

A Researcher's Journal

Surveilling Violence, Witnessing Resilience: Reflections from Conflict Tracking in the Field.

“I witnessed a pregnant woman dying as we tried to flee across the border [from the Military] as she was unable to deliver, I witnessed elderly people die due to over exhaustion”.

Such was the scene described by a Rohingya man, retelling his harrowing journey during our research on the intersection of climate change, conflict, and displacement. He dreamed of running his own business and providing his children with an education. Instead he was forced to flee to a refugee camp in Bangladesh - and tragically, his children perished during their escape.

This sobering account illustrates just one of the many stories that emerged from the protracted war in Myanmar's Rakhine State and the real experiences people endure. Raising urgent questions about accountability, justice, and the importance of systematically documenting violent incidents. Such documentation not only deepens our understanding of the mechanisms of violence but encourages accountability and lays the groundwork for peace and democracy. Such documentation also reveals the strength of the human spirit to overcome adversity.

The work of monitoring violence requires a system that can record incidents, locations, and the type of force used. But it also requires the perspectives and experiences of communities to translate excel inputs into a meaningful analysis.

The objective of this monitoring system was to build a reliable and regularly updated database of incidents that would highlight the patterns and characteristics of violence. Supporting data driven decision making, transparency and hopefully, stopping such instances as described earlier from happening in the future.

The conflict in Myanmar has its roots stretching back over 75 years. Starting with its independence in 1948, military rule from 1962-2011, the Rohingya crisis in 2017, and the current civil war ignited by the 2021 coup. With the most recent milestone precipitating a severe humanitarian crisis with 3.4 million displaced people, 40% being children ([ref](#)).

One of the things learned about data collection in conflict settings is to not identify the people interviewed. I recall an editing review undertaken with a friend from Kachin. We attributed a quote to a community member in a particular town, identifying him by his profession - a priest. But this idea was dropped when someone loudly declared, “but there are only three priests in

that town!”, not ideal when trying to protect a person's identity. In that regard maintaining anonymity with sources is crucial.

Personal stories such as the “Rohingya man's” highlight the impact of violence: the risks are not confined to just the area of conflict but escaping it as well. That is why it is vital to bring to light such accounts. Documentation plays a key role in fostering accountability in conflict zones, transitioning anecdotal accounts to systematic monitoring, illuminating patterns and ultimately informing resolution strategies. For example, arbitrary arrests were the most recurring form of violence in Rakhine, hitting their peak in September 2022, with Arakanese men as the most targeted demographic. What this information shows is the authorities' preferred mechanism of oppression—but why this form? It could be ideal for suppressing dissent, controlling minorities, and creating a climate of fear.

Conflict monitoring in Rakhine presents significant challenges, particularly in ensuring the reliability of community input. Informants posing as local voices but actually serving as key conflict actors often spread propaganda, manipulating narratives to obscure the truth. This highlights the critical need to cross-verify data while maintaining the safety and confidentiality of genuine informants who risk retaliation. Translating raw data into actionable insights is equally complex; it demands a balance between retaining the human context and creating analysis that informs meaningful advocacy without reducing trauma to impersonal statistics.

Amid this work, the resilience of the affected communities stood out as a source of inspiration. Despite enduring profound trauma, individuals demonstrated remarkable strength and determination. A man who lost his children shared hope for the future, underscoring the power of the human spirit to endure and rebuild. These stories highlight the importance of systemic change, reminding us that data collected through monitoring can inform pathways for justice and peace. Resilience offers a model for how healing can occur, even in the face of despair.

The necessity of conflict monitoring cannot be overstated. Sustained documentation is critical to holding perpetrators accountable, ensuring transparency, and advocating for the marginalized. Strengthening international mechanisms to support grassroots efforts is essential for a just resolution. Conflict zones embody a stark duality: despair born of violence and hope rooted in resilience. Within this tension lies the blueprint for change, one that bridges gaps through empathy, evidence, and action. By amplifying voices, documenting stories with integrity, and translating these into systemic action, we can pave the way toward accountability and peace.

A Researcher's Journal is a series by PeaceWatch Initiative, offering reflections and insights from the field.