

## RDI Commentaries

# 2025 Myanmar's Saguing Fault's Earthquake: Addressing Response Gaps

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### Synopsis

On March 28, 2025, massive 7.7 and 6.4M earthquakes affected Myanmar's 58 townships, resulting in more than 3,500 deaths, 5,233 buildings collapsed, and displaced 69,000 people. This commentary highlights Myanmar's complex challenges by exploring the intersection of the cascading seismic-induced disasters with civil war, volatility in governance, international isolation and complex institutional arrangements. We offer some alternative views on what needs to be done in the first three months of Myanmar's immediate response.

### Commentary

#### Catastrophic Impact and Immediate Needs

According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Prompt Assessment of Global Earthquakes for Response (PAGER) report, the 2025 Myanmar Earthquake had a 35% probability of resulting in 10,000–100,000 fatalities—classified as a catastrophic level—and a 31% probability of economic losses exceeding USD 100 billion, surpassing Myanmar's 2023 GDP of USD 66 billion. AHA Centre reported a total displacement of at least 69,000 people as of April 6 and the potential for mass fatalities, a rapid and disaggregated needs assessment focusing on the most vulnerable populations is critical. In light of these projections, there is an urgent need to assess damages, losses, and needs using a comprehensive and systematic methodology.

#### Security Risks and Obstructed Access in Emergency Response

Pre-existing security challenges—including a governance crisis and ongoing humanitarian emergency—have significantly exacerbated the earthquake response. While the National Unity Government (NUG) called for a two-week ceasefire to facilitate rescue operations, multiple reports highlighted the deviant behaviour of the military junta that continued to mobilise resources not for relief efforts but for conducting airstrikes and obstructing aid delivery. Ongoing conflict between the military and resistance groups is expected to

escalate in the coming months, further disrupting humanitarian access and mobility. This includes flight restrictions to key cities such as Mandalay and Naypyidaw, where severe earthquake damage has been compounded by already weak infrastructure.

### **Resources Mobilisation and Coordination**

Myanmar's decentralised, cluster-based coordination—led by national authorities (e.g., Ministries of Fire Service, Health, and Infrastructure)—allows for sectoral responses. However, these responses may lead to fragmented decision-making during the 2025 earthquake crisis. As the Department of Disaster Management under a ministerial office, the lack of a centralised authority delays cross-sector coordination and hampers international assistance. ASEAN and global actors (e.g., Myanmar Red Cross, World Vision, Oxfam) provide essential logistics and community support. Nevertheless, their efforts face overlapping mandates, uneven local capacity, and bureaucratic hurdles to access affected areas. The ongoing civil conflict and the junta's control over aid distribution also complicated the situation, despite 'rare requests' for international humanitarian support by its leader. The international media's lack of access to the field led to the lack of coverage from international headlines, further isolating the disasters from global charities and funding supports. Timeliness relies on ad-hoc negotiations rather than unified command, underscoring the need for joint protocols and harmonised stakeholder coordination.

### **Myanmar's Economic Struggle Amid Global and Domestic Constraints**

Myanmar faces escalating constraints due to severe economic, political, and humanitarian challenges exacerbated by natural hazards and systemic instability. World Bank reported that since 2020, the country's GDP has contracted by 9%, with a further 1% decline projected for 2024–2025. In addition to inflation and currency depreciation, UNDP recently reported that trade and investment have plummeted due to restrictive military policies and Myanmar's placement on the Financial Action Task Force blacklist. Consequently, underfunded humanitarian efforts, as stated by UN OCHA in 2024, compounded the already strained situation. Without renewed international engagement, sustained investment in both humanitarian and development sectors, and commitment to peaceful operation, Myanmar risks prolonged instability and substantial losses from present and future disasters, as well as the compounding effects of its ongoing crises.

### **Transition from Response to Recovery through ASEAN Coordination**

It is crucial to start planning for the post-disaster recovery phase to guarantee a seamless transition while maintaining ongoing response efforts. The question is, how to plan amid institutional crisis, volatile governance and insecurity?

The ASEAN mechanism can help. The fourth priority of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) can be capitalised to nudge and promote recovery efforts through the ASEAN Disaster Recovery Reference Guide (ADRRG). The ADRRG highlights several critical recovery readiness components: policy and planning, institutional framework, post-disaster assessment, resource mobilisation and financial

management, implementation, coordination, communication, and monitoring. Myanmar could strengthen its post-earthquake response and recovery by adopting this structured approach that emphasises preparedness for recovery even during the emergency phase. Furthermore, rebuilding should be resilient and incorporate the "building back better" principle, considering potential secondary risks like liquefaction, landslides, and aftershocks.

**Points to consider** and recommended solutions:

- **A rapid, group-specific needs assessment**—aligned with international humanitarian standards (Sphere) for disaster response—and coordinated with humanitarian networks that differentiate the needs of children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, and marginalised communities is necessary to ensure access to shelter, healthcare, water, sanitation, and psychosocial support.
- **Coordinated action** through a clear framework involving multi-level actors and incorporating regional mechanisms like ASEAN-ERAT would improve the coherence and effectiveness of cross-sectoral response and recovery. Additionally, mobilising resources through transparent financial management and partnerships with humanitarian organisations can accelerate recovery efforts.
- **Incorporating Social Protection (ASP)** (e.g., cash transfers, food subsidies, and health insurance) **into emergency responses** enables swift and equitable expansion of safety nets to affected populations.
- **Post-disaster need assessment (PDNA) that encompasses comprehensive damage and loss, as well as human-centric recovery needs**, is crucial in the post-disaster response phase to evaluate the earthquake's full impact across social, economic, and environmental sectors. An adjusted PDNA that is sensitive to the intersection of civil war and such earthquake disasters is imperative.
- **Temporary ceasefire agreements** should be implemented, exemplified by Indonesia's 2004 Aceh Tsunami peace agreement or ASEAN's diplomatic efforts for humanitarian access in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. In addition, neutral third-party monitors (e.g., the International Committee Of The Red Cross) should oversee aid distribution to ensure transparency and accountability.
- **Resource mobilisation** is crucial, as Myanmar risks extended instability and significant losses from future disasters and ongoing crises. This is due to a lack of renewed international engagement and continued investment in humanitarian and development sectors.

Collectively, these steps would improve immediate response outcomes and build a strong foundation for resilient and inclusive long-term recovery.

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