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Assessing Myanmar's Earthquake Response

Mechanisms for current and future humanitarian missions

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The 2025 earthquake has reflected not only the fragility of Myanmar's infrastructure but the deep fractures of its political and humanitarian landscape. In a nation where aid is weaponized, civil war fragments the state, and conscription pushes the flight of an entire generation, traditional humanitarian responses fall short.

As the military junta continues to manipulate disaster for its own survival, international actors must rethink their approach. *While it is an almost impossible task to bypass the military leaders entirely, especially for international agencies like the UN, relying on information from the Myanmar Diaspora and Civil Society Organisations helps: with who to engage on the ground, which funds and networks to support financially (even from abroad) and opening up the possibility of land border for aid delivery, point to alternative means of humanitarian assistance for current and future missions*

I. Introduction

Myanmar finds itself caught in simultaneous crises: an earthquake that has shaken the country to its core, an ongoing civil war that has prevented effective response and recovery and a military-junta trying to use the momentum for legitimacy gains. On 28 March 2025, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck the Sagaing region, one of the most conflict-affected zones in the country, killing more than 3,700 people, injuring thousands, and leaving hundreds missing (per mid-April 4, increasing by the day). According to United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimates, the death toll could potentially surpass 10,000 as search and operations continue in remote regions.¹

Yet, as is so often the case with Myanmar, natural disasters have not only exposed the vulnerabilities of an already prone region but also the deep fractures created by the country's long-standing conflict caused by relentless military rule.

In Myanmar, natural disasters cannot be separated from the political reality. Aid is not simply about relief — it's a strategic tool. The military has a long history of using humanitarian assistance to consolidate control, gain international legitimacy while restricting movement, and punish dissident regions. This legacy is resurfacing again in the earthquake response: the junta remains focused on suppressing the ethnic revolutionary organizations in the country rather than coordinating relief, even continuing airstrikes in conflict zones just a day

after the earthquake. The political context has only intensified the challenges for both survivors and aid providers.

Given the military coup in 2021 against the democratically elected government of Myanmar, heavy restrictions on aid delivery, the junta's weaponization of humanitarian assistance, and the fragmented nature of the state, the international response on how to best respond to the earthquake and help serves as a reminder of Myanmar's political and humanitarian catastrophe.

II. The Key Challenges facing Myanmar

A) Earthquake and Natural Disaster

The earthquake struck Mandalay, Myanmar, at a depth of 10 km, followed by a powerful aftershock of 6.4 magnitude just 12 minutes later.² The earthquake, the largest in Myanmar in over a century, ruptured along the Sagaing Fault, causing widespread destruction. Buildings collapsed, roads buckled, and bridges were destroyed across multiple regions. Aftershocks continued to impact the area, hindering search and rescue efforts.

The affected regions, including Bago, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, Sagaing, and parts of Shan State, were declared a state of emergency by the government, which - in a move to increase its otherwise isolated international standing - called for international assistance.³ The World Health Organization reported significant damage to healthcare infrastructure, with four hospitals and one health centre completely destroyed and several others partially damaged. This destruction, combined with a surge in patient numbers, has made healthcare access nearly impossible in many affected areas.

The earthquake has worsened Myanmar's *already* critical humanitarian situation, displacing over 3 million people and leaving nearly 20 million in need of aid, according to the UN⁴, since the military coup and ousting of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021. Efforts to provide medical care are further challenged by extreme heat, limited supplies, and the ongoing risk of disease outbreaks, including cholera. Hospitals, such as Mandalay General, are overwhelmed, with patients being treated outside in extreme weather conditions.

B. Civil War and Battlefield Dynamics

Myanmar's civil war has worsened the earthquake's destruction and made aid delivery more difficult. The ongoing armed conflict occurs between the military-junta, the State Administration Council (SAC) and various ethnic armed organisations or revolutionary

groups fighting for greater autonomy, their preservation of their ethnic rights or the expansion of their territorial claims, as well as in some cases supporting the People's Defense Forces (PDF), the military arm of the shadow and legitimate government of Myanmar, the National Unity Government (NUG), effectively joining the revolution. It is crucial to note that the resistance encompasses broad sectors of society, both the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities. "The widespread anti-junta movement has moved on from calls to reinstate the 2020 election results [...] to become a radical and intersectional Spring Revolution, aiming to fundamentally change state-society relations in Myanmar."⁵ Almost all of the resistance groups have a joint understanding that the military poses a threat to the people of Myanmar and is what stands between them and a better future for the country and its people. Recent clashes between ethnic militias such as the Arakan Army (AA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) or the powerful Three Brotherhood Alliance have created a fragmented country with shifting fault lines.⁶

Now, with an increasingly professionalised revolution and military success against the SAC on the battlefield in Rakhine, Karenni, Northern Shan or Kachin, the military's retreat from these areas has been marked by escalating aerial assaults and shelling, both in civilian zones and strategic military points, a trend that is not stopping in the wake of the earthquake.⁷ The junta still controls the populous and economically important heartland of Myanmar, including major cities such as Yangon, Mandalay and the capital Nay Pyi Taw.

While both the military junta and the National Unity Government's allied forces have announced ceasefires, the continuing violence has severely restricted humanitarian access. It is also unclear how the earthquake might affect the country's conflict and political crisis.

Since the earthquake, the UN Human Rights Office has received reports that the military has carried out at least 53 attacks, including strikes by aircraft and drones, artillery and paramotors in areas affected by the earthquake. At least 14 attacks by the military have been reported since they announced a temporary ceasefire taking effect on 2 April," UN High Commissioner Volker Türk added.⁸

C. Weaponization of Aid & Humanitarian Assistance

As the country and certain areas grapple with the devastating aftermath of the earthquake, the military junta has once again weaponized humanitarian aid, exploiting suffering to consolidate power and suppress opposition. This tactic is not new — during Cyclone Nargis (2008), the regime blocked international aid for weeks, exacerbating a death toll of over

138,000, while manipulating relief distribution to force survivors to vote in a sham constitutional referendum the same year.⁹ The pattern repeated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the military hoarded and restricted oxygen supplies, denying lifesaving resources to civilians in ethnic armed organisations' held areas.¹⁰ Similar abuses emerged after Cyclone Mocha (2023), when the SAC obstructed aid to cyclone-hit regions, particularly in Rakhine and Chin States, where ethnic armed groups like the Arakan Army and Chin National Front operate. The junta even prohibited educational material to reach citizens on how to behave and best respond in the case of cyclones before Mocha even made landfall on Myanmar's western coast.¹¹

The junta's tightening control over the country and its increasingly oppressive policies make it difficult for international aid to flow freely. Humanitarian organizations must carefully navigate government regulations, which may restrict access or impose bureaucratic delays, especially if the aid is perceived to be supporting groups opposed to the junta. At the same time, the decentralized nature of the opposition groups means that negotiating access through multiple, fragmented actors becomes a logistical nightmare. This fragmentation of authority leads to inconsistent access across regions, with some areas seeing very little aid, while others may receive more support, further exacerbating inequality and vulnerability.

Checkpoints around Mandalay are used to block medicine and supplies from reaching the countryside or contested areas, while volunteers and humanitarian workers face systematic obstruction. The UN has therefore accused the military of prioritizing control over crisis response, with Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews noting "consistent reports of aid being blocked" even as airstrikes persist.¹² Meanwhile, the regime's absence in relief efforts as measured in the number of soldiers helping out—even in military-controlled areas like Mandalay—suggests either a deliberate neglect or a lack of capacity, as troops remain embroiled in defending territory against resistance forces.¹³

Furthermore, the safety risks to humanitarian workers are significant, with aid organizations facing increasing threats from both sides of the conflict. Aid convoys, medical teams, and relief workers have been attacked, harassed, or detained by military forces, which makes it even harder to reach those who need assistance the most.¹⁴ Humanitarian workers also face threats from armed opposition groups, who sometimes view aid organizations as complicit in the junta's actions, further complicating the security landscape. As a result, many international and local aid organizations are forced to limit their operations, reduce staff, or

even suspend programs in high-risk areas, leaving large swaths of the population without necessary services.

The displacement crisis, combined with these access challenges, has created a vicious cycle where humanitarian needs are growing, but the ability to respond remains limited. The junta wants to use the momentum in the wake of the catastrophe for international recognition it so desperately seeks. While it may now cautiously permit limited aid to rehabilitate its image ahead of planned elections (end 2024/beginning 2025), its actions reveal a calculated strategy: aid is not a lifeline for the people, but a tool of coercion, reward, and punishment. Whether through oxygen deprivation during COVID-19, blockade after cyclones, or diversion during the earthquake, the junta ensures that humanitarian assistance serves its and its soldiers' survival—not the people of Myanmar.

D. Conscription Law and Outflow of Young People

On 10 February 2024, the Myanmar junta made military service mandatory for all young men and women. The conscription law had mandated, upon its introduction, that men between 18 and 35 and women between 18 and 27 must serve for two years in a national military service programme. Professionals such as doctors, engineers and technicians could serve up to five years.¹⁵ For many young Burmese, this law is not only a call to arms but a direct threat to their freedom and future. Having already played a significant role in protests and resistance movements against the junta, this new policy forces them into a position where they are now expected to fight for the regime they have actively opposed. Therefore, many young people are increasingly looking beyond Myanmar's borders for safety and opportunity. The outflow of young migrants seeking asylum or a better life abroad is becoming more pronounced, as these individuals search for ways to escape conscription, avoid persecution, and find stability.¹⁶

This exodus of young people already has and will have significant long-term consequences for Myanmar's future. The loss of a generation that is politically aware, educated, and capable of contributing to the nation's rebuilding efforts represents a massive blow to the country's potential for recovery. Many of these young people are not only critical to the workforce and the earthquake response but are also the ones driving change and reform within the country. Their departure risks depleting the nation's human capital, leaving a gap in leadership,

innovation, and critical skills that would be essential for post-conflict reconstruction and rebuilding the country after a natural disaster. Not surprisingly, young people are increasingly becoming a rarer sight in the streets of the cities of Myanmar, so much needed for search & help missions at the very moment.

III. The Role of International Aid: Slow, Selective, and Strategic

A. Myanmar's Representation: Implications for Aid Delivery

The issue of who represents Myanmar is complicated by differing levels of international recognition. Many Western nations, including the United States, Canada, and European Union members, have recognized the NUG as the legitimate representative of Myanmar. However, countries with closer ties to Myanmar, including China and Russia, have maintained support for the military junta, further complicating efforts to unify international opinion on Myanmar's representation.

The military (Tatmadaw) -- since it ousted the democratically elected government of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021 -- holds de facto control over some parts of the country and key state institutions. It claims legitimacy under the 2008 Constitution, citing emergency provisions; however, this justification has been widely contested, particularly due to procedural irregularities during the declaration of the state of emergency. Despite its control, the military administration has received limited international recognition, and its proposed representative has not been seated at the United Nations.

In contrast, the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by elected lawmakers from the 2020 general election. It asserts constitutional and democratic legitimacy, though it lacks full territorial control. The UN has allowed the pre-coup ambassador, aligned with the NUG, to retain Myanmar's seat.

In regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Myanmar's participation has been significantly reduced since the coup. The junta has been excluded from high-level ASEAN meetings, and Myanmar's seat at ASEAN summits has remained vacant. Additionally, the junta's absence from multilateral forums like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has reinforced its diplomatic isolation.

Despite the junta's regional isolation, Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's military, has continued to engage in bilateral meetings with select countries, often as part of Myanmar's diplomatic efforts to maintain ties with China, Russia, and some Southeast Asian countries. These meetings, however, have drawn widespread criticism from human rights

groups and Western nations, which argue that legitimizing the junta in these forums undermines efforts to restore democracy in Myanmar.

Recently after the earthquake, at the 2025 BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) summit, Min Aung Hlaing was invited and seen in a picture together with other Bay of Bengal countries included Thailand and India.¹⁷

B. Western Hesitation and Slow U.S. Response

The U.S. has pledged only \$2 million in humanitarian assistance, but this aid is mainly funnelled through Myanmar-based NGOs due to the military's strict control over aid routes. As reported by Straits Times, a USAID team in Myanmar was fired upon while trying to assist in the quake zone, highlighting the risks and difficulties of conducting aid work in such a politically charged environment. The U.S. and European nations face the dual challenge of wanting to provide aid while avoiding any collaboration with the illegitimate junta.¹⁸ The United Nations has allocated \$12 million in emergency funding for food, shelter, and medical services, but with infrastructure severely compromised, delivering assistance remains a major challenge.¹⁹

Meanwhile China has sent \$13.9 million in aid, including tents, blankets, and medical supplies, while India deployed search-and-rescue teams and military aircraft to assist with logistical support. It is important to note however, that allied countries of the junta are allowed in much easier and their aid is much less scrutinised compared to UN-agencies or Western nations. ASEAN's response has been more cautious, with Malaysia urging an extension of the junta's ceasefire to allow for more aid distribution.²⁰

IV. Approaches to Addressing These Issues

Though, the key to improving the situation in Myanmar lies foremost in supporting local solutions (Localisation Approach). Civil society organizations, ethnic-based NGOs, and resistance groups have consistently proven their ability to respond effectively in areas outside junta control (for decades, sometimes far away from Nay Pyi Taw, establishing parallel governance structures). In this governance vacuum local leadership lies primarily in the hands of ethnic groups, which has helped maintain a semblance of order during the disaster.²¹ Ethnic organizations in contested regions have developed trust with local communities (or rather represent them).

From the operational side, however, this is almost not feasible, with the SAC asserting full control of where and how the incoming aid will be delivered.²² Mostly due to its control over the heartland and cities in Myanmar, including the airports in Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon, that are used as the main point of entry into Myanmar. This means relief and aid workers will need a valid visa to get into the country in the first place. Against this background, many aid groups are making plans to deliver supplies through alternative land routes, which are familiar to locals in Mandalay, Bago, Nay Pyi Taw and Shan states or use land borders from India and Thailand altogether.²³ Another approach by the Myanmar Diaspora was to put together reliable channels, funding that goes directly to local NGOs like the Myanmar Earthquake Relief Fund allocating funds in ethnic areas and townships.²⁴ The US and the EU invested in similar initiatives through Myanmar-based humanitarian assistance organisations.

The Myanmar Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have compiled a very useful document "Fault Lines: Think Politically, Act Locally: Navigating Myanmar's 2025 Earthquake Response", endowing aid organisations with some strategies on how to best access the country limiting engagement with the SAC.²⁵

- Ensuring any engagement with SAC is purely technical and focused solely on humanitarian access.
- Document all SAC interactions to maintain transparency and accountability and also to counter potential use of meetings as propaganda by SAC – paying particular attention to avoid photographs of handshakes or distribution of relief accompanied by SAC. However, interactions should be documented with all governance actors.
- Creating, and enforcing, a clear organizational position on "red lines" that won't be crossed (e.g. providing some material solely for SAC's activities, like boats).
- Beware that engagement and coordination with SAC does not protect local staff from scrutiny and harassment nor extortion. Indeed, local staff may be subject to additional checks that are not immediately visible to international colleagues.
- Carefully monitoring how SAC attempts to manipulate international assistance and divert aid – which requires coordination and dialogue with networks of Myanmar CSOs, ensuring they feel safe and are not penalised for reporting aid diversion.
- Exchange with other international agencies / situation reports / regular updates.

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