

## The Survivors of the Rohingya Genocide



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# The Survivors of the Rohingya Genocide

**An investigation into Myanmar's state-orchestrated murder of thousands of Rohingya Muslims — and the second tragedy unfolding in the refugee camps**



**By** *JASON MOTLAGH > AUGUST 9, 2018*

Rajuma Begum heard the first gunshots at eight in the morning. She was hauling furniture out of her family home in Tula Toli village, a small community of mostly Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, on the western coast of Myanmar. She knew Rohingya had been burned out of three nearby villages in the preceding days, and Rajuma, a slight 20-year-old with somber eyes and a gold nose piercing, had been tracking the smoke plumes from her window, sleepless and on edge. She and her neighbors feared defenseless Tula Toli would be attacked next.

After five decades of military rule nominally came to an end in Myanmar in 2011, ethnic tensions intensified across Rakhine, one of the country's poorest states and the heartland of the Rohingya, a minority long oppressed by the country's Buddhist majority. A ruthless military crackdown had left scores dead in October 2016, and forced 87,000 Rohingya to seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. Tula Toli, a sleepy farming community nestled in a fertile river bend, had been spared much of the bloodshed, until late last summer. Openly hostile Rakhine villagers had begun stealing Rohingya crops and livestock at will, while security forces came to loot Muslim homes and tear down farm fences. The Rohingya could not walk to the nearest market without paying bribes

to Rakhine officials, and if found congregating in groups or outside after curfew, Rohingya were beaten up. “We couldn’t eat because of the tension,” Rajuma says.

Rajuma had spent her entire life in the village. Working in the rice-paddy fields, she caught the eye of Rafiq, a shy neighbor with a boyish grin. They flirted with each other in passing, until one day Rafiq told his parents he wanted to marry Rajuma. His parents arranged the marriage on their son’s behalf, offering five grams of gold to seal the deal. The wedding was low-key, given the prohibition against large Rohingya gatherings. Rajuma was soon pregnant with their first son, Sadiq, and the young family moved in with her parents.

She now found herself trying to save what heirlooms she could as she prepared to flee her home. Five days earlier, on August 25th, 2017, small groups of Rohingya militants had stormed police outposts, killing 12 officers. The army was all too ready. A massive, scorched-earth military operation backed by helicopters and civilian death squads razed dozens of Rohingya -hamlets. As panic swept Tula Toli, the village chairman, an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist, called an emergency meeting to assure Rohingya elders there was no need to flee if the army came. “Nothing will happen to you,” he pledged. A peace agreement was signed for good measure.



***Rajuma (center) holding her infant son, Sadiq, five months before the attack on Tula Toli last August. Photo: Courtesy of Mohammad Rafiq***

But then the attack on Tula Toli began. Sheets of incoming bullets smacked the thatch homes “like raindrops,” Rajuma recalls. They were followed by rocket-propelled-grenade blasts that set the houses ablaze. Rajuma and other eyewitnesses say soldiers emerged from the tree line, firing scattershot at fleeing villagers. They were trailed by Rakhine and other non-Muslim conscripts armed with homemade muskets, machetes and farm tools. Rajuma scooped up Sadiq and ran with her mother and younger brother down to the riverbank, where scores of other Rohingya had gathered. As the attackers closed in, Rajuma and the others found themselves trapped.

Desperate Rohingya dived into the fast-running current. Some managed to swim across hanging onto banana-tree branches, but many families were gunned down where they stood. Eyewitnesses say stray children caught by the attackers were beheaded and tossed into the river. Rajuma says she and about 200 other women and children were forced to kneel in the shallows while uniformed soldiers carried out systematic murder. Over the next three hours, the survivors say, males were lined up and shot, two or three times apiece. The militia then combed over the bodies and finished them off with blades.

Rajuma scanned the beach for her husband. She had not seen him since dawn, and worried that he might be dead. Her mother suddenly broke down; she knew they would die next. Fearing the soldiers would notice them, Rajuma tried to quiet her, but then Rajuma’s 10-year-old brother, Musa Ali, began to cry and ask for forgiveness. Terrified, the boy made a run for it. He took several

steps before he was cut down by gunshots. “At that moment I felt like I was already dead,” Rajuma recalls. “I think I’m only alive to tell the world about what I saw.”

Since last august, Rajuma and some 700,000 Rohingya have flooded across the border into Bangladesh with harrowingly consistent stories of murder and rape. Authorities in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, barred investigators and journalists from entering northern Rakhine to independently verify refugees’ accounts, but when I arrived in the Bangladesh camps last September, just weeks after the Tula Toli massacre, the physical evidence of genocide against civilians was overwhelming: gaping gunshot wounds, women with shredded limbs, a newborn with a bullet graze on his head, and countless orphans, dazed and hungry from breathless journeys and the raw terror of what they had seen. From the edge of the camps, I could see smoke curdling on the horizon as Burmese soldiers razed more villages to the ground. It was the most rapid human exodus since the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

“The pages of my notebook are stained with my own tears,” says Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch’s hard-boiled emergencies director. A veteran of the Balkans and Iraq, he had just finished interviewing a Tula Toli survivor who says her six children were murdered in front of her before she was gang-raped and left for dead in a burning home. “We’re not talking about an ordinary war,” he says. “These are unarmed villagers who are being attacked by an army that is murdering them.” For a moment, he chokes up. “We are faced with an entire people being forced out of Burma.”

In late 2010, the ruling Myanmar military began enacting a series of democratic reforms after decades as a pariah state with only China for an ally. President Obama responded by later scrapping economic sanctions, calling it “the right thing to do in order to ensure that the people of Burma see the rewards from a new way of doing business, and a new government.” But behind the smokescreen of civilian rule, the military retains enormous power, controlling security forces, police and key Cabinet positions. Despite damning evidence of atrocities, military officials maintain they were carrying out “clearance operations” against “extremist terrorists” fighting for an Islamic state in Rakhine. Denying all responsibility, they claim “Bengali invaders” – official-speak for all Rohingya Muslims – were burning down their own villages to gain international sympathy.

Such nonsense could be expected from a hermetic military that crushed dissent and vilified ethnic and religious minorities over a half-century of brutal dictatorship. More shocking was how their bigoted doctrine was parroted by Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning human-rights icon and de facto leader of Myanmar, known to her admirers as “The Lady.” When she finally broke her silence, on Facebook, nearly two weeks after the 2017 attacks began, it was in cold defense of the same military that kept her under house arrest for 15 years when she was the country’s leading dissident. Suu Kyi blamed “terrorists” for promoting a “huge iceberg of misinformation” about the violence engulfing Rakhine. She made no mention of the Rohingya exodus.

In the wake of the violence and refugee crisis in 2016, the U.N. floated the “very likely” possibility of crimes against humanity. Yet nearly every Western diplomatic mission, including the U.N. leadership in Myanmar, opposed an investigation. Off the record, many diplomats expressed disgust over the military’s crimes, but publicly they played with words. “The government wants the world to believe [the army’s] ‘clearance operations’ were a spontaneous response to a terrorist attack,” says Matthew Smith, chief executive officer of the Bangkok-based human-rights group Fortify Rights. “The reality is the authorities were preparing for months to destroy Rohingya – or for years, some would argue.”

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The Rohingya have been called the “world’s most persecuted minority.” An estimated 1.1 million lived in Myanmar before the crisis, the descendants of Muslim traders who settled in the region more than 1,000 years ago. Though many Rohingya families have documentation going back generations, they are denied citizenship and basic rights. “The idea of the malevolent Rohingya has become such a staple of the public imagination in Myanmar,” says Francis Wade, author of *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim ‘Other.’* Rohingya face onerous marriage restrictions, cannot vote or pursue higher education, and their movement is limited under apartheid-like conditions. Two months after the country’s first modern elections, in June 2012, anti-Muslim pogroms broke out in Rakhine following the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman; 140,000 Rohingya were forced into open-air concentration camps. Squeezed between barbed wire and the sea, tens of thousands fled by boats to Thailand and Malaysia, only to become ensnared by traffickers and tortured for ransom. In May 2015, the crisis made global headlines when boats packed with starving Rohingya were stranded at sea. For weeks, no country would accept them. “That’s the unique burden stateless people carry,” says Wade. “Even those nations most vociferously condemning the military know it’s not their problem.”



That same year, a report by Yale Law School found “strong evidence” the Rohingya were facing genocide. Established in the wake of the Holocaust, the Genocide Convention created a legal definition of genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.”

Intent to destroy, however, is hard to prove, says James Silk, the law professor who supervised the Yale study. “You’re rarely going to have the situation of Nazi Germany where they leave behind documents and plans,” he says. But based on the regime’s long-standing policies to restrict and weaken the group, a pattern of anti-Rohingya rhetoric from government officials and Buddhist leaders, and collaboration between state security forces and anti-Muslim vigilantes, the report concluded it was “difficult to avoid inferring an intent to destroy Rohingya.”

At the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, Rolling Stone conducted interviews with dozens of Rohingya, including 15 survivors from Tula Toli, all of whom testify to a deliberate campaign of eradication. Among them: a former Myanmar army officer whose extraordinary eyewitness account gives more proof the massacre was preplanned.

Further, a July report by Fortify Rights reveals that wide-ranging preparations were made by Myanmar authorities months in advance of the August 2017 crackdown, indicating it was not a spontaneous response to an attack but part of a premeditated plan to wipe out the Rohingya. In late 2016, the military began arming and training the civilian death squads that would carry out mass killings; systematically confiscating sharp and blunt objects from Rohingya households that could be used for self-defense; blocking food aid in order to weaken the Rohingya population; and increasing troop levels in areas where the worst atrocities would take place.



***Rajuma at a refugee camp in Bangladesh. “I think I’m only alive to tell the world about what I saw,” she says. Photo: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

“When we connect the dots, it paints a sinister picture,” says Smith of Fortify Rights. “This is probably the strongest indication yet of an intent to destroy Rohingya.”

By 11 a.m., the shooting in Tula Toli had ceased. All the Rohingya men were either dead or running for their lives. Out of the monsoon clouds, a red military helicopter landed on a small plateau at the edge of the village. Nearby, Nazmul Islam was being held prisoner by border police in a guard post overlooking the village. He had watched and listened throughout the morning as soldiers and vigilantes slaughtered his friends and neighbors.

In calmer times, Islam, 69, was regarded as a curiosity by both Rakhine and Rohingya residents of Tula Toli. An ethnic Bamar with Asiatic features, wiry limbs and a faded tattoo of a fighting peacock on his wrist, he had retired to the village with his Rakhine wife after 19 years in the Myanmar army. With a six-acre plot of land, water buffaloes and cows, he was comfortable. Yet he began to sympathize with his Rohingya neighbors. After years of studying the Koran, he converted and

changed his name. His wife demanded a divorce and took him to court. He lost all his property and custody of the children.

Islam, a military veteran and card-carrying citizen of Myanmar, was forced to move to the Rohingya side of Tula Toli. He slept on the floor of a madrasa and supported himself by teaching Burmese to Rohingya students. Then he met Marbiyar, a spunky Rohingya woman who cleaned the premises. Her husband had abandoned her with an infant child, and she was less than half Islam’s age, but he was smitten. “In true love,” he says, flashing a smile, “there is no age difference.” The couple got married, even though state authorities refused to grant them permission.

Islam's easygoing nature won him both Muslim and Buddhist friends. More important, he was literate, and his side hustle translating government documents made him useful to both communities. On the afternoon of August 27th, three days before the military attacked Tula Toli, Islam had been summoned to a police outpost on the Rakhine side of the village at the behest of Aung Ko Sing, the Rak-hine chairman. As Islam approached, two armed officers seized him and told him not to ask questions.

"Don't try to escape, or we will kill you," he recalls a Rakhine village elder warning him. "No one will feel sorry for you; we will just think a *kalargot* killed," a racial slur used to describe darker-skinned Muslims. Islam was stunned; the man, whom he'd known for years, had never acted so hostile before. Looking back, Islam believes he had been extracted from the Rohingya village to save his life before the town was exterminated.



***The physical evidence of atrocities is overwhelming among survivors in the refugee camps. Momtaz Begum (left) was treated for burns to her face and body. Seven-year old Mohammad Shohail was shot in the chest. Photos: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

From the guard post, Islam saw a senior army officer step out of the helicopter to confer with another officer. Their shoulders bore the crimson logo "99," a battle-hardened division redeployed to the area on the pretext of fighting insurgents. Islam heard the junior officer tell Rakhine leaders that 20 volunteers were needed to help dig graves for the Rohingya bodies and to "burn them all." A police officer ordered his men to stay away from the riverbank: "The military will do their work."

Down on the beach, soldiers and non-Muslim militia began digging three large pits. Multiple witnesses tell Rolling Stone the dozens of corpses scattered on the flats were collected and heaved inside on the army soldiers' orders. Rohingya men were forced to help, and then shot and dumped on top. The bodies were doused with fuel and set alight. "The smell of roasting meat, worse than that," says Islam, recalling the foul smoke that drifted across the village. (The military's communications unit, the True News Information Team, did not respond to Rolling Stone's requests for comment.) As the men's bodies burned, the soldiers turned on the women.

Waiting at the edge of the river with baby Sadiq in her lap, Rajuma watched groups of eight to 10 soldiers round up women and young teens and take them into a row of homes, where screams fell into silence. The men walked out alone, and the next group came for Rajuma. Along with four other women, she was pushed toward one of the huts by a pair of soldiers. She says one of them grabbed Sadiq and threw him into a fire pit. Two more infant girls were snatched from the other women and tossed in with him. Rajuma could hear Sadiq's cries as the door slammed behind them. "I couldn't do anything to save him," she says.

Another 10 soldiers entered the room. They ordered Rajuma to give up her gold jewelry and money stashed in her bra. She refused, and a rifle butt to the head knocked her unconscious. "They raped us any way they pleased, with the intention of killing us after," she says. "If they don't feel shame to do these crimes, then why should we be shy to tell the whole world?"

Hours later, as the sun set, Rajuma, bloody and in shock, woke to a burning sensation: The house was on fire. Her head, ribs and groin throbbed in pain, and the women lying beside her were dead. Rajuma threw herself into the door, but it was locked. Crouching down, she says, she punched and kicked her way through a bamboo wall and slipped out the back.

By nightfall, the killers who laid waste to Tula Toli gathered near the guardhouse overlooking the village. Two-thirds of the homes were burned down, and the soldiers were in a loose, festive mood. Islam, who was detained within earshot, says they bragged about burning children alive in front of their mothers, “laughing out loud and telling each other how they took the jewelry and money off the women they raped,” Islam says. For dinner they slaughtered a cow and several goats. Then the drinking started.

Islam stayed awake. “I was afraid they’d kill me if I slept,” he says. A hard rain fell through the night and put the smoldering fires out. In the morning, he saw corpses drifting in the river bend. The soldiers and militiamen shook off their hangovers and set the last tracts of homes ablaze. Not even dogs were spared.



***Mohammad Faysal (right) spent a month hiding in the jungle after losing his arm in an attack on his village. “The scale of this crisis is unimaginable,” one aid worker says. Photo: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

When the job was done, their wrath turned on Islam. “You know that kalars can’t live in our country,” one soldier said. “If you come back to Buddhism, we will take care of you.” Islam explained he had chosen Allah after many years of deep reflection and would rather die than renounce his faith. “Motherfucker, you talk too much,” another soldier shouted, slapping him in the face. He ripped off Islam’s prayer cap and stepped on it.

Meanwhile, Rajuma spent the night wandering in the dark until she ran into some women from the village. No one knew which way to flee, where they might cross paths with keyed-up soldiers or Rak-hine vigilantes and meet their end. So they looked for small clues to guide them out – grains of rice, chilies, scarves that people dropped in flight.

For three days and nights the women pushed through paddy fields and mud-slick hills sluiced with rain. “I couldn’t feel any pain or even notice the blood flowing out of my body,” Rajuma says. Eventually, they fell in with a stream of Rohingya walking toward the Naf River, the western border with Bangladesh. The banks were thronged with frantic people negotiating passage with smugglers. On Saturday morning, as Muslims worldwide celebrated the start of the Eid festival, Rajuma and seven others made the boat crossing and became refugees.

Bangladesh, one of the poorest, most densely populated countries in the world, rallied to handle a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. On the fringes of Kutupalong, a sprawling supercamp already home to some 400,000 Rohingya refugees displaced by previous waves of violence, the latest arrivals were busy clear-cutting hillsides to make new camps. Shacks of bamboo and



tarpaulin tumbled down into ravines choked with waste. In the alleys, loudspeakers crackled with the names of children who were missing parents; on the roadsides, soldiers beat back crowds jostling for aid packages of rice and oil. Several people were trampled to death in the chaos.

Relief workers invariably described the dismal conditions as a public-health “time bomb.” Access to food and clean water was strained by the endless stream of new arrivals; early outbreaks of measles and diphtheria warned of the devastating potential for a cholera epidemic, as NGOs rushed to vaccinate settlements that swelled by the day. “The scale of this crisis is unimaginable,” a Dutch doctor tells me. “We have babies being born in our clinics today, and I’m worried that when I come back 20 years from now they’ll still be living in this camp.”



***Rohingya fleeing across the Naf River to Bangladesh. The crisis made global headlines in 2015 when boats packed with starving Rohingya were stranded at sea. For weeks, no country would accept them. Photo: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

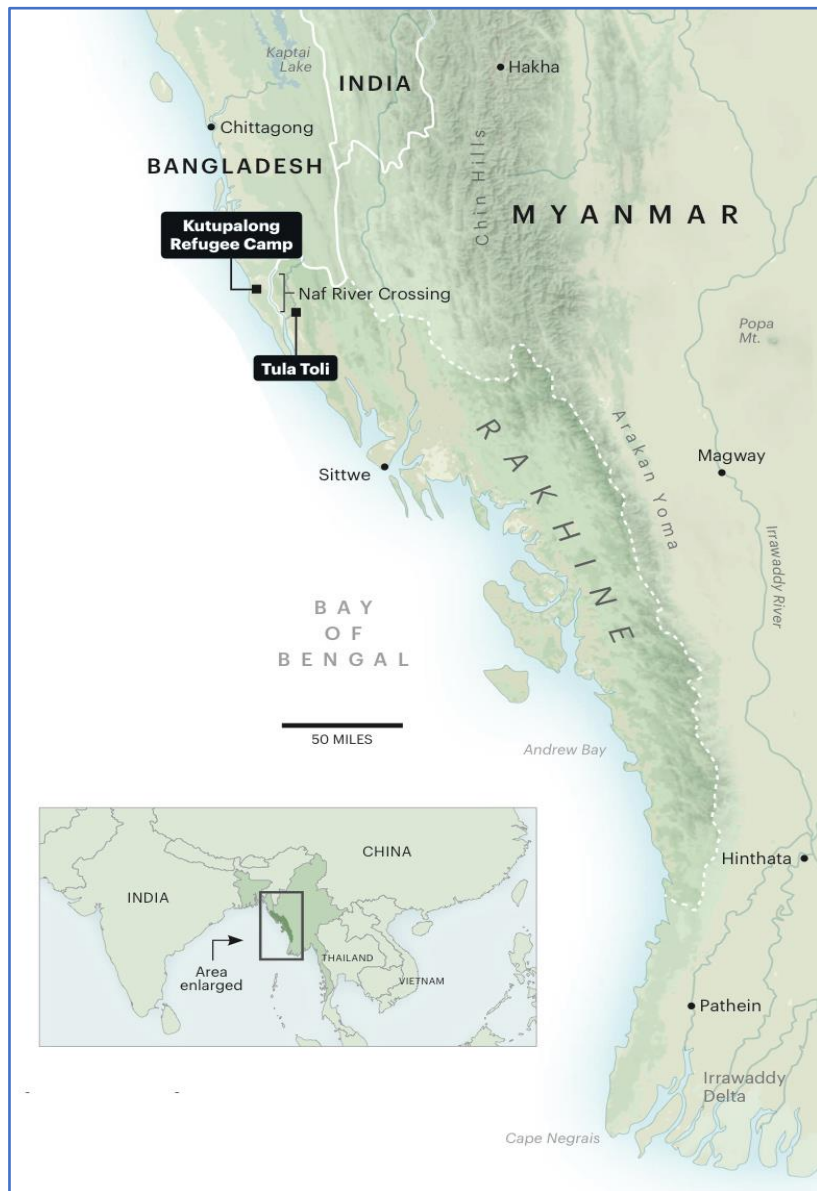
While receiving care at a Doctors Without Borders clinic, Rajuma had an unexpected visitor: her husband, Rafiq. “Rajuma, Rajuma,” he repeated, but she couldn’t answer. Her mouth was bloody, teeth askew. Gashes carved her skull, and her torso was covered with bruises and cuts that had to be stitched up. His firstborn son, Sadiq, was gone.

When army troops had advanced on Tula Toli in a hail of gunfire, Rafiq had dived into the river and thrashed across as rounds snapped over his head. Climbing up a tree for cover, he saw men being executed and groups of women taken inside homes. He was unable to make out their faces, but assumed Rajuma was among them. “After seeing that, I realized no one would be spared,” he says. Rafiq reached Kutupalong in three days and was panhandling by the road when a relative recognized him and directed him to the clinic where he found his wife.

In the overcrowded camp, Rafiq found a small dirt tract on a rise near the main road and gathered some bamboo and plastic sheeting to build a home where he and Rajuma could live when she was discharged. At least 10 neighbors are Tula Toli transplants, including Nazmul Islam. After he endured regular beatings over a month in captivity, the army soldiers had issued him an ultimatum: Convert or die. Islam was prepared to die, but his guards had left him unbound, figuring he was too weak to escape. Two days later, while they were busy cooking a meal, he made his move. “The old man is running,” someone shouted as he dashed

away. Five gunshots missed. Islam tore through the bush and ran to the next village, then the next, finally making his way to Bangladesh. In the camps, he reunited with his wife and their five children, who had fled Tula Toli after Islam's arrest. Now, Islam is sick with fever and bears the scars of daily abuse. He worries his kids will grow up fatherless and depressed in exile. "We don't have any light in our life," he says. "Everything is dark." Five times a day he trudges uphill to a makeshift mosque to say his prayers and collect alms for his medicine. Most of the time, though, he sits in the doorway of his shack, haunted by visions he can't shake. "I saw limitless cruelty," says Islam. "We can cure the wounds on our skin, but we can't cure the injuries in our minds."

Noor Kabir, Tula Toli's village representative, lives in a camp down the road. He shows me a notebook filled with names, ages and village quarters of Rohingya residents he has confirmed killed or missing. "There are 410 people here," he says, drawing a finger down the list. "At least 700 are still missing." He recites names aloud "... Lal Mia - one year, Ahmed Hussain - 85 ..." and riffs memories of the ones he knew well. He keeps adding names to the book. "Now we are stuck here under these plastic roofs," he says. "What can we say about justice?"



**Illustration: Meghan Kelly, The University of Wisconsin Cartography Lab.**

Nearly a year on, Rohingya are still fleeing Rakhine. I returned to Bangladesh in mid-March, the day after a group of several hundred crossed over. They tell me they'd spent months evading authorities and scrounging for food. Several had seen bulldozers razing villages firsthand. Satellite imagery confirms more than 350 hamlets have been destroyed so far across the state. Entire crime scenes, and the remnants of Rohingya culture, are being erased, leaving no chance of a credible autopsy.

But details of hidden crimes keep trickling out. Two Burmese reporters working for Reuters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were arrested in December on bogus charges while investigating the murder of 10 Rohingya men and boys in the village of Inn Din. A Myanmar police officer has since testified that Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were "set up" by police higher-ups, but the pair are still in jail. The whistle-blowing officer is now locked up too.

Doctors Without Borders has estimated that 6,700 Rohingya were killed in the first month of the military's crackdown in Rakhine last fall, including at least 730 children under the age of five. Jarring as this number is, it was a conservative figure extrapolated from a limited sample of refugees in just one area of Bangladesh. It does not include Rohingya in other settlements, or those still mired in Myanmar. (There are reportedly at least 120,000 Rohingya

confined to internment camps in Rakhine State.) Humanitarian groups say the best indications that the actual death toll is far higher are the nearly 40,000 unaccompanied children Bangladesh has counted in its refugee camps.

Beyond harsh words, the U.S. has done almost nothing to penalize the perpetrators. Before he was fired by President Trump, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the Burmese military should be held responsible for "crimes against humanity," but he made no effort to actually ensure any criminal accountability. Punishment has so far amounted to pulling military aid from a few units involved in the violence and sanctioning a single officer, Maj. Gen. Maung Maung Soe, the chief of the army's western command, which encompasses Rakhine State.





***Four-year-old refugee Sami Alter suffers from acute malnutrition. Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, is struggling to handle a public-health “time bomb.” Photo: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

In late June, the European Union and Canada imposed sanctions on seven senior military officers, notably Maj. Gen. Soe and Lt. Gen. Aung Kyaw Zaw, the chief of the Special Operations Bureau for western Myanmar. He commanded Divisions 33 and 99 in Northern Rakhine during the massacre in Tula Toli. To date, no punitive steps have been taken against the army's commander in chief, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. Getting away with what amounted to a slap on the wrist has emboldened the military to ramp up long-running anti-minority campaigns elsewhere in the country, where a bounty of jade, timber and hydropower riches are up for grabs and civilians are in the crosshairs.

Predictably, the U.N. has buried its head in the business of humanitarian relief while offering impotent condemnations. In March, its top human-rights investigator in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said she was “increasingly of the opinion that the events bear the hallmarks of genocide,” the harshest words we’re likely to hear from a diplomat. (Lee has been banned from the country.) In September, a U.N. fact-finding mission is due to report on a yearlong inquiry. Damning evidence of crimes against humanity and genocide are sure to emerge, adding to the overwhelming body of evidence gathered by journalists and human-rights monitors. But then what?

The U.N. Security Council will not refer the matter to the International Criminal Court. China, which sits on the council and remains Myanmar’s unflinching ally and biggest trade partner, has made multibillion-dollar investments all over the country, including in Rakhine, with a new industrial park, oil-and-gas terminal and a deep-water port. A Myanmar state security official put it bluntly back in September: “China is our friend, and we have a similar friendly relationship with Russia, so it will not be possible for that issue to go forward.”

Meanwhile, after years of conflict, as much as 90 percent of the Rohingya population – more than 850,000 people – has been hunted out of Rakhine. Familiar warning signs went ignored, a slow-motion genocide turned fast and furious, and Western powers still can’t agree on a name, much less a penalty. “The U.N. and policymakers around the globe are fully aware that the persecution of the Rohingya will eventually be classified legally as a genocide,” says Azeem Ibrahim, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Policy in Washington and author of *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Hidden Genocide*. “Just like Rwanda, the international community will hem and haw until the removal of the Rohingya from Myanmar has been completed and action is no longer



necessary. We are then likely to see some low-level military commanders carted off to The Hague as scapegoats to be tried for the crimes against humanity of an entire society.”

In a cynical PR stunt, Myanmar officials have dangled the prospect of allowing Rohingya to return, on condition that qualifying refugees agree to renounce all claims on citizenship. Out of an initial batch of 8,032 refugees’ documents handed over by Bangladesh, only 374 were accepted. The U.N. has since played into this farce by signing a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar to pursue the repatriation of Rohingya refugees – without obligating protections for them or accountability for the genocidal campaign.



***A mass grave for a group of Rohingya who drowned while trying to escape Myanmar. Photo: Patrick Brown/Panos Pictures/UNICEF***

“I would rather drink poison than go back to Burma,” says Rajuma, who in addition to her son and brother, lost her parents and two sisters in the attack. Like most Rohingya, she says returning is not an option until their rights and safety can be guaranteed. She grapples with thoughts of suicide. The sight of Bangladeshi soldiers patrolling the road outside sends her into panic.

On a scorching-hot morning, Rajuma swaddles herself in a black nylon burka that has only a slit for her eyes. Trailing Rafiq with a low gaze, she walks past Nazmul Islam’s house to a food-distribution point. For months, the couple have had to subsist on rice and vegetable handouts. But having waited more than an hour, they go home empty-handed.

Back in their airless shack, swatting mosquitoes, Rafiq shares the good news that Rajuma’s loose clothing hides: She is four months pregnant. But he’s worried. “Rajuma is sick five out of 10 days,” he says, adding that she needs better nutrition to deliver a healthy child in a filthy, overcrowded camp where sickness thrives. “She wants meat and fish, but I cannot feed her anything.” The couple’s woes are poised to get worse during the summer monsoon season, which coincides with her due date, and severe flooding threatens to wash out vast swaths of the camp. Rafiq, Rajuma and their next-born may have to move again. “It’s all because we’re Rohingya,” Rajuma says. “For us, there is no place to stand.”

***Jason Motlagh has written for “The Washington Post” and “Time.” This report was supported with a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, where Motlagh is a Fellow***

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