

MSF survey provides clear evidence of the Burmese military's mass murder

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A report based on surveys by the medical relief organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has provided the first detailed study of the horrific scale of killings by military, police and Buddhist nationalist thugs of the Rohingya population in Burma's Rakhine state.

In what the MSF says is a conservative estimate, at least 6,700 died violent deaths at the hands of the security forces and associated gangs in the 31-day period from August 25. Of these, 730 were children under the age of five.

There have been numerous reports of individual atrocities, missing family members, grave site discoveries and satellite images of burnt-out Rohingya villages. Previous estimates of the number of deaths were based on this scattered information.

The Burmese military led by General Min Aung Hlaing and backed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) government has dismissed all of these accounts out of hand.

In September, in the period covered by the MSF report, NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi blamed the violence in the Rakhine on Rohingya "terrorists" and condemned reports of Burmese army atrocities as "fake news photographs" and "a huge ice berg of misinformation." The government claimed no more than 400 were killed during this period of which most were "extremist terrorists."

Since August 25, 647,000 people have fled into refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh, already overcrowded with previous Rohingya refugees, creating a massive humanitarian crisis. The Muslim Rohingya are regarded by Burmese Buddhist chauvinists as "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh and have been persecuted and denied citizenship for decades.

The sheer scale of the exodus has made clear that

army operations begun on August 25, supposedly in response to small-scale attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, were aimed at driving the Rohingya out of Rakhine state where many have lived for generations. The United Nations has described it as "ethnic cleansing."

The MSF report, released simultaneously in New York, Amsterdam and Paris on December 14, exposes the scale of the state terrorism.

The MSF estimates the overall death toll range is from 9,425 to 13,759 Rohingya in the period August 25 to September 24. These include the 6,700 people who died as the result of violent attacks. The peak was reached in the last week of August.

The MSF has 2,000 staff, three inpatient facilities, three primary care centres, 15 health posts and two mobile clinics in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. It has treated 142,980 patients since August 25, ten times the figure for the same period last year.

The report is based on six retrospective health surveys in different sections of the refugee camps. Four surveys were conducted in northern settlements and two in southern settlements—ranging from the northern Kutupalong camp to the southern Moynarghona camp in the Cox's Bazar area just over the border from Burma.

The population in camps covered by the survey was 608,108 of whom 503,698 had fled Burma since August 25. In the northern sector, the survey team used random sampling of 905 households and in the south, systematic sampling of 1,529 households. In all 2,434 households representing 11,426 people were involved.

Household heads described the family structure and dates, locations and causes of the deaths of family members during the period.

The overall mortality rate of the households surveyed

from August 25 to September 24 was equivalent to 2.26 percent of the sampled population. This pooled crude mortality rate (CMR), which was 13.3 times higher than the figure for the same population from May 27 to 24 August, was used to estimate the total number of killings.

Karline Kleijer, MSF Emergency Desk manager, stressed in the video released with the report that the estimate of 6,700 violent deaths was based on a conservative approach to interpreting the data and almost certainly underestimated the death toll.

The survey did not take place in all the camps and the report made no estimate of those who did not make it out of Burma, nor of the ongoing repression inside Rakhine state. MSF medical director Dr Sidney Wong said the MSF has reports of entire families being locked in their homes that were then set on fire.

Kleijer said that the surveys were originally part of a general health study but when the scale of the killings emerged “we simply could not sit on this information.”

Of the violent deaths, 69.4 percent were from gunshot wounds. Some 8.8 percent were burnt to death in homes, 5 percent were beaten to death, 2.6 percent suffered sexual violence leading to death and 1 percent were killed by landmines.

Of children under five, 59 percent were killed by gunshot, 14.8 percent were burnt to death in homes, 6.9 percent were beaten to death and 2.3 percent were killed by land mines.

This slaughter has been compounded by the efforts of the Bangladeshi government to block refugees from Burma. Moreover, Bangladesh struck a deal with Burma last month, the details of which remain unpublished, to repatriate hundreds of thousands Rohingya back to where they fled from.

If such atrocities had been carried out in Syria, for instance, which the US has targeted for regime change, there would be howls of condemnation in the international media. However, the criticism from the US and the European Union of the killings in Burma has been belated and muted.

In 2011, Burma’s military dictatorship shifted its orientation away from Beijing and towards Washington, and entered into a power-sharing arrangement with the pro-Western NLD. Virtually overnight, Burma was referred to as “a developing democracy” rather than a “rogue state.”

In a carefully-staged election in 2016 under an anti-democratic constitution, the NLD and Suu Kyi was installed as head of government and foreign minister. In reality, the junta is still in charge and controls the key ministries of defence, home affairs and border affairs. Suu Kyi and her government, which share the military’s Buddhist supremacist ideology, function as the apologists for its crimes.

As long as the Burmese regime continues to align with Washington and to open up its economy to Western investment, the US and its allies will continue to turn a blind eye to the military’s slaughter. The Trump administration has rejected any immediate calls for sanctions and limited its response to face-saving appeals for an end to the violence in order to maintain US ties with the Suu Kyi government and the military.



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