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“If we die, we die”: Myanmar’s Rakhine pushed to the brink

“If food supplies continue to be blocked, Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities could face famine in the coming months.”

Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar’s Rakhine State have for decades been subjected to a litany of abuses, including movement restrictions, arbitrary detention, forced labour, extrajudicial killings, and the denial of citizenship, but now they’re being starved of food too.

It’s not just the ruling junta. In a recent news release, Human Rights Watch also [accused](#) the Arakan Army (AA), the most successful ethno-nationalist armed group taking on the junta, of similarly abusing and oppressing the Rohingya. Such allegations date back years.

Human Rights Watch said life for the Rohingya under the AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan, is “harsh and restrictive, with discriminatory regulations and practices”. The findings, based on interviews with 12 Rohingya refugees who had fled to Bangladesh from northern Rakhine, fly in the face of the AA’s [stated commitment](#) to “protect the rights of all communities equally in the region”, including the Rohingya.

For those who have survived the junta’s past atrocities and managed to avoid the AA’s wrath, life remains incredibly difficult.



**The New
Humanitarian**

Fatima Khatun, a Rohingya Muslim widow in her forties, lives in Kyauktaw Township in northeast Rakhine, one of three townships in Rakhine still under military control.

“I have no regular job. If I find some work, I do it. If I can’t, I beg relatives for help. If they can’t help, I just go hungry,” she said, sitting on the damp floor of a makeshift bamboo-and-tarpaulin hut as rain leaked through the roof.

Her husband died of cancer four years ago, leaving her to raise four children alone. Khatun once laboured in farms and hauled goods but jobs have dried up. On days when there is no work, the family subsists on two cups of rice.

“I haven't seen meat or fish for a long time. I can't afford them,” she said. “I pick cassava leaves from the roadside or search for greens in the fields.”

When her youngest son recently fell ill, she couldn't afford treatment. “We live day by day. If we die, we die. If not, we live on. I've made peace with it,” she said.

Unlike other parts of Myanmar gripped by civil war, Rakhine State on the country's western coast is largely cut off from both local and international aid networks. Long-standing movement restrictions, the Myanmar military's continued blockade of aid, tightening control by the AA, and continuing clashes between the AA and the junta have left many civilians – Rohingya and Rakhine alike – trapped and struggling to access food, medical care, or safe passage.

“We asked if we could be treated equally. They said they'd treat us like the [ethnic majority] Burmans did, calling us ‘Bengali kalar’,” a slur for Muslims.

The sort of grassroots support systems that have sustained resistance and survival in places like Sagaing or Karenni are far more limited here, and while food insecurity is widespread across Myanmar, Rakhine is the only place where the UN has [warned](#) that “acute famine” is imminent, with over two million people at risk of starvation.

"If food supplies continue to be blocked, Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities could face famine in the coming months," Aung Ko Ko, founding executive director of Mosaic Myanmar, which works on conflict resolution and minority rights and conducts research across the country, told The New Humanitarian and Western News, a Myanmar news outlet.

Rohingya refugees recounted to Human Rights Watch that they were “not allowed to work, fish, farm, or even move without permission”. The communities “faced extreme food shortages, with most people begging from one another”, according to one 62-year-old, whose identity, along with others in this story, is being withheld for security reasons.

A 19-year-old, who said he spent five months with the AA after being forcibly recruited as a labourer, said Rohingya were often sent to the front line as “human shields”.

“If anyone resisted, they were beaten and mocked,” he said. “We asked if we could be treated equally. They said they'd treat us like the [ethnic majority] Burmans did, calling us ‘Bengali kalar’,” a slur for Muslims.

While rights groups and media reports have focused on the abuses in the three most northern townships bordering Bangladesh, the restrictions and denial of basic rights extend throughout the state, where the AA has seized control of 14 out of 17 townships since launching an offensive in November 2023.

"Rohingya in Rakhine don't have the freedom to move around or to access education. I want to study. I want to go to school. I want to be able to travel to other parts of the country,” a 24-year-old Rohingya man from Minbya Township in central Rakhine told The New Humanitarian and Western News.

A perfect storm

"Right now, the refugees and the displaced are not only struggling for food, clothing, and shelter, they're also suffering from a lack of access to medicine. Compared to the refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border, communities in Rakhine are being hit the hardest. So far, we haven't heard of any international aid agencies reaching the Rakhine side,” said Aung Ko Ko.

He was referring to the junta's [blocking](#) of humanitarian aid deliveries to parts of Rakhine since November 2023, paralleling Israel's restrictions of aid to Gaza that has brought the Palestinian

population to [the brink of famine](#).

While only three townships are under the junta's control, one of them is Sittwe, the state's capital and Rakhine's main port and transportation hub. Rakhine's poor infrastructure and internet and communication blackouts also hamper the provision of aid, but the junta's authority of a city that has served as a critical entry point for past humanitarian aid is a key reason that people are unable to access basic assistance.

Human rights group Fortify Rights said the junta's blockade has directly led to civilian deaths and warned these actions "[may amount to war crimes](#)".

Aid restrictions and escalating conflict also forced Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to [indefinitely suspend](#) its medical activities in northern Rakhine in June 2024. MSF did not respond to a request seeking comment.

The International Committee of the Red Cross told The New Humanitarian and Western News that it continues to deliver aid "where the situation and security allow", but it did not disclose those locations.

"No organisation is supporting us on a regular basis. Some groups gave us 50,000 kyats (about \$15) each, but they didn't say their name. Sometimes, we get small items like soap and toothpaste."

Up until a few months ago, the World Food Programme (WFP) was providing much-needed aid and operating in a limited manner despite the blockade. Then in March, the agency [announced](#) that a funding shortfall was threatening food assistance to more than one million people in Myanmar, including nearly 100,000 in central Rakhine "who will have no access to food". Local sources in Rakhine said WFP has since stopped its assistance there. The UN agency did not respond to requests seeking comment.

Communities across Myanmar may be grappling with a "[polycrisis](#)", but conditions in Rakhine are especially desperate, with the abuses by the AA and the junta compounding vulnerabilities far beyond the national average.

Than Hla May, 36, fled when her village near Sittwe came under the AA's control and the fighting between the two sides reached her doorstep. She has been living in a displacement camp in Ponnagyun in central Rakhine for nearly a year now. She said she has not received regular assistance over the past seven months.

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Rakhine is also increasingly exposed to extreme weather events, including cyclones like [Mocha in 2023](#). The state has already experienced two rounds of flooding this rainy season that has affected Than Hla May's camp. Yet she is stuck there because the AA forbade them from returning home, citing frequent clashes nearby.

"We have nothing left"

Long before the February 2021 coup that saw Myanmar's military leaders overthrow the democratically elected government, Rakhine State was one of the country's poorest and most conflict-affected regions – the site of repeated cycles of violence, military crackdowns, and deep-seated intercommunal tension.

In 2017, the Myanmar military carried out "clearance operations" following attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group, leading to mass killings, sexual violence, and the displacement of over 700,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh.

Aung San Suu Kyi, then leader of the country, [dismissed](#) the charges of genocide as “incomplete and misleading” to the UN, whose investigators later described the abuses as bearing “[genocidal intent](#)”. In November 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) [requested](#) an arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar’s coup leader, for crimes against humanity over the alleged persecution of the Rohingya.

Fortify Rights has repeatedly called on the ICC to also investigate the AA for its [abuses](#) and [mass killings](#) of Rohingya civilians, and for its [extrajudicial executions of Myanmar junta soldiers](#).

Elaine Pearson, Human Rights Watch’s Asia director, called in [the 28 July news release](#) on the AA to “end its discriminatory and abusive practices and comply with international law”. Meanwhile, Myanmar observers and aid workers said they fear for the long-term consequences on both Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

While ethnic Rakhine Buddhists do not face anywhere near the level of persecution as the Rohingya, they too are caught in the AA-junta crossfire.

Since 2023, the junta “has [increasingly relied](#) on remote violence, including... airstrikes”, often [targeting civilians](#) including in Rakhine, according to data from ACLED (the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project).

Nyo Sein Myint, 55, from another village in Kyauktaw, lost her home to Cyclone Mocha in May 2023. The storm killed at least 145 people and damaged over 180,000 homes, according to the junta.

“I still can’t rebuild my home and there’s no work,” she said. She used to sell snacks but the business collapsed post-storm, and government aid was limited to tarpaulin and kitchenware. “I got some pots, plates, and a few bowls,” she said.

Six months after the storm, as she was planning to rebuild her house, her husband was wounded in a junta airstrike while fleeing clashes between AA and the military. All their savings were spent on his treatment.

“I’m lucky he survived,” she said. “But we have nothing left.”

Edited by Thin Lei Win and Ali M. Latifi.