

Northern Rakhine State clashes

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Part of the internal conflict in Myanmar			
Date	9 October 2016 – present (3 years, 9 months, 3 weeks and 4 days)		
Location	Northern Rakhine State, ^[1] Bangladesh–Myanmar border, Southern Chin State (spillovers) ^[2]		
Status	Ongoing		
Belligerents			
 Myanmar	 Arakan Army	 ARSA	
Commanders and leaders			
 Min Aung Hlaing	Twan	Ataullah	
 Soe Tint Naing ^[3]	Mrat	abu	
 Aung Myat Moe ^[4]	Naing ^{[5][6]}	Ammar	
Former:	Nyo	Jununi ^[8]	
 Maung Maung Soe (until 2017)	Twan Awng ^[7]		
 Sein Lwin (until 2017) ^[4]			
Units involved			
 Myanmar Army	Unknown	No specific units	
<div><ul style="list-style-type: none"> 33rd Light Infantry Division^[9] 99th Light Infantry Division^[9]</div>			
 Myanmar Air Force ^[10]			
 Myanmar Navy ^[11]			
 Myanmar Police Force			
<div><ul style="list-style-type: none"> Border Guard Police</div>			

Strength		
15,000–20,000 soldiers ^[12] ~1,000 policemen ^[13]	7,000 ^[14]	~200 ^[a]
Casualties and losses		
109 killed ^[b] 21 wounded ^[c] 100+ captured ^[d]	Unknown	475 killed ^[e]
~600 combatants killed in total ^{[24][31]} 24,000+ civilians killed ^{[32][33][34]} 128,000 internally displaced ^{[35][36]} 950,000+ fled abroad ^[f]		

Violent clashes have been ongoing in the northern part of Myanmar's Rakhine State since October 2016. Insurgent attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) have led to sectarian violence perpetrated by Myanmar's military and the local Buddhist population against predominantly Muslim Rohingya civilians.^{[45][46][47][48]} The conflict has sparked international outcry and was described as an ethnic cleansing by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.^{[48][49]} In August 2017, the situation worsened and hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Myanmar into Bangladesh, with an estimated 500,000 refugees having arrived by 27 September 2017.^{[50][51]} In January 2019, Arakan Army insurgents raided border police posts in Buthidaung Township, joining the conflict and beginning their military campaign in northern Rakhine State against the Burmese military.^[52]

The Muslim Rohingya minority in the region has historically experienced persecution.^{[53][54][55]} Laws such as the 1982 Myanmar nationality law ban Rohingya people from obtaining citizenship, and military operations in 1978, 1991 and 1992 against the Rohingya have led to their displacement throughout Rakhine State.^[56] Sectarian violence between Buddhist Rakhines and Muslim Rohingyas in 2012 and the 2013 have also caused mass displacements.

The current conflict began on 9 October 2016 when ARSA insurgents attacked Burmese border posts along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. In response, Burmese authorities launched "clearance operations" between October 2016 to June 2017, which killed more than 1,000 Rohingya civilians, according to UN officials.^{[53][57]} Following attacks on military outposts by ARSA on 25 August 2017, sectarian violence erupted once again in northern Rakhine State. The Burmese military later claimed that 400 insurgents had died in the clashes that followed.^{[31][58][59]} However, the UN estimates that at least 1,000 people were killed between 25 August and 8 September.^{[60][61]} By September, the violence had resulted in 389,000 Rohingyas fleeing their homes.^[62]

Foreign leaders, including the United Nations Secretary General and other high UN officials, and the United Nations Security Council—while acknowledging the initial attacks by Rohingya insurgents—have strongly criticised the Myanmar government's conduct in the current conflict, calling for the Myanmar government to restrain its forces and factions, and to stop attacking civilians.^[60]

A report published on 27 June 2018 by Amnesty International detailed crimes against humanity perpetrated by Burmese military units both before and after 25 August 2017 ARSA attacks. It also noted that those units were sent to Rakhine State shortly before the attacks took place, suggesting that the crackdown that followed was planned in advance.^[63]

Contents

Background

Timeline

2016

2017

January to August

25 August ARSA attacks

Post-August aftermath and crisis

Late September to December

2018

2019

January Arakan Army attacks

Myanmar Army response and subsequent clashes

Other clashes

2020

Humanitarian crisis

Repatriation

Human rights violations

Killings of civilians

Accusations against Myanmar's security forces

Accusations against ARSA

Arson

Rape

Reactions

Report by the OHCHR

Government restrictions

2019 internet shutdown

Misleading images

International reactions

Advisory Commission on Rakhine State

Notes

References

External links

Background

The Rohingya people are an ethnic minority that mainly live in the northern region of Rakhine State, Myanmar, and have been described as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.^{[64][65][66]} They describe themselves as descendants of Arab traders and other groups who settled in the region many generations ago.^[64] After riots in 2012, academic authors used the term Rohingya to refer to the Muslim community in northern Rakhine. For example, Professor Andrew Selth of Griffith University uses "Rohingya" but states "These are Bengali Muslims who live in Arakan State...most Rohingyas arrived with the British colonialists in the 19th and 20th centuries."^[67] Among the overseas Rohingya community, the term has been gaining

popularity since the 1990s, though a considerable portion of Muslims in northern Rakhine are unfamiliar with the term and prefer to use alternatives.^{[68][69]} Scholars have stated that they have been present in the region since the 15th century.^[70] However, they have been denied citizenship by the government of Myanmar, which describes them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.^[64]

In modern times, the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar dates back to the 1970s.^[71] Since then, Rohingya people have regularly been made the target of persecution by the government and nationalist Buddhists.^[54] The tension between various religious groups in the country had often been exploited by the past military governments of Myanmar.^[64] According to Amnesty International, the Rohingyas have suffered from human rights violations under past military dictatorships since 1978, and many have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh as a result.^[72] In 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had assisted with the repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh, but allegations of human rights abuses in the refugee camps threatened this effort.^[73] In 2015, 140,000 Rohingyas remained in IDP camps after communal riots in 2012.^[74]

Timeline

2016

On 9 October, hundreds of unidentified insurgents attacked three Burmese border posts along Myanmar's border with Bangladesh. According to government officials in the majority Rohingya border town of Maungdaw, the attackers brandished knives, machetes and homemade slingshots that fired metal bolts.^[75] Nine border officers were killed in the attack,^{[76][77][78]} and 48 guns, 6,624 bullets, 47 bayonets and 164 bullet cartridges were looted by the insurgents.^[79] Four Burmese soldiers were also killed two days later.^[80] Government officials in Rakhine State initially blamed the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), an Islamist insurgent group mainly active in the 1980s and 1990s, for the attacks,^[81] but a group calling itself Harakah al-Yaqin (*Faith Movement*) later claimed responsibility.^[82]

Following the attacks in October, the Myanmar Army began "clearance operations"—widely seen as a military crackdown on the Rohingya—in the villages of northern Rakhine State. In the initial operation, dozens of people were killed and many were arrested.^[83] The military enforced a curfew and blocked food aid from the World Food Programme to 80,000 people in Rakhine State.^[84] As the crackdown continued, the casualties increased. Arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killings, gang rapes and looting were reportedly carried out by the military.^{[85][86][65]} Hundreds of Rohingya people had been killed by December 2016, and many had fled Myanmar as refugees to take shelter in the nearby areas of Bangladesh.^{[83][87][54][88]}

The chief of police in Rakhine State, Colonel Sein Lwin, announced on 2 November that his force had begun recruiting non-Rohingya locals for a new branch of "regional police", which would be trained in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, and then sent back to their villages. The stated purpose of these forces was to defend villages against Rohingya insurgents; however, human rights organisations criticised the move, saying the new branch would likely to be used to further the persecution of Rohingya civilians.^{[89][90]}

New clashes began on 13 November, resulting in the deaths of one policeman, one soldier and six insurgents. Burmese police later arrested 36 suspected insurgents in connection to the attacks.^{[78][91][92]} Fighting continued and on the third day of fighting, the death toll rose to 134 (102 insurgents and 32 security forces). The government later announced that 234 people suspected of being linked to the attackers had been arrested.^[24] Some of those arrested were later sentenced to death for their suspected involvement in the attack.^[93]

2017

January to August

Clashes between insurgents and the military continued in 2017. Burmese state media reported on 22 June that three insurgents had been killed by security forces in a raid on an insurgent camp supposedly belonging to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), as part of a two-day "area clearance operation" by the government. Authorities confiscated gunpowder, ski masks and wooden rifles suspected to have been used for training.^{[94][95]}

In February, the United Nations accused Myanmar's military of mass killings and gang rapes, as well as burning down villages over the course of their "clearance operations". It stated that the military's operations had "likely caused hundreds of deaths."^[96] Two senior UN officials working in its two separate agencies in Bangladesh stated that more than 1,000 may have died per testimonies gathered from Rohingyas. Meanwhile, Myanmar's presidential spokesman, Zaw Htay said that per latest reports from military commanders, fewer than 100 people had been killed.^[97] The government of Myanmar denied that there was a systematic campaign of rape, though acknowledges it may have been committed by "individual members of the security forces".^[46]

A police document obtained by Reuters in March listed 423 Rohingyas detained by the police since 9 October 2016, 13 of whom were children, the youngest being ten years old. Two police captains in Maungdaw verified the document and justified the arrests, with one of them saying, "We the police have to arrest those who collaborated with the attackers, children or not, but the court will decide if they are guilty; we are not the ones who decide." Myanmar police also claimed that the children had confessed to their alleged crimes during interrogations, and that they were not beaten or pressured during questioning. The average age of those detained is 34, the youngest is 10, and the oldest is 75.^{[98][99]}

In April the Myanmar Army deployed an additional 1,000 soldiers to Rakhine State, increasing the number of active troops in the region to 2,000.^[100]

Rakhine State police chief Sein Lwin announced on 27 June that security forces were on "high alert" after "masked assailants" killed several local administrators close to the Burmese government in the days prior.^[101] A week later on 4 July, a mob of at least a hundred Rakhine Buddhists in Sittwe attacked seven Rohingya men from Dapaing camp for internally displaced persons with bricks,^[102] killing one and severely injuring another. The Rohingya men were being escorted by police to Sittwe's docks to purchase boats, but were attacked despite armed guards being present nearby.^{[103][104][105]} According to a spokesman for the Burmese Ministry of Home Affairs, an unarmed junior policeman was with the Rohingya men at the time of the attack, but was unable to stop the attackers.^[102] One man was arrested in relation to the attacks on 26 July.^[106]

Bodies of slain locals have been discovered over the course of the conflict; the government has stated that they were victims of Rohingya insurgents. The bodies of three Rohingya locals who had worked closely with the local administration were found in shallow graves in Maungdaw on 21 January. The government suspected that they were murdered by Rohingya insurgents in a reprisal attack.^[107] Three decapitated bodies were found in Rathedaung Township on 31 July. According to a government official, they were murdered by Rohingya insurgents.^[108] The bodies of six ethnic Mro farmers, reportedly killed by Rohingya insurgents, were found in Maungdaw Township on 3 August.^{[109][110][111]}

In mid-August 2017, Bangladesh security forces had stepped up its border patrols, following reports of 1,100 Rohingya migrating into Bangladesh in the past two weeks amid fresh tensions in Rakhine state. After the October 2016 clashes in Myanmar, the refugee flow had slowed until hundreds of more soldiers were deployed recently.^[112]

25 August ARSA attacks

The government announced on 25 August that 71 people (one soldier, one immigration officer, 10 policemen and 59 insurgents) had been killed overnight during coordinated attacks by up to 150 insurgents on 24 police posts and the 552nd Light Infantry Battalion army base in Rakhine State.^{[25][113][114]} The Myanmar Army stated that the attack began at around 1:00 am, when insurgents armed with bombs, light weapons and machetes blew up a bridge. The army further stated that a majority of the attacks occurred around 3:00 am to 4:00 am.^[115]

ARSA claimed they were taking "defensive actions" in 25 different locations and accused government soldiers of raping and killing civilians. The group also claimed that Rathedaung had been under a blockade for more than two weeks, starving the Rohingya, and that the government forces were preparing to do the same in Maungdaw.^[116]

Myanmar's civilian leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, sharply criticised the insurgent Rohingya attacks as an attempt to undermine others' efforts to "build peace and harmony in Rakhine state."^[55] The United Nations condemned the attacks, while calling on all sides to refrain from violence.^[117]

Post-August aftermath and crisis

Following attacks by ARSA on 25 August, Myanmar's armed forces led a crackdown against Rohingyas in Rakhine State. The military referred to the action as "clearance operations",^[118] but critics argued that the targets were Rohingya civilians and that it was an attempt to drive the Rohingya out of Myanmar.^{[119][120][121]}

On 26 August, Myanmar troops allegedly opened fire on Rohingya civilians as they attempted to escape into Bangladesh.^{[121][122]}

The violence resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people in Myanmar's Rakhine state. At least 1,000 have been killed by 7 September, according to Yanghee Lee, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Myanmar. She added that the figure is "very likely an underestimate".^[61] On the same day, Myanmar's armed forces claimed that 400 insurgents had been killed.^{[118][120]} However, Rohingya accounts indicate that most of the dead were non-combatant civilians, including women and children.^{[120][53]}

Rohingya refugees quickly began fleeing Myanmar by the thousands,^{[123][118]} then, within two weeks, by the hundreds of thousands.^{[124][125]} By 12 September, authorities in Bangladesh and aid agencies were reporting 370,000 refugees had fled Myanmar, mostly Rohingya Muslims (about a third of the estimated Rohingya population in Myanmar),^[126] but also hundreds of Hindus and Buddhists.^[127]

Rohingya refugees arrived in Bangladesh, many of whom had injuries such as bullet wounds, and reported fleeing indiscriminate shootings, rapes, torture and other violent acts against Rohingya civilians^{[118][119]} by mobs of Buddhist Rakhine civilians and Myanmar government forces, including upon whole villages, many of which were burnt down^[120] (reportedly some with villagers, even children, confined in the burning structures by their attackers).^[118]

When Human Rights Watch published satellite photos showing villages on fire,^{[128][129]} the Burmese government acknowledged that Rohingya houses were burned, but again insisted (as they did in 2012) that the Rohingya insurgents were burning their own villages.^{[120][118]} However, a group of reporters on a government-guided tour claimed they caught Rakhine civilians torching empty Rohingya houses, and one reporter alleged he was told by a Rakhine civilian that the police had assisted them.^[118]

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said the violence appeared to be "a textbook example of 'ethnic cleansing.'"^[126]

In late August 2017, Bangladesh proposed joint military operations with Myanmar against ARSA.^[130] In September 2017, it accused Myanmar of repeatedly violating its airspace and issued a warning stating that any more "provocative acts" could have "unwarranted consequences". Myanmar spokesman, Zaw Htay, stated Myanmar would check any information Bangladesh provided.^[131]

On 2 September, the 33rd Light Infantry Division of the Myanmar Army and local paramilitaries executed ten villagers in Inn Din who were suspected of being ARSA members.^{[132][133][134][135]}

Starting on 6 September, reports emerged that the Myanmar Army had begun laying landmines near the border with Bangladesh.^[136] Bangladesh said it had photographic evidence of Myanmar laying mines,^[137] and lodged an official complaint.^[136] On 10 September, Amnesty International accused Myanmar's security forces of laying landmines in violation of the landmine ban under international law,^[138] an accusation Myanmar's government denied. The purpose of Myanmar laying mines is believed to be to prevent the Rohingya refugees from returning.^[137] At least three people, including two children, had been injured in landmines as of 10 September.^{[119][138]} Mro people crossing the border into Myanmar have also been injured by the mines.^[139]

A one-month unilateral ceasefire was declared by ARSA on 9 September, in an attempt to allow aid groups and humanitarian workers safe access into northern Rakhine State.^{[140][141][142]} In a statement, the group urged the government to lay down their arms and agree to their ceasefire, which would have been in effect from 10 September until 9 October (the one-year anniversary of the first attacks on Burmese security forces by ARSA). The government rejected the ceasefire, with Zaw Htay, the spokesperson for the State Counsellor's office, stating, "We have no policy to negotiate with terrorists."^{[120][143]}

The Myanmar government reported on 17 September that 176 of 471 Rohingya villages had been abandoned. By then it was reported that 430,000 Rohingyas had fled into neighbouring Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh also announced plans to build shelters for 400,000 refugees and start immunisations, but began restricting the movement of some of the refugees.^{[144][145][146]}

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres urged Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi to use her planned speech to her nation on 19 September to announce a stop to the military offensive, warning that if she did not, "I don't see how this can be reversed in the future".^[145] However, U.S. diplomats—while demanding that "this persecution must stop", attempted to be supportive of Suu Kyi's fragile, new civilian-leader position in a nation still largely ruled by the military.^{[145][144][146][147][148]} Suu Kyi's speech was later criticised by Amnesty International as "a mix of untruths and victim-blaming".^[149] Doubt was also cast on her statement of there being no clashes after 5 September, with satellite imagery examined by Amnesty International appearing to show more than a dozen burned villages and fires since then.^[150]

Late September to December

Myanmar's vice-president Henry Van Thio told the UN on 20 September that Burmese security forces had been instructed to avoid collateral damage and harm to innocent civilians. He also promised that human rights violations would be dealt with "in accordance with strict norms of justice." Thio added that minority groups other than the Rohingya had also fled the violence and that his government was concerned over Rohingyas fleeing despite there being no armed clashes since 5 September.^[151]

Rakhine Chief Minister Nyi Pu and Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Win Myat Aye visited the villages of Nyaung Pin Gyi and Ah Nauk Pyin to deliver aid after reports of Rohingya Muslims being trapped in the latter. An official also stated that those



Members of the Myanmar Police Force patrolling in Maungdaw in September 2017.

trap were guaranteed safe passage by the two ministers, after local Rakhine Buddhists threatened them. Win Myat Aye stated that he had learned of the situation in the villages from international reports and that he and Nyi Pu had assured the Rohingya that they would take action against those intimidating them.^[152]

ARSA stated on 7 October that they would respond to any peace initiatives proposed by Myanmar's government, but added that their one-month unilateral ceasefire was about to end.^[153] Despite the ceasefire ending on 9 October, the government stated that there were no signs of any new attacks as it held inter-faith prayers in a stadium in Yangon to curb animosity.^[154]

Myanmar's military launched an internal probe into the actions of its soldiers during the August clashes.^[155] In November, the military released a report denying all accusations against its security forces. Major General Maung Maung Soe was meanwhile transferred from his post as head of Western Command in Rakhine State in the same month.^[156]

The state-run *Global New Light of Myanmar* stated on 17 November that three trucks were extensively damaged in landmine explosions in Minbya two days earlier. It stated they were targeting army convoys, and added that another landmine exploded near a village later in the day as seven military trucks passed by, injuring a pedestrian. It also separately stated that 19 people had been arrested over the August attacks and charged under the anti-terrorism law.^[157]

While welcoming Pope Francis on 28 November during the second day of his visit to Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi stated that there had been an "erosion of trust and understanding" between the communities of Rakhine State.^[158] The International Committee of the Red Cross stated on 13 December that an estimated 300,000 Rohingya Muslims remained in Rakhine State, 180,000 of whom were displaced in the north.^[159] Human Rights Watch stated on 18 December that it had identified 40 Rohingya villages which had been destroyed in October and November.^[160]

2018

ARSA claimed responsibility for an ambush carried out on a Burmese military convoy on 5 January in the village of Turaing, claiming they were fighting against "Burmese state-sponsored terrorism" against Rohingyas. Six security personnel and a civilian driver were reportedly wounded^{[26][161][162]} by gunfire and homemade land mines.^{[163][164][165]}

In mid-March, Burmese authorities began sponsoring the migration of Rakhine Buddhists from Rakhine State's poorer southern regions to areas in the north that were formerly dominated by Rohingya Muslims. The village of Inn Din, which was the site of a mass execution of Rohingyas, had 250 new Rakhine arrivals from the south by 16 March.^[166] According to Amnesty International, three facilities were being constructed for the security forces at the time, and Rohingyas were forcibly evicted from their village so that the land could be used for a military base. Four undamaged mosques were also reportedly dismantled.^[167] Yanghee Lee stated on 12 March that the government of Myanmar appeared to be deliberately starving the Rohingya to make them flee.^[168]

On 27 June, Amnesty International published a report on the situation in Rakhine State, detailing abuses faced by Rohingyas both before and after the August 2017 attacks. The report noted that the 33rd and 99th Light Infantry Divisions, known for committing abuses in the past, were sent to Rakhine State only weeks before the attacks happened, suggesting that the ensuing military crackdown was planned in advance. Thirteen military officials were also implicated in the report as being the primary sanctioners of the crackdown.^[63]

Clashes in Buthidaung Township and Rathedaung Township between the Arakan Army, an armed group of the ethnic Rakhine people, and Tatmadaw killed four soldiers and an unknown number of Arakan Army insurgents according to Myawady Daily. It also stated that army men with senior ranks were killed, but didn't

provide any details. The clash started on 3 December and continued till 5 December according to Myawady, after it was ambushed during area-clearance operations near the border with Bangladesh. Arakan Army said that the conflict occurred after Tatmadaw entered territory controlled by them.^[169] The clashes intensified by next week, forcing 330 people to flee from Buthidaung.^[170]

Myanmar's military announced in late December that it would resume "clearance operations" in northern Rakhine State after one policeman and three Rakhine Buddhist civilians were found murdered shortly after they were reported missing.^{[22][171]} Two Maramagyi fishermen were also kidnapped and stabbed by six unidentified assailants speaking "Bengali", but they managed to escape their abductors according to Myanmar's commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing.^[172]

Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Buthidaung and Pletwa townships meanwhile experienced clashes between Arakan Army and Tatmadaw throughout December. The Arakan Army accused Tatmadaw of using heavy weapons as well as helicopters in Pletwa, but Zaw Htay rejected usage of helicopters in fighting. Villagers meanwhile accused Tatmadaw of detaining civilians and stated over 2,000 people had fled due to the clashes.^[173]

2019

January Arakan Army attacks

The government-owned *Global New Light of Myanmar* reported on 1 January that 30 insurgents of the Arakan Army had attacked members of the Border Guard Police (BGP) that day in Bathidaung Township's Saytaung village, leaving one policeman gravely wounded. The Arakan Army denied responsibility, but admitted it had clashed with other members of Myanmar's security forces.^[174] On 4 January, around 300 members of the Arakan Army launched pre-dawn attacks on four border police outposts—Kyaung Taung, Nga Myin Taw, Ka Htee La and Kone Myint—in northern Buthidaung Township.^[52] Thirteen members of the Border Guard Police (BGP) were killed and nine others were injured,^{[23][175][176]} whilst 40 firearms and more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition were looted. The Arakan Army later stated that it had captured nine BGP personnel and five civilians, and that three of its fighters were also killed in the attacks.^{[177][27]} Following the attacks, the Office of the President of Myanmar held a high-level meeting on national security in the capital Naypyidaw on 7 January, and instructed the Defense Ministry to increase troop deployments in the areas that were attacked and to use aircraft if necessary.^[178]

Myanmar Army response and subsequent clashes

Myanmar Army soldiers from the 22nd Light Infantry Division, elements of the 66th and 99th Light Infantry Divisions, and battalions from the Western Command of the Tatmadaw were reportedly involved in the subsequent military offensive against the Arakan Army. Clashes were reported in Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Rathedaung and Ponnagyun Townships, located in the northern and central parts of Rakhine State. The Myanmar Army claimed it killed 13 Arakan Army insurgents in military operations between 5 and 16 January.^[179]

Immediately after the initial attacks, the Rakhine State government issued a notice blocking non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, except for the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Food Programme, from travelling to rural areas in these townships affected by the conflict. The fighting prompted 5,000 civilians to flee from their homes and to take shelter in monasteries and communal areas across the region, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.^[180] Civilian casualties,^[181] arbitrary detention of ethnic Rakhine villagers,^[182] looting of homes,^[183] and military blockage of food aid and medical relief were also reported.^[184]

A mine explosion killed two police officers and injured two others in Ponnagyun Township on 27 February, after which the police convoy they were travelling with came under gunfire. The police blamed the attack on Arakan Army.^[185] From September 2018 to February 2019, about four people believed to be informants were killed, leading to suspicion that they were being targeted by Arakan Army and Tatmadaw.^[186]

Around 60 Arakan Army insurgents launched an evening attack on Yoe-ta-yoke Police Station on 9 March. According to a leaked combat report, nine policemen were killed, two were injured, and a dozen weapons, including 10 BA-63 assault rifles, were stolen by the attackers.^[187] On the same day, Arakan Army insurgents managed to conquer the front line commanding post of Rakhine State's Gwa Township-based No. 563 Light Infantry Battalion under the supervision of Light Infantry Division No. 5. According to a press release by the Arakan Army, 11 personnel, including four military engineers, were captured and 16 backhoe excavators, one Toyota car, a dump truck, and 60 mm and 80 mm mortars were confiscated.^[188]

About 400 villagers fled fighting in Mrauk-U Township from 16–17 March. Arakan Army however claimed that the military was staging false battles and firing upon living areas of civilians. The clashes in the town meanwhile had damaged archaeological buildings.^[189] Six civilians were injured on 18 March according to residents of the township during firing. The military claimed that its convoy was ambushed by the Arakan Army.^[190] Residents of the town however said that they indiscriminately targeted civilian areas and didn't clash with any rebels.^[191]

Two police officers and a wife of one of the officers were killed in an attack by 200 members of Arakan Army on a police base in Mrauk U on 9 April. An Arakan Army spokesman however denied any civilians were harmed, claiming the base was being used to store heavy weapons only. Residents meanwhile reported that the military was using warplanes.^[192] During clashes between Arakan Army and Tatmadaw on 21 May killed two Rohingyas of Kyauktaw Township's Alae Gyun village when their home was hit by a shell.^[193] A battle in Minbya Township that started on 2 June left casualties on both sides. Four civilians were also killed and six injured when a shell fell on a monastery of Sapar Htar village the next day.^[194]

The government of Myanmar announced authorisation for the Tatmadaw to use helicopters against insurgents on 7 June.^[195] Battles between Arakan Army and the military near Minya township's Shwegyin village and Ghahtar Taung Dam in Mrauk-U township caused hundreds of villagers to flee in late June.^{[196][197]} Clashes between two sides occurred in Kyauktaw and Rathedaung townships on 8 August, leaving casualties on both sides.^[198]

The Arakan Army attacked a border police post in Nyaungchaung village of Buthidaung township on 26 July, with two policemen and four villagers being wounded in the resulting clashes.^[199] A mine attack on a police convoy by the Arakan Army killed three policemen on 20 August near Pat Kwet village per the Myanmar Police Force.^[200] On 23 August, airplanes were called into action against Arakan Army in Minbya Township. Meanwhile, the clashes since January had left over 100 civilians dead.^[201] On 28 August, the rebels attacked a base of Tatmadaw in Mrauk-U.^[202] A battle between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army saw the latter temporarily capture their artillery base in Myebon Township on 24 September.^[203]

On 26 October, a group of 30 Arakan Army insurgents boarded a civilian ferry and kidnapped 58 off-duty soldiers and policemen.^[28] The next day, three boats carrying the hostages were attacked by government helicopters, sinking two and resulting in the deaths of several insurgents and hostages.^{[28][29]} Fifteen of the hostages were later rescued.^[29] On 3 November, the Arakan Army abducted ten people from a speedboat which included a Member of Parliament belonging to National League for Democracy (NLD) and five Indian workers. An Indian died the next day which the Arakan Army stated was due to fatigue while walking. Everyone were released later except the lawmaker, whom the Arakan Army said was their real target.^[204] The MP was released in January 2020.^[205]

A Rohingya Muslim civilian was killed during firing between Arakan Army and Tatmadaw in Phone Nyo Leik village of Buthidaung township on 6 November 2019. Meanwhile 35 houses of Thayatpyin village were burnt in the shelling.^[206] Nearly 1,700 civilians fled from three townships fearing the army's clearance operations in the next week.^[207] The Arakan Army accused the military of causing the death of NLD's Buthidaung Township chairman Ye Thein after attacking it on 25 December. The Tatmadaw, however, denied that any such clashes took place in Buthidaung and the NLD blamed the Arakan Army for the death.^{[208][209]}

Other clashes

Myanmar government media stated on 20 January that 10 members of ARSA attacked a border guard post near Maungdaw Township's Wet Kyin village on 16 January, leaving six policemen wounded.^[210] Two border guard policemen and an engineer of the Military Engineer Corps were wounded by gunfire near a border guard post in Maungdaw Township according to a Tatmadaw spokesman on 24 January. The spokesman claimed the unidentified attackers fired at them from Bangladesh.^[211] A mine attack on a police vehicle by ARSA on 22 April 2019 injured its driver.^[212]

2020

On 13 February, at least 19 children were wounded due to shelling that struck a school of Khamwe Chaung village in Buthidaung Township. Both the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army blamed each other for the shelling.^[213] On 29 May, the Arakan Army ambushed a border police outpost and killed four policemen in Thazin Myaing village of Rathedaung Township according to the Tatmadaw. The Arakan Army confirmed the attack and stated it was in retaliation for the Tatmadaw attacking their medical facility in Chin State's Paletwa Township earlier. Six policemen and three civilians were also kidnapped, but the civilians were later released.^[214]

The Tatmadaw stated on 23 June that three border guards and a civilian were killed after an ambush by the Arakan Army a day earlier in Rathedaung Township.^[215] Thousands of civilians fled after local governments informed 40 villages of clearance operations in late June, but the Burmese military later stated they will only be carried out in five villages.^[216]

Humanitarian crisis

4,000 non-Muslim villagers were evacuated by security forces in late-August amid ongoing clashes. According to estimates by Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, around 2,000 people crossed into Bangladesh.^[217] The number of displaced non-Muslims later rose to 30,000 in early-September.^[218] According to the United Nations, at least 270,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in just two weeks following renewed violence that began on 25 August 2017.^{[219][61]} Prior to which, two refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh were already home to nearly 34,000 Rohingya refugees.^[220] Some 23,000 others remain internally displaced within Rakhine State.^[221] By late October 2017, around 200 had drowned while trying to cross into Bangladesh on boats since late-August.^[222]



Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh.

In February 2017, the government of Bangladesh announced that it planned to relocate the new refugees and another 232,000 Rohingya refugees already in the country to Bhasan Char, a sedimentary island in the Bay of Bengal.^{[223][224]} The island first appeared around 2007, formed from washed down silt from the Meghna River.^{[223][224]} The nearest inhabited land, Hatiya Island is around 30 kilometres (19 mi) away.^[223] News

agencies quoted a regional official describing the plan as "terrible".^[224] The move has received substantial opposition from a number of quarters. Human rights groups have described the plan as a forced relocation.^{[224][223]} Bangladesh approved a plan on 28 November 2017 to temporarily shelter 100,000 Rohingya on the island.^[225]



Displaced Hindu families at a makeshift camp in Maungdaw.

Hundreds of Hindus who complained of violence in their villages have also fled to Bangladesh.^{[226][227][228]} At least 3,000 of an estimated 8,000 Hindus living in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Sittwe have fled since the start of military operations, some of whom were internally displaced, whilst others fled to Bangladesh. More than 500 Hindus returned to Maungdaw from Sittwe in December 2017.^[229]

From 25 August 2017, when the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) launched a military operation in response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents, to 22 September 2017, satellite images showed that Rohingya villages were still being burned and an estimated 429,000 refugees had fled into Bangladesh^[230] (creating a larger

weekly outflow of refugees than the Rwandan genocide), out of a pre-violence Rohingya population of about 1 million in Rakhine state.^[149]

On 5 October 2017, the Bangladeshi Minister of Disaster Management and Relief Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya announced that the world's largest refugee camp would be built to house Rohingya refugees. Rohingyas settled across the border in 23 camps were to be transferred to one central camp in Cox's Bazar, with all the other camps being closed after the completion of the transfer.^[231] By the end of October 2017, the UN estimated that over 600,000 refugees had fled to Bangladesh since armed clashes resumed two months earlier.^{[232][233][234]}

Around 13,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar from January to September 2018 according to the UNHCR.^[235] In 2018 Myanmar began closing IDP camps for Rohingyas and constructing permanent buildings of refuge in their place. The Rohingyas' movement, however, remained restricted. Aid workers and IDPs stated that even those with national verification cards had their movement restricted.^{[236][237]} About 5,000 civilians in Rakhine State were forced to flee fighting between the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw from early December 2018 to mid-January 2019, per the United Nations.^[238] This number had swelled to more than 20,000 by the start of April 2019.^[239] About 10,000 were displaced from Minbya Township alone from late July to late August.^{[240][241]} According to statistics collected by a local NGO, the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, the number of IDPs displaced by fighting between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army had reached 160,000 by January 2020.^[242]

Repatriation

Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali met with Myanmar officials on 2 October 2017, later stating after their meeting that both countries had agreed on a "joint working group" for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees who had fled to Bangladesh.^[243]

The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding on 23 November 2017 regarding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Rakhine State.^[244] Bangladesh's Foreign Minister stated that a joint working group composed of UNHCR and members of both nations was to be established within three weeks to fix the final terms for the beginning of the process. He also stated that those returning would be kept in temporary camps near their abandoned homes. Under the deal, Myanmar would ensure that they are not kept in the camps for long and are issued identity cards.^[245] The foreign secretaries of both nations met on 19 December to finalise the agreement. Bangladesh's foreign ministry issued a statement saying

that the group would "ensure commencement of repatriation within two months" by developing a timetable for verification of identities and logistics.^[246]

Bangladesh's foreign ministry announced on 15 January 2018 that their government and Myanmar's had bilaterally agreed on a repatriation deal for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which would aim to complete the process of repatriation within two years.^{[247][248]} Win Myat Aye, Myanmar's Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, also announced that his country would begin repatriating Rohingya refugees beginning on 23 January 2018.^{[249][250]} Originally, the government of Myanmar agreed to repatriate only 374 Rohingya refugees out of a list of over 8,000 submitted by their Bangladeshi counterparts on 14 March 2018, citing incomplete paperwork as the reason for the slow process,^{[251][252]} but four days later they announced that a total of 1,100 "verified" Rohingyas from the list would be repatriated.^[253]



Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, protesting against what they view as a dangerous repatriation to Myanmar.

On 6 June 2018, the United Nations and the government of Myanmar signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the repatriation of Rohingya refugees,^[254] the details of which were kept secret until they were leaked online on 29 June 2018.^[255] The agreement was immediately criticised and rejected by Rohingya leaders, who say it does not address the concerns of their community.^{[256][257]} In a September 2018 interview with *Reuters*, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accused Myanmar of fabricating excuses to avoid repatriating the Rohingya. She also said the Rohingya would not be allowed to stay permanently in Bangladesh.^[258] The two countries agreed to begin repatriation from mid-November.^[259] However, most Rohingyas believed it was not safe to return and refused to be repatriated, demanding accountability for abuses against them and guarantees of citizenship.^[260]

Bangladesh's foreign secretary Shahidul Haque told the United Nations Security Council on 28 February 2019 that no Rohingya refugee had agreed to return to Myanmar due to the non-guarantee of a safe and conducive environment. He also said that Bangladesh could not take in any more refugees.^[261]

Human rights violations

A 20-page report by United Nations' investigators stated Tatmadaw was responsible a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya which included mass-murder, sex slavery, kidnappings, deportations and gang rapes. It also blamed the civilian government for helping the military by destroying documents implicating the Tatmadaw, allowing hate speech and not protecting civilians from human rights abuses. The generals named by the report for orchestrating the genocide included Myanmar's commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing, deputy Commander-in-Chief Soe Win, Lt. Gen. Aung Kyaw Zaw, Major General Maung Maung Soe, and Brigadier-General Than Oo.^[262] It also accused ARSA of committing human right abuses.^[263] The UN stated in April 2019 that both the military and the Arakan Army were committing abuses upon civilians since the start of the conflict.^[239]

Myanmar appointed a panel to investigate the alleged abuses in July 2018. It consisted of two non-Myanmarese members – Rosario Manalo, Kenzo Oshima, as well as two Burmese members – Aung Tun Thet and the lawyer Mya Thein.^[264] It submitted a report to the government on 20 January 2020 and stated that though war crimes as well as abuses had taken place, there was no evidence that the military tried to commit a genocide of the Rohingyas.^[265]

Killings of civilians

The Burmese government and Rohingya advocates have both accused the other side of killing civilians. Advocates for the Rohingyas have claimed that many civilians have died in military attacks on villages. The government has accused ARSA of killing civilians, including Hindus and Muslims, some of whom were suspected by ARSA of being government informants.^{[266][267][268]} ARSA in a statement has dismissed government allegations against it as baseless, seeking to present its cause as a defence of Rohingya rights.^[269]

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali has stated that Myanmar's security forces have killed over 3,000 Rohingyas during the 2017 clashes.^[270] Myanmar officials meanwhile have stated that 163 people have been killed and 91 have gone missing in ARSA attacks since 2016.^[271] A Médecins Sans Frontières survey published in December 2017 reported that 6,700 Rohingyas had been killed by shooting and other violence between 25 August and 24 September. The report was based on interviews in late October and early November with refugees regarding questions on numbers and conditions of deaths of their family members.^[272]

Some members of the Hindu community have also fled to Bangladesh, with some blaming soldiers and others blaming Buddhist vigilantes for violence against them while others have accused Rohingya insurgents of attacking them on suspicion of being government spies.^[273] Some of the Hindus who migrated to Bangladesh stated that their villages are also experiencing killings, torture and arson attacks like those of Rohingyas. 86 Hindus were killed by unidentified men in Myanmar according to the refugees and Rana Dasgupta, head of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.^{[226][227][228]}

Accusations against Myanmar's security forces

The Border Guards Bangladesh station chief of the Ghumdum border post in Bangladesh accused Myanmar's military of firing on fleeing Rohingyas on 26 August. An Agence France-Presse reporter counted more than a dozen mortar shells and several heavy machine gun rounds fired by Burmese security forces on fleeing Rohingyas.^[274]

Reports of mass killings of Rohingyas by the military and Buddhist vigilantes in Chut Pyin village near Rathedaung emerged in September 2017. Chris Lewa stated that they had received reports of 130 people being killed in the village. A video provided to ABC News by a human rights monitor purportedly shows the village burning and in another clip of freshly dug earth mound, allegedly graves of those killed.^[275]

In interviews with The Guardian in the same month, Rohingya villagers of Tula Toli accused Myanmar's armed forces of sweeping through the village and murdering scores of people.^[276] Human Rights Watch in December 2017 accused the military of killing several hundred villagers of Tula Toli and burning the bodies of victims in pits to destroy evidence. The report was partly based on interviews with 18 people. HRW also accessed images detailing complete destruction of Tula Toli and nearby Dual Toli while neighbouring non-Muslim villages were unharmed.^[277]

In interviews with Human Rights Watch in October 2017, 14 villagers of Muang Nu and surrounding villages in the Chin Tha Mar village area blamed Myanmar's army of beating, sexually assaulting and killing Rohingya villagers seeking safety in a residential compound on 27 August. Satellite imagery accessed by the group showed near total destruction of Muang Nu and Hpaung Taw Pyin village. Though the group wasn't able to verify the death toll, some interviewees stated there were 100 or more bodies.^{[278][279]}

Myanmar's army discovered a mass-grave containing 10 unidentified bodies in Inn Din village, located 50 kilometres (31 mi) north of Rakhine's capital Sittwe on 18 December. The army stated two days later that a senior officer had been appointed to investigate whether security forces were involved in their killing. Myanmar's commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing stated that a five-member team was involved in the investigation.^[280] The attacks on Rohingyas in the mixed village had been documented by Amnesty in August as well as burning of their homes.^[281]

The military issued details of the investigation team's findings on 10 January 2018, stating that some of the soldiers were involved in extrajudicial killings of 10 Rohingya, who were among the 200 involved in attacking Buddhist villagers and security forces in Inn Din. The statement added that the ten who were arrested, were killed instead of being handed over to the police. It added that action would be taken against ethnic Rakhine villagers and soldiers involved. AFP meanwhile reported that Rohingya refugees from the village claimed that those killed were civilians and not terrorists.^[282] ARSA on 13 January denied that the Rohingyas who were killed were associated with them, claiming they were innocent civilians.^[283] Seven soldiers involved in the killings were sentenced to 10-year prison terms with hard labour.^{[284][285]}

The Associated Press reported on 1 February 2018 that five mass graves of Rohingya civilians had been found around the village of Gu Dar Pyin, and based on the testimonies of survivors and time-stamped cellphone videos, the report claimed they were victims of the Gu Dar Pyin massacre. However, the government of Myanmar denied the report, stating only "terrorists" were killed in self-defense and "carefully buried" by soldiers.^{[286][287]}

On 22 March 2019, seven civilians were killed in shelling on Buthidaung township's Si Taung Gyi village blamed on the Tatmadaw by the villagers as well as the Arakan Army.^[288] Six Rohingya Muslims who were collecting bamboo, were killed and 13 injured upon being fired by a helicopter on 3 April in a village of Bathidaung township according to a local resident and Maungdaw Township's MP. The Tatmadaw however claimed that they were affiliates of the Arakan Army whom they were hunting down after being notified about their presence in the area, while nine insurgents were injured.^[289] Two Rakhine villagers from Pyi Taw Thar of Minbya Township were killed on 23 April 2020. A victim's brother claimed they were shot dead by the military without provocation, however a Tatmadaw spokesman accused them of being Arakan Army insurgents who refused to stop for checking.^[290]

Six civilians were shot dead and eight injured in Kyauk Tan village of Rathedaung Township on 2 May at a school where 275 men had been detained over alleged links with Arakan Army. The military claimed that they had tried to attack them, however this account was disputed by local politicians and witnesses who claimed that the firing was unprovoked.^{[291][292][293]} Firing between Myauk Taung and Marlar Taung villages of Kyauktaw Township on 19 May in revenge for a mine attack on a military convoy, left a civilian dead according to the villagers. Two others were injured in Marlar Taung village due to shelling.^[294] Residents of Minbya Township's Pan Myaung village also accused the army of killing three civilians and injuring four in shelling on 25 August despite there being no insurgents present there.^[295]

The official website of Tatmadaw on 31 August announced investigation into the conduct of soldiers at Gu Dar Pyin saying they disregarded instructions.^[296] It stated in November that court-martial proceedings had begun against soldiers who were involved in "accidents".^[297] In February 2020 it announced opening of investigations into the alleged massacres in Muang Nu and Chut Pyin villages.^[298] Three officers were announced on 30 June to have been convicted for their actions at Gu Dar Pyin, though their crimes weren't revealed to the public.^[299]

Shelling by the army on 2 December killed three civilians and injured six according to residents and a MP of Mrauk U town.^[300] Four Rohingya children were killed in Htaikhtoo Pauk village of Buthidaung township, with five others being injured along with their teacher on 7 January 2020. Both the military and Arakan Army accused each other of planting the mine.^[301]

Three civilians were killed and 30 injured in villages of Mrauk U and Kyauktaw townships due to attacks on 13 March blamed on the army by their residents. The villagers stated that the attacks came in reprisal due to an ambush by the Arakan Army.^[302] On 1 April, five civilians were killed and seen injured in attacks blamed on the military by some residents.^[303]

Eight civilians were killed by shelling on Kyauk Seik village of Ponnagyun Township, blamed on the military by both the villagers and the Arakan Army.^[304] Villagers of Kyauktaw Township accused the Tatmadaw of killing a civilian and injuring 13 others in shooting while targeting rebels.^[305]

A driver working for the World Health Organization was killed in a mine attack while a government health worker was injured in an attack on their vehicle on 20 April; the military and Arakan Army blamed each other for the incidents.^[306] Witnesses reported that the Tatmadaw executed two men on a motorbike in Minbya Township on 22 April, though the military claimed they were insurgents who were shot after they refused to stop.^[307] A mine blast killed 2 Rohingya children and wounded another on 13 May, with both the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw accusing each other.^[308]

Accusations against ARSA

The Myanmar government claimed in a statement that ARSA killed four Muslims, including a village head and a government informant, on 25 August 2017. The next day on 26 August, another Muslim village head and a Hindu child were allegedly killed when ARSA insurgents fired at a monastery. In addition, six Hindus were stated to have been killed when the insurgents attacked a Hindu family.^[268] The Office of Myanmar's State Counsellor also blamed ARSA for the killings of five Daingnets on 26 August^[309] and seven Mro people on 31 August.^[310]

The mass-graves of 28 Hindus were found by Myanmar's security forces on 24 September 2017 near the village of Ye Baw Kya,^[311] with 17 more bodies found on the next day.^[312] Three relatives of the deceased said that masked men marched 100 Hindus away from the village before slitting their throats and pushing them into a hole. The relatives recognised some of the attackers as Rohingya Muslims, who told their victims they should not be in possession of official identity cards, which were issued by the government to Hindus but not to Muslims.^[313] After the discovery of the bodies, the Myanmar government claimed the victims were killed by ARSA insurgents.^{[313][314][315]} An ARSA spokesman denied the allegation that it was behind the killings and accused Buddhist nationalists of spreading lies to divide Hindus and Muslims.^[273]

On 9 November 2017, Myint Khyine, the secretary of the Immigration and Population Department, blamed the deaths of 18 village leaders in the past three months in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, on ARSA. The village leaders helped the department to issue national verification cards to Rohingya villagers.^[316]

On 22 May 2018, Amnesty International released a report based on accounts of witnesses and survivors claiming it had evidence that ARSA rounded up and killed as many as 99 Hindu civilians (53 in Kha Maung Seik and 46 in Ye Bauk Kyar) on 25 August 2017, the same day that ARSA launched a massive attack against Myanmar's security forces. 45 of the victims were found in a mass grave in September 2017.^{[317][318]}

Arson

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has been accused by the State Counsellor's office of committing arson on Buddhist monasteries and local police outposts, killing innocent civilians and planting landmines. ARSA has meanwhile accused the Myanmar Army of using civilians as human shields.^[319]

A number of Rohingya properties were set alight during the violence, with residents blaming security forces while the government blamed Rohingya insurgents, suggesting that they had burnt down their own community's property.^[320] According to the State Counsellor's office,



A burnt down house in a Rohingya village in northern Rakhine State.

insurgents had burnt down 88 homes, more than 100 shops, two mosques and eight religious schools, as well as vehicles in a village.^{[321][267]}

Human Rights Watch in August 2017 said that satellite images showed widespread burning in 10 areas in northern Rakhine. While the causes of the fires could not be determined, the group said that it "compared the locations of these fires with witness statements it has collected and media reports, and found a correlation with some reported incidents where residences have allegedly been deliberately burned."^[322]



A member of Myanmar's Border Guard Police inspects a house burnt down in an arson attack.

Chris Lewa, the director of *The Arakan Project*, has accused Myanmar's security forces of burning village after village in a systematic way while also blaming Rohingya arsonists of burning the Buddhist village of Pyu Ma.^[323] Amnesty International's crisis response director Tirana Hassan said that evidence points to Myanmar security setting northern Rakhine ablaze. The group also stated that it has credible reports of Rohingya militants burning the homes of ethnic Rakhine and other minorities.^[324]

Human Rights Watch stated on 18 December that 354 villages had been completely or partially destroyed since the clashes that began in August.^[160]

Amnesty International released a report on 11 March 2018, documenting the bulldozing of intact structures in Rohingya villages and the removal of charred homes by security forces to make way for military bases.^{[325][326]}

The Tatmadaw has also been accused of deliberately torching ethnic Rakhine villages during their conflict with Arakan Army. These include Ooyinthar village of Buthidaung, Kyaukmaw Paik Seik village of Myebon and Amyet Taung in Rathedaung, whose destruction was blamed on the army by their residents.^{[327][328][329]} During a press conference held on 30 March 2020, residents of various villages accused the army of deliberately bombing and burning around 150 homes in mid-March.^[330]

On 26 May Human Rights Watch called for an unbiased investigation into the burning of 200 buildings in Let Kyar, a deserted ethnic Rakhine village located in Mrauk U Township, which occurred on 16 May. Villagers in nearby Bu Ywat Ma Nyo had stated they heard gunshots and witnessed the Tatmadaw entering the village around the time the buildings were burnt. The military had stated earlier that it came into conflict with Arakan Army insurgents and blamed them for burning the village, though the latter denied it.^[331]

Rape

Myanmar security forces have reportedly raped Rohingya women during the violence. In February 2017, the UN's Human Rights Office published a report accused the army and police forces in Myanmar of committing gang rapes against Rohingya women.^{[332][46]} Systematic rape of Rohingya women has also been reported by Amnesty International,^[333] Human Rights Watch,^[334] and other NGOs. Reuters,^[335] IRIN,^[336] NPR,^[337] The Associated Press^[338] and the Myanmar Times^[339] have all published reports of rape. Myanmar denies that there is a systematic campaign of rape, though acknowledges it may have been committed by "individual members of the security forces".^[46]

Reports of rape began in October 2016. On 27 October, the Myanmar Times published an article reporting "dozens" of rapes in northern Rakhine state.^{[340][339]} The journalist who wrote that piece was later fired, allegedly due to government pressure.^[339] On 28 October, Reuters interviewed eight women who reported

being raped by soldiers at gun point.^[335] In April 2017, National Public Radio interviewed 12 women from different villages who all reported rape.^[337] IRIN reported instances of rape in May 2017.^[336]

Members of Myanmar's armed forces have been accused of raping civilians before.^[337] In 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi herself said "In the areas of the ethnic nationalities, rape is rife. It is used as a weapon by armed forces to intimidate the ethnic nationalities."^[336] The United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women asked Myanmar on 28 November to provide reports on rapes, sexual violence and deaths of Rohingya women by their security forces and told them that action would be taken against the perpetrators.^[341]

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres released a report on 16 April 2018 regarding conflict-related sexual violence specifically perpetrated by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces). In a United Nations Security Council meeting, human rights activist Razia Sultana told a panel about the sexual violence in the conflict, based on research and interviews with Rohingyas she had conducted. Sultana claimed that there was evidence of soldiers raping more than 300 women and girls in 17 villages in Rakhine State. Hau Do Suan, Myanmar's representative to the United Nations, rejected the claims and stated that the report implicating the military was done based on unverified allegations.^[342]

Reactions

The military crackdown on Rohingya people drew criticism from various quarters. On 30 December 2016, nearly two dozen prominent human rights activists, including Malala Yousafzai, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Richard Branson, called on the United Nations Security Council to intervene and end the "ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" being perpetrated in northern Rakhine State.^[343]

High officials from the United Nations, and international organisations such as the human rights group Amnesty International, have labelled the military crackdown on the Rohingya minority as "crimes against humanity" and "ethnic cleansing", adding that the military had made the civilians a target of "a systematic campaign of violence".^{[88][344][345][64]} Amnesty International's Regional Director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, James Gomez, said on 19 October 2017: "Aung San Suu Kyi today demonstrated that she and her government are still burying their heads in the sand over the horrors unfolding in Rakhine State. At times, her speech amounted to little more than a mix of untruths and victim blaming."^[346]

In August 2017, a government-appointed commission rejected allegations of human rights violations and ethnic cleansing, calling them "exaggerations".^{[347][348]} In September 2017, Desmond Tutu wrote an open letter to Aung San Suu Kyi urging her "to speak out for justice, human rights and the unity of your people".^{[219][61]}

Nobel Laureates Malala^[349] and Bishop Tutu again appealed to Aung San Suu Kyi to intercede on behalf of the Rohingya, and on 6 September 2017 Pope Francis called for an end to "persecution" of the Rohingya.^[55] On 14 September, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, "I think it is important that the global community speak out in support of what we all know the expectation is for the treatment of people regardless of their ethnicity... This violence must stop, this persecution must stop."^[350] Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Theresa May's spokesman announced on 19 September that the country would stop training Myanmar's armed forces until the crisis was resolved.^[351]

Maung Maung Soe, who led the operations in Rakhine in 2017, was sanctioned by the United States according to the Treasury Department. It added that the US had "examined credible evidence of Maung Maung Soe's activities, including allegations against Burmese security forces of extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and arbitrary arrest as well as the widespread burning of villages."^[352]

On 28 September 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council voted to establish an international body to gather evidence of alleged atrocities committed by Myanmar's security forces and prepare files for future independent criminal proceedings.^{[353][354]}

On 18 March 2019, Myanmar set up a military court to investigate alleged abuses.^[355]

Report by the OHCHR

On 11 October 2017, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report titled the *Mission report of OHCHR rapid response mission to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*, which detailed the Burmese military's "systematic process" of driving away hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas from Myanmar. The report noted that prior to the attacks on 25 August 2017 and the military crackdown that ensued, the military pursued a strategy to:^{[356][357]}

- have male Rohingyas between the ages of 15–40 years arrested and/or arbitrarily detained
- have Rohingya political, cultural and religious figures arrested and/or arbitrarily detained
- ensure that access to food, livelihoods and other means of conducting daily activities and life be taken away from Rohingya villagers
- drive out Rohingya villagers en masse through repeated acts of humiliation and violence, such as [the] incitement of [sectarian] hatred, violence and killings
- instill deep and widespread fear and trauma (physical, emotional and psychological) in Rohingyas, through acts of brutality; namely killings, disappearances, torture, and rape (and other forms of sexual violence)

Government restrictions

Access to Rakhine State by journalists and observers has been restricted by the authorities.^[358] Myanmar stated in mid-September that it does not bar aid workers from Rakhine, but authorities on ground might restrict access for security reasons.^[324] Doctors Without Borders urged Myanmar on 18 September to grant international humanitarian organisations unrestricted and independent access to the conflict zone. In a statement, the organisation said that its international staff had not been granted authorisation to visit the health facilities since the end of August, while the national staff was afraid to go work in the region, after Myanmar officials accused NGOs of colluding with ARSA.^[359] In early October 2017, the United Nations denounced the government's refusal of access to Rakhine State, with Mark Lowcock, the head of UN's humanitarian office, stating, "The access we have in northern Rakhine State is unacceptable."^[360]

In June 2017, Myanmar's government refused to grant visas to a UN fact-finding mission appointed in March 2017.^[361] In December 2017, Myanmar banned Yanghee Lee, the United Nation's special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, who was due to visit the country in January 2018. The government stated that her ban was because of "biased and unfair" statements made by her during her visit in July 2017. Lee accused Aung San Suu Kyi of behaving similarly to the military juntas that ruled before her, citing her response to the treatment of Rohingya Muslims. Lee also stated that the decision suggested "something terribly awful" was happening in Rakhine State. The decision by Myanmar was criticised by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.^{[362][363]}

A local newspaper had claimed that three days after two Reuters reporters were arrested on 12 December, five ethnic Rakhine villagers of Inn Din were arrested on suspicion of giving information about what happened in their village to journalists including the two arrested reporters according to some residents.^[281] On 21 December, the UN rejected a report by The Irrawaddy which claimed that the two journalists had passed information to them concerning the violence in Rakhine State. Reuters also denied they worked with the UN

or any other organisation.^[364] The Ministry of Information cited the police as stating that the two were "arrested for possessing important and secret government documents related to Rakhine State and security forces". It added that they "illegally acquired information with the intention to share it with foreign media".^[365] Reuters claimed that they were arrested for investigating a mass grave of Rohingyas near the village of Inn Din.^[366]

Knut Ostby, UN's Acting Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Myanmar, said in August that the UN was only permitted to work in a few villages and the officials often delayed requests to visit parts of Rakhine State.^[367]

2019 internet shutdown

On 21 June 2019, the government of Myanmar authorised the shutdown of internet services in nine townships which include Ponnangyun, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Maruk U, Minbya, and Myebon townships in Rakhine State, as well as Paletwa township in Chin State.^[368] In September 2019, internet restrictions were lifted in five of the nine townships; four in Rakhine State—Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, and Myebon—and Paletwa township in Chin State. However, they were reimposed in February 2020.^[369]

On 22 February 2020, around 100 students gathered in Yangon and demanded an end to the internet shutdown. A case was filed by the government of Myanmar against the nine students who organised the protest, citing section 19 of the Peaceful Assembly Law, which outlaws unauthorised assemblies and carries a maximum six-month prison sentence.^{[370][371]}

Misleading images

Misleading images have been used by both sides of the conflict, alongside claims of violence against civilians. Verifying the authenticity of images has become a challenge for researchers, due to media and travel restrictions imposed by Myanmar's government on Rakhine State. In 2016, an OHCHR report stated that it would not use any photograph or video that it had not taken itself.^[372] In August 2017, one of the images shared on Twitter by Mehmet Şimşek, a Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, was of the Rwandan genocide. He later deleted the image and issued a correction.^[373]

In September 2017, Burmese officials shared photos that purportedly showed several Rohingyas setting fire to buildings in their own village. However, journalists later recognised two of the arsonists as Hindus from a nearby school building. The arsonists wore what appeared to be tablecloths on their heads to make themselves "appear Muslim". The Eleven Media Group published an article showing burnt Rohingya homes in Ka Nyin Tan, with government spokesman Zaw Htay tweeting a link to it with the caption "Photos of Bengalis setting fire to their houses!" After the story of the misleading images emerged, Zaw Htay said the government was investigating the matter.^{[374][375]}

On 14 April 2018, Burmese authorities released photos of the "first repatriated Muslim family" receiving "National Verification Cards". Bangladesh's refugee commissioner, Abul Kalam, rejected Myanmar's claims of repatriation, stating that the family never travelled beyond a no-man's land between the two countries.^[376]

In July 2018, the Burmese military's department of public relations published a propaganda book titled "*Myanmar Politics and the Tatmadaw: Part I*", in which it contained photos purportedly showing the illegal immigration of Rohingyas during British rule and violence perpetrated by Rohingya villagers against Rakhine villagers. It was later revealed by Reuters that the photos had been captioned misleadingly; a photo that supposedly showed a Rohingya man with the corpses of slain Rakhine locals was actually a photo taken during the Bangladesh Liberation War of a man recovering the corpses of massacred Bengalis, and a photo

that claimed to show the entry of hundreds of "Bengali intruders" (i.e. Rohingyas) into Rakhine State was in fact an award-winning photo of Hutu refugees taken in 1996. A third photo claiming to show Rohingyas entering Myanmar in a boat was actually of them leaving the country in 2015.^{[377][378]} The publisher, a subsidiary of Myawady Daily, later issued an apology and stated that the photos were incorrectly published in the book.^[379]

International reactions

International condemnation of government and government-supported civilian attacks on Rohingyas and other minorities in the region led to widespread public protests around the world, in countries such as France and Indonesia.^{[380][381][382]}

The State Counsellor of Myanmar, Aung Sun Suu Kyi, has been criticised by the international community for not condemning the violence or the Burmese Army's military response to the crisis.^[120] Aung San Suu Kyi was initially backed by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi; however, the government of India quickly urged "restraint" in the "anti-terrorism" operations.^{[383][384]}

Advisory Commission on Rakhine State

In August 2016, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was invited to head the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which was responsible for addressing human rights violations in the region.^[385] The complete report was published a year later on 25 August – the same day new clashes erupted in the region^[115] – by the Kofi Annan Foundation and accepted by the government of Myanmar in August 2017,^[386] in which it cited 10% of the world's stateless people as having originated from Rakhine State.^[387] One of Kofi Annan's final statements after completing the commission's mandate was this:

We propose a ministerial-level appointment to be made with the sole function of coordinating policy on Rakhine State and ensuring the effective implementation of the Rakhine Advisory Commission's recommendations. The appointee should be supported by a permanent and well-staffed secretariat, which will be an integral part of the Central Committee on Implementation of Peace and Development in Rakhine State and support its work.^[388]

Retaliatory attacks by Myanmar's armed forces and Buddhist mobs ensued, leading to a further escalation in the regional humanitarian crisis.^{[389][390]} Following the deaths of over a thousand civilians in the ensuing violence and the exodus of over 350,000 Rohingya refugees, the office of the President of Myanmar announced on 12 September that it had formed a new 15-member committee to implement the recommendations of the Rakhine Commission.^[390] The President's Office stated that the *Implementation Committee of Rakhine Advisory Committee* was formed to adhere to the recommendations set for improving the security, social affairs and economic development of Myanmar's ethnic Rohingya Muslim minority, improving the sustainability of ethnic villages, removing camps for the displaced and accelerating the citizen verification process for Rohingyas under Myanmar's citizenship laws.^[390]

Notes

a. Myanmar Army estimate in January 2018.^{[15][16]}

b. 54 soldiers,^{[17][18][11][19][20][21]} 54 policemen,^{[22][23][18]} and 1 immigration officer.^{[24][25]}

c. See^{[18][20][23][26]}

d. See^{[27][28][29][30]}

- e. The Myanmar Army claims to have killed only insurgents in their operations; their numbers have not been independently verified.^{[24][31]}
- f. See^{[37][38][39][40][41][42][43][44]}

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