

Militancy in Arakan State

By BERTIL LINTNER 15 December 2016

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*Burma Army troops on patrol in Maungdaw in October after militant attacks on border guard outposts.
Hein Htet / The Irrawaddy*

Ongoing violence in Arakan State has captured the attention of the outside world in a way that no other ethnic conflict in Burma has ever done. But are Muslim communities in the northwestern corner of the state subjected to ethnic cleansing verging on genocide — or is it, as two writers from the International Crisis Group (ICG) suggested in an article in *Time* magazine, and elaborated in a longer report, “the world’s newest Muslim insurgency?” Either way, the events that have unfolded in Arakan State since conflict erupted in June 2012 are a tragedy, and widespread allegations have circulated regarding severe human rights abuses committed by Burma’s security forces during counterinsurgency operations. Satellite images of the area show that entire villages were burned and thousands of people fled to neighboring Bangladesh since militants launched a series of attacks against border police stations on Oct. 9, prompting the Burma Army to intervene.

The militants, who killed nine police officers and captured more than 50 guns from the outposts, were poorly armed, but the manner in which they carried out the attacks showed clear signs of coordination and knowledge of basic military tactics. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that there is more to the conflict than that the Muslims in the northwestern corner of Arakan State—known as the Rohingya—are the most persecuted minority in the world, as they are often described in the international media. Without ignoring the suffering of the local people, evidence is emerging of a more organized, Islamist-inspired militancy in the area — and the army’s ferocious response to it could have far-reaching consequences. “The authorities are playing with fire,” said a diplomat familiar with the issue. “There’s widespread sympathy for the militants in the Muslim world.” Or, as the ICG says, unless properly handled, this could well be the beginning of a new religiously motivated insurgency with outside support.

A central figure behind the scenes in the conflict is said to be a man called Abdus Qadoos Burmi, a Pakistani of Rohingya descent. Based in Karachi, Pakistan, he has appeared in videos that have spread on social media as well as in bulletins issued by his group, *Harkat ul Jihad Islami-Arakan* (HUJI-A), which may be part of a broader network usually transcribed from the name in Arabic as *Harakah al-Yaqin*, or “the Faith Movement”. Qadoos Burmi, who was born in Pakistan to parents from Arakan State, is reported to be closely associated with *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), “the Army of the Righteous” and its political wing, *Jamat ud Dawah* (JuD). Both organizations are banned in Pakistan but continue to operate more or less openly. According to a US diplomatic cable dated as early as Aug. 10, 2009, and made public by Wikileaks, LeT and its “alias” JuD are affiliated with the international terrorist network al-Qaida and have raised funds for its activities from so-called charities in Saudi Arabia.

Shortly after the first bout of violence in June 2012, LeT and JuD initiated a movement called the *Difa-e-Musalman e-Arakan Conference* to highlight the Rohingya issue. In August the same year, two senior JuD operatives, identified by intelligence agencies as Shahid Mahmood and Nadeem Awan, visited Bangladesh to make contact with Rohingya in camps near the Burmese border. Religious and some military-style training is said to have been provided. At the same time, LeT-linked operatives visited the Mae Sot area in Thailand, where training was also provided to potential militants.

Using social media, the Rohingya support network has been busy releasing photos and videos of alleged atrocities committed by the security services in Arakan State. While not denying that atrocities have been carried out, veteran human rights observers are appalled by the dissemination of a flood of fake images coming from the area. Most recently, pictures of a Cambodian child being tortured by a Dutch man and two Cambodian men appeared in the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* claiming that it was a Rohingya toddler being tortured by Burmese soldiers. Pictures of victims of the May 2008 Cyclone Nargis and an earthquake in the Chinese province Sichuan, also in May 2008, have been peddled as evidence of violence against the Rohingya as well. Pictures of Christians laid in an open field and killed by Islamic militants in Nigeria were said to be dead Rohingya. Even a picture of a Muslim man killed in a traffic accident in Thailand was portrayed as a victim of violence in Arakan State.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), which has released genuine pictures of villages that have been burned down in Arakan State and other confirmed reports of abuses, has had to be careful to sort fact from fiction. According to David Mathieson, who has covered human rights abuses for HRW for 15 years, said many photos and videos they had been sent were “crude fakes.” By doing so, some Rohingya-support groups are actually undermining the work of internationally-recognized human rights organizations such as HRW. “One bad set of reporting gives the government ammunition to smear serious rights reporting and discredit professional reports,” said Mathieson. “It also shows that social media can be misused as a platform for transmitting information of complex human rights issues and users should automatically question every report and image instead of immediately posting anguish and invective. Too often people feed off their emotions during crises, and don’t rely on balanced reporting.”

The violence in Arakan State—accurate reports and rumors included—has been the main focus of the international media to the extent that many foreign reporters have equated ethnic conflicts in Burma with the Rohingya issue — while a fiercer and much more serious civil war between government forces and several armed ethnic groups is raging in the north of the country. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1994, has been under attack since June 2011. More than 100,000 people have been internally displaced and are living in makeshift camps in Kachin State while KIA camps and outposts, as well as civilian villages, have been bombed from the air. In central and northern Shan State, fighting is raging between government forces and the KIA, as well as the Palaung, Kokang and Shan rebel forces. Helicopter gunships, attack aircraft and heavy artillery have been used in the heaviest fighting Burma has seen since the 1980s—at the same time the government has announced a “peace process.” Burmese journalists who tell foreign colleagues that they cover the country’s decades-long ethnic conflicts frequently get the response, “ah, so you are writing about the Rohingya!”

It is uncertain whether the conflict in Arakan State will become a full-fledged insurgency like those in the north, and it all depends on what kind of outside support local militants can muster from their foreign allies. So far, militant activities in the Muslim-dominated townships of northwestern Arakan State have not been particularly successful. The first Muslim resistance army in the area was set up on Aug. 20, 1947 — even before Burma's independence from Britain in Jan. 1948 — in Buthidaung Township. The leader, Jafar Hussain *aka* Jafar Kawwal was a local, popular singer who wanted to merge the area with the then newly-proclaimed independent country of Pakistan. Pakistan achieved its independence on Aug. 14, 1947, comprising a western as well as an eastern part, separated by India, which became independent on Aug. 15. The eastern part, formerly the Indian province of East Bengal, broke away in 1971 and became Bangladesh.

The first rebellion spread quickly in Maungdaw, Rathedaung and Buthidaung townships, but when it was clear that Pakistan was not going to accept the insurgents' demands, they began to advocate for local autonomy. Burmese Muslim leaders also disowned the rebels in the western border areas. As early as May 20, 1946, U Razak, a Muslim and one of Burma's national heroes who was assassinated along with Gen Aung San in July of that year, published a warning in the Burmese press to the country's Muslim communities not to show any sympathy towards the then-proposed state of Pakistan. U Razak wanted all Burmese Muslims to be a strong and respected community in the country of their birth, and that has been the stance of Burmese Muslims ever since. Muslim separatism and armed rebellion has always been confined to those townships in what now constitutes Arakan State.

Jafar Hussain, the leader of the rebellion, was assassinated in 1950 and replaced by a man called Cassim. The rebellion petered out in the mid-1950s, especially after a military campaign in 1954 called "Operation Monsoon." In 1961, the last remaining rebels surrendered after an agreement was reached with the government. They were going to get their self-governing area, called the Mayu Frontier Administration.

Those early rebels did not call themselves Rohingya but *mujaheds*. It was not until the late 1950s that the name Rohingya came into use and the government recognized the designation. U Nu, who had resigned as prime minister in 1958 to give way to a military caretaker government headed by Gen Ne Win, wanted to get the Muslim vote when he sought re-election in 1960—and the creation of the Mayu Frontier Administration as well as the recognition of the name Rohingya was part of that campaign.

The origin and meaning of the name Rohingya is uncertain. Support groups often refer to writings by the Scottish geographer, botanist and zoologist Francis Buchanan-Hamilton who in 1799 wrote that a people called "Rooinga" lived in what is now northwestern Arakan State. But it far from certain that those "Rooinga" are the same people as those who today call themselves Rohingya. According to Moshe Yegar, the author of *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, published in Germany in 1972 and still one of the best sources on Burma's Muslim communities, the meaning could be "the compassionate ones" or perhaps a distortion of the words *rwa-haung-ga-kyar*, "tiger from the ancient village" which equals "brave" and was the name given to Muslim soldiers who settled in the area after the Burmese conquest in the 1780s. Until 1784, Arakan was an independent kingdom and the Burmese king Bodawpaya used his Muslim soldiers to conquer the area. If that theory is correct, there is no connection between the "Rooinga" of 1799 and today's Rohingya, who speak the Chittagonian dialect of Bengali. The Muslim soldiers who remained behind in the area soon adopted Burmese names and their descendants speak Burmese or the Arakan dialect, although they have retained their religion.

The area between Chittagong and Sittwe has always been a typical frontier area where the Indian Subcontinent ends and Southeast Asia begins, and there have always been Buddhists and Muslims living on both sides of what is currently the border between Bangladesh and Burma. The Buddhists on the other side speak the Arakan dialect but are called Marma, a term coined by Maung Shwe Prue, the raja of Bohmong, in the late 1940s. Marma is how Arakan people would pronounce Myanmar, as the consonant *ya gaut* is still an "r-sound" in their language, not a softened "y" as in standard Burmese. After Pakistan and Burma gained independence and the border between the two countries became an

international boundary, the question of ethnic identity became important. The Arakan Buddhists in East Pakistan decided that they were Marma and, a decade later, the Muslims in northwestern Arakan, who throughout the British period was categorized as Chittagonians, resurrected the old designation Rohingya and gave it new meaning. But while the Marmas in East Pakistan/Bangladesh became citizens of that country, the Rohingya have not managed to achieve a similar status in the country where they live. Most Arakan and Burmese activists refer to them as “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh,” although most of them settled in the area during British colonial time.

Long-standing frictions between the two communities became severe during the Japanese occupation in the 1940s. The Arakan Buddhists sided with the Japanese and Aung San’s Burma Independence Army while nearly all the Chittagonian Muslims, according to what C.E. Lucas Phillips writes in his book about the war, *The Raiders of Arakan*, “were completely loyal to the British, who protected them from Mugh (Arakan) oppression.” Both communities carried out acts of violence against one another and when the war was over, 50,000 or perhaps as many as 80,000 Chittagonians from Burma fled to East Bengal, where they were interned in camps. They did not return after independence, and many of them continued to West Pakistan, where they settled in and around Karachi. Later in the 1950s, some continued to Sharjah in what is now the United Arab Emirates, marking the beginning of what has become a large exile community from which today’s militants are drawing support.

The 1962 military takeover, which brought Gen Ne Win back to power — now permanently — meant that the Mayu Frontier Administration was abolished and all Rohingya organizations, among them the Rohingya Students’ Union and the Rohingya Youth League, were outlawed. Some of the activists, among them the leader of the student union, Mohammad Jafar Habib, went underground in March 1963 and set up the Rohingya Independence Force (RIF), the first rebel group to use the name Rohingya. In 1974, it became the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), but like the RIF before it, it did not carry out many activities inside Burma. It was based in Chittagong, where it published bulletins, newsletters and booklets about the Rohingya struggle.

International interest in the issue came after the Burmese government in March 1978 launched a campaign code-named Naga Min (“Dragon King”) in Arakan State, ostensibly to “check illegal immigrants.” By June, at least 200,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, causing an international outcry. Eventually, most of them were allowed to return, but thousands found it safer to remain on the Bangladesh side of the border. The immensely wealthy Saudi Arabian charity Rabitat-al-Alam-al-Islami began sending aid to the refugees during the 1978 crisis, and it also built a hospital, a mosque and a madrasa at Ukhia south of Cox’s Bazar.

As a consequence, more militant elements broke away from the RPF in the early 1980s to set up the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). Led by a medical doctor from Arakan State, Muhammad Yunus, it soon became the main and the most militant organization among the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Given its more rigid religious stance, the RSO soon enjoyed support from like-minded groups in the Muslim world. These included the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh and its even more radical youth organization, Islami Chhatra Shibir as well as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, Hizbe-ul Mujahideen in Kashmir and Angkatan Belia Islam sa-Malaysia, the Islamic youth organization in Malaysia. Afghan instructors were seen in RSO camps near Ukhia, while nearly 100 RSO militants went to Afghanistan to undergo training Hizb-e-Islami in the province of Khost.

The rise of the RSO coincided with another Burmese government operation in northwestern Arakan State, which forced people to flee across the border. By April 1992, more than 250,000 Rohingya had taken refuge in Bangladesh and, at that time, Prince Khaled Sultan Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi Arabian contingent in the 1991 Gulf War, visited the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka and recommended a Desert Storm-like (the name of the US-led campaign to drive Iraq out of Kuwait) action against Burma, “just what was done to liberate Kuwait.” That, of course, did not happen and the Burmese government, under pressure from the United Nations, eventually agreed to take most of the refugees back.

The RSO acquired weapons such as automatic rifles, machine guns and even rocket launchers on regional black markets, and, in the early 1990s, Bangladeshi media gave extensive coverage to the rebel build-up near the border. But it soon became clear that it was not only Rohingya who underwent training in the RSO's camps. Many, it turned out, were members of Islami Chhatra Shibir and came from the University of Chittagong, who used the RSO camps as a cover for their own militant activities. The RSO was, in fact, engaged in little or no fighting inside Burma. Videotapes from those camps later showed up with al-Qaida in Kabul, where the US cable TV network CNN obtained them after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The tapes were marked "Burma" in Arabic and were shown worldwide in August 2002. It was assumed that they were shot inside Burma instead of across the border in Ukhia.

There is little doubt that extremist groups in Bangladesh, Pakistan and beyond took advantage of the disenfranchised Rohingya, recruiting them as cannon fodder for al-Qaida in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In an interview with the Karchai-based newspaper *Ummat* on September 28, 1991, Osama bin Laden himself said, "There are areas in all parts of the world where strong *jihadi* forces are present, from Bosnia to Sudan, and from Burma to Kashmir." He was most probably referring to the RSO in Ukhia.

Many of the Rohingya recruits were given the most dangerous tasks in the battlefield, clearing mines and portering. According to intelligence sources, Rohingya recruits were paid 30,000 Bangladeshi taka (US\$525) on joining and then 10,000 taka (US\$175) per month. The families of recruits killed in action were offered 100,000 taka (US\$1,750). Recruits were taken mostly via Nepal to Pakistan, where they were trained and sent on further to military camps in Afghanistan.

But there was also a more moderate faction among the Rohingya in Bangladesh, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), which was set up in 1986, uniting remnants of the old RPF and a handful of defectors from the RSO. It was led by Nurul Islam, a Rangoon-educated lawyer. However, it never had more than a handful of soldiers equipped with old weapons, and based well inside Bangladesh. In 1998, it became the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), maintaining a moderate stance and barely surviving in exile in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

Today, the RSO as well as ARIF/ARNO are more or less defunct after Bangladeshi government drives to assume better control over the border areas. But, as the recent attacks in Arakan State show, it is evident that a new, even more militant generation of Rohingya militants has emerged and the highly publicized attacks in October were not the first attempts to enter Burma with armed personnel. In February and May 2014, militants from across the border carried out deadly attacks on Border Guard Force police in Maungdaw, events that were hardly reported in local media. At least four, some say more, policemen were killed in those attacks.

Training of more militants is being carried out in remote border areas in Bangladesh, and in Pakistan, and funds for the *jihad*, or "holy war" are coming from wealthy financiers in Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries, mainly Qatar. The new groups are also reported to have links with Islamic fundamentalists in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Exact numbers of militants, trained, armed or otherwise, are not known and the names of the groups are unclear and identities of their leaders still a bit of a mystery with most of them using different aliases. It is also not known whether today's militants, as suggested, want to establish an Islamic state in northwestern Arakan State, or are looking only for new havens for operations in the region, including perhaps even India. But it is clear that it is a growing movement that international observers only now are beginning to take seriously. And the ICG might well be right. It could be the beginning of a new Islamic-inspired insurgency in Burma, which could have a significant impact on peace and stability in other countries in the region as well.

Bertil Lintner is a former correspondent with the Far Eastern Economic Review and author of several books on Burma.