 BRITISH EMBASSY,
No. 51 R A N G O O N. F 2680
SECRET 12th February, 1949.

Sir, F552/1015/79

I have the honour, with reference to my secret letter of the 13th January to Mr. Grey about affairs in Arakan a copy of which was sent to the United Kingdom High Commissioner at Karachi, to submit the following review of the situation in that Division of Burma.

2. During the past year most of the outstanding news from Arakan has been devoted to the activities there of Muslim insurgents although they are not by any means the only source of trouble in that part of Burma. There have been two aspects of this Muslim activity. The Pyaukkyas, or guerillas, have been campaigning against the Government with the object of obtaining a separate State in Arakan, while the Mujahid, a political organisation, have been carrying on agitation for the attainment of similar aims. It is hard to say whether the ultimate object of the Muslims is that their separate State should remain within the Union or not, but it seems likely that even an autonomous State within the Union would necessarily be drawn towards Pakistan. The Mujahid also seems to have taken to arms in about October last, although this does not exclude the possibility that some have not gone underground and are still trying to obtain their objective by agitation only. There are perhaps 500 Muslims under arms, although the total number of supporters of the movement is greater. The countryside round Buthidaung and Maungdaw has been out of control since December at least, although the towns themselves have been held by Government forces.

3. As early as October last year, the situation warranted a visit by the Prime Minister and the Supreme Commander, Lieutenant-General Smith Dun. At a security meeting held at Akyab on the 27th October, they heard reports of the help which had been given to the Muslim insurgents from across the Pakistan border. The Sub-Divisional Officer and Township Officer from Cox's Bazaar were reported to have supplied the Muslim Pyaukkyas with arms and ammunition. Wounded guerillas were apparently able to obtain treatment in the hospital at Cox's Bazaar. One result of the Muslim insurgents' activities has been to prevent Government forces enforcing the prohibition of the export of rice across the border. The profits to be made in smuggling may well form a subsidiary reason for the rebellion, and the Muslim leaders, Sultan Ahmed and Omra Meah, are reported to have taken part in it. The need for rice in the Pakistan District of Chittagong is probably not unconnected with local officials' support for the Pyaukkyas.

4. There is no suggestion however that the help given to the insurgents has been other than purely local, arising out of the sympathies of individual officers. On the other hand, the Pakistan Government are undoubtedly taking notice of the movement, as may be seen from the fact that the Joint Secretary to the Pakistan Foreign Affairs Department who recently toured in the area submitted an exhaustive questionnaire on the subject to Pakistan local officials in the Chittagong District. This was reported to the Commonwealth Relations Office in a Top Secret letter of the 30th December 1948 from Sir Laurence Grafftey-Smith to Sir Gilbert Laithwaite. It /is

The Right Honourable Ernest Bevin, M.P.,
Foreign Office,
S.W.1.

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is to be hoped that the Pakistan Government will not be swayed too much by the answers of local officers if the one we have seen is a typical sample. Apart from being somewhat misinformed about Burmese affairs in general it seemed to advocate fairly plainly that Pakistan should interfere in Burmese affairs.

5. Although the main interest in the last few months has centred on the very small area north of Akyab it would be a mistake to suppose that the rest of Arakan has been quiet. It is true that the Division was comparatively little affected by the Pyeethu Yebaw Ahpwe trouble in August last year, perhaps because the personal following of Aung San was never very strong there and was never as great as that of the Buddhist monk U Sein Da, who pressed his advocacy of separatism to the point of armed rebellion and was arrested in May 1947. Most of the insurgent activities in the Kyaukpyu District may now be ascribed to the followers of Bonbank Tha Gyaw, a lieutenant of U Sein Da. They, too, are campaigning for Arakanese independence in one form or another. Some idea of the success they are having may be gained from the fact that of the seven main Townships of the District the Government is in full control of only two. There are some White Communists in the area, but they failed in their attempt to gain influence over Bonbank Tha Gyaw's movement for their own ends, and they are of minor importance.

6. Communists of both parties have been active in the Sandoway area since well before the transfer of power, although there again the White Communists must be regarded as of minor importance and the area has been virtually a Red Flag Communist stronghold. This district has been quiet since the end of 1947, chiefly, it would seem, because of the excellent law and order maintained by the Red Flag Communists themselves in the country districts. The Government forces control the towns only. There is no question of the Red Flag Communists in the area having any separatist tendencies. It is not thought that the Communists in central Burma and the Delta region, have much contact with Sandoway, although a group of 100 was reported at the end of November to have moved up from Bassein to reinforce Communist strongholds between Kyeintali and Pazunbye, about 55 and 35 miles south of Sandoway respectively.

7. It is quite possible that a number of insurgents in Arakan described as separatists or autonomists are in fact simply criminals, just as in the rest of Burma much plain dacoity has a political label attached to it. A contributory cause of the general unrest has been the complete lack of any serious effort on the part of the Burmese Government to carry out rehabilitation in the area. But the idea of autonomy in Arakan is not confined to lawless elements. At a mass meeting held at Akyab on the 7th November, 1948, a resolution was passed that "this meeting of Akyab people resolves that Arakan should be formed into an autonomous State not inferior in status to that of the Shan State under the present Constitution". It was also resolved that this resolution be forwarded to the Regional Autonomy Commission through one of its members, U Shwe Baw, who attended the meeting. It was issued over the signatures of U Tun Hla and U Tha Nee Aung, who were active in the affairs of the Arakan Freedom League as early as 1947.

8. It would appear that apart from the Muslim population on the Pakistan border, who are bitterly hostile to the Burmese, most of the Arakanese would be satisfied with the employment of Arakanese officials in the administration, and the adoption of measures by the Government to repair the

/ravages

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ravages of the last war and restore prosperity. The Chairman of the Regional Autonomy Commission which, among its terms of reference, had to consider the aspirations of the Arakanese, assured me not long ago that the Arakanese did not want autonomy, and that the problem was a simple one. The Commission, so far, has been mainly concerned with Karen and Mon affairs, and has not yet visited Arakan. A number of Arakanese Members of Parliament belonging to the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League have been selected to represent the Arakanese on the Commission, but it seems unlikely that the autonomists will get much satisfaction from them if any significance is to be attached to a statement put out by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. Deputies from Arakan on the 12th of September last condemning the action of those who advocated, whether peacefully or otherwise, that the people of Arakan should be granted a separate State within the Union. So far the Government have done little more than try to impose their authority in Arakan by military action. With the troops at their disposal they have not been able to do more than hold some of the main towns.

9. Although Arakan is plagued by the lawlessness unhappily common to so large a part of Burma, its importance is overshadowed by more pressing questions, notably that of the Karens. That in itself may lead the Government to under-estimate the risks of failing to do something to satisfy the Arakanese. Arakanese affairs are however likely to assume major and critical importance only if the Pakistan Government depart from their present attitude of detachment towards the activities of the Muslim insurgents over the Pakistan border. If they yield to the temptation which their local officials seem disposed to put in their way, it would be logical to expect a strong increase in anti-Muslim feeling in Arakan, with possibly a repetition of the massacres of 1942.

10. I am sending copies of this despatch to the United Kingdom High Commissioners at Karachi and New Delhi and to the Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in South-East Asia at Singapore.

I have the honour to be,
with the highest respect,
Sir,
Your most obedient humble Servant,

James Bowker

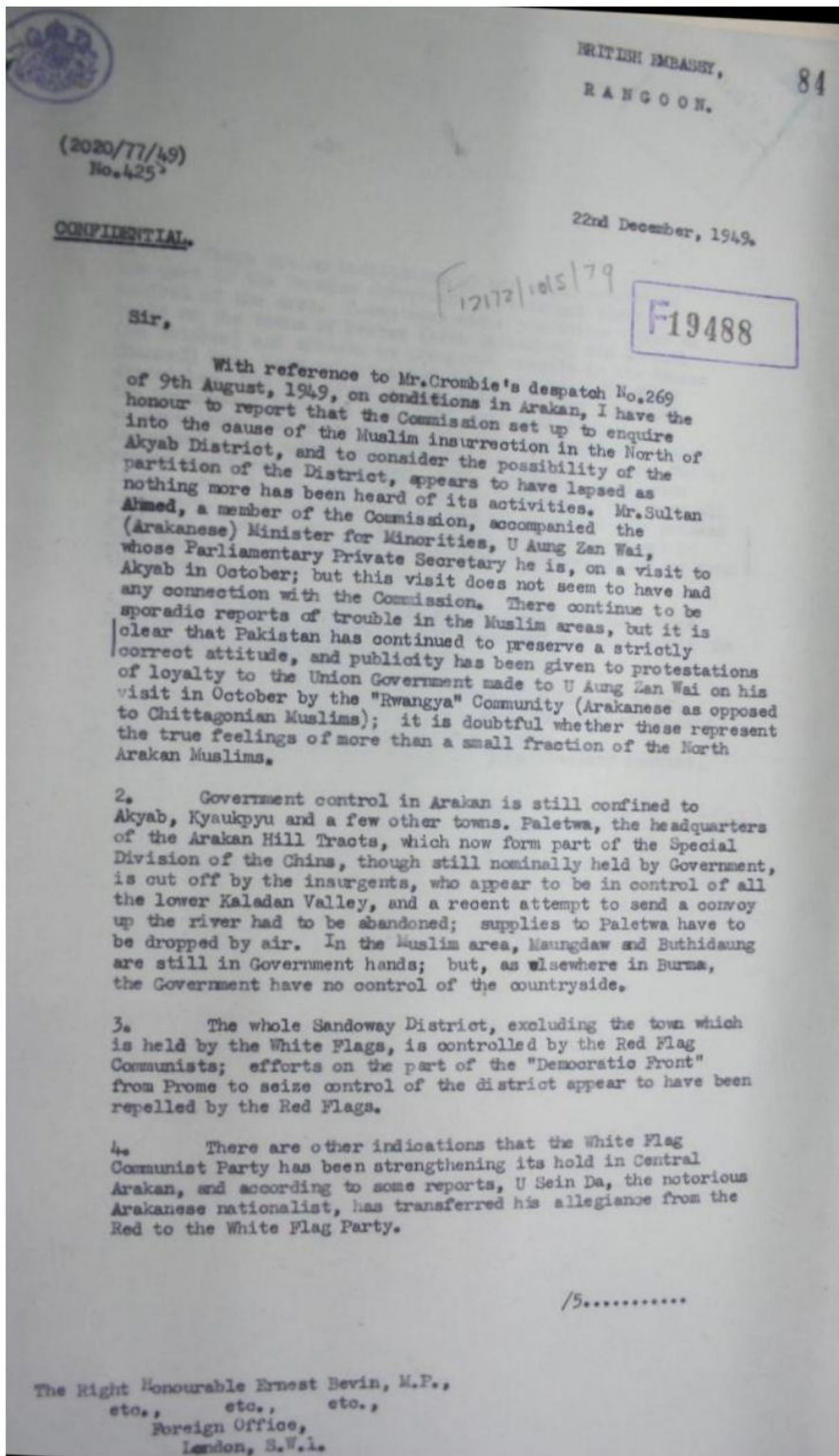
Transcript of Paragraph 1 of a diplomatic despatch from Ambassador James Bowker in Rangoon to the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, dated 22 December 1949

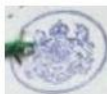
Sir,

With reference to Mr Crombie's despatch No. 269 of 9th August, 1949, on conditions in Arakan, I have the honour to report that the Commission set up to enquire into the cause of the Muslim insurrection in the North of Akyab District, and to consider the possibility of the partition of the District, appears to have lapsed as nothing more has been heard of its activities. Mr Sultan Ahmed, a member of the Commission, accompanied the (Arakanese) Minister for Minorities, U Aung Zan Wai, whose Parliamentary Private Secretary he is, on a visit to Akyab in October; but this visit does not seem to have had any connection with the Commission. There continue to be sporadic reports of trouble in the Muslim areas, but it is clear that Pakistan has continued to preserve a strictly correct attitude, and publicity has been given to protestations of loyalty to the Union Government made to U Aung Zan Wai on his visit in October by the "Rwangya" Community (Arakanese as opposed to Chittagonian Muslims); it is doubtful whether these represent the true feelings of more than a small fraction of the North Arakan Muslims.

2. Government control in Arakan is still confined to Akyab, Kyaukpyu and a few other towns.....

[Note the distinction drawn by the Ambassador between the minority of quasi-indigenous "Rwangya" Muslims and the majority of 19th-20th Century immigrant Chittagonian Muslims. The "Rwangya" Muslims were in my view most probably the descendants of the "Rooinga" Mohamedans recorded in 1799 by Dr Francis Buchanan. The Chittagonian Muslims would subsequently appear to have absorbed the remnants of the "Rwangya" Muslims to become today's "Rohingya" Muslims, a designation which began to emerge in the early 1960s at the time of the surrender of the East Pakistan-based Mujahid movement – Derek Tonkin.]





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5. There are no indications of any major attempt on the part of the Burmese Government to reassert their control of the area. Occasional minor operations (such as raids on the towns of Rmree (12th September) and Cheduba (in October) and attacks on insurgent vessels in the Rmree Channel) have been reported and there are constant small skirmishes, but the truth of the matter is probably that the Government dare not arm local Arakanese forces, who as experience has shown would join the Arakanese autonomist insurgents, and cannot spare sufficient Burmese troops for a proper pacification campaign; such a campaign by Burmese troops would in any case meet with bitter opposition from all Arakanese. The Government seem content to accept the present position of stalemate, in which their hold on the towns is just sufficient to prevent a complete breakaway of Arakan from the Union of Burma.

6. I am sending copies of this despatch to the United Kingdom High Commissioners in New Delhi and Karachi and to the Commissioner General at Singapore.

I have the honour to be,
With the highest respect,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

James Dowler.

Transcript of an undated letter, probably written in 1951, from Professor Pearn of the Foreign Office to Professor Gordon Luce of SOAS University of London

FOREIGN OFFICE
Research Department
Cornwall House S.E.1

[1951 ?]

My dear Luce ¹,

You may remember that a little while ago I wrote to you on the subject of the derivation of the word RWANGYA, by which Arakanese Muslims describe themselves.

I have had a word from Merrells ², in Rangoon, on the same subject. He says that he asked E Maung ³, who gave the following explanation : -

“Between the two words [-] and [-] I would prefer the latter as it would seem to have a relevant meaning. RWAM [-] is a Tibeto-Burmese word and means ‘midway between’- i.e. a person who is a stranger to one is called in Burmese [-] and a person who is neither a stranger nor an intimate (in other words, a person who is on the midway between the stage of a stranger and that of an intimate) is called in Burmese [-]. So also in the case of a half-ripened fruit, the midway between the stage of green and that of ripeness. The other word [-] means ‘in between’. Consequently the two words [-] and [-] put together as a coined word would mean ‘half-caste’ or ‘a person of mixed blood’.”

This sort of thing is beyond my ken, but the above does not, to my untutored mind, seem convincing. So far as I have seen, the term RWANGYA is used by few except the Arakan Muslims themselves, and I should have expected them to adopt some simpler expression, perhaps with an Indian connexion. But I am very likely wrong. However, if some time when leisure permits, you should feel disposed to let me know your views, I should be most grateful.

with all good wishes,
Yours ever,
[signed]
(B.R.Pearn)⁴

G.H. Luce, Esq., OBE.,
School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London
W.C.1

[See original letter on next page. No response known.]

¹ [Professor Gordon Hannington Luce](#)

² George Merrells, Oriental Secretary at the British Embassy, resident some years in Arakan

³ Professor E Maung, formerly University of Rangoon, Foreign Minister, Minister of Justice

⁴ Professor Bertie Reginald Pearn, formerly University of Rangoon, Head of Asian Section FO Research

FOREIGN OFFICE,
Research Department,
Cormwall House, S.E. 1.

1951?

My dear Lucie,

You may remember that a little while ago I wrote to you on the subject of the derivation of the word KWANGYA, by which Arakanese Muslims describe themselves.

I have had a line from Herralls, in Rangoon, on the same subject. He says that he asked K Hwang, who gave the following explanation :-

"Between the two words 35. 36 and 20. 21 I would prefer the latter as it seems to have a relevant meaning. KWAN 20 is a Tibeto-Burmes word and means 'midway between' - i.e. a person who is a stranger to one is called in Burmese 20. 21 and a person who is neither a stranger nor an intimate (in other words, a person who is on the midway between the stage of a stranger and that of an intimate) is called in Burmese 20. 21. So also in the case of a half-ripened fruit, the word 20. 21 is used. That is to say, the fruit is on the midway between the stage of green and that of ripeness. The other word 35. 36 means 'in between'. Consequently the two words 35. 36 and 20. 21 put together as a coined word would mean 'half-ripened' or 'a person of mixed blood'."

This sort of thing is beyond my ken, but the above does not, to my untutored mind, seem convincing. So far as I have seen, the term KWANGYA is used by few except the Arakanese Muslim themselves, and I should have expected them to adopt some simpler expression, perhaps with an Indian connexion. But I am very likely wrong. However, if, sometime when leisure permits, you should feel disposed to let me know your views, I should be most grateful.

With all good wishes,
Yours ever,

B. R. F.
(D. R. F. Peck)

G. S. Lucas, Esq., F.R.S.,
School of Oriental & African Studies,
University of London,
W.C. 1.