

Burmese military steps up ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims

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Over the last week, the Burmese (Myanmar) government led by Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi has fully collaborated with the military's "clearance operations" against the Rohingya Muslim population of northwestern Rakhine state.

According to UN officials, since the ethnic cleansing campaign began on August 25, supposedly in response to attacks on security forces, nearly 90,000 Rohingya refugees have fled, driven out by the military's scorched earth policy and widespread killings.

On Monday, another 20,000 refugees were massed on the border with Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government has ordered all refugees be turned back. However, as one border guard told Agence France Presse, the sheer numbers made it impossible to stop the influx. "It's bigger than the last time," he said.

As of Monday, the UN estimated that 87,000 new refugees had fled, bringing the total to 150,000 since October. The previous "clearance" operations that began in October and lasted for five months were in response to earlier, smaller attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

A catastrophic situation is now developing in the refugee camps. The overall numbers in Bangladesh have risen to more than 400,000.

As in October, the military, in league with Burmese nationalist thugs, exploited the ARSA attacks as the pretext for unleashing pre-planned pogroms. The army has been building up its forces in the area since at least early August. Its aim is to completely drive the Rohingya out of Burma, where many families have lived for generations.

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) have backed the military at every step. On Monday, the media revealed that President U Htin Yyaw, who was appointed by Suu Kyi and the NLD,

granted military chief General Min Aung Hlaing's "request" to declare the whole region "a military operational area."

At the border police headquarters in Kyee Kan Pyin, Major Ko Soe said the operational area covered Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships as well as Taungpoletwe and Myinlut sub-townships. U Htin even backdated the decree to August 25, thus legitimising the crimes already carried out.

Major Soe said the president's decision ensured "decisive actions can be taken against terrorist organisations in clearance operations." As of Saturday, 11,700 non-Muslim "ethnic residents" also have been driven out of the area, which has been sealed off to the media and non-government organisations.

The army only admitted the destruction of 2,700 homes after the US-based Human Rights Watch accessed satellite images that showed 10 villages and towns had been torched in Rohingya areas parallel to a 100-kilometre stretch of coastline. HRW said the area was five times larger than that torched by security forces last October to November, when 1,500 dwellings were destroyed.

At a military ceremony last Friday, General Hlaing said 11 police and two soldiers, as well as 16 civilians and officials, had been killed and eight bridges and 2,700 homes had been destroyed. An August 31 army statement said there were 90 clashes between the security forces and the ARSA in late August, in which 370 alleged militants had been killed.

Suu Kyi and the military blame the death and destruction on the primitively-armed militia of ARSA, which announced its existence last October. Burmese security officials claim the group began recruiting six months earlier. The group has been isolated by the Bangladesh government's offer to assist the Burmese

in cracking down on the insurgents.

The NLD and the military are both deeply imbued with anti-Rohingya chauvinism that brands the Rohingya as illegal “Bengali” immigrants. They are treated as non-citizens with no basic democratic rights.

At Friday’s ceremony, General Hlaing denounced the “Bengalis” for having fought with the British military in 1942. This must never happen again, he said, and the army would defend Burmese sovereignty.

Hlaing’s reference to the “Bengalis” in 1942 points to the reactionary roots of Burmese nationalism. Whereas some Muslim Rohingya were recruited by the British colonial authorities into its military forces, a layer of Burmese nationalists collaborated with Japan after it falsely promised to grant independence.

Japan’s colonial regime formed the Burma Independence Army (BIA), which fought the British alongside the Japanese military. Among its recruits were the “Thirty Comrades,” who included Suu Kyi’s father Aung San and Ne Win, who went on to found the Burmese army after the end of World War II. Ne Win led the military dictatorship from 1962 to 1988.

When the BIA forces entered Burma with the Japanese army, they were particularly brutal in attacking ethnic minorities they defined as British collaborators. Many were killed. At one point, the Japanese had to rein in some BIA militias from attacking ethnic groups.

These are the traditions invoked by General Hlaing. He said the Bengali “problem” was “a long-standing one which has become an unfinished job.” The obvious implication is that the time has come to finish the job through brutal ethnic cleansing.

That is exactly what Rohingya refugees describe.

Jalal Ahmed, 60, entered Bangladesh last Friday among a group of 3,000. He told Reuters the army arrived with 200 people and set fire to the whole village. Other specific reports of beheadings and shootings in the fields and villages have been made to the aid agency, Fortify Rights.

Reports to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva last February, based on hundreds of interviews at different refugee centres, provided further evidence. Many Rohingya, particularly adult males aged 17-45, simply disappeared. Satellite images raised the probability of large-scale killings and abuses that constitute crimes against humanity.

UN officials called for an inquiry into the Burmese military’s activities, including in 2012 and 2014, but the Suu Kyi government refused to cooperate.

The scale of the latest “clearance operations” led to formal protests by Malaysia, Turkey and Pakistan. Indonesian President Joko Widodo sent Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to Burma and Bangladesh. There have been demonstrations and protests outside Burmese embassies internationally.

Western nations, however, while critical of the military’s activities, have refused to condemn Suu Kyi and her government. British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, for instance, described her “as one of the most inspiring figures of our age” and urged her to use her “remarkable qualities” to end the violence.

These comments were made, with full knowledge of Suu Kyi’s collaboration with the military pogroms, to obscure the responsibility of her imperialist backers for what is now taking place.

The Suu Kyi-led government is in large part the creation of the European Union and the United States. London, Brussels and Washington promoted her as a “democratic icon” and endorsed her alliance with the military junta in 2011.

The Western imperialist opposition to the Burmese military had nothing to do with its crimes and abuses of democratic rights but was bound up with its orientation to Beijing. Once the junta opened Burma to Western investment and reoriented its foreign policy, US and European concerns about “human rights” were quickly shelved.



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