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YOUTH ACTION IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> **"The conflict has changed our dreams. I would have stayed and worked in the fields at home. I would have got married and have children by now. I never would have thought about having a different job. Everything is different."**
>
> Displaced young woman, 18, Myanmar

The largest group of people living in countries affected by fragility and conflict is often those aged between 10-24, yet there is little attention paid to their experiences, needs or capabilities. In many cases young people, particularly young men, are seen as contributors to instability: part of the problem rather than the solution. This report is an attempt to assess the positive role that young people can play in re-establishing peace and security and is based on research carried out by the Institute of Development Studies in Myanmar, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. There are many inspiring examples of youth in action and it is clear that young people are not passive victims but have the ability to change their lives and the lives of those around them. In all three of the research areas we found young people who were already having a constructive impact, working within formal processes and more informally in their communities, to help build a stable and peaceful future. The research concentrated on answering several key questions: where was young people's contribution most effective and what were the

key factors leading to them making a meaningful difference? what were the gaps and barriers that impeded young men and women's participation? were young women in fact included in both the formal and informal processes set up to tackle fragility, and how does age and stage in life affect a young person's ability to contribute?

FRAGILITY:

"the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or community to manage, absorb, or mitigate [...] risks" OECD 2016

While countries can be more or less fragile in five dimensions (violence, justice, institutions, economic foundations and resilience), it is violence that is the major factor: of the 50 most vulnerable countries, 36 score on the violence dimension.

DID YOU KNOW?

The current world population is the youngest ever:

1.8BN

young people are in the age group 10–24 years old.[1]

More than

600M

of them live in fragile and conflict-afflicted areas, and in many fragile countries more than 60% of the population is under age 25.[2]

Children and youth are also highly represented among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), with

50%

of the world's 21.3 million refugees now under age 18.

Despite being the largest group affected by fragility and conflict, young people remain invisible in terms of their specific needs and capacities. Their voices are rarely heard by governments, development practitioners or relief agencies.[3]

The report shows that while violent conflict and political instability are key factors affecting the security and wellbeing of young men and women, they themselves are also concerned about the knock on effects of this on their mobility, their livelihood and educational opportunities, and their health, both physical and psychological. The ramifications of fragility were made clear by an 18-year old woman in Nigeria. Her family's displacement had delayed her ability to finish school and find a job, as well as potentially delaying her marriage prospects: *"If I was a boy, it would be different. Because a man has no time limit, he can decide not to get married before he is 45…as a woman, in the next seven years, I will be a liability [to my parents] if I am not married."* [4]

Ultimately, young people are aware that the context of instability in which they live will make the transition into adulthood more complex: affecting their ability to mark the usual milestones of financial independence, supporting a family and bringing up children. They know that the impact of fragility on their lives is not just short term but stretches well into the future.

> "During the Ebola outbreak, I lost my husband and things became much harder for me … I was traumatised as people were looking at me differently …I was rejected as my family abandoned us and we were living through the help we were getting from outsiders."
>
> Young woman, 22, Sierra Leone

Girls walk to school in Sierra Leone

Methodology

The selection of countries for the research was based on logistics, according to where Plan International had offices, and also chosen for their differences in the capacity of the state and the type of regime in power. Sierra Leone, Myanmar and Nigeria are all fragile settings in multiple ways. Fieldwork was carried out between October 2016 and January 2017.

In total, the country teams conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 32 key informant interviews (KIIs) in Nigeria; 12 focus group discussion s and 33 key informant interviews in Sierra Leone, and 13 focus group discussions and 22 key informant interviews in Myanmar. Among those interviewed

for the KIIs in each country were ordinary youth, youth activists, representatives of civil society organisations, and government officials. FGDs were split evenly between younger (14-18/19) and older (19/20-25) youth and between men and women. Other relevant group selection characteristics were determined based on the research site.[5]

The study is unique in that youth researchers joined the team in each country. Their reflections on their encounters with other young people and on the research process have enriched the findings and promoted a clearer understanding of the lives and needs of young people in the context of fragility.

KACHIN STATE

MYANMAR

Since 2011, Myanmar has seen huge change in terms of economic investment and the opening up of political space, creating widespread optimism for the future. However despite the election of a new civilian government in 2015 ethnic strife is rife in the country and conflict has continued between the state military and armed ethnic groups.[6] In 2016 Myanmar was ranked 26 in the fragile states index.[7] Recently when violence erupted in Rakhine State nearly 600,000 Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh amidst accusations of army

atrocities. State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi had earlier made national reconciliation the new government's top priority with a growing recognition that youth engagement is critical for sustained peace and stability. To capture youth involvement in these processes, fieldwork was undertaken in Myitkyina, the capital of Myanmar's northern-most state, Kachin which is home to 1.6 million people, the majority of whom are ethnic Kachin.[8] Young people and children have been heavily involved in Myanmar's civil conflicts, both voluntarily and forcefully recruited into rebel and state militias and armies. The conflict in Kachin State has forced nearly 10% of the state's population to move, with around 100,000 people living in IDP camps.

Girls fetch water in Kenya

NIGERIA

PLATEAU STATE

Nigeria was ranked at 13 in the 2016 Fragile States Index. Many factors contributed to this including: weaknesses in the security apparatus, weak public services and performance of the rule of law, failures in the protection of human rights, and high levels of grievance among ethnic groups. Conflicts between people native to their area and later settlers have caused violence in many places in Nigeria since the early 1990s, and are a major cause of fragility nationwide. Divisions between these two groups often overlap with other identities such as religion and ethnicity. Since 2009, northern parts of Nigeria have been heavily affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. The combination of Boko Haram activities and the government's counter-insurgency have caused major internal displacement and the loss of an estimated 15,000 lives.[9] For the current study, fieldwork was conducted in the city of Jos in Plateau State, a state located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where native ethnic groups are mainly Christian and the majority of newer arrivals are Muslim. Ethno-religious conflicts have escalated into large-scale violence at various points since the mid-1990s. The city of Jos has suffered several bomb blasts claimed by Boko Haram, and the state hosts half a million people displaced by its violence from neighbouring states.

SIERRA LEONE

MAKENI

After a decade of civil war which ended in 2002, and despite being ranked number 34 on the fragility index prior to the 2014 Ebola outbreak the overall picture for Sierra Leone was gradually improving. However, the 2014 Ebola outbreak[10] accelerated a downturn in the economy. The recently adopted austerity measures supported by the IMF and World Bank are seeing rapid rises in utility fees and the cost of living, and simmering discontent amongst disenfranchised groups, especially young people, which mirrors the socio-economic and political conditions preceding the earlier civil war. Based in the Northern regional capital Makeni, this study mapped youth responses to fragility across the region by engaging with young people from different age groups, youth leaders and activists and a range of civil society organisers, as well as those involved in local, regional and national governance.

The Experience of Fragility

For this research youth is defined as young men and women between the ages of 14-25 but, within this bracket, "youth" of course comes in many different guises. The group is not homogenous and throughout the research process for this study it was painfully clear that women, minorities and the very poor are, unsurprisingly, disproportionally affected by living in unstable and fragile environments. Young women and girls are especially at risk of exploitation with huge consequences for them in both the present and the future. Not only is the experience of fragility influenced by gender so too is the ability to take action. Girls and young women are often excluded from public spaces and their opinions and experiences are not seen as important. It is clear that not all youth initiatives are inclusive: they may even reproduce the behaviour and power dynamics that sustain gender inequality and fail to incorporate girls' and women's needs. Projects specifically set up to address issues affecting young women and girls are particularly important in that they recognise the barriers that limit their participation and are more likely to lead to their greater overall involvement in activities that help to build peace and security.

> **"In our societies, men are more free than women and they can do whatever they like. It is true that young men mingle more than women. Our parents and the society in general give them that freedom. You know they say: 'It's a man's world.'"**
>
> Woman, 23, Muslim, Nigeria

Promoting Peace

Young people are driven to act by two key motivators: the need to survive and the aspiration towards a "normal" adult life. They often start with informal subtle actions to improve those aspects of fragility that have the most impact on their everyday lives: including the need for public security, stable livelihood opportunities and to re-establish social trust, which has been eroded by violence and political instability, within their immediate environments

In **Sierra Leone**, this informal approach, the idea of do it yourself community development, has been a vital part of local life since the end of the civil war in 2002. Endemic poverty and the lack of reach from government and social protection services meant that, in terms of establishing security and rebuilding communities shattered by war, doing it yourself was often the only real option. Working in schools and in their neighbourhoods young people act as welfare advocates and organisers: providing services, ranging from street cleaning to running anti-violence clubs, that might normally be provided by the local authority. Unofficial groups of youth activists were also influential during the Ebola crisis helping to bridge the gap between their local communities and the international and national aid efforts and ensure that the help offered reached the people who needed it.

In both **Myanmar** and **Nigeria**, youth activists organise rallies and large cultural and sports events in order to promote peace. Young men and women in Nigeria agree that such events are important for bringing people

> **"Peace means when we are free from war, disease or anything that disturbs and threatens our lives."**
>
> Women, aged 21, Sierra Leone

> **"Peace means we can go anywhere safely and talk freely. We would have the right to say wrong if government does wrong."**
>
> Man, aged 20, Myitkyina, Myanmar

together and leaving ethnic differences behind, especially because some are afraid to visit areas dominated by the ethnic 'other'. In Myanmar, state security actors scrutinise rallies on topics it considers controversial, like school curricula and injustice and some parents are reluctant to let their daughters participate. For them, attending the collective peace prayers organised by the churches is a more acceptable public forum.

Many young people like Gam Awng, featured below, are acting to challenge discrimination, violence and exclusion and to build peace and are becoming increasingly aware of the many challenges they face.

Some of the activities carried out by young people are born simply from the need to survive: tactics adopted to protect themselves and their loved ones. However young people also act for moral and political reasons to build the kind of society they would want to live in. On the surface, some of these actions might not be recognised as acts that deliberately address fragility: as, for example, when a young Muslim woman in Nigeria purposefully attends a Christian wedding. In Myanmar young people tried informally to reduce violence by working with the armed groups as message-takers, providing accurate information to military leaders and encouraging them not to react to rumours or other events that seemed to threaten them. One young woman explained that young people can build relationships more easily, because they can 'chat informally' and 'drink' with them. The level of impact of actions like this is, of course, not always easy to assess but it is clear from the research that youth activism builds success in many different ways.

GAM AWNG: YOUTH ACTIVIST IN MYANMAR

Gam Awng is a 24-year-old church youth leader in a village in Kachin State, Myanmar. He was elected to this position three years ago. He organises sports and leisure activities to nurture relationships between youth from different ethnic groups. He holds youth meetings at the house of a religious leader. He is aware that this might be excluding young people who belong to different faiths. If he holds these meetings at the house of the village leader, however, although everyone could come, he would have to get permission from the district and officials would ask 'difficult questions'. He finds it easier to organise through the church, and has learned to negotiate with village authorities to organise youth activities.

For girls and young women involvement in any form of activism is much harder as there are often strict rules governing what is considered 'appropriate behaviour' . These change according to their age and status: a young married woman may potentially experience more restrictions than someone who is younger but still unmarried. Whatever their age, young women are often preoccupied with domestic and caring responsibilities and just do not have the time to join in. Also insecurity and crime, real and perceived, may make young women very reluctant to go to specific places or go out at all, especially after dark, and often parents or carers forbid them. Despite these obstacles there are always those who will contribute whatever barriers they face:

"My main motivation for joining the vigilante [group] was [to] contribute in fighting crime in my community. I don't consider this kind of job is strictly for men or boys alone. Most of my female friends say I am doing the work of men. They are wrong. Peace and security is not for men alone. Since females are also involved in crime, females can also be involved in fighting the crime. Today, some of my female friends are having second thoughts because they see us operate and see how the male vigilantes protect me in their midst."

Female Muslim vigilante group member, 22, Jos, Nigeria

Tackling Exclusion

Young activists act as role models within their communities and are more effective when adult leadership figures mentor young people and legitimise youth actions. In many countries, religious leaders promoting peace and dialogue are a great support. While established sexism continues to limit the engagement of young women and girls, the study found evidence suggesting generational shifts and attitudinal change are happening in some places, like in Sierra Leone, where some young men are willing to recognise and address gender equality, and young male activists work alongside female advocates. One of the key issues is child marriage and the Ebola crisis resulted in an increase in both early marriage and teenage pregnancies. Young women are also bullied at school and many feel that their male classmates inhibit their progress: "If you compete with the boys for certain positions in the school, some are so bad that they will assault you and beat you up at times."[11] However, a number of young men spoke up for women's rights and argued that the government needed to do more to tackle sexual exploitation. One 17-year-old male activist talked about the difficulties in reducing child marriage: it is not easy… (…) The culture of our people is one of the barriers to female education in the region. What we are now doing is involving parents from different communities, organising meetings where young women will discuss the role of women in the development of the nation or the family (…). I think if we continue with [this]

kind of work, the mentality of our people on girl child education and the issue of earlier marriage will be reduced in the district."[12]

FODAY: COMMUNITY ACTIVIST IN SIERRA LEONE

Foday is 17 years old and started volunteering for a local community organisation when his mother could not afford his school fees. Now he combines his youth advocacy work with helping his mother earn some money to support his family. Inspired by a visit from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, he started working on youth outreach programmes, before getting involved with Plan Sierra Leone's youth advisory panel, which promotes youth participation. He is an active campaigner on the rights of women and the disabled, counting himself a member of several voluntary organisations. His network tries to bring traditional leaders and community members into dialogue with the young people he represents, often with limited success as "the traditional leaders and some community members are not happy with us as they think [it] is a taboo for a young man to discuss publicly issues relating to FGM". He blames the national government for not providing enough support for organisations like his.

A note of caution

Youth activism should not be romanticised. It may in some cases mirror the society it originates from. Youth action can be exclusionary; this research makes it clear that it often ignores the interests of young women and marginalised youth. It can also become part of the dynamic perpetuating fragility: for example young men taking part in the exploitation of young women in Sierra Leone, or vigilantes monitoring cases of homosexuality in Nigeria. While youth action can play an important role in achieving peace and development, it also needs to be more inclusive and accountable: in particular, it must involve young women and take into account their interests and experiences.

> "When they have chiefdom meetings, women are not allowed because they believe that women are not part of development and should stay in the kitchen."
>
> Female activist, Sierra Leone

VIGILANTE:

"a member of a self-appointed group of citizens who undertake law enforcement in their community without legal authority, typically because the legal agencies are thought to be inadequate."[13]

In Nigeria, vigilantism has a long and complex history and is viewed in both a positive and negative light. According to many people interviewed for this study, vigilantism can offer an entry point for young people to contribute to peace in their communities. Vigilantes, who should be distinguished from militia groups, are often seen as a form of community policing in areas where the state is struggling to maintain order. More recently, young people have been involved in the Borno Youth Vigilance Group, part of the counter-insurgency to stop Boko Haram. Both vigilante members and female interviewees emphasised that vigilantism has in some instances enhanced public security: young women report feeling that they can move around more safely and easily. In some areas vigilante groups co-operate with local police though in others they can be involved in crime and have little accountability. A bill formalising the role of vigilante groups is to be discussed in parliament.

Working Strategically

Beyond actions originating in the immediate everyday needs of themselves and their families youth activists like Foday and Gwam Ang, above, are also aware that they need to plan strategically to work with governments and local authorities. This is proving difficult. Formal youth institutions such as National Youth Councils risk becoming politicised, are often not inclusive, lack support and may have little real influence. In some instances, youth civil society has successfully mobilised to be included in such processes, such as in Myanmar's peace process, but so far struggles to have real influence. There is hope however that the United Nations Council Resolution on Youth, Peace and Security will create new momentum to support young people's participation across the board, not just in small ghettoes marked "youth".

Young people from the poorest families find it especially difficult to take part in formal processes: they may not have the time as they have to work hard and often work away from the main towns where the meetings and activities take place. Since socio-economic marginalisation can overlap with ethnic and religious identity, poor minority groups risk being excluded altogether. Additionally the findings in this report indicate that youth engagement, even when initiated, is often not sustained in the long term.

This study has also identified factors which help youth participation in formal processes

"I'm not aware of any programme at national level that is supporting youth advocacy at community or district level. If there is any, they should have let us know because I'm also part of vibrant youth groups in the district."[14]

Young Man, Sierra Leone

be more effective, such as the building of broad alliances of youth organisations, fostering strategic relationships with state representatives who might be prepared to champion youth, and active dialogue between national and local level youth to enhance their representation. There are however complications which can impede progress:

• Youth civil society itself is not united and there are differences in ideology or identity.

• Despite gender equality being placed at the centre of many youth policies and frameworks, patriarchy runs through state institutions in the countries in this study, including those that are set up to promote the empowerment of women and youth.

Girls filling up jerry cans with water from a borehole dug by Plan in Baratuku resettlement camp

- In many contexts ethnic and religious discrimination on the part of the state constitute a major barrier to accessing political spaces, though in some places this in itself has mobilised young people.

- Both government and non-state authorities are likely to be suspicious of any effort aimed at the empowerment of young people.

As long as they are clearly recognised none of these barriers are insuperable. Everyone involved needs to work strategically to create an enabling environment: one which generates appropriate and effective support for the many young people determined to contribute to the rebuilding of their societies and their futures.

> "When we did the first youth forum in 2012 it was very hard. The government was very afraid of youth power. It was under the old government. They were very suspicious. Only five years before then, it had been illegal for more than five youth to gather together."
>
> Youth activist, Myanmar

SENG RA: A FEMALE PEACE ACTIVIST IN MYANMAR

Seng Ra is a 28-year old woman from Shan State. It is one of the areas that has ongoing conflict involving different ethnic militias and the government army. When Seng Ra was 16 she joined a local youth group. In 2010 the groups decided that the Shan, Ta'ang and Kachin ethnic youth groups should work together. Initially they collaborated with political parties, but then realised they needed to be non-partisan in order to work across different youth groups: "We wanted to have[a] collective voice and to reclaim the rights of ethnic people. We didn't want to be caught in what the political groups want – it's about what young people want." The group set up the Ethnic Youth Network around 2013. Up until then, only the Burmese had youth organisations operating at national level. Seng Ra felt these were dominating the youth space and were under the influence of the government. In Shan State, she is involved in negotiating between the Shan and Ta'ang people to reduce tensions. She says: "People trust me. I have good relations with people. I have always done this and I'm good at it! I am a young woman. Other girls see me and they get involved. … In the groups where men lead, there are more men. More and more women are getting involved. Men have to worry about bringing money into the family, but women are a bit freer. Men are also exhausted by the political situation while for women it's all new. There is an excitement."

Girls learn about adolescent friendly spaces, Nepal

Conclusion

Young people are not given high priority in many fragile and conflict-affected states, despite the huge implications fragility has for their lives and the vast numbers of them involved. They are frustrated with their lack of influence and impact at the national level. Many common participation challenges, such as social exclusion and gender bias, limit their effective involvement. The development of new national youth policies or youth empowerment programmes offers some hope for youth engagement with the formal institutions of state , and may provide the momentum for youth civil society to rally around a host of issues that are important to them. However, often this engagement is not sustained, is not inclusive and is ineffectual as it tends to set "youth issues" apart from wider societal challenges. It is clear from the research that young people have the potential to contribute to peace and development. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that they cannot be made responsible for resolving problems and conflict that have deep structural and political causes.

It is also apparent from the research that the everyday actions and the more informal initiatives of young people provide key insights into what they prioritise in contexts of fragility and these everyday actions, where young people reach in friendship across social and ethnic divides or work to keep their streets safe and clean , are crucial. Their importance and their impact tends to be underestimated. National and local leaders should recognise that young people have a part to play in rebuilding communities and take positive advantage of their ideas and their energies.

Across the research areas we have found young people working for peace in ways that are creative brave and effective. It is clear that they can and do support reconciliation and development but it is also evident that they need to be supported in turn. Everyone from community leaders, government officials and NGOs must find a way to provide the appropriate encouragement and practical assistance that will enable young people to help build the future that provides them with the security and the opportunities they deserve.

"In theory, I think it is normal that you have three square meals in a day, but I remember I have never had three square meals in a day, or maybe probably when I was very little with my parents. (…) I felt the country also owes the youths, to grant the opportunities [so we] would at least have these three square meals. We are not talking about building mansions in Abuja: we are saying we should have relatively a fair life, just a fair life. That is what we are demanding."

Young man, 22, Jos, Nigeria

Recommendations to support youth action

1. FOR POLICYMAKERS AND DONORS

- **Take an evidence-based approach:** Neither policy nor programme interventions should be underpinned by presumptions about the drivers and social norms which lead young men and women to take on roles as 'entrepreneurs of violence' or as 'peace-builders'; nor should assumed roles be used to justify the exclusion of young men or women from processes. **Invest in research** (including longitudinal studies) **to better understand the drivers which lead young men and women to take on particular roles during periods of fragility and armed conflict** to support more effective and targeted interventions to prevent violence and build peace.

- **Recognise that youth are already addressing fragility and building peace – invest in this youth agency, including in line with the Grand Bargain:** Intervention strategies should invest in understanding youth's existing agency in responding to fragility, and support and build up from these interventions. Donors should significantly increase the direct support provided to youth-led organisations and local organisations working with young people, in line with commitments in the Grand Bargain, along with targeted actions to address the root causes of fragility and conflict.

- **Address gender inequality in policy processes:** Policy actors need to recognise and address patriarchy and gender bias at the outset of formal processes addressing fragility, and seek to create terms of engagement that are enabling for young women, for instance through quotas, debating rules about respect and active listening, allowing women to speak first, and supporting women-only dialogue forums in advance of formal process so they can strengthen their agency and voice.

- **Build momentum on UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and strengthen its focus on young women.**

    - Young people are often sidelined from important policy and development processes if these are not 'earmarked' for youth, even if they have direct impact on their lives. UNSC Resolution 2250 is an important step in the recognition of the importance of youth participation in peacebuilding at the local, national, regional and international levels.

    - Policymakers must use the Progress Study of Security Council Resolution 2250 to translate the resolution's objectives into clear targets with milestones to ensure accountability.

    - Efforts to promote UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are often insufficiently age-sensitive, focusing on the inclusion of adult women. Meanwhile, efforts to promote UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security are often insufficiently gender-sensitive, focusing on the inclusion of young men. As a result, there is a real risk that the needs and voices of young women may fall through the gap between these two agendas.

Photo: Girl speaks at refugee camp, Rwanda

2. FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

- **Reflect DFID's approach to engaging youth as agents and advocates of development, as outlined in the *Youth Agenda*[77], in the Government's wider foreign policy.**
  - Consider convening an informal working group with representatives from relevant departments and members of the international community to share evidence and develop best practice on supporting youth agency, including in conflict and fragile settings.
- **The UK Government should prioritise the importance of understanding, supporting and investing in adolescent girls' and young women's agency.** Measures should:
  - **Change the narrative around girls and young women:** ensure that as well as recognising the gendered experience of women in situations of fragility and conflict, the characterisation of girls and women must be as more than victims and their agency and contribution to transforming fragility and building peace must be recognised.
  - Recognise that girls and women experience discrimination and exclusion as a result of the intersection of multiple characteristics including gender and age – **ensure gender context analyses include an age dimension.**
  - **Fund research into understanding the existing agency of adolescent girls and women in transforming fragility and peacebuilding (including providing services, preventing violence and promoting more peaceful societies), and strengthen and invest in this agency through policy adoption and investment in targeted programming.** This could also include greater investment in adolescent girls' and young women's leadership programmes across all WPS focus countries.
- **A Foreign Office ministerial role should be assigned the key responsibility of promoting the rights and interests of young people in UK foreign policy,** with an explicit focus on ensuring their participation in, and meaningful contribution to, the promotion of peace and security.

Photo: Village meeting, Sierra Leone

References

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2 IANYD 2016.

3 Evans and Lo Forte 2013.

4 Interview with young woman, 18, Nigeria.

5 for more information on the methodology please consult the full report: https://plan-uk.org/policy/policy-reports-research-and-briefings

6 Myanmar comprises approximately 135 ethnic groups, with ethnic Burman around 60% of the population. It is administered through seven majority Burman regions and seven ethnic states.

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