

## CHAPTER 4

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# Myanmar Security Trend and Outlook: Tatmadaw's Mixed Fortunes

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### **Introduction**

After facilitating the smooth transition of power to the NLD (National League for Democracy; the opposition party that won a landslide victory in the November 2015 General Election) in March 2016, the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) or Myanmar Defence Services (MDS) which goes by the name Tatmadaw (Royal Force) seemed to have become well adapted in 2017 in dealing with its former nemesis NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership as the State Counsellor. In fact there was virtually no criticism by the State Counsellor or the Government of the Tatmadaw's role and actions carried out in the name of national security under the mandate given by the 2008 Constitution which accorded considerable power and latitude to the military.

However, as the peace process failed to make substantial progress, violent clashes with EAOs (ethnic armed organizations) that did not sign the October 2015 NCA (Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement) remained unabated throughout the year in Kachin, Shan, Kayin and even Chin States which had been peaceful in recent years. In the Western Rakhine State the Rohingya insurgency flared up again and Tatamadaw's harsh response led to an exodus of some 700,000 "Bengalis" (the government refused to acknowledge the name Rohingya for the stateless Muslims of Northern Rakhine) across the border to Bangladesh. The refugee crisis then resulted in an outcry from the international community (mainly Muslim and Western countries and their media, United Nations agencies, human rights advocates and Rohingya lobbies) leading to accusations of "ethnic cleansing" and calls for sanctions against the Tatmadaw.

### **Fighting with EAOs**

Most of the fighting was with members of the EAO coalition called Northern Alliance–Burma (NA-B) originally comprising the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic

Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Arakan Army (AA).<sup>1</sup>

It was reported by the Myanmar Peace Monitor (a peace support group based in Thailand) that in the five months after the conclusion of the Second Union Peace Conference 21st Century Panglong (UPC21CP) in end of May 2017 there were more than 80 instances of armed conflict compared to over 120 clashes in the five months before the UPC21CP event. In the June-October period, the most number of clashes between the MDS and the EAOs were with TNLA followed by clashes with KIA.<sup>2</sup> There was no let up in the last two months of the year as the Tatmadaw repeatedly clashed with KIA, TNLA, SSPP/SSA South (Shan State Progressive Party's Shan State Army-South), in Kachin and Shan States as well as AA in Chin and Rakhine States. The DKBA (Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army) splinter group which left the main DKBA (Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, an NCA signatory) some years ago also clashed with the army on several occasions in Kayin State. There were even fighting with the NCA signatory SSA-North mainly due to territorial disputes and surprise encounters. As for the reasons behind those clashes, many EAOs accused the MDS of expanding territory and launching unprovoked offensives often using armour, artillery and air (rotary and fixed wing aircraft) support, while the army justified its operations as defensive reactions, "area clearing", anti-smuggling measures (mainly narcotics, jade, gems and timber) and counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among them the AA is believed to be under the tutelage of KIA.

<sup>2</sup> See Zarli Myint Oo, "Over 80 armed conflicts happened during the five months after the conclusion of the 21st [Century] Panlong Second Conference" (in Myanmar language), *7 Day Daily* online, 14 November 2017 at <http://www.7daydaily.com/story/112942>.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Lawi Weng and Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, "Burma Army Seizes Four KIA Bases", *Irrawaddy*, 10 January 2017 at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burma-army-seizes-four-kia-bases.html>; Dustin Barter, "The forgotten war in Kachin State", *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 October 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-forgotten-war-in-kachin-state>; "Army Shelling Seen Signaling Start of New Offensive in Kachin, Shan States", *Irrawaddy*, 14 December 2017 at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/army-shelling-seen-signaling-start-new-offensive-kachin-shan-states.html>; Chan Thar, "KIA/TNLA forces attack pipeline in Shan State", *Myanmar Times*, 22 December 2017 at <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/kiatnla-forces-attack-pipeline-shan-state.html>; Naing Naing, "TNLA, Burma Army clash in northern Shan State", *DVB*, 10 April 2017 at <http://www.dvb.no/news/tnla-burma-army-clash-northern-shan-state/75077>; Sai Wansai, "ARMED CONFLICT RESUMES IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE", *S.H.A.N.*, 19 September 2017 at <http://english.panglong.org/2017/09/19/armed-conflict-resumes-in-northern-shan-state-after-a-month-lull-conflict-continues-between-the-tnla-and-tatmadaw/>; "SSPSSA clash with Burmese army in Mong Hsu", *S.H.A.N.*, 25 January 2017 at <http://english.panglong.org/2017/01/25/sspssa-clash-with-burmese-army-in-mong-hsu/>; "Government Tatmadaw battles SSPP/SSA in area control and clearing operation" (in Myanmar language), Thit Htoo Lwin, 29 November 2017 at <http://thittoolwin.com/2017/11/sspssa.html>; Shwe Aung, "Arakan Army clashes with government troops", *DVB*, 16 February 2017 at <http://www.dvb.no/news/arakan-army-clashes-government-troops/74189>; Anthony Davis, "Myanmar's other Rakhine problem", *Asia Times*, 29 November 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/myanmars-rakhine-problem/>; "1,300 Chin State villagers flee to India to escape Tatmadaw, Arakan Army clashes", *Frontier Myanmar*, 29 November 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/1300-chin-state-villagers-flee-to-india-to-escape-tatmadaw-arakan-army-clashes/>; "Burmese army clashes with RCSS/SSA in Mong Pawn", *S.H.A.N.*, 20 January 2017 at <http://english.panglong.org/2017/01/20/burmese-army-clashes-with-rcsssa-in-mong-pawn/>; and

A surprising development in the conflict cycle involving EAOs and the MDS was the sudden eruption of violence on 6 March 2017 in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone which saw prolonged heavy large scale fighting between the MDS and the MNDA in 2015 in which both sides suffered hundreds of casualties.<sup>4</sup> The MNDA attacks on army outposts, police stations and private enterprises in Laukkai, the capital of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, on Monday morning resulted in some 30 fatalities and around 20,000 refugees crossing over the border to Yunnan with a smaller number of people fleeing to Lashio to the south. Though the number of attackers was quite small and the duration, intensity and geographical scope of the conflict were much less than that in the 2015 “war”, it could be seen as a significant negative development that undermined the involvement of the NA-B in the peace process and created a kink in relations with China which accords a high priority on border security and stability.<sup>5</sup> Further clashes broke out in May when government troops reportedly shelled MNDA bases that led to retaliatory attacks by the Kokang rebels.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Rakhine Crisis and the Tatmadaw<sup>8</sup>

Myanmar's western Rakhine State which borders Bangladesh has been a destination for Muslim settlers for centuries. The influx of people from India (both Muslims and Hindu) into Rakhine (then called Arakan) increased after it was ceded to Britain in 1825 after the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824. Successive governments in Myanmar since independence in 1948 have been unsuccessfully grappling with the problem of undocumented Muslim immigrants in Rakhine State who are stateless

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Sai Aw, <http://english.panglong.org/2017/04/05/burmese-army-rcsssa-clash-in-panglong/>.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the 2015 “Kokang war”, see Tin Maung Maung Than, “Myanmar Security Outlook: A Taxing Year for the Tatmadaw”, in *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, NIDS Joint Research Series No. 14 (Tokyo: NIDS, 2016), pp. 33-43.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Roseanne Gerin and Luisetta Mudie, “20,000 Refugees Flee Myanmar's Kokang Conflict Across The Border Into China”, RFA, 8 March 2017 at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/20000-refugees-flee-myanmars-kokang-conflict-across-the-border-into-china-03082017142216.html>; Mraat Kyaw Thu, “Kokang fighting the latest setback to peace process”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 March 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/kokang-fighting-the-latest-setback-to-peace-process>; and Bertil Lintner, “A Chinese war in Myanmar”, *Asia Times*, 5 April 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/chinese-war-myanmar/>.

<sup>6</sup> See “Fighting reignites in Kokang region”, S.H.A.N., 13 May 2017 at <http://english.panglong.org/2017/05/13/fighting-reignites-in-kokang-region/>.

<sup>7</sup> See *Kyemon* (Myanmar language daily), 5 January 2017, p. 9; and *Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM)*, 5 January 2017, p.3

<sup>8</sup> For an overview with a human rights perspective on the post-August 2017 Rakhine crisis and its international repercussions, see ALTSEAN BURMA, “ROHINGYA TARGETED BY ETHNIC CLEANSING IN ARAKAN/RAKHINE STATE”, Briefing Note, 12 October 2017 at <http://www.altsean.org/Docs/PDF%20Format/Briefer/Rohingya%20briefer%20-%20October%202013.pdf>.

and believed to have their origin in what is now Bangladesh. When those migrants became the majority in northern Rakhine and they assumed the “Rohingya”<sup>9</sup> identity (both the name and their claim as natives have been rejected by the authorities as well as the Myanmar polity who use the name “Bengali”), communal tensions rose to the point where violent confrontations broke out on an unprecedented scale in recent years, culminating in an armed uprising by Muslim militants in October 2016.<sup>10</sup>

The “clearing operation” conducted by the MDS in northern Rakhine in the aftermath of the October attack lasted some four months. Thereafter with occasional kidnapping, killing and setting of IEDs (improvised explosive devices), tensions lingered on between the Rakhine (Buddhist) and Rohingya (Muslim) communities while both the State Government and Union Government redoubled their efforts to improve security, understand the conflict situation<sup>11</sup> and improve the livelihood of the impoverished people through increased development aid. However, the shadowing insurgent group which adopted the acronym ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) apparently had been receiving foreign assistance and working the ground quietly and waiting for an opportunity to launch another round of assaults on the weaker links of the security apparatus. On hindsight it seems that such an outbreak is a question of not if but when.<sup>12</sup>

The attack on 25 August 2017 appeared more coordinated and involved a larger number of militants than that launched in October 2016. According to a Tatmadaw

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<sup>9</sup> The use of the term Rohingya in this article does not necessarily mean an endorsement of the group’s claim to be classified as an ethnic national group. The issues of citizenship and ethnic classification are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> For an insightful study of the origins and evolution of communal violence in Rakhine, see Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim “Other”* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> An investigation commission chaired by Vice-President U Myint Swe (former Lt. general and Yangon Region Chief Minister under the previous government) was formed in December 2016 to investigate the October attacks. It found that there were no human rights violations by the security forces. Earlier in September the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State chaired by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was established “as a neutral and impartial body which aims to propose concrete measures for improving the welfare of all people in Rakhine” (<http://www.rakhinecommission.org/>). Popularly known as the Annan Commission it tendered its final report to the Myanmar Government on 23 August 2017 (see press release on 24 August 2017 by the Annan Commission at [http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/final\\_report-20170822-news-release\\_For-Web.pdf](http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/final_report-20170822-news-release_For-Web.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Anthony Davis, “Foreign support gives Rohingya militants a lethal edge”, *Asia Times*, 15 August 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/foreign-support-gives-rohingya-militants-lethal-edge/>; idem., “Rohingya insurgency gains momentum in Myanmar”, *Asia Times*, 15 August 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/rohingya-insurgency-gains-momentum-myanmar/>; and “Myanmar: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?” BBC News, 6 September 2017 at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41160679>. Interestingly, the attacks happened barely two weeks after the emergence of media reports on army troops being sent to northern Rakhine to counter the rising number of terror attacks against the local population (“Myanmar ramps up troops, curfews in violence-wracked Rakhine”, *The Straits Times*, 12 August 2017 at <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia-se-asia/myanmar-ramps-up-troops-curfews-in-violence-wracked-rakhine>).

statement issued in October, some 4,000 militants led by ARSA members attacked 30 police outposts and an army camp “simultaneously”. In the statement the Tatmadaw “said it is important to view the attacks as an intentional disruption of national security”.<sup>13</sup> The initial wave of early morning attacks left one soldier and ten policemen dead, and as the military moved in to clear the affected area (Maungtau, Buthidaung and Yathedaung Townships) the insurgents resorted to hit-and-run tactics using IEDs (improvised explosive device) and assorted weapons. It was reported that 370 militants and 15 security personnel died in the fighting up to the end of August.<sup>14</sup> As the fighting tapered off and the exodus of refugees to Bangladesh gathered momentum, ARSA declared a one month-long unilateral ceasefire on 10 September which was ignored and later rejected by the authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Defence Minister Lt. General Sein Win was reported to have said “No government negotiates with terrorist groups. We dismiss them”.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the military response, the Anti-terrorism Central Committee, with the approval of the government, issued Order 1/2017 dated 25 August 2017 that declared ARSA as a terrorist group.<sup>17</sup> Local authorities also issued a curfew order in Maungtau District (Maungtau and Buthidaung townships) after the attacks and it was extended for another two months on 25 December 2017. It forbids assembly of five or more persons and prohibits going outside from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore the government decided to speed up the building of security infrastructure in Rakhine State announcing on 18 September that an additional sum of Kyat (K) 20 billion (around US\$15 million) would be provided for the fencing of the border with Bangladesh which had been carried out by military engineers since fiscal year 2009/10. It was also revealed that the construction ministry was to urgently build a

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<sup>13</sup> President Office, “Tatmadaw releases statement on Rakhine terrorist attacks”, 24 October 2017 at <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-7837>.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM)*, 26 August 2017, pp. 1, 3; and BenarNews, “Nearly 400 Rohingya Insurgents Killed in Rakhine Violence: Myanmar Military Chief”, RFA, 1 September 2017 at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/toll-09012017153437.html>. The government’s information committee stated that the total number of known casualties up to 10 November at the hands of the Muslim militants were 115 with 86 dead and 29 injured of which 13 (2 from the military) and 15 (5 from the military) respectively were security personnel. Another 82 (one soldier) went missing or were abducted (“86 dead due to violent attacks by ARSA extremist terrorists” [in Myanmar language], Thit Htoo Lwin, 11 November 2017 at [http://www.thittoolwin.com/2017/11/arsa\\_11.html](http://www.thittoolwin.com/2017/11/arsa_11.html)).

<sup>15</sup> Htet Naing Zaw, “Myanmar Army Rejects ARSA on Final Ceasefire Day”, *Irrawaddy*, 9 October 2017 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-army-rejects-arsa-final-ceasefire-day.html>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *GNLM*, 26 August 2017, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *GNLM*, 27 December 2017, p. 6.

network of roads to and around the northern Rakhine Mayu mountain range where ARSA was active.<sup>19</sup>

The plight of the stateless Rohingya has been the perennial issue of interest for foreign (mainly Western and Muslim) media for decades but after the communal violence in 2012 it became the *cause célèbre* for the international community influenced by Rohingya lobbies and human rights bodies highlighting Rohingyas' vulnerabilities to coercion, abuse and violence allegedly perpetrated by the Buddhist majority and the authorities including the security forces. "Genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" became the catch words for those condemning the "clearance" operations conducted by the Tatmadaw in the aftermath of the October 2016 and August 2017 attacks by ARSA that led to an exodus of some 70,000 and 700,000 refugees into Bangladesh respectively. This time around, like in 2016 (but more extensively and intensively), print, broadcast and social media were effectively utilized by Myanmar's detractors to lobby the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and Western governments to censure and impose sanctions on the government and the Tatmadaw for allegedly abetting and /or perpetrating arson, rape, torture and mass killings. Myanmar authorities' many attempts to counter the allegations and fake/false news by providing "true facts" and explanations through the local media, press conferences, notifications, tours and presentations at the UN and other international forums apparently resonated with the sentiments of the general public, who responded by staging rallies in support of the Tatmadaw actions to defend sovereignty and protect its citizens. However, those activities and refutations did little to change the widely held perceptions that security forces in general and the Tatmadaw in particular were responsible for the alleged crimes against Rohingyas and international pressure remained unabated.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The border fence had a 67-kilometre gap out of a total of some 273 kilometres and some existing sections required repair or upgrading. The forested Mayu mountain range is believed to be the sanctuary for ARSA militants. See *GNLM*, 19 September 2017, p. 6; and Mratt Kyaw Thu, "Security, infrastructure in northern Rakhine receives massive cash boost after refugee exodus", *Frontier Myanmar*, 11 October 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/security-infrastructure-in-northern-rakhine-receives-massive-cash-boost-after-refugee-exodus>; and *GNLM*, 19 September 2017, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> See ALTSEAN op. cit. and pronouncements by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Fortify Rights, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Secretary General, Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar and the UN Secretary General himself as well as the resolutions adopted by the European Union (EU) and UN Human Rights Commission on the Rohingya crisis. It seems that Myanmar had lost the "media war" well before the latest round in 2017 (private communications in Yangon and Singapore). See, also, David Scott Mathieson, "Spin, lies and social media obscure crisis in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 1 September 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/spin-lies-social-media-obscure-crisis-myanmar/>.

Consequently, Western governments began taking punitive measures aimed at punishing the Tatmadaw. On 19 September, the United Kingdom (UK) suspended its non-combat training courses for Myanmar military officers. A government statement said: "In light of the ongoing violence in Burma's Rakhine State, the growing humanitarian crisis it has caused, and our deep concern about the human rights abuses that are taking place, we have decided to suspend the educational courses provided to the Burmese military until there is an acceptable resolution to the current situation".<sup>21</sup> Tatmadaw authorities reacted angrily saying that the Tatmadaw would "never, ever send any trainees to Britain in the future".<sup>22</sup>

According to a statement on 16 October, the EU suspended "invitations" to Myanmar military "senior military officials including the commander-in-chief". It was also reported that "all practical defence cooperation" would be reviewed due to "the disproportionate use of force by the Myanmar government in carrying out military operations in Rakhine State and alleged human rights violations".<sup>23</sup>

There were also adverse reactions from the United States. On 12 September Senator John McCain, a supporter of US military engagement with the Tatmadaw (who as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee is a powerful voice in Washington), announced that he "can no longer support expanding military-to-military cooperation given the worsening humanitarian crisis and human rights crackdown against the Rohingya people".<sup>24</sup> On 18 October, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a speech at the Washington Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said "We really hold the military leadership accountable for what's happening". However, he did not mention whether sanctions were being considered at the moment.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless on 23 October a State Department spokesperson said "It is imperative that any individuals or entities responsible for atrocities, including non-state actors and vigilantes, be held accountable". The AFP reported that the US "has halted its consideration of travel waivers for senior Myanmar

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<sup>21</sup> AFP, "UK suspends Myanmar military training amid Rakhine crisis", *Frontier Myanmar*, 20 September 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/uk-suspends-myanmar-military-training-amid-rakhine-crisis>.

<sup>22</sup> *GNLM*, 21 September 2017, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ei Ei Toe Lwin, "Military sanction 'very specific', says EU", *Myanmar Times*, 19 October 2017 at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/military-sanction-very-specific-says-eu.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "US Senate panel chairman dumps plans to expand military cooperation with Tatmadaw", *Frontier Myanmar*, 14 September 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/us-senate-panel-chairman-dumps-plans-to-expand-military-cooperation-with-tatmadaw>.

<sup>25</sup> "US holds Tatmadaw leaders responsible for Rakhine crisis, says Tillerson", *Frontier Myanmar*, 19 October 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/us-holds-tatmadaw-leaders-responsible-for-rakhine-crisis-says-tillerson>.

military leaders, and is weighing targeted economic measures against individuals linked to the ‘atrocities’, along with targeted sanctions”. The AFP news report also mentioned that the “State Department also said that the US has also rescinded invitations to senior members of Myanmar’s security forces to US-sponsored events”.<sup>26</sup> Some Western experts and Myanmar watchers including Derek Mitchell, a former American Ambassador to Myanmar, Professor Zachary Abuza of National War College (Washington) and David Mathieson, who used to work for Human Rights Watch, expressed views that the sanctions were more symbolic than biting and could be counterproductive.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile Secretary Tillerson, after visiting Myanmar in mid-November, released a statement on 22 November in which he said “After a careful and thorough analysis of available facts, it is clear that the situation in northern Rakhine State constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya”. He reportedly promised to “pursue accountability through US law” that would include “possible targeted sanctions”. Though he reiterated the US condemnation of the August ARSA attacks he also stated “[No] provocation can justify the horrendous atrocities that have ensued”.<sup>28</sup> On 21 December the US Treasury Department sanctioned Major General Maung Maung Soe (commander of the Western Command that covers Rakhine, who was transferred out in November) together with 12 other individuals targeted as “serious human rights abusers and corrupt actors”, invoking a 2016 law named the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The sanctions would “block” the individual’s “assets under US jurisdiction, bar most Americans from dealing with” the person “and largely cut” the person “off from the global financial system”.<sup>29</sup> The Tatmadaw refused to comment on the sanction with Maj. General Tun Tun Nyi, a member of the Tatmadaw True Information Committee, telling VOA’s Myanmar language programme that there was nothing to say as the US was following its own policy. Meanwhile Myanmar political analyst Dr. Yan Myo Thein commented that he regarded it as a calibrated move in the light of Myanmar’s ongoing democratic

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<sup>26</sup> AFP, “US targets Myanmar military over Rakhine Violence”, *Mizzima*, 24 October 2017 at <http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/us-targets-myanmar-military-over-rakhine-violence>.

<sup>27</sup> See Martin De Bourmont, “U.S. Pulls Military Assistance to Myanmar Over Rohingya Abuses”, *Foreign Policy*, 24 October 2017 at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/24/u-s-pulls-military-assistance-to-myanmar-over-rohingya-abses/>.

<sup>28</sup> Oliver Slow, “US calls Rakhine security operation ‘ethnic cleansing’”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 November 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/us-calls-rakhine-security-operation-ethnic-cleansing>.

<sup>29</sup> Reuters, “US sanctions Myanmar general for human rights abuses in Rakhine”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 22 December 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/us-sanctions-myanmar-general-for-human-rights-abuses-in-rakhine>.



transition and being more of a symbolic nature. U Pe Than, a Union lower house representative from Rakhine, told VOA that the local Rakhine people regarded the Tatmadaw's actions as an operation to repel aggression by the other side and did not regard that as unjust violence.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation refused to condemn Myanmar and the Tatmadaw over the Rakhine issue.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it was reported that the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Senior General Min Aung Hlaing "expressed his gratitude to China for defending Myanmar's actions in handling the Rakhine crisis before the international community" when he met Sun Guoxiang, the Special Envoy for Asian Affairs of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 17 October.<sup>32</sup>

In response to allegations of systematic abuse and excessive use of force in its Rakhine operations, the MDS convened an investigation team led by Inspector General Lt. General Aye Win which conducted interviews with 2,817 "Bengali" Muslim villagers as well as hundreds of villagers from ethnic communities. It apparently found no wrongdoing by the security forces in their clearance operations in the aftermath of the August 25 ARSA attacks. According to its statement posted on 13 November on social media, "They [security forces] did not commit shooting at innocent villagers and sexual violence and rape cases against women. They did not arrest, beat and kill the villagers", adding that, "They did not totally destroy, rob and take property, gold and silver wares, vehicles and animals of villagers from the villages and displaced villagers. They did not set fire to the mosques in Bengali villages". Moreover it was asserted that all security personnel were just following "orders" from "superior bodies", and exercising "the rights of self-defence".<sup>33</sup> The report did not convince the critics and skeptics who believed the narratives given by the refugees in Bangladesh. For example, the retired Dutch Ambassador Laetitia van den Assum, a former member of the Annan Commission, reacted by saying that

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<sup>30</sup> "Tatmadaw said no remarks on American sanction because we are acting to defend the country", Thit Htoo Lwin (Myanmar language), 22 December 2017 at [http://www.thithtoolwin.com/2017/12/blog-post\\_382.html](http://www.thithtoolwin.com/2017/12/blog-post_382.html).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Hyonhee Shin, "U.N. rights investigator calls for pressure on China, Russia over Myanmar abuses", Reuters, 28 December 2017 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un/u-n-rights-investigator-calls-for-pressure-on-china-russia-over-myanmar-abuses-idUSKBN1EM00J>.

<sup>32</sup> Lun Min Mang, "Senior General thanks China for Rakhine support", *Myanmar Times*, 18 October 2017 at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/senior-general-thanks-china-rakhine-support.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Oliver Slow, "Tatmadaw denies wrongdoing in northern Rakhine operation", *Frontier Myanmar*, 14 November 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/tatmadaw-denies-wrongdoing-in-northern-rakhine-operation>.

the report “reinforces the dire need for an independent and impartial investigation” while others questioned the credibility of the report.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Tatmadaw and peace**

The Tatmadaw still maintained its insistence that the EAOs must accept the following six principles for peace:

1. to have a keen desire to reach eternal peace;
2. to keep promises agreed to in peace deals;
3. to avoid capitalising on the peace agreement;
4. to avoid placing a heavy burden on local people;
5. to strictly abide by the existing laws; and
6. to march towards a democratic country in accord with the 2008 Constitution.

It continued its rejection of proposals to include MNDA, TNLA and AA in the peace dialogue. It also refused to contemplate any change in its stance on accepting only one unified army under its command and that DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) must come first before SSR (security sector reform) in the sequencing steps towards peace. On the other hand the Tatmadaw C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing seemed to have accepted the importance of China’s role in the peace process while appreciating China’s support in defending its actions in Rakhine.<sup>35</sup>

## **The Tatmadaw’s other activities**

The Tatmadaw’s notable non-combat activities in 2017 include conducting high level international defence relations, military-to-military engagements with foreign militaries and addressing human rights related issues such as local grievances over soldiers, land mines and child soldiers.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, see e.g., David Scott Mathieson, “The mendacity of military justice in Myanmar”, *Asia Times*, 14 November 2017 at <http://www.atimes.com/article/mendacity-military-justice-myanmar/>; and “The military’s investigation into its own conduct in Rakhine is not credible”, *Frontier Myanmar* (editorial), 21 November 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-militarys-investigation-into-its-own-conduct-in-rakhine-is-not-credible>.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Lun Min Maung, “Senior General thanks China for Rakhine support”, *Myanmar Times*, 24 October 2017 at <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/senior-general-thanks-china-rakhine-support.html>.

### *Defence relations and military diplomacy*

As usual, in the Tatmadaw's conduct of international relations, the leading role was played by the C-in-C himself through bilateral visits and attendance of international gatherings on defence and security matters where occasionally service chiefs (army, navy and air force) and other senior officers were involved as well. It was a busy year in terms of overseas travel for the C-in-C who went on 11 (three for formal meetings) trips abroad in 2017 in which he met not only military counterparts but also political and government leaders. His agenda was reportedly wide ranging covering military cooperation as well as important national issues such as Myanmar's democratic transition, the Rakhine crisis and the peace process.

The first trip of the year for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in early March was to Vietnam and Cambodia, followed by visits to Germany and Austria toward the end of April where discussion on training for Myanmar officers was reportedly mooted.

During the trip to Manila in May for the 14th ASEAN military chiefs' informal meeting he met defence chiefs from Laos, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia separately.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to the Russian Federation from 17 to 24 June appeared to be a strategic move to enhance long standing military cooperation including weapon sales, training and sharing of anti-terrorism information. The trip included a meeting with the Russian National Security Advisor on 19 June where cooperation on broader security issues was likely to be on the agenda.

India has become an important country for military ties not only because of its proximity as a neighbour with a land border but also as a regional military and economic power that could temper to some degree the overwhelming presence of China in Myanmar. In his visit to India from 7 to 15 July the C-in-C met Prime Minister Modi which reflected New Delhi's high regard for Myanmar's friendship and cooperation in its rivalry with China.

His visit to Japan from 2 to 7 August was an informal working visit on the invitation of the Chairman of the Nippon Foundation which has been involved in supporting Myanmar's peace process, among others. He called upon Prime Minister Abe as well as the deputy prime minister who held the finance portfolio.

Bangkok's military and the government have been well disposed toward the Tatmadaw in recent years. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing attended the 5th Thai-Myanmar high level meeting on 29 August and was again in Bangkok from 5 to 8 November attending the defence and security exhibition of ASEAN countries.

His visit to PRC from 21 to 26 November was during a period of intense Western pressure over the Rakhine issue and could be seen as an attempt to boost the Tatmadaw's standing and reaffirm Beijing's backing in the face of widespread condemnation and sanctions by its Western detractors. The highlights of the visit included meetings with President Xi, Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chair General Xu and CMC member and Joint Chief of Staff General Li.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's last trip of the year was to Nepal on 10 December where he met the president, the prime minister and the defence minister.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's extensive travels and meetings with political and government leaders could be seen as a strategic thrust in the Tatmadaw's international relations to establish an expanding web of military cooperation, as observed by Dr. Yan Myo Thein, and keeping Myanmar and its Tatmadaw relevant within the New Delhi-Beijing-Tokyo triangle.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, due to the rift with the West caused by the latter's stand on human rights issues in Rakhine the Tatmadaw's cooperation with the US, Britain and the EU has been disrupted. Until a rapprochement could be engineered through decisive and bold steps by Tatmadaw leaders to rectify the MDS shortcomings and reconcile the differences over the handling of the Rohingya problem, the envisaged web would be incomplete.

### ***Human rights issues***

Much of the concerns over alleged human rights violations were related to issues regarding portering, excessive use of force, summary executions, child soldiers and land mines. In addressing those issues in 2017 MDS also employed litigation against the accusers. Journalists, activists and vocal ethnic personnel were prosecuted in the courts on charges such as defamation and unlawful association (with armed groups).<sup>37</sup> In a rare case of military justice, in January 2017, a military court in

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<sup>36</sup> This section is based on Dr. Yan Myoe Thein, "Tatmadaw's diplomacy and senior generals trips" (in Myanmar language), *7DayDaily*, 18 December 2017 at <https://www.7daydaily.com/story/115771>.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Lun Min Maung, "Military has dropped charges against journalists, activists", *Myanmar Times*,

Myitkyina (Kachin State capital) sentenced a private to two years of hard labour for the unwarranted fatal shooting of a university student in June 2016 at a bridge checkpoint in Myitkyina.<sup>38</sup> In another case two soldiers, two officers, and a battalion commander from the army's 319th Light Infantry Regiment were prosecuted in September 2017 for murdering three male Kachin IDP (internally displaced persons) in Mansi Township (Kachin State) after they confessed in a military court. The trio were detained on 25 May on their way to their refugee camp after gathering firewood and were summarily executed after interrogation.<sup>39</sup>

A joint press release on the situation of child soldiers in Myanmar was issued on 23 June 2017 by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Myanmar UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) on Grave Violations against Children. It stated that the "Tatmadaw today released 67 children and young people from its" service adding that after the signing "of a Joint Action Plan (JAP) between the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) on Grave Violations against Children and the Tatmadaw in 2012, 849 children and young people have been released by the army". Moreover, it praised Myanmar for taking a couple of "significant actions" in 2017. For example, in "February, the Government signed the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups – an important international framework for the reintegration of children into civilian life". Also, in May "the Government relaunched its national campaign to raise awareness amongst the public about its commitment to end use and recruitment of children by the Tatmadaw – with radio and TV spots, newspaper inserts, and the reinstallation of billboards across the country".<sup>40</sup>

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1 September 2017 at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/military-has-dropped-charges-against-journalists-activists.html>; Sean Gleeson, "It's not fair": Khaing Myo Htun sentenced after controversial Sittwe trial", *Frontier Myanmar*, 12 October 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/its-not-fair-khaing-myo-htun-sentenced-after-controversial-sittwe-trial>; and Sean Gleeson, "Kachin pastor duo jailed after exposing alleged Tatmadaw church bombing", *Frontier Myanmar*, 27 October 2017 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/kachin-pastor-duo-jailed-after-exposing-alleged-tatmadaw-church-bombing>.

<sup>38</sup> The family of the deceased expressed disappointment over the apparent lenient sentence. See Nyein Nyein, "Burma Army Soldier Sentenced to Two Years over Student's Death" *Irrawaddy*, 6 January 2016 at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burma-army-soldier-sentenced-to-two-years-over-students-death.html>.

<sup>39</sup> See Kyaw Soe Lin, "Myanmar Soldiers Confess to Killing Three Kachin Refugees", *Radio Free Asia*, 20 September 2017 at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-soldiers-confess-to-killing-three-kachin-refugees-09202017134700.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Press Release, "Myanmar: 849 children and young people released from Tatmadaw since 2012", 23 June 2017, at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/press-release/myanmar-849-children-and-young-people-released-from-tatmadaw-since-2012/>.

Myanmar has yet to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and abstained in the voting for the 2017 UNGA Resolutions: 72/40 (landmines).<sup>41</sup> Myanmar reportedly allocated nearly US\$6 million for the joint initiative of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlements. The money was meant for "landmine risk education, victims' assistance, capacity-building and other related projects", covering affected areas in Kachin, Shan and Kayin States and Tanintharyi Region.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile the Myanmar armed forces had been accused of laying mines along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border on the path of fleeing Rohingya refugees in the exodus that started in September 2017.<sup>43</sup>

## **The Tatmadaw leadership and force modernization**

The Tatmadaw C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who obtained an extension of five more years after he reached the mandatory retirement age of 60 in 2016, appeared to be firmly in charge of the Tatmadaw. Moreover, during 2017 he seemed to have been able to maintain a steady working relationship with the civilian government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi despite some rumblings by some local and foreign observers that his Praetorian stance bordered on running an autonomous power centre influencing crucial areas of governance like security and the peace process.<sup>44</sup>

The generational change<sup>45</sup> in the command hierarchy up to the end of 2017 is shown in Table 1. As could be seen from Table 1 almost all major command and staff positions were occupied by those from cohorts close to DSA Class 25 to which General Mya Tun Oo, regarded as the third highest-ranking general in the Tatmadaw, belongs. The

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<sup>41</sup> See "Myanmar/Burma Country Profile" at [http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2017/myanmar\\_burma.aspx#](http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2017/myanmar_burma.aspx#).

<sup>42</sup> DVB, "Nearly \$6m budgeted for landmine initiatives in 2017", 5 April 2017, at <http://www.dvb.no/news/nearly-6m-budgeted-landmine-initiatives-2017/74974>.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Reuters, "Exclusive: Bangladesh protests over Myanmar's suspected landmine use near border", at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh-landmines/exclusive-bangladesh-protests-over-myanmars-suspected-landmine-use-near-border-idUSKCN1BH04F>.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., "The Unpublicized Summit in Naypyidaw", *Irrawaddy*, 9 February 2017 at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/the-unpublicized-summit-in-naypyidaw.html>; and Kyaw Zin Win, "Constitution needs changing 'as we have two governments'", *Eleven* online, 5 May 2017 at <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/9233>.

<sup>45</sup> September 1988 was the month in which the military coup took place after the popular uprising that toppled the Socialist one-party regime. November 1997 was when the ruling military junta known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) replaced the old guard members with younger commanders and rebranded itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The army has always taken the top leadership positions in the Tatmadaw and the short stint served by the air force C-in-C as JCS was an interim measure during the transition from the USDP to the NLD government.

only new appointee (during 2017) in this select group of top officers is Lt. G. Myo Zaw Thein who filled the position at BSO 5 that was previously concurrently held by Lt. G. Aung Kyaw Zaw. This line-up was perhaps part of the Tatmadaw leadership's renewal agenda in anticipation of the current C-in-C's eventual retirement.<sup>46</sup> It seems that two decades after a major change in the MDS leadership a new generation of leaders is in the making. The picture is expected to be clearer by the time of the next general election in 2020.

**Table 1: Generational Change in Army Leadership since the Coup**

Position	September 1988	November 1997	December 2017
C-in-C	Gen. Saw Maung (OTS 6)	Snr.Gen. Than Shwe (OTS 6)	Snr.Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (DSA 19)
Dy. C-in-C	Lt.G. Than Shwe (OTS 9)	Gen. Maung Aye (DSA 1)	V.Snr.Gen. Soe Win (DSA 22)
JCS	n.a.	n.a.	Gen. Mya Tun Oo (DSA 25)
AG	B.G. Aung Ye Kyaw (OTS 6)	Lt.G. Win Myint (OTS 28)	Lt.G. San Oo (DSA 24)
QMG	M.G. Phone Myint (OTS 9)	Lt.G. Tin Hla (DSA 3)	Lt.G. Nyo Saw (DSA 23)
BSO 1	M.G. Sein Aung (OTS 10)	Lt.G. Tin Oo* (OTS 22)	Lt.G. Tun Tun Naung (DSA-25)
BSO 2	M.G. Chit Swe (OTS 8)	--	Lt. G. Than Tun Oo (DSA-24)
BSO 3	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Aung Kyaw Zaw (DSA-24)
BSO 4	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Min Naung (OTS-66)
BSO 5	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Myo Zaw Thein (DSA-28)
BSO 6	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Soe Htut (OTS 64)
CMAS (DDSI)**	B.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)	Lt.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)**	Lt.G. Soe Htut (OTS 64) concurrent

Notes: n.a. = not applicable; -- = vacant; Snr. = Senior; V.Snr. = Vice Senior; Gen. = General; Lt.G. = Lieutenant General; M.G. = Major General; B.G. = Brigadier General; C-in-C = Commander-in-Chief; Dy. = Deputy; JCS = Joint Chief of Staff; AG = Adjutant General; QMG = Quartermaster General; BSO = Bureau of Special Operations (Chief); CMAS = Chief of Military Affairs Security (intelligence); OTS = Officer Training School (for graduates); DSA = Defence Services Academy (for high school leavers); \*Lt. G. Tin Oo was killed in a helicopter crash in 2001. \*\* (Then) Gen. Khin Nyunt was removed and arrested in October 2004 and Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) was replaced by MAS.

Sources: Maung Aung Myo, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009); media reports; and personal communications.

<sup>46</sup> It has been speculated that the C-in-C would retire after the 2020 general election upon reaching the age of 65.

In the annual live-firing fleet exercise code named Sea Shield held in waters near Coco Islands during the last week of March 2017 involved 28 naval vessels. An assortment of combatants (frigates, corvettes, and fast attack craft) and support ships were deployed in the Bay of Bengal (in the Indian Ocean) for hands-on training and tactical manoeuvres.<sup>47</sup>

On 21 May 2017 Myanmar Navy and China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) held a one-day exercise in the Gulf of Martaban that involved China's guided-missile destroyer *Changchun*, guided-missile frigate *Jingzhou*, and supply ship *Chaohu*. Myanmar ships taking part in this first ever joint exercise were guided-missile frigate UMS *Aung Zeya* and guided-missile corvette UMS *Anawrahta*. It was reported that it focused on "formation manoeuvres, fleet communication and joint search-and-rescue operations".<sup>48</sup>

Naval surface combatants are relatively expensive to purchase from abroad and the Myanmar Navy has been building up its shipbuilding capability for decades to produce modern sophisticated warships. In recent years the naval shipyard had successfully built frigates, corvettes, patrol crafts and support vessels. On Navy Day, 24 December 2017, the Tatmadaw (Navy) commissioned seven ships that included two LSTs (56-metre and 29-metre long landing ship tank), an offshore patrol boat (MNS *Inlay*) and four landing craft.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, submarines, apparently on the navy's wish list, are beyond the current technological and financial capacity of Myanmar. Nevertheless, the deputy defence minister revealed at a press conference in May 2017 that the "matter [of acquiring submarines] is being considered".<sup>50</sup>

The air force acquired more modern aircraft in the past year and also reportedly agreed to buy advanced jet fighters from China and to upgrade its inventory of ageing Russian-made jet fighters. On 15 December 2017 commemorating the 70th

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<sup>47</sup> See Lu Maw Naing, "Navy finishes Cocoa exercise", *Eleven* online, 1 April 2017, at <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/local/8596>.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Davis, "China holds first joint exercise with Myanmar Navy", *Jane's 360*, 23 May 2017, at <http://www.janes.com/article/70671/china-holds-first-joint-exercise-with-myanmar-navy>.

<sup>49</sup> See *GNLM*, 25 December 2017, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Pyae Thet Phyoo, "Submarine purchase if there is only sufficient budget", *Myanmar Times*, 4 May 2017, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/25843-submarine-purchase-only-if-there-is-sufficient-budget.html>.



anniversary of Tatmadaw (Air) Day, six Yak-130 advanced jet trainers cum light attack aircraft, two Dutch Fokker-70 (twin turboprop) transports and French/Italian ATR-42-320 (twin turboprop) transports were inducted into the air force.<sup>51</sup>

In the first half of 2017 there were reports that Myanmar air force had agreed to purchase 16 Pakistani/Chinese JF-17/FC-1 Thunder multi-role combat aircraft. Apparently the acquisition of the Block-II variant with air-to-air refuelling capability, as a replacement for the ageing (1990s era) Chinese Chengdu F-7M Airguard (MiG-21 variant) interceptor and Nanchang A-5C Fantan (based on MiG-19) attack aircraft would greatly enhance the combat capability of the Tatmadaw (Air).<sup>52</sup>

Russian sources also revealed in early 2017 that ten older generation MiG-29 Fulcrum were upgraded by the manufacturer to the MiG 29SM (mod) standard which was less expensive and inferior to India's upgraded MiG-29UPG standard.<sup>53</sup>

Myanmar's air force suffered a tragic setback on 7 June 2017 when its less-than-a-year old Shaanxi Y-8F-200W four engine turboprop transport crashed in bad weather off Dawei (west coast of southern Myanmar) on its way from Myeik to Yangon. All 122 military personnel and civilians on board were lost.<sup>54</sup> A G-4 Super Galeb light attack jet and its pilot were also lost on the morning of 5 September 2017 near the town of Gwa while on a routine training mission.<sup>55</sup>

The relentless fighting with armed ethnic groups and clearing operations in Rakhine State as well as purchasing of military hardware resulted in a military budget for fiscal 2017/18 (April to March) that was the third largest among government ministries. At K 2.9 trillion (K 1.65 trillion for current spending and K 1.25 trillion for capital expenditure; altogether equivalent to US\$2.14 billion at the prevailing

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<sup>51</sup> Pyae Thet Phyo, "Submarine purchase if there is only sufficient budget", Myanmar Times, 4 May 2017, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/25843-submarine-purchase-only-if-there-is-sufficient-budget.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Reportedly decided in 2015 to buy the Sino-Pakistani aircraft at a unit price of US\$16 million the deal took some two years to be finalized. It was also indicated that license production in Myanmar could be on the cards. See Anthony Davis, "Myanmar In Advanced Negotiations to Licence-Build JF-17 Fighter", *Jane's 360*, 1 February 2017, at <http://www.janes.com/article/67387/myanmar-in-advanced-negotiations-to-licence-build-jf-17-fighter>; and Gabriel Dominguez, "Images show Myanmar Air Force JF-17/FC-1 conducting flight tests in China", *Jane's 360*, 14 June 2017, at <http://www.janes.com/article/71422/images-show-myanmar-air-force-jf-17-fc-1-conducting-flight-tests-in-china>.

<sup>53</sup> See "Myanmar MiG-29 Upgrade Revealed: Will Malaysia Follow?" *Defense Studies*, 2 April 2017, at <http://defense-studies.blogspot.sg/2017/04/myanmar-mig-29-upgrade-revealed.html>.

<sup>54</sup> See AviationSafet Network, 23 August 2017, at <https://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=20170607-0>.

<sup>55</sup> See *GNLM*, 19 October 2017, p. 3.

exchange rate) it constituted 13.95 per cent of the proposed total Union Government expenditure of K 20.9 trillion but it was reportedly less than the amount allocated for the previous fiscal year.<sup>56</sup>

## **Concluding remarks**

The Tatmadaw led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had mixed fortunes in 2017. It had not encountered any attempt by the civilian government to challenge its political role mandated by the 2008 Constitution. It had managed to maintain military pressure on the EAOs who had not ceded to the NCA. More importantly the government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military were seemingly on the same page regarding the peace process. In the Rakhine crisis it had garnered much goodwill and support from the Rakhine nationalists while the public at large rallied behind the Tatmadaw against international pressure. However, its international credibility and image suffered greatly and faced punitive actions by the Western powers and pressures from the UN and multilateral agencies. The Western assistance in transforming it to a “standard army” had all but evaporated. The narrowing of choice for support and cooperation had increased the vulnerability to the geopolitical ambitions of China and Russia.

In Rakhine the war is yet to be won. Though defeated in battle ARSA cannot be completely eradicated by force and the Tatmadaw may be ill-equipped to fight a prolonged asymmetric war of attrition where combatants and non-combatants are indistinguishable. Winning the hearts and minds of the Rohingya population in whose midst militants and potential jihadists are embedded is a herculean task under the present circumstances.

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<sup>56</sup> The highest allocation was for the Ministry of Planning and Finance which was followed by the Ministry of Electricity and Energy. Under the military rule the defence budget was given the largest share of the government budget. In the Fiscal 2016/17 budget that was approved by the outgoing President Thein Sein’s government, the military’s quantum was slightly more according to the deputy defence minister of the current government and was the second highest after the Ministry of National Planning. See Htoo Thant, “Defence expenditure ranks third in 2017-18 Union budget proposal”, *Myanmar Times*, 31 January 2017, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/24755-defence-expenditure-ranks-third-in-2017-18-union-budget-proposal.html>.