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# Rohingya trapped in the middle of Myanmar's escalating conflict

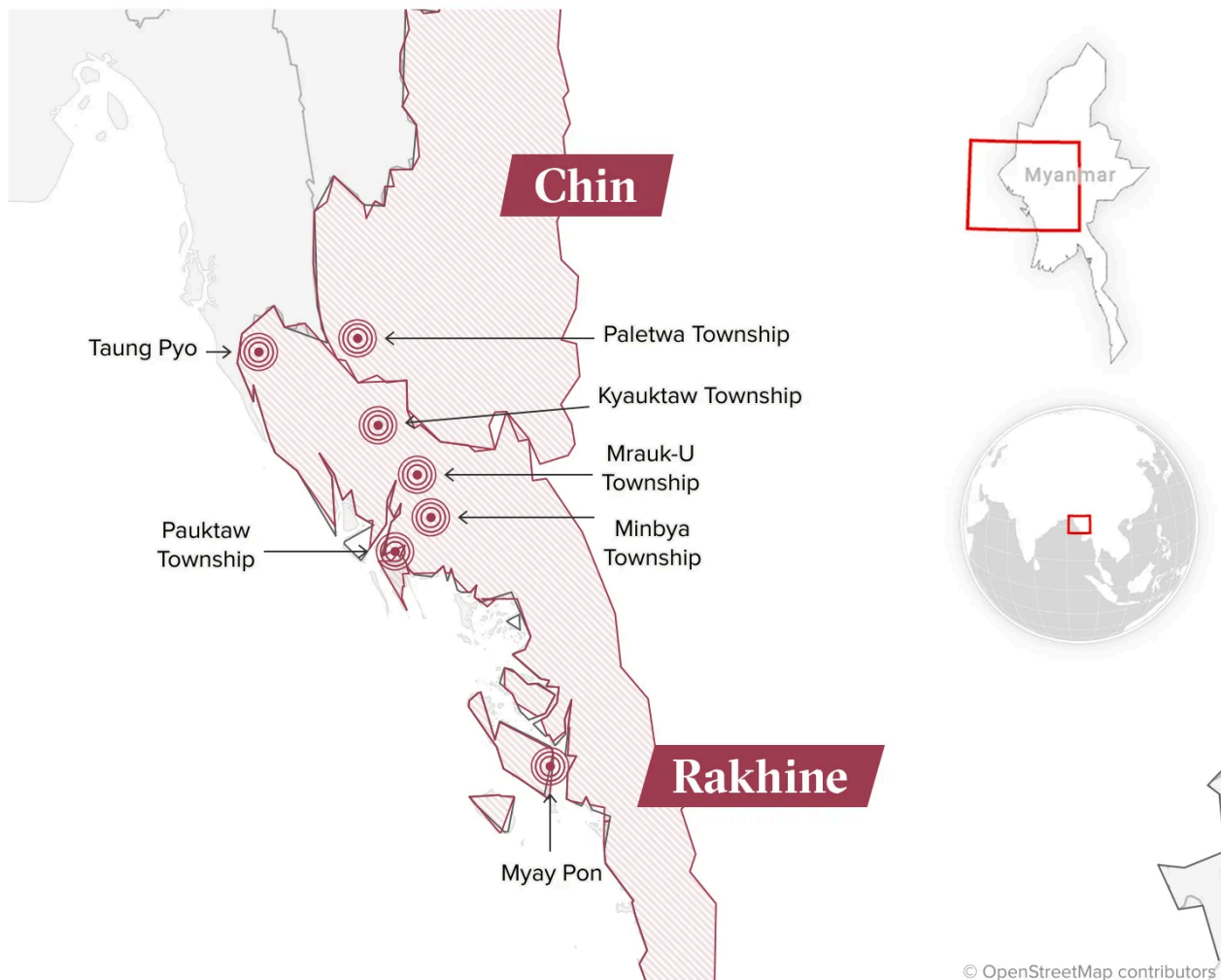
'They have oppressed us throughout history, and it has been a decade that they've detained us, like in this internment camp.'



Long oppressed in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, the Muslim Rohingya minority faces a renewed threat of violence from both the junta and armed opposition groups as they have become trapped in the middle of an escalating conflict amid growing pressure from both sides.

Last November, the Arakan Army – an armed opposition group formed in 2009 to seek a confederate Arakan state for the predominantly Buddhist Arakanese – broke an informal ceasefire by attacking junta outposts across Rakhine State, formerly known as Arakan.

Since then, the military has surrendered control of several townships in Rakhine, including Pauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Myay Pon, and Taung Pyo – along with Paletwa Township in adjacent Chin State.



**The New Humanitarian**

The territorial gains by the AA, and by a collection of armed groups known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance, have led hundreds of junta soldiers to surrender or flee to Thailand, Bangladesh, and India. In response to these and [previous defections and desertions](#), and as it tries to counter broader battlefield losses, the military has initiated a conscription programme due to begin next month.

This mandatory draft, based on the 2010 People's Military Service Law enacted by a prior government, will see all men aged 18-35 and all women aged 18-27 face a prison term of up to five years if they refuse to fulfil their two years of military service.

The plan includes the Rohingya, despite the fact they've been stripped of Myanmar citizenship for decades: [More than 600,000 Rohingya](#) remain confined to displacement camps and sectioned-off villages under what rights groups have called an apartheid system.

"I was approached, but I didn't agree because the military has never done anything positive for the Rohingya," a 25-year-old Rohingya resident of a camp in Rakhine's Sittwe Township told The New Humanitarian via WhatsApp and Messenger, asking that his use name not be used for fear of reprisals from the military. "They have oppressed us throughout history, and it has been a decade that they've detained us, like in this internment camp."

Around [100 Rohingya](#) were reportedly arrested by the junta in February for refusing conscription, which has already been happening to some extent ahead of the official launch of the new programme in [mid-April](#).



With the borders to neighbouring countries being highly policed, and increased fighting in various parts of Myanmar, dodging the draft has not been easy.

Media reports say that in some areas that are heavily patrolled by the junta, young men rarely [venture outside](#) for fear of being spotted by potential recruiters. Others are trying to flee the area, if not the country.

There have also been reports of [indiscriminate aerial raids](#) by the junta that have led to [civilian casualties](#), including Rohingya. Airstrikes on 18 March on the village of Thada, north of Minbya Township, [reportedly killed at least 25 Rohingya](#) and wounded another 25.

## Pressure from both sides, and growing ethnic tensions

But it's not just the military junta pressuring and threatening the Rohingya. There have also been accusations of [extortion](#) and targeted killings of Rohingya by AA forces. The AA has denied the charges of killing Rohingya civilians, but reports of Rohingya and other ethnic groups being forced into assisting the opposition armed groups are widespread.

AA fighters often also enter Rohingya villages that then come under attack from the junta. "We Rohingya are dying, caught between the two parties," one villager told Human Rights Watch in a [February report](#). "If we talk to the military, the Arakan Army will suspect us," another 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."

Forced conscription of Rohingya men and women risks exacerbating tensions and turning entire ethnic groups against each other, especially as most Burmese oppose the military-led State Administration Council, or junta, that has controlled the country since a 2021 coup.

*"If the Rohingya are forced into their army, there could be a lot of problems between the Arakanese and the Rohingya. That's what the junta want. Once that happens, they'll drop all support for the Rohingya as usual."*

Ethnic tensions, stoked by government propaganda that the Rohingya are foreign migrants, have flared [several times](#) in Rakhine over the last decade, often leading to violence and property destruction targeted at the Rohingya.

In a recent [interview](#) with Radio Free Asia, Nay San Lwin, a Rohingya activist, said the junta is hoping renewed tensions between the Rohingya and the Arakanese, caused in part by the conscription, will divert attention from their military losses.

"If the Rohingya are forced into their army, there could be a lot of problems between the [Arakanese] and the Rohingya," he said. "That's what [the junta] want. Once that happens, they'll drop all support for the Rohingya as usual."

Responding to the 18 March airstrikes in Rakhine, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [expressed concern](#) through his spokesperson about the escalating conflict, and in particular about "reports of forcible detention and recruitment of youths, including Rohingya, and the potential impact of forced conscription on human rights and on the social fabric of communities in Myanmar".

Military officials have wasted no time in compiling lists of military-aged residents of displacement camps in Kyaukphyu, Sittwe, Maungdaw, and Buthiduang Townships. They have also been accused of [abducting youths](#) and arranging a two-week military training regime for Rohingya Muslims.

"The military said, 'Our country is at risk, and we need civilian support to protect it'," an older resident of Sittwe camp told The New Humanitarian. In order to sway the Rohingya, he said the

military made a promise no other government has made: “We will guarantee your rights and recognise you as citizens.”

This may be propaganda but, on the other hand, the AA has made no moves to indicate it would recognise the Rohingya if it does take control of all of Rakhine State, even if it has managed to persuade some Rohingya to join its efforts. It has also been accused of [killing](#) newly conscripted Rohingya soldiers and of imposing its own [taxes](#) in the areas of Rakhine where it has a presence.

Some activists have accused the AA of purposefully [positioning its forces](#) in civilian areas, using villages and villagers as [human shields](#) – something the [junta](#) has also been accused of.

By the end of January, the Arakan Rohingya National Alliance, a collective of Rohingya organisations and activists, was already [warning](#) that, “both regime and AA have become a serious threat to the security of lives and property to Muslim Rohingya”.

## No good choices

Since 1982, Rohingya have not been counted among Myanmar’s 135 official ethnic groups. Each subsequent government has accused them of being Bengali migrants who crossed into Myanmar illegally during British colonial rule, denying them citizenship and effectively rendering them stateless in their own country.

Myanmar’s previous government, led by the now-imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi, was [accused](#) by the International Criminal Court of waging an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya in 2017. The military crackdown drove some 700,000 Rohingya into overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh, where [fires and insecurity](#) are making life increasingly hard.

*“You can never be sure when a clash will take place around your village... We live here in constant fear of death. If there were any way to escape, nobody would remain.”*

Mohammed Salim, a 28-year-old resident of a displacement camp in Sittwe, told The New Humanitarian he holds out little hope that any armed group will be able to defeat the junta, nor does he believe that those groups would grant him proper rights of citizenship even if they did emerge victorious. “It’s better that we support the government. Otherwise they will never grant us our rights,” he said, speaking via WhatsApp.

Others said they feared they would be exploited by both the junta and the AA.

“If I support the AA, the junta will target me, and if I support the junta, the AA will target me. Where can I go? Both the parties keep warning us, and we have no place to hide or run,” Hoque, a 32-year-old who preferred to give only one name, told The New Humanitarian, using WhatsApp and Messenger.

“You can never be sure when a clash will take place around your village... We live here in constant fear of death. If there were any way to escape, nobody would remain,” said Hoque.

At the moment, it is mostly uneducated youth choosing to enlist with the junta, largely because they see no other job opportunities or hopes for economic and geographic mobility. They join the military in the false hope that it will secure their freedom and allow them to support their families, but really, they are just coerced into engaging in violence and intimidation tactics against their own people.

More educated youth support the AA due to their knowledge of the historical oppression by the current junta and previous Myanmar governments. They also acknowledge the need to coexist with the Rakhine community and oppose division, said Salim.

Now that the junta no longer has a monopoly on control and power across the country, there is fear that ultimately Myanmar will be fragmented into increasingly autonomously governed regions, rather than a centrally governed state.

With so many armed groups, many of them united along ethnic and geographic lines, the minority Rohingya fear their dreams of citizenship will just slip even further away and they will once again be marginalised, or even worse, persecuted all over again.

*Edited by Ali M. Latifi and Andrew Gully.*