



Press Release: Rohingya in Buthidaung Fleeing Due to Starvation With Many Stranded and Unable to Escape

10 October 2017, London, UK – The Burma Human Rights Network has been closely monitoring food shortages in Northern Rakhine State following a military crackdown that began in the region after militants attacked 30 police posts on August 25th, 2017. The military’s crackdown has been marked with widespread accusations of Crimes Against Humanity resulting in a mass exodus of nearly half of the Northern Rakhine State’s Rohingya population, leading even the UN to say it “seems a textbook case of ethnic cleansing.” Those remaining have faced continued restrictions on movement preventing them from working or gathering food at a time most aid has been blocked from the region and as a result several locations are facing dire food shortages that locals say may be leading to many areas facing threat of starvation. Northern Rakhine State is composed of three townships; Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. Arson attacks were frequent in each township after the attacks on August 25th and continue to occur regularly in Maungdaw. Only five Rohingya villages remain undamaged in Rathedaung. Buthidaung has seen fewer arson attacks in recent weeks but worsening food shortages. As food supplies are dwindling many Rohingya, especially in Buthidaung, are fleeing to Bangladesh, but some have become stranded in the process, unable to cross. Rathedaung has previously seen severe shortages of food that caused a mass exodus where 11,000 Rohingya were stranded which was previously documented by BHRN. At the same time Bangladesh has begun a crackdown on boat operators, claiming that some are working as traffickers, which has prevented rescue of some of those stranded.

In Buthidaung, residents have informed the Burma Human Rights Network that many in the township have not received any aid rations following the violence, and that what deliveries are made are severely limited in the township as the army has blocked most aid from coming into the region. Currently, aside from some small aid deliveries by domestic groups, the International Committee of the Red Cross is the only organization permitted to deliver aid to the region, but according to locals this aid has been very limited, infrequent and, they say, catering more often to Ethnic Rakhine communities. One local resident said, “All the villages [in Buthidaung] besides downtown quarters need food. Here [downtown] we can survive, but in the villages people are poor. Since August 25th no NGO assistance has been allowed.” Notably, aid to Northern Rakhine State has been significantly limited for some time, with aid agencies previously being forced out and limitations being imposed on which areas can receive aid. Further complicating the situation are recent restrictions on aid throughout the whole of Rakhine State, which NGO workers have described as being especially harmful to the Rohingya populations in Sittwe and central Rakhine. The previous shortage on aid has significantly compounded the current crisis.

The food shortages are most evident by the recent waves of Rohingya fleeing into neighboring Bangladesh. Among those fleeing is a sense that they have been intentionally forced out, though without the kind of apparent bloodshed that has been seen in the news. As aid is prevented from entering the region, its residents find themselves forced into what appears to be a less overt but equally effective campaign to cleanse the township of its Rohingya population.

The UN agency, Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has stated that despite their efforts to assist throughout affected areas, the Burmese Government has refused to allow them access. They said, “Despite strong advocacy by the UN for humanitarian access for its own staff and for other humanitarian organizations, the Government has said that staff from the UN and international non-government organizations (INGOs) will not be granted access in these areas for the time being.” OCHA also included data from Burma’s Relief and Resettlement Department stating that the Red Cross Movement had reached 19,000 people from August 26th to September 15th. The aid was distributed across 10 different townships, meaning hundreds of thousands remained in need.

Of those fleeing, some have found themselves stranded by the mouth of the Naf River and the beaches to its south. These areas are especially difficult to cross as the width of the river is far too wide. Previously, fishermen or other boat owners have been utilized to help those stranded to cross the river, but this has become more difficult as Bangladesh has begun cracking down on them as alleged traffickers. On October 4th it was reported that the Bangladeshi authorities had destroyed 20 boats used to bring refugees into Bangladesh on accusations they were used to smuggle amphetamines into the country. Over the next few days locals reported at least six fishermen and other boat owners had been detained by authorities in connection to their assistance bringing refugees into Bangladesh. As a result those stranded on the Burma side of the border have severely limited options to cross into Bangladesh to find safety and aid and are at extreme risk of starvation and disease while being vulnerable to the elements.

The Burma Human Rights Network believes without drastic changes these events will lead to mass human suffering and death and calls upon the Government of Myanmar to immediately allow all aid and agencies providing aid to return to all areas of Rakhine State without restrictions. We call on Bangladesh to permit aid and rescue boats to those in need. We call on ASEAN nations to use their influence to pressure the Burmese Government to allow unfettered access for NGOs and aid agencies into all areas of Rakhine State to address the dire needs of Rohingya remaining there. And finally we call on the international community to ensure these measures are taken along with steps to end conflict in Rakhine State including the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State and access for the UN mandated fact finding mission to areas of conflict and alleged abuses.

Notes for Editors

Background on the current situation:

On August 25th an insurgent group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked 30 police posts and killed 12 security officers and one soldier. In response the Burmese Authorities have unleashed a brutal campaign against the civilian population, which has caused half of the Rohingya

population in Northern Rakhine State to flee. Security forces have been monitored burning down Rohingya villages systematically and driving the population into neighboring Bangladesh. These actions by the Burmese army have widely been described as ethnic cleansing, with the UN even evoking the term when they said the military's actions "seemed like a textbook case of ethnic cleansing." The military operations have caused a humanitarian crisis in neighboring Bangladesh which many nations have stepped up to address. Those remaining inside of Myanmar have not been given the same response as Myanmar has limited how much access NGOs have to the region and currently only the International Committee of the Red Cross has been given limited access.

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.

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