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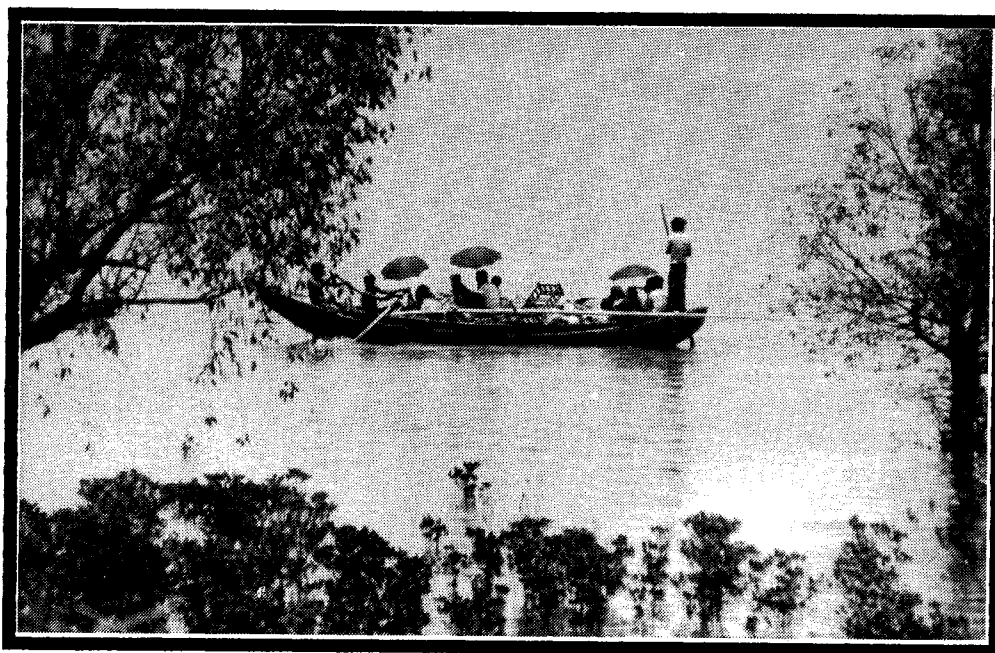
INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Cox's Bazaar,  
Bangladesh  
April 28, 1992

## TROUBLED PARADISE

by Carol Rose

A hundred miles of white sand beach stretches before the Bay of Bengal, coconut palms sway in the warm sea breeze, and green rice paddies shimmer in the sunlight.



Burmese refugees arrive by boat in Bangladesh.

But beneath the surface of this tropical paradise, something is wrong. A blue and white United Nations flag flies in front of the "honeymoon cottages" near the beach, signaling an emergency relief operation. White land rovers and trucks rumble down the main road, carrying tents and medical supplies. Nearly two thousand refugees arrive by boat each day from neighboring Burma (Myanmar). By mid-April, nearly a quarter of a million people live in the make-shift refugee camps south of town.

I am struck initially by the visual incongruities: the beauty of the land and the squalid conditions in the refugee camps. But over time, I glimpse the shadowy political forces behind this refugee exodus -- secret military training camps, pan-Islamic

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organizations, corrupt bureaucracies, divisions within the Burmese democracy movement and the deft political maneuvering of the Burmese military junta.

**"They tortured us so we fled"**

The old woman looks into my eyes as she explains why she became a refugee. Her name is Amina Khatune. She arrived in the refugee camps with her daughter two months earlier. "The soldiers took me to work as a slave building their roads," she says. "They took my house, my land. I have nothing to go back for."

Khatune is one of the 225,000 Muslim Burmese who have fled Burma's mainly-Buddhist Arakan state since late 1991. Most come from two districts along the Bangladesh-Burma border where Muslims make up the majority of the population. The refugees called themselves "Rohingyas" -- a name derived from the local dialect, best translated as "those from the state of Arakan." They say they are fleeing soldiers of Burma's military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), who have been forcing Rohingya men and women into slave labor, raping women and girls, and transferring Muslim land, homes and livestock to Burma's Buddhist citizens.<sup>1</sup>



Burmese refugees arriving in Bangladesh.

Near the Naaf river, which the refugees must cross to reach Bangladesh, an old man trudges down the road with his family. "We just arrived," he says, glancing at a large wooden row boat docked at the river. "We fled because the soldiers took my son and beat him across his eyes with a whip." The man points to a boy about 12 years old with a bandage over his face. Then he begins to weep.

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the name "Burma" rather than "Myanmar" -- the official name given the country by the military junta -- because "Burma" is the name used by the Rohingya refugees and the democratic opposition.

A recent survey of the refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that 86 percent of the Rohingya men said they had been conscripted into forced labor; 46 percent of female family members reported to have been raped; 52 percent could name persons killed by the Burmese military; and 80 percent said that their property had been confiscated.

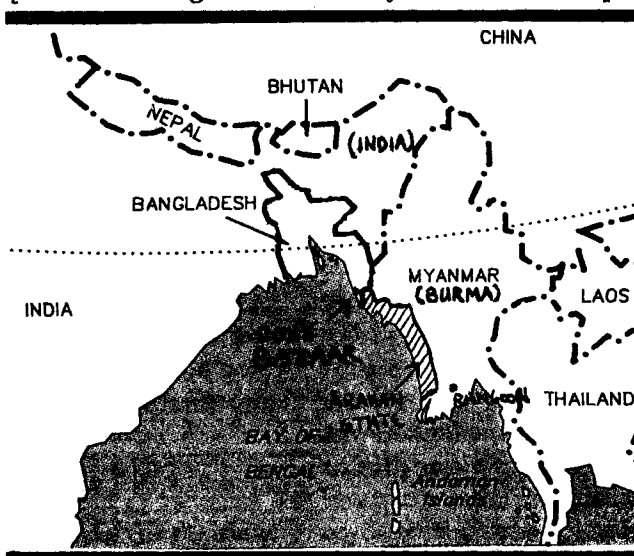
Rohingyas are not the only ethnic group targeted by the SLORC regime. The junta seized power in 1988 following a nationwide pro-democracy movement. Soon thereafter, the regime imposed house arrest on Aung San Suu Kyi, head of the opposition National League for Democracy who subsequently was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. In 1990, the junta refused to recognize a landslide election victory by the National League for Democracy, imprisoning hundreds of opposition leaders. The regime also launched military offensives against anti-SLORC rebels stationed near Burma's borders with Thailand and China.

Last year the regime turned its attention to the border with Bangladesh, constructing a new road to connect its military cantonments in Arakan. Although most of Burma's Muslims are denied the right to vote, they are forced to pay for the road. They must give half of their rice harvest to the military, as well as part of their cattle, poultry and vegetables to the troops. The Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights reports that Burmese Muslims also are taken as forced labor for construction of the road, during which time they are rarely fed and often beaten or raped.<sup>2</sup>

"My sister was taken away by the [Burmese] military, and when I went to look for her the soldiers slashed my arm with a machete," says Abdul Razad, age 22, revealing a five-inch scar on his shoulder. "My wife also was taken away, but I found her after three days. I still haven't found my sister."

<sup>2</sup> One Buddhist Burmese spokesman said that Buddhists in Arakan also are being forced to work on the road, but I was unable to confirm this.

### BURMESE-BANGLADESH BORDER AREA [Source: Bangladesh Lonely Planet Guide]



### "On the Knife Edge of Disaster"

Two thousand additional refugees arrive in Bangladesh every day. Near the border town of Teknaf, hundreds of families cross the river each morning. They carry their possessions -- water jugs, blankets, bamboo bird cages -- balanced on yokes over their shoulders. They have no place to sleep, little food, and no water.

Hundreds of people wander on the road that connects the 12 refugee camps that stretches for 30 miles between Teknaf with Cox's Bazaar. The older camps consist of rows of tents or bamboo huts. But 96,000 refugees have no formal shelter. They live in lean-tos made from leaves, sticks, bits of clothing and plastic. Many huts are perched precariously on hillsides that will wash away in the June monsoon rains. In the meantime, swarms of naked children play on the side of the road and adults huddle beneath the occasional tree in an attempt to escape the scorching sun.

The sheer number of incoming refugees has put tremendous pressure on the already scarce natural resources of Bangladesh. The only land available is government forest reserves. Refugees cut down the trees to use as fuel wood, hauling the timber to their huts in bundles carried on their backs. The heavily-forested mountains of Burma are visible across the Naaf river, as if taunting those who have fled their resource-rich homeland.

A more life-threatening problem is the lack of water. More than 70,000 refugees live in an area where the ground water is too salty to drink. United Nations tanker-trucks haul in fresh water



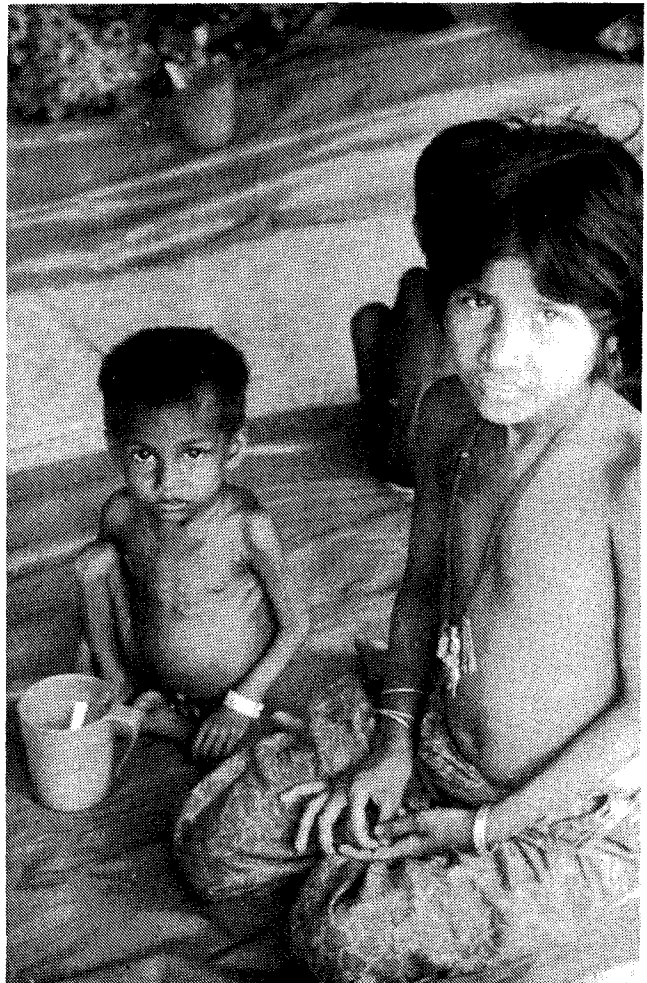
As temperatures soar over 90-degrees, refugees arrange their water jugs in front of an empty United Nations water tank.

each day, but the operation is expensive and cannot keep pace with demand. Hundreds of women stand with water jugs in front of the metal water tanks, waiting for the water trucks to arrive. Temperatures soar well over 90 degrees fahrenheit, but people say the dry weather is a blessing. When the monsoon rains start, roads and houses will be washed away and diseases will flourish.

"I keep telling people that the emergency hasn't happened yet," says Mitch Carlson, senior officer for UNHCR. "We are living on the knife-edge of a disaster.

"At the first rain, it will be a mess: latrines will overflow, houses will fall down the hills," he adds. "The minute the rains begin, we will face a cholera epidemic. And God forbid there should be another cyclone."

During a similar refugee exodus from Burma in 1978, officials estimate that at least 10,000 people died from Cholera. A cyclone that hit this coast last April killed 139,000 people.



A young Burmese girl and her brother at a feeding center in the Dumdumia refugee camp.

Despite the lack of land and infrastructure, the international relief effort for the Rohingyas is well-managed. A coordinating effort led by UNHCR and the government of Bangladesh limits the number of private charities operating in the camps and streamlines assistance programs to prevent waste and duplication. These efforts have paid off: in just six weeks, international assistance has provided emergency feeding centers for dozens of malnourished children, housing for more than 100,000 people, food for 95 percent of the refugees, and widespread vaccinations against measles.

At a feeding center run by Save the Children (UK) health workers target dozens of children who show classic signs of severe malnutrition: distended bellies, bone-thin limbs, glassy eyes.



At least 96,000 Burmese refugees have inadequate shelter. Many live in huts made of leaves and sticks. In the distance, the Naaf river and hills of Burma.

Parents or older sisters sit with the children on the floor of the bamboo shelter, trying to spoon-feed the babies a thin rice gruel.

In theory, each arriving refugee is given a medical screening and vaccination by Bangladeshi health workers. But thousands of refugees suffer from malnutrition, diarrhoea, and respiratory infections, and there is one doctor for every 12,000 refugees. The only hospital in the area has just 150 beds and already 250 patients. Nonetheless, only 358 refugee deaths have been reported by late April, compared with 559 births in the camps.

Once they have registered with the Bangladeshi government, refugees are assigned to a camp. Then they are given a ration card that entitles each person to 500 grams of rice, 60 grams of pulses and 20 grams of oil -- about 2200 calories a day -- from the World Food Program (WFP).

"Our feeding programs are about 5 percent short of total coverage," said Gemmo Lodesani, WFP program officer. "But the situation could get worse when the rains come. We are operating at full capacity already. How do you respond to an emergency within an emergency?"

A partial answer to that question is evident on my last day in Cox's Bazaar. Relief workers are scouting for additional land upon which to put isolation tents for expected victims of cholera. Says one: "We also will need space to bury the dead."

## Kickbacks and Closed Camps

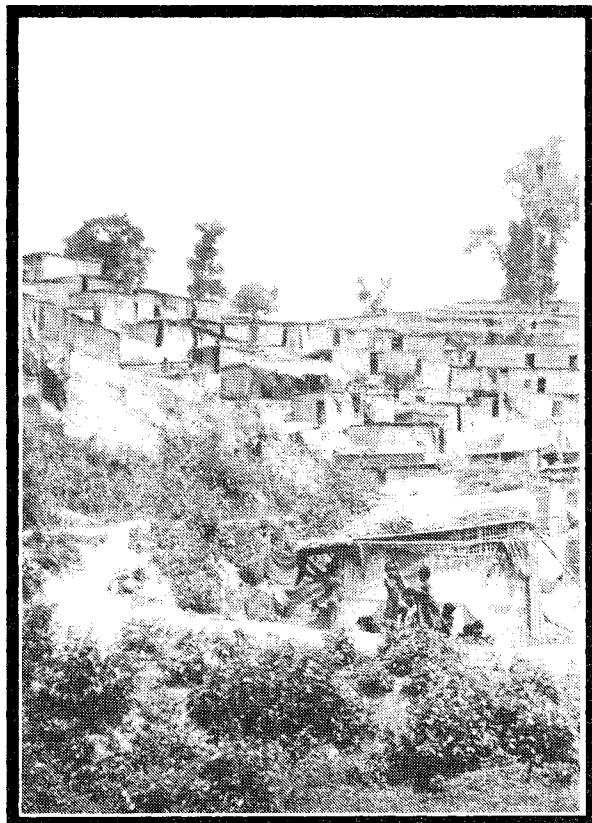
While I was there, the government of Bangladesh decided to post guards to stop the free movement of refugees in and out of camps. A UN official told me that the government now plans to put barbed wire around the camps. The reason, say local officials, is to prevent conflicts between the Rohingya refugees and the 450,000 Bangladeshis living in the area around the camps.

"Up until today we have hired locals to build the housing, but with this influx of people we have had to let some refugees build their own structures," says K.H. Shahidul Islam, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. "The local people organized against me in one valley, but when I explained that the refugees will die unless we give them shelter before the monsoon, they agreed to not draft a petition against me."

Forestry officials say refugees searching for fuel wood have used more than \$800,000 worth of forest resources -- about 4 percent of the total timber in just three months.

"If more refugees come they will destroy our forest. Locals already are worried that the [Rohingyas] will claim the land as their own," says Islam. "They can't stay here. Even in Hong Kong refugees are shipped back. We are helping them for now, but we will have to put our foot down soon or else there will be a civil war between these people and our own people. If they stay for six months that is no problem. But more than that, I am afraid..."

A Bangladesh relief worker has a different interpretation of the reported conflicts between local villagers and refugees: "The villagers are not really affected by the refugees," he says. "But some local politicians are stirring up problems to ensure that all the construction jobs are given to Bangladeshis rather than to the Rohingyas. That way, the politicians can demand kickbacks on the contracts."



Refugee homes built on hills meant for forest reserves may wash away in the first rains.

## "Despised Foreigners"

The conflict between Muslims and Buddhists in Burma is rooted in the history of the region, as well as the rise of pan-Islamic movements throughout the Indian subcontinent. From 2666 BC until 1784, Arakan was an independent kingdom that included the present-day region of Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> When the king of Burma defeated the Arakan king in 1784, the British seized control of land west of the Naaf river -- now present-day Bangladesh. Around the same time, the town of Cox's Bazaar was named after Captain Hiram Cox, who led a British refugee relief mission there -- offering protection to 40,000 Buddhist "Rakhaine" refugees fleeing the King of Burma".<sup>4</sup>

The British did more than resettle refugees. In 1826, they annexed the entire Burmese kingdom and incorporated all of Arakan into British India. Arakan -- like the rest of Burma -- remained under British rule until 1947. When the British quit India, they divided the territory into Burma and East Pakistan. The Naaf river was made the border, effectively splitting the former kingdom of Arakan.<sup>5</sup>

As in India, however, Burma's independence movement was in full swing by the 1930s. It was dominated by the Buddhist "Bahman" ethnic group which carried out a "Burmanization" campaign in which more than 100,000 Muslim Rohingyas were massacred. In response, there was a movement among the Muslims in Arakan to become a part of the emerging nation of [East] Pakistan. In the early 1950s, Burma's leaders announced that the Rohingyas were not citizens. They were "kala" -- "despised foreigners" and were denied the right to vote, attend school or obtain government jobs.

A military junta led by General Ne Win seized power in Burma in 1962. Since that time, the government has used various military means to clamp down on resistance movements throughout the country, including the Karen rebels on the border with Thailand, the Kichin

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<sup>3</sup> Some accounts suggest that the kings of Arakan adopted Islam in the 15th century, but others insist that the Kingdom was always ruled by Buddhist kings of Tibeto-Burman ethnic stock.

<sup>4</sup> It was from an Anglicized mispronunciation of "Rakhaine" that the name "Arakan" was given to the state. The ancient name Rakhaine was pronounced locally as Rohang, hence Rohingya -- the inhabitants of Rohang. Likewise, the name "Burma" came from the English mispronunciation of the country's dominate "Bahman" ethnic group.

<sup>5</sup> East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971.



guerrillas on the Chinese border, and the Rakhaine Buddhist resistance in Arakan state.

Throughout this time, relations remained tense between the Rohingyas and the Buddhist anti-government democracy movements in Arakan, enabling the junta to use "divide and rule" tactics against the opposition. The junta launched "Operation Dragon Minh" in 1978, driving 300,000 Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh as illegal aliens. International pressure forced the Rangoon government to take back 200,000 Rohingyas -- but did nothing to guarantee their human rights. The remaining 100,000 Rohingyas dispersed across the subcontinent and elsewhere. This year, many refugees who repatriated to Burma in 1978 say they will not return again.

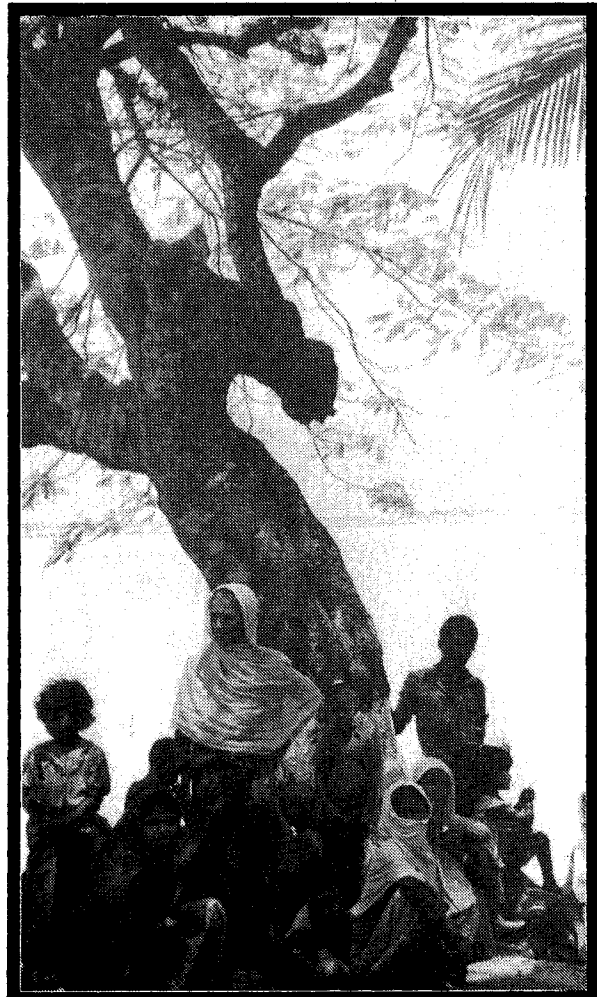
### "The Path of Allah"

"Our attitude in coming to Bangladesh is to liberate Arakan," said Mohammed Kashim, age 17. "I would rather die here with my Muslim friends trying to liberate my country than to die in Burma under military repression. I am ready to hold a gun."

Kashim's attitude is shared by virtually every Rohingya refugee with whom I speak. Many have fled Burma under similar circumstances in 1978, returning as part of a Burmese government program that promised them protection. Unfortunately, that promise was broken.

"From the time we went back in 1978 we were harassed by the government and told that we were not citizens of Burma, even if we had [citizenship] papers," says Mohammed Sediq, age 35. "This time we won't go back until we have our own country in Arakan and a Muslim government of our own."

Most of the refugees with whom I speak say they will not return unless there are international guarantees for

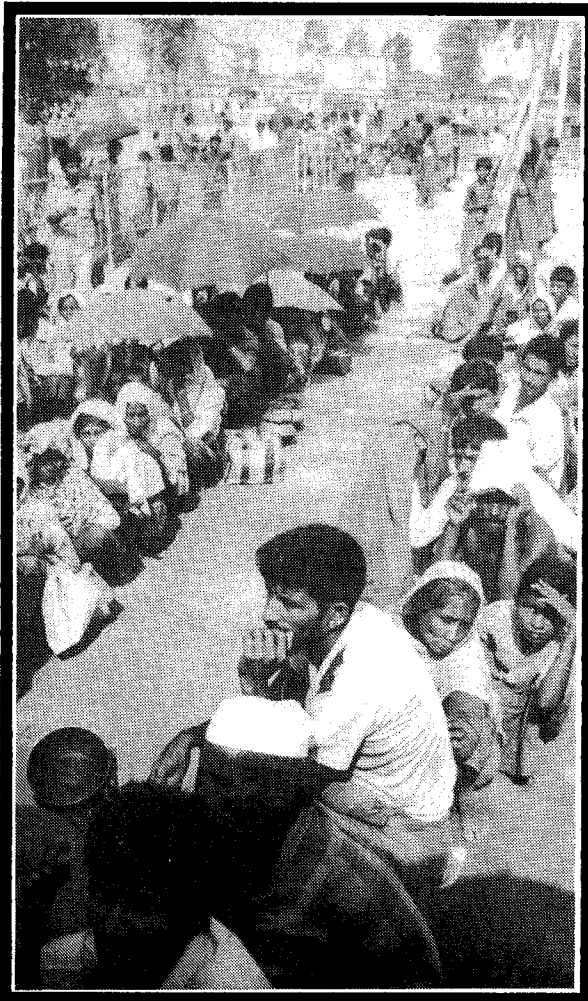


Burmese women and children find shade beneath a tree by the Naaf river.

their safety. Some say they won't go back until there is a new government in Burma and still others insist they will settle only for an independent Islamic Arakan state.

Leading the military fight for the Rohingyas are Nural Islam, leader of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), and Mohammed Yunis, leader of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). ARIF calls for autonomy for the Rohingyas within a federated Burma, while the RSO has announced a *jihād* or holy war against Rangoon leading to an independent Islamic state.

One evening a local Reuters correspondent invites me to watch a video he has filmed of an RSO training camp in Burma. It shows around 200 men and boys doing kung foo stunts and marching drills. Their discipline is impressive. But I notice they are practicing with wooden dummy guns. Moreover, estimates of the strength of ARIF and the RSO range from around 100 trained guerrillas apiece to just 5,000. They would be no match for Rangoon's well-equipped 300,000-man militia.



Waiting for food

Yet, I hear repeated stories among local and foreign aid workers that the Bangladesh army is involved in training and arming the Rohingyas. People say that mujahideen from Afghanistan and soldiers from Libya are training the RSO guerrillas. Others say that Saudi Arabia is paying the boat fares for refugees crossing the Naaf river.

Few people want to talk openly about these military developments. But one man agrees to do so -- adding that he doesn't expect to live long anyway. His name is Shwe Lu Maung, a Burmese national and scientist residing in Dhaka. He has been involved in the Burmese democratic resistance since 1962.

"The politics of SLORC are very calculating and the



Seeking help from Allah: Friday prayers in a make-shift mosque.

creation of this Rohingya problem is very calculated," says Maung. "They want to provoke them to fight to scare the local Buddhists of Arakan and rally the people behind them. In the 1960s, they did the same thing with democratic forces on the Chinese border -- saying the Communists were coming. Only now that Burma is friends with China, in place of Communism as the villain, the government is putting up Muslims as the villain."

Kaiser Morshed, chairman of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, agrees that the move against the Rohingyas is driven by domestic political considerations within Burma. "It only makes political sense if it is popular with the Buddhist Burmese people. Otherwise, there is no rationale for it," he says.

According to Maung, the RSO is playing into the hands of the SLORC government by aligning with an international Muslim organization called Jamaat-e-Islami. "The aims and objectives of the RSO are declared to be 'To establish a sovereign Islamic State in Arakan through jihad -- holy war, that path of Allah'," says Maung. "They have been collecting a lot of money and arms from Pakistan and other Islamic states using the name of this organization since June 1991."

Maung says that in February 1991, some retired Pakistani colonels and officers of the fundamentalist Afghan mujahideen group, Hezb-i-Islami (led by Gulbadin Hekmatyar, see CVR-23), gave training to RSO fighters.

In addition to rallying Buddhist Burmese against the "Muslim threat," the SLORC government may be using the refugee crisis to divert international attention from its actions elsewhere.

"At this moment, the military junta is eliminating insurgents on its borders with Thailand and China," says Maung. "SLORC is bombing [opposition bases in] Manerplaw and crushing the Karen rebels [Christian guerrillas on the Thai border]. But their actions are ignored under the cloud of the refugee crisis."

### "No Time for Silence"

As with most refugee situations, the challenge for the United Nations and the international community is not merely humanitarian. It also is political.

"The international community sees this as a humanitarian and financial problem, but it is more than that," says Morshed. "If

the basic political premises are not changed, then we will face the same refugee exodus in five years. This pan-Islamic element is very strong in the make-up of the Rohingyas."



A diplomatic effort last March by United Nations special envoy, Jan Eliasson, resulted in an agreement "in principle" by Burma to take back the Rohingya refugees. On April 29, the junta announced an agreement with Bangladesh for the return of the refugees beginning May 15. But only those who have "evidence of their nationality" can go back, a restriction that excludes many whose citizenship papers were seized by SLORC soldiers. Worse yet, the junta says that anyone who returns may be put in a "receiving" camp in Burma. Fortunately, Burma relented on its initial statement that the United Nations be excluded from the repatriation process. UNHCR is now planning to send human

rights monitors to assist in the return.

While it can monitor the repatriation, there is little the United Nations can do to prevent Burma from harassing returning refugees. Nor can it stop Bangladesh from forcibly pushing the refugees back over the border. Other nations, however, may have some clout.

"Bangladesh doesn't have many strategic options," says Morshed. "But India could do more. So far, its attitude [regarding Burma] has been ambiguous. India is so obsessed with Kashmir, the Punjab and Afghanistan that it is ignoring all the crises on its eastern border -- Assam, Bhutan and the Rohingyas.

"China could exercise a moderating influence over Burma, but China has much greater strategic interest in Burma than it does in Bangladesh," he adds. "Bangladesh is poor, Burma is rich."

Other countries also have financial leverage over Burma. Two hundred foreign firms and 14 international agencies are working with the Rangoon junta -- including eight United States and 23 European firms doing business in oil, gas and soft drinks. Moreover, Japanese ventures make up a quarter of new investment in Burma and virtually all of the new government projects.

"Japan could mold Burma if it wanted to," says Maung. "But Japan is keeping Burma as an ally in Southeast Asia. Don't forget that Burma supported Japan in [World War II.] They will never let Burma go."

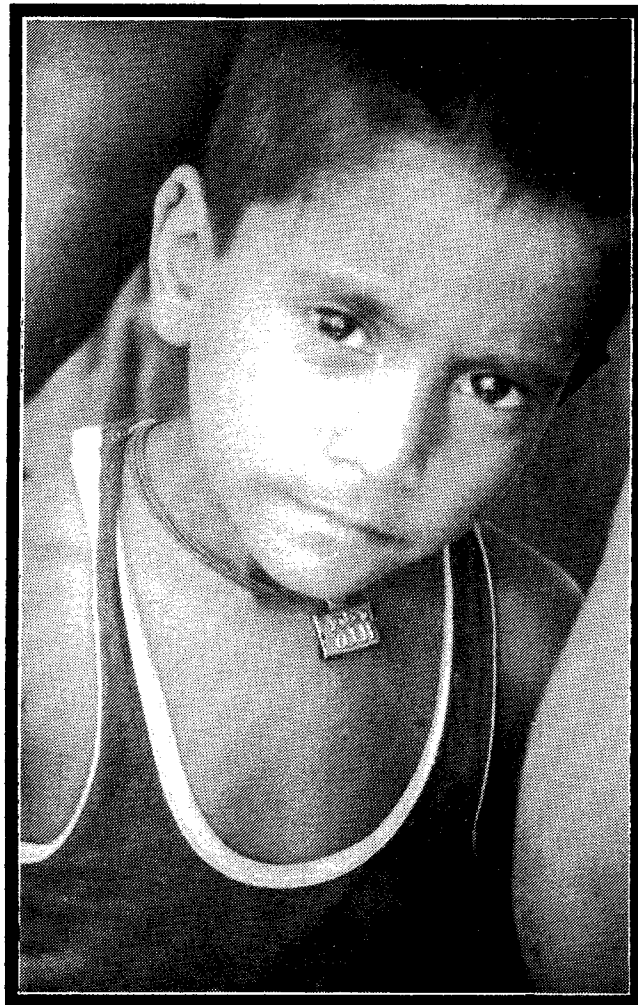
Recent news reports suggest that Japan and China have put pressure on the SLORC government to improve its human rights record. It may have helped. In late April, Burma announced that the junta's chairman, prime minister and armed forces' commander, General Saw Maung, would step down. The regime also released 40 political prisoners and allowed the family of Aung Sang Suu Kyi to visit her.

But many observers say these moves are meaningless. Maung was ill and due to retire last year. His replacement, Than Shwe, is said to be even more hard-line, as is the real power behind the junta, Khin Nyunt. Hundreds of political prisoners remain behind bars, since the regime released only those "not deemed a threat to national security." And the visit by Aung Sang Suu Kyi's family is seen by many as a ploy to convince her to leave Burma.

Clearly, international pressure alone won't bring down the SLORC regime. Burma's democracy movement also must resolve the deep religious and ethnic divisions among its factions -- Christian Karen, Buddhist Rakhaine, Muslim Rohingya, etc. Only a unified opposition can take on the powerful Burmese military machine.

"This should be a civil rights movement for all the people of Burma, not a *jihad* for the Muslims," says Maung. "And we must tell the Muslims of Arakan that they, too, are Burmese citizens.

"Let us go toward democracy and dilute this concept of ethnic identity. Now is the time to begin an open discussion of these ethnic issues," he adds. "We have no time for silence."



Photographs by Tom Harrington

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