

# **Burma's Western Border as Reported by the Diplomatic Correspondence**

(1947 - 1975)

Aye Chan \*

## **1. Introduction**

If one explores the diplomatic records of the British Commonwealth in the National Archives in London, two files will be found in the accession to the Southeast Asia Collection, bound with the corresponding letters between the British Embassy in Rangoon, the Foreign Office in London, the High Commissioner of the United Kingdom in Karachi, Pakistan and the Deputy High Commissioner of the United Kingdom in Dacca (Dhaka). According to the British Archival Law, these files were kept secret as government documents until 1979 and 2005 respectively. Both of them consist of the correspondences between these diplomatic missions, regarding border problems between Burma and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh).

Burma (Myanmar) was a British colony until 1948: the Arakan (Rakhine State) that shares an international boundary of 45 miles with Bangladesh today was the first Burmese province annexed to British India after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1924-26). The Naaf River serves as the emblematic border between the two countries. The aforementioned documents have shed lights on new information on the Jihadist movement of the Chittagonian residents (or so-called Rohingya) in North

---

\* Professor of Southeast Asian History, Kanda University of International Studies.

Arakan, the illegal cross-border migrations, and the communal violence on Burma's western frontier in the first decade of independent Burma.

## **2. On the Mujahid Rebellion in Arakan.**

The Mujahids of Chittagonian Muslims from North Arakan declared the jihad on Burma after the central government refused to grant a separate Muslim state in the two townships, Buthidaung and Maungdaw that lie along the East Pakistani (present-day Bangladeshi) border. The Mujahid movement was launched before Burma gained independence, and sabotaged the resettlement program for the refugees in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships. During the World War II, the Arakanese inhabitants of Buthidaung and Maungdaw were forced to leave their homes.

The people of Buthidaung fled to Kyauktaw and Minbya where the Arakanese lived as the majority. The Arakanese from Maungdaw were evacuated to Dinajpur in East Bengal by the British officials. Even though the British administration was reestablished after the war, the Arakanese were unable to return to their homes:

"For want of funds only 277 out of about 2400 indigenous Arakanese, who were displaced from Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships after the British evacuation in 1942, could be resettled on the sites of their original homes. There are also two thousand Arakanese Buddhist refugees brought for fear of Muslims' threatening and frightening them by firing machine guns near the villages at night. While our hands are full with internally displaced refugees we cannot take the responsibility for repatriation of the Muslim refugees from the Sabirnagar camp which the government of India

is pressing.<sup>1)</sup>"

The Muslim refugees from the camp at Subirnagar were also unable to resettle in the interior part of Akyab District at Alegyun, Apaukwa and Gobedaung. All 3,000 of them were initially sent to Akyab Island. Two Muslim Relief Committees were formed in Akyab and Buthidaung in order to provide any possible assistance to the refugees. Then a proposal to send about 1,500 refugees in small groups to the Muslim villages in Buthidaung Township as a temporary solution was accepted. The District Welfare Officer was instructed to work out the expenses for transport and building materials.<sup>2)</sup>

In August 1947, the Sub-Divisional Officer of Maungdaw, U Tun Oo, was brutally murdered by the Muslims. The Commissioner of Arakan reports:

"I have no doubt that this is a result of a long fostered communal feeling by the Muslims. The assassins who committed the murder were suspected to be employed by the Muslim Police Officers and have been organizing strong Muslim feelings and dominating the whole areas. This is a direct affront and open challenge to the lawful authority of the Burma Government by the Muslim Community of Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships whose economic invasion of this country was fostered during the British regime. Unless this most dastardly flouting of the government is firmly and severely dealt with, this alien community will try to annex this

---

1) The Report of the Commissioner's Office of Arakan, April 18, 1947 (The National Archives, London, Foreign Office Record) FO- 643/74.

2) Ibid.

territory or instigate Pakistan to annex it.<sup>3)</sup>"

The newly independent republic had to cope with the insurgency of Karen ethnic group rebels and the communists after celebrating the independence in 1948. Major cities were captured by the Communists and Karen rebels. Two battalions of the regular army went underground to join the communists. The rebels surrounded the Capital City, Rangoon. The Union government was scrawled in the international newspapers with the epithet of "Rangoon Government." In such a situation only a few hundred troops from the Battalion (V) were sent to the western front to fight the Mujahids. Buthidaung and Maungdaw were under the control of the government forces but the countryside around the town was out of control. Concerning the objective and strength of the Mujahids, The British Embassy in Rangoon reported the Foreign Office in London on February 12, 1949:

"It is hard to say whether the ultimate object of the Muslims is that their separate state should remain within the Union or not, but it seems likely that even an autonomous state within the Union would necessarily be drawn towards Pakistan. The Mujahids seem also to have taken arms in about October last, although this does not exclude the possibility that some have not gone underground and are still trying to obtain their objective by agitation only. There are perhaps 500 Muslims under arms, although the total number of supporters of the movement is greater.<sup>4)</sup>"

---

3) The Monthly Report of the Commissioner of Arakan for August 1947, dated 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1947 (National Archives, London, Foreign Office Record) FO- 643/79.

4) The Letter from British Embassy, Rangoon, to the Foreign Office in London, dated 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1949, The National Archives, London: 2-SEA 60/611:DO 196/133.

One report gives a detailed account of the visit of Prime Minister U Nu and the Supreme Commander of the Burmese Army, Lieutenant General Smith Dun, to Akyab in October of 1948. It illuminates that the local officials in East Pakistan provided information and aid to the insurgents from across the border. The Sub-Divisional Officer and the Township Officer from Cox's Bazaar reportedly supplied the Muslim guerrillas with arms and ammunition. The wounded rebels were apparently able to obtain treatment from the hospital in Cox's Bazaar. According to the report of the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts, both the commissioner and the Burmese officials were informed that the two Mujahid leaders, Jaffar Meah and Omra Meah, were hiding in Balukhali village in East Pakistan, near to the Burmese border.<sup>5)</sup> The British Embassy in Rangoon sent a confidential letter to the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan on February 28, 1949; this letter dealt with the probability of provocation and interference from local Pakistani officials on the other side of the border, reporting that:

"In spite of the correct attitude of the Pakistan Central Government there have been fairly reliable reports that their local officials in, for instance, Cox's Bazaar have actively helped Muslim guerrillas. You yourselves are well aware of the pro-guerrilla attitude in this affair of the Pakistan district officers. The Pakistan Government must also be aware of it, and we feel that if they do not curb these officials they may run the risks of provoking Anti-Muslim riots in Akyab district as bad as those which occurred during the war."<sup>6)</sup>

---

5) The Report of the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts dated 7<sup>th</sup> February 1949 (The National Archives, London) 2-SEA 60/611: DO 196/133.

6) Ibid.

The main financial source of the Mujahid Party was the smuggling of rice from Arakan to East Pakistan. Their actions were part of an encompassing strategy to prevent the government forces from enforcing the prohibition on exporting rice.

It has been reported that even the Muslim leaders, Sultan Ahmed and Omra Meah were involved in this illegal border trade.<sup>7)</sup> To solve the problem of this rice shortage in the Chittagong District of East Pakistan, regional officials seem to have sought cooperation with the Mujahid leaders. For many years the Mujahid Party leaders monopolized this smuggling of rice across the border.

The main objective of the rebellion was to absorb the western frontier of Burma into East Pakistan. On May 18, 1949, The Hindustan Standard newspaper, reported the following news about the Mujahids:

"A dangerous aspect of this fighting is its international aspect: the Moslem insurgents have been carrying the Pakistani flag, and many of them clamor for the incorporation of this end of Arakan with Pakistan. It was suspected that they drew arms from across the border; the Government, however, is now satisfied that their rifles and ammunition are old stocks, left behind by the Japanese and British.... The great majority of Arakan Moslems are said to be really Pakistanis from Chittagong, even if they have been settled here for a generation. Out of the 130,000 here, 80,000 are still Pakistani citizens."<sup>8)</sup>

---

7) Ibid.

8) The Newspaper cutting is attached to weekly report No. 21 for the period ending 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1949, from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in in Pakistan, Dacca (The National Archives, London: 2-SEA 60/611: DO 196/133).

When India, Pakistan and Burma gained independence, the immigrants from British India were granted the choice of citizenship in either India or Pakistan: they could also choose Burmese citizenship if so inclined. The Pakistani Government was very anxious that the Burmese Government would use brutal tactics to suppress the rebellion. Pakistan feared that the atrocities in the Burmese border regions would lead to anti-Burma demonstrations in Pakistan, which could in turn instigate anti-Pakistan riots in Burma. Such scenario would be very dangerous for the Pakistanis residing in Burma reportedly 6,000 to 7,000 refugees had already arrived in East Pakistan. The authorities in Karachi were also concerned about the communists infiltrating into Pakistan along with the refugees.<sup>9)</sup>

In the Akyab District of Arakan, it was reported that only the town and island of Akyab were firmly in the hands of the Burmese government. Conditions had deteriorated following the withdrawal of the only Burmese Army battalion (Burma Rifle V). The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) went underground in March 1948, and its followers in Arakan reached an agreement with the Mujahid Party to fight the government forces jointly. The government of Pakistan was informed that the Communist Party of East Bengal had instructed its members to establish contacts with the Muslim communists in Arakan and persuade them to infiltrate the Cox's Bazaar subdivision in order to organize Muslim cultivators for a revolt once the government of Burma had fallen to the communists,<sup>10)</sup> as evidenced by the following record:

---

9) The Letter from Commonwealth Relations Office, London to the High Commissioner for United Kingdom in Karachi, Pakistan, dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 1949 (The National Archives, London: (NA/2-SEA 60/611:DO 196/133).

10) A Telegram from the British Embassy to the Foreign Office in London (April 3, 1949), NA/2-SEA 60/611: DO: 196/133).

"This is borne out by a conversation which the Commissioner of Chittagong Division recently with one of the Mujahid leaders who said that the early agreement with the communists was that when the Burmese Government was overthrown, the Communists will leave Mujahid territory to become an independent state.<sup>11)</sup>"

On June 17, 1949 the British Embassy in Rangoon sent a telegram to the Foreign Office in London about the fall of two district headquarters into communist hands. Sandoway had fallen on June 9, and Kyaupyu on June 10, because of a mutiny by the Union Military Police and levy garrisons in collusion with the local communists. The situation in Akyab was uncertain, and even all air services were suspended.<sup>12)</sup>

A climate of mistrust and fear between the Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Chittagonians was brewed, despite a peace mission sent by the Union government to North Arakan. Muslim leaders, carrying a credential from Premier Nu, contacted the insurgent Muslims and persuaded them to lay down their arms and drop their demand for autonomy.<sup>13)</sup> The mission was unsuccessful because this was more of a communal violence than a rebellion. The prestigious newspaper of India, The Hindustan Standard, on May 18, 1949 reported:

---

11) (a) A Letter from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca to H.E Sir Lawrence G. Smith, the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Karachi, reference 144, dated 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1949, 2-SEA 60/611: DO 196/133.

(b) A Telegram from the British Embassy in Rangoon to Foreign Office, London (April 3, 1949): NA/ 2-SEA 60/611O:196/133.

12) Telegram No. 602 from the British Embassy to the Foreign Office in London, dated 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1949 (National Archives, London), 2- SEA 60/611: DO 196/333.

13) The Reuter News, attached to Weekly Report No. 21 from the period ending 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1949 from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca.



"These guerrilla operations are less a Muslim insurrection against the government than "communal action" against the Arakanese - a prolongation of the Muslim-Buddhist riots of 1942. The Moslems, natives of Chittagong in what is now part of Pakistan - fear oppression by the Arakanese. The Arakanese, the intensely clannish community less than a million strong, hate their Buddhist Kith and kin, and are afraid of losing their identity in the growing Chittagongese population. Neither trusts the other .<sup>14)</sup>"

The cooperation between the two countries improved the situation at the border after the instructions from Karachi were strictly enforced. In order to advance their joint operation and communications, an agreement was reached for the establishment of a Pakistani Consulate in Akyab and a Burmese Consulate in Chittagong. Mohamed Ali, Pakistan's High Commissioner designated to Canada, after relinquishing his post as ambassador to Burma, sent a statement to the press. He noted that the impact of communist infiltration into Pakistan was being weakened by the joint operation of the two countries. At the same time the Pakistani government was persuading the refugees from Arakan to lay down arms and to arrange for their repatriation when the conditions in Burma settled. Reuters reported that the governments of Burma and Pakistan were cooperating to restore peace in Arakan. Their cooperation was further displayed with units of East Pakistan Rifles being stationed along the border to cooperate with their Burmese counterparts.<sup>15)</sup>

---

14) See the reference 5. The term, "Chittagongese" is as it appears in the newspaper.

15) Weekly Report of 28<sup>th</sup> May 1949, from the Deputy High Commissioner for United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca to the Foreign Office, London. (National Archives, London), NA/2-SEA 60/611: DO 196/333.

However, since mid-1949, the Burmese Army's offensive warfare had succeeded. As a result all the towns and major cities under the control of the rebels were recaptured. Sadar Aungmye Khan, the Pakistani ambassador to Burma, who visited East Bengal (East Pakistan) and, expressed confidence that the position of the Burmese Government was improving and that the power of the insurgents was on the decline.<sup>16)</sup> The rebellion lasted one more decade until the Mujahid Party surrendered in 1960.

### 3. **Burma's Relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh**

In 1962, the Army took power in a coup d'état and Burma has been under military rule ever since. The position of Muslims in Arakan was still a subject of discussion between the two countries. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, visited Burma from January 18 to 21, 1964. In his statement he said:

"The Moslems in that portion of Arakan which adjoins with East Pakistan number about 400,000 and have lived there for generations and have acquired Burmese nationality. But they are patently of Pakistani origin and occasionally some Pakistani cross into Arakan illegally and mingled with the population. As part of drive to detect these illegal immigrants the local Burmese authorities have for some time employ extremely oppressive measures. The Pakistan Government is anxious that these Arakanese Moslems should not be goaded into

---

16) The Report Number 26, for the period ending 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1949, from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca (The National Archives, London, 2-SEA 60/6/1:DO 196/333)

leaving Burma and taking refuge in East Pakistan which cannot support them. Mr. Bhutto therefore urged the Burmese to modify their attitude towards these people and offered the maximum cooperation in dealing with any genuine illegal immigrants... Ali Bhutto expressed his belief that the Burmese government would solve the question of Muslims in Arakan with sympathetic consideration and assured that Pakistan on its part would be glad to extend maximum cooperation in any way possible consistent with its policy of good neighborly relations.<sup>17)</sup>"

General and Madame Ne Win, accompanied by Burmese Foreign Minister U Thi Han visited Pakistan from May 7 to 11, 1964. The Burmese party was received by President Ayub Khan: on May 9, 1964 the Pakistan Burma Border Agreement was signed. Both sides agreed to mark the River Naaf which stretches 45 miles between the two countries, as the international border. Then until the outbreak of the Independence War in Bangladesh, relations between Burma and Pakistan were friendly and no border problem existed until Burma launched the Hinthar Operation to investigate illegal immigrants in 1986.

After the coup d'état in Bangladesh in 1975, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, was assassinated, resulting in a dramatic change in the foreign policy of the country. The British Ambassador in Rangoon, T.J. O'Brien had a confidential talk with the Bangladeshi Ambassador, Mr. K. N. Kaiser

---

17) This refers to the talk between Pakistani Foreign Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Burmese Foreign Minister U Thi Han on the Ali Bhutto's visit to Burma from January 18 to 21, 1964. (The Confidential Letter of the British High Commissioner in Rawalpindi, Pakistan to the Commonwealth Relations Office, London, The National Archives, London, 2-SEA 60/6/1)

on December 23, 1975. Mr. Kaiser was appointed by Sheik Mujibur Rahman in July 1975 as the permanent representative for Bangladesh at the United Nations. Following the bewildering coup d'état in Dacca, that appointment was cancelled and he was nominated as ambassador to Beijing instead. The British ambassador reported:

"[Mr. Kaiser] admitted that there were upward of a half million Bengali trespassers in Arakan whom the Burmese had some right to eject. He had implored the Burmese authorities not to press this issue during Bangladesh's present troubles and had been pleased that the Burmese had not taken advantage of his country's misfortunes in this respect. He denied that there had been any fresh exodus into Burma.<sup>18)</sup>"

The records of the Hinthar Operation have not been available in any archives in Burma. Although the Burmese Government should be blamed for the brutal and inhuman measures taken on these illegal immigrants during the operation it would be reasonable for Ne Win's government to take action on the illegal immigration across the border.

#### 4. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the Chittagonian uprising in 1947, they called themselves Mujahid. The name means "the founder and defender of Islamic law" in Sunni Islam.

---

18) The National Archives, London: FCO 15/2041 – C384097

Their revolt was intended to convert northern Arakan, especially Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships, into Dar al-Islam, the region under Muslim sovereignty where the Islamic law prevails. The so-called Rohigya Organizations still see the territory as Dar al-Harb, the territory of the Holy War, and they believe that it is their obligation to wage Jihad on the Union of Burma.

The two separate files in the British National Archives in London consist of diplomatic correspondence regarding the Chittagonian Bengalis' Jihadist movement in the northern Arakan of Burma, and illustrate the respective attitudes of the Burmese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and British governments. There is no doubt that all of these documents give new information on the background of the current problem of Muslim minority in Burma's western frontier.

## 5. References

Note: In this paper the term "Chittagonian" is used as these people are indicated in the British colonial records, although they are recently called in the Medias as "Rhingyas." The Burmese government has refused to accept the claim of the ethnic identity of "Rohingya."

