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# Bangladesh/Myanmar: The Dangers of a Rohingya Insurgency

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PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** Since the Arakan Army's seizure of much of Myanmar's Rakhine State, Rohingya armed groups have paused their turf war in Bangladesh's refugee camps and ramped up recruitment, using religious language to mobilise refugees to fight the Rakhine armed group. Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government has started engaging the Arakan Army.

**Why does it matter?** A Rohingya insurgency against the Arakan Army is unlikely to succeed, but it would do grave damage to intercommunal relations in Myanmar. Rohingya in Rakhine State are likely to be caught between the armed groups, while prospects for the return of one million refugees living in Bangladesh would fade away.

**What should be done?** Bangladesh should step up informal cross-border aid and trade with Rakhine State while curbing the influence of Rohingya armed groups in refugee camps. The Arakan Army should strive to govern for all communities in Rakhine, while foreign donors – where possible – should limit aid cuts affecting refugees.

## *Executive Summary*

The Arakan Army's defeat of the Myanmar military in northern Rakhine State has shifted Rohingya armed groups onto the front foot. After years of bloody infighting in Bangladesh's refugee camps, these groups, which claim to represent the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine, agreed in November 2024 to work together to fight the Arakan Army, which draws support mainly from the state's Buddhist majority. Since then, violence has fallen sharply in the refugee camps, while the groups have expanded recruitment. At the same time, the Bangladeshi government has started engaging tentatively with the Arakan Army, which controls all of Myanmar's border with the country. Mounting attacks by Rohingya armed groups in Rakhine are not only likely to undermine these talks, but could also heighten anti-Rohingya sentiment in Myanmar, damaging prospects for the repatriation of up to one million refugees. Bangladesh should curb the influence of Rohingya armed groups in the camps and step up dialogue with the Arakan Army, which for its part should take concrete steps to show it can govern in the interests of all communities.

When the Arakan Army began pushing into northern Rakhine State in early 2024, the outnumbered Myanmar military sought to mobilise the Rohingya Muslim minority in the state to fight alongside it. The military forcibly recruited Rohingya men into militia units, worked with community leaders to attract volunteers and cut deals with Rohingya armed groups – a startling turnaround, given that these outfits had previously battled Myanmar's authorities, ostensibly in defence of Rohingya rights. This mobilisation slowed the Arakan Army advance, but the military was unable to stave it off entirely. Many Rohingya opposed the decision to align with the Myanmar military. The Arakan Army's rhetoric and alleged abuses of Rohingya in northern Rakhine, however, spurred a good number of refugees to view the ethnic armed group as a bigger threat than the military.

Even before the fall of Maungdaw township in December 2024, which marked the Arakan Army's complete takeover of northern Rakhine, Rohingya armed groups had begun repositioning themselves. They reached a "harmony" agreement in November and held a large "unity" rally in the refugee camps the following month, urging Rohingya attendees to join the fight to take back northern Rakhine by force. They enlisted religious leaders to legitimise their campaign, which they frame as a "jihad" against "non-believers". Until recently, most refugees resented these groups, due to the violent tactics they had used. Nonetheless, strong negative sentiment toward the Arakan Army and fears that repatriation will remain elusive have made refugee camps more fertile recruiting grounds for the armed groups.

Bangladeshi security agencies, which have long maintained relations with both Rohingya armed groups and the Arakan Army, have backed the "unity" campaign. While they insist that their intention is to reduce violence in the camps, they appear to be using Rohingya armed groups as a means of compelling the Arakan Army to take back refugees. Though it remains unclear whether they are providing material support to the groups, the involvement of these security bodies threatens prospects for nascent dialogue between the Bangladeshi government and the Arakan Army, which now controls all the areas from which Rohingya refugees fled in 2017.

Rohingya armed groups, meanwhile, have already started carrying out attacks on the Arakan Army in Rakhine State and are training fighters in camps along the border. Further intensification of this insurgency would cause great harm to all concerned – Rohingya civilians, the Arakan Army and Bangladesh. It would heighten the risk of further bloodshed between the Buddhist majority and Rohingya Muslim minority within Rakhine State, as well as increase the likelihood that more Rohingya will flee conflict across the border to Bangladesh. It would also make it more difficult for the Bangladeshi government to engage the Arakan Army, since the group believes that Dhaka is offering support to Rohingya armed groups. Given that the Arakan Army is now an inescapable interlocutor for any meaningful effort to repatriate the Rohingya living in Bangladesh, a breakdown in ties between it and the Bangladeshi government would represent a major setback to planning for the refugees' return.

Rohingya armed group attacks on the Arakan Army are also likely to shape the way the Rohingya are perceived in Myanmar and undermine their campaign to gain full rights, including citizenship, in the country. The Arakan Army has emerged as one of the junta's most formidable opponents, boosting its appeal nationwide. Opposing it would put the Rohingya on the "wrong" side of the anti-military struggle in the eyes of many across Myanmar, damaging their prospects of gaining public acceptance, increasing the threat of persecution and undermining efforts at eventual reform of the country's discriminatory citizenship law.

Building trust among the three sides – the Arakan Army, the Rohingya and Bangladesh – will be crucial to averting a drift into further conflict. Bangladesh's interim government should step up its dialogue with the Arakan Army as well as work to increase informal trade and humanitarian assistance to Rakhine State that could stabilise the border area by improving living conditions. Dhaka and its security agencies should also strive to contain the influence of Rohingya armed groups within the camps and create opportunities for civilian leadership to emerge. For its part, the Arakan Army should seek to demonstrate both to Bangladeshi authorities and Rohingya refugees that it can govern for all communities in Rakhine State and that it is willing to sit down in talks with the Rohingya minority to smooth over differences. With the U.S. axing much of its foreign aid, other international donors should minimise the impact on Bangladesh's refugee camps in the knowledge that severe cuts will deepen the disillusionment and frustration among refugees that is already playing into the hands of the budding Rohingya insurgency.

**Cox's Bazar/Dhaka/Brussels, 18 June 2025**

# Bangladesh/Myanmar: The Dangers of a Rohingya Insurgency

## I. Introduction

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In November 2023, the Arakan Army launched a decisive offensive against the Myanmar military.<sup>1</sup> The regime responded with artillery, air and naval support, but in the absence of a major ground counteroffensive was unable to stave off the assault. By early 2025, the Arakan Army had captured nearly the whole of Rakhine State, including the military's Western Command at Ann, and established de facto rule over a population estimated at more than one million.<sup>2</sup> Only three pockets of territory now remain in the regime's hands. Since early 2025, these areas have also come under periodic attack.<sup>3</sup>

Unable to match the Arakan Army on the battlefield, the military has tried to hurt it in other ways. Naypyitaw has blocked essential goods from entering Rakhine State, restricted the delivery of humanitarian assistance and shut down electricity, communications and banking services.<sup>4</sup> The military has also continued to wage a campaign of terror from the skies.<sup>5</sup> Chinese attempts to broker an end to the fighting have so far made little progress, largely because the military regime is unwilling to recognise the Arakan Army's territorial gains.<sup>6</sup>

The military's determination to prevent the Arakan Army from building a viable proto-state has compelled the group to take the fight beyond Rakhine's borders.

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<sup>1</sup> The Arakan Army formed in the borderlands of China in 2009 but began shifting its forces into Rakhine in early 2014. For reporting on the Arakan Army's rise, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°339, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 27 August 2024; N°325, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 1 June 2022; and *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ann was the second regional command to fall to resistance forces; the first, in Shan State, fell in August 2024. "Rebel militia claims strategically important Myanmar military command centre at Lashio in Shan State", Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 7 August 2024. There are no accurate figures for Rakhine State's current population. Around 750,000 Rohingya fled in 2016-2017, and up to 200,000 more have left over the past eighteen months. Hundreds of thousands of people – Rakhine, Rohingya and other minorities – have likely fled fighting between the Arakan Army and the military, particularly since November 2023. It is plausible that the state's population is less than half of the 3.2 million counted or estimated during the 2014 census, with the majority now in areas controlled by the Arakan Army.

<sup>3</sup> One of these is Kyaukphyu, which hosts important Chinese energy infrastructure, including an oil terminal and oil and natural gas pipelines. Beijing also has plans to build a deep-sea port and high-speed railway that would give it direct access to the Indian Ocean. Crisis Group Video, "Mapping Conflict: The Arakan Army's War in Western Myanmar", 28 February 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "At least 40 killed in Myanmar military air attack in Rakhine State, UN says", Al Jazeera, 11 January 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Beijing has hosted several rounds of talks in Kunming between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, but these have not resulted in a ceasefire. Crisis Group interview, source close to the military regime, January 2025.

Since late 2024, Arakan Army forces have advanced into neighbouring Magway, Bago and Ayeyarwady regions, working together with local resistance forces.<sup>7</sup> Rather than toppling the regime, the group's primary goals are to build up a buffer zone of allied resistance forces around the periphery of Rakhine State and to weaken the regime's ability to enforce its blockade. It may also hope to hurt the military by threatening strategic targets, such as defence industries, many of which are in Bago and Magway, and divert Naypyitaw's attention from Rakhine proper.<sup>8</sup>

With the military's blockade of Rakhine State, the importance to the Arakan Army of its relations with neighbours Bangladesh and India has increased.<sup>9</sup> To some extent, it is reliant on trade with these countries for its proto-state to function. Under long-time Bangladeshi leader Sheikh Hasina, whose government was overthrown by mass protests in 2024, Dhaka had shied away from directly engaging with the group. The Arakan Army, however, has long maintained discreet ties with Bangladesh's security agencies. These links began fraying in March 2024, when the Arakan Army rejected demands to engage with Rohingya armed group leaders and come up with a plan for large-scale refugee repatriation.<sup>10</sup> Tensions mounted further over the group's alleged mistreatment of Rohingya in northern Rakhine and Bangladesh's perceived support for Rohingya armed groups (see Section III.B below).

This report examines the build-up of Rohingya armed groups and the risks that they may launch an insurgency in northern Rakhine State against the Arakan Army. It explores how growing desperation within the camps is turning refugees into a recruitment pool and how the groups' activities are undermining prospects for stronger relations between Dhaka and the Arakan Army. The report is based on field research in Bangladesh in February and March 2025, as well as on interviews conducted remotely over a period of six months. Interviewees included Arakan Army and Rohingya armed group leaders, Rakhine and Rohingya activists, civil society leaders and politicians, UN and NGO officials, donor representatives and diplomats from a wide range of countries, Bangladeshi government and security officials, independent experts, and dozens of Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh. About 70 per cent of interviewees identified as men, and 30 per cent as women, reflecting the dominance of men in many of the institutions in question.

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<sup>7</sup> "Arakan Army, allies attack Myanmar military in regions bordering Rakhine State", Myanmar Now, 4 March 2025.

<sup>8</sup> "Arakan Army has Myanmar junta's weapons factories in its sights", *The Irrawaddy*, 6 January 2025.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of India's approach to Myanmar's post-coup crisis, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°182, *A Rebel Border: India's Evolving Ties with Myanmar after the Coup*, 11 April 2025, and N°181, *Disquiet on the Western Front: A Divided Resistance in Myanmar's Chin State*, 19 March 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

## II. Rohingya Armed Groups

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Armed groups purporting to represent the Rohingya community date to Myanmar's independence.<sup>11</sup> Among the most prominent of these has been the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which formed in 1982 but by the late 1990s was widely considered defunct as an armed group.<sup>12</sup> Outbreaks of communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in 2012 spurred the creation of another group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which launched its first attacks in October 2016, targeting Myanmar's Border Guard Police.<sup>13</sup> After further attacks in August 2017, the military responded with a brutal crackdown, forcing close to 750,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

### A. Controlling the Camps

When the Myanmar military pushed Rohingya out of Rakhine in 2017, ARSA members were also forced to leave. They gradually established themselves as the dominant force in the sprawling refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.<sup>14</sup> At first, the Bangladeshi government denied that ARSA had a foothold in the camps, but in late 2022 it began to take action against the group. Security agencies started rounding up ARSA members and dismantling the group's administrative network.

The dormant RSO also re-emerged – with the alleged backing of the security forces – and the group and ARSA waged a violent turf war for control of the refugee camps throughout 2023 and much of 2024. Feeling increasingly vulnerable, many low-level ARSA members defected to the RSO. Remaining ARSA members were forced underground but not eradicated from the camps; unlike the RSO, the group also preserved a presence within Rakhine State.<sup>15</sup>

Besides these two main groups, several other Rohingya armed outfits and criminal organisations have controlled or contested smaller areas of the refugee camps, including the Rohingya Islamic Mahaz, the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA, first known as the “Nobi Hussain group”), and the “Munnah group”. The line between armed group and criminal network is often blurry, as all these groups, in addition to ARSA and the RSO, are involved to some degree in the illicit economy, particularly the thriving trade with Myanmar in methamphetamine tablets known as *yaba*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For background on the Rohingya refugee crisis, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°335, *Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 6 December 2023; and N°303, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 27 December 2019.

<sup>12</sup> For background on Rohingya insurgency, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°155, *Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 25 April 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## B. *Aligning with the Regime*

As the Arakan Army began advancing into Rohingya-dominated northern Rakhine in early 2024, the Myanmar military sought to mobilise Muslims against it.<sup>17</sup> Though the vast majority of Rohingya are not recognised as Myanmar citizens, the junta used the pretext of national conscription to recruit thousands of them into militia units.<sup>18</sup> Alongside this recruitment campaign, the military also attempted to foment communal tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Rakhine State and are the Arakan Army's support base. At first, most Rohingya recruitment into the army was forced or the result of inducement, but later some Rohingya men volunteered out of anger at the Arakan Army, which had by then been accused of widespread human right violations against Rohingya in Buthidaung (see Section II.C below).<sup>19</sup>

Regime commanders also forged alliances with Rohingya armed groups, seeking their support to defend both Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships. At first, the military worked with ARSA – an unexpected turn of events, given that the group had been responsible for the 2016-2017 attacks that prompted the military campaign against the Rohingya. In April-May 2024, ARSA and the military fought alongside each other against the Arakan Army in both Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Though the RSO initially claimed to be seeking an alliance with the Arakan Army, by April 2024, its forces were also clashing with the armed group in Maungdaw.<sup>20</sup> The RSO then reached an agreement with the Myanmar military and, together with the smaller ARA, began a forced recruitment campaign in the refugee camps of southern Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> Many of these recruits were sent to Maungdaw, where they received training from the military.<sup>22</sup>

While the military was able to hold out against the Arakan Army in Maungdaw for more than six months – far longer than in most other parts of the state – it is unclear how much of a role Rohingya fighters played in drawing out the township's defence. When the Arakan Army stepped up its attacks in early August, RSO leaders fled to Bangladesh; many recent RSO recruits soon followed.<sup>23</sup> Though there are no official figures, thousands of fighters from the Arakan Army, the Myanmar military, and

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<sup>17</sup> Even after 750,000 fled in 2017, the Rohingya still accounted for 75 per cent of the population in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships, according to township profiles that the General Administration Department produced in 2019. These figures should be considered estimates.

<sup>18</sup> In February 2024, the military regime began enforcing the dormant People's Military Service Law and has since conscripted around 5,000 young men per month. The recruitment of Rohingya men coincided with the introduction of conscription but occurred outside this framework, however, as the vast majority of Rohingya do not have citizenship documents.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Around 2,000 Rohingya refugees are thought to have been recruited, mainly by force, from southern Bangladesh in April-May 2024. The campaign quickly dissipated due to a combination of resistance from refugees – including mass protests and even attempts to lynch RSO members – and diplomatic pressure on the Bangladeshi government. The campaign caused major damage to the RSO's standing among Rohingya refugees, enabling groups such as ARSA and Rohingya Islamic Mahaz to gain a stronger position within the camps.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, source who was present in Maungdaw, March 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Rohingya armed groups and militia forces are likely to have been killed or injured in the fighting in Buthidaung and Maungdaw.

### C. *Damage to Communal Relations*

The toll of the conflict raging in northern Rakhine extends beyond the number of people killed and injured. Up to 200,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, the majority over the past year.<sup>24</sup> Thousands more have paid human smugglers to take them to Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and countries farther afield, many of them via dangerous boat journeys.<sup>25</sup> The fighting between Rohingya armed groups and the Arakan Army, as well as the presence of Rohingya in regime-controlled militias, has also had a ruinous effect on communal relations. Hate speech on social media quickly became commonplace on both sides of the ethnic divide.<sup>26</sup>

Leaders on the two sides share at least some responsibility. The decision by Rohingya armed groups and some community leaders to align with the Myanmar military has set communities against each other in northern Rakhine. Arakan Army soldiers have also been accused of unleashing violence on Rohingya civilians. In April-May 2024, thousands of Rohingya houses were destroyed in rural and urban Buthidaung township; satellite images show that more than 30 villages in the area were almost totally razed.<sup>27</sup> Rohingya residents say Arakan Army soldiers are responsible, which the group denies.<sup>28</sup> In Maungdaw, meanwhile, the group was accused of attacking fleeing Rohingya civilians in early August, resulting in heavy casualties. Arakan Army leaders also regularly used inflammatory language when discussing the conflict; many Rohingya, encouraged by Rohingya armed groups, reciprocated by referring to the Arakan Army as “Mogh” terrorists, particularly online.<sup>29</sup>

Relations between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities have come under huge strain. Some 400,000 Rohingya are still thought to reside in Rakhine State, most of them in Arakan Army-controlled areas. Rohingya in Maungdaw and Buthidaung have

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<sup>24</sup> Bangladesh has allowed the UN to identify biometrically and provide limited support to Rohingya who have arrived over the past eighteen months. Around 119,000 Rohingya have been formally counted as of the end of May, but the tally is not yet completed, and UN officials estimate the total number of arrivals since the start of 2024 could be as high as 200,000. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials, March and June 2025.

<sup>25</sup> The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says at least 9,195 Rohingya fled by boat in 2024, more than double the number in 2023; 91 per cent departed from Myanmar and the rest from Bangladesh, a change from the previous year when 76 per cent of departures were from Bangladesh. “More refugees risk dangerous sea journeys from Myanmar as crisis worsens”, UNHCR, 6 February 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Nathan Ruser, “They left a trail of ash: Decoding the Arakan Army’s arson attacks in the Rohingya heartland”, *The Strategist*, 13 June 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, Arakan Army official, June 2024.

<sup>29</sup> “Mogh” is a derogatory term for Rakhine people in the Bengali, Chittagonian and Rohingya languages. Since tensions escalated in 2024, it has become common for Rohingya to refer to the Arakan Army as “Mogh Baghi”. A term common to several South Asian languages, “Baghi” is usually translated as “rebels”, “insurgents” or even “terrorists” and carries negative connotations, including a lack of legitimacy and propensity for violence.

accused the group of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests.<sup>30</sup> The allegations are most common in areas where Rohingya armed groups, particularly ARSA, are or have been active (see Section III.A below). Rohingya who had recently arrived in Bangladesh from Buthidaung township said they had left Rakhine because the Arakan Army had not allowed them to return to their villages since the May 2024 fighting and they feared being detained by the group. “They are abducting, killing many people, accusing them of being members of ARSA”, a refugee told Crisis Group.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the Arakan Army has made attempts to improve relations with Rohingya in more stable areas of northern Rakhine. For example, the group has incorporated Rohingya into the lower rungs of its administration and permitted some of those displaced by fighting to return to their homes in Maungdaw and Buthidaung.<sup>32</sup> But as a Rohingya from Maungdaw explained, in comments echoed by other interviewees: “The AA calls this a ‘liberated area’, but for us that’s not the case. Our choices are to try and survive under AA oppression and domination – or to flee to Bangladesh”.<sup>33</sup>

In areas of central Rakhine that the Arakan Army also controls but where Muslims are a minority and Rohingya armed groups are not present, communal relations appear to be much better, and Rohingya face less harsh treatment. “There is much less tension because no Rohingya there took the side of the regime”, said a Rohingya researcher with extensive contacts in Rakhine State.<sup>34</sup> Getting a clear picture of the state of communal tensions across Rakhine State is difficult, however, as the regime has cut almost all telephone and internet service.

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<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya in Rakhine State, February 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, newly arrived Rohingya refugee, March 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya from Maungdaw, March 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya researcher, March 2025.

### III. A Rohingya Insurgency in the Making?

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The Arakan Army's conquest of Maungdaw in December 2024 has initiated a new phase in northern Rakhine State's conflict. Under pressure from Bangladeshi authorities, Rohingya armed groups have stopped fighting one another and boosted recruitment activities in the refugee camps. As refugees' anger at the Arakan Army and despair over the lack of opportunities has grown, their support for armed struggle to carve out a Rohingya homeland has risen. One of the armed groups, ARSA, has already started carrying out attacks in northern Rakhine, initially targeting civilians and more recently Arakan Army fighters. Rohingya armed group activities on both sides of the border have undermined Dhaka's efforts to engage with the Arakan Army, as the latter believes Bangladesh – and particularly the country's security agencies – is conspiring with its adversaries.

#### A. *Harmony and Unity?*

In late 2024, with the fall of Maungdaw seemingly imminent, the four largest Rohingya armed groups began negotiations to pause the turf war that had engulfed Bangladesh's refugee camps for more than two years.<sup>35</sup> On 8 November, they reached an informal agreement, dubbed "mission harmony", that amounts to a truce in the camps and a loose commitment to work together against the Arakan Army in Rakhine State.<sup>36</sup> The deal was brokered by Dil Mohammed, a Rohingya businessman with longstanding links to the military and the regime's Border Guard Police.<sup>37</sup> While not formally affiliated with any armed group, he has since emerged as a leading political figure in the camps.<sup>38</sup>

The November agreement has led to a large reduction in violent incidents within the camps. After rising sharply through 2023 and 2024, killings linked to armed groups stopped almost completely for around four months, while reported violent incidents more than halved.<sup>39</sup> All categories of violent crime have fallen except for abductions and kidnappings for ransom, which have increased markedly in recent months. By some estimates, around half of these cases are thought to be linked to the armed groups, in what appears to essentially be a fundraising drive.<sup>40</sup>

This welcome reduction in violence has come at a cost: it has enabled Dil Mohammed and armed groups to carry out open recruitment campaigns among refugees. To avoid the community opposition that the RSO faced when it attempted mass forced recruitment in May 2024, they have tried to mobilise refugees by convincing them of the need to retake northern Rakhine from the Arakan Army by force, claiming to

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<sup>35</sup> The four groups are the RSO, ARSA, the Arakan Rohingya Army and Rohingya Islamic Mahaz.

<sup>36</sup> "Joint Protection Monitoring Report", Protection Sector, Quarter 4 2024. Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, February 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, February 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> According to a monitoring organisation, an average of 34 violent incidents and seven killings were reported monthly from January 2023 to October 2024. Starting in November 2024, the average has been fifteen incidents and two killings.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, February and March 2025.

have accumulated a sufficient stockpile of weapons given to them by the Myanmar military.<sup>41</sup> To build their legitimacy, the groups have framed the conflict in religious terms and worked closely with Rohingya religious leaders.

Throughout November and December, they organised large public meetings in the camps, with 500 or more attendees.<sup>42</sup> These gatherings culminated on 25 December, with a “unity” rally organised by Dil Mohammed that was attended by tens of thousands of camp residents, mainly madrassa students and their teachers.<sup>43</sup> Representatives from all four armed groups gave speeches; some, including Dil Mohammed, leaned heavily into religious language, describing the fighting in Rakhine as a “jihad” against the “kafir” or non-believer.<sup>44</sup> The crowd reportedly met these remarks with cheering.

Since the start of 2025, the meetings have been smaller but more regular.<sup>45</sup> Armed groups have worked together with Dil Mohammed, who has formed a civil society group, the Rohingya Committee for Peace and Repatriation, and opened an office in Camp 1E.<sup>46</sup> Religious leaders and Rohingya camp officials known as *majhis* – all of them men – have been enlisted to strengthen the campaign. “Many people have been motivated to join the fight after hearing these words. The Rohingya religious leaders fully support the armed groups”, an 18-year-old male refugee told Crisis Group.<sup>47</sup> Other Rohingya interviewees acknowledged that young men were joining in large numbers, sometimes with the encouragement of their families. “They are joining voluntarily, saying, ‘It’s up to us to secure our rights’”, said a 48-year-old woman. “If I were a man, I would join as well”.<sup>48</sup> Some humanitarian agency officials monitoring recruitment say the number may be as high as 3,000 to 4,000.<sup>49</sup>

The conflict may have taken a dangerous turn. While Rohingya armed groups have dominated the refugee camps for years, support for the groups among refugees has tended to be low. Complaints about armed group members perpetrating abuses in

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<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, source with knowledge of the matter, March 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, February and March 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, February 2025. See also “Rohingya’s unity: A historic turning point”, *Rohingya Khobor*, 25 December 2024.

<sup>44</sup> “Rohingya armed groups and the struggle for Arakan”, *Rohingya Refugee News*, 4 January 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, February and March 2025.

<sup>46</sup> The civil society group may be intended to give cover to recruitment activities. Publicly, Dil Mohammed is now urging “patience” and for Rohingya to “embrace peace”, a marked contrast from his firebrand statements at rallies in late 2024. “We don’t need to fight with anyone”, he insisted in a voice message on the committee’s Facebook page in March 2025. But he continues to organise private recruitment meetings, at which Rohingya are told they need to return to Rakhine and fight the Arakan Army. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials and Rohingya refugees, May 2025. See also “Official Statement from the Rohingya Committee for Peace and Repatriation”, 22 March 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 22, February 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Rohingya armed groups do not have women in their ranks, reflecting conservative views about women’s roles in Rohingya society. Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 13, February 2025.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, March 2025.

the camps have been frequent.<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Rohingya refugees conducted in February and March 2025 suggest that the truce, unity campaign and framing of the conflict in religious terms have bolstered perceptions of the armed groups, with more men and women expressing outright support. “I think it’s good for us that all the Rohingya armed groups are cooperating and fighting the Arakan Army for our rights and homeland”, said a 25-year-old woman teacher from Camp 19, where the RSO is dominant.<sup>51</sup>

Yet many refugees remain critical of their actions and wary of their motivations. As a man residing in Camp 11 said: “The armed groups treat us badly because their members are all uneducated and poorly trained – it’s just young men with weapons”.<sup>52</sup> An elderly man in Camp 10 concurred, saying group members “don’t treat people as human beings. ... The younger members don’t even show respect for the elderly in the camp”.<sup>53</sup> A woman refugee added: “This cooperation [between the groups] is just propaganda – it doesn’t help us get our rights or property from the Arakan Army. But I must admit that ARSA, the RSO and the ARA are popular right now in the camps”.<sup>54</sup> The growing presence of armed outfits in the camps has left women and girls feeling scared and vulnerable, and some reports have linked the groups to gender-based violence, including sexual assault and forced marriage.<sup>55</sup>

There have also been reports of armed group leaders using more coercive tactics to recruit. In some camps, they have compiled lists of young men and told families they must contribute a male member to their ranks. “It’s not forced recruitment like last year, but it’s also not really voluntary”, explained a Bangladeshi researcher. “There is a lot of pressure”.<sup>56</sup> Humanitarian workers said armed group members had in some cases told refugees their food rations would be cut if they did not attend recruitment meetings – even if depriving people of supplies in that way is likely impossible. In May, armed groups began to formally recruit in some camps, creating teams of *majhis*, teachers, imams, former administrators and businesspeople to urge refugees to sign up, adding to the risks of coercion.<sup>57</sup> Some young men are now living outside the camps to avoid recruitment.<sup>58</sup>

Regardless of their views on existing armed groups, all interviewees said they thought that some sort of force was needed to fight for the Rohingya’s rights in Rakhine State. Their views are driven by a combination of desperation and anger at the Arakan Army for its alleged human rights violations in 2024. “I didn’t understand the need for an armed group before, but now I realise we definitely need one”, said a

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, “‘I May Be Killed Any Moment’: Killings, Abductions, Torture and Other Serious Violations by Rohingya Militant Groups in Bangladesh”, Fortify Rights, March 2025.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 19, February 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 11, February 2025.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 10, February 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 1E, February 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, February–March 2025. See also “Protection Sector Flash Update #2”, Protection Sector Cox’s Bazar, 21 May 2025; and “Gendered Violence and Insecurity in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh – New Insights and Ways Forward”, XCEPT, January 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi researcher, March 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, May 2025.

<sup>58</sup> “Protection Sector Flash Update #2”, Protection Sector Cox’s Bazar, 21 May 2025.

35-year-old man from Camp 13, recounting how “the Rakhine community” helped the Myanmar military in cracking down on Rohingya in 2017.<sup>59</sup> As years pass, there is also a sense among refugees that donors are abandoning them, a sentiment that is only likely to increase as foreign aid declines (see Section III.C below). “We need an armed group because the only way we will get our rights is with our own hands”, asserted a refugee from Camp 10.<sup>60</sup>

So far, ARSA has spearheaded the fight in northern Rakhine, posting regular videos to social media of its fighters firing weapons, apparently in Rakhine State. These attacks appear to have targeted civilians more than the Arakan Army: one report claimed that the group had killed at least twenty civilians and injured more than 30 in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships over the past year.<sup>61</sup> Rohingya sources say these videos are important for the group’s fundraising efforts among expatriates in countries such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

In late March, ARSA stepped up its offensive, launching simultaneous attacks on Arakan Army positions in Maungdaw and Buthidaung (see Section IV.C below). This campaign began after Bangladesh arrested the group’s leader, Attaullah Abu Ammar Jununi, on the southern outskirts of Dhaka on 18 March.<sup>62</sup> Sources say the security forces turned against Jununi because he was “inflexible”, while the interim government wanted to see him detained as a gesture to the Arakan Army. Following his arrest, the group warned it “would be a grave miscalculation” to assume it “signifies the demise of ARSA”.<sup>63</sup> Now under the leadership of “ground commander” Ustad Khaled (also known as “Master Khaled”), ARSA remains a force both in the refugee camps and across the border.

Meanwhile, other Rohingya groups claim they are preparing to join the fight in Rakhine. “Bangladesh and others are trying to resolve [repatriation] politically and we’re waiting for the results. If they can’t, then we will do it ourselves”, said a senior RSO official. “We will start a war against the Arakan Army if they ignore our rights”.<sup>64</sup> There are also indications that the Myanmar military is planning to support Rohingya armed groups against the Arakan Army so as to weaken its rival. In May, the regime reportedly dispatched a Rohingya man from Rakhine to Bangladesh for meetings with Rohingya armed group leaders in Cox’s Bazar.<sup>65</sup> During these talks, the man promised that Naypyitaw would provide weapons if the armed groups could build up their forces sufficiently.<sup>66</sup>

Whether or not insurgency expands in northern Rakhine, there is a risk that the truce between the armed groups will break down, particularly since it was largely forced on them by Bangladesh’s security agencies. The senior RSO official told Crisis

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<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 13, February 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 10, February 2025.

<sup>61</sup> “Militia training compulsory in Rakhine State townships under AA control, says AA source”, DVB, 24 March 2025.

<sup>62</sup> “Armed Rohingya group’s leader is arrested in Bangladesh”, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2025.

<sup>63</sup> See Telegram post by ARSA Freedom Soldiers (Harrakah Al-Yakin), @ojGpXXIVpSUwYTg1, 5:11am, 19 March 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, analysts and humanitarian agency officials with knowledge of the situation, May 2025.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Group that the “informal” November agreement was mainly a vehicle for Dil Mohammed to position himself as a refugee leader “above the armed groups”. The official downplayed the significance of the agreement and expressed confidence that Dil Mohammed would soon lose influence.<sup>67</sup> If fighting among armed groups were to resume in the camps, the harm could be greater than prior to the truce because of how these outfits have inflated their ranks and increased their firepower over the past six months.

### B. *Bangladesh’s Position*

Bangladesh’s main objective when it comes to Myanmar is repatriation of Rohingya refugees, who now number well over one million. Political upheaval on both sides of the border has not altered this goal. Since taking office in early August 2024, following Sheikh Hasina’s overthrow, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus’s administration has acknowledged the need to engage the Arakan Army, given the group’s control of the border.<sup>68</sup> In November 2024, it appointed a former UN official, Khalilur Rahman, as high representative for Rohingya affairs and “other priority issues”. In February, he held talks with counterparts from the Arakan Army’s political wing.<sup>69</sup>

The interim government has proposed establishing a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine State and lobbied the UN successfully to convene a “high-level conference” on the Rohingya in late September, on the sidelines of the General Assembly, with the aim of drawing up solutions to the crisis. Dhaka has also permitted the UN to biometrically identify new Rohingya arrivals, and Yunus has spoken several times of the need to establish a “safe zone” for the Rohingya in northern Rakhine State. Bangladesh has even continued dialogue with Myanmar’s military regime on the issue of refugee returns; at a meeting in Bangkok in early April, Naypyitaw told Dhaka it had verified 180,000 Rohingya for repatriation.<sup>70</sup>

All these moves suggest a desire to work with international partners to resolve the refugee crisis through negotiation and dialogue. But this approach appears to be at odds with much of what is happening on the ground, both within the refugee camps and along the border, where Rohingya armed groups and their affiliates receive a degree of succour from Bangladeshi security agencies. It remains unclear whether Dhaka is deliberately pursuing a two-pronged strategy or a self-contradictory one due to lack of oversight.

In Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh’s security agencies continue to exert close control of the refugee camps and maintain ties with both Rohingya armed groups and the Arakan Army. Rohingya refugees, the Arakan Army and many analysts insist these agencies were behind the RSO’s revival from late 2022. They say these agencies were keen to displace ARSA from the camps after it fell out of favour and allowed (if not support-

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<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior RSO official, March 2025.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, “8,000 more Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh: Foreign adviser”, *The Business Standard*, 3 September 2024; and “Rohingya crisis: Can the interim government’s ‘new strategy’ break the deadlock?”, *bdnews24.com*, 23 December 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sources with knowledge of the meetings, February-March 2025.

<sup>70</sup> The interim government hailed this pledge as a breakthrough, but Myanmar’s military regime does not control the areas to which the Rohingya would return.

ed) its rival's forced recruitment campaigns in April-May 2024.<sup>71</sup> Speaking to Crisis Group, officials from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the military intelligence agency, denied backing forced recruitment or even that it had taken place.<sup>72</sup> But the scale of the recruitment was such that intelligence agencies would have been aware of it. At a minimum, their decision not to intervene suggests a level of tacit support, as does the fact that the RSO sent many of its members and recruits across the border during daylight hours.<sup>73</sup>

In the wake of the 8 November truce between the warring Rohingya armed groups, DGFI sought to claim credit for the agreement. Shortly afterward, officials from the body invited UN representatives to a meeting in Cox's Bazar and introduced Dil Mohammed as "our negotiator" who brokered what they termed the "mission harmony" agreement.<sup>74</sup> Other sources confirmed to Crisis Group that DGFI "orchestrated" the truce.<sup>75</sup> The relative freedom with which Rohingya armed groups have subsequently been able to conduct recruitment campaigns suggests that DGFI and other agencies are supportive of these activities. At the 25 December unity rally, organisers thanked the authorities for permitting it to take place, with members of the Armed Police Battalion posted around the crowd; security personnel have also been present at some more recent meetings.

Dil Mohammed's supporters and affiliates of the armed groups have also been included in meetings or events with visiting dignitaries, such as Organisation for Islamic Cooperation envoy Ibrahim Khairat in February and UN Secretary-General António Guterres in March.<sup>76</sup> Refugees Crisis Group spoke to believe that Rohingya armed groups are acting with the blessing of security agencies.<sup>77</sup>

Security officials have previously suggested to Crisis Group that Rohingya armed groups could play an important role in securing the refugees' return to Rakhine. In May 2024, at the height of the forced recruitment campaign in the refugee camps, one said he believed the Arakan Army's offensive presented "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to resolve the Rohingya crisis", because the community could get training and weapons from the Myanmar military. "Once more than 5,000 have received training from the military, it will be tough for the Arakan Army to crush their resistance. ... Rohingyas have the ability to fight. They know the terrain. All they need is weapons to halt the Arakan Army", he explained, adding that he believed Bangladesh should "help build [this] capacity" in order to carve out a Rohingya enclave in northern Rakhine by force.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bangladesh officials, September 2024. Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit. See also "Competing Armed Groups Pose New Threat to Rohingya in Bangladesh", IISS, 11 December 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, DGFI officials, June and September 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya resident in Maungdaw, July 2024; Rohingya refugee, March 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, individual with knowledge of the meeting, March 2025.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, sources with knowledge of the matter, February-March 2025.

<sup>76</sup> "Dil Mohammed, the Rohingya camps and Dhaka's diplomacy", Rohingya Refugee News, 20 May 2025.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, February-March 2025.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi security official who follows developments in Rakhine State closely, May 2024.

Bangladeshi officials and foreign policy experts insist there is no formal support for Rohingya armed groups. “The policy remains the same – there is no way we will provide support”, said one senior official. “Yunus knows it would just create a lot of trouble. ... Would anyone defy his orders? Nobody will get involved in this stupidity”.<sup>79</sup> That said, a former senior Bangladeshi diplomat told Crisis Group that some were taking advantage of a “policy vacuum” to support Rohingya armed groups. “These things happen at the local level”, he said. “I’m 200 per cent sure it’s not official policy”.<sup>80</sup>

### C. *The Impact of Funding Cuts*

Until recently, funding for the Rohingya refugee humanitarian response had proven resilient. Since 2017, the annual appeals issued by the UN and the Bangladeshi government have typically received 70-75 per cent of the targeted amount – far higher than many other appeals – and pulled in close to \$700 million per year. Over the last couple of years, however, competing crises have made it harder to attract funding; in 2024, commitments fell to \$550 million (around 65 per cent of the target), and food assistance was temporarily reduced for several months.<sup>81</sup> In response, Bangladesh has shifted its policies, slowly moving toward allowing aid organisations to start more projects aimed at alleviating a protracted refugee crisis, including providing more durable housing and opportunities to earn a living. Even so, refugees remain heavily reliant on foreign aid.<sup>82</sup>

U.S. President Donald Trump’s decision to first freeze and eventually cut international assistance after taking office in late January has already had a dramatic impact in Cox’s Bazar, given that U.S. funding accounted for more than half of the humanitarian response.<sup>83</sup> Everything from health care services and education to waste management has either stopped or been scaled back significantly, and the UN agencies and NGOs working in the camps have laid off many Rohingya “volunteers”, cutting a rare source of income for refugees.<sup>84</sup> The Trump administration has also stopped all refugee settlement programs to the U.S., dashing the interim government’s hope that Washington might accept as many as 20,000 per year.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Bangladeshi official, May 2025.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Bangladeshi diplomat, March 2025.

<sup>81</sup> For detailed information, see the “Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan 2024” and previous years’ plans on the Financial Tracking Service website of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid.

<sup>82</sup> While Rohingya are not legally allowed to work outside the camps, many find employment, particularly in agriculture, fishing and construction. Some families also receive remittances from relatives abroad.

<sup>83</sup> In 2024, the U.S. contributed 55 per cent of all funding to the UN’s yearly appeal for the Rohingya refugee crisis. On the U.S. aid cuts, see Chris Newton and Delaney Simon, “U.S. Aid Cuts Make Famine More Likely and Easier to Hide”, Crisis Group Commentary, 28 February 2025.

<sup>84</sup> The UN and other humanitarian groups are allowed to employ Rohingya as “volunteers”, paying them the equivalent of around \$80 a month. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, March 2025.

<sup>85</sup> Bangladesh had long opposed third-country resettlement, arguing that it would result in more refugees crossing the border, but allowed it to resume in 2022. Since then, the U.S. had resettled around 2,500 Rohingya refugees, while smaller numbers have gone to Canada, New Zealand and

Humanitarian agency officials told Crisis Group the funding outlook was bleak, with support unlikely to return to anything like 2024 levels.<sup>86</sup> Aid workers say they will inevitably be forced to make difficult decisions about how the reduced funding is allocated. “It’s a scary picture”, one said.<sup>87</sup> Large cuts to food support were narrowly averted in late March, but funding has only been secured until September. This uncertainty comes as Bangladesh and its partners are trying to accommodate up to 200,000 newly arrived Rohingya who have fled northern Rakhine in the last eighteen months. To date, around 119,000 have been biometrically identified so they can get support, and none of the new arrivals have received housing assistance. As a result, most are staying with relatives, adding to the overcrowding and putting women at risk of gender-based violence.<sup>88</sup>

Less international support, particularly food assistance, will force refugees to make difficult decisions. For young men, joining armed groups and criminal gangs is an obvious coping strategy. There are also growing reports of women and girls marrying armed group members, while gender-based violence is on the rise as financial pressures stoke frustrations within households and male breadwinners lash out physically at their partners. Alongside the shutdown of refugee resettlement to the U.S., and with limited prospects for repatriation, diminishing aid will contribute to a growing sense of hopelessness among refugees that armed groups will try to exploit by offering financial incentives or in-kind support. A refugee told Crisis Group said they are already doing so:

Many young people in the camps don’t have education or work. They will work for anyone who promises them money, power and opportunities. This is what they [armed groups] are doing now. That’s why many illiterate and jobless youths are joining them, even though educated people know that these groups will not be able to do anything for the community.<sup>89</sup>

Another option is paying people smugglers to reach third countries, with Malaysia the most popular destination. Rohingya refugees told Crisis Group that departures from southern Bangladesh and Rakhine have risen since the start of 2025; unusually, boats were continuing to leave into late May, outside the usual “sailing season”. “People used to avoid travelling at this time of year because of the weather, but now they are leaving continuously, in any season”, said one refugee. “From Teknaf, they take a small boat out to a big boat”.<sup>90</sup> The rougher seas during the monsoon make these crossings far more dangerous for those on board; the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said it had received reports that 427 Rohingya had died in May when two boats capsized off the coast of Myanmar.<sup>91</sup>

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other countries. “Bangladesh seeks to send 20,000 Rohingya refugees to the US annually”, *bdnews24.com*, 10 September 2024.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials, February-March 2025.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official, March 2025.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials and recently arrived refugees, March and June 2025.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee living outside the camps, March 2025.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, May 2025.

<sup>91</sup> “UNHCR fears extreme desperation led to deaths of 427 Rohingya at sea”, UNHCR, 23 May 2025.

There is also a risk that declining aid could shift Bangladesh's calculations, including its commitment to ensuring that refugee repatriation – if and when that happens – is safe, voluntary and dignified.<sup>92</sup> Dhaka's commitment to respect voluntary repatriation following the mass refugee arrivals of 2017 was predicated on an understanding that donors would provide adequate funding for the humanitarian response. If the money dries up, some in Bangladesh might start arguing for more coercive tactics to repatriate refugees. In such circumstances, supporting Rohingya armed groups might also become a more attractive strategy for Dhaka.

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<sup>92</sup> Previous repatriation programs, in the late 1970s and early 1990s, were successful in sending Rohingya back to Myanmar in part because they employed force or coercion. The fact that so many people were forced to flee again in 2017 illustrates why such an approach is unsustainable and why it is important to instead pursue safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation.

## IV. Anticipating the Fallout

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It is not yet clear that Rohingya armed groups are planning to launch a major insurgency against the Arakan Army or will even be able to develop the capacity to do so. But their growing influence in the camps and regular recruitment activities, alongside shifting attitudes toward armed struggle among refugees, risk destabilising the border region, given the effects they could have on the Rohingya community's relations with the Arakan Army, Bangladesh's attempts to engage the armed group and how the Muslim minority is perceived within Myanmar.

### A. *Control of the Refugee Camps*

Although armed groups have always been present in Cox's Bazar and held varying levels of power in the area's 33 refugee camps, they are now the most influential Rohingya organisations in the sprawling settlements. "It's clear that the armed groups are the ones who rule the camps", said a 23-year-old teacher from Camp 9, where the RSO is the dominant force. "Civil society groups are now supporting them. ... Previously, religious leaders did not, but now they are saying it is mandatory for us to fight the Arakan Army".<sup>93</sup> A 34-year-old man from Camp 10 said the RSO had grown strong in his camp by extorting money from residents. "No one in my community supports the armed groups, but we all fear them", he said.<sup>94</sup>

Achieving such sway will have a range of likely consequences. The presence of Rohingya armed groups has already compromised the camps' civilian character, putting refugees at greater risk of violence and exploitation. It could undermine the ability of humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance.<sup>95</sup> Because armed group leaders are all men, it is also likely to reinforce gender stereotypes and stifle already limited opportunities for women to participate in civil society activities, let alone take on leadership roles. Armed groups and their members also tend to promote, and sometimes enforce, strict interpretations of Islam, particularly in relation to the role of women in society and how they should dress.<sup>96</sup>

The dominance of armed groups also makes it much more difficult for civilian Rohingya leadership to emerge. After the mass exodus to Bangladesh in 2017, civil society flourished at first, as ARSA had not yet established full control and the political environment was more permissive than in northern Rakhine State. But Bangladeshi government restrictions – particularly after a mass demonstration in the camps in August 2019 prompted a public backlash – and the growing strength of ARSA, which viewed civil society as a threat to its authority, soon narrowed the space for peaceful political activities in the camps.<sup>97</sup> In particular, the killing in September

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<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 9, February 2025.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee from Camp 10, February 2025.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency officials, March 2025.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Fadela Novak-Irons, "Rohingya Refugee Women Empowerment – Enhancing Programming for Women and Girls in the Refugee Camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh", 30 April 2025.

<sup>97</sup> On 25 August 2019, large crowds of refugees – some media reports put the number at 200,000 – demonstrated to mark what they referred to as "genocide day", ie, the anniversary of the outbreak of violence in northern Rakhine State in 2017 that triggered the mass exodus. See Crisis Group Report, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, op. cit.

2021 of Mohib Ullah, leader of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, had a chilling effect. Since then, Bangladeshi security agencies have sponsored the creation of new Rohingya civil society organisations, but these have generally lacked legitimacy because refugees perceive them to be pushing the Bangladeshi government's interests – that is, repatriation as soon as possible – rather than the community's.<sup>98</sup>

The lack of organic civilian leadership in the refugee camps is a problem for Bangladesh. Dhaka has demanded that the Arakan Army engage with the Rohingya community, but the ethnic armed group has demurred on the grounds that it is unclear whom it should be talking with. This response may be disingenuous, but it does point to a real paucity of representation. Bangladesh is also keen to have civil society representatives at both the high-level UN conference on the Rohingya crisis planned for September and any preparatory events. While genuine civil society leaders do exist, they are reluctant to put themselves forward given the likely risks to their safety.

The growing tendency of armed groups to depict the conflict in religious terms may also have harmful effects over the long term. It has already contributed to a paradigm shift among many refugees: as mentioned earlier, even those who do not support the current crop of Rohingya militants now see armed struggle as the only way forward. Given the size of the refugee population, this new attitude may pose security risks not only for the Arakan Army but also for Bangladesh. “Everyone from children to the elderly are now talking about jihad”, commented a Bangladeshi researcher who studies conflict in the camps.<sup>99</sup> As armed groups become more influential, they will stifle more moderate voices in the camps and limit opportunities for dialogue with the Arakan Army.

Bangladeshi security agencies also risk losing control of the armed groups, particularly if they establish themselves more firmly across the border with Myanmar. To some extent, ARSA appears to be moving back into Rakhine State, following the arrest of its leader Attaullah Abu Ammar Jununi (see Section III.A).

### *B. Bangladesh's Relations with the Arakan Army*

The Arakan Army's perception that Bangladesh is allowing or even encouraging Rohingya armed groups to flourish undermines Dhaka's efforts to engage with the group. The group's leaders are already frustrated with Bangladeshi security agencies, believing they facilitated forced recruitment in the refugee camps in 2024 on the Myanmar military's behalf.<sup>100</sup> These tensions damaged trust and made it more difficult for Bangladesh's interim government to initiate dialogue with the group after it took office. “Pitting Rohingya against the Arakan Army [in 2024] was a big mistake. If we were talking, it wouldn't have happened”, said a former senior Bangladeshi diplomat.<sup>101</sup>

While Dhaka wants to continue its nascent dialogue with the Arakan Army, the activities of Rohingya armed groups are fuelling suspicion and hindering prospects

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<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian agency officials, June 2023.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi researcher, March 2025.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Arakan Army official, June 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Bangladeshi diplomat, March 2025.

for greater engagement. Partly as a result, there has been little follow-up to the initial meeting between Khalilur Rahman and the Arakan Army in February. “The [Rohingya armed groups] look stronger than before. Almost weekly, the militants are entering our territory and opening fire or kidnapping, and then they are running back to Bangladesh. Who is supporting those militants?”, asked a senior Arakan Army official.<sup>102</sup> The damage to relations between Bangladesh and the Arakan Army will only increase if Rohingya armed groups step up the frequency and intensity of their attacks in northern Rakhine. Developments in the camps are also shaping the group’s thinking, particularly regarding the support seemingly given to figures like Dil Mohammed, who is known to be close to the Myanmar military.

From the Arakan Army’s point of view, Bangladesh is playing a dangerous and counterproductive game. At best, Bangladesh could be adopting a carrot-and-stick approach, using the threat of a Rohingya insurgency in northern Rakhine State to force the Arakan Army into taking back Rohingya refugees into its newly conquered territory. But the group also fears that Bangladesh intends to use Rohingya armed groups to seize part of northern Rakhine by force. A senior Arakan Army official told Crisis Group that Bangladesh’s references to “safe zones”, along with recent comments from Jamaat-e-Islami, the main Bangladeshi Islamist party, that China should support the creation of an independent Rohingya state, suggest a possible “hidden agenda”. “Because of these things we don’t know what Bangladesh really wants. But they are not combating the illegal activities and militancy. So, what is their purpose? It looks like they are trying to organise something”, he said.<sup>103</sup>

More broadly, the prominence of these groups in the camps and parts of Rakhine is likely to damage prospects for reconciliation between refugees in Bangladesh and the Arakan Army, making repatriation even more difficult. Armed groups are displacing civilian Rohingya leaders, who may be more willing to pursue dialogue with the Arakan Army.

### C. *Conflict and Reprisals*

Worsening conflict between Rohingya armed groups and the Arakan Army would be devastating for the Rohingya who remain in northern Rakhine State. Insurgents are likely to base themselves in and around Rohingya villages, making it difficult for Arakan Army forces to distinguish fighters from civilians. Rohingya communities could be caught between opposing armed combatants and might feel compelled to seek sanctuary in Bangladesh, triggering new refugee flows at a time of diminishing international aid. Perceived Bangladeshi support for Rohingya forces could heighten the Arakan Army’s threat perceptions, probably even beyond the real capacity of the armed groups, and thus prompt a harsh crackdown.

In some areas of Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships where ARSA is carrying out attacks, reprisals are already under way. The insurgent raids have drawn a predictable response from the Arakan Army, which has carried out “clearance operations” targeting suspected ARSA hideouts. In February, one of these operations around the village of Mee Tike, close to the Bangladeshi border, sparked several days of fighting.

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<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interview, Arakan Army official, May 2025.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Arakan Army official, May 2025.

In far northern Maungdaw, where locals have reported that Rohingya forces are training in camps close to the frontier, the Arakan Army has begun forming village defence militias among ethnic Rakhine in anticipation of attacks.<sup>104</sup> The group has also told some nearby Rohingya communities they may have to relocate, likely due to concerns that ARSA will base itself in their villages.<sup>105</sup> Fresh ARSA attacks in late March and April prompted further clearance operations as well as alleged mistreatment of Rohingya civilians by Arakan Army forces.<sup>106</sup> “Rohingya are still coming across the border due to Arakan Army clearance operations against ARSA”, a humanitarian agency official in Cox’s Bazar noted.<sup>107</sup>

Getting a clear picture of how the Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State see the prospect of an insurgency against the Arakan Army is challenging, given the communications blackout across the state. Even so, interviews with Rohingya and other informed sources suggest that views on armed struggle are far more mixed than in the refugee camps, as many fear getting directly caught up in the conflict or being persecuted by the Arakan Army as a result of it. Some also worry about losing their land should they have to flee to Bangladesh. A Rohingya living in Maungdaw said armed groups have little support in his community. “People who live in the refugee camps, they have nothing, they are helpless – so it’s easy to persuade them with a few words”, he said. “The majority of us in Rakhine, we don’t support or endorse these groups at all. We live in fear of all armed groups”.<sup>108</sup>

#### D. *Ramifications within Myanmar*

A Rohingya insurgency would not only face strong and violent opposition from the Arakan Army – it would also find little support among Myanmar’s other political or armed groups. In the post-coup struggle against the military regime, nearly all ethnic armed groups and resistance forces consider the powerful Arakan Army an important partner. While it has mostly shunned political cooperation, the group has provided extensive training and support to Burman resistance groups, particularly those based along Rakhine State’s periphery. It is hard to imagine that any of these forces would take sides with Rohingya armed groups against the Arakan Army. By fighting one of the military regime’s most formidable adversaries, the Rohingya would be inviting opprobrium from across the spectrum of political and armed groups, as well as the public.

Conflict between the Arakan Army and Rohingya forces would likely undo some of the progress made in the way the community is perceived within Myanmar. Following the 2012 communal violence and 2016-2017 ARSA attacks, anti-Rohingya sentiment soared in Myanmar. But after the coup, as members of the majority Bur-

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<sup>104</sup> “AA executes search and clearance operations at ARSA camps in former Mel De Village, northern Maungdaw township”, *Narinjara*, 26 February 2025. “Reports of fighting between AA and ARSA near Mel De village in Maungdaw township”, *Narinjara*, 19 February 2025 [Burmese].

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, researcher, March 2025.

<sup>106</sup> “ARSA-AA clashes escalate in northern Maungdaw as ULA/AA imposes night curfew, launches clearance operation”, *Rohingya Khobor*, 1 April 2025; “Rohingya face fresh persecution as AA crackdown spreads across northern Maungdaw”, *Rohingya Khobor*, 6 April 2025.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency official based in Cox’s Bazar, March 2025.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya man living in Maungdaw, March 2025.

man community found themselves subject to the Myanmar military's brutal methods, these attitudes began to soften. The National Unity Government – a parallel administration appointed by elected lawmakers ousted in the 2021 coup, which operates mostly from exile – consolidated this shift by introducing a Rohingya policy, appointing a Rohingya as a deputy minister and vowing to replace the 1982 Citizenship Law, which for decades has been used to discriminate against the Muslim minority.<sup>109</sup> These policies marked a major departure from those of the National League for Democracy government (2016–2021), during which Aung San Suu Kyi defended the Myanmar military at the International Court of Justice.<sup>110</sup>

Even so, latent suspicion of the Rohingya has not gone away. Most people in Myanmar do not view armed movements purporting to represent the community as legitimate, let alone the equivalent of the country's other ethnic forces. Media outlets and social media users typically refer to ARSA and the RSO as “terrorist organisations”, rather than “ethnic armed groups”. Many people in Myanmar also believe that armed Rohingya groups are trying to establish an Islamist enclave.<sup>111</sup> The recent use of religious rhetoric to mobilise the Rohingya refugee population, and the fact that recruitment is taking place over the border in Bangladesh, a majority-Muslim country, will only further this perception.

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<sup>109</sup> The law made it much more difficult for people from ethnic groups deemed non-Indigenous – mainly those of South Asian and Chinese descent – to get citizenship.

<sup>110</sup> National League for Democracy representatives played a crucial role in forming the National Unity Government and hold prominent positions in it. See Richard Horsey, “Myanmar at the International Court of Justice”, Crisis Group Commentary, 10 December 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, op. cit.

## V. The Way Forward

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Further conflict between Rohingya armed groups and the Arakan Army is in the interest of neither the Rohingya people, Bangladesh nor the Arakan Army. Given the Arakan Army's military strength, armed struggle will not succeed in helping the Rohingya return to Rakhine State, and it could have devastating consequences, now that the Arakan Army in effect controls most of the areas where Rohingya remain and all the areas to which refugees would return. All parties should instead take steps to ensure that fighting does not escalate in northern Rakhine. Given that Rohingya armed groups are still building up their strength and the November truce appears to be fraying, there is an opportunity to reverse some of the dangerous pro-armed struggle rhetoric fuelling recruitment among Bangladesh's refugee population.

### A. Bangladesh's Approach

While it has plenty of other issues to deal with as it rebuilds the country's institutions and prepares for elections, Bangladesh's interim government has a crucial role to play. It has already identified the Rohingya crisis as one of its top foreign policy challenges. After seven years of scant progress under Sheikh Hasina, and notwithstanding the challenges of recent months, the government has the chance to move the country closer to its goal of repatriating refugees. To do so, however, it will need to patiently build trust with the Arakan Army and develop a cohesive, coherent strategy involving all branches of the state.

While Dhaka is not entirely comfortable negotiating with a non-state armed group – an area in which it lacks experience – and worries about the ramifications for its relationship with Naypyitaw, it has little choice given that Myanmar's military regime is very unlikely to retake Rakhine or to be able to retaliate against Dhaka. In any case, Naypyitaw has grown accustomed to neighbouring states striking up dialogue with ethnic armed groups along their borders; China and Thailand have done so for decades, while India has followed suit more recently.<sup>112</sup>

With these facts in mind, Dhaka should continue to pursue dialogue with the Arakan Army, including discussions of provision of humanitarian assistance. Talking is important given not just the immensity of humanitarian need – including for the Rohingya still living in northern Rakhine – but also as a trust-building exercise. The Arakan Army is more likely to respond to incentives than the threat of an insurgency, and Bangladesh has much that it could offer, particularly in terms of cross-border aid and trade.

Bangladesh will need to rethink its approach, however. To date, the interim government has been trying to establish a formal corridor, requiring the military regime's approval. Given that Naypyitaw is blockading and bombing Arakan Army-controlled areas, it is very unlikely to agree; it may, however, wish to give the impression of supporting the initiative, so as not to antagonise Dhaka. Political parties in Bangladesh and the country's army chief have also begun to speak out against the corridor

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<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *A Rebel Border: India's Evolving Ties with Myanmar after the Coup*, op. cit.

proposal, calling it a threat to national sovereignty.<sup>113</sup> Domestic disputes over the issue now mean that Dhaka is even less likely to bring a formal corridor to fruition. But in light of Rakhine's humanitarian emergency, along with the danger of a larger influx of refugees if no aid reaches the state, it should keep pursuing talks with the Arakan Army about informal cross-border assistance – now the only feasible option.

Dhaka should also allow more informal trade between southern Bangladesh and northern Rakhine – not just in food, but also in construction materials and agricultural inputs that are desperately lacking due to the military regime's blockade. Given that Rohingya have traditionally been the main intermediary, this commerce would not only help make goods more affordable for everyone in northern Rakhine, but it could also foster greater cooperation between the Rohingya community and local Arakan Army leaders.

Bangladesh's overriding concern remains a peaceful solution to the refugee crisis. But the growing influence of Rohingya armed groups within the refugee camps undermines the prospects of achieving one. It will be extremely difficult for Dhaka to improve relations with the Arakan Army and pursue talks on repatriation while these outfits are mobilising within the camps and building support for armed struggle – let alone carrying out attacks in northern Rakhine. While dismantling the groups would be a tall order, the Bangladeshi government and security agencies should improve coordination to ensure that their influence is checked. As a priority, the security forces should take stronger measures to prevent armed group members from recruiting in the camps, as well as to discourage religious and community leaders from supporting such campaigns. Security agencies should also increase monitoring to prevent armed group members from entering the camps and cut off the flow of weapons. Ideally, they should encourage the groups to abandon armed struggle for political activism.

Bangladeshi civilian officials should also ensure that their actions cannot be interpreted even as tacit support for the armed groups, refraining from meeting their members or echoing their rhetoric. Dhaka, meanwhile, should avoid references to establishing “safe zones” within northern Rakhine, a phrase that interim government leader Muhammad Yunus himself has used several times. Regardless of the merits of a safe zone in Rakhine, for Arakan Army leaders, the concept of a protected area for the Muslim minority amounts to a partial loss of territory that has just been wrested from the Myanmar military after years of fighting, at great human cost. Meanwhile, whichever party comes to power in Dhaka in the elections due to take place between December 2025 and June 2026 will need to ready itself to manage the Rohingya crisis. Both the front runner, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and other forces should ideally avoid any move to exploit the issues of the Rohingya and Rakhine for political gain, as such attempts would likely harm relations with the Arakan Army and undermine prospects for repatriation.

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<sup>113</sup> These criticisms likely have less to do with the humanitarian corridor than with tensions between the interim government, on one side, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and army chief Wakar-Uz-Zaman, on the other, over the government's reluctance to announce a date for elections. Both Wakar and BNP leaders have argued that an unelected interim government has no mandate to establish a humanitarian corridor. See, for example, “National election should be held by December”, *Prothom Alo*, 22 May 2025.

### B. *Creating Space for Civil Society*

Limiting the influence of armed groups is also vital in enabling civilian leaders to emerge from among the refugees in Bangladesh. No such personage will rise to prominence so long as militants remain the dominant force in the refugee camps; armed group leaders and their associates cannot adequately represent the community as they are not accepted by many Rohingya, let alone the Arakan Army or foreign actors. Bangladesh needs to create an environment in which community members of all genders feel safe enough to take on leadership roles. Without such legitimate representatives, voluntary repatriation is unlikely to occur, as there will be few Rohingya leaders who can negotiate and build trust with the Arakan Army.

For civilian leadership to emerge, the Bangladeshi government needs to review its own policies regarding management of the refugee camps. Since the August 2019 genocide day rallies, which prompted a domestic backlash, Bangladeshi authorities have kept Rohingya civil society figures under close watch and limited their ability to organise. At times, they have sought to displace the civil society groups that emerged organically since 2017 by sponsoring rival organisations that advocate for repatriation or other causes that align with Bangladeshi interests. These groups lack credibility with refugees, who perceive them as government stooges. Bangladesh should allow greater political space within the camps so that genuinely representative figures can emerge.

### C. *Inclusive Government in Rakhine*

The Arakan Army's next steps will be crucial. Regardless of the hostility it has faced from the Myanmar military and Rohingya armed groups, its troops' actions in northern Rakhine, along with public statements from its leaders, have badly damaged the group's reputation in the refugee camps, and Rohingya armed groups are capitalising on this sentiment. Further abuses of civilians in northern Rakhine as part of clearance operations targeting Rohingya armed groups will only add fuel to the insurgency, creating a cycle of violence and fear that is likely to force more Rohingya to flee across the border to Bangladesh. Additional refugee flight will hurt the Arakan Army's relationship with Dhaka, undermine prospects for developing its proto-state and likely prompt more Rohingya to join armed groups.

The Arakan Army needs to show that it can govern for all communities in Rakhine State, including the Rohingya Muslim minority. Despite apparent attempts at including Rohingya in the lower echelons of its expanding administration, many Rohingya civilians still complain that life is hardly better than under the military. The Arakan Army should end discrimination against Rohingya civilians, build trust with community leaders and ensure that they have equal access to services and livelihood opportunities. As a refugee put it: "They are the ones who can bring peace and justice by ruling fairly. If they are good and just, the situation will get much better".<sup>114</sup> To show such fairness, however, the Arakan Army will itself need to be convinced that Rohingya armed groups are ceasing operations in Rakhine and relations with Dhaka are on a more stable footing.

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<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee living outside the camps, March 2025.

Setting such a virtuous cycle in motion will require willingness from all sides. The Arakan Army should meet its side of the bargain by resuming earlier attempts at dialogue with Rohingya refugees. To change perceptions within the camps and undermine support for a Rohingya insurgency, it should assure refugees that it is not opposed to repatriation or to fundamental rights, such as citizenship and property ownership, for the Rohingya.

#### *D. Foreign Support*

Continued international aid for the Rohingya refugees will also be essential to counter the risk of an insurgency emerging from the camps. Refugees are largely reliant on foreign donors for food, shelter, sanitation, health care and other forms of assistance. Already, the sense among Rohingya that they can no longer depend on international support, either to sustain themselves in Bangladesh or to push for their return to Myanmar, is galvanising support for armed struggle. Reductions in support and services will play into the hands of Rohingya armed groups and criminal gangs.

Ideally, the U.S. would reverse its decision to cut its contribution to the UN-led humanitarian response, but this prospect seems remote. Making up for the funding shortfall will be challenging, but other major donors such as the European Union and its member states, as well as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Japan and Türkiye, should step up. Further development assistance, especially from international financial institutions, and aid from non-traditional donors – particularly Gulf Arab states – could also help mitigate the impact.

Even if other donors increase their contributions, they are unlikely to completely fill the vacuum left by the U.S., especially at a time when humanitarian needs are at an historic high worldwide. It is therefore essential that UN agencies and donors work with the Bangladeshi government to build Rohingya self-reliance. The interim government has been more open to the idea of allowing livelihood opportunities for refugees than its predecessor, which regarded these initiatives as undermining the path toward repatriation. But the likely decline in donor support means that all sides now need to move much faster in this area.

To begin with, small businesses should be allowed to operate in the camps. In practice, these already exist, but legalising them could allow far more to open and trim operating costs, such as by making it easier for Rohingya to get supplies from wholesalers. Many Rohingya – mainly men – already work illegally outside the camps, in agriculture, construction and other sectors. Creating avenues for them to work legally while mitigating any harm to Bangladeshis is essential. This step would also enable the UN to direct humanitarian assistance, particularly food support, to those who are unable to work, such as households headed by women. Granting legal access to SIM cards and mobile money would also help reduce overhead and improve safety, among other benefits.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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The November 2024 truce between Rohingya armed groups has brought welcome relief from the bloody turf war of the past two years in Bangladesh's sprawling refugee camps. But it has had a sting in its tail, opening the door for these groups to expand recruitment within the camps, mobilise support for an armed campaign and lay the basis for a sustained Rohingya insurgency against the Arakan Army in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The consequences of a resurgence of war in the region would be devastating. Even in the unlikely scenario that these groups were able to wrest territory from the Arakan Army, it would come at a high human cost while also turning the Rohingya into pariahs in the eyes of Myanmar's other anti-regime forces as well as for much of the public in the country.

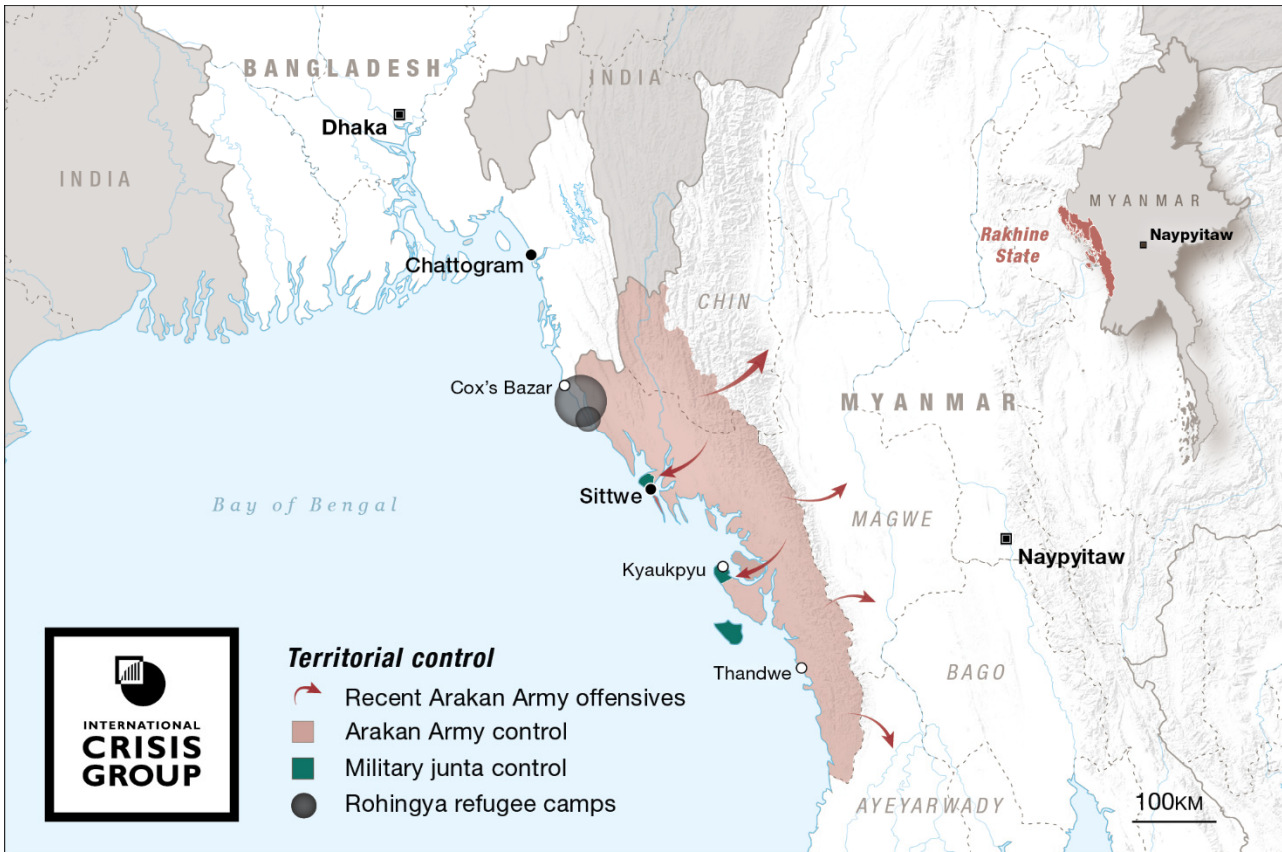
Insurgency is not the answer to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Growing support for armed struggle in the camps reflects how desperate most refugees are: now that the Arakan Army has taken over the areas they fled from, many doubt that they will ever be able to return home. With aid also dwindling, despair among refugees has reached alarming depths.

Even so, Bangladesh, the Arakan Army and outside actors have an opportunity to restore a semblance of hope. Bangladesh should help improve living conditions in Rakhine by allowing cross-border aid and trade, while also bringing an end to its dealings with Rohingya armed groups. The Arakan Army should pursue dialogue with Rohingya civilian leaders to build trust and explore viable options for repatriation. Foreign powers should strive to maintain support for the humanitarian response, though funding cuts make it imperative for Dhaka to find ways to reduce reliance on aid. Failure to take these steps could sow the seeds of an even greater disaster across northern Rakhine State and southern Bangladesh.

**Cox's Bazar/Dhaka/Brussels, 18 June 2025**

**Appendix A: Map of Arakan Army Control in Myanmar's Rakhine and Southern Chin States**

Since late 2023, the Arakan Army has gradually wrested almost full control over Rakhine State from the Myanmar military, including the northern Rakhine region from where close to 750,000 Rohingya refugees fled in 2016-2017.



Source: Crisis Group research, June 2025, CRISIS GROUP

## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**June 2025**

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