

HRW report details persecution of Burma's Rohingya Muslims

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Reports from the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, and from Al Jazeera, have shed further light on the oppressive conditions facing the Rohingya Muslim population in Burma's Rakhine state (also known as Arakan), as well as the communal violence that broke out in June.

The Rohingya are a distinct ethnic group in Burma and neighbouring Bangladesh. They have lived in the area for centuries and are believed to have descended from Arab traders. Both countries treat them as illegal immigrants, deny them citizenship and discriminate against them. In times of rising economic stress and social tension, they become convenient scapegoats for nationalist demagogues.

On June 3, a Buddhist mob pulled 10 Muslims from a bus in the town of Toungop and slaughtered them. Local police and soldiers stood by and watched. The murders were supposedly in retaliation for the rape and killing of a Buddhist woman in nearby Ramri on May 28, even though three Muslim men had been arrested for that crime.

Tensions exploded on June 8 when thousands of Rohingya rioted in Maungdaw after Friday prayers, destroying the property of Arakan Buddhists and killing an unknown number of people. Sectarian violence swept through the state capital of Sittwe and surrounding areas. After Burmese President Thein Sein declared a state of emergency on June 10, the security forces and mobs of Arakan thugs went on a rampage against Rohingya communities. In all, at least 80 people died and 5,000 homes were torched.

An August 1 HRW report, entitled “‘The Government Could Have Stopped This’: Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State,” provided details of the atrocities carried out by both sides in the communal conflict, and by Burmese security forces against the Rohingya.

The HRW press release stated: “Burmese security forces

committed killings, rape, and mass arrests against Rohingya Muslims after failing to protect both them and Arakan Buddhists during deadly sectarian violence in western Burma in June 2012. Government restrictions on humanitarian access to the Rohingya community have left many of the over 100,000 people displaced and in dire need of food, shelter, and medical care.”

One example of the security forces' role in Sittwe occurred on June 12. A Buddhist mob burned down the houses of up to 10,000 Rohingya Muslims in the city's Narzi quarter—the most economically important Muslim area. Police and the anti-riot paramilitary “opened fire on the Rohingya with live ammunition” as they attempted to extinguish fires.

HRW and Amnesty International confirmed that since June, hundreds of Rohingya men and boys had been arrested and held incommunicado. The government denied this, but the HRW reported one case in a southern coastal town, in which 82 fleeing Rohingya were arrested in late June and jailed for a year for violating immigration laws.

HRW said that since June thousands of Rohingya had been pushed back into Burma by the Bangladesh government, in violation of international law. HRW representatives witnessed Rohingya men, women and children pleading for mercy after arriving in Bangladesh, only to be forced back to sea in unseaworthy boats. “It is unknown how many people died in these pushbacks,” a HRW statement noted.

On August 26, HRW called on the Bangladesh government to reverse its order that three international aid groups—Doctors Without Borders, Action Against Hunger and Muslim Aid—cease their assistance to Rohingya in the Cox's Bazaar and surrounding areas.

An Al Jazeera report on August 9 painted a picture of the situation in Sittwe, a city of over 200,000 inhabitants.

“Traditional Muslim neighbourhoods... were deserted, locked up, or living in deep secrecy,” it said. “Most striking was the almost complete absence of the Rohingya population that once made up nearly one-third of the city’s population, and the largest portion of its working class...”

“The Rohingya who worked as the city’s ever-present rickshaw drivers and porters at the jetty and markets are now gone. There are no signs of Muslims at the airport, the boat shuttles that ferry passengers to outlying islands, or even the local buses that run Buthidaung to Maungdaw, two Rohingya-majority (areas).”

The article reported that Muslim residents “say (there) is a state sponsored campaign to segregate the population along ethno-sectarian lines.” The report cited unconfirmed statements by off-duty soldiers that many more military murders had been committed than those reported.

Asia HRW director Brad Adams commented: “Burmese security forces failed to protect the Arakan and Rohingya from each other and then unleashed a campaign of violence and mass roundups against the Rohingya. The government claims it is committed to ending ethnic strife and abuse, but recent events in Arakan State demonstrate that state-sponsored persecution and discrimination persist.”

These remarks reflect the broader campaign by the US and its European allies to pressure the Burma’s military-backed regime to distance itself from China, align more closely with the West and open up to foreign investment. The “human rights” issue—including demands for an end to ethnic conflicts in northern Burma—has been exploited by the US as a convenient means for extracting concessions.

There has, however, been a muted international response to the persecution of the Rohingya, except from governments in Muslim majority countries, seeking to placate public concern at home.

On August 20, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono appointed former Vice President Jusuf Kalla as a special envoy to Burma to show “solidarity with our Rohingya brothers.” A meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on August 23 resolved to take the matter to the UN because of “the continued recourse to violence by the Myanmar [Burmese] authorities against the members of this minority and their refusal to recognise their right to citizenship.”

From Washington, however, there has been little criticism

of the Burmese junta. Full diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored without a hitch. The new US ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell told the *Wall Street Journal* he had been surprised that the violence spread rapidly but added: “I don’t think it affects our view on sanctions.”

The Obama administration has never been concerned about the “human rights” of the Burmese people. Moreover, in the case of the Rohingya, criticism of the Burmese government would risk exposing Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is closely aligned to the West.

Suu Kyi has been silent on the persecution of the Rohingya. Her National League for Democracy (NLD) has the same chauvinist attitude as the government, regarding them as “illegal immigrants.” In her first speech to Burma’s parliament on July 25, she called for rights for ethnic minorities without mentioning the Rohingya, who are not official recognised as one of Burma’s 135 ethnic groups.

To placate international criticism, President Thein Sein announced a commission of inquiry on August 17 into the sectarian violence. The 27-member commission has no Rohingya representatives. Its chairman, Dr Aye Maung, advocates communal segregation. Another commissioner, Ko Ko Gyi, a member of Suu Kyi’s NLD, has called for the deportation of the Rohingya.



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