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Rohingya civilians recall alleged Arakan Army abuses

“They killed my family. I don’t feel like I’m alive anymore”



Mohammad Ayas came to live in Bangladesh just weeks after the August 2024 killing of his family by armed men he says were members of the Arakan Army, the largest ethno-nationalist armed group taking on Myanmar’s ruling junta.

Like other Rohingya in Rakhine state, the 35-year-old refers to the Arakan Army’s forces with the pejorative *Mogh Bagi*, meaning robbers, and he never imagined they would kill his relatives in front of his eyes.

“They killed my family. I don’t feel like I’m alive anymore. I can’t see my mother, my beautiful daughter, and my beloved wife” ever again, he told The New Humanitarian from Cox’s Bazar, a part of Bangladesh known for its beaches but also now for the world’s largest refugee camp.

Recalling the events of that August evening, Ayas said: “They came to our home and knocked at the door; my mother opened the door. I couldn’t recognise how many there were, but they instantly slaughtered my mother, my sleeping children, and my wife with sharp knives.”

Ayas believes the AA soldiers were looking for members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – a Rohingya armed group accused of collaborating with the junta – who had taken shelter in neighbours’ homes. Often when the AA is accused of targeting and abusing Rohingya civilians, it claims to have been looking for alleged ARSA members.

“Once I arrived here [in Cox’s Bazar], I realised I was alive and alone, without my family. It always hurts me,” Ayas said.

Since its founding in 2009, the Arakan Army has fought successive central governments in Myanmar to try to gain greater autonomy. But critics have long feared that if the United League of Arakan, the Arakan Army’s political branch, were to come to power in Rakhine, it would lead to further disenfranchisement of non-Arakan minorities, including the Rohingya.

Thomas Kean, Myanmar researcher at the International Crisis Group, said the intensifying conflict over the last year-and-a-half has doused initial hopes the AA might be more amenable to the Rohingya than successive central governments in the country: civilian or junta.

“A lot of mistrust has developed on all sides, particularly because of the way that Rohingya were perceived as having supported the military,” Kean said via email. “It is going to take a lot of work to repair the damage.”

Myanmar’s military, which has ruled the country since 2021, also has a track record of abuse.

In November, the International Criminal Court issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the military, [accusing](#) him of perpetrating crimes against the Rohingya, including widespread killings and rapes in 2017 that [drove](#) half a million Rohingya from their homes in just a few weeks and prompted allegations of genocide.



Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/TNH

ICC chief prosecutor Karim Khan visited the Rohingya refugee camps to talk to genocide survivors on 26 November 2024.

The Arakan Army says it wants to create a multi-ethnic bulwark against Myanmar's military rulers. But its members also stand accused of an array of abuses, including summary executions, sexual violence, and torture.

"Despite their previous claims of respecting Rohingya rights, their actions after capturing our towns have revealed their true intentions. At least 2,500 Rohingya have been killed and at least 40,000 have been forced to flee the country" between March and August 2024, Nay San Lwin, co-founder of the [Free Rohingya Coalition](#), told The New Humanitarian.

Joe Freeman, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher, said he has been told of alleged forced recruitment and other alleged abuses by the Arakan Army against the Rohingya. Freeman said the charges his agency and other rights groups have collected are proof that very little has changed for the Rohingya, even as the junta's dominance has been challenged more and more by the armed groups.

"[It's] just a microcosm of the larger pattern playing out across Rakhine State. Rohingya human rights are not respected," Freeman said in reference to the Arakan Army and the military leadership. "They are seen by both sides to the conflict as a means to an end, a mere afterthought."

The New Humanitarian reached out to the Arakan Army for comment on the accusations in this article, but did not receive a response by the time of publication.

Forced conscription and forced returns

Over the past year, as the Arakan Army has taken control of more territory, the group has come under [increasing criticism](#) amid allegations that its forces have been [targeting](#) the Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine and committing widespread [abuses](#) against them.

During his visits to the Cox's Bazar camps, John Quinley, director of Fortify Rights, a rights group closely monitoring Myanmar and the situation in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, said he has heard numerous reports of the Arakan Army trying to force young people to join its ranks.

Kean, from the Crisis Group, said his organisation has also received reports of attempted forced conscription by AA forces.

"Some Rohingya told us that in areas that were under Arakan Army control, they were forced to attend trainings," Kean said. When the Crisis Group reached out to the AA, "they insisted that the trainings were aimed at forming community self-defence teams, rather than recruiting Rohingya into its army," he added. "It said it had no shortage of willing fighters already, so the Rohingya weren't needed."

Because Rakhine shares a porous frontier with Bangladesh, many Rohingya continue to feel unsafe even when they cross the border. This fear has been compounded by [news](#) that the Arakan Army now has complete control of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.



ရက္ခိုင်-ဧရာဝတီ အစပ် တိုက်ပွဲများအတွက်

A photo of Arakan Army forces posted on Telegram by the Arakan Army Information Desk in January 2025.

According to one Bangladeshi official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, their government in Dhaka wasn't sure what to make of the Arakan Army initially.

"Informally, some Bangladeshi [officials] maintained a relationship with the Arakan Army," the official said. "At that time, the Arakan Army showed positive intentions for the Rohingya repatriations."

Kean, from the Crisis Group, also remembered the flickers of hope early on.

"Compared to how the Rohingya have often been treated, there was [initially] a possibility that things could have improved under the Arakan Army," he said, adding that this didn't last long.

As the Arakan Army's foothold in Rakhine has continued to grow, the group began to change its tune.

"Now, they are spreading a false narrative against the Rohingya," the Bangladeshi official said, accusing the Arakan Army of reiterating a claim long used to deny Rohingya rights in Myanmar: that they are Bangladeshi migrants and not indigenous to the country. In 1982, the then-government used this reasoning to strip the Rohingya of their right to citizenship.

"For now, it seems like things are only likely to get worse, due to potential conflict between the Arakan Army and Rohingya armed groups," said Kean.

To make matters worse, recent reports indicate that Bangladesh is once again [detaining](#) and deporting Rohingya refugees, and the prospect of a forced return to Rakhine is another source of fear for Rohingya in Cox's Bazar.

Since the beginning of the year, the Bangladeshi Border Guard has pushed 11,546 Rohingya back to Rakhine – including people trying to cross the border and others already in the camps – according to a Bangladeshi security official, who requested anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

"I didn't bury my husband's dead body"

Twenty-three-year-old Seno Ara arrived in Bangladesh last August. She told The New Humanitarian she was gang-raped by Arakan Army soldiers in front of her husband before they killed him.

Ara said she was cooking for her family in broad daylight when 12 young soldiers entered her home in search of her husband, whose name she asked to be kept anonymous. "My husband is not home now. I don't know where he is," she recalled telling them. "They said I was a liar and that he is an informant to the Myanmar military, and we need him."

Ara insisted her husband was a daily labourer with no ties to the military, but the soldiers said they didn't believe her.

"Two guys were holding my hands tightly. Some others hit me on my chest and belly, and my children were crying. Some tore my clothes and touched my private parts. Then they raped me," she said.

When her husband entered the home to try to come to her rescue, "three of them caught my husband, and after they raped me in front of him, they beat him brutally. I begged them not to kill him... They said today was his last day, he was an informant to our enemy, and they slaughtered him with a sharp knife. Then they left.

"I didn't bury my husband's dead body. I left his dead body there. I was tired, and all my body parts were in pain; my two kids were crying all day. But I knew I had to cross the border," Ara continued. "I don't know what my future holds, but I am safe with my two kids. Every single night, that day haunts me. I am surviving for my two little daughters; I lost my life. The Arakan Army took my life."

Edited by Ali M. Latifi, Thin Lei Win, and Eric Reidy.