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Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls - New Eyewitness Accounts Show Systematic Attacks Based on Ethnicity, Religion

(New York) – [Burmese](#) government forces committed rape and other sexual violence against ethnic Rohingya women and girls as young as 13 during security operations in northern Rakhine State in late 2016, Human Rights Watch said today. The Burmese government should urgently endorse an independent, international investigation into alleged abuses in northern Rakhine State, including into possible systematic rape against Rohingya women and girls.

Burmese army and Border Guard Police personnel took part in rape, gang rape, invasive body searches, and sexual assaults in at least nine villages in Maungdaw district between October 9 and mid-December. Survivors and witnesses, who identified army and border police units by their uniforms, kerchiefs, armbands, and patches, described security forces carrying out attacks in groups, some holding women down or threatening them at gunpoint while others raped them. Many survivors reported being insulted and threatened on an ethnic or religious basis during the assaults.

“These horrific attacks on Rohingya women and girls by security forces add a new and brutal chapter to the Burmese military’s long and sickening history of sexual violence against women,” said [Priyanka Motaparthi](#), senior emergencies researcher. “Military and police commanders should be held responsible for these crimes if they did not do everything in their power to stop them or punish those involved.”

Between December 2016 and January 2017, Human Rights Watch researchers in Bangladesh interviewed 18 women, of whom 11 had survived sexual assault, as well as 10 men. Seventeen men and women, including some women who survived assaults, witnessed sexual violence, including against their wives, sisters, or daughters. Altogether Human Rights Watch documented 28 incidents of rape and other sexual assault. Some incidents involved several victims. A [report released](#) by the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) on February 3 found that more than half of the 101 women UN investigators interviewed said they were raped or suffered other forms of sexual violence. The report, based on a total of 204 interviews, [concluded](#) that attacks including rape and other sexual violence “seem[ed] to have been widespread as well as systematic, indicating the very likely commission of crimes against humanity.

After [attacks](#) by Rohingya militants on border police posts on October 9, 2016, the Burmese military undertook a series of “clearance operations” in northern Rakhine State. Security forces summarily executed men, women, and children; looted property; and burned down [at least 1,500 homes and other buildings](#). More than [69,000 Rohingya](#) fled to [Bangladesh](#), while another 23,000 have become internally displaced in Maungdaw district.

Several women described how soldiers surrounded their villages or homes, then gathered the villagers in an outdoor area, separating men from women, and detained them for up to several hours. Soldiers often shot villagers, and raped and gang raped women and girls. “Ayesha,” a Rohingya woman in her 20s, told Human Rights Watch: “They gathered all the women and started

beating us with bamboo sticks and kicking us with their boots. After beating us, the military took [me and] 15 women about my age and separated us.... [The soldiers] raped me one by one, tearing my clothes.”

During raids on homes, security forces frequently beat or killed family members and raped the women. “Noor,” in her 40s, said that 20 soldiers stormed her home and grabbed her and her husband: “They took me in the yard of the home. Another two put a rifle to my head, tore off my clothes, and raped me.... They slaughtered [my husband] in front of me with a machete. Then three more men raped me.... After some time, I had severe bleeding. I had severe pain in my lower abdomen and pain in my whole body.”

The sexual violence did not appear to be random or opportunistic, but part of a [coordinated and systematic attack](#) against Rohingya, in part because of their ethnicity and religion. Many women told Human Rights Watch that soldiers threatened or insulted them with language focused on their status as Rohingya Muslims, calling them “you Bengali bitch” or “you Muslim bitch” while beating or raping them. “We will kill you because you are Muslim,” one woman said soldiers threatened. Other women said that security forces asked if they were “harboring terrorists,” then proceeded to beat and rape them when they said no. A woman in her 20s who said soldiers attempted to rape her in her home, added that they told her, “You are just raising your kids to kill us, so we will kill your kids.”

Burmese authorities have taken no evident steps to seriously investigate allegations of [sexual violence or other abuses](#) reported by nongovernmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch. A national-level investigation commission on the situation in Maungdaw district headed by the first vice president and comprised of current and former government officials [released an interim report](#) on January 3, 2017. The commission claims to have addressed rape allegations and “interviewed local villagers and women using various methods ... [but found] insufficient evidence to take legal action up to this date.” Also contrary to the findings of human rights groups, the commission rejected reports of serious abuses and religious persecution, and said there were no cases of malnutrition.

On December 26, 2016, the Information Committee of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi [issued a press release](#) addressing “the rumours that some women were raped during the area clearance operations of security forces following the violent attacks in Maungdaw Township.” Accompanied by an image stating “Fake Rape,” the release claimed that the investigation commission had interviewed two women who gave conflicting testimony as to whether they had been raped, and that village leaders later refuted their accounts. However, video footage of the commission’s visit shows an interviewer asking one of the women about violence against other women she witnessed, not her personal experience. Nothing in her video testimony suggests she lied in her interview. The interview appears confrontational, and out of keeping with accepted guidelines on how to conduct interviews with victims of sexual violence. The problematic circumstances under which authorities conducted these interviews, as well as the risks to the women, including when authorities exposed their names and identities to the media, raise serious doubts about the credibility of the Information Committee’s press release.

“The government should stop contesting these rape allegations and instead provide survivors with access to necessary support, health care, and other services,” Motaparthi said.

Rohingya victims of sexual assault face limited access to emergency health care including to prevent unwanted pregnancy from rape and infection with HIV, and to treat other sexually transmitted infections. Though the Burmese government has permitted some aid to go through to northern Rakhine State, it continues to obstruct international assistance from reaching the civilian population. It is unknown how many rape survivors remain in the area and whether they have received appropriate health care. None of the women Human Rights Watch interviewed had access to medical facilities until they reached Bangladesh. Many reported that in Bangladesh, they lacked information about services available, or could not arrange child care or pay transportation costs to clinics.

“The government’s failure to investigate rape and other crimes against the Rohingya should make it clear to Burma’s friends and donors that an independent, international inquiry is desperately needed to get to the bottom of these appalling abuses,” Motaparthi said.

Rape and Sexual Assault Against Rohingya Women and Girls in Northern Rakhine State

The following incidents took place between October 9 and mid-December 2016. Pseudonyms are used to protect those interviewed, as well as to protect their relatives who remain in Burma from possible government reprisals.

Cases of Rape and Gang Rape

Human Rights Watch interviewed nine Rohingya women who said that Burmese security force members had raped or gang raped them during attacks on their villages in Rakhine State. Several women described how security forces forcibly entered their homes, looted their belongings, and subjected women to invasive body searches before raping one or more women or girls in the family. Fatima, a Rohingya woman in her 20s, described an assault by soldiers against her and her young children in Kyet Yoe Pyin village in mid-November. She said:

Four soldiers attacked and suddenly entered the house. One grabbed the children, two of them grabbed each of my arms.... They were armed with rifles, pistols, small and long knives, and some were wearing ammunition belts.

My eldest [5-year-old] daughter screamed and said, “Please leave us.” ... So they killed her ... with a machete. They slaughtered her in front of me.

When they killed her, I became very upset. [The soldiers] said many things to me that I could not understand and put a gun to my head.... They kicked me in my hip and back, and beat me on the head with a wooden stick.

[Then] one of the soldiers tore off my clothes. Two soldiers raped me, one by one. They were about 30 to 35 years old. They touched too many places in a very painful way – they touched my chest, they touched my vaginal area. They did it quickly, they only opened their zippers – they didn’t take their pants off. When another soldier tried to rape me, I resisted. Then they burned my leg with plastic, they put it out on my leg.

Noor, in her 40s, said that about 20 soldiers stormed her home in the border town of Shein Kar Li in early December, and grabbed her and her husband:

Two of them held my arms tightly. I couldn't move. They took me in the yard of the home. Another two put a rifle to my head, tore off my clothes, and raped me.... While they held me, my husband was also held. They slaughtered him in front of me with a machete. Then three more men raped me. I began bleeding severely. After some time, I didn't know what was happening, I fell unconscious.... I regained consciousness the next morning. I took my gold jewelry, went to the nearby *ghat* [stairs leading to the river], and gave it to the boatman [so that I could cross to Bangladesh]. I walked there very slowly, as I was in pain. I had severe pain in my lower abdomen and pain in my whole body.

Witnesses also described security forces gathering women together in public areas – in paddy fields or school courtyards – and detaining them before selecting some women to rape. Ayesha, a woman in her 20s from Pyaung Pyit village, said:

They gathered all the women and started beating us with bamboo sticks and kicking us with their boots. In total they beat about 100 to 150 women, young boys, and girls. After beating us, the military took me and 15 women about my age and separated us [from the group].

They took us to a nearby school, kept us in the burning sun, standing in the field in front. They made us turn to face the sun. Then three soldiers took me to a nearby pond.

When they prepared to rape me, they opened their pants. All I could notice was their underwear. When one finished raping me, I resisted with my leg, and one of them punched me in the eye.... One of them kicked my knee and I got hurt. They also bit my face and scratched me with their nails.

I started bleeding. When I started severely bleeding from my genital area and leg, they left me. I became senseless. When I came to, I found my clothes torn around me. I found my skirt and wrapped my body in that.

Ayesha said that her abdomen and vaginal area had become red and swollen, and that she remained in pain for at least a week after the attack.

One woman in her 30s from Kyet Yoe Pyin village said that four soldiers raped her, then one raped her again by inserting the barrel of his rifle into her vagina.

Rape of Girls

Five people told Human Rights Watch they saw security forces raping or sexually assaulting girls as young as 13, or saw girls taken away, heard their screams, and learned soon afterward that they had been raped. Some of these victims were their family members.

Sayed, a woman in her 40s from Kyet Yoe Pyin village, said that in mid-November soldiers gang raped her 16-year-old daughter in front of her, then burned her house:

After evening prayer time, the military came and surrounded our house, then entered. Three soldiers grabbed me and my [seven] daughters, and took us to the paddy field. They beat us with their rifles.

On the spot in front of me, four military raped [my eldest daughter]. Then one soldier took her to another place. When the soldiers attacked her, I grabbed my other daughters and ran. We ran into the bushes. Other people later told me she died. I didn't see her body.

Amina, a woman in her 20s from Hpar Wut Chaung village, said that soldiers raped and killed her 13-year-old sister during a raid on their home in early December, as well as killing five other siblings. She said:

When they entered [our house], our brothers were sleeping on the veranda, and we [five sisters] were in the bed. They shot and killed my [brothers] and held the girls so they couldn't move.

They instantly shot my younger sister in the head. While [another sister was] running away, they shot [her too].

They took my other [13-year-old] sister to another room and raped her there. We heard [her screaming]. She screamed, "Someone save me! He's trying to take my clothes off!" What I saw from outside is that 10 more people entered that room with my sister.

Amina and her father managed to escape and fled to a neighboring village. There, her next-door neighbor who also fled told her that she had found Amina's sister dead, without any clothes on.

Sexual Assault

Several women told Human Rights Watch that security forces subjected them to invasive body searches during village raids, either in their homes or while villagers were gathered in open fields. Soldiers put their hands underneath women's clothes and painfully pressed their breasts and genital areas – searches that constitute sexual assault. They beat or slapped some women, and threatened them with machetes and guns. They also snatched gold jewelry women wore, and took money they kept in their blouses. Some women said they were searched twice.

Taslima, a woman in her mid-20s from Dar Gyi Zar village, said that in early November, after she fled to the nearby village of Yae Twin Kyun, soldiers came to the house where she was staying and dragged her and other women from the village out into the yard:

When [the military] entered the house, one soldier searched my body for gold and jewelry, and asked for money. When I didn't give it to them, soldiers grabbed me and searched my body. They searched under my clothes ... they pressed my chest very badly. They found where I hid my money in my chest. They also touched my hips and sensitive area [genital area].

She said they then dragged her outside: "There were about 10 to 12 women standing in the yard, around the same age as me. They touched us all, very bad touches. They used [their rifles] and machetes to threaten us."

Sara, from Sin Thae Pyin village, said that in late November about 15 soldiers entered her home where she was with her mother-in-law and her 15-year-old niece. She said that they first searched the cupboards but, finding no valuables, they then searched the women's bodies:

When they searched our bodies, a soldier was searching my chest, he put his hands inside my clothes. So I started to cry. When I started to cry, they hit us. They slapped me and my mother-in-law, and my sister-in-law's elder daughter. They took my clothes off and attempted to rape me, but I screamed very loudly, so they left.

Several women said that soldiers subjected them to intrusive body searches or other non-consensual touching. Several men and women described witnessing these searches.

Access to Care and Services

Survivors of sexual assault need access to emergency and long-term medical services, legal assistance, and social support to address injuries caused by the assault; to prevent pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections; and to collect evidence to support prosecution of perpetrators.

International organizations including the International Organization for Migration and Médecins Sans Frontières maintain or fund clinics in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, where the women interviewed by Human Rights Watch have fled. These facilities can provide essential and life-saving care, other medical treatment, and psychological counseling to sexual assault survivors. Survivors may also be referred to Bangladeshi government hospitals for more serious or long-term care.

However, while several women interviewed said they had received care at these facilities in Bangladesh, including psychological support, only one had visited medical facilities within 24 hours of being assaulted. The boatman who transported her from Burma to Bangladesh referred her to a clinic after noting the severity of her injuries, and she went there directly after crossing the border. The remaining women sought care several days after they were assaulted, after they had moved within Burma seeking safety, or after they had found a place to stay and basic necessities in Bangladesh. This placed them beyond the window during which providers can effectively administer emergency contraception (120 hours) and post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV (72 hours), as [recommended](#) by the World Health Organization. One woman said villagers in Burma provided her with contraceptive medication, while others took only paracetamol, a mild painkiller, after they were assaulted.

A lack of knowledge about services and how to access them has stopped women from getting care, even in Bangladesh. Many other women said they did not seek medical care, including at government or humanitarian-supported facilities in Bangladesh where they could receive treatment for free, because they believed incorrectly that they would have to pay for services, or because they did not know they could access them. Some women also cited financial difficulties paying for transport to facilities, or said that they had no one to watch their children while they visited. None of the women Human Rights Watch interviewed had returned to medical facilities for follow-up visits, though some said they still experienced pain or they had not completed a course of medication and needed prescription refills.

Fatima said, "Now I have urine problems. When I was at [the clinic] they gave me medicine but I didn't properly recover my [normal urine flow].... After that I didn't go back ... because I was worried about paying for medicine." Mumtaz said, "I still feel pain in my shoulder and chest [where

they beat me] ... also in my lower abdomen and back. Now my medicine is finished but I have no money to consult with the doctor, and [I can't] leave my child home alone."

Those interviewed also said they did not return for follow-up psychological counseling, even when they continued to experience nightmares about violent incidents or other signs of trauma. Many of the women interviewed said they did not know what counseling was. One woman who received an initial counseling session said she would not return because she felt too overwhelmed by the hardships she faced, and did not feel up to returning. "I won't visit again. I feel weak, too tired to go," she said.

Most of the women interviewed said they had come to Bangladesh only with their children, or with other female family members, and struggled to provide for themselves and their children. Their husbands or other male family members had either been killed by the Burmese military or had been separated from them during the violence. Many women no longer knew their husbands' whereabouts or if they were still alive. Several interviewees who fled with only their children struggled to meet their basic food and shelter needs. They said they survived through limited charity distributions, by begging, or by sending a young child to the local bazaar to beg.

Concerned governments and international agencies should continue to support medical and psychosocial care for survivors of sexual violence in Burma, including those who have fled to Bangladesh. More efforts are also needed to encourage and educate those who may need services about how they can access them.