



Photo: Emergency preparedness planning with local actors, Northern Shan, 25/1 2021 / DRC

## Myanmar: Responding to humanitarian needs in Northern Shan

When armed groups clashed in a small township in the eastern part of Myanmar’s Northern Shan State back in March 2021, it was not the first time that the villagers felt threatened. Ethnic armed group disputes over territory, as well as confrontations with the Myanmar Military – locally known as Tatmadaw - are deeply rooted and people here have lived in an environment influenced by conflict and instability their entire life. As a result, the area is also known to be contaminated by old landmines and other explosive remnants.

In late March 2021, fighting once more came too close and this time the villagers saw no other option than to flee to save their lives. While the current political instability in Yangon and other major urban centers of Myanmar is often what is in focus in the media, the rural ethnic armed group conflict and waves of fighting with the Tatmadaw persist but is often less known to the outside world. In this instance in Northern Shan fighting this time was between the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) alliance – all of them armed groups well known across Myanmar.

Following clashes in the area that had continued some places for over five days, a group of 447 women, children and elderly made their way to an old Buddhist monastery five to six hours walk away from their village. The men were left behind in the village to look after and protect the farmlands and houses. It was at this interim safe haven that DRC and local humanitarian partner organisations were able to meet the newly displaced who were provided with emergency kits to help them and their host community cope with the crisis.



Photo: Distribution of aid kits to new displaced seeking refuge in a monastery in Northern Shan / Meikwe Myanmar

## **Covid-19 compounding crises**

The recent intensification of conflict affecting people throughout Myanmar is leading to daily reports of new displacement and humanitarian needs are rising to alarming levels.

In addition, a new wave and rapid spread of COVID-19 in Myanmar is right now sweeping through Myanmar, with a reported 90% of the country affected. The currently circulating Delta mutation of the virus is even more infectious than previous variants, resulting in unprecedented infection and casualty rates, and health facilities nationwide struggling to meet the rapidly growing demand for testing and treatment. As the pandemic continues to exhaust all remaining capacities it creates new fear across the conflict-ridden country, and in particular so among the most vulnerable and isolated communities.

## **First Line Emergency Response through ECHO**

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has worked with support to conflict-affected people in Myanmar since 2009 and in Northern Shan State since 2016. With recent developments in the country, new instability and not least the pandemic, DRC was among humanitarian organisations in Myanmar selected by the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO) to strengthen locally led emergency response mechanisms. These new efforts through the so-called First Line Emergency Response (FLER) project are critical to ensure access to life-saving aid and enhance outreach in isolated areas of Myanmar.

## **Working with local partner organisations**

DRC has been present in Northern Shan State since 2016, and has worked with EU Humanitarian Aid funding of emergency responses in Northern Shan State since March 2020. In March 2021, the FLER project was launched in two townships in collaboration with several local partner organisations in this north-eastern part of Myanmar surrounded by five other states and bordering China to the east. DRC works closely with other ECHO implementing partners – Danish Church Aid (DCA) and Oxfam as well as several local partners, to ensure that the townships that are most affected by conflict are covered by FLER activities.

[Meikswe Myanmar](#) – meaning ‘Friends of Myanmar’ – has worked with DRC since 2019 and is one of the partners now working with DRC to implement the First Line Emergency Response programme.

As a well-known and widely trusted civil society organisation Meikswe Myanmar is anchored in local communities and has been operational since 2004. Their expertise, insight and detailed local knowledge gathered through a network of civil society organisations across Northern Shan State is crucial when navigating in environments that are highly sensitive and complex and where even practical outreach is a challenge.



*Photo: DRC's Emergency Response Team and partner Meikswe Myanmar planning FLER / DRC*



## Reaching people trapped in conflict

Planning of the First Line Emergency Responses in Northern Shan State is spearheaded by DRC with its partners as well as representatives of local communities and civil society organisations. They meet to discuss, design and develop the project and define the intervention in detail.

The planning process helps DRC and partners to ensure that local coordination structures are in place and that the most vulnerable and crisis-affected are identified and provided with adequate assistance. In areas where roads are often damaged or communities are isolated after years of conflict, and where communication infrastructure is weak at its best, logistics is one of the everyday challenges for people in these remote areas as well as for those who try to reach them.



*Photo: Emergency kits with basic hygiene items packed in buckets later used for fetching water, washing, etc. / DRC*

‘Once we get there, providing protection, emergency aid and if needed Emergency Mine Risk Education is a very first step to assist people in need here,’ tells Martin Vane, Country Director, DRC Myanmar and explains:

‘DRC and our FLER partners are furthermore working with grassroots actors to strengthen local capacity even remotely in order to build people’s resilience to future shocks. In this sense FLER aims

to be distinct from other emergency response mechanisms in that local actors are the default responders and the aim of the mechanism will be to support their capacity to provide humanitarian assistance. This includes developing preparedness measures, training, prepositioning of stocks and other supplies. When people are able to return to their villages, they might need to travel through mined areas again and then once they are back, they often have to start all over, resuming farming activities, and maybe also reconstructing their houses.'

### **Conflict and climate change**

The First Line Emergency Response programme is now implemented by DRC through Meikwe Myanmar in two townships in Northern Shan State. Both are areas affected by a complex of decades old and new armed conflict affecting the population and creating widespread internal displacement within Northern Shan, but also spilling into Southern Shan and Eastern Shan states.

Conflict is not the only threat here. Natural hazard threats are seasonal and people are all too familiar with Myanmar's extreme weather events such as increasing hot summers and colder winters, floods, landslides and other extreme events that continue to be seen to intensify due to effects of climate change.

Most people here are living in deep poverty and are already vulnerable to shocks from conflict and instability. Adding to this the weather events that are growing in scale and intensity, while also becoming more and more unpredictable, then the little means and weak resilience to cope is easily depleted.

### **The risk of being trapped in displacement**

These risks altogether make entire communities prone to displacement that easily becomes a protracted situation. Many displaced individuals, families and entire communities now find themselves trapped and not able to sustain themselves in their interim safe haven, nor return home to the areas from where they fled.

'As public services are limited or not existing and there is often no national institutions to rely on, we know from our local partners and the people we reach through the emergency responses, that every bit of aid and support makes a big difference,' says Martin Vane, DRC Myanmar.

DRC's current First Line Emergency Response programme funded by EU Humanitarian Aid runs until March 2022 and aims to reach nearly 30,000 men, women and children with emergency aid and life-saving support as well as support to strengthen local resilience to cope with crises.

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