



# The Civilian Cost of Myanmar's Civil War: An Accounting of the First Three Years

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The civil war in Myanmar reached a bloody three-year anniversary in early 2024 with the junta clinging to power as rebel groups slowly gained and consolidated territory around the country. More than 18.6 million people, or about a third of the population, was in need of humanitarian aid at the start of 2024.<sup>1</sup> As of early June, only about 11% of the \$993.5 million the UN is seeking to meet these needs was funded.<sup>2</sup> Myanmar remains the only significant violent conflict in an Indo-Pacific region preoccupied with the much colder battles waging over Taiwan and the South China Sea. International attention – in the form of decisive political and military support for either side of the conflict – though never particularly strong, has fallen even further as Ukraine and then Gaza demand attention.

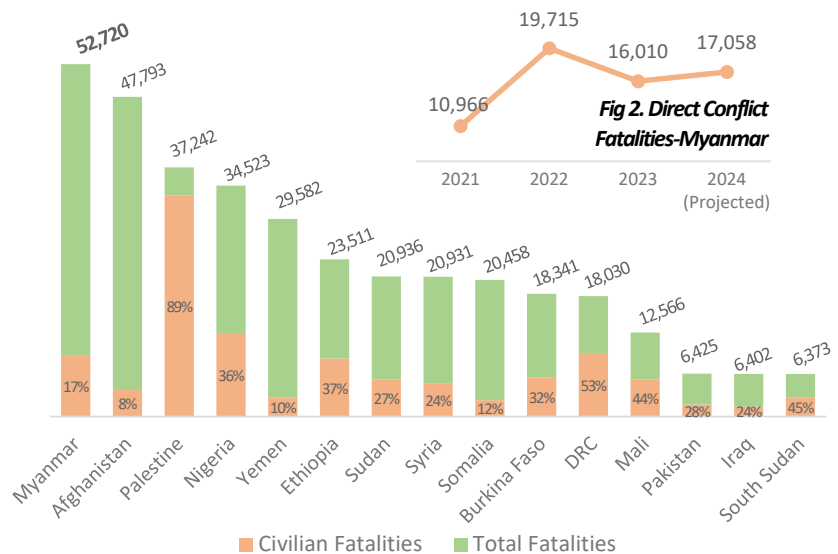
## Conflict Fatalities Highest in the World Since 2021

Attention or not, the situation inside Myanmar is getting worse for civilians by almost every metric available. A Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM) analysis of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data, finds that from January 2021 through 10 May 2024, the war in Myanmar has killed more people – 52,720 – than any other armed conflict in the world over that period (fig 1). Far from waning, as conflicts in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Syria have in recent years, the level of violence in Myanmar has remained stubbornly elevated, with total fatalities directly related to the conflict projected to rise again in 2024 (fig 2).

## Civilian Fatalities Rising at a Faster Rate than Overall Fatalities

Of the 52,720 deaths directly attributed to the conflict, 9,147, or about 17% of these have been civilians. From 2021 – 2024, Myanmar ranks only behind Palestine, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo in total number of civilian fatalities directly resulting from conflict (fig 3). This figure does not include, nor does ACLED attempt to track, indirect deaths from the war caused by lack of access to healthcare, food insecurity, and other follow-on impacts from prolonged conflict.

**Fig 1. Total Direct Conflict Fatalities: 2021-2024 (10 May)**



**Figure 1:** Total fatalities as a direct consequence of conflict from January 1, 2021 through May 10, 2024, including the percentage of civilian fatalities as a direct consequence of conflict. These figures do not include indirect fatalities from, for example, curtailed access to basic services such as healthcare, as well as food insecurity and other privations resulting from conflict. These figures do not include countries where the primary cause of death is associated with criminal violence. See the ACLED codebook for more on how terms are defined throughout this report.

**Figure 2:** Yearly conflict fatalities for Myanmar with 2024 roughly projected based upon fatalities through May 17, 2024. Graphs: CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED.

1 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan: Myanmar (2024). [https://reliefweb.int/attachments/d3f91f48-f154-4db8-97cb-4eaf3adde2e/MMR\\_2024\\_Humanitarian\\_Needs\\_and\\_Response\\_Plan\\_EN.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/d3f91f48-f154-4db8-97cb-4eaf3adde2e/MMR_2024_Humanitarian_Needs_and_Response_Plan_EN.pdf); UNICEF Myanmar Situation Report No. 1, 2024. (14 March 2024). <https://myanmar.un.org/en/263368-unicef-myanmar-humanitarian-situation-report-no-1-2024>

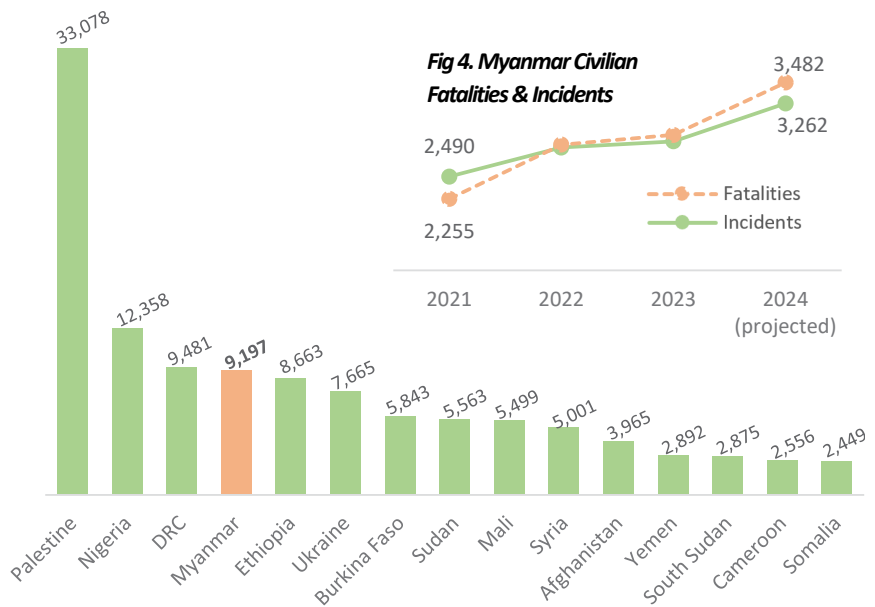
2 Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan 2024. OCHA Financial Tracking Service. [fts.unocha.org/plans/1160/summary](https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1160/summary); Myanmar Emergency - UNHCR Regional Update - 1 May 2024 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/108943>

## Civilian Fatalities Rise as Junta Turns to Airstrikes

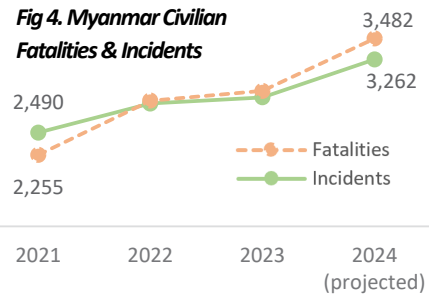
The rise in civilian fatalities projected through the end of 2024 (fig 4) is driven largely by the junta's increasing use of what ACLED tracks as "Explosion/Remote Violence," or incidents in which one side uses weapons that are "at range and widely destructive." Over time, the share of such incidents has risen dramatically, while incidents and fatalities associated with "protests" fell to zero after 2021 (fig 5). "Violence against civilians," a metric that tracks abductions, targeted attacks, and sexual violence, has declined slightly after peaking in 2022, but still accounts for the majority of incidents and fatalities since 2021.

As rebels have consolidated territory and expanded slightly out of ethnic peripheries, the junta has responded with remote violence, either from airstrikes or artillery strikes from a distance. Whether as a coherent strategy or a byproduct of a shift in tactics, remote violence is killing civilians at a greater rate than any time since the conflict began. A closer look at the subgroups within the "Explosion/Remote Violence" category (fig 6), shows a sharp rise in the use of air and drone strikes since 2022, as well as a relatively high proportion of associated fatalities. The uptick in airstrikes, combined with a consistently upward trend in the use of "artillery/shelling/missiles" is resulting in a greater projected increase in civilian fatalities (a 14% increase) than overall conflict fatalities (a 6% increase).

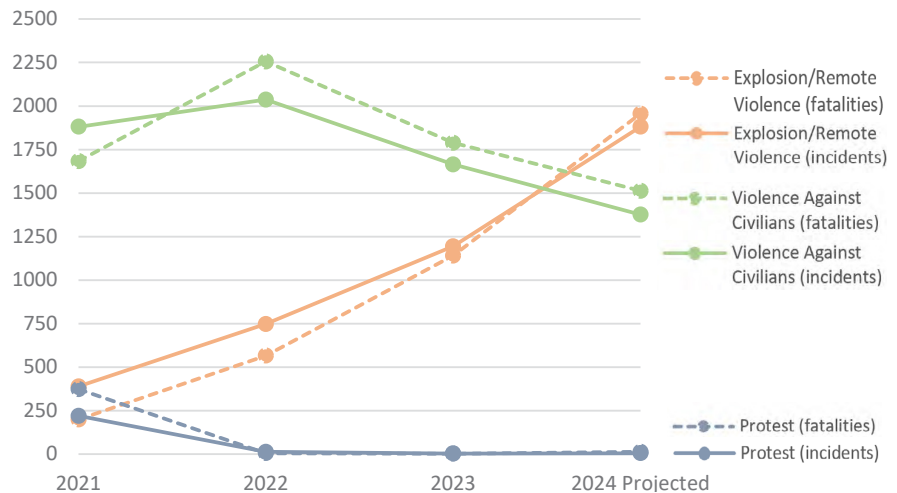
**Fig 3. Civilian Conflict Fatalities: 2021-24 (10 May)**



**Fig 4. Myanmar Civilian Fatalities & Incidents**



**Fig 5. Myanmar Civilian Incidents/Fatalities: Type of Violence**

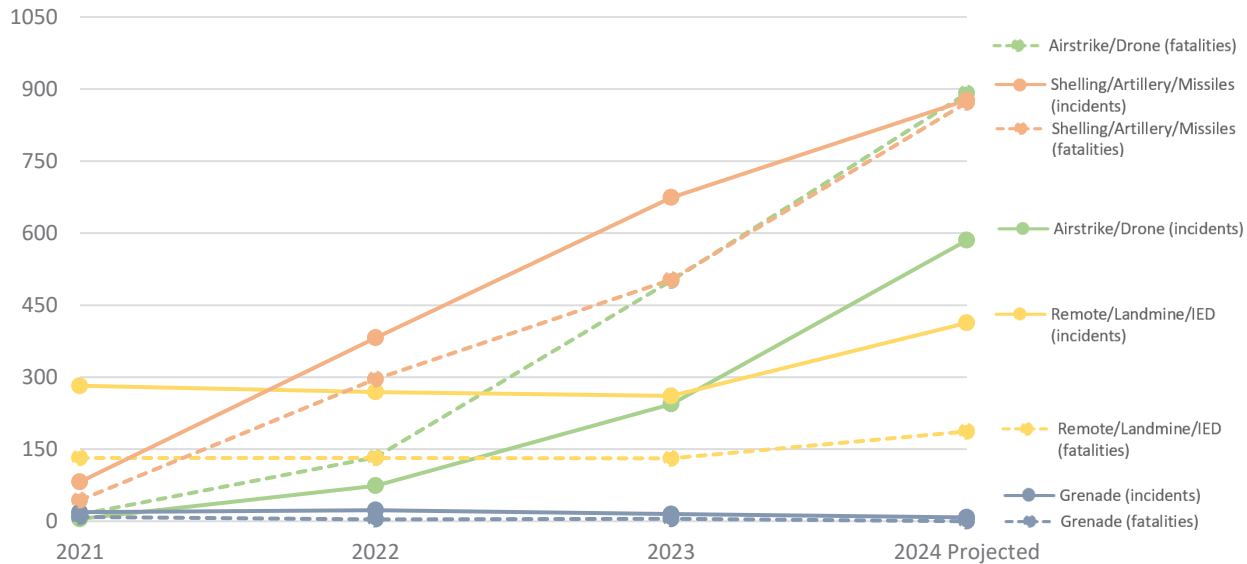


**Figure 3:** Civilian fatalities as a direct result of conflict, worldwide figures through 10 May 2024.

**Figure 4:** A comparison of violent incidents involving civilians and fatalities resulting from those incidents through 17 May 2024. Note: Due to a lag in reporting for ACLED aggregated data, figures comparing Myanmar with other countries are through 10 May while data for Myanmar alone is through 17 May. Figure 5: Direct violence involving civilians is subdivided into four main categories, of which three are relevant to Myanmar: Explosions/Remote Violence, Violence against Civilians, and Protests.

Graphs: CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED.

**Fig 6. Explosion/Remote Violence by Subgroups: Fatalities and Incidents**



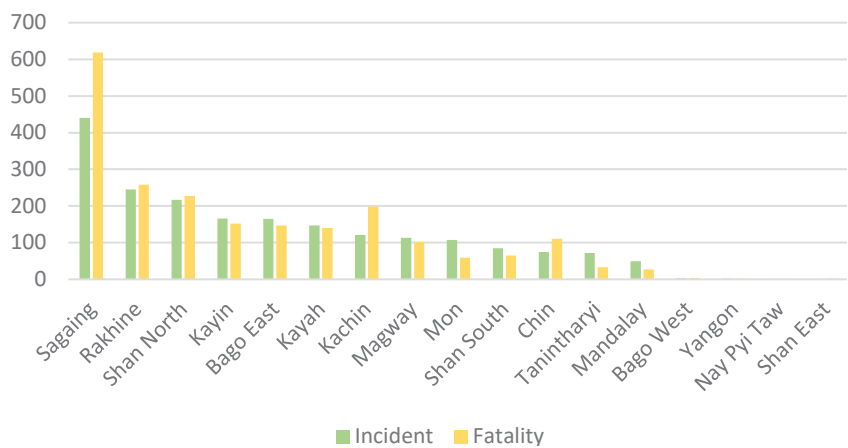
**Figure 6:** “Explosion/Remote Violence” subgroup by fatalities and incidents from 2021 with 2024 figures projected based on data through 17 May. Though the number of airstrike/drone attacks is projected to account for about 300 fewer incidents involving civilians than shelling/artillery attacks, they are projected to account for more civilian fatalities. Graph: CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED.

### Most airstrikes and shelling occurring in Sagaing and Rakhine

Geographically, the greatest number of incidents involving either “airstrikes/drone” or “shelling/artillery/missiles” are occurring in the northwestern Sagaing region, bordering India, followed by Rakhine state in the southwest, bordering Bangladesh (fig 7). Sagaing region has been particularly hard hit, with 619 civilian fatalities, or more than double civilian deaths in Rakhine. Of the 440 air strikes or shelling incidents involving civilians that have occurred in Sagaing, almost 60% were in the three districts of Kale (98), Shwebo (97), and Katha (63). Not surprisingly, the largest share of internally displaced persons in the country is located in Sagaing (see displacement section below). Some of the deadliest recent airstrikes include the following entries taken from the notes section of the ACLED database:

- 6 April 2024:** Shar Taw village, Sagaing region, around 80 Myanmar military soldiers and Pyu Saw Htee [pro-junta militia] troops attacked with bombs attached to a drone, hitting some houses and killing two women. The military also abducted seven locals including a Taung Tin villager as human shields and killed them. The military set fire to about 200 houses, forcing 500 villagers to flee, and abducted a monk.

**Fig 7. Airstrikes and Shelling Civilian Incidents & Fatalities: by subnational Administration**



**Figure 7:** Airstrikes and shelling incidents and fatalities from 2021 to 2024 (May 17) by principle subnational unit (region or state). Sagaing region alone accounts for 28% of all incidents and 21% of all fatalities countrywide. Graph CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED.

- **18 March 2024:** Thar Dar village, Rakhine state, the Myanmar military conducted an airstrike with a fighter jet and dropped two bombs around 1:30 a.m. killing 22 Rohingya civilians including children and destroying ten houses.
- **7 January 2024:** Ka Nan village, Sagaing region, the Myanmar military dropped four 250lb bombs from multiple A-5 jet fighters at 10:30 a.m., destroying a church, a high school and residential houses and killing 14 locals, including six children, and injuring another 20.
- **11 April 2023:** Pa Zi Gyi village, Sagaing region, the Myanmar military conducted an airstrike on a gathering of the new People's Administration Team, local shadow administrations set up in regions outside junta control. The military dropped two rockets from a Mi35 aircraft and opened fire from a jet fighter, killing 175, including 33 women and 42 children. Human Rights Watch concluded that the military used a thermobaric bomb in the airstrike.

Airstrikes are not only the work of the junta. Rebel groups, most notably the Three Brotherhood Alliance, have weaponized Chinese agricultural drones to conduct attacks on the Myanmar military light infantry vehicles as well as (mostly symbolic) attacks on the capital of Naypyidaw.<sup>3</sup> Rebel airstrikes have thus far been relatively infrequent, though they too have caused civilian fatalities. Since 2021, ACLED records 11 air/drone strike incidents initiated by anti-state armed groups resulting in five civilian deaths, compared to 509 incidents resulting in 959 civilian deaths from junta air/drone strikes.

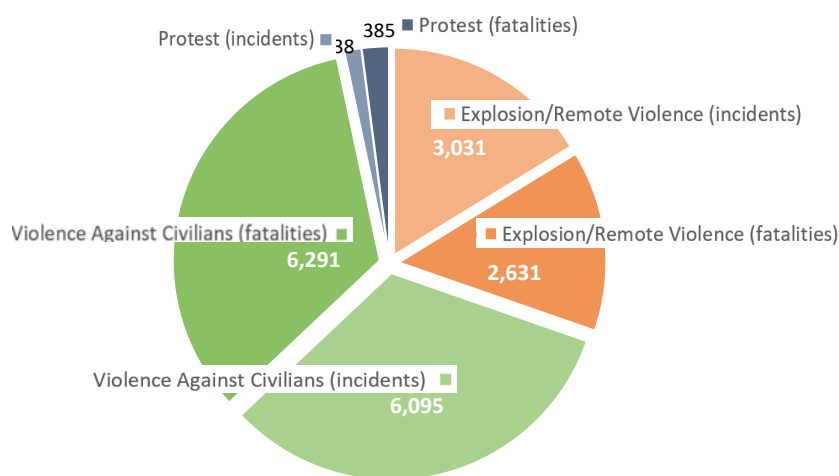
### Violence Against Civilians (attacks, sexual violence, abductions) declines but still far outnumber remote violence (airstrikes, shelling, IEDs)

As depicted in figure 5 above, ACLED tracks a category of civilian-related conflict incidents classified as “violence against civilians” separate from the “explosion/remote violence” category detailed thus far. Violence against civilians is defined by ACLED as “events where an organized armed group [either state or non-state] inflicts violence upon unarmed non-combatants.” Events within this category are divided into three sub-categories:

1. Attacks (that do not use explosions or remote methods and are often at close quarters);
2. Abductions/forced disappearance (including for forced conscription); and
3. Sexual violence.

As noted above, incidents and fatalities associated with “violence against civilians” are trending downward but still account for more than double the “explosion/remote violence” category in both frequency and lethality (fig 8) since 2021. Incident notes accompanying each entry in the database are clinical in their descriptions but no less troubling in the violence and trauma they describe:

**Fig 8. Civilian Incidents/Fatalities by Type of Violence: Totals from 2021 - 2024 (17 May)**



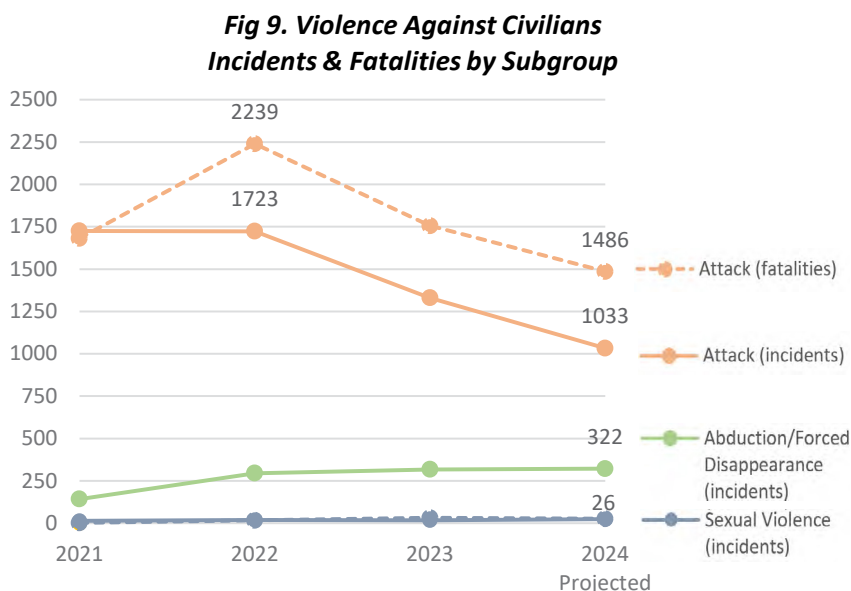
**Figure 8:** Myanmar Conflict-related Civilian Incidents/Fatalities by type of violence from January 2021 to 17 May 2024. Graph: CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED

<sup>3</sup> “Ethnic Autonomy and its Consequences in Post-Coup Myanmar” International Crisis Group. 30 May 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/southeast-asia/myanmar/b180-ethnic-autonomy-and-its-consequences-post-coupmyanmar>

- 5 March 2024:** In Kamma town, Magway region, the Myanmar military killed an 80-year-old woman and her 46-year-old daughter from No.3 ward by cutting their throats at around 12 a.m. The daughter had signs of being raped by the military troops.
- 29 January 2024:** Outside Mongmit town [of] Shan-North state, Myanmar military troops detained a young married couple who went back to their home in Mongmit town to feed pigs. The military troops raped the wife while forcing her husband at gunpoint to witness the scene. The military troops then shot and killed both of them according to an IDP who was arrested and later released after being beaten.

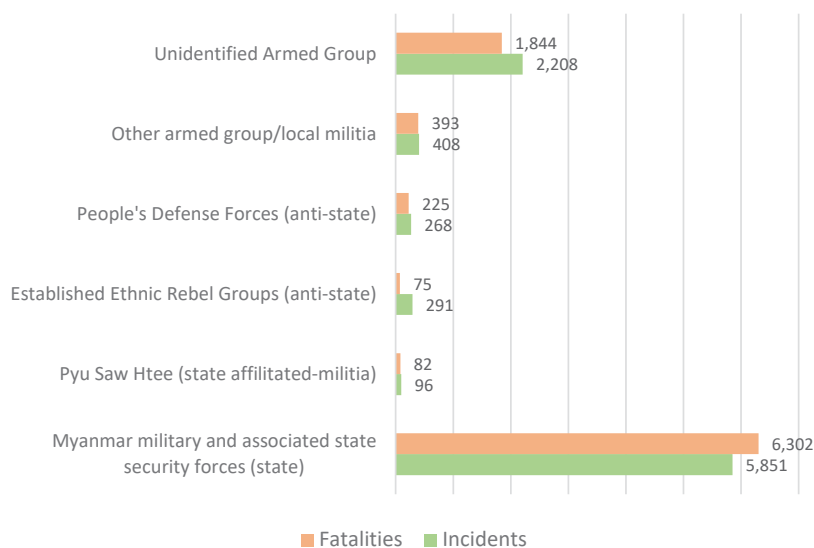
The recent decline in “violence against civilian” attacks following a peak in 2022 corresponds to an increase in remote violence. Suggesting that as rebels have consolidated territory, civilians are afforded (marginally) better protection from close quarter targeted killings. However, this small tactical shift provides little peace of mind to those who now must contend with more airstrikes and shelling as detailed in figures 5 and 6.

The consistent rate of abductions depicted in figure 9 is due to the steady use of kidnapping and forced conscription by both junta forces and rebel groups; and because when rebels detain or imprison individuals within their various areas of control, often in an attempt to curb criminality via shadow governance, these incidents are coded as abductions by ACLED. For example, abductions increased during “Operation



**Figure 9:** Violence against civilians by three subgroups – attacks, abductions, sexual violence. When abductions end in fatalities these are then coded as attacks in the dataset, hence there is no subcategory for fatalities for this specific event. Graph: CFE-DM. Data source: ACLED.

**Fig 10. Total Incidents/Fatalities by Perpetrator**



**Figure 10:** Total incidents/fatalities for “explosion/remote violence” and “violence against civilian” categories by recorded perpetrator. This does not include incidents/fatalities related to protests. Myanmar military and affiliates (state) includes all related state forces (e.g., national, border, prison police). Pyu Saw Htee is the largest, but not the only, junta-affiliated militia. Established Ethnic rebel groups, include those predominately ethnic-aligned rebel groups already established when the junta seized power in 2021. People’s Defense Forces include local militias established post-2021. Other armed group/local include a broad range of other militias and guerrilla groups with both pro- and anti-junta alignment or unclear alignment, further analysis of the ACLED data and additional qualitative research is necessary to attempt to classify all groups in this category. Graphic: CFE-DM. Data Source: ACLED

1027” in October of 2023 when a coalition of rebel groups launched a simultaneous offensive against the junta and police actions against illegal casinos, traffickers, and other scammers operating along the Myanmar-China border.

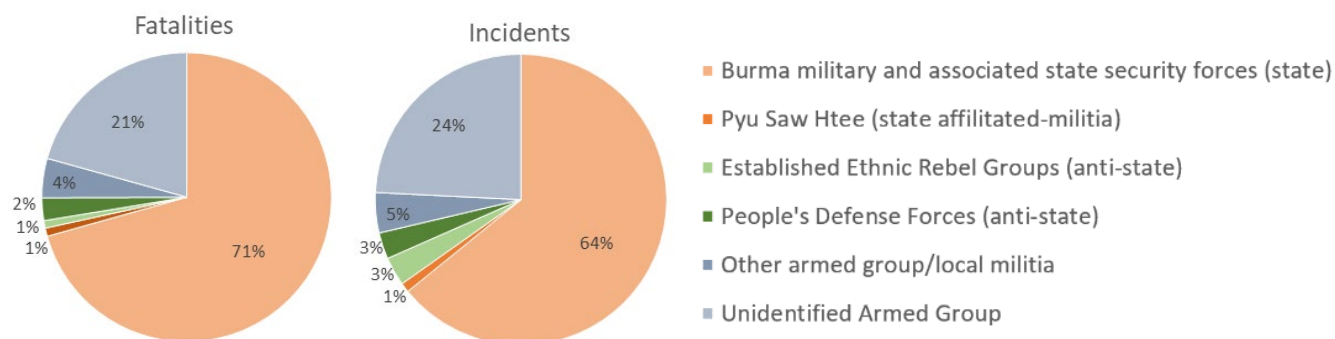
Sexual violence, as recorded in the database, remains relatively low at only about 1% of all violence against civilian incidents. Yet, in many cases, including the two incidents bulleted above, sexual violence is part of a larger assault that the database ultimately categorizes as an attack rather than as sexual violence. It is also likely that a significant number of survivors do not report the sexual violence perpetrated against them for a number of reasons. Thus, incidences of sexual violence are undoubtedly higher than is reflected in the data.

### Junta Associated with Vast Majority of Civilian Conflict Incidents and Fatalities

The vast majority of ACLED accounts are based on local news reporting. Most often, determining what happened (and to whom it happened) is an easier task than determining what entity is chiefly responsible for carrying out the act. This is especially true in Myanmar – both pre- and post-coup – where non-state armed groups number in the hundreds. According to the database, the Myanmar military and related state security forces are associated with the vast majority of conflict incidents (64%) and fatalities (71%) involving civilians. The largest of the state-affiliated militias, the Pyu Saw Htee, accounts for another 1% of both incidents and fatalities. Ethnic rebel groups that existed prior to 2021 account for about 3% of all incidents and 1% of all fatalities while the newly established People’s Defense Forces are responsible for 3% of incidents and 3% of fatalities involving civilians.

Another 24% of incidents and 21% of fatalities are coded in the database as unidentified. Finally, named armed groups without clear state- or anti-state leanings reportedly perpetrated 5% of incidents and 4% of fatalities. Additional qualitative research is needed to build a better profile of these groups before a more accurate classification is possible.

**Fig 11. Percentage of Civilian Conflict Incidents/Fatalities by Perpetrator**



**Figure 11:** Percentage of incidents/fatalities involving civilians by percentage share of each recorded perpetrator. Graphic: CFE-DM. Data Source: ACLED

### Conflict-related Internal Displacement up three-fold since 2021

Direct violence against civilians is only one way conflict affects non-combatants. There are a range of other negative consequences outside the ACLED database, among the most significant is displacement. Since February 2021, 2.7 million people have been displaced by the resulting conflict, with 1 million of these uprooted since October 2023 alone. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the total number of IDPs in Myanmar is now just over 3 million.<sup>4</sup> The largest concentration of IDPs is in the northwestern region of Sagaing where 1.23 million, or about 40% of total IDPs, are located. IDPs in Sagaing and elsewhere are living in “terrible conditions often in informal settlements in the jungle” with little access to adequate shelter

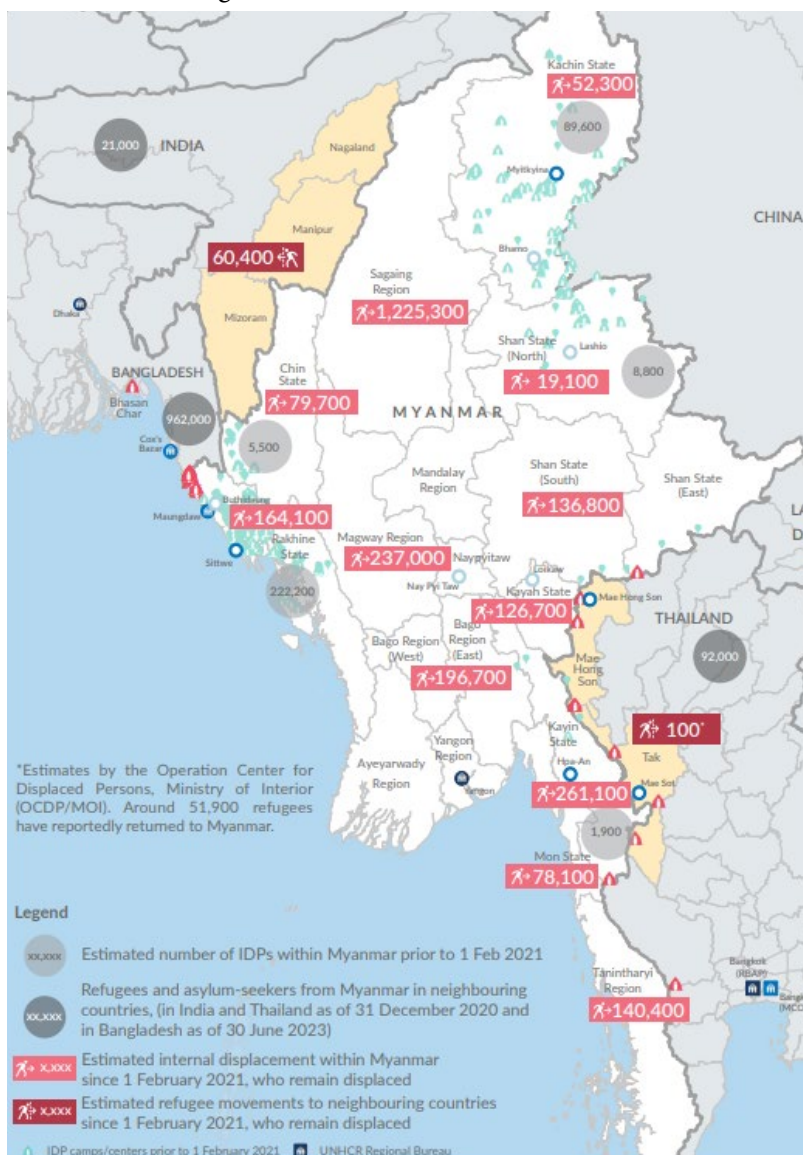
<sup>4</sup> Myanmar Situation. UNHCR Operational Data Portal. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar>.

or services, according to a UN situation report from May.<sup>5</sup> As noted above, Sagaing has received the greatest number of airstrikes and shelling carried out by the junta (fig 7). However, the IDP situation is notable for how geographically dispersed it has become, with displaced populations in almost every area of the country (map 1), an indicator of the multi-fronted nature of the conflict.

In addition to IDPs, the conflict has also generated new refugee movements, including more than 60,000 residents from the northwest who have crossed into the Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland since 2021. Another 51,000 residents from Myanmar's southeastern Kayin state have crossed into Thailand and are sheltering in Temporary Safety Areas (TSAs) administered by the Royal Thai government along the border. While Myanmar arrivals in India have been constant since late 2022, arrivals in Thailand have spiked since the latter half of 2023, including at least 3,000 who arrived in April after the armed wing of the Karen National Union, the oldest of Myanmar's ethnic rebel groups, defeated the military and briefly took control of the town of Myawaddy.<sup>6</sup> As the most important border trade post with Thailand, the town handles around \$4 billion of imports and exports annually and serves as a hub for the thriving casino and scam industry, according to an International Crisis Group report.<sup>7</sup> These post-coup refugee flows are on top of an estimated 1.1 million mostly ethnic Rohingya who sought asylum in Bangladesh and Malaysia before 2021.

### What Comes Next? More of the Same.

In the absence of a political solution or a decisive military victory, the conflict will grind on through 2024. The UN has requested \$993.5 million in emergency humanitarian funding for 2024. Since 2022, Myanmar's yearly humanitarian plans have been funded at less than 50%. The 2024 Plan was 11% funded as of early June. Not surprisingly, the U.S. leads all donors, contributing over \$250 million since 2022. The PRC, historically adverse to pooled UN funding, has provided just \$1.2 million during this period, even less than Russia (fig 12).



Map 1: UNHCR. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/108943>

5 Myanmar Emergency - UNHCR Regional Update - 1 May 2024 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/108943>  
 6 Ibid. Figures for those seeking protection in Thailand and India are only outflows and do not include an unknown number how have since returned to Myanmar. The UN does not have access to the Temporary Shelter Areas administered by the Thai government. Of those seeking protection in India, 6,123 had made it to New Delhi and registered with UNHCR.  
 7 "Ethnic Autonomy and its Consequences in Post-Coup Myanmar" International Crisis Group. 30 May 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/southeast-asia/myanmar/b180-ethnic-autonomy-and-its-consequences-post-coupmyanmar>

The junta has suffered a number of embarrassing battlefield losses in the last year and no longer maintains durable control of most of its land borders. Morale, from general officers down to the rank-and-file, is low. Yet, the junta retains control of the center of the country and population centers in Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw, as well as key ports in Sittwe. Importantly, it still has the backing of the People's Republic of China (PRC), its most important foreign patron.

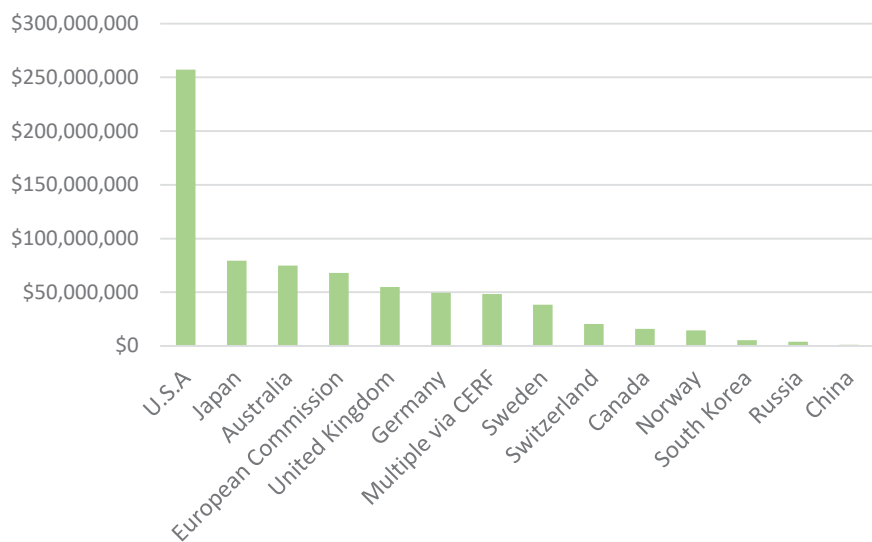
Rebel groups are stronger than at any point since the coup and recent alliances among some of these groups have translated into battlefield success. Morale is high. The trend

will be for greater consolidation of peripheral territory under these groups' control, including more sophisticated governance, durable defenses, and normalized relations with cross-border neighbors (the PRC of course, but also potentially Thailand, India, Bangladesh, and Laos). Yet, the opposition landscape will struggle to overcome its historically fragmented nature. Stronger control within ethnic enclaves does not translate well into the type of federalized powersharing needed to challenge the military state. In the absence of external military support, it will also struggle to capture key population centers. As such, the odds of either side achieving anything decisive on the battlefield, by at least the end of 2024, are remote.

Battlefield parity, without a mutually hurting stalemate, will also discourage prospects of a political settlement. The PRC remains the most influential external actor because of its proximity, economic weight, and relations with both sides of the conflict: it continues to support the junta militarily and diplomatically, and is more reliant upon rebel groups to maintain security along the Myanmar side of its 1,357-mile border than ever before. Yet, the PRC continues to do the minimum as far as peacebuilding efforts go. It began mediating in earnest only in late 2023 after rebel advances along its border and in southern Rakhine state where it has significant Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments, including a crucial Indian Ocean port, began to have economic and security implications. Five rounds of talks between the junta and some of the rebel groups produced a short ceasefire in Shan State but no broader dialogue on ending the conflict. Thus far, the junta has not agreed to talks with the National Unity Government, the resistance government in exile, and the PRC seems in no hurry to bring the two together. To the extent that the PRC's interests remain fixed on narrow economic and border security concerns, its mediation efforts will remain correspondingly blinkered.

Barring a break through on the battlefield that drastically shifts external calculations, regional states will also continue to hedge: backing the junta in regional and international fora, in part by refusing to recognize the NUG, while engaging more and more with the rebel groups as the de facto authorities on their shared borders. Though the EU has recognized the NUG, it and other western powers will remain, ultimately, preoccupied. As documented throughout this report, the cost of this preoccupation will continue to fall disproportionately on Myanmar's civilian population.

**Fig 12. Govt Funding to UN Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plans 2022 - 2024 (June 5)**



**Figure 12:** Government Funding to UN Myanmar Humanitarian Response plan from 2022 to June 5 2024. Chart: CFE-DM. Data Source: UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service.





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