



ARAKAN

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)



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Rakhine Humanitarian Corridor: Hope or Hazard?

A proposal to open a humanitarian corridor from Bangladesh into Myanmar's Rakhine State has ignited both hope and trepidation across the region. After years of conflict and blockade in Rakhine, where entire villages face dire shortages, even the whisper of relief arriving from across the border offers a lifeline to civilians – including Rohingya communities long trapped in upheaval.

Yet this very notion of a cross-border safe passage for aid raises hard questions. Can a humanitarian corridor truly alleviate the suffering without entangling Bangladesh in Myanmar's turmoil? Or would it, as critics warn, repeat the tragic mistakes of past "safe zones" and destabilize a fragile region? In weighing this proposal, one must balance the immediate moral imperative to save lives against the significant security risks and historical precedents that urge extreme caution.



The Promise: Lifeline for Rohingya and Other Civilians

On its face, a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine State holds the promise of desperately needed relief. Rakhine has been wracked by a multi-faceted crisis – renewed civil conflict between Myanmar’s military junta and the Arakan Army, a devastating cyclone and earthquake, and an official blockade on food and supplies to rebel-held areas and the reach of Myanmar’s blockade.

Over 2 million people in Rakhine are now in urgent need of food, medicine, and basic aid, with more than half a million displaced from their homes. International rights groups have warned that Myanmar’s deliberate restrictions on aid are causing avoidable deaths and may amount to war crimes. In this context, carving out a protected passage for humanitarian convoys from Bangladesh could be a life-saving corridor, delivering essential goods to famished villages cut off behind conflict lines.



Photo courtesy: Free Malaysia Today



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“A humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar would enable vital aid and trade for all communities. Failure to act will cost lives,” urged Fortify Rights, which has documented the unfolding catastrophe in Rakhine. The corridor could serve as a bridge to survival, ensuring that Rohingya Muslims, Rakhine Buddhists, and other ethnic minorities isolated by the fighting all receive food, water, and medical care beyond the reach of Myanmar’s blockade.

Bangladesh's leaders also see a potential strategic upside to participating in an aid corridor. For Bangladesh, which hosts over 1 million Rohingya refugees in sprawling camps, helping stabilize Rakhine State is not only a humanitarian duty but a step toward an eventual solution to the refugee crisis. "The UN-supported humanitarian aid would help stabilize Rakhine and create conditions for the return of the refugees," explained Khalilur Rahman, an adviser in Bangladesh's interim government. If peace and normalcy begin to take root in northern Rakhine thanks to sustained relief, Rohingya families might dare to hope that safe repatriation is possible in the future. In theory, the corridor could thus serve as a confidence-building measure, showing Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya that the world has not forgotten them and perhaps opening the door – however narrowly – to their dignified return home.

Some Rohingya leaders have even suggested that an internationally backed corridor, ideally combined with a protected safe zone on Myanmar's side of the border, could make returning to Rakhine a more realistic and secure prospect.

Finally, agreeing to an aid passage could bolster Bangladesh's diplomatic standing. It would position Dhaka as a responsible regional actor taking initiative to alleviate suffering next door. Bangladeshi officials note that the country could leverage its experience in disaster response and peacekeeping by coordinating logistics for the corridor, potentially drawing in fresh international support and goodwill. Indeed, Bangladesh's Foreign Adviser Towhid Hossain framed the move as serving Bangladesh's own interests: the sooner Myanmar is stabilized and refugees can return, the better for Bangladesh's security and development.

In short, the corridor holds genuine hope, a chance to save lives on the ground and begin addressing the root causes of a protracted refugee crisis. But these hopes are tempered by history and hard realities on the ground.

Haunted by History: Lessons from Srebrenica, Syria, and Beyond

Humanitarian corridors and safe zones have been tried in conflicts around the world with very mixed results. Supporters see them as sanctuaries and lifelines; skeptics point to a litany of failures when such zones lacked sufficient protection or political support. Perhaps the darkest cautionary tale comes from Srebrenica in Bosnia. In 1993 the United Nations declared Srebrenica a "safe area" for Bosnian Muslim civilians amid war, yet it remained essentially undefended. In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces overran the enclave and massacred over 8,000 people, the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II.

Srebrenica's legacy stands as a stark warning that simply designating a safe haven is not enough; without the will and capacity to militarily defend such zones, they can become death traps. Any "humanitarian corridor" similarly needs credible security guarantees. As one analysis bluntly noted, establishing a safe zone for the displaced is irresponsible without the ability to safeguard those who enter it. The ghosts of Srebrenica underscore that well-meaning humanitarian plans can go horribly wrong if divorced from on-the-ground security realities.

More recent conflicts provide further lessons. In Syria, limited cross-border aid corridors have indeed sustained millions of civilians – for example, UN aid convoys from Turkey into northwest Syria have been a lifeline since 2014. But these corridors have existed at the mercy of great-power politics. The Syrian regime and its Russian ally have repeatedly threatened to shut down the UN's cross-border relief operation as a violation of sovereignty. Every year, humanitarian access hangs on fraught UN Security Council votes – with Russia even vetoing an extension of the main aid route in 2023 to press its geopolitical aims. Within Syria, truces to allow "humanitarian corridors" in cities like Aleppo or Homs were often shaky and mistrusted.

Many besieged civilians feared that offers of safe passage were cynical ploys – a pretext for the regime to empty out rebel-held areas or detain those who emerged. Providing a corridor is no substitute for protecting civilians in place, as Amnesty International warned during the battle for Aleppo in 2016. Syria showed that without neutral monitoring and genuine consent of combatants, corridors can collapse or be used as bargaining chips, leaving civilians only slightly less vulnerable than before.

The war in Ukraine has similarly illustrated both the life-saving potential and fragility of humanitarian corridors. During Russia's 2022 invasion, corridors negotiated by the UN and Red Cross allowed tens of thousands of people to escape besieged cities like Mariupol and enabled some aid deliveries to reach trapped residents. These brief pauses in fighting undoubtedly saved lives. Yet ceasefires around the corridors were frequently violated; evacuation convoys came under fire even after assurances of safe passage, with each side trading blame for the breaches. In Mariupol, repeated attempts to establish corridors faltered amid fighting and mistrust. The Ukrainian example showed that humanitarian corridors are only as effective as the warring parties'

commitment to honor them – a commitment that can evaporate quickly on the battlefield.

Conflicts in Sudan and Libya add further notes of caution. In Sudan's Darfur region, the UN World Food Programme recently managed to open an overland aid route from neighboring Chad – only to see it swiftly shut again as violence reignited along the corridor. Fighting around Al-Fashir in 2024 blocked the critical aid passage and left millions at risk of starvation, despite urgent international efforts. Both the Sudanese army and the paramilitary RSF have been accused of looting relief supplies and impeding deliveries, illustrating how humanitarian operations can be hampered or co-opted by combatants. Meanwhile in Libya's civil wars, local ceasefires were occasionally brokered to allow aid into besieged cities. In one notable case during 2011, Muammar Gaddafi's government agreed to grant the UN "safe passage" to the embattled city of Misrata for aid and evacuations. While that promise provided a brief opening for relief, it was entirely contingent on the regime's goodwill and did not end the siege by itself. The Libyan fighting continued to exact a heavy toll, demonstrating that a corridor can alleviate symptoms of a crisis but not resolve its cause.

Across all these cases – Bosnia, Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, Libya – the common thread is that humanitarian corridors offer no magic solution. They may bring hope and respite, but they carry immense risks if not backed by effective security and political will. These global lessons cast a long shadow over the Rakhine proposal, urging planners to be clear-eyed about what a corridor can and cannot achieve.

Security Concerns and Regional Stability

Nowhere are the risks more apparent than in Rakhine's current volatile context. Northern Rakhine State today is an active conflict zone. The Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic Rakhine insurgent force, controls much of the territory along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, while Myanmar's junta army is trying to reclaim ground. Intense fighting in late 2024 led the junta to impose a siege, blocking all supplies to parts of Rakhine in an effort to starve out the AA rebels. Any aid corridor through this landscape would thus be threading a very narrow needle: it must negotiate access across front lines and potentially through areas held by an insurgent group that Myanmar labels a terrorist organization. Security is the foremost concern. Ongoing clashes, extremist factions, or spoilers on either side

could turn an aid convoy into a target. One worry is that militant groups could hijack or exploit the corridor, whether to divert aid, move fighters, or smuggle contraband. The region's borderlands already see trafficking of drugs, weapons and other illicit goods – a corridor might be misused as another route for such activities if not carefully monitored. Any lapse in security or neutrality could imperil both the aid workers and the civilians they aim to assist.

Bangladesh, understandably, is wary of being drawn directly into this conflict. Officials in Dhaka have stressed that the corridor must carry “goods, not guns”, emphasizing that the passage is solely for humanitarian aid and not to be politicized or militarized. Bangladesh's foreign advisers openly acknowledge the delicate reality: the Myanmar junta has zero control in the border area where aid would cross, so informal coordination with the Arakan Army is unavoidable. Yet any contact with a non-state armed group risks provoking Myanmar's regime. Striking a balance between engaging the AA to guarantee convoy safety, while not legitimizing them in a way that inflames the junta, will be an enormous diplomatic challenge. There is also the grim possibility of Myanmar's military reacting hostilely to a cross-border operation that it doesn't fully control. If the junta perceives the UN corridor as a cover to supply the AA or a breach of

sovereignty, it could retaliate – conceivably even with cross-border shelling or airstrikes that would endanger Bangladesh's territory. Such scenarios are not far-fetched given the regime's hardline stance on Rakhine and its readiness to defy international pressure. Without ironclad agreements from all parties – including Myanmar's generals – the corridor could become a flashpoint rather than a relief line.

Beyond the immediate conflict, broader regional stability is at stake. Bangladesh's political opposition has loudly raised concerns that hosting a humanitarian corridor could entangle the country in Myanmar's war and international rivalries. At rallies in Dhaka, leaders warned that “a humanitarian passage through Bangladesh is intertwined with the independence and sovereignty of our country, as well as regional peace and stability.” The fear is that Bangladesh could lose control of the situation, step into a geopolitical quagmire, and even compromise its own security. Some critics vividly cautioned that Bangladesh must not become “another Gaza” by allowing a foreign conflict to spill onto its soil. Others suspect the corridor is a “Western conspiracy” – essentially a Trojan horse for the U.S. and its allies to increase influence in Myanmar under humanitarian cover. These claims may be exaggerated rhetoric,

but they tap into real anxieties about regional destabilization. Bangladesh sits at a crossroads of great-power competition: China backs Myanmar's junta and invests heavily in Rakhine, while Western nations support Myanmar's pro-democracy opposition. It has not escaped notice that Washington has signaled support for getting aid into opposition-held areas of Myanmar as part of a strategy to pressure the junta. Observers note that a UN corridor in Rakhine, however neutral in intent, could be viewed through a geopolitical lens – Beijing might see it as Western encroachment near its strategic projects, and Delhi or others will have their own calculations. In the worst case, humanitarian aid could get entangled in the “new Great Game” of South Asia, making the corridor a proxy battleground for influence. This would severely undermine its humanitarian purpose. Thus, Bangladesh must calibrate its involvement to avoid unwittingly becoming a pawn in others' chess match. The country has so far trodden carefully, insisting that any corridor be UN-led and have buy-in from all relevant authorities. The coming weeks will test whether those conditions can realistically be met.

Bangladesh's Delicate Dilemma

The proposal has placed Bangladesh in a delicate dilemma: how to do the right thing for suffering neighbors without harming its own interests. Initially, Bangladesh's interim government appeared open and even enthusiastic about facilitating the UN's request. During UN Secretary-General António Guterres's visit to Dhaka in March 2025, the idea of a Rakhine aid corridor took center stage. By late April, Foreign Adviser Towhid Hossain announced Bangladesh had “agreed in principle” to allow a humanitarian passage through its territory. He underscored that certain conditions would apply: reportedly, these include that the corridor must strictly be for humanitarian supplies (not arms or military assistance), and that it must involve coordination among Bangladesh, the UN, and others to ensure security. At face value, Dhaka's conditional green light reflected a recognition of the unfolding famine next door and a willingness to act boldly to prevent a catastrophe.

However, the swift domestic backlash in Bangladesh laid bare the political risks. Within days of the announcement, top Bangladeshi political parties across the spectrum voiced strong objections. Opposition leaders from the BNP demanded broad consultation, arguing the interim government had no mandate to take such a consequential step on its own. Islamist and nationalist groups alike decried the plan as a potential violation of sovereignty, or a trap set by foreign powers. Sensing the growing furor, the government quickly walked back its definitive stance. On April 29, a spokesman for the chief adviser denied that any final decision had been made, and officials emphasized that the corridor was only under discussion, not approved. By early May, Bangladeshi authorities were in damage-control mode, assuring that no corridor would proceed without further consultation and consensus.

This policy whiplash -- an initial yes, followed by a cautious maybe -- highlights the immense pressures on Dhaka. Even if morally Bangladesh wishes to assist, it must maintain domestic unity and avoid inadvertently sparking unrest or partisan conflict at home over the issue.

Bangladesh's security establishment has also weighed in. Military officials reportedly harbor concerns that any foreign humanitarian operation on Bangladeshi soil could create unwanted precedents. Memories of prior insurgencies and cross-border entanglements run deep. The Bangladesh Army has fought its own militancy problems in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in decades past; a corridor abutting that region raises the specter (however remote) of armed groups exploiting Bangladeshi territory. Thus, it is unsurprising that Bangladesh's army chief signaled misgivings about the corridor proposal, emphasizing that protecting national security is paramount (some accounts suggest he outright rejected the idea in internal discussions). While humanitarian ideals are central to Bangladesh's identity as seen in its generous hosting of Rohingya refugees the leadership must balance those against the constitutional duty to safeguard Bangladesh's borders and stability. At the same time, outright refusal to help could carry diplomatic costs, especially with the UN and Western partners who have advocated for access into Rakhine. Clearly, Bangladesh is walking a tightrope, trying to satisfy international expectations and humanitarian impulses without overstepping what its political climate can bear.

So far, Dhaka has taken a pragmatic middle course. It continues to engage in talks with the UN and "all concerned parties," including informal channels to the Arakan Army, to explore how a corridor might work. The interim government has made it plain that any operation must have Myanmar's consent as well -- a challenging prospect, since Myanmar's junta remains publicly silent and wary about the plan. Myanmar's generals have preferred bilateral refugee repatriation efforts on their own terms, likely to avoid international intervention in Rakhine. They have already verified some 180,000 Rohingya for return (on paper), portraying themselves as capable of addressing the crisis independently. Given this stance, Bangladesh cannot force the issue without risking a diplomatic row or worse. In essence, Bangladesh's position boils down to this: the corridor idea is alive, but it hinges on multilateral agreement and must not jeopardize Bangladesh's security or sovereignty. The coming days will require deft diplomacy from Dhaka to keep the humanitarian vision from collapsing under political strain.

Hope with Eyes Wide Open

The vision of a Bangladesh-Rakhine humanitarian corridor encapsulates both humanity's highest aspirations and its most sobering lessons. On one hand, it shines as a beacon of hope -- a tangible plan to deliver relief to desperate families in Myanmar

and a ray of possibility for Rohingya refugees dreaming of home. On the other hand, it sits atop a tinderbox of risks in a region fraught with conflict and mistrust. The balanced truth is that such a corridor could be a lifesaver, but only if pursued with extreme caution and clarity of purpose. All stakeholders must approach it with eyes wide open.

Several measured steps emerge as prudent. First, any corridor arrangement must have robust international oversight and security guarantees. This could mean UN humanitarian escorts or even a neutral protection force on the Myanmar side without which vulnerable civilians and aid convoys would remain at the mercy of armed actors. Past tragedies like Srebrenica underscore that a nominal safe zone is insufficient; there must be credible deterrence against anyone attempting to attack or exploit the corridor. If Myanmar's junta cannot provide security, the international community should be prepared to step in creatively perhaps via ASEAN monitors or UN observers acceptable to all sides. Second, the mission's mandate should be strictly humanitarian and time-bound. Clear protocols are needed to prevent mission creep or misuse. For Bangladesh, this means retaining control of its territory and ensuring no arms or combatants slip through under the guise of aid. For Myanmar, it means respecting the neutral role of aid providers and not attempting to commandeer or redirect aid to serve military aims. Transparency and communication will be key to building trust that the corridor is truly "goods in, people out," not a cover for other agendas.

Moreover, the corridor must not distract from the broader political solution required in Rakhine. Humanitarian aid can alleviate symptoms, but it cannot resolve the underlying conflict or the statelessness of the Rohingya. As one Dhaka Tribune commentary argued, a "safe zone" in Rakhine with international protection might ultimately address the Rohingya crisis more effectively than an aid corridor alone. While establishing such a safe zone is easier said than done, the point remains that humanitarian access should complement, not replace, diplomatic efforts to secure peace and rights for Rakhine's people. Bangladesh and other regional players should continue to press Myanmar's junta and ethnic leaders for a sustainable ceasefire and a roadmap to Rohingya repatriation with guarantees of citizenship and security.

In the final calculation, caution does not mean inaction. It means carefully calibrating action to minimize harm. The international community including Bangladesh must not turn away from Rakhine's unfolding tragedy. A humanitarian corridor, if crafted with consensus and care, could be a lifeline for those who have endured unimaginable hardship. But it should be undertaken only with rigorous safeguards and contingency plans informed by the scars of history. There is a narrow path where this initiative could succeed: through painstaking coordination, genuine buy-in from Myanmar and the AA, and steadfast focus on the humanitarian mission above all else. Traversing that path will require diplomatic finesse and moral courage in equal measure. The people of Rakhine, and the Rohingya who long to return there, deserve no less. In the end, the corridor proposal reminds us that even as we offer hope, we must guard against hubris. The world can ill afford another well-intentioned plan that unravels into chaos. Only by heeding the lessons of the past and exercising vigilance in the present can this corridor of hope avoid becoming a corridor of tragedy.

REBALANCING RAKHINE IN A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Arakan Army's Rise and Regional Realignments:

In recent years, the Arakan Army (AA) has emerged as the de facto power in Myanmar's Rakhine State (historically called Arakan). By late 2024, the AA controlled roughly 80–90% of Rakhine territory, seizing 15 of 17 key townships and even overrunning a major Myanmar military base. The junta retains only a few footholds such as the state capital Sittwe and the Chinese-backed Kyaukphyu deep-sea port while the AA's own Arakan People's Revolutionary Government now administers many public services. This power shift has significant geopolitical implications. For one, China's long-standing footprint in Rakhine is under pressure. Rakhine is a linchpin of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, hosting multibillion-dollar projects like the Kyaukphyu port and the Shwe oil and gas pipelines that give China vital access to the Indian Ocean. But ongoing civil conflict has made Chinese investments vulnerable: anti-junta forces (including the AA) have overrun many project areas, and China has grown uneasy about the Myanmar military's ability to safeguard its interests. In response, Beijing has doubled down on the junta

proposing joint security arrangements to protect BRI projects, yet these risks alienating local ethnic forces like the AA. In effect, China finds itself caught in a *Rakhine reset* where its once-dominant influence is slipping as new actors assert control.

India's Policy Reversal From "Betrayal" to Engagement:

For India, the AA's ascendancy poses both opportunities and dilemmas. Historically, New Delhi had fraught relations with Rakhine rebels: in 1998, Indian forces infamously crushed a nascent Arakan insurgent group on its soil (Operation Leech), killing or arresting dozens of Rakhine fighters and derailing the first major Rakhine revolution. This incident, remembered in Rakhine as "Betrayal Day," left deep resentment toward India for decades. Until recently, India's Myanmar policy favored the central government (and later the junta), partly to curb insurgents along its Northeast frontier. However, the 2021 Myanmar coup and the AA's battlefield success have forced a reevaluation. India now sees strategic value in courting the Arakan Army as a counterweight to China's influence in western Myanmar. In February 2024, for example, an Indian parliamentary delegation from Mizoram quietly met AA representatives across the border, a signal that New Delhi recognizes the AA's rising clout. Engaging the AA could secure India's regional infrastructure initiatives like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project (which runs through Rakhine), and bolster India's "Act East" connectivity to Southeast Asia. Indeed, analysts note a potential *strategic*

partnership akin to China's ties with the Wa rebels: accommodating Rakhine autonomy under AA leadership, India might gain a friendly buffer on the Bay of Bengal and limit Beijing's reach.



Map of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project linking India and Myanmar. The route (shown in blue and red) connects India's Kolkata Port (via a 539 km sea link across the Bay of Bengal) to Myanmar's Sittwe Port in Rakhine State. From Sittwe, the project continues inland by the Kaladan River to Paletwa and then by highway to Mizoram in Northeast India. This Indian-funded corridor is crucial to New Delhi's "Act East" strategy, improving connectivity and reducing reliance on routes via Bangladesh.

China's Waning Footprint: Such an India-AA alignment would come at Beijing's expense. China has invested heavily in Rakhine, but much of the state is now beyond the Myanmar military's control. The AA's forces have not attacked Chinese projects directly (likely to avoid provoking Beijing), yet the new reality is that any Chinese venture in Rakhine must reckon with the AA's consent. Moreover, by openly backing the unpopular junta, China risks local backlash: the AA and other ethnic groups bristle at the prospect of foreign (Chinese) security personnel guarding projects on their land. Beijing's influence, once secured through the military regime, is therefore on uncertain ground. In contrast, India's outreach to the AA signals a possible realignment. New Delhi has long balanced relations with both Naypyidaw and ethnic armies, but the prospect of an "Arakan arrangement" could mark a historic shift. It would reverse India's prior policy of shunning Rakhine separatists, instead acknowledging the AA as a legitimate stakeholder in Rakhine's future. This realpolitik gamble could yield India greater access and goodwill in Rakhine, yet it also carries significant risks, as discussed below.



Dark red areas mark AA-held territory in Rakhine and eastern Chin State following successive operations; light red areas denote recent gains. Overlaid are Chinese energy and port projects highlighting strategic contestation."

Rohingya Interests and Equal Rights

The Rohingya Predicament in Rakhine: Any discussion of Rakhine's future is incomplete without its most persecuted population, the Rohingya. These ethnic Muslim minority group have faced decades of disenfranchisement, ethnic violence, and a genocidal campaign by Myanmar's military, driving most into squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh. Now, the ascent of the Arakan Army adds a new twist to the Rohingya's struggle for equal rights. The AA, representing Rakhine Buddhist nationalism, has historically been ambivalent or even hostile toward the Rohingya's identity. It pointedly avoids the term "Rohingya," often echoing the Myanmar state's narrative that they are "Bengali" interlopers. For instance, after a 2016 militant attack, the AA denounced the Rohingya insurgents as "savage Bengali Muslim terrorists," framing the violence as an alien intrusion. This rhetoric undermines the Rohingya's legitimate claim as an indigenous community of Rakhine and signals that an Arakan nationalist authority might continue to marginalize them much as the Burmese junta did.

AA's Actions of Conflict and Exclusion: On the ground, the situation for Rohingya in AA-cowntrolled areas remains precarious. While the Arakan Army proclaims a vision of inclusive governance, in practice trust-building has been neglected. There are credible reports of AA fighters committing abuses against Rohingya civilians amid the conflict. Human rights monitors and Rohingya activists have reported the AA of atrocities such

as killings, village burnings, forced recruitment, and using Rohingya as human shields. In one grim account, a Rohingya activist told The New Humanitarian that at least 2,500 Rohingya were killed and 40,000 displaced by AA operations in 2024 alone. Even if some reports are contested, fear runs high among Rohingya communities. By August 2024, eyewitnesses from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar were telling CNN that *"the AA wants to wipe out Rohingyas from Rakhine State"*. Such realization is alarming and, if unaddressed, could ignite a new Rakhine-Rohingya communal conflict on top of the existing wars.

Bangladesh's Stake and Western Scrutiny: The Rohingya issue is also a geopolitical fault line involving Bangladesh and the wider international community. Bangladesh, now host to over one million Rohingya refugees, insists on their safe repatriation with citizenship and security. The tacit alignment between India and the Arakan Army that ignores Rohingya rights are viewed with suspicion in Dhaka. Bangladesh's cooperation with India historically strong under Sheikh Hasina's government has already come under strain amid new political shifts in Dhaka. If India were seen abetting an Arakan authority that perpetuates Rohingya persecution, it could push Bangladesh away from India's orbit and even closer to China or other partners. Furthermore, Western nations are closely watching how any new Rakhine order treats the Rohingya. To date, the US and EU have sanctioned Myanmar's military for the Rohingya genocide, but not the Arakan Army. This may change if the AA is found committing comparable abuses. In May 2025, a coalition of 26 Rohingya diaspora groups worldwide called on Western governments to sanction the Arakan Army's leaders for ongoing killings, village burnings, and forced displacement of Rohingya in Rakhine. Their joint statement including the political umbrella organization Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) questioned why international outrage has spared the AA despite it "committing the same human rights violations" for which the Burmese military was condemned. Such pressure highlights that the AA's quest for legitimacy abroad will be untenable if it continues to sideline and brutalize the Rohingya. In short, the Rohingya's quest for equal rights and recognition is not just a humanitarian imperative but a strategic one: it is a litmus test for any political arrangement in Rakhine seeking regional acceptance and international legitimacy.

A Synthesized Narrative

Converging Interests and the New Great Game: Rakhine State today stands at the nexus of competing geopolitical interests a microcosm of the wider Indo-Pacific contest. On one side, China's grand infrastructure ambitions face an unforeseen setback as Myanmar's western frontier slips from the junta's grasp. On the other, India senses an opening to

expand its influence by engaging the Arakan Army, thereby offsetting China's Belt-and-Road leverage on the Bay of Bengal. For the AA itself, this realignment is equally strategic. Long reliant on China's tolerance (and Chinese arms flowing through the borderlands), the AA has grown wary of Beijing's cozy ties with the hated junta. Shifting closer to India and by extension to the West offers the AA not only an alternative patron but also a degree of political legitimacy as a partner in the "free and open Indo-Pacific" narrative. Indeed, the AA has started to present itself as a quasi-government in Rakhine, forming administrative organs and even hinting at using the Indian rupee in its territories to reduce dependence on Myanmar's currency. This is a calculated bid to normalize its rule in the eyes of neighbors and investors. However, the Achilles' heel of the Arakan Army's international appeal remains its treatment of the Rohingya. No amount of statecraft or strategic alignment can paper over what genocide scholars and human rights groups have noted: AA leaders like Major General Twan Mrat Naing have openly dismissed the Rohingya minority in their vision for a revived Arakan kingdom. Such exclusionary nationalism not only mirrors the Burmese military's playbook but also undercuts the AA's moral standing. As one analysis cautioned, any Indian or Western partnership with the Arakan Army, if driven solely by realpolitik while disregarding the Rohingya's existence and rights, would not only incur serious reputational damage but also risk complicity in the ongoing genocide against the Rohingya. It risks turning a blind eye to abuses and thus tarnishing the democratic values that India and Western nations profess.

No to Exclusion, Yes to Inclusion: The evolving narrative of Rakhine's future suggests that a purely hard-power approach will not secure lasting peace or a balanced order. No – sidelining the Rohingya or undermining their rights cannot bring true stability to Rakhine. Such exclusion would perpetuate grievance, invite international censure, and possibly fuel new cycles of violence and instability. It would also keep Bangladesh, a key neighbor estranged and on edge. Conversely, yes, empowering the Rohingyas and embracing inclusive governance is arguably the most effective way to balance power in Rakhine and the wider region. If the Arakan Army sincerely protects all communities' rights (Rakhine, Rohingya, and others alike) and allows the Muslim Rohingya a stake in Rakhine's



governance, it would transform the conflict dynamics. This inclusive approach is exactly what many experts urge: the AA must move beyond military victory to demonstrate capacity for inclusive leadership, safeguarding minority rights and sharing power in any new political arrangement. Encouragingly, the pursuit of peaceful coexistence already has promising examples, such as the alliance and cooperation between the Rohingya political umbrella organization, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), and the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA). This model of intercommunal dialogue could serve as a constructive path forward. Such steps would build trust and undercut the divide-and-rule tactics of the Myanmar military, which has tried to pit Rohingya fighters against the AA in the past. An Arakan polity that integrates Rohingya as equal citizens would also open the door for Bangladesh, India, and international stakeholders to support Rakhine's development without reservations. It could facilitate the voluntary, dignified repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh a goal all sides profess to desire. In turn, this would eliminate a long-standing source of regional tension and help prevent the refugee camps from becoming fertile ground for future cycles of violence and instability.

Balancing Power for a Stable Rakhine: The convergence of the AA's Rakhine nationalist revolution with India-China rivalry and the Rohingya crisis makes for a complex, high-stakes puzzle. A balanced outcome where all groups' interests are respected is challenging but not impossible. It will require statesmanship from the Arakan Army tempering its nationalist ambitions with pluralism. It will also require India (and any other backers) to condition their support on humane governance. As observers note, India's engagement with the AA should be strictly contingent on the AA upholding Rohingya rights and committing to their repatriation. Likewise, regional diplomacy involving Bangladesh, ASEAN, and the UN is crucial to craft an inclusive political settlement in Rakhine. If these pieces fall into place, Rakhine State could transform from a battleground into a model of power-sharing, with a strong autonomous Arakan led by the AA alongside a safe homeland for the Rohingya. That scenario would neutralize the

most explosive ethnic fault line in Myanmar, stabilize a zone of competition between great powers, and allow both India and China to pursue economic projects in a more peaceful environment. In sum, empowering the Rohingya and reconciling Rakhine's communities is not just a moral imperative but a strategic one, the cornerstone for a durable equilibrium in Rakhine and a check against any one power's domination in the region.



Photo Courtesy: Wikimedia commons



A child combatant from a local defense force in Chin State examines a makeshift firearm. Children across Myanmar's conflict zones – from Chin to Rakhine – have been drawn into fighting, often out of desperation or coercion.

Photo Courtesy: www.thediplomat.com



Photo Courtesy: www.iwm.org.uk

NO CHILDHOOD HERE:

MYANMAR'S YOUTH TRAPPED IN A WAR THEY DIDN'T CHOOSE

Thura Maung was only 18 when war returned to his homeland of Rakhine State late last year. As artillery shells thundered in the distance, he fled his village with his family under cover of night. They navigated dark waterways to escape detection, only to return and flee twice more as fighting intensified. With his university shuttered by conflict, Thura watched his dreams slip away. "There were no opportunities for my life to develop, and I saw no future," he recalls forlornly. For young people like Thura, the resumption of fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army (AA) – an ethnic Rakhine armed group – has not only brought back the terror of war, but the looming threat of forced conscription that steals the last vestiges of their youth [www.aljazeera.com].

Zubair, a 24-year-old Rohingya Muslim from northern Rakhine, shares a similar story of promise derailed. He had been interning with a peacebuilding organization when clashes reignited and his office closed. Soon he found himself on the run not just from gunfire but

from a military conscription drive targeting Rohingya men. "We weren't able to stay at home, go to work or even sleep on time," he said, describing how the junta's forced recruitment campaign upended daily life. "Time that we could've spent working on our futures was wasted". Like countless other Rakhine and Rohingya youth, Thura and Zubair see their futures evaporating as they are ensnared in a conflict not of their making. Many face an impossible choice: risk abduction into armed service or undertake perilous journeys to flee the state altogether.

Their stories illustrate a broader tragedy unfolding in Rakhine State: the forced conscription of children and young adults by the Arakan Army, set against a backdrop of rampant child recruitment by armed groups and militias across Myanmar. Reports have emerged of the AA press-ganging villagers – even minors – into its ranks. In parts of Chin State adjacent to Rakhine, ethnic Chin communities say AA units imposed a lottery system to force locals into porter service and even mandatory military training camps, effectively conscripting those whose names were drawn [www.thediplomat.com]. In Rakhine's Rohingya villages, people speak of summary abductions by AA fighters. Refugees who recently fled to Bangladesh accuse the Arakan Army of brutality against Rohingya civilians, including killings, enforced disappearances, torture and forcing Rohingya to serve as human

shields against the Myanmar military [www.asianews.com]. "Five young men were forcibly taken from our village by the military for conscription...I think this was why the Arakan Army launched the attack on our village in retaliation," one Rohingya resident from Buthidaung told investigators, illustrating how conscription drives are stoking communal tensions between Rohingya and Rakhine communities [www.hrw.org]. Caught between an army that views them with deep-rooted hostility and an insurgent force that views them with suspicion, Rohingya children and adolescents are uniquely vulnerable in the crossfire.

Ethnic Armies and Child Soldiers: A Nationwide Tragedy

The crisis in Rakhine is part of a much broader pattern of child soldiering that has plagued Myanmar for decades. Tragically, the conscription of child soldiers is a fact of life in the country's conflict-plagued regions. From the northern Kachin and Shan hills to the eastern jungles of Karen State, every armed actor – the national military and a myriad of ethnic armed organizations (EOs) – has been accused of recruiting and using children in their ranks. While many armed groups insist their fighters are volunteers or that recruitment drives are "fair," years of documentation by local and international rights groups tell a different story [www.thediplomat.com].

In Shan State, for example, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has a notorious reputation for forced recruitment, even of children. Witnesses describe TNLA units abducting boys and young men at gunpoint, executing those who resist and even forcing each soldier to supply a family member to the army. Other militias active in Shan have been accused of similar practices – a sobering reminder that no side of Myanmar's civil war has been immune to the exploitation of children. In Karen and Kachin states too, years of fighting have seen under-18s pressed into service. Tens of thousands of children from ethnic minorities have effectively gone into hiding to avoid recruitment – sent by their families to distant cities or even across borders, or taking refuge as novice monks, nuns, or students in Buddhist monasteries far from home. Some communities have resorted to extreme measures like holding fake funerals to “hide” youths from recruiters, or agreeing to pay hefty bribes in exchange for a son's freedom. It is a grim cycle: as long as conflict persists, armed groups see fresh recruits as a strategic resource – and children are the easiest prey.

Even new forces born of the anti-junta resistance have struggled with this issue. In the wake of the 2021 coup, dozens of local “People's Defense Force” (PDF) militias sprang up. Desperate for manpower, some initially allowed boys and girls to join the fight. However, the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) has since issued strict directives banning child soldiers, and many PDFs now claim to bar anyone under 18. Compliance is uneven – observers note that while NUG-affiliated groups have released most underage fighters, smaller splinter factions still continue to recruit children to fight. The phenomenon of child soldiers is not new in Myanmar – the country was once infamously cited as having one of the world's highest numbers of child combatants. But as the civil war deepens, the scale may be reaching new heights. The United Nations has warned that grave violations against children in Myanmar have risen to “extreme levels”. In 2023 alone, the UN verified 2,799 serious offenses against over 2,000 children, including hundreds of killings and maimings [www.english.dvb.no]. Each statistic represents a boy or girl whose innocence has been lost to a conflict that shows no mercy for youth.

Erosion of Protections Since the 2021 Coup

In the decade before the February 2021 military coup, there were signs of progress in protecting children from armed conflict. The national armed forces (the Tatmadaw) had been listed by the UN for years as a persistent perpetrator of child soldier recruitment. Under international pressure, the military signed a Joint Action Plan with the UN in 2012 to end underage recruitment, and hundreds of child soldiers were formally released from service in subsequent years. By 2019, the UN even removed

the Tatmadaw from its “list of shame” for child soldiers – a delisting many experts felt was premature. In hindsight, they were right: violations never fully ceased, and by 2020 the UN had to re-list Myanmar’s army after a 350% spike in verified child recruitment cases (from 205 cases in 2019 to 726 in 2020). Much of that surge corresponded with heavy fighting in Rakhine State in 2020, as both the military and Arakan Army scrambled for new troops.

After the coup, whatever limited oversight and protection mechanisms existed were effectively dismantled. The UN-led Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, which had negotiated child soldier releases, was sidelined as the junta turned its back on prior commitments. International humanitarian access was severely restricted. The protective legal framework also eroded – although Myanmar’s 2019 Child Rights Law set 18 as the minimum age for military service, the junta’s actions have blatantly flouted this rule. In a stark move, the regime activated the long-dormant 2010 People’s Military Service Law in February 2024, announcing a plan to conscript men 18–35 (and women 18–27) for military duty. The law theoretically applies only to citizens, but the Rohingya – who are denied citizenship – became the first targets of this draft. Human Rights Watch found that since February 2024 the Myanmar military has abducted and forcibly recruited over 1,000 Rohingya men and boys from villages and displacement camps across Rakhine.

Soldiers swept through Rohingya areas in nighttime raids, seizing boys as young as 15 at gunpoint, often luring them with false promises of citizenship or simply dragging them away under threat. Many of the captured youths were sent to abusive two-week training camps and then tossed onto the front lines of battle against the AA – cannon fodder in a war that is not their own. “The youngest boy taken was 15 years old...there were three recruits under 18 among us,” one Rohingya man who escaped conscription testified of his ordeal.

The United Nations and international child protection agencies have sounded the alarm. The UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, along with UNICEF and others, has expressed deep concern that Myanmar’s post-coup chaos is reversing years of child protection gains. They highlight not only recruitment, but a litany of “grave violations” against children: killings, maiming, abductions, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian aid. According to a statement by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, since the coup at least 75 children have been killed and around 1,000 arbitrarily detained, with countless more suffering trauma and deprivation. UNICEF, for its part, has implored “all parties to the conflict to prioritize the protection of children”, emphasizing that children should never be recruited or used in conflict and that humanitarian access to vulnerable kids must be allowed [www.unicef.org]. The agency’s Myanmar

office reported that at least 650 children were killed or maimed by violence in a single year – a number it calls likely an underestimation given many cases go unreported [www.progressivevoicemyanmar.org]. International humanitarian law is unequivocal: recruiting or using children under 15 in armed conflict is a war crime, and all parties – state or non-state – are obligated to prevent and end such practices. Yet in today's Myanmar, those norms are routinely ignored. The country's military leaders have shrugged off appeals to reinstate the child soldier action plan or to enforce their own laws against underage recruitment. Meanwhile, many ethnic rebels argue that in the face of the junta's onslaught, they have no choice but to enlist "every capable hand" to defend their communities. Caught in the middle of these justifications are children and teenagers whose fundamental rights are being crushed.

Scars on a Generation: Social and Psychological Consequences

Beyond the immediate peril of battle, the forced conscription of children leaves profound social and psychological scars on Myanmar's communities. When a child is taken by an armed group – whether through coercion or economic desperation – an entire family and village feels the pain. Parents often live in fear, hiding their teenage sons and even daughters or sending them away to keep them safe. Some communities have been torn apart by resentment when one family's child is conscripted while another's is spared, sometimes due to bribes or connections. In Rakhine State, the junta's deliberate targeting of Rohingya youth for conscription has sowed mistrust between Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine neighbors, undermining years of fragile reconciliation efforts. "Through its forced conscription of Rohingya men as well as by demanding they protest against the AA, the military is deliberately working to threaten years of fragile progress towards reconciliation," warns Karen Simbulan, the conflict analyst. The sight of child soldiers – boys barely in their teens wielding rifles – also sends a chilling message, normalizing violence for the next generation. In ethnic minority regions, an entire generation has now grown up knowing little but war, displacement, and militarization.

The psychological toll on these children is incalculable. Save the Children reports that in the first six months of 2024 alone, *"a child lost their life every day as a direct result of the ongoing conflict."* Those who survive endure "distress, anxiety, depression, and fear," with both immediate and long-term suffering for themselves and their caregivers [www.savethechildren.net]. Being forced into combat – often witnessing and perpetrating extreme violence – can lead to severe trauma, PTSD, and a loss of childhood innocence that can never be reclaimed. "It was terrifying...I still have

nightmares,” confessed one former child soldier reflecting on his time in the army in an interview, describing how he struggled to separate normal life from the brutalities he had seen. Many child recruits are also physically scarred or disabled by their experiences, whether from wounds or harsh training. They miss out on education and the chance to develop skills for civilian life. As a result, even if they escape or are released, they face enormous challenges reintegrating into society. Without psychosocial support, these youth are at high risk of continued violence – as victims or perpetrators – creating a tragic cycle that can perpetuate conflict. “Our childhood has been taken away – we cannot have the life we used to have,” a 16-year-old displaced girl in Myanmar said, after losing friends and family to the war. Her words echo the feelings of countless young people across Myanmar.

The cultural fabric of communities is also fraying. In Rakhine, as in many conflict areas, elders worry that their traditional values of protection and care for children are being eroded by the constant presence of armed groups. Rituals and coming-of-age ceremonies are disrupted as many youths are absent – either in army camps or in hiding. Education, once a ladder for children to climb out of poverty, has been devastated by war. Over 3.4 million people in Myanmar have been displaced from their homes, and children make up nearly 40% of the displaced. Schools have shut down in many conflict zones. In Rakhine, frequent clashes and military checkpoints make it dangerous for children to attend the few schools that remain. As one report noted, more than a quarter of Myanmar’s children aged 6–17 were out of school in 2023, and millions now require educational support due to the disruption. This education crisis feeds the



Photo Courtesy: hrw.org

Rohingya families at a displacement camp in Rakhine State. Both Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities have seen their children caught up in conflict – recruited as soldiers, used as porters, or forced to flee their homes.

cycle of recruitment: idle, desperate, and uneducated youths are more likely to be drawn into armed groups, whether by coercion or by the lack of alternatives. Conversely, communities that manage to keep their children in school – even improvised classes in IDP camps – see a glimmer of hope to break the cycle. “If I can study, I won’t have to carry a gun,” said one 14-year-old boy at a camp school in Chin State, expressing a simple yet powerful truth.

Shared Vulnerability and Shared Loss in Rakhine

Rakhine State’s tragedy is that both major communities Rakhine and Rohingya are suffering profoundly, even if their circumstances differ. Ethnic Rakhine (Arakanese) children have been pulled into the Arakan Army’s separatist struggle, some motivated by a sense of duty to defend their homeland, others simply forced or enticed by the promise of a salary. The AA has denied systematically recruiting under-18s, yet evidence and local testimonies suggest otherwise. “The accusation has been leveled at every armed actor,” writes one analyst, noting that Arakan Army units, like many rebel forces, rely on villages to meet quotas of new fighters and sometimes turn to teens to fill the ranks. In an environment where contraceptives have even been banned in some areas “to ensure future generations of recruits,” the line between voluntary service and coercion is blurred. Rakhine families describe living in fear of the knock on the door that could take their son away – or being asked to “donate” money or food if they cannot donate a child to the cause. The social pressure is immense. Some parents in Rakhine quietly urge their boys to join the AA to avoid being labeled unpatriotic, even as their hearts break. Others resort to smuggling their children out to safer areas. For Rakhine youth who do join the rebels, life in the jungle camps is harsh and often deadly, but many see no other future. “We will win,” one teenage Arakan Army fighter told a journalist defiantly when asked about the war’s outcome – yet when pressed on how long it would take, he fell silent.

Meanwhile, Rohingya children and teenagers are caught in a nightmare within a nightmare. Already victims of decades of state persecution – including the 2017 genocidal campaign that drove over 750,000 to Bangladesh – those who remain in Rakhine now find themselves exploited by both sides. The junta views Rohingya boys as expendable labor and conscripts, useful to bulk up frontline units precisely because their deaths would stir less public outrage among the Bamar-Buddhist majority. Human Rights Watch documented how Rohingya youths have been tricked or forced into joining the Myanmar army, only to be sent to fight (and often die) in clashes with the AA. At the same time, the Arakan Army has treated Rohingya communities with deep suspicion, frequently restricting their movements and access to supplies (much as the Myanmar military has). During recent fighting, AA units have been implicated in shelling Rohingya villages and torching homes, ostensibly to root out informants.

Scores of Rohingya civilians, including children, have been killed in AA-military crossfire or executions in the past year. Some Rohingya have even been used as porters and human shields by the AA forced to carry supplies or walk at the front of columns to deter enemy fire [www.asianews.network]. It is no wonder that since the conflict reignited in late 2023, a fresh exodus of Rohingya has been fleeing Rakhine. Over 110,000 Rohingya have crossed into Bangladesh from November 2023 to April 2025, according to Bangladeshi officials, citing AA atrocities as the driving cause. These refugees speak of a “new wave of persecution” at the hands of the Arakan Army, on top of the familiar brutality of the Myanmar military. Caught between two armies, Rohingya children face an almost impossible situation – they are at once unwanted and exploited by the state and mistrusted and mistreated by the rebel authority in their area. As one Rohingya father in a refugee camp lamented after militants kidnapped his 15-year-old son: “We have stopped eating and drinking due to grief. He is too young to understand anything about war”.

Despite the ethnic and religious divide, the fates of Rakhine and Rohingya children are now intertwined. Both communities long for peace so their children can live normal lives. Both have seen their young bear arms – whether under a Rakhine flag or under duress in a Myanmar army uniform – when they should be holding schoolbooks. And both will require extensive support to heal the

wounds that forced conscription and conflict have inflicted on their next generation. “Ethnic Rohingya and Rakhine civilians are bearing the brunt of the atrocities that the Myanmar military and the opposition Arakan Army are committing,” observes Elaine Pearson of Human Rights Watch. Her assessment underscores that, at the community level, all families in Rakhine are suffering from this war’s abuses.

Resisting the Theft of Childhood

As the conflict in Rakhine and across Myanmar grinds on, there is a growing chorus of voices demanding an end to the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. The United Nations Security Council, urged on by over 200 organizations, has been called to impose a global arms embargo and to press all armed actors in Myanmar to cease grave violations against children. International human rights groups are seeking accountability: campaigns are underway to document and ultimately prosecute commanders – whether of the junta or insurgent groups – who perpetrate child conscription. Fortify Rights, for instance, has urged the International Criminal Court to investigate an alleged AA massacre of Rohingya civilians, which included children, as a war crime. Within Myanmar, brave community leaders and activists (many operating covertly) are trying to shield at-risk youth by providing sanctuary and education. Some ethnic armed groups have signed deeds of

commitment with Geneva Call (an NGO) to end child soldier recruitment, though enforcement remains tenuous. The National Unity Government has pledged to work toward a “Child Soldiers-Free Myanmar” in the future federal democracy it envisions and has engaged with UN agencies in exile to develop reintegration programs for former child fighters.

Yet, much more is needed. UNICEF and Save the Children stress that every stakeholder – from Myanmar’s warring parties to its neighbors – must treat this as an urgent crisis. “Myanmar’s children cannot afford to wait,” UNICEF implored in a recent plea for greater international action. Aid organizations emphasize that funding for child protection and psychosocial support is woefully insufficient, with Myanmar’s humanitarian appeals only fractionally funded. Meanwhile, the flow of arms and money that sustains the combatants indirectly fuels the use of child soldiers – cutting those lifelines is critical. Regional powers, often focused on strategic interests, are being urged to remember that an entire generation of Myanmar children is at stake. As Save the Children notes, the impact of this conflict on children has been “particularly harrowing,” with millions now suffering from trauma, displacement, and loss of education. Every additional day of war and forced conscription deepens those wounds.

Ultimately, the practice of child conscription in Rakhine and across Myanmar strikes at the very heart of the country’s future. A nation whose children are robbed of their childhood – turned into soldiers, porters, or fugitives – is a nation being robbed of its hope. As one Rakhine elder put it in an emotional appeal during a community meeting: “These children should be our next teachers, our next farmers, our next caregivers. Instead, we are lighting funeral pyres for them.” The moral and cultural fabric of Myanmar demands that children be protected as the precious treasure they are, not used as instruments of war. Restoring that principle will require concerted effort: a cessation of hostilities, accountability for those who recruit and harm children, and a massive investment in healing and educating the young survivors of this conflict.

For Thura Maung, Zubair, and countless others, the road ahead is uncertain. Yet their voices – and the memory of those children who never returned – call on all of us to not look away. The tragedy of forced child conscription in Rakhine is a reminder of the human cost of Myanmar’s turmoil. It is measured not only in lives lost, but in childhoods stolen and potential unfulfilled. Undoing that damage will take years of peace and care. But each step toward ending the practice of child recruitment is a step toward giving Myanmar’s next generation the chance to reclaim their stolen childhoods – to simply be children again, free from the burdens of a war not of their choosing. As the region and the world grapple with how to respond, that goal must remain at the center: to ensure that no more boys and girls in Myanmar are forced to trade their school uniforms for military fatigues, and that those already scarred by this conflict are given the support to heal, learn, and grow into the peacemakers of tomorrow.



Photo courtesy: Arpon Paul

POWER AND PREJUDICE:

Arakan Army's Policy Toward the Rohingya in Its Controlled Territories

Introduction

Recent fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine State has refocused attention on the Arakan Army (AA) and its treatment of the Rohingya people. The AA – an ethnic Rakhine armed group – has rapidly expanded its control in Rakhine during the country's post-coup civil war, becoming the de facto authority in many townships[1]. As thousands of Rohingya civilians live (or flee) under AA-held territories, reports of how they are treated on the ground provide crucial clues to the AA's broader policy and intentions toward the Rohingya community. This article examines the AA's actions and statements in 2023–2025, drawing on events of violence and displacement,

restrictions on Rohingya identity and movement, and public positions from both AA/ULA leaders and Rohingya representatives. It offers context on the AA and the Rohingya conflict in Rakhine, analyzes recent incidents and responses, and discusses what these dynamics imply for the Rohingya's future in Arakan.

Background: The AA, the Rohingya, and Rakhine's Conflict

Rakhine State (historically Arakan) has long been a locus of inter-ethnic tension and armed struggle. The Rohingya – a predominantly Muslim minority in Rakhine – have faced decades of persecution in Myanmar. Even before Myanmar's 2017 military campaign of massacres and mass expulsion (widely recognized as genocidal), Rohingya communities endured systemic discrimination, including citizenship denial and apartheid-like restrictions. After the 2017 violence, around one million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, but roughly 600,000 remained in Rakhine State under oppressive conditions[2][3]. Many are confined to displacement camps or isolated villages, effectively segregated from the Rakhine Buddhist population.

Alongside this, Rakhine (Arakanese) nationalism has grown. The Arakan Army was founded in 2009 as an ethnic Rakhine insurgent force seeking greater autonomy (or even independence) from Myanmar's Bamar-dominated central government. The AA gained strength through alliances with other ethnic rebels and by tapping popular Rakhine resentment toward decades of Burman military rule[4]. Communal relations between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims were already fraught – erupting in deadly riots in 2012 – and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) often exploited these divides. During the 2017 crackdown, the AA was not directly involved (it was then primarily fighting the Tatmadaw elsewhere), but the violence deepened Rohingya mistrust of Rakhine authorities and vice versa.

The February 2021 military coup dramatically shifted dynamics. The AA entered into a loose ceasefire with the junta for much of 2021, consolidating its political wing (the United League of Arakan, ULA) as a parallel administration in Rakhine. By late 2022, however, fighting between the AA and junta forces resumed. Over the past two years, the AA has seized control of most of Rakhine State, carving out a proto-state and largely displacing the junta's presence[5]. As of early 2025, the AA effectively controls 13 of Rakhine's 17 townships, including all the northern townships along the Bangladesh border, as well as parts of central Rakhine⁵. This means tens of thousands of Rohingya who remain in northern Rakhine now find themselves under AA/ULA authority rather than the Myanmar state. The critical question is how the AA is treating these Rohingya communities – and what that indicates about its stance on Rohingya rights.

Recent Conflict and Rohingya Displacement (2023–2024)

A village in Rakhine State shows destruction following fighting between the Arakan Army and Myanmar junta forces in May 2024[PC1] [1]. The escalation of conflict in Rakhine has had dire consequences for Rohingya civilians⁶.

Full-scale hostilities between the AA and Myanmar's State Administration Council (SAC) junta flared up again in late 2023, shattering an informal ceasefire. As the AA advanced, Rohingya civilians were caught in the crossfire and targeted amid the chaos. In November 2023, clashes spread into northern Rakhine (Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships) – areas that still had significant Rohingya populations. By May 2024, the AA launched a major offensive to capture remaining junta bases in these townships, triggering *mass displacement*. The United Nations gathered witness accounts of Rohingya villagers being killed and their homes systematically torched as Myanmar troops pulled back and AA fighters moved in⁶. Tens of thousands of Rohingya fled their villages in Buthidaung and Maungdaw during this period, some escaping into neighboring Bangladesh for safety⁶.

One pivotal incident was the battle for Buthidaung town in May 2024. After weeks of heavy fighting in the countryside, AA forces on May 17 overran Buthidaung, a town near the Bangladesh border. Multiple reports – from Rohingya activists, humanitarian groups, and Rohingya eyewitnesses – alleged that AA troops forcibly expelled Rohingya residents from Buthidaung and then looted and burned Rohingya neighborhoods[7]^[8]. “AA troops came into downtown, forced the people to leave their homes and started torching houses,” said the Rohingya activist, citing testimony from contacts on the ground⁷.

1] [Arakan Army Posed to “Liberate” Myanmar’s Rakhine State](#)

[2] [Joint Statement: Rohingya Facing Existential Threat In Arakan | ARNO](#)

[3] [Myanmar: New Atrocities Against Rohingya | Human Rights Watch](#)

[4] [The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army’s hands | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)



Photo courtesy: UN Women

Human Rights Watch likewise reported that as the AA took control on May 17, its forces “shelled, looted, and burned Rohingya neighborhoods in Buthidaung town and nearby villages,” causing thousands to flee⁸. By the next morning, large swathes of the town had been reduced to ashes. Rohingya residents who had refused to leave – saying they had nowhere else to go – were left trapped amid the flames, with some casualties reported as they fled to fields for refuge.

The AA categorically denied targeting Rohingya in Buthidaung. AA spokesman Khine Thu Kha insisted that any burning in the town was caused by junta airstrikes and by “Muslim insurgent groups aligned with the military”– essentially blaming retreating junta troops or Rohingya militants for the arson⁷. “The burning of Buthidaung is due to the junta’s jet fighter air strikes before our troops entered,” he told. The AA claims it had even warned Rohingya civilians to evacuate for their safety, portraying the exodus as a precaution rather than a forced expulsion[9]. However, Rohingya community leaders and rights monitors remain skeptical.

The cycle of violence only intensified through mid-2024. Fighting shifted westward to Maungdaw township on the Bangladesh border, where new atrocities occurred. On August 5, 2024, as Rohingya villagers tried to flee ongoing clashes near the Naf River, a horrific attack killed scores of civilians. According to multiple accounts, drone bombs and artillery shells rained down on Rohingya families crowded along the Naf River bank, killing or injuring hundreds[10][11]. Witnesses identified the fire as coming from AA-controlled territory, contradicting AA denials of responsibility¹⁰. Human Rights Watch described this August 5 incident – in which nearly 200 people were reportedly killed – as one of the gravest massacres since 2017¹¹.



In summary, recent events show Rohingya civilians suffering grievously amid the AA’s war with the junta. Both warring parties have been accused of egregious abuses. Human Rights Watch points out that “junta forces and the opposition Arakan Army have committed extrajudicial killings and widespread arson against Rohingya [and] Rakhine civilians” in Rakhine State⁸. The AA’s scorched-earth tactics in

[5] [Arakan Army Posed to “Liberate” Myanmar’s Rakhine State](#)

[6] [The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army’s hands | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)

[7] [Myanmar rebel group claims control of town, denies targeting Rohingya | Reuters](#)

[8] [Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine | Human Rights Watch](#)

captured areas, coupled with the junta's own brutal methods (like forcibly conscripting Rohingya men to fight on the frontlines), have created a nightmare for the Rohingya stuck in the middle⁸[12]. "Ethnic Rohingya and Rakhine civilians are bearing the brunt of the atrocities ... both sides are using hate speech, attacks on civilians, and massive arson to drive people from their homes," warned HRW's Asia director, Elaine Pearson⁸. These patterns raise the specter of ethnic cleansing unfolding yet again in Rakhine.

Life for Rohingya Under AA Control: Restrictions and Abuses

Beyond the immediate violence of conflict, day-to-day life for Rohingya in AA-controlled areas has been characterized by severe restrictions and hardships. Multiple reports from late 2024 and early 2025 indicate that the AA/ULA's administrative practices impose tight controls on Rohingya communities, in some cases even tighter than what the Myanmar authorities had enforced. One major issue is freedom of movement. Rohingya residents under AA rule in northern Rakhine report harsh travel restrictions that cripple livelihoods and food security[13]. "In the northern and southern parts of Maungdaw, we cannot move freely," said a Rohingya elder, describing how AA/ULA checkpoints confine people to their villages¹³. In northern Maungdaw, Rohingya are "completely banned" from traveling to certain areas, even with official documents that previously allowed travel under the former military government. By comparison, under the junta's rule, a village administrator's letter might permit limited movement, but "now, everything is controlled by AA/ULA," the elder explained. In some villages (Kyaukhlaykhar, Pyinphyu, Maglagyi, Pawngzar, etc.), residents can only move within strictly delineated local zones. In southern Maungdaw, people are barred from entering town centers at all – they cannot leave their village perimeter¹³.

[9] [The New Humanitarian | The Arakan Army responds to Rohingya abuse accusations in Myanmar](#)

[10] [Arakan Army's Atrocities Spark Mass Rohingya Exodus: Reports KPN – Rohingya Khobor](#)

[11] [Myanmar: New Atrocities Against Rohingya | Human Rights Watch](#)

[12] [AA following footsteps of Junta, Rohingyas fear another genocide](#)

[13] [Rohingya in AA-Controlled Areas Face Severe Restrictions and Food Shortages – Rohingya Khobor](#)

These movement curbs have led to economic strangulation and food shortages. With markets out of reach and jobs vanished, many Rohingya families struggle to survive. “Since AA took control of the town, there are no jobs, food is extremely scarce, and medicines are very expensive,” one woman in Buthidaung testified in early 2025. She noted that “many families cannot afford even one meal a day.” Even basic errands require navigating bureaucratic tolls: to buy groceries, a Rohingya villager might have to pay “travel fees” to AA authorities (e.g. 2,000 kyats for a permit, 10,000 for a transport ride, plus unofficial fees at river crossings) – turning a simple food run into an 18,000-kyat ordeal. Such costs are exorbitant for an impoverished community and have bred resentment at the AA’s governance.

There are also troubling reports of exploitation and human rights abuses under AA’s watch. As desperation grows, human traffickers linked to AA have allegedly preyed on Rohingya families, promising to smuggle them out of Myanmar for large sums of money¹³. Meanwhile, both the AA and the junta have been accused of press-ganging Rohingya youths into their forces as porters or frontline cannon fodder. The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance (ARNA) stated in May 2024 that “the two warring groups are forcibly recruiting Rohingya youths ... to use them on the frontlines as human shields,” noting that many such draftees have been killed or maimed. (The AA denies forcible recruitment, as discussed later.) Long-term displacement has left Rohingya in a state of limbo; camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) have effectively become “open-air prisons” since 2012, and renewed conflict since 2023 has only worsened this plight.

Perhaps the most alarming development is the AA’s campaign of forced evictions of Rohingya villages in areas it now firmly controls. Starting in late 2024 and continuing into 2025, Rohingya sources and media have documented systematic orders by the AA for entire villages to clear out. In Buthidaung Township – the same area where battles raged months before – the ULA/AA began issuing eviction notices to Rohingya villages even in the absence of active fighting. By March 2025, this campaign escalated: “Tensions continue to escalate in Buthidaung as the AA intensifies its campaign of forced displacement, ordering the eviction of two more Rohingya villages,” reported Rohingya Khobor news. Local sources said residents of Fetoa Ali village and Zadi Fara village were instructed to leave immediately in March¹⁴. Villagers begged for a delay (as it was Ramadan), and the AA granted a one-week extension – but with an explicit warning that force would be used if they failed to vacate by the new deadline¹⁴. These two villages together contained multiple mosques and madrasas (Islamic schools), all now at risk of destruction as the communities scatter.

This was not an isolated case. Over the preceding months, dozens of Rohingya villages in Buthidaung had already been emptied by AA orders, affecting thousands

of people. A Rohingya news bulletin in March 2025 listed a litany of villages depopulated by such evictions – from Pyin Shay (Lamba Bil) and Kyauk Maw Taung, to Maung Hnama (Rang Fara) and Tharak Kinu – underscoring the vast scale of displacement. Families forced out of their homes often have nowhere to go, and end up in squalid camps or huddling in villages that remain under AA control, with scant access to food or shelter. There is no clear public rationale from the AA for these evictions; despite repeated inquiries by Rohingya leaders, “the ULA/AA has not provided any justification” for why it is clearing Rohingya villages that are no longer active conflict zones. The pattern has raised *serious human rights concerns* about whether the AA is attempting to alter the demographics of northern Rakhine or collectively punish the Rohingya populace under its rule.

AA’s Public Stance vs. Actions on the Rohingya

The AA’s official rhetoric on the Rohingya paints a vastly different picture from the realities above. In public statements, the Arakan Army and its ULA political wing claim to support a pluralistic and inclusive vision for Rakhine State. For instance, in a May 2024 interview with The New Humanitarian, the ULA responded to questions about Rohingya rights by insisting it “has always prioritized protecting the rights of all communities in the region regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity”⁹. The AA leadership avoids using the term “Rohingya” – which it deems politically loaded – and instead refers to “Muslim residents of Arakan.” Nonetheless, AA representatives told TNH that “we recognize and uphold the citizenship and human rights of the Muslim residents in Arakan” and that under ULA governance, Muslims “surely have the same citizenship rights and duties as any other individuals”⁹. They asserted that in areas the AA controls, Rohingya (Muslim) residents already enjoy various degrees of rights with no discrimination and receive equal services in security, justice, healthcare, and education. The AA even trumpeted what it called an “unprecedented degree of progress” in inter-communal relations in Rakhine under its administration in recent years.

However, one glaring aspect of the AA’s discourse is its refusal to acknowledge the Rohingya ethnic identity. The AA pointedly labels Rohingya as “Bengali Muslims,” echoing the Myanmar military’s narrative that they are foreign interlopers. In an official ULA/AA statement on May 1, 2024, responding to abuse allegations, the AA described the Rohingya community using the term “Bengali Muslim” – a term widely considered derogatory by Rohingya themselves^[15]. (As Mizzima news noted, this term is employed by those who believe Rohingya “do not belong in Myanmar”¹⁵.) The AA’s top leadership, including Commander Tun Myat Naing, also frequently couches the issue in terms of “Muslim residents” and condemns

[14]Arakan Army Expands Forced Evictions of Rohingya Villages in Buthidaung – Rohingya Khobor

“extremist Bengali Muslim terrorists” (a reference to groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, ARSA) in their communications[16]. According to analysts, “such statements reveal that the AA leadership has not renounced the narrative that the Rohingya are ‘illegal Bengali migrants’.[17]” This stance on terminology raises red flags about whether the AA truly accepts Rohingya as a native ethnic group of Rakhine with equal status, or whether it tacitly shares the Burman junta’s exclusionary view.

Unsurprisingly, the AA fervently denies all accusations of wrongdoing against Rohingya civilians. In early May 2024, as reports of abuses began circulating, the ULA/AA issued a statement rejecting “fabricated news and allegations” of AA ill-treatment of Rohingya¹⁵. It accused “Bengali Muslim terrorist organisations such as ARSA, ARA, RSO” of spreading “false propaganda” and using “the word ‘genocide’ as a weapon” to mislead the world¹⁵. The AA warned that such claims – which it dubbed “fake genocides” – only worsen communal divisions. Similarly, in the TNH interview, the AA defended its conduct during the Buthidaung events. ULA representatives claimed they gave proper early warnings to Rohingya civilians to evacuate and took precautions to avoid harm, and that any displacement that occurred was “misinterpreted by some Muslim diaspora groups as forced relocations.”⁹ They went so far as to blame “joined forces of Myanmar military and Rohingya militants” for burning houses, alleging that retreating Rohingya fighters lit fires to slow the AA’s advance, while junta airstrikes also caused destruction. “We categorically reject all these one-sided and groundless accusations,” the ULA said, urging observers to look at suffering across Myanmar in a “balanced” way rather than focusing on Rohingya in Buthidaung⁹. The AA insists that if any individual fighters committed abuses, they would be held accountable internally.

On the matter of forced recruitment, the AA again disputes the claims. The ULA boasts that the AA’s ranks have swelled to nearly 40,000 voluntary troops, implying there is “no need” to conscript anyone⁹. It dismisses reports of forcing Rohingya men into service as “irrational and unfounded” – suggesting that perhaps AA officers telling Rohingya IDPs not to return to conflict zones was misinterpreted as conscription. The AA says it gives the same instructions to all civilians (Rakhine, Rohingya or others) to stay in safe areas under ULA control⁹. Notably, the AA also

[15] [AA denies ill treating Rohingyas – ENG.MIZZIMA.COM](#)

[16] [The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army’s hands | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)

[17] [The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army’s hands | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)

claims it is actually providing for Rohingya IDPs: “Currently, there are now more than 200,000 Muslim IDPs in our controlled areas, and we are providing security, shelter, food, medication, and clothes with all that we have,” the ULA told TNH. AA leaders have appealed for humanitarian aid to be delivered to their territory to help all communities, Rohingya included, affected by the conflict².

The contrast between these assurances and the on-the-ground reports could not be more stark. The AA’s “positive rhetoric” about protecting Rohingya rights is viewed with deep skepticism by Rohingya leaders and international observers, especially “given the latest reports of attacks on the community.”⁶ Rohingya advocates point out that words alone don’t guarantee safety or rights. They urge that any future political settlement must enshrine concrete protections for the Rohingya, rather than relying on the goodwill of an armed group that may have been complicit in their suffering.

Rohingya and International Responses

Rohingya organizations have been outspoken in condemning the AA’s actions and voicing the community’s fears. The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance (ARNA) and Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) – two major Rohingya rights groups – have issued strongly worded statements accusing the AA of perpetrating violence reminiscent of the Myanmar military’s genocidal campaign. In a May 18, 2024 release titled “AA following footsteps of Junta, Rohingyas fear another genocide,” ARNA warned that the AA’s attitudes toward Rohingya “are eerily similar to that of the junta they have fought to replace¹².” ARNA cited the “mass killings and other acts of terror targeting Rohingya civilians” and questioned whether the AA-led forces controlling northern Arakan are “as determined as the junta in forcing the Rohingyas out of the homeland and over the border to Bangladesh.”¹² This chilling suggestion underscores the Rohingya community’s trauma and distrust – essentially, they fear the AA could be completing the ethnic cleansing that the Tatmadaw started. ARNA’s statement catalogued the arson and bombings in Rohingya areas (like the drone strike on a school shelter in Buthidaung) and the forced exodus of tens of thousands, calling on the UN and ASEAN to intervene “to prevent yet another genocide on the Rohingya people in Arakan.”¹² ARNO, for its part, joined other Rohingya groups in a Joint Statement: “Rohingya Facing Existential Threat in Arakan”. That statement condemned “all the atrocities committed by the Arakan Army” and urged immediate international pressure on the ULA/AA “to end mass forced displacement and human rights violations against Rohingya communities in Rakhine.”² ARNO estimated that of the 600,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine after 2017, only one-third still lived in their original homes by mid-2024 – with the rest displaced or in fear of being displaced by ongoing conflict².

International human rights organizations and UN officials have echoed these alarms. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, raised an alert in April 2024 about “intensified fighting in Rakhine... alongside tensions being fuelled between the Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities,” warning of a “grave threat to the civilian population.”¹⁶ He noted that hate-filled disinformation (such as claims of “Islamic terrorists” taking hostages) was resurfacing, mirroring narratives that led to violence in 2012 and 2017. Human Rights Watch in August 2024 issued a report titled “Myanmar: New Atrocities Against Rohingya,” stating that Rohingya in Rakhine were “facing the gravest threats since 2017.” It concluded that “once again, armed forces are driving thousands of Rohingya from their homes with killings and arson, leaving them nowhere safe to turn.”³ HRW and others have called on all parties – the junta, AA, and any Rohingya armed elements – to cease unlawful attacks and allow humanitarian aid to reach affected civilians⁸. Fortify Rights, an NGO focusing on Myanmar and Bangladesh, has specifically urged the AA to facilitate a humanitarian corridor from Bangladesh to Rohingya areas. In March 2025, Fortify Rights appealed to both Bangladesh and the AA to immediately allow cross-border aid flow, given that more than 500,000 people are displaced in Rakhine and over 2 million need food and medicine, a crisis exacerbated by the junta’s blockade of aid. The underlying message from the international community is clear: any legitimacy the AA seeks as a governing force will be undermined if it does not protect all civilians under its control, including the long-persecuted Rohingya.

Notably, elements of Myanmar’s pro-democracy opposition have tried to reach out to the Rohingya. The NUG (National Unity Government), composed of anti-junta forces, has officially recognized the Rohingya identity and appointed a Rohingya activist, U Aung Kyaw Moe, as Deputy Minister of Human Rights⁴. However, as analyst Nasir Uddin observes, these steps may be viewed as symbolic, aimed at global opinion, unless they translate into real commitments on repatriation and rights⁴. The NUG has limited sway in Rakhine where the AA holds power, so any solution for Rohingya in Rakhine inevitably hinges on the AA’s cooperation. Rohingya diaspora figures are urging the community to organize and engage in dialogue: one diaspora statement called on Rohingya to “unite and form their own force capable of joining the federal army and People’s Defense Force (PDF)... to initiate meaningful political dialogues with the AA, the NUG, and other ethnic armed organizations to ensure recognition of Rohingya ethnicity and federal rights.”⁴ This underscores that Rohingya themselves want a seat at the table in determining Arakan’s future, rather than being passive victims of deals between other players.

Prospective Repatriation and Humanitarian Corridor:

The prospect of Rohingya repatriation to northern Rakhine under Arakan Army (AA) control presents serious and multifaceted challenges. Despite claiming to uphold ethnic rights, the AA has systematically marginalized Rohingya communities through extortion, movement restrictions, forced conscription, and structural inequality compared to the Rakhine Buddhist population. In this context, proposals for a humanitarian corridor—intended to deliver aid and support repatriation—must be assessed with caution.

While such a corridor could enable phased, internationally monitored returns, it also risks legitimizing an armed actor complicit in abuses and exposing returnees to renewed threats from the AA, residual Myanmar military forces, and hostile local elements. The question of who will ensure the safety, rights, and dignity of returning Rohingyas remains critical. For Bangladesh, this presents both a diplomatic opportunity and a strategic risk. A successful corridor—if accompanied by robust safeguards and monitoring—could alleviate the protracted refugee crisis and reinforce Dhaka's regional leadership. However, without credible protection mechanisms, it could further entrench insecurity.

A sustainable solution requires either an international stabilization mission led by Bangladesh and neutral partners, or the creation and empowerment of a Rohingya self-defense force to protect returnees, as is afforded to other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Crucially, the establishment of any humanitarian corridor must result from inclusive dialogue and agreement among the Myanmar military, Arakan Army, other armed groups, Bangladesh, and key regional stakeholders to ensure legitimacy, accountability, and long-term viability.

Conclusion: Outlook for AA–Rohingya Relations in Arakan

The current state of AA–Rohingya relations in Rakhine is fraught and uncertain. On paper, the Arakan Army's leadership espouses a vision of a multi-ethnic Rakhine State where all communities' rights are respected. In practice, however, the treatment of Rohingya in AA-controlled areas has been marred by violence,



Photo courtesy: Free Malaysia Today

dispossession, and restrictions that mirror some of the worst abuses of past regimes. The discrepancy between the AA's words and actions has sown deep mistrust. If indeed the "fate of the Rohingya is in the Arakan Army's hands," as one analyst put it⁴, then so far, those hands have not been gentle. The experiences of the past two years – with Rohingya villages burned and emptied under AA watch – suggest that the Rohingya's future in their homeland remains extremely precarious.

Looking ahead, much depends on how the AA chooses to evolve its policy toward the Rohingya. Will it recognize that securing long-term peace and stability in Rakhine necessitates embracing the Rohingya as equal stakeholders? Or will it continue to view this minority with suspicion, as a bargaining chip or even a threat? The AA's near-total control of Rakhine gives it an opportunity to break from the Myanmar military's brutal legacy by protecting minority rights – but so far, the signs have been discouraging. Without strong and consistent pressure, both domestic (from the NUG and other ethnic allies) and international, the AA may lack incentive to change its approach. The international community, as well as Myanmar's democratic resistance, will need to engage the AA on Rohingya issues explicitly – making it clear that any political solution for Myanmar includes safety and equality for the Rohingya. This could mean insisting on independent monitoring in AA areas, humanitarian access, and concrete assurances of non-harm to Rohingya communities. For the roughly half-million Rohingya still in Myanmar, and the million more languishing in refugee camps abroad, the stakes could not be higher. Many Rohingya refugees fear that even if the hated military junta falls, they might return to an Arakan under AA rule that is hostile to them -- a prospect that dashes hopes of safe repatriation⁴. As things stand in 2025, the outlook for peace, coexistence, and rights in Arakan is tenuous. Unless the AA's actions start aligning with its assurances, Rohingya civilians will remain in peril on their own native soil. A genuine resolution will require the AA to explicitly renounce the toxic "Bengali immigrant" narrative, halt all abuses and expulsions, and include Rohingya representatives in dialogues about Rakhine's future. Anything short of that, and the Rohingya's quest for justice and security in Arakan will remain heartbreakingly out of reach.

Ultimately, an assessment of the AA's policy toward the Rohingya – judged by the treatment of Rohingya under its control – reveals a troubling gap between rhetoric and reality. Bridging that gap is essential not only for the Rohingya people's future, but for the prospect of a genuinely peaceful, inclusive Arakan that leaves behind decades of bloodshed and bitterness.



HIGHLIGHTS HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND ROHINGYA PLIGHT IN RAKHINE STATE TRAGEDY AT SEA UNDERSCORES DEEPENING ROHINGYA CRISIS

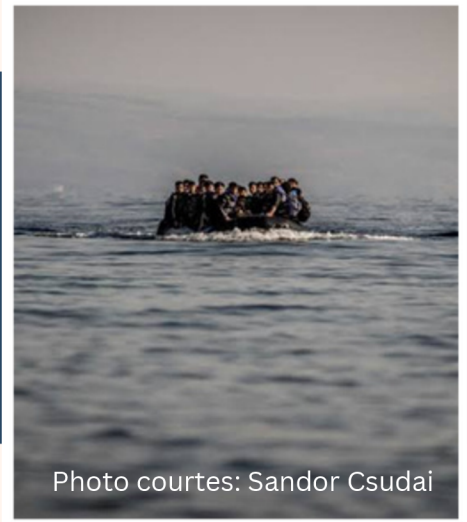



Photo courtes: Sandor Csudai

A worsening humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State is forcing the persecuted Rohingya minority into increasingly desperate situations. Since a brutal military crackdown in 2017, over 1 million Rohingya have fled to overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh, while around 600,000 remain trapped in Rakhine under apartheid-like conditions, denied citizenship and basic rights. The 2021 military coup has further destabilized the region, with renewed conflict between the junta and Arakan Army exacerbating the suffering of Rohingya civilians.

The recent sinking of two overloaded boats off Myanmar's coast in May leaving an estimated 427 Rohingya dead or missing highlights the growing desperation. According to UNHCR, nearly one in five Rohingya attempting sea escapes this year have been reported dead or missing, making the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea some of the world's deadliest routes for migrants. "The dire humanitarian situation, exacerbated by funding cuts, is having a devastating impact on Rohingya lives, pushing more to attempt dangerous journeys," said Hai Kyung Jun, Director of UNHCR's Asia-Pacific bureau. He urged countries in the region to share responsibility and improve rescue efforts.

Meanwhile, a severe funding shortfall is crippling humanitarian aid. UNHCR's \$383 million appeal for 2025 is only 30% funded, forcing cuts to food rations and essential services. In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar camps, the World Food Programme has halved monthly food rations to just \$6 per person. Aid agencies warn that further cuts may drive increased child trafficking and unsafe migration. "If food rations are cut further, families will be forced to send their children on dangerous boat journeys just to survive," said Amir, a Rohingya father in Cox's Bazar. Community leaders echo fears that despair is pushing many into the hands of traffickers.

Bangladesh continues to press Myanmar for refugee repatriation and recently announced that 180,000 Rohingya could potentially be returned in coming months. However, refugee leaders remain skeptical. "After all these years, confirming only 180,000 names feels like eyewash. We want a genuine solution—full rights, dignity, and citizenship," said Shafiqur



Rahman, a refugee in Bangladesh. The Rohingya crisis carries broader regional implications. Bangladesh, hosting the world's largest refugee camp, has voiced frustration over the slow diplomatic progress. Tensions along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border remain high, and fears of radicalization and cross-border crime persist. ASEAN has struggled to broker a solution, and the crisis remains a regional flashpoint.

Globally, pressure is mounting on Myanmar's junta, with the UN labeling atrocities against the Rohingya a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" and an International Court of Justice case underway. Yet geopolitical rivalries hinder a unified international response. China supports repatriation talks but prioritizes regional stability over accountability. UNHCR emphasizes that until conditions in Myanmar are "peaceful and conducive to safe and voluntary return," the world must continue to aid and protect the Rohingya. Now entering its eighth year, the crisis shows no clear end in sight. Human rights advocates stress that without a coordinated global response combining humanitarian relief, diplomatic pressure, and justice, the cycle of despair will continue. Yet amid hardship, the Rohingya persist in their hope for a future where they can live freely and safely in their homeland.

300,000

ROHINGYA CHILDREN AT RISK AS FUNDING CUTS SHUT CAMP LEARNING CENTRES



Photo courtesy: GPE/Salman Saeed

Approximately 300,000 Rohingya refugee children are at risk of losing access to education after more than 6,400 learning centres in the camps were shut down due to a severe funding shortfall. Humanitarian agencies say the closures, effective immediately, threaten to derail the futures of an entire generation in the world's largest refugee settlement.


Education officials from UNICEF and Save the Children – co-leads of the Rohingya Education Sector – informed Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner on June 3 that all learning facilities in the Cox's Bazar camps would close "with immediate effect" and remain shut until further notice. The move affects sprawling camps that house about one million Rohingya refugees, including over 500,000 school-age children, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian crisis. "Nobody wants to take education away from children, least of all children who come from families that have already endured so much trauma and hardship.

However, funding shortfalls have forced us to make the incredibly difficult decision to shut thousands of learning centres,” said Golam Mostofa, Save the Children’s Area Director in Cox’s Bazar. “This should not be the world that we live in... every child deserves to access learning opportunities, so it is heartbreaking for us to have to shut these centres,” he added, expressing hope that the closures will only be temporary if new funding can be secured.

UNICEF, which supports a vast network of camp classrooms, has similarly sounded the alarm. The agency warned last week that 83% of Rohingya refugee children in the camps – around 230,000 students – could lose critical schooling due to an “acute and deepening funding crisis”. “The children we are speaking about are among the most vulnerable in the world,” said Rana Flowers, UNICEF’s Representative in Bangladesh. “We are doing everything possible to sustain critical education services... but unfortunately there will be a delay in receiving [new funding] and thus UNICEF is forced to close learning facilities temporarily. Without urgent funding, the learning facilities may remain closed, and an entire generation of Rohingya children risks being left behind”. In recent weeks, UNICEF had to terminate the contracts of 1,179 local volunteer teachers due to budget cuts. All learning centres will remain closed at least through the end of June, and even if classes resume, early-grade lessons will be pared down to core subjects because resources for materials and curriculum have been slashed. No new textbooks will be procured for the upcoming school year and year-end assessments have been cancelled under these emergency measures.

The funding crunch in Cox’s Bazar is part of a wider shortfall hitting the protracted Rohingya refugee crisis. The 2025 Joint Response Plan seeks about \$934 million for humanitarian needs, but as of June less than 20% of that has been funded. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, during a visit to the camps in March, blasted recent aid reductions by donor governments as “a crime”. The United States – historically the largest donor to the Rohingya response, with roughly \$2.4 billion provided since 2017 – has sharply reduced its contributions amid shifting foreign aid policies. Aid agencies warn that refugee children are now “paying the price for donor fatigue,” as critical services from food rations to education are cut back for lack of funds.

For the Rohingya children who have already endured displacement and trauma, the loss of education opportunities is especially devastating. Humanitarian groups stress that education is not a luxury it provides structure, protection, and hope for displaced children. Schools and learning



centres in refugee camps serve as a safeguard against exploitation, child marriage and other risks, while offering a sense of normalcy and future opportunity. In the wake of the closures, aid organizations and U.N. officials are urgently appealing to the international community to step up support. Only a massive infusion of funds can reopen the learning centres and prevent a “lost generation” of Rohingya youth being left behind.

Observers say the next few weeks will be critical. Unless donors respond with immediate funding, the halt of education services will continue indefinitely, imperiling the hopes of hundreds of thousands of refugee children. Both UNICEF and Save the Children underscore that they stand ready to restart classes as soon as resources are available but the world must not look away if these children are to have any chance at a better future.



Photo courtesy: Evangelos Petratos, Rakhine, Myanmar/Burma June 2014

Relentless monsoon rains accompanied by gusty winds have wreaked havoc across the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, damaging over 1,900 shelters and affecting nearly 16,000 residents under the management of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Landslides, flooded pathways, and crumbling infrastructure have left many families displaced and in urgent need of support.

According to IOM officials, 14 refugees have been injured, and many more are at risk as blocked access roads and overloaded drainage systems delay recovery.

"The destruction we're witnessing is deeply concerning, especially in an already fragile environment," said Amy Pope, Director General of IOM. "Our teams and volunteers are working around the clock to ensure safety and deliver life-saving assistance."

Relief on the Ground: Local Volunteers Lead the Way

IOM, in coordination with Bangladeshi authorities

MONSOON RAINS DEVASTATE ROHINGYA CAMPS: NEARLY 2,000 SHELTERS DAMAGED, IOM MOBILIZES EMERGENCY RESPONSE

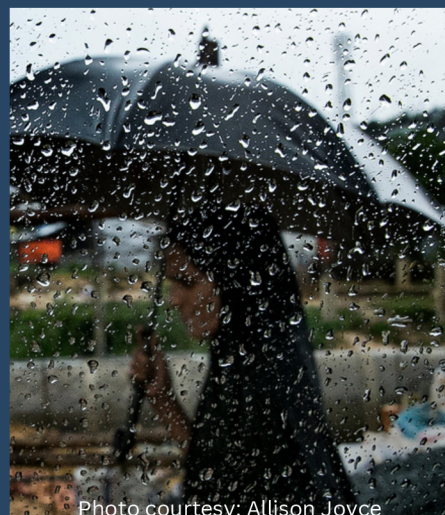


Photo courtesy: Allison Joyce

and humanitarian partners under the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), has launched a large-scale emergency response. Over 1,400 community disaster management volunteers and 300 additional responders have been mobilized to assist with evacuation, relocation, and damage assessment.

Nearly 5,000 Rohingya refugees are now engaged in cash-for-work activities, helping to:

- Clear debris and fallen trees
- Unblock nearly 10,000 meters of drainage
- Stabilize over 13,500 square meters of eroded hillside using tarpaulins
- Reopen crucial camp pathways

Essential Aid and Temporary Shelter Provided

IOM and its partners have begun distributing emergency shelter kits to the most severely affected families, while technical teams are repairing homes, particularly for the elderly, the disabled, and single-parent households. Water and sanitation facilities are also being restored, and displaced families are receiving hot meals and shelter in temporary communal spaces.

Though the intensity of the rain has reduced slightly, intermittent showers continue to disrupt operations and threaten further damage. Humanitarian workers warn that without urgent donor support, the response efforts may fall short as the monsoon season intensifies.

A Call for Support Before the Peak

With peak monsoon months still ahead, the situation remains precarious. Aid agencies have urged the global community not to turn away. The lives of thousands, already displaced and vulnerable, now hang in the balance as they face nature's fury atop the trauma of forced displacement.

"This is not just a weather crisis—it is a human crisis," said a camp volunteer from Camp 17. "We need help, and we need it fast."


ARAKAN ARMY RESETTLES RAKHINE FAMILIES IN VACATED ROHINGYA VILLAGES IN BUTHIDAUNG

The Arakan Army (AA) and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), have initiated a systematic resettlement of Rakhine Buddhist families into villages in Buthidaung Township that were previously inhabited by Rohingya Muslims. This development follows a series of military operations by the AA since March 2024, which led to the displacement of thousands of Rohingya residents and the burning of numerous villages.

Local sources report that over 30 vacated Rohingya villages are now being repopulated with Rakhine settlers under the supervision of the AA. In Shar Barzar village, also known as Maung Gyi Taung, 135 Rakhine families from Thandwe and Rathedaung have been resettled, replacing the displaced Rohingya community. Displaced Rohingya individuals have expressed deep concern over these actions, viewing them as an erasure of their historical presence in the region. A displaced resident from Shar Barzar stated, "They forced our people out and brought in outsiders to replace us. Our village existed long before 1905. Now it's been handed over like we never lived here."



Photo courtesy: Mohigan



The AA's actions have drawn international attention and concern. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented reports of targeted attacks against civilians, including the intentional burning of homes and public buildings, firing on civilians, torture, and sexual violence in and around Buthidaung. Human rights organizations have accused the AA of committing war crimes, including forced displacement, arbitrary detentions, and targeting civilians. In January 2025, reports emerged of the AA forcibly removing Rohingya residents from their homes in Buthidaung, leaving them without food or water for an entire day during interrogations.

The AA has denied allegations of targeting civilians, attributing the destruction to other factors. However, eyewitness accounts and satellite imagery have corroborated reports of widespread destruction in Rohingya-majority areas. The situation in Buthidaung Township remains tense, with the displaced Rohingya population facing uncertain futures. The international community continues to monitor the developments, urging all parties to respect human rights and seek peaceful resolutions to the ongoing conflict.

ROHINGYA GROUPS DEMAND SANCTIONS ON ARAKAN ARMY OVER RIGHTS ABUSES, CALL FOR UN PROBE INTO DEADLY SEA DISASTERS



A coalition of 26 Rohingya organizations from across the globe has issued an urgent appeal to Western governments to impose targeted sanctions on the Arakan Army (AA) and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), for alleged widespread human rights abuses against Rohingya civilians in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The groups are also calling for an independent United Nations investigation into recent maritime disasters that have claimed hundreds of Rohingya lives.



In a joint statement released last week, the coalition—comprising Rohingya groups based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries—condemned the AA's actions, including mass killings, arbitrary arrests, forced displacement, and the destruction of Rohingya villages. They argue that the AA's conduct mirrors that of Myanmar's military junta, which is already under international sanctions for similar atrocities. "Western countries which have sanctioned the Burmese military for human rights violations need to

explain why they have not also sanctioned the Arakan Army, which is committing the same human rights violations against Rohingya,” the statement read.

The call for sanctions comes in the wake of two tragic incidents in early May, where boats carrying Rohingya refugees sank in separate events, leaving at least 427 people, including women and children, feared dead, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The coalition attributes these disasters to the escalating violence perpetrated by the AA, which has forced many Rohingya to flee their homes in search of safety. “The drowning of Rohingya fleeing persecution and hunger has become a constant reality which the international community cannot ignore,” the groups emphasized.

The coalition reports that over 200,000 people have been displaced as their homes and villages were burned down by the Arakan Army in Rakhine State. Additionally, 118,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh and other neighboring countries in recent months, seeking refuge from the ongoing violence. The groups are urging the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to conduct an independent investigation into the boat disasters and the Arakan Army's role in causing them. They also demand the immediate release of Rohingya detained by the Arakan Army.

The Arakan Army has denied allegations of targeting civilians, attributing the destruction to other factors. However, eyewitness accounts and satellite imagery have corroborated reports of widespread destruction in Rohingya-majority areas. The situation in Rakhine State remains dire, with the displaced Rohingya population facing uncertain futures. The international community continues to monitor developments, with increasing calls for accountability and humanitarian assistance to address the escalating crisis.



Eid ul Adha

Eid al-Adha Mubarak from the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)

On this blessed occasion of Eid al-Adha, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) extends its warmest greetings and heartfelt wishes to Rohingya communities around the world, our brothers and sisters in humanity, and all those who observe this sacred festival.

Eid al-Adha is a time of deep reflection, sacrifice, and compassion—a reminder of the strength of faith and the importance of standing in solidarity with those in need. It commemorates the unwavering devotion of Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and calls upon us all to embody the values of patience, selflessness, and unity.

As Rohingya, this occasion also presents an opportunity to reflect on our resilience and unwavering spirit in the face of adversity. While many of our people continue to live in refuge, displacement, or under dire conditions, Eid al-Adha reminds us that hope endures and that justice and peace remain possible when we stand together with determination and dignity.

We honour the sacrifices made by our community and reaffirm our commitment to advocating for the rights, safety, and rightful place of the Rohingya people in their homeland of Arakan (Rakhine State), Myanmar.

May this Eid bring peace to hearts, healing to wounds, and strength to all who continue the pursuit of freedom, equality, and dignity.

Eid Mubarak!

With peace and solidarity,

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)

ARNO Mourns the Loss of 427 Rohingya at Sea and Demands Urgent Global Intervention

May 27, 2025 | ARNO Press Release

The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) is devastated by reports confirming the tragic deaths of an estimated 427 Rohingya men, women, and children in two separate boat disasters off the coast of Myanmar earlier this month. These devastating incidents, which took place on May 9 and 10, mark one of the deadliest maritime tragedies involving Rohingya refugees in recent memory. As confirmed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the victims were fleeing from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and conflict-affected areas in northern Rakhine, seeking safety and dignity elsewhere.

This unspeakable tragedy is not a natural disaster—it is the predictable outcome of a brutal and deliberate campaign of genocide. The Myanmar military and the Rakhine ethnic armed group the Arakan Army continues to orchestrate a systemic effort to erase the Rohingya's historic presence in Rakhine State. Widespread violence, targeted displacement, and destruction of Rohingya villages have forced thousands to risk their lives at sea. This demographic engineering, cloaked in conflict, aims to empty Rakhine of its indigenous Rohingya population.

We urgently call for immediate action from the international community:

- To the United Nations and International Human Rights Mechanisms: Launch a full and transparent investigation into these shipwrecks and hold all perpetrators—state and non-state actors—accountable for crimes that led to this tragedy.
- To Donor States and Humanitarian Agencies: Immediately restore and expand support for Rohingya refugees and displaced persons, ensuring access to food, shelter, education, and protection from exploitation.
- To Regional Governments: Fulfill international obligations by offering protection to Rohingya refugees, halting forced returns, and coordinating multilateral efforts toward long-term solutions.
- The State Administration Council: End the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya, acknowledge their rightful citizenship, ethnicity and create verifiable conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation.

The deaths of 427 Rohingya are not isolated incidents—they are emblematic of a broader, state-engineered calamity. ARNO stands with the families of the victims and with every Rohingya soul yearning for justice, protection, and the right to live freely in their ancestral homeland. We renew our call for international solidarity and decisive action to end this cycle of violence and despair before more lives are lost.

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ARNA Calls for Urgent Action on Escalating Rohingya Crisis in Rakhine State

May 4, 2025 | ARNA

The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance (ARNA) expresses deep alarm over the intensifying violence, persecution, and displacement of Rohingya civilians in Northern Rakhine State, Myanmar. Recent reports reveal a disturbing escalation of abuses perpetrated by the Arakan Army (AA), including abductions, forced evictions, religious persecution, and coercive conscription. These actions pose an existential threat to the Rohingya people and demand immediate international response.

On May 2, 2025, four fishermen were abducted at gunpoint by AA fighters while fishing on the Naf River. Taken across the border into Myanmar, they remain missing, underscoring the extreme vulnerability of Rohingya on the frontier. This incident is part of a wider campaign of violence. In early May, AA forces raided several Rohingya villages in Maungdaw Township, burning homes, torturing and assaulting civilians, seizing and plundering their properties. In one attack, at least five homes were torched, and over 60 innocent villagers, including old men, women and children, were arrested, beaten and carried away without charges. These deliberate acts of terror reflect a systematic pattern of brutality designed to instill fear in the Rohingya population and to starve them out to Bangladesh.

Simultaneously, the AA has escalated its campaign of forced evictions and property confiscation. Nearly 40 Rohingya villages have reportedly been emptied in northern Rakhine under AA orders. In Buthidaung Township, entire communities have been instructed to evacuate by early May, with each family given a tiny plot on confiscated land away from their original places. Mosques and schools have been closed or repurposed. Particularly egregious was the seizure of the home of Dr. Kamal, a respected Rohingya physician, under false accusation of collaboration with the Myanmar military. These actions appear aimed at permanently erasing Rohingya presence from their ancestral homeland.

Religious persecution has increased manifold. The AA has locked mosques in multiple villages, preventing Muslims from congregating for prayers. In Kin Taung village, newly rebuilt mosques have been sealed and threatened with demolition. Rohingya villagers are also barred from using age-old local graveyards and religious spaces near Buddhist sites. These actions represent flagrant violations of religious freedom and cultural identity.

ARNA is especially concerned by reports of forced conscription and forced labor. The AA is compelling Rohingya women and girls, aged 18–35, to undergo military recruitment under threat of punishment. Now over 700 Rohingya men have been coerced into road construction and military fortification for the AA. This systematic use of civilians for military purposes is a gross breach of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and it must end immediately.

The resulting humanitarian crisis is reaching catastrophic levels. Since November 2023, over 113,000 Rohingya have fled renewed violence in Rakhine and sought refuge in Bangladesh. This brings the total Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh to more than 1.3 million. The influx is overwhelming existing camps in Cox's Bazar. New arrivals are living in overcrowded schools, mosques, and makeshift shelters, lacking access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has urgently appealed for additional land and resources to accommodate this population, but support remains far below what is required.

Given these grave developments, ARNA calls for the following immediate actions:

To the United Nations: Condemn the Arakan Army's atrocities and take urgent steps through the UN Security Council and its agencies to ensure civilian protection and pursue accountability mechanisms for crimes against the Rohingya.

To ASEAN and regional governments: Apply collective diplomatic pressure to stop the AA's abuses, ensure humanitarian access, and support Bangladesh in managing the growing refugee burden.

To donor countries and humanitarian organizations: Rapidly increase emergency aid for both displaced Rohingya within Rakhine State and refugees in Bangladesh, prioritizing shelter, food, water, education and medical care.

The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance remains firmly committed to peace, justice, and the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya people. We stand in solidarity with our community and reaffirm our resolve for their honorable repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration with honor, dignity, and security.

Justice delayed is justice denied. The international community must act now to prevent further tragedy, destruction, death, and to restore hope for a peaceful and inclusive future in Arakan for all its people.

For further inquiries, please contact: secretariat@thearna.org



Photo courtesy: Seyyed Mahmoud Hosseini

About ARNO

The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) emerged in 1998 as a broad-based organisation of the Rohingya people with a pledge to promote 'Rohingya unity' and to realise the hopes and aspirations of the Rohingya people.

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