



## Press Release: Fighting Breaks out In Northern Rakhine State Following Increased Tensions

25 August, 2017 London, United Kingdom – At around 1:20AM civilians in Maungdaw reported to a loud explosion to BHRN which was followed by gunfire to the north of Maungdaw. Within a few hours civilians reported hearing gunfire again. Reports quickly emerged of fighting between the militant group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Burmese Military. Reports emerged that ARSA ambushed up to 25 security posts in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. Estimates from Government sources say that 21 militants, 10 police and one soldier were killed, but totals are suspected to be higher. The Government also claimed that the attacks were carried out by over a thousand men organized and acting in different locations simultaneously. Reports to BHRN indicate many Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh took part in the fighting. It has been relayed to BHRN that many of the refugees who fled last years fighting between ARSA and the Burmese Army were recruited and trained since winter of last year. ARSA has claimed responsibility for initiating the attacks in response to the blockade on Rathedaung, recent killings of Rohingya by security forces and increased troop presence in northern Rakhine State.

These events follow a series of alleged human rights abuses in the past month and a large troop increase in the region. Locals have complained of massive sweeping arrests, deaths in custody and blockade of food and aid to civilians. After a month of tension militants unexpectedly attacked, which will undoubtedly make the situation far worse and appears to be motivated in part by desperation and anger with recent events.

At the same time the state has been visited by extremist monks, including Wirathu, who have provoked greater fears and hostility in the region. Wirathu visited the state on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. These events happening at the same time risk communal conflict to emerge at the same time militants are fighting the army. Wirathu is notoriously anti-Muslim and has frequently given sermons in areas that saw anti-Muslim violence shortly afterwards.

The attacks occurred one day after the release of the Kofi Annan led Rakhine Commission's report detailing their investigation and recommendations of a similar situation last year where militants attacked 3 police posts and the Military engaged in an especially brutal crackdown over the following months. Among the Commission's recommendations were Rohingya citizenship and freedom of movement, both of which ARSA has listed as among their primary grievances. The timing of the attacks is especially tragic in how they may have derailed progress the commission might have made in helping secure rights for Rohingya.

Throughout August BHRN received multiple reports of escalating tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities as well as security forces in Northern Rakhine State. These incidents included arrests of several Rohingya men in Rathedaung and the disappearance of a Rakhine man in late July

near Rauthedaung. The Rakhine man is said to be from Chutpyin village and was last seen on a snail gathering expedition with two other men in the Mayyu Mountains. The arrests seemed related to the disappearance of the local Rakhine man, after search efforts failed to locate him. Many of those arrested and interrogated were said to only be connected to the incident due to the proximity of their village to where the man was believed to have disappeared from. Reports indicated that Rakhine civilians accompanied police during these raids and witnesses described civilians being beaten randomly in the process. A confrontation later occurred on August 5<sup>th</sup> as police raided Aut Nan Yar Village. As police were arresting and taking men, including an imam, into custody a mob formed, seemingly to help free the men. Police were said to have opened fire to disperse the mob and arrested some involved while some of those previously arrested escaped. Four were reportedly injured in the incident. The village was later sealed off with barbed wire and food and aid were blocked from entering. Several locals complained the blockade was causing food shortages. Villagers also complained they felt threatened by Rakhine and Buddhists living in the same area who informally enforced the blockade, as they are out numbered and tensions have increased significantly.

Later in the month on August 15<sup>th</sup> villagers in Rathedaung stated that soldiers were asking for rations from Muslim villagers, and that their presence had increased to 300 soldiers in the area. While this occurred a curfew was imposed on all villages in Rathedaung following an incident on August 11<sup>th</sup>, where a Rohingya mob gathered in response to sweeping arrests by police. Following these events reports continued to emerge of villagers throughout Rathedaung being detained, beaten or both, with reports in the same region of Rohingya livestock being looted by Rakhine villagers.

BHRN later received reports of large sweeping arrests by border guard police (BGP) and military forces in Southern Buthidaung Township, U Hla Pay Village Tract, at 7am on August 15<sup>th</sup>. Reports from the area have stated that 50-80 Rohingya were arrested arbitrarily, some were said to be workers on the roadside or farmland who were randomly swept away by police. Those arrested were taken to Nyaung Cheung BGP camp at around 12pm of the same day. There are reports that one man died in custody during this time, and BHRN is working to confirm if this is true.

With these most recent attacks it is almost certain that the military will respond harshly and may not differentiate between civilians and combatants. Without proper and immediate intervention the situation may easily spiral out of control as violence is further normalized in the region causing attacks to increase between the army and militants. The military must use restraint when engaging in combat and avoid civilians at all costs. Likewise we call on ARSA to avoid fighting in civilian areas at any time. The International Community must take any allegations coming from this conflict seriously and not allow the situation to further deteriorate as it has for the past year. With this in mind we reiterate our call on Myanmar to accept the UN mandated Fact Finding Mission into allegations from last years fighting in order to address grievances of the local population and pursue peace and justice in the region. Any human rights violations emerging from this conflict will ultimately prolong it and potentially create an environment of constant violence that erodes the perceived value of human life both in combat and in communal interactions.

We call on security forces to respect the principles of proportionality and distinction with regard to the use of force in counter-insurgency operations in accordance with International Humanitarian Law. In restoring law and order, International Law and human rights must be kept as a priority to ensure that this restoration is meaningful, just and avoids worsening tensions in an already fragmented and volatile region.

## **Notes for Editors**

Background on the current situation: In 2012 violence broke out in Rakhine state between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya communities which ultimately saw over 100,000 Rohingya displaced. Much of the Rohingya population is currently forced to live in camps for the displaced, which are generally squalid, cramped and lack adequate access to food and medicine for all living in them. In October 2016 a Rohingya militia called The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked three police posts and killed 9 border guard police. The attack was followed by an extremely harsh crackdown by security forces, with witnesses describing instances of security forces killing civilians, gang raping women, torture of detainees who have died in custody, arbitrary arrests, destruction of property and forced displacement. The United Nations has mandated a fact-finding mission into these claims but the Burmese Government has so far blocked them from conducting it.

### Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

### Media Enquiries

Members of The Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) are available for comment and interview.

### Please contact:

#### **Kyaw Win**

Executive Director of the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

E:kyawwin78@gmail.com

T: +44(0) 740 345 2378