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BRIEFING: MYANMAR FORCES STARVE, ABDUCT AND ROB ROHINGYA, AS ETHNIC CLEANSING CONTINUES

The Myanmar security forces are committing serious human rights violations against the Rohingya population that remained in northern Rakhine State through the military's campaign of violence last year. Since 30 November 2017, thousands of Rohingya women, men, and children have fled to Bangladesh, bringing the total number of Rohingya who have fled since August 2017 to 688,000.¹

On 25 August 2017, Myanmar's military launched an operation against the Rohingya population across northern Rakhine State, after a Rohingya armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), attacked around 30 security force outposts, killing 12 state officials. The military's campaign has been marked by crimes against humanity, including the widespread killing of Rohingya women, men, and children; rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls; mass deportation; and the systematic burning of villages.²

During research in Bangladesh from 17-31 January, Amnesty International interviewed 11 Rohingya men and 8 Rohingya women who fled their villages in Myanmar in December 2017 or January 2018, months after the Myanmar authorities allege that violence stopped. Several were interviewed the day they arrived at a refugee camp; most of the rest were interviewed within 10 days of arriving. The vast majority came from villages in Buthidaung Township, though Amnesty also interviewed new arrivals from Maungdaw and Rathedaung Townships.

This briefing explores the violations that continue to force Rohingya families to leave Myanmar, as well as the abuse they face while in flight. A shortage of food is the most common reason new arrivals give for fleeing, as deliberate actions by the Myanmar authorities, including denial of access to rice fields and markets as well as restrictions on aid access, are in effect starving out many Rohingya who have tried to remain in their villages. In a few Rohingya villages, Myanmar soldiers have also carried out abductions, particularly of young women and girls, the news of which has driven other people to flee. And as people have walked for days toward Bangladesh in recent weeks, Myanmar forces have systematically robbed them at checkpoints, taking money and possessions.

While the most acute period of direct violence against Rohingya women, men, and children occurred between late August and late September, the security forces' ongoing actions appear designed toward the same goal: to make northern Rakhine State unliveable for the Rohingya population.

FORCED STARVATION

Rakhine State is one of the poorest states in Myanmar. Most people live in rural areas, where they rely on agriculture, in particular fishing and farming, to earn a living. The population in majority-Rohingya northern Rakhine State has long suffered from high rates of malnutrition. Malnutrition among the Rohingya in particular is due in part to severe restrictions on their movement—part of the system of apartheid under which they live. These movement restrictions prevent them from accessing fields, forests, rivers, and coastal waters.³

In the aftermath of the 25 August attacks, the Myanmar authorities tightened such restrictions and further squeezed the Rohingya population. *"We weren't able to get food, that's why we fled,"* said Dildar Begum, 30, from Ka Kyet Bet Kan Pyin village tract, near Buthidaung town, echoing the most common reason new arrivals cited for leaving.⁴ By denying access to rice fields; burning several markets and denying access to others; severely

¹ Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), Situation Report: Rohingya Refugee Crisis, 27 January 2018 (identifying 688,000 new arrivals to Bangladesh since 25 August 2017); Amnesty International interviews, January and February 2018.

² See Amnesty International, *"My World Is Finished": Rohingya Targeted by Crimes Against Humanity in Myanmar* (Index: ASA 16/7288/2017), 18 October 2017.

³ Amnesty International, *"Caged Without a Roof": Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State* (Index: ASA/16/7436/2017), November 2017. For more information on rates of malnutrition prior to the current crisis, see World Food Programme, Food security assessment in the northern part of Rakhine State: Final Report, July 2017, https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP0000019264/download/?_ga=2.193844397.1274248860.1510069014-1309529638.1508234327.

⁴ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

restricting access to humanitarian organizations who provide food and other essential aid; and turning a blind eye to the looting of Rohingya livestock by non-Rohingya villagers, the Myanmar authorities, in particular the military, have in effect instituted a policy of forced starvation.⁵

DENIAL OF ACCESS TO RICE FIELDS

Most of the new Rohingya arrivals interviewed by Amnesty International said the authorities, typically the military, stopped them from harvesting their rice fields during the harvest season in November and December.⁶ There were exceptions, with several new arrivals from village tracts where only Rohingya live saying they had been able to harvest and mill at least part of their crop. For the majority, however, the inability to replenish the supply of their staple food meant a growing prospect of starvation. After staying in northern Rakhine State through the most acute period of the military's killing, raping, and burning, the lack of food finally drove them to Bangladesh.

Several new Rohingya arrivals said they started to harvest rice fields, then were stopped. Abdu Salam, 37, lived in Hpon Nyo Leik village just south of Buthidaung town, and was a day labourer on other people's rice fields. He told Amnesty International that, for four or five days after the harvest started, he was able to work. *"Then the soldiers came and said, 'This harvest is not your harvest.' There were many [of us] harvesting there. All of us were forced to leave,"* he recalled. Soon after, he saw non-Rohingya villagers using machinery to harvest the same land.⁷

Abdu Salam said the Rohingya population in Hpon Nyo Leik was only able to harvest the small rice plots right next to the village, but *"where there is a [farming] camp, where the fields go on and on, there we couldn't go."*⁸ His neighbours provided his family a little rice on which they survived for several weeks, but he said it was insufficient for his children, forcing them to leave Myanmar in December 2017. He said the shortage of food forced many other families to flee his village around the same time, while others remained, deciding whether to flee next.⁹

Similarly, a 35-year-old farmer and shopkeeper from Ah Lel Chaung village, also in Buthidaung Township, told Amnesty International that while he has three acres of rice fields, he was only able to harvest the acre adjacent to where he lived; the security forces did not allow him access to the fields further outside the village. Due to that and other pressures that left them with insufficient food, his family fled, arriving in Bangladesh in mid-January.¹⁰

Other Rohingya farmers said soldiers blocked them from harvesting anywhere. A 46-year-old man from Sin Thay Pyin (Laung Don) village, Maungdaw Township, said his family's food shortage started in August, when his home was burned and non-Rohingya villagers stole his 18 cows and 12 buffalo. He said the authorities refused to intervene and return the livestock. Then in December, he was barred from harvesting his rice fields. He recalled, *"There were six of us near the road. We saw soldiers coming toward us. We came out and asked, 'Our paddy fields are ready, can we harvest them?' They said no, it was the government's property, not our property."*¹¹

Soon after, he saw non-Rohingya villagers harvesting his land. His family had almost eaten through the rice from the previous year's harvest, even though for months they had eaten less than normal. He said many Rohingya families had fled the village in late August, when the military attacked and partially burned it. Of those who remained, he said several other families left for Bangladesh around the same time he did. *"How could we stay?"* he asked after arriving to the refugee camp. *"All these memories, if we think of them, we feel like we shouldn't*

⁵ For more information on the levels of acute malnutrition among the Rohingya population fleeing to Bangladesh, see, e.g., Kate Hodal, "Rohingya children close to starvation amid 'health crisis on an unimaginable scale'," *The Guardian*, 10 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/nov/10/rohingya-kids-starvation-health-crisis-unimaginable-scale-malnutrition-myanmar-bangladesh>.

⁶ In October, the Myanmar government announced that it would begin in November harvesting rice paddy crops in 20 village tracts in Maungdaw Township, in what appeared to be a mass confiscation of Rohingya crops. Global New Light of Myanmar, "Harvesting combines arrive in Rakhine State," 25 October 2017, www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/harvesting-combines-arrive-rakhine-state/. The Rakhine State Chief Minister said the government would sell the crops, and that money from the sales would be transferred to the state budget and used for state development. Ministry of Information, "Sales from Maungdaw paddy kept as national budget," 12 November 2017, www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng?q=news/12/11/2017/id-11975. Following an outcry from some of the diplomatic community, the national government announced that the harvested paddies would instead "be returned to the original owners either in cash or in the form of paddy." Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement, and Development in Rakhine, "Clarification regarding harvested rice in northern Rakhine State," 12 November 2017, <http://rakhine.unionenterprise.org/latest-news-en/205-2017-11-12>. Several people with direct knowledge of the harvest in northern Rakhine State told Amnesty International that only a small percentage of the paddy fields was ultimately harvested; most of the crop rotted, in part because there were so few people remaining in the region to work the fields. Amnesty International interviews, 16 and 17 January 2018.

⁷ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

⁸ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

⁹ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

¹⁰ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 27 January 2018.

¹¹ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

survive in this world. We should just take poison and die.”¹²

Hasina, 25, had stayed in Hpoe Khaung Chaung village, Buthidaung Township, even as many Rohingya were killed in late August in the neighbouring village of Gu Dar Pyin. But when her family and other Rohingya families were barred from harvesting their rice fields—and watched as non-Rohingya villagers harvested them instead—they felt they had no choice but to leave. *“We had very little to eat,”* she told Amnesty International. *“There wasn’t enough for our children... We thought maybe peace would come, but we saw nothing was changing.”* She said she and her family arrived in Bangladesh around 18 January, along with a dozen other families facing similar circumstances.¹³

STEALING OF ROHINGYA LIVESTOCK

In dozens of interviews in Bangladesh in September 2017, Rohingya men and women from across northern Rakhine State described to Amnesty International seeing their family’s cows, buffalo, and chickens stolen, typically by non-Rohingya neighbours who lived in the same village tract. Such theft often occurred during or immediately after attacks on Rohingya villages by Myanmar soldiers, at times working alongside local vigilantes. Witnesses consistently said the security forces actively participated in the livestock theft or, at minimum, did nothing as they watched non-Rohingya villagers take the livestock away.

The theft of livestock continued after the acute violence of late August and September. For example, Abdul Ghani, 27, told Amnesty International in January 2018 that, in his village of Thein Tan, in southern Buthidaung Township, the Rohingya villagers put all their cows and buffalo in one area, and assigned eight people to watch over them. In October, a group wielding long knives attacked them at night, cutting one of the watchpersons on the side of the face and taking away cows and buffalo. In response, the community moved the remaining livestock to another area at the village’s edge. In November, there was another night attack. Community leaders complained to the Village Administrator, who reportedly told them that if they could not recognize the attackers, there was nothing he could do. *“Since we didn’t get justice, and never would, we thought it was better to sell all these cows and buffalo, before they were all taken,”* Abdul Ghani said. *“We slaughtered the cows and sold the beef.”¹⁴*

When the Village Administrator then ordered all Rohingya to obtain the National Verification Card (NVC), a temporary identification document that most of the community rejects since it fails to recognise them as citizens, Abdul Ghani, and at least scores others from Thein Tan, left for Bangladesh.¹⁵

Many other recent arrivals to Bangladesh cited the theft of their livestock in August and September as what, combined with the lack of access to their rice fields, led to the worsening food security at the end of the year, and ultimately forced them to leave Myanmar.¹⁶

LACK OF ACCESS TO MARKETS

Since the beginning of the crisis, Myanmar security forces and local vigilantes have burned and looted stalls in Rohingya markets. At times, the destruction of markets appears part of the systematic burning of entire Rohingya villages. Other times, markets appear to be targeted specifically, even when many Rohingya houses nearby are spared, as when soldiers burned the market in Buthidaung Township’s Sein Hnyin Pyar village tract in late August.

Based on interviews with new arrivals in Bangladesh and with Rohingya activists, Amnesty International believes that the targeting of some Rohingya markets continued through late 2017. Those still intact are often only open for limited hours and are difficult to reach, as movement restrictions have become even more severe.¹⁷ This lack of access to markets has exacerbated economic hardship and food insecurity, and is another factor that has driven the Rohingya population to continue fleeing in December 2017 and January 2018.

A 41-year-old man told Amnesty International that he made his living as a small trader selling dried fish at the Taung Bazar market in Buthidaung Township. He said he watched as his stall, along with others run by Rohingya traders there, was torched in September, losing cash, goods, as well as his livelihood. He fled to Maungdaw Township with several of his children, begging for food and working as a day labourer to survive, before fleeing to Bangladesh in late January 2018 as the lack of food bred desperation.¹⁸

A 47-year-old farmer from Ka Kyet Bet village, Buthidaung Township, similarly said his family left Myanmar in early January due to a lack of food. He said the market stalls in his village had been burned down in October or

¹² Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

¹³ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

¹⁴ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

¹⁵ For background on the NVC cards, see Amnesty International, *“Caged Without a Roof”*, pp. 28-41.

¹⁶ Amnesty International interviews, Bangladesh, January 2018.

¹⁷ For more on movement restrictions, see Amnesty International, *“Caged Without a Roof”*, pp. 42-58.

¹⁸ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 29 January 2018.

November 2017, depriving the community of its most accessible market. Buthidaung town became the closest market. *"You'd have to go to Buthidaung market, and to go there, you have to pass through a checkpoint. They check for the NVC,"* he said. *"If anyone is found without it, they're beaten. So how would we go to market?"*¹⁹

At least seven other recent Rohingya arrivals referenced mounting pressure from the authorities to obtain an NVC, with basic livelihood used as leverage. Abdu Salam, 37, said the market near his village was still running, but *"if you go to the market—sellers and visitors both—you need an NVC. We don't want to take the NVC."*²⁰

At times, soldiers have used violence to pressure people into taking the NVC. The 35-year-old farmer and shopkeeper from Ah Lel Chaung told Amnesty International that, in mid-December, soldiers came to his shop in his village's market and said he needed to get the NVC card, then beat him up. Non-Rohingya villagers then looted his shop. The man and his family left for Bangladesh around 10 days later.²¹

LACK OF ACCESS TO HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Since early August 2017, several weeks before the ARSA attacks and the subsequent campaign of violence unleashed by the Myanmar military, the Myanmar authorities have severely restricted and at times outright blocked aid access to northern Rakhine State. The Rohingya population living there has long faced food insecurity, in large part because of severe restrictions on their movement that limit access to areas they rely on for sustenance and livelihoods. As a result, many have depended heavily on humanitarian assistance for survival.

The Myanmar authorities have allowed some aid organizations to partially resume operations in northern Rakhine State, but there are still major gaps in coverage and not all affected communities are receiving the assistance they need.²² Travel authorizations for aid workers are often limited in duration, making it almost impossible to guarantee sustained delivery of aid, while access to some rural areas is non-existent. Five months into the crisis, the authorities have yet to allow the UN and other agencies assess the needs of those remaining in the region.

Most recent arrivals in Bangladesh told Amnesty International they had not received a food distribution since August 2017. A few reported receiving one distribution in late 2017; one of those said the Myanmar military handed out a small amount of rice, though it was far less than the aid community's pre-crisis distributions.²³

Several Rohingya told Amnesty International that the lack of humanitarian access had a direct impact on their food security. For example, Zaiur Rahman, 31, arrived in Bangladesh in mid-January from Ah Nauk Pyin, an isolated Rohingya village in Rathedaung Township, surrounded primarily by ethnic Rakhine villages. Its isolation made its inhabitants particularly dependent on food aid. He said a UN agency had long brought rice by boat to the village, but this stopped shortly before 25 August. *"When it stopped, it cut our food rations. We only had a small quantity of rice,"* he recalled. *"The government and ethnic [Rakhine] didn't allow us to go out of the village."*

The situation became increasingly desperate in October and early November, including several weeks during which Zaiur Rahman said his and other families *"were starving."*²⁴ Unlike in many other villages, Rohingya families in Ah Nauk Pyin were able to harvest some paddy fields around their village, which allowed them to restock a minimal rice supply. But without the supplemental food aid, he said they were quickly eating through their rice, which forced him, after holding out for four months, to bring his family to Bangladesh. He indicated that at least several dozen other households from the same village fled around the same time.²⁵

ABDUCTIONS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Amnesty International documented three incidents from December and January in which soldiers abducted girls and young women. Family members waited in vain for days for their return or for information about their whereabouts, then left for Bangladesh in part out of concern that more women and girls might be taken. Several other Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in January told Amnesty International they had heard of women and girls being abducted, which was a motivating factor in fleeing.

Hasina, 25, told Amnesty International that six or seven soldiers came to her family's house in Hpoe Khaung Chaung village, Buthidaung Township, in early January. They checked everyone in the home, guns pointed, and

¹⁹ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

²⁰ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

²¹ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 27 January 2018.

²² Amnesty International interviews, 17 and 18 January and 2 February 2018. See also World Food Programme, *WFP Myanmar Country Brief: December 2017*, 31 December 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Myanmar%20CB%20December%202017_RBB%20cleared_V2.pdf.

²³ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

²⁴ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

²⁵ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

then focused on her 15-year-old cousin, Samuda. “*They told my uncle, ‘If you refuse to hand over your daughter, you’ll be killed’*,” Hasina recalled. “*They dragged her away.*” Hasina said that soldiers abducted other girls and young women from the village around the same time.²⁶

The 46-year-old man from Sin Thay Pyin (Laung Don), Maungdaw Township, likewise told Amnesty International that soldiers abducted his 18-year-old sister. He first fled his home when soldiers burned it down in late August. After hiding in the nearby hills, he and some family members took shelter in their cow shed. For months, he moved back and forth between there and a relative’s house that remained intact, trying to eke out an existence and to protect the family’s property. His younger sister stayed with him, until soldiers came in early January:

“We were in the cowshed, and the military came. There were four or five of them in dark green uniforms. They entered and took some cooking materials. Then they noticed my sister. They told me, ‘We have to interview your sister. We need to speak with her.’ They took her, and she didn’t return. We waited two days... Once [women] go, they never come back, [and] we don’t have the strength to question the military.”²⁷

The man did not see where the soldiers took his sister, but said there is a security force post nearby. He said that around the same time, soldiers abducted other women, whom he described as young and attractive, in the village.

The threat of abduction exists even as Rohingya prepare to leave for Bangladesh. Hashim Ulla, 35, and his family initially fled their hamlet in Ah Lel Than Kyaw village tract, Maungdaw Township, when soldiers torched it in late August 2017. After living with relatives in other villages, they spent several months sleeping in the open air in Gozon Dia, near the Nakhon Dia boat departure point. Around 22 January, Myanmar soldiers descended on Gozon Dia. Hashim Ulla said they separated the men from the women, then said they needed men to clear land in an area where homes were burned; and women to cook and perform domestic work in the military outpost.²⁸ His wife Hasina, 28; his father Sultan, 60; and his son Asmadullah, 18, were all taken away at gunpoint by the soldiers. Hashim Ulla said he saw the group of women being walked toward the Ah Lel Than Kyaw outpost. He waited for three days, along with his mother, sisters, and children, but no one returned, and they received no information. Fearing the soldiers might return and take more people, they and other families fled by boat to Bangladesh.²⁹

The abduction of women raises concerns of rape and sexual slavery, particularly given the prevalence of rape during the military’s operations in late 2016 and again after 25 August 2017.³⁰ Following a visit to Cox’s Bazar in November 2017, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, specifically raised concerns about sexual slavery in northern Rakhine State.³¹ Myanmar’s security forces should immediately release those who have been abducted or otherwise detained, unless they are charged with an internationally recognisable offence and remanded by an independent, civilian court. All those remanded under such conditions must also have access to legal counsel and to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This includes anyone held in unofficial detention sites like the military and Border Guard Police (BGP) bases and outposts.

ROBBERY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING THE FLIGHT TO BANGLADESH

After fleeing continued persecution in their villages, Rohingya men, women, and children have faced further abuse on the path to Bangladesh. Every recent arrival Amnesty International interviewed from Buthidaung and Rathedaung Townships said that members of the Myanmar security forces robbed them of money and other valuables at checkpoints along the way. Women described being sexually assaulted, as soldiers felt under their clothes for hidden money and jewellery. By the time they reached a boat departure point in Myanmar, many Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in January 2018 were left with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Fatima, 22, left her village of Kan Sit in northern Rathedaung Township in December 2017, due to a lack of food caused in part by the confiscation of her father’s fishing boat when it crossed into an area considered the territory

²⁶ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

²⁷ Amnesty International interview, name withheld, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

²⁸ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 27 January 2018. While this was Amnesty International’s only documented case of forced labour, the Myanmar Army has a long history of using ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, in forced labour. See Reuters, “Forced labor shows back-breaking lack of reform in Myanmar military,” 2 July 2015; Amnesty International, “*All the Civilians Suffer*”: Conflict, Displacement, and Abuse in Northern Myanmar (Index: ASA/16/6429/2017), 14 June 2017; Amnesty International, Myanmar: Leaving Home (Index: ASA/16/023/2005), 7 September 2005; Amnesty International, Myanmar: Exodus from the Shan State (Index: ASA/16/011/2000), 10 July 2000.

²⁹ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 27 January 2018.

³⁰ Amnesty International interviews, Bangladesh, September 2017 and January 2018; Human Rights Watch, “*All of My Body Was Pain*”: Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma, November 2017; Amnesty International, “*We Are at Breaking Point*”: Rohingya: Persecuted in Myanmar, Neglected in Bangladesh (Index: ASA/16/5362/2016), 19 December 2016.

³¹ UN News Centre, “UN envoy urges greater support for Rohingya victims of sexual violence,” 16 November 2017.

of a neighbouring non-Rohingya community.³² Fatima walked for days, carrying her 9-month-old son, eventually passing through Sein Hnyin Pyar village tract, where tens of thousands of fleeing Rohingya have crossed the mountain range that divides southern Buthidaung Township from Maungdaw Township.

At the foot of the mountain, she said the Myanmar security forces had erected a barbed-wire checkpoint and quickly surrounded the several dozen Rohingya families with whom Fatima was fleeing. She said it was mostly military, though several BGP were also present. They separated the men from the women and began searching people's bodies and sacks of possessions. From Fatima, they took cash, mobile phones, a small portable solar panel, and batteries; she watched as they stole gold jewellery from women nearby. After finishing their plunder, soldiers asked the group if they would complain upon arriving to Bangladesh; they said no, and were let go.³³

More than a dozen Rohingya women and men, from seven different villages, provided similar descriptions of being robbed in December and January by Myanmar security forces at the foot of the mountain pass near Sein Hnyin Pyar. Mohammed Salam, 37, said he was in a group of several hundred people who in early January arrived at the same barbed-wire gate. After around 20 soldiers surrounded them and separated the women from the men, people were called forward one by one and searched, as well as asked to provide their names and village; a soldier present compiled a list. Mohammed Salam's wife had sewn a pocket inside her clothes, where she hid the bulk of the family's wealth—600,000 kyats (\$451 USD)—and a little gold. The soldiers found and stole it all. From Mohammed Salam, they took a portable solar panel, clothes, and 6,500 kyats (\$4.89 USD), before giving back 1,500 kyats. He watched as soldiers similarly searched and robbed each adult and older child in the group.³⁴

The systematic theft deprives the fleeing Rohingya of what little wealth they can carry, and the soldiers often add insult to injury. When Zaiur Rahman, 31, arrived at the same checkpoint, soldiers stole everything of value from him and his family, including a torch, 70,000 kyats (\$53 USD), and his wife's gold earrings. The soldiers then opened his sack, which mostly held clothes. He said the soldiers took the nicest clothes from his and other families' sacks, then put them in a pile and set them on fire. *"As we were leaving, it was a little cold. One of the soldiers told us to go get warm by the fire [of burning clothes],"* he recalled.³⁵

While robbing Rohingya on the path to Bangladesh, security forces at times sexually assault women, with male soldiers searching under their clothes for hidden valuables. Khateza, 22, left her village of Thein Taung Pyin, in southern Buthidaung Township, in late January. Amnesty International interviewed her on 29 January, the day she arrived in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. Myanmar security forces saw the group approaching the barbed wire fence near Sein Hnyin Pyar and came down, again separating the men from the women. Khateza recalled:

"Everything was searched. Our bodies, our sacks. I had some food for my children with me, and they took it. They took my mobile phone. I had no money on me, but other people who had money, they took it. Gold jewellery, they also took.

*They searched our bodies. They took off our [outer] clothes. All the young women, including me, they searched us like this—they put their hand inside [on our breasts]... I was really uncomfortable. It was so embarrassing. I was crying."*³⁶

Dildar Begum, 30, fled Ka Kyet Bet Kan Pyin village, near Buthidaung town, when her family was no longer able to obtain sufficient food.³⁷ She took a different route, but faced the same problem; after arriving in Maungdaw Township, 10 to 12 Myanmar soldiers stopped her family and the 15 families with whom they were travelling. In the course of searching and robbing the group, Dildar Begum said the soldiers pulled off the veil of women wearing burqas and never returned them. *"It was a way to attack our dignity,"* she told Amnesty International.³⁸

Four new arrivals also told Amnesty International that, during one of the checkpoint stops, soldiers recorded asking them whether the military had mistreated them; they felt compelled for their safety to say no.³⁹

³² Fatima said her father went to the BGP post to lodge a complaint about his fishing boat being taken. Instead, she said he was beaten and told he was not allowed to enter the area of the neighbouring non-Rohingya community. Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

³³ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018. Fatima said she completed 4th class in school, which allowed her to understand and speak basic Burmese. She said that, because of her knowledge of Burmese, the soldiers had her translate for the other women and respond to questions on behalf of the group.

³⁴ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 23 January 2018.

³⁵ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

³⁶ Amnesty International interview, Kutupalong Refugee Camp transit centre, Bangladesh, 29 January 2018.

³⁷ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

³⁸ Amnesty International interview, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 January 2018.

³⁹ Amnesty International interviews, Bangladesh, January 2018.

After being robbed of everything, many Rohingya said they had no money left to pay the Bangladeshi boatmen who, throughout the crisis, have often charged between 30,000 and 70,000 kyats (\$23-\$53 USD) per person to transport the Rohingya across the Naf River or Bay of Bengal, with children under 10 years old typically riding for free. Several recent Rohingya arrivals interviewed by Amnesty International said they had friends or relatives in Bangladesh—or, in one case, Malaysia—transfer money to the boatman so they could leave. Others borrowed money from neighbours and relatives who had been luckier in hiding money through checkpoints. Others still were left behind at the boat point, trying to scratch together a way across.

ONGOING CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

During the past 14 months, Amnesty International has documented in detail serious human rights violations by the Myanmar authorities, perpetrated knowingly within widespread and systematic attacks on the Rohingya civilian population in Rakhine State. These constitute crimes against humanity under international law.⁴⁰

The human rights violations documented in this briefing, in the context of the ongoing attack against the Rohingya population, also amount to crimes against humanity, including of apartheid.⁴¹ These crimes include:

- **Deportation or forcible transfer of a population,**⁴² through continued pressure on the Rohingya population to leave, by making life in Rakhine State intolerable for them;
- **Enforced disappearance of persons,**⁴³ such as the abduction of women and girls by the military with no information on their fate or whereabouts subsequently provided to their families. This also constitutes **imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law,**⁴⁴ and raises serious concerns that other crimes, notably **rape, sexual slavery,** and similar crimes,⁴⁵ have been committed;
- **Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health,**⁴⁶ such as forced starvation, deprivation of livelihood, and sexual attacks.

CONCLUSION

Five months after the Myanmar military unleashed a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya population in northern Rakhine State, the security forces continue to commit serious human rights violations against those who remained through the most acute violence. Instead of terrorizing the population through killings, rapes, and the widespread burning of Rohingya villages, security forces are today using mainly quieter and more subtle measures to squeeze people out, making life so intolerable that they have little option other than to leave.

This situation must not continue. There must be effective international action, including significant pressure on Myanmar's military to stop the violations, otherwise this campaign of ethnic cleansing will continue its relentless, disastrous march. As several hundred continue to flee every week, the proposed imminent, organised return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar is clearly premature. The international community should instead focus on ensuring that Rohingya on both sides of the border have full and sustained access to humanitarian aid and enjoy full respect and protection of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right of those fleeing Myanmar to seek and receive asylum in Bangladesh. The international community must also seek accountability and end the impunity with which the Myanmar military operates, including through imposing targeted financial sanctions on senior officials implicated in human rights violations and crimes under international law; and by ensuring access throughout Myanmar for the UN Fact-Finding Mission.

⁴⁰ See Amnesty International, *"We Are at Breaking Point"*; Amnesty International, *"My World Is Finished"*; Amnesty International, *"Caged Without a Roof"*.

⁴¹ See the detailed analysis in Amnesty International, *"Caged Without a Roof"*, pp. 88-98.

⁴² See, e.g., Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted on 17 July 1998 (A/CONF.183/9, as subsequently amended), entered into force 1 July 2002, Article 7(1)(d).

⁴³ Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(i).

⁴⁴ Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(e).

⁴⁵ Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(g).

⁴⁶ Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(k).