



Myanmar: Restore Internet Services in Rakhine and Chin States, promote access to information for all

(Bangkok, 25 March 2020) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and its member organisations, Equality Myanmar, Progressive Voice and Women’s League of Burma call for the full restoration of Internet services in townships in Rakhine and Chin States to enable communities to access critical information in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the rapidly increasing cases of COVID-19 in the region, the lack of access to information caused by Internet shutdown will only worsen existing abuses and violations suffered by communities in these townships.

On 23 March, the Government of Myanmar declared that it had two positive cases of COVID-19, after weeks of denial.¹ The declaration came as neighbouring country Thailand saw thousands of migrant workers returning home to Myanmar as many businesses ceased operations. There are genuine fears that many more are at risk in a country with a weak health infrastructure and a lack of social security safeguards.²

In a statement last week, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression David Kaye argued that Internet access is ‘critical at a time of crisis’ and that broad restrictions to internet access ‘cannot be justified on public order or national security grounds’ at times of emergencies. He further recommended that governments ‘ensure immediate access to the fastest and broadest possible internet service’, in places with existing internet blockage.³

The ongoing internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin townships is one of the longest in the world, and has been blamed for further facilitating grave human rights abuses and violations in an escalating ethnic conflict, including forced displacement of over 140,000 people, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings by the Myanmar Military.⁴ The information blackout has allowed key perpetrators to elude accountability in these conflict-affected areas.⁵ With continued Internet shutdown, overcrowding in displaced communities and insufficient health services, these communities would be rendered far too vulnerable to the threat of COVID-19.

¹ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/infections-03232020173108.html>

² <https://asiatimes.com/2020/03/myanmar-in-denial-with-zero-covid-19-case-claim/>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25729&LangID=E>

⁴ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=31237>

⁵ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=29156>

FORUM-ASIA and its member organisations in Myanmar urge the Government of Myanmar to provide a response centred on the principles of human rights. It must immediately restore Internet access in the affected townships, as this is vital to upholding the right to information, and refrain from further imposing these lockdowns, or other barriers to access information. It must also provide accurate and reliable information on COVID-19, as well as access to health services, to everyone regardless of ethnic affiliation or identity.

With ongoing violations and abuses, including grave international crimes against ethnic and religious minorities, FORUM-ASIA cautions the Government of Myanmar to ensure all its efforts to combat COVID-19 comply with international human rights standards and do not exacerbate existing inequities and violations of human rights in the country.