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# UP IN SMOKE

Dispatches from Maungdaw challenge the official narrative on northern Rakhine conflict

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# ‘THAT GUY SHOULD BE KILLED’ ESCAPING A MOB IN MAUNGDAW

Three journalists who made a clandestine trip to Maungdaw late last month in the wake of the August 25 attacks received a very hostile reception from residents, including death threats.

By Mratt Kyaw Thu

**W**HEN 10 journalists with domestic and international media organisations, including *Frontier*, arrived at Buthidaung jetty by river ferry from Sittwe on August 28 in the hope of travelling to Maungdaw, special branch police were everywhere.

We’d taken the ferry with Border Guard Police escorting a consignment of packages wrapped tightly with yellow tape. No

one we asked knew what the parcels contained.

Problems began soon after we left for Maungdaw. We were stopped by BGP at the 6-mile checkpoint outside Buthidaung. After a 25-minute wait an immigration official and a township administrator arrived and told us that the district administrator had ordered our return to Buthidaung. The two officials then asked for our names.

One of our group managed to call the district administrator, U Ye Htut, who said

he could not allow us to proceed to Maungdaw because he lacked a document from the Rakhine government to allow our trip. We remonstrated, citing comments by Rakhine State Chief Minister U Nyi Pu and Union Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Dr Win Myat Aye, “that no one is prohibited from going there”. But Ye Htut was adamant.

We had no choice but to return to Buthidaung. A 6pm to 6am curfew was in force and accommodation was hard to find because guesthouses and motels were crowded with people fleeing violence in Maungdaw.

We had to find a safe place to spend the night and a kind friend invited us to stay at his home. The situation was tense and our host was on edge. After a rumour spread online that “terrorists will occupy Buthidaung tonight”, our host moved his family to somewhere he considered safer. “I’ve been moving them to a safe place every night” since the coordinated attacks by the extremists on August 25, he said.





**THE MAIN** street in downtown Maungdaw was quiet in the immediate aftermath of the August 25 attacks. Photo: Mratt Kyaw Thu

The situation grew more ominous for us after our names and other personal information were posted on fake social media accounts and went viral. Local government officials were likely the only ones with access to this information. The posts included images of the journalists who had opted to return to Sittwe.

*Frontier* and two Rakhine journalists decided to travel to Maungdaw by van with three other passengers. We were warned that our pants, shirt and shoes immediately marked us as outsiders, so we did our best to dress like locals. It was a journey fraught with suspense, especially when the van passed through the three checkpoints between the two towns.

We arrived in downtown Maungdaw without incident and made our way to a camp for Rakhine displaced by the fighting since August 25. That's when the trouble started.

A woman pointed at a reporter and shouted that he was creating "wrong news". The reporter invited her to speak on the record about the information she claimed was incorrect and promised to send the interview to his office. She did

At midnight, a Muslim friend called our host and said he was concerned because "some people are very quiet" – a reference to local Muslims. He warned us to "stay alert".

We spent a nervous, sleepless night, alert for trouble that did not eventuate.

The next morning we were summoned to a meeting with the deputy township administrator, U Hla Shwe, who warned that we needed official permits to visit and report on the situation in Buthidaung and Maungdaw. He read out a Union government statement about the official permits. *Frontier* learned later that the statement was issued on April 6.

Amid rising tensions, some journalists decided that afternoon to return to Sittwe. Hostile rumours had circulated on social media about our presence in Buthidaung. One rumour-monger claimed to have overheard us planning the trip to Maungdaw so we could report pro-Rohingya stories and afterward get paid millions of dollars by a foreign Muslim organisation.



**A GROUP** of ethnic Rakhine pass a Border Guard Police checkpoint on the road from Buthidaung to Maungdaw. Photos: Teza Hlaing





**MAUNGDAW DISTRICT** administrator U Ye Htut, who blocked journalists in Buthidaung from travelling to Maungdaw. Photo: Nyan Hlaing Lynn

not seem to be listening and continued shouting at him. We knew there was already some hostility towards reporters in Maungdaw because a Rakhine reporter had been accosted the previous day by angry residents, who made him delete images he had taken of military helicopters. Nevertheless, we were surprised by the level of vitriol.

We then travelled by three-wheeled motorcycle to a bridge that connects downtown Maungdaw with a large Muslim village, Shwe Zar. We left the area immediately when we realised we were being followed by two men.

Our next destination was a camp sheltering thousands of Hindus displaced by the violence. They were suffering from shortages of food and other assistance.

After speaking to some of the Hindus, we asked our motorbike driver to return to the camps housing displaced Rakhine. We did not get far. A drunk man on a big motorcycle blocked our way and began issuing threats.

He pointed to a Rakhine reporter. “I know you, bastard. Do your job right, OK,” he said. Then he addressed all of us. “You motherfuckers are doing wrong news. Get out of here right now. Don’t you know that no journalists are allowed to come to Maungdaw?” he said. His tirade began to attract a supportive crowd.

It was a shock to realise that the crowd was aware of the deputy township administrator’s instruction to visit Maungdaw, which had been issued to us verbally just 90 minutes earlier.

After the drunk man threatened to kill our young motorbike driver, we left the area quickly and headed to a camp for displaced Rakhine. The cursing drunk followed us on his motorbike.

At the camp, we were fortunate to meet Rakhine State MP U Maung Ohn (Arakan National Party, Maungdaw-2). We asked him to protect us from the drunk man.

The situation grew uglier. The drunk shouted that we deserved to be killed and were “bastards” and “traitors”. A crowd of men and women gathered, shouting their agreement.

The situation escalated after another man asked for our identity cards. When a reporter from *The Irrawaddy* produced his press card, the man yelled, “That guy should be killed.”

Maung Ohn tried to calm the crowd but was shouted down by the belligerent drunk and an argument broke out. It was frightening: The crowd was chanting that we were spreading wrong information and deserved to be killed.

After Maung Ohn and the drunk began quarrelling, an elderly woman warned us to leave immediately and we fled. The

drunk followed, shouting, “There are journalists in town, here they are.”

One of the Rakhine reporters led us to an office of the Arakan National Party, where one of his friends helped us to hire a van. The driver offered to leave immediately. We agreed to pay K50,000 each for a trip that usually costs K4,000 and huddled on the floor of the van until it left Maungdaw Township.

During our visit to Maungdaw we saw no members of the security forces. In contrast, when journalists travelled to the town on a state-sponsored trip the following day, its streets were crowded with armed police and soldiers, who were also deployed in some of the villages on the arranged visit.

For the two Rakhine reporters, the encounter in Maungdaw was a particularly dispiriting experience. As they slumped down in their chairs back in the relative safety of Buthidaung, they agreed that the locals’ anger towards them was unlike anything they’d seen before.

“It’s very disappointing and ... very sad. There’s nothing else to say,” one of them commented.

Journalists trying to cover the conflict independently face a range of challenges. It’s no longer just about getting around government restrictions, keeping a low profile and trying to sort fact from fiction on the ground. It’s clear that civilian anger at the perceived bias of journalists – even Rakhine journalists working for domestic media – will be going to make our jobs much more difficult. ■



# INTO THE NORTH

*Frontier* joined the government's latest media trip to Maungdaw, and developments there placed further scrutiny on the government's official version of events.

Story and photos by Nyan Hlaing Lynn





**A**ROUND THE lush green paddy fields, herds of cattle and goats roam freely without their owners, set against a backdrop of the rolling Mayu Mountains. Off in the distance, occasional plumes of smoke can be seen sprouting up into the sky.

This is Maungdaw, the district in northern Rakhine State that has been the scene of heightened security, and violence, for the better part of a year following the emergence of a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.

ARSA first made their presence known on October 9 last year, with attacks on Border Guard Police outposts that saw almost a dozen security officers killed. The attacks led to a months-long security operation that came with accusations of disproportionate force, a charge continuously denied by the military and civilian government.

After a period of relative calm, ARSA

“**THERE’S NO ONE AROUND HERE. I’M SCARED,**

**Hindu motorbike repairman**

again launched attacks on the morning of August 25, just hours after the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, submitted its final report to the Myanmar government.

Violence, fear and distrust have returned to northern Rakhine and the conflict at this point appears intractable.

I have had the opportunity to visit the region on two separate occasions. The

first visit was immediately after the October 9 attacks and the second shortly after the latest uptick of violence started. Given independent media face restrictions accessing the region, both of these visits were media trips organised and tightly controlled by the government.

Our recent trip took place on September 6 and 7, with 18 journalists from domestic and international media visiting some of the communities affected by the latest violence. Due to time constraints, we were not able to get a real grasp of the situation on the ground, but the trip did offer some insights.

### **Staged photos**

One of our first visits was to a small school on the outskirts of Maungdaw town that was being used as a camp for Hindus displaced by the violence.

“There’s no one around here. I’m scared,” said our first interviewee, a Hindu motorbike repairman.







**ONE OF** the villages burned to the ground in the latest wave of violence to hit northern Rakhine State.

The people there all told us that attacks had been launched by Muslims, forcing them to flee. They said they were taking shelter at the school, which was guarded by security forces, and were too scared to return to their homes. According to a government statement, three homes in their ward had been burned by ARSA extremists on August 26.

From there we were taken to the Zawtikayon monastery, where a monk told us he had seen Muslims burning down homes nearby.

“When they set the houses on fire, I went and told them to stop,” the monk told us.

We were then shown photos apparently of the incident the monk had witnessed. They looked questionable. They showed men in Muslim-style caps burning down a thatched roof, as women – with what appeared to be tablecloths over their heads – stood nearby waving machetes.

Evidence later emerged that one woman in the photos was among the group of “displaced Hindus” we had earlier interviewed, while another man in the photos

wearing a distinctive checked shirt and longyi had also been seen at the displacement camp.

Clearly, the photos had been staged.

### Widespread distrust

We then visited a Muslim village called Shwe Zar. Before the violence, the village had been home to about 15,000 residents, but during our visit we saw just a handful of people walking along the street, and most

of the doors to the homes were closed.

“There are people inside – no one fled from this village,” said local resident Roshi Amad, 59, who was concerned that his two sons, both who are in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, would not be allowed to return to school to complete their education.

“If people are allowed to do their business, their livelihoods, I think everything will be calm and peaceful,” Roshi Amad said.





When we asked him about the violence, he repeatedly told us he could not say anything. Many other villagers we tried to interview refused to speak with us, while others expressed concern that ARSA had taken root in their village.

“We don’t have terrorists. We don’t want violence,” said Mamad Zawli, 48, who later told us that the key to improving the situation would be for authorities to work closely with residents from all communities.

Mamad Zawli was the only Muslim we met during the trip who holds a National Registration Card, but even he cannot leave the village currently. One thing all the residents we met in the village agreed on was the fact that Muslims and Rakhine had lived and worked peacefully side by side before, but that the distrust was so strong that a return to normalcy was not possible for the time being.

He believes that the key to re-building trust in the region is for authorities and the local people to work side by side.

On the following day when we reached Myoma Kanyindan village, a Muslim be-



**A PHOTO** provided to reporters that appeared to show Muslims burning their own homes. Evidence later emerged that suggests the photos were staged.

On September 8, the government announced that they would establish seven temporary camps in various parts of Maungdaw district and provide humanitarian aid to Muslims displaced by the violence.

A day later, government spokesman U Zaw Htay told *Frontier* that they would accept those who had been displaced if they could prove they had lived in the area before August 25. He said that authorities had photo records taken by immigration department and that they would also consult village elders.

“What is happening now is that those who were displaced went to the border, but Bangladesh doesn’t accept them. So they had to build huts along the border,” he said.

“We cannot accept all of those displaced openly, but we will accept those with documents showing that they lived here,” he said. “The government will scrutinise to ensure that those who did not live in Rakhine State don’t enter Myanmar.”

NYAN HLAING LYNN

tel seller told reporters that the government was not doing enough to solve the situation.

“International assistance is needed. The government is not doing enough and now we can’t go anywhere,” said the vendor.

### Charred villages

At Mawrawady village, we spoke to ethnic Rakhine who said they were frequently threatened by Muslim people living in surrounding villages. Originally home to about 600 residents, only about 120 remain, with the rest having fled for Maungdaw town or Sittwe.

“If [the violence] continues to happen, we can no longer live here,” said resident U San Hla Phyu, 57. “Formerly both communities were interdependent and worked and lived together. I can’t understand why violence suddenly erupted here.”

He called on the government to grant

citizenship to those who can prove they qualify under the 1982 citizenship law. Those who cannot should be put into camps. “We can live together with them,” he said.

At another village, Alethankyaw, Muslim and Rakhine residents lived side by side after the October 2016 attacks. But that changed after the latest violence, when a Border Guard Police outpost was attacked, thousands of people fled and an immigration officer killed. Now, Alethankyaw is silent, except for ashes and smoke, and only a few residents remain.

“I heard people shouting ‘Kill, kill’ nearby, and when I came out and looked I saw that they [ARSA] had captured more than half of the [police] camp,” said Daw Thet Thet recalling the events.

The attack appeared to pit neighbours against neighbours in some cases. Thet Thet told *Frontier* that she recognised some of those who had launched the attacks.





**A MONK** told reporters he had seen Muslims setting fire to homes, but evidence later emerged that suggested the photos had been staged.

“I didn’t think the situation would be so bad,” she said.

Police-Lieutenant Aung Kyaw Moe, who oversees security in the village, said he had received a tip-off that an attack was being planned so moved the ethnic Rakhine and government staff to a nearby camp in advance.

Authorities then escorted the reporters along a nearby track. After half an hour we reached an area where damage from a recent fire had caused widespread devastation and sporadic sounds of gunfire could be heard in the distance.

We continued further along the track and eventually reached the top of a hill from where we could see the beautiful Bay of Bengal in the distance.

We then noticed a figure moving slowly towards us. As he got closer, we saw that it was a man carrying some belongings. Immediately upon seeing us, he sat down quickly and held up his hands.

His name was Haribraman, 55. He said he had been walking for two days from a village called Thawun Chaung that had witnessed fighting between military forces and ARSA, and was hoping to take a boat to Bangladesh. His family was following closely behind, he said.

We left Haribraman to his journey and made our way back to the vehicles for the

return journey to Maungdaw town. While travelling along the road, we passed a village that was on fire. After some negotiation with the authorities, we were allowed to stop.

The village was called Gawduthara and had been Muslim-majority before the residents had fled. We could see religious books, some with Arabic script, strewn across the floor. An empty plastic jug, smelling of petrol, was sitting on the floor.

We could see no Muslims in the area, but we could see some people – who appeared to be Rakhine by their appearance – standing around watching in small groups. Some were holding swords or machetes.

*Frontier* approached one of the unarmed men and asked what he had seen. He said he was from a nearby village and that “Bengalis” – a term many in Myanmar use to call the Muslim minority who identify as Rohingya – had set fire to their houses at 5am that morning.

I checked my watch. It was 1.44pm, almost nine hours after the man said the fires had been lit. It was clear that the fires flickering before us had been set much more recently than that.

Authorities have claimed that Muslims are setting fire to their own homes and blaming it on the military.

Colonel Phone Thit, the Rakhine State minister for security and border affairs, had previously told us that the “Bengali terrorists” had set fire to the villages to make local residents scared of them. “Then the international community would condemn [the military]. That’s why they set fire to the homes.”

But as I stood watching the flames, I recalled a conversation from a day earlier with the Muslim betel seller in Myoma Kanyindan village.

“It’s not like that,” he said, referring to reports that Muslims had set fire to their own homes. “We know who did it. It’s impossible for someone to set fire to their own home. Impossible.” ■







# THE DESTRUCTION OF MIN GYI

Story by Oliver Slow and photos by Steve Tickner

Refugees in Bangladesh recount the burning of their homes and killing of their relatives, allegedly at the hands of soldiers and Rakhine vigilantes.





**MUSLIM CHILDREN** fetch water from a well at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh.

**W**HAT IS most striking is the consistency of their testimonies.

In more than a dozen interviews conducted in refugee camps in Bangladesh in late September, former Muslim residents of Min Gyi – which they call Tula Toli – told *Frontier* that Tatmadaw soldiers, accompanied by Rakhine vigilantes, came to their village on August 30. They then torched houses and killed scores of people; the violence lasted for three days, they said.

Min Gyi is several hours north of Maungdaw town, nestled into a kink of the Purma River, which winds its way through northern Rakhine. The village is about a dozen miles east of the seemingly endless refugee camps that have sprouted up in southern Bangladesh since late August, and where these interviews were carried out.

It is surrounded on three sides by the river – to the north, south and east – and the only way to enter, or leave, the village is through the forests to the west.

Min Gyi had once been a mixed village.

While the exact demographics of Min Gyi before the exodus are unclear, one villager in Bangladesh told *Frontier* that it had been home to about 300 families, of which 60 had been Rakhine and the rest Muslim.

Just over a year ago, relations between the Muslim and Rakhine were generally amicable. Like most villages in this picturesque but deprived corner of the country, residents survived through farming or fishing. For the most part, Rakhine and Muslims lived and worked peacefully side by side.

Then their lives were upended.





**HAJ JAFORD ALAM** said he was once the village chairman of Min Gyi, but was forced to flee after the violence in late August.

“Things changed after October 9,” said Mohammed Rashid, 50, referring to the 2016 attacks launched by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on Border Guard Police posts, which announced the arrival of a new and even darker chapter to the dynamics in northern Rakhine. “After that, the military came to the village and arrested innocent people, saying they were involved with the militants.”

#### The village chief

A name that would crop up consistently in interviews was that of the village leader in Min Gyi, an ethnic Rakhine. (*Frontier* has not named him because he could not be reached for comment.)

Villagers recounted numerous interactions with Aung Ko Sing prior to the second ARSA offensive on August 25. All seemed to include some sort of threat.

Some said he had threatened to kill all Muslims in the village. Others said he told them that if they took part in the government’s National Verification Certificate process and identified themselves as Bengalis rather than Rohingyas, then all Min Gyi

“**I WATCHED EVERYTHING. MY WIFE AND THREE CHILDREN WERE KILLED**”

**Mohammed Islam, 40**

residents could live peacefully side by side.

A few days before the soldiers arrived in Min Gyi on August 30, a nearby village was set alight, forcing its residents to flee. Several interviewees said that Aung Ko Sing reassured the Muslims in Min Gyi that they had nothing to fear if the soldiers came.

“He told us we don’t need to go anywhere,” said Amin Khartoum, 22, who is now staying at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. “He said that if the

military came, we should take shelter at the river bank. We went to the forest, but those who listened to him, they died.”

Among those to flee into the forest was Mohammed Islam, 40. On August 30, he said he had been visiting a nearby village and was returning to his home in Min Gyi when he came across a neighbour.

“They told me the village was being burned, that people were being killed,” he told *Frontier*, his eyes filling with tears.

He joined his neighbours and ran to a nearby hill in the forest, on the west side of the village.

“I watched everything,” he said. “My wife and three children were killed.”

#### On the river bank

During the interview, Mohammed Islam’s 10-year-old daughter Nor Kaida sat beside him. As her father spoke she stared blankly ahead, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She had been at her home with her mother and brothers when the soldiers entered Min Gyi. She ran with them to the riverbank, she said.

“When the military reached us, they





**NOR KAIDA** speaks to *Frontier* at a refugee camp in Bangladesh.

divided us into two groups: male and female,” she said. “The military told the men to dig a hole. After that, they were shot.”

A group of women were then taken to nearby houses. According to witnesses *Frontier* interviewed, as well as other journalists and monitoring groups researching what happened at Min Gyi, the women were raped and severely beaten before the houses were torched with the women inside.

Some women are said to have escaped the buildings and are now receiving treatment in hospitals in Bangladesh, but this could not be independently verified.

Those who remained on the riverbank were then told to lie on the ground, Nor Kaida said. “The military then told us to stand up. Some people jumped into the river, so I did too,” she said.

Nor Kaida said she swam for about an hour, before returning to shore. After some time, she eventually came across her elder sister, who lived in a nearby village with her husband. (Mohammed Islam said this daughter had also fled to Bangladesh with her family, but *Frontier* was unable to locate her among the hundreds of thou-



sands of refugees.)

Asked how she felt at that moment when she found her sister, Nor Kaida said: “I just cried. I shouted. I said, ‘My mum is dead. My siblings are dead.’”

### Conflicting accounts

Speaking by telephone on November 10, government spokesperson U Zaw Htay told *Frontier* that a total of eight clashes had broken out in the area close to Min Gyi

village on August 30.

Citing military reports, he said that a military unit had been staying in the area, when it had come under attack by an unspecified group, leading to the fighting to break out.

The Tatmadaw has denied that its personnel committed any wrongdoing during its northern Rakhine operations in late August and early September. On November 13, a statement was posted to the Facebook page of the military’s commander-in-chief saying that an investigation by the Tatmadaw True News Information Team had found “there was no death of innocent people” during the operations.

The investigation was headed by Lieutenant-General Aye Win, the Inspector General of the Defence Services, and included interviews with more than 3,000 villagers in northern Rakhine, including 2,817 “Bengalis”, a term the military uses to describe the Muslim minority.

“They [security forces] did not commit shooting at innocent villagers and sexual violence and rape cases against women. They did not arrest, beat and kill the





Satellite imagery of Min Gyi Village (Tula Toli) taken in September.  
Photograph: Amnesty International / Guardian



villagers,” the statement said. “They did not totally destroy, rob and take property, gold and silver wares, vehicles and animals of villagers from the villages and displaced villages. They did not set fire to the mosques in Bengali villages. They allow (sic) the Bengali villagers to perform their faiths in freedom without banning them to attend the mosques and join prayers.”

The statement added that all security members were following the orders of “superior bodies” especially in rules relating to the rights of self-defence and in conducting anti-terrorist operations.

It said that in 94 clashes between August 25 and September 5, 376 alleged ARSA members were killed and 78 arrested. The government’s death toll from the fighting

was 13, with 15 injured and one missing.

However, the statement came in for criticism from several quarters.

Dutch diplomat Ms Laetitia van den Assum, a former member of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by UN Secretary General Mr Kofi Annan, which concluded its work in August, said that the report “reinforces the dire need for an independent and impartial investigation” into what happened in northern Rakhine, including listening to the more than 600,000 refugees who have fled to Bangladesh.

“There is a remarkable consistency in the testimony by refugees, and hospital records in Bangladesh indicate that a large number of them have presented bullet







**AN UNOFFICIAL**  
refugee camp in  
an area known as  
'No Man's Land' on  
the border between  
Myanmar and  
Bangladesh.  
Photo: Steve Tickner

wounds and other serious injuries,” she told *Frontier* by email on November 14. “Credible reports on sexual violence indicate that many women suffered tremendously. This cannot just be ignored.”

The incident at Min Gyi has been documented by human rights groups and other media outlets, including *The Guardian*, CNN and the BBC. It is also documented in Fortify Rights’ report *They tried to kill us all*, which was published on November 15. The findings documented in that report are consistent with those *Frontier* heard.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also released satellite imagery showing the widespread burning of villages in northern Rakhine.

In its October report *My world is fin-*

*ished*, Amnesty released satellite images of Min Gyi, comparing shots taken on September 22 with those captured on May 25 (see map on previous page). The later image showed a pattern of burning along the southern shore of the river in the north of the village, and to a row of houses running north to south.

The report suggests that targeted burning took place on the houses belonging to Muslims. “In Min Gyi, Rohingya residents described their houses as being near the river, while the ethnic Rakhine lived at a higher elevation, in the southwestern part of the village,” said the report. “This, too, matches what the satellite imagery shows in terms of the targeted burning of Rohingya areas.”

One of the burned houses belonged to Haj Jaford Alam, 75. Many of the relatives he shared it with were killed in the attacks, he said.

Asked if he wanted to return to Min Gyi, he said he would if his people were given back their rights.

“We had our rights before,” he said, having to stop the interview several times to compose himself as he fought back tears. “In the past, I was the chairman, I had rights. If they accept us, we will go back.

“This is all we are asking of the world, that we get back our rights. Because we have nothing.” ■

*Additional reporting by Mratt Kyaw Thu*