

Myanmar army deserters confirm atrocities against Rohingya Muslims

by [Grant Peck](#) in the [October 7, 2020](#) issue



An image taken from the video testimony of Myanmar army deserter Myo Win Tun, who said he was instructed by commanding officers to "shoot all that you see and hear" in villages where minority Rohingya Muslims lived. (Arakan Army via AP)

Two soldiers who deserted from Myanmar's army have testified on video that they were instructed by commanding officers to "shoot all that you see and that you hear" in villages where minority Rohingya Muslims lived, a human rights group said on September 8.

The comments appear to be the first public confession by soldiers of involvement in army-directed massacres, rape, and other crimes against Rohingya in the Buddhist-majority country, and the group Fortify Rights suggested they could provide important evidence for an ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court.

More than 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar to neighboring Bangladesh since August 2017 to escape what Myanmar's military called a clearance campaign following an attack by a Rohingya insurgent group in Rakhine State. Myanmar's government has denied accusations that security forces committed mass rapes and killings and burned thousands of homes.

Fortify Rights, which focuses on Myanmar, said the two soldiers fled the country this summer and are believed to be in the custody of the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands.

According to Fortify Rights, privates Myo Win Tun, 33, and Zaw Naing Tun, 30, who served in separate light infantry battalions, gave "the names and ranks of 19 direct perpetrators from the Myanmar army, including themselves, as well as six senior commanders . . . they claim ordered or contributed to atrocity crimes against Rohingya."

The videos were filmed in July while the soldiers were in the custody of the Arakan Army, an ethnic guerrilla group in Rakhine engaged in an armed conflict with the government, and included subtitled translations into English, the human rights group said. They were posted on Fortify Rights' page on a video-sharing site, where the Associated Press viewed them.

The AP was not able to independently corroborate the soldiers' accounts or ascertain whether they made their statements under duress.

However, UN agencies and human rights organizations have extensively documented atrocities carried out against the Rohingya by Myanmar security forces. The International Court of Justice agreed last year to consider a case alleging that Myanmar committed genocide against the group. The court's proceedings are likely to continue for years.

Myanmar has long considered Rohingya Muslims to have migrated illegally from Bangladesh, even though their families have lived in Myanmar for generations. Nearly all have been denied citizenship since 1982, effectively rendering them stateless. They are also denied freedom of movement and other basic rights.

After answering questions about his name, serial number, and military units, Myo Win Tun said the commander of the 15th Military Operations Center, whom he named as Col. Than Htike, ordered his unit to "exterminate all Kalar"—a derogatory

name for the Rohingya—and that they shot the men in their foreheads and kicked their bodies into a hole. They also raped the women before killing them, and he admitted to carrying out one rape himself.

He said his unit appropriated mobile phones and laptops and also seized cattle, an allegation that has been widely reported.

Staring directly at the camera with barely any perceptible movement, Zaw Naing Tun recounted how his unit “wiped out” 20 Rohingya villages. The soldier said about 80 people in all were killed, including children, adults, and the elderly. The killings were sanctioned by his battalion commander, Lt. Col. Myo Myint Aung, he said.

In one incident, ten villagers suspected of belonging to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Rohingya insurgent group, were captured and tied up and then shot on the orders of a captain, Zaw Naing Tun said, acknowledging that he was one of the shooters.

He acknowledged taking part in looting, saying his unit officer declared “what you take is what you get” ahead of a raid on a market.

“We entered into the market, destroyed locks and doors, and then we took money, gold, clothes, food, and mobile phones,” he said.

Fortify Rights said the two deserters arrived at Myanmar’s border with Bangladesh in mid-August and asked Bangladesh authorities for protection. Bangladesh officials then notified the International Criminal Court about their presence and said they are no longer in Bangladesh, according to Fortify Rights.

“These confessions demonstrate what we’ve long known, which is that the Myanmar army is a well-functioning national army operating with a specific and centralized command structure,” Fortify Rights chief Matthew Smith said in a statement.

“Commanders control, direct, and order their subordinates in all they do. In this case, commanders ordered foot soldiers to commit genocidal acts and exterminate Rohingya, and that’s exactly what they did.”

The International Court of Justice is the UN’s top court. It settles disputes between nations and does not prosecute individuals. The International Criminal Court, which seeks to hold individuals responsible for crimes, has not issued any public indictments in the investigation it is conducting. Both courts are based in The Hague

in the Netherlands. —Associated Press. Associated Press writer Mike Corder in The Hague, Netherlands, contributed to this report.