

**Burma Democratic Futures Working Group (BDFWG)  
University of Virginia**

**May 2023 Report: Myanmar**

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## **Overview**

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May 2023, China's new foreign minister Qin Gang visited Myanmar for the first time. The Karen National Union (KNU) held a conference. ASEAN held a summit to discuss Myanmar issues. The Kachin Liberation Organization (KIO) and the Palaung Liberation Front met to discuss re-establishing relations.

Conflicts between the Military Council and the People's Defense Forces continue to escalate. Military conflicts and human rights violations occurred most frequently in the Sagaing region, Chin State, Karen State, Kachin State and Kayah State. In one incident, 20 villagers were tortured and killed by military soldiers in Nyaung Pin Tha village, Nyaung Lay Pin township, Bago region.

## **New Chinese Foreign Minister visits Nay Pyi Taw**

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Since the beginning of 2023, China has been steadily improving its relationship with Myanmar. Deng Xijun, the special envoy for Myanmar, made many trips to Myanmar to meet with military officials. The Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar met with the Union Solidarity and Development Party and the Electoral Commission. The Director General of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC) of Asia Ban Shupin met with former General Than Shwe and former President Thein Sein. Finally, the new Chinese Foreign Minister Mr. Qin Gang had recently taken a trip to Nay Pyi Taw to hold meetings with the Military Council. All of these meetings took place in the span of five months.

The meeting between Than Shwe and Thein Sein during the visit of Qin Gang and Ban Shupin in Nay Pyi Taw are important to take note of. It is speculated that the Chinese government believes that these two former generals can find a way out of the current political deadlock in Myanmar. Both leaders both have influence on current military officials, and especially Thein Sein has also received international recognition for leading reforms. China's policy requires Myanmar to maintain stability in order to promote its interests in the region. However, China's attempts at solving the political crisis by having conversations with the two former generals raises questions of whether or not the two generals can effectively negotiate peace processes.

## **The 17th Congress of Karen National Union (KNU)**

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The Karen National Association, also known as the oldest ethnic revolutionary organization in Myanmar, held its 17th conference in May to choose new leaders. The conference was originally intended to be held in 2021, but was pushed back because of the pandemic and the coup d'état. It was announced after the conference that they would work together with democratic forces and ethnic revolutionary forces to fight for the following policy goals: continuing the effort against bigotry and the military dictatorship, the establishment of a federal democratic system, national equality and self-determination. However there were also some disputes that took place during the meeting. There were allegations that a few of the top leaders of the KNU are involved in illegal business activities in areas along the Myanmar-Thailand border, Karen

State, that are controlled by the Burmese Army's Border Guard Force called the Shwekokeko. In response to the rumors, the leaders of the 5th Brigade under the KNU requested to investigate the allegations according to the procedures of the congress. However, the investigations did not proceed as requested, and it was also reported that the delegates of the 5th Brigade did not participate in the KNU congress.

### **ASEAN Convoy Providing Humanitarian Aid was Attacked**

On May 7th, the aid convoy of the AHA Center of ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance was fired at while passing along the Hsihseng-Hsaikhkawng road in Hsihseng Township, Southern Shan State. Singaporean and Indonesian diplomats were in the convoy. No one in the vehicle was injured; only the vehicle was hit. The organization that carried out the attack could not be confirmed, however it is certain that the area where the shooting took place is controlled by militias of the Pao National Organization which is under the Burmese army. ASEAN leaders, including Singapore and Indonesia, have already issued statements condemning the shooting.

### **ASEAN Summit and Myanmar Affairs**

From May 10 to May 11, the ASEAN summit took place in Indonesia. It can be summarized that there was little serious discussion of the Myanmar issue at the summit.

After the meeting, the ASEAN Chairman's statement on Myanmar stated that it would continue to stand on the ASEAN Five Point Consensus on the Myanmar issue. The only changes made to the consensus are the following: "we support China's continuous efforts to engage with all forces in Myanmar in order to create a favorable environment for holding an all-inclusive national dialogue, owned by Myanmar and led by Myanmar, and seeking a peaceful and sustainable solution". It can be inferred from this statement that ASEAN and China have reached a common understanding regarding the resolution of the Myanmar issue.

### **The Impact of Cyclone Mokha and its Aftermath**

On May 14th, the powerful Cyclone Mokha hit Myanmar, ripping through the northern Rakhine State and passing through the Magway region, Chin State, and then the Sagaing region. The destructive winds struck at 120 kilometers per hour and impacted 3.4 million people. As a result of the storm, 1.6 million people in Myanmar, particularly in the Rakhine State, are in need of humanitarian assistance. It is estimated that 85 percent of all residential buildings in refugee camps were damaged by the storm. Humanitarian aid groups, including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), have estimated that a total of \$333 million is required to address the needs of the IDPs.

According to the reports released by UNOCHA in Myanmar, there are more than 200,000 internally displaced people in the Rakhine State. These refugees are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. Additionally, the villages in Magwe and Sagaing regions were also harshly

impacted by the incessant heavy rains and floods. It is reported that stored harvested grains, agricultural lands, and the oxen and buffalo used for farming were destroyed.

### **The Limits on Humanitarian Aid to Myanmar Following the Cyclone**

Before talking about the humanitarian crisis following the cyclone, it is important to mention that before disaster hit there were already 17.6 million people in need of humanitarian aid. Which can be compared to the number of people who currently need humanitarian aid in Ukraine. The cyclone hit the Rakhine State in a place where people were already internally displaced, and suffering from health risks that come with living in crowded and unsanitary conditions.

To properly deliver aid to the people affected by the cyclone, authorities will need to relax travel authorization, require expedited custom clearance for commodities, and a huge infusion of funds. Authorities in Myanmar will have to cooperate with international aid groups to open up communications, especially in terms of surveillance in order to identify areas and communities in a timely manner. As of May 16, only 10 percent of the UN's humanitarian response plan was funded. Even if humanitarian aid has been provided, the distribution of the aid is at the SAC's discretion. This means the vast majority of civilians living in areas outside of the SAC control lack access to humanitarian aid. There has been an effort to formally approve an International Humanitarian Forum/Fund that would work with neighboring countries to allow for the provision of aid via border areas controlled by ethnic resistance organizations or the NUG. This effort was met with enormous pushback and hostility, but the pitching of this idea is still critically important as first steps forward.

### **Discussion Between the Kachin Independence Organization and the Palaung State Liberation Front**

For years, relations between the Kachin Independence Organization and the Palaung State Liberation Front were strained. The two groups were close allies in the past, but territorial disputes between the two groups have led to an increase in tensions. Specifically, the Ta'ang (Palang) people live in areas where the KIO operates. On May 28th, the two groups met and agreed to reestablish friendly relations and work on becoming close allies as they were in the past. As KIO and PSLF are cooperating with People Defense Forces under the NUG, this agreement is a positive development for the revolution. The improved relations between the two groups, which are both located in the Northern Shan State, is a good prospect for the revolutionary forces to gain total control over the Northern Shan State.

### **Top Chinese Intelligence Official met with the Junta's Number Two Official**

On May 31, Major-General Yang Yang, the acting director-general of the Intelligence Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of China's Central Military Commission met with the Junta's Vice-Senior General Soe Win. The two groups met to talk about cooperation for peace and

development for border areas. An example of a project is the Belt and Road infrastructure initiative that intends to link China’s landlocked Yunnan province through northern Myanmar to the Indian Ocean.

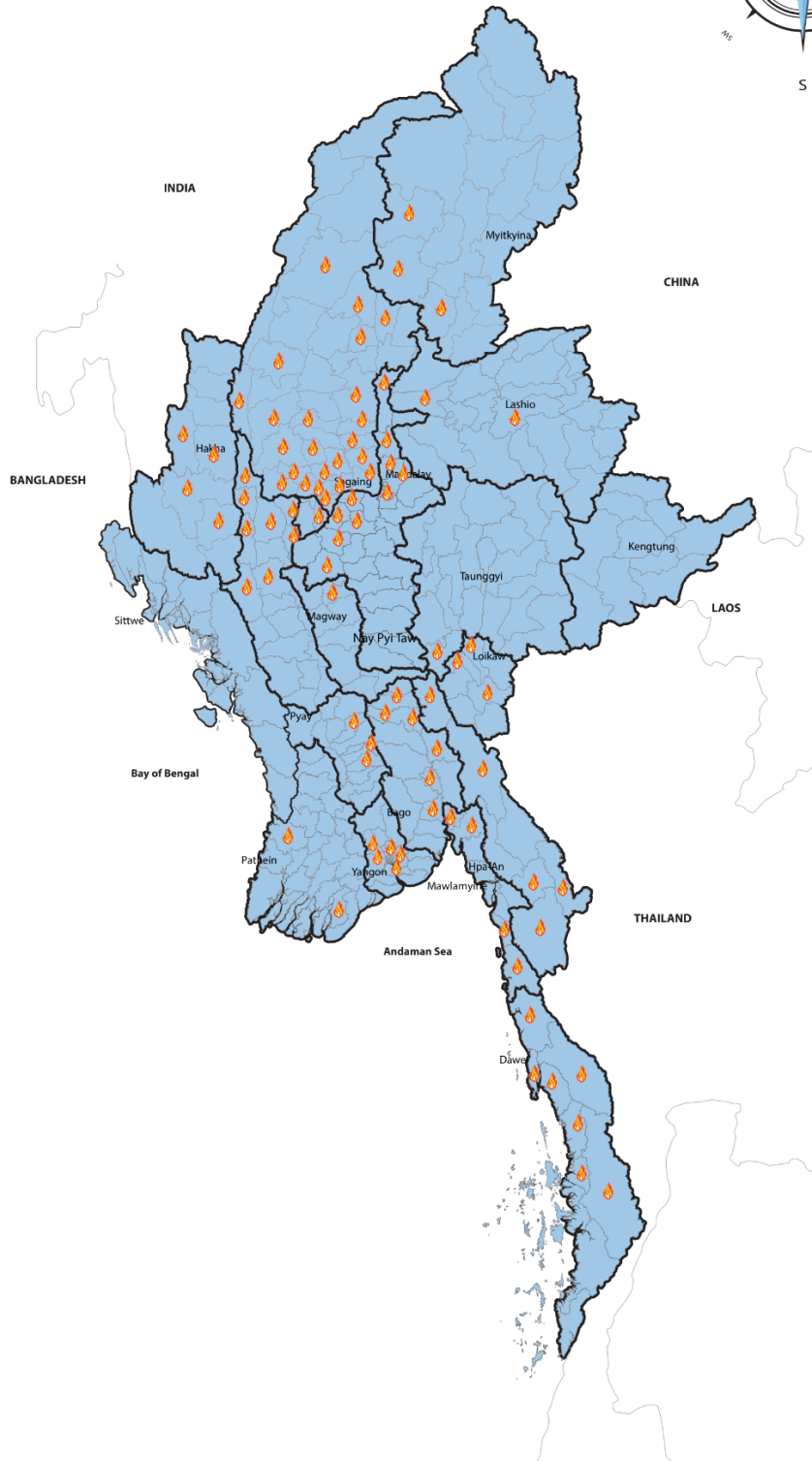
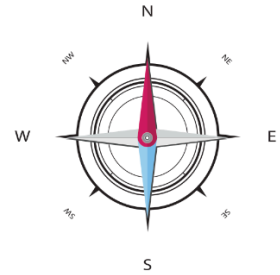
While also establishing relations with the military, Beijing is also supporting several ethnic rebel groups along the border with Myanmar. Conflicts between these ethnic rebel groups with the military has prompted the Chinese government to step in. China has also played an active role in piloting a programme to repatriate Rohingya refugees who fled genocide in 2017, working with both Myanmar and Bangladesh. It was reported that at the meeting Qin Gang called on the international community to “respect Myanmar's sovereignty”.

However, it is unclear what China means in terms of promoting peace, as they have already exported US \$267 million in arms and equipment to the Myanmar military as reported by the United Nations’ special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar Tom Andrews. Additionally, in the statement about sovereignty, the Chinese government has indirectly called for the international community to recognize the Military Council as legitimate. Considering the way that the Military Council took control of the country, there is still much uncertainty amongst the international community as to whether or not the Military Council is the legitimate sovereign.

<b>States</b>	<b>Clashes between SAC and PDF/EAOs</b>	<b>SAC's soldiers killed</b>	<b>PDF killed</b>
<b>BAGO</b>	7	35	2
<b>CHIN</b>	9	60	13
<b>KACHIN</b>	5	4	
<b>KAYAH (Karenni)</b>	9	53	9
<b>KAYIN</b>	10	86	4
<b>MAGWAY</b>	9	45	3
<b>MANDALAY</b>	21	136	
<b>MON</b>	5	42	3
<b>SAGAING</b>	34	292	8
<b>SHAN (North)</b>	2	15	
<b>SHAN (South)</b>	2		
<b>TANINTHARYI</b>	10	57	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>43</b>

**Burmese Democratic Futures Working Group - BDFWG**  
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**Map of Myanmar Conflict ( May , 2023 Total)**



<b>Table 2: Data of Human Rights Violations by SAC in April 2023</b>					
<b>States</b>	<b>Children Killed</b>	<b>Civilians Killed</b>	<b>Civilians Arrested</b>	<b>Villages Set on Fire</b>	<b>Houses Burned Down</b>
AYEYARWADY			9		
BAGO	12	15	18		42
CHIN			5		3
KACHIN		3	85		30
KAYAH (Karenni)		9			5
KAYIN		1			101
MAGWAY		9	182	15	589
MANDALAY		3	70	1	39
MON		1	10		1
SAGAING	8	34	171	21	2216
SHAN (South)					34
TANINTHARYI	1	1	87	1	8
YANGON			35		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>672</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>3068</b>

## **List of Acronyms**

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IDCPC - International Department of the Communist Party of China

KIO - Kachin Liberation Organization

KNU - Karen National Union

PDF - People's Defense Forces

PSLF - Palaung State Liberation Front

UNOCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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