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Rohingya ordered by Myanmar officer to 'fight for our faith'

Just before midnight on Feb. 25, Ali opened his door to see junta soldiers pointing guns at him. Myanmar's military had been making its way through Rakhine state, as part of a newly launched forced conscription campaign and the young Rohingya man was their latest victim.

Ali (whose name has been changed for security reasons) said they pushed him into a car and brought him to the Light Infantry Battalion No. 535 military camp in Buthidaung. The next day, a tactical operation commander urged the new recruits to take their military training seriously, offering them a deal.

If these Rohingya men formed a militia and held off the Arakan Army, which had recently made significant gains against the junta in Rakhine state, Ali and his fellow conscripts would be given legal status. They promised him a salary of 1,000,000 kyats along with rations.

"They demonstrated how to shoot the gun, how to walk, and how to avoid [injury] during the battle," he said. They told him that the training would last 14 days, after which they would be prepared to form militias to fight the AA.

"He tried to persuade us, saying that we were brought there in consideration of our religion. He also quoted the Prophet Muhammad, saying that we need to fight for our faith," said Ali, who managed to escape after 10 days.

The invocation of the prophet likely came as a bitter irony for the Rohingya conscripts, who are not legally recognized as citizens and whose ethnic and religious identity has long made them the targets of violence, particularly from Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw.

Seven years after the Tatmadaw tortured, raped and killed thousands of Rohingya and sent nearly 1 million fleeing into neighboring Bangladesh, soldiers are now pressing those who remain in a patchwork of villages and IDP camps into service to prop up their struggling military campaign.

Myanmar's military, which came to power in a February 2021 coup, has faced mounting battlefield losses since October. Earlier this year, the military announced a draft law that would see 50,000 young men and women forcibly recruited each year. Since then, thousands of civilians across the country have been ordered into military service, while countless more have fled.

But the military appears to be forcibly conscripting Rohingya in particularly large numbers, according to accounts given to Radio Free Asia by village residents and those who escaped training.

"These Rohingya are being forced into military service. They are being unlawfully detained, thrust into frontline combat, and compelled to participate," said Nay San Lwin, co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition. "Thus, the ongoing genocide against our people persists."

Replenishing its ranks

In late October, the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army — in partnership with other ethnic armed groups and anti-junta forces — began making significant gains against the leadership. "Operation 1027" launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance initially saw mass surrenders and a number of key cities taken over in northern Shan state.

In March, an ethnic army captured a major trade route near the China border. And most recently, the Arakan Army, or AA, has captured six of Rakhine state's 17 townships. By early April, the AA held 170 junta camps.

Faced with mounting losses in Rakhine, the junta have been forcibly recruiting Rohingya in high numbers from the internally displaced camps in which they have been forced to live for years. In exchange for their service, the junta has promised would-be fighters freedom of movement as well as small amounts of food and money — intended to appeal to a desperately poor population.

"Initially enticed by a bag of rice and fifty thousand kyats, they volunteered for the first round of training," said a Rohingya man who had familiarity with the situation and asked to remain anonymous for security concerns. "Some even returned for a second session. However, after witnessing fatalities among those deployed to the frontline during battles, many hesitate to participate for a third time out of fear."

In the Rohingya camps, young men are reportedly being forced into service by the hundreds — far more than the estimated two or three youths called up per village elsewhere in the country.

Starting in late February, residents reported forcible enlistments of Rohingyas from Kyaukphyu, Sittwe and Buthidaung townships. Among those coerced into military service are Rohingyas residing in IDP camps including South Ohn Taw Gyi, North Ohn Taw Gyi, Baw Du Pha I, Baw Du Pha II, Hman Si Taung, Thea Chaung, and Thet Kay Pyin.

Over the span of a single month, nearly one thousand Rohingya refugees underwent military training in three separate batches, according to residents. RFA has previously reported that captives are threatened with violent deaths if they refuse to take part in the training and told their families would be targeted if they flee.

Given the scant training, once they are sent to the frontlines, the Rohingya fighters appear to be little more than human shields. The Rohingya witness said that those sent off to fight were dying at an extraordinarily high rate.

"Out of about hundred trainees, 61 died while 41 sustained injuries and are currently hospitalized."

The AA, too, has reported large numbers of Rohingya fighter casualties. In a March 17 press statement, the group said that when they took control of the junta camps in Rathedaung, they discovered the bodies of several Rohingya who had undergone brief military training and were deployed to the front lines. The release included photos of the killed men.

Approximately 600 out of the nearly 1,000 Rohingyas who underwent military training were sent back as reservists to their respective refugee camps in the second week of March. However, the status of the remaining 300 is unknown, according to another Rohingya witness who asked not to be named for security reasons. He also said that because the junta is calling back the Rohingya who were returned to the camps, some of them are fleeing because they are afraid of being sent to the battlefield again.

Breaking the law

The night Ali was taken was a busy one for the Myanmar military's conscription drive in Rakhine.

According to accounts provided by IDP camp residents, on Feb. 25 and 26 alone, 39 Rohingya from four villages and wards in Buthidaung township were forced into training by the Light Infantry Battalion No. 535.

In Kyaukphyu, the Light Infantry Battalion No. 542 trained around 100 Rohingyas from Kyauk Ta Lone Rohingya IDP camp for a period of 14 days, commencing at the end of February, according to locals.

Fifty of them were outfitted with military uniforms and weaponry on March 28 and were assigned security duties at four army camps within the township, said a young woman from Kyauk Ta Lone village who preferred to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Given their lack of citizenship status, Rohingya legally should not be eligible for conscription, lawyers have told RFA. And the junta seems to be skirting its own conscription law in other ways.

The military draft law stipulates that those eligible for direct service are men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27. Professionals – such as doctors, engineers and technicians – aged 18-45 for men and 18-35 for women must also serve. But the Kyauk Ta Lone resident said Rohingya far outside that age range were drafted.

"They brought young people from 18 to over 40. People up to 55 years old were also called up for training," she said. "All are Muslims."

RFA could not independently confirm these accounts. An official from the Rakhine State Committee on Summoning People's Military Service said he was not the right person to speak to about the matter while Hla Thein, the Rakhine state attorney general and spokesperson of the junta, did not respond to calls.

For Ali, who remains in hiding lest he be killed for desertion, the forced recruitment represents only the latest brutality levied by the military.

"They carried out attacks [against us in 2017] and now they are trying to use kind words to persuade us. I really hate them because they have destroyed our lives."

Translated by Aung Naing and Kalyar Lwin. Edited by Abby Seiff, Malcolm Foster, Joshua Lipes, and Boer Deng.

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