POLICY BRIEF September 2024

# Unarmed Civilian Protection in Myanmar

## Central Myanmar, Kachin and Chin State



*'Civilians Protecting Civilians'*
*Artist – Bu Ning*

## Executive Summary

❖ This policy brief is an outcome of the research project "Understanding Community-level Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP): A Comparative Study of Initiatives in South Sudan, Myanmar and Colombia", led by the University of Winchester, and supported by the Network Plus "Creating Safer Space".

❖ Data from Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from Central Myanmar and Chin state, and local civilians in Kachin, show that civilians have been proactive in protecting each other in post-coup Myanmar.

❖ Unarmed Civilian Protection training and activities have existed in Myanmar for some time; however, many civilians are unaware of the practices, and in many cases local protection activities and strategies can be seen as acts of 'Spontaneous' Unarmed Civilian Protection (SUCP).

❖ Spontaneous responses have been intuitive and adaptive, and often emerge from local knowledge, embedded in religious and cultural practices, and kinship relationships and networks.

❖ Religious leaders and faith communities have played an integral role in carrying out UCP activities, protecting and supporting IDPs displaced by the ongoing violence across Myanmar.

❖ Whilst many UCP activities have been effective in the short-term, widespread population movement has brought its own challenges. Much greater support is needed in Myanmar to learn from and strengthen spontaneous UCP activities, as well longer-term strategic support to continue to protect and provide for large numbers of IDPs.

## The Myanmar Conflict and Context

Ethnic armed conflict against the ruling military (Tatmadaw) has been on-going in Myanmar since it gained independence from British rule in 1948. Whilst 2011 saw an apparent relaxation of military control, and the beginning of a series of democratic reforms which led to the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the 2015, the military coup of February 2021 put an abrupt and violent end to hopes of a peaceful transition to democracy.

The coup led to widespread protests against the military ruling party across Myanmar. In response the Tatmadaw began a violent crackdown on peaceful civilian protest, and renewed violent conflict with many of the armed ethic groups and militia. This has resulted in fierce fighting in many parts of the country, and significant population movement: with people fleeing from their homes across state borders, and some into neighbouring countries.

With a population of approximately 55 million people, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) has 135 different indigenous ethnic groups, categorized 'officially' into eight national races –
Bamar (68%), Chin (2.5%), Kachin (1.5%), Karen (7%), Kayah (1.83%), Mon (2%), Rakhine (4%) and Shan (9%). Buddhism is the state religion of Myanmar and is practiced by nearly 90% of the population; with much smaller minorities of Christians (6.3%), Muslims (2.3%), and Hindus (0.5%).[1]

Ethnicity and religion have always been closely linked in Myanmar, with Bamar Buddhists historically being the largest and most dominant ethnoreligious grouping. Minorities such as Chin, Kachin and Karen people follow a variety of Christian traditions.

Religious and ethnic identity has always been an influential factor in Myanmar communities and society. Whilst tensions between ethnic and religious groups have been prevalent in Myanmar history, resisting the repression of the Tatmadaw has become a common goal for many people, transcending ethnic and religious difference.

However, suspicion and confusion has also degraded trust amongst large parts of the population and has divided people more than ever in many communities, and within ethnic and clan groupings.

1.Religion. Census Report Volume 2-C. 2016. Department of Population Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, Myanmar.

# What Our Research Shows

Research identified three broad types of UCP activities:

1. ***The use of inside informants and networks as early warning systems.*** This often took the form of civilians working for local authorities and the ruling military (Tatmadaw), using inside information to warn civilians being targeted because of their political connections and affiliations, or suspicion that they had somehow been involved in anti-military activities. Warnings were given in person, or through encrypted social media platforms and networks.



*'Early warning to Protect Civilians'*
*– Bu Ning*

3. ***The roles of religious actors in UCP.*** In common with many conflicts, religious leaders, groups, and institutions were reported as often acting as 'first responders' to help civilians under attack and threat. Religious legitimacy and authority are hugely influential in the Myanmar context. Religious leaders and communities in Myanmar have been essential in housing IPDs in places of worship, negotiating with armed groups for safe passage for civilians, feeding and clothing civilians at risk, and supporting them in resettling in safer zones. Religious leaders have also offered emotional and spiritual support for traumatized people, and by preaching hope for the future.

> *"Because no two people have the same needs, we protect civilians in different ways. During the coup protectors are mostly civilians, but we don't know what UCP is. We must act immediately if people need help".*

2. ***Kinship networks to aid escape from violence and support onward travel to safer spaces.*** Many civilians have been forced from their homes and villages because of lethal conflict between the Tatmadaw and armed ethnic groups, and the newly formed People's Defence Force (PDF). Family members and ethnic groups have supported each other by providing safe houses to hide for those targeted by violence; producing new identity cards and passports to change names and ethnic affiliation; provisions to feed and clothe IDPs; and by providing transportation to take civilians to safer regions and areas.
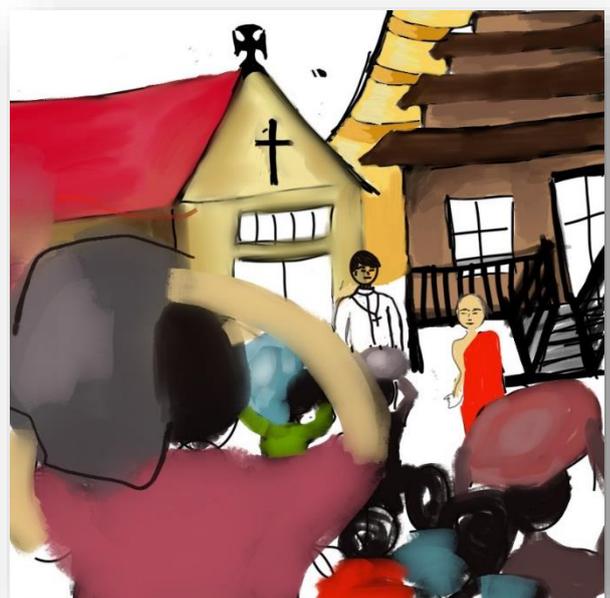


*'Religious Communities Protecting Civilians'*
*- Bu Ning*

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## *To policymakers and UCP organisations:*

❖ Whilst UCP has been present in Myanmar for some time, practices and strategies are still not widely known. Given the ongoing violence in Myanmar, more resources need to be dedicated to training and knowledge dissemination, and dedicated funding provided to support and enhance UCP activities and knowledge dissemination.

❖ Participants believed that the development of communities' physical and mental resilience is essential to the efficacy of UCP. It is important to provide civilian groups and actors with psychological and psychosocial support, as well as information about trauma support and healing, so they are better placed to protect one another regardless of the political party and/or ethnicity they identify with.

❖ Religious leaders and actors are key to many UCP activities in Myanmar. Policymakers and UCP organizations should provide more training and support on UCP strategies and techniques specifically directed at religious leaders and communities. Training must be designed and delivered in a way that considers religious identity, and the specific resources within religions for developing and enhancing existing UCP activities.

❖ Relatedly, religious actors should be brought together to work in unison across religious and ethnic divides. This can be done by supporting interfaith initiatives, and providing UCP Training of Trainers activities, so that skills and knowledge can be developed which builds on existing interfaith networks and activities.

❖ In keeping with the Creating Safer Space Network methodology, artistic approaches are key in Myanmar to effective knowledge dissemination. Artistic forms can be used to help deal with trauma through storytelling, and to give a voice to the civilians who are in danger, speaking not just to the armed combatants within Myanmar, but also to audiences abroad.

## *To the International community and donors:*

❖ More effort should be made by international actors and the international community to engage with all armed factions on their responsibilities under International Law, and to protect civilian casualties at all costs. A Working Group of international and Myanmar experts should be established to open dialogue with all sides of the armed conflict to explore what more could be done to put civilian protection strategies into practice.

❖ A more specific project targeted on UCP in Myanmar should be implemented and supported, to raise greater awareness of the methods and effectiveness of UCP, introducing knowledge and learning from other contexts. Whilst the Creating Safer Space Network has made a significant contribution to this objective already, a Myanmar focused project could address the issues of language, culture, religion, and context specificity more effectively.

## *To Religious Leaders and communities:*

❖ More must be done to encourage additional religious leaders and communities to get proactively involved in protecting civilians from harm. Christian communities have so far played a disproportionate role in Kachin and Mizoram (India) in protecting civilians from central Myanmar and Chin state, and Buddhist leaders and communities could do much more to assist in addressing the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

## Acknowledgements

## Related publications & projects

Bliesemann de Guevara, B., et al. (2022). 'Drawing Out Experiential Conflict Knowledge in Myanmar: Arts-Based Methods in Qualitative Research with Conflict-Affected Communities'. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, *17*(1), 22-41.

Julian, R., B. Bliesemann de Guevara, and R. Redhead, 'From expert to experiential knowledge: exploring the inclusion of local experiences in understanding violence in conflict', *Peacebuilding,* 7(2), 2019, pp. 210–225.

Julian, R., et al., *Like a Shady tree for Those in Trouble: Experiences of War and Hopes for Peace of People Living Amidst Violent Conflict in Kachin State, Myanmar*. Raising Silent Voices project brochure.

Knowledge Hub Myanmar, 'Stories of Everyday Violence: Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar'. Findings Report, March 2024 (unpublished).

Krause, J., and E. Kamler, 'Ceasefires and Civilian Protection Monitoring in Myanmar', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(1), 2022, ksac005.

Project 'Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar', part of the Creating Safer Space network.

Project 'Raising Silent Voices: Harnessing local knowledge for communities' protection from violence in Myanmar', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK.

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*Kinship networks for creating safe spaces – Bu Ning*

## Further information

- Creating Safer Space website: https://creating-safer-space.com/understanding-community-level-spontaneous-unarmed-civilian-protection-ucp-a-comparative-study-of-initiatives-in-south-sudan-myanmar-and-colombia/

- Creating Safer Space newsletter: https://creating-safer-space.com/contact/

- UCP Research Database: https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/

- UCP/A Community of Practice website: https://www.ucpacommunityofpractice.org