

Dark clouds over Rakhine State

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Dark clouds over Rakhine State

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Early on the morning of 25 August 2017, Fortify Rights — a regional human rights NGO — held an internal workshop at their Bangkok office. The previous day, the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State had delivered their [final report](#) ^[1] to the Myanmar government.



The researchers at Fortify Rights agreed that the Commission's recommendations — that the government take concrete steps to end enforced segregation of Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, ensure full and unfettered humanitarian access throughout the state, deal with Rohingya statelessness, hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable and end restrictions on freedom of movement — were well-judged and [comprehensive](#) ^[2].

There was also approval for the positive response from the Office of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, which released a [statement](#) ^[3] announcing that the government would implement the recommendations 'to the fullest extent, and within the shortest timeframe possible'.

As an immediate step, a new cross-government ministerial-led committee responsible for the implementation of the Commission's recommendations was to be established, assisted by an advisory board that included regional and international experts. For the first time since the outbreak of violence in 2012, there appeared to be a sliver of optimism over Rakhine State.

This optimism was short-lived. Reports started to emerge that overnight a group known as Harakah al-Yaqin, or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), had mounted [coordinated attacks](#) ^[4] on 30 police posts and an army base in the towns of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung in northern Rakhine State.

It was clear from the level of coordination that the attack had been [long-planned](#) ^[5] and timed to

coincide with the release of the Annan report. Despite [protestations to the contrary](#) ^[6], it appeared that one of the ARSA leadership's main aims was to undermine attempts at the [peace process](#) ^[7] in Rakhine State.

ARSA first came to prominence as a result of their coordinated attacks on 9 October 2016. These attacks were [qualitatively different](#) ^[8] to anything in Rakhine State in recent decades, being the first organised military response to five years of repression experienced by the Rohingya.

After violence broke out in mid-2012, [largely perpetrated by Rakhine Buddhists against Rohingya Muslims](#) ^[9], internment camps restrained the movement of over 120,000 Rohingya. Since then, the ability of Rohingya throughout the state to earn a living and find food and shelter has been severely curtailed. The resulting [humanitarian disaster](#) ^[10] has been exacerbated by the government or military blocking access to humanitarian aid.

This has been part of a broader anti-Muslim sentiment emerging throughout the country and follows other historical instances of [repression and exile of the Rohingya](#) ^[11]. Despite their longevity in Myanmar, the Rohingya are seen as illegal migrants and a threat to [national security](#) ^[12].

In response to the 25 August attacks, the government's Anti-Terrorism Committee labelled ARSA a '[terrorist organisation](#)' ^[13] — the first time the label had been deployed under the country's new Anti-Terror Law, despite ARSA's tactics not being significantly different from many other armed groups in Myanmar. This action is consistent with the special treatment meted out to the Rohingya.

Following the attacks, the Myanmar military engaged in what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) labelled a 'brutal security operation', which he said constituted '[a textbook example of ethnic cleansing](#)' ^[14]. The seriousness of the situation resulted in the UN Security Council displaying a rare unity on Myanmar to call for '[immediate steps](#)' ^[15] to end the violence.

The UNHCR estimates that more than [409,000 Rohingya](#) ^[16] — about 40 per cent of their population in Myanmar — have crossed the border into Bangladesh in the three weeks since.

Reports of the Myanmar military burning villages, conducting extrajudicial killings and laying landmines in the path of fleeing refugees have been widespread. Satellite imagery of more than 80 burned sites demonstrates what appears to have been an orchestrated and systematic [scorched earth](#) ^[17] policy by the military.

The government, on the other hand, blames the Rohingya for [setting fire to their own homes](#) ^[18], when the evidence was [clearly manufactured](#) ^[19]. Support for the government on Rakhine by civil society groups such as the allegedly pro-democracy [88 Generation Peace and Open Society](#) ^[20] — even in the face of these inflammatory claims — demonstrates the pervasive racism throughout Myanmar society when it comes to the Rohingya.

It is well known that the government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its *de facto* leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, [has no oversight over the Myanmar military](#) ^[21]. And of course, the Commander-in-Chief of the military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, rather than Aung San Suu Kyi, bears most of the responsibility for the ruthless military operation.

She is, nonetheless, the undisputed leader of the country and her relative silence on the military's brutality in dealing with the Rohingya furthers the normalisation in Myanmar of what, under any reasonable international assessment, may constitute crimes against humanity and even [genocide](#) ^[22].

When Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in April 2016 she faced an enormous range of [political and economic issues](#) ^[23], a legacy from a half century of military rule. These problems cannot be underestimated. But the government's ongoing willingness to turn a blind eye to extreme and widespread violence against a minority in the country diminishes its legitimacy.

There are [no real winners](#) ^[24] in this conflict. The NLD government needs ongoing [international support](#) ^[25] to help transform the country, economically and politically. It should not be abandoned. But foreign governments need to [put pressure](#) ^[26] on both the government and the military to adhere to international norms in dealing with militant groups. This includes avoiding collective punishment.

While engagement with Myanmar is necessary, prematurely feting the [Myanmar military's chief](#) ^[27] in search of defence contracts while his military is engaged in numerous brutal civil conflicts around the country is not the solution.

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