

HUMANITARIAN AID RELIEF TRUST (HART)
BURMA BRIEFING
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Background

- As Burma is slowly continuing its transition from military rule to a full multiparty democracy, the country's reform process has been accompanied by international appraisal as well as greater amounts of investments. Burma is predicted to receive [\\$5 billion in foreign direct investment \(FDI\) in the 2014-2015 fiscal period](#).
- After the UK [opened a Trade and Investment office in 2012](#) in Rangoon, British investment into the country has soared with more companies and banks investing in the country every year. For the first half of 2014, British FDI [amounted to \\$14 million](#), making it the western country with most investment in Burma.
- However there are still serious issues that need to be addressed as the country begins to prosper economically. These include:
 1. The **quasi-apartheid conditions** of the **Rohingya peoples** in the Rakhine State where they are increasingly being treated as second-class citizens;
 2. The **conflict in Kachin and Shan states** entering its **fourth year**, following the government's breaking of a 17-year ceasefire in 2011, and affecting more civilians everyday;
 3. Significant **limitations on political rights**.

The situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine

- The [Rohingya](#) are a Muslim ethnic group that is native to the Rakhine State in Burma. It is believed that the Rohingyas have inhabited Burma [since the 8th century](#). Out of the two million Rohingyas in South East Asia, an [estimated](#) one million live in Burma. The Burmese Rohingyas have been neglected and persecuted for decades by the Burmese government that considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (i.e. 'Bengalis').
- Since sectarian strife led to violence between **June and October 2012**, around **140,000 Rohingya** have been **displaced** and live in entirely aid-dependent camps around Rakhine State. An **additional 40,000** live in **remote communities** that are receiving no external assistance ([Human Rights Watch](#)).
- The Rohingya have not been included in the recent [government census](#) – the first since 1983 - which took place in April/May of this year, over fears that allowing the Muslims in Rakhine to self-identify as 'Rohingya' would create further tensions within the local communities.
- On **September 28th**, the **Burmese Government** [presented the 'Rakhine State Action Plan'](#) in order to deal with the sectarian conflict and displaced peoples in the area.
 - The plan aims at **assessing all Rohingya peoples** for their **eligibility to obtain citizenship** in one of two ways:
 - Either [present evidence on paper](#) that they have lived in the country for three generations and have a chance to become naturalized citizens; however, few Rohingya have ever had access to such evidence, and many of those that did, lost them during the 2012 violence;
 - Or accept to be **classified as 'Bengalis'** and hope to gain citizenship having an immigrant status.
 - The plan provides that the **government** will "**construct temporary camps** in required numbers for those who **refuse to be registered** and those **without adequate documents**", which amounts to **indefinite arbitrary detention** and is a clear violation of the **freedom of movement**.
- "*The long-awaited **Rakhine State Action Plan** both **expands and solidifies the discriminatory and abusive Burmese government policies** that underpin the **decades-long persecution of the Rohingya**," said [Phil Robertson](#), deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch.*
- [Reports](#) say that Rohingya Muslims who refused to register with immigrations have been beaten and arrested by Burmese police in 30 different towns in Rakhine between June and September.

On-going conflict in Shan and Kachin States

- Between **September 22nd and 26th** the Burmese government's Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC) held the **sixth round of peace talks** with the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), a group consisting of 16 ethnic armed organisations. However, [according to the NCCT leader](#), Nai Hongsar, **ceasefire talks** seem to be **'moving backwards'** as discussion has stalled and more difficulties have risen.

Kachin State:

- Conflict in Kachin State began in 1961 as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) sought to gain the autonomy that was promised to the region in the [1947 Panglong Agreement](#). A ceasefire was signed in 1994, but fighting erupted once again in 2011 when the government attacked KIA positions.
- The [most recent estimate](#), calculated by the **UNHCR** in **June**, of the **number of internally displaced peoples (IDPs)** in Kachin State is of **100,000** since the conflict erupted again in 2011.
- Skirmishes between the army and the KIA are [reported](#) to be occurring on a daily basis, and [have caused a further 5,000 people to flee](#) townships in the past week.

- As there are less than 100 camps throughout Kachin and little funds to cover operational costs, the situation in many IDPs camps [is dire](#). The Kachin Women's Association Thailand [reports](#) that in certain camps there are **as few as six nurses per 4,000 people**; this leads to unhealthy conditions and high risks of diseases, and causing the death of many women and children.

Shan State:

- Fighting in Shan State has continued since the 1950s following the government's failure to meet the conditions in the Panglong Agreement. Despite a ceasefire in 2011, skirmishes occur frequently.
- On October 3rd, three Shan armed groups (including both North and South Shan State Armies) and two major Shan parties (Shan Nationalities Democratic Party and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy) [met in Bangkok](#). They established three key points for a peaceful future in Shan State:
 - To unite in negotiating with the government on issues regarding the Union and Shan State;
 - To cooperate in order to enhance peace-building efforts within Shan State;
 - To continue negotiating in order to resolve political issues by dialogue, not by military means.
- On the other hand, the Burmese government does not seem to want to put an end to the conflict anytime soon. Between October 2 and 4, [more than 2,000 troops](#) were deployed to Shan State, according to Shan Human Rights Foundation. According to the organisation, the deployment led to severe human rights abuses over the past week including: shelling of towns, direct targeting of civilians in a marketplace, and looting of villagers property.

Political freedom

- Since the 2010 elections, that led to the end of five decades of military rule, the Burmese government [has been re-establishing some freedoms](#) by allowing opposition parties to run, relaxing the hold on media by allowing private press to publish and by freeing more political prisoners.
- However, big issues still remain in all three of these fields:

Political parties:

- On **September 30th**, **President Thein Sein** [signed into law](#) an **amendment** to the 2010 Political Parties Registration Law forbidding temporary citizenship holders to become members of or form political parties.
- Irrawaddy [reports](#) that the law previously allowed any "citizen, associate citizen, naturalized citizen or temporary certificate holder" to participate in the activities and formation of political parties, but with the current amendment **only those holding full citizenship status** are allowed to do so.
- This amendment will therefore prevent the Rohingya Muslims from participating in the political arena as most of them are 'white card' holders and are therefore considered 'temporary citizens'.

Media freedom:

- By 2012, there were 12 daily and 218 weekly newspapers in Burma.
- However, the government [has recently started](#) tightening its grip on the media once again as several editors and writers of Burmese newspapers have been arrested this year. In July, [five reporters were sentenced](#) to 10 years imprisonment with hard labour for allegedly 'disclosing state secrets'.

Political prisoners:

- In a recent media show-off move, the government '[pardoned](#)' over 3,000 prisoners. Those pardoned include 13 who were imprisoned due to 'political offences' and eight former senior military intelligence officers who served the former ousted intelligence chief and PM Khin Nyunt. The rest of these however had committed minor crimes and were due to be released soon.
- The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) [estimates](#) that there are currently still 74 political prisoners and a further 130 activists who are awaiting trial.

Find out more:

- Visit the webpage of [Burma Campaign UK](#), a UK based NGO that works for human rights, democracy and development in Burma, to learn more and read how you can take action;
- To read more on the issues facing Burma visit the [webpage](#) of **Burma Partnership**, a coalition of Burmese human rights organisations that promote peace and democracy for Burma;
- To learn more on the Rohingya people and to have regular updates on their situation, please visit **Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK)**'s [website](#);
- For updates on the situation in Shan State, please visit the **Shan Human Rights Foundation's** [website](#);
- For updates on the situation in Kachin State, visit the **Kachin Independence Organisation's** [website](#);
- For impartial and good quality news on Burma, please visit **The Irrawaddy's** [website](#).

[Join us](#) on November 21st for an evening with **Dr Sasa**, an inspirational doctor from Chin State whose mission is to run programmes that put primary health care, education, hope and community development into the hands of villagers in and around Chin State.