



Weekly Security Review

Safety and security highlights for clients operating in Myanmar

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The information in this report is correct as of 1600 hours (UTC+6:30) 07 January 2020.

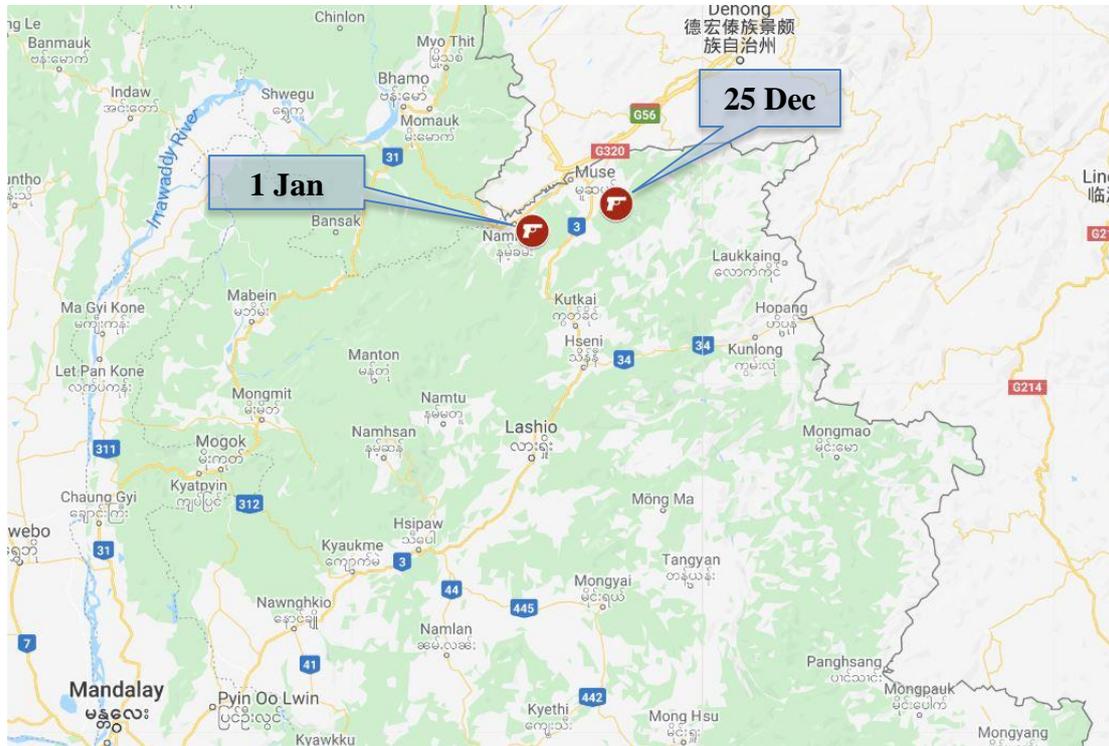
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Tatmadaw and KIA engaged in first battle in 2020

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Tatmadaw troops engaged in their first clash in 2020 on 1 January in Namhkan Township, northern Shan State. KIA spokesman Colonel Naw Bu confirmed the fighting and said there were casualties on both sides.



There have been few clashes between the KIA and the Tatmadaw in 2019, despite a lack of peace talks and KIA support for the Northern Alliance, which includes the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), all of which are in conflict with the Tatmadaw.

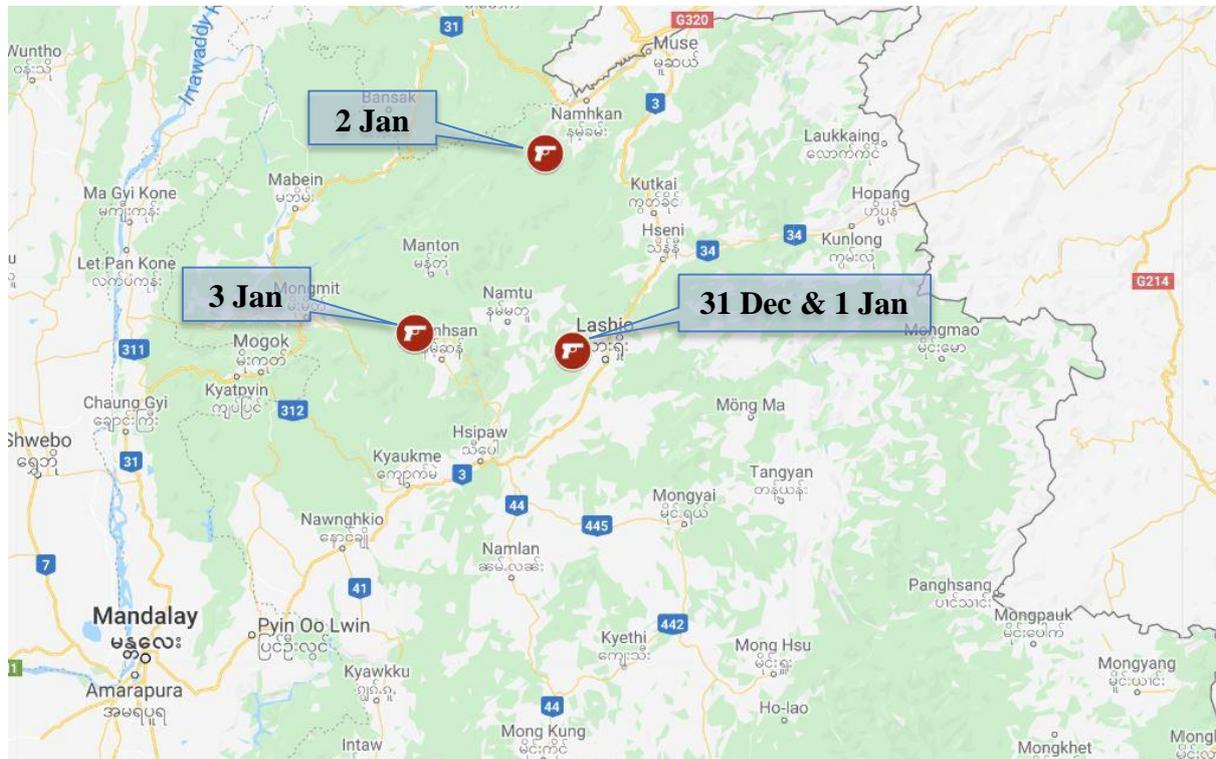
According to a KIA Brigade 6 officer, KIA members launched a landmine attack on a Tatmadaw column from Light Infantry Division (LID) 99 on 25 December morning near the Mungbaw market in northern Shan State's Muse District. On 20 December, troops from LID 99 captured the KIA Battalion 36 near Mungbaw, Muse. The Christmas Day attack by the KIA troops are in retaliation for the destruction of their camp, KIA spokesperson said.

Assessment

Skirmishes between KIA and Tatmadaw troops are likely to intensify into fighting, as large military buildups in Mohnyin, Bhamo and Muse were observed since August 2019 and significant Tatmadaw reinforcements were reported by local sources in Mohnyin Township after skirmishes in October. The deployments likely signal an effort to block the KIA from reinforcing Northern Alliance members in Northern Shan.

Fighting continues in northern Shan State

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) clashed with the Tatmadaw for three consecutive days on 1, 2 and 3 January in Namhkan, Namtu and Namhsan townships in northern Shan State. Movements of Shan State Progress Party / Shan State Army – North (SSPP/SSA-N) forces were also reported in the area. The RCSS is a signatory to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), while the TNLA and SSPP are not.



Regular conflict is ongoing between the TNLA and the Tatmadaw, including road transport disruptions and collateral damage. On 29 December, a truck driver was killed by artillery shell explosion amid fighting between TNLA and Tatmadaw near milestone 15 on Lashio-Namtu Road. TNLA and Tatmadaw clashed 29 times in December 2019 and RCSS and TNLA once on 20 December in Mongngawt area.

Assessment

It is possible that fighting between the TNLA, RCSS and Tatmadaw will continue in northern Shan State even though the TNLA, Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), who refer to themselves as the Brotherhood Alliance, extended its unilateral ceasefire from 1 January till 29 February, with the aim to smoothen negotiations and peace talks. The groups first announced a unilateral ceasefire on 9 September. Major offensives by the Tatmadaw against TNLA and KIA are anticipated in northern Shan State as monsoon season ends and road conditions improve. However, there are no concrete evidences indicating that Lashio or Namtu will be affected directly in the immediate future.

The RCSS/SSA-S has taken advantage of conflict between the Northern Alliance and the Tatmadaw to press territorial claims in northern Shan State in 2019, bringing them into occasional conflict with the SSPP/SSA-N, which is aligned with the TNLA. They have been seen as a useful bulwark against TNLA influence, even reportedly attacking their forces after the August 2019 attacks on Pyin Oo Lwin and Goteik that closed national highway 3 (NH3).

It is unknown whether the Tatmadaw action against the RCSS in Namtu signals a demarcation in how far north they are willing to tolerate their sphere of influence, or simply lack of communication. With a heavy TNLA presence in the area, it is possible that the Tatmadaw mistook the RCSS camp for TNLA. Either way, continued military operations against the TNLA, including the capture of a large cache of arms on 22 November in Namhsan Township, may leave a vacuum that other ethnic armed organizations, including the RCSS/SSA-S, will seek to fill.

Avoid non-essential travel by road in northern Shan State north of Lashio outside of urban areas. Avoid all travel by road in northern Shan State after sunset. It is strongly recommended to submit a journey management plan, including regular communications, movement tracking, evacuation plans and designated secure-in-place locations for travel party. Avoid proximity to military convoys and cattle trucks. Cattle truck owners who refused to pay extortion money are mostly targeted by armed groups (TNLA, RCSS & SSPP) in northern Shan.

Tatmadaw used combat drones in Rakhine conflict

Frequent battles between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw continued throughout the New Year in Paletwa, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Myebon, Minbya, and Kyauktaw townships. This week, attention was drawn to the use of unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) by the Tatmadaw in northern Rakhine clashes. According to the statement by the AA on 2 January, the Tatmadaw began drone operations in northern Rakhine clashes since 1 January, specifically in Rathedaung and Buthidaung townships.

According to Tatmadaw Western Command spokesperson Colonel Win Zaw Oo, the Tatmadaw is using drones for surveillance operations and would use UCAV if necessary. Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun of the Tatmadaw True News Information Team told local media that the Tatmadaw has never used drones in counterinsurgency roles.



Photo via Defence Blog

Photographs and other information have emerged in the past of the Tatmadaw using Chinese-made CH3 UCAV, with a number of photographs widely circulated on social media.

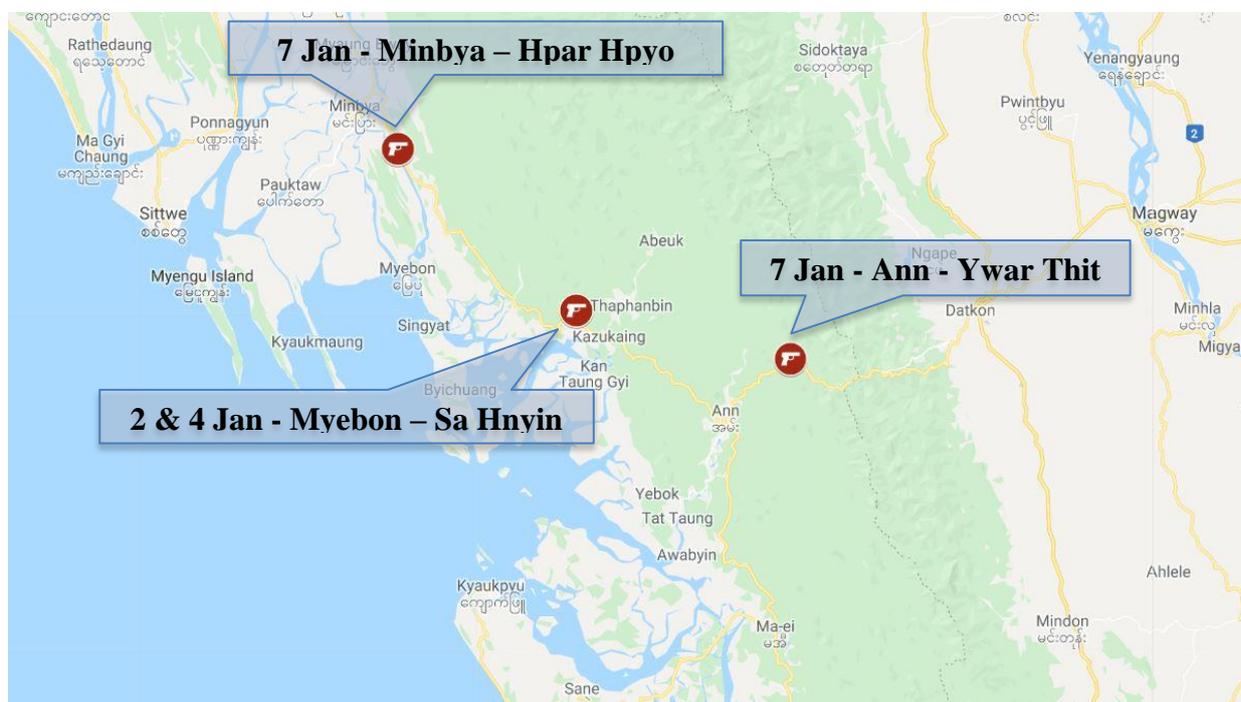
In 2016, an online military magazine “Defence Blog” reported that a Chinese armed CH3 drone was spotted in Myanmar preparing for flight.

Assessment

Since intense conflict erupted between the AA and Tatmadaw in early December 2018, it has spread throughout northern and central Rakhine State, including the tourist destination of Mrauk-U, and started moving south along main roads and rivers. The number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has reached 100,000 according to the Rakhine Ethnic Congress (REC).

Conflict has most recently been observed in Ywar Thit Village, Ann Township on 7 January. The village is approximately 700 meters from Minbu-Ann Road and 80km from Kyaukpyu, a major focal point for oil and gas offshore activities, pipeline construction, and port development.

The conflict in Rakhine State shows no sign of weakening despite a formal talk between government peace team and northern alliance armed groups is planned for second week of January. The political stalemate means that the conflict is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, as will the humanitarian crisis facing civilians in several townships in Rakhine State.



Sustained conflict in Ann Township, which previously was subject to sporadic mine or improvised explosive device strikes, supports a continued trend of insurgents improving their ability to attack throughout Rakhine State, not just in the north. Ann Township is located at a strategically important crossroads between Magway,

Kyaukpyu, southern Rakhine, and Sittwe. Conflict in the area could result in severe disruptions to logistics, and divert security forces otherwise engaged in counter-insurgency operations elsewhere in Rakhine State.

Although Kyaukpyu remains geographically isolated and well-protected from the conflict given its location on Ramree Island, it is vulnerable to operational disruptions caused by interruptions in overland supply routes or increased security presence. Previous attacks in Ann Township have resulted in heavy security presence along main supply routes and, in some cases, shipments being turned back. Reconsider supply routes running through Ann Township. Increased security force activity can be expected in Ann and Kyaukpyu townships, but there are currently no indications that day-to-day activity in commercial centers will be affected.

With clashes intensifying in the vicinity of Minbya and Myebon, Sittwe, the state capital is effectively surrounded by conflict zones, with supply lines jeopardized along the Yangon-Sittwe road, and the AA continue to push southwards into Rakhine State while conflict continues in the north. Avoid non-essential travel along the Yangon-Sittwe road north of Ann Township.

List of Acronyms

AA: Arakan Army. The militant outfit of the ULA (United League of Arakan). Created in 2009 by Major General Tunn Myat Naing, the AA has grown into a force of about 7,000 soldiers benefiting from a solid support by the Arakanese Population.

TNLA : Ta'ang National Liberation Army. The armed wing of the Palaung State Liberation Front group, claiming more autonomy for the Ta'ang regions. Created in 2009, the TNLA now fields more 7,000 soldiers across Ta'ang populated regions of Northern Shan State.

RCSS : Restoration Council of Shan State. A 10,000 strong armed group based on the Thai border. Founded in 1996, RCSS joined the national cease-fire with central government in 2015 and subsequently started to move northward to the Chinese border where it has clashed regularly with other armed groups operating the region.

SSPP/SSA : Shan State Progressive Party/ Shan State Army. Founded in 1964, the SSPP and its armed wing the SSA is a 8000 strong armed group operating in Northern Shan State. SSPP is regarded as the historically political and military group acting on behalf of the Shan population.

MNDAA : Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army. A communist-inspired army insurgent group in the Kokang region in the northern Shan State. The army has existed since 1989, having been the first one to sign a ceasefire with the Myanmar government that lasted for about two decades.

KIO/KIA : Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army. Created in 1961, the KIO/KIA claims to represent the struggle of the Kachin

population for self-determination. KIA fields more than 10,000 soldiers operating in 10 different brigades throughout Kachin and Shan States as well as Sagaing Division.

Source Information

This product represents highlights from a comprehensive review of Myanmar and English language print, electronic, and social media as well as information obtained from sources in law enforcement, government, diplomatic missions, the United Nations, international NGOs and other Exera partners active in the region. Supplementary research is conducted by Exera investigators and analysts.

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