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# Burma's Perfect Storm

Simmering hatred between Buddhists and Muslims has left 140,000 people trapped in low-lying refugee camps. Facing a cyclone and monsoon floods, some fear a massive act of ethnic cleansing. **Daniel Otis** travels to the heart of darkness, **WD4-5**

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» WORLD WEEKLY

# A flood of hate

DANIEL OTIS

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

RAKHINE STATE, BURMA—As a mob of Arakanese Buddhists descended on their village, Ma Nu, 52, and her family pushed off in their fishing boat.

“The day before, we were given leaflets, telling us to leave,” says Ma Nu, a Rohingya Muslim. “We lived together for decades. We never thought anything like this could happen.”

From the water, they watched the violence. Stragglers were attacked and houses were looted with the assistance of local police. Then, a hail of Molotov cocktails set Shwe Pya village ablaze. More than 800 houses were destroyed. At least three villagers had their throats slit, according to Ma Nu.

She lists the names of people she recognized in the mob. Most of the Buddhists, however, were strangers. As far as Ma Nu knows, no one has been arrested.

“We lost everything — our fishing equipment, our clothes, our identification cards . . . and afterward, they said we set fire to our own homes!”

Ma Nu has been living in the crowded Bawduba internally displaced persons (IDP) camp since July. She shares a two-metre-by-two-metre room with her family of seven in a rickety, government-built longhouse. Nearby, stand canvas tents and makeshift shacks that front precarious mud flats and, beyond, the Bay of Bengal.

“I don’t know how long we’ll have to stay here. This is not a suitable place to live.”

Built atop dry rice paddies, the camp, like many others in the region, is at serious risk of being flooded with the arrival this month of the monsoon season. If inhabitants survive the deluge, they’ll face outbreaks of malaria and water-borne diseases. The state already has one of the highest malaria mortality rates in Asia.

To make matters worse, a cyclone was expected to hit this week near the Bangladesh-Burma border — precisely where the camps are located. Until now, Muslim IDPs have been barred from leaving their camps, and government attempts to move them in advance of the cyclone were met with widespread distrust.

In desperation, Ma Nu’s son-in-law and son set out to sea in separate boats earlier in the year, hoping for a better life in Malaysia, trusting more, it seems, to the wind, tides and human smugglers than Burmese authorities.

“I don’t want to live with the Arakanese,” Ma Nu says. “If they try to attack us again, this time, even I will fight back.”

**IN JUNE** and October of 2012, communal violence erupted in western Burma’s Rakhine state between Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists.

The Arakanese (also known as the Rakhine) are the three-million-strong progeny of a Buddhist kingdom that thrived in the area from the dawn of the Common Era until 1785, when it was annexed by the Burmese. The stateless Rohingya, who number about one million, claim they have been part of the region’s ethnic tapestry for centuries. The Arakanese (as well as Burmese authorities) consider the Rohingya to be illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

Burma’s 1982 citizenship law denies the Rohingya official ethnic status, and thus, citizenship rights. To be part of a legally recognized ethnic group, one’s people must have resided in the country prior to 1893. While Muslims have lived in the region since at least the 15th century, their numbers grew dramatically under British rule (1824-1948) when agricultural labourers were encouraged to migrate to Rakhine from neighbouring Bangladesh.

Under current legislation, third-generation Rohingya may become citizens, but it’s rarely awarded. Proof of ancestry is often difficult to verify and the law is full of arbitrary clauses — one states applicants must “be of good character” and “sound mind.”

Despite this identity dispute, the Arakanese and Rohingya long enjoyed a certain degree of economic and social integration.

The communal violence followed the May 28, 2012, rape and murder of an Arakanese woman by three Muslim men. On June 3, a gang of Arakanese killed 10 Muslims in retaliation, sparking a Rohingya reprisal on June 8 that descended



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MA NU  
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WAS BURNED



GEMUNU AMARASINGHE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rohingya people stand in the mud outside their makeshift tent in a displaced persons camp in Sittwe, northwestern Rakhine State this week.

the state into five hellish days of arson, attacks and murder as Arakanese mobs swarmed Rohingya neighbourhoods with swords, spears and torches — and vice-versa.

A second wave of violence occurred between Oct. 21 and 24. This time, Arakanese mobs staged co-ordinated attacks in nine townships. In one Rohingya village, 70 people (including 28 children) were slaughtered. As with the June riots, security forces were accused of either watching idly or participating.

Officially, 211 people have been killed in Rakhine state since June. Rohingya activists put the number closer to 1,000. More than 8,000 homes have also been razed, and at least 140,000 people have been displaced, the vast majority of whom — some 94 per cent — are Muslim.

Rohingya villages and quarters that were not evacuated or destroyed have been surrounded and contained by security forces, ostensibly to protect their inhabitants, but essentially creating ethnic ghettos that lack access to food, water and medical supplies. This forced segregation is particularly pronounced in the state capital — Muslims once made up nearly half of Sittwe’s population of 180,000, but its once-bustling streets are now Muslim-free.

**HEADING OUT OF SITTWE**, we pass shops, houses, tree-shaded boulevards and a glittering gold pagoda that was constructed in 1997 by the country’s last dictator, Gen. Than Shwe. Large bats dangle from nearly every tree. Most buildings fly the red-white-and-blue Rakhine state flag.

In town, a new deepwater port is being built with Indian money. Further south, an oil pipeline to China is under construction. After decades of isolation, Burma (also known as Myanmar) is open for business. Many Arakanese, however, complain their homeland is being exploited by the government. Despite its resource wealth, Rakhine state remains the second poorest in the country.

On the outskirts of Sittwe, the recent violence becomes palpable. We pass entire neighbourhoods — both Buddhist and Muslim — that have been reduced to rubble. The few surviving mosques are guarded by police.

We come upon a checkpoint and my *tuk*

*tuk* slows to a stop. A clutch of soldiers sit on plastic chairs, cradling new assault rifles and what look like Second World War carbines. They glance at me and I anticipate difficulty. My driver begins speaking to them in Arakanese.

The day before, while visiting the office of a humanitarian agency, I was surprised when a foreign aid worker (who was not authorized to speak with the media) asked me to describe camp conditions.

“We can’t go where we want,” she said. “They see our white licence plates and stop us at the checkpoints.” Vehicles registered to international agencies all sport these white plates. Camp visits, she said, need to be preapproved and are then directed by the authorities.

Another aid worker complained that their staff are routinely threatened. Their capacity to deliver help is limited, she said, because the government is constantly trying to placate the Arakanese.

Turkey’s development agency, for example, was blocked from building 5,000 permanent homes for the Rohingya after demonstrations in March. Since June, at least 14 Muslim humanitarian workers have been arrested. Human Rights Watch says five remain in custody.

The soldiers just wave us through and we enter a dust-cloaked world, one of destitution and despair, where men sport beards or *topi* caps and women cover their hair with scarves.

I pay my Arakanese driver and he beats a retreat out of the ghetto that was once Bu May village. It’s not long before my Rohingya fixer, 57-year-old Aung Win, finds me standing near the barricaded crossroads. A retired consular interpreter turned poultry farmer, he says an Arakanese mob mutilated his livestock in the riots. He now styles himself a fixer/activist. He was imprisoned briefly in February, he says, for trying to contact a visiting United Nations rapporteur.

“Buddhists are supposed to be peace-loving people, so why are they attacking the Rohingya?” he asks. “The government was capable of suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations in the past, so why not suppress the Arakanese now?”

We step into a battered jeep and follow a narrow, hole-riddled dirt road. Aung Win points out the new multi-storey Sittwe Muslim quarter in Sittwe — a tightly guarded ghetto of 7,000 people that I was



REUTERS PHOTO

A Buddhist Rakhine man holds weapons as he walks in front of houses burnt during fighting in Sittwe on June 10, 2012.

kanese students are now escorted to its guarded entrance by armed police.

The first camp we see is composed of tight rows of squalid huts constructed from bamboo, thatch and frayed bits of tarpaulin. One hut’s door is made from a piece of a World Food Program sack: “50 kg chickpeas / gift of Canada.” The irony: As an “unregistered” camp, this settlement receives no aid, only the occasional bit of food from Muslims in Rangoon.

Unregistered camps have sprung up around the tents and longhouses of “registered” IDP camps. Registered IDPs either lost their homes or were forcefully moved by Burmese authorities. As such, they receive small rations of oil, rice, salt and chickpeas. Unregistered IDPs are people who fled their communities after October, fearing more violence.

Rabiya Khattu, 45, has been living in the unregistered section since January. She claims that police opened fire on their houses in June. Her brother was killed in the riots.

“I had to sell my daughter’s earrings to bring her here,” she says. “Bribing authorities is the only way to leave Aung Mingalar.” She is referring to the last Muslim quarter in Sittwe — a tightly guarded ghetto of 7,000 people that I was

barred from entering.

“Everything depends on the government,” she says. “If they supported us and gave us security, we could live together again with the Arakanese . . . But I think the government is against the Rohingya people.”

She shares her small hut with her family of eight, sleeping on thin mats. Like thousands of others, her hut sits atop a soon-to-be-flooded rice paddy.

“We are very worried about the rainy season. We have no idea what to do.” The area we tour is several kilometres square. Within it, camps have been placed in the fields of existing Muslim villages. Nearly half of the state’s Rohingya IDPs live within this sprawling, guarded prison.

A few small markets line the area’s earthen roads, selling rice, eggs, watermelons, tea. Supplies mostly come via bribed soldiers or sympathetic (as well as enterprising) Arakanese. For them, doing business with the Rohingya can be dangerous: there have been reports of attacks against “traitorous” Arakanese.

I’m taken to the house of U Kyaw Hla Aung, 73, an activist lawyer who has spent 10 of the past 27 years in prison. Until June, he worked as an administrator for Médecins Sans Frontières. Kyaw Hla



TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Aung was one of the NGO workers arrested after the riots. He spent 14 days in prison.

“They searched my house, then accused me of having a letter from Al Qaeda!” he says indignantly. “Yet township by township, the Arakanese are destroying mosques and Muslim houses, and the government takes no action against these terrorists.”

Kyaw Hla Aung talks at length about the NaSaKa: the state’s notorious frontier police. He describes extortion, arrests, torture, rape, killings and mass graves. The situation in Rakhine state, he says, is a “hidden genocide.”

He shows me videos on a laptop. He says they are from June. In one, young women futilely try to douse the flames engulfing a thatch house. In another, people with bundles on their heads and shoulders are being marched out of Sittwe at gunpoint by what looks to be the military.

“We can forgive,” he says, “but future peace depends on the government and the Arakanese. But why would they seek peace while they’re winning?”

**WE VISIT A TINY CLINIC** where waiting patients cower from the blazing sun under a cement awning or a lone banyan tree, swatting flies if they are conscious, if they have the energy. Tuberculosis, diarrhea and malaria are the most common ailments. The clinic, Aung Win says, receives funding from Rangoon Muslims.

## ▲ The history

**1942** Sectarian violence erupts between Muslims and the Arakanese.

**1947** A mujahedeen movement develops in Rakhine state, hoping to create an independent Islamic state.

**1962** The mujahedeen is brutally quashed by the Burmese military.

**1968** The Arakan Liberation Party is formed.

**1971** Bangladesh descends into civil war. A new Islamic insurgency develops in northwestern Rakhine state.

**1978** The Burmese army battles insurgents and kills thousands of Rohingya civilians.

**1982** Burma’s new citizenship law denies the Rohingya official ethnicity status, and thus citizenship.

**1992** The NaSaKa, Burma’s frontier police, is formed in Rakhine state.

**2000** Bangladesh-based Rohingya militants receive training from Al Qaeda.

**2001** Communal violence erupts in Sittwe.

**2010** The Rakhine Nationalities Development Party is formed.

**May 28, 2012** An Arakanese woman is raped and murdered by three Muslim men.

**June 3** An Arakanese mob beats 10 to death in retaliation.

**June 8-12** Rohingya and Arakanese mobs torch each other’s neighbourhoods.

**Oct. 21-24** Arakanese mobs stage attacks in nine townships throughout Rakhine state.

**March 2013** Buddhist mobs attack non-Rohingya Muslim houses and shops in central Burma.

**April 22** Human Rights Watch issues a report accusing government security forces of being complicit in the “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya.

The clinic’s lone doctor refuses to waste time speaking with me.

Out back, a Rohingya nurse from Save the Children hands out nutritional supplements to a group of pregnant women and young mothers. She is the only NGO worker I see within the camps. “The UN and MSF are afraid to work here,” Aung Win says. Both organizations have been targeted by Arakanese activists.

At a crumbling schoolhouse, I’m swarmed by smiling children. Two-thirds of the school’s 1400 students are IDPs. Lacking outside funding, the community pools money to pay the teachers’ paltry \$40-per-month salaries.

“My people are poor and illiterate,” Aung Win says. He tells me that Muslim extremism is borne of poverty, discrimination and a lack of knowledge of the outside world. “If my people do not receive education, they will become radicals in the future. We cannot let this happen.”

We tour several more camps. Nearly everyone complains about inadequate provisions, their uncertain future, how the violence was unwarranted and perpetuated by both state security forces and the Arakanese. Conditions range from rudimentary to deplorable. Unable to leave, few people can work. Nearly every camp reeks of overflowing latrines.

The conditions in remote ghettos and camps are supposedly much worse. My attempts to access such areas were blocked by state authorities.

“This is not a religious conflict between two communities,” U Shwe Mawng, 56, says. “This is about one community trying to appropriate the others’ land.” A landowner himself, his large wooden house sits amid a sea of camps. There have been allegations of Arakanese appropriating Rohingya houses, farmland and livestock following evictions.

“We never had this kind of violence during the military dictatorship,” he says.

“I don’t think Myanmar is ready for democracy.”

**BEFORE ARRIVING** in Sittwe, I was warned that the Arakanese can be incredibly hostile to foreigners, who, in their eyes, are too sympathetic toward their enemy. My Arakanese fixer, who had asked about my background when we met, suggested that his people would be warm and unabashedly candid if I made them aware of my Jewish ancestry.

“Finally, a foreigner who understands!” says Khin Maung Gree, a central committee member of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDDP), when we meet. “But your people have their own country. For us, that is still a dream.”

The ultra-nationalist RNDDP has been influential in Rakhine state since winning 35 seats in the country’s 2010 election. Abetted by Burma’s government and several monastic associations, it is believed the RNDDP is driving Rakhine state’s anti-Rohingya campaign.

“We could let them stay here if they wanted to live in peace,” he says, “but they are trying to invade our territory.” He claims the state’s Muslims are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants masquerading under an artificial ethnicity, religious extremists intent on conquering the Arakanese homeland through violence and their “alarmingly high birth rate.”

There is a historical precedent for this ethnic antipathy. Following fierce sectarian clashes in 1942, a Mujahedeen movement developed in the region in 1947 with the aim of creating an Islamic state along the Bangladeshi frontier. The Burmese military has been combating such militants ever since, with particularly fierce (and even genocidal) campaigns being waged against both Rohingya combatants and civilians in the 1960s and ‘70s.

While this Islamic insurgency has waned in recent years, there is evidence that Bangladesh-based Rohingya militants have been receiving at least some training from Al Qaeda since 2000. The Arakanese, meanwhile, have been waging their own guerrilla war against the Rohingya and the Burmese, starting with the 1968 formation of the independence-seeking Arakan Liberation Party. Its armed wing still operates in remote parts of the state.

The RNDDP’s solution to the Rohingya question is simple: “We want the government to take them to a third country.”

Across town, U Sa King Da, the severe 38-year-old leader of Sittwe’s 200-strong Young Monks’ Association, spends nearly half an hour detailing the moral degener-

acy of the “so-called” Rohingya.

“They’re polygamous . . . and incestuous,” he says. He talks about Muslims setting fire to their own houses, deliberately contracting tuberculosis and starving their children to garner international aid and sympathy.

Like the RNDDP, the Young Monks’ Association pays regular visits to international humanitarian agencies in Sittwe. To avoid further violence, Sa King Da says that NGOs should avoid “playing favourites.” Aid, he says, must be distributed equally between the two communities.

The state’s 7,300 Arakanese IDPs receive regular rations and were given one-time payments of \$120 — half provided by the United Nations, half by the government. These people, whose houses were destroyed in the June riots, will be moved from their government longhouses to new, permanent housing before the monsoon season. In the meantime, they are able to come and go from their camps as they please.

“In a way, we’re fortunate that Muslims raped and murdered that girl last May,” says U Tun Sein, 37, the head of a small Arakanese IDP camp. “Now we know that they have been conspiring to conquer Arakanese territory.”

**IF EVENTS** of 2012 and 2013 are any indication, growing Islamophobia appears to be a caveat of Burma’s courtship with democracy and freedom of speech. Non-Rohingya Muslims are now being targeted as well, with pogroms occurring in March, April and May of this year. Muslims make up approximately five per cent of Burma’s population of 55 million.

Perhaps with the 2015 election in mind, even Aung San Suu Kyi, traditionally the voice of Burma’s disenfranchised, has been decidedly silent about the Rohingya.

Other members of the National League for Democracy, however, have been more forthright. “Citizenship for them is possible, but being defined as a distinct ethnic group is not,” political prisoner turned parliamentarian Phyo Min Thein said when I sat down with him in April. Bengali immigrants, he says, should be granted citizenship papers if they can prove that their families have been in the country for at least three generations. “But they should understand themselves. . . . Historically, there is no such thing as ‘Rohingya.’”

International pressure on Burma’s government for its alleged complicity in the anti-Rohingya campaign has been minimal. To the contrary, the European Union lifted trade and investment sanctions last month. In 2012, Australia, Canada and the United States did much the same. With its first embassy to the country opening this year, Canada may be a witness to a humanitarian disaster that threatens to become ethnic cleansing.

**WITH HER LONGHOUSE** raised 30 centimetres above the ground, Ma Nu may be able to avoid the rising water — for now. Still, she is one of at least 69,000 Muslim IDPs that the United Nations estimates to be living in flood-prone areas.

In advance of Cyclone Mahasen, temporary weatherproof shelters are being constructed, but this is a Band-Aid. According to one humanitarian worker, “Engineering is not the solution. These people need to be moved to other sites.” But many Muslim IDPs don’t trust the government to move them.

“I want to go to a third country. . . .” Ma Nu says. “Any Muslim country would do.”

Of the 13,000 Rohingyas to set sail from Rakhine state in 2012, the United Nations believes as many as 500 have died at sea. If they manage to land on the region’s shores, they are again placed in camps. Bangladesh and Thai authorities have turned boats back, and in February, the Thai navy opened fire on one. Reports differ: two or 15 were killed. Fleeing in advance of Cyclone Mahasen, moreover, a boat carrying 100 Rohingyas as part of a government evacuation plan capsized late Monday night, killing at least 50.

Ma Nu’s son-in-law is one of the fortunate ones to make it Malaysia. Her son’s boat drifted off-course to India’s Andaman Islands. She has received messages that they are alive. She can tell me nothing, however, about their conditions.

“Our future,” Ma Nu says, “depends on Allah’s decisions.”

Daniel Otis is a freelance writer based in Cambodia.