

When disaster strikes a warzone: The politics of humanitarian aid in post-earthquake Myanmar

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Abstract: On 28 March 2025, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck central Myanmar, creating a complex humanitarian crisis in a country experiencing longstanding armed conflict. With over 5,000 deaths and 17.2 million people affected, the humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by ongoing military operations and aid restrictions imposed by Myanmar's military leaders. This article examines how the Myanmar military has exploited the disaster for strategic gain, obstructed aid delivery, and continued attacks in affected areas. It argues for conflict-sensitive, decentralised humanitarian responses that engage non-state actors and community networks, while highlighting the urgent need for renewed international sanctions on arms and fuel transfers.

Keywords: Myanmar; humanitarian crisis; humanitarian response; earthquake; war

On 28 March 2025, at approximately 12:50pm local time, Myanmar experienced a devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake. The epicentre was located near Mandalay, the country's second-largest city.

Casualty figures remain uncertain, but reports indicate that over 5,000 people were killed with thousands more injured and hundreds still missing. Over 120,000 homes and numerous public structures—including schools, hospitals, and religious sites—were damaged or destroyed. An estimated [17.2 million people](#) have been affected by the disaster.

Women have faced specific challenges, as the earthquake disrupted health services across the affected regions. [More than 220,000 pregnancies were put at risk](#) due to damaged health facilities, shortages of medical supplies, and limited access to reproductive health services.

1. Earthquake responses amidst war: A complex humanitarian crisis

The response to the earthquake has been severely complicated by ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar. The country is home to one of the world's longest-running civil wars, dating back to its independence in 1948. Levels of conflict escalated dramatically following the February 2021 military coup.

The coup followed the November 2020 General Election, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory. On 1 February 2021, just before the new parliament was scheduled to convene, the Myanmar military (known as the Tatmadaw) seized power, claiming electoral fraud. They detained Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other senior leaders, declared a one-year state of emergency, and transferred authority to Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as head of a new governing body, the State Administration Council (SAC).

The coup sparked widespread protests and a civil disobedience movement. The military responded with violent crackdowns. Armed conflict intensified across many regions, particularly in the country's borderlands where longstanding clashes with ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) intensified. The National Unity Government (NUG) - formed after the coup and comprising ousted lawmakers and activists operating in exile or underground - claims to be the legitimate government of Myanmar.

In response to the coup, new armed resistance groups known as People's Defence Forces (PDFs) were formed. There are now over [600 PDFs operating across Myanmar](#). These groups vary in size, capacity, and affiliation—some are closely aligned with EAOs, others with the NUG, and many operate autonomously.

Nearly half of all PDFs are concentrated in the Central Dry Zone, a region that had remained relatively peaceful prior to the coup but has experienced some of the most intense fighting since 2021. Sagaing and Mandalay have become centres of PDF resistance, with anti-SAC forces successfully expelling the military from many areas, including large towns. These regions are among the hardest hit by the recent earthquake.

2. Bombing the victims: The Myanmar military's earthquake response

Following the earthquake, the SAC declared a state of emergency in six affected regions and publicly appealed for international aid. It also called for blood donations to support overwhelmed hospitals. On 2 April, the junta announced a 20-day unilateral ceasefire, later extended to 30 April. The NUG and several EAOs also announced ceasefires to facilitate relief efforts.

However, the ceasefire exists on paper only. Despite the scale of the disaster, the Myanmar military has sought to leverage the devastation caused by the earthquake for strategic advantage. Military operations have continued, including [airstrikes](#) on earthquake-affected areas in Sagaing and Mandalay. Between 28 March and 24 April, the military conducted at least 207 attacks, including 140 airstrikes. [Data from the UN Human Rights Office](#) shows that more than 70 of these attacks targeted areas hit by the earthquake. In Sagaing region, there have been reports of airstrikes targeting more residential areas, and the number of people injured or killed by airstrikes increased in the month after the earthquake.

The military has continued to restrict humanitarian access to opposition-held areas. Aid that enters the country must pass through military-controlled channels, and distribution has favoured SAC-held areas.

The SAC's control over information and movement—through internet and mobile phone shutdowns, and media restrictions—has significantly hampered coordination among aid organisations and hindered the dissemination of critical information to earthquake survivors.

3. Implications for humanitarian response in Myanmar

The intersection of Myanmar's civil war and the 2025 earthquake has created a complex humanitarian crisis. Ongoing military operations, restricted aid access, damaged infrastructure, and communication blackouts have all undermined effective disaster response. Addressing this humanitarian crisis requires international responders to consider the following implications.

1. The Myanmar military is seeking to exploit the disaster for strategic advantage. Rather than prioritising humanitarian needs, the SAC has used the crisis to attempt to regain territory in areas of the country where it has been in retreat.

2. There is no genuine ceasefire. Despite formal declarations, violence continues unabated. Humanitarian strategies must focus on the actual conditions on the ground rather than official statements.

3. New models of aid delivery are essential. Traditional, state-centric approaches are ineffective in a context where large parts of the country are governed by non-state actors. These approaches will not reach Myanmar's most vulnerable populations. The political situation in Myanmar is likely to remain one in which the SAC is not entirely overthrown but controls only a minority of the country. Large areas will continue to be governed by non-state actors. Donors and policymakers cannot wait for a national-level transition at the centre (such as new elections or peace agreements) but must operate within this reality. This requires finding ways to work in contested areas by engaging flexibly and constructively with EAOs, PDFs, and civil society networks to reach the most vulnerable populations. This includes sustained support for community-based organisations, who were at the forefront of the earthquake relief efforts, despite limited resources.

4. Disaster response must be conflict-sensitive. Aid workers should not attempt to 'work around' the conflict but instead recognise how it shapes the delivery and distribution of aid and people's

capacity to respond to disasters. This requires training in conflict analysis and the integration of conflict-sensitive approaches across all stages of disaster response.

5. Renew efforts to ban arms and aviation fuel sales to the Myanmar military: The SAC's continued human rights violations and its airstrikes in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, emphasise the need for [renewed efforts](#) to sanction the transfer of arms and aviation fuel to the Myanmar military.