

India, Bangladesh support Burmese military repression of Rohingya

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During a visit to Burma (Myanmar) this week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi explicitly endorsed the ongoing military repression of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's northwestern Rakhine state. His government and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are both moving to forcibly deport thousands of poverty-stricken Rohingya refugees.

Since August 25, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) has stepped up its violent attacks on Rohingya in Rakhine state where most of the Muslim minority live. Rohingya have been tortured, women raped, houses torched and villages destroyed in "ethnic cleansing" operations throughout the state.

According to UNICEF, over 400 Rohingya have been killed and 164,000 have been forced to flee—80 percent are women and children. Tens of thousands are seeking refuge in neighbouring India and Bangladesh. The Burmese government claims the military operations are in response to terrorist attacks by insurgency groups linked with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army which purportedly killed 12 security officers.

During his visit, Modi fully backed the military repression declared, "We share your [the Burmese government's] concerns about the extremist violence in Rakhine state and especially the violence against the security forces and how innocent lives have been affected and killed."

Modi praised Myanmar Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi for her "courageous leadership" and issued a joint statement in which he promised to work with her to solve the "terrorist problem." In return, she thanked "India for its strong stance with regard to the terrorist threat" and claimed her government was "defending all the people" in Rakhine state.

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy are directly responsible for the brutal repression, having

given a blank cheque to the military and defended all it has done. Last week she attempted to deny the military violence unleashed against Rohingyas, claiming that news reports about the attacks were "a huge iceberg of misinformation."

Modi signed 11 joint agreements in Myanmar last week, his first trip to the country. The *Hindu* newspaper reported on September 6 that these included "maritime security, strengthening democratic institutions in Myanmar, health and information technology."

Prior to the trip, Deputy Home Minister Kiren Rijiju declared that India would deport Rohingya refugees, including those registered under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "They are illegal immigrants in India, he declared, and "as per law, they stand to be deported."

Early last month, Rijiju told the Indian parliament that about "40,000 [Rohingyas] were staying in India illegally." The Home Affairs Ministry also declared that Rohingya refugees and others deemed to be "illegal immigrants" were responsible for the "rise of terrorism in last few decades" and called on Indian's state governments to deport them.

Thousands of Burmese Rohingya have sought refuge in India from previous persecutions, settling in Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi-NCR and Rajasthan. In these areas, poor and oppressed Rohingya communities are being targeted for racist attacks. According to *thewire.in* website, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Jammu in April "threatened to 'identify and kill' Rohingya refugees in Jammu if they were not immediately deported." Up to 7,000 have taken refuge in the north Indian state.

These threats are encouraged by the Modi government, which is promoting racist and religious divisions in an attempt to divide Indian workers and

undermine the growing opposition to New Delhi's social austerity attacks on the working class and the poor.

The government's support for the ethnic cleansing attacks on the Rohingya are in line with its attempts to develop closer ties with Myanmar and undercut Beijing's influence in that country. This is directly connected to India's active involvement in the US-led diplomatic and strategic confrontation with China.

Burma is also crucial to India's so-called "Act East Policy"—a strategic outreach to South East Asia and East Asia. This includes boosting Indian trade and investment with Myanmar to exploit the country's rich resources. Much of this has focused on Rakhine, where India has completed work on the Paletwa Inland Waterways Terminal and Sittwe port as part of the Kaladan project. Both countries share a 1,600 kilometre border.

Last week two Rohingya immigrants—Mohammad Salimullah and Mohammad Shaqir—filed a petition with the Indian Supreme Court opposing any deportation of Rohingyas. Both men are registered refugees under the UNHCR.

Their plea states that their deportation is illegal under the Indian constitution and violates the principle of "non-refoulement" which bans sending a refugee back to where his or her life or freedom is "threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." The two men stated that they were forced to seek refuge in India due to widespread discrimination, violence and bloodshed in Myanmar.

India's threat to deport thousands of Rohingya refugees has been widely condemned. Farhan Haq, deputy spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, said the UN was concerned about India's treatment of refugees. "Once refugees are registered they are not to be returned back to the countries where they fear persecution," he said.

Bangladesh has also declared that it wants to expel Rohingya refugees. There are currently 400,000 Rohingyas living in desperate conditions in Bangladesh, having fled there in response to previous attacks by the Myanmar military and anti-Muslim thugs.

The Bangladesh government has mobilised security forces along its border to prevent more refugees

entering the country. Late last month 20 Rohingyas, including 12 children, died when boats carrying them across the Naf River, which borders both countries, capsized. The International Organization for Migration said last week that thousands of others are stranded in a "no man's land" between the two countries.

While there are no accurate figures, the Inter Sector Coordination Group of Humanitarian Agencies in Bangladesh estimates that over 160,000 Rohingyas have entered Bangladesh since the latest pogroms began on August 25.



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