

Ceasefires and Civilian Protection Monitoring in Myanmar

JANA KRAUSE

Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Norway

AND

ERIN KAMLER

Minerva University, USA

Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Civilian ceasefire and civilian protection monitoring are often seen as innovative peacekeeping and protection mechanisms in conflict zones difficult to access for international actors. However, the literature on civilian monitoring and its impact is sparse. In many conflicts, civilians organize to protect themselves. Research into civilian agency and protection has shown that *civilian capacity* to self-protect and *conflict conditions* determine whether protective civilian agency can be effective. We analyze whether civilian protection monitoring can positively impact the protection of civilians, focusing on Myanmar, where donors have funded civilian ceasefire monitoring efforts that are inclusive of a strong civilian protection component. We argue that despite failed ceasefires in Myanmar, the nurturing of civilian monitoring networks, that is, supporting *civilian capacity*, had a positive—albeit limited—impact on civilian protection. Monitors *adapted* knowledge from international ceasefire monitoring trainings to their reality on the ground and implemented civilian protection monitoring. Yet, *conflict conditions* seriously limited protection monitoring and posed grave security challenges to monitors and communities. We conclude that in conflict situations where armed actors show little sensitivity to civilian preferences and commitment to respecting human rights, the need for civilian protection is high while the protective potential of civilian monitoring is limited as long as armed groups' incentives to better protect civilians remain weak.

La surveillance civile des cessez-le-feu et la surveillance civile de la protection des civils sont souvent considérées comme des mécanismes innovants de maintien de la paix et de protection dans les zones de conflit difficiles d'accès pour les acteurs internationaux. Cependant, la littérature sur la surveillance civile et son impact est rare. Dans de nombreux conflits, les civils s'organisent pour se protéger. Des recherches sur la capacité à agir et sur la protection des civils ont montré que la capacité des civils à se protéger eux-mêmes et que les conditions du conflit déterminaient si la capacité des civils à agir pour leur protection pouvait être efficace. Nous analysons si la surveillance civile de la protection des civils peut avoir un impact positif sur la protection des civils en nous concentrant sur la Birmanie où des donateurs ont financé des efforts de surveillance civile des cessez-le-feu comprenant une forte composante de protection des civils. Nous soutenons que malgré l'échec des cessez-le-feu en Birmanie, la favorisation du développement des réseaux de surveillance civile, c'est-à-dire le soutien à la capacité des civils, a eu un impact positif - bien que limité - sur la protection des civils. Les responsables de la surveillance ont adapté les connaissances issues des formations internationales à la surveillance des cessez-le-feu à leur réalité de terrain et mis en œuvre une surveillance de la protection des civils. Pourtant, les conditions du conflit ont considérablement limité cette surveillance de la protection des civils et posé de graves problèmes de sécurité aux responsables de la surveillance et aux communautés. Nous concluons que dans les situations de conflit où les acteurs armés se montrent peu sensibles aux préférences des civils et peu engagés à respecter les droits de l'homme, le besoin de protection des civils est élevé tandis que le potentiel de protection de la surveillance civile est limité tant que les motivations des groupes armés à mieux protéger les civils restent faibles.

En general, la supervisión civil de la cesación del fuego y de la seguridad se considera un mecanismo innovador de mantenimiento de la paz y protección en zonas de conflicto de difícil acceso para los agentes internacionales. Sin embargo, no hay suficiente bibliografía sobre la supervisión civil y su impacto. En muchos conflictos, los civiles se organizan para protegerse. Según investigaciones sobre organismos civiles y cuestiones relativas a la seguridad, se demostró que la capacidad de autoprotección de los civiles y las condiciones del conflicto determinan si el organismo civil de seguridad puede ser eficaz. Analizamos si la supervisión civil de la seguridad puede tener un impacto positivo en la protección de los civiles, centrándonos en Birmania, donde los donantes financiaron iniciativas de supervisión civil de la cesación del fuego que incluyen un fuerte componente de seguridad civil. A pesar del fracaso de la cesación del fuego en Birmania, sostenemos que el fomento de las redes civiles de supervisión (es decir, el apoyo a la capacidad civil) tuvo un impacto positivo, aunque limitado, en la protección de los civiles. Los supervisores adaptaron la información de las capacitaciones sobre supervisión de la cesación del fuego internacional a su realidad y pusieron en práctica la supervisión civil de la seguridad. Sin embargo, las condiciones del conflicto limitaron significativamente la supervisión de la protección, a la vez que plantearon graves problemas de seguridad para los supervisores y las comunidades. Concluimos que, en las situaciones de conflicto donde los agentes armados muestran poca sensibilidad hacia las preferencias de los civiles y un escaso compromiso con el respeto de los derechos humanos, la necesidad de protección de los civiles es alta, pero que el potencial de protección de la supervisión civil será limitado mientras los incentivos de los grupos armados para proteger mejor a los civiles sigan siendo débiles.

Introduction

Ceasefire monitoring has long been one of the prime conflict-resolution activities of the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations. In recent years, how-

ever, questions have been raised about the potential and benefits of domestic ceasefire monitoring and observation (Verjee 2019). Many contemporary conflict zones are difficult to access for international observers and humanitarian actors. For example, when in 2012, international UN

ceasefire monitors were withdrawn from Syria after only four months, it was hoped that domestic civil society could effectively monitor ceasefires and document human rights violations (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2016). Civilians have monitored ceasefires in protracted conflicts such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Yemen, or Myanmar.

Ceasefire monitoring is a fundamental compliance mechanism that aims to support peace negotiations by preventing violence from spiraling out of control. Peacebuilding actors and donors who support civilian ceasefire monitoring hope that it contributes to reducing the impact of armed conflict on civilians and ensures the inclusion of civil society and women groups in the early stages of a peace process, which increases the likelihood of durable peace (Nilsson 2012; Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018). However, empirical research of civilian monitoring is limited to date. We neither know whether civilian ceasefire monitoring tends to positively impact ceasefire durability and peace negotiations nor whether such practices can effectively reduce violence against civilians.

Civilian monitoring mandates are usually linked to the text of a political settlement, such as a ceasefire or peace agreement. Because such agreements often include provisions on the protection of civilians, monitoring can encompass not only troop movements that violate a ceasefire but also acts of violence against civilians and human rights violations. In Myanmar, many civilian monitors—particularly women—emphasized the importance of *civilian protection monitoring* as being a core component of their monitoring work (Kamler 2016). Civilian protection monitoring is important because ceasefires rarely result in the immediate end of all forms of violence against civilians. However, neither the sparse civilian ceasefire monitoring literature nor the broader fields of civilian agency and civilian protection research have analyzed civilian protection monitoring in more detail. Our purpose is to address this lacuna. *We analyze the prospects and limitations as well as the challenges and dangers of civilian protection monitoring, focusing on the context of Myanmar.*

There is now a burgeoning research field on how civilians protect themselves and others across diverse conflict zones. We know that organized civilians often facilitate practices of seeking safety, establishing communities as safe spaces and negotiating with armed actors to prevent attacks and abuse (Arjona 2016; Baines and Paddon 2012; Barter 2012; Kaplan 2017; Krause 2018; Verweijen 2018; Masullo 2020; Schon 2020). Civilian self-protection practices may be particularly prevalent in protracted conflict zones with persistent violence against civilians during high- as well as low-intensity conflict periods (Suarez 2017). Civilians who effectively protect themselves and others rely on extensive knowledge of conflict dynamics. Drawing on their knowledge and networks, civilians may support the monitoring of ceasefire violations and human rights abuses by collecting information from remote areas for verification. International peacebuilding actors may nurture and strengthen such civilian agency in the context of local peacebuilding programs (Kaplan 2017).

However, questions arise concerning the viability of such arrangements in protracted conflicts with high levels of violence against civilians and—if a ceasefire fails—implications for the safety of civilian monitors and the communities they worked with. The literature on civilian agency specifies scope conditions tied to conflict dynamics and the nature of armed groups: protective civilian agency is more likely to be effective in conflicts where armed groups are

sensitive to civilian preferences and reputational damage (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017). Armed groups are more likely to limit violence against civilians if they purposefully choose restraint (Stanton 2016) and socialize members into respecting norms of restraint (Hoover Green 2018). Many government militaries and rebel groups refrain from some or all forms of violence against civilians (Stanton 2016). However, in Myanmar's conflict zones, such as Kachin State, the military is known for its lack of restraint (Hedström and Olivius 2021).

We ask *whether civilian monitoring can positively impact the protection of civilians in protracted conflicts*. By protracted conflict, we mean prolonged conflicts characterized by repeated conflict-resolution failure and periods of high- and low-intensity fighting (see also Azar 1990). We focus on civilian ceasefire monitoring in the context of Myanmar's peace process to understand how *civilian capacity* and *conflict conditions* shaped *civilian protection monitoring* and discuss implications for peacebuilding actors.

Myanmar has been plagued by insurgencies in its borderlands since shortly after independence in 1948. The Tatmadaw, the country's military, has a long history of negotiating ceasefires but historically, these agreements never translated into substantial political reform. Myanmar's transition in 2011 from a military to a civilian-led regime was "driven by a government hoping to terminate Myanmar's armed conflicts altogether" (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2021). In this context, local and international peacebuilding organizations and donors supported civilian ceasefire monitoring with a civilian protection component to strengthen the nascent ceasefires between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the Union of Myanmar Government. Unfortunately, by the time civilian ceasefire monitoring became fully operational across Myanmar's conflict zones,¹ the country-wide peace process had already stalled.

We limit our analysis to the largest civilian monitoring network, which operated in Kachin State, for the period 2015–2018. Kachin State suffered one of the highest levels of violence after Myanmar's transition due to the 2011 collapse of a long ceasefire between the Myanmar army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which is one of the strongest EAOs in the country. A bilateral ceasefire was renewed in 2013 but never implemented. Fighting escalated until the Myanmar army declared a unilateral ceasefire in 2018. Since the coup in February 2021, violence in Kachin State and other conflict areas reescalated. Consequently, in Kachin State, international and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) trained civilian ceasefire monitors at a time when there was no longer a ceasefire to monitor.

We argue that despite the failed ceasefire, the nurturing of civilian ceasefire monitoring networks, that is, *civilian capacity*, had a positive albeit limited impact on civilian protection in Kachin State. Monitors *adapted* external ceasefire monitoring knowledge to their reality on the ground and implemented civilian protection monitoring. This adaptation allowed them to become important protection providers alongside other civil society actors. At the same time, *conflict conditions* seriously limited civilian protection monitoring and other forms of protective civilian agency.

Reflecting on the implications of our analysis beyond Myanmar, we argue that in conflicts where armed actors

¹ Civilian ceasefire monitoring networks operated in Kachin, Chin, Shan, Kayah, Karen, and Mon states, supported by local NGOs. Information obtained from the office of Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2017.

show little sensitivity to civilian preferences and commitment to respecting human rights norms, the need for civilian protection monitoring is high while its protective potential is limited. Consequently, despite an increasing focus on engaging local actors, international peacebuilders can hardly scale up local protection and peacebuilding mechanisms to address a lack of direct protection from international actors.

Our analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Myanmar during the years 2015–2020. The research focused on the emergence and challenges of civilian ceasefire and protection monitoring. We draw on interviews with ceasefire monitors conducted during the formation of the networks in 2015 across a number of conflict-affected states in Myanmar; a set of twenty interviews and one focus group discussion conducted in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, in 2018, with civilian monitors who were based in Kachin State's conflict regions; and repeated interviews with NGO staff based in Yangon in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

We first review the literature on civilian ceasefire monitoring and protective civilian agency and summarize how *civilian capacity* and *conflict conditions* shape the prospects for civilian protection monitoring. Next, we provide an overview of Myanmar's political transition, the Kachin conflict, and the establishment of monitoring networks. We then discuss our research process before analyzing civilian protection monitoring in Kachin State. Before we conclude, we reflect on the risk of international peacebuilding actors creating a moral hazard for civilians in protracted conflict zones.

Ceasefires, Civilian Monitoring, and Civilian Protection

In the most basic terms, a ceasefire means the declared intention by at least one party to an armed conflict to suspend hostilities. It can be a useful component of a peace process that eases tensions, facilitates political negotiations, and increases chances for durable peace (Ary 1995; Fortna 2004; Potter 2004; Mahieu 2007). Ceasefire agreements usually address the prohibition of military activities undertaken for the purpose of strategic or military gain and the prohibition of human rights violations against civilians, such as recruitment, targeting, blocking humanitarian aid, and impeding freedom of movement (Forster 2019). Such agreements are first and foremost political arrangements meant to alter belligerents' interactions, territorial control, and governance, and they rarely benefit both sides equally (Potter 2004; Sosnowski 2020). The military constellation, the economic dimensions of the conflict, and international actors' normative influence all shape the political process and power constellations.

Research has shown that factors contributing to ceasefire durability include strong agreement provisions and third-party guarantees, peacekeeping, and joint commissions for dispute resolutions (Fortna 2004). In protracted conflicts, repeated ceasefires are less likely to lead to peace (Sagård 2019). Furthermore, ceasefire durability cannot be automatically equated with an effective peace process. It may not only enable humanitarian access but also allow armed groups to recover from losses, regroup, and potentially rearm. Flawed ceasefires may generate a "no war no peace" gray zone that effectively establishes government control over rebel territories. In Myanmar, the long-lasting ceasefire economy of Kachin State (1994–2011) proved an effective state-building tool for the military government and its businesses (Woods 2016).

Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring

Civilian monitoring missions capture a range of missions in which unarmed civilians are deployed to observe, report, and verify information through field presence. The establishment of such missions is usually linked to a political settlement, such as a ceasefire agreement, which establishes the mandate of the monitoring mission. The key function of civilian monitors is confidence building in situations of high tensions and mistrust by resolving disputes and reducing misunderstandings and the chances of unintended conflict escalation (Höglund and Wennerström 2015).

Research into the effectiveness of civilian monitoring is limited. Case studies have analyzed civilian monitoring in Sri Lanka, where the peace process failed (Höglund and Wennerström 2015); the Philippines (Mindanao), where domestic civilian observers worked alongside international monitors (Gündüz and Torralba 2016); or the case of Nepal, where civil society monitoring positively impacted the peace process (Pinaud 2020). Scholars have argued that civilian monitors can nurture a climate of trust and confidence (Höglund and Wennerström 2015), empower civilians to document abuses for redress (Puttick 2017), integrate local knowledge to promote ownership of the peace process (Ross 2017), and positively impact peace agreement implementation (Pinaud 2020).

However, limited attention has been paid to the fact that civilian monitors are *endogenous* to any peace process: their networks emerge during ceasefire negotiations and are tied to more or less robust ceasefire architectures. Civilian monitoring fundamentally depends on the goodwill of armed parties to the ceasefire: unarmed observers have little ability to enforce peace, monitor a dysfunctional ceasefire, or halt conflict reescalation (Höglund and Wennerström 2015; Palik 2021).

Civilian Protection Monitoring

A number of international NGOs and humanitarian actors have adopted programs to train civilians in monitoring and protection strategies. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross' (ICRC) efforts in Colombia "catalysed the civilians' agency and their innovative efforts to avoid, negotiate with, or protest the armed groups," thereby strengthening civilian protective agency (Kaplan 2021). Nonviolent Peaceforce, the international NGO that supported civilian monitoring in Myanmar, linked monitoring to the broader concept of "unarmed civilian protection." This the organization defined as "the practice of deploying professionally prepared unarmed civilians before, during, or after violent conflict, to prevent or reduce violence; to provide direct physical protection to civilian populations under threat; and to strengthen or build resilient local peace infrastructures" (Duncan 2016; see also Furnari 2016; Julian 2020). However, under what conditions civilian self-protection strategies can effectively link to ceasefire monitoring and local peacebuilding remains unclear. We specify these conditions and demonstrate their interplay in our analysis.

A substantial body of research has analyzed how civilians protect themselves in conflict zones. By protective civilian agency, we mean actions that focus on one's own survival and/or the protection of others but exclude purposefully supporting an armed group (Krause 2017). Such actions include evading the reach of armed groups, for example, through temporary displacement (Baines and Paddon 2012; Jose and Medie 2015; Gorur and Carstensen 2016; Rhoads and Sutton 2020), community self-

organization and negotiations with armed groups (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017; Krause 2018; Masullo 2020), and rescue agency of saving others, particularly in the context of genocide (Monroe 2012; Finkel 2017; Braun 2019). To a varying extent, these studies show that social connections, access to information, strong networks, and adequate resources are vital for individual and collective protection efforts. Some scholars emphasize that social knowledge, learning, threat anticipation, and adaptation to conflict dynamics support individuals and communities in maintaining effective protection (Monroe 2012; Finkel 2017; Krause 2018), suggesting that skills can at least be partially built through external training (Kaplan 2017). Consequently, if civilians and communities lack the necessary knowledge, expertise, and networks to organize effective protection, that is, *civilian capacity*, their efforts are less likely to curb or mitigate violence.

However, beyond civilian capacity, *conflict conditions* also shape civilian agency. Civilians can only effectively negotiate protection from armed actors who are sensitive to civilian preferences and reputational damage (Kaplan 2017). Armed groups with cohesive internal structures, political education, and effective discipline (Hoover Green 2018) that act under long time horizons (Arjona 2016) are more likely to be sensitive to civilian preferences and limit violence against civilians. By contrast, state military forces that do not institutionalize policies of restraint (Stanton 2016)—such as the Tatmadaw in Myanmar—are unlikely to respond positively to civilian efforts to protect themselves and others through engagement and negotiation. In sum, *civilian capacity* and *conflict conditions* both determine the prospects of a protective civilian agency. Civilian protection monitoring is one form of a protective civilian agency. In the following, we demonstrate how civilian capacity and conflict conditions shaped civilian protection monitoring in Kachin State, Myanmar.

Myanmar's Ceasefires and the Kachin Conflict

Myanmar's protracted conflicts have persisted for decades in cycles of peace negotiations and conflict escalation (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007). Between 1989 and 1997, the Myanmar military negotiated at least seventeen ceasefires with EAOs (Kyed and Gravers 2014). Ceasefire arrangements primarily profited the military government, enabling it to contain the significant threat of a pro-democracy uprising and resulting in enormous income from the border trade with China and Thailand previously controlled by EAOs (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007, 56–57). Economic development has been a primary strategy for the central government to penetrate the territories of ethnic minorities and establish political and military control and resource concessions in contested territories (Sadan 2016; Brenner 2019). The latter led to a further militarization of the surrounding countryside to protect military businesses (Woods 2016).

The long Kachin ceasefire (1994–2011) exemplifies this strategy of ceasefire statebuilding and its consequences for ethnic minority populations. Kachin State is Myanmar's most northern state and borders China and India. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its armed wing, the KIA, was founded in 1961 and is one of the largest and most influential EAOs in Myanmar. Kachin State is rich in natural resources, first and foremost the highly profitable jade mines. Myanmar's jade sector is estimated to be worth roughly half of the country's gross domestic product (Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexton 2019). The most valuable jade is found in Kachin State (Global Witness 2015).

In the early 1990s, the prospect of unending war and grassroots pressure from traditional community and religious leaders led the KIO to pursue a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007). The KIO hoped to negotiate a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA), along with all other EAOs, which would support a political dialogue. However, EAOs were divided over approaches to ceasefires; major groups such as the Karen National Union and the Shan State Army-South refused to enter a ceasefire without a commitment to future political dialogue (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007; Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2021). With insurgencies continuing in other border regions, a genuine national political dialogue remained elusive. During the 2000s, the Kachin elites took part in the military government's political roadmap of change that resulted in the adoption of the 2008 constitution, a process in which ethnic minority delegates had little say (International Crisis Group 2013). The new constitution secured the military's position of power and control under the new democratic system and blocked civilian oversight.

During the Kachin ceasefire, the KIO lost its profitable jade business but continued revenue-making by logging, mining, and taxing border trade (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007). Economic co-optation led to temporary stability, but the KIO's political aspirations were not met. Instead, the local population witnessed the militarization and Burmanization of state–society relations (Woods 2016). New abuses resulted from land confiscation and displacement due to the military businesses and resource extraction in previously contested areas (Brenner 2015). Both the KIA and the Tatmadaw significantly increased their troop sizes, and the number of military battalions tripled (Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007). Even before the ceasefire breakdown in June 2011, “many leaders were already questioning what their peace efforts had truly achieved in advancing Kachin rights and autonomy” (Smith 2016, 78). A younger generation of KIO members remobilized the KIA (Brenner 2015, 2019).

Myanmar's Political Transition and Conflict Escalation in Kachin State

In 2011, at the time that the Kachin ceasefire collapsed, the national political situation in Myanmar altered and an end to the decades-old borderland conflicts seemed genuinely possible (Sadan 2016). The transitional military-backed government led by President U Thein Sein (2011–2015) instigated a program of political and economic reform that included ceasefires with ten of the country's eleven largest EAOs, culminating in the NCA in 2015 signed by eight EAOs. International donors pledged financial support to a multi-donor joint peace fund and hoped that the peace process would lead to ceasefires with all active EAOs and a political dialogue that resolved issues concerning the federal character of the state and natural resource exploitation, thus paving the way toward sustainable peace. The term nation-wide, however, hardly captured the reality of armed conflict in Myanmar since EAOs that together account for more than 80 percent of rebel troops remained outside the peace process (Lintner 2020). With the coming into power of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy after the 2015 elections, the implementation of the NCA stalled. Suu Kyi professed commitment to the peace process, but her government lacked military knowledge and influence and did not invest the necessary resources (International Crisis Group 2019). During the same period, the Northern Alliance of EAOs fighting against the Tatmadaw emerged. The KIO became part of the

Northern Alliance alongside major armed groups that had been excluded from the 2015 NCA. Fighting in Kachin State and parts of Northern Shan State, in which the KIO was also active, only declined when the Tatmadaw declared a unilateral ceasefire in 2018 in order to concentrate on fighting another rebel group (the Arakan Army) in the west of the country.

Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring in Myanmar

Civilian ceasefire monitoring networks were established between 2012 and 2015 in support of the bilateral ceasefires and later the NCA. These ceasefire agreements did not provide much detail for the monitoring architecture. Neither the 2013 bilateral ceasefire for Kachin State nor the 2015 NCA texts included a clear and strong mandate for civilian ceasefire monitors. Instead, civilian monitoring emerged through the work of NGOs, such as the Yangon-based Nyein (Shalom) foundation and Nonviolent Peaceforce, who recruited and trained monitors (Furnari 2018), funded by the EU and other Western donor states. For the EU as a donor, the aim was to “provide effective monitoring by broadly legitimate, civilian observers and thus consolidate the recently negotiated ceasefires” and facilitate the “involvement of grassroots representatives in the monitoring” (European Commission 2013). It was hoped that monitors would secure early civil society and women’s participation in the peace process on the local level.

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) trained monitors to observe and report with impartiality,² despite the reality on the ground, where monitors were linked to civil society and community-based organizations deeply rooted in the conflict-affected population and its ethnic identity, such as the Kachin in Kachin State. The military accused Kachin monitors of supporting the KIA, while KIA soldiers at times accused monitors of undermining their objectives. Civilian monitors were also not unilaterally welcomed among the Kachin civil society. Some CSOs who were mindful of the failure of the 1994 ceasefire opposed monitors because they did not want another peace process without gains in political dialogue and the federal arrangement of the state. From their perspective, civilian monitors and their advocacy for the peace process threatened to undermine Kachin unity in opposition to the ceasefire politics of the Myanmar military.³

The 2015 NCA included provisions for the creation of a joint monitoring committee (JMC). The JMC established national, state, and local ceasefire monitoring bodies in support of the peace process. Because the peace process quickly stalled, the JMC remained weak and did not conduct monitoring in conflict-affected remote locations beyond state capitals. It was unable to prevent clashes between the Tatmadaw and the EAOs (Banim and Ohn 2019, 18). In parallel, CSOs continued supporting civilian monitors with a focus on civilian protection both in areas covered by the NCA and in Kachin State, where the KIO had not signed the NCA (Banim and Ohn 2019).

However, by June 2017, the JMC announced it no longer accepted civilian monitors outside its structures because they would “create confusion in the official monitoring mechanism” and were instead to “coordinate their voluntary ceasefire monitoring with the official mechanism of the JMC” (Mang 2017). The JMC claimed that civilian moni-

tors communicated ceasefire breaches before the information was verified by its committees and thereby undermined the peace process (Mang 2017). Civilian monitors lost funding, legitimacy, and political support and were forced to refer to themselves as “peace observers.” In 2018, the JMC announced the formation of local civilian monitoring groups within its structures, but little progress was made.

In sum, among belligerents, civilian ceasefire monitoring remained perceived as an independent activity not directly related to the joint monitoring agreed between the ceasefire parties. Civilians were never in a position to effectively monitor as a third party because this would have required access to information and restricted conflict areas, which was never fully granted (Banim and Ohn 2019). The value of the conflict economy in Kachin State incentivized renewed fighting, and the lack of detailed ceasefire provisions and a functioning monitoring and verification system did not change this calculus. Civilian monitors did not alter the stakes for armed actors and had no discernible impact on ceasefire durability. However, their structures, once established, were effectively repurposed for the protection of civilians.

Research Process

We ask *whether civilian protection monitoring positively impacted the protection of civilians*. Before we demonstrate how civilian monitors in Kachin State repurposed ceasefire monitoring knowledge and networks for protection monitoring, we briefly summarize our research process. We argue that *civilian capacity* and *conflict conditions* shape the prospects of civilian protection monitoring. We relied on interviews with monitors to analyze *civilian capacity* for protection monitoring and on event data and document analysis for understanding *conflict conditions*.

In 2015, Kamler interviewed civilian ceasefire monitors from Kachin, Karen, Chin, Mon, and Shan States, at a time when monitoring networks just consolidated (Kamler 2016). Between 2016 and 2020, Krause repeatedly interviewed staff members of NGOs based in Yangon who had supported the establishment of civilian ceasefire monitoring networks in Myanmar, and Kachin CSOs in exile based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Taken together, these interviews allow us to trace the changing rationale of civilian monitoring. The bulk of our material was collected in 2018, when we conducted twenty interviews with members of the civilian ceasefire monitoring network in Kachin State over the course of three days. We met all monitors in a hotel in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, which remained accessible to foreigners. All monitors were provided with the means to travel to Myitkyina from their respective homes in conflict regions outside Myitkyina, which was an arrangement beneficial to them as they had lost travel funds and had difficulties meeting each other on the state level. We worked with research assistant and translators from Myitkyina.⁴ We also held one focus group discussion with civil society representatives in Myitkyina to understand their perceptions of the monitoring in the context of a stalled peace process. It would have been desirable to also travel beyond Myitkyina and interview civilians from different regions about their experiences with civilian ceasefire monitors. However, travel beyond Myitkyina was not possible due to the resurgence of conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States.⁵

⁴See our ethics online appendix for a more detailed discussion of the research process.

⁵On the limitations of fieldwork in Myanmar’s conflict zones and engagement with local communities, see also Bliesemann de Guevara, Furnari, and Julian (2020).

²On the challenges of impartiality in civilian ceasefire monitoring, see also Pinaud (2020) and Palik (2021).

³Author interviews with Kachin civil society representatives living in exile in Thailand, 2019.

We interviewed five female and fifteen male monitors between the ages of twenty-four and seventy years. Three respondents were monitors on the district level, five on the township level, and eleven were field monitors. Some respondents had been government servants, school teachers, pastors, NGO workers, and village leaders, while others worked in farming, forestry, and carpentry. Due to the imperative to protect monitors' identities in a highly volatile conflict zone, we do not offer further information about their location and other background factors.

We relied on relational interviewing (Fujii 2017) for generating knowledge in interaction with our respondents in a reflexive manner. Our semi-structured interviews allowed monitors to narrate their work and its challenges, shaped by their social position and experience as a district-, township-, or village-level monitor, and age, gender, and location in urban or rural areas. This allowed monitors to explain how their network was organized and how the monitoring was conducted on a day-by-day basis, how they had been recruited and what previous work and experiences they considered an important motivation for joining the network, and what protection activities they undertook and the challenges and limitations they faced, particularly after the collapse of the ceasefire.

In addition, we draw on conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED; Raleigh et al. 2010) and human rights reporting to analyze the contextual conditions under which civilian monitoring took place. The UN Human Rights Council's reports on Myanmar provided information on military businesses and human rights abuses in Kachin State. ACLED is based on the coding of newspaper reporting of violent incidents in national and international news. Its coverage of Myanmar and Kachin State should be regarded as an estimate of trends in violent events and casualty numbers only. However, event data do allow us to demonstrate approximately the intensity of fighting between state military forces and rebels in Kachin State during the observation period, demonstrating that the bilateral ceasefire did not hold and that civilian protection efforts were of crucial relevance. UN documents evidence the lack of restraint among Tatmadaw forces operating in Kachin State.

Civilian Protection Monitoring in Kachin State

Civilian ceasefire monitoring started in Kachin State in 2015 when the 2013 bilateral ceasefire between Tatmadaw and KIA, a short agreement without specifications, had effectively remained ignored and battles continued. In early 2015, the Nyein (Shalom) foundation conducted trainings in Kachin State with more than one hundred civilians and monitors from the civilian ceasefire monitoring networks previously established in Mon and Chin States. The Kachin monitoring network became operational in late 2015. Interview respondents recounted what they had learned in trainings, how their committee and secretary were formed, and the division into four monitoring districts. Monitors explained their network's hierarchical structure that linked village-level observers to township- and district-level coordinators. The network covered Kachin State's four districts—Myitkyina, Monyin, Putao, and Bhamo—with Myitkyina and Bhamo as the most conflict-affected ones including the highest monitor numbers. One respondent described the reporting structure as follows:

There is an informal process of reporting to the field monitor by phone or in emergency by SMS. The

field monitor then tries to visit the site, verifies the situation, asks community leaders and others, and reports back to the township monitor. Then the township monitor reports to the district monitor. The district monitor reports to the secretary office. Then a report goes to the Nyein (Shalom) foundation. They have been involved in peace talks between KIO and Tatmadaw. There is no JMC [Joint Monitoring Committee] because the KIO is not a signatory to the NCA. The reporting does not go to the JMC office but some of this information might reach them through Shalom (Nyein)—because as a civil society organization they take part in the JMC.⁶

Respondents emphasized the importance of recruiting trusted and respected community members, often through personal networks, by village or community leaders. Many spoke with pride about joining the team, describing a sense of personal obligation and an ethical duty to protect their communities and work for the good of the people. Some had previously held leadership positions in their communities. In the most contested areas, communities along the frontlines feared incursions from the military and the KIA and retribution from either side. People were afraid to be associated with any discussion about peace or a ceasefire. Monitors acknowledged that the context for their work was already difficult at that time; the government was “wary of anyone conducting trainings or workshops on peacebuilding, and especially women were afraid to get involved” (male monitor, Myitkyina). One district monitor emphasized the sensitive nature of the monitoring, the perceived risks associated with it, and the importance of this information reaching humanitarian actors:

If there are acts of violence, the field monitor has to write a letter and report to the township monitor. They check the information in the report and send it to me. I put the information into a spreadsheet and send it to the secretary office. If it is very sensitive information, I delete the file as soon as I sent it. There are about 7 INGOs who provide humanitarian assistance to IDPs. They had a monthly joint coordination meeting. CSO members are often invited so INGOs get the information from them. Information flow goes from us to the INGOs.⁷

Civilian Capacity and Protection Monitoring

Civilian ceasefire monitors adapted and repurposed their knowledge and networks for protection monitoring and recruited further members. According to information from Nonviolent Peaceforce, by 2018, Kachin State had the largest civilian monitoring network of all of Myanmar's conflict regions. Protection monitoring included documenting human rights abuses, such as incidents of extrajudicial killings, forced recruitment and portering, and sexual violence. Skills that the monitors had learned in their ceasefire monitoring training effectively supported the protection of civilians:

Between 2016 and 2017, we did not have to apply for permission to hold these trainings and peace activities. Due to the network's training and awareness raising work, civilians started using this knowledge

⁶ Authors' interview with a male township monitor from Wai Maw 2018.

⁷ Authors' interview with a district monitor, 2018. International humanitarian access faced severe access restrictions in Kachin State and had to rely on domestic CSOs for information flow.

when they had incidents. This can cause conflict with the government. Abductions, forcibly taking people, disappearances. Nobody in the community knows what happened to these civilians. Later they see people killed in the jungle. We do the investigation.⁸

Protection activities further included educating civilians about norms of protection that they could use to verbally defend themselves against soldiers, teaching civilians displacement strategies that increased their safety and humanitarian access, documenting and reporting human rights violations and seeking redress, and providing early warnings. Several respondents emphasized that despite the failed ceasefire, they used their knowledge of the agreement content and standards of international law in negotiations with armed actors to nudge them toward respecting norms of civilian protection.

Our network mainly focuses on monitoring civilian protection aspects, collecting information about what happened on the ground and receiving reports by field monitors. There are several formats: when, what, etc. I also have to inspect whether or not the information is true and visit the field and report back to the district level monitors. *We monitor the incidents that happen between the troops and civilians, not between the troops.* We do not have a direct confrontation with the troops who commit these atrocities because the troops hate the monitoring networks. *All we can do is support the victim's family to solve the problem.*⁹

Township- or district-level monitors collectively brought cases of civilian abuse to the attention of the military command or government officials to lobby for the prosecution of those responsible for killings and the release of abducted civilians. Respondents stated that some reported cases led to the sentencing of the soldiers responsible and recounted examples. Unfortunately, given the sensitivity of the information, no documents were available to confirm the number of reports and subsequent actions taken.

The monitors also held community meetings in which they informed people about the status of restricted areas that they should not enter and trained them in organized displacement practices. During the 1994–2011 ceasefire, survival practices became forgotten. When armed conflict resumed, many communities along the frontlines were unprepared. Respondents described community protection strategies as being very rudimentary, noting that when fighting erupted people would just run into the jungle and scatter. They taught people how to better organize their own displacement and supported coordination with church leaders, CSOs, and government actors so that humanitarian support would reach them. One older monitor recounted, “in the past, whenever the dog barked, we would just run. Now it is more organized; civilians became more knowledgeable.”¹⁰

In the context of shifting frontlines and military gains in territorial control, informing civilians about troop movements and aiding their displacement were particularly important. Civilians became increasingly reliant on such protection networks because the fighting became less seasonal and concentrated in the dry season and, therefore, less predictable than in the past (South 2018). To conclude, for civilian monitors, the networks established through cease-

fire monitoring were valuable for coordinating the protection of civilians in the context of a failed ceasefire:

We can do protection, which is very effective. Because when we collect the information, we have to confirm what happened, who and why, if we note more troops, we have to clarify where are they planning to go, what are they planning to do, which is very helpful to protect civilians because if we receive the information ahead of time *we can give the civilians early warning.* It will be less devastating for the civilians. *Previously, we did not have these communication networks but now we collect this information.*¹¹

A significant number of monitors had previously held or continued to hold roles such as religious leader, village leader, NGO staff member, or another function broadly focused on serving the community. In situations of tensions with a community, monitors relied on members who could draw on their previous or parallel roles of community leadership to carry out civilian protection work:

For some time, when we have to rescue villagers, *if we introduce ourselves as monitors they will not accept us. So, we have to negotiate as elders and religious leaders.*¹²

Most monitors felt primarily endangered by Tatmadaw troops but found themselves under pressure from both sides. Monitors who wore different “hats” as community leaders often used social capital from these positions in support of civilian protection work:

Sometimes, we have misunderstandings or accusations from both sides, also from the KIO. We are seen as inspectors or accused that we side with the military. They assume that our support and salary are provided by the government military. The military in turn sees us as Kachin and all Kachin people are KIO. *If we try to rescue villagers, we often cannot do this in our role as monitors but instead as pastors and religious leaders.* It is getting more difficult because the government military just ignores us and things have gotten worse with the recent fighting. The government military accused us of being one-sided. (...) I believe our network is neutral and I am neutral. It is easier to convince the KIA side to follow the rules because of our common language but I still feel that I can be critical of the KIA. *But even in some Burmese and in some Shan villages, people contact our network whenever someone is recruited.*¹³

While monitors saw the overlap of identities (e.g., “civilian monitor,” “religious leader”) as a strength in carrying out protection work, international NGO staff had initially worried that wearing multiple hats could undermine the perception of impartiality of the monitors. Civilian monitors who also filled prominent community leadership positions within the Kachin society could be identified with the KIO’s political position and, therefore, be perceived as less impartial.¹⁴ Similar arguments were raised from within the NCA’s JMC when it rejected the civilian monitors and insisted on recruiting new civilians into its own mechanism to ensure impartiality.¹⁵ However, when ceasefire monitors repurposed their structures for protection monitoring, wearing

⁸ Authors’ interview with a township monitor from Myitkyina 2018.

⁹ Authors’ interview with a male township monitor from Myitkyina 2018.

¹⁰ Authors’ interview with a male field monitor from Wai Maw 2018.

¹¹ Authors’ interview with a male district monitor, 2018. It is important to note that most civilian monitors were ethnic Kachin and that this monitor felt that the civilian monitoring network was also appreciated by non-Kachin population groups in Kachin State.

¹² Authors’ interview with NGO staff members, Yangon 2016.

¹³ Authors’ interview with an NGO staff member, Yangon 2020.

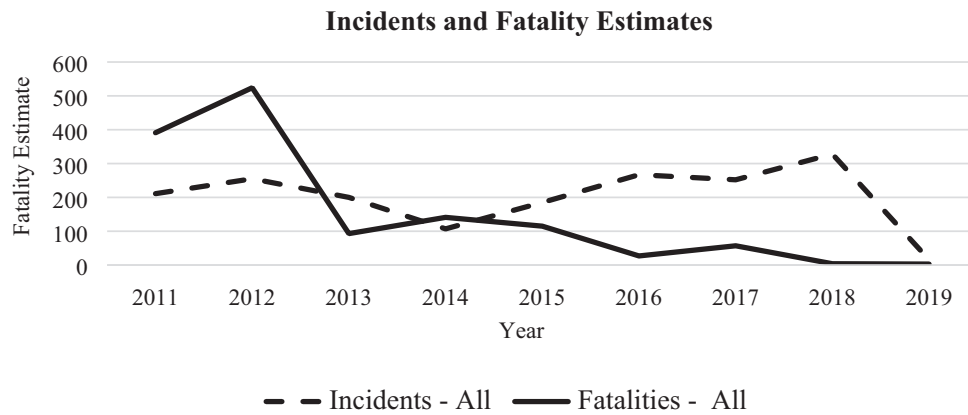


Figure 1. Kachin State fatalities and violent incidents, 2011–2019

Note: (<https://www.acleddata.com>.)

multiple hats strengthened the network and allowed monitors to continue operating under conditions of extreme duress. Despite the loss of funds and lack of legitimacy, many monitors continued their work to protect civilians and drew explicitly on the social capital of their parallel or previous community roles.

Conflict Conditions and Civilian Monitoring

The Kachin conflict has a history of widespread human rights violations, primarily perpetrated by the Tatmadaw. The resurgence of fighting in 2011 killed at least 207 civilians by the end of 2019.¹⁶ Although this is a low direct casualty number (extrajudicial killings may be underreported), the humanitarian consequences were dire. Fighting intensified in 2015 and peaked in 2018, as [figure 1](#) demonstrates. Although fatality numbers remained low, military airstrikes increased during this period until the military declared a unilateral ceasefire in late 2018.

Apart from extrajudicial killings, violence against civilians primarily included nonlethal forms, such as forced displacement, arbitrary arrest and torture, sexual violence, forced labor and forced recruitment, denial of free movement and obstruction of humanitarian support, and land grabbing ([Human Rights Council 2018](#)). The number of displaced civilians in Kachin and Shan States reached more than one hundred and five thousand ([Human Rights Council 2019](#)). Their situation was further aggravated by the frequent blockade of international humanitarian assistance by the government ([Fortify Rights 2018](#)). Military troops attacked Kachin villages and forced the displacement of tens of thousands of people, in some cases deliberately and indiscriminately shelling settlements ([Smith 2012](#)). Together, these practices “amount to the gravest crimes under international law” ([Human Rights Council 2018](#)). The military’s economic profit seeking mirrored its “Four Cuts” counterinsurgency strategy aimed at cutting off rebel groups from access to food, finances, intelligence, and recruits from the civilian population ([Human Rights Council 2019](#)). Consequently, the military demonstrated little sensitivity to civilian preferences and international shaming for human rights violations.

¹⁶<https://www.acleddata.com>. This number includes all fatalities in the category “violence against civilians” (131 casualties) plus other civilian casualties mentioned in the incidents’ description notes.

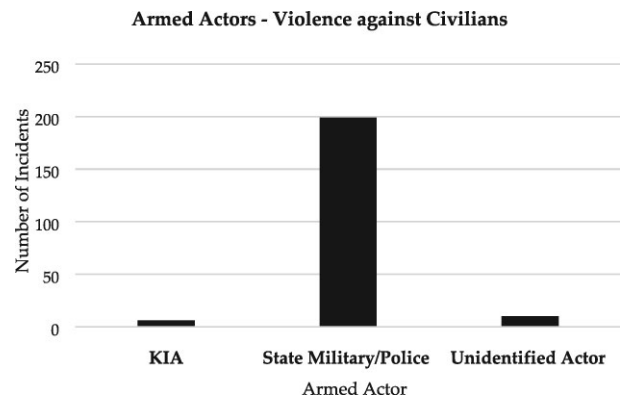


Figure 2. Violence against civilians—estimates by perpetrators, 2011–2019

Note: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); <https://www.acleddata.com>.

By contrast, the KIA is a rebel group deeply embedded within the Kachin society and depends on the civilian population. Among the Kachin, it is primarily seen as a source of protection ([South 2018](#)). After the ceasefire collapsed in 2011, there was strong popular support for the KIA’s revitalized military stance ([Brenner 2015](#); [Sadan 2016](#), 3). At various stages, the KIA sought international support for the peace process. Consequently, it remained sensitive to civilian preferences and international reputational damage. Event data demonstrate that the vast majority of reported violence against civilians was perpetrated by the Tatmadaw ([figure 2](#)).

The military’s economic agenda and its lack of sensitivity to civilian preferences meant that conflict-affected communities had very limited options to negotiate respect for safe spaces or peace zones. Military shelling and remote violence increased significantly ([figure 3](#)). It is particularly difficult for civilians to protect themselves against remote violence without observing troop movements to anticipate dangers and personally engage commanders to negotiate protection and safe passage. Given the lack of access for international humanitarian and protection actors, the civilian monitoring network and other CSOs became primary protection actors.

Monitors faced similar restrictions to international humanitarian actors in reaching the most conflict-affected

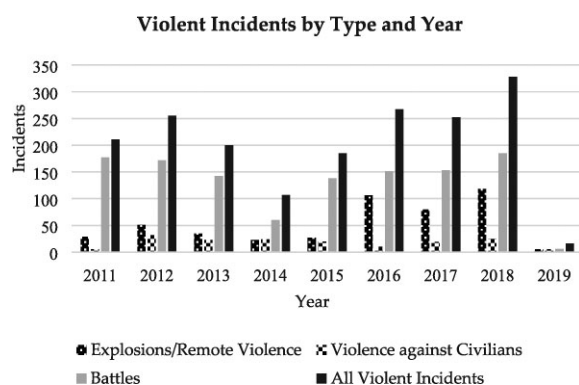


Figure 3. Kachin State: violent incidents by type of violence
Note: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); <https://www.acleddata.com>.

populations. Yet, for such populations, the network also represented a crucial lifeline of support:

Whenever there is an incident in the community, especially in restricted conflict areas where monitors are not allowed to go, we get contacted by those living in these rural areas. We collect information this way. We check all the information about an incident. For example, if civilians are arrested and recruited, we inquire about their names, ages, how many men and women. I report to the township monitor by phone. The information then goes to the district monitor and the government side. Normally, we can easily have access to information about incidents in the community. But there are some victims that we are not able to save.¹⁷

Civilian monitors reported positive relationships with many communities, stating that people were initially relieved to be able to inform monitors about their grievances and raise injustices, such as double taxation in contested territories, which they would previously have remained silent about. However, especially in communities along the frontlines, they were often unable to establish trust when leaders held different opinions about the risks and benefits associated with monitoring and feared retaliation.

Community leaders told the civilians not to report incidents committed by the troops in fear that they would retaliate; villagers were more likely to listen to them than to the monitors.¹⁸

Sometimes, there is conflict between the monitors and the community leaders or other elders because sometimes people don't know how the monitors work, how the process works, they criticise us for receiving financial support.¹⁹

Conflict conditions and military forces with little consideration for civilian protection meant that monitors faced grave threats to their personal security. In their narratives, monitors were acutely aware that they lacked legitimacy and political support. Traveling to remote areas and having to pass checkpoints were noted as particularly dangerous. They did not have identity cards that would document any protected status. Some worried about being added to a "blacklist" of people to be killed for openly criticizing military forces if

they conducted the monitoring too publicly. All respondents described being very cautious about their work. In the previous section, we noted that township- and district-level monitors avoided saving reports so that documenting human rights violations could not be used against them at a later stage. Although no respondent recounted an example of violence or retaliation against a monitor, many spoke of their fears of reprisals.

My biggest obstacle is security concerns. Especially when I have to travel to remote areas and going through the jungle. I might have a direct confrontation with Myanmar army troops along the way. If Tatmadaw troops see civilians they will beat us. Most civilians are Kachin. Personally, I have not faced a particular threat. But the government reiterated that the monitors are not supposed to do this work. I have a good relationship with officials who understand the network but I may have a problem going to restricted areas and negotiating with the Tatmadaw.²⁰

Respondents noted that lower ranking positions within the network were more dangerous because field monitors would be more likely to move close to frontlines when verifying incidents while township observers stayed in areas less affected by fighting and were often better connected to political authorities.

Conflict conditions made civilian monitors reflect very carefully about what aspects of protection work they were able to carry out. In NGO trainings, often held by people from outside the conflict region or the country, monitors were taught to negotiate with Tatmadaw and KIA leaders and troops in support of civilian protection, for example, to safeguard evacuating civilians or to organize the release of forcibly recruited civilians. One monitor stated, "they told us in the training how to negotiate and engage with soldiers. We had role playing and demonstrated how to approach soldiers and commanders." Indeed, scholars have argued that civilian negotiation with armed groups is a key protection strategy (Barter 2012; Kaplan 2013, 2017; Krause 2018). Studies find that civilian negotiation can be effective when armed groups act under long time horizons and seek to govern civilian populations (Arjona 2016) and when they partly rely on civilians and are sensitive to civilian preferences (Kaplan 2013, 2017). However, armed groups also need to have socialized soldiers and commanders into norms of restraint and enforce discipline to curb violence against civilians (Hoover Green 2018). Armed actors are more likely to institutionalize norms of restraint when the domestic or international costs of violence incentivize such actions (Stanton 2016). The political situation in Myanmar and the position of the military vis-à-vis ethnic minority populations in the borderlands fits Stanton's description of an exclusive political system in which a government seeks to exclude certain ethnic or religious groups from political power and is, therefore, less likely to institutionalize restraint (Stanton 2016).

According to our interviews, few monitors negotiated with military and government officials. Only some township-level and district-level monitors had good contacts with a select number of military commanders based on personal relationships, particularly if they had been stationed in one area for a longer period of time. Many others judged actively approaching the military as too dangerous. In particular, field monitors outside towns who did not hold high social status or had a previous experience of engaging with government

¹⁷ Authors' interview with a field monitor from Bhamo 2018.

¹⁸ Authors' interview with a field monitor from Wai Maw 2018.

¹⁹ Authors' interview with a field monitor 2018.

²⁰ Authors' interview with a male field monitor from Wai Maw 2018.

officials avoided direct contact with the Tatmadaw. Two field monitors explained:

We have been taught in the training to contact military commanders and to negotiate with the officials. But on the ground, I just receive information and spread it. We talk among the monitors to figure out the best way to save civilians and to build and maintain our network. Negotiating with the Tatmadaw would not have worked.²¹

During my time as a monitor, I have not gone to the government or military side for any direct contact in fear that they will not guarantee my safety. I have to do my work secretly. But I have built a good relationship with civilians in the community, respect and trust. But I can't stop worrying that I might get caught when I go through a checkpoint—either side could catch me. There is just no security.²²

Risks, Responsibility, and Moral Hazard

Civilian monitors and community leaders consistently engaged in risk mitigation. This included the rejection of practices deemed as too dangerous, such as proactive negotiations with armed actors. One township monitor stated, “all the things we have learned in trainings, *I can adapt to my reality*.” Contrary to the training they had received, many would not negotiate with soldiers, and at times even government officials, to intervene or seek redress. They filtered lessons learned from monitoring networks in other areas of Myanmar and abroad, as in the case of monitors who attended trainings by civilian monitors from the Philippines. Community leaders equally shouldered the burden of decision-making for risk mitigation. Given conflict conditions in Kachin State, many simply judged civilian monitoring and accountability seeking as too dangerous because monitors could offer no protection in case of retaliation. Monitors also reflected on the dangers of presenting themselves as overly confident and assuring civilian communities that they could protect them if they reported cases of abuse. One monitor based in the town of Myitkyina summarized:

Civilians want to know what our network can do for them. Our difficulty is that most of the issues are only reported. If the Tatmadaw does a crime we have to send a reminding letter to the military authority to address the issue. Sometimes, civilians misunderstand what we can do—we can't really protect them. The role of our network is to protect civilians, their rights and their security. In my region, there is so much crime done by the military. For example, rape and murder. There are so many cases of human rights abuses.²³

International and local organizations who train civilians need to guard against creating a *moral hazard* by raising expectations of protection when they—or the protection practices they teach—cannot effectively protect civilians (Kaplan 2021). When the peace process stalled, it was the cautious approach adopted by civilian monitors and community leaders and their adaptation of practices to local reality that protected them against major reprisals.

Conclusion

Can civilian protection monitoring positively impact the protection of civilians? Our analysis demonstrated how civilians recruited for ceasefire monitoring in Kachin State, Myanmar, adopted monitoring knowledge and networks to carry out protection monitoring in the wake of a failed ceasefire. We showed how *civilian capacity* and *conflict conditions* shaped and limited the effectiveness of civilian protection monitoring. We argue that the knowledge and networks that emerged from civilian ceasefire monitoring remained valuable even when the ceasefire did not hold. Due to the ceasefire monitoring training and the recruitment of monitors with previous experience in community leadership and activism, *civilian capacity* for protection monitoring was high. Monitors emphasized that their network structure and embedding within communities supported information flow for early warning, humanitarian relief coordination, documentation of human rights abuses, and selected cases of achieving justice. At the same time, *conflict conditions* characterized by a lack of commitment to protecting civilians among state military forces but commitment among rebel forces meant that space for a protective civilian agency was severely constrained.

We conclude that civilian protection monitoring *can* contribute to the immediate protection of civilians, albeit at serious costs and risks to monitors. Many worked in constant fear of the Tatmadaw and very carefully judged their protective actions and consequences for the safety of communities they tried to support. Monitors mitigated moral hazard and protected themselves by relying on their own experience and intuition, adapting trainings and advice received from international actors to their specific circumstances to avoid potentially dangerous confrontations with armed actors. Civilian protection monitoring also forced many community leaders to carry the burden of weighing decisions whether to collaborate with the monitoring network and provide information in the hope for improved protection and furthering an eventual peace process or whether to refuse monitors for fear of retaliation in the wake of a return of fighting.

Myanmar is only one of many contemporary conflict zones difficult to access for international protection and peacebuilding actors. In these areas, often characterized by high levels of violence against civilians, the demand for civilian protection monitoring is high while the prospects of effective protection are limited. Adopting a focus on local peacebuilding and supporting local protection mechanisms do not mean that international actors can “scale up” local civilian protection or “outsource” the protection of civilians to domestic actors. International actors may strengthen *civilian capacity* with local peacebuilding programs. However, if international actors are unable to reshape *conflict conditions* and ultimately increase armed group sensitivity to civilian preferences, the impact of such programs remains very limited. Rather than building peace from the bottom-up, civilian protective agency can often only secure immediate protection and mere survival.

Despite these limitations, we argue that the establishment of civilian monitoring networks with a focus on protection remains meaningful in protracted conflicts. Civilian monitors neither fixed a flawed ceasefire architecture nor solved the complexity of Myanmar's conflicts. If conditions for a lasting ceasefire are not met, external support to local civilian monitoring cannot be expected to make dysfunctional ceasefires work. Nevertheless, civilian protection monitoring contributed to protecting civilians in places where the need for such protection was evidently high. If adequately

²¹ Authors' interview with an older male field monitor 2018.

²² Authors' interview with a young male field monitor 2018.

²³ Authors' interview with male township monitor 2018.

supported with a view to risk mitigation over long periods of time, civilian monitoring networks may retain the *potential* to strengthen a revived peace process due to preserved civilian capacity, secure civil society and women's participation in the early stages of peace negotiations, and contribute to trust and popular acceptance of a future peace agreement and its implementation.

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Supplementary Information

The ethics appendix is available at the ISAGSQ data archive.

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