen villagers fleeing to the Myanmar-Thai border. UNHCR estimates that 2,800 people crossed into Thailand (UNHCR, 1 May 2021). On 27 April, nearly 2,300 people entered the Thai border province of Mae Hong Son and were moved to quarantine areas. On 13 May, 1,700 new arrivals were reported in Mae Hong Son, though the majority soon returned to Myanmar (UNHCR-RBAP, 3 June 2021). As of late May, more than 7,000 Myanmar nationals had sought temporary protection in Thailand since March (UNOCHA, 27 May 2021). UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have not been granted formal access to reception sites set up by Thai authorities to host newly arrived refugees.

On Myanmar's north-western border, an estimated 15,000 people have crossed into the Indian border states of Manipur and Mizoram (UNHCR-RBAP, 15 June 2021).). Despite instructions from India's central government to bar refugees from Myanmar, local officials and civil society groups in Mizoram have provided humanitarian assistance to arrivals. Authorities in Manipur initially sought to deny entry to refugees but have backtracked.

Fighting between EAOs and the Tatmadaw is growing in frequency and intensity. In the past five weeks, the number of people displaced since the coup has more than doubled, and humanitarian actors anticipate tens of thousands of additional people could be internally and externally displaced by the end of 2021.

### Recommendations:

- To meet new levels of internal displacement in Myanmar, UN humanitarian agencies—with the support of donors—should develop a new, country-wide and comprehensive Humanitarian Response Plan.
- Regional governments should offer refuge and protection to all civilians from Myanmar seeking safety, as well as access to asylum procedures and humanitarian services. The international community should support host governments and humanitarian actors to meet the protection and humanitarian needs of refugees, offering flexible financing and technical expertise.

## 2. Removing or circumventing barriers to humanitarian access and services

OCHA estimates that before the coup, around one million people in Myanmar needed humanitarian assistance because of conflict or natural disaster (UNOCHA, 25 February 2021). The country—particularly its marginalised ethnic communities—was hard hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, experiencing significant reductions in average income and access to services (World Bank, 15 December 2020). The coup and accompanying instability have made matters worse. Experts estimate that the country's economy will contract by as much as 20% in fiscal year 2020-2021. A recent UNDP study warns that the combined effects of COVID-19 and the coup could push an additional 12 million people below the national poverty line, nearly doubling the country's impoverished population and resulting in poverty levels not seen in Myanmar since 2005 (UNDP, 30 April 2021).

Public services, already limited in some areas, are now collapsing across the country. Access to health care, for example, has dramatically decreased because of general strikes and violence against health sector workers. Soldiers have occupied more than 50 health facilities and attacked emergency responders who assist protestors; health care professionals alleged to have participated in or supported the Civil Disobedience Movement face increased risk of arrest and prosecution. By some accounts, Myanmar's health system is at breaking point. COVID-19 screening and care have all but halted, and emergency medicine, treatment for manageable diseases and reproductive health services have been slashed.

As humanitarian needs increase and public services shrink, new barriers have constrained humanitarian organisations. Restrictions on movement and communications have slowed or blocked humanitarian access to affected communities, particularly in areas controlled or contested by EAOs. Aid organisations, for example, have struggled to reach or communicate with more than 10,000 people recently displaced by fighting in Mindat, Chin State.

Disruptions in banking have also delayed or halted humanitarian assistance. Access to cash has decreased as centralised funding systems have frozen, bank withdrawals have been limited, and money transfers into Myanmar have been blocked or subjected to additional scrutiny. Local humanitarian groups have been especially impacted, struggling to pay for their programs and to distribute cash aid on which hundreds of thousands of IDPs and others rely. In Northern Shan State, several organisations have stopped distributing multi-purpose cash assistance to newly displaced persons, and in IDP camps in Rakhine State, humanitarian groups have had to cut monthly cash assistance to IDPs and delay payments to local providers for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. Continued paralysis of Myanmar's banking system could further disrupt supply chains and cutback humanitarian assistance as prices rise and cash on hand is spent.

The de facto authorities are broadly distrustful of civil society, and local humanitarian organisations are at growing risk of being shut down or attacked. International humanitarian organisations are similarly under suspicion for connections to Western governments critical of the coup and the violent crackdown that has followed. In March for example, the de facto authorities ordered banks serving four international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to audit accounts belonging to those organisations. Humanitarian INGOs fear the Tatmadaw may target their staff members or further curtail their activities.

## Recommendations:

- The international community and ASEAN member states should increase pressure on Myanmar's de facto authorities to ease travel restrictions for humanitarian actors, enable communications with displaced and conflict-affected communities, and cease targeting of humanitarian organisations and their staff members.
- ASEAN member states should follow through on their commitment to provide humanitarian assistance inside Myanmar through ASEAN's AHA Centre. Resources deployed by the AHA Centre to aid IDPs and other affected populations should support the programming of UN humanitarian agencies and local and international non-governmental organisations already providing humanitarian assistance within Myanmar.
- Donors should cooperate with humanitarian actors inside Myanmar to mitigate or circumvent the impacts of banking disruptions, identify reliable pathways for transferring funds into the country, and otherwise ensure financing is available to support communities in need.

## 3. Redirecting development assistance to support humanitarian activities; monitoring humanitarian impacts of international sanctions

Since February, donors have cut or pledged to redirect development assistance intended for Myanmar's government. In mid-February, the US Agency for International Development diverted 42.4 million USD from programs that would have involved the new Tatmadaw government. Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the UK have similarly suspended development aid that would directly or indirectly benefit Myanmar's de facto authorities. And the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have frozen funding to Myanmar earmarked for public-sector projects.

Several countries have also imposed sanctions on Tatmadaw leaders, their family members, select Tatmadaw units and Tatmadaw-linked companies, including conglomerates Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). Though sanctions have been targeted to limit collateral damage to Myanmar's population, including exemptions for non-governmental organisations, there is uncertainty about whether even targeted sanctions could have broad impacts on Myanmar's economy. MEHL and MEC reportedly control at least 120 subsidiary companies across key economic sectors, including banking, tourism, mining, construction and energy production. A decline in their fortunes is likely to contribute to further loss of livelihoods, placing greater numbers of people at risk of poverty.

## Recommendations:

- Donors should fulfil commitments to redirect development assistance intended for Myanmar's government to humanitarian activities, consulting with affected communities and international and local humanitarian organisations to identify key funding priorities.
- Sanctioning countries should closely coordinate with UN agencies and international and local humanitarian organisations to monitor for unintended impacts of sanctions, particularly on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

## Conclusion:

Humanitarian conditions in Myanmar will continue to worsen as violence and instability spread in the wake of the coup. Additional resources and close coordination will be required to meet the needs of affected populations. UN humanitarian agencies—in collaboration with local and international NGO partners—must reorient response planning to address rapidly growing displacement and widespread collapse of public services. The international community and ASEAN member states should adequately resource a new response plan, particularly with financing that can be flexibly used to respond to emerging crises and should step-up pressure on Myanmar’s de facto authorities to remove barriers to the delivery of humanitarian services. Countries that have imposed sanctions in response to the coup must similarly ensure that sanctions do not inadvertently undermine the humanitarian response. Beyond Myanmar’s borders, coordination will also be necessary to protect and meet the basic needs of refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries. Regional governments must grant safe haven to civilians displaced by fighting, and share responsibility with the international community and humanitarian actors to provide refugees with essential services.