

Seventy thousand Rohingya have fled Burma since “repatriation” agreement signed

By John Roberts
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The military’s pogrom against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Burma [Myanmar] has continued unabated, even as the Burmese government claims to be preparing for the return of refugees under last November’s “repatriation” agreement with Bangladesh. According to the UN, another 70,000 Rohingya have arrived in Bangladesh by various routes since the deal was signed.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s Burmese government, under international pressure, signed the agreement on November 23, but without any involvement of the UN or other outside agency. Burma promised to accept, over a two-year period, the return of 750,000 Rohingya currently taking refuge in Bangladesh’s overcrowded camps in the Cox’s Bazar district. Most fled after the current crackdown began last August but some have been there since 2012.

According to a study by the *Irrawaddy* magazine, published on February 23, close to 90 percent of Rohingya in the western state of Rakhine have fled from Burma. The *Irrawaddy* puts the number of Rohingya still in Rakhine at around 79,000. The 90 percent figure does not include those killed, missing or arrested.

The estimate was made by comparing reports by the military-controlled General Administrative Department (GAD), showing that 767,038 Rohingya lived in Rakhine in 2016, with the latest figures of the UN Office For Coordination of Human Affairs, showing 688,000 arrivals in Bangladesh’s refugee camps since last August.

The GAD reports refer to Rohingya as “foreigner” or “Bangladeshi,” in accord with the government’s racist stance that Rohingya, many of whom have lived in Rakhine for decades, and their ancestors sometimes for centuries, are not citizens and have no right to be in

Burma.

The repatriation deal was never more than a fraud designed by Suu Kyi to take Western pressure off her National League for Democracy (NLD) government and the military, both of which are mired in Burmese Buddhist supremacism and are hostile to the Rohingya minority.

The extent and brutality of the military’s ethnic cleansing operations has provoked opposition and protests internationally, seriously compromising Suu Kyi, who was previously promoted by the United States and the European Union (EU) as a democracy icon. Not wanting to drive Burma to re-establish close ties with China, Washington and Brussels have cautiously criticised the military, while maintaining support for Suu Kyi.

On 26 February, EU foreign ministers in Brussels called on EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini to prepare a list of sanctions to be placed on senior Burmese military figures, including travel restrictions and assets freezes. It also asked for an extension of an arms embargo, established in the 1990s but due to expire in April.

In mid-February, the US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley warned in the UN Security Council that time was running out for Suu Kyi if she did not bring the military to account for the atrocities in Rakhine. The US has no concern for human rights abuses in Burma but is exploiting the issue to pressure Suu Kyi not to develop close relations with China.

Pressure on Suu Kyi is continuing to mount. On March 7, the United States Holocaust Museum rescinded its 2012 Elie Wiesel Award to Suu Kyi. On the same day, UN Human Rights chief Zeid Ra’ad Hussein called on the UN General Assembly to create a new body “to prepare and expedite criminal

proceedings in courts.”

Suu Kyi has announced a development plan for Rakhine state, supposedly to prepare for the return of the Rohingya, but there is a different agenda behind the plan. It appears that the government is preparing to use any returnees as a highly-exploited cheap labour force without any rights.

On March 13, the *Washington Post* reported that business tycoons, including those on US sanctions lists and cronies of the old military junta, were summoned to the Burmese capital of Naypyidaw and pressured to provide money and resources to construction and business projects in Rakhine.

An Amnesty International report released on March 12, based largely on new satellite imagery, says the campaign to drive out the Rohingya has taken on “new forms.” It notes evidence of bulldozing to cover up mass murder sites and also a land grab by the military. Abandoned Rohingya villages and mosques are being demolished. New roads and structures are being built in their place “making it less likely for refugees to return.”

Three large military bases are being built on cleared land, one in Maungdaw and another in the Buthidaung townships, as part of the militarisation of Rakhine. The report also notes that the two new “repatriation centres” built for returnees are surrounded by security fences and are located in the middle of large concentrations of army units and border guards.

Human Rights Watch reported on February 23 that satellite images show that since November heavy machinery has been used in 55 villages to clear them of all structures and vegetation. These were among the 362 villages wholly or partially destroyed by arson since August 25. At least two other undamaged villages were also demolished.

The government claims that the Rohingya returnees will be kept in these centres until their homes are rebuilt, even as the military busily proceeds with its bulldozing.

Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar know the worthlessness of such promises. There have been organised protests in the camps against the repatriation agreement. One refugee involved in a camp protest, Mohammad Elias, told Agence France-Presse: “We would rather be killed here in Bangladesh. Here, at least I’ll get a Muslim burial.”

Evidence of mass graves in the Rakhine has emerged. Associated Press obtained first-hand evidence in late January of one instance of wholesale murder in the village of Gu Dar Pyin. Videos show men half buried with their faces blasted away by bullets or burned away by acid to obscure their identities.

A survey by Medecins Sans Frontieres last December concluded that at least 6,700 Rohingya had died violent deaths in 31 days from August 25, including 730 children.

The anti-Rohingya campaign is not confined to north Rakhine. There is evidence of the intimidation of Rohingya in an enclave in the state capital Sittwe. Also, *Time* magazine on February 13 exposed the increasingly vicious treatment of Rohingya in Rangoon (Yangon), Burma’s largest city.

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