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Humanitarian Crisis looms in Kachin conflict: Implications for Myanmar's reform process

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Recent reports of reforms in Myanmar have been overwhelmingly positive. However there remain some serious concerns around them. The current conflict in Kachin state is one significant challenge to reform and human security in Myanmar. In June 2011 the 17 year ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Army and tatmadaw broke down with a return to fighting and the forced displacement of civilians. Over the past nineteen months, access to the internally displaced people has been stymied by restrictions on the movement of humanitarian assistance in territory controlled by the KIA. While many local civil society organisations found ways and means to deliver some assistance, it is unsustainable if the basic needs of this population at risk are to be met. While a United Nations humanitarian assistance convoy suffered delays but eventually arrived in Kachin State in mid February 2013, the Myanmar government met with the United

Nationalities Federation Council for their [second round of talks](#) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. At the peace talks, the issue of humanitarian assistance was addressed but without the attendance of military officials raises questions about whether word will be met with deed.

Since Myanmar President Thein Sein [ordered a ceasefire](#) the fighting continues around the Chinese border town of Laiza, home to the Kachin Independence Army headquarters. There have been several attempts at ceasefires none of which actually brought an end to the fighting. While President Thein Sein courts favourable international opinion, the [recent rebuttal](#) of the [US Embassy statement](#) over its deep concern of the war in Kachin state shows the sensitive nature of the situation for the government. The conflict is showing the limits to the current transition in Myanmar, which won't make happy reading for potential foreign investors seeking to better understand the country. While the President may issue a ceasefire it is unclear whether he is complicit or irrelevant to the current tatmadaw (army) incursions in Kachin state. Either way, what is clear is that the presidential word is not reflective of practices on the ground wherever the sticking point is.

The lack of reliable information coming out of Kachin state makes the challenges to peace difficult to assess. Whether or not the tatmadaw decides to capture or strangle Laiza there is already a humanitarian disaster in the making. An [estimated 130,000 people](#) have fled the fighting; many finding refuge in church compounds, also known as IDP camps or staying with family members. In situations of war, borders don't matter, people flee to where they can find safety whether legal or not. Others have found refuge in Northern Shan state or even, for a while, across the border in China. However, many of these refugees were tossed out by local police authorities tearing down their shelters essentially forcing them back into the conflict zone. However the [recent peace protests](#) in Yunnan province have sparked increased awareness and understanding of the Jingpo – the Kachin in China – which has resulted in a more accommodating policy for those fleeing the fighting but many are reluctant to try for fear of being forced back into the line of fire.

Those who have made the IDP camps their refuge are in dire need of assistance with a recent civil society activist noting that very many IDP camps do not even meet the Sphere standards – the basics of humanitarian assistance. With the shelters built in close proximity to one another the stage is set for health insecurity. Since August last year, [IDP camps have had to deal with widespread diarrhoea](#) and this remains a central challenge six months on. While international assistance has started to arrive in government-controlled areas, [barriers to distribution remain as a result of army checkpoints throughout Kachin state](#). Since July 2012 the government have prevented international assistance in KIA-controlled areas which is home to around [12,000 civilians in two IDP camps on the outskirts of Laiza](#). The situation in Kachin state remains desperate for so many people directly affected by the war, their steely resolve and ability to self-organise in harsh conditions is admirable. The prospect for peace however remains an elusive goal for the time being but with greater international awareness and pressure on resolving the political issues through transparent negotiations it can bring resolution to the conflict that has affected so many.

The current challenges faced by international and local actors to deploy humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced persons across Kachin and Northern Shan states illustrate well the need to focus on the interests and motivations in the current transformation underway in Myanmar. By using these evaluation tools, observers will be better placed to understand the opportunities and challenges afoot in a reform process marked by multiple personalities, informal political relationships, and a complex web of interactions. While the international media focus on presidential statements as representative of a whole system, policy professionals and academics need to focus on the multifaceted nature of this reform process to better understand its speed and reach.

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