



# Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase

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# Principal Findings

**What's the issue?** The response of Myanmar's military to militant group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's (ARSA) August attacks has led to one of the most catastrophically fast refugee exoduses in modern times. More than 624,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar to Bangladesh, creating the world's largest refugee camp.

**Why does it matter?** The eviction of the Rohingya community from Myanmar is far from the end of the crisis. The situation is transforming Myanmar's domestic politics and international relations, and potential future cross-border attacks by ARSA militants could increase tensions between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

**What should be done?** Imposing targeted sanctions can send an important message and potentially deter others from similar actions against minority communities. But they are unlikely to produce positive change in Myanmar. Even as they impose targeted sanctions, the international community should continue to provide humanitarian support for Rohingya refugees and resist pressure to disengage from the country.

## *Executive Summary*

Three months after militant attacks triggered a brutal army operation targeting Rohingya Muslim communities in Myanmar's northern Rakhine State, more than 624,000 have fled to Bangladesh, one of the fastest refugee exoduses in modern times. In addition to unimaginable human suffering, the crisis has transformed Myanmar's domestic politics and international relations and will have a huge impact on the regional security landscape.

Myanmar is rapidly losing what remains of the enormous international good-will that its political transition had generated. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in particular has been widely criticised for failing to use her moral authority and domestic legitimacy to shift anti-Rohingya sentiment in Myanmar and the government's current course. Meanwhile, the exodus continues and will likely soon reach its tragic end point: the almost complete depopulation of Rohingya from northern Rakhine State.

As the world struggles to define a response, and as the crisis enters a new, fraught and highly uncertain phase, several important elements need to be borne in mind. First, there needs to be continued insistence on the right of refugees to return in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner. At the same time, the grim reality is that the vast majority of the Rohingya in Bangladesh will not be going home any time soon. This presents the enormous humanitarian challenge of sustaining lives and dignity in the largest refugee camp in the world. It also presents grave political and security risks that need to be addressed, including potential cross-border attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militant group and possible transnational terrorism.

Second, it is important to recognise that Myanmar's political direction has been set and will be extremely difficult to change. The strength of the national consensus is hard to overstate: the government, military and almost the entire population of the country are united on this issue as on no other in its modern history. This will make it extraordinarily difficult to move official policy. Any imposition of sanctions thus requires careful deliberation: they can help send a welcome signal that might deter others around the world contemplating similar actions, but they are unlikely to produce positive change in Myanmar and, depending on what precisely is done, could make the situation worse.

This report examines the lead-up to the ARSA attacks on 25 August 2017, revealing new and significant details about the group's preparations, and the attacks themselves. This is based on research in Myanmar and Bangladesh since October 2016, including interviews with members of ARSA, analysis of WhatsApp messages sent by the group and its supporters, publicly-posted videos and interviews with villagers in Rakhine State and recently-arrived refugees in Bangladesh. Much of the research has been done by experienced personnel fluent in the Rohingya language. The report also assesses the impact the crisis will have on Myanmar. Finally, it discusses some possible international policy responses.

**Brussels, 7 December 2017**

# Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase

## I. Background to the Crisis

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While the current crisis is rooted in longstanding discrimination and denial of human rights, the immediate trigger was the emergence of a militant group within the Rohingya population in the north of Rakhine State.<sup>1</sup> This hardened national sentiment toward the Rohingya and shifted the calculus of the security forces.

Harakah al-Yaqin, subsequently rebranded in English as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), first began organising itself after deadly communal violence in 2012. It launched its initial attacks – coordinated assaults on the Border Guard Police (BGP) headquarters and two other bases – on 9 October 2016. Previous armed militant groups had been based in the hills (the Arakan mujahidin in the 1950s), or launched hit-and-run attacks from across the border in Bangladesh (for example the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation in the 1990s). In contrast, ARSA operates from within Rohingya villages, using cells of villagers who have been given some basic training but most of whom do not have access to firearms, only bladed weapons and some improvised explosive devices (IEDs).<sup>2</sup>

In response to the October 2016 attacks, the military deployed overwhelming retaliatory force against nearby villages, followed by extensive “clearance operations” – brutal counter-insurgency operations that the military has used for decades in other parts of the country – with the stated purpose of recapturing the dozens of small arms and thousands of rounds of ammunition looted by ARSA.<sup>3</sup> When troops came under attack from militants and villagers and a senior officer was killed, the military further escalated, including the use of helicopter gunships in civilian areas. Over the following weeks, tens of thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh and security forces burned down several thousand homes.<sup>4</sup> A United Nations (UN) human

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed background on the situation in Rakhine State, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016; 261, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014; and 251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013. For other recent Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar, see Asia Briefings N°s 149, *Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, 19 October 2016; 147, *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, 9 December 2015; also Asia Reports N°s 290, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, 5 September 2017; 287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017; 283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016; 282, *Myanmar's New Government: Finding Its Feet?*, 29 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> For details on the Myanmar military's counterinsurgency approach, known as the “four cuts”, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2nd ed. (London, 1999), p. 288 ff.; Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces* (Norwalk, 2001), pp. 91-92; and Maung Aung Myoe, “Military Doctrine and Strategy in Myanmar”, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, working paper 339, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

rights office report found the “very likely commission of crimes against humanity”.<sup>5</sup> A retired senior army officer noted that it would have been more effective to use the police to achieve the operation’s stated purpose of recovering the looted weapons and ammunition (most were not found).<sup>6</sup>

In the months following the October 2016 attacks, ARSA set about consolidating its authority in Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine and preparing for the next round of attacks. It did this through the targeted killings of dozens of Rohingya men with links to the authorities (such as village heads, other local administrators and suspected informers), ramped up training in the hills as well as IED production in safe houses. The authorities were aware of these developments, with the state media reporting many of the killings as well as the discovery of IED factories. For them, the next ARSA attacks were seen as a matter of when, not if.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016”, Flash Report, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) mission to Bangladesh, 3 February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yangon, March 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials and military officers, Yangon, Naypyitaw and Sittwe, November 2016–August 2017; “Rakhine slayings by insurgents”, *Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM)*, 22 July 2017. GNLM is the state-owned English-language daily. For details on discovery of IED production sites, see section II below.

## II. Build-up to the Crisis

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In the months before the August 2017 ARSA attacks, a series of incidents suggested an uptick in ARSA training and preparation, putting Rakhine Buddhist villagers and the security forces on edge:

- On 4 May, the accidental detonation of an IED during an ARSA explosives training course in Kyaung Taung village tract (north Buthidaung) killed seven men including the instructor, and injured at least five others. According to a reliable source close to the events, the instructor was Pakistani, not Rohingya. He was badly injured and died in Padakar Ywar Thit village tract (Maungdaw) while being carried to Bangladesh for treatment.<sup>8</sup> The people carrying him asked a village head to arrange his burial in a local cemetery but after being informed of the situation, security officials arrested the village head and took the body to Buthidaung hospital. These officials were the source of domestic Myanmar media reports some days later about the death of a foreign militant.
- On 7 May, security forces investigating the IED detonation discovered the training camp and bomb-making materials. Six days later, the government announced it had found the bodies of five victims buried nearby, which they said included two foreigners. This prompted security forces to undertake violent evictions and clearance operations in the area (particularly around adjacent Tin May village tract), killing several people and prompting some families to flee to Bangladesh in May and June.<sup>9</sup>
- On June 20-21, the government reported that security forces had killed three men while clearing a likely ARSA training camp in the mountains near Sein Hnyin Pyar village tract (south Buthidaung).<sup>10</sup>
- On 24 June, four Rakhine Buddhist villagers came across bomb-making material while foraging in Kyun Pauk Pyu Su village tract (north Maungdaw). ARSA members shot two of them dead; the two others, one of whom was injured, fled and alerted authorities. However, ARSA members apparently removed the incriminating material before the security forces reached the spot. This was the first known case of ARSA killing non-Rohingya civilians, and significantly increased anxiety

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<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local villagers with direct knowledge of the events, Rakhine State, May 2017. It appears there was a subsequent – possibly related – mass killing by the army of “at least scores” of Rohingya in an adjacent village (Min Gyi, or Tula Toli) on 30 August. “‘My World Is Finished’: Rohingya Targeted in Crimes Against Humanity in Myanmar”, Amnesty International, 18 October 2017, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> While the government says two foreigners were killed in the 4 May incident, ARSA sources say there was only one, the Pakistani trainer who died. Six other people died, four on the spot and one later at a medical facility in Bangladesh. Five injured people received treatment at different medical facilities in Bangladesh; three were reportedly arrested by the Bangladeshi authorities. Crisis Group interviews, medical staff, Bangladesh, May 2017; refugees from Tin May, Bangladesh, May-July 2017. See also “Five Bodies Found in Buthidaung”, *The Irrawaddy*, 15 May 2017; “Five bodies unearthed near 5 May explosion site in Buthidaung”, *GNLM*, 16 May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local villagers, June 2017; “Terrorist training camps, guns uncovered in Mayu Mountains”, *GNLM*, 22 June 2017.

among Rakhine Buddhist villagers; some 200 fled to Maungdaw town, fearing ARSA attacks. On 27 June, security forces in the area were placed on high alert; on 30 June, senior government officials in Naypyitaw discussed the situation at a “special meeting on Rakhine State”.<sup>11</sup>

- ❑ On 1 August, authorities reported that an IED accidentally exploded at an ARSA safe house in Pan Taw Pyin village tract (Maungdaw) and that they found explosives and other bomb-making material at the house.<sup>12</sup> Two days later, eight members of the Mro ethnic group, both men and women, were killed in the hills of Maungdaw township. The government immediately blamed ARSA, although some local villagers say the killings were related to the illicit methamphetamine trade.<sup>13</sup>
- ❑ On 4 August, BGP clashed with a group of villagers in Auk Nan Yar village tract, Rathedaung township, firing a dozen or more shots while trying to disperse a 300-strong crowd angry over the arrest of villagers suspected of being associated with ARSA, including a prominent local imam. During the clash, one of the suspected militants escaped; local villagers reported several injuries from gunshots, including four people taken to Bangladesh for treatment.

There were already significant tensions in the area. On 27 July 2017, a Rakhine villager had gone missing while foraging in nearby Chut Pyin village tract. Three days later, while searching in the surrounding hills, security forces and villagers discovered a stash of tarpaulins and food, including World Food Programme (WFP)-branded energy biscuits (see section V.A below), which they took to be an ARSA camp. Believing militants killed the missing person, Rakhine villagers declared a boycott of Muslims in the area. In the nearby village of Zay Di Pyin, Buddhist villagers blocked all access roads with barbed wire and prevented residents from going to work or accessing the mosque, food markets and water sources.<sup>14</sup> According to various sources, on 27 August, security forces and local vigilantes perpetrated a mass killing of “at least scores” of Rohingya villagers in Chut Pyin.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, ARSA member with knowledge of the events, June 2017. See also, “Four local ethnic people were attacked by swords and killed two”, *GNLM*, 26 June 2017; “Troops in Myanmar’s Rakhine on high alert after killings of Rohingya”, Reuters, 27 June 2017; “Special meeting on Rakhine issue held”, *GNLM*, 1 July 2017. The “special meeting” comprised the president, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, vice presidents one and two, the legislative speakers, deputy commander-in-chief, relevant ministers, and national security adviser.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local Rohingya villagers, August 2017; “IED explodes in Maungdaw”, *GNLM*, 2 August 2017.

<sup>13</sup> According to local sources, the area is on a methamphetamine smuggling route from Buthidaung to Bangladesh, and there had been previous tensions between the Mro village and a nearby NaTaLa (Buddhist resettlement) village, but generally good relations with nearby Rohingya villages; the method of killing of the Mro was not consistent with ARSA assassinations, which normally involve a machete cut to the neck. Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya villagers in the area, August 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local villagers, August 2017. See also “Tents of violent attackers discovered in Mayu Mountain”, *GNLM*, 1 August 2017; “Attack on police force arresting financial supporter of violent attackers in Yathedaung”, *GNLM*, 5 August 2017; “Rohingya villagers blockaded amid fresh tensions in Myanmar’s Rakhine – residents”, Reuters, 22 August 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International, *op. cit.*, p. 13.



These events provoked heightened nervousness. On 9 August 2017, the commander-in-chief and other senior military officers met with leaders of the Arakan National Party, the largest party in Rakhine State – a rare meeting between the top brass and a political party. The party expressed concerns about the security situation in northern Rakhine and requested the arming of local Rakhine Buddhist militias. That same day, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi convened a ministerial meeting on the security situation in Rakhine to discuss the recent killings and rising tensions. The following day, the government highlighted its deployment of some 500 troops to northern Rakhine to reassure local non-Muslim villagers and conduct patrols in the mountains between Maungdaw and Buthidaung where militants were suspected of having established training camps.<sup>16</sup>

The escalatory dynamic was well under way. On 16 August, ARSA uploaded a video of its commander, Ata Ullah, flanked by armed fighters and warning the Myanmar military to demilitarise northern Rakhine State and end abuses of Rohingya; he specifically cited the blockade of Rohingya villagers in Zay Di Pyin. He reiterated that the group had no relation with international jihadist groups and said that, contrary to government assertions, it did not target Rakhine civilians.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Facebook post, 10 August 2017, <http://bit.ly/2yqQYSA>; “State Counsellor, Union Ministers hold talks on security in Rakhine State”, *GNLM*, 10 August 2017; “Myanmar Army Deployed in Maungdaw”, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> “ARSA Commander Addresses Rohingya diaspora & the world; Warns Myanmar military”, video, YouTube, 16 August 2017, <http://bit.ly/2AhDSHX>.

### III. ARSA Attacks and Military Response

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#### A. ARSA Attacks

In the early hours of 25 August 2017, from 1am until dawn, ARSA launched attacks on some 30 BGP posts and an army base.<sup>18</sup> Their human wave attacks in some cases involved hundreds of people, mostly untrained local villagers armed with farm tools as well as some hand-held and remote-detonated IEDs. A small number of further clashes occurred over the next several days. The official death toll was fourteen members of the security forces, one government official and 371 people the government characterised as militants.<sup>19</sup>

ARSA initiated the attacks via a WhatsApp audio message delivered shortly after 8pm on 24 August. It instructed cell leaders to mobilise all male villagers over the age of fifteen, assemble in pre-planned locations with whatever sharp objects were available and attack designated targets. Many ordinary villagers apparently responded to the call, which was often conveyed by respected local Islamic clerics (known as “Mullahs” or “Maulvis”) or scholars (“Hafiz”) who seemingly made up most cell leaders and who enjoy considerable religious and community authority. Many untrained villagers were provided with IEDs for use in the attacks.

The targets were mostly small police posts and checkpoints, except for the army base in Chin Tha Mar village (near Nga Yant Chaung or Taung Bazar), Buthidaung township, though not many villagers appear to have joined this attack, which was quickly overpowered. ARSA members claim they planned to attack additional targets but that some police posts were deserted when militants reached them. Other targets were more heavily defended than expected and the attackers suffered heavy casualties. The security forces assert that they had several hours advance warning; whether accurate or not, they clearly were expecting attacks at some point.

On 25 August, ARSA issued a series of messages apparently intended both to instil confidence and resolve among its members and followers and to promote and glorify martyrdom, the goal being to encourage lightly armed male villagers to participate in highly risky attacks. Some messages falsely claimed that ARSA was taking control of the areas it attacked. Members were also reassured that armed reinforcements had been dispatched; they never arrived.

On 28 August, Ata Ullah issued WhatsApp audio messages instructing his followers to burn down Rakhine Buddhist villages with Molotov cocktails. This was in direct contradiction to the group’s repeatedly stated policy and prior approach, which was to refrain from attacking non-security targets. The reason for this change is not clear, though it may have been because non-Rohingya vigilantes from nearby villages were helping the military burn Rohingya villages during clearance operations. ARSA might have concluded that Rakhine and other non-Rohingya villagers therefore were

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<sup>18</sup> The information in this sub-section comes from Crisis Group interviews with ARSA members, Rohingya in Rakhine State and refugees in Bangladesh, August-October 2017; and from analysis of WhatsApp audio messages sent by Ata Ullah and others.

<sup>19</sup> Death toll listed in “Humanitarian aid provided to displaced people without segregation”, *GNLM*, 6 September 2017.

a fair target.<sup>20</sup> In the event, the order does not appear to have been widely acted upon as only three non-Rohingya villages are known to have been attacked or burned down by Rohingya.<sup>21</sup>

One particularly high-profile case is the alleged massacre by ARSA of dozens of Hindu men and women in Kha Maung Seik (also known as Fakira Bazar) in Maungdaw township. Conflicting accounts of the incident and of who was responsible have surfaced. Survivors who fled to Bangladesh initially told Bangladeshi journalists in late-August that the killers were Rakhine militants; others said later that they wore masks, preventing identification. The first report of the incident by Myanmar media on 5 September 2017 attributed the killings to ARSA, based on interviews with survivors in Myanmar. A more detailed account reaching the same conclusion was posted on Facebook on 13 September by a Rakhine nationalist parliament member who investigated the incident. The security forces reported finding and exhuming a mass grave containing the victims' bodies on 24 September; these subsequently were cremated. It is not clear what forensic evidence remains.<sup>22</sup>

#### B. *Catastrophic Military Response*

A brutal military response that failed to discriminate between militants and the general population, followed by continued insecurity and restrictions that have imperilled livelihoods, has driven more than 624,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. This is one of the fastest refugee exoduses in modern times and has created the largest refugee camp in the world. A large proportion of Rohingya villages in the area have been systematically reduced to ashes by both troops and local Rakhine vigilante groups that were equipped and supported by the military following the 25 August ARSA attacks.

Grim details of the military and local vigilante campaign of violence, described by the UN as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (a characterisation that has now been echoed by the United States) and by human rights groups as crimes against humanity, have been set out in a series of detailed reports by these organisations. They document widespread, unlawful killings by the security forces and vigilantes, including several massacres; rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and children; the widespread, systematic, pre-planned burning of tens of thousands of Rohingya homes and other structures by the military, BGP and vigilantes across

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<sup>20</sup> The Rakhine, a predominantly Buddhist ethnic group, make up the majority of the non-Rohingya population in northern Rakhine State, but numerous other ethnic groups live in the area and some have also reportedly been involved in vigilante attacks. See Amnesty International, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> On 28 August 2017, there were deadly attacks on the Rakhine Buddhist village of Auk Pyu Ma and the Mro village of Khon Taing (Pa Da Kar Ywar Thit village tract), as well as an earlier attack on the Daingnet village of Aung Zan (all in Maungdaw township). ARSA's involvement in attacks on two Hindu villages (Myo Thu Gyi and Kha Maung Seik) is alleged, but not confirmed.

<sup>22</sup> “Hindus too fleeing persecution in Myanmar”, *The Daily Star* (Bangladesh), 31 August 2017; “Mystery surrounds deaths of Hindu villagers in Myanmar mass graves”, *The Guardian*, 12 October 2017; “Dozens of Hindus Killed in Maungdaw: Relatives”, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 September 2017; Kyaw Zaw Oo (Arakan National Party, Sittwe-2 constituency), Facebook post, 12 September 2017, <http://bit.ly/2ApcmZo>; See “45 Hindu corpses cremated”, *GNLM*, 29 September 2017.

northern Rakhine State from 25 August until at least October 2017; and severe, ongoing restrictions on humanitarian assistance for remaining Rohingya villagers.<sup>23</sup>

Crisis Group's analysis of population data for northern Rakhine State from various sources suggests that around 85 per cent of the Rohingya population in these three townships has fled to Bangladesh over the last twelve months, leaving behind only 100,000-150,000. There are also some 320,000 Muslims in central Rakhine State, many but not all of whom identify as Rohingya; 120,000 of these have been confined to displacement camps since communal violence in 2012.<sup>24</sup>

The three northern townships were impacted in somewhat different ways:

- ❑ *Maungdaw township* was the focus of ARSA attacks on 25 August 2017 and in October 2016. It had the largest Rohingya population and shares the longest border with Bangladesh (river and land, as well as adjacent seaboard). It bore the brunt of the military response and it appears that almost the entire township has been depopulated of Rohingya, apart from some parts of Maungdaw town and a small number of villages.<sup>25</sup>
- ❑ *Buthidaung township* has historically been less affected by violence and displacement than Maungdaw. It also shares a land border with Bangladesh, along the hilly and hard to access northern part of the township; most of the population lives in the south. There were no ARSA attacks here in October 2016, only a small number in August 2017, to which the initial military response appears to have been more localised and limited. Far fewer Rohingya villages were initially burned here compared to Maungdaw. While the military response and burnings triggered some immediate departures to Bangladesh, the vast majority left later to escape untenable living conditions: continued burning of villages and attacks or threats by Rakhine vigilantes plus new, severe movement restrictions that deprived people of their normal means of survival from farming, fishing, foraging and trading. With humanitarian assistance also heavily restricted, communities came to the decision in late September 2017 that they had no choice but to make the long and dangerous journey in large groups, over the mountains to Maungdaw and on to Bangladesh.<sup>26</sup>
- ❑ *Rathedaung township*, unlike Maungdaw and Buthidaung, is a Rakhine Buddhist-majority area that does not share a border with Bangladesh. One of the three October 2016 ARSA attacks was here, in Koe Tan Kauk (close to the boundary

<sup>23</sup> See, in particular, Amnesty International, *op. cit.*, as well as "Destroyed areas in Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung Townships of Rakhine State", UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)/UNITAR's Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT) imagery analysis, 16 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2iR4YPW>; "Burma: New Satellite Images Confirm Mass Destruction", Human Rights Watch, 17 October 2017; "Mission report of OHCHR rapid response mission to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 13-24 September 2017", OHCHR, October 2017; "U.N. sees 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' in Myanmar", Reuters, 11 September 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Analysis based on 2014 census estimates of non-enumerated (Rohingya) population; government 2016 General Administration Department figures; UN figures for camp populations; and community estimates of Rohingya population by township, all broadly consistent. There are 20,000-plus Muslims in southern Rakhine, where communal relations tend to be better.

<sup>25</sup> UNITAR/UNOSAT imagery analysis, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, villagers, Buthidaung and Bangladesh, August-November 2017.

with Maungdaw); the government claimed an ARSA attack in this area on 25 August 2017. Subsequent anti-Rohingya violence and threats had a much greater communal component. Nearly all Rohingya in the township have now fled to Bangladesh, apart from five villages with no viable escape route and only very limited access to food or humanitarian support.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the massive Rohingya exodus, the crisis also led to the displacement of some 27,000 non-Rohingya villagers and government employees in northern Rakhine, most of whom fled the initial ARSA attacks and subsequent clashes. Nearly all moved or were evacuated inland, to the main towns of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Sittwe. The government is now strongly encouraging them to return and begin rebuilding their damaged or destroyed houses.<sup>28</sup>

Since 25 August 2017, the government has blocked access to northern Rakhine State by the UN and most other humanitarian actors. The Red Cross movement (the International Committee, International Federation, and Myanmar Red Cross Society) have been permitted to work, although they face delays and restrictions as well as enormous logistical challenges in reaching populations in need; they have called for other humanitarian actors to be granted access. On 6 November, the World Food Programme was able to resume food aid to Rohingya and non-Rohingya communities through the government but with no staff access to monitor distribution directly.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “‘We will kill you all’ – Rohingya villagers in Myanmar beg for safe passage”, Reuters, 17 September 2017.

<sup>28</sup> “Ethnic IDPs who fled homes due to terrorist attacks”, *GNLM*, 6 September 2017; “Rakhine State Govt to Close Hindu, Ethnic Arakanese Displaced Person Camps”, *The Irrawaddy*, 30 October 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, international humanitarian staff, Yangon, September–November 2017.

## IV. Dangers Ahead

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### A. *Repatriation Remains a Distant Hope*

More than 624,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in the last three months. Myanmar's neighbours and other members of the international community must insist on their right of return and press the Myanmar authorities to create conditions conducive to a voluntary and safe repatriation. At the same time, prospects are extremely dim for the return of any significant number of Rohingya refugees to their home areas in Myanmar in the short or medium term.

Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a repatriation agreement on 23 November 2017 in Naypyitaw.<sup>30</sup> While it was politically expedient for both sides – Bangladesh to signal that it will not host the refugees indefinitely, and Myanmar to respond to charges of ethnic cleansing and ease pressure for action – it should be seen as a statement of intent rather than a sign that return is imminent. On paper, the criteria for returnees to be accepted by Myanmar are not too onerous: they need to have left Myanmar after 9 October 2016 (ruling out historical caseloads) and to provide evidence of bona fide residence in Myanmar, with no need for any particular documentation (an address should be sufficient).

But the main obstacle to repatriation is that most are very unlikely to want to do so (according to the agreement, returns must be voluntary). The conditions on the ground in northern Rakhine are far from conducive, and the exodus of deeply traumatised refugees continues. There is lack of clarity from Myanmar on whether they would be allowed to return to their villages of origin and reclaim their farmland. The agreement also provides for the issuance of National Verification Cards at the point of return – a document most Rohingya reject out of fear that it will codify second-class citizenship status. The government and security forces have expressed concern about the presence of “terrorists” (that is, ARSA) or their supporters among the refugees, warning they would arrest such individuals upon return, which suggests returnees will be subject to extreme scrutiny or vetting. Another major obstacle is that Rakhine Buddhist leaders and communities are strongly opposed to the return of any Rohingya refugees.

Even if these obstacles could be overcome, a repatriation effort on this scale would overwhelm Myanmar's capacity and resources; a senior official asserted that only 300 could be processed per day. Myanmar has consistently declined any role for the UN Refugee Agency, which could mobilise the necessary support as well as credibility in the eyes of the Rohingya and internationally; the bilateral agreement does not require it.<sup>31</sup>

Fundamentally, neither the government nor security forces possess the political will to create conditions for voluntary return and implement a credible and effective process to that end. This raises the prospect of a long-term concentration of hundreds

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<sup>30</sup> “Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State”, 23 November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh, September-November 2017; “Sales from Maungtau paddy kept as national budget”, *GNLM*, 12 November 2017; “Govt Suggests Possible Daily Repatriation of 300 Rohingya Refugees”, *The Irrawaddy*, 30 October 2017; “Tensions over Rohingya return highlight donor dilemmas”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 27 October 2017; “Returning Rohingya may lose land, crops under Myanmar plans”, Reuters, 22 October 2017; “Caged Without a Roof: Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State”, Amnesty International, 21 November 2017.

of thousands of traumatised Rohingya confined to squalid camps in Bangladesh, with no obvious way out or hope for the future. That would not only be a human tragedy, but also a grave security threat. Such a context would be ripe for mobilising further violent responses and potential transnational jihadist recruitment.

### B. *Security Risks*

ARSA may still be reeling from the enormity of the crisis that its attacks triggered; tellingly, no videos of Ata Ullah have been released since 28 August 2017. Still, it appears determined to regroup and remain relevant. A Twitter account that likely represents the group remains active. It issued a statement on 7 October 2017 announcing the end of its unilateral ceasefire two days later, putting pressure on the group to demonstrate its continued capabilities. ARSA has not launched any new attack since then, but will undoubtedly strive to do so.<sup>32</sup>

Given how ARSA is organised, this will require a significant departure from its previous way of operating. Rather than basing uniformed, armed militants in camps, ARSA has, to date, organised cells within hundreds of villages, led by a network of respected local leaders, including young Mullahs. It attempted to incite a general uprising among the population, overrunning police posts using overwhelming numbers of ordinary villagers with farm tools, rather than military might. Yet operating under cover of the civilian population is no longer possible given that few Rohingya villages remain. Most of the group's organisers and fighters are now in the Bangladesh camps, having fled along with the rest of the population.<sup>33</sup>

The group may thus shift to cross-border attacks, which would require different training, access to weapons as well as operating space in Bangladesh. Acquiring that space might now be more realistic given Bangladesh's anger and frustration toward Myanmar. If ARSA launches cross-border attacks, it could aim at opportunistic security targets in northern Rakhine or turn to attacking any non-Muslim villagers resettled on Rohingya lands, an easier target.

Inevitably, such attacks would have profoundly negative consequences. They would escalate tensions between Bangladesh and Myanmar and could potentially lead to clashes between the two countries' militaries. New ARSA attacks would reinforce anti-Rohingya sentiment within Myanmar and prompt heightened security measures that would further diminish prospects for an eventual refugee return. Moreover, attacks against Rakhine Buddhist villagers would inflame anti-Muslim sentiment in general and could tip central Rakhine State, so far untouched by the recent violence, into crisis. Intercommunal relations are now on a knife-edge, which further constrains the ability of Muslims in the area to move freely and access services and livelihoods. Communal attacks there are a very real threat, and unlike their coreligionists in northern Rakhine, these communities have no viable escape routes.

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<sup>32</sup> "Assessment of the humanitarian pause", ARSA press statement, 7 October 2017. The Twitter handle is @ARSA\_Official; the 28 August video is available at <http://bit.ly/2hn2V5a>.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ARSA members and well-placed individuals in the camps, Bangladesh, September–November 2017. For details on ARSA organisation, see Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, op. cit.

Finally, while new ARSA attacks could provoke further violence, international jihadist groups represent a far bigger security threat to Myanmar. The country has justified what it calls clearance operations by arguing the nation faces a terrorist threat. This could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The plight of the Rohingya has captured the attention of the Muslim world, becoming a *cause célèbre* like perhaps no other since Kosovo.

Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other jihadist groups, which have long issued statements of solidarity with the Rohingya for propaganda purposes, are now calling directly for attacks on Myanmar and its leaders. Most recently, on 27 October 2017, the media arm of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent released a video message from the group's leader, Abu Syed al-Ansari, repeating calls for a jihad against Myanmar in support of the Rohingya. Myanmar is not prepared to prevent or deal with such an attack, which could be directed or merely inspired by these jihadist groups. Any attack, particularly on a religious target in a major city, would shred the fraught relations between Buddhists and Muslims across Myanmar, potentially sparking widespread communal violence; there are Muslim communities in most cities and many rural areas in Myanmar.<sup>34</sup>

### C. *Impact within Myanmar*

Extreme Buddhist nationalist sentiment, a growing concern in Myanmar in recent years, has contributed to – and been reinforced by – the current crisis. This has included anti-Rohingya hate speech in state media under the civilian government's editorial control and in sermons by prominent Buddhist monks.<sup>35</sup>

A sermon by Sitagu Sayadaw, one of Myanmar's most revered monks and a leading doctrinal authority, is particularly alarming. Preaching to military officers at a garrison and training college in Kayin State on 30 October 2017, he urged unity between the military and monkhood, then appeared to provide a religious justification for the mass killing of non-Buddhists. He recounted a well-known fifth century legend from Sri Lanka commonly used in Myanmar to justify violence in defence of the faith, telling the soldiers that no matter how much they had to fight, they should remember that non-Buddhists killed were “not fully human”. The sermon and local media reporting of it have been widely shared on social media, with many Myanmar people expressing support, though some have voiced unease or opposition.<sup>36</sup>

The government and military's repeated, blanket denials of wrongdoing, widely disseminated in English and Burmese via state media, further reinforce a climate of impunity. This is particularly dangerous given that negative sentiments toward the Rohingya population are widespread at all levels of the military and in society as a

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<sup>34</sup> See “Bangladesh dragging feet over repatriating Rohingya refugees, says Myanmar”, Reuters, 1 November 2017. For examples of earlier propaganda statements see Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, op. cit., section V.E.

<sup>35</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, op. cit. See also a 2016 editorial (in Burmese and English) referring to the Rakhine State violence as caused by “detestable human fleas” that “we greatly loathe for their stench”; “A flea cannot make a whirl of dust, but ...”, *GNLM*, 27 November 2016.

<sup>36</sup> See Matthew J. Walton, “Religion and Violence in Myanmar: Sitagu Sayadaw's Case for Mass Killing”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 November 2017.



whole. A recent editorial in the state paper dismissed “baseless accusations against the Myanmar Armed Forces” and stated that “it certainly does not take a legal expert to come to the conclusion that all those village[r]s who took part in the raids are also punishable under the anti-terrorism law. This fact may perhaps explain why nearly half-a-million people decided to cross over to ... Bangladesh”.

A detailed internal investigation by the military concluded that troops fired “not a single shot” on civilians and that “all security members ... strictly abided by the orders”, a further signal of impunity. In a 21 September speech to northern Rakhine State troops, Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing honoured “brilliant efforts to restore regional peace, security” and warned that a “race cannot be swallowed by the ground but only by another race” (a well-known Burmese saying that is also the motto of the immigration department). In a 15 November meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson, he stated that those who had fled to Bangladesh were ARSA terrorists and their families.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the risk of further abuses against the Rohingya, the authorities have reinforced an ugly strand of nationalism that will outlast the current crisis and could be channelled to target other minorities. At a minimum, it will be more difficult for national leaders to make the necessary concessions in the peace process of greater minority rights and political and economic devolution.<sup>38</sup> This could undermine prospects for a stable, peaceful and more prosperous future, and thus imperil the country's political transition or significantly shift its landing spot.

The crisis also will define the country in the eyes of much of the world for years to come. This will have a negative impact on trade, investment, tourism and global good-will, at a time when Myanmar is emerging from decades of isolation from the West. This is in turn likely to feed anti-Western sentiment, leading to greater estrangement and potentially cementing the country's status as a pariah. The government's priority long-term aims – balancing China's geostrategic influence, integrating into the global economy and rehabilitating the military's international image – may now be all but impossible to achieve.

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<sup>37</sup> “Rakhine State affair and cooperation”, *GNLM*, 2 November 2017; “Troops did not commit sexual violence nor killed civilians: Investigation Team”, *GNLM*, 14 November 2017, p. 10; Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Facebook posts, 21 September 2017, <http://bit.ly/2hCQq90> and 16 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2muFJY4>. See also the dated immigration ministry website at <http://bit.ly/-259Wafy>.

<sup>38</sup> For details on the peace process with ethnic armed groups, see Crisis Group Report, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, op. cit. ARSA is not (and likely never will be) part of the peace process, given that the Rohingya are not a recognised ethnic group.

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## V. Government and International Response

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### A. Government Position

On the day of the attacks, the government declared ARSA a terrorist group under domestic law. It issued a warning to the media to refer to ARSA as “extremist terrorists” rather than use terms such as “insurgents”. It claimed that international NGOs may have been collaborating with ARSA and that World Food Programme (WFP) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) food aid had been diverted to the group. The government also stated that ammonia and tubes provided by development agencies for construction had been turned into IEDs. These statements set the tone for Myanmar’s escalatory response to the attacks and uncompromising attitude toward the UN and humanitarian agencies.<sup>39</sup>

Allegations of aid agency collusion were condemned by the U.S. ambassador to Myanmar as “absurd” and by the UN Human Rights chief as “irresponsible”, as they placed humanitarian staff “in danger and may make it impossible for them to deliver essential aid”. The accusations resulted in a boycott of aid agencies by their local contractors in Rakhine State and shipments came under mob attack. The government blocked access to northern Rakhine for all organisations (except the Red Cross) and most media.<sup>40</sup>

On 19 September and 12 October 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi addressed the Rakhine crisis in speeches that were criticised internationally, but gained strong local support. She questioned why Rohingya were fleeing, saying there were “allegations and counter-allegations” and claiming many Muslim villages were untouched and peaceful. She also announced the creation of a national fund for Rakhine State under her direction – the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development – and lobbied for Myanmar conglomerates and the general population to contribute cash; it has so far received some \$20 million. Nine taskforces were established, all related to development.

The risk is that if, as seems likely, repatriation does not proceed quickly or at scale, and there is no dramatic progress on desegregation or citizenship for Muslim communities across Rakhine State, this fund will end up supporting development initiatives that increase inequality and exacerbate conflict.<sup>41</sup> As we have noted in

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<sup>39</sup> “Anti-Terrorism Central Committee Order No. 1/2017”, 25 August 2017, under 2014 Anti-Terrorism Law, §72(B); “Warning in relation with extremist terrorists”, *GNLM*, 28 August 2017; “Terrorist hideouts discovered, items provided by int’l organisations found”, *GNLM*, 30 August 2017.

<sup>40</sup> “US Ambassador Rejects Govt Implication of Aid Agencies in Rakhine Attacks”, *The Irrawaddy*, 31 August 2017; “‘Humanitarian catastrophe’ unfolding as Myanmar takes over aid efforts in Rakhine state”, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2017; “Myanmar police fire warning shots in Rakhine as mob attacks aid boat”, Agence France-Presse, 21 September 2017.

<sup>41</sup> “State Counsellor: ‘Myanmar does not fear world scrutiny’”, *GNLM*, 20 September 2017; “Join hands for peace in Rakhine”, *GNLM*, 13 October 2017. The taskforces are: infrastructure, agriculture and livestock, economic zone development, information and public relations, job creation and vocational training, healthcare, microfinance, crowdfunding, tourism promotion; “Nine private sector task forces formed to participate in UEHRD programme”, *GNLM*, 22 October 2017.

prior reports and briefings, development interventions must be properly sequenced with political steps to address discrimination, segregation and citizenship status.<sup>42</sup>

### B. *International Response*

The crisis has prompted significant international scrutiny and criticism. UN Secretary-General Guterres sent an official letter to the Security Council on 2 September 2017 – the first time a Secretary-General has done so on any issue since 1989 – saying that “the international community has a responsibility to undertake concerted efforts to prevent further escalation of the crisis”. The Council met five times in August–October on the issue – including a briefing by Guterres on 28 September and a 13 October closed-door “Arria Formula” briefing with Kofi Annan, who was appointed by Suu Kyi in 2016 as chair of an advisory commission on Rakhine State, which completed its work in August. Guterres called on Myanmar to end the violence, allow unfettered humanitarian access, ensure the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of the refugees to their areas of origin, and prioritise implementation of the Annan commission recommendations – points echoed by several Council members.

On 6 November, given Chinese and Russian opposition to a resolution, the Council instead unanimously agreed on a presidential statement that “strongly condemns the widespread violence that has taken place in Rakhine State since 25 August, which has led to the mass displacement” of Rohingya communities; “expresses alarm at the significantly and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation”; and “demands the Government of Myanmar grant immediate, safe and unhindered access to United Nations agencies and their partners”. Myanmar expressed “deep concern” at the adoption of the statement and its use of the term “Rohingya”. The UN General Assembly approved a human rights resolution on Myanmar on 16 November, reviving annual resolutions dropped in 2016 in recognition of the country’s progress.<sup>43</sup>

Some countries also raised concerns bilaterally in a series of phone calls and meetings with Suu Kyi and the Commander-in-Chief. On 19 September, the UK announced it was suspending training programs for the Myanmar military and Prime Minister Theresa May signalled her willingness to support further action. The European Union Council of Foreign Ministers decided on 16 October to suspend visits of Myanmar military officers to Europe and review all defence cooperation, while also flagging the possibility of more formal sanctions.

On 23 October, the U.S. issued a statement outlining its own steps, including restrictions on travel of current and former senior military leaders to the U.S., cancelling military-to-military engagements and exploring options for visa bans and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act. On 22 November, Secretary Tillerson declared that the situation in northern Rakhine constituted ethnic cleansing and that accountability would be pursued through U.S. law, including possible targeted sanc-

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> See “Briefing under ‘any other business’”, [Whatsinblue.org](https://www.whatsinblue.org), 12 September 2017; “Public Briefing by the Secretary-General”, 27 September 2017; “Adoption of a Presidential Statement”, 6 November 2017; UNSC Presidential Statement S/PRST/2017/22, UN Security Council, 6 November; Statement of Myanmar Permanent Representative, *GNLM*, 8 November 2017; “Situation of human rights in Myanmar”, UN doc A/C.3/72/L.48, UN General Assembly, 31 October 2017.

tions. Congress is currently vetting draft legislation that would re-impose some of the sanctions lifted in 2016.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed a Special Envoy to spearhead diplomatic efforts to address the crisis, but the envoy, Bob Rae, was unable to secure any meetings with government officials during his visit to Myanmar in early November 2017.<sup>44</sup>

Myanmar set its political direction early in the crisis, and, so far, international scrutiny, pressure and diplomatic engagement has brought about no meaningful change – not even seemingly minor concessions such as allowing UN humanitarian access to the area or signalling openness to international support or advice. Extremely strong domestic political consensus on this issue has united the government, military and vast majority of the population as never before in Myanmar's modern history.

The international community thus faces a major challenge. In the face of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, the political and moral imperative to take action has become overwhelming. The huge reservoir of international good-will for Myanmar and for Suu Kyi personally that existed prior to the crisis is rapidly drying up. Many countries wish to support Myanmar's transition away from military rule, and have no desire to undermine its first democratically elected government in more than 50 years. But given the strong perception that the diplomatic channel is not producing results, and with public views hardening in many countries in the West and the Muslim world, the imposition of sanctions by Europe and the U.S. seems inevitable. Over time, the drumbeat for holding those most responsible criminally accountable will also likely increase.

Yet policymakers should be under no illusions: sanctions are very unlikely to prompt positive change in Myanmar. Indeed, – depending on specifics – they could make matters worse. Unlike in the past, there is no domestic debate on different policy approaches that sanctions might be thought to influence. Their most likely effect will thus be to push the government, military and population even closer together and to reinforce current narratives in Myanmar that the West is a fickle friend and unreliable partner. Government leaders have explicitly warned that criticism and punitive actions from the West will only push them closer to China.<sup>45</sup>

History also is a guide. Until 2012, Myanmar was under some of the most stringent bilateral sanctions of any country; contemporaneous Crisis Group research indicates that these did almost nothing to influence the military regime and had very little tangible impact on it. Although termed “targeted”, they had little impact on the regime and its leaders, but caused significant damage to the general economy and the fortunes of ordinary people – something acknowledged for example by then-Secretary-of-

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<sup>44</sup> “UK suspends aid for Myanmar military”, BBC News, 19 September 2017; “Myanmar/Burma: Council adopts conclusions”, European Council Press Release, 16 October 2017; “Accountability for Human Rights Abuses in Rakhine State, Burma”, U.S. Department of State Press Statement, 23 October 2017; “Efforts To Address Burma's Rakhine State Crisis”, U.S. Secretary of State Press Statement, 22 November 2017; Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yangon, November 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Yangon, September–November 2017. See also “U.S. Pressure on Aung San Suu Kyi Only Helps China, Aides Warn”, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 2017.

State Hillary Clinton when she initiated a review of U.S. policy in 2009.<sup>46</sup> There are few new options on the table, and any return to sanctions will inevitably involve some of the same basic elements. For Myanmar, these do not represent ominous new threats but rather the prospect of return to a very familiar status quo ante.

Policymakers nevertheless feel they should act, not only in response to political pressure from their constituents but also to send an important broader signal to would-be perpetrators that such abuses will not go unpunished. There are ways policymakers can limit potential negative impact on the Myanmar people, who should not pay the price for the actions of a military that is constitutionally outside of democratic control.

- ❑ **First, resist the urge to disengage.** Policymakers should not lose sight of the distinction between government and people. Myanmar is home to millions of the poorest people in the region, and their aspirations for a better economic future must not be forgotten. The urge to disengage from the country, therefore, should be resisted. People-to-people exchanges with the West through academic, cultural and commercial interactions and tourism are crucial for a country that was isolated for so many decades.
- ❑ **Second, maintain development assistance and non-military engagement.** This will be easy for Western countries to commit to in theory, but hard to deliver in practice now that Myanmar is no longer a global good news story and its government is showing little flexibility on aid modalities. Trade preferences recently reinstated by the EU and U.S. are critical in supporting manufacturing jobs in Myanmar and should not be revoked.
- ❑ **Third, work carefully to minimise the collateral impact of any targeted sanctions.** Targeted sanctions on specific individuals and entities against whom there is evidence of wrongdoing, can help to promote accountability. Recent experience in Myanmar shows, however, that ostensibly targeted sanctions can have broader systemic impact on the economy that should be avoided.
- ❑ **Fourth, engage with the military and government prior to imposing any sanctions.** The goal should be to maximise any leverage that is available (even if minimal) at the critical moment of opportunity, by raising the prospect of any new sanctions and pushing for progress on the key objectives before these measures are imposed.

Given the limited utility of sanctions, the international community should do all it can to mitigate the humanitarian disaster and influence the situation in other ways. This could include:

- ❑ Provide substantial ongoing humanitarian support to the Rohingya refugees, to reduce the risks of a further humanitarian catastrophe and alleviate the enormous burden on Bangladesh and local communities. This can help also mitigate the risk of refolement.

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<sup>46</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report N°78, *Myanmar: Sanctions, Engagement or Another Way Forward?*, 26 April 2004; Asia Briefing N°118, *Myanmar's Post-Election Landscape*, 7 March 2011. "Shift Possible on Burma Policy", *Washington Post*, 19 February 2009.

- ❑ Assist Myanmar to define a pathway out of the current crisis, on the understanding that at least part of the challenge relates to management and implementation ability, in addition to political will. In particular, since the development-first approach being pursued by the government will be neither credible nor effective, pushing for political decisions to implement key recommendations of the Annan commission, including as regards discrimination, segregation and citizenship. Meaningful progress on these issues is vital to creating an environment conducive to voluntary repatriation, and giving international credibility to the Myanmar's efforts.
- ❑ Begin contingency planning for the humanitarian, security and political consequences of a scenario where the Myanmar-Bangladesh bilateral process does not lead to significant numbers of refugees returning home. This will be discussed in detail in forthcoming Crisis Group reporting.

China is particularly well-placed to promote positive outcomes should it decide to prioritise these. While in recent decades it has always supported Myanmar governments politically, and continues to be sceptical of international pressure, its blanket support cannot be taken for granted by Myanmar. China does not want this to come at the cost of its important relations with Bangladesh and the wider Muslim world, which is part of the reason why it allowed the recent UN Security Council presidential statement to be issued. China also has significant economic and strategic interests in Rakhine State that could be impacted by the crisis. So far, however, it has focused on allowing Myanmar and Bangladesh to work out the issue bilaterally.

## **VI. Conclusion**

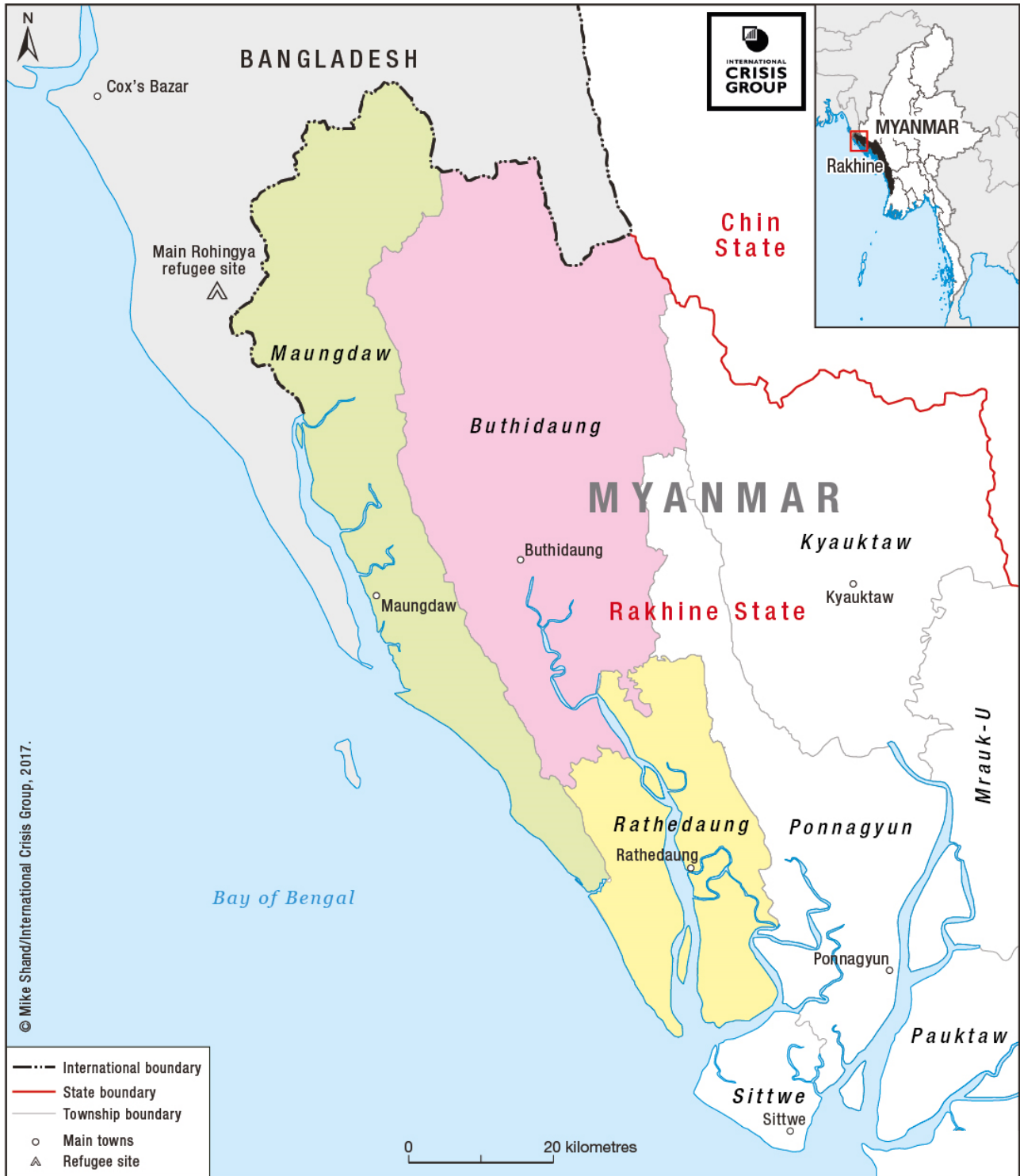
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The actions of the Myanmar military in northern Rakhine State have created a major humanitarian catastrophe, a crisis for the country and a security threat to the region. It has strengthened an ugly strand of nationalism that will be long-lasting and could lead to the targeting of other minorities in the future. The crisis will define Myanmar in the eyes of much of the world for years to come, with hugely negative consequences across the board on trade, investment, tourism. The country has squandered its considerable reserves of global good-will just when it needed them most, as it was emerging from decades of isolation from the West. Myanmar has also put itself at much greater risk of attack by transnational jihadist groups. Priority long-term aims of balancing China's geostrategic influence and economic dominance in the country and rehabilitating the military's international image have been significantly set back.

The abuses against the Rohingya minority have captured global public opinion, and the uncompromising posture of the government has exacerbated the situation. Western countries almost certainly will re-impose some of the sanctions that had been lifted in recent years. As they do so, they should acknowledge their inherent limitations and approach them in a manner that can maximise leverage while minimising collateral damage on Myanmar's long-suffering population.

**Brussels, 7 December 2017**

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar





## **Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group**

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Defence, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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**December 2017**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2014

### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### North East Asia

*Old Scores and New Grudges: Evolving Sino-Japanese Tensions*, Asia Report N°258, 24 July 2014 (also available in Chinese).

*Risks of Intelligence Pathologies in South Korea*, Asia Report N°259, 5 August 2014.

*Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm*, Asia Report N°267, 7 May 2015 (also available in Chinese).

*North Korea: Beyond the Six-Party Talks*, Asia Report N°269, 16 June 2015.

*Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters*, Asia Report N°275, 26 January 2016 (also available in Chinese).

*East China Sea: Preventing Clashes from Becoming Crises*, Asia Report N°280, 30 June 2016.

*China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017.

### South Asia

*Policing Urban Violence in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°255, 23 January 2014.

*Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition*, Asia Report N°256, 12 May 2014.

*Education Reform in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°257, 23 June 2014.

*Afghanistan's Political Transition*, Asia Report N°260, 16 October 2014.

*Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, Asia Report N°262, 28 October 2014.

*Sri Lanka's Presidential Election: Risks and Opportunities*, Asia Briefing N°145, 9 December 2014.

*Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis*, Asia Report N°264, 9 February 2015.

*Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan*, Asia Report, N°265, 8 April 2015.

*The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, Asia Report N°268, 4 June 2015.

*Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls*, Asia Report N°271, 22 July 2015.

*Sri Lanka Between Elections*, Asia Report N°272, 12 August 2015.

*Winning the War on Polio in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°273, 23 October 2015.

*Nepal's Divisive New Constitution: An Existential Crisis*, Asia Report N°276, 4 April 2016.

*Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°277, 11 April 2016.

*Sri Lanka: Jumpstarting the Reform Process*, Asia Report N°278, 18 May 2016.

*Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab*, Asia Report N°279, 30 May 2016.

*Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi*, Asia Report N°284, 15 February 2017.

*Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, Asia Report N°285, 10 April 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere*, Asia Report N°286, 16 May 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report N°289, 28 July 2017.

### South East Asia

*Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?*, Asia Briefing N°143, 22 April 2014 (also available in Burmese).

*Counting the Costs: Myanmar's Problematic Census*, Asia Briefing N°144, 15 May 2014 (also available in Burmese).

*Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°261, 22 October 2014 (also available in Burmese).

*A Coup Ordained? Thailand's Prospects for Stability*, Asia Report N°263, 3 December 2014.

*Myanmar's Electoral Landscape*, Asia Report N°266, 28 April 2015 (also available in Burmese).

*Southern Thailand: Dialogue in Doubt*, Asia Report N°270, 8 July 2015.

*Myanmar's Peace Process: A Nationwide Ceasefire Remains Elusive*, Asia Briefing N°146, 16 September 2015 (also available in Burmese).

*The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, Asia Briefing N°147, 9 December 2015 (also available in Burmese).

*Thailand's Lengthening Roadmap to Elections*, Asia Report N°274, 10 December 2015.

*The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao*, Asia Report N°281, 6 July 2016.

*Myanmar's New Government: Finding Its Feet?*, Asia Report N°282, 29 July 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: No Traction*, Asia Briefing N°148, 21 September 2016.

*Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, Asia Briefing N°149, 19 October 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°283, 15 December 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°287, 29 June 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°290, 5 September 2017.

*Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace*, Asia Report N°291, 8 November 2017 (also available in Thai and Malay).

## Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

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