

Burma: Pogroms continue against Rohingya Muslims

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12 October 2017

The Burmese (Myanmar) government's bogus claims that the "cleansing operations" against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state ended on September 5 are refuted by the ongoing flight of tens of thousands of refugees and clear evidence of intensifying attacks by the military and Burmese nationalist thugs.

The government alleges that the million plus Rohingya in Burma, many of whom have lived in the Arakan region for generations, are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and has subjected them to decades of blatant discrimination.

At least 520,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since the Burmese military began its operations on August 25, supposedly in response to minor attacks on security posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The real aim of the country's military, with the full collaboration of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) government, is to drive the Rohingya out of Burma.

In early September, military chief General Min Aung Hlaing told a parade that the "Bengali" (Rohingya) problem was a long-standing one and "an unfinished job." The generals have ruled the country from 1964, until a power sharing arrangement with the NLD in 2011. Now they have decided to exploit the "democratic" veneer provided by the NLD to finish the "job".

United Nations and international aid groups estimate that about 20,000 Rohingya have been forced to leave the county in the last 10–14 days. The Organisation for Migration puts the figure at 2,000 per day currently.

On September 28, UN spokesman Farhan Haq told the media that the number of Rohingya now in Bangladesh, including those who had fled Burma since 2012, is now "well over 700,000" and increasing.

At the same time, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned that the ongoing and "systematic violence" against the Rohingya could result in "spillover" into central Rakhine. This would mean, he said, that another 250,000 Rohingya could be displaced.

In fact, a Reuters report published this week indicated that Buddhist monks and nationalist thugs are stepping up their attacks against these Rohingya. Ashin Saromani, a Buddhist monk from the central town of Myebon, told the news agency that vigilante committees had blocked all "communication with the Muslims."

Rohingya residents said they were being cut off from essential supplies in the town and other areas where these racist committees have been established.

In 2012 nearly 200 Rohingya were killed and 140,000 displaced by communalist attacks. Three thousand of those displaced that year are currently living in an overcrowded camp in Myebon. Dependant on international aid, the camp is now surrounded by thousands of hostile Arkanese Buddhists. According to Reuters, one Arkanese woman who ignored the ban to sell goods to the Muslims was dealt with by a mob who branded her as a "national traitor."

On October 6, United Nations humanitarian office chief Mark Lowcock in Geneva demanded "unhindered and unfettered" access to the now closed-off area of north Rakhine. He told the media that a small UN team had visited the area and witnessed "unimaginable" suffering.

Last Sunday an overloaded boat carrying 100 Rohingya attempting to flee the increasing violence sank in the Naf River, which separates Burma from Bangladesh. Eleven people were rescued on the Bangladesh side with an unknown number drowned. It

was the latest of many such incidents.

Last week the Australian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast video from the cordoned off Rakhine. The footage, which the state-funded network stated was from reliable sources, showed bodies exhumed from mud in Gu-Dar Pyin village. It refutes claims by Suu Kyi that Burmese security forces had ended their campaign on September 5. The program included video allegedly showing security forces and vigilantes burning Muslim homes in Maungdaw on October 5.

The sheer size of the humanitarian disaster and its destabilising effect across the entire region are forcing the international backers of Suu Kyi and the NLD belatedly issue limited criticisms. Plans are reportedly being drawn up by the US and European Union to impose targeted sanctions against certain Burmese military leaders, whilst taking care not to push the regime towards China for further economic and political support.

Danish minister for development cooperation Ulla Tornaes told the media on Monday that Copenhagen wants Burma discussed at the EU Foreign Ministers' Council meeting on October 16, and "further pressure [put] on the (Burmese) military."

Two US officials informed Reuters that the Trump administration is considering sanctions against Hlaing and other Burmese generals and Buddhist militia leaders. This could include US asset freezes, travel bans and business restrictions.

One official said that Washington wanted a plan for Burma in place before the US president's November 3–14 trip to Asia. Trump will visit Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines and attend both the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam and the Association of South East Asian Nations in the Philippines.

Significantly, no sanctions are planned against Suu Kyi and her ministers despite the fact that she gave the green light for the ethnic cleansing and acted as an apologist for the military's atrocities. The US regards Suu Kyi as an essential political asset in its efforts to strengthen its position in Burma and undermine Chinese influence.

China is also manoeuvring. Its major projects underway in Burma including, the energy corridor and Kyaukphyu seaport on the Bay of Bengal, are under threat by the ongoing crisis in Rakhine. While Beijing

has supported Burma's "security operation," it has offered relief supplies to Bangladesh and to mediate between Bangladesh and Burma.



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