

The Other Side of the Rohingya

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Rangoon correspondent U Maung Maung reports on his recent (July 1978) secret visit to the towns of Aykab (Sittwe), Buthidaung and Maungdaw:

Extracts: From the minarets of mosques in the townships I toured, I could hear the familiar chant calling the devout to prayer. The sound seemed to support the government's contention that there was no religious persecution in the area. I certainly saw no sign of antipathy among the non-Muslims towards Muslims.

Any visitor can see that the Muslim population in these townships is significant. According to the 1973 census, 209,873 of Maungdaw's 223,616 people were Muslims while in Buthidaung there were 138,547 Muslims in a total population of 263,317. In Akyab, the capital of Arakan state, Muslims dominate.

The problem is that the proportion of "Chittagong Muslims" among these groups has been steadily rising; these are people who moved into Burma from the Chittagong area of Bangladesh. They have settled down as farmers and fishermen, but many are active in the smuggling trade. They apparently have access to relief goods supplied to Bangladesh, such as clothing and medicine. They also bring bicycle accessories, Horlicks, Ovaltine, biscuits and talcum powder through the well-trodden jungle paths into Maungdaw. In the village of Phone Nye Leik, all the people I saw were Chittagong Muslims.

Burma looks upon these people as illegal immigrants. It says that many of them have now fled to Bangladesh – not because they're Muslims but because their illegal status was being exposed. Burma does not even concede that they are refugees, preferring the term "fugitives".

While arguments go on at governmental levels, problems on the ground are continuing. People described as "bad elements" are apparently in a situation to exploit the situation. Many of them are said to have crept back into Arakan from the camps in Bangladesh. They are certainly keeping themselves busy. On my way back, I saw a village near Buthidaung belching smoke; enquiries revealed that it had been set on fire by some Chittagongians [sic] who had returned for that purpose and then vanished again.

Rohingya Are Involving themselves



Refugees

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From that a major religious clash involving many countries could develop over the flight of Muslims from Burma to Bangladesh have resulted following the visit to Rangoon of a high-powered Duca delegation. Official circles are tight-lipped about the outcome of the talks, but the reading this week among diplomats is that Rangoon has generally succeeded in establishing its twin postulates — that the affected Muslims are not Burmese and that Rangoon has no moral obligation to absorb them.

However, that is unlikely to improve the plight of some 200,000 uprooted people (Rangoon's figure: 95,000) now living in conditions that numerous foreigners have made abominable. Bangladesh, clearly in no position to provide for such an influx, is hoping

other Muslim countries will come to the aid of the refugees. This follows the sentiment of the Bangladesh liberation war that non-Bengalis are outsiders despite the common bond of Islam. Most of the displaced Muslims are said to have their ethnic roots in India, Pakistan and even beyond.

As Burma sees it, they crossed illegally into the Arakan region for mostly economic reasons. The southern tongue of Bangladesh, Rangoon sources say, is especially poor in resources and there is a running temptation for people to cross the open border into Burma's more promising frontier districts. Natural calamities and political disturbances often raise such illegal immigration to the proportions of a flood.

Even before the crisis broke over, Burmese newspapers had carried stories of a two-way smuggling trade: boats loaded with rice would go from Akyab to areas in Bangladesh and, after selling off the ribs, return with illegal immigrants. The resultant swelling of the population in the border districts is what prompted Burmese authorities to launch the Nagas ("Dragon King") project in Arakan, Chin and Kachin states and in Mandalay and Iqung divisions.

The Nagas operation was an attempt by the Immigration & Manpower Department to register citizens and absorb under two separate categories. Predictably, it created panic among those who had moved into the region without authorization. The "results" followed. To check an aspect of tension in the area, Rangoon Correspondent U Mung Mung recently visited the towns of Akyab, Butchasing and Munglaw and filed this report:

From the minutes of meetings in the townships I covered, I could hear the familiar chant calling the devout to prayer. The sound seemed to support the government's contention that

there was no religious persecution in the area. I certainly saw no sign of antipathy among the non-Muslims towards Muslims.

Any visitor can see that the Muslim population in these townships is significant. According to the 1972 census, 229,273 of Munglaw's 223,545 people were Muslims while in Butchasing there were 138,547 Muslims in a total population of 262,317. In Akyab, the capital of Arakan state, Muslims dominate.

The problem is that the proportion of "Chittagong Muslims" among these groups has been steadily rising. As the name implies, these are people who moved into Burma from the Chittagong area of Bangladesh. They have settled down as farmers and fishermen, but many are active in the smuggling trade. They apparently have access to relief goods supplied to Bangladesh, such as clothing and medicine. They also bring bicycle accessories, Harlicks, Dynaflex, biscuits and talcum powder through the well-trodden jungle paths into Munglaw. In the village of Phaw Nya Lek in Butchasing, all the



Rohingya in Bangladesh. Photographed

people I saw were Chittagong Muslims.

Burma looks upon these people as illegal immigrants. It says that many of them have now fled to Bangladesh — not because they're Muslims but because their illegal status was being exposed. Burma does not even concede that they are refugees, preferring the term "fugitives."

While arguments go on at governmental levels, problems on the ground are continuing. People described as "hard elements" are apparently in a position to exploit the situation. Many of them are said to have crept back into Arakan from the camps in Bangladesh. They are certainly keeping themselves busy. On my way back, I saw a village near Butchasing being looted; suspicion revealed that it had been set on fire by some Chittagongians who had returned for that purpose then vanished again.



Muslims of Butchasing, Burma. "Hard elements" are exploiting the situation