

Rohingya Facing Existential Threat in Arakan

Rohingya organisations call for urgent international humanitarian assistance

- Out of 600,000 Rohingya left in Arakan or Rakhine State after the genocidal attacks of 2016-2017, we estimate that only one third remain in their original homes.
- Tens of thousands of Rohingya are internally displaced in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships.
- Rohingya in Buthidaung downtown were ordered to leave the town by 10 am on 18 May by the Arakan Army (AA). There was no fighting taking place in Buthidaung downtown. Late at night on 17 May, AA soldiers fired shots overhead to frighten people out of their homes, then looted and set fire to the houses. Thousands of Rohingya, including women, children and the elderly, were forced to flee for their lives. We condemn all the atrocities committed by the Arakan Army.
- Displaced Rohingya have no food and shelter. The death toll will likely soon rise through starvation, lack of clean water and medical care. International humanitarian assistance is urgently needed.

Rohingya organisations today urge the international community to immediately put pressure on the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army to end mass forced displacement and human rights violations against Rohingya communities in Rakhine and to uphold international humanitarian law.

The international community must also robustly engage with the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army for the safe and unrestricted delivery of international humanitarian assistance to all communities, including the Rohingya, in the areas of Rakhine State under its control.

With the Burmese military restricting humanitarian aid deliveries from the areas of Burma which it occupies, we call on the government of Bangladesh to open up its borders for the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance into areas of northern Rakhine State which have been freed from military rule. International donors, UN agencies and INGOs must engage with the government of Bangladesh and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army to enable the opening of this humanitarian lifeline.

We call on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation in Myanmar, and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar to immediately begin investigations into the current crisis, with a view to publicly reporting on what is taking place and collecting evidence for future prosecutions to hold those responsible for human rights violations to account.

We call on the government of the United Kingdom to urgently convene a meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss this current crisis and to call on the Arakan Army to end the mass forced displacement and human rights violations against Rohingya.

We remain disappointed that during the recent UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Rakhine State, an opportunity to try to prevent the current crisis was missed. Security Council members failed to address the regime's ongoing violations of the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice to protect the Rohingya. Likewise, they failed to call on the Arakan Army to abide by international law.

We propose a dialogue process including all ethnic and religious communities in Rakhine State, in order to work together for peaceful co-existence, effective administration and the economic development of Rakhine State as it is finally liberated from Burmese military rule.

Once again, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are fleeing for their lives. Once again, the international community was warned about what could happen and failed to act. Now is not the time to hide behind claims that it is not clear what is going on or how complex the situation is. We have been here before. Now is the time for bold action.

The current situation in Buthidaung

On the morning of 17 May, fierce fighting between the AA and Myanmar military took place in the Rohingya village of Zabbar Fara (Tat Yar) to the south of Buthidaung town. Several Rohingya civilians were killed and injured, while others fled to Buthidaung downtown for safety.

The Arakan Army issued an order for all Rohingya to leave Buthidaung downtown by 10am on 18 May. Tens of thousands of Rohingya IDPs were seeking shelter in Buthidaung downtown after their villages came under attack in the preceding days and weeks.

Rohingya residents and IDPs refused to leave the town because they had nowhere else to go. Before the deadline had expired, Arakan Army soldiers surrounded the town. According to eyewitnesses, they fired shots overhead to frighten people out of their homes, then looted them before setting fire to them. Rohingya were forced to flee and seek shelter in nearby paddy fields for many hours. They were then directed by the Arakan Army to go to Hpon Nyo Leik and other villages that are in areas under Arakan Army control.

In the days prior to the arson attack on Buthidaung downtown, the Arakan Army is also reported to have launched artillery strikes and used drone bombs to attack the high school and hospital in Buthidaung town where Rohingya IDPs were taking shelter, resulting in deaths and injuries. Residents in Buthidaung downtown reported that Myanmar army soldiers, their proxies, and Rohingya forced recruits had already retreated to Maungdaw township before such attacks took place.

There have also been credible – but as yet unverified – reports of mass killings and mass abductions of Rohingya civilians, arson attacks and forced displacement of numerous villages in Buthidaung township by the Arakan Army in the days and weeks preceding the arson attack on Buthidaung town. Such atrocity crimes are alleged to have taken place in Tat Min Chaung, Kyauk Phyu Taung, Let Wei Dat Pyin Shay, Nga Kyin Tauk, Htan Shauk Khan, Pyar Pin Yin, Ywet Nyo Taung, Kun Daing and Da Pyu Chaung village tracts.

Divide-and-rule strategy

The regime has employed its decades-old divide-and-rule strategy in Rakhine State to devastating effect. Since February, the Myanmar military has forcibly recruited several thousand Rohingya men from the detention camps in Sittwe and Kyaukphyu, as well as from villages in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. Due to the regime's freedom of movement restrictions on Rohingya communities, it is extremely difficult for Rohingya to flee or evade such orders. Rohingya forced recruits have been sent into battle with the AA and the regime is using them as cannon fodder. Hundreds are feared to have already been killed. Local media reports indicate that Rohingya conscripts are currently being used by the Myanmar military in their battles with the AA in Maungdaw and Thandwe. The AA has also forcibly recruited Rohingya in Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Minbya townships, although in smaller numbers.

At the same time, the regime has coerced Rohingya communities in Sittwe and Buthidaung to participate in protests it has organised to denounce the AA. The regime has used this for propaganda purposes to incite ethnic and religious hatred and violence towards the Rohingya.

In addition, the military is collaborating with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Fighters from these groups are alleged to be fighting alongside the Myanmar military in its battles with the Arakan Army. Even more concerning are the [credible reports](#) that these groups are abducting Rohingya refugees from the camps in Bangladesh and trafficking them to Maungdaw to fight alongside the Myanmar military. We again totally reject [ARSA](#), ARA, and RSO. Those groups do not represent or act on behalf of Rohingya communities. We condemn their actions unequivocally.

In April, reports emerged of the Myanmar military, along with Rohingya conscripts and members of ARSA committing arson attacks on Rakhine homes in Buthidaung. Similar reports emerged from Maungdaw in May. We wholeheartedly condemn such crimes. Their words and actions do not represent Rohingya communities. We understand only too well the pain of losing our homes and belongings in such attacks and we stand in complete solidarity with the Rakhine victims of such crimes.

Against this backdrop, there has been an increase in the intensity of violations of international law and likely war crimes by the Arakan Army towards Rohingya, and a distinct shift in rhetoric. The ULA/AA leadership has repeatedly referred to Rohingya as 'Bengali', used in a derogatory manner to suggest that Rohingya are outsiders from Bangladesh, and 'Muslim extremists'.

All armed groups must uphold international law

International humanitarian law requires all parties to internal armed conflict to take precautionary measures to minimise harm to civilians and civilian objects. Parties must distinguish between combatants and civilians and between military and civilian objects, such as schools and hospitals. Reprisal attacks against civilians are prohibited in all circumstances, regardless of the behaviour of other parties to the conflict. Attacks against civilians and civilian objects and pillaging are prohibited and may constitute war crimes. Displacement of the civilian population can only be justified in exceptional circumstances such as to protect civilians from grave danger or for critical military reasons, which must be within the public's interest.

Recommendations to the ULA/AA

Rohingya organisations urge the Arakan Army to immediately end human rights violations and mass forced displacement of Rohingya communities. We call for urgent dialogue with the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army to protect Rohingya civilians and resolve the current crisis.

We call on the leadership of the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army not to fall into the trap of the Burmese military playing divide and rule games and trying to set the people of Rakhine State against each other. Only the military regime will benefit from this.

A free Rakhine State will forever be tainted in the eyes of the world if it begins with mass human rights violations. Just as ethnic people such as Rakhine do not want to be dominated or abused by Bamar, ethnic and religious minorities including Rohingya in Rakhine State do not want to be dominated and abused by Rakhine.

Rohingya want to live as equals in Arakan not under Burmese military rule. We want to live side by side in peaceful co-existence with the Rakhine and other diverse ethnic and religious communities, on equal terms, rooted in dignity and respect for our Rohingya identity. We want a seat at the table, not a separate state.

Background

Around 600,000 survivors of the 2017 Rohingya genocide remain in Rakhine State. The largest population of an estimated 260,000 Rohingya is in Buthidaung township. Around 140,000 Rohingya are confined to detention camps in the coastal towns of Sittwe, Pauktaw, Myebon, and Kyaukphyu. Tens of thousands of Rohingya are in Maungdaw township, while other communities are concentrated in Rathedaung, Kyauktaw, Minbya, and Mrauk U.

On 27 October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance comprised of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army launched Operation 1027 against the junta in northern Shan State. The alliance quickly made gains against the Myanmar military and has been credited with inspiring similar operations in other parts of the country. On 13 November, the Arakan Army turned its attentions to Rakhine State and launched attacks on the Myanmar military, even as Rakhine and Rohingya communities were struggling to recover from Cyclone Mocha. The AA has repeatedly stated that it will not stop fighting until it has gained complete control of the territory.

All parties to the conflict in Rakhine State have routinely violated international humanitarian law. Rohingya, Rakhine and other ethnic communities such as Mro and Kaman have suffered greatly. Hundreds of civilians have been killed by the regime's airstrikes and artillery shelling.

The Arakan Army has taken over nine of Rakhine State's 17 townships – Pauktaw, Minbya, Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, Myebon Ponnagyun, Ramree, Rathedaung and most recently, Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine State - as well as the northern part

of Maungdaw township bordering Bangladesh. Fierce fighting is currently ongoing in Thandwe township to the south of the state and Maungdaw to the north.

Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships are heavily militarised. Myanmar military battalion bases are located nearby Rohingya villages in Buthidaung area, while in Maungdaw area Border Guard Police Battalion outposts are next to Rohingya villages. Rohingya villages have become battlegrounds as the Arakan Army has launched artillery attacks while the State Administration Council (SAC) has deployed airstrikes. As the Arakan Army has taken over Buthidaung township, fighting is likely to further intensify in Maungdaw township in the coming days and weeks. There are concerning local media reports that the Myanmar military has deployed 500 additional troops from Light Infantry Division (LID) 22 to Maungdaw in recent days. During a previous outbreak of conflict in 2019, LID22 was [accused](#) of war crimes against Rakhine and Rohingya communities.

Information has been slow to emerge from Rakhine State due to the regime's rolling communication blackouts. Internet access and Myanmar mobile networks are largely cut off in most of northern Rakhine, heightening the risk of atrocity crimes. Intermittent, sporadic communication is occasionally possible with Rohingya who hold Bangladeshi sim cards, but the connection is generally very poor.

Signatories:

- Arakan Rohingya Development Association - Australia
- Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)
- Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU)
- Australian Burmese Rohingya Organization
- British Rohingya Community UK
- Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan (BRAJ)
- Burmese Rohingya Association in Queensland- Australia (BRAQA)
- Burmese Rohingya Association of North America (BRANA)
- Burmese Rohingya Community in Denmark (BRCD)
- Burmese Rohingya Community Netherlands (BRCNL)
- Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK)
- Burmese Rohingya Community of Georgia, Atlanta (BRCG)
- Canadian Burmese Rohingya Organisation
- European Rohingya Council (ERC)
- Free Rohingya Coalition (FRC)
- Los Angeles Rohingya Association

- Rohingya Action Ireland
- Rohingya American Council (RAC)
- Rohingya Association of Canada
- Rohingya Centre Canada
- Rohingya Community in Japan (RCJ)
- Rohingya Community in Norway (RCN)
- Rohingya Human Rights Initiative
- Rohingya Human Rights Network
- Rohingya Organisation Norway (RON)
- Rohingya Women Development Network-RWDN
- RW Welfare Society (RWWS)
- Swedish Rohingya Association (SRA)

For more information, please contact:

Tun Khin: +44 78 8871 4866

Nay San Lwin: +49 176 6213 9138