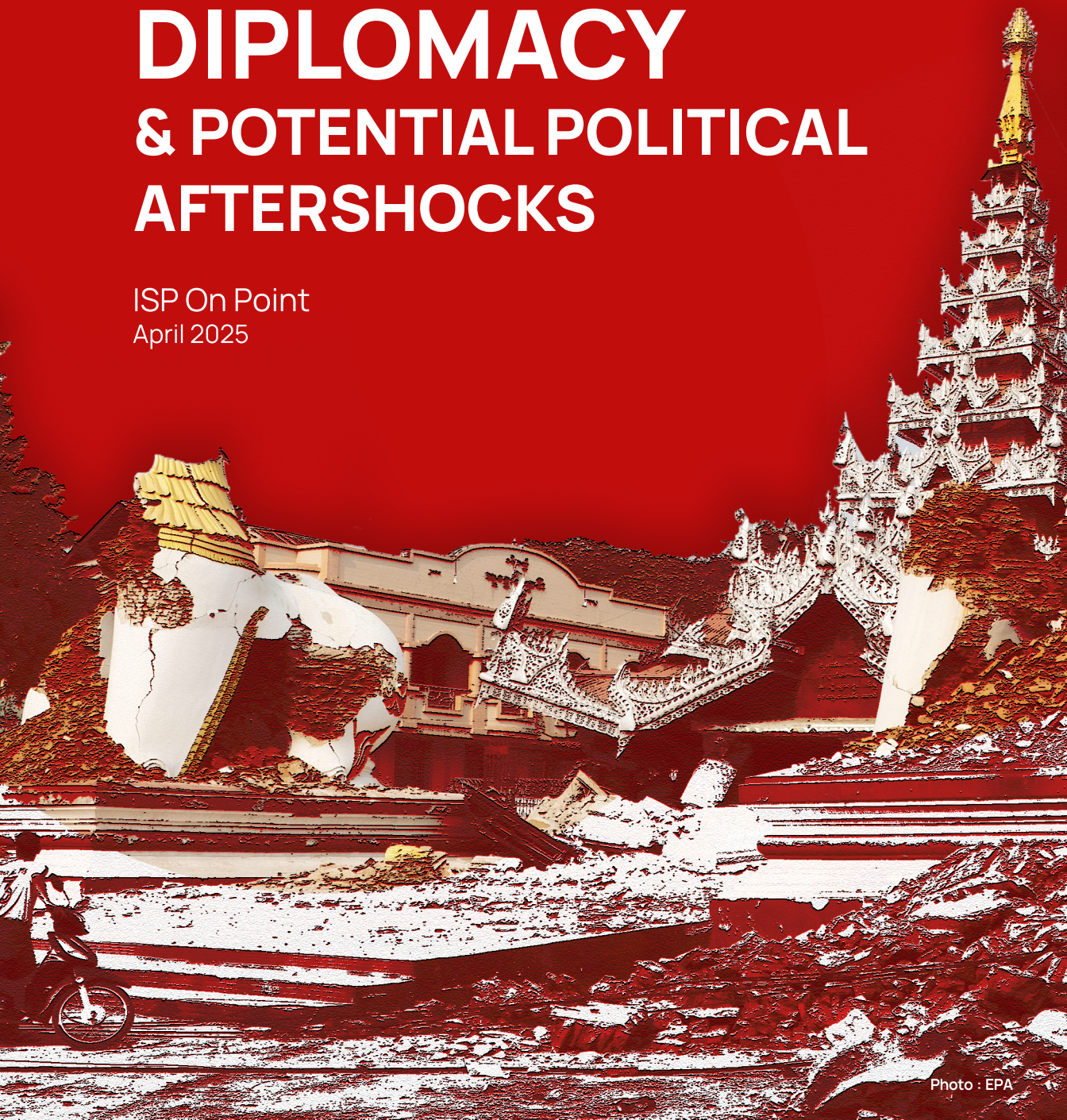




The March 28 Sagaing Earthquake:

# EARTHQUAKE DIPLOMACY & POTENTIAL POLITICAL AFTERSHOCKS

ISP On Point  
April 2025





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## ■ Events

In response to the devastating Sagaing earthquake that occurred on March 28, 2025, nearly a thousand rescuers from China, India, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam arrived within 60 hours of the crisis to provide relief. International bodies and nations, including the United Nations, the European Union, ASEAN, the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia, Norway, and others, have committed a total humanitarian aid worth at least 50 million USD. The National Unity Government (NUG) has declared a two-week ceasefire, except the defensive operations, in the impacted districts. The United Wa State Party (UWSP), the Shan State Joint Action Committee (SSJAC), and the Mongla Peace and Solidarity Council (PSC) also pledged to support financial aid. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) such as the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and the Karen National Union (KNU) have expressed their condolences and committed to providing support in the needed areas. The State Administration Council (SAC) has designated the Sagaing, Mandalay, Magway, Bago Regions and the northeastern part of Shan State, and the Naypyitaw Council territory as emergency zones and is conducting rescue operations. Simultaneously, despite the devastation caused by the earthquake in central Myanmar, the SAC continues its military offensives and airstrikes among the towns in these regions as well as in Kachin State.

## ■ Preliminary Analysis

The “March 28 Sagaing Earthquake” is likely one of the most significant societal shocks faced by Myanmar. Beyond the absolute toll of deaths and destruction

caused by this earthquake disaster, the scale of relative tolls due to secondary effects—such as infectious disease outbreaks, famine, and crime— is expected to be immense. In particular, assessing the damage requires considering whether the earthquake struck regions with high population density, key economic and administrative hubs, areas with heightened pre-existing conflict, or regions with less economic development, or less conflict. Such assessments are essential not only to estimate the extent of the losses but also to gauge the effectiveness of rescue, relief, and reconstruction efforts. For example, the “March 28 Earthquake,” centered in urban areas such as Mandalay, Sagaing, and Naypyitaw, would result in a direct tally of destruction and cascading consequences. These include damage to basic infrastructure; the loss of religious, cultural, and historical heritage; disruptions to the economy and human resources; and the breakdown of administrative mechanisms, all amplifying the secondary adverse effects.

The massive earthquake’s effects were particularly severe in the Bamar regions of Central Myanmar (*Anyar*), predominantly under SAC control. This region, already strained by high tensions and ongoing conflicts between SAC troops and numerous local resistance forces, has faced significant damage. Conversely, data indicates that areas controlled by EAOs and other resistance groups faced relatively less impact from the earthquake. At the same time, the disaster has exacerbated Myanmar’s socio-economic challenges, elevating the situation from an acute crisis to system breakdowns in essential services like electricity and healthcare for some regions.

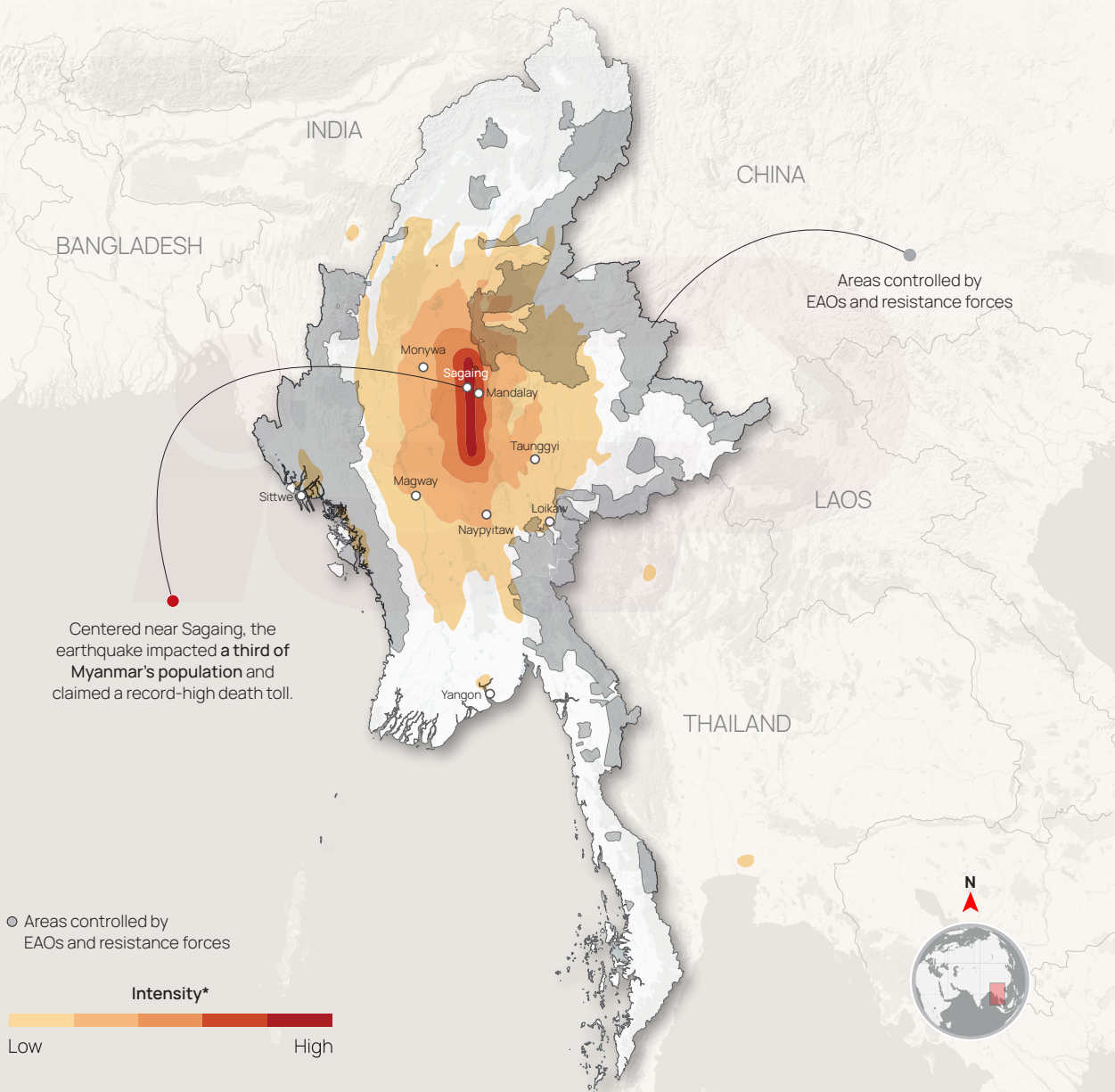


# Central Myanmar Suffered the Worst

ISP Mapping Number 90

ISP Mapping

The “March 28 Sagaing Earthquake” of 2025 brought unprecedented devastation to central Myanmar. This central lowland region, under the control of the State Administration Council (SAC), experienced significantly more damages than those controlled by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and resistance forces.



As of March 31, 2025, data are based on ISP-Myanmar's research and may vary from other sources due to methodological differences and data availability. (\*) The intensity data, analyzed using vector data layers, is primarily sourced from the US Geological Survey (USGS) and detailed by The Guardian.

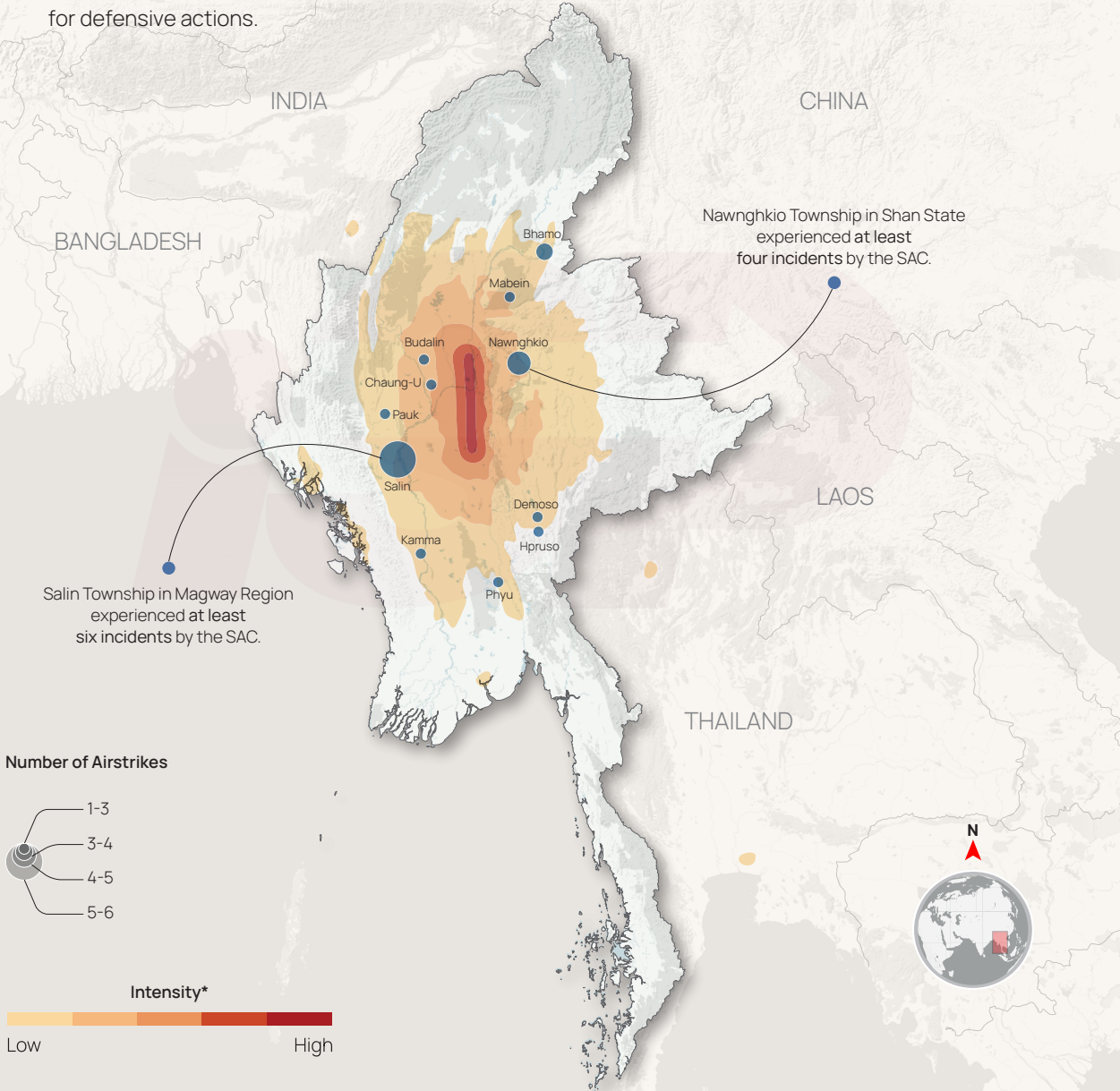


# Airstrikes Continue Amid the Earthquake

ISP Mapping Number 91

ISP Mapping

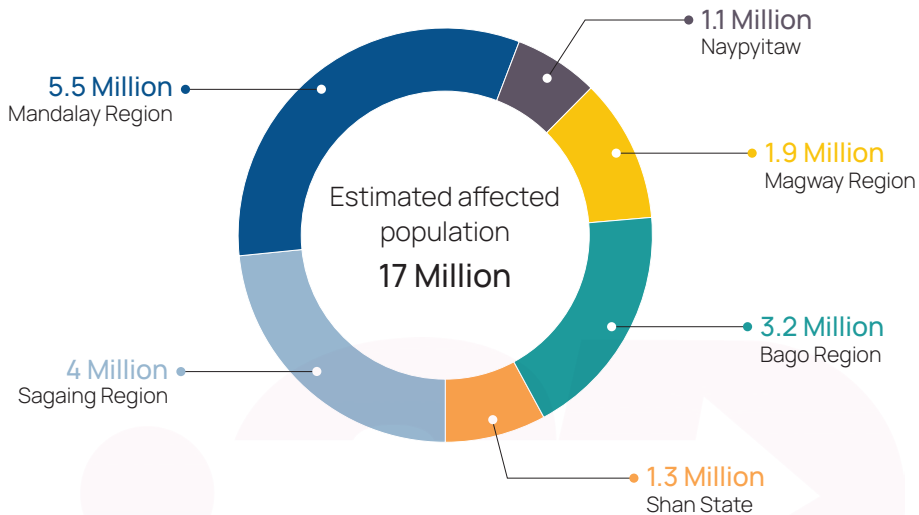
Despite the severe devastation caused by the “March 28 Sagaing Earthquake,” the State Administration Council (SAC) has continued its airstrikes. In the three days following the earthquake, at least 23 airstrikes were reported across no fewer than 11 townships. These included Budalin, Chaung-U, Pauk, and Salin—areas also significantly impacted by the earthquake. Meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) has announced a two-week ceasefire in the earthquake-affected districts except for defensive actions.



The data, covering March 28 to 31, 2025, are based on ISP-Myanmar’s research and may vary from other sources due to differences in methodology and data availability. (\*) The impact data, analyzed using vector data layers, is primarily sourced from the US Geological Survey (USGS) and detailed by The Guardian.

## ■ Nearly 17m People Affected

Approximately 17 million residents of Sagaing, Mandalay, Magway, Bago Regions, Shan State, and the Naypyitaw Council Territory were likely affected by the “March 28 Earthquake.”



ISP-Myanmar calculated the affected population figure based on the demographic data of districts that experienced Modified Mercalli Intensity levels ranging from 5.5 (moderate) to 8.5 (severe), according to the US Geological Survey (USGS) and the most recent population data.

The international community's goodwill, especially from regional countries, should be acknowledged in light of this disaster. Since mid-2024, neighboring countries have been pressuring the SAC and resistance groups to de-escalate the armed conflict in Myanmar through trade, commerce, and investment projects. These efforts encouraged the SAC and resistance forces to consider a profit-sharing model. Now, it should be noted that the recent earthquake disaster presents an opportunity to push for a humanitarian ceasefire, essential for facilitating urgent humanitarian aid. In response to the crisis, Singapore's Foreign Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, emphasized the need for a humanitarian ceasefire in a March 30 statement urging immediate action during this critical period.

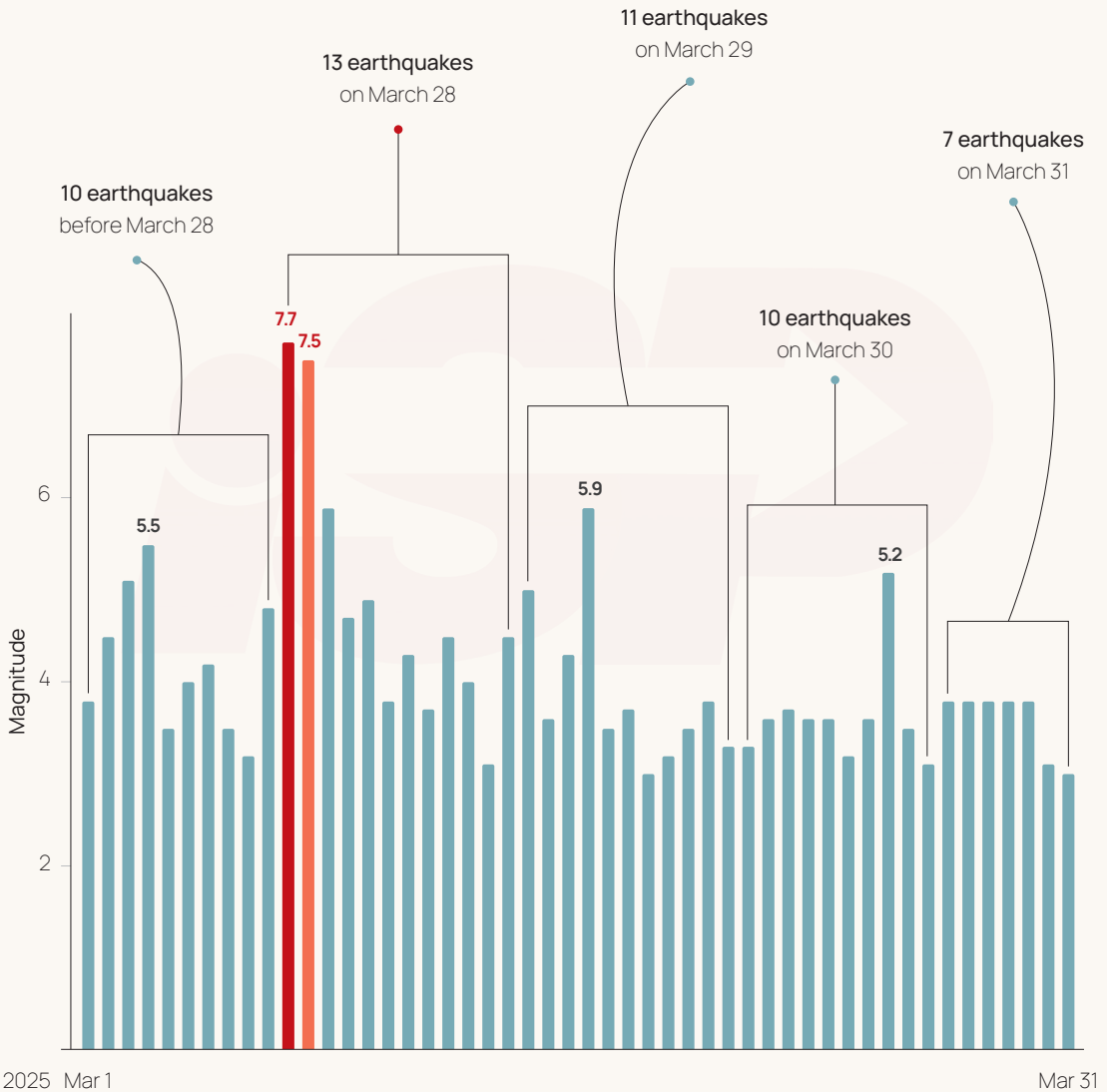
The saying “Don't let a crisis go to waste” has been repeated so many times already. The term “crisis” originates from the Greek word “krisis,” which means a pivotal “turning point.” Researchers define such a point as a time when traditional solutions fail to meet challenges, compelling societies to develop new strategies. However, some view the earthquake disaster not as a crisis but as a mere temporary setback, comparable to a roadblock that merely requires a detour without necessitating a new route. This perspective focuses solely on the absolute tolls—deaths and destruction—while overlooking the relative or excess tolls, such as the collapse of societal systems and structures.

## Myanmar Logged 51 Earthquakes of M3+ in March

ISP Data Matters Number 150

ISP Data Matters

According to the SAC's Department of Meteorology and Hydrology, Myanmar experienced 51 earthquakes with a magnitude of 3 and above during March 2025. Prior to the significant "March 28 Sagaing Earthquake," there were 10 such seismic events recorded.



These figures are based on data covering the period from March 1 to 12:00 PM on March 31, 2025, as reported by the SAC's Department of Meteorology and Hydrology. The Earthquake Observation Division of Thailand's Department of Meteorology reported a significantly higher number of aftershocks following the March 28 earthquake, with 157 seismic events of magnitude 3 and above occurring until 4:50 PM on March 31.



## ■ Scenario Forecast

When discussing earthquake disaster responses and relief initiatives, it is crucial to follow the experts and practitioners who possess both scientific knowledge and practical humanitarian assistance experience. ISP-Myanmar focuses on analysing the potential political aftershocks that could follow the immediate emergency relief. **The first scenario** is that the SAC may face public outrage due to its disrupted administrative mechanisms, incompetence, corruption, tendency to prioritize security above all else and continues oppression driven by fear, and take advantage of the crisis by strategically controlling or diverting domestic and international aid, redirecting of resources, or imposing blockades to aid. Resistance groups and Myanmar activists abroad may see earthquake aid as a political tool, using propaganda and advocacy to prevent the SAC from gaining support, leverage, or legitimacy through relief efforts.

**The second scenario** involves the potential delay of SAC's elections, which the junta chief announced will be organized in December 2025. The earthquake has severely impacted areas under the SAC's control, posing substantial administrative hurdles. Naypyitaw, a central stronghold for the SAC, seems to have experienced significant damage akin to that seen in Mandalay and Sagaing. If the SAC decides to proceed with the elections in December 2025, despite these adversities, it could lead to an outcome more catastrophic than the controversial 2008 constitutional referendum conducted during Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. Pushing forward under such circumstances could exacerbate public discontent and aggravate existing grievances.

**The third potential scenario** is that, regardless of the type of regime—whether in the past (such as feudal monarchy, parliamentary system, one-party system, military dictatorship, or a pseudo-democracy with a military veto) or any new system that might emerge in the near future—the consequences of this massive earthquake could lead to a significant decline in Myanmar's majority Bamar society. This could lead to structural shifts in the Bamar society. For instance, in the aftermath, families struggling financially to rebuild their homes and livelihoods may be compelled to sell land and property, potentially triggering widespread internal and external migration and displacement. This displacement, when combined with that already caused by armed conflict and the Conscription Law, could significantly uproot Bamar populations from their ancestral lands and lead to massive capital flight. This could result in disruptions to education and healthcare for the younger generation, which could be severe and prolonged, setting back an entire generation. As a result, the type of structural displacement long endured by ethnic minorities in Myanmar might now severely impact the Bamar majority, increasing the potential for societal upheaval.

This third scenario is reinforced by **the fourth possibility**, the inherent characteristics of Myanmar's armed conflicts. While EAOs might show visible and wholeheartedly sympathetic relief efforts after an earthquake, it's unlikely to shift their military or political strategic calculus. If EAOs pursue conflict de-escalation, their decisions are likely influenced more by territorial control, conflict economies, and the strengthening ►

▶ of their negotiating positions or self-determination than by earthquake relief. Even if some EAOs, guided by genuine goodwill and a vision for a union rather than economic or ethnic-regional interests, are willing to de-escalate or initiate ceasefires, deep-rooted mistrust remains a barrier. Doubts will persist, from distrust of the SAC chairman to skepticism over whether regional mediators will treat EAOs fairly, given their status as non-state actors without sovereign authority.

Based on current trends, it appears unlikely that the SAC will reduce its attacks, including airstrikes and other forms of assault. In considering security threats and the security dilemma, the SAC seems not only to react excessively in tit for tat but also shows no inclination to abandon its relentless expansion of the war momentum. Although the NUG has declared a temporary ceasefire for the earthquake relief, this crisis may not be viewed as a pivotal point to de-escalate for others. For many within the Bamar PDFs, who envision seizing control of Naypyitaw and overthrowing the existing system, the earthquake has not significantly influenced their long-term strategy, and they would not consider de-escalating the conflict for an extended period, in contrast to the EAOs, who prioritize their battles for self-determination in their respective regions. The influence of Myanmar activists in diaspora communities and on social media, advocating for and fueling unrestrained combat, can exacerbate tensions, much like wind-fanning flames. At the same time, the SAC, who often fear the populace and panics about security, could put more restrictions on the operations of domestic civil society organisations, such as limiting VPN access or blocking the entry of foreign journalists. This could overshadow the more moderate

voices of local stakeholders amid the noise on social media. The predominance of social media could then drown out these essential voices, further reducing the chances of de-escalating the conflict. This analysis is backed by a study done by Brancati (2007), which analyzed the relationship between earthquakes and conflict across 185 countries from 1975 to 2002. The study found that earthquakes not only increase the likelihood of conflict but that their effects are greater for higher magnitude earthquakes striking more densely populated areas of countries with lower gross domestic products and preexisting conflicts.

In the case of other major EAOs joining the NUG's two-week ceasefire, it could create an opportunity, which is our **fifth scenario**. This ceasefire can be viewed from two perspectives: tactical and strategic de-escalation. Currently, a cessation of hostilities would aid earthquake relief logistics, safeguard civilians, ensure the flow of both domestic and international aid, and display a commitment to humanitarian spirit—constituting a tactical de-escalation. To evolve this into a strategic de-escalation, the ceasefire must be accompanied by confidence-building measures aimed at long-term political resolutions. These measures could include creating safe zones, establishing humanitarian corridors for aid delivery, facilitating joint management of aid by opposing groups, integrating Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) workers into relief efforts, addressing the needs of those displaced by both the earthquake and conflict, and negotiating for the unhindered operation of independent media, civil society organizations (CSOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs). These steps could further foster discussions on post-disaster rebuilding ▶

## International Aid Totals at Least \$50m

ISP Data Matters Number 151

ISP Data Matters

In response to the “March 28 Sagaing Earthquake,” international aid commitments have reached at least 50 million USD for rescue and rehabilitation efforts. This figure, based on announcements made up to March 30, includes not only monetary pledges but also contributions of rescue teams, food, medicine, and other essential supplies from a variety of countries. China has made the most significant contribution, committing humanitarian aid valued at 100 million RMB. Additionally, China has dispatched the largest contingent of rescue forces to aid in the relief efforts.

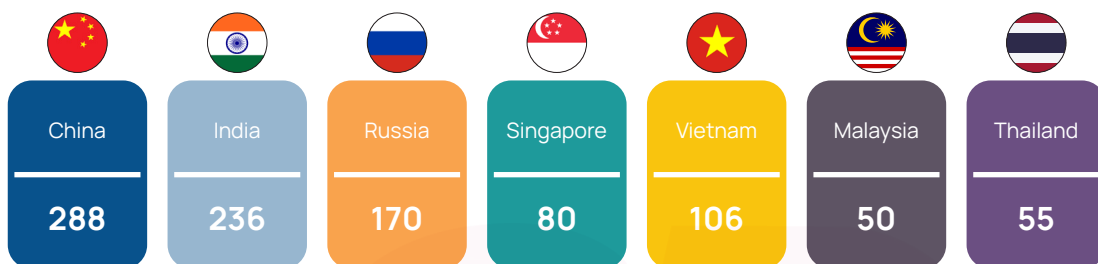
Countries	Amount	Amount in USD
China	RMB 100 Million	14 Million
European Union (EU)	EUR 2.5 Million	2.7 Million
Singapore	SGD 0.15 Million	0.1 Million
South Korea	USD 2 Million	2 Million
United Kingdom	GBP 10 Million	12.6 Million
Australia	USD 2 Million	2 Million
United States (US)	USD 2 Million	2 Million
Cambodia	USD 0.1 Million	0.1 Million
Vietnam	USD 0.3 Million	0.3 Million
Malaysia	MYR 10 Million	2.1 Million
Norway	NOK 120 Million	12 Million
Taiwan Red Cross	USD 0.05 Million	0.05 Million

Data as of March 30, based on preliminary information and subject to change over time. The exchange rates to US dollars are estimated based on market rates.



## ■ Nearly 1,000 International Rescuers Arrived

Within 60 hours of the “March 28 Sagaing Earthquake,” 985 members of various international rescue teams arrived in Myanmar. These teams include personnel from China, India, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.



Data as of March 30. Aid materials from Bangladesh had arrived by this date, though the number of Bangladeshi rescue team members is not known. Additionally, the US, UAE, Laos, the Philippines, Belarus and other countries are also dispatching rescue forces.

► and political negotiations, potentially including election postponements and substantial talks on institutional transformation, such as issues related to the country’s constitution. To initiate this process of strategic de-escalation, domestic political organizations such as the NUG, key EAOs, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), and groups like the 88 Generation could lead the efforts. However, for the SAC to adopt this path—characterized by goodwill toward the people and the Union and respect for national dignity—pressure and support from regional countries like China, Thailand, and India, as well as ASEAN and international bodies like the United Nations, are essential. This approach, often referred to as “earthquake

diplomacy,” uses the disaster as a catalyst to foster cooperation among adversaries, reduce conflict, and lay the groundwork for peace. Without effective international and regional intervention, the prospects for achieving strategic de-escalation through humanitarian efforts remain limited. However, whether it’s discreet diplomatic efforts or public expressions of desire from the masses for this approach, these should be valued and encouraged. At the very least, if there’s agreement to tactically de-escalate the conflict and cease hostilities, it could be regarded as a positive precedent amidst the adversity for the country. As Kelman (2012) pointed out, the pursuit of “peace from the ruins”—striving to create peace amid extreme suffering and destruction—makes

In 2024, over 5.6 million people experienced flooding, with over 24 percent of cropland flooded. This is only a tiny spillover of the climate crisis. In times of conflict and climate change crises, Myanmar's society urgently needs the emergence of everyday champions. Visit [www.ispmyanmar.com](http://www.ispmyanmar.com) or scan the QR below to read the complete analysis.

SCAN THIS CODE



## The Terror Twins of CLIMATE AND CONFLICT

- ▶ earthquake diplomacy a double-edged sword, with potential for both progress and risk.

On one hand, it risks inadvertently legitimizing the SAC. On the other hand, prioritizing humanitarianism over a zero-sum conflict could present a golden opportunity. However, crises do not automatically lead to change—only those who seize the moment can shape history.




Strategic action is essential for transforming a disaster into a historical turning point rather than another missed opportunity. Neither an earthquake nor any natural calamity will create change on its own; it is up to people to drive that change. A disaster may open a window of opportunity, a political entry point. Still, if leaders across the spectrum refuse to act, Myanmar's society will remain trapped in a vicious cycle of hardship.

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