

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 23 October 2017

A Background to the Security Crisis in Northern Rakhine

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 25 August 2017, the day after Kofi Annan’s Rakhine Advisory Commission submitted its report, the Rohingya group ARSA simultaneously attacked 30 police outposts and one army regiment’s headquarters. The Myanmar Army responded with a massive security operation that led to more than 500,000 Rohingya people fleeing to Bangladesh.
- Rakhine State has had a history of Muslim separatist movements since 1948, and successive governments have tried to control illegal immigration and prevent separatist movements in Northern Rakhine State. In 2004, the removal of military intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt weakened the Myanmar government’s intelligence network in Rakhine State, and in 2013, the security situation worsened when the Border and Immigration Control Command was disbanded.
- Without these two security apparatuses, the government lacked intelligence on separatist sentiments and illegal operations in Northern Rakhine State, and security forces were caught off-guard by the ARSA attacks in October 2016 and August 2017.
- The current humanitarian crisis, the breakdown of law and order, and the communal violence and hatred in Northern Rakhine State are not only a legacy of the past but also contemporary developments that are seeing the emergence of a new terrorist group with extremist links.

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BACKGROUND¹

Concurrent with Burma's independence negotiations with the the United Kingdom, Muslims in the Buthidaung-Maungdaw area of Northern Arakan² in Burma had appealed to what was then East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) to annex these areas. After this idea was rejected by both Burma's independence hero Aung San and Pakistan's founder Muhammed Ali Jinnah, a Mujahidin insurgency led by Kassem started in 1948, following Burma's formal independence earlier that year. The roots of this insurgency lay in the Jamia-Tul Ulema movement that was founded at Maungdaw in May 1942.³

Distracted by the communist and ethnic insurgencies among Karens, Kachins, and others which sprang up almost simultaneously with the gaining of independence, the Burmese government and armed forces in the immediate post-independence years could only exert control in major cities and towns in Arakan. The Mujahidin thus managed to control a large part of the Buthidaung-Maungdaw area, and this led to many Arakanese Buddhist villagers fleeing to the southern part of the state. It was only in March 1951 that the *Tatmadaw*, Burma's Armed Forces, launched an offensive against the Mujahidin, capturing its headquarters at Latpantaung in November 1952. The remaining Mujahidin camps fell in late 1954, and the insurgents retreated into East Pakistan.⁴

The *Tatmadaw* launched another major offensive in 1960, which effectively ended the Mujahidin insurgency. Most of its leaders surrendered in November 1961. Small numbers of insurgents continued however to operate along the Burma-East Pakistan border, sometimes launching small-scale attacks on the police, committing acts of banditry on the local communities, and taxing illegal trade.

On 26 April 1964, two years after the then Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Ne Win, seized power on 2 March 1962, Muslim youths from the Buthidaung-Maungdaw area formed an underground movement called the Rohingya Independence Force (RIF).⁵ Their leader B.A. Jafar had been the chairman of the Yangon University Muslim Students Organization in 1962.

Former Mujahidin members joined the RIF, which changed its name to the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1973. Leadership crises in the RPF caused it to split into several

¹ In referring to the communities that identify themselves as "Rohingya", this article uses the term "Bengali", in view of the fact that the vast majority of people in Myanmar see them as such because of their origin from Bangladesh and earlier from the East Bengal province of Pakistan and before that from British India. The term "Rohingya" also has strong political connotations for the Burmese. Politicians who were members of this ethnic group used the term "Rohingya" around 1951, and it gradually came to be used by international organisations and the international media.

² The article uses "Burma" and "Arakan" in references to the country and its westernmost state in the years prior to July 1989 when the State Law and Order Restoration Council changed these names to Myanmar and Rakhine State respectively, among other changes to region, town and street names.

³ *History of Insurgency in Myanmar* (News and Periodical Enterprise, Second Edition 2000) p. 116.

⁴ *Ibid*, pages 126, 127.

⁵ *History of Rakhine State* (Rakhine State People's Council, 1983), volume 4, page 206.

factions; one became the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) armed group in 1982.⁶ In 1986, the RSO in turn split into two factions, with one faction forming the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) in June 1986. During 24-28 October 1998, the RSO and ARIF met with a view to mend the rift and form a united front. This meeting was supported by the International Relief Organization (IIRO), which promised financial and material support for the Rohingya movement. It led to the formation of the Rohingya National Organization (RNO), which later changed its name to the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO). The Ministry of Defence believed that change was made in order to garner support from Rakhine ethnic armed groups such as the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP).⁷ The ARNO mostly operated as a political organization, while the RSO continued military operations at the Bangladeshi border.

During the 1990s, the only major military operation carried out by the RSO was when 300 Rohingya insurgents attacked Ale Than Gyaw, Myin Lut and three other army posts in April 1994. The Myanmar Army had received a tip-off about the attack, however, and the RSO suffered heavy casualties. The Bangladesh authorities also attacked RSO camps and arrested some of its members in order to maintain friendly bilateral relations with Myanmar.⁸ Despite that setback, the RSO continued to conduct trainings for new recruits, but it was only able after that to mount a few small attacks on security forces along the border.

Throughout all this, the Myanmar Army and immigration officials had also been launching operations in Arakan. From 1966 to 1978, at least five operations were carried out with the aim of preventing illegal migration.⁹ Of these, the 1978 operation, which was conducted country-wide, created a large-scale exodus from Arakan. During its two-stage operation there,¹⁰ there were clashes with immigration officials, and the Army and police were called in. An exodus to Bangladesh on the part of those who wished to avoid scrutiny from the immigration officers ensued.¹¹

⁶ "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State", International Crisis Group Asia Report, 15 December 2016, page 4.

⁷ Personal interview, September 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Khin Nyunt (2016), "Issues from the Western Border Gate", (La Min Eain, Yangon, 2016) page 15 . The five operations listed by Khin Nyunt include Kyee-Gan (Oct.-Dec.1966); Shwe-Kyee (Oct.-Dec.1966); Myatmon (February 1969); Sabee (Feb.-Dec. 1974); and Nagarmin(12 February to 5 June 1978). During Operation Shwe Kyee in 1966, two operations were launched simultaneously in different townships in Arakan.

¹⁰ On 12-18 February 1978 in Sittwe Township, and 17 March-5 June 1978 in Buthidaung-Maungdaw Townships

¹¹ Khin Nyunt, *op cit.* page 25, relates that in Buthidaung Township, immigration officials inspected 83 village tracts, 17,193 households and 108,431 people. They found 643 illegal immigrants, and 35,596 people fled to Bangladesh. In Maungdaw Township, immigration officials inspected 99 village tracts, 19,418 households and 125,983 people. They found 458 illegal immigrants, and 98,227 people fled to Bangladesh. From other townships, 156,683 people fled across the border.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IN ARAKAN/RAKHINE STATE

After the 1962 coup and under both the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party governments, the country's military intelligence apparatus, widely referred to by its acronym MI, closely watched separatist movements in Arakan. It arrested RSO supporters and members of underground cells in Arakan, and put them in prison for a duration of two years under the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act. MI also inspected letters from abroad arriving at the Sittwe Post Office, and compiled lists of local Bengalis who had contacts in foreign countries.¹²

On 18 May 1983, Brig.-Gen. Tin Oo, who had been the MI Chief from 1972 to 1978 and later Head of the National Intelligence Bureau,¹³ was removed and the intelligence corps was purged. Not only senior officials from the National Intelligence Bureau and Military Intelligence but also former intelligence officers who were senior officials in government, diplomats and military attachés were dismissed from their posts. In Military Intelligence, all senior officers above the rank of major and senior enlisted men who were dismissed were replaced by Army officers and enlisted men. Most of them had basic military intelligence training but lacked operational experience in intelligence. Many intelligence networks were broken and would take a long time to reestablish. The regular operations to control immigration were disrupted in Arakan, and this was one reason for the rise of RSO movement.¹⁴

However, after 1988, the number of military intelligence units was increased across the country, along with their power and responsibilities. In Rakhine State, Intelligence Unit 10¹⁵ was responsible for 15 townships, and Unit 18 was responsible for the Buthidaung-Maungdaw and Yathetaung areas, where the majority of the population was Muslim.¹⁶

Unit 18 was able to establish personal relations with local mullahs, who had great influence over the villagers. The mullahs were sometimes given special favours such as permission to visit Yangon for medical treatment, or permission to visit other parts of Rakhine State.¹⁷ Intelligence officers set up networks of informers among the local communities by offering special economic privileges such as border-trade with Bangladesh.

With the expansion of intelligence units and a newly established Border and Immigration Control Command, the military government was able to suppress separatist movements among Bengalis and set up an effective administrative mechanism in Northern Rakhine State.

¹² Interview with former intelligence officer who served Sittwe before 1983.

¹³ He later rose to power as Joint General Secretary of the Burma Socialist Programme Party.

¹⁴ Interview with former intelligence officer who served in Sittwe before 1983.

¹⁵ Unit 10 was opened in 1972, when new Western Regional Command was established.

¹⁶ In Buthidaung and Maungdaw, more than 90 per cent of the population were Muslims.

¹⁷ Interview with Maj. Win Myint, retired military intelligence officer, *Speaker Journal*, 21 September 2017

BORDER AND IMMIGRATION CONTROL COMMAND (NA SA KA)

In 1991-92, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) launched another operation targeting illegal immigrants in Rakhine State, and nearly 200,000 Bengalis fled to Bangladesh. Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding for the repatriation of refugees in November 1993.

During that time, Senior General Than Shwe, who had replaced Senior General Saw Maung as Chairman of the SLORC in April 1992, laid out a strategy to control Northern Rakhine State more effectively. This strategy included administrative, defense and intelligence measures. A Border and Immigration Control Command was set up in June 1992, widely known by its Myanmar acronym “Na Sa Ka”. The Na Sa Ka was a combined force of military intelligence, police, and immigration and customs officers, led by military intelligence personnel. It operated in Northern Rakhine State, with nine operational areas and 25 stations¹⁸. Na Sa Ka’s main tasks were to prevent illegal immigration and illegal border trade, and to ensure border security and maintain an intelligence network. To accomplish these goals, Na Sa Ka implemented a mapping, registration and inspection process.¹⁹ In this process, Na Sa Ka teams visited every village in Northern Rakhine State, whether Rakhine or Bengali, to perform the following tasks:²⁰

- a. Register households and draw village maps.
- b. Form village administrations.
- c. Photograph family members of each household.
- d. Register the village population.
- e. Create a registration and reporting system for visitors, births, deaths and marriages.
- f. Issue travel documents.
- g. Conduct regular inspections.
- h. Hold regular meetings with village heads.

This process became a yearly exercise in Northern Rakhine State. During these operations Na Sa Ka visited every village in the designated areas, modified the previous village maps to reflect the current situation, inspected every household with family photos, updated birth, death and marriage registers, and took legal action against illegal immigrants and those who failed to abide by rules and regulations. The Na Sa Ka also conducted a citizenship verification process and issued temporary identification cards (white cards) to Bengalis.

With this vast mechanism, Na Sa Ka tightly controlled population movements in Northern Rakhine State. Intelligence Unit 18 established an internal security network and infiltrated Rohingya separatist movements in Bangladesh.²¹ Since both intelligence units operating in the area were headed by senior intelligence officers under the direct command of General Khin Nyunt, they worked closely as a team.

¹⁸ In 2012, it expanded to 11 operational areas.

¹⁹ Called “Swè, Tin, Sit” in the Myanmar language

²⁰ Khin Nyunt, page 33.

²¹ Interview with former intelligence officer who served before 2004.

THE ARMY AND ADMINISTRATION IN RAKHINE STATE

In 1995, Senior General Than Shwe instituted a military modernisation programme, establishing 11 Military Operation Commands (MOC).²² MOCs are similar in organizational structure to the Light Infantry Divisions established between 1966 and 1991.²³ In 1999-2001, seven more MOCs were established, including three MOCs – 5, 9 and 15 – in Rakhine State.²⁴ The Western Command, which was responsible for the state but had only had four regiments there, now had three additional regiments. The command had been based at the state capital Sittwe, 49 miles from the Bangladesh border, but this now moved to Ahn, 79 miles south of Sittwe. A new Regional Operation Command (ROC) was established at Sittwe.²⁵ The MOCs, which are rapid response units, were put to use in the Army's operations in Maungdaw area in 2016 and 2017. The ROCs functioned as a sub-command of the Western Command. The naval command was also moved to Kyaukpyu, 79 nautical miles south of Sittwe. These two relocations were strategic moves, as Ahn is located at the Ahn Pass, which connects Rakhine State with the rest of Myanmar and Kyaukpyu is the location of the terminus of the future Myanmar-China oil and gas pipeline and deep sea port project.²⁶

Senior Gen. Than Shwe also upgraded Maungdaw to a Special Administrative District.²⁷ For immigration and customs matters, the administrators of these districts came under the Na Sa Ka Commander.²⁸ The military government also set up 24 new villages in Northern Rakhine State to increase the Buddhist population in that area. These villages, inhabited by Bamar and Rakhine residents, were called “Na Ta La villages”, for the Myanmar-language acronym for the Ministry for Development of National Races and Border Affairs.²⁹ Their residents were given land, bullocks, and tractors³⁰. In 2007, the residents of these villages numbered 1,777 households and had 8,777 people—4,485 males and 4,232 females.³¹

²² Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw* (ISEAS 2009), page 80.

²³ There are ten LIDs in the Myanmar Army. Each MOC and LID commands 10 regiments and other service units such as artillery, signals, medicine.

²⁴ In Taungoke, Kyautkaw and Buthidaung townships.

²⁵ A regional operations command (ROC) is commanded by a brigadier-general and is under the respective Regional Command, for example the Western Command in Rakhine State. An ROC is mainly responsible for logistics and administrative matters. The Regional Command assigns some local military operations to them depending on the local situation.

²⁶ MOC No. 5 was also located at Taungoke Pass, a strategic pass connecting the state to the rest of Myanmar.

²⁷ The special district is administered by a Lt.-Colonel directly appointed by the Commander-in-Chief's office. All major townships along Myanmar's borders with China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh are designated as Special Districts. Additionally, Taungpyo Letwe, which is a major immigration checkpoint, was upgraded to sub-township.

²⁸ The district administration, the District Peace and Development Council, was formally under the Rakhine State Peace and Development Council headed by the Army's Regional Commander. But because of the special nature of Na Sa Ka, it had to work under the Na Sa Ka on security and development issues.

²⁹ It is now called the Ministry of Border Affairs. It was previously known as Ministry for Progress of Border Areas, National Races and Development Affairs.

³⁰ Most of these villages were attacked by the ARSA in recent terrorist attacks.

³¹ Na Sa Ka report 2007.

THE DOWNFALL OF KHIN NYUNT, AND NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES

On 18 October 2004, the then Prime Minister and military intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt was removed, and the entire intelligence corps was purged. Compared to 1983, the 2004 purge was more widespread and intense. All high-ranking officers except four,³² and all commanding officers of intelligence units and Na Sa Ka were sentenced to long prison terms. Officers and enlisted men with over two years' service in the intelligence corps were dismissed from their posts or given prison sentences. Those who had served less than two years were sent back to the army and barred from promotion. Many former intelligence officers in civil service posts were also dismissed; only a few maintained their posts upon ministerial guarantee.

The military intelligence corps³³ was reorganized as Military Affairs Security (MAS)³⁴ with reduced power and resources. All officers and enlisted men were appointed from infantry units, and the Chief of MAS was a former regional commander. Na Sa Ka faced the same fate but somehow managed to maintain the mapping, registration and inspection process. The intelligence network totally collapsed, however, and never recovered. Over the next 13 years, MAS units in Rakhine State were not able to set up a human intelligence network to penetrate the Bengali community or the RSO in Bangladesh.³⁵

After 2012, the Arakan Army (AA) emerged as a new security threat to government. Previously, the only ethnic armed organization in Rakhine State was the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP),³⁶ which signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 2013. Both the AA and the ALP aimed to represent the interests of Buddhist Rakhine people, members of an ethnic group that, like the Chin, Kachin and others, Myanmar recognizes to be indigenous to the country.

The AA was formed by 28 Rakhine youths at Laiza, the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organization on the Myanmar-China border. It recruited Rakhine labourers working in the Phakant jade mines in Kachin State, but it conducted no military activities until 2013. When the ceasefire between Tatmadaw and Kachin Independence Army (KIA)³⁷ collapsed, the AA starting to fight alongside the KIA in Northern Shan State. The KIA also supported the AA's plan to infiltrate Rakhine State and open a new Western front. In March 2015, fighting broke out between the Myanmar Army and the AA. From March 2015 to April 2016, the army lost 13 soldiers and captured 57 AA troops. There are currently some 300 AA troops along the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh border and another 200 with the KIA.³⁸ Surprisingly, during the recent ARSA attacks in August 2017, the AA fought against government troops and the ALP. The AA also ambushed army troops on 31 August, and attacked and seized the ALP headquarters on 1 September.

³² Maj Gen. Kyaw Win, Brig. Gen Kyaw Thein, Hla Aung, and Kyaw Han.

³³ The official name was Defense Services Intelligence Bureau, DDIB.

³⁴ Later renamed Military Security Affairs.

³⁵ Interview with Maj. Win Maung Maung, retired military intelligence officer, *Speaker Journal*, 14 September 2017.

³⁶ It was formed in the 1970s with its headquarters at the Myanmar -Thai border and it had a small force at the Myanmar-India border.

³⁷ The KIA is the military arm of the KIO.

³⁸ Personal interview, August 2017.

The AA and ARSA are also suspected of a role in the illegal drug trade in Rakhine State. In July 2015, police in Yangon seized 26.7 million methamphetamine pills meant to be shipped to Rakhine State.³⁹ A special operation against the drug trade in Rakhine State carried out over 2016 to August 2017, seized 37.7 million pills. According to a Ministry of Home Affairs source, the drug trade route started from the Myanmar-China border and ended at the Myanmar–Bangladesh border.⁴⁰

These new security challenges emerged as the military intelligence operations were weakened with the 2004 purge. The new military affairs security units were not given the discretion to act independently, but instead had to report to and share all intelligence information with the Regional Commander, who had the final say.⁴¹ Adding to this was the abrupt abolition of the Na Sa Ka by President Thein Sein in July 2013.⁴² This move was in response to demands by international organizations, human rights groups, and the then opposition party, the National League for Democracy, on grounds that the Na Sa Ka's policies and regulations constituted discrimination against the Bengali population in Northern Rakhine State. The pressure to abolish Na Sa Ka became more intense after the 2012 communal violence between Buddhist Rakhines and Muslim Bengalis. But local communities, including the Bengalis, saw Na Sa Ka in a positive light. According to a survey among 2,000 members of the Rakhine and Bengali communities in Rakhine State,⁴³ 33 per cent of the 800 Bengali respondents stated that having the Na Sa-Ka was not necessary, while 44 per cent viewed it as necessary, and 23 percent were undecided. Of the 1,200 Rakhines interviewed, 68 per cent stated that it was necessary to maintain the Na Sa Ka.⁴⁴

President Thein Sein's decision was intended mainly to reduce international and domestic pressure before his visit to Europe in July 2013. He consulted only a small group of cabinet ministers, and the Rakhine State government was informed only shortly before the announcement was to be issued. While the Na Sa Ka's abolition was widely welcomed by the international community, in reality, there was no organization to replace it in its monitoring role. A Border Police force was hastily formed for border security, and the Immigration Department took over the mapping, registration and inspection process. As could have been expected, these actions lacked the coordination of a centralised command and control system.

³⁹ Myanmar Army officers take note of the AA's failure to attack or denounce the ARSA and other factors in believing that the two groups are linked. They have in mind the precedent of the 1989 agreement to fight the army that the RSO and the ALP concluded.

⁴⁰ Personal interview, August 2017 Aug. The Ministry of Home Affairs believes that the AA and the ARSA are involved in the drug trade to generate funds for their armed activities.

⁴¹ Under Khin Nyunt, military intelligence units operate independently from local army commanders. They did not need to share intelligence information with those commanders.

⁴² President Thein Sein issued Notification No. 59/2013 on 12 July 2013 to announce the abolition of Na Sa Ka.

⁴³ *Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State* (2013), page 60.

⁴⁴ Bengalis appeared to view the Na Sa Ka as a necessary evil under whose regulations they enjoyed basic rights. It also offered them a means of settling disputes with Rakhines. The latter, in turn, like the Na Sa Ka for its measures to control the Bengali population.

As a result, the authorities had no way of knowing what mullahs were now preaching in mosques, and routine inspections or mappings could not be conducted. At times, the police and immigration officers were chased out when they entered Bengali villages.⁴⁵ All this contributed to the security forces being caught off-guard during the attacks in October 2016 and again in August 2017 .

CONCLUSION

The August 2017 attacks have intensified all these existing conditions towards a humanitarian crisis, a breakdown in law and order, and a situation marked by terrorism, drugs, communal violence and hatred in Northern Rakhine State.

A new terrorist group, the ARSA, has emerged, with more sophisticated methods than traditional separatist groups like the RSO, and with clear links to extremist groups in the Middle East and Pakistan. The ARSA has shown that it is capable of staging a widespread offensive against security forces and that it enjoys support among local Muslims. With constant media coverage, the recent violence has the potential of becoming a new rallying cry for the so-called Islamic State, which is losing ground in Middle East and which the Myanmar military considers the terrorist group most likely to infiltrate Northern Rakhine State. This presents an additional concern for regional security in Southeast Asia, as Northern Rakhine State—though covered by deep forests and mountainous terrain and benefitting from few access roads—is nevertheless strategically located on Myanmar’s borders with Bangladesh and India and on direct sea routes to Pakistan, Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Southern Philippines, some of which have been used for human trafficking for several years .

The Myanmar government now needs to set up effective security operations in Rakhine State. This does not mean reactivating the old Na Sa Ka or draconian intelligence mechanisms, but there needs to be an over-arching organization which can effectively conduct counter-terrorism operations and immigration-control operations while fully respecting human rights and international norms.

This may be a consideration for Myanmar’s future collaboration with the ASEAN intelligence community.

⁴⁵ On the night of 13 January 2014, a five-member police patrol team was attacked by more than one hundred people wielding sticks and knives at Ducheertan (Middle) Village, in Maungdaw Township. As the police withdrew, the leader of the police patrol team was lost and his body was never found. After that incident, similar attacks happened on many occasions; see Myanmar government press releases of 24 January 2014 and on 5 August 2017.

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