



Photographing humanity: hope amid crisis in Myanmar

June 27, 2025, Analysis / Health care / Humanitarian Action / Social Protection

🕒 7 mins read



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A local resident steps across remnants of a home destroyed by the recent earthquake. Photo by Stephanie Xu, © 2025.

When a powerful earthquake struck Myanmar on 28 March 2025, it tore through communities already living under the shadow of armed conflict and chronic instability. In the tangle of collapsed homes and fractured lives, it laid bare the brutal convergence of natural hazard-induced disaster

and manmade violence – a crisis within a crisis, testing not only the resilience of survivors but also the principles that guide humanitarian response.

In this post, ICRC Communication Delegate Stephanie Xu reflects on what it means to photograph humanity at the intersection of conflict and catastrophe. Her lens captures both the visible wreckage and the quiet dignity of those rebuilding amid despair. Marking three months since the earthquake – and in a year marking the 60th anniversary of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – she shows how the principle of humanity continues to illuminate and inform the work of humanitarian actors responding in some of the world's most complex emergencies.

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The deep rumbling beneath my feet vibrates as if a large cargo truck carrying heavy equipment has driven by at full speed. Yet my colleague, sitting across the café table from me, motions on her phone app that it is merely an earthquake aftershock of almost four on the Richter scale. While I express my worry and slight fear, my colleague seems to be both unnerved and at the same time concerned of what further effect it may have on the ground. It is clear she has been through this situation many times before – her texting to exchange words of safety with our ICRC Mandalay subdelegation colleagues is an automatic and easy reflex.

Months after the 7.7 magnitude earthquake, aftershocks continue to shake Mandalay and Sagaing townships – some so intense they would be considered major earthquakes elsewhere.

Through a crisis lens

During my two weeks in the field, I would accompany our ICRC Mandalay teams to visit several different villages and photograph the devastating effect of the earthquake on those injured, displaced and unaccounted for, not to mention the severe damage present everywhere. My camera holds hundreds of images, capturing cracked roads stretching for miles, collapsed golden pagodas, slanted buildings and shattered homes, and people walking through rubble as they work to rebuild their lives. These images are heartbreaking.

In a country already impacted by armed conflict and other forms of violence, this earthquake only exacerbated the humanitarian needs of the affected populations, many of whom relocated to avoid active fighting only to face a loss of their homes and personal goods. How can I possibly capture humanity during a time of such difficulty to relay any type of hope?



A woman stands before rubble left by the recent earthquake. In Mandalay and Sagaing townships, scenes of damaged buildings are a common sight. Photo by Stephanie Xu, © 2025.

Through a Movement lens

As I capture the destruction, I recognize that there is also a certain determination on the faces of those helping. In the earthquake response, the impact of humanity is embodied in the unified response, where the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement stands shoulder-to-shoulder with communities and each other to provide assistance. [The ICRC's presence in Myanmar, for almost 40 years](#), has been providing assistance to people affected by armed conflict and other violence in numerous states of the country. Working alongside the Host National Society, the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), the ICRC supports MRCS with technical, financial and material support to enhance emergency response capacity. There is no doubt of the shared humanitarian mandate, as well as the MRCS's efforts and immediate response as first-aid responders.

However, due to the [Movement Coordination for Collective Impact Agreement, also known as the Seville Agreement 2.0](#), adopted at the 2022 Council of Delegates, there are certain coordination responsibilities for the components of the RCRC Movement. According to Article 5.1b, the ICRC must act as a co-convenor in "situations of international and non-international armed conflicts, internal strife and their direct results as defined...". Simply put, the ICRC plays a unique role; one of coordination, support, and collaboration with the MRCS, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC).

This level of collective action and agreement does not end at the policy level, but extends into the way the Movement operates on a field and practical level. During the earthquake, this has taken the form of joint Movement statements, where

we speak with one voice to express solidarity and to outline our humanitarian priorities. Coordination meetings among Movement partners – bringing together representatives from National Societies, the ICRC, IFRC and MRCS – have provided critical space for reflection, alignment, and strategic planning. The establishment of technical working groups ensure that all métiers can provide expertise on the proper technicalities.



The ICRC Water and Habitat team visits a water distribution site in Sagaing. Led by the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), the Host National Society, the ICRC and collaborates on projects like this as part of the Movement's earthquake response. Photo by Stephanie Xu, © 2025.



ICRC and MRCS colleagues discuss distribution items, including those provided by the IFRC, at an MRCS office in Sagaing. Led by the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), the Host National Society, the ICRC collaborates on projects such as these as part of the Movement's earthquake response. Photo by Stephanie Xu, © 2025.

Myanmar is certainly not an exception to this Seville Agreement 2.0 coordination of responsibilities. Across the globe, in conflict zones hit by natural hazard-induced disasters, this Movement-wide collaboration is the standard. In the past, the ICRC has been active in Thailand and the Philippines providing relief to flood victims; the ICRC has also responded to the 2005 Kashmir earthquake affecting both Pakistan and India; and in similar situations of earthquakes, the [2010 Haiti earthquake that affected more than 45,000 people](#) and the [2023 Syrian-Turkish earthquake killing tens of thousands of people](#).

For me, as a humanitarian photographer, this Movement collaboration is not only a policy, but it represents a story that unfolds through moments of collaboration, coordination and respect for humanitarian aid and assistance. Photographing humanity means making this invisible thread of continued and unified prevention and alleviation of human suffering visible – a shared common goal by everyone within the RCRC Movement. I witness it in the pictures of MRCS youth volunteers filling up water bottles to pass on to a family of five; in IFRC donation boxes stacked up to be shipped off and distributed in various villages; in the presence of Red Cross of China and Macau Red Cross tents that dot along the city centre; and in the ICRC flag waving proudly as we boat across the Irrawaddy River to visit villages for their very first assessments.

During one field visit, I met an elderly woman who slowly approached with her walking stick to receive financial assistance from the ICRC team. After we spoke, she gave us warm hugs, as if we had known each other for years. Her gratitude, resilience and smile are what I aim to capture through my lens: humanity expressed through solidarity, compassion, and partnership.



ICRC staff member assists a laughing beneficiary during a cash and voucher assistance distribution in a town near Mandalay. Residents in the area have been affected by both the ongoing armed conflict and the recent earthquake. Photo by Stephanie Xu, © 2025.

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