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The Muslim Rohingya of Burma

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A preliminary point I want to highlight is that, while Burma has many complex ethnic problems, the plight of the Muslims of Arakan is by far the most tense and difficult of all the ethnic problems I have encountered in over a decade of writing on the political and ethnic situation in Burma. Firstly, there is a strong element of ethnic communalism, which has resulted in periodic but unpredictable outbreaks of social violence and upheaval; secondly, there are strong religious under currents which relate to the situation of all Muslims in Burma at large; and, thirdly, there is an intransigence on the part of many of the main protagonists, which has made the finding of lasting solutions so very difficult.

In addition, it is important to bear in mind that, after decades of isolation, the whole crisis is overshadowed by a complete absence of reliable anthropological or social field research, which means that different sides continue to circulate - or even invent - very different versions of the same people's histories.

Well, as the whole world is now aware, all these unresolved issues have once again come to a violent head in the seven years since the State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC assumed power in Rangoon - and, sadly, as so often in Burma's troubled past it is innocent civilians and villagers, caught in the middle, who are the main victims.

ARAKAN OR RAKHINE

So to give an overview of the entire situation, I would like to give a brief run through, as a historical perspective, of the underlying problems and issues until the present day. It will be necessary to go into more detail about ethnic terminology later on, but it is also important to clarify at the very beginning that different sides have some very different views about names of the same places and peoples, and this argument has recently intensified. Therefore - for the sake of simplicity - I will generally refer to the modern Rakhine State by its historic name of Arakan; if speaking about both Muslims and Buddhists, I will use the term Arakanese, which for many years was the traditional international style; and if I am only referring to the main Buddhist ethnic group, then I will use the word Rakhine. For Muslims, in general, I will also continue to use this general religious word, since in Arakan - as elsewhere in Burma - there are a number of different kinds of Muslim communities, and I will turn later to the specific question of "Rohingya" ethnicity that has become so very controversial in recent years.

So first, because the present Muslim-Buddhist or Burman- Bengali crisis can not be looked at in isolation, it is necessary to put Arakan and the historical situation in the regional context. In particular, the post-colonial tendency to see

Bangladesh as a historic Bengali-Muslim nation or Burma as a Burman-Buddhist nation has been extremely damaging to the minority groups in both countries. The proof of this can clearly be seen in the continuing ethnic instability and violence that has greatly arrested the development of both countries since the British departure in 1947- 48. In fact, much of Burma and all of its borderland regions are multi-ethnic, and they have historically remained in a state of social and political flux. Bangladesh, too, with its Chakma and other Buddhist minorities has faced a history of similar religious and ethnic problems.

ARAKAN IN HISTORIC PICTURE

So in this context, the historic territory of Arakan, which was long famous to Dutch, Portuguese and British traders as a land of economic opportunity, is no exception. Situated in the tri- border region between modern-day Burma, India and Bangladesh, Arakan is on the front-line between the Islamic and Buddhist worlds of Asia. A vast area of over 36,000 square kilo meters, it enjoys an unusual geography, with marshy plains and estuaries along the coast, flanked by a 500 kilometer-long range of deep mountains to the east that have kept it often isolated from the affairs of central Burma. Even today, despite its maritime potential and easy access in the north to Bangladesh, Arakan is only linked to central Burma by a couple of really passable roads. As a result, through a combination of continuing conflict and governmental neglect, Arakan has very much become a forgotten and impoverished backwater within Burma.

The historical picture, however, is rather different, and across the last two thousand years there has been a great deal of local vibrancy as well as movement by different ethnic peoples through the region. In addition to the Muslim and Buddhist majority groups, a number of other minority peoples have also come to live in Arakan, including the Chin, Mro and Khami in the eastern hills who, though many are Christians today, were traditionally animists, and the Kamans in several coastal areas who, as will be returned to later, have converted to Islam.

So it is important to stress at the very outset that Arakan itself is an ethnic minority state and that the problems of this territory are not simply internal problems between local Muslims and Buddhists but also between the Arakanese Buddhists, known as Rakhines, and the central government in Rangoon. Like the Tavoyans of Lower Burma, the Rakhines speak a dialect of Burmese, but ethnic Rakhine nationalists also claim traditions of great antiquity and political independence from Burma. As a result, there is a centuries-old history of conflict between ethnic Rakhine leaders and ethnic Burman rulers or governments in Mandalay, Rangoon and central Burma, and this has continued until the present day.

Now in the last fifty years, because of the central government's sometimes determination to question the right of Muslims to live in north Arakan (or even Burma), there have been some very diametrically opposed interpretations of the region's history. What, however, can not be disputed is that, for the last thousand years or so, Muslims and Buddhists have historically lived on both sides of the Naaf River which marks the modern border with Bangladesh? As a result, the present cultural and ethnic distinctions - between Buddhists and Muslims or

Rakhines and Rohingyas - were not always so clear. As recently as 1955, for example, in his classic "History of South-East Asia", D.G.E. Hall described the Arakanese of today as "basically Burmese with an unmistakable Indian admixture" (p.4 II).

The Rakhines, as an ethnic group, who traditionally formed the majority population, appear to have come into the territory around the same time as the main body of ethnic Burman migration into the dry zone of area of Upper Burma around the 9th or possibly 10th centuries A.D. There are many great gaps in the historical and archaeological record, which still need filling. But the existing inhabitants, most of whom are thought to have been Hindus under Indian dynastic rule and of a similar population to neighbouring Bengal, appear to have been either absorbed or, like the Chins and Mros, simply moved into more remote forest or hill regions.

UNUSUAL HISTORY OF BUDDHISM

It was on this disparate mix of ethnic communities, then, that both Buddhism and, later, Islam began to impress their influence from around the 10th centuries A.D. What is interesting here is the unusual history of Buddhism in Arakan, which some observers believe helps explain the particular importance of the religious issue in Arakan and the apparent chauvinism by some -though not, of course, all - of the later Rakhine nationalist movements. The Rakhines, like their Burman cousins, practice Theravadha or Hinayana Buddhism, the influence of which is generally dated to the 11th century when the first great Burman king and unifier of Burma, Anawrahta, overran the Kingdom of the Buddhist Mons in Lower Burma and transported away hundreds of monks and scholars to his capital at Pagan.

However, hidden by undergrowth in the forests of Arakan, local Rakhines also found a great golden Buddha image, known as the Mahamuni statue, which belongs to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and must have predated the Rakhine arrival by some centuries. None the less, it is undoubtedly one of the great treasures of the Buddhist world, and it has since become a great symbol for the ancient traditions of Buddhism in Burma - and for Rakhine nationalists and Buddhist leaders in particular In the following centuries, domination by the Burman kings was resisted and a number of powerful Buddhist rulers arose in Arakan, with proud cultural and political traditions that were similar to the city-state or valley kingdoms of the Burmans, Shans and Mons lying to Arakan's east. Their main locus of power was the royal court at Myohaung -or Mrauk-U as it is known to Rakhines - which was established by King "Narameikhia in the 15th century A.D. (For anyone interested, a graphic account of the traditions of Buddhism in Arakan is contained in Maurice Collis' book, "The Land of the Great Image".)

By contrast to the Buddhists, the question of Islamic inhabitation and influence in Arakan is more difficult to identify and appears to have come from a number of different sources. Various historians and Muslim scholars have recorded evidence of a Muslim presence or settlement along parts of the Arakan coast-line, from as early as the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. These first

arrivals, it is presumed, were largely Arab sea-farers, merchants and occasional holy-men. However as Moslem and, later, Moghal influence came to dominate over Bengal and the neighbouring region of Chittagong, the religious distinctions became less clear in a world of poly-ethnic and poly-religious societies.

EARLY ISLAMIC INFLUENCE

The clearest evidence of this came in the reign of King Narameikhla, mentioned above, in the 15th century when he was forced to take sanctuary with King Ahmed Shah of Gaur in Chittagong during one of the many periodic wars with the Burman kings. Once restored to his throne, he and his successors also took Muslim titles - apparently as vassals of Gaur - and issued medallions bearing the Kalima, the Islamic confession of faith. This has led to modern arguments over who actually controlled the Arakan royal court, and many Muslims believe that Narameikhla actually converted to Islam. However, I think it rather more likely that they simply used these titles as royal honorifics, which would undoubtedly have been of great prestige in the region. Moreover, as the Arakanese kings reasserted themselves, for the next two centuries Chittagong itself became a bone of contention between local rulers in Arakan and Bengal, and this territory alsoc hanged hands several times until it was recovered by the Mughal emperors for India in 1666.

This was to be a critical period of conflict and upheaval during which time there was a continuing intermix of different ethnic and religious communities, especially around the Naaf River border,that has a lasting legacy today. For example, the Rakhines built up a fierce reputation for coastal raiding into Bengal and earned the derogatory Bengali name of “Maghs" or "bandits", which is still used in both Bangladesh and by Arakanese Muslims to describe Rakhine Buddhists today. Itis, it needs to be stressed, a term which most Rakhines find offensive, especially amongst the many Rakhines who settled in what has become modern-day Bangladesh. Indeed, although predominantly Bengali today, the important regional centre of Cox's Bazar was a Rakhine-majority town until the British departure in 1947.

Similarly, during this period Muslim influence or migrants also spread into several parts of Arakan. Although apparently indigenous, for example, the coastal Kamans apparently adopted Islam at some stage which remains unrecorded. Many Muslims or Bengalis, including traders) craftsmen or soldiers, also came to live or stay at the royal court at Mrauk-U. Many others settled in coastal areas such as Akyab (Sittwe) where one of Arakan's largest mosques, the Jam-e Mosque, was constructed in the 17th century - and perhaps, most strikingly, there are descendants, still recognisable today, of soldiers of the Bengali ruler, Shah Shuja, who took sanctuary in Arakan inthe 17th century. Following his assassination, they were disarmed and deported to RamreeIsland off the coast of central Arakan, where their descendants can be found, speaking the rakhine language but still practising Islam today.

Out of this complex past, then, the cataclysmic date for Arakan appears to have come in 1784 A.D., when the great Burman monarch, Bodawpaya, invaded Arakan, deposed the last Arakanese king, Thainada, and took away the

Mahamuni image to Mandalay where, to the great anger of Rakhine nationalists, it still remains today at the world-famous Arakan pagoda.Resistance was not finished, but Arakan's historic independence had come to an end. In thefollowing years, over 20,000 Arakanese nationalists, led by King-bering, fled into British-controlled Bengal to ask for help and protection - and it was continuing fighting along the Naaf River border, which finally brought the British into Burma in the first Anglo-Burman War of 1824-25.

CONSEQUENCES OF BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

Now, as shall be discussed, the date of 1824-25 and British colonisation have become embedded in the Burmese government's mind with regards the Muslim question and the historic rights of Muslims to residency in Arakan. That there were Muslim inhabitants in Arakan before1824 is not in dispute; the argument is over their ethnicity and numbers - and the starting point of the present troubles must therefore be dated to the advent of British rule.

Many countries, of course, have suffered the debilitating consequences of colonial rule, but in Burma the experience was particularly acute. What is often forgotten is that, until 1937, Burma was administered as a Province of the British Indian Empire, and this was to have extremely negatives consequences in perceptions of the Muslims of Arakan. Even today, although no one likes to admit it, there is an underlying prejudice by many government officials and Burmese Buddhists in general against Christians and ethnic minority groups, such as the Karens or Kachins, whom they still identify (sometimes in the state- controlled media) as supporting the British under colonial rule. However it is the Muslims of Arakan - and inhabitants of ethnic Indian origin in general - who have clearly born the brunt of this resentment.

Under British rule, there was a massive immigration of different peoples from India – including labourers, merchants and administrators, and by the time of the 1931 census the Indian population of Burma, including such diverse groups as Hindus and Muslims or Gurkhas and Tamils, had passed one million out of a total population of 14,650,000. Indeed, to the anger of many Burmese nationalists, Hindi not Burmese was the language of the country's post office. In Arakan, British government records from towns such as Maungdaw and Sittwe or Akyab show that there was a large immigration of male workers, many of whom came from the Chittagong area, as a seasonal worker to help rich local landowners during harvest time. However, it was the activities of a caste of "chettyar" money-lenders of Indian origin, who caused the most resentment amongst impoverished rural farmers in central and lower Burma. This, in turn, fuelled the growing tide of Burmese nationalism, and there were violent anti-Indian communal riots in 1930-31 and again in 1938 in which several hundred Indians were killed.

In Arakan itself, there is little evidence of such communal flare-ups but, as a result of these experiences, many Burmese nationalists and politicians have never really bothered to distinguish between Indians or Muslims in general and the indigenous- Muslims of Arakan. The word colloquially used to describe Muslims in Arakan is the pejorative word "Kala" or foreigner, which is exactly the

same word commonly used to describe Muslims or Indians anywhere else they live in Burma (anti-Muslim prejudice is not just confined to Arakan today).

INDIAN EXODUS OF WW-II

Eventually, during the Second World War an estimated 500,000 Indians and Muslims fled Burma. Some were clearly following in the footsteps of the British government, but others allege that they were brutally chased out by nationalists of Aung San's Burma Independence Army or BIA. Thousands are reported to have died of starvation, disease or during sporadic military attacks in one of the darkest but least reported incidents in modem Burmese history.

Ten years ago I did briefly try to investigate this issue further. At that time, many local Muslims and Buddhists I spoke to said that, initially there was not really any serious trouble between thet wo religious communities, but that it only flared up when the first BIA units entered the area with the Japanese Imperial Army. They immediately began giving speeches about the ongoing expulsions of Indians and other alleged British supporters from central Burma and asked why Rakhine nationalists were not doing the same. As a result, there was an outbreak of the first serious communal clashes from 1942 onwards, and while the Muslims generally stayed loyal to the British and worked with the underground V-Force, most Rakhine nationalists joined either with the BIA or underground communist movement (who were working closely together) and only turned against the Japanese when the British re- invaded Burma in 1945. As a result, both sides accuse each other of anti-Muslim or anti-Buddhist atrocities during the war.

To emphasise the sensitivity of this religious issue, it perhaps should be added that Aung San, the hero of Burma's national liberation movement and father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was also alleged to have executed a Muslim headman in Lower Burma during the war. Indeed the British originally wanted to put him on trial for murder after the war until they realised his immense popularity. Many Muslims, however, have never forgotten this incident and believe that it represents just another example of the long history of human rights abuses against Muslims, for which they have never had proper protection or restitution.

Thus, out of this bitter war-time experience came enormous bloodshed and loss of life, which also stored up a legacy of resentment amongst other minorities, such as the Karens and Kachins,that has continued in some areas until today. In Arakan, both local Muslim and Rakhine nationalists admit that they began stockpiling weapons during the war ready for the fight in post-independence Burma.

ARAKAN INSURGENCY AFTER WW-II

Now, the long-running insurgencies of minorities such as the Karens and Mons, which broke out soon after the British departure in 1948, are generally well-known around the world. However what is often forgotten is that the armed conflict in Arakan never really subsided after 1945. Amongst the ethnic Rakhine population, for example, a number of different armed and communist factions,

spearheaded by a former Buddhist monk, U Seinda, fought against both the British (before their departure) and the first post- independence government under prime minister U Nu after Aung San's assassination.

Meanwhile, amongst the Muslim community, there were both aboveground and underground movements which demanded that the Muslim-majority Mayu Division, which adjoined the Naaf River border, should either become independent or joined into the newly- formed East Pakistan. This is something that many Burmese leaders have never forgotten or forgiven, leading to the insistence by some officials and politicians that the Muslims are really foreigners illegally trying to seize Burma's land. I would also add here that one can probably date to this struggle over territory at independence an argument and division amongst the Muslims of Arakan themselves,which has still not been reconciled; over the past 50 years a split has emerged between those who have traditionally described themselves as "Arakanese Muslims" as a religious group within the Arakanese peoples - and those Muslim nationalists, largely concentrated in the north, who prefer to call themselves "Rohingyas". This latter expression is a term that has become increasingly popular in recent years and will be returned to in a minute.

From independence in 1948, Arakan - like many other regions of Burma – was rocked by political violence. The political demands of both the Muslim and Buddhist communities were both overlooked by the central government in Rangoon, and Arakan was not even granted ethnic statehood - although, as evidence of strong constituency support, four Muslims did win seats in elections to the new parliament. As a result, while communists and armed Rakhine nationalists seized control of many of the towns throughout Arakan, hundreds of armed Muslim supporters flocked to join the popular Muslim singer, Jafar Hussain (aka Jafar Kawwal), who had formed the first Mujahid Party in Buthidaung township in December 1947 to press the demand for an Islamic state in the north.

FORGOTTEN CEASEFIRE PACT

Burma's first independent government barely survived. As fighting raged across the country, the Rangoon government under U Nu and the army chief-of-staff, Ne Win, was only gradually able to establish central control - and rural Arakan was no exception. Kawwal himself was assassinated in 1950 to be replaced by his better- known successor, Cassim, but most of the Naaf River borderline remained in Mujahid hands until late 1954 when a massive offensive, known as Operation Monsoon, was launched by the Burmese army, which finally succeeded in scaling the high mountain peaks and capturing the Mujahids' main border strongholds.

Around the same time, too, the U Nu government for the first time seemed to recognise the depth of local Buddhist and Muslim grievances, and from 1958 onwards a number of local ceasefires were reached, beginning with the Rakhine leader U Seinda, in return for which the central government agreed to look more seriously at Arakanese ethnic and religious demands. The main Muslim ceasefires eventually followed in 1961 when some 500 guerrillas, headed by Rauschid Bullah and Mustafiz, agreed a local ceasefire in north Arakan.

This pact, although largely forgotten by other ethnic groups, is of great importance to many Muslims today, because they claim that, under the terms of the treaty, the Burmese government for the first time recognised the notion of the word "Rohingya" and the existence of ethnic "Rohingyas" in Burma by agreeing to have programmes in the local Rohingya language on national radio.

So it is necessary to digress briefly on the Rohingya question here, because many Rakhines absolutely reject the concept of any such ethnic group in Burma's history; they say it is word that, until recently, they had never heard of and, supporting this, there are also Arakanese Muslims, living in other parts of Arakan, who have expressed similar doubts. What, however, is absolutely clear is that in the Muslim-majority townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung in northernmost Arakan a distinctive but local Muslim culture has developed over the past two hundred years in which the inhabitants speak a distinctive local dialect which mixes Bengali, Burmese, Hindi and English.

There have been absolutely no reliable on the spot studies as to when and how this local culture developed, and depending on whom one talks to, one can hear very different versions of what such words as Arakan, Rohingya and Rakhine mean. By way of an explanation, however, a number of Muslim leaders have said that during the 1950s they felt very discriminated against as a religious minority without any clear ethnic identity in Arakan, and it was during this period that the popularity of promoting the ethnic term of "Rohingya" rather than simply Muslim or Arakanese Muslim took root.

ROHINGYA AS NEW DESIGNATION

According to this theory, Rohingya and Rakhine both come from the same ancient word for Arakan - it is just that one term is used by the Buddhists and one by the Muslims. And certainly, from the early 1950s onwards many local Muslim leaders have insisted on this new designation for their people, whereas many Buddhist Rakhines will still tell you that it is simply a fabrication or invention. To this group, while they accept the historic existence of a certain number of Burmese-speaking Muslims in Arakan, the people who today describe themselves as Rohingyas are simply Bengalis, most of whom crossed in under the British or have used the periodic upheavals of the last 50 years to illegally enter Burma. This whole subject, it should be stressed,is still unresolved and any comments or further discussion are welcome.

So to return to the main narrative, any peace in Arakan after the ceasefires of 1961 was very short-lived. In 1962 General Ne Win seized power in a military coup, imposed his idiosyncratic"Burmese Way to Socialism", and set off a new wave of social unrest and insurgencies around the country. Ethnic Indians were once again a main target, and an estimated 300,000 residents of Indian origin, mostly merchants and businessmen, quickly left the country following Ne Win's nationalisation of all schools, the currency and most of the economy between 1962 and 1964. Such pressures were especially deeply felt in Muslim communities in Arakan, where a number of new armed Muslim forces, including the Rohingya Patriotic Front under Muhammad Jafar Habib, sprang to life.

THE POLICY CHANGES UNDER GEN. NE WIN

However, this time the war was to be fought in a number of new ways by the Burmese army, generally to the detriment of the Muslims of Arakan - and this, in many respects, underpins the volatility and deep-seated fears of many Muslims in the present crisis. There is, most certainly, a direct continuity between Ne Win's military socialist government from 1962 to 1988 and the present SLORC regime, which consists entirely of Ne Win military loyalists.

Firstly, there was a definite change in the central government's perception of the ethnic problems in Arakan. In a policy which has continued until today, there was the first real recognition of the ethnic Rakhine people who, although they also allege ethnic discrimination by central government, have been promoted as the real inhabitants and indigenous people of Arakan. Their Buddhist religion and ethnic similarity to the country's Burman majority have been stressed, and under the 1974 constitution, Arakan was finally granted statehood. However, in a conscious policy decision, Arakan was granted the official title of the Rakhine State. Similarly, a number of other historic name changes were adopted, including that of Akyab, the state capital, which has since been officially referred to by only its Rakhine name of Sittwe.

As a result, many Muslims feel that this was the beginning of a long-term policy to exclude their culture and people from the Arakan territory - and there is much evidence to support their fears. Indeed, in recent years few ethnic Rakhines or democracy supporters in Burma have spoken up in defense of the Muslim population or against its sufferings. In both governmental and Rakhine terminology, a Rakhine must be a Buddhist; the words are synonymous. Arakanese Muslims is still sometimes heard, but "Rohingya" or "Rakhine Muslim" are regarded completely unacceptable.

This apparent picture, then, of the attempt to eliminate a distinctive Muslim voice from the day-to-day business and political affairs of Arakan after 1962 was then backed up by intense military pressures. Under Gen. Ne Win, human rights abuses and the coercion of the civilian population - including forced labour and forced relocations - became almost routine in many ethnic minority regions of the country, especially under a draconian military operation known as the "Four Cuts", which was similar in intent to the strategic hamlet operation of the USA in Vietnam. Significantly, it has been the use of such brutal tactics as these in Arakan that many Muslim leaders claim has been the main cause of the dramatic flight of several hundred thousand Muslim inhabitants from Burma on two different occasions in the past twenty years.

MASS EXODUS OF 1978

So turning to the first mass exodus in 1978, the exact background and circumstances of what actually look place are still unclear, but there are many parallels between the first exodus of Muslims in 1978 and the more recent events of 1991-92. In the late 1970s, at least, there were still various insurgent forces, including Muslim, communist and Rakhine nationalists, operating in much of the

far north of Arakan. As a result, the Burmese army targeted the entire region for a massive "Four Cuts" campaign, by relocating local villagers with relentless military sweeps, to flush out insurgent forces and their sympathisers. In north Arakan in 1978, a military operation code named "Ye The Ha" was launched in the mountains around the Sittwe plain while, in tandem, a heavy- handed census operation, known as "Nagamin" or "King Dragon", was begun to check identity papers in the border region for the first time.

Now whether it really was intended as a proper survey operation never became clear because the "Nagamin" census quickly got out of hand, amidst widespread reports of army brutality, including rape, murder and the destruction of Muslim mosques. As a result, over 200,000 Muslim refugees immediately took flight in fear of their lives. After an international outcry, most were allowed to return, but many Muslim leaders have never forgotten that, at the time, government officials in the state- controlled media, in complete contradiction of the truth, blamed all the trouble on "armed bands of Bengalis" or "wild Muslim extremists" attacking indigenous Buddhist villages.

Another argument, also used by the Ne Win government, was that many of those who fled in1978 were in fact illegal Bengali immigrants who had crossed into Burma as part of a general expansion in the Bengali population in this region of Asia. This issue can not be discounted out of hand, and such fears need to be addressed seriously. In recent years, violence and communal upheavals have followed the better- documented spread of Bengali migrants into adjoining areas of Assam, Tripura and the Chittagong Hill tracts. However, if such illegal immigration was really taking place on any sizeable scale in Arakan, it does not explain why the Ne Win government then told the world back in 1978 that it was prepared, in principle, to accept all the refugees back. And it is also important to add that virtually all the same accusations and then later climb-down by the government have also taken place in the most recent exodus of refugees during 1991 -92.

MARGINALIZATION OF ROHINGYAS

The fact is that, in the mid-1980s I, was told by many refugees that they had either never had National Registration Cards or they had been confiscated by the immigration authorities during the 1978 operation. And this feeling that they were deliberately being discriminated against was further increased under the tough Citizenship Law that was subsequently passed by the Ne Win government in 1982. Under this law, three categories of citizen were created in place of the previous one - National, Associate and Naturalised. Since this time, full citizenship in Burma has been confined, in theory, to only "National" ethnic groups, such as the Burmans, Mons or Rakhines, or to those who can prove ancestors resident in Burma before the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-25.

For many Muslim residents, this is, of course, a near impossible task: there are no such records to be found and, as Professor Yokota, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights has frequently pointed out, such legislation is discriminatory and unsustainable under international law and covenants. Instead, many Muslims have since been forced to apply for

"Naturalised"citizenship if they had not already applied for citizenship at independence under the 1948 Citizenship Law, in which case they now found themselves re-classified as "Associate" citizens. Both categories, however, are considered very discriminatory, for although they both apparently grant the right to residency in Burma, they also exclude the holders from holding government office and many other citizenship rights.

Many Muslims complain that this second-class status is then deliberately used as the basis for every kind of petty harassment and economic or social discrimination. According to Muslim leaders, this all fits in with a long-term government plan to drive Muslims out of Burma because, since the early 1980s, there have been continuing reports of anti-Muslim persecution throughout the country. There are no reliable figures on the Muslim or ethnic Indian population of Burma but, in addition to the Muslim inhabitants of Arakan, they are believed to number well over half a million. As well as Chinese Panthay Muslims in the Shan Stale, Indian Muslim quarters can be .found in many of the main conurbations as well as several rural areas of southern Burma, and from these areas there have also been reports of human rights abuses or the destruction of Muslim property over the past 15 years. In 1983, for example, a 200-strong force, the Kawthoolei Muslim Liberation Front, was set up in alliance with the Karen National Union in the aftermath of anti-Muslim riots in Martaban, Moulmein and other towns in Lower Burma, which led to the flight of several hundred Muslim refugees to the Thai border.

After 1982, the continuing destruction or uprooting of Muslim villages and mosques were also reported in several parts of Arakan, from Sandoway to Tongup - and not just in the north. The result was a continuing flow of Muslim refugees, including holders of National Registration Card,out of Arakan to countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world where they were dubbed Asia's "New Palestinians".

Equally, as if confirming their separate identity, in the 1980s it was still possible to meet many Muslims from Burma taking sanctuary in border areas of Bangladesh, where they spoke either Burmese or their local "Rohingya" dialect and were clearly regarded as an alien population by Bangladeshi officials and not as local Bengali inhabitants. Tragically, it was quite obvious that the issue of the Muslims in Arakan had not been resolved. As a popular Muslim saying put it at the time: "lf the Burmese army sees a Muslim in the village he is an alien; if he is fishing on the river he is a smuggler; and if he is working in the forest he is an insurgent."

THE 1991-92 EXODUS

This, then, was the backdrop to the eventual exodus of 1991-92, which Muslims count as the fourth major flight of Muslim refugees from Burma, following those of the Second World War, 1962-64 after Ne Win's seizure of power, and that of 1978 such a spontaneous exodus was clearly triggered by fear, but a number of other new factors also need to be taken into account.

The first was the change in the national Burmese government, which followed the Burmese army's suppression of the democracy uprising in 1988. Although consisting of Ne Win loyalists, a number of new policy changes were announced by the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government, including a new "market- oriented" and "open-door" economic policy. This put far greater focus and geo-political importance on northern Arakan and the sleepy Naaf River border. Previously much of the borderline had been under the control or influence of black-market traders as well as a few remnant insurgent forces of communists, Muslims and Rakhine nationalists, who perhaps numbered a maximum of 500 guerrillas under arms, in total, at that time.

The question of local control also tied in closely with the SLORC's political agenda because, inthe aftermath of the 1988 takeover, several thousand students and oilier democracy activists fled into armed opposition-controlled territory around all of Burma's borders. Arakan was no exception, and several hundred young people and students fled to both the Rakhine and Muslim forces in their remote forest hide-outs near the Bangladesh-India borders.

The SLORC's fears of popular resistance then appeared to be further added to by the result of the 1990 election, in which opposition candidates from the Rakhine League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and the Muslim-based National Democratic Party for Human Rights swept the board across the Arakan state. The result of the 1990 election, as is well know, has never been accepted by the SLORC and all three victorious parties have faced considerable harassment; for example, Fazul Ahmed, the Muslim MP for Maungdaw, hasbeen imprisoned, while Mohammed Ilyas, the NLD organiser for Buthidaung, and U Oo Tha Tun a respected Rakhine historian and parliamentary candidate, have both died after alleged ill-treatment.

The main thrust of the SLORC activities, however, has been in the north of Arakan and appears to have initially had a twin counter-insurgency and economic motive to secure the northernmost border under central control once and for all. From the middle of 1991, several new regiments - as well as a local border police militia known as the "Na Sa Ka" - were deployed in the northern border region. In response, local Rakhine, Mro and Chin populations also began to complain of forced relocations and military harassment but, as in 1978, it was once again the Muslim community who felt the full brunt.

In this context, it not necessary to go into detail here about the events that followed. These have been well-documented by Amnesty International, Asia Watch and other human rights organisations. But during the following half year, over 250,000 Muslim refugees from Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships fled into the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh in one of the greatest humanitarian emergencies that Asia has witnessed in recent times. Many of the underlying and historic issues over land ownership and citizenship are still being discussed under the current repatriation programme. But, tragically, there were many reported cases of murder, rape, and the destruction of Muslim land or property which, on occasion, seemed to be handed over to Buddhist Rakhines or other ethnic nationality incomers. In addition, a particular grievance in the 1991-92 exodus was the constant demands by the Burmese armed forces for civilians

to work as unpaid labourers and porters in harsh conditions on government road and economic development projects, where a steady number were reported to have died.

HEAVY-HANDED TACTICS

So heavy-handed were the Burmese army tactics and so serious did the crisis become that a full-scale border war with Bangladesh seemed possible at one stage in late 1991 after the Burmese army attacked a Bangladeshi outpost, killing one policeman and wounding three others. However continued pressure by China - as an intermediary - as well as ASEAN countries ensured that the matter was contained as an internal government-to-government affair, without Western involvement, under an April 1992 agreement. Eventually, however, after many delays, it was the UNHCR which had to be brought in to technically organise and oversee the repatriation process under a Memorandum of Understanding which was signed with the SLORC in November 1993.

The repatriation process will be looked at in the moment, but by the latest count over 190,000 refugees have officially returned to date, leaving an estimated 50,000 Muslim refugees in six camps in Bangladesh. From different sources, it appears that those remaining consist largely of Muslims, who can clearly be identified as sympathisers or members of armed Mujahid resistance groups, or are single members of families, whom the SLORC has decided to check more carefully. Just 500 refugees were repatriated in November and, according to diplomats who recently visited the area, the SLORC, immigration authorities have now become far more bureaucratic in sending out officials to examine every case.

So, in view of the immense human suffering and displacement that has occurred, it is worth re-examining exactly what the SLORC officials said at the time of the refugee exodus and what has subsequently occurred. In fact, just as in 1978, the government claimed that a main problem was one of illegal immigration: "The Rohingya problem is no more than the problem of unregistered illegal immigrants", claimed the state- controlled Working People's Daily in January 1992. If this was really the case, then one has to ask why the repatriation process has not, as yet,thrown up thousands of such documented examples.

Again, as in 1978, the second main justification used by the SLORC is the accusation of insurgent activities. In March 1992, for example, and again in May 1992 the SLORC foreign minister, U Ohn Gyaw, told Western journalists that Muslim insurgents were stirring up what he described as the "cross-border human traffic" and spreading anti-government scare stories. However, most-local observers would claim that the military capabilities and influence of a number of small Muslim factions along the border have been greatly exaggerated.

Currently, there are just two armed groups, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, led by Dr Mohammed Yunus, and the Arakan Rohingya lslamic Front, under Nurul Islam, which formed a joint Rohingya Solidarity Alliance on 10 July 1995 with perhaps 500 guerrillas under arms. Now, there can be no doubt that they have long enjoyed a certain degree of support in the international

Islamic community - as well as amongst Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh. However, any military operations they have launched have been extremely limited and have led to immediate reprisals by the Burmese army and Na Sa Ka border police. For example, the last major step-up in operations, which largely consisted of small arms fire and some terrorist grenade attacks in the Maungdaw area in April 1994, was followed by the summary arrest of dozens of local Muslims and the reported torture or extra judicial execution of a number of RSO members as well as innocent villagers found working in the forest. It should also be added that there is no evidence that these insurgent forces enjoy mass support throughout Muslim communities in Arakan. Indeed, there are still many Arakanese Muslims (including some who have joined the insurgent Muslim Liberation Organisation led by U Kyaw Hla), who prefer to identify with the issue of Muslims in Burma at large rather than that of the Rohingya question, which they tend to see as a local or borderland issue.

REPATRIATION ISSUES

So finally, to finish with the general repatriation issue. As documented in reports by such organisations as Medecin Sans Frontieres and the US Committee for Refugees, there have been many causes for international concern over the entire repatriation programme. These concerns initially centred on governmental secrecy, both in Bangladesh and in Arakan, and the lack of public access to information over the screening procedures to assess who should be allowed to return. Subsequently, once the repatriations actually started, there have also been doubts over the physical security and "voluntary" basis of the repatriation of refugees being ferried back across the Naaf River to Burma. Then, finally, now that the bulk of the refugees are back in Arakan, there are continuing concerns over human rights abuses and the treatment of those refugees who are trying to pick up the threads of their lives.

On all sides, the situation remains extremely delicate. The UNHCR, for example, has about 25 international staff in the border area (as well as some 40 locals) and claims that the programme is now changing from one of the repatriation of refugees to the "resettlement" or "anchoring" of refugees in their communities, through such diverse projects as health and sanitation programmes and the building of wells. In this process of resettlement, they have also received humanitarian support from international NGOs, notably Action International Centre la Faim of France and Bridge Asia of Japan.

Later speakers will talk in more detail on some of these issues, but a general picture has emerged. Firstly, it does seem that, although the refugees are generally being returned to the areas from which they came, many were landless or uneducated labourers, and they have now returned to face a situation of bleak poverty. In addition, it also clear that the SLORC has an agenda of its own and is most certainly building up a firm infrastructure of military control along the border, which has seen the continuing construction of new roads and communities.

At the same time, military security remains tight, and it remains extremely difficult for international aid workers to move freely in these remote border areas

without a military escort or presence. Equally disturbing, forced labour, which was one of the prime causes of the Muslim exodus in the first place, is still a routine government practice, and over the past year both Western diplomats and UNHCR officials have tried to intercede, unsuccessfully so far, with the SLORC authorities over this extraordinary duty which causes so much hardship. The UNHCR also reported in June that it was aware of about 45 refugees who had been detained by the SLORC on a variety of political charges since their return (largely in alleged connection with armed opposition groups).

And finally, just no. seriously, the entire question of the legal right of Muslims to live in Arakan - or even their very numbers - still remains very much m doubt. The SLORC estimates Arakan's current population at around 2.5 million and Muslim numbers at some 700,000. By contrast, Muslim groups - as well as officials of the Bangladesh government - have put the Muslim population at 1.4 million or over half the total Arakanese population.

`However according to the UNHCR, which has been discussing this issue with the SLORC, most of the 700,000 Muslims, which the SLORC recognises in Arakan, are not entitled to citizenship under the 1982 law. Moreover most of the returnees have not so far shown any wish to apply for associate or naturalised citizen status. As a result, they are living as non-nationals or foreign residents in Burma, with restricted freedom of movement, no right to vole or hold official office, and they all require official permission and a travel permit before they can make any long journeys.

In addition, many Muslims are concerned over the so-called "Yellow Cards" that they were issued with as temporary registration cards, along with food, clothes and money, as part of their repatriation packs. Unless and until these are replaced, they fear that they will be marked out forever as a discriminated-against minority without any of the social, economic, cultural or political rights that citizens take for granted under international covenants.

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