

**Aid Groups Stretched by Refugees in Myanmar's Kachin State
Reported by Zin Mar Win for RFA's Myanmar Service. Translated by Khet Mar. Written in
English by Joshua Lipes, Radio Free Asia
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Aid groups in Myanmar's Kachin state are facing a humanitarian crisis as thousands of villagers fleeing homes to avoid fresh fighting between government troops and ethnic rebels inundate ill-prepared refugee camps, sources said Wednesday. Around 2,000 villagers have been displaced by a surge in clashes since Oct. 16 between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the military in Mansi township in Kachin, a region near Myanmar's northern border with China.

Mary Tom, an official from the nongovernmental organization Wunpawng Ninghtoi (WPN), which is based in Kachin's Lizayan town, told RFA's Myanmar Service that some 1,000 of the new refugees had already found their way to camps for the displaced and that a similar number were still in transit.

"According to the list we have, about 700 people have arrived in Lagutyam refugee camp and about 300 ... have arrived in Lazazuja refugee camp," both of which are located in areas of Mansi township controlled by the Kachin rebels, she said. "Between 800 and 1,000 refugees are still on their way to refugee camps." The Lagutyam refugee camp is being administered by a Christian religious organization, she said. Many of the new refugees had already been displaced from earlier fighting and were staying at Nantlinpa village in Mansi when they were again forced to flee, Tom said.

A KIA spokesman told RFA on Monday that government troops had "attacked the village" on Oct. 16 and that "because the troops came in firing their weapons, the villagers and refugees ran away, and there is no one at the camps now." Government troops, numbering around 300, "took advantage" of the situation by entering the area "just minutes after a Catholic funded aid convoy reached" a camp in Nantlinpa village," according to a report by the Kachin News Group, which cited a KIA official as saying that resistance "would have resulted in many civilians getting caught up in the cross fire."

Tom said Wednesday that although there has been no recent fighting in Nantlinpa, the KIA and government troops have set up encampments in the area and further clashes are expected.

She said that when the residents of Nantlinpa gathered their belongings and left, many people from neighboring villages decided to do the same.

Inadequate supplies

According to Tom, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Organisation and several local civil society organizations are working to assist the flood of new refugees, but they are in short supply of food, medicine, clothing, blankets, shelters, and sanitation equipment.

"We have delivered [some] blankets to the refugees, as they are the most necessary in this [cold] weather. We also have delivered some clothing that other people have donated for them," she said. "Most of them have asked us for shoes or slippers and cots, as they don't have any of these things. As many more refugees have arrived in the camps, we are facing difficulty even finding wood to use to cook for them."

In addition to the 1,000 refugees in Lazazuja and Lagutyam, Tom said, around 70 have been staying at the Minekaung village Baptist Christian Church, while an additional 30 arrived there Wednesday from a neighboring village because "several landmines exploded in the area last night and this morning." Tin Maung Naw, secretary of the Minekaung Baptist Christian Church, confirmed the new arrivals.

"More than 70 people are ... staying at the camp and some people just arrived this morning because there were several explosions around their villages," he said. "I think we may have more refugees [arrive] in our camp, as the situation between the two sides is tense." The church's pastor Zaw Latt, said resources were running low at the makeshift camp. "The shelters in our camp are not enough for all of the refugees, so we have arranged some places in nearby villages for them [to stay]," he said.

"The refugees have diarrhea and colds, as it is in the middle of winter right now. The older people are weak, as they had to walk two to three days to get here, and the children need nutrition because they were only able to eat a little food on the way."

Call for peace

In light of the fresh fighting, the international community and rights campaigners have called on both sides of the conflict to end hostilities, which they say are severely endangering local residents.

Earlier this week, the U.N. called for an "immediate cessation of hostilities," according to Agence France-Presse. The U.N. voiced particular concern for villagers fleeing the fighting and for hundreds

of schoolchildren blockaded in their school but later released following an appeal by the Catholic Church. Several Kachin campaign groups have also called for an end to hostilities “to allow humanitarian access” to the area. Speaking to reporters on Monday in Yangon, KIA chief of staff Gen. Gwan Maw remained confident that the new clashes would not derail plans for a nationwide cease-fire—a draft proposal for which will be released and sent to the government next week, following a Nov. 25 meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Ethnic rebel groups, which have fought civil wars with Myanmar’s central government since independence from Britain in 1948, individually signed numerous cease-fire agreements with the country’s former military regime in late 1989 and early 1990, with some of those agreements breaking down in 2010 and 2011.

The government has inked peace deals with 10 out of 11 major armed groups in Myanmar since President Thein Sein extended an olive branch in August 2011, after his nominally civilian government took power after decades of military misrule. Thein Sein’s efforts to secure a nationwide cease-fire are part of a bid to speed up political and economic reforms in Myanmar. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), is the only major Myanmar rebel group that has not yet signed a cease-fire pact with the government.

Last month, the government and Kachin rebels failed to nail down a permanent cease-fire accord, but signed a new agreement aimed at reducing hostilities and laying the groundwork for political dialogue.

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