

Myanmar fighting forces people to take shelter at churches, monasteries

MANDALAY, Myanmar (CNS) – About 1,000 people fled their homes and took refuge at religious sites as renewed fighting erupted in Myanmar's Shan state.

Aid workers said more than 300 people were sheltering at a Catholic church in a village in Hsenwi township Aug. 19, while 700 people were at Mansu Shan Buddhist monastery in the town of Lashio, reported ucanews.com.

Tensions remain high and fighting has spread to several townships in Shan state since Aug. 15, following coordinated attacks by police and Myanmar's military forces in Mandalay Division. The clashes have left 14 people dead – nine military officers, three police officers and two civilians. The military was fighting with three northern alliance groups: the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Arakan Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

A man identified only as Eddie, project coordinator of Karuna Lashio, a branch of Caritas Myanmar, said people started fleeing their homes and taking refuge at the church Aug. 17. Most, he said, were ethnic Kachins.

He said Caritas was arranging to send cash and food to the internally displaced people; agency staffers could not travel there due to roads being blocked by the authorities.

"We can't tell exactly how long they (displaced people) need to stay in the church, as fighting has spreading in several townships," Eddie told ucanews.com.

Gum Sha Awng, a spokesman for the Joint Strategy Team, an

alliance of nine humanitarian groups, said fighting had erupted in northern Shan state Aug. 18 and was still continuing.

“We are monitoring the situation to respond to the relief works of new IDPs, but the blockage of routes has been our main challenge so far,” Gum Sha Awng told ucanews.com.

Clashes between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army have displaced more than 33,000 people in Rakhine and Chin states since November 2018.