

Myanmar: Who are the Rohingya?

28 Sept 2017

THE ROHINGYA

- [Who are they?](#)
- [Where are they from?](#)
- [How are they persecuted?](#)
- [How many have fled?](#)
- [What does Myanmar say?](#)
- [What does Bangladesh say?](#)
- [What does the international community say?](#)
- [What is the ARSA?](#)

Who are the Rohingya?

[The Rohingya](#) are often described as "the world's most persecuted minority".

They are an ethnic group, majority of whom are Muslim, who have lived for centuries in the majority Buddhist [Myanmar](#). Currently, there are about 1.1 million Rohingya who live in the Southeast Asian country.

The Rohingya speak Rohingya or Ruaingga, a dialect that is distinct to others spoken in Rakhine State and throughout Myanmar. They are not considered one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups and have been denied citizenship in Myanmar since 1982, which has effectively rendered them stateless.

Nearly all of the Rohingya in Myanmar live in the western coastal state of Rakhine and are not allowed to leave without government permission. It is one of the poorest states in the country with ghetto-like camps and a lack of basic services and opportunities.

Due to ongoing violence and persecution, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled to neighbouring countries either by land or boat over the course of many decades.

Where are the Rohingya from?

Muslims have lived in the area now known as Myanmar since as early as the 12th century, according to many historians and Rohingya groups.

The [Arakan Rohingya National Organisation](#) has said, "Rohingyas have been living in Arakan from time immemorial," referring to the area now known as Rakhine.

During the more than 100 years of British rule (1824-1948), there was a significant amount of migration of labourers to what is now known as Myanmar from today's India and [Bangladesh](#).

Because the British administered Myanmar as a province of [India](#), such migration was considered internal, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The migration of labourers was viewed negatively by the majority of the native population.

After independence, the government viewed the migration that took place during British rule as "illegal, and it is on this basis that they refuse citizenship to the majority of Rohingya," HRW said in a [2000 report](#).

This has led many Buddhists to consider the Rohingya to be Bengali, rejecting the term Rohingya as a recent invention, created for political reasons.

How and why are they being persecuted? And why aren't they recognised?

Shortly after Myanmar's independence from the British in 1948, the Union Citizenship Act was passed, defining which ethnicities could gain citizenship. According to a [2015 report](#) by the International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School, the Rohingya were not included. The act, however, did allow those whose families had lived in Myanmar for at least two generations to apply for identity cards.

Rohingya were initially given such identification or even citizenship under the generational provision. During this time, several Rohingya also served in parliament.

After the 1962 military coup in Myanmar, things changed dramatically for the Rohingya. All citizens were required to obtain national registration cards. The Rohingya, however, were only given foreign identity cards, which limited the jobs and educational opportunities they could pursue and obtain.

In 1982, a new citizenship law was passed, which effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless. Under the law, Rohingya were again not recognised as one of the country's 135 ethnic groups. The law established three levels of citizenship. In order to obtain the most basic level (naturalised citizenship), there must be proof that the person's family lived in Myanmar prior to 1948, as well as fluency in one of the national languages. Many Rohingya lack such paperwork because it was either unavailable or denied to them.

As a result of the law, their rights to study, work, travel, marry, practice their religion and access health services have been and continue to be restricted. The Rohingya cannot vote and even if they jump through the citizenship test hoops, they have to identify as "naturalised" as opposed to Rohingya, and limits are placed on them entering certain professions like medicine, law or running for office.

Since the 1970s, a number of crackdowns on the Rohingya in Rakhine State have forced hundreds of thousands to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh, as well as [Malaysia](#), Thailand and

other Southeast Asian countries. During such crackdowns, refugees have often reported rape, torture, arson and murder by Myanmar security forces.

After the killings of nine border police in October 2016, troops started pouring into villages in Rakhine State. The government blamed what it called fighters from an armed Rohingya group. The killings led to a security crackdown on villages where Rohingya lived. During the crackdown, government troops were accused of an array of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killing, rape and arson - allegations the government denied.

In November 2016, a UN official accused the government of carrying out "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya. It was not the first time such an accusation has been made.

In April 2013, for example, HRW said Myanmar was [conducting](#) a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. The government has consistently denied such accusations.

Most recently, Myanmar's military has imposed a crackdown on the country's Rohingya population after police posts and an army base were attacked in late August.

Residents and activists have [described](#) scenes of troops firing indiscriminately at unarmed Rohingya men, women and children. The government, however, has said nearly 100 people were killed after armed men from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) launched a raid on police outposts in the region.

Since the violence erupted, rights groups have documented fires burning in at least 10 areas of Myanmar's Rakhine State. More than 500,000 people have fled the violence, with thousands trapped in a no-man's land between the two countries, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

The UN has also said that hundreds of civilians who have tried to enter Bangladesh have been pushed back by patrols. Many have also been detained and forcibly returned to Myanmar.

Myanmar does not recognise the Rohingya as an ethnic group [Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera]

How many Rohingya have fled Myanmar and where have they gone?

Since the late 1970s, nearly one million Rohingya have fled Myanmar due to widespread persecution.

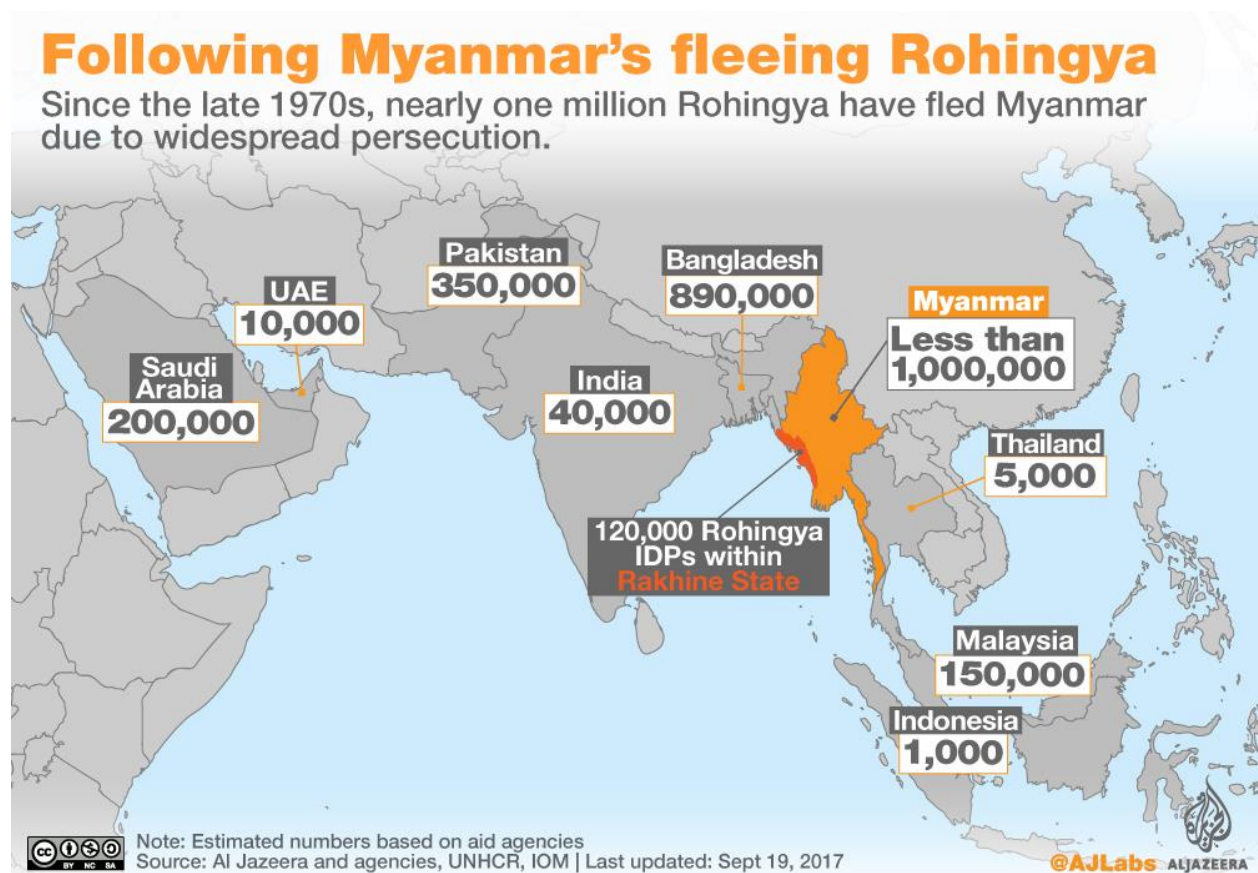
According to the most recently available data from the United Nations in May, more than 168,000 Rohingya [have fled](#) Myanmar since 2012.

Following violence that broke out last year, more than 87,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh from October 2016 to July 2017, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Many Rohingya also risked their lives trying to get to Malaysia by boat across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Between 2012 and 2015, more than [112,000](#) made the dangerous journey.

Prior to the violence that began in August, the UN estimated that there are as many as 420,000 Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia. Additionally, it said there were around 120,000 internally displaced Rohingya.

Since the violence in Myanmar's northwest began, more than 500,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, [UNHCR said](#). It added that more than 1,000 people, mostly Rohingya, may have been killed in Myanmar.



What do Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar government say about the Rohingya?

State Chancellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who is the de facto leader of Myanmar, has refused to really discuss the plight of the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government do not recognise the Rohingya as an ethnic group and have blamed violence in Rakhine, and subsequent military crackdowns, on those they call "terrorists".

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate does not have control over the military but has been criticised for her failure to condemn indiscriminate force used by troops, as well as to stand up for the rights of the more than one million Rohingya in Myanmar.

The government has also repeatedly rejected accusations of abuses. In February 2017, the UN published a report that [found that](#) government troops "very likely" committed crimes against humanity since renewed military crackdowns began in October 2016.

At the time, the government did not directly address the findings of the report and [said](#) it had the "the right to defend the country by lawful means" against "increasing terrorist activities", adding that a domestic investigation was enough.

In September 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi entrusted former UN chief Kofi Annan with finding ways to heal the long-standing divisions in the region. While many welcomed the commission and its findings, which were released this August, Azeem Ibrahim, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Policy, [argued](#) it was just a way for Aung San Suu Kyi to "pacify the global public opinion and try to demonstrate to the international community that she is doing what she can to resolve the issue".

Annan was not given the mandate to investigate specific cases of human rights abuses, but rather one for long-term economic development, education and healthcare.

When setting up the commission, Aung San Suu Kyi's government [said](#) it would abide by its findings. The commission urged the government to end the highly militarised crackdown on neighbourhoods where Rohingya live, as well as scrap restrictions on movement and citizenship.

Following the release of the August report, the government welcomed the commission's [recommendations](#) and said it would give the report "full consideration with the view to carrying out the recommendations to the fullest extent ... in line with the situation on the ground".

On the latest round of violence, Aung San Suu Kyi condemned a ["huge iceberg of misinformation"](#) on the crisis, without mentioning the Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh.

On September 19, she gave a [televised address](#), condemning "all human rights violations" in Rakhine.

She said that Myanmar was ready "at any time" to verify the status of those who have fled the violence in the last month. She did not specify who would be qualified to return and did not elaborate on how the verification process would work.

Her speech was [criticised by Rohingya refugees](#), as well as activists who accused her government of "burying their heads in the sand".

The government has often restricted access to northern Rakhine States for journalists and aid workers. Aung San Suu Kyi's office has also accused aid groups of helping those it considers to be "terrorists".

In January, Yanghee Lee, a UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, [said](#) she was denied access to certain parts of Rakhine and was only allowed to speak to Rohingya who had been pre-approved by the government.

The country has also denied visas to members of a UN probe investigating the violence and alleged abuses in Rakhine.

What does Bangladesh say about the Rohingya?

There are more than half a million Rohingya refugees living in mostly makeshift camps in Bangladesh. The majority remain unregistered.

Bangladesh considers most of those who have crossed its borders and are living outside of camps as having "illegally infiltrated" the country. Bangladesh has often tried to prevent Rohingya refugees from crossing its border.

In late January, the country [resurrected a plan](#) to relocate tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to a remote island that is prone to flooding and has also been called "uninhabitable" by rights groups. Under the plan, which was originally introduced in 2015, authorities would move undocumented Myanmar nationals to Thengar Char in the Bay of Bengal.

Rights groups have decried the proposal, saying the island completely floods during monsoon season. The UN also called the forced relocation "very complex and controversial".

Most recently, Bangladesh's foreign minister [labelled the violence](#) against the Rohingya in Myanmar "a genocide". The country's National Commission for Human Rights also said it was considering "pressing for a trial against Myanmar, and against the Myanmar army at an international tribunal" on charges of genocide.

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited a Rohingya refugee camp in September and [called on the UN](#) and the international community to pressure Myanmar's government to allow the return of hundreds of thousands Rohingya refugees.

She said that Bangladesh would offer the refugees temporary shelter and aid, but that Myanmar should soon "take their nationals back".

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have [told Al Jazeera](#) that the government's aid thus far has been inadequate, with many saying they haven't received any kind of government help.

Refugees in Bangladesh have been banned from leaving the overcrowded border areas. Police check posts and surveillance have been set up in key transit points to stop Rohingyas from travelling to other parts of the country.

The Rohingyas have effectively been stateless for decades [Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera]

What does the international community say about the Rohingyas?

The international community has labelled the Rohingyas the "most persecuted minority in the world".

The UN, as well as several rights groups such as [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#), have consistently decried the treatment of the Rohingyas by Myanmar and neighbouring countries.

The UN has said that it is "very likely" that the military committed grave human rights abuses in Rakhine that may amount to war crimes, allegations the government denies.

In March, the UN adopted a resolution to set up an independent, international mission to [investigate](#) the alleged abuses. It stopped short of calling for a Commission of Inquiry, the UN's highest level of investigation.

The UN investigators must provide a verbal update in September and a full report next year on their findings.

Rights groups have criticised the government's reluctance to accept the UN investigators.

Human Rights Watch warned that Myanmar's government [risked](#) getting bracketed with "pariah states" like North Korea and Syria if it did not allow the UN to investigate alleged crimes.

In response to the latest round of violence, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of the risk of ethnic cleansing, calling on Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's security forces to end the violence.

In early September, Guterres also [warned](#) of a looming "humanitarian catastrophe" if the violence does not end.

UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein [urged Myanmar](#) to end its "brutal security operation" against the Rohingya in Rakhine, calling it a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

Both UN officials said they completely supported the findings of the advisory commission, led by Kofi Annan, and urged the government to fulfil its recommendations.

What is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), formerly known as the al-Yaqeen Faith Movement, [released a statement](#) under its new name in March 2017, saying it was obligated to "defend, salvage and protect [the] Rohingya community".

The group said it would do so "with our best capacities as we have the legitimate right under international law to defend ourselves in line with the principle of self defence".

The group is considered a "terrorist" organisation by the Myanmar government.

In its March statement, the ARSA added that it does "not associate with any terrorist group across the world" and does "not commit any form of terrorism against any civilian[s] regardless of their religious and ethnic origin".

The statement also said: "We [...] declare loud and clear that our defensive attacks have only been aimed at the oppressive Burmese regime in accordance with international norms and principles until our demands are fulfilled."

The group has claimed responsibility for an [attack](#) on police posts and an army base in Rakhine State. According to the government nearly 400 people were killed, the majority of whom were members of the ARSA. Rights groups, however, say hundreds of civilians have been killed by security forces.

Rights group Fortify Rights said it has documented that fighters with the ARSA "are also accused of killing civilians - suspected government 'informants' - in recent days and months, as well as preventing men and boys from flee Maungdaw Township".

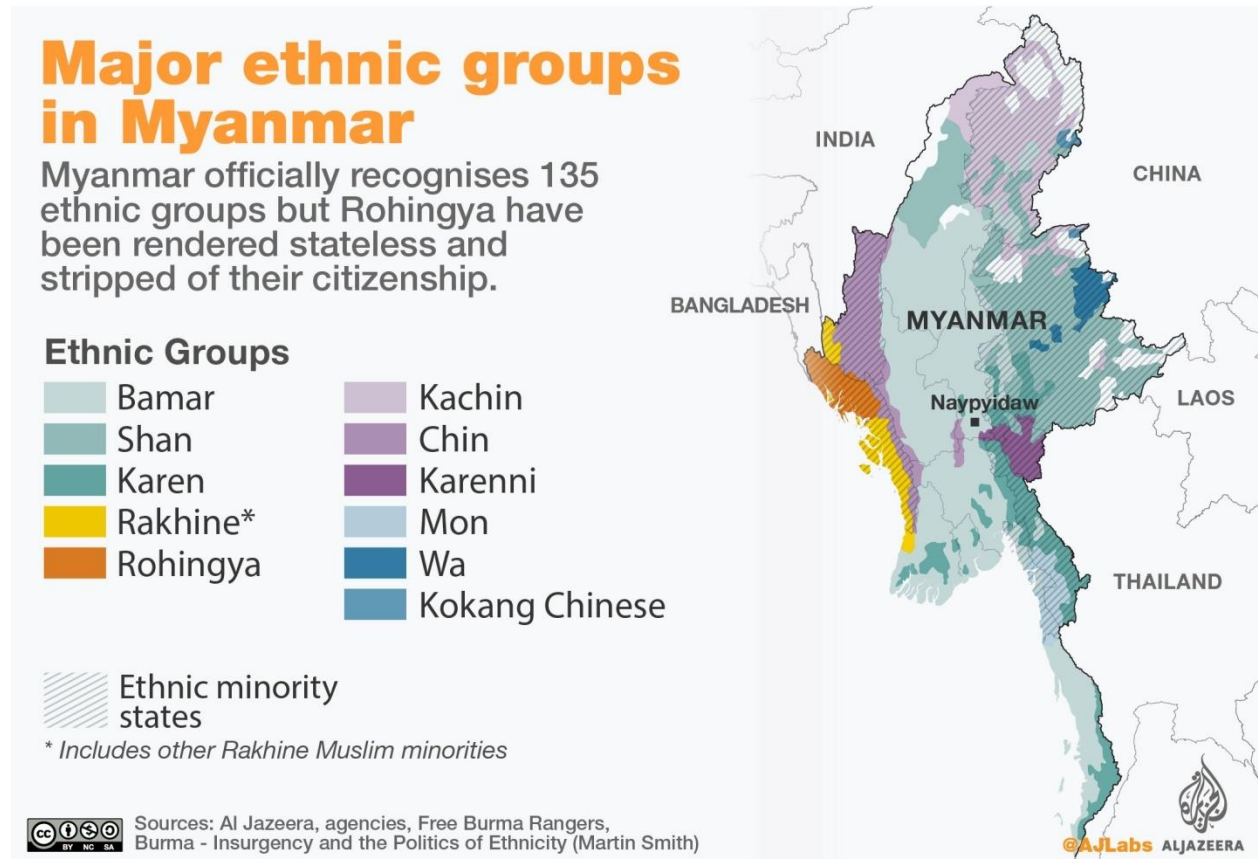
On September 9, the group [declared a month-long unilateral ceasefire](#) in Rakhine to enable aid groups to address the humanitarian crisis in the area.

"ARSA strongly encourages all concerned humanitarian actors resume their humanitarian assistance to all victims of the humanitarian crisis, irrespective of ethnic or religious background during the ceasefire period," the group said in a statement, adding that it calls on Myanmar's military to also temporarily lay down arms.

According to the International Crisis group, the ARSA [has ties](#) to Rohingya living in Saudi Arabia.

The Myanmar government formally categorised the group as a "terrorist" organisation on August 25.

SOURCE: Al Jazeera



Who are the Rohingya and what is happening in Myanmar?

Who are the Rohingya?

Described as the world's most persecuted people, 1.1 million [Rohingya](#) people live in Myanmar. They live predominately in Rakhine state, where they have co-existed uneasily alongside Buddhists for decades.

Rohingya people say they are descendants of Muslims, perhaps Persian and Arab traders, who came to [Myanmar](#) generations ago. Unlike the Buddhist community, they speak a language similar to the Bengali dialect of Chittagong in Bangladesh.

The Rohingya are reviled by many in Myanmar as illegal immigrants and they suffer from systematic discrimination. The Myanmar government treats them as stateless people, denying them citizenship. Stringent restrictions have been placed on Rohingya people's freedom of movement, access to medical assistance, education and other basic services.

What has been happening to them?

Violence broke out in northern Rakhine state on 25 August, when [militants attacked government forces](#). In response, security forces supported by Buddhist militia launched a "clearance operation" that has killed at least 1,000 people and forced more than 300,000 to flee their homes. The UN's [top human rights official](#) said on 11 September that the military's response was "clearly disproportionate" to insurgent attacks and warned that Myanmar's treatment of its Rohingya minority appears to be a "textbook example" of ethnic cleansing.

Refugees [have spoken of massacres](#) in villages, where they say soldiers raided and burned their homes. The government claims the Rohingya have burned their own homes and killed Buddhists and Hindus, a [claim repeated](#) by some residents. It says that the military is targeting terrorists, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa), the group that claimed responsibility for the August attacks.

Satellite analysis by Human Rights Watch has shown [evidence of fire damage](#) in urban areas populated by Rohingyas, as well as in isolated villages.

How many have been killed, injured or forced to flee?

Estimates of the death toll vary: the Myanmar government claims about 400 people have been killed so far, though others say the number is much higher. The UN [estimated on 7 September](#) that 1,000 had been killed. Bangladesh's foreign minister, AH Mahmood Ali, said unofficial sources put the [death toll at about 3,000](#). More than [310,000 people](#) had fled to Bangladesh by 11 September. Those who have made it to the border have walked for days, hiding in jungles and crossing mountains and rivers. Many are sick and some have bullet wounds.

Aid agencies have warned of a growing humanitarian crisis in overstretched border camps, where water, food rations and medical supplies are running out of stock. Most refugees are now living in established camps, makeshift settlements or sheltering in host communities. Nearly 50,000 are in new spontaneous settlements that have sprung up along the border, where access to services is especially limited.

There are also fears for Rohingya people trapped in conflict zones. On 4 September, the UN said its [aid agencies had been blocked](#) from supplying life-saving supplies such as food, water and medicine to thousands of civilians in northern Rakhine state.

What's the background to the story?

For decades ethnic tensions have simmered in Rakhine state, with frequent outbreaks of violence. In October 2016 nine police officers were killed by armed men, believed by officials to be Muslims. Amid the ensuing violence, [87,000 Rohingya Muslims fled](#) to Bangladesh and government troops expanded their presence in Rakhine state.

At the time, a [senior UN official](#) alleged that the Myanmar government was seeking to rid the country of its Muslim minority – an accusation that has been made repeatedly by human rights groups. The government denies the charge.

In August, Myanmar further increased the number of troops in Rakhine, after seven Buddhists were found hacked to death. The buildup of troops prompted warnings of a [fresh wave of violence](#).

The most recent violence is seen as a major escalation not only because of the scale, but because of the involvement of the new Rohingya militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. It says the attacks on government forces were an act of self-defence.

What is the Myanmar government saying?

The government has claimed that it is targeting militants responsible for attacks on the security forces, and that the majority of those killed are terrorists. It also says that Rohingya are burning their own villages – a claim questioned by journalists who [reported seeing new fires](#) burning in villages that had been abandoned by Rohingya people.

The government has also accused international aid workers of [helping “terrorists”](#) besiege a village in Rakhine state. The claim was condemned as dangerously irresponsible by aid workers, who fear for their safety.

Why hasn't Aung San Suu Kyi done anything about it?

When Aung San Suu Kyi rose to power there were [high hopes](#) that the Nobel peace prize winner would help heal the country's entrenched ethnic divides. But she has been accused of silently standing by while violence is committed against the Rohingya. [International pressure is growing on her](#) to curb the military operations.

Last year she appointed Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary general, to lead a commission looking at long-term reconciliation in Rakhine state. But she has failed to criticise violence against the Rohingya.

Some argue that Aung San Suu Kyi fears an unpredictable military. Despite her position as state counsellor, the military has retained significant political power, with an allocated 25% of seats in parliament.

On Thursday 7 September, Aung San Suu Kyi [defended her handling of the crisis](#). “It is a little unreasonable to expect us to solve the issue in 18 months,” she told the Delhi-based Asian News International. “The situation in Rakhine has been such since many decades. It goes back to pre-colonial times.

“Our resources are not as complete and adequate as we would like them to be but still, we try our best and we want to make sure that everyone is entitled to the protection of the law,” she said.

A statement on Aung San Suu Kyi's Facebook page [blamed “terrorists” for “a huge iceberg of misinformation” about the violence](#), and made no mention of the Rohingya who had fled.

The figures in this article were updated on Monday 11 September

Malala tells Aung San Suu Kyi 'world is waiting' for her to act over Rohingya violence

The youngest ever Nobel peace prize winner urges her fellow laureate to stop 'shameful' treatment of the Muslim minority in Myanmar

Monday 4 September 2017 05.46 BST Last modified on Monday 4 September 2017 23.12 BST

Malala Yousafzai has called on [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) to condemn the “tragic and shameful” treatment of the Myanmar’s Rohingya people following violence that has left hundreds dead.

In a [statement on Twitter](#), the Nobel peace prize winner told her fellow laureate that the “world is waiting” for her to act over unrest that has seen tens of thousands of people flee into neighbouring Bangladesh.

Yousafzai’s intervention comes after foreign secretary Boris Johnson warned Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s de facto leader, that the treatment of the ethnic minority group was “besmirching” the country’s reputation.

Myanmar security officials and insurgents from the Rohingya [have accused each other](#) of burning down villages and committing atrocities in Rakhine state in the north-west of the country.

Calling for an end to the violence, Yousafzai said she had been left heartbroken by reports of young children being killed by security forces and urged the Burmese government to grant the group citizenship.

She wrote: “Over the last several years, I have repeatedly condemned this tragic and shameful treatment.

“I am still waiting for my fellow Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to do the same. The world is waiting and the Rohingya Muslims are waiting.”

Almost 400 people have died in the recent unrest, with the Burmese military accused of committing crimes against humanity by campaigners.

Advertisement

Yousafzai wrote: “Stop the violence. Today we have seen pictures of small children killed by Myanmar’s security forces. These children attacked no one, but still their homes were burned to the ground.

“If their home is not Myanmar, where they have lived for generations, then where is it? Rohingya people should be given citizenship in [Myanmar](#), the country where they were born.”

On Saturday, Johnson sent a message to Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel peace prize for her pro-democracy activism, to use “all her remarkable qualities” to end the violence.

He said: “Aung San Suu Kyi is rightly regarded as one of the most inspiring figures of our age but the treatment of the Rohingya is alas besmirching the reputation of Burma.

“She faces huge challenges in modernising her country. I hope she can now use all her remarkable qualities to unite her country, to stop the violence and to end the prejudice that afflicts both Muslims and other communities in Rakhine.

“It is vital that she receives the support of the Burmese military, and that her attempts at peacemaking are not frustrated. She and all in Burma will have our full support in this.”

According to the UN’s refugee agency an estimated 73,000 people have crossed the border into Bangladesh since violence flared on August 25, leaving relief camps near full capacity.

Yousafzai, who narrowly avoided death in 2012 after being shot in the head by the Pakistani Taliban for her outspoken campaigning over girls’ rights to an education, called for more countries to offer the Rohingya food, shelter and schooling.

Awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2014, the youngest ever recipient, she recently celebrated a place at the University of Oxford to philosophy, politics and economics.

The real significance of the Rohingya issue

Horrendous bloodshed would result should the notion of ethnic cleansing take hold in Asia

HONG KONG – The real significance of the crisis of the Rohingya minority of Myanmar extends far beyond the two issues currently at the center of global attention.

Yes, it is a humanitarian crisis of huge dimension, and true as well that it has revealed the fragility of Aung San Suu Kyi's status as a Nobel Peace Prize winner.

But what is not properly appreciated yet is that, unless handled with much greater care than seen to date, this issue will long reverberate through all of Southeast Asia, far beyond Bangladesh.

Most people are aware that the Rohingyas are Muslims in an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation. In that nation, Buddhist monks have had a nationalist political role dating back to British rule, if not before.

If viewed as an exclusively Muslim issue, this has the potential to enlarge the cracks already apparent in the edifice of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

One of the great achievements of independent Asia so far is to have accepted almost all colonial-era boundaries and demographic changes, however illogical or disadvantageous they may have been to this or that ethnic or religious group.

The Rohingyas are mostly descendants of people who arrived in what today is Myanmar under British rule, at a time when it was administered as part of India. This lasted 150 years and effectively ended with the Japanese occupation 75 years ago.

There is hell to pay if reversing history is the silent goal of the Myanmar government. The short term will be agony for the Rohingya, the long-term possibly a calamity for the people of Myanmar in the face of Bengali numbers.

Horrendous bloodshed would also be in store — especially for communities of Chinese origin — should the notion of post-colonial ethnic cleansing take hold elsewhere in Asia.

In this combustible, post-colonial context, it is far from helpful that Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, currently pursued by allegations of a billion dollar fraud, attempted to burnish his Islamic credentials by sharply criticizing Myanmar.

Next, Indonesia's effort to try to calm troubled waters by sending its foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, to Myanmar's capital Naypyitaw didn't yield anything really useful. Soothing words were spoken, but little action followed.

So far both the Muslim Indonesians and the Buddhist Thais have kept their cool. But there is no guarantee that Indonesia's approach can last if atrocities continue.

The Buddhist Thais may have little sympathy for their neighbors in Myanmar, given a long history of rivalry. Nonetheless their own Muslim minority problems in southern Thailand, and Bangkok's lack of interest in the issues of Chinese maritime expansion which trouble Indonesia, make ASEAN solidarity increasingly difficult.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar has a long history, though the Rohingya issue is different in origin and character from those against Muslims, many of them small traders, in the cities.

The Rohingya are Bengali speakers and thus readily identified not only with Bangladesh, but with the Bengali world. At 250 million people, including Indian West Bengal, it is much more populous than Myanmar with its 60 million, let alone its Burmese core (which may only total 40 million).

This demographic issue lies behind the Myanmar obsession with Rohingya immigration into Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh and where most Rohingya live. It is also for that reason that the government has refused to grant citizenship to the Rohingya — however long their families may have resided there.

The Rohingya are mostly dark-skinned people with features common to the Indian subcontinent. Myanmar officials, of course, do not admit to blatant racism based on skin color and facial characteristics.

But it is revealing that in 2009 Myanmar's then consul general in Hong Kong was unwise enough to speak his mind. He put forth a view that is probably silently shared by a significant proportion of his countrymen.

Addressing his fellow diplomats on the Rohingya issue soon after it came to foreign attention at the time as boatloads of refugees arrived on the shores of Thailand and Malaysia, Ye Mint Aung said that the Rohingya were not actually Myanmarese and were not accepted as one of the ethnic groups of his country, or indeed as citizens.

He wrote: "You will see in the photos that their complexion is dark brown" in contrast to the complexion of Myanmar people, which is "fair and soft, good-looking as well."

He claimed that his own complexion is typical of a Myanmar gentleman and fellow diplomats could contrast their "handsome colleague" with the "ugly as ogres" Rohingya whose pictures were in the newspapers.

Never mind that Suu Kyi, let alone the monks and generals, see the Rohingya as immigrants into Rakhine state.

But all of these considerations, ominous as they already are, pale in comparison to the possibility that the de facto goal of the Myanmar government may be to unwind colonial-era population movements with its stance on the Rohingya.

However illogical or disadvantageous those boundaries and migrations may have been to this or that ethnic or religious group, any attempt to reverse history opens up the proverbial Pandora's box.

If Asian nations, which since independence have largely steered clear of reversing the past, are now to get into the business of rejecting some population movements that occurred in colonial times, be prepared for bloodbaths on a horrendous scale.

That is why all of Asia needs to wake up to the Rohingya crisis. It is far more than a "little local difficulty." To be sure, this is not like the Marawi in the Philippines or the Patani in Thailand where small insurgencies have been ongoing for decades. The ethnic collision in Rakhine is a threat of altogether different proportions, as well as an ongoing tragedy.

Rohingya crisis: Finding out the truth about Arsa militants

- 11 October 2017

If there was one thing almost everyone who has monitored Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State agreed on, it was that sooner or later their plight would breed militant resistance to the authority of the state.

The attacks that started in the early hours of 25 August on around 30 police and army posts, triggering a ruthless military counter-attack which has driven more than half a million Rohingya into Bangladesh, showed that militancy, now led by a shadowy group calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa), has taken root.

But conversations with refugees and militants in Bangladesh also show that the group's strategy is still poorly-formed, and that it is not supported by all Rohingya.

Even the accounts given by the Myanmar security forces suggest that the 25 August attacks were mostly simple, almost suicidal charges by groups of men, most armed only with machetes and sharpened bamboo sticks.

- [What sparked latest violence in Rakhine?](#)
- [Who are the Rohingya group behind attacks?](#)
- [Seeing through the official story in Myanmar](#)

One of the earliest and biggest attacks was on the police post in Alel Than Kyaw, a town on the coast south of Maungdaw.

Police Lt Aung Kyaw Moe later told a group of visiting journalists that they had advance warning of the attack and sheltered all local officials inside the barracks the night before.

At 04:00, he said two groups of around 500 men each stormed up from the beach.

They killed an immigration officer, whose house was close to the beach, but were easily driven off by police officers firing automatic weapons. Seventeen bodies were left behind.

Image caption The village of Alel Than Kyaw was burnt down after the attack

This tallies with an account given to me by a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh.

In a conversation about how he had been driven out of Rakhine state, he complained about the way the militants had tried to co-opt his village into joining the attacks in the days after 25 August.

They had helped themselves to cattle and goats, he said, telling the villagers they would be paid back when there was an independent Rohingya homeland.

And they gave new machetes to the young men, and told them to attack a nearby police station.

Arsa has plenty of weapons, he remembers them saying, and would be back to back them. Around 25 men from his community did as they were told, and a number of them were killed, he said.

There was no backup from armed militants.

Media caption Watch: Who are the Rohingya?

I was able to meet a young man in his 20s, now in Bangladesh, who had joined Arsa four years before.

He described how the Arsa leader, Ata Ullah, had come to his village in 2013, telling them it was time to fight against the mistreatment of Rohingya.

He asked for five to 10 men from every community. A group was taken from his village to the forested hills, where they were trained in making crude bombs, using old car engine pistons.

Our informant said his village was encouraged by this, and began taking up food and other supplies to support the trainees. He eventually joined them.

They started patrolling the village, armed with sharpened bamboo sticks, and making sure everyone attended mosque. He says he never saw any guns.

'Getting the world's attention'

On 25 August he described hearing shooting, and seeing burning in the distance. The local Arsa commander - his "amir", he called him - arrived and told the men that the military was on its way and would attack them.

The men were told to launch their attack first - you are going to die anyway, he said, so die as martyrs for the cause.

Our informant said men of all ages armed themselves with knives and bamboo sticks, and charged the advancing soldiers, suffering many casualties - he named some of the dead.

After that they ran into the rice fields with their families, trying to make their way to Bangladesh. He said they were also harassed by Rakhine Buddhist men as they fled.

Image copyright Reuters Image caption More than half a million Rohingya, many of them women and children, have fled to Bangladesh

What was the point of such futile attacks, I asked him?

We wanted to get the world's attention, he said. We had been suffering so much, we thought it did not matter if we died.

He denied any links with international jihadist groups - we are fighting for our rights, and to try to get guns and ammunition from the Myanmar military, that's all, he said.

- [Tales of horror from Myanmar](#)
- [UN failures on Rohingya revealed](#)
- [Reality Check: Are Suu Kyi's Rohingya claims correct?](#)

His and other accounts describe a movement with a small core of several hundred full-time militants, with perhaps a handful of foreigners among them, and many thousands of untrained and unarmed followers who joined the attacks only at the last minute.

On 25 August Ata Ullah, the Pakistan-born Rohingya man who started Arsa after an earlier wave of communal violence in Rakhine state in 2012, issued a video, flanked by hooded armed fighters.

He described the attacks that day as a defensive action, against what he called a genocide against the Rohingya.

He said his fighters had no choice but to launch the attacks against a Burmese army which had "surrounded and besieged us".

He appealed for international support. He described Arakan, another name for Rakhine state, as rightfully Rohingya land.

But he has insisted in subsequent statements that Arsa has no quarrel with other ethnic groups in Rakhine state.

There was no call for solidarity from other Muslims. He did not frame his struggle in terms of jihad, or as part of a global Islamist struggle.

Image copyright EPA Image caption Officials have accused Arsa militants of burning the Hindu village of Yebawkyaw and killing many of its inhabitants

Ata Ullah is known to be suspicious of other Islamist groups, and does not at this stage appear to be asking them for help.

"Ata Ullah and his spokesmen have made it clear that they see themselves as an ethno-nationalist movement," says Anthony Davis, a Bangkok-based security analyst.

"They do not have any substantive links with international jihadism, IS [Islamic State group] or al- Qaeda. They see their struggle as regaining rights for Rohingya inside Rakhine State. They are neither separatists, nor jihadists."

However the military has successfully portrayed them as a foreign-backed conspiracy to the population of Myanmar, where the media has reported little of the massive Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh.

Ata Ullah's comment about Rakhine belonging to Rohingya was picked up by armed forces commander Gen Min Aung Hlaing early last month, when he warned that the military would never allow the country to lose any territory to what he called "extremist Bengali terrorists".

He described the military operation in Rakhine as addressing "unfinished business from 1942" - a reference to the time when it was a shifting frontline in the battles between British and Japanese forces.

'Rebalancing' population?

Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists largely supported opposing sides in that war, and there were a number of massacres by militias on both sides, and large population movements.

This is when many Burmese and Rakhine nationalists believe the Rohingya population in Rakhine was artificially boosted by Bengali immigrants.

By driving half the Rohingya population out of Rakhine in just four weeks, the military "clearance operations" would appear to have rebalanced the population firmly back in favour of the non-Muslims.

Media caption Rohingya families face a desperate choice between violence in Myanmar and danger at sea

That leaves questions over how Arsa will function, now that it has few or no bases left inside Rakhine State.

Launching attacks over the border will be much harder, and probably will not be tolerated by Bangladesh, which, though furious with the refugee crisis dumped on it by its neighbour, has always taken care to avoid conflict along its long, porous borders.

- [Reality Check: Fake photos of Myanmar violence](#)
- [Beauty queen 'dethroned over Arsa Rohingya row'](#)

Our informant says he is still in regular contact with his "amir" and other Arsa leaders in Bangladesh, although he has had no contact with Ata Ullah.

He says he has no idea what the movement will do next. Most people we spoke to in the camps were aware of Arsa's presence. Some were clearly nervous even speaking quietly about the movement.

There are credible reports of numbers of informers being killed by Arsa in the months leading up to the August attacks.

But there is also widespread admiration among Rohingya for the only organisation to have fought back against the Myanmar military since the 1950s.

"A great deal now will depend on the attitude of Bangladesh," says Anthony Davis.

"They may choose to keep the border sealed. Or they may wish to exert some control over Arsa by supplying them with rudimentary assistance, rather than have radical Islamist groups, Bangladeshi or foreign, move in and fill a vacuum.

"There are examples elsewhere of military intelligence services using insurgent movements to exert cross-border pressure on a neighbour."

Myanmar: What sparked latest violence in Rakhine?

- 19 September 2017

Rohingya Muslims have been pouring into Bangladesh since 25 August

A fresh outbreak of violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state has caused hundreds of thousands of Rohingya civilians to flee to Bangladesh.

The exodus began on 25 August after Rohingya militants attacked police posts, killing 12 members of the security forces.

Those attacks led to a security crackdown. Myanmar's military says it is fighting insurgents but those who have fled say troops and Rakhine Buddhists are conducting a brutal campaign to drive them out.

The Rohingya - a stateless mostly Muslim minority group - have faced years of persecution in Myanmar. Deep-seated tensions between them and the majority Buddhist population in Rakhine have led to deadly communal violence in the past.

When did the latest violence start?

On 25 August Rohingya insurgents armed with knives and home-made bombs [attacked more than 30 police posts](#) in northern Rakhine, the government said.

Huge numbers of Rohingya civilians then began fleeing over the border into Bangladesh.

Many of them say that Burmese troops, backed by local Buddhist mobs, began [burning their villages and attacking and killing civilians](#) in response to the 25 August attacks. Some of those who have arrived in Bangladesh have bullet or other wounds.

Observers on the ground and satellite images confirm many razed Muslim villages across northern Rakhine state.

- [Seeing through the official story in Myanmar](#)
- [Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?](#)
- [Tales of horror from Rohingya who fled](#)

Image copyright Reuters Image caption Aid agencies say those who have fled need food and shelter

The Myanmar military accuses the militants and the Rohingyas of burning their own homes. But a [BBC reporter saw one case of burning](#) that appeared to contradict the official narrative and the

UN human rights chief, Zeid Raad Al Hussein, has called on the military to "stop pretending" that Muslims are burning their own homes.

Speaking on 11 September, Mr Zeid said the security operation in Myanmar seems "[a textbook example of ethnic cleansing](#)".

It is not clear how many people have died. The military gave a toll of 400 on 1 September and said most of those were militants. But a UN human rights official said a week later that she thought the number could be over 1,000. Verifying the situation on the ground is difficult because access is restricted.

Image copyright Reuters Image caption Rakhine Buddhists have also left their homes to head to safer parts of the state, reports say

What is the situation at the border?

The number of Rohingya seeking safety in Bangladesh had been steadily rising since 25 August, and turned into a flood by early September.

The UN says more than 410,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since the attacks. Many have arrived with injuries they say were sustained in the crackdown. Several dozen are reported to have drowned trying to cross the Naf River into Bangladesh.

Media captionThe BBC's Justin Rowlatt on the situation at the Bangladesh border

Early on there were reports of people being turned back at the border but that is no longer the case. Aid agencies and the UN are working to provide food, water and shelter for the huge influx.

Bangladesh is already home to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees who have fled previous outbreaks of violence in Myanmar. But existing refugee camps are now full, so the new arrivals are sleeping in any space they can find.

Inside Myanmar, early on there were reports of Rakhine Buddhists moving south to escape the violence.

Who are the militants?

A group [called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army \(Arsa\)](#) says it carried out the 25 August attacks. The group first emerged in October 2016, when it carried out [similar assaults](#) on police posts, killing nine police officers.

It says its main aim is to protect the Rohingya Muslim minority from state repression in Myanmar.

The government says Arsa is a terrorist group whose leaders have been trained abroad. Arsa's leader is Ata Ullah, a Rohingya born in Pakistan who was raised in Saudi Arabia, [according to the International Crisis Group](#).

But a spokesman for the group [told Asia Times](#) that it had no links to jihadist groups and that its members were young Rohingya men angered by events since communal violence in 2012.

What are the Rohingyas' grievances?

Myanmar's government claims the Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and denies them citizenship, even though many say they have been there for generations. Bangladesh also denies they are its citizens.

Media captionWatch: Who are the Rohingya?

Many are living in temporary camps after being forced from their villages by [the wave of communal violence](#) that swept Rakhine in 2012. They live in one of Myanmar's poorest states, and their movements and access to employment are severely restricted.

- [Why won't Aung San Suu Kyi act?](#)
- [Myanmar conflict: The view from Yangon](#)
- [Fake photos inflame tensions](#)

After the first attacks by Arsa in October 2016, [many Rohingya accused](#) the security forces of rape, killings, burning villages and torture during a subsequent crackdown. The UN is now carrying out a formal investigation, although the military denies wrongdoing.

The UN human rights chief says rights violations in Rakhine have almost certainly contributed to the growth of Rohingya extremism.

What has Myanmar said?

Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi is facing mounting international criticism over her failure to protect the Rohingya.

Fellow Nobel Peace laureates - including [Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai](#), the Dalai Lama and South Africa's anti-apartheid campaigner Archbishop Desmond Tutu - have called on her to do more to end the violence.

Early on Ms Suu Kyi - who faces strong domestic anti-Rohingya sentiment and governs a nation in which significant power remains concentrated in the military - claimed the crisis was being distorted by a "[huge iceberg of misinformation](#)".

Media captionAung San Suu Kyi: 'We will accept refugees who want to return'

In a speech to the nation on 19 September she condemned "all human rights violations and unlawful violence", saying she felt "deeply for the suffering of all the people caught up in the conflict".

She said she wanted to find out why so many people were fleeing, but also pointed out that many Muslims had chosen to stay in Rakhine. She said people verified as refugees would be able to return home.

Responding to her speech, rights group Amnesty accused her government of "burying their heads in the sand" and said Rohingya refugees could not "return to this appalling status quo".

The plight of the Rohingya has sparked protests in many Muslim nations, including Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaysia.

UN failures on Rohingya revealed

- 28 September 2017

Caption More than 500,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar

The UN leadership in Myanmar tried to stop the Rohingya rights issue being raised with the government, sources in the UN and aid community told the BBC.

One former UN official said the head of the UN in Myanmar (Burma) tried to prevent human rights advocates from visiting sensitive Rohingya areas.

More than 500,000 Rohingya have [fled an offensive by the military](#), with many now sheltering in camps in Bangladesh.

The UN in Myanmar "strongly disagreed" with the BBC findings.

In the month since Rohingya Muslims began flowing into Bangladesh, the UN has been at the forefront of the response. It has delivered aid and made robust statements condemning the Burmese authorities.

But sources within the UN and the aid community both in Myanmar and outside have told the BBC that, in the four years before the current crisis, the head of the United Nations Country Team (UNCT), a Canadian called Renata Lok-Dessallien:

- tried to stop human rights activists travelling to Rohingya areas
- attempted to shut down public advocacy on the subject
- isolated staff who tried to warn that ethnic cleansing might be on the way.

One aid worker, Caroline Vandenabeele, had seen the warning signs before. She worked in Rwanda in the run-up to the genocide in late 1993 and early 1994 and says when she first arrived in Myanmar she noticed worrying similarities.

- ['Mass Hindu grave' found in Rakhine state](#)
- [Truth, lies and Aung San Suu Kyi](#)
- [Reality Check: Fake photos of Myanmar violence](#)

Media captionWatch: Who are the Rohingya?

"I was with a group of expats and Burmese business people talking about Rakhine and Rohingya and one of the Burmese people just said 'we should kill them all as if they are just dogs'. For me, this level of dehumanisation of humans is one sign that you have reached a level of acceptance in society that this is normal."

For more than a year I have been corresponding with Ms Vandenabeele, who has served in conflict areas such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Rwanda and Nepal.

Between 2013 and 2015 she had a crucial job in the UNCT in Myanmar. She was head of office for what is known as the resident co-ordinator, the top UN official in the country, currently Ms Dessallien.

The job gave Ms Vandenabeele a front-row seat as the UN grappled with how to respond to rising tensions in Rakhine state.

Back in 2012, clashes between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists left more than 100 dead and more than 100,000 Rohingya Muslims in camps around the state capital, Sittwe.

Since then, there have been periodic flare-ups and, in the past year, the emergence of a Rohingya militant group. Attempts to deliver aid to the Rohingya have been complicated by Rakhine Buddhists who resent the supply of aid for the Rohingya, at times blocking it and even attacking aid vehicles.

Image copyright Reuters Image caption Some Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine state have been razed

It presented a complex emergency for the UN and aid agencies, who needed the co-operation of the government and the Buddhist community to get basic aid to the Rohingya.

At the same time they knew that speaking up about the human rights and statelessness of the Rohingya would upset many Buddhists.

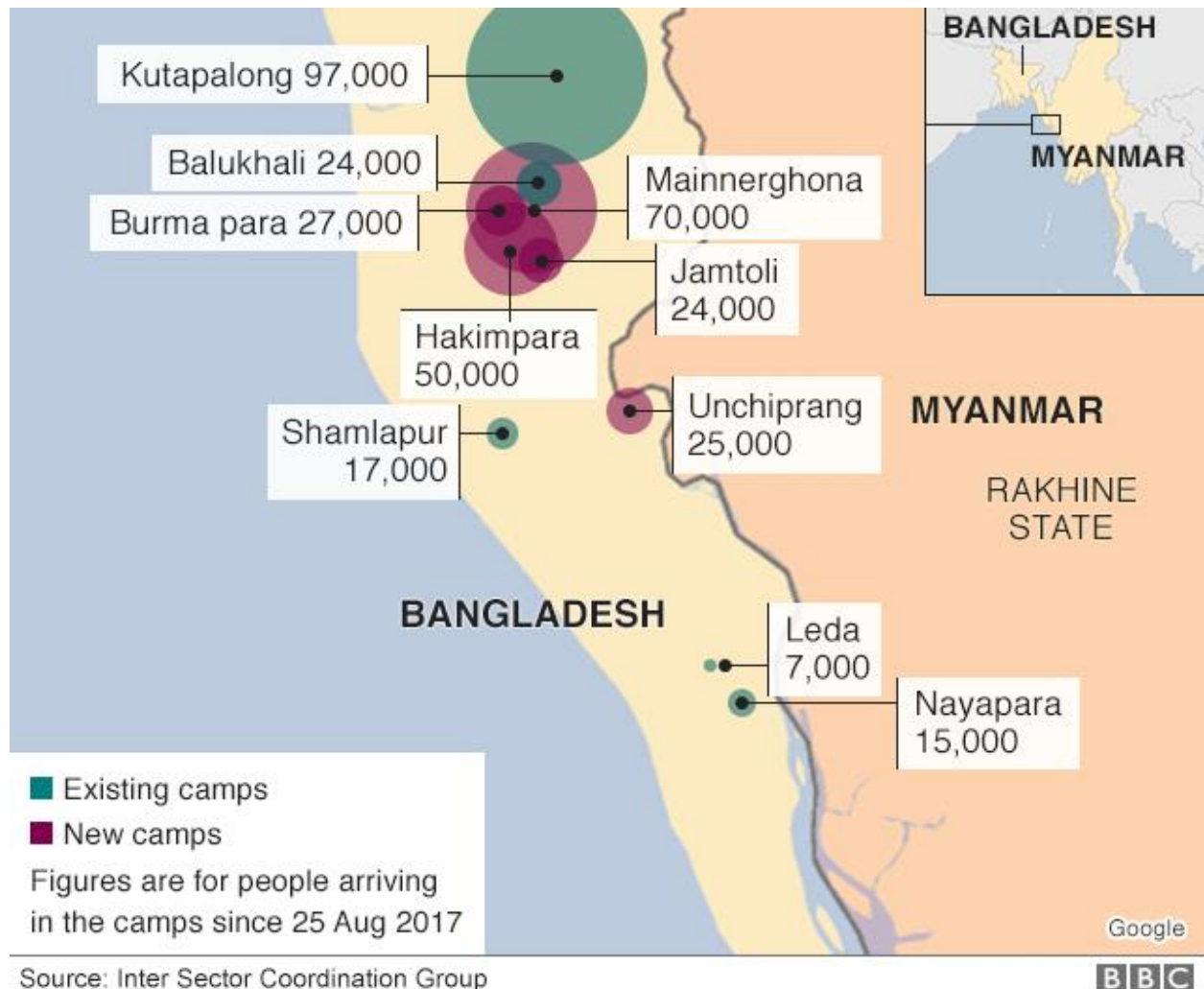
So the decision was made to focus on a long-term strategy. The UN and the international community prioritised long-term development in Rakhine in the hope that eventually increased prosperity would lead to reduced tensions between the Rohingya and the Buddhists.

- ['Torture' of Myanmar Muslim minority - UN](#)
- [Top UN official in Myanmar to be changed](#)
- [UN demands access amid Myanmar 'nightmare'](#)

For UN staff it meant that publicly talking about the Rohingya became almost taboo. Many UN press releases about Rakhine avoided using the word completely. The Burmese government does not even use the word Rohingya or recognise them as a distinct group, preferring to call them "Bengalis".

During my years reporting from Myanmar, very few UN staff were willing to speak frankly on the record about the Rohingya. Now an investigation into the internal workings of the UN in Myanmar has revealed that even behind closed doors the Rohingyas' problems were put to one side.

Where have the Rohingya fled to



Multiple sources in Myanmar's aid community have told the BBC that at high-level UN meetings in Myanmar any question of asking the Burmese authorities to respect the Rohingyas' human rights became almost impossible.

- [Who will help Myanmar's Rohingya?](#)

Ms Vandenabeele said it soon became clear to everyone that raising the Rohingyas' problems, or warning of ethnic cleansing in senior UN meetings, was simply not acceptable.

"Well you could do it but it had consequences," she said. "And it had negative consequences, like you were no longer invited to meetings and your travel authorisations were not cleared. Other staff were taken off jobs - and being humiliated in meetings. An atmosphere was created that talking about these issues was simply not on."

Repeat offenders, like the head of the UN's Office for the Co-ordination for Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) were deliberately excluded from discussions.

Ms Vandenaabeele told me she was often instructed to find out when the UNOCHA representative was out of town so meetings could be held at those times. The head of UNOCHA declined to speak to the BBC but it has been confirmed by several other UN sources inside Myanmar.

Ms Vandenaabeele said she was labelled a troublemaker and frozen out of her job for repeatedly warning about the possibility of Rohingya ethnic cleansing. This version of events has not been challenged by the UN.

Attempts to restrict those talking about the Rohingya extended to UN officials visiting Myanmar. Tomas Quintana is now the UN special rapporteur for human rights in North Korea but for six years, until 2014, held that same role for Myanmar.

Speaking from Argentina, he told me about being met at Yangon airport by Ms Dessallien.

"I received this advice from her - saying you should not go to northern Rakhine state - please don't go there. So I asked why and there was not an answer in any respect, there was just the stance of not trying to bring trouble with the authorities, basically," he said.

"This is just one story, but it demonstrates what was the strategy of the UN Country Team in regards to the issue of the Rohingya."

Mr Quintana still went to northern Rakhine but said Ms Dessallien "disassociated" herself from his mission and he didn't see her again.

One senior UN staffer told me: "We've been pandering to the Rakhine community at the expense of the Rohingya.

"The government knows how to use us and to manipulate us and they keep on doing it - we never learn. And we can never stand up to them because we can't upset the government."

Image copyright Getty Images Image caption Many Rohingya fled by night into Bangladesh leaving everything behind

The UN's priorities in Rakhine were examined in a report commissioned by the UN in 2015 entitled "Slippery Slope: Helping Victims or Supporting Systems of Abuse".

Leaked to the BBC, it is damning of the UNCT approach.

"The UNCT strategy with respect to human rights focuses too heavily on the over-simplified hope that development investment itself will reduce tensions, failing to take into account that investing in a discriminatory structure run by discriminatory state actors is more likely to reinforce discrimination than change it."

There have been other documents with similar conclusions. With António Guterres as the new secretary general in New York, a former senior member of the UN was asked to write a memo for his team in April.

Titled "Repositioning the UN" the two-page document was damning in its assessment, calling the UN in Myanmar "glaringly dysfunctional".

In the weeks that followed the memo, [the UN confirmed that Ms Dessallien was being "rotated"](#) but stressed it was nothing to do with her performance. Three months on Ms Dessallien is still the UN's top official there after the Burmese government rejected her proposed successor.

"She has a fair view and is not biased," Shwe Mann, a former senior general and close ally of Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, told me. "Whoever is biased towards the Rohingyas, they won't like her and they will criticise her."

Ms Dessallien declined to give an interview to the BBC to respond to this article.

The UN in Myanmar said its approach was to be "fully inclusive" and ensure the participation of all relevant experts.

"We strongly disagree with the accusations that the resident co-ordinator 'prevented' internal discussions. The resident co-ordinator regularly convenes all UN agencies in Myanmar to discuss how to support peace and security, human rights, development and humanitarian assistance in Rakhine state," a statement from a UN spokesperson in Yangon said.

On Tomas Quintana's visits to Rakhine, the spokesperson said Ms Dessallien had "provided full support" in terms of personnel, logistics and security.

Ten ambassadors, including from Britain and the United States, wrote unsolicited emails to the BBC when they heard we were working on this report, expressing their support for Ms Dessallien.

There are those who see similarities between the UN's much-criticised role in Sri Lanka and what has happened in Myanmar. Charles Petrie wrote a damning report into the UN and Sri Lanka, and also served as the UN's top official in Myanmar (before being expelled in 2007).

He said the UN's response to the Rohingya over the past few years had been confused and that Ms Dessallien hadn't been given the mandate to bring all of the key areas together.

"I think the key lesson for Myanmar from Sri Lanka is the lack of a focal point. A senior level focal point addressing the situation in Myanmar in its totality - the political, the human rights, the humanitarian and the development. It remains diffuse. And that means over the last few years there have been almost competing agendas."

So might a different approach from the UN and the international community have averted the humanitarian disaster we are seeing now? It's hard to see how it might have deterred the Burmese army's massive response following the 25 August Rohingya militant attack.

Image copyright AFP Image caption Bangladesh says it is struggling to cope with the refugees

Ms Vandenabeele said she at least believed an early warning system she proposed might have provided some indications of what was about to unfold.

"It's hard to say which action would have been able to prevent this," she told me. "But what I know for sure is that the way it was done was never going to prevent it. The way it was done was simply ignoring the issue."

Mr Quintana said he wished the international community had pushed harder for some sort of transitional justice system as part of the move to a hybrid democratic government.

One source said the UN now appeared to be preparing itself for an inquiry into its response to Rakhine, and this could be similar to the inquiry that came after the controversial end to Sri Lanka's civil war - and which found it wanting.