

Rohingya killings expose fraud of Burmese “democracy”

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The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva last month adopted a resolution setting up an investigation into serious crimes committed by the Burmese (Myanmar) security forces and nationalist thugs against the country’s Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine state bordering Bangladesh.

UN reports dating back to early February document accounts of mass killings, rapes and the burning of whole villages in military “clearance” operations. These atrocities began last October after attacks on Burmese border posts, allegedly by Rohingya militants, killed nine security force members. Since then over 70,000 Rohingya have fled into Bangladesh taking the total number of refugees there to over 300,000, in addition to 140,000 internally displaced inside Burma.

UN reports indicate the commission of crimes on a mass scale. UN officials have estimated that at least 1,000 people have been killed and unknown numbers, particularly of males aged 17–45, are missing. Over 200 refugees were interviewed in eight separate Bangladesh refugee camps. The destruction of villages has been confirmed by satellite images.

The extent of the operation indicates that a systematic pogrom organised by the military, with the complicity of the government, is underway and ultimately designed to drive all of the one million Rohingya out of Burma.

The resolution was a rotten compromise worked out among the 47 nations on the UNHRC. Calls by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights in Burma, Yanghee Lee, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, as well as 13 international human rights groups, for a Commission of Inquiry (COI), the UN’s highest level of investigation, were rejected.

Instead the UNHRC adopted a proposal from

European Union diplomats for a fact-finding mission, including forensic and sexual violence experts to “urgently” establish facts “with a view to ensuring full accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims.” The resolution is premised on cooperation from the hybrid military-National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the West’s “democratic icon.” The “urgent” investigation will submit an initial report in September and a full report next year.

In her submission of February 24, UN Rapporteur Lee had called for an inquiry to also examine similar military operations in 2012 and 2014, which were largely passed over until the anti-Rohingya drive reached its current intensity.

The aim of the EU diplomats is to cover up the role of Suu Kyi. Lee told journalists last month that the EU leaders wanted to give Suu Kyi more time before a full-scale investigation was launched and initially opposed any inquiry that did not fully involve Burma’s own investigators.

The NLD shares power with the military that exercised a brutal dictatorship over the country for half a century. It took over from military’s United Solidarity and Development Party government last April but key security ministries remain in the hands of the generals.

Both the NLD and the armed forces are steeped in the anti-Rohingya chauvinism that permeates the entire Buddhist Burmese political establishment. The Rohingya, most of whom have been in Burma for generations and have been terrorised and denied citizenship, are officially described as “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh.

The response of the Burmese ruling elite to the March 24 UNHRC resolution has been uniform.

Burma's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, U Htin Lynn, a representative of the foreign ministry that is under Suu Kyi's direct control denounced the resolution prior to its adoption saying: "We will do what needs to be done."

The day after the resolution was passed the foreign affairs ministry stated that Burma "dissociated itself from the resolution as whole" and added "an international fact-finding mission would do more to inflame, rather than resolve the issues at this time."

Suu Kyi, who has previously maintained a stony silence on the Rohingya massacres, explicitly backed the actions of the military in comments to the BBC yesterday. She denied that there was "ethnic cleansing" in Rakhine, and underscored her government's support for the army's operations, stating, "They are free to go in and fight. And of course, that is in the constitution ... Military matters are to be left to the army."

Suu Kyi's comments were in line with those of senior military figures in the government. Army strongman General Min Aung Hlaing, who directly controls the ministries of home affairs, defence and border security, condemned any UN intervention into Burma, stating that the Rohingya were "Bengalis" not one of Burma's nationalities and therefore had no right to remain in Burma.

The arguments at the UNHRC over what type of investigation should take place were not based on any concern for the democratic rights of the Rohingya or any other section of the population. The differences reflected conflicting economic and geo-political interests in Burma.

The installation of the NLD government in April last year was the culmination of a Faustian deal with the generals, sealed in 2011. It was fostered and overseen by Washington under the Obama administration.

The junta needed to get out from under Western sanctions and its economic over-dependence on China. After years of repression, Suu Kyi and the NLD, representing sections of the Burmese elite seeking closer ties and investment from the West, accepted the role of junior partner to the military and provide a "democratic" façade for the hybrid regime.

The arrangement opened up economic opportunities for both sides as Burma was converted into a cheap labour platform and mineral exporter to the West. The

Obama administration prised Burma from dependence on Beijing and established ties with the military as part of its strategy of encircling China.

The EU moved quickly to lift economic sanctions after the deal was sealed, forcing a much faster pace of engagement with the NLD regime than many in Washington planned. International finance circles gushed about Burma being a "new frontier" where abundant untapped natural resources and cheap labour offered big profits.

Burma received \$US9.4 billion in foreign direct investment in 2015–2016 with EU members Britain, the Netherlands and France high on the list, and the US well back at 35th.

China's economic preponderance remains. In 2015–16, Singapore was the greatest contributor with \$4.3 billion but China was second with \$3.3 billion and still Burma's largest trading partner. Burmese and Chinese officials announced this week that they expect a 771-kilometre oil pipeline from Burma's Madaya Island to southern China to begin operation in May.

The US and its EU allies cynically exploit concerns over "human rights" in Burma and elsewhere to advance their geo-political interests. The inquiry into the military's atrocities against the Rohingya minority, while limited at present, is a means of exerting pressure on the regime if it fails to toe the line.



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