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Myanmar: Arakan Army Oppresses Rohingya Muslims

Severe Movement Restrictions, Pillage, Mistreatment in Northern Rakhine State



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A family who fled from Buthidaung, Myanmar, at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, June 25, 2024. © 2024 Mohammad Ponir

(Bangkok) – The Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group in [Myanmar](#)’s western Rakhine State, has imposed severe restrictions and committed grave abuses against the ethnic [Rohingya](#) population, Human Rights Watch said today.

The Arakan Army’s territorial gains in the state have been accompanied by movement restrictions, pillage, arbitrary detention, mistreatment, and unlawful forced labor and recruitment, among other abuses against the Rohingya. Myanmar’s military has long subjected the Rohingya to atrocity crimes, including the ongoing crime against humanity of apartheid.

“The Arakan Army is carrying out policies of oppression against the Rohingya similar to the those long imposed by the Myanmar military in Rakhine State,” said [Elaine Pearson](#), Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The Arakan Army should end its discriminatory and abusive practices and comply with international law.”

The Arakan Army [pledged](#) inclusive, equitable governance in areas it captured from Myanmar’s abusive military junta, following fighting that resumed in November 2023. But Rohingya describe life under the Arakan Army and its political wing, the United League of Arakan, as harsh and restrictive, with discriminatory regulations and practices.

From April to July 2025, Human Rights Watch interviewed 12 Rohingya refugees who had fled to Bangladesh from Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine State.

“Life under the Arakan Army’s control was incredibly restrictive,” said a 62-year-old Rohingya refugee who arrived in Bangladesh in June. “We were not allowed to work, fish, farm, or even move without permission. We faced extreme food shortages, with most people begging from one another.”

Rohingya in Rakhine State have been caught between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, with both forces committing [grave abuses](#), including extrajudicial killings, widespread arson, and unlawful recruitment. Since late 2023, over 400,000 people have been internally displaced in Rakhine and Chin States, while as many as 200,000 have fled to Bangladesh.

A Rohingya man, also 62, said he was displaced with his wife and two children five times over the past year. “Life during this time has been incredibly difficult,” he said. “Travel between villages was restricted, requiring permits that were rarely given.”

Rohingya villagers said permits to travel between villages in Buthidaung, valid for only one day, cost 3,000 to 5,000 kyat (US\$1.40-US\$2.40) and require signatures from the local Muslim administrator and the Arakan Army or its political wing. They said the Arakan Army set up a curfew. “If they found anyone outside their homes, they would arrest them,” the man said. “And their whereabouts would become unknown.”

Arakan Army restrictions on livelihoods and agriculture, compounded by extortion and exorbitant prices, have exacerbated the severe food shortages and the junta’s [blockade](#) on aid, in place since late 2023. Some Rohingya said they survived by begging from families who received money from relatives abroad. Others worked as day laborers for little to no pay.

“We were left struggling to survive,” said another Rohingya man in his sixties who arrived in Bangladesh in May. “I worked as a laborer, doing any job offered by the Arakan Army.... At first, they paid us half [the prior day rate], but later, they stopped paying us at all.”

Rohingya villagers said the Arakan Army had confiscated farmland, houses, cattle, fishing hauls, firewood, and even cemeteries. Two men from Kin Taung in Buthidaung township said the Arakan Army demolished their graveyard in May, telling them to use paddy fields for burials.

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and other Rohingya armed groups—after fighting alongside the Myanmar military in 2024—are again [deploying fighters](#) in clashes against the Arakan Army in northern Rakhine State. The fighting as well as the Arakan Army’s forcible recruitment of Rohingya villagers have inflamed communal tensions between the largely Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine.

Three Rohingya said they fled to protect their sons, including children, from being forcibly recruited by the Arakan Army. A 57-year-old Rohingya refugee arrived in Bangladesh with his family in June after the Arakan Army began looking for his 17-year-old son. “I had to hide him in different villages for two months,” he said.

One of the 62-year-old men said his son was selected for recruitment by the Kin Taung village administrator in April. “I lived in constant fear as they tried to force him to join,” he said. “They target children from poor families. My son was terrified of being recruited and fled the village 45 days ago. He’s been missing since.”

The Arakan Army arrested the man when they were unable to find his son and held him for 35 days, along with two others. “They beat me constantly,” he said. “I was only released after promising to bring my son to them.” When he went into hiding instead, the Arakan Army burned the family’s house down. He said he had no choice but to flee to Bangladesh.

The Arakan Army has severely mistreated Rohingya it suspects of working with ARSA or the Myanmar military. They arrested a 35-year-old Rohingya man in December 2024 from Keya Zinga Para village. “They accused me of working with the military and receiving military training, which

I was not,” he said. “I was taken to Buthidaung town, to the police station in Ward 3. “They often beat me severely with bamboo sticks. I still have trouble walking.”

A 19-year-old Rohingya man spent five months with the Arakan Army after being abducted from Nga Yat Chaung village in May 2024 for unlawful forced labor. He 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.

Applicable international humanitarian law, notably Common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international law, prohibits torture and other mistreatment of detainees, pillage, recruitment of children under 18, and dangerous forced labor, among other abuses.

The Arakan Army and Rohingya armed groups, both working with smuggling networks, profit from the exodus to Bangladesh. Rohingya said they paid between 800,000 and 1.25 million kyat (US\$380-US\$595) per person for the journey.

Bangladesh has registered 120,000 new arrivals in camps since May 2024, while tens of thousands more remain unregistered. The recent arrivals said they had no official aid or support. Bangladesh authorities contend that the repatriation of Rohingya to Myanmar is the only solution. The United Nations and concerned governments should underscore that conditions for safe, sustainable, and dignified return do not currently exist.

“Donors and influential governments need to do much more to protect the Rohingya people, including their right to safety and freedom, whether in Myanmar or Bangladesh,” Pearson said. “They should also press the Arakan Army to respect the rights of all communities in Rakhine State.”