

# Advance Myanmar

## Project Report

### Myanmar earthquake: Local volunteers delivering life-saving aid amid military attacks and crackdown

**“In the absence of government-led support, this project provided a crucial lifeline, helping families restore basic shelter, dignity, and hope. The support not only met urgent needs but also reaffirmed that community-driven humanitarian action can prevail, even under military repression.”**

Project partner delivering support in Sagaing and Mandalay



# Earthquake, attacks and deadly military neglect

On 28 March 2025, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Myanmar along the Sagaing faultline, killing thousands and making tens of thousands homeless. Nobody knows the real extent of the death and damage caused by the earthquake as the Burmese military is known to lie and downplay the impact of natural disasters.



The earthquake struck a little over four years after the 2021 military coup. Since then, Myanmar has been suffering a human rights and humanitarian crisis, with around five million people already displaced before the earthquake and rapidly rising poverty levels.

The Burmese military arrests human rights defenders, attacks civilians, and bombs schools and hospitals. At the time of the earthquake, some estimates had the Burmese military in control of only roughly 20 percent of the country, with large areas controlled by ethnic and local administrations, or contested.

The earthquake made an already appalling humanitarian situation worse, and the subsequent actions of the military worsened the effects of the earthquake.

Firstly, the Burmese military blocked aid to areas outside of its control. As the epicentre of the earthquake was in Sagaing region, which is largely under opposition control or contested territory, the military leadership actively worsened the effect of the earthquake.

Once again, the military showed their true colours: protecting themselves and their interests ahead of helping suffering people.

One of our partners implementing earthquake support, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland, said: "Local communities report that junta authorities continue to neglect the rehabilitation of affected families while maintaining tight control over humanitarian aid."

Secondly, the Burmese military continued bombing areas affected by the earthquake, despite playing up the fact to the international community that they had announced a ceasefire – a ceasefire that they never adhered to.

Their announcement of a ceasefire came days after several ethnic armed groups and other opposition groups had declared ceasefires, and after increasing international pressure. But rather than honouring their words, the military kept bombing already devastated communities in Sagaing region and Karen state, causing more destruction and death.

## Local civil society groups = local heroes

Instead, local civil society organisations and volunteers worked heroically to bring aid into the hardest hit areas, utilising existing networks and connections with international organisations like Advance Myanmar.

They provided emergency medical care and medicines, shelter, food and drinking water. They dug toilets, built water stations, set up makeshift clinics, and bought generators for electricity. They delivered body bags for the dead, and helped bereaved families with funeral costs. They did the work of the state in extremely demanding and dangerous circumstances, under the threat of arrest. They did it, because there was no one else to do the job. They did it for the people and communities that had lost everything.

One local volunteer said: “With the support we received, families finally felt that someone cared. It gave them strength to keep going.”

## Advance Myanmar's Earthquake appeal

**“We really appreciate your support and contribution to our people who are suffering from environmental and political crises.”**

Local group providing emergency support in Shan State

Shortly after the earthquake struck, partners started to reach out to us for help. Less than 6 hours after the earthquake struck, our appeal was up and running. We know from experience of past disasters in Myanmar that it is vital to get aid to those in need as fast as possible, avoiding delays imposed by the military, and that people in areas outside of military control were unlikely to be reached by larger aid agencies or the UN and we would need to ensure they received support. Indeed, this is how one of our partners, the Institute for Muslim Affairs in Myanmar, described the situation at the end of May – a full two months after the earthquake hit: “In several affected areas, international aid has not yet reached the ground level. Many victims remain in urgent need of basic necessities”.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters and trusts supporting us with grants, Advance Myanmar could support local groups providing life-saving aid to their communities with grants totalling over £132,000. This is by far the largest amount of money Advance Myanmar has ever raised during an emergency appeal, and we are grateful to everyone who donated. With the funds, we supported groups in the areas most affected by the earthquake, areas outside military control, and communities that did not receive any aid from other organisations. Our support extended to Sagaing region, Mandalay and its surrounding areas, Inlay and the wider Shan State, and Karen state.

Below is a summary of the support provided by our partners. When necessary for their safety, we have withheld their names.

## Immediate emergency response

**“We are deeply grateful for your swift and compassionate support during this critical time.”**

Local partner, bringing emergency support to Sagaing and Mandalay

As our partners on the ground did rapid needs assessments, we set about raising money to be able to respond once they knew what they would need. The first request came in the day after the earthquake, urgent medical care for someone with a broken leg, and water supply to their ward.

Our partners across the country worked to reach different areas impacted by the earthquake where there was little or no support. They did needs assessments and contacted us for support to meet local needs. We distributed funds as fast as we raised them, with donations made by supporters often in the country within 24 hours. In one instance, our partner received the money they needed within 29 minutes of making the request.

Within one week of the earthquake, we had managed to support partners working in some of the worst affected areas with grants totalling £50,000. Our partners have experience in working in the most challenging conditions. They operate in conflict zones at constant risk of airstrikes. They operate underground networks under a military regime which would arrest and jail them if it found them. They can move swiftly and flexibly, avoiding Burmese military restrictions and getting aid to people not receiving it from elsewhere. They delivered:

- Tents, mosquito nets and blankets to people made homeless
- Emergency supplies of food and drinking water
- Funding for emergency medical care, including operations and amputations
- Medicines
- Makeshift medical centres
- Construction of new toilets to help with sanitation and prevent killer diseases like cholera
- Financial support to bereaved families, including to cover funeral costs
- Solar batteries, torches and generators for electricity
- Generators and petrol for water supplies
- Cash support, allowing impacted people to prioritise according to their varying needs and what commodities were available in their areas
- Household items like pots, pans and plates
- Menstrual hygiene products and hygiene kits
- Toys for traumatised children



These are the voices of some of our partners, providing support in Mandalay and Karen State:

**“The aid was based on direct assessments and consultations with local families to address real-time needs, including food, medical supplies, water access, and support for injured individuals and bereaved families.”**

Institute for Muslim Affairs Myanmar, supporting local efforts in Mandalay.

**“The shelter was an essential necessity, and it has already saved lives. Shortly after its construction, a storm and heavy rain hit the area.”**

Kachin Human Rights Watch, supporting emergency aid delivery in Mandalay.

**“Sometimes, the most effective way to help earthquake-affected families, is to give them cash payments so they can meet their immediate needs, repair their homes, or buy food.”**

Karen Peace Support Network

## Addressing long-term needs: sanitation, water supply, rebuilding homes, ongoing medical care

As time moved on, the type of support requested by victims changed from immediate necessities to address more long-term needs. Thanks to the generosity of Advance Myanmar donors and the consistency of donations received over multiple months, we could offer continuous funding to multiple partners. One of these, the Kachin Human Rights Watch, who supported affected communities in Mandalay, told us how important this was:

**“Your donation has helped prevent long-term disabilities, as many patients with serious injuries struggle to access continued treatment. For example, a woman suffered fractures in both femurs. Initially, she received care through emergency rescue health services. However, after returning from the hospital, she developed an infection. Thanks to your support, she was able to undergo a second operation that significantly improved her condition.”**

The long-term support included:

- Construction of water supplies
- Construction of toilets to prevent the spread of killer diseases like cholera
- Rebuilding houses and other buildings
- Follow up medical appointments and medicines
- Constructing more durable shelters for homeless people ahead of the monsoon rains



## Local ownership of aid implementation

**“Deliveries were organised through local resettlement site committees, ensuring transparency and adherence to the principle of ‘no one left behind’.**

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland

Advance Myanmar provided our support through local partners, or partners with the capacity to reach impacted areas through existing networks. In total, we supported twelve partners: Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), Institute for Muslim Affairs in Myanmar (IMAM), Kachin Human Rights Watch (KHRW), Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), Myanmar Emergency Response Coordination Unit (MERCU), Ta’ang Women’s Organisation (TWO), and six other groups we cannot name for security reasons. Some of these partners focused exclusively on one area whereas others covered multiple locations.

Working with local partners ensures that more aid reaches the intended communities, and that less is spent on administration. Locally based organisations are best placed to work with their communities to prioritise according to need and where the support will have the most impact. For example, the Karen Peace Support Network told us: “The two impacted communities had already organised themselves to respond to the disaster and were gathering information about the effects, which was crucial for effective aid delivery.”

Finally, working with local grassroots organisations empowers communities to address their own problems rather than being passive recipients of aid. One of our partners in Shan State told us: “We worked with local volunteers who are experts on the geography in Inlay.” This was important as some areas experienced flooding after the earthquake. Another partner told us: “For the flood-hit areas, we procured items locally and distributed the items and cash by using local transportation routes known by local volunteers.”

## The risk to and resilience of partners

Apart from dealing with environmental hazards like the flooding after the earthquake, partners also had to deal with electricity and internet shutdowns. This made it much harder to connect with people affected by the earthquake, and increased the risk to the volunteers delivering the aid, as they couldn’t stay in touch with their organisation.

The volunteers providing emergency support to their communities suffered intimidation, surveillance and threats from the military. They reported being forced to register at military checkpoints, as the military used the earthquake to increase surveillance over local organisations, under the guise of coordinating relief efforts. Multiple military checkpoints and toll gates were set up on routes leading from larger towns and cities to the affected rural areas. The Ta’ang Women’s Organisation told us: “Our staff planned to deliver food and material for emergency shelters and directly to displaced families. But there was a high security risk in getting staff and goods past military checkpoints, so we collaborated with local groups to support the IDPs directly.”



For some groups, the level of threats and actual arrests made them reconsider their whole operations, and where they were operating. One organisation said: “Our community of volunteers in Mandalay and Bago received serious security threats of arbitrary arrest by the junta. One of our volunteers in Mandalay was arrested while delivering the emergency items. Another one was arrested in Yangon after the delivery. We had to pause the operation for weeks until we could evacuate key members of the volunteer community at risk to Thailand. We then diverted our delivery to rural areas, rather than risking more volunteer arrests in urban areas.”

As of January 2026, both arrested volunteers remain in prison.

Another group reported that the military used the influx of young volunteers into the disaster areas to try and forcibly recruit people to the Myanmar military, which made this group redirect its relief efforts to other areas.

Despite all the threats, harassment, arrests and attacks by the military, our partners carried on with bringing aid to their communities, offering both life-saving support and hope. All of us at Advance Myanmar are so impressed of what they achieved during the most appalling circumstances, and we are so grateful to everyone that supported our appeal. Thank you.

**“In times of such adversity, it is inspiring to witness a group of people like you come forward to lend a helping hand. Your act of kindness is a powerful reminder of humanity’s capacity to come together and support one another in times of crisis.”**

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland

## About Advance Myanmar

Advance Myanmar is a registered charity working with grassroots organisations to promote change.

Advance Myanmar is founded and run by five part-time staff with decades of experience of the humanitarian and human rights situation in Myanmar. We provide humanitarian assistance at times of crisis, but also assist local communities to promote positive change to tackle the root causes of those crises.

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