

UN rights expert calls for civilian protection as fighting escalates between military and armed group

Calling on the Myanmar Government to “immediately reverse its decision not to allow access to all humanitarian organizations”, the United Nations expert on human rights in the South-East Asian country said on Friday, that “it’s vital that assistance is able to reach those who have fled violence in the region”.

Voicing alarm at the escalating violence in northern and central Rakhine state and Chin state, the UN Special Rapporteur on human Rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, urged all sides, including the State military and ethnic armed groups, to show restraint and protect civilians.

In a [statement](#), Ms. Lee added that “blocking humanitarian access is a serious violation of international humanitarian law”.

On 10 January, a letter was sent by the Rakhine state government to the UN and international humanitarian agencies with instructions, apart from the UN [World Food Programme](#) (WFP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to suspend their activities in the five townships in northern Rakhine that are affected by the conflict, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Rathedaung, Buthidaung and Maungdaw.

Since November last year, the Arakan Army separatists and the Myanmar military have been engaged in heavy fighting, which has resulted in deaths and injuries to civilians. Since early December, at least 5,000 people have been displaced from their homes.

Condemning the attack by the Arakan Army on the four Border Guard Police posts on 4 January and expressing concern at the Myanmar military disproportionate response to the attack, Ms. Lee stressed that “all the people of Rakhine state, including the Rakhine, Mro, Daignet, Hindu and Rohingya, have already suffered enough”.

The UN human rights expert also expressed her concern about the risks of “exacerbating divisions among communities in an already fractured state, further complicating the complex situation that exists in the country”.

The latest violence comes amid a wider pattern of sporadic but at times intense fighting between ethnic groups and the authorities in Myanmar dating back more than 70 years in some cases, since independence in January 1948.

Ms. Lee called on the Government to prioritise the safety and well-being of “all the people of Rakhine State and work towards peace around Myanmar”.