



Men walk at a Rohingya village outside Maungdaw in Rakhine state, Myanmar. **Picture by Soe Zeya Tun**

# Myanmar's army cracks down on Muslim villages

BY SIMON LEWIS, WA LONE, YIMOU LEE, ANTONI SLODKOWSKI AND MICHELLE NICHOLS

OCTOBER 22 — NOVEMBER 24 YANGON/U SHEY KYA/SITTWE/UNITED NATIONS

# Residents say civilians among dead in Myanmar army lockdown

BY SIMON LEWIS AND WA LONE

OCTOBER 22 YANGON

**M**uslim residents and rights activists say a military operation in northwestern Myanmar has killed more people than official reports have acknowledged, as a fresh bout of ethnic unrest threatens to undermine the country's fledgling peace process.

The government, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, has said the army and police in Rakhine State are fighting a group of at least 400 insurgents, drawn from the Rohingya Muslim minority, with links to Islamist militants overseas.

While officials say the army has been conducting carefully targeted sweeps against the group behind attacks on police border posts on Oct. 9, residents who spoke to Reuters accused security forces of killing non-combatants and burning homes.

With the area around Maungdaw Township, near the border with Bangladesh, under military lockdown it was not possible to independently verify either side's version of events.

The violence has destabilised Myanmar's most volatile state, where the relations between the Rohingya and majority Buddhists are at their lowest point since hundreds of people were killed and thousands displaced in ethnic violence in 2012.

Delicate efforts to rebuild fragile intercommunal ties since then have been shattered, marking a massive setback for the No.1 goal of Suu Kyi's government — securing a lasting peace and unifying the country.

In videos posted online, armed men speaking the Rohingya language have claimed responsibility for the coordinated attacks on Oct. 9 that ignited the region, where Rohingya face severe restrictions on their movement and access to basic services.

## DEADLY CLASHES

State-run media have reported that 30 “attackers” have been killed by security forces since Oct. 9, including two women reported to have been armed with swords.

But Reuters interviews with six residents and community leaders in Maungdaw Township — as well as diplomats in Yangon and rights groups — paint a different picture.

“Clearly there are more than 30 killed,” said Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a monitoring group that says it has drawn information from a network of sources throughout Maungdaw Township. “And many of them are civilians, not attackers.”

Lewa said the army was using “typical counter-insurgency measures against civilians”, including “shooting civilians on sight, burning homes, looting property and arbitrary arrests”.



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Chris Lewa  
Arakan Project

Ye Naing, a director at the Ministry of Information, said the official reports coming out of Maungdaw could be trusted.

“The current operation is not blind searching. The military has the information from interrogations, so the target is very clear and the scope of the operation is narrow,” he said.

The military did not respond to requests for comment.

### OPERATION ZONE

Foreign reporters have not been allowed into the area the military has declared an “operation zone”, but Reuters was able to contact some residents and community leaders by telephone.

The people, who did not want to be identified, contradicted several of the reports in state media, saying that the death toll in the area was higher than reported and that a number of those killed were unarmed.

In one of the disputed accounts, the state-run Myanmar Alinn newspaper said 30 Muslims attacked government forces on Oct. 11 near Kyetyoepyin village, and that 10 Rohingyas were killed in the subsequent fighting. After the clash, the insurgents fled, setting fire to homes, the report said.

But several Rohingya residents from the area said they believed at least 19 people, including eight women, were killed by security forces that day. They also say it was the soldiers who set a large part of the village on fire.

The United Nations has said the violence is preventing aid agencies from delivering food and medicines to the region.

The conflict underlines the power the army retains in Myanmar, which was ruled for decades by a junta, despite the democratic reforms that brought Suu Kyi to power this year.

Suu Kyi has urged the military to use restraint and act in accordance with the law, but day-to-day handling of the crisis is in the hands of the home affairs minister, who, like the heads of two other security ministries, is a general appointed by the military.

Though feted abroad as a champion of democracy, Suu Kyi has also faced


international criticism for not doing enough to ease the plight of around 1.1 million Rohingya living in Rakhine, most of whom are denied Myanmar citizenship.

A commission on solving the Rakhine quagmire led by former U.N. chief Kofi Annan and appointed by Suu Kyi in August was in Myanmar this week, but would not travel to the troubled state, officials said.

The government has blamed the violence on a little known Islamist group it says has links to the Pakistani Taliban.

But Suu Kyi said during a trip to India this week that the government’s initial statement may have been based on unreliable sources, underlining how the sudden upsurge in violence has taken it by surprise.

Diplomats believe that the group’s outside support is largely limited to the Rohingya diaspora, many of whom live in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, rather than established Islamist militant groups.

The initial attacks, in which three border police outposts were overrun by hundreds of people, most only lightly armed, showed a degree of sophistication not seen before in violence involving the Rohingya, but did not suggest the group was especially well-funded or armed, diplomats said. 

Additional reporting by **Mohammad Nurul Islam** in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh; Editing by **Alex Richardson**

# Myanmar army forces hundreds of Rohingya villagers from homes

BY WALONE

OCTOBER 24 YANGON

**H**undreds of Myanmar's Rohingya villagers are facing a second night hiding in rice fields without shelter, after the army on Sunday forcibly removed them from a village in a crackdown following attacks on border security forces.

Four Rohingya sources contacted by Reuters by telephone, said border guard officers went to Kye Kan Pyin village on Sunday and ordered about 2,000 villagers to abandon it, giving them just enough time to collect basic household items.

The move marks an escalation in violence which has destabilised Myanmar's most volatile state located in the remote northwest. In Rakhine, relations between the Rohingya and majority Buddhists have hit their lowest point since hundreds of people were killed and thousands displaced in ethnic and religious violence in 2012.

The government, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, has said the army

and police in Rakhine are fighting a group of at least 400 insurgents, drawn from the Rohingya Muslim minority, with links to Islamist militants overseas.

While officials say the army has been conducting carefully targeted sweeps against the group behind attacks on police border posts on Oct. 9, residents have accused security forces of killing non-combatants and burning homes.

"I was kicked out from my house yesterday afternoon, now I live in a paddy field outside of my village with some 200 people including my family — I became homeless," said a Rohingya man from Kye Kan Pyin village contacted by Reuters by telephone.

"After the soldiers arrived at our village, they said that if all of us didn't leave, they would shoot us,—" he said.

Another witness and two Rohingya community elders based in Maungdaw who are collecting information from across the area have corroborated the account, estimating a total of about 2,000 villagers were removed from homes.


Some were able to find shelter in neighbouring villages, but hundreds spent last night hiding in the rice fields. They are still stranded and are facing another without shelter.

Mynt Kyaw, a government spokesman, said the government was unable to contact anyone in the area because it was a militarily-operated "red zone".

"A Muslim man called me this morning as they were being forcibly removed from their homes, but I was not able to confirm that information," said Mynt Kyaw.

The military did not respond to a request for comment.

Videos uploaded on social media by Rohingya rights activists showed men and women speaking Rohingya language carrying their belongings and livestock to other villages or waiting out the crackdown in paddy fields.

The area around Maungdaw Township, near the border with Bangladesh, is under military lockdown and journalists and aid workers have not been allowed to go inside. 

Editing by **Antoni Slodkowski** and **Richard Balmforth**

# Rohingya women say Myanmar soldiers raped them amid crackdown on militants

BY WA LONE AND SIMON LEWIS

OCTOBER 28 U SHEY KYA/YANGON

**R**ohingya Muslims say Myanmar soldiers raped or sexually assaulted dozens of women in a remote village in the northwest of the country during the biggest upsurge in violence against the persecuted minority in four years.

Eight Rohingya women, all from U Shey Kya village in Rakhine State, described in detail how soldiers last week raided their homes, looted property and raped them at gun point.

Reuters interviewed three of the women in person and five by telephone, and spoke to human rights groups and community leaders. Not all the claims could be independently verified, including the total number of women assaulted.

Soldiers have poured into the Maungdaw area since Oct. 9, after an insurgent group of

Rohingyas that the government believes has links to Islamists overseas launched coordinated attacks on several border guard posts.

Citing evidence garnered by interrogating suspected militants, the government blamed the attacks on an armed group it says is made up of some 400 Rohingya fighters.

The militants, who have identified themselves as the previously unknown Al-Yakin Mujahidin in videos posted online, are accused of killing nine police officers and five soldiers, and of stealing a cache of weapons.

The crisis in northern Rakhine marks the biggest challenge Myanmar's six-month-old civilian government has faced, and raises questions over de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to maintain control of the country's military, observers and diplomats say.

The United States has raised the issue directly with Myanmar's Foreign Ministry and would like to see authorities "investigate these allegations fully and take whatever actions against the perpetrators are warranted," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told a briefing in Washington.

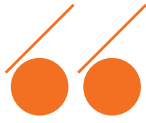
A State Department official who spoke on condition of anonymity said Scot Marciel, the U.S. ambassador to Myanmar, "has been raising the issue consistently since the attack" and spoke to the Foreign Ministry about it on Thursday.

Suu Kyi's relationship with the army remains strained because of the constitution, drafted by the military in 2008, which bars her from the presidency. It also guarantees the army key ministerial posts, including defence, border affairs and home affairs.

Diplomats and United Nations officials say privately that the Oct. 9 attacks and subsequent crackdown have shattered years of work rebuilding trust between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Rakhine after ethnic and religious violence broke out there in 2012.

## 'THEY TORE MY CLOTHES'

A 40-year-old woman from U Shey Kya told Reuters that four soldiers raped her and assaulted her 15-year-old daughter, while stealing jewelry and cash from the family.



They told me, 'We will kill you. We will not allow you to live in this country.'



A 30-year-old woman being repeatedly raped by soldiers

"They took me inside the house. They tore my clothes and they took my head scarf off," the mother of seven told Reuters in an interview outside her home, a cramped bamboo hut.

"Two men held me, one holding each arm, and another one held me by my hair from the back and they raped me."

Zaw Htay, the spokesman for Myanmar President Htin Kyaw, denied the allegations.

"There's no logical way of committing rape in the middle of a big village of 800 homes, where insurgents are hiding," Zaw Htay said.

Zaw Htay telephoned a military commander in Maungdaw, whose name he did not disclose, during an interview with Reuters this week. The commander said troops conducted a sweep of U Shey Kya village on Oct. 19, but left without committing abuses.

The military did not respond to an emailed request for comment about the accusations.

### SECURITY CRACKDOWN

The escalation of violence threatens to derail Suu Kyi's goal of ending years of ethnic war in Myanmar, undermining the nation's surprisingly smooth democratic transition that started a year ago with her historic election win, observers and diplomats say.

Though feted as a champion of democracy, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate has faced international criticism for not doing enough to ease the plight of around 1.1 million Rohingya living in Rakhine, most of whom are denied Myanmar citizenship.

After the first attacks, Suu Kyi urged the army to act in accordance with the law.

The military, which oversaw decades of authoritarian rule and now presents itself as a responsible partner in Myanmar's transition, has declared an "operation zone" in northern Rakhine.

Residents and activists say civilians are being caught up in the security crackdown, and say scores more have been killed than the 33 alleged attackers that official reports have acknowledged.

### 'MUSLIM PROPAGANDA'

U Shey Kya village's official administrator,

Armah Harkim, said he was working to verify the latest accounts, adding most residents believed them to be true.

Zaw Htay, the president's spokesman, accused residents of fabricating the allegations as part of a disinformation campaign led by the insurgents, which he compared to the tactics of Islamist groups Islamic State and al Qaeda.

Colonel Sein Lwin, the police chief for Rakhine State, dismissed the claims as "propaganda for Muslim groups."

Reuters reporters traveled to U Shey Kya village on Thursday, passing nearby villages where dozens of houses were recently burned down, and interviewed three women who said they were raped by soldiers.

Five other women from U Shey Kya have also detailed in a series of telephone interviews how Myanmar soldiers raped them. The accounts are backed up by at least three male residents of the village and a Rohingya community leader in Maungdaw who has gathered reports about the incident.

The residents said some 150 soldiers arrived near U Shey Kya on Oct. 19.


Most male residents left the village as they believed they would be suspected as insurgents. The women said they stayed behind in the belief the military would burn down empty homes.

Soldiers dismantled the fences around homes, residents said, removing possible hiding places as part of what authorities called a "clearance operation."

A 30-year-old woman described being knocked off her feet by soldiers and repeatedly raped.

"They told me, 'We will kill you. We will not allow you to live in this country,'" she said.

The women said soldiers took gold, money and other property, and spoiled rice stores with sand.

"We can't move to another village to find medical care," said a 32-year-old survivor. "I don't have clothes now or food to eat. It was all destroyed. I'm feeling ashamed and scared." 

Additional reporting by **Yangon newsroom** and **Arshad Mohammed** in Washington; Editing by **Lincoln Feast** and **Will Dunham**

# Myanmar's training for non-Muslim police stokes fear in Rakhine

BY WA LONE AND YIMOULEE

NOVEMBER 18 SITTWE

**E**ver since deadly attacks by alleged Muslim militants in Myanmar's troubled northwestern Rakhine State, Myint Lwin says he has been unable to sleep at night. As rumours spread of fresh violence, even the sound of dogs barking frightened him.

"No one in the village has had enough sleep since last month," said Myint Lwin, an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist from a Muslim-majority village in the north of the state. "We were scared when we heard people shouting and

dogs barking in the middle of the night."

The 18-year-old motorbike taxi driver is one of 116 civilians to sign up for a new auxiliary police force in Rakhine State, part of the response by authorities to the latest spasm of violence that began with attacks on border police posts that killed nine officers on Oct. 9.

Human rights monitors say arming and training non-Muslims will lead to further bloodshed in the divided state, but Myint Lwin sees it as necessary for self-defence.

"These Muslims are trying to abuse our Buddhist women and people, so I want to protect our country from them," he told Reuters, wearing his new police uniform with a badge bearing a white star on the shoulder.

Sixty-nine suspected insurgents and 17 members of the security forces have been killed, according to official reports since a military crackdown began last month along Myanmar's frontier with Bangladesh.

It is the most serious unrest in the state since hundreds were killed in communal clashes between Muslims and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists in 2012.

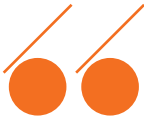
Residents and rights advocates have also accused security forces of killing and raping civilians and setting fire to homes in the area, where the vast majority of residents are Rohingya Muslims. The government of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the army reject the accusations.

There have been no reports of insurgent attacks on Buddhist civilians.

## LOYALTY OATH

Chanting an oath of loyalty to the state, the new recruits began an accelerated training programme in the state capital Sittwe this week. Mostly Rakhine Buddhists in their early 20s, in 16 weeks they will be deployed guarding border posts in the tense north.

The training is two months shorter than the programme undertaken by regular police and the recruits did not have to meet the usual entrance criteria such as educational attainment standards and minimum height.



I have some Muslim friends, they are not bad people, and we have no problems.



A Rohingya teacher from northern Rakhine

Only citizens were eligible, excluding the 1.1 million Rohingyas living in Rakhine State who are denied citizenship in Myanmar, where many regard them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The recruits, who are from across Rakhine, will be given training courses including martial arts, use of weapons and riot control.

“The ethnic Rakhine asked the government to protect them in the Muslim-majority region,” said Rakhine State police chief Colonel Sein Lwin. “If we have enough police force, we can give more security to them.”

He said the recruits would help protect residents from what the government has described as a Rohingya Muslim militant group, estimated to be 400-strong, that has been blamed for the Oct. 9 attacks.

“These Muslims never follow the laws,” Sein Lwin said. “They are trying to seize land and extend their territory in northern Rakhine and kill Rakhine ethnics.”

The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar reported that apart from the special training for new police recruits, “healthy Rakhine women” and wives of members of the security forces had received military training in January.

The auxiliary force will come under the control of the border police. After an 18-month stint on the border, the recruits will be deployed to police stations close to their hometowns.

They will be paid 150,000 Kyat (\$115) monthly, a salary many recruits said was less than they earned as civilians.

“I don’t care about salary,” said Than Lwin Oo, a 24-year-old waiter from the northern Buthidaung township who failed a college entrance exam — a requirement to join the regular police.

“I dislike the Muslim who try to intimidate our country. That is one of the reasons why I want to become a policeman.”

### “RECIPE FOR ABUSES”

While officials have said the auxiliary police recruits are not a new “people’s militia”, like those that fight ethnic insurgencies elsewhere

in Myanmar, some observers fear the move will sharpen tensions between the two communities.

“This is a recipe for rights abuses against the Rohingya,” said Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division. “The Burmese government is foolhardy to think they will be able to control the local recruits operating on a basis of bias against the Rohingya people.”

Not all the recruits voiced hostility towards Muslims.

Kyaw San Win, 29, said he had always wanted to join the police, but had not achieved the level of education usually required. He said his village of 100 houses in northern Rakhine was close to a Muslim settlement of 500 homes.

“I have some Muslim friends, they are not bad people, and we have no problems,” he said.


But many Muslims say the auxiliary programme was likely to worsen the distrust and fear between the two communities.

“We don’t dare to go out on the street. If they found us, they would accuse us of being insurgents,” said a Rohingya teacher from northern Rakhine, who asked not to be named because he was afraid of repercussions.

In Buddhist Rakhine communities the fear is just as palpable. Some living in the Muslim-majority north said the auxiliary police recruitment comes too little and too late.

“The police training is useless,” said Kyaw Win from a village where some 1,200 Rohingya houses outnumber the 40 ethnic Rakhine households. He said some 50 Rakhine villagers have fled since fighting escalated in mid-November.

He urged the government to reinforce with militias with weapons rather than police.

“We don’t know what would happen in the future,” he said. “We can get killed any time because we are surrounded by Muslims.” 

Editing by **Alex Richardson**



# West voices growing concern at Myanmar's handling of crisis

BY ANTONI SLODKOWSKI AND  
MICHELLE NICHOLS

NOVEMBER 24 YANGON/UNITED NATIONS

**W**estern nations are increasingly concerned at how Aung San Suu Kyi's government is dealing with violence in Myanmar's divided northwest, with the U.S. envoy to the United Nations privately warning fellow diplomats the country could not handle the crisis on its own.

Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State has sent hundreds of Rohingya Muslims fleeing across the border to Bangladesh amid allegations of abuses by security forces, posing the biggest test yet for Suu Kyi's eight-month-old administration.

Samantha Power, Washington's ambassador to the UN, outlined the level of concern at a closed meeting of the United Nations Security Council, held at the United States' request at the body's headquarters in New York last Thursday, diplomats said.

"Initial enthusiasm of (the) international community to let Myanmar continue on this path of reform on its own seems to be dangerous

at this stage," Power told the meeting, according to two diplomats briefed on the discussions.

Suu Kyi responded the next day by telling a gathering of diplomats in Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw, that her country was being treated unfairly, sources said. They added, however, that Myanmar had also committed to restore aid access and launch a probe into allegations of rights abuses, the key points they had been pressing for.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi has for years been feted in the West for her role as a champion of democracy during years of military rule and house arrest, and her landslide election win last year on a platform of reform was widely hailed.

But the current crisis, the most serious bloodshed in Rakhine since hundreds were killed in communal clashes in 2012, has renewed international criticism that she has done too little to alleviate the plight of the Rohingya minority, who are denied citizenship and access to basic services.

Reuters spoke to about a dozen diplomats and aid workers, who described the previously unreported discussions in Myanmar and New York on condition of anonymity.

## ABUSE ALLEGATIONS

Soldiers have poured into the area along Myanmar's frontier with Bangladesh, responding to coordinated attacks on three border posts on Oct. 9 that killed nine police officers.

Myanmar's military and the government have rejected allegations by residents and rights groups that soldiers have raped Rohingya women, burnt houses and killed civilians during the military operation in Rakhine.

Presidential spokesman Zaw Htay said Myanmar was "releasing correct news immediately" to prevent the spread of misinformation.

"The international community misunderstood us because of Rohingya lobbyists who distributed fabricated news," he said. "No one in the world would accept attacks on security forces, killings and looting of weapons."

At the New York meeting last week, Power



Our government is working on solving the problem in Rakhine State.



**Zaw Htay**  
Presidential  
spokesman

renewed Washington's call for the opening of an office of the OHCHR, the UN's human rights body, in Myanmar.

She also warned that years of disenfranchisement might have triggered radicalisation of some elements of the Rohingya community, describing the Security Council meeting as a "classic prevention moment".

State Department spokeswoman Nicole Thompson declined to comment on what was said at the closed-door Nov. 17 meeting.

"We remain concerned by reports of ongoing violence and displacement in northern Rakhine State," Thompson said.

"We continue to urge the government to conduct a credible, independent investigation into the events in Rakhine State, and renew our request for open media access."

Britain also expressed its concerns at the meeting, diplomats said, as did Malaysia, which voiced worries the violence could prompt a renewed regional migration crisis.

Underscoring the diplomatic tensions, Muslim-majority Malaysia said on Wednesday it was considering pulling out of a regional soccer tournament co-hosted by Myanmar in protest over its handling of the crisis.

Egypt's representative said it too was concerned by reports of radicalisation among the Rohingya.

### SUU KYI "UPSET"

Suu Kyi was "upset" at a gathering with top diplomats from the UN, United States, Britain, EU and Denmark in Naypyitaw on Friday, sources said, accusing the international community of an overt focus on one side of the conflict, without "having the real information".

Diplomats and aid workers said the meeting focused on the resumption of aid in northern Rakhine, where provision of food and medicines to 150,000 people has been suspended for more than 40 days as the military has locked down the area.

The UN has said aid is urgently needed for more than 3,000 severely malnourished children who may die without help.

Suu Kyi expressed "positive indications" towards helping people obtain food aid, the diplomats said, but as of Wednesday the aid had not been restored.

Diplomats in Myanmar say they have been quietly trying to persuade Suu Kyi to allow aid access for some time, with some voicing frustration that she has pressed ahead with a busy schedule of long overseas trips during the crisis.


But while she dominates the civilian government, Suu Kyi remains severely constrained by the still-powerful military, which controls the defence, home and border affairs ministries, and some diplomats acknowledged the limits of what she could do.

At the New York meeting, the UN Secretary General's Special Advisor on Myanmar, Vijay Nambiar, "painted a picture of a government in conflict between the civilian and the military", said a security council diplomat.

"A number of security council diplomats bought this line and felt the government needed more space," the diplomat said.

Diplomats were also assured that Myanmar was working to establish a commission to probe both the original attacks and allegations of abuses. A report in state media on Saturday referred only to the formation of a body to investigate "violent attacks" and did not specify whether it would include allegations against security forces.

Presidential spokesman Zaw Htay said the country was taking action in Rakhine, pointing to a citizen verification programme aimed at the mostly stateless Rohingya and a special government-level taskforce on Rakhine appointed by Suu Kyi after assuming power.

"Our government is working on solving the problem in Rakhine State," said Zaw Htay. 

Additional reporting by **Yimou Lee** in Yangon and **David Brunstrom** in Washington; Editing by **Alex Richardson**