

Burmese military steps up brutal crackdown on Rohingya Muslims

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Five thousand Rohingya Muslims and non-Muslim residents have fled into Bangladesh in the past few days after the Burmese (Myanmar) army stepped up its program of torching villages and forcing residents to flee.

The Burmese military (Tatmadaw) waged this violence in the northwestern part of Rakhine state, supposedly in response to small-scale attacks on August 24 by insurgency groups linked with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

In fact, the army began a build-up in the area earlier in the month, with two planeloads of troops arriving in the state capital Sittwe on August 10.

On Saturday, Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye gave an ominous sign of a major expansion of the “clearance operation” that began last October. He announced that 4,000 “ethnic villagers” had been evacuated from the military’s operational area. About 500 arrived in Sittwe on Monday. “Ethnic villagers” refers to Buddhists—the country’s majority religion—and their evacuation cleared the way for more army violence.

The latest wave of refugees arrived in Bangladesh after Burmese troops cracked down on Rakhine state villages, firing machine guns and mortars at residents, even as they ran for their lives.

According to Burmese state officials, Rohingya insurgents used home-made weapons to launch last week’s attacks on 30 police stations and an army base near a village in Rakhine state. Myanmar military forces, backed by Buddhist militias, responded with indiscriminate killing and heavy weaponry. The total death toll climbed up to 102 over the weekend, with nearly 90 Rohingya civilians, branded as “insurgents,” killed by the Burmese military.

Speaking to Reuters by phone on Tuesday, a villager

described the attack, involving shotguns, on three hamlets in the Kyee Kan Pyin village group. Houses were torched. “Everything is on fire. Now I’m in the fields with the people, we’re running away.”

Those fleeing find Bangladesh border patrols waiting to turn them away. By Tuesday, Bangladesh military forces prevented about 1,000 refugees from crossing the border, and captured another 90 who were en route to the nearest refugee camp in Kutupalong.

Bangladeshi military official Mohammad Ali Hossain told Reuters: “We have a zero tolerance policy—no one will be allowed [in].” On Monday, a Bangladesh foreign ministry official told reporters that Bangladesh, to stem the tide of refugees, would offer to work with Burma in cracking down on Rohingya insurgents.

Those who successfully crossed the border remain fearful of evacuation, knowing Bangladesh troops could still seize them after arriving at any refugee camp. Most of the refugees are women, children and the elderly seeking safety.

The Rohingya Muslim civilians were not the only ones to flee. An estimated 1,000 non-Muslim residents either armed themselves or fled to nearby towns, though they receive protection from the Burmese military. Additionally, humanitarian aid workers are considering evacuation as the Myanmar military accuses them of helping insurgents carry out attacks.

Since October, 87,000 Rohingya have fled into Bangladesh, bringing the total number to 400,000. Another 40,000 are in India, which has threatened to deport them back to the war zone.

Early last month, India’s junior interior minister Kiren Rijiju, told parliament the government would deport all the Rohingya. He later declared it was irrelevant that the UN refugee agency issued them identity papers. “We are not a signatory to the [UN]

accord on refugees,” he said. “Anyone who is an illegal migrant will be deported.”

While the military’s persecution of the Rohingya minority is longstanding, it has escalated under the National League of Democracy (NLD) government, headed by State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi.

The campaign is aimed at driving the Rohingya Muslims out of Rakhine state, where they have lived, sometimes for centuries, as a minority. The military has continually terrorized villages in the area, including via murder, rape, pillaging, kidnapping and arson. The Rohingya are falsely branded as illegal immigrants and have no rights as citizens.

Nobel laureate Suu Kyi has defended the military, denouncing international criticism as lies, blocking proposals for limited UN investigations and expanding the army’s powers. The army has near-complete autonomy to conduct whatever actions it sees fit, including the ruthless ethnic cleansing campaign. The generals control the key ministries of defence, interior and border control.

On Friday, after her government declared ARSA a terrorist organization, Suu Kyi commended the police and security forces for “great courage.” She made the absurd claim that the ARSA’s limited and essentially defensive actions against the security forces, were attacks on “those seeking to build peace and harmony in Rakhine state.”

To declare that the army is seeking “peace and harmony” simply underscores the fact that the NLD is thoroughly permeated with Buddhist Burmese chauvinism and functions as a junior partner to the military, which dominated the nation for over five decades. This is the military that has driven 40 percent of the population of 1.1 million Rohingya out of the country and forced another 140,000 into squalid concentration camps inside Burma.

Suu Kyi’s unqualified support for the military’s brutal measures makes clear that the US and its allies backed her not to defend democratic rights in Burma, but to promote their own interests and in particular to curb China’s influence. Once the military shifted away from Beijing and reached a modus vivendi with the US and its “democracy icon,” criticism of its gross abuse of democratic rights has been all but dropped.

The response of the US Embassy on Sunday to the

military operations of the past week is a case in point. It supported the actions of the government and security forces, with full knowledge of the brutality underway, only adding an empty caveat that the operations should be conducted “in a way that protects all innocent civilians.”



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