



STATEMENT / ASIA 27 AUGUST 2017

Myanmar Tips into New Crisis after Rakhine State Attacks

The Rohingya insurgent attacks that killed twelve Myanmar soldiers and officials and perhaps 77 of their own number is a serious escalation of a ten-month-old crisis. They make implementation of this week's recommendations to address Rohingya grievances from Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission both harder and more urgent.

In the early hours of 25 August, militants from Harakah al-Yaqin – a Rohingya insurgent group that now refers to itself in English as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – mounted coordinated attacks on 30 police posts and an army base in the north of Myanmar's Rakhine state, in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. The government reports that the attackers, equipped with hand-held explosive devices, machetes and a few small arms, killed ten police officers, a soldier and an immigration official. Reportedly, 77 insurgents also were killed and one captured. In response, the military is conducting "clearance operations" across the area and police in rural outposts have moved to more secure locations in case of further attacks. Clashes continue in some locations, and there are reports of vigilantism against Rohingya communities. Both Rohingya and Buddhist residents are attempting to flee the areas affected. Time is not on the government's side if Rakhine state is to be pulled back from the brink. It must quickly take bold measures to address legitimate Rakhine and Rohingya concerns.

This episode represents a very serious escalation in the conflict and was preceded by a significant rise in tensions in northern

Rakhine. The insurgent group launched its first operation in October 2016, when it conducted a complex, deadly, coordinated attack on three border police bases in northern Rakhine state. A months-long, heavy-handed military response followed, including a new deployment of Myanmar army troops. As a result, some 87,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh and, in February 2017, a UN investigation concluded that there had been grave and widespread abuses by the military that "very likely" amounted to crimes against humanity. A domestic investigation has rejected these claims.

The path to a long-term solution is clear, if challenging. It has been set out in considerable detail in the final report of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission, released on 23 August and welcomed by the government. It involves addressing the legitimate grievances of the Rakhine, while ensuring freedom of movement, access to services and livelihoods, political participation and citizenship rights for the Rohingya. The recent attacks have created a far more difficult political context for the government to implement these recommendations, but have also reinforced the urgency of doing so.

The current crisis was neither unpredicted nor unpreventable. The anti-Muslim violence of 2012, and the emergence of the new insurgent group last year were both clear signals that the volatile dynamics of Rakhine state urgently need a political, not just a security response to address the concerns of all communities in the state. Yet the Myanmar government has not moved quickly or decisively enough to remedy the deep, years-long policy failures that are leading some Muslims in Rakhine state to take up violence. These include extreme discrimination by Myanmar's society and state as well as a progressive erosion of rights and barriers to obtaining critical identity and citizenship documents, the community's disenfranchisement before the 2015 elections, its gradual marginalisation from social and political life, and rights abuses. These factors, in combination with the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Rohingya communities that resulted from separate violence in 2012, and the military crackdown last year that targeted civilians, create an environment where ARSA can increase its legitimacy and recruiting base among local communities and more easily intimidate and kill Rohingya who disagree with it and lack any real protection from the state.

There are clear lessons for the Myanmar government from the previous episodes of violence and from the present crisis. Crisis Group has noted repeatedly that an aggressive military response that is not part of a broader political strategy and policy framework will only worsen the situation. In the immediate future, if the military response is not to entrench worsening cycles of violence, it must respect the principle of proportionality and distinguish between insurgents and Rohingya civilians. It must provide protection to all civilians caught up in or fleeing the fighting. And it must provide unfettered access to humanitarian agencies and media to affected areas, lest it contribute to a dangerous, violent polarisation, increase alienation

and despair, and enable provocative misinformation to take hold.

ARSA's violent actions inevitably will harm, not help it, despite its claims to be fighting the Myanmar state – and not Rakhine civilians – for the Rohingya cause. ARSA will face international censure for the violence of its attacks, which will increase if it seeks to improve its fighting capacity. The Myanmar government formally declared it a terrorist group under national law on 25 August. This has limited legal implications but will placate nationalists who have been calling for the government to be unequivocal on this point. It also means that Myanmar is likely to increasingly present this as a fight against transnational terrorism rather than domestic insurgency. In short, by resorting to violence, ARSA's leaders are hardening social divisions and biases against the Rohingya, and increasing anti-Muslim sentiment across Myanmar.

ARSA are well aware that their latest attacks are likely to provoke a strong military response and political backlash, as they did in 2016, which will greatly harm Rohingya villagers. That almost certainly is its aim. Despite its claim that it is "protecting" the Rohingya, it knows that it is provoking the security forces into a heavy-handed military response, hoping that this will further alienate Rohingya communities, drive support for ARSA, and place the spotlight of the world back on military abuses in northern Rakhine state. A disproportionate military response without any overarching political strategy once again will play directly into ARSA's hands.

There is no evidence that ARSA's goals or members support a transnational jihadist agenda, despite indications that the group may have received some training from members of such outfits. That will not stop those who resent all Muslim groups and grievances from characterising it as such. On the other

side, another harsh military response and the continued displacement of scores of thousands to camps in Bangladesh will create conditions ripe for exploitation by transnational jihadists.

The costs of failing to address the roots of the crisis increase every day. The impact will not fall only on Rakhine state, but on Myanmar as a whole, where anti-Muslim sentiment and Buddhist nationalism are on the rise,

threatening fragile communal relations. The government has many other urgent issues to deal with, including its complex peace process with multiple ethnic armed groups and the difficult job of steering the economy and ensuring greater prosperity for all the people of the country. The deepening crisis in Rakhine state threatens to sweep aside all other priorities, as it will continue to dominate both domestic debate and international engagement with Myanmar.