

Supporting the people of Myanmar: it's about political will

Friday 28 October 2022, by [BENOWITZ Daniel](#), [KAMAL Adelina](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2022).

In my recent interactions with Myanmar border-based local humanitarian actors and networks, what moved me most was their courage, ingenuity and solidarity. Many of these frontline humanitarian workers are refugees themselves or have been running and hiding from military atrocities for months, years or even decades. Rather than waiting for a formal mechanism, they have taken it upon themselves to devise strategies to assist those in need, by developing aid networks, building support and taking the necessary risks on the ground.

This is what I call [humanitarian resistance](#). According to [Hugo Slim](#), humanitarian resistance 'takes sides against repression, actively supports the democratic movement and tries to save as many lives as possible through the non-state networks'. It places the most vulnerable populations at the centre and enables local humanitarian actors to develop their own humanitarian solutions.

Observing how they facilitate assistance to people on both sides of Myanmar's borders and deep inside the country, I witnessed resilience at its best. It is a forced resilience - a means of survival - built over decades of resistance and strengthened after the February 2021 coup attempt. These people and groups have fundraised and mobilised to meet humanitarian needs without jeopardising their safety. Shared hardships with those in need have enabled them to nurture strong bonds and build trust. This strong resilience capital has resulted in more effective and efficient assistance, and provides assurance of continued, consistent efforts.

[Humanitarian resistance](#) is humanitarianism. It is an essential, ethical and legal form of humanitarianism. It is technically feasible, politically viable and morally imperative. But it is also often challenged and not sufficiently supported. For those with the power to facilitate or strengthen this humanitarian resistance, the question is: *are you willing to help?*

The costs of inaction

There are economic, health, and human security benefits to supporting humanitarian resistance here. It would help economies at Myanmar's borders; allow conflict-affected populations to access protection closer to home; and insulate neighbouring countries from further negative impacts. Conversely, not supporting humanitarian resistance would threaten regional stability and security. For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) specifically, it would further tarnish the bloc's credibility as an engine of peace, stability and economic growth.

Human security. A year into the coup, the number of armed clashes and attacks on civilians (8,647) [exceeded](#) those during the same period in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen or Iraq. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a group that tracks political detentions and killings (among other things) in Myanmar, the junta had killed [2,326](#) civilians. According to the United Nations (UN), in January 2022 [14.4 million](#) people in Myanmar - a quarter of the population -

were in humanitarian need and required \$826 million-worth of assistance (only [20%](#) of the year's pledge had been met as of 5 October). The [number](#) of people displaced across Myanmar exceeded 1.3 million, a record high. As pointed out by local groups providing aid since the coup, these figures are underestimates as they do not cover people fleeing and in hiding. The junta cannot track or record these households and individuals and will not give access to others to do so.

On 25 July 2022, the junta announced that it had executed four political prisoners. All four had been arrested, tried – though without basic fair trial rights, including the right to an appeal – and sentenced to death. Another [126](#) potentially face the same fate. Many others are detained awaiting court proceedings; according to the AAPP, [15,686](#) people are in detention. The junta has also targeted [family family](#) of those executed. Of the ten members of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, five criticised the executions in a [joint statement](#), with Indonesia's representative [specifying](#) that it breached the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. This was particularly significant in light of many ASEAN members' reticence to comment publicly on the post-2021 situation, much less criticise the junta.

Health security. [Even before the coup](#), Myanmar's health system was [in shambles](#) and sorely underfunded in rural ethnic areas, where the lion's share of healthcare service was provided by local community actors, ethnic health organisations and health workers now taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Since February 2021, government health professionals have [left work](#) to join the CDM. Meanwhile, the junta has further [undermined \[PDF\]](#) access to healthcare, including by targeting health and humanitarian workers and hospitals. A large proportion of IDPs in Myanmar are now in remote border areas, out of reach of community health mechanisms, in encampments and in close proximity to neighbouring countries. All of these factors increase the risk of disease transmission across borders, helping to explain why the China Red Cross has [facilitated](#) Covid-19 vaccinations in Myanmar's Shan and Kachin States. According to a local healthcare provider, malaria cases have multiplied ten-fold along the Thai-Myanmar border since 2021. The World Health Organization estimates that routine measles vaccination coverage for children in Myanmar [dropped](#) from 90% in 2020 to 42% in 2021.

Economic security. The economic fallout of the current crisis is also devastating. Myanmar's economic growth [fell](#) by 18.4% in 2021 and is on track to keep shrinking in 2022. As prices of oil and other inputs rise, and the value of the Myanmar kyat falls, many farmers have reduced production. Farmers in border areas are often either displaced by junta violence or see farming as a losing economic proposition in the face of local instability, and junta forces have destroyed villages, farms, food stores and livestock. The International Labour Organization [estimates \[PDF\]](#) that, in the first half of 2022, there were 1.1 million fewer jobs than in 2020, work productivity had fallen by roughly 10% and poverty had roughly doubled, with around 40% of people in Myanmar now living below the poverty line. The result of all this is that many people massing near Myanmar's borders are driven by poverty and economic uncertainty, and would benefit from economic assistance.

Four routes of aid

According to Slim, there are four routes that humanitarian aid providers could take at this point: (1) work exclusively through non-state actors; (2) work through the junta; (3) do both; or (4) leave Myanmar entirely. Option (2) is fraught for moral and practical reasons. Option (3) is dangerous because it jeopardises the security of aid recipients, who are willing to work with non-state actors but justifiably fear their information getting into the junta's hands. Multiple local actors said specifically that they would not accept aid from a donor that also works with the junta. Option (4) is considered better than options (2) and (3), because it would allow international aid providers to do good work elsewhere while potentially supporting local groups in Myanmar.

I strongly advocate for option (1). This approach would channel aid into Myanmar through its borders, using networks that have existed for decades and are providing aid to hundreds of thousands of people. These existing informal networks need more resources, including from major donors whose inclination has been to work through the junta or not at all. Assistance through Naypyidaw or Yangon cannot be facilitated by the actors also working with border-based local groups.

Costs of working through the junta

The junta has [weaponised](#) and cut off local sources of aid. It lacks de facto [control over much of the country](#) and the trust of people nationwide; because it will only allow international aid organisations to work in Myanmar under its auspices, working through the junta would deprive aid providers of access to most of the country, including border areas with the most acute need. In just one of seven districts in Karen State, along the Thai border, fighting and junta attacks since December 2021 have displaced [over 86,000 people](#). In Karenni State, clashes and attacks have displaced [between a half and two-thirds](#) of the population. Anecdotally, in Karenni State, one of the few places the junta has granted the World Food Programme (WFP) access, communities have refused to accept WFP aid because it is working through the junta.

The junta continues to brutalise the population, making it a terrible conduit for aid, so the principle of humanity suggests excluding it. The military has been at war for decades with many of the country's ethnic minorities, and has a history of religious persecution, including atrocities against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. Thus, the principle of impartiality makes the junta a highly suspect partner in aid provision.

Key international actors have privileged the junta as a partner in delivering humanitarian aid because they fear it will survive this crisis and only continued good relations will allow them to maintain their presence in and relations with Myanmar. While this is an understandable concern, its integration into humanitarian aid decisions violates the principle of independence.

[The junta will not allow neutral access to populations in need](#). It is an armed force waging war on the entire country, and a party to almost all conflict in Myanmar. The principle of neutrality suggests that the junta is no better - and is possibly worse - a choice than any other actor in Myanmar as a conduit for aid. That same principle should also not be used as an argument against supporting non-state actors that oppose the junta. In fact, neutral humanitarianism is not required under human rights or humanitarian law.

Benefits of border-based aid

Humanitarian aid through local groups operating along the borders poses fewer such problems. It does not need to be routed through political actors, and it therefore poses a lower risk of being co-opted by them; it can be provided directly to border-based aid providers that have established delivery systems of their own. Border-based groups have also established trust, alongside decades of experience and expertise. They know when and how to act effectively and have the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions. While these groups mostly operate in ethnic areas along the borders, they can organise assistance deep into the [Dry Zone of Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay Regions](#) by connecting to informal networks.

Generally, there are two types of border-based groups: those directly providing aid and those that pool funds from international donors and parcel it out to groups of the first type. Both receive either direct funding from international donors, diaspora groups and charities, or grants from pooled funds. Many have reporting, accountability and proposal mechanisms that comply with the

standards of foreign governments and other donors, but may choose not to pursue a funding source that forces them to reveal information they consider sensitive.

These groups' activities cover much of the country. One reported reaching over 80 partners with its aid since the coup, supporting community organisation, healthcare delivery and Covid-19 vaccines across 30% of Myanmar's townships in 12 states/regions. Aid, particularly in the form of cash, can reach much of Myanmar. This model has been used successfully, with one organisation having given cash aid to over 100,000 people in the first quarter of 2022 alone. Refugees International estimates that, between February 2021 and July 2022, border-based groups facilitated [over \\$10 million \[PDF\]](#) in aid to over a million people, including in areas in the interior.

How external parties can help

Any intervention or external support must start by acknowledging and building on the local context and the social, cultural, and physical capital supporting those in need. This includes informal networks built over decades, actors' wealth of local knowledge and experience, their capacity, their strong sense of solidarity and empathy and their clarity about their goals and what local populations need. It also includes people's endurance in resisting injustice and their resolve to improve the situation - a constant motivation external actors often take for granted.

The most effective approach identified thus far is to creatively circumvent restrictions and create an enabling environment for this locally led humanitarian action. Total disengagement from the junta is non-negotiable, as noted in the recommendations below.

Donors. Foreign governments and large donors should scale up their assistance for border-based groups. This will require greater support, consistency and flexibility. Border-based groups have, over decades, developed accountable systems, procedures and criteria suitable to their context. They have provided aid across Myanmar, but the scale of their services depends on the funding they receive. Consistent funding is recommended because one-time or short-term grants make it more difficult for local groups to plan humanitarian activities and reduce the consistency of their operations. One border-based aid provider reported that, after receiving a \$1 million grant this year, it planned to use leftover administrative funds to cover future gaps; while this may be prudent planning, it is also indicative of the erratic nature of aid to these groups.

Most importantly, donors must be flexible, not just in shifting funds as the crisis changes, but also in their reporting and accountability requirements. After all, as in any emergency, the severity of this crisis justifies donors exercising some flexibility. Border-based groups consistently said that they were unwilling to jeopardise the safety of their beneficiaries (and themselves) by reporting sensitive information about them. Some aspects of their work may lack a paper trail.

UN agencies - most of them, at least - are unwilling to facilitate humanitarian aid in Myanmar without the buy-in of the junta. Border-based groups have also overwhelmingly rejected the idea of a formalised cross-border channel that involves the junta, even if set up by the UN, ASEAN or the Thai government. The current situation requires further assessment of whether existing UN activities in Myanmar have benefited people, and whether their presence has done [more harm than good \[PDF\]](#).

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that provide humanitarian aid must decide which track they will pursue: the 'convenient' but fraught route through the junta, or the border-based solidarity route. If they use a dual-track approach, they must put in place strict mitigation measures to reduce risks and put in place strong firewalls to avoid information leakage and actions that jeopardise the safety of vulnerable groups.

Independent groups, unaffiliated with humanitarian aid implementation, should closely monitor those who use a dual-track approach, with an understanding of the context and the ethics and dangers of conducting dual-track aid. Monitor(s) should not be delivering aid or be affiliated with a group delivering aid, and their role should not be created by an agency coordinating aid.

Unlike UN agencies and foreign governments, INGOs have greater freedom to leave the country and support local groups remotely or from neighbouring countries. Doing so is more morally justifiable than pretending to do principled humanitarian work in Myanmar through the junta.

ASEAN has consistently leaned towards the junta, manifested through its decision to seek permission for aid delivery and safe passage mainly through the junta. Unless it removes the military junta from decision-making related to humanitarian aid and provides operational independence to its humanitarian agent (i.e. the [AHA Centre](#)), ASEAN should use its collective political leverage to encourage the international community to direct aid to border-based groups.

The AHA Centre should not be seeking access and safe passage from both junta and non-junta actors. It has no capacity to build strong firewalls between these dual tracks. Nor is it the appropriate mechanism for dealing with this political crisis. The [ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response](#) [PDF] envisages the AHA Centre facilitating aid through the leadership of the country in crisis. If ASEAN maintains that the illegitimate and illegal junta is Myanmar's leadership, those responsible for perpetrating the crisis will continue manipulating aid. While ASEAN's call for a joint needs assessment makes sense after a natural hazard-induced disaster, it makes little sense during a civil war when the scope and configuration of humanitarian need is in flux. It also makes little sense where the junta cannot provide – indeed, is blocking – access to much of the country. Tasking the AHA Centre to facilitate humanitarian assistance is also risky because it [stretches the Centre's resources and capacity](#) at the expense of its ability to address to its core mandate.

People-to-people solidarity Supporting humanitarian resistance requires informality, confidentiality, risk-taking and trust. Grassroots movements and people-to-people solidarity, such as the Myanmar diaspora, civil society and community-based groups outside the country, are likewise not constrained by bureaucracy or steered by a certain set of political objectives, and support for these groups should be aligned with this reality. However, the [risk](#) of relying on small-scale aid like this is that contributions may be one-off, threatening continuity and consistency. Ideally, larger donors should provide robust funding as core sources of support to local groups, supplemented by people-to-people resources.

Southeast Asia is home to over 660 million people; even a fraction of this population could potentially generate millions of dollars. Following massive displacement of Rohingyas to Bangladesh in 2017, Indonesia convened an [alliance](#) of locally based humanitarian organisations to pool aid to help the Rohingya population in Bangladesh. The power of solidarity should not be underestimated. If well-coordinated and supported by [parliamentarians](#) and [civil society groups](#), it can create strong pressure on governments, not only in ASEAN, but also in donor countries and [neighbours](#) such as India.

It's about political will

There is clearly a double standard in the policy of the international community, which has condemned Russian aggression and actively and quickly supported humanitarian resistance in Ukraine, but not done the same in Myanmar. There is a strong moral argument for supporting resistance in Myanmar, where the junta's atrocities compare in some ways to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The international community, including ASEAN, should exert maximum pressure to [end](#) the illegitimate, illegal and [unconstitutional existence](#) of the military regime and its horrendous acts through all possible political and diplomatic means. It should take the strongest stance and employ the toughest measures possible, including internationally coordinated and targeted economic sanctions, a global arms embargo and the referral of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.

The international community - particularly ASEAN - should stop relying on humanitarian assistance as an entry-point for political dialogue. This violates core humanitarian principles and creates more harm. Instead, ASEAN and other international actors should channel all available resources to support humanitarian resistance through border-based groups.

Clearly, there is no shortage of reasons for disengaging with the junta, and no shortage of options for supporting humanitarian resistance in Myanmar. What is lacking, as pointed out by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, is the political will to act. So the question remains: *are you willing to help?*

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