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## Suu Kyi must stop the ethnic cleansing in Arakan

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By **Dr. Habib Siddiqui**

Myanmar's government said that the October 9 raids were conducted by the Aqamul Mujahidin organization, which it described as being affiliated with an extremist group. On the other hand, a previously unknown group – Faith Movement – has released a press statement on October 15 in which it claimed itself as the sons of Arakan soil who were compelled by the dire situation that they faced to make their own destiny through uprising, self-determination in self-defense. “We stand as an independent body which is free from all elements of terror in any nature,” the press release stated “that seeks fundamental but legitimate rights and justice for all ARAKANESE including our innocent Rohingyas and OTHER civilians dying from the continuous military assaults.”

An outcome like this was only waiting to happen given that history has repeatedly shown that such prolonged encampment in IDP concentration camps create a sense of ultimate abandonment by the state, pushing even the most moderates to take violent means to redress their plight. The initial attacks, in which three border police outposts were overrun by hundreds of people, most only lightly armed, showed a degree of sophistication not seen before in violence involving the Rohingya, but did not suggest the group was especially well-funded or armed, diplomats said.

Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw) has since been deployed in the Rohingya populated northern part of Arakan (Rakhine) state. And what we are witnessing there is simply shocking. War crimes are perpetrated. Under the pretext of finding the Rohingya perpetrators, the Tatmadaw has been doing what it has always done – using its criminal scorched-earth tactics. As a result, since the Oct. 9 attacks, at least 133 unarmed Rohingyas (mostly children and women) have been killed, or have died in custody. Over a hundred Rohingyas have been detained, several villages and more than a thousand homes and several mosques have been burned by the security forces forcing an internal displacement of at least 15,000 people, who are even denied humanitarian aid. Many of the local elders and Imams have also been killed extra-judicially after they were asked to report the local military camp.

Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a monitoring group, said the army was using “typical counter-insurgency measures [against civilians](#)”, including “shooting civilians on sight, burning homes, looting property and arbitrary arrests”.

Foreign reporters have not been allowed into the area the military has declared an “operation zone”, but Reuters was able to contact some residents and community leaders by telephone. The people, who did not want to be identified, contradicted several of the reports in state media, saying that the death toll in the area was higher than reported and that a number of those killed were unarmed. In one of the disputed accounts, the state-run Myanma Alinn newspaper said 30 Muslims attacked government forces on Oct. 11 near Kyetyoepyin village, and that 10 Rohingyas were killed in the subsequent fighting. After the clash, the insurgents fled, setting fire to homes, the report said. But several Rohingya residents from the area said they believed at least 19 people, including eight women, were killed by security forces that day. They also say it was the soldiers who set a large part of the village on fire.

The United Nations has said the violence is preventing aid agencies from delivering food and medicines to the region.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned in a statement Friday that as troops poured into the region and authorities blocked off the delivery of humanitarian aid to Maungdaw, aid agencies have not been able to conduct a needs assessment. The statement quoted a World Food Program (WFP) partnerships officer as saying they had requested access “from township level to Union level”. WFP told HRW that 50,000 people remain without food aid in Maungdaw.

Brad Adams, the group's Asia director, said the recent violence “has led the army to deny access to aid agencies that provide essential health care and food to people at grave risk”. “The Rohingya and others have been especially vulnerable since the ethnic cleansing campaign in 2012, and many rely on humanitarian aid to survive,” he added.

Rohingya advocacy groups have expressed concerns over what they claim is a continued crackdown in the area, with global groups releasing a statement Sunday claiming security forces have been indiscriminately killing Rohingya and torching and plundering their homes and villages, under the pretext of looking for the attackers.

This latest ethnic cleansing drives against the Rohingya are simply sickening in a country that is led by someone like Suu Kyi who was honored with a Nobel Prize for peace. What a joke this award is becoming! Apparently, she has failed to learn lessons from history, esp. why her wise father Aung San had organized the Panglong Conference in the pre-independence days.

Suu Kyi should have known better than most Burmese that such military excesses only weaken the very foundation of an artificial geographic entity like Burma (and today's Myanmar) that comprises peoples of many nationalities, races, ethnicities and religions. Since the time of Pagan King Anawrahta (11<sup>th</sup> century, CE), her country has been kept together by strong arms tactics of feudal kings, the British Raj and the military governments that ruled. 'Divide and rule' and fear-mongering against a perceived foe became prudent methods to administer this diverse country. But such tactics failed to create nationhood. There was never a sense of belonging except for the dominant group.

This much-needed task for forging national unity was taken up by visionaries like Aung San (who represented the Interim Burmese government), Sao Shwe Thaik (Shan leader) and others (including U Razak of AFPFL, a Muslim) in the late 1940s. That was the background for the Panglong Conference, which was held in Southern Shan state on February 1947. However, the spirit of [Panglong Agreement](#) that was reached between [Aung San](#) and other ethnic and community leaders in an attempt to unite everyone – irrespective of race, ethnicity and religion, Buddhists and non-Buddhists – for a common goal of independence was dead following [Aung San's assassination](#) (along with [U Razak](#) who was Education and National Planning Minister in Aung San's cabinet, and six other cabinet ministers) on July 19, 1947, less than six months before Union of Burma was to emerge as an independent state in the global arena. It should be noted that the Agreement, amongst other provisions, accepted full autonomy in internal administration for the "Frontier Areas" (bordering British India, Thailand, Laos, China) in principle and envisioned the creation of a [Kachin State](#) by the Constituent Assembly.

The founding fathers of Burma were very serious to foster unity in their future state. Thus, in 1946 General Aung San assured full rights and privileges to Rohingya/Arakanese Muslims as an indigenous people, saying: ***"I give (offer) you a blank cheque. We will live together and die together. Demand what you want. I will do my best to fulfill them. If native people are divided, it will be difficult to achieve independence for Burma."***

The First President, Sao Shwe Thaik, who was the last [Saopha](#) of [Yawnghwe](#), famously said, ***"If the Rohingyas are not indigenous, nor am I."***

After Myanmar gained independence on January 4, 1948, communists and ethnic/national/religious minorities in the country began a series of insurgencies displaying their grave discontent towards the newly formed [post-independence government](#) as they believed that the Panglong Agreement was not honored and that they were being unfairly excluded from governing the country. Their overwhelming perception was that the new government was a state for, by and of the majority Bamar and Buddhists only, and not for other minorities.

Sao Shwe Thaik who had led and organized the Panglong conference became the first president of the Union of Burma. His public speech on 4 January 1949 at a mass rally held outside City Hall to mark the first anniversary of Independence Day captures the troubled mood of the state: ***"Cooperation and understanding cannot come about so long as the element of violence or threat of violence exists, for violence has no counterpart in freedom, and liberty ends where violence begins."***

There were also widespread practice of discrimination against anyone who was not a Buddhist. For example, it was noted that many Christian Karen and Muslim and Sikh military officials, who were originally appointed by the British, were replaced with Buddhist [Bamars](#) by the new parliament. The situation was much worse for Muslims everywhere – from Arakan to Rangoon. As a result of serious discrimination, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs lost their jobs in every government sector – civilian, police and military. Many lost their businesses, too, and were looked down upon as either British-era migrants or their children thereof. Loss for them was craved as a net gain for the majority Buddhist. Steadily, intolerance of the minority became the law of the land.

The occupation of Burma by Japan during the early years of the World War II, when Rakhine Buddhists had allied themselves with the occupying fascist Japanese forces while the Arakanese Muslims collaborated with the British Raj to defeat Japan, had

already poisoned the relationship between these two dominant groups in Arakan. After Burma earned its independence, many Rakhine Buddhists took advantage of the emerging situation to ethnically cleanse Muslims from many parts of Arakan, esp. the southern part of the state. This led to the ghettoization of Muslims in towns and villages bordering today's Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan).

It is not difficult to understand why almost every racial/religious entity, including the Mujahedeen (made up of Arakanese/Rohingya Muslims), outside the majority Bamar/Buddhist race/religion rebelled in the early years. Being [betrayed](#) by the British Raj, in spite of their valuable services rendered during and after the WWII, it was no brainer that some Arakanese Muslims had felt that they had to protect themselves against marauding Buddhist incursions into their northern Mayu Frontier Territories. Muslim rebellion against the central government ultimately stopped when promises for their wider acceptance were made by government officials. Even then the persecution of the Rohingya and other Muslims continued.

According to the Pakistan Times (August 26, 1959), some 10,000 refugees had by then taken shelter in East Pakistan. In 1959, Burma agreed with East Pakistan governor Zakir Hossain to take back Rohingya refugees who had taken shelter in Chittagong in 1958. When questioned 'why refugees were pouring into Pakistan from Burma, the governor replied that the government of Burma had nothing to do with it. Actually the Moghs [ie, Buddhist Rakhines] of Arakan were creating the trouble.' (Pakistan Times, August 27, 1959) Governor Zakir Hossain's reply once again underscored the deep hostility of the racist Rakhines against the minority Rohingyas. On October 27, 1960, the Daily Guardian, Rangoon, reported that Burmese 'Supreme Court quashes expulsion orders against Arakanese Muslims,' which once again shows that the Arakanese [Rohingya] Muslims faced much problems in their reintegration.

Armed resistance by various ethnic and religious minorities and communists became the new norms and not the exceptions, which continued for more than a decade until the military was able to crush such through its savage scorched-earth tactics. Even then armed struggle is a reality in many parts of Myanmar to this very day.

The two largest insurgent factions in Myanmar were the communists, led by the [Communist Party of Burma](#) (CPB), and ethnic Karen insurgents, led by the [Karen National Union](#) (KNU). The KNU favored an independent state, forged out of [Karen State](#) (Kayin State) and [Karenni State](#) (Kayah State), in Outer Myanmar (Lower Burma), administered solely by the Karen people.

Even the Rakhine Buddhist separatists were not behind in such insurgency movements, nor were the Chins. Rakhine insurgent groups, such as the [Arakan Army](#) (AA) and [Arakan Liberation Army](#) (ALA) continue to have hostilities towards the government, though major violence has been rare since political reforms and peace talks. The AA, founded in 2009, is currently the largest insurgent group in Rakhine State, with an estimated 1,500–2,500 fighters active in the region. Its goal is an independent Rakhine state.

In the early 1960s, the Burmese government refused to adopt a federal system, to the dismay of insurgent groups such as the CPB, who proposed adopting the system during peace talks. By the early 1980s, politically motivated armed insurgencies (like the communist) had largely disappeared, while ethnic-based insurgencies continued.

The Panglong Agreement of 1947 offered the Shan the option to split from Myanmar a decade after independence if they were unsatisfied with the central government. This was, however, not honored following Aung San's assassination. Instead, what they got are – severe mistreatment, torture, robbery, rape, unlawful arrest, and massacre. As a result, an armed resistance movement, led by Sao Noi and Saw Yanna, was launched in May of 1958 in the Shan State. One of the largest Shan insurgent groups in Myanmar is the [Shan State Army – South](#) (SSA-S), which has some 6,000 to 8,000 soldiers, with its bases along the Myanmar-Thailand border.

In October 2012, the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar included the [Kachin conflict](#), between the Christian [Kachin Independence Army](#) (KIA) and the government; a series of genocidal pogroms directed against the [Rohingya](#) Muslims that were participated by Rakhine Buddhists, and aided by the government and non-government groups in [Rakhine State](#), including the Buddhist clergy; and a conflict between the [Shan](#), [Lahu](#), and [Karen](#) minority groups, and the government in the eastern half of the country. Armed conflict between [ethnic Chinese rebels](#) and the [Myanmar Armed Forces](#) have resulted in the [Kokang offensive](#) in February 2015. The conflict had forced 40,000 to 50,000 civilians to flee their homes and seek shelter on the Chinese side of the border.

In 2012 alone, fighting between the KIA and the government resulted in around 2,500 casualties (both civilian and military); 211 of whom were government soldiers. The violence resulted in the displacement of nearly 100,000 civilians, and the complete or partial abandonment of 364 villages.

Several insurgent groups have negotiated ceasefires and peace agreements with successive governments, which until [political reforms](#) that begun in 2011 and ended in 2015, had largely fallen apart. That reality marshaled in the Second Panglong-type conference held in Naypyidaw this August to end the decades-long insurgencies in many of the ethnic areas.

As can be seen from the brief review above, civil/genocidal wars have been a constant feature of Myanmar's socio-political landscape since her independence as Union of Burma in 1948. These wars are predominantly struggles for ethnic and sub-national autonomy, with the areas surrounding the ethnically [Bamar](#) central districts of the country serving as the primary geographical setting of conflict.

The Rohingya and other Muslims inside Myanmar had been in the receiving end of annihilation. They have faced dozens of extermination campaigns since 1942. Denied each of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, truly, the Rohingyas of Myanmar remain the most persecuted people in our planet. And yet, until this latest episode of attacks by some disgruntled Rohingya youths for daily dehumanization that their family members face, they have been the most unarmed, passive and peaceful of all the communities that make up the fractured mosaic of Myanmar. This, in spite of the fact, more than 1 in 2 Rohingyas now live a life of a refugee outside Myanmar.

In the last few years alone, they have seen only death and destruction of their folks; desperation has set in, and many have fled the country, while some 150,000 remain internally displaced with no shelters except concentration camps within the Arakan state. Their ID cards were confiscated and they were denied the right to vote; their political parties banned; and not a single Muslim candidate was allowed to contest in the election. Suu Kyi has come to power and refuses to identify them as 'Rohingya'. She even did not invite them into the peace/unity conference in Naypyidaw. In spite of mounting international pressure, the Rohingya continue to be denied the basic rights and means of livelihood; their women continue to be raped by Tatmadaw as weapons of war to bring collective shame upon them and force them out of their ancestral homeland. [As I write, many Rohingya women (ten of which alone are from Anauk Kwin hamlet of U Shin Gya village tract) continue to be gang raped by the Tatmadaw in its latest ethnic cleansing drives.]

The new pogrom inside the Rohingya populated territories of northern Arakan state once again underlines the power the army retains in Myanmar, which is guilty of committing war crimes against an unarmed civilian population. Such brutality against the Rohingya Muslims also unmasks the Buddhist government's double-standards when dealing with non-Buddhists. Army generals continue to run the home ministry, which inflicts the worst form of collective punishment against the Muslims (but not against the Buddhist rebels). This is quite evident when the Rakhine Buddhist extremists of the Arakan Army attacked the military, which it has done 15 times since 28 December, 2015, in which several [soldiers got killed](#), interestingly no such scorched-earth and combing operation to flush them out was undertaken by the military.

Suu Kyi can start the process of reintegration of the Rohingya, by following the footsteps of her wise father. She can immediately withdraw the military from Rohingya towns and villages where they are committing war crimes. She can restore the citizenship rights of the Rohingya on the basis of the First Schedule to the Burma Independence Act 1947. That Act clearly stated that the Rohingya and all other Muslims who were British subjects – who were born in Burma or whose father or paternal grandfather was born in Burma – were considered citizens of the Union of Burma. Under Annex A of the Aung San-Attlee Agreement, 27 January, 1947, Rohingyas were citizens of the Union of Burma: "A Burma National is defined for the purposes of eligibility to vote and to stand as a candidate of the forthcoming elections as a British subject or the subject of an Indian State who was born in Burma and resided there for a total period of not less than eight years in the ten years immediately preceding either 1st January, 1942 or 1st January, 1947."

The Nu-Attlee Agreement (1947), signed between Prime Minister U Nu (Burma) and Prime Minister Clement Attlee (Great Britain) on Oct. 17, 1947 on transferring power to Burma was very important as to the determination of the citizenship status of the peoples and races in Burma. Article 3 of the Agreement states: "***Any person who at the date of the coming into force of the present Treaty is, by virtue of the Constitution of the Union of Burma, a citizen thereof and who is, or by virtue of a subsequent election is deemed to be, also a British subject, may make a declaration of alienage in the manner prescribed by the law of the Union, and thereupon shall cease to be a citizen of the Union.***"

Human rights group, including the Faith Movement, have called for: restoration of human rights including citizenship rights for their Rohingya people; immediate relocation of the Rohingyas from the IDP camps back to their places of origin (before the genocidal campaigns ensued in 2012), return of their confiscated assets, repeal of the 1982 Citizenship Law so that they can be treated as equals in Myanmar, compensation to IDP detainees towards rebuilding their burnt/destroyed homes and places of worship, a cessation of military offensives against all ethnic groups of Myanmar, and prevention of all kinds of religious persecution including hate speeches by Buddhist extremists. They have also demanded international investigation and intervention to stop Rohingya Genocide, and have sought their protection.

So, if Suu Kyi's government is serious about bringing peace in Arakan, it should seriously fulfil such legitimate demands for the greater good of all. After all, in all fairness, none of these demands is irrational and within the capacity of the Myanmar government to implement. If she continues to overlook such demands and follows the dictates of her savage Tatmadaw that has been committing war crimes in its conflicts against the ethnic minorities, I am afraid, it won't be too long that Myanmar would divide into many states, and that many of the top generals and ministers could be charged with committing crimes against humanity in the International Criminal Court. The international community may also find it necessary to demand that the Mayu Frontier Territories (in northern Arakan) be declared a 'safe' territory for the persecuted Rohingyas of Myanmar so that they could live there with honor, dignity, safety and security.

Let Suu Kyi do the math and figure out what is better for her fractured and artificial country. The sooner the better!

#### **Dr. Habib Siddiqui**



Dr. Habib Siddiqui

"I have a long history of a peaceful activist in my effort towards improving human rights and creating a just and equitable world. I have written extensively in the arena of humanity, global politics, social conscience and human rights since 1980, many of which have appeared in newspapers, magazines, journals and the Internet. I have tirelessly championed the cause of the disadvantaged, the poor and the forgotten here in Americas and abroad. Commenting on my articles, others have said, "His meticulously researched essays and articles combined with real human dimensions on the plight of the displaced peoples of Rohingya in Myanmar, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo and Palestine, and American Muslims in the post-9/11 era have made him a singular important intellectual offering a sane voice with counterpoints to the shrill threats of the oppressors and the powerful. He offers a fresh and insightful perspective on a whole generation of a misunderstood and displaced people with little or no voice of their own." I have authored 13

books, 10 of which are now available through the Amazon.com."