

Crisis for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar worsens

Myanmar's military has been accused of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

by [Laignee Barron](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) In just a few weeks, clashes between insurgents and Myanmar's military drove almost 400,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees into neighboring Bangladesh—as many refugees as crossed the Mediterranean in 2016.

The government says it is waging a campaign against terrorists. The Rohingya say they are being forcibly expelled—a view the United Nations' human rights chief endorsed in mid-September, saying the situation “seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” The Rohingya, a Muslim minority of about 1 million, have lived in the northern state of Rakhine for generations, yet are largely deprived of citizenship, making them the world's largest stateless population.

The escalation of the long-simmering crisis has brought international pressure upon Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's de facto leader and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to condemn military excesses.

Instead, the former dissident has turned to state media to marshal support for the military, while her government has accused international aid groups of supporting the militants. During her combined 15 years of house arrest under the military governments which ruled for half a century, Aung San Suu Kyi's fight for democracy was sustained with coverage given by exiled Burmese media. But now her administration is accused of stifling the free press while endorsing the state mouthpieces inherited from her erstwhile military captors.

Her defenders argue that she is hamstrung. Despite her elected administration's overwhelming democratic mandate, it is constitutionally obliged to share power with the autonomous military.

But the administration's use of propaganda goes beyond a reluctance to criticize their rulers, said Mark Farmaner, director of the human rights group Burma

Campaign UK.

“By standing shoulder to shoulder with the military, [Aung San Suu Kyi] has bought into the narrative they use to justify their behavior, that the nation is under serious threat from foreign terrorists,” he said. “Now her government is propagating that narrative, which is increasing tensions and the likelihood of further violence.”

In early September, in her first statement since the crisis flared in August, Aung San Suu Kyi slammed a “huge iceberg of misinformation” for promoting sympathy for “terrorists.” Her statement made no mention of Rohingya refugees. Aung San Suu Kyi has explicitly endorsed state media, whose official coverage of the conflict is dominated by graphic photos of the alleged crimes of “extremist terrorists,” as the government refers to the insurgents, and insists that independent media do as well. The accuracy of certain images circulating on both sides of the issue has been called into question, with some photos stemming from other conflicts.

“The people have a lot of trust for this government, so that [trust] will, of course, extend to the press of the government as well,” said Htaike Htaike Aung, executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organization, a digital rights advocacy group.

Leaders such as fellow Peace Prize laureates Malala Yousafzai and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have pressured Aung San Suu Kyi to speak out about the plight of the Rohingya.

Concerns about the situation in Rakhine predate the latest escalation, as do the government’s attempts to manage reporting about it.

A UN report said security forces had “very likely” committed crimes against humanity during the crackdown from October to February, including gang rapes, village burnings, and the killing of children, women, and the elderly—allegations that Aung San Suu Kyi’s office has dismissed as “fabricated news” and “fake rapes.” One official, asked by a BBC interviewer last year about the allegations, laughed and said that the women were “too dirty” to rape.

Myanmar’s administration has denied visas to a UN team tasked with investigating alleged military atrocities, claiming the probe would create “greater hostility.” It has largely barred independent media and international observers from the area, imposing an information void across the low-lying hills and swampland of northern

Rakhine.

Critics allege that the government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, has sought to fill the vacuum of news with its own accounts. Outlets controlled by the civilian-led government have cast the military as protectors against insurgent atrocities, such as using children as human shields, while omitting claims of military abuses against the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi's spokesperson shared photos supposedly capturing the Rohingya setting their own homes alight. The authenticity of those photos have been questioned, and journalists reported that Buddhist youths admitted to starting fires.

Some observers argue that the civilian government fears a derailing of democratization if it openly confronts the military. The constitution invests the military with significant powers, including control over three key ministries, law enforcement, and local administration, as well as the ability to appoint 25 percent of the seats in parliament and to veto constitutional changes.

The government "is trying to avoid further conflict," said Jean Jonathan Bogais, a professor at the University of Sydney who studies conflict in Southeast Asia. "Myanmar is in a critical juncture."

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