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NEWS

October 24, 2024

Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya community facing gravest threats since 2017

- *Rohingya say Arakan Army drove them from their homes and killed civilians*
- *Urgent need for international support and humanitarian aid as thousands of new arrivals seek protection in Bangladesh*
- *Bangladesh must refrain from sending Rohingya back to Myanmar, where indiscriminate military air strikes also killing civilians*

Newly arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh need urgent access to food, shelter and medical attention after enduring the worst violence against their communities since the Myanmar military-led campaign in 2017, Amnesty International said today.

Testimony shows how Rohingya families forced to leave their homes in Myanmar have been caught in the middle of increasingly fierce clashes between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, one of many armed groups opposing the junta. Hundreds of thousands have been internally displaced and upwards of tens of thousands of Rohingya have crossed the border or are waiting to cross the border to seek refuge in Bangladesh.

“Once again, the Rohingya people are being driven from their homes and dying in scenes tragically reminiscent of the 2017 exodus. We met people who told us they lost parents, siblings, spouses, children and grandchildren as they fled fighting in Myanmar. But this time, they are facing persecution on two fronts, from the rebel Arakan Army and the Myanmar military, which is forcibly conscripting Rohingya men,” Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, said.

“Those lucky enough to make it to Bangladesh do not have enough to eat, a proper place to sleep, or even their own clothes.”

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has had a catastrophic impact on human rights. Myanmar’s military has killed more than 5,000 civilians and arrested more than 25,000 people. Since the coup, Amnesty has documented indiscriminate air strikes by the Myanmar military, torture and other ill-treatment in prison, collective punishment and arbitrary arrests.

The recent escalation in Myanmar’s Rakhine State started in November 2023 with the launch of a rebel counter-offensive by the Arakan Army and two other armed groups that has posed the biggest threat to military control since the 2021 coup. Myanmar’s military has responded by stepping up indiscriminate air strikes that have killed, injured and displaced civilians.

The impact on Rakhine State, where many of the more than 600,000 Rohingya in Myanmar still live, has been severe, with towns transformed into battlegrounds.

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The international community needs to step up with funds and assistance for those living in the refugee camps.

In Bangladesh, authorities have been pushing Rohingya fleeing the conflict back into Myanmar, while those who reached the Bangladesh camps told of a desperate shortage of essential supplies and services there.

In September 2024, Amnesty interviewed 22 people in individual and group settings who recently sought refuge in Bangladesh, joining more than one million Rohingya refugees, the majority having arrived in 2017 or earlier.

The new arrivals said the Arakan Army unlawfully killed Rohingya civilians, drove them from their homes and left them vulnerable to attacks, allegations the group denies. These attacks faced by the Rohingya come on top of indiscriminate air strikes by the Myanmar military that have killed both Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine civilians.

Many Rohingya, including children, who were fleeing the violence to Bangladesh drowned while crossing by boat.

Bangladesh pushbacks deepen woes of Rohingya

The people Amnesty International interviewed in Bangladesh had recently fled Maungdaw Township in northern Rakhine State, which the Arakan Army tried to capture from the Myanmar military after it seized Buthidaung Township in May.

Many were survivors of a drone and mortar attack that took place on 5 August on the shores of the Naf River that divides Myanmar and Bangladesh.

All those interviewed stressed that their urgent priority now was access to basic services in the camp, including aid, shelter, money, security, food and healthcare.

They were also terrified of being sent back to Myanmar. But Amnesty International found that Bangladeshi border authorities have forcibly returned Rohingya people fleeing the violence, in violation of the international law principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning or transferring anyone to a country where they are at risk of serious human rights violations.

A 39-year-old Rohingya man told Amnesty International he fled Maungdaw with his family on 5 August 2024. In the early morning of 6 August, their boat was near the Bangladesh shore and started taking on water before tipping over. Residents told him later that Bangladeshi border guards prevented them from helping.

“The border guards were nearby, but they did not help us,” he said.

He said he passed out and woke up on the beach to see dead bodies washed ashore. He later discovered that all his six children, aged between two and 15, had drowned. He said his sister also lost six of her children.



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A destroyed house and burned trees following fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army armed group in a village in Minbya Township in western Rakhine State. (Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images)

Bangladesh border guards detained him. The next night he and the others with him were sent back to Myanmar, where they found another boat and returned. According to one credible estimate, there have been more than 5,000 cases of refoulement this year, with a spike following the 5 August attacks.

“Sending people back to a country where they are at real risk of being killed is not only a violation of international law; it will also force people to take greater risks while making the journey to avoid detection, such as traveling by night or on longer routes,” Agnès Callamard said.

The Rohingya who made it to the refugee camps are living off the generosity of relatives there. New arrivals in particular expressed concern that they were unable to register with the UN refugee agency for essential support. As a result, many are going without meals, and are afraid to venture out for fear of deportation, even when in need of medical care.

Interviewees also mentioned the deteriorating security situation in the camps, due mainly to the presence of two Rohingya armed groups: the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Myanmar’s shifting conflict dynamics in Rakhine State have meant that some Rohingya militants have aligned with the junta in Myanmar. As a result, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh fear that they or their family members could be snatched and forcibly taken back and conscripted to fight there.

The vast majority hoped for resettlement in a third country.

“We are constantly afraid of moving from one place to another because we don’t have any documents. We are newcomers here, and we have also heard about people being abducted,” a 40-year-old woman said.

“The interim Bangladesh government and humanitarian relief organizations must work together so that people can have access to essential services such as food, adequate shelter and medical care,” Agnès Callamard said.

“Bangladesh must also ensure that it does not forcibly return people to escalating conflict. Meanwhile, the international community needs to step up with funds and assistance for those living in the refugee camps.”

In a meeting with Amnesty International, Bangladesh officials rejected the allegations of refoulement but said border guards “intercept” people trying to cross the border. They also stressed that the country cannot accommodate any more Rohingya refugees.

Arakan Army and Myanmar military abuses

The Myanmar military has persecuted Rohingya for decades and expelled them en masse in 2017. It is now forcing them to join the army as part of a nationwide military service law. The Myanmar military has also reportedly reached an informal “peace” pact with the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, an older Rohingya armed group that has reemerged as a force in recent months. These complex developments have further inflamed tensions between the Rohingya and the ethnic Rakhine, whom the Arakan Army purports to represent.

The rise in fighting nationwide has also resulted in mounting allegations of abuses by armed groups fighting against the military. Many Rohingya described the fatal consequences of being trapped between the two sides.

“Every time there is a conflict, we get killed,” one Rohingya interviewee told Amnesty.

A 42-year-old shopkeeper said that on 1 August, a munition of unknown origin landed outside his house in Maungdaw, killing his 4-year-old son. On 6 August, the Arakan Army – whose fighters he identified by their badges – entered his village in Maungdaw and relocated all the Hindu and Buddhist families to another area they said was safe, while the Rohingya families were left in place.



Both the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military must abide by international humanitarian law

“They began causing unrest [using it as a base to launch attacks] in the village, which forced us, the Muslim families, to leave on 7 August. We were the only ethnic group left in the village. It seemed like they did this intentionally,” he said.

When he later took shelter in downtown Maungdaw on 15 August, he said he saw Arakan Army “snipers” shoot two Rohingya civilians. “I witnessed the Arakan Army kill a woman right on the spot with gunfire while she went to a pond to collect water ... there was another man who was sitting and smoking in front of his house and he too was shot right in his head and killed.”

In response to questions by Amnesty International, the Arakan Army said on 13 October that these allegations were unsubstantiated or not credible. It said it issued warnings for civilians to leave Maungdaw ahead of its operations and helped evacuate people, that it instructs its soldiers to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and that in case of breaches, it takes disciplinary action.

Since late last year, Amnesty International has separately documented Myanmar military air strikes that have killed civilians and destroyed civilian infrastructure in Rakhine State. This year, the impact of the Myanmar military conscripting Rohingya has added to the historical, systemic discrimination and apartheid already experienced by Rohingya.

“I felt really bad that they were involving us in their fight, even though we had nothing to do with it. It felt like they were laying the foundation to get us killed,” a 63-year-old cattle trader said.

Families wiped out

On 5 August 2024, the intensity of bombardments and gunfights between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army forced scores of people from Maungdaw to seek shelter in sturdier homes near the Naf river border with Bangladesh.

Recalling that day, the Rohingya cattle trader said the Arakan Army was “getting closer to our village, capturing the surrounding villages ... they flew drones in the sky, holding them there

for about an hour, and could drop bombs from the drones whenever and wherever they wanted with remote control. They killed so many people.”

That afternoon, many recounted seeing a drone and hearing multiple blasts. The cattle trader said he heard eight to 10 blasts, and that bombs were exploding “before even touching the ground”. He saw a small unmanned aerial device flying near the crowd that looked like a “rounded-shaped drone” with something attached underneath.

He said his wife, daughter, son-in-law, and two of his grandchildren were killed, while the youngest grandchild, aged one, was seriously injured and later had her lower left leg amputated at the knee in Bangladesh.



A group of approximately 250 Rohingya people who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar stand in line after being held in a building in Cox's Bazar. Photo: Shafiqur Rahman

One 18-year-old woman from Maungdaw said she lost both parents and two of her sisters, aged seven and five, during the blast. At the time of the attack, her father was carrying one of her sisters while her mother carried the other. When they reached the Maungdaw shore in the afternoon in search of boats to cross to Bangladesh, an explosion occurred.

“We quickly hid in the mud, sitting down in the muddy water, and then another bomb exploded, killing my parents, sisters and many others,” she said. “I saw it all with my own eyes – my parents and sisters were killed when the bomb shrapnel hit them.”

While she didn't see a drone, she said the “big bomb” that killed her family members “came flying”. The sound has haunted her ever since. She said she saw about 200 bodies on the shore, a figure cited independently by another interviewee.

Almost everyone Amnesty spoke to said they lost at least one relative while trying to flee Myanmar. Medical records shared with Amnesty International from the days after the attack show treatment for bomb blast injuries after arriving in Bangladesh. Since August there has been a dramatic increase in treatment of war wounds from those fleeing Myanmar.

In its response to Amnesty International, the Arakan Army said that the Myanmar military or aligned armed groups were likely those most responsible and that eyewitnesses or survivors may be affiliated with militant groups.

“The Arakan Army must allow an independent, impartial and effective investigation into possible violations carried out during their operations. Both the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military must abide by international humanitarian law,” Agnès Callamard said.

“We continue to call on the UN Security Council to refer the entire situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.”

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