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## When Aid Becomes a Weapon

The Impact of the 2021 Military Coup on Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar

### About the Article

Does the long-standing belief that independent, international agencies are best suited to deliver humanitarian assistance still hold today? The presence of a repressive military junta and numerous insurgency groups mean that traditional methods of aid distribution face many barriers to success. Aid operations in Myanmar should therefore emphasise locality rather than neutrality and take a humanitarian resistance.

### About the Authors

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rants (IOM, 2025, p. 10). Crossborder and community-based initiatives like the Back Pack Health Worker Team have the advantage of better access and local expertise (Degterev, 2025). However, they are not uncontroversial as they are more likely to be involved in the ongoing conflict in Myanmar and thus breach international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality (UNHCR, 2025).

This is a frequently debated tension in the literature and indeed, these principles have come under heightened scrutiny in recent years. Many local aid workers argue that neutrality is a luxury that can no longer be sustained in settings as heavily politicised and shaped by systemic injustice as Myanmar (Hou, 2024).

Against this background and in hopes for a democratic stabilisation, many Western donors had increasingly turned away from humanitarianism toward development before the coup, which would have entailed more rigid and institutionalised mechanisms for aid provision (Hou, 2024). However, the landscape has changed dramatically since the SAC rose to power, leading to a shift in the aid paradigm that will be outlined below.

### 3. Impact of the 2021 Coup on Aid Distribution in Myanmar

The 2021 coup has had drastic effects on humanitarian aid distribution in Myanmar. Even before the coup, access to certain parts of Myanmar was heavily restricted. For example, the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Yanghee Lee was denied access to the country in 2017 by the government, likely as a result of her investigations into the wave of violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine State beginning in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017). The coup has only exacerbated these accessibility issues, with Progressive Voice Myanmar (2025) noting the use of the “four-cuts” strategy. Four cuts is a counter-insurgency strategy dating back to the 1960s designed to “cut rebel access to

food, funds, intelligence, and recruits” (Ware & Laoutides, 2018, p. 16), which has historically resulted in the collective punishment of entire villages through massacre, rape, and torture (Fishbein Lasan, 2021). Thus, the military’s attempt to prevent resources from reaching insurgency groups has negatively impacted Burmese civilians.

**Four cuts is a counter-insurgency strategy dating back to the 1960s designed to “cut rebel access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits” (Ware & Laoutides, 2018, p. 16)**



Over the course of the civil war and

especially in the wake of the recent earthquake, several resistance groups and international medical staff have accused the SAC of blocking and misappropriating aid (Karen National Union, 2025; Lamb & Ratcliffe, 2025). The National Unity Government (2025) has alleged that the junta is exploiting aid for political and military advantages and to weaken the opposition, which amounts to a violation of international law (Guénaël, 2020).

While it is difficult to verify these claims as Myanmar’s humanitarian data are not publicly available for security reasons (ACAPS, 2025), the UN and Human Rights Watch (2021) have confirmed that “military forces have seized food deliveries en route to displacement sites and arrested people on suspicion of supporting aid efforts” (para. 18). These instances are nothing new as the Tatmadaw has a history of obstructing aid, especially from territories outside of its control (Lamb & Ratcliffe, 2025). As the military is increasingly losing its grip over substantial parts of Burmese territory (Pertiwi, 2025; Center for Preventative Action, 2025), their strategy of aid misappropriation may intensify further. Simultaneously, anti-junta factions like the Three Brotherhood Alliance have blocked and weaponised aid, too, illustrating how civil war enmities impede humanitarian operations (Degterev 2025). In this context, bypassing the Burmese state has become considerably more difficult, prompting many international aid organisations to face a humanitarian dilemma: to leave or to stay and collaborate with the military junta? On the one hand, leaving the country would mark a signal of protest against the junta but would also result in

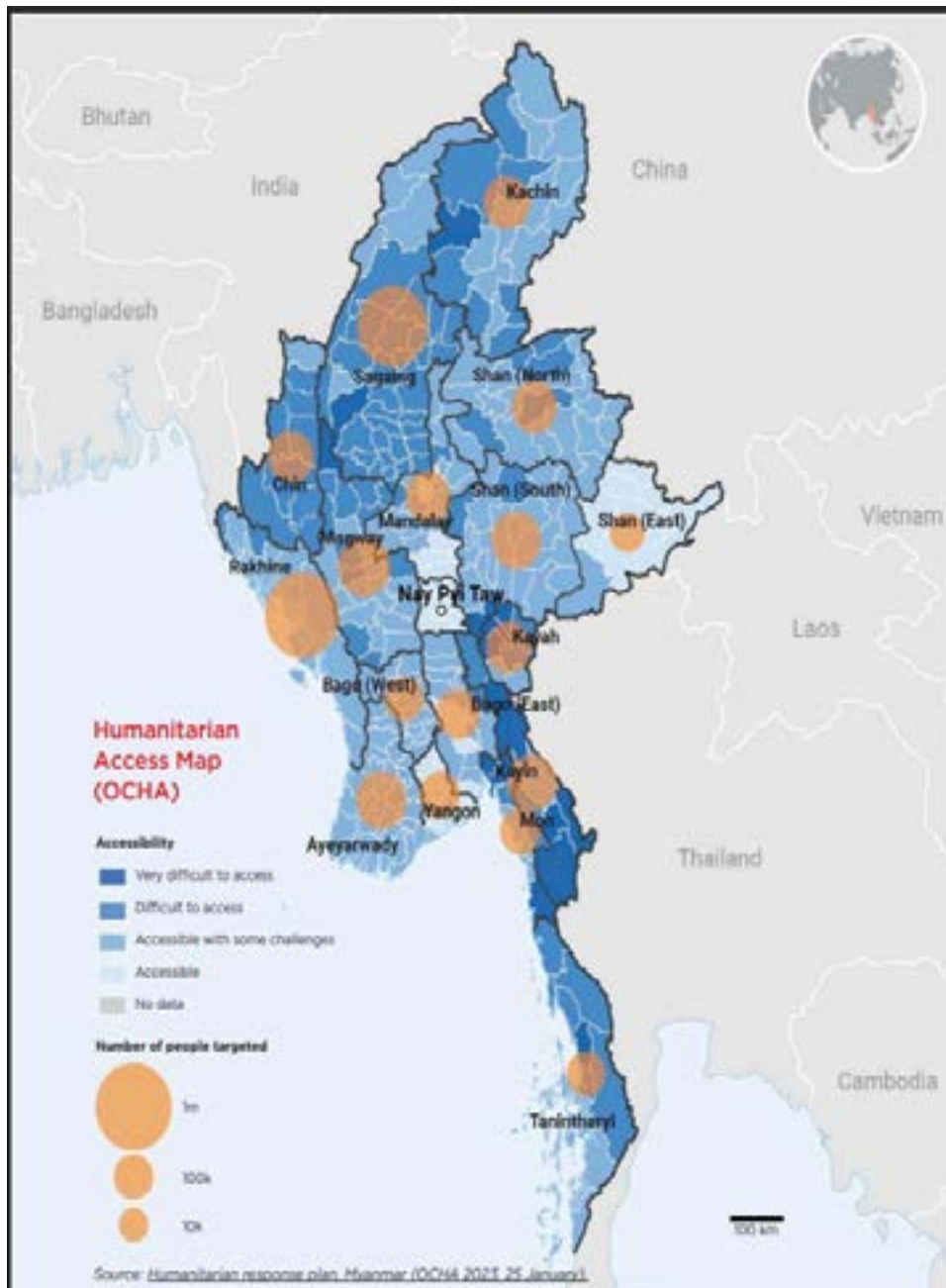


Fig. 3: OCHA. (25 Jan 2023). Humanitarian response plan, Myanmar [Map]. OCHA. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023>. C00.

considerable loss of life-saving assistance on the ground. On the other hand, staying and cooperating with SAC-controlled institutions may “secure more funding and enable more effective aid, but it might also conflict with the broader expectations of the beneficiary public” who do not trust the junta (Hou, 2024, p. 5). Simultaneously, aid providers are faced with the trade-off between getting humanitarian access in the short term via collaboration with the regime, which is responsible for the current suffering, and securing human rights for the future (Nilsen, 2020). Some organisations like the UN have opted to conduct aid operations with the SAC’s permission (Root, 2023), but this also runs the risk of legitimising the junta,

which has not been internationally recognised as the Burmese government and is not in control of more than half of the country (Thiha, 2025).

Therefore, other aid agencies have refused to cooperate with the SAC, demonstrating their solidarity with community-based organisations inside Myanmar or at the border regions instead (Décobert, 2023). The SAC’s restrictions on foreign aid entering the country have forced international donors to rely more on local initiatives as well (Hou, 2024). However, despite their increased importance, local aid agencies are often stifled by unequal power dynamics and bureaucracy (Hou, 2024). Based

on these developments, Fumagalli (2022) declares a triple reverse shift in the aid paradigm: “from engagement [with international donors] to isolation, from development to humanitarian aid and from the state and government to non-state and informal institutions in the borderlands” (p. 5). The coup has thus shattered hopes for peaceful democratisation and dismantled Myanmar’s former status as “donor darling”. Instead, it renewed the country’s position as a pariah state since other nations fear their aid might be misused to fuel the conflict (Fumagalli, 2022).

#### 4. Impact of Aid Cuts on the Situation in Myanmar

“There is nothing to live on. I don’t know anything anymore. I don’t see any pathway ahead. I can’t fathom anymore. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Mahmud Karmar, Rohingya refugee in Thailand (Gelineau, 2025)

Mahmud Karmar fled to Thailand after his brother was murdered and has lived there since 2006.

Overnight funding cuts to international organisations such as USAID in January 2025 have severely impacted Burmese populations, both within and outside of Myanmar (Cabrallero, 2026). Before, USAID had played a key role in Myanmar’s democratic transition as well as food security and health. In 2020, the organisation provided about \$69 million in aid programmes (Tun, 2025). Now, however, medical services, both for physical and mental health and especially for non-emergency treatments, have seen a massive reduction, and the Rohingya are one of the most affected communities. Food rations almost saw a drastic reduction and were only narrowly saved after donor nations stepped up to fill the funding gap (Sullivan and Karim, 2025). Services for education and gender-based violence prevention were also heavily cut, indicating that the

damage will be both short- and long-term.

These cuts do not only affect the refugee populations, but the host governments and local populations. Tensions between Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi residents of Cox’s Bazar were already high, with the latter citing difficulty finding employment and increased crime as impacts of the mass-influx of Rohingya refugees (VICE, 2020). While the recency of the aid cuts makes the impact on the host government uncertain, reduced resources will likely exacerbate these already-existing problems.

Among the primary reasons for the budget cuts of USAID are President Trump’s America First policies that endorse drastic funding cuts to public services in the name of increasing government efficiency and recipient nations’ self-reliance. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has announced that the US rejects the role of the world’s biggest foreign aid donor, encouraging other countries like China and India to step up and share the burden (Mbah et al., 2025; Psaledakis & Pamuk, 2025). Consequently, while other nations like South Korea, the Netherlands, and Japan have committed nearly 65 million dollars for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the Trump administration has focused less on refugees in Myanmar, where the effects have

been most drastic (Kingston, 2025). The impact of this decision is

“In this context, many international aid organisations are facing a humanitarian dilemma: to leave or to stay and collaborate with the junta?”

already felt on the ground, with the US leaving behind a vacuum in an environment heavily dependent on foreign support. As such, the funding cuts reflect a prioritisation of domestic concerns, and broader strategic recalibrations, not just in the US but globally, with aid being increasingly weighed against national interest (Sinanoglu, 2025). Simultaneously, high-profile crises such as Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan attract donor attention (Tun, 2025), illustrating how humanitarian funding is influenced by global visibility and embedded within the interplay between domestic politics and geopolitical rivalry.

## 5. Outlook and Recommendations

The presence of a repressive military junta and numerous armed insurgency groups in close proximity to civilian populations means that traditional methods of aid distribution face many barriers to success. Clarke (2019) notes that “[n]eutrality is not possible if a shared understanding of what constitutes neutrality is absent” (para 4). This is especially true in the Burmese context, where many armed insurgency groups are fighting the Tatmadaw for control in various regions of the violence-wracked country, meaning there is no clear neutral party to engage with.

Moreover, when the military actively engages in persecution of Burmese ethnic minorities like the Rohingya, they cannot be trusted with the humanitarian aid meant for those same groups. Thus, we recommend that a humanitarian resistance approach be taken. Humanitarian resistance is “specifically organised by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it because of their political commitments or personal conscience” (Slim, 2022). In other words, it advocates for a two-pronged approach, in which humanitarianism and justice work in concert with one another.

Additionally, humanitarian resistance supports a “locally led, horizontally constructed ecosystem” detached from the junta that would allow for unhindered aid to reach in-need populations. This approach would be applicable for both internally displaced persons and refugees residing outside of Myanmar. Crucially, a more localised approach can be more cost-effective than international organisations (Manis, 2018), which is underscored by Kamal’s (2023) observation that local actors utilise “their wealth of local knowledge and experience to facilitate and deliver assistance to people on both sides of the borders and deep inside the country” (p. 7). As such, the international community should consider funding this approach in the face of the repressive and illegitimate junta.

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