



AID UNDER ATTACK:

How Myanmar's Military Junta is Weaponizing Humanitarian Relief

— A Special Issue on the Humanitarian Crisis and Obstruction Under the SAC

EDITOR'S NOTE:

A TIME TO SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

In a world where disaster should unify and awaken compassion, Myanmar stands as a tragic exception. For nearly two decades, the country has endured not only cyclones, floods, and earthquakes—but also the Myanmar military that systematically uses suffering as a tool of control. From **Cyclone Nargis in 2008** to the **2025 earthquake**, the Myanmar military—now operating as the State Administration Council (SAC)—has weaponized humanitarian aid, obstructed lifesaving relief, and manipulated crises for its own political survival.

This special issue is not merely a chronicle of disasters—it is a

reckoning. It sheds light on how the junta has **delayed access**, **spread disinformation**, **endangered aid workers**, and **turned neutrality into complicity**. These are not isolated failings. They are deliberate, calculated tactics.

As the world watches Myanmar from afar, silence is no longer neutrality—it is permission. Speaking the truth is not just an act of journalism or advocacy; it is a **moral imperative**. This publication is a call to stand with the people of Myanmar and ensure that aid reaches hands in need, not those that oppress.

HUMANITARIAN AID HELD HOSTAGE

MYANMAR'S MILITARY JUNTA AND THE SYSTEMATIC WEAPONIZATION OF RELIEF EFFORTS

Since the 2021 coup, the Myanmar military's the State Administration Council (SAC)—has systematically transformed humanitarian assistance from a neutral lifeline into a political weapon. Rather than enabling relief, the SAC has manipulated aid to consolidate control, reward loyalty, and punish resistance. By obstructing access, controlling distribution, and branding international aid as military benevolence, the Junta has undermined the principles of impartiality and neutrality that define humanitarian work ([Human Rights Watch, 2025](#)).

“**Aid was used as a propaganda tool, rather than a humanitarian response,** said a Southeast Asia analyst quoted by [Human Rights Watch \(2023\)](#).”

This pattern deepened following **Cyclone Mocha in 2023**, when entire villages—particularly those home to Rohingya and resistance-aligned communities—were left without food or shelter while aid was redirected to military-favoured zones. The trend has continued in the aftermath of the **7.7-magnitude earthquake in March 2025**, with the SAC allegedly delaying aid convoys, limiting access to opposition-held areas, and even launching airstrikes near relief zones ([UN News, 2025](#)).

Humanitarian aid in Myanmar today is not just obstructed—it is **weaponized**, politicized, and used to suppress rather than save.

CONTROLLING THE LIFELINE

HOW THE JUNTA CONTROLS WHERE, HOW, AND TO WHOM AID IS DELIVERED

Humanitarian aid in Myanmar is increasingly dictated by military priorities, not humanitarian principles. Since the 2021 coup, the SAC has methodically co-opted international assistance, exercising near-total control over **where aid goes, how it is distributed, and who receives it**.

Donor-funded aid has been repeatedly rebranded with Junta insignias, repackaged as military goodwill, and used to bolster its image. In 2023, following Cyclone Mocha, reports emerged that the

“**The [the military officials] also aim to benefit from aid support, as they did when Cyclone Nargis struck. Some of the aid received from different countries ended up in the market, allowing them to make money from it,” she said.**” ([BBC, 2023](#)).

RED TAPE OR REPRESSION?

DELAYS, DENIALS, AND BUREAUCRATIC SABOTAGE OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

Under the guise of administrative protocol, Myanmar's military Junta has erected a wall of red tape that effectively blocks timely and impartial humanitarian aid. Since the 2021 coup, the SAC has used **visa delays, convoy restrictions, and opaque approval processes** as political tools to deny life-saving support to communities in need. International humanitarian agencies, including the UN OCHA, have faced routine obstacles—permits withheld, staff movement blocked, and access limited to Junta-approved zones (UN News, 2022). Local NGOs report weeks-long delays for travel authorizations and distribution permits, even in disaster-hit regions. These tactics are not logistical mishaps; they are a **strategic form of repression**.

“**The military imposed further restrictions on humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of deadly Cyclone Mocha in May** ([UN News, 2022](#)).

Efforts under **ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus** have been similarly derailed. Humanitarian convoys coordinated through the AHA Centre were restricted to government-held areas, with the Junta blocking access to displaced populations in conflict zones ([International Crisis Group, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, cross-line aid—particularly to opposition-held territories—remains virtually impossible under SAC's tightly controlled bureaucracy.

In Myanmar today, humanitarian access is not governed by needs, but by politics.

military had stored **UN-marked rice sacks in bunkers** on military bases in Rakhine State ([The Irrawaddy, 2023](#)). This blatant misuse drew international condemnation.

In conflict zones—such as Sagaing and Chin—the Junta has **outright denied aid** access, allowing relief only in territories under military control. Aid has become an extension of the Junta's political playbook: **a tool of reward and punishment**.

International agencies working under these conditions face a stark dilemma—comply with restrictions and risk legitimizing the Junta or push back and face expulsion.

DANGER ON THE FRONTLINE

HOW MYANMAR'S MILITARY ENDANGERS INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN WORKERS

In Myanmar, delivering humanitarian aid has become an increasingly perilous task—not only for local actors, but for international personnel as well. A stark example came in May 2023, when an **ASEAN-led humanitarian convoy** travelling through **Southern Shan State** was attacked en route to Kayah (Karenni) State. While the SAC quickly blamed resistance forces, multiple reports pointed to the Junta's own troops as the likely perpetrators of the ambush ([The Irrawaddy, 2023](#)).

“Eye witnesses suggest the shots came from a military checkpoint,” noted Al Jazeera in its coverage of the incident (2023).

The incident caused a temporary suspension of field missions by ASEAN's Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), raising serious concerns about the **Junta's ability—or willingness—to protect international aid workers**. It also underscored the broader erosion of humanitarian neutrality, with foreign missions increasingly seen as tools of propaganda or threats to military control.

Such attacks are not isolated. Aid workers have faced intimidation, surveillance, and even detention in various parts of the country. In Myanmar today, the frontline of humanitarian work is not just about logistics—it's about survival.

LIES IN THE RUBBLE

DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE IN CRISIS ZONES

In the aftermath of crises, truth is often the first casualty in Myanmar. The SAC has actively deployed **disinformation and psychological warfare** to distort public perception and delegitimize both resistance forces and humanitarian actors. This tactic has intensified during disasters, with state media and military-linked social media channels pushing false narratives to conceal abuses and sow confusion.

Following the **ASEAN convoy attack in Southern Shan State (May 2023)**, the SAC promptly blamed the **People's Defense Forces (PDF)**, despite multiple local sources indicating that the Junta troops were responsible ([The Irrawaddy, 2023](#)). Similarly, after Cyclone Mocha, the Junta accused resistance fighters of looting aid trucks—claims that were **refuted by civil society groups and aid workers on the ground** ([Human Rights Watch, 2023](#)).

“The Junta is manipulating humanitarian crises to frame opposition forces and control the narrative,” reported The Irrawaddy (2023)

State television and military-backed Facebook pages have amplified these narratives, often accompanied by staged videos or unverified reports. This information warfare not only endangers aid missions but also erodes public trust in legitimate humanitarian efforts—leaving vulnerable communities further isolated.

BOMBS AFTER THE STORM

AIRSTRIKES AND MILITARY OFFENSIVES DURING NATURAL DISASTERS

In Myanmar, disaster-stricken regions are not spared from war. The SAC has demonstrated a chilling pattern of continuing military offensives even during major natural calamities, compounding suffering for already vulnerable communities.

After Cyclone Mocha devastated parts of Rakhine in May 2023, the military not only delayed aid delivery but also resumed attacks on conflict zones within days. Civilians described the situation as “inhuman,” with BBC News reporting that residents in affected townships were caught between **collapsed homes and advancing troops** ([BBC, 2023](#)). During **floods in Magway in 2024**, artillery fire was reported in nearby villages housing displaced populations. In the wake of the March 2025 earthquake, the Regime reportedly

“Instead of allowing aid workers to reach communities affected by Cyclone Mocha, the Regime resumed attacks on ethnic villages and IDP camps.” (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

continued airstrikes in parts of Mandalay and Southern Shan, further obstructing relief efforts. This blatant disregard for humanitarian pauses undermines any notion of the Junta's willingness to prioritize civilian protection during emergencies.

These offensives amid crisis are not incidental—they are part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent and control territory, no matter the human cost.

VOICES FROM THE GROUND

TESTIMONIES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY AND DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

While official narratives attempt to control the story, the reality of Myanmar's humanitarian crisis is best understood through the voices of those living it. Local NGOs, CDM health workers, and displaced families have been the backbone of survival for millions—operating without institutional support, often in defiance of the military's blockades and restrictions.

“Myanmar's junta has worsened a self-created humanitarian catastrophe by displacing hundreds of thousands of people and then blocking the critical support they need to survive,” said Shayna Bauchner, Asia researcher. “The generals are callously denying lifesaving assistance to people affected by conflict since

the military takeover, seemingly as a form of punishment.” ([Human Rights Watch, 2021](#))

Health workers from the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) continue to treat patients in makeshift clinics, even as the military targets hospitals and ambulances. One CDM medic in Sagaing told Reuters, “We don’t have enough bandages, but we can’t wait for permission—we treat with what we have.” Internally displaced

people (IDPs) shelter in forests, monasteries, and bombed-out schools. In their own words: **“We survive because our communities protect each other. No one else is coming.”**

These testimonies underscore the resilience of Myanmar’s people—and the urgent need to channel aid through independent, community-driven networks.

INTERNATIONAL SILENCE OR ACTION?

THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO AID OBSTRUCTION IN MYANMAR

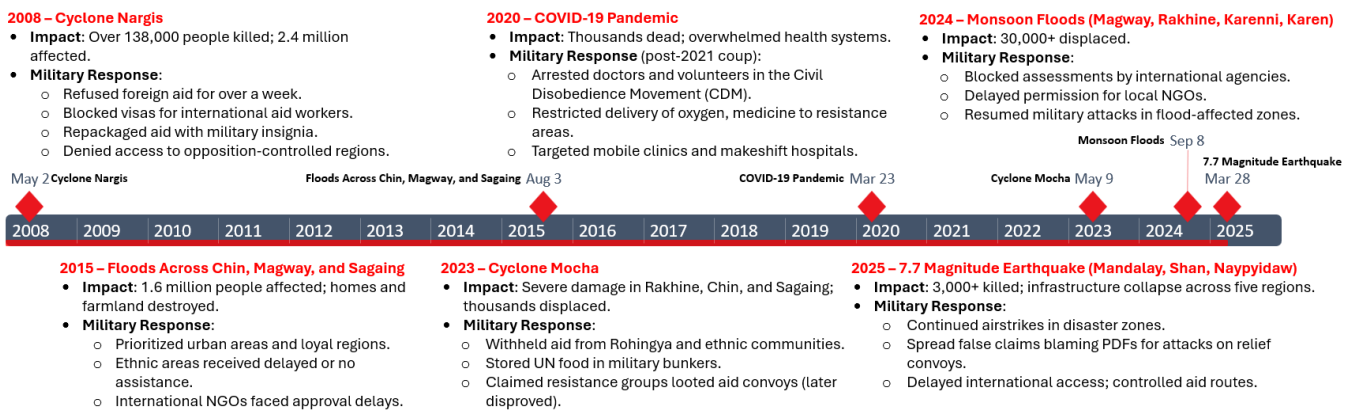
The international community has struggled to respond decisively to the **Myanmar Military’s obstruction of humanitarian assistance**, raising urgent questions about accountability, access, and ethical aid delivery. While ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus called for humanitarian support, the bloc’s implementation has been widely criticized as ineffective, with operations limited to the Junta-approved areas and envoys blocked from engaging with opposition groups ([International Crisis Group, 2022](#)). The United Nations, too, has faced operational paralysis. Despite clear evidence of

obstruction, reprisals, and aid misuse, its agencies continue to operate largely through channels monitored or controlled by the SAC, risking complicity in the Junta propaganda efforts ([Human Rights Watch, 2023](#)).

Australia recently pledged \$2 million in humanitarian aid via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)—a welcome move, but not without concern. As ABC News reported, “ensuring that aid does not legitimize or empower the Junta is one of the biggest challenges facing donor governments” ([ABC News, 2025](#)).

Without safeguards that enable neutral, independent, and cross-line delivery, even well-intentioned assistance risks reinforcing the very structures that prolong suffering. The choice before the global community is clear: continue cautious engagement or take bold action to **protect aid from political abuse**.

FROM NARGIS TO NOW: A TIMELINE OF DISASTER AND DECEPTION (2008–2025)



CALL TO ACTION

A ROADMAP FOR ETHICAL, INDEPENDENT HUMANITARIAN ACCESS IN MYANMAR

Myanmar’s humanitarian crisis is not simply a matter of need—it is a crisis of access and integrity. To ensure that aid reaches those most affected, the international community must shift toward a **principled, independent response model**. This begins with **bypassing the Junta** as the primary gatekeeper of humanitarian assistance and instead supporting **cross-border aid delivery** and **local responder networks** that have consistently provided life-saving support despite immense risk.

Key international actors—including ASEAN, the UN, and donor governments—must demand unrestricted access, establish

safeguards against aid diversion, and prioritize funding to grassroots organizations operating in resistance-held areas. According to [The Guardian \(2023\)](#), “humanitarian neutrality cannot exist when assistance is subject to approval by those who target civilians.”

Diaspora communities and civil society must continue their advocacy, pressing governments to align funding with ethical standards and amplify the voices of those on the ground. The time for symbolic gestures is over—**Myanmar’s people need action that respects dignity, neutrality, and justice**.