



Renewed Rakhine-Rohingya Tensions?

On 29 July 2021, the Rohingya Post first reported that hundreds of Arakan Army troops and Buddhist Rakhine had sealed off a Rohingya village in Minbya Township, since 24 July 2021. The village was running out of essential supplies and villagers were being tortured in the local mosques.



From the Rohingya Post.

Burma Campaign UK reported that the Arakan Army had occupied and laid siege to Let Ma (also known as Lumbashor by the Rohingya) Village, Minbya Township, Rakhine State, but had withdrawn in the afternoon of 2 August taking two villagers with them. Burma Campaign UK called on the Arakan Army to immediately release the two villagers and to commit to ending all abductions and hostage taking of civilians. Burma Campaign UK also reported that the Arakan Army had forced villagers to sign documents and be filmed stating that no human rights violations had taken place.

The Development Media Group, a Rakhine news agency promoted for its professionalism and unbiased news, denied the report claiming that it is propaganda against the Arakan Army and its growing influence on the people of Arakan/ Rakhine State.



What Happened and Why?

Letma or Lumbashor is a big village with quite a large population. The villagers are well known for being very united and strong in protecting themselves from the excesses of successive authorities, even during the Japanese occupation. There is no Tatmadaw base near the village but there are some AA bases which means the area is likely 'administered' by the civilian arm of the AA – United League of Arakan.

According to local sources, on 21 July before Eid ul Adha, the festival commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, AA troops demanded that every household making kurbaan (animal sacrifices) in the village pay Kyat 15,000 and provide 3 kilograms of meat (beef or mutton). Some villagers did not comply. Therefore on 24 July, AA troops arrived at Letma from three directions. Rakhine villagers from surrounding villages then surrounded the village. The family and relatives of 12 villagers who refused to pay were detained and kept imprisoned in a mosque without food for three days. During the occupation, AA soldiers apparently made the villagers cook and provide meals for them. Soldiers were reportedly also stealing cattle and goats owned by the Rohingya villagers. According to Burma Campaign UK, the AA troops were commanded by Lt. Colonel Zaw Min Htun and Major Khaing Kyaw.

The AA denies the allegations and claims that they were trying to capture bandits, who are engaged in smuggling cattle. It is true that cattle smugglers are active in the area but Twan Mrat Naing, Commander-in-Chief of the AA, posted an apparent threat to Rohingyas on his Twitter account today, stating: *"We promote ethnic diversity and religious tolerance but can't afford to provide safe haven and breeding ground for the terrorists and criminal gangs. Be aware that you are just about to turn your best friend into (an) enemy by using your best tool of disinformation."*

Given the rapid expansion of the AA and its 'administrative' areas due to the absence of local authorities following the 1 February coup, it is possible that as one observer noted, *"Twan Mrat Naing, sometimes may not know what is really happening on the ground. Some of his commanders may have been misbehaving and intentionally wrongly reporting to him. It is likely that they did something that was not right. But even if Rakhines do not like what has been happening on the ground, nobody (especially Rakhine) dares or wants to criticise the AA openly even on social media."*

If this is true, the AA leadership will need to redouble its efforts and make a sincere attempt to improve. Compared to fighting, governance is difficult and good governance is even more difficult. The culture of impunity so prevalent in the Tatmadaw must not be allowed to grow in the AA and ULA. Twan Mrat Naing is a good leader and he needs to face problems head-on. The goodwill of the Rakhine and Rohingya people as well as that of the Myanmar and international communities must not be squandered.