



TAKE WHAT YOU CAN: Rohingya children rummaged last October through the ruins of a village market that was set on fire during the army's "clearance operation" in Rakhine state. **REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun**

Persecuting the Rohingya

BY ANTONI SLODKOWSKI, WA LONE, SIMON LEWIS, KRISHNA N. DAS,
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APRIL 25 – SEPTEMBER 27 BALUKHALI CAMP, BANGLADESH/ DHAKA/ SITTWE/ MAUNGDAW, MYANMAR

How a two-week army crackdown reignited Myanmar's Rohingya crisis

BY ANTONI SLODKOWSKI, WA LONE,
SIMON LEWIS AND KRISHNA N. DAS

APRIL 25 BALUKHALI CAMP, BANGLADESH

When army helicopters fired on Rahim's village in northwest Myanmar one day last November, the Rohingya school-teacher told his pregnant wife to take their three young daughters and leave. He stayed behind with his 72-year-old mother.

At dawn the next morning soldiers encircled and then entered the village. Rahim and his mother crept into a rice field. Crouching,

Rahim said they saw the soldiers set fire to homes and shoot fleeing villagers.

"I thought we were going to die that day," said Rahim, who like many Rohingya identifies by a single name. "We kept hearing gunshots. I saw several people shot dead."

His account, told in a Bangladesh refugee camp where thousands of Rohingya are sheltering, was corroborated by four people from his village.

The attack on Rahim's village, Dar Gyi Zar, on Nov. 12-13, claimed dozens of lives, Rohingya elders said. The killings marked the start of a two-week military onslaught across about 10 Rohingya villages in northwest Rakhine State, a Reuters reconstruction of events has found.

Rohingya elders estimate some 600 people were killed. A United Nations report from February said the likely toll was hundreds. At least 1,500 homes were destroyed, Human Rights Watch satellite imagery shows. Countless women were raped, eyewitnesses and aid workers said. Doctors in Bangladesh told Reuters they treated women who had been raped.

It was the latest round of ethnic bloodletting in Myanmar, a majority Buddhist country where the roughly one million Muslim Rohingya are marginalised, often living in camps, denied access to healthcare and education and uprooted and killed in pogroms.

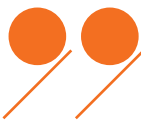
Myanmar's march to democracy, beginning in 2011, uncorked long-suppressed ethnic and religious tensions between Rakhine's Buddhists and the Rohingya. Clashes between the two communities in 2012 killed at least 192 people and displaced 140,000, mostly Rohingya.

This latest eruption of violence drove some 75,000 Rohingya across the border into Bangladesh, the United Nations said. Myanmar's government has conceded some soldiers may have committed crimes but has rejected charges of "ethnic cleansing." It has promised to prosecute any officers where there is evidence of wrongdoing.

The military assault involving a little under 2,000 soldiers has presented Aung San Suu Kyi with the first major crisis since her party



I am angry
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A Rohingya teen

won elections in late 2015. Many hoped Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, would bring a new era of tolerance after five decades of military rule. While generals remain in control of a significant part of the government, she now faces accusations of failing to oppose human rights abuses.

Suu Kyi's National Security Adviser Thaung Tun said some individuals may have committed abuses "in the heat of the confrontation." But he stressed the government did not approve of such conduct. Suu Kyi did not respond to detailed questions from Reuters about events in Rakhine.

The army began its "clearance operation" in Rakhine after Rohingya militants attacked border posts there on Oct. 9. For a month, it tried to pressure villagers to hand over the rebels, without success. That approach changed on Nov. 12-13 in Dar Gyi Zar and the neighbouring village Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son, marking a sharp escalation of the military operation.

This article pieces together how events unfolded, drawing on interviews with Rohingya refugees, diplomats, aid workers and Myanmar government officials. Reuters also gained rare access to Myanmar security officials and spoke with a Rohingya militant leader.

The reconstruction of the military operation contains previously unreported details about army negotiations with villagers over the insurgents, a shift in military strategy and the army units involved. Reuters also learned new details about investigations into alleged atrocities that are being conducted by Myanmar's army and by the home affairs ministry.

The violence was brutal. A 16-year-old girl assaulted in the village of Kyar Gaung Taung, said two soldiers raped her. Speaking in a Bangladesh refugee camp, she said she still suffers anxiety and trauma after the attack.

"I am angry with myself for being Rohingya," said the teen, whose name Reuters is withholding. "If I had been Bangladeshi or American, I would never have been raped. But they did it to me because I was born Rohingya."

The army has denied there were widespread

abuses and said it was carrying out a legitimate counterinsurgency operation. The army and the ministry of home affairs did not respond to detailed questions from Reuters about events in Rakhine.

"It is possible that individual security officers or individual policemen may have reacted in an excessive manner," Thaung Tun, the security adviser, said. "But what we want to make clear is that it's not the policy of the government to condone these excesses."

CLEARANCE

After years of persecution, some Rohingya have begun to fight back. A militant group called Harakah al-Yaqin, or "Faith Movement", was formed by Rohingya living in Saudi Arabia after the 2012 violence, according to the International Crisis Group. Its leader, Ata Ullah, said hundreds of young Rohingya men have joined the ranks of the group, which now wants to be known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Myanmar's government estimates it has about 400 fighters.

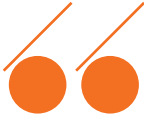
"In 2012, they killed us and we understood at that time, they would not give us our rights," said Ata Ullah, speaking by video link from an undisclosed location in Myanmar.

Before dawn on Oct. 9, Rohingya militants staged attacks on border police. The army set about trying to capture the rebels. For a month, it attempted to pressure villagers to give up the insurgents, according to Rohingya elders and villagers.

The village of Kyet Yoe Pyin, located on the main road north to Bangladesh in northwest Rakhine, was one of the first to draw the army's attention on Oct. 13, according to a military intelligence source.

Insurgents had used logs to erect road-blocks near the settlement of 1,300 houses, blocking the way for military vehicles, residents and the military intelligence source said. In retaliation, about 400 soldiers burned down a part of Kyet Yoe Pyin and shot several people, according to four villagers.

Officials have blamed insurgents and



I treated one woman. She was so badly raped she had lost sensation in her lower limbs.



John Sarkar
Bangladeshi doctor

villagers themselves for the burning of homes.

After a few days of trying unsuccessfully to capture the insurgents, the soldiers asked village elders to negotiate. The meeting took place in western Kyet Yoe Pyin.

About 300 soldiers crowded the road while four commanders led the talks with five Rohingya men, according to a village elder who attended the meeting. The talks, confirmed by the military intelligence source, were an example of the army's attempts in those early weeks to pressure the villagers to help identify the rebels.

"Their first question was: 'Who cut the trees?' We told them we didn't know," the village elder recounted. "They told us: 'We will give you a chance: You can either give us the names of the insurgents, or we will kill you.'"

The officers visited Kyet Yoe Pyin on several further occasions, asking about insurgents and taking money in exchange for leaving the remaining houses untouched, the villagers said. A variation of this scene was repeated in other villages in the weeks leading up to Nov. 12, residents said.

TWO WEEKS

On Nov. 12, this low-grade violence escalated abruptly when the army clashed with rebels north of two villages in northwestern Rakhine – Rahim's village Dar Gyi Zar, a settlement of more than 400 houses, and Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son, with some 600 houses.

Muhammad Ismail, another Rohingya teacher from Dar Gyi Zar, said the army spotted insurgents a few kilometres to the north of his village at around 4 a.m. After a two-hour shootout, the militants fled towards neighbouring Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son, where fighting resumed in the afternoon. The area is densely forested, and residents could not say how many militants there were.

The leader of the insurgents, Ata Ullah, said he and his men found themselves surrounded. "We had to fight," he told Reuters. He did not say how many insurgents were involved in the clash.

During a day-long battle, some villagers joined the insurgents, fighting the security forces with knives and sticks, according to Ata Ullah and the military. A senior officer was killed and the army brought in two helicopters mounted with guns as back-up, according to official accounts, which described the incident as an ambush by the insurgents.

The helicopters swooped in around 4 p.m., hovering low over the road connecting Dar Gyi Zar and Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son, according to eyewitnesses. The villagers dispersed in panic as one of the helicopters sprayed the insurgents with bullets. The other helicopter fired indiscriminately on those fleeing, five eyewitnesses said. The military intelligence source confirmed that the helicopters dispersed the crowd but denied they shot at civilians.

It marked the start of an offensive across a section of northwest Rakhine that lasted about two weeks, according to villagers, aid workers and human rights monitors and a review of satellite imagery from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Security and administrative officials confirmed the scope of the sweep but said they were not aware of abuses.

Whole communities fled north towards larger villages and then west to Bangladesh, pursued by the army. Women who were raped said the soldiers shouted "go to Bangladesh."

Three doctors from small clinics near refugee camps in Bangladesh have described treating some three dozen cases of Rohingya women whom they say were raped.

"I treated one woman. She was so badly raped she had lost sensation in her lower limbs," said John Sarkar, 40, a Bangladeshi doctor who has worked with Rohingya refugees for eight years.

National Security Adviser Thaung Tun said a commission, set up by Suu Kyi in December and chaired by vice president Myint Swe, a former head of military intelligence, needed time to investigate.

"We find it really difficult to believe that the Myanmar military would use (sexual violence) as a tool, sex slaves or rape as a weapon. In Myanmar this is repulsive, it's not acceptable," he said.

The Suu Kyi appointed investigation is one of several. The army is conducting an internal probe and the ministry of home affairs, which is controlled by the army, is also carrying out an inquiry. Separately, the United Nations has ordered a fact-finding mission to examine allegations of human rights abuses.

A senior government source and a senior military source said the commander of the army division that led the operation, Major General Khin Maung Soe, had been questioned by investigators in the army probe. The army did not respond to Reuters questions about Khin Maung Soe's role and Reuters was unable to contact him directly.

The ministry of home affairs, meanwhile, is examining 21 cases, including five suspected murders, six rapes, two cases of looting and one case of arson and seven unexplained deaths, according to police colonel Shwe Thaug. Investigators were seeking the army's cooperation to interrogate soldiers.



Life in the camps

<http://tmsnrt.rs/2iilExY>

By **Weiyei Cai** and **Simon Scarr**

Additional Editing and Reporting by **Darren Schuettler**

LEFT BEHIND

When the sun went down on the villages of Dar Gyi Zar and Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son on Nov. 12, the fighting stopped. "The night was tense. Some people sneaked out to neighbouring villages. Others were preparing to move first thing in the morning," said Muhammad Ismail, the Rohingya teacher who witnessed fighting.

But at dawn the next day, soldiers encircled the two villages and set the houses on fire, five eyewitnesses said. Those who could, fled. But the elderly and the infirm stayed. From the rice field where he hid, Rahim said he saw soldiers shooting indiscriminately.

Police reports from the period confirm that security forces focused their attention on about 10 villages – Dar Gyi Zar, Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son and other settlements nearby. They detained nearly 400 people between Nov. 12 and 30, according to a senior administrator in the state capital of Sittwe who received the daily dispatches.

The administrator, who briefed Reuters on condition of anonymity, said the reports described a lawful counterinsurgency operation.

One of the villages that bore the brunt of the post-Nov. 12 crackdown was Kyar Gaung Taung, a settlement of about 300 houses in northwest Rakhine.

Residents say that for five days starting around Nov. 16, security forces swooped in, searching for men. As in neighbouring villages, they arrested or killed most working-age men, and gathered the women in groups, carrying out invasive body searches.

Reuters talked to 17 people from Kyar Gaung Taung from November through March by telephone and in person in Bangladeshi camps, including five rape victims, three close relatives of those raped and several village elders. They corroborated one another's accounts.

Shamshida, a 30-year-old mother of six, was ordered to come out of her house.

"One of the soldiers put a machete to my chest and bit me on the back. Then, they started picking women from the group gathered on the road. I was selected and pulled inside the house. I knelt down thinking that

may help and the last thing I remember was one of the soldiers kicking me in the head,” said Shamshida, who identifies with a single name.

When her husband and her sister found her several hours later, she was stripped naked, unconscious, covered in bruises and bleeding from her mouth and her vagina.

They carried her to the neighbouring village of U Shey Kya several hundred metres away, where she regained consciousness, was showered and taken care of by a village doctor.

After eight days, she returned to her village, where there were no men left and many houses were burned down.

Doctors in Bangladesh said the Rohingya women they treated had torn vaginal tissue and scars inside their mouths from having guns inserted. In some cases, the women couldn’t walk and had to be carried by relatives to the clinics. Many were covered in bruises and bite marks.

Sarkar, the Bangladeshi doctor, and others administered abortion-inducing kits, painkillers and antibiotics. In cases where the kits didn’t work, they referred the women to regional hospitals for abortions.

OUT OF THE COUNTRY


As thousands of Rohingya were fleeing across the river border to Bangladesh, Suu Kyi was not in the country. In early December she went to Singapore, attending meetings and a ceremony to have a purple orchid named after her in the city-state’s botanic gardens.

Suu Kyi’s defenders, including some Western diplomats, say she is hamstrung by a military-drafted constitution that left the army in control of key security ministries and much of the apparatus of the state. Suu Kyi may be playing a long game, these diplomats said – back the military for now and coax the generals into accepting a rewriting of the constitution to reduce their power.

During her trip, Suu Kyi gave an interview to state broadcaster Channel News Asia, in which she accused the international community of “always drumming up cause for bigger fires of

resentment,” adding it didn’t help “if everybody is just concentrating on the negative side of the situation.” She appealed for understanding of her nation’s ethnic complexities, and said the world should not forget that the military operation was launched in response to the Rohingya insurgents’ attacks on border posts.

Rahim, the village schoolteacher, and his family were among thousands of Rohingya who made the 2 kilometre (1.2 mile) river crossing to Bangladesh.

On April 8, in a Bangladesh refugee camp, Rahim’s wife Rasheda gave birth to their first boy, Futu, or “little son.” Rahim doesn’t know whether Futu will ever see his homeland. 

Reporting by **Simon Lewis** and **Wa Lone** in Naypyitaw;
Editing by **Janet McBride**, **Peter Hirschberg** and
Richard Woods

Myanmar laying landmines near Bangladesh border: government sources in Dhaka

BY KRISHNA N. DAS

SEPTEMBER 6 DHAKA

Myanmar has been laying landmines across a section of its border with Bangladesh, said two government sources in Dhaka, adding that the purpose may have been to prevent the return of Rohingya Muslims fleeing violence.

Bangladesh will on Wednesday formally lodge a protest against the laying of land mines so close to the border, said the sources, who

had direct knowledge of the situation but asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the matter.

An army crackdown triggered by an attack on Aug. 25 by Rohingya insurgents on Myanmar security forces has led to the killing of at least 400 people and the exodus of nearly 125,000 Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh, leading to a major humanitarian crisis.

“They are putting the landmines in their territory along the barbed-wire fence” between a series of border pillars, said one of the sources. Both sources said Bangladesh learned about the landmines mainly through photographic evidence and informers.

“Our forces have also seen three to four groups working near the barbed wire fence, putting something into the ground,” one of the sources said. “We then confirmed with our informers that they were laying land mines.”

The sources did not clarify if the groups were in uniform, but added that they were sure they were not Rohingya insurgents.

Manzurul Hassan Khan, a Bangladesh border guard officer, told Reuters earlier that two blasts were heard on Tuesday on the Myanmar side, after two on Monday fuelled speculation that Myanmar forces had laid land mines.

One boy had his left leg blown off on Tuesday near a border crossing before being brought to Bangladesh for treatment, while another boy suffered minor injuries, Khan said, adding that the blast could have been a mine explosion.

A Rohingya refugee who went to the site of the blast on Monday – on a footpath near where civilians fleeing violence are huddled in a no man’s land on the border – filmed what appeared to be a mine: a metal disc about 10 centimetres (4 inches) in diameter partially buried in the mud. He said he believed there were two more such devices buried in the ground.

Two refugees also told Reuters they saw members of the Myanmar army around the site in the immediate period preceding the Monday blasts, which occurred around 2:25 p.m.

Reuters was unable to independently verify that the planted devices were land mines and that there was any link to the Myanmar army.



They are not doing anything on Bangladeshi soil... But we have not seen such laying of land mines in the border before.



Myanmar government source

Myanmar army has not commented on the blasts near the border. Zaw Htay, the spokesman for Myanmar’s national leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was not immediately available for comment.


On Monday, he told Reuters clarification was needed to determine “where did it explode, who can go there and who laid those land mines. Who can surely say those mines were not laid by the terrorists?”

A Myanmar military source said land-mines were laid along the border in the 1990s to prevent trespassing and the military had since tried to remove them, but none had been planted recently.

The Bangladesh interior ministry secretary, Mostafa Kamal Uddin, did not respond to calls seeking comment.

The border pillars mentioned by the Dhaka-based sources demarcate the boundaries of the two countries, along which Myanmar has a portion of barbed wire fencing. Most of the two countries’ 217-km-long border is porous.

“They are not doing anything on Bangladeshi soil,” said one of the sources. “But we have not seen such laying of land mines in the border before.”

Myanmar, which was under military rule until recently and is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, is one of the few countries that have not signed the 1997 U.N. Mine Ban Treaty. 

Additional reporting by **Wa Lone** in Yangon; Editing by **Philip McClellan**

“We will kill you all”: Rohingya villagers in Myanmar beg for safe passage

BY WA LONE AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

SEPTEMBER 17 SITTWE, MYANMAR

Thousands of Rohingya Muslims in violence-racked northwest Myanmar are pleading with authorities for safe passage from two remote villages that are cut off by hostile Buddhists and running short of food.

“We’re terrified,” Maung Maung, a Rohingya official at Ah Nauk Pyin village, told Reuters by telephone. “We’ll starve soon and they’re threatening to burn down our houses.”

Another Rohingya contacted by Reuters, who asked not to be named, said ethnic Rakhine Buddhists came to the same village and shouted, “Leave, or we will kill you all.”

Fragile relations between Ah Nauk Pyin and its Rakhine neighbours were shattered on Aug. 25, when deadly attacks by Rohingya militants in Rakhine State prompted a ferocious response from Myanmar’s security forces.

At least 430,000 Rohingya have since fled into neighbouring Bangladesh to evade what the United Nations has called a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

About a million Rohingya lived in Rakhine State until the recent violence. Most face draconian travel restrictions and are denied citizenship in a country where many Buddhists regard them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Tin Maung Swe, secretary of the Rakhine State government, told Reuters he was working closely with the Rathedaung authorities, and had received no information about the Rohingya villagers’ plea for safe passage.

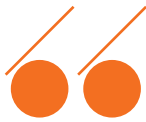
“There is nothing to be concerned about,” he said when asked about local tensions. “Southern Rathedaung is completely safe.”

National police spokesman Myo Thu Soe said he also had no information about the Rohingya villages but that he would look into the matter.

Asked to comment, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department’s East Asia Bureau made no reference to the situation in the villages, but said the United States was calling “urgently” for Myanmar’s security forces “to act in accordance with the rule of law and to stop the violence and displacement suffered by individuals from all communities.”

“Tens of thousands of people reportedly lack adequate food, water, and shelter in northern Rakhine State,” spokeswoman Katina Adams said. “The government should act immediately to assist them.”

Adams said Patrick Murphy, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, would reiterate grave U.S. concern about the situation in Rakhine when he meets senior officials in Myanmar this week.



Leave tomorrow or we'll come and burn down all your houses.



A Rakhine villager

Britain is to host a ministerial meeting on Monday on the sidelines of the annual U.N. General Assembly in New York to discuss the situation in Rakhine.

NO BOATS

Ah Nauk Pyin sits on a mangrove-fringed peninsula in Rathedaung, one of three townships in northern Rakhine State. The villagers say they have no boats.

Until three weeks ago, there were 21 Muslim villages in Rathedaung, along with three camps for Muslims displaced by previous bouts of religious violence. Sixteen of those villages and all three camps have since been emptied and in many cases burnt, forcing an estimated 28,000 Rohingya to flee.

Rathedaung's five surviving Rohingya villages and their 8,000 or so inhabitants are encircled by Rakhine Buddhists and acutely vulnerable, say human rights monitors.

The situation is particularly dire in Ah Nauk Pyin and nearby Naung Pin Gyi, where any escape route to Bangladesh is long, arduous, and sometimes blocked by hostile Rakhine neighbours.

Maung Maung, the Rohingya official, said the villagers were resigned to leaving but the authorities had not responded to their requests for security. At night, he said, villagers had heard distant gunfire.

"It's better they go somewhere else," said Thein Aung, a Rathedaung official, who dismissed Rohingya allegations that Rakhines were threatening them.

Only two of the Aug. 25 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) took place in Rathedaung. But the township was already a tinderbox of religious tension, with ARSA citing the mistreatment of Rohingya there as one justification for its offensive.

In late July, Rakhine residents of a large, mixed village in northern Rathedaung corralled hundreds of Rohingya inside their neighbourhood, blocking access to food and water.

A similar pattern is repeating itself in southern Rathedaung, with local Rakhine citing

possible ARSA infiltration as a reason for ejecting the last remaining Rohingya.

'ANOTHER PLACE'

Maung Maung said he had called the police at least 30 times to report threats against his village.

On Sept. 13, he said, he got a call from a Rakhine villager he knew. "Leave tomorrow or we'll come and burn down all your houses," said the man, according to a recording Maung Maung gave to Reuters.

When Maung Maung protested that they had no means to escape, the man replied: "That's not our problem."

On Aug. 31, the police convened a roadside meeting between two villages, attended by seven Rohingya from Ah Nauk Pyin and 14 Rakhine officials from the surrounding villages.

Instead of addressing the Rohingya complaints, said Maung Maung and two other Rohingya who attended the meeting, the Rakhine officials delivered an ultimatum.

"They said they didn't want any Muslims in the region and we should leave immediately," said the Rohingya resident of Ah Nauk Pyin who requested anonymity.

The Rohingya agreed, said Maung Maung, but only if the authorities provided security.

He showed Reuters a letter that the village elders had sent to the Rathedaung authorities on Sept. 7, asking to be moved to "another place". They had yet to receive a response, he said.

VIOLENT HISTORY

Relations between the two communities deteriorated in 2012, when religious unrest in Rakhine State killed nearly 200 people and made 140,000 homeless, most of them Rohingya. Scores of houses in Ah Nauk Pyin were torched.

Since then, said villagers, Rohingya have been too scared to leave the village or till their land, surviving mainly on monthly deliveries from the World Food Programme (WFP). The recent violence halted those deliveries.

The WFP pulled out most staff and suspended operations in the region after Aug. 25.

Residents in the area's two Rohingya villages said they could no longer venture out to fish or buy food from Rakhine traders, and were running low on food and medicines.

Maung Maung said the local police told the Rohingya to stay in their villages and not to worry because "nothing would happen," he said.


But the nearest police station had only half a dozen or so officers, he said, and could not do much if Ah Nauk Pyin was attacked.

A few minutes' walk away, at the Rakhine village of Shwe Long Tin, residents were also on edge, said its leader, Khin Tun Aye.

They had also heard gunfire at night, he said, and were guarding the village around the clock with machetes and slingshots in case the Rohingya attacked with ARSA's help.

"We're also terrified," he said.

He said he told his fellow Rakhine to stay calm, but the situation remained so tense that he feared for the safety of his Rohingya neighbours.

"If there is violence, all of them will be killed," he said. 

Additional reporting by **David Brunnstrom** in Washington; Editing by **Ian Geoghegan** and **Peter Cooney**

Eating leaves to survive in Myanmar's “ethnic cleansing” zone

BY WA LONE AND SHOON NAING

SEPTEMBER 27 MAUNGDAW, MYANMAR

Along the main road that stretches nearly 40 kilometres north from Maungdaw town in Myanmar's violence-riven Rakhine State, all but one of the villages that were once home to tens of thousands of people have been turned into smouldering ash.

Hundreds of cows roam through deserted settlements and charred paddy fields. Hungry dogs eat small goats. The remains of local mosques, markets and schools – once bustling with Rohingya Muslims – are silent.

Despite strict controls on access to northern Rakhine, Reuters independently travelled to parts of the most-affected area in early September, the first detailed look by reporters inside the region where the United Nations says Myanmar's security forces have carried out ethnic cleansing.

Nearly 500 people have been killed and 480,000 Rohingya have fled since Aug. 25, when attacks on 30 police posts and a military base by Muslim militants provoked a fierce army crackdown. The government has rejected

allegations of arson, rape and arbitrary killings levelled against its security forces.

“We were scared that the army and the police would shoot us if they found us ... so we ran away from the village,” said Suyaid Islam, 32, from Yae Khat Chaung Gwa Son, near the area visited by Reuters north of Maungdaw. He was speaking by phone from a refugee camp in Bangladesh after leaving his village soon after the attacks.

Residents of his village told Reuters it had been burned down by security forces in an earlier operation against Rohingya insurgents late last year. Those that did not flee have been surviving since in makeshift shacks, eating food distributed by aid agencies.

Satellite photos showed that tens of thousands of homes in northern Rakhine have been destroyed in 214 villages, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said. The U.N. detected 20 sq km (8 sq miles) of destroyed structures.

The government said more than 6,800 houses have been set on fire. It blames the Rohingya villagers and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which staged the Aug. 25 attacks.

“The information we obtained on this side is that terrorists did the burnings,” said Zaw Htay, spokesman for national leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Reuters reporters have made two trips to northern Rakhine, visiting the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, and driving from Maungdaw through the most affected area along the main road north to the town of Kyein Chaung.

The reporters talked briefly to residents but, because many were scared of being seen speaking to outsiders, most interviews were carried out by phone from outside the army operation area.

FOOD RUNNING LOW

Little aid has made it to northern Rakhine since the U.N. had to suspend operations because of the fighting and after the government suggested its food was sustaining insurgents. Convoys organised by the Red Cross have twice been stopped and searched by hostile ethnic Rakhines in the state capital Sittwe.



We are close to the forest where we have leaves we can eat and find some water to survive.



A Rohingya resident

In U Shey Kya, where last October Rohingya residents accused the Myanmar army of raping several women, a teacher who spoke to Reuters from the village by phone said only about 100 families out of 800 households have stayed behind.

Those who remain are playing a cat-and-mouse game with the soldiers, who come to the village in the morning prompting the residents to hide in the forest and return at night.

“We don’t even have food to eat for this evening. What can we do?” said the teacher. “We are close to the forest where we have leaves we can eat and find some water to survive.” He refused to give his name because he had been warned by the authorities not to talk to reporters.

The man said escaping through bush in monsoon rain with his elderly parents, six children and pregnant wife was not an option.

Zaw Htay said the government has prioritised humanitarian assistance to the area.

“If there are any locations where aid has not reached yet, people should let us know, we will try to reach them as soon as we can,” he said.

About 30,000 non-Muslim residents of northern Rakhine have also been displaced.

Before the latest exodus there were around 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, mostly living in Rakhine, where they are denied citizenship and are regarded as interlopers from Bangladesh by the Buddhist majority.

“HAPPY THEY’RE GONE NOW”

Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh and human rights organisations say ethnic Rakhine vigilantes have aided the military in driving out the Muslim population.

Kamal Hussein, 22, from Alel Than Kyaw, south of Maungdaw town said his village was destroyed in early September, after which he fled to Bangladesh, where he spoke to Reuters.

Hussein said Rakhine mobs “poured petrol on the houses. Then, they came out and the military fired a grenade launcher at a house to set it alight”.

Government spokesman Zaw Htay said some

empty buildings in the area had been burned by ethnic Rakhines. “We told the regional government to take action on that,” he said.

The damage caused by the fires, Reuters interviews and satellite pictures show, is by far the largest in Maungdaw, where the bulk of insurgent attacks took place. Across the mostly coastal area, stretching more than 100 km (60 miles) through thick bush and monsoon-swollen streams, most villages have been burned.

Maungdaw town itself, until recently ethnically mixed with Rakhine Buddhists, Muslims and some Hindus, is now segregated, with the remaining Rohingya shuttered in their homes. Some 450 houses in Rohingya parts of the town were burned down in the first week after the attacks, HRW said citing satellite photographs.

“Those who stored food, sold it and raised money to flee to Bangladesh,” Mohammad Salem, 35, who used to sell cosmetics at the market, told Reuters by phone from the town.


In ethnically-mixed Rathedaung township, 16 out of 21 Rohingya villages have been burned, according to residents and humanitarian workers.

Of the remaining five, two villages in the south are now cut off from food and threatened by hostile Rakhine neighbours.

In many places people have no access to medicines, residents said.

Reuters talked to two Rakhine Buddhist officials who corroborated the scale of the damage.

Tin Tun Soe, a Rakhine administrator in Chein Khar Li, where a security post had come under attack, said the army response was rapid and all the Rohingya had been driven out. Nearly 1,600 houses were burned down a day after the attacks, he said, though he blamed the fires on the insurgents.

“They have so many people. If they are here, we’re afraid to live,” said Tin Tun Soe. “I am very happy that now all of them are gone.” 

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