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(Author)

## Myanmar: Rohingya at Risk in Rakhine Fighting

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Dozens of Civilians Killed in Village Battlegrounds, Over 100,000 Displaced

(Bangkok) – Fighting in [Myanmar's](#) Rakhine State has surged in recent weeks, causing civilian casualties and large-scale displacement, Human Rights Watch said today. Myanmar's junta and the Arakan Army ethnic armed group should take immediate measures to minimize harm to ethnic Rohingya and other civilians caught up in the hostilities.

On November 13, 2023, [renewed fighting](#) between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army ended a year-long unofficial ceasefire in Rakhine State. Since January 2024, Myanmar military forces have attacked Arakan Army fighters deployed in Rohingya villages particularly in south Buthidaung township, which has resulted [in civilian casualties and destruction of property](#), according to local residents, Rohingya groups, and the media. Over 100,000 people in Rakhine State, many displaced by previous violence, [have again had to relocate](#).

"Myanmar military and opposition forces need to do all they can to minimize civilian casualties and destruction of homes and property," said [Shayna Bauchner](#), Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Rohingya villages that were devastated by military atrocities in 2017 are again at grave risk of attack."

Nine witnesses from Hpon Nyo Leik, a predominantly Rohingya village tract in Buthidaung township with over a dozen hamlets, said that Arakan Army fighters entered the area in late January in an apparent effort to gain control over a nearby Myanmar military command. The military soon

responded with helicopter gunship attacks, artillery shelling, and ground assaults.

"The Arakan Army suddenly entered our area and started deploying all around the village," a 30-year-old villager said. "Soon after, three artillery shells fell in our area. One of the shells exploded in the local market, critically injuring four people. The explosion of another shell injured six people, and the third one injured three." When the villagers told the Arakan Army that their presence was making them unsafe, the fighters said they would leave when they received orders to do so. "We Rohingya are dying, caught between the two parties," the villager said.

Residents and rights groups have reported that [during the fighting](#) in late January, between 12 and 24 [Rohingya civilians were killed](#), while as many as [100 more may have been injured](#). More than 100 homes are believed to have been [damaged or destroyed](#), according to Rohingya groups. "On Friday morning [January 26] the military intensified its offensive," the villager said. "One of my cousins died on the spot. Almost all of my family members were injured and admitted to the hospital. My brother is still struggling to recover as one of the bomb fragments in his body hasn't been removed."

A 66-year-old villager said: "An artillery shell hit and killed my son. There were dozens of funerals all around, but I only dared to attend my son's funeral. He was 42 and the father of five children."

Another villager, 42, said: "During the attack, we had to leave the village, wrapping the dead bodies in blankets. After about five or six hours, we returned to the village to complete the burials."

Rohingya villagers said that all the beds in the hospital in Buthidaung and local clinics were filled and that the facilities had stopped admitting people. Clinics were running low on supplies and charging injured patients exorbitant prices.

Some residents described the Myanmar military's airstrikes on their village as indiscriminate bombardments. "The military is not just targeting the Arakan Army," said a 47-year-old Rohingya villager. "They are using their helicopters to shoot all over the village."

Many people fled for shelter in nearby villages but have had little to no access to food or medical supplies, and received no humanitarian support. "My family of 25 people is now displaced and scattered," a villager said. "We spend our days uncertain about food and shelter." Rohingya families expressed concerns about food stocks dwindling and unharvested crops rotting in the fields.

Fighting was continuing into early February. During two phone interviews on February 1 with villagers who had remained in Hpon Nyo Leik,

gunshots and explosions could be heard in the background.

“No one can enter the village,” a 35-year-old villager said. “It’s not yet safe to go back since the fighting is still going on. The internet is completely down in Buthidaung township. Maybe for two hours a day we can make phone calls, but after that no more calls, as the network is down. No shops are open, everything remains closed. No one is coming to help us, not the authorities or the UN or any international agency.”

The junta has continued to block urgently needed humanitarian aid to civilians in conflict areas, a form of collective punishment that is a war crime. The military is blocking major roads and waterways, destroying nonmilitary supplies, imposing severe restrictions on aid workers, and shutting down telecommunications services. The humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said on January 16 that restrictions are preventing MSF from running any of the 25 mobile clinics in Rakhine State and warned of a “catastrophic impact on people’s health.”

Since the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the junta has driven the country further into a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe. The junta’s widespread and systematic abuses amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

More than 700,000 Rohingya fled the Myanmar military’s crimes against humanity and acts of genocide in 2017. About 600,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State, confined to squalid camps and villages [under a system of apartheid](#) in which security forces have arrested thousands of Rohingya for “unauthorized travel” and imposed [new movement restrictions and aid blockages](#). This has left the Rohingya particularly vulnerable to armed conflict.

Since December, civilian casualties [have been reported in a number of other Rohingya villages](#) in northern Rakhine State.

The laws of war prohibit attacks that do not or cannot discriminate between civilians and combatants. Bombardments that treat a populated town or village as a single military objective are prohibited as indiscriminate. Parties to a conflict are required to take constant care to spare the civilian population and to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize the incidental loss of civilian life and damage to civilian objects. Warring parties, to the extent feasible, should avoid deploying their forces in heavily populated areas.

Several Rohingya said they felt caught between both sides. “If we talk to the military, the Arakan Army will suspect us,” a villager said. “But if the military or the government find any connection between us and the Arakan Army, I’m sure the military would kill the Rohingya.” He said that the Arakan Army has promised security to the Rohingya once they have

fully captured the territory, but for the present they have sought to confiscate food and other support.

Fighting near the border [has spilled over into Bangladesh](#), including casualties from mortar fire. Influential foreign governments should respond urgently to the worsening crisis in Myanmar, Human Rights Watch said.

“Foreign governments should loudly express their concerns about the spiraling risks to the Rohingya population from the fighting in Rakhine State,” Bauchner said. “The junta needs to immediately lift the blockage on communications and humanitarian aid and stop their forces from violating international humanitarian law.”

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Rohingya civilians killed and displaced

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