

## Policy Brief

# Humanitarian Assistance Options for Myanmar

Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia



## Background

Since the military in Myanmar launched a coup against the democratically elected government in February 2021, the political conflict in Myanmar has escalated into not only a domestic crisis but also a threat to regional peace and stability. As it continues to develop into an uncontrollable situation, the attacks against civilians have continued bringing the population to the verge of a failed state situation. While ASEAN leaders have agreed on the Five-Point Consensus on April 24, 2021, regional action to stop the ongoing violence, deal with the multiple crises, and restore democracy in Myanmar has been extremely limited.

The Special Emergency Meeting among the ASEAN Foreign Ministers held on October 15, 2021, resulted in a decision to invite only a non-political actor to represent Myanmar in the Summit in late October. While this action can be seen as a way to “punish” Tatmadaw for not showing a cooperative attitude to implementing the Five-Point Consensus, including allowing the ASEAN Special Envoy to meet with all parties, it remains unknown whether such move can push for a more positive result to stop the violence against civilians on the ground.

While the political tension continues, one of the most immediate concerns is to deliver humanitarian assistance to meet the dire needs of the Myanmar people, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the country. A surge in coronavirus cases fuelled by the highly infectious delta variant has left Myanmar with no room to breathe between the two crises. The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in people suffering from a lack of oxygen supplies, medicines, and hospital treatment. It has been worsened by the government ban on direct oxygen sales to the public. Myanmar's medical system was already fragile, but despite the limited resources, it managed to cope with the surging cases last year, yet the coup changed the situation drastically.

While some limited humanitarian works have been operating on the ground, those efforts are still far from effectively meeting the actual need on a large scale. Both ASEAN as the regional organisation and the international community are still facing impediments to getting into the country and delivering humanitarian assistance. There is a complex question as to which actors—state and non-state—would have the capabilities and leverage to do so and whether these actors can cooperate to facilitate the process more effectively. Aside from structural and institutional challenges, practical barriers faced by aid agencies should also be taken into account. Factors such as the availability of the resources, the safety and security of humanitarian workers in conflict areas, and the lack of reliability need to be scrutinised further—to ensure that the people most affected by the conflict receive assistance without causing further harm.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia, with the support from S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Singapore, organised a Workshop on **Humanitarian Assistance Options for Myanmar** on September 30. This policy workshop invited practitioners and experts in the region to explore novel but feasible paths to undertake to begin deescalating the political crisis and at the same time addressing the humanitarian needs of the Myanmar people. The discussion yielded various options for conducting humanitarian works that are effective and legitimate for Myanmar stakeholders. These options are carefully crafted according to the international humanitarian principle of “doing no harm,” thus presenting a holistic approach to solving the crisis.

## Problem Identification

In searching for the best options for carrying out humanitarian assistance into Myanmar, the discussion examined three levels of possible entry points: a) regional vs regional-plus option, which specifically examined the strengths and weaknesses of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre); b) the role of frontline states, particularly Thailand, China, and India; and c) the role of the private sector, such as business, international humanitarian agencies, and community/religious organisations.

To decide which option would be best, these entry points were assessed in two aspects: a) Legitimacy, which relates to the acceptance and trust from the local stakeholders, and ensures access to the

country, as well as legitimacy given by the international community based on their motivation and interests in engaging in humanitarian efforts; and b) Effectiveness, in regard to the existing capacities and leverage to conduct humanitarian works amidst the volatile and complex situation of internal conflict on the ground.

### a. Regional mechanism

As the regional body within the ASEAN framework, the AHA Centre has strong legitimacy as well as the capacity to deliver assistance in comparison to other mechanisms. Due to its nature and experiences working in Myanmar during the Nargis and Rakhine crises, it is considered to have a better understanding of the local context. To a certain extent, the Myanmar military seems to be more cooperative if the AHA is proposed as the main instrument, which may give better guarantees of access and safety for humanitarian workers.

However, the AHA has limitations due to its mandates and structures. So far, the AHA has no clear mandate to operate in an internal conflict setting, especially where there is no clear ruling government, since it needs to fully cooperate with the local government to do its tasks inside a country. Also, the structure of the AHA presents certain obstacles because its governing council consists of state representatives from the ASEAN Member States. The SAC-appointed person is currently occupying the Myanmar seat. This situation has raised concern about whether the AHA can fully operate inside the country

without being compelled by the SAC to divert the aid package to those that comply with the military instead of to the general population in distress.

### b. Neighbouring/ frontline states

The second possible entry point is to carry out humanitarian assistance that can also be implemented with the cooperation with the neighbouring countries/frontline states. On the one hand, their economic and political ties with Myanmar and their real interests—due to the direct challenges they face as a result of the crisis—can bring some leverage when engaging with local actors. Moreover, the real capacity to send aid to the border areas, including COVID-19 supplies, also underlines the significant role of these states. For India and China, there is an interesting development where local governments, especially those at the border areas, are playing bigger roles in providing these necessary supplies with a certain degree of autonomy.

Despite their leverage, some countries like Thailand and India are quite careful about further involvement in the Myanmar crisis due to their domestic political considerations. Thailand, itself led by a military government, has been perceived to be potentially siding with the Myanmar junta, as indicated by its preference to implement quiet diplomacy. India also has limitations to expanding its role due to the fact that it has been one of the main destinations for exiled NLD politicians.

Furthermore, despite the huge expectation for China to play a bigger role due to its interest in seeing some

order for the benefit of its companies in Myanmar, it has shown an ambiguous standpoint in terms of putting pressure on the junta to stop the violence. Expectations for these frontline states to apply a state-to-state approach to navigate access for humanitarian assistance into Myanmar carry some limitations and challenges, due to their domestic interests.

### c. Private sectors

Finally, the third possible but still largely unexplored approach is to collaborate with the private sector, particularly businesses, humanitarian agencies, and community-based and civil society organisations. Due to their long-term operations in Myanmar, these organisations certainly have the crucial knowledge, expertise, capacities, and networks to take roles as humanitarian actors—or at least to be engaged to complement formal/state-to-state approaches—and deliver humanitarian assistance.

In Myanmar, there are various community-based organisations operating everywhere, including in the remote areas, to send basic aid and recently, also COVID-19 supplies. Different types of business actors, ranging from multi-national companies (MNCs), major local companies, and small-medium enterprises (SMEs), can also play roles to channel humanitarian assistance, particularly as they practice philanthropic and corporate social responsibility activities. Engaging these local or international non-state actors operating inside Myanmar is important to

mapping out the actual needs on the ground. Such reliable information/data cannot be gained from the military as it is potentially skewed in the interest of the junta. In addition to companies, the role chambers of commerce can have to assist in opening up access for humanitarian assistance delivery should also be explored further.

One key motivation of the current business actors is that they do not want to operate under the old system of the junta. They have become more adept at the international standards that increase competitiveness and attract foreign markets. Since the state-to-state approach carries the risk of collaborating with/supporting the Tatmadaw—which may derogate the legitimacy of any humanitarian efforts—it is extremely important to cooperate with these non-state actors. Furthermore, failing to work with these local partners will certainly be a huge waste of resources and potentially lower the effectiveness of delivering humanitarian aid to the most in need communities in Myanmar.

Nonetheless, engagement with the private sector has some limitations. Due to the small-scale and non-state nature, some community-based and civil society organisations have also become victims of the Myanmar military crackdown against civilians. The political crisis added to the pandemic have significantly threatened the supply chain, such as funding and in-kind support needed for them to operate. For engagement with business sectors, there should be a deep understanding of their profit-seeking orientation and not an expectation to see pure humanitarian action.



The utmost priority of these businesspeople is to keep their businesses alive; engaging with them for humanitarian assistance should also consider this particular need.

## Proposed Solutions and Recommendation

This exercise resulted in five key recommendations.

**First**, for the purpose of conveying legitimacy, a regional mechanism like the AHA Centre should ideally serve as the tip of the spearhead of the humanitarian assistance effort in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the limitations of the AHA Centre in terms of its mandate and structure need to be overcome first to make it fully functional. There is a high expectation for ASEAN leaders to show a strong and united political will to expand the mandate for the AHA Centre to operate in this internal conflict setting. Nonetheless, looking at the divisions in ASEAN, it really depends on how certain member states or the next ASEAN Chair show leadership in enabling this option. One possible option is to create a bigger framework such as an ASEAN Mission in Myanmar, where the AHA Centre is one element inside the Mission. This would give higher legitimacy and protection for the AHA Centre to operate in the internal conflict.

**Second**, the AHA-Plus model can also be an option where frontline states need to be engaged to support the regional mechanism. Based on a state's leverage and willingness, as indicated from existing

activities, this model can facilitate support to border areas. Meanwhile, the role of other interested states, in this case, Japan, is also important. While its leverage is comparably less than some neighbouring states, certain multi-national associations, such as the Japanese-Myanmar Association and the role of its Ambassador on Myanmar, should also be leveraged to support ASEAN's humanitarian effort.

**Third**, to increase the effectiveness and counteract the limitations of state-to-state approaches, the AHA-Plus/multilateral options should also include the private sector/non-state actors from regional countries that are operating in Myanmar, and importantly, the local actors themselves. The social services provided by the local NGOs that have reached the local people, including in the remote areas, can certainly be tapped as an entry point for channelling aid into the country. Moreover, engagement with them is extremely important to gain useful insights and knowledge on how to operate in the country.

**Fourth**, to materialise this wide collaboration with multiple actors, there is an urgent need to organise a multi-stakeholder dialogue that can be held in at least two stages. The first stage is to have a meeting with specific actors, such as business actors, international/local humanitarian agencies, and local community-based organisations, etc. The second stage is a bigger initiative that creates an interface meeting between regional policymakers, scholars from regional think-tanks, representatives from

UN agencies and other international humanitarian agencies, and these private actors.

Prior to this, a preliminary exercise needs to be done to map these non-state actors operating in Myanmar to see what their interests/motivations are and what capacities/roles they can play. Here, the role of think-tank institutions is important to facilitating such activities.

**Fifth,** in terms of humanitarian assistance, the provision of COVID-19 supplies can be one of the initial focuses, rather than addressing the whole scope of needs caused by the crisis. This should be a palatable option for all stakeholders in Myanmar, and particularly meets the aim to gain some level of acceptance and navigate access into the country.

This Policy Brief is published by the CSIS Myanmar Initiative Program. The program seeks to initiate policy research, discussions and collaborative engagements to generate options for regional governments and organisations along with civil society groups and the international community to effectively address the post-coup humanitarian crisis in Myanmar.

The program's activities and published materials are generously supported by regional and international institutions and donors. The publication does not reflect the positions of its research clients and sponsors. CSIS is an independent, nonprofit think-tank institution based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Since 1971, CSIS has continuously worked to provide policy recommendations to shape government policies at the domestic, regional and international levels.

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