

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# MYANMAR: CIVILIANS AT RISK IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE FIGHTING

The Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups must ensure the protection of civilians and provision of aid as violence in northern Shan State escalates, Amnesty International urged today.

On 15 August 2019, three members of the Northern Alliance, a coalition ethnic armed groups operating in northern Shan State, staged a series of indiscriminate attacks on Myanmar military installations and other locations, killing or injuring soldiers, police officers, and civilians. Since then, northern Shan State has seen an intensification of fighting between the Myanmar military – also known as the Tatmadaw – and ethnic armed groups. The renewed fighting comes despite a unilateral ceasefire announced by the Myanmar military on 21 December 2018, which was recently extended until 21 September 2019. Amnesty International and others have documented ongoing violations and abuses during this time.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about mounting reports of civilian casualties, including the killing of five people – three of them children – on 31 August 2019 by suspected mortar fire. While it is difficult to confirm which side fired the shells, the killing likely constitutes a war crime. The organization calls on all parties to the conflict to immediately end all attacks targeting civilians and indiscriminate attacks, commit to protecting civilians, allow safe passage for those fleeing the fighting, and ensure full, safe and unfettered access for humanitarian workers.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), almost 8,000 people have been internally displaced by the latest fighting. Despite this, the Myanmar authorities – both civilian and military – continue to restrict humanitarian access in northern Shan State. Meanwhile, humanitarian actors report that ambushes and attacks on vehicles by ethnic armed groups are preventing them from accessing some areas and assisting people in need.

Under international humanitarian law, all parties to the armed conflict have an obligation to allow and facilitate delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance for civilians in need. Blocking such aid is a violation of international humanitarian law. Amnesty International calls on all sides to ensure free and unimpeded access for humanitarian organizations delivering aid and emergency assistance to all civilians who need it without discrimination.

Amnesty International also calls on all parties to take immediate action to secure roads so that humanitarian organizations can provide aid and emergency assistance – including life-saving medical treatment.

## BACKGROUND

The Northern Alliance is a loose coalition of ethnic armed groups operating in northern Shan State – the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA). The groups have engaged in active conflict with the Myanmar military in recent years, seeking greater rights, autonomy, and control over natural resources. Three of the four – now calling themselves the “Brotherhood Alliance” – were involved in the 15 August attacks: the MNDAA, the TNLA, and the AA. None of the three are signatories to Myanmar’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, having been excluded from joining by the authorities.

The 15 August attacks came just days after the three had issued a joint statement calling on the Myanmar military to stop fighting in Rakhine and northern Shan States and threatening retaliatory action. Since the start of 2019, there has been a major escalation of fighting between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army in Rakhine State, which is not covered by the military’s unilateral ceasefire. Amnesty International has documented serious violations – including war crimes – by the Myanmar military, as well as violations by the AA.

This is not the first time that members of the Northern Alliance have launched coordinated attacks against security targets in recent years. In November 2016, in response to intensifying military offensives in northern Myanmar, the group attacked three military and police posts in Muse township, northern Shan State. In a June 2017 report, Amnesty International documented wide-ranging violations of human rights and humanitarian law by the Myanmar military in Kachin and northern Shan States, including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, indiscriminate shelling, arbitrary detentions, torture and forced labour. Many of the violations were committed in the aftermath of the November attacks. Ethnic armed groups were also responsible for violations and abuses, including summary executions, abductions, and forced recruitment. To date, none of those responsible for abuses by any of the parties to the conflicts have been held to account.