

UN warns of health crisis brewing in west Myanmar

April 3 2014

More than 800,000 people lack adequate healthcare in strife-torn western Myanmar after aid workers fled the region, the UN has warned, with children deprived of life-saving treatment.

A wave of attacks against humanitarian workers in Rakhine state has choked off health, water and food supplies to isolated communities and camps for people displaced by deadly sectarian violence.

The exodus worsened an already dire medical situation for hundreds of thousands of people left without access to treatment after the government in February ordered aid group Doctors Without Borders to leave the region following protests against them.

International relief groups in Rakhine have come under mounting pressure from local Buddhists who accuse them of bias towards Muslims.

Health services for most of the 140,000 displaced people in Rakhine and more than 700,000 vulnerable people outside the camps are "severely hampered", Liviu Vedrasco of the World Health Organisation said in a joint UN statement with humanitarian groups released late Wednesday.

Life-saving therapeutic treatment for more than 300 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition has been suspended in the state capital Sittwe, the statement said.

"Without the immediate and full restoration of an enabling and secure environment to re-establish essential life-saving assistance, the humanitarian situation will rapidly deteriorate, putting children and their families at even greater risk," said Kelland Stevenson, country director for Save the Children.

Mobs ransacked offices, looted warehouses and smashed equipment in last week's attacks.

More than 170 aid workers were pulled out from the state as a result—the first time providers have been forced to leave en masse—and there are fears that the entire relief infrastructure has been severely damaged.

"What happened in Sittwe last week was not just an attack on international organisations, but an attack on the entire humanitarian response in Rakhine State," said UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Renata Dessallien.

The United States also expressed alarm at the deepening crisis and called on Myanmar to end severe travel restrictions which have long hampered access to vast swathes of Rakhine.

"Currently, large segments of the population do not have access to adequate medical services, water, sanitation, and food," said State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf.

"The government has so far failed to provide adequate security and the travel authorisations necessary for the humanitarian [aid workers](#) to resume their life-saving services."

Long-standing animosity between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine erupted into bloodshed in 2012, leaving dozens dead in clashes.

Aid workers have faced a Buddhist nationalist campaign to stop local people cooperating with them, while boats used to deliver supplies have been destroyed.

The UN said it was in talks with Myanmar authorities to ensure relief was delivered.

Tensions have been heightened by Myanmar's first census in three decades, which has stoked anger among Buddhists that it might lead to official recognition for the Rohingya, a Muslim minority viewed by the authorities as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

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