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# Burma: Rohingya refugees flee new wave of violence and ethnic cleansing

Tuesday 29 November 2016, by [ILTIS Tony](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2016).

**Supplies have been cut to the concentration camps into which about 150,000 Rohingya people were forced by the military after pogroms in 2012. The UN has warned that more than 3,000 severely malnourished children may die.**

The victory of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2015 national elections in Burma (Myanmar) was hailed by Western leaders as heralding a new era of democracy and respect for human rights in the country.

Once isolated by sanctions imposed on the pretext of the widespread human rights abuses by previous military regimes, Burma is now a profitable destination for Western investment. By September, the US had lifted its last remaining sanctions.

However, a year after the elections, the security forces, now answering to an NLD-led government, are still engaged in huge human rights abuses.

On November 24, UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) official John McKissick told the BBC that the NLD-led government had perpetrated "atrocities" against the Rohingya minority from Arakan (Rakhine) state with the "ultimate goal of ethnic cleansing of the Muslim minority in Myanmar".

Since October 9, counter-insurgency operations by the Burmese military in Arakan have killed hundreds of Rohingya people and displaced tens of thousands. The military have been "killing men, shooting them, slaughtering children, raping women [and] burning and looting houses," McKissick said.

The pretext for the counter-insurgency operation was an attack on a police post by men armed with knives that killed nine police officers.

The government has blamed Rohingya insurgent groups that have been defunct for decades, and also alleged the involvement of international Islamist terror groups such as ISIS. However, the identity of the attackers is unknown.

Speculation on their identity has ranged from drug smuggling gangs to locals responding to the ongoing destruction of Rohingya homes.

The NLD-led government's denials of the atrocities have been both bizarre and tasteless.

The office of Aung San Suu Kyi said in a Facebook post: "Regarding those incidents, after asking the [army] and border guard troops in those regions, it is known that the information is absolutely not true."

On November 3, she said the counter-insurgency operations in Arakan were “based on the principles of the rule of law,” Reuters reported.

Evidence of the burning of Rohingya homes has been backed up by satellite images released by Human Rights Watch. “Burmese officials say Rohingya are setting fire to their own houses in northern Rakhine state,” the BBC said on November 24.

U Aung Win, a politician in the Arakan state government who heads the commission into investigating the October 9 attack, told the BBC on November 7 that Burmese government soldiers would not have committed rape because Rohingya women “are very dirty”.

Fiona MacGregor, a journalist for the *Myanmar Times* — the country’s only private English-language daily — reported on October 27 that dozens of sexual assaults by security forces had been documented by human rights groups. On October 31, she was sacked after social media harassment led by government officials.

“It is profoundly concerning for women’s rights, media freedom and democracy as a whole in Myanmar, that the civilian government is using bullyboy tactics to intimidate journalists and attempt to silence allegations of rape by the military,” she told Time on November 21. “We should not forget that at the centre of this propaganda war are real people who are allegedly the victims of the most horrible and brutal crimes.”

The paper’s editor, Douglas Long, was sacked a fortnight later for speaking about the incident with the international media and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

“With each passing day the current government is starting to look more and more like the pre-2010 government,” he told Time.

A November 24 Amnesty International report said thousands of Rohingya refugees have successfully crossed the border into Bangladesh, but hundreds of others have fallen victim to Bangladeshi efforts to seal the frontier and been forcibly returned.

“The Rohingya are being squeezed by the callous actions of both the Myanmar and Bangladesh authorities. Fleeing collective punishment in Myanmar, they are being pushed back by the Bangladeshi authorities,” Amnesty International’s South Asia Director Champa Patel said.

“Trapped between these cruel fates, their desperate need for food, water and medical care is not being addressed.”

The backdrop to the current violence is the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Rohingya from Arakan that has been occurring with varying intensity since the 1940s.

Estimates of those killed in a June 2012 pogrom range from the hundreds to the thousands. The Rohingya-based National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR) said at the time that more than 10,000 Rohingya had been killed. An even deadlier pogrom followed in October that year.

The 2012 pogroms were perpetrated by mobs from the largest ethnic community in Arakan, the Rakhine. They were organised by Buddhist fundamentalist and Rakhine nationalist organisations with the complicity, and sometimes participation, of the Burmese security forces. Following mass destruction of Rohingya homes and property, about 150,000 displaced Rohingya people were forced by the military into what are essentially concentration camps.

Denied freedom of movement or any opportunity of a livelihood, those in these camps have been

dependent on subsistence food aid provided by a small number of NGOs. Since the current “counter-insurgency operations” began, NGOs have been expelled from Arakan and supplies to the camps effectively cut.

“The UN has warned that more than 3,000 severely malnourished children may die without help,” the November 24 Guardian said.

Those Rohingya refugees who have reached Bangladesh join an estimated half million refugees who have fled successive waves of ethnic cleansing. Only 33,000 of these are in official refugee camps, the remaining undocumented refugees living in squalid conditions, the Amnesty report said.

The new arrivals are facing the worst conditions.

A refugee who fled with her remaining children after the army killed her husband and one of her sons told Amnesty: “We are sleeping outside in the mud. My son is two years old and is crying all the time, he is very cold in the mornings.

“Still, compared to Myanmar, Bangladesh seems like heaven to me.”

Many Rohingya refugees have taken to the sea, particularly since the 2012 pogroms. Last year, the governments of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia followed Australia’s lead and started towing boats of Rohingya refugees back out to sea.

In response to a global outcry, the three South-East Asian governments relented. Australia, however, maintained its hard-line stance.

Then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s response to suggestions that Australia should soften its stance was his infamous: “Nope. Nope. Nope.”

Rohingya refugees in South-East Asia are routinely victims of extreme labour exploitation. Some have been trafficked into outright slavery, mainly in the fishing industry but also in the sex industry.

The few who have reached Australia fare no better. There are about 600 Rohingya refugees either living in Australia on temporary visas that deny the right to work or welfare above subsistence level or imprisoned in the notorious offshore detention camps in Nauru and Manus Island.

Aung San Suu Kyi has reflected the official Burmese narrative in refusing to even acknowledge that the Rohingya exist — referring to them instead as “Bengalis”. This is factually incorrect: while the Rohingya language is related to Bengali, the two are not mutually intelligible.

In reality, the Rohingya can trace their roots in Arakan to over a millennium ago. In fact, Rohingya and Rakhine both mean “Arakanese” in their respective languages. The two communities co-existed for centuries, with both the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya influencing the medieval Arakanese polity.

Arakan was invaded by Burma just 40 years before the British invaded in 1825. The British introduced the politics of divide-and-rule and the ideology of ethnic nationalism.

During World War II, relations between the two communities deteriorated significantly. Arakan was the scene of intense fighting between Britain and Japan and both empires used local proxies — Rohingya in the case of the British and Rakhine in the case of the Japanese.

Before the war, both communities were distributed throughout Arakan but at the end of the fighting

and mutual communal violence, the Rohingya were the majority in the north but non-existent in the south.

The Rohingya suffered most in this with tens of thousands killed and 100,000 fleeing to what is now Bangladesh, then ruled by Britain.

This, and subsequent waves of ethnic cleansing in 1949, 1967-68, 1978 and 1991, led to the Rohingya becoming a minority. There are now at least as many Rohingya in exile as the about 1 million remaining in Arakan.

The hope that accompanied the NLD's election win was that a return to elected civilian government after more than 50 years of military rule would lead to an end to the country's numerous national liberation struggles that in several cases have involved armed warfare since independence in 1949. But while peace negotiations are taking place, most of these conflicts continue.

Voice of America reported on November 23 that fighting between Burmese forces and the Kachin Independence Army had caused several thousand civilians to flee across the border into China.

The Rohingya, however, are the only minority whose existence is not recognised by the state and who, since 1982, are not entitled to citizenship.

Ironically, Rakhine nationalist groups, such as the Arakan Army, have been involved in armed conflict with the Burmese military while Rohingya armed groups have been inactive for decades.

Aung San Suu Kyi's anti-Rohingya stance has been motivated by appeasement of both Rakhine nationalism and the Burmese military, which still retains much institutional power.

It has also been motivated by the rise of Buddhist extremist groups, such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement, both led by fundamentalist cleric Ashin Wirathu, since the transition to civilian rule began in 2010.

These groups have been responsible for much of the violence in Arakan but also represent a powerful electoral force that Aung San Suu Kyi does not wish to alienate.

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/burma-rohingya-refugees-flee-new-wave-violence-and-ethnic-cleansing>