

INSIGHT BRIEF: MYANMAR CIVIL WAR

21/02/2024

Incident

A Myanmar Navy PGM-421-class coastal patrol vessel (pennant number 423) was damaged by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) launched by the anti-government rebels, the People's Defense Force (PDF), in the mouth of the Dawei River, Myanmar. The UAV reportedly damaged the vessel and injured five naval personnel aboard. The vessel returned fire with heavy machine guns; rebel casualties were not reported.

Context

A civil war erupted in Myanmar following a military coup by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) ousting the democratically elected government, the National League for Democracy, in early 2021. The Tatmadaw then installed a junta under the moniker of the State Administration Council (SAC). In opposition to the SAC, a variety of rebel groups and movements organically formed commonly based upon ethnic groups and political ideologies. The groups often conducted cooperative and coordinated attacks on the Tatmadaw and its allied militia group known as the Pyu Saw Htee. Throughout the conflict rebel groups targeted military outposts, police stations, as well as military vessels on internal waterways. Rebel actions against military vessels have been mainly centred on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers in the Monywa and Mandalay regions. However, attacks on naval vessels have also occurred in the western and southern regions.

In October 2023 a coalition of rebel groups, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, launched a major military offensive, dubbed "Operation 1027," in northern Shan State. Other ethnic armed organisations collaborated to launch separate offensives in the states of Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Mon as well as parts of Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, and Tanintharyi. The offensive was highly successful for rebel groups, resulting in the seizure of 100 Tatmadaw outposts and significant small arms and heavy weapons caches. From late 2023 into 2024 rebel groups have gained a significant foothold in the country claiming control of 60% of Myanmar.

Borders along the north and west of Myanmar have seen minor spillovers. On 05 February 2024, two people were killed as a mortar shell fired from Myanmar struck a border village in Bangladesh. On 10 February 2024, the Bangladeshi authorities suspended all ferries and tourist boats travelling between Teknaf and Saint Martin, Bangladesh.

Analysis

Ambrey assessed that the anti-government rebel offensive will likely continue in the medium term following the successful momentum garnered from the October 2023 offensive. The Tatmadaw is suffering reduced numbers of personnel due to low morale, surrender, and desertion. Rebels will continue to utilise UAVs in attacks on government targets. The continuation of the conflict will also cause the continued migration of people to neighbouring countries, this may include people fleeing along the coast in small boats.

Implications

Ambrey assessed that there is a LOW risk to merchant vessels calling Myanmar and bordering Bangladeshi ports. No merchant vessel has been targeted in rebel UAV or ambush attacks, and it is highly unlikely the rebels' targeting would change. Vessels are at increased risk if calling Myanmar ports and transporting supplies or equipment for the military.

Due to increased operational activity from rebel groups, there is a potential for UAV sightings from vessels transiting in Myanmar territorial waters.

It is assessed that there is a LOW likelihood of spillover incidents occurring in Bangladesh and a LOW likelihood of collateral damage to merchant vessels.