Addressing Uncertainty in Changing Conflict Situations

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Introduction

The armed conflict in Myanmar has been ongoing since the country gained independence in 1948. The failure to address ethnic grievances and the imposed Burmanisation in the post-colonial era led to the outbreak of violence in several Myanmar regions. Numerous armed groups, mostly ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), have been engaged in fighting against the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) and among themselves. The conflict, marked by ethnic tensions, manifests differently across regions in Myanmar. Some groups seek greater autonomy or independence, while others fight for control over the political system and natural resources.

The armed conflict in Myanmar is not geographically homogenous and changes its geographical scope over time.[i] While in some regions, peace negotiations have reduced violence levels to some extent, in others, intense violence continues. Similarly, the overall intensity of the conflict has been changing over time. Myanmar had experienced periods of conflict escalation, such as in the 80s and 90s, as well as periods when attempts to achieve a peace agreement with EAOs were made, such as the efforts of President Thein Sein (in office 2011-2015) that led to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015.

Although the NCA was signed by some but not all major EAOs and did not include any meaningful bindings for the signatories, it represented a historical breakthrough. The military, however, continued with the intense operations in regions where EAOs did not join the NCA.[ii] The transitions from armed conflict to ceasefires, including the NCA, and back to armed conflict triggered changes in local orders with varying levels of uncertainty that may have increased the perceived and experienced security of communities living in the affected regions.

Conflict-related violence tends to cluster in the Myanmar geographical and political margins where most of the EAOs operate. However, more recently, the military coup in February 2021 also brought armed conflict to central Myanmar. The coup triggered widespread protests across the country and was followed by state repressions and the intensification of the fighting in the Myanmar border regions. Despite its brutality and protractedness, the armed conflict in Myanmar remains understudied as Western media tend to focus only on some aspects of the conflicts, such as the Rohingya genocide and the consequences of the 2021 military coup.

Cross-Stakeholder Forum

Oxford's Global Security Programme, in cooperation with the International Alert, co-organised a virtual cross-stakeholder forum at the turn of August and September. The forum brought together the representatives of civil society, the international community, and academia, to better understand and learn from how communities experience changing conflict situations. The forum focused on how communities living in the Shan, Karen, and Kachin states, experienced conflict changes and related uncertainties. The Global Security Programme's cross-stakeholder methodology allowed us to explore different perspectives on uncertainty and its impact on the communities.
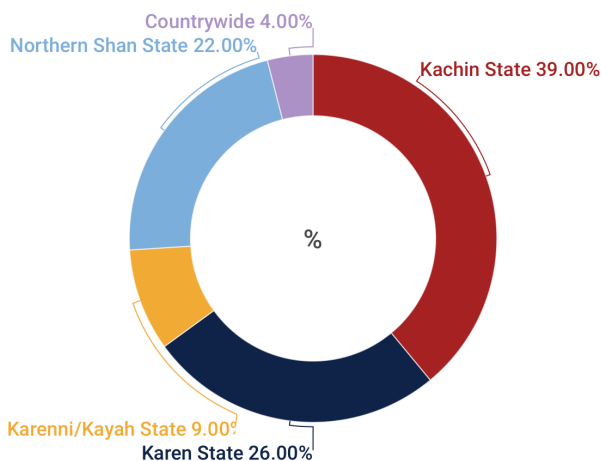

Figure 1: Distribution of the forum participants based on region

On the first day of the forum, the Oxford team presented the Conflict Platform tool, that is an analytical framework for the analysis of changes in conflict. Additionally, interactive digital visualisations were used to demonstrate the evolution of armed conflicts over time and space. The tool and visualisations helped to provide a broader context for discussing changes in conflicts.

On the second day, the Oxford team shared photo-essays that showcased different aspects of armed conflicts. The goal was to emphasise how perceptions play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of changes in armed conflicts and the unique experiences of local communities.

During the forum, the participants shared how they and their communities experience insecurity. We further discussed the difficulty of cooperation, even among the neighbours, caused by an increased feeling of mistrust among the people. Our dialogue identified some of the key needs of the communities and highlighted the opportunities for future collaboration across the stakeholder groups.

# Perceived and Experienced Insecurities

Throughout the forum discussions, the participants emphasised that conflict changes and uncertainty about the future have a negative impact on the perceived and experienced insecurities of individuals and communities. The themes below were identified as major factors contributing to insecurity.

Armed conflict and related security measures

The ongoing armed conflict and related security measures have a severe negative impact on daily life. Artillery attacks, landmines, and conflict-related explosions kill and cause serious injuries and traumas to many civilians, including children, and create large populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. As of April 2023, there are 1,805,000 IDPs in Myanmar. 1,086,000 people fled to the neighbouring countries as of June 2022.[iii]

The military coup in 2021 was followed by widespread human rights abuses and arrests of those peacefully protesting the

▶ Conflict events over time -- အချိန်နှင့်အမျှ
ဖြစ်ပွားခဲ့သည့် ပဋိပက္ခဖြစ်ရပ်များ
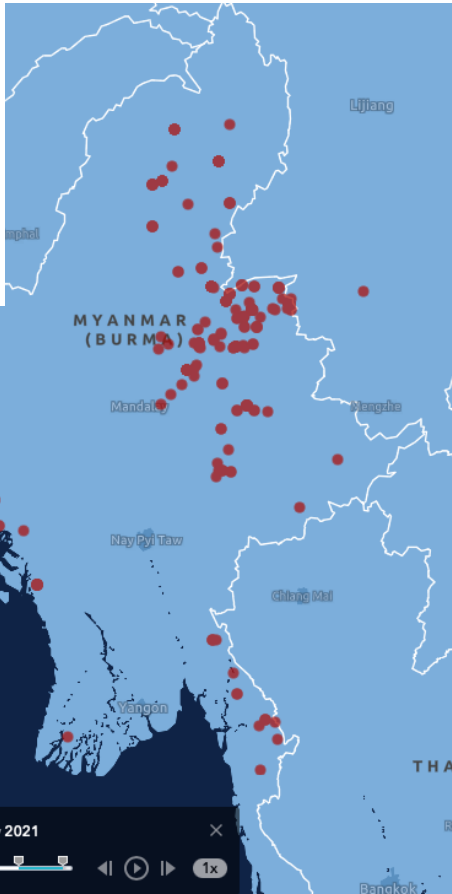
ဤမြေပုံသည် ပဋိပက္ခဖြစ်ရပ်များ၏ တည်နေရာပြောင်းလဲမှုများအပေါ်
အခြေခံ၍ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ပဋိပက္ခများ၏ အပြောင်းအလဲများကို ပြသသည်။
မြေပုံပေါ်ရှိ အစက်များသည် စစ်ပွဲများကဲ့သို့သော ပဋိပက္ခဖြစ်ရပ်များကို
ကိုယ်စားပြုပြီး နှစ်ဖက်စလုံးသည် အစုအဖွဲ့ဖြင့် ကျူးလွန်သော အကြမ်းဖက်မှု
နှင့် သက်ဆိုင်သည့် ပဋိပက္ခများတွင် ပါဝင်နေသည့် လက်နက်ကိုင်များဖြစ်ကာ
အနည်းဆုံး တိုက်ပွဲနှင့်ပတ်သက်သည့် သေဆုံးမှုတစ်ခုအထိ ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေသည်။
ဖြစ်ရပ်များအတွက်ဒေတာသည် UCDP GED မှဖြစ်ပါသည်။

မည်သည့် လက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့များ ပါဝင်ခဲ့သည်ကို သိရှိရန် ဖြစ်ရပ်တစ်ခုစီကို နှိပ်
ပါ။ legend နှင့် အချိန်ဆလိုက်ကို ပြသရန် �’ဘယ်ဘက်အပေါ်ထောင့်ရှိ
widgetsများကို နှိပ်ပါ။

The map shows the dynamic of the conflict in Myanmar based on
changes in the location of conflict events. The dots on the map
represent conflict events, such as battles, where both sides are
armed actors involved in conflicts relevant to the setting of organized
violence and result in at least one battle-related death. The data for
events are from the UCDP GED.

Click on each event to find out which actors were involved. Click on
the widgets in the top-left corner to display the legend and time
slider.

▶ Conflict intensity -- ပဋိပက္ခ၏ ပြင်းထန်မှု

▶ Fatalities over time -- အချိန်နှင့်အမျှသေဆုံးမှု
များ

Figure 2: Example of conflict Platform visualisations, use URL (https://conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk/cccp/research/conflict-in-myanmar) or QR code
to access the visualisations on the Conflict Platform website.

undemocratic regime change. Additionally, to control the population, the military limited access to electricity and the internet. In some areas, people experienced total blackouts or only had access to the internet for a few hours each day. This made it difficult for people to communicate and share information. Regions in the Myanmar periphery were particularly affected by total blackouts.[iv]

Karen state: State security forces stop people and search their mobile phones to identify any illegal activity. As a reaction, many refrain from carrying smartphones and use keypad mobile phones while travelling. However, that personal self-protection measure often triggers even more suspicion from the military.

The locations with the presence of the EAOs fighters might be exposed to the increased threat of artillery strikes. Civilians also fear forced recruitment from the EAOs.

Other security measures include military checkpoints making travel for civilians difficult and dangerous.

Environment and natural resources

Myanmar faces environmental degradation caused by prolonged conflict, extensive construction projects, and mining activities. The deterioration of rivers and soil is particularly concerning, as it has a detrimental impact on the health and livelihood of the local population.

Myanmar has deposits of natural gas, minerals, and precious stones. However, disagreements over mining rights and the distribution of profits from these resources have caused numerous conflicts between the central government of Myanmar and regional authorities. In addition, the profits generated from mining and trafficking resources have contributed to ongoing armed conflicts. The extraction of vast jade deposits has been linked to dangerous landslides and flooding, partly due to inadequate safety measures and a long rainy season.[v] Miners, particularly the independent miners known as jade pickers, are often the victims of such disasters.

Kachin state: The Myitsone Dam, funded by China, caused several environmental and social issues. The large flooding area required by the dam led to the loss of farmlands in the Irrawaddy Delta and many historical temples and cultural sites important to the Kachin people. Several villages were destroyed, turning hundreds of people into internally displaced people in 2009 and 2010.

Illegal drugs and other crimes

Illicit drug production, trafficking, and consumption of drugs represent a serious threat to the security of individuals and communities. The profit from the illicit drug business fuels the armed conflict and is connected to various criminal activities, including corruption.[vi] Aside from traditional opium, the production and consumption of synthetic drugs is on the rise.

Shan state: Communities suffer the severe impact of illicit drug production and trafficking. Drugs being sold during the day show the overall feeling of impunity by those involved in the drug trade. The number of people addicted to drugs is rising, as is the number of related crimes, such as pickpocketing and gambling. "Drugs are destroying lives more than armed conflict."[vii]

According to many of the forum participants, there is a general feeling that crime is on the rise, including embezzlement, and domestic and sexual-based violence, and a general perception that perpetrators are met with impunity. Also, a high number of weapons owned by civilians, and the legacy of the armed conflict, contributes to the seriousness of crimes and the general feeling of insecurity.

Economic situation

Myanmar's economy suffers from significant uncertainty connected to the armed conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, and global price rises. The security measures in recent years, such as electricity blackouts and restrictions on international trade and foreign exchange, further disrupt the economy.[viii] Myanmar suffers from skyrocketing prices of food and fuel. Those increases have a significant effect on the affordability of basic goods, including those needed for agriculture.[ix] The situation is so severe that some civil society organisations (CSOs) suggest the possibility of food shortages in the near future.

Lack of public services

The prolonged armed conflict, economic crisis, and unstable political situation in Myanmar create many challenges for civilians to navigate. The need for healthcare and psychological care has been high due to exposure to violence, crime, and harsh security measures, often violating human rights. However, access to those very needed services is severely limited due to the same reasons that are causing the demand. Similarly, the education system is also in a poor state, limiting the aspirations of the young generation. The legal services that, to some extent, operated in the pre-coup period are nascent; thus, those who fell victim to a crime have nowhere to go for justice and protection from further victimisation. CSOs that work to substitute the provision of services have been severely weakened by the post-coup development in Myanmar.

Vulnerable groups

The difficult situation in Myanmar is further highlighted by the experiences of those who belong to the most vulnerable groups, as their experienced and perceived insecurities are more pronounced due to their position within society.

Women and girls are especially vulnerable due to the high levels of domestic and sexual violence in Myanmar. The forum participants spoke of instances of rape of girls as young as eleven years old. While some of the perpetrators are soldiers, many sex-based crimes are committed against women and girls by their family members. The lack of resources contributes to the inadequate (or lack of) treatment of the physical and psychological injuries resulting from sexual violence.

Although there are dedicated CSOs and women's networks working with the survivors/victims of sexual violence, their ability to provide help and support is limited because of the lack of resources and threats they are facing. This limits their ability to support the survivors/victims in getting medical care, complex psychosocial help, and a safe shelter. In addition, survivors/victims are not able to seek justice due to the absence of the rule of law.

Many women and girls who get pregnant find themselves in such a desperate situation that they decide for an abortion. The lack of facilities leaves them with unsafe options leading to further health problems and traumatisation. There are also reports about the rise of suicides, especially among women, some connected to sexual assaults.[x]

The forum participants emphasised the severe impact of artillery shelling, explosions, and other signs of fighting on *children*, leaving many traumatised. Children exposed to armed conflict often suffer from PTSD, sleep problems, disturbed play, and psychosomatic, emotional, and behavioural issues.[xi] Furthermore, the substandard quality of education and absence of job opportunities leave children and young adults with a despairing outlook on the future. As one forum participant put it: "They are left

with not many options – drugs, armed groups, robbery or fleeing abroad."

After the coup in 2021, armed conflict re-ignited across Myanmar, forcing many to leave their homes and creating large populations of *Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).* Regardless of the reason for displacement, the loss of a home, livelihood, and social network of family and friends leads to distress and feeling of insecurity, and destitution. Some IDPs have been forced to relocate more than once, adding to the trauma and uncertainty. The act of fleeing is also associated with safety risks as travel has become dangerous. The IDP camps are often not safe and breed crime, including sexual violence. People living in the camps face difficulty finding a new livelihood, access to food, hygiene products, healthcare, and education.

Internal displacement has a particularly negative impact on women, girls, and children. In unsafe IDP camps, women and girls are at a higher risk of sexual violence. For women, it is challenging for them to secure a new livelihood due to a lack of economic opportunities and cultural barriers.[xii] For children, the unstable situation caused by displacement can interrupt their education and cause trauma that lasts a lifetime if left unaddressed.[xiii]

Throughout our discussions on insecurities, several forum participants emphasised the need for mental health care and wider psychosocial support. This need is especially acute for children, victims/survivors of sexual violence, and those who are active in the local CSOs and other support networks. The combined effects of armed conflict, the rise of violent crimes, the economic crisis, and poor provision of basic goods, are strenuous on mental health. The poor mental health of many, in turn, contributes to crime, mistrust, and ultimately, to the weakening of the social fabric and civil society.

Impunity was also often raised by many participants as one of the factors contributing to the uncertainty in which many communities live and deepening their experienced and perceived insecurities.

Good Practices in the Context of Uncertainty and Insecurity

The participants of the forum discussed a widespread feeling of mistrust that was exacerbated by the coup in February 2021. Within communities, people do not know who supports the Myanmar military and who belongs to EAOs. Especially those who participated in the protests in the aftermath of the coup are worried about being arrested and live in constant fear, which is preventing them from, in some instances, going about their daily routine and leaving their own house. The Covid-19 pandemic limited social interactions and communication. That, in combination with the active armed conflict, high crime rates and the security measures preventing many from travelling, further deepened the lack of trust.

Despite those difficulties, there are some remarkable examples of community members helping each other to overcome their hardships. Neighbours are coming together to tackle food insecurity and safety issues. Some inform their neighbours about their itinerary when leaving their house so there could be a quick community response if they do not return in time. Others use their garden to plant vegetables that can be exchanged or shared within their community. Some people direct their help towards IDPs and deliver them food. As travelling is increasingly difficult and often dangerous, help in the form of driving people to attend to their errands, including travel for medical care, is another crucial community approach to tackling insecurity.

Aside from these examples of self-help among the neighbours, CSOs play a crucial role in many communities, despite the fact that they operate in an uncertain environment.

The forum participants highlighted that one of the main effects of uncertainty on many CSO is their inability to plan, which limits the timing and the scale of the support the CSOs provide

for communities and also puts additional strain on their limited resources. Due to the security measures and attempts to isolate parts of Myanmar society from international financial flows, CSOs maintain only weak connections to the international community.

Some communities rely on religious authorities such as the Kachin Baptist Convention when looking for support in difficult life situations. However, the power and resources of religious leaders are limited, especially in the case of combating sexual violence.

Recommendations and Opportunities for Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration

The forum participants identified opportunities for cross-stakeholder collaboration and made suggestions on how to mitigate the negative effects of insecurity and uncertainty on communities. Some of the ideas involved building on successful practices and supporting trusted CSOs, local groups, networks, and religious authorities. The forum participants also recommended focusing on the improvement of communication within and among communities, which can, in turn, foster trust and build resilience by encouraging cooperation and organising help among neighbours at the local level.

The international community, as well as academics based outside of Myanmar, can support this bottom-up approach by directly connecting with the local networks and CSOs. Given the constraints imposed by Myanmar law, this is not an easy task, and the opportunities for cooperation are limited.

Although the collaboration might at first consist of "only" knowledge exchange, the existence of direct communication is a valuable stepping stone in the bottom-up approach to

the mitigation of the impact of the armed conflict on communities and civilians.

- **Academics**: Universities, think tanks, and other research and educational institutions can set up in-residence scholarships and visiting fellowships targeting Myanmar students, academics, and civil society representatives. Online courses, lecture series, and webinars advertised among Myanmar students and academics help to strengthen the dialogue between the international and Myanmar academia. Although the inclusion in these activities is restricted by language barriers, the benefits of the academic knowledge exchange trickle down and will ultimately benefit also those who are not fluent in English or other languages used by the international academic community.

- **International community**: International NGOs and states need to work towards improving the access of local communities, including those in IDP camps, to humanitarian aid that is currently very limited. Similar to academics, also CSOs, especially those based in conflict settings, can directly connect with their Myanmar counterparts and establish knowledge exchange channels. In addition, the international community can help to facilitate services needed in Myanmar, for instance, by providing educational online courses in English or with interpreters, training for the local women's network in psychotherapy for victims/survivors of sexual violence, or providing psychotherapy directly with the use of interpreters.[xiv]

> **List of free online courses in English**
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> - EdX (free courses with optional paid certificate): https://www.edx.org/
> - Coursera (free and paid courses): https://www.coursera.org/courses
> - Khan Academy (free courses, mostly pre-university level): https://www.khanacademy.org/

During our conversations, it became clear that there is a strong desire for increased participation of women in leadership and peace negotiations. Although the Myanmar government has set quotas for minimum female participation in parliament and peace talks, these goals are rarely met, despite the fact that women are often very active "behind the scene".[xv] Given the disproportionate impact of armed conflict and security issues on women and girls, as well as the active role played by women in local networks and CSOs, it is essential to increase women's representation in positions of power, including political institutions at the state and federal level, local councils, and peace negotiations.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the forum participants for sharing with us their experiences and knowledge. Without their generosity, the cross-stakeholder forum would not have been possible.

About the Conflict Platform's Network for Change

The Network for Change is the second phase of the project (Conflict Platform, http://www.conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk/) based at the University of Oxford, which started on 1 January 2017, funded by the UK Research Council's Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research. The Conflict Platform seeks to enhance understanding of changing conflict dynamics along five dimensions: the actor involved in conflict, the methods used, the resources that fuel conflict, the environments where conflict takes place, and the impact it has on individuals, communities and societies. The team has developed a novel conceptualisation of armed conflicts and a tool (see UN article) to analyse changes across the five dimensions of conflict[xvi]. For the project's second phase, we selected **the Horn of Africa and Myanmar** as some of the world's most protracted conflicts. In this phase, our goal is to deepen the Conflict Platform's positive impact that benefits communities affected by armed conflict. These activities include innovative cross-stakeholder fora through which local community leaders with lived experiences of conflict, practitioners, policymakers, and academics with expertise in conflict and related fields (e.g. policy, security, development) will engage with each other and the findings of our research. Creatively employing modern technologies, we will integrate written resources with innovative resources in the form of photoessays, storytelling, and web-based interactive visualisations to provide forum participants with a wide array of input formats for discussions during the fora and further knowledge exchange among the participants.

Project Partners:
- Global Security Programme (University of Oxford)
- Danish Refugee Council
- International Alert
- UN System Staff College

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Global Security Programme: https://globalsecurity.web.ox.ac.uk

The Global Security Programme (GSP), based at Pembroke College, conducts cutting-edge research on global security in the contemporary world. Taking a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to global security research, GSP focuses on security dynamics in the context of armed conflict, cross-border violence, and the global illicit economy; transitions from war to peace, and responses to insecurity. We emphasise the connections between localised insecurities and global shifts in power and order. While grounded in Political Science and International Relations, our work also draws on insights from other social science disciplines and is in dialogue with the humanities, the arts and STEM. Our research combines various methods ranging from ethnographic approaches and visualisation techniques to quantitative methods such as GIS analysis. We place emphasis on both developing rigorous theorisations of security as well as carrying out applied research. To enhance the positive impact of our work, we have long-standing partnerships with various UN bodies as well as universities in conflict zones, and advise governments and international organisations.

i Read more on the changes in the geographical scope of armed conflicts in Annette Idler and Katerina Tkacova, "Conflict Shapes in Flux: Explaining spatial shift in conflict-related violence", *International Political Science Review*, 2023.

ii Kim Jolliffe, "Peace and reconciliation," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, eds. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 359-370.

iii UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, rep., *Myanmar Emergency Update as of 10 April 2023* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), April 14, 2023), https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/4666.

iv Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Myanmar Coup: Military Expands Internet Shutdown," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/02/myanmar-coup-military-expands-internet-shutdown.

v Cape Diamond, "Myanmar: Mining Disasters Continue despite Regulations," *Deutsche Welle*, July 3, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/mining-disasters-continue-in-myanmar-despite-regulations/a-54042106.

vi International Crisis Group, rep., *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State* (International Crisis Group, 8 January, 2019), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/299-fire-and-ice-conflict-and-drugs-myanmars-shan-state

vii Forum participant from the Shan state of Myanmar, Oxford [Online], May 2023.

viii The World Bank, rep., *Myanmar Economic Monitor January 2023: Navigating Uncertainty* (The World Bank, January 30, 2023), https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmar-economic-monitor-january-2023-navigating-uncertainty.

ix Women's League of Burma, rep., *August – September 2022 Situation Update of Burma/Myanmar* (Women's League of Burma, November 1, 2022), https://www.womenofburma.org/reports/august-september-situation-update-burmamyanmar.

x Women's League of Burma, August – September 2022 Situation Update.

xi Michelle Slone and Shiri Mann, "Effects of War, Terrorism and Armed Conflict on Young Children: A Systematic Review," *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 47 (January 18, 2016): 950–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-016-0626-7.

xii Women's League of Burma, August – September 2022 Situation Update.

xiii Christelle Cazabat, "Internally Displaced Children, Youth and Education," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Ce*ntre, 2023, accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.internal-displacement.org/research-areas/children-youth-education.

xiv Although psychotherapy with the use of interpreters has its challenges, including the provision of the adequate trainig and debrief for the intereepreters, there are ways mitigate those challenges. See, e.g. Erminia Colucci et al., "In or out? Barriers and Facilitators to Refugee-Background Young People Accessing Mental Health Services," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 6 (2015): 766–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461515571624.

xv International Crisis Group, rep., *Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution* (International Crisis Group, February 16, 2023), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b174-breaking-gender-and-age-barriers-amid-myanmars-spring-revolution.

xvi Annette Idler, "Change in armed conflict: An introduction", *International Political Science Review*, 2023.