

Questionable Motives: Myanmar Security Operations in Rakhine State

On 9 October, nine police officers were killed and five injured during coordinated ambushes in Maungdaw and Rethadaung Townships in Rakhine state, Myanmar. The night time attacks hit three Border Police posts on the border with Bangladesh. Police said the attackers were armed with knives and "ginkali", a homemade slingshot that fires iron bolts. According to reports, they were able to steal more than 50 guns and 10,000 bullets from the border posts.¹ Speaking at a press conference the next day Police Maj-Gen Zaw Win, Chief of the Myanmar Police Force, said that the bodies of eight attackers were found. Two attackers were captured alive and one home-made pistol was seized along with two bullets and one cartridge of bullets.²

It was unclear what organisation could mount such coordinated attacks, however, suspicion fell on the Muslim Rohingya, a long persecuted minority that are dominant in the two townships. Shortly after the attacks, Maj-Gen Zaw Win was quoted as saying,

According to our force members who are working on this case, those who attacked and raided were shouting that they were Rohingyas,³

Meanwhile Tin Maung Swe, a senior official within Rakhine's state government, told AFP that those behind the ambushes were "RSO insurgents", a reference to the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation.⁴

The attacks

A press conference the next day reported that the first attack was launched against the Kyikanpyin Border Post Headquarters in Maungdaw Township. At about 1 am, approximately 10 men attacked the outpost in Maungdaw Township. Six policemen fought back and seized one home-made pistol, two bullets and one cartridge.

After the first incident, another attack occurred at the central outpost of the headquarters around 1.50 am. Police at the outpost fought against approximately 90 attackers for about hour. The attackers held a high position, which prompted police to move to a hill on the left side of the central outpost and gained an advantage. The attackers withdrew around 4 am. Six police were killed and two injured and 51 arms and 10,140 bullets, one bayonet and 28 cartridges of bullets were taken away by the attackers.

The second attack occurred on the Kotankauk Outpost in Rethadaung Township. At 3 am, about 30 attackers jumped over the fence of the Kotankauk Outpost and attacked police with swords and spears. Ten policemen fought back, killing one attacker and capturing two. The attackers withdrew at about 3.45 am. One policeman was killed and two injured. Two weapons were taken away by the attackers.

The third attack was on Ngakhuya Office. As officers from the Ngakhuya Office reinforced police at the Kyikanpyin Headquarters to repel an attack earlier in the morning, about 50 men attacked the Ngakhuya office with swords, spears and home-made weapons. The police remaining at the outpost fought back before the attackers withdrew at around 5.45 am.

At the press conference on 17 October, which was translated into English and appeared in state media, Maj-Gen Aung Soe said,

. . . that the government came to know from the confessions of detainees [after the attacks] that the so-called leader of the attacks had a relationship with RSO, training courses and

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subsidy from them. The authorities released the news as confessed by them. Some weakness can be found in receiving news and information.

Significantly, the attacks came only two days after The Deputy Minister for Home Affairs, Major-General Aung Soe, revealed that

. . . the Union had made extensive efforts to combat terrorism in country and beyond, including surveillance of suspected terrorists and specially trained anti-terrorist combatants.⁵

This was in response to a question from MP U Tin Aye about whether Myanmar was prepared for a possible terrorist attack. Aung Soe further remarked,

The Ministry has world terrorist organizations and their members recorded, international mercenary fighters registered, having terrorist suspects kept under constant surveillance, and is concurrently making arrangements to be able to take prompt action against them.⁶

A press release posted on the President's Office website on 13 October later clarified in relation to the October attacks:

According to the findings of the interrogations, the attacks in Maungdaw were intended to promote extremist violent ideology among the majority Muslim population in the area. Using Maungdaw as a foothold, this was an attempt to take over the areas of Maungdaw and Buthitaung. For this, they received significant financial support from extremist individuals in some Middle Eastern countries. This funding was not provided by particular organisations, but was provided secretly through contacts between individuals.

Interrogations have revealed that the attacks in Maungdaw were carried out by the Aqa Mul Mujahidin organisation which is active in Maungdaw, and which is linked to the RSO armed organisation. The leader of this organisation is Havistoohar, a religious and social extremist aged around 45 years old, of Kyaukpyinseik village in Maungdaw Township. He previously attended a six-month Taliban training course in Pakistan, and he has 4 sisters and 1 brother living in Saudi Arabia. Assuming the identity of a refugee, he frequently went to stay in a village near Teknaf in Bangladesh, from where he received funding from organisations based in the Middle East. Among those he worked with were: a Pakistani citizen called Kalis who came to Nga Ku Ra village after living in Bangladesh; Ibrahim, Aza, and Ayatullah who lived in Kutabaloun refugee camp in Bangladesh; and 12 men living in Nila refugee camp including individuals called Zubaid and Islam. Kalis previously attended a terrorist training camp in Pakistan, and he speaks Myanmar, Bengali, Arakan, Malay and Pakistani languages fluently. Around five months ago, through the arrangement of Havistoohar, Kalis came to Maungdaw and began delivering armed training classes to local extremist youths recruited and mobilised by Havistoohar.

The four main instigators in Middle NgaKuRa village, called Abdul Rahman, Munet, Kapiktulah and Akis, had all attended an RSO training course. Havistoohar, Kalis, Mabuaya of Maungnama Village (who led the attack on Kyikanpyin), together with 12 attackers who had come from a refugee camp in Bangladesh, had carried out robberies in the villages of Pha Wut Chaung, Ale Than Kyaw and Nga Chaung in Maungdaw Township.

It continues,

According to the findings of the interrogations, Havistoohar and his organisation mobilised extremist youths in the Maungdaw area. They secretly ran weapons training and self-defence training in remote locations in the hills and forests, as well as in the compound of Abdul

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Rahman in the Middle Nga Ku Ra village, and in the forest near Kyauk Pyin Seik village. Following this, plans were drawn up to carry out violent attacks.

Havistoohar had planned for a total of around 400 attackers to simultaneously launch attacks on 6 separate locations: Mabuya would lead around 100 attackers against Kyikanpyin Border Guard Police (Number One) Headquarters; Kalis and Abdul Rahman would lead around 100 attackers against Ngakhuya Police Local Office; Wadif would lead around 50 attackers against Kyain Chaung Local Police Office; Aza would lead around 50 attackers against Kyauk Hlay Kar Local Police Office; Raw Paing would lead around 50 attackers against Ywet Nyo Taung Local Police Office; and Abu Kumar would lead around 12 attackers against Kotankauk Police Outpost. However, on 9th October they were only able to attack three locations: Kyikanpyin, Kotankauk, and Ngakhuya. Havistoohar had instructed that after attacking the bases, the attackers should murder the members of the police, take their weapons and equipment, and use those weapons in further attacks on nearby Tatmadaw and police bases. Before the attacks took place, the organisation leaders systematically explained to the attackers the plan of attack.

The Aqa Mul Mujahidin organisation deployed tactics often used in violent armed attacks around the world: receiving foreign funding (from those originally from Maungdaw but now in the Middle East); attending terrorist training courses (delivered by the Taliban in Pakistan, and RSO in Bangladesh); and using religion to mobilise extremist youth in Maungdaw. According to their plan, they intended to take over the majority-Muslim areas of Buthitaung and Maungdaw, and to spread propaganda through disseminating video files on the internet and via social networks, in line with the methods of terrorist organisations such as the Taleban, Al Qaeda and ISIS, in order to attract greater foreign support and funding and encourage the cooperation and participation of domestic and foreign religious extremists.

It remains unclear considering the long-standing oppression of Rohingya in Rakhine State why it has taken so long for such an armed force to be assembled and trained. If such a movement had been receiving foreign funding (from those originally from Maungdaw but now in the Middle East), as noted in the last paragraph, why did the attacks not happen much sooner. The outbreak of sectarian violence in 2012 would seem a more likely time for a terrorist attack by antagonised Rohingya.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation



One of the alleged culprits in the attacks, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) had been dormant for years until an attack was reported on 17 May 2014. A police patrol consisting of eight police officers was ambushed on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Over forty rebels, allegedly belonging to the RSO based across the border in Bangladesh, attacked the patrol killing four and injuring two.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation was created in 1982 after a number of individuals split from what was the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF). The two main factions that emerged were led by Nurul Islam and Mohammad Yunus. The RSO developed ties to extremist Muslim organisations including Jamaat e Islami in Bangladesh and its youth organisation Islami Chatro Shibir. In addition, it was reported that the RSO were training other militant organisations and that RSO camps had hosted trainers from the Afghan Mojahedin.⁷

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The RSO's main military camp was located near the hospital in Ukhia, Bangladesh. The RSO had been able to acquire an extensive number of Chinese-made RPG-2 rocket launchers, light machine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles, claymore mines and explosives from private arms dealers in the Thai town of Aranyaprathet near Thailand's border with Cambodia. In addition to the RSO, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) also participated in the attack. ARIF was formed in 1986, and included what was left of the RPF cadres. The ARIF was led by Nurul Islam, a Rangoon-educated lawyer. However, it never had more than a few dozen soldiers, mostly equipped with elderly, UK-made 9mm Sterling L2A3 sub-machine guns, bolt action .303 rifles and a few M-16 assault rifles.³³ In 1998, it became the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO).

It remains unclear as to the goal of the RSO, which according to one prominent Rohingya leader has splintered into yet more factions. Reports suggest, the most militant faction headed by Mohammed Yunus is no longer active and was replaced by the Moulavi Salim Ullah RSO faction. The 2014 attacks on the police, it has been suggested, was carried out by yet another faction, which was previously under the leadership of Moulavi Deen Mohamed.⁸

Moulavi Deen Mohamed, had been involved in the Rohingya revolutionary movement since the early nineties and became a member of the RSO central executive committee in 1994. In 1998, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) led by Nurul Islam, RSO led by Mohammad Yunus, and the RSO faction led by Zakaria merged into the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO). The headquarters of ARNO was opened at No. 30 Jumakhar street, Jumakhar ward, Chittagong in Bangladesh and they established three camps the Zailarsawri HQ, Dawmawsri camp and Kyarlaungtaik camp. In total, it was estimated that ARNO could field up to two hundred troops.⁹

Under pressure from the Myanmar Government the Bangladeshi authorities ordered ARNO to leave its territory in 2002. As a result, in August 2002, Fayos Ahmed, ARNO and U Maung Lu Gyi from NUPA (National Unity Party of Arakan) purportedly visited Thailand where they met with leaders of the Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) and requested that they be allowed to open a base in KNPP territory, a request that was subsequently refused.¹⁰ They both met with a number of ethnic leaders in Thailand and asked that ARNO be allowed to join the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), yet again this request was refused after strong opposition from the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and the Democratic Party of Arakan (DPA), which were already DAB members. According to a Rangoon embassy cable:

Both Khaing Soe Aung [ALP] and Aung Sein Tha [DPA] bitterly rejected the proposal on the grounds that the Rohingya were not indigenous to Rakhine State and that they could not accept them at all as ethnic people.

Failing to elicit support from armed ethnic groups in Thailand the delegation returned to Bangladesh where they continued to maintain bases. While ARNO, under the leadership of Nurul Islam still exists he states that:

ARNO has no formal relation with any RSO factions . . . ARNO is a peaceful political organization to ensure the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya people on par with other national groups of the country, Union of Myanmar.¹¹

Moulavi Deen Mohammad left ARNO, and joined one of the armed groups and then remerged under the RSO banner as President. Current numbers of the Deen Mohammed faction are unlikely to exceed a few dozen men. In addition, who currently leads the faction remains unknown, Moulavi Deen Mohammad died on 3 May 2005 in Saudi Arabia while he was there on party matters.¹²

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Major concerns in relation to Islamic extremism also appeared in 2013 when it was reported that an RSO delegation visited a rally of the Forum Umat Islam in central Jakarta on 19 June. It is not clear which faction of the RSO the delegates represented, or if indeed they were actually RSO. The two-man delegation consisted of Ustadz Abu Arif and Abu Shafiyah, the latter claiming to be the commander of the Rohingya Laskar Mujahideen. According to an article originally published on arrahmah.com, the purported RSO delegates stated that:

There should be no diplomacy whatsoever, we Muslims must fight. We the Mujahideen of Rohingya hope in the Muslim brothers in Indonesia, if there are those who could help in the form of Mujahideen personnel, firearms, funds and medical teams.¹³

The report also claims that over three hundred people had been trained, although this is highly unlikely, and even if so, the group still lacks military capability in relation to arms with Ustadz Abu Arif admitting that:

Muslims are empty handed, while the kuffars are using weapons,¹⁴

There has been little to no activity on Myanmar soil prior to the latest attacks. The last major incident, prior to the 2014 attack, allegedly involving RSO members, occurred on 6 November 2012 when they attacked a Myanmar Engineering unit constructing a border fence in Maungdaw. One officer and two civil servants were captured and eventually executed by the group.¹⁵ Turkey's INCA published photos of the captured unit in March 2014 alongside a number of photographs purportedly showing RSO cadres training in Myanmar.¹⁶ It is unclear as to why the photographs were published by the Turkish News agency at this particular time. According to veteran journalist Bertil Lintner who has written numerous articles on separatist groups operating in Bangladesh,

The pictures are genuine but old and were taken near Ukhia between Cox's Bazar and Teknaf in Bangladesh.¹⁷

He also noted that many of the fighters in the photographs were actually members of the youth wing of the Jamaat e Islami and not RSO troops.

A leading member of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation has denied any involvement with Islamist militants stating that a number of such reports have been designed '... to tarnish the image of the Rohingya people.'¹⁸

Despite such allusions by the Myanmar government of a Rohingya Jihad in Myanmar, it seems most likely that any remnants of the RSO group are primarily involved in the various illicit activities that have increased along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Since anti-Muslim violence erupted in 2012, security along the border has become increasingly precarious. According to one Bangladeshi journalist:

Now you see more and more people getting involved in robbery, smuggling and hijacking. It's getting to be huge.¹⁹

While it would serve the interests of some parties in Myanmar concerned with the Rohingya issue, a review of recent events does not suggest a sudden upsurge in Rohingya militancy. There is no evidence to support the belief that the RSO is retraining and preparing for Jihad or the creation of an Islamist state in Myanmar. Rather, it would appear that a number of armed individuals have been involved in criminal enterprises. As Jason Eligh, the Myanmar country manager for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) notes:

Illicit economies thrive in such environments of conflict and strife, particularly where rule of law institutions are weakened or non-existent . . . As a result, the trafficking of drugs, arms

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and people across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border is a serious and growing concern, as is the movement of illicit armed groups.²⁰

Currently there appears to be no single operational RSO faction.²¹ Those that remain are mostly likely to be nothing more than bandits. According to one former RSO leader when asked if he believed the RSO were now connected to Islamic militants,

According to government's announcement or the videos released almost all of the attackers were unarmed but, only equipped with traditional long knives, spears and farm tools. It is puzzling how it was possible for a really ill-equipped home-grown poor young villagers attack a well-built and strong Border Guard Police (BGP) headquarters and two other outposts.²²

Despite this argument, supported by video footage,²³ the Myanmar military closed off large swathes of Rakhine State, inhabited by the Rohingya and started anti-terrorist operations.

Security operations

Witnesses quoted in media and by human rights organisations say troops have used investigations of the attacks as an excuse for a crackdown against them, gunning down unarmed Muslim civilians in the street. The military say they have been defending themselves from armed attackers. Rumours of killings and mass arrests quickly spread on social media, stoking fear. But details have proved difficult to confirm in the remote and tightly controlled area.

Myanmar's security forces have killed almost 70 people since taking control of northern Rakhine state last month, the army said, adding that media reports of widespread destruction in the area were "false news".

A hunt for the attackers has seen a total of "69 Bengalis (Rohingya) killed and 234 arrested" between October 9 and November 14, according to a Facebook post by the army chief's office. "Seven soldiers, including one commanding officer... and 10 police sacrificed their lives", it added.²⁴

The assertion that Aqa Mul Mujahidin (AMM) was further supported, according to one media report, by Indian and Bangladeshi intelligence, although it must be noted both agencies have their own agenda in relation to the issue.

According to the report, senior officials in Indian intelligence, who 'have closely followed the Rohingya armed militancy for decades', had said the Aqa Mul Mujahideen (AMM) leaders were indeed trained in Pakistan.²⁵

The report continues, "Later they recruited Rohingya youths in Rakhine and trained them in jungle bases on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border." He was also quoted as saying that AMM is a new armed group that originated from the Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami-Arakan (HUJI-A) which enjoys close relations with the Pakistan Taliban, it notes.

The HUJI-A chief is Abdus Qadoos Burmi, a Pakistani national of Rohingya origin, who it is claimed recruited Hafiz Tohar [Havistoohar], 45, from Kyauk Pyin Seik village in Maungdaw in Myanmar and arranged for his training in Pakistan.

Tohar is said to be heading the AMM now and Qadoos Burmi is reported to be close to the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba/Jamaat ud Dawa (LeT/JuD), headed by Hafiz Sayeed.²⁶

The Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami - Arakan, was founded by Abdul Qadoos, a Burmese Muslim who fled to Pakistan sometime in the early 1980s. He formed Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami - Arakan in 1988. The goal was to liberate the Muslim-dominated Burmese state of Rakhine.²⁷

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Qadoos has said he fought Russians in Afghanistan in 1980s after settling in Karachi he joined Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. Quddus and his Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami - Arakan are based in Korangi Town in Karachi, Pakistan, the group used to work closely with Ilyas Kashmiri, head of al-Qaeda's 313 Brigade.²⁸ While there have been numerous calls for Rohingya to join Jihad in Myanmar it has been suggested that the Rohingya are unlikely to find Islamist support with Ahmad Suaedy of Jakarta's Abdurrahman Wahid Centre for interfaith dialogue stating,

. . . some jihadist groups, reared on the fundamentalist doctrines of the Arab world, would regard the Rohingyas' brand of Islam as unduly syncretic, even unIslamic, and thus unworthy of support.²⁹

The fact that the RSO has for all intents and purposes ceased to exist further supports such an argument.

There remain serious concerns in relation to continued security operations in Rakhine State and there is a strong belief that the attacks on 9 October have been used to further crack down on the Rohingya population. Thousands continue to flee what one UN official has characterised as "ethnic cleansing."³⁰ The Government of Myanmar has still not been able to provide credible evidence that Islamic militants are responsible for attacks in Rakhine State and most recently the violence in Rakhine State, along with increased military operations by armed ethnic groups in Shan State, has been used as a pretext to call for a state of emergency to be imposed in the country. Such a call would transfer the government's executive, legislative, and judicial powers to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces. In essence, the country would revert back to military rule, a move some elements in the country would no doubt applaud.

Notes

- ¹ 'Nine Myanmar police killed in attack on Bangladesh border', AFP, 10 October 2016
- ² 'Nine policemen killed, five injured, one missing in border attacks', Myanmar News Agency, 10 October 2016
- ³ 'Nine Myanmar police killed in attack on Bangladesh border', AFP, 10 October 2016
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ 'Myanmar is prepared: Ministry - Union's readiness for anti-terrorism attacks revealed', MOI, 7 October 2016, <http://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=news/7/10/2016/id-8647> accessed 25 November 16
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ 'Foreign Combatants in Afghanistan', Jane's Intelligence Review, 1 July 1993
- ⁸ Email correspondence with former RSO leader, 29 May 2014
- ⁹ 'Arakan Rohingya National Organization Contacts with Al Qaeda and with Myanmar Insurgent Groups on the Thai Border', US Embassy Cable, Rangoon, Wikileaks.
- ¹⁰ This information is denied by at least one former RSO leader, Email correspondence 21 July 2014
- ¹¹ Email correspondence with former RSO leader, 29 May 2014
- ¹² 'Rohingya Revolutionary Leader Dies in Saudi Arabia', Kaladan 5 May 2005,
- ¹³ <http://prisonerofjoy.blogspot.com/2013/06/ulama-of-rohingya-jihad-fi-sabilillah-i.html>
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5445:photo-of-kidnapped-military-officer-is-from-2012-president-s-office&catid=44:national&Itemid=384, accessed 16 June 2014
- ¹⁶ <http://www.incanews.com/?aType=haber&ArticleID=2847&q=Myanmar>, accessed 16 June 2014
- ¹⁷ 'Experts Reject Claims of 'Rohingya Mujahideen' Insurgency', Paul Vrieze, The Irrawaddy, 15 July 2013
- ¹⁸ Email correspondence with former RSO leader, 30 November 2016
- ¹⁹ 'Attack on border fuels growing concern', Bill O'Toole, Myanmar Times, 26 May 2014
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Email correspondence with former RSO leader, 16 November 2016
- ²² Ibid
- ²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36tRKor-WDg>. It must be noted at least three videos show the alleged attackers all with varying degree of weaponry.
- ²⁴ 'Almost 70 killed in month of Rakhine violence: Myanmar army', AFP, 15 November 2016
- ²⁵ 'Pakistan links to Rohingya militants 'deep-rooted'', Mizzima, 19 October 2016
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/hakat-ul-jihad-al-islami-arakan-burma>
- ²⁸ 'Is JeM pushing Myanmar rebels into Kashmir?', PEERZADA ASHIQ, The Hindu, 8 October, 2016
- ²⁹ 'Fears of a new religious strife', The Economist, 27 July, 2013
- ³⁰ 'Myanmar pursuing 'ethnic cleansing' of Rohingya: UN official', AFP, 25 November 16