

# The controversial issue of minorities in responding to cyclone Komen in 2015

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RESEARCH BRIEF #7

## Key messages

- **Minorities were vulnerable and had limited options for self-help after cyclone Komen in 2015.** They were to varying degrees marginalized in the government response, aspects of which were directly or indirectly discriminatory, but international humanitarian actors rarely mentioned these challenges openly.
- **Chin and Christian civil society organizations (CSOs) were instrumental in providing relief to members of the Chin minority, but CSOs overall largely refrained from helping Muslims in Rakhine because of bias, restrictions or fear of stigmatization.** CSOs were either unwilling to support Muslims or described it as too risky for their organization
- **International humanitarian agencies relied on a multitude of strategies to try and help Muslims while not further escalating tensions, but with mixed success.** Perceptions were ultimately prone to political manipulation.
- **Minorities' plight during disasters deserves more outspoken attention – within Myanmar but also in high-level disaster policy circles.** In low-intensity conflict settings, humanitarian governance is partly about governing perceptions, but the trade-offs involved made must be carefully evaluated by policy-makers, donors and disaster response actors.

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## This research is part of the programme 'When disaster meets conflict'

Responses to disasters triggered by natural hazards have changed considerably in recent decades: away from reactive responses to disasters and towards more proactive attention to risk reduction, as well as away from state-centred top-down approaches towards more deliberately involving non-state actors and communities in the formal governance of disaster response.

However, in research and policy, little attention has been paid to scenarios where disasters happen in conflict situations, even though a significant proportion of disasters occur in such contexts. There is evidence that conflict aggravates disaster and that disaster can intensify conflict – but not much is known about the precise relationship and how it may impact upon aid responses.

This five-year research programme analyses how state, non-state and humanitarian actors respond to disasters in different conflict-affected situations. Because the type of conflict matters – for how disasters impact communities and for how aid actors support the people affected – we distinguish different conflict scenarios, notably high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict, and post-conflict.

The core of the research programme consists of case studies in conflict countries where disasters occur, but our interest extends beyond the disaster events. In particular, we seek to understand how the politicisation of disaster response affects the legitimacy, power and relations between governance actors.

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## Disaster response in low-intensity conflict scenario

Low-intensity conflicts constitute the largest share of conflicts worldwide and are generally under-researched.

In such settings, violence will often manifest itself through a repressive law, roadblocks cutting access to a separatist area, or structural discrimination of an ethnic group. While casualties are fewer than in high-intensity conflict, actual physical violence may suddenly erupt in the form of riots, targeted attacks or state repression. That is especially the case in intra-state low-intensity conflict, where the state is one of the conflict parties and (part of) society perceives it as unresponsive to their needs. To focus on heightened state-society tensions, an authoritarian state element can be found in all our low-intensity conflict country case studies.

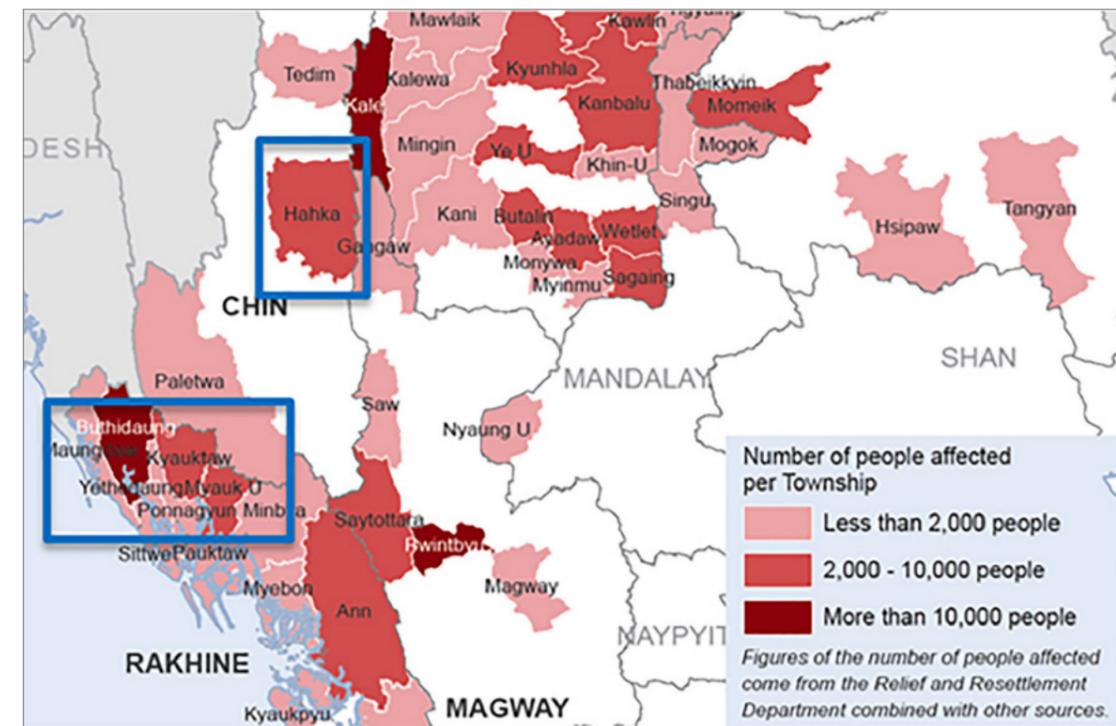
The low-intensity conflict scenario provides an intriguing terrain to study aid-state-society relations and humanitarian governance. The legitimacy of the state, state-contesting groups and side-lined minorities as providers or receivers of aid is highly contested. The ways in which parties frame the causes and effects of a disaster and the response are inevitably political.

International actors must position themselves within these tense intra-societal, state-societal and global dynamics. Functioning and sovereignty-asserting state structures remain their primary interlocutors, even when they fail to respect humanitarian principles.

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Flood-affected areas as compiled by government and humanitarian sources on 3 August 2015 (in red) and research case study areas (framed in blue). Source: modified based on United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2015.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Cyclone Komen made landfall on 30 July 2015, compounding the Myanmar floods and landslides which resulted from an unusually heavy monsoon season. On 31 July, the Government of Myanmar declared Chin and Rakhine ethnic states and the regions of Sagaing and Magwa 'natural disaster zones'. The cyclone struck at a moment of exacerbated identity politics: a few months after the passing of the controversial 'race and religion protection laws' which limit religious freedom and discriminate on religious and gender grounds, and a few months before the first open elections after 50 years of military rule.

This brief is based on research that focused on some of the most vulnerable groups, namely ethnic and religious minorities in the peripheral Chin and Rakhine States. It also explores the strategies civil society and international humanitarian actors devised to channel relief to the minorities.

<sup>1</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Myanmar: Flood Affected Areas (3 Aug 2015)*, 2015.

This research aimed to address the following questions:

- Was the government response impartial and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable?
- Which challenges did civil society and international humanitarians face when trying to channel relief to minorities?
- Which strategies did they devise to try and overcome these challenges?
- What does this mean for the governance of disaster response in low-intensity conflict settings?

In a context where the conflict dynamics varied greatly by location and where people may have their own motivations for participating in the research, let it be stressed from the start that all statements relate back to the participants' subjective framing of the disaster and of the conflict. This in itself is reflective of the conflict dynamics at play.

## Risks, disasters and disaster response in Myanmar

Myanmar is highly exposed to floods, landslides, earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis. It is 12<sup>th</sup> most at risk country out of 191, with high risk for associated increased conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Disaster risk is further compounded by vulnerability, especially among displaced people, and low capacity in terms of disaster risk reduction but also more broadly institutions and governance.<sup>3</sup> The Myanmar Disaster Preparedness Agency and the National Disaster Management Central Committee were only established in 2012. Existing research<sup>4</sup> and research participants pointed to lack of clarity in terms of leadership and responsibilities. A disaster law, reference handbooks and other standing orders were not yet fully tested or operational when the cyclone struck.

## A context of high-rising tensions and volatility

2015 Myanmar was a highly volatile context to operate in on three levels: the volatility of intercommunal tensions, the volatility of a government system in partial democratic transition, and the volatility of a humanitarian system in over-haul.

First, for decades the Myanmar government has responded to numerous minorities' calls for self-governance with repression, asserting the image of a national, unified Buddhist and ethnically Bamar entity. In 2015, tensions between religious groups were high, not least on social media. Rakhine State is an especially tense zone, where

<sup>2</sup> INFORM Index for Risk Management: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Risk Early Warning and Preparedness and the European Commission, *Myanmar 2018 INFORM Index for Risk Management*, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Thet Naing Zaw and Seunghoo Lim, *The Military's Role in Disaster Management and Response during the 2015 Myanmar Floods: A Social Network Approach*, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 25, 1-21, 2017.



*The effects van cyclone Komen. Source: Alamy*

violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities killed hundreds and displaced 140,000 in 2012. The fate of the Rohingya Muslim minority, portrayed in the mainstream Myanmar discourse as illegal immigrants, was far from resolved in 2015. Chin State is inhabited by members of the historically marginalised ethnic Chin minorities, which are predominantly Christian.<sup>5</sup> The degree to which they face persecution and still need international protection is debated. The UN High Commission for Refugees,<sup>6</sup> however, confirmed the maintenance of their refugee status in March 2019.

Second, the gradual shift away from an open military dictatorship, with the transfer of 75% of parliament seats and selected ministries to civilians, led to a multiplication of parallel government entry points under military and civilian authority. International research participants in particular described being 'overwhelmed' by a complex and confusing government system. Government authorities operate informally and unpredictably. The military-led General Administrative Department (GAD) is one of the few institutions which clearly maintains a central role in disaster response, down to the lowest governance level, the townships.

Third, international humanitarian actors have shifted from being '*institia non grata*' in the 2008 cyclone Nargis response to being established in permanent Myanmar country offices in 2015. Following the 2013 Nay Pi Daw accords, international donors are increasingly channelling their aid funds via government structures instead of via border operations or civil society actors, and commit to do so in line with govern-

<sup>5</sup> A few Chins also inhabit Rakhine state.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR Says Ethnic Chin Refugees May Require Continued International Protection as Security Situation Worsens in Myanmar*, 2019.

ment priorities. This shift is deemed problematic by many civil society organizations (CSOs), who say their communities are still suffering under the present regime. CSOs gained legitimacy and became more active in disaster response following their role in the 2008 response to cyclone Nargis. Still, far from all are officially registered as local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) – which would ease cooperation with international organizations (IOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) but also entail more government scrutiny.

## The wider context of increased sovereignty-humanitarianism tensions

How aid actors engage with minorities is part of a broader ongoing debate. In recent decades, tensions between states and international humanitarian actors have increased. There are on the one hand reassertions of state sovereignty worldwide, and on the other hand increasingly blurred humanitarian mandates which can expand to human rights or long-term resilience issues.<sup>7</sup>

Sovereignty-humanitarianism tensions intensify where international humanitarian actors take a stand on a government's treatment of minorities. In regimes where multiculturalism is perceived as a threat to unity and stability, the treatment of minorities clearly is framed as a domestic issue, or sometimes even a national security issue.<sup>8</sup> The level to which minorities are contentious ground may be one of the reasons why mainstream disaster policy and practice circles mention the need to pay attention to the 'most vulnerable' and indigenous people, but not minorities.

## Methods

Fieldwork was conducted between September 2017 and February 2018 in Yangon and in the landslide-impacted capital and civil society hub of Chin State, Hakha. Rakhine State itself could not be visited at the height of the Rohingya crisis, but the situation was discussed with a diverse range of Yangon-based aid actors. With one exception, government officials were not approachable for interviews.

Data collection consisted in documented exchanges with a total of 71 participants. 37 of them participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews including with staff from CSOs, LNGOs, INGOs, international organizations (IOs) and donor agencies, and 10 community members displaced by the Hakha landslide participated in focus group discussions and ranking exercises. Supplementary data were collected through informal discussion, observation and secondary sources such as official humanitarian reports and press clippings.

7 Clea Kahn and Andrew Cunningham, Introduction to the Issue of State Sovereignty and Humanitarian Action, *Disasters*, 37, S139-50, 2013.

8 Matthias Koenig and P. F. A. de Guchteneire (eds.) *Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies*, 2007.

## The 2015 cyclone response

The landslides and most widespread flooding in decades further compounded by cyclone Komen on 30 July left 125 dead and more than 1.5 million people temporarily displaced.<sup>9</sup> In the remote, mountainous and airport-less Chin State, floods and landslides swept away fields, roads and bridges, making relief very difficult logistically. Hakha township was listed amongst the five most impacted townships countrywide.<sup>10</sup> In Rakhine State, the same eight townships highly impacted by the 2012 intercommunal violence counted more than 125,151 damaged houses and more than 200,000 acres of destroyed arable land. According to official records,<sup>11</sup> 96,165 Rakhine inhabitants were still displaced on account of this disaster on 2 September 2015.

The Myanmar Union government handled the 2015 disaster very differently to how cyclone Nargis was dealt with seven years previously. In 2008, international support was first refused, and then let into the country very selectively. In 2015, for the first time in Myanmar history, the government promptly appealed to international support and worked side by side with staff dispatched by the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency in the newly operational Crisis Management Unit.

## Main findings

The three main findings show that some aspects have not changed significantly when comparing the 2008 and 2015 response, at least in the way in which minorities were handled.

### 1. Minorities were more vulnerable and had limited options for self-help. They were marginalized in the government response, albeit to different degrees

In both Chin and Rakhine States, **several structural factors limited minorities' coping capacities and increased their vulnerability to the cyclone.** These include:

- Living in the poorest and most remote region of Myanmar, as is the case for Chin State residents;
- Being of lower socio-economic status and barred from entry into certain business or public service opportunities, as is the case for Muslims by law;
- Living in flooded internally displaced people camps without freedom of movement, as was the case for many of the 140,000 Muslims displaced by the 2012 violence still living in camps in 2015;
- Not being recognized as citizens of the country and not having rights, as is the case for the approximately one million people belonging to the Rohingya ethnic group based in Rakhine prior to 2015.

9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Myanmar Floods and Landslides 2015*, 2015.

10 National Natural Disaster Management Committee, *Situation Report No.3* - National Natural Disaster Management Committee, 24 August 2015, 2015.

11 National Natural Disaster Management Committee, *Situation Report No.4* - National Natural Disaster Management Committee, 2 September 2015, 2015.

**Substantial aspects of the government response were described as directly or indirectly discriminatory by many participants.**

- In Rakhine, Chins and Muslims are politically underrepresented. Locally powerful people such as township administrators channelled aid towards their own non-minority communities;
- In Rakhine, government relief cash grants ended up in the hands of non-Muslims, who own the businesses;
- Government relief distributed from monasteries, not mosques or churches, was difficult to access for Muslims and the Chin Christian inhabitants of Rakhine;
- In Rakhine, isolated cases of severe minority marginalization were reported. For example, an IO official (interviewed 11 January 2018) mentioned that the relocation of Muslim flood victims in 'military vehicles' was 'not always done voluntarily';
- Concerning Chin State, a Chin CSO report<sup>12</sup> criticized the fact that, although Chin State is the poorest in Myanmar and was among the hardest hit by the floods and landslides, only 4% of Union government relief funding went to the state;
- In Hakha town, the government relief was described as belated and insufficient, and there was a 'difference in thousands' between the government and CSO count of impacted people – poorer households for instance were not included in the GAD count because they were not in formally registered housing. The relief was further described as inefficient and corrupt, as relief items went to waste in a government warehouse and the GAD was accused of withholding funds.

**International humanitarian actors did not talk about these challenges openly.**

When asked why, one INGO member (interviewed 11 January 2018) stated: 'we deal with this with the Humanitarian Country Team. We are not so stupid as to [speak out] alone.' This may be linked to fear of being withheld travel authorizations or even being banned from the country, which has happened to IOs and INGOs in the 2000s. In the case of Chin State, international humanitarians explained the lower levels of support in terms of logistical challenges. Some described Chin CSOs advocating for more support to Chin State of being 'too critical' and 'biased'. This bewildered those CSOs, who see advocacy for fair and transparent relief as their mandate.

**2. CSOs were instrumental in providing relief to members of the Chin minority, but largely refrained from helping Muslims in Rakhine because of bias, or restrictions, or fear of stigmatization.**

- **Chin and Christian CSOs were instrumental in mobilizing relief for their communities via diaspora and parallel minority or church networks.** CSOs were first excluded from the Hakha emergency meetings coordinated by the state government because they did not fulfil specific regulations, but were eventually allowed to participate when it became clear how much funding they could contribute. Yet the civil society response should not be romanticized; accusations of

<sup>12</sup> Chin Committee for Emergency Response and Rehabilitation, *The Chin State Floods & Landslides: A Community-Led Response and Assessment*, 2015.

biased distribution among the more than 50 different Chin ethnic sub-groups, lack of transparency on the spending of funds, or their instrumentalization for evangelism, were reported.

- **Muslim-affiliated civil society and international groups could only play a limited role in the response**, because of limited opportunities and networks, or government restrictions. Muslim contractors were for instance not allowed to participate in reconstruction efforts. There is a history of denying access to Muslim-affiliated organizations.<sup>13</sup> One rare INGO with Muslim ties mentioned that they did operate in Rakhine, but without a formal Memorandum of Understanding.
- **INGOs who usually collaborate with CSOs to implement relief activities stated that the Rakhine context needed an 'international hand' to make sure relief reached Muslims.** CSO research participants were indeed either unwilling to support Muslims, or described it as too risky for their organization. The latter point is reflected in this quote of a Chin CSO member (interviewed 17 November 2018):

*'We speak on behalf of other minority groups. But with Muslims it is tricky on the ground [...] Even if I personally also feel for the Rohingya. But if you are in a dangerous situation [...] Between the tiger and the snake, you have to be careful. Limits exist even for [our organisation].'*

**3. International humanitarian agencies relied on a multitude of strategies to try and help Muslims while not further escalating tensions, but with mixed success.**

As described by one IO official (interviewed 7 November 2017), there was '**political manipulation**' to frame the internationals as the '**bad**' helping Muslims, and the government as the good helping the Rakhine and mostly the Bamar, thus gaining political mileage.

**Supporting Muslims came with especially high security risks for staff, who could be attacked in the field and online, and with reputational risks for the organization.** As stated by an IO member (interviewed 30 January 2018): 'In Rakhine, everyone is poor. It is true the Muslims are often worse off, but working only for them is a suicide mission.'

International humanitarians **tried to 'limit the perception damage' of providing relief to Muslim groups** including the Rohingya by four main strategies:

1. Conducting the exact same relief initiatives in neighbouring Buddhist and Muslim communities '50-50', regardless of differentiated needs;

<sup>13</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, *Burma Blocks Opening of Office for Islamic Body OIC*, 2012.

2. Hoisting the right flags in the field and when interacting with government. Abiding to strict 'visibility guidelines' (e.g. no pictures of aid workers' faces to prevent them from being attacked individually), and closely monitoring how their organizations and activities were portrayed, including on social media. Donors also highlighted perception management as core discussion point with the agencies they funded.
3. Engaging with actors beyond those who would be strictly necessary for a humanitarian operation, such as paying visits to monastery leaders to increase trust and acceptance. Organizations with a dual humanitarian and development mandate described their long-term policy or development work as beneficial to their relief operations.
4. Providing financial incentives for civil society actors to distribute relief to Muslim minorities for the international agency.

## Conclusions

The case of Myanmar demonstrates that, even in contexts where there might be progress in terms of democratic transition and disaster policy, working with minorities remains a highly contested terrain. Minorities' plight during disasters deserves more outspoken attention, within Myanmar but also in high-level disaster policy circles. The same applies more generally concerning the political drivers of vulnerability. Exploitation, oppression and repression, which all increase disaster vulnerability and marginalization in disaster response, are too often brushed aside. This is especially the case as increasing attention is given to build people's 'resilience' at community level, thus shifting structural vulnerability drivers to the background.

These findings are relevant for other low-intensity conflict settings which unfold along ethnic, religious or class lines. First, the findings highlight how disaster response perceived as benefiting one group only can escalate tensions. In low-intensity conflict settings especially, humanitarian governance is not only about shaping the content of relief programmes, but also about governing perceptions. Some examples of how important this is, and how that can be done in practice, were given in this brief.

A second important question is the degree to which the governance of perceptions should take precedence over core activities. In Rakhine State, many civil society actors refrained from supporting Muslim minorities, and many international humanitarian actors chose to apply '50-50 targeting' as the new targeting standard, openly departing from the principles of humanity and impartiality. For the sake of minimizing low-intensity conflict tensions, 'impartiality' was reinterpreted as helping two community groups without discrimination, while it usually means helping *human beings* according to their needs, without discrimination.

Just as in the Ethiopian case study in this research programme,<sup>14</sup> disaster response in low-intensity conflict settings is an endeavour involving largely unavoidable trade-offs. These trade-offs must be carefully evaluated by policy-makers, donors and disaster response actors.

The findings are further elaborated on in an [open access article](#).<sup>15</sup> For more information, please contact the author at [desportes@iss.nl](mailto:desportes@iss.nl)

## More information

- For more information, please contact the author at [mena@iss.nl](mailto:mena@iss.nl).
- Find the project details [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Desportes, Hone Mandefro, and Dorothea Hilhorst, *The Humanitarian Theatre: Drought Response during Ethiopia's Low-Intensity Conflict of 2016*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57.1, 1-29, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Isabelle Desportes, *Getting Relief to Marginalised Minorities: The Response to Cyclone Komen in 2015 in Myanmar*, *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 39-59, 2019.