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War in Western Myanmar: Avoiding a Rakhine-Rohingya Conflict

The Arakan Army has greatly expanded the territory it controls in Rakhine State, on Myanmar's border with Bangladesh, seizing many areas inhabited by Rohingya Muslims. With the regime keen to foment inter-communal strife, Rakhine and Rohingya leaders should act swiftly to calm tensions.

Over the past six months, one of Myanmar's most powerful armed groups, the Arakan Army, has swept across much of Rakhine State, on the country's western border, expelling regime troops from cities and military bases. But in Rakhine's north, the force, composed mainly of fighters from the Rakhine ethnic group, has become embroiled in a complex three-way battle that also involves Rohingya Muslims. Desperate to hold on to power, the military regime has sought to foment inter-communal tensions, rallying some Rohingya to its side through a mix of coercion and inducements. Although the Arakan Army, whose goal is to create an autonomous enclave, says it wants to govern for all communities, some of its recent statements and actions have angered Rohingya people. The conflict has accordingly taken on a dangerous communal overtone. A war pitting the Buddhist Rakhine against the Muslim Rohingya would come at great cost to both sides. At this pivotal juncture, leaders from both communities should take the long view – tamping down incendiary rhetoric, guarding against abuses, rising above historical animus and spurning the regime's efforts to set them at odds to preserve prospects for a more peaceful future.

A Rakhine Mini-State

The hostilities in Rakhine State constitute the third round of combat between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military, following a brutal two-year war that ended with a ceasefire in November 2020 and a brief, but intense outbreak of fighting in the second half of 2022. With the military distracted by war on other fronts, the Army has tightened its grip on the areas it

controls since the February 2021 coup, setting up its own administration there and boosting its military capacity. The major offensive it launched six months ago has allowed it to expand its territory, to the extent that it now holds nine entire townships in the centre and north, as well as much of the Bangladesh border. It could soon take Sittwe, the state capital, as well as the military's regional command headquarters farther south.

The Arakan Army has created ... the largest ethnic armed group-controlled mini-state in the country.

With remarkable speed, the Arakan Army has created what is in effect the largest ethnic armed group-controlled mini-state in the country, home to more than a million people. Many Rakhine residents celebrate the group as liberating them from Naypyitaw's rule; they feel the central government has always exploited the state without developing it. But the rapid expansion comes with risks, including with respect to communal relations between the majority Rakhine and minority Rohingya populations.

Prior to November 2023, those relations had been showing signs of improvement. Rakhine State was under mixed governance, with the Arakan Army holding rural stretches of the centre and north and the military mostly confined to its bases and urban areas. The Army's leadership had tried to improve relations with the Rohingya by lifting movement and other restrictions, giving Rohingya jobs in the lower echelons of its administration, and more generally encouraging interaction with the Rakhine majority. The Army, which is extremely popular among Rakhine people, also redirected its supporters' frustrations away from the Rohingya toward Myanmar's majority Burmans, who have controlled both the central government and the military since independence in 1948.

The Arakan Army's recent gains, however, mean that it has seized or is on the verge of seizing almost all the areas where the Rohingya live, as well as those where around 750,000 who fled to Bangladesh following the military crackdown on the community in 2017 would return if conditions allowed. It is by no means pre-ordained that these changes on the ground would by themselves spark dangerous new friction between the two groups. Although some Rohingya view these developments warily, there have been no inter-communal clashes of the kind that have punctuated Rakhine State's recent history – particularly in 2012, when hundreds of people from both the Rakhine and Rohingya communities were killed and around 150,000, mostly Rohingya Muslims, were displaced. Still, the Arakan Army's efforts to improve inter-communal relations over the past several years have recently come under severe strain.

Inflamed Tensions

These strains are largely due to the Myanmar military's actions, including a massive mobilisation campaign. On 10 February, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing announced that the

regime had activated a dormant conscription law, making all young men and women across the country eligible for compulsory military service. In other parts of Myanmar, hundreds of thousands – mostly young men – have fled abroad or to areas beyond the junta's control to avoid having to fight for the widely hated regime. The Rohingya, however, have few places to run to. Although authorities in Myanmar have long persecuted the Rohingya, including by denying citizenship to the vast majority of them and constraining their freedom of movement, the military has no qualms about using them as cannon fodder against the Arakan Army. Facing the prospect of further defeats in Rakhine, the regime has conscripted Rohingya men from villages across the state's north, where the Rohingya still make up most of the population, and from internment camps near Sittwe, where some 130,000 continue to live after being forcibly displaced following the 2012 violence.

As the Arakan Army has ramped up its offensive in Muslim-majority Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, along the border with Bangladesh, the military has intensified this recruitment. While exact figures are difficult to confirm, especially given the internet outage imposed on Rakhine State since fighting resumed, thousands of Rohingya are now likely serving in the Myanmar military as militia members. Most of this recruitment is forced, but some Rohingya are enlisting voluntarily in the same army that brutally expelled some 750,000 of them to neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017 – a campaign that the U.S. formally declared a genocide. While fear of and anger at the Arakan Army seems to be part of their motivation, the regime has also reportedly dangled the prospect of regular wages, and, at least in some cases, the promise of citizenship. Influential Rohingya community leaders close to the military have also been encouraging young men to enlist.

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In an effort to stoke inter-communal tensions to destabilise its opponent, the regime has also coerced Rohingya into staging demonstrations against the Arakan Army and collaborated with Rohingya armed groups, particularly the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the outfit whose attacks provided the pretext for the 2017 crackdown and which the military has long designated a "terrorist organisation".

These developments have clearly incensed the Arakan Army's high command. In late March, the group warned that "Bengali people from Rakhine" who had been conscripted would be considered members of the regime's military and "attacked". In response to criticism for using the term "Bengali" – which the Rohingya consider a slur because it implies they are recent immigrants from Bangladesh and has long been used to undermine their claim to citizenship – Arakan Army leader Twan Mrat Naing doubled down, insisting that "nothing is wrong with calling Bengalis 'Bengalis'". The Army has since referred to Rohingya armed groups as "Bengali Muslim terrorist groups", mimicking the rhetoric used by Naypyitaw to justify its 2017 campaign against the Rohingya and moving away from the more conciliatory tone of recent years. Twan Mrat Naing has mocked Rohingya fighters the group recently took prisoner in Buthidaung, while

the group's spokesperson claimed that Rohingya joining the military was "the worst betrayal of those who had recently been victims of genocide, and of those fighting for liberation from dictatorship".

In this febrile environment, abuses against civilians are spreading, further inflaming tensions on both sides. On 11 April, the bodies of two Rakhine men were found in Buthidaung with their throats cut; over the following days, members of Rohingya armed groups – likely at the regime's direction – burned down hundreds of homes belonging to Rakhine who had already fled the town. On 17 April, meanwhile, five Rohingya men disappeared from a village in Maungdaw, to the west, that had come under Arakan Army control. Residents reported last seeing the men with soldiers from the armed group. When their bodies were found five days later, the Army pinned the murders on Rohingya armed outfits. Then, in early May, Rohingya soldiers fighting alongside the military reportedly raided two Rakhine villages in Maungdaw, to the west, burning down dozens of homes and killing a young mother. The Army has also been accused of forcibly recruiting Rohingya in areas it governs, albeit in much smaller numbers than the military. These and other allegations of rights abuses, many of which are difficult to verify, especially given the internet shutdown in northern Rakhine, have prompted Rohingya leaders to accuse the group of war crimes or even a "second wave of genocide" in the same vein as the military's 2017 atrocities. On social media, Rohingya are increasingly calling the Army a "Mogh terrorist group" – "Mogh" being a pejorative term for Rakhine people.

This inflammatory language has helped both the military and Rohingya armed groups to attract new fighters, including in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. In particular, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation has ramped up its recruitment in the camps, telling residents it is time to "liberate" northern Rakhine. Sources in the camps told Crisis Group that in recent months thousands of would-be fighters have crossed the border into Myanmar, including children as young as fourteen; this recruitment campaign has escalated dramatically in recent days, with as many as 500 refugees enlisting. While some Rohingya are responding to appeals to fight for a homeland, most recruits have been pressed into service against their will. This forced recruitment is happening openly in the camps and has left many refugees too terrified to leave their homes, but Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have done little to stop it.

Overcoming Mistrust

In recent days, the Arakan Army has expanded its offensive in northern Rakhine, capturing several key military sites. It appears almost certain that the group will, in the weeks and months ahead, secure control of both Maungdaw and Buthidaung, the two townships where the vast majority of Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State live. But while it may succeed militarily, if the group wants to emerge from this war with the hope of consolidating peace in the areas under its control, then it needs to tread carefully. While it is the Myanmar military that has most actively inflamed inter-communal tensions in northern Rakhine and could most easily defuse them, it is unlikely to do so. The Arakan Army's unhelpful statements, together with allegations of human rights abuses, are making an already tense situation worse. It needs to begin rebuilding trust now with the Rohingya so that, if it succeeds in kicking the military regime out of northern Rakhine, as seems very likely, it does not end up facing an insurgency that could

prove all but impossible to eradicate and would risk deepening inter-communal rancour across the state once again.

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Dropping the use of the term "Bengali", and more clearly reiterating its commitment to extending rights to Rohingya that the Myanmar state has long denied them – such as freedom of movement, economic rights and access to essential services – would be a good place to start. The Arakan Army should also avoid using Rohingya villages as launchpads for attacks on the military, to spare Rohingya civilians the threat of regime reprisal. It should additionally publicise a clear code of conduct for its soldiers, commit to investigating credible allegations of wrongdoing by its forces and take clear, visible and proportionate action against offenders. To nurture better relations between the two communities, it should also integrate more Rohingya into its administration, including at higher levels.

In charting its course, the Arakan Army should be cognisant of the heightened international attention to rights violations in Rakhine State due to the military's campaign against the Rohingya in 2017. The scrutiny includes an investigation at the International Criminal Court, allegations of genocide being adjudicated at the International Court of Justice, which has ordered provisional measures to protect the Rohingya, and the establishment of accountability mechanisms such as the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, which is mandated to collect evidence of serious international crimes committed in Myanmar regardless of the perpetrator's affiliation or official capacity. If the Arakan Army were to be implicated in abuses, both its legal exposure and its standing would suffer, not only with the Rohingya in the areas it administers, but also with neighbouring states and other international actors.

Talks between the Arakan Army and prominent Rohingya could help. Although the absence of unified Rohingya leadership complicates matters, the Army's commanders should establish a regular dialogue with Rohingya leaders to help overcome the rising mistrust on both sides. Bangladesh could facilitate this dialogue, and has a strong incentive to do so, given that it wants the more than one million refugees it hosts to be able one day to return to Rakhine, which for the foreseeable future is likely to be under Arakan Army control. Dhaka and its law enforcement agencies should take immediate action to prevent Rohingya armed groups from recruiting in the refugee camps and work to stem their sources of funding and weapons. A Rohingya armed group is not the answer to either the refugee crisis or the plight of Rohingya still inside the country.

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The role Rohingya leaders could play in averting further violence includes discouraging community members from taking up arms where there is a choice. The risk of retaliation means

that community leaders in both Rakhine State and Bangladesh are often unable safely to speak out against armed actors, including both the Myanmar military and Rohingya armed groups. The diaspora thus plays a significant role in shaping the views of Rohingya people and how they see the conflict. It is important that they keep the big picture in mind – that there is still a possibility to build relations between the Arakan Army and the Rohingya when the military is not stirring up conflict – and carefully consider how they talk about communal dynamics in Rakhine State, as well as the way in which they present potentially inflammatory information online.

Finally, international actors should increase their support for Rohingya in the sprawling refugee camps, including for protection services that can undermine the recruitment campaigns of armed groups. Among other ill effects, diminishing aid risks prompting more young men to join the ranks of armed groups, if only to get a steady wage. They should also press Bangladesh to take stronger action against armed groups' recruitment campaigns, both to protect individuals from harm and to preserve the civilian character of the refugee camps. Inside Rakhine State, foreign actors should continue to support Rohingya in internment camps around Sittwe and encourage the Arakan Army to expand humanitarian access in Rakhine so that much-needed assistance can reach members of all ethnic communities in the central and northern parts of the state.

As the Arakan Army advances, and the Myanmar military reaches for every possible tool to stop it, the fate of communal relations in Rakhine State is hanging in the balance. If a Rohingya insurgency emerges – particularly one pitted against the powerful ethnic armed group – it can only lead to more bloodshed and misery in communities that have seen too much of both. There is still a chance for the parties to step back from the brink. All who have influence should be working to make sure they do so.

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