

Suu Kyi defends military crackdown on Burma's Rohingya Muslims

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Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of government in Burma, has dismissed mounting allegations of killings by the country's military of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state, bordering Bangladesh.

State Counsellor Suu Kyi's office issued a statement on November 19 declaring: "Regarding those incidents, after asking the Tatmadaw [the military] and border guard troops in those regions, it is known the information is absolutely not true."

At every point, Suu Kyi and her government, in which the military hold the key ministries of defence, home affairs and border affairs, have attempted to downplay the size of the military's current operation and its impact on the local population.

The military initiated a crackdown in northern Rakhine state after attacks on three border posts killed nine police and soldiers on October 9. The army command blamed Rohingya militants connected to the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, a loose grouping widely thought to have been defunct since at least 2001.

Aid groups and the media have been largely excluded from the "operational area" declared by the military around the town of Maungdaw, where it says "clearance operations" are being conducted. A brief tour of Maungdaw on November 2 by foreign diplomats and a UN official was described by *Time* as "highly chaperoned."

The editor of the English-language *Myanmar Times*, Fiona MacGregor, was sacked after she wrote an October 27 article on allegations of widespread rape of Rohingya women. She said the management claimed her article breached company policy by damaging "national reconciliation."

An article "A Genocide in the Making" published yesterday by the *Foreign Policy* web site stated: "A

recent escalation in the latest violence has raised the official death toll since the October crackdown to 134, although Rohingya advocacy groups put it at more than 420. Despite Bangladesh's refusal to take refugees, several hundred are believed to have fled to camps there. A number who crossed the Naf River separating the two countries in the middle of November were gunned down mid-river. While a number of security personnel have been killed in skirmishes, the overwhelming majority of deaths have been Rohingya."

The UN has reported that some 30,000 people have been displaced in Rakhine state since October, adding to the more than 100,000 already living in squalid, heavily-guarded internment camps for those displaced in the anti-Rohingya pogroms that began in 2012.

For decades, the military and Buddhist nationalist groups have terrorised and denied the Rohingya the most basic democratic rights—many are deemed second-class citizens or denied citizenship altogether. All are officially regarded as "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh despite many having lived in Burma for generations.

Like the rest of the political establishment, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) is mired in anti-Rohingya chauvinism and opposed to the granting of citizenship and other basic democratic rights. In May 2016, Suu Kyi asked the US ambassador to Burma to refrain from using the word "Rohingya" as it implied recognition of an ethnic and religious group.

Despite media restrictions, there is growing evidence of military atrocities in the north of Rakhine state. The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has issued two reports based on satellite surveillance images that indicate the extent of the army's "clearance" operations. On November 21, its second report found

that a total of 1,250 buildings had been destroyed in five villages by arson.

The HRW evidence has been reinforced by other reports.

Time on November 14 said the army had responded with helicopter gunships when it claimed it was confronted by 500 Rohingya in the village of Gwason armed with “small guns, knives and spears.” The BBC reported at least 25 suspects were killed there on November 13.

A Rohingya man named Salaman told Agence France Presse that he helped bury the bodies of a man and a woman who were shot by soldiers in the village of Doetan. “Soldiers came in to Doetan village in the evening of [November 19] about 5pm. Most of the men from the village ran away because they are afraid of being arrested and tortured. Then they [the soldiers] started shooting and two were killed.”

Presidential spokesman Zaw Htay downplayed the satellite imagery and flatly rejected reports of the two deaths in Doetan. He provided no evidence, insisting only that the government and military have “strongly prohibited any human rights violations, especially against women and children.”

Chris Lewa, an activist with the Arakan Project, told the Voice of America the military operation was creating great hardships. “It’s very brutal and the issue [in] that area is access to displaced people and even non-displaced. And it’s not only the poor, it’s everyone because they can’t access markets and they cannot harvest—this is going to lead to a humanitarian disaster.”

The brutal treatment of the Rohingya has provoked protests in neighbouring countries. The *Nikkei Asian Review* reported that 400 people gathered last Friday outside the Burmese Embassy in Jakarta, and on Saturday several thousand marched through the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka demanding an end to the killing of Rohingya.

Suu Kyi was denounced as a “butcher” according to the report. There were also demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. The Malaysian government called in the Burmese ambassador to issue a warning and express its “concern” over the situation in Rakhine.

At a closed meeting of the UN Security Council on November 17, US Ambassador Samantha Power expressed concern over the situation in the Rakhine and

called for international observers to be allowed into the area. No credibility should be given to such statements as Washington routinely uses “human rights” as a means for pursuing its interests around the world through diplomatic and military interventions.

For decades, the US and its allies have promoted the pro-Western Suu Kyi as Burma’s “democracy icon” and backed her installation in power in April in a de facto coalition with the military. In reality, the military still controls the reins of power, with Suu Kyi acting as its promoter as the regime seeks investment and aid internationally.

By keeping the spotlight on the atrocities in Rakhine, Washington no doubt is seeking to marginalise the Burmese military, consolidate the position of Suu Kyu and the NLD, and further draw Burma into its network of alliances and strategic partnerships in Asia aimed against China.

The fate of the Rohingya people, and the fact that Suu Kyi backs the military’s repression, is of no concern to Washington.



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