



Smuggled goods from Burma being unloaded at Teknaf.

BURMA'S MUSLIM BORDERLAND

Sold down the river

Arakan State, in western Burma, was the scene in 1978 of a mass exodus of some 200,000 Muslims into Bangladesh. Though most of the refugees were subsequently allowed back, Muslims in Arakan still suffer harassment from the authorities. **Martin Smith** examines recent developments in Arakan, and the plethora of groups there opposing the central government.

THE SUN COMES UP over Burma's Arakan border and a small ferry boat slips out of Maungdaw harbour, along the Naaf River bound for Teknaf in Bangladesh. On board are local villagers and officials grasping one-day passes allowing them to do business in the bustling Teknaf bazaar.

But these official visitors are not the only travellers crossing the 256-kilometre Arakan border. Night and day, smugglers' launches ply the Naaf River or move out into the open sea where they trade with larger ships anchored off shore. And over rugged hills to the east, traders drive cattle or drag timber for sale over the border. Nor are these the only clandestine cross-border travellers. Eight years after the giant migration when over 200,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees fled into Bangladesh, a steady stream of Muslims filters out little noticed by the outside world.

The Arakan (Rakhine) State, guided by the unique 'Burmese way to socialism' of Burma's long-time military ruler, General Ne Win, is in many ways present-day Burma in microcosm—a largely rural rice-growing population, a stagnant economy, a thriving black market, ethnic discontent and insurgents in the mountains.

Markets along the border abound with goods smuggled across Burma—sarongs and electrical goods from Malaysia and Thailand which first have passed through customs gates belonging to the rebel Karen National Union in the south, and crockery from China channelled through territory controlled by the Kachin Independence Army or the Communist Party of Burma. Even heroin, unheard of a few years ago, is now available, though largely from offshore sources. In this impoverished backwater, however, most local

traders deal in basic goods—rice, fish, timber and cigars from Burma, and medicine and kerosene from Bangladesh.

Black market: a way of life

For local villagers black market trading has become almost a way of life. Under its curious blend of marxist and Buddhist principles the 'Burmese way to socialism' requires farmers to sell their harvest to the government at fixed prices—at present, rice sells at 9 kyat (about £1) a basket. But selling to Bangladesh on the black market for as high as 50 kyat a basket enables many families to buy a variety of goods available only on the black market. Likewise, a box of prawns going for 50 kyat in Burma will sell for six times that amount across the border. According to Gyaw Hla of the Arakan Liberation Organization: 'if you need to earn money in Arakan today there are only two ways—to become a soldier or a smuggler.'

The scale of Burma's black market, though impossible to calculate, is undoubtedly vast. One 1983 estimate put the total volume at some US\$200 million a year—the equivalent to one quarter of Burma's official imports that year. As one intelligence officer with long-time experience of the cross-border trading explained, 'many people, when they hear figures quoted in millions, are very sceptical. They look at the vegetables, cheroots and cattle, which are all most people see trickling across the border, and think the trade can't be very large. What they forget is the high value of goods like jade, teak, rubies and opium which pass through largely unnoticed.'

Indeed, some observers have speculated that in many areas of Burma today there is probably more money circulating in illegal transactions than in legal ones—a remarkable claim given some credence by the extraordinary 'demonetization' of the Burmese currency on 3 November last year. Overnight all the larger notes in circulation—of 20, 50 and 100 kyat—were declared valueless, and Burmese citizens were required to deposit their cash holdings for exchange. But there was a catch. Only a maximum 5,000 kyat (£500) per family—the price of a pair of oxen—would be returned, until investigations ensured that the rest of the money had been legally earned. In practice, 5,000 kyat appears to have become the legal amount any family can hold and anything above this limit has apparently been 'nationalized'.

Although there are reports of individual black marketeers losing personal fortunes, most of Burma's numerous rebel organizations that depend on taxes from black market trade claim contingency plans have minimized their losses. Indeed, a spokesman for the Karen National Union said the measures showed that serious financial difficulties exist in Rangoon with Burma's foreign debt having almost doubled over the past five years—one recent estimate suggesting a figure of US\$2.8 billion.

Legal robbery

Many local villagers in Arakan have greeted the measures with bitterness. 'Daylight robbery', said one trader from Akyab. Hill-tribe farmers also complain of difficulties in travelling to banks in time. But it is in the hard-pressed Rohingya Muslim community that demonetization has been hardest felt.

In 1978 local Muslims fled northern Arakan *en masse* when the government 'Nagamin' census operation went badly wrong, amid widespread allegations of rape, brutality and murder by the Burmese army. A seriously embarrassed Ne Win government eventually allowed most of the 200,000 refugees to return, but recent refugees claim many have still not been issued national registration cards, without which money cannot be exchanged.

Local Muslims consider this just another example of a deliberate but now more subtle campaign of harassment by government authorities to drive all Muslims out of Arakan. According to Jaffar Habbib, President of the Rohingya Patriotic Front, on average one family crosses the border every day. 'We have a saying—if the Burmese army sees you in the village you are an alien, if you are fishing on the river you are a smuggler, and if you are working in the forest you are an insurgent.'

At issue is the definition of who is a bona fide citizen of Burma. That Muslims, along with the Buddhist or Rakhine majority and several hill-tribe groups, form a historic part of the Arakan community is not in doubt. Muslim settlements date back to the ninth century, and from the fifteenth century Arakan kings even used Muslim titles. But large-scale immigration from India during the era of British rule greatly complicated the situation. Resentment at the activities of unscrupulous money lenders and landlords of Indian descent fuelled in part the rising Burmese nationalist movement in the 1930s. During World War Two an estimated 500,000 Indians fled Burma, chased out by the young nationalists of the Burma Independence Army.

Muslim separatists

Since independence, this resentment has apparently been channelled towards the Muslim community, especially after an armed *Mujahid* separatist movement took control of much of the old Mayu frontier district of Arakan in the chaos of the early years. In recent years, however, alleged harassment of Muslims has occurred beyond Arakan. In August 1983 an armed Muslim front was formed under the Karen National Union in the south, after a series of alleged officially inspired attacks on mosques and Muslim quarters in Moulmein, Martaban and other towns in southern Burma.

In Arakan, the difficulties local Muslims face have been compounded by a citizenship law passed in 1982, which restricts full citizenship, exempting 'indigenous' races like



Bangladesh prices for Burmese fish are six times those across the border.

the Shans or Burmans, to those who can prove ancestors resident in Burma before the British conquest in 1824—a practically impossible task in an area where Muslim and Buddhist communities have historically intermingled on both sides of the Naaf River. Government officials nowadays studiously avoid calling Muslims by their own local name 'Rohingya', with its indigenous connotations, and use instead 'Bengalis' or 'Kalas'. They have also begun replacing names from the historic Muslim past with their Buddhist counterparts—Rakhine for Arakan, Sittwe for Akyab. This policy finds undoubted popularity among the Raichine majority who greatly fear unchecked illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Conversely, many Burmese-speaking Muslims answer to the name Rohingya and claim to have been born in Burma.

The Burmese army and authorities appear to have stepped up activities in the northern Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung areas. Refugees allege arbitrary arrests, army brutality, constant restrictions on travel, and the confiscation of land which is then handed over to their Buddhist neighbours. In October 1985 Amnesty International launched an emergency appeal after the arrest and alleged torture in Buthidaung of 19 Muslims suspected of links with an armed underground Muslim organization.

Several refugees who escaped this round-up denied the charges. Mohammed Sayed, a 48-year old headmaster from Taung Bazaar

in Buthidaung, fled with his family in October, fearing imminent arrest after military intelligence officers twice came to his home asking after him. Sayed, a graduate of Rangoon University, holds a national registration card and was one local Muslim leader not to flee in 1978. 'I encouraged my students not to run away. I tried to control the situation by staying.' He categorically denies involvement with the Muslim underground, claiming he has been singled out because of his education and position.

Other active groups

Today, two small armed Muslim groups, the Rohingya Patriotic Front and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, remain active along the border, while a third, the Arakan Liberation Organization, trains in the south. But their armed strength today is a far cry from the *Mujahids* in the early years after Burma's independence. Pressured by the Burmese army, they are restricted to publicity and liaison, with a growing exile movement spread as far afield as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan causing some observers to dub the Rohingyas the 'new Palestinians'.

Besides the Rohingya fronts, Arakan, geographically isolated from Burma proper by the long Arakan Yomas, has a long history of independence. Only in 1784, forty years before the first British annexation of Burma, was Arakan overrun by its Burman ethnic cousins and drawn into the Burmese empire.

Today the Arakanese separatist move-



MARTIN SMITH

Arakan CP cadres: General-Secretary Thein Pe (fourth from right) has spent 24 years in the jungle.

ment, though splintered, remains alive. A common grievance is that Arakan has been economically neglected since Burma's independence. 'The country is kept backward by Burmese colonialism. There is no modern industry except cottage farms and a few essential works like rice mills and small timber mills', claims Thein Pe, general secretary of the Communist Party of Arakan (CPA).

But the Rangoon government has held its own in Arakan on the military front. A counter-insurgency campaign in 1979 drove guerrillas of the Arakan Independence Organization and the Communist Party of Arakan from their base areas in Kyauktaw and Myebon. Then a 1980 general amnesty netted a top organizer in the Burmese Communist Party. Central committee member Thet Tun surrendered with his men, and the strategic base area around An township fell into government hands. Today, some 150 CPB cadres under Saw Tun Qo patrol the Arakan hill tracts along the India-Bangladesh borders but pose little threat to government forces. Indeed most recent reports stress clashes between the Burmese army and Mizo insurgents from India.

Disaster and realignment

Two remaining insurgent forces, the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and the Arakan Independence Organization (AIO), have never really recovered from disasters suffered in 1977—the year of the 'long marches'. In that

year AIO troops trained by the Kachin Independence Army and ALP troops trained by the Karen National Union both attempted the long trek back to Arakan to establish new base areas. Both were ambushed and decimated within a few months of each other in the Chin State in an area unprotected by other insurgent armies.

Today ALP troops remain with the Karen National Union in southern Burma, concentrating with the AIO on underground activities in Arakan. Last year the two groups formed a joint committee with the Communist Party of Arakan, which still employs a few guerrilla units in Arakan. The CPA, which aims at setting up a people's republic of Arakan, is alone amongst Burma's rebellious ethnic minorities in being a separatist communist party. Formed largely by defectors from the now defunct Red Flag faction of the CPB of Thakin Soe, the CPA condemns the CPB for being 'unstable', and the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party for being 'pseudo-socialist'.

A fourth rebel group, a small band of followers led by veteran nationalist Maung Sein Nyunt, the Arakan National Liberation Party, is expected to join shortly, but there is equally a remote possibility that the Rohingya Muslim forces will join as well. As one AIO spokesman explained, 'we recognize the rights of the Muslim people in Arakan and invite them to join us but they must realize that talk of holy wars severely alienates our people.'

But for many observers these attempts at

unity are too few and too late. 'The only way change will come is when the Burmans themselves get fed up with this economic chaos', commented one Muslim exile from Rangoon, watching boats unloading in Teknaf.

Indeed the recent success of the Burmese army in Arakan points out the economic failings of the Burmese way to socialism. Elsewhere in Burma, government officials regularly place blame on collusion between 'economic' and 'political' insurgents, and the Burmese army has in the past year summarily executed suspected smugglers on the Karen front. But in the mostly 'white' areas of Arakan the black market thrives with, according to some traders, the active collusion of the local Burmese military. And common complaints such as the press-ganging of local villagers into forced labour or porter service for the Burmese army continue unabated.

And as if to stress the seemingly unending nature of the problems facing the Ne Win government, news comes in with a sadly familiar ring. In November 1985 a new rebel group—the Revolutionary National Party—was formed in the hill-tracts—this time amongst the hill-tribe Kami, Chin and Mro. They are armed, in training, and are actively seeking new recruits.

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