

Burma's anti-Rohingya pogrom fuels regional tensions

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According to the latest UN figures, 507,000 Muslim Rohingya have fled Burma's (Myanmar) northwestern Rakhine state since the country's military launched its brutal "clearance operation." The military offensive was supposedly in response to attacks on police posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on August 25.

Conditions in the refugee camps in Bangladesh are deteriorating. The latest influx is dramatically swelling the number of people needing shelter, food and basic amenities. Rohingyas have been fleeing Burma as a result of military operations going back to 2012.

According to a September 28 Reuters report, human rights groups calculated that the country's military and Burmese nationalist gangs have torched half the more than 400 villages identified as Rohingya. Human Rights Watch used satellite imagery to identify 62 villages targeted from August 25 to September 14.

Inside Rakhine state, hundreds of thousands of people lack essentials. The National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government of Aung San Suu Kyi and the military have barred international aid organisations, UN agencies and journalists from the area on "security" grounds.

On September 27, international aid agencies, including Care International, Save the Children and Oxfam, issued a statement pointing out that "severe restrictions on humanitarian access" deprived those trapped inside the conflict zone of medical services, food and shelter. The government placed all aid operations under the control of the Myanmar Red Cross.

A *Washington Post* report on Monday cited people contacted via mobile phone who said Rohingya were under siege in their villages, often by nationalist gangs. One village faced starvation. The article noted reports of Rohingya being prevented from fleeing to Bangladesh, to stop more stories of atrocities reaching the outside world.

The Burmese government classifies Rohingya as illegal

immigrants from Bangladesh. They have been denied citizenship and made the target of Burmese national chauvinism for decades, despite many being descendants of Muslims who lived in Burma for generations.

The humanitarian disaster is fuelling tensions throughout South East Asia and within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Philippine Foreign Secretary Alan Cayetano, as the current ASEAN chairperson, issued a statement on September 24 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on the situation in Rakhine state, but failed to mention the violence against Rohingya.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifah Aman, reacting to mounting anger at home over the treatment of Rohingya Muslims, dissociated Kuala Lumpur from the statement. The Philippines foreign ministry responded by declaring that it respected Malaysia's position, but it did not back away from Cayetano's comments.

The Philippine statement provoked criticism in Jakarta as well. Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who is fighting off challenges to his administration by Islamist groups, has been critical of the treatment of Rohingya. He sent his foreign minister to Burma and has pushed diplomatic efforts at the UN to resolve the crisis.

The tensions within ASEAN threaten to disrupt the Trump administration's efforts, following on from Obama's "pivot to Asia," to marginalise Chinese influence in the region. Obama established closer ties with the Burmese military from 2011 as it sought to move out of Beijing's orbit and allowed the pro-Western NLD to enter government. Trump is due to attend the ASEAN summit in November.

The US response to the Burmese army's ethnic cleansing of Rohingya was initially limited to describing it as "disproportionate" to the ARSA attacks. However, as the scale of the horrors inflicted on the Rohingya has become more widely known, and outrage has grown in

predominantly Muslim allies in the Middle East and Asia, Washington has adopted a more critical attitude.

On September 28, US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley called on all countries to stop supplying weapons to the Burmese military and to hold military leaders accountable for the “brutal, sustained campaign.” Haley, however, made no criticism of NLD leader Suu Kyi or her ministers, who have defended the military and helped cover up their atrocities.

China has sought to strengthen its ties with the Burmese government and military by supporting the “security” measures. Beijing moved to step up its investment in the new Kyaukphyu seaport and the energy corridor into China’s Yunnan province. As Britain announced an end to training Burma’s army, military leader General Min Aung Hlaing was reportedly invited to Beijing again.

Suu Kyi has sought to blunt growing international criticism. On Monday, 66 diplomats and foreign representatives, including from the US, UK, Australia, Indonesia, Turkey and Germany, were allowed into the Rakhine. It was a cynical and closely-managed operation designed to prove Suu Kyi’s absurd claim that life for those still in the area was “normal”.

In addition, Suu Kyi declared that Rohingya refugees now in Bangladesh could return if they could be verified as residents under a 1993 repatriation agreement. The agreement, which followed pogroms in 1992, did not recognise the Rohingya as citizens. Lacking any documents establishing residency or property rights, many were refused re-entry.

In another ominous sign of the government’s intent, Social Development Minister Win Myat Aye recently declared: “According to the law, burnt land becomes government-managed land.” The implication is that even if Rohingya refugees return to Burma, they will be barred from going back to their burnt-out villages.



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