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Mass Departures in the Rakhine-Bangladesh Borderlands

By Jacques P. Leider

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The 2017 exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh was the latest in a series of escalating transborder movements. As they reference physical harassment, systemic exclusion, *de facto* statelessness, and earlier mass flights, Rohingyas have condemned the recent exodus as a deliberate attempt to extinguish their group. Since the 1990s, mass departures have commonly been described as the outcome of military crack-downs. However, while characterizations underscore the violence of the state-ethnic contest, they pass over transnational aspects of the conflict dynamics.¹

This brief looks at the departures of 1942, 1948-49, 1959, 1976-78 and 1991-92, happening in different political contexts from World War II to the end of Myanmar's military regime in 2011. Yet each crisis was triggered and unfolded within the same area at nearly identical locations in Cox's Bazaar district (Chittagong Division) and Maungdaw sub-district (in the former Akyab district). Mass departures were cyclic with recurrent acts of atrocity and destruction of livelihood perpetrated against Muslim civilians. But they were also singular events to be explored within their own contexts of overlapping complexity of territorial and identity politics. The descriptive analysis below highlights how past events are 'emboxed' in the present context. It points to a dynamic of arbitrary and unrestrained violence within a continuum of shifting power relations, weakening civilians and strengthening the hand of the state. The diachronic perspective proposed undercuts the narrative of a "relatively peaceful nature of Arakan" that has falsely embellished the memory of Burma's parliamentary regime from 1948 to 1962.²

1. Mass Departures as Cycles of Violence

'Mass departure' is defined here as an unforeseen massive exodus of North Arakan Muslims across the Naf River into the Bengal/

East Pakistan/Bangladesh borderlands happening over several months. Mass departures were central, eruptive events within violent cycles which matured, burst, and resulted in gradually thornier relations between the two countries. Repetition suggests a lack of opportunities, lack of will, or indifference to durable solutions. The state's failure to act as a moderator is apparent and its role as a predator raises an array of questions. Categorizing actors within uniform groups of perpetrators ('military') and victims ('Rohingyas') fits a moral-cum-legal grid preferred by media and advocacy groups. However, agency is multiple and drivers complex: Muslims and their leaders did never form a single homogenous group, both departures and repatriation were contested; rebel groups tried to exert influence on policies and their interpretation. Poles apart, Burmese army and police under central command, regional Rakhine authorities, and local Buddhist residents might share prejudice and condone anti-Rohingya/Muslim violence, but they did not have identical interests. The narrative of mass departures triggered by state-induced violence is also underpinned by a record of otherwise shared Buddhist-Muslim grief about multiple state dereliction.

Each of the five mass departures was set in motion by reported acts of physical aggression reaching an intolerable level (rape often being highlighted). Each exodus was (1) linked to a background of anterior conditions (conveniently, but inadequately described as 'tensions'); (2) extended over several months entailing the creation of camps across the border; and (3) followed by a formal or informal process of partial return, on the one hand, and incremental diaspora formation on the other.³ When return processes are included, periods ascribed to each exodus are bulging: 1942-47, 1948-1956, 1959-1960 (?), 1978-1979, and 1991-2005. Considering the known but poorly documented flow of single or small-group departures taking place at the interstices, the accumulated human cost conditioned by these inherently destructive cycles looks immense.

Myanmar authorities presented state-led campaigns in North Rakhine State as administrative operations to check identities,

¹ "Transnational is an optic or gaze, a way of asking questions that does not take the spatial or temporal unit of analysis as given. It asks, instead, what the appropriate space and time are that need to be considered for the question at hand", Peggy Levitt and Rafael de la Dehesa, "Rethinking 'transnational migration and the re-definition of the state' or what to do about (semi-) permanent impermanence", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2017, vol. 40, no. 9, p. 1520.

² Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*, Hurst and Company, London, 2016, pp. 48-49. See also Martin Smith, "The Muslim 'Rohingyas' of Burma", in *Rohingya Reader II*, Burma Centrum Nederland, 1996 [2017] (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/lxx-eit/>), p. 6: "what is often forgotten is that the armed conflict in Arakan never really subsided after 1945".

³ Wong and Suan describe the "standard cartography of Rohingya mobilisation as an area bounded by 'flight and repatriation across the border, immobilisation in camp life, or precarious existence in border settlements [...] with long-distance resettlement as an exceptional, residual solution", Diana Wong and Tan Pok Suan, "'Looking for a Life': Rohingya Refugee Migration in the Post-Imperial Age", in Barak Kalir and Malini Sur (eds.), *Transnational Flows and Permissive Politics: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 80.

prevent illegal migration, enforce border security and fight rebels. Mass flights were variously characterized as the escape of illegals. Repatriation raised suspicion bearing the risk of new illegal entries.

Muslim victims described their maltreatment early on as ethnic and religious persecution, increasingly linking it to the denial of constitutional recognition. After the 1982 citizenship law, expulsion was interpreted as the ultimate step of a process of disenfranchisement. As testimonies of horrific crimes were recorded at each cycle, the accusation of ethnocide or genocide was repeatedly raised by Muslim leaders since 1951.

While the host country pushed for repatriation, resistance has been a recurrent phenomenon. Like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (known as 'ARSA') in today's camps, the Rohingya Patriotic Front in 1978, and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation after 1991, militated strongly against a return while advertising their political demands. The issue of a fair and safe repatriation came to involve a growing number of voices. Its implementation generated mandates of the UNHCR in co-operation with other humanitarian organisations.

2. Transborder Space, Mobility, and Demographic Change in the Borderlands

Mobility of people predates the modern nation-states, and is a trait of the borderlands where Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and animists had to co-exist in changing political configurations. The Naf River connected rather than divided. It was a natural boundary once separating the Mughal empire and the Arakanese realm, cutting across a sparsely populated and poorly regulated buffer zone.

The colonial regime changed this setting. It encouraged increased migration and an expansion of the agricultural frontier. The north of Arakan became intensely connected to Southeast Bengal. A seasonal migration of Bengali agricultural labour became indispensable to Arakan's annual rice producing cycle for nearly a century. And Chittagonian settlement migration transformed the territorial pattern and enveloped older dispersed Muslim communities in Arakan. Maungdaw and Buthidaung turned into densely populated, Muslim-majority townships before WW I. In 1947-48, the creation of an international border did not stop this established pattern of trans-river connectivity. As Virginia Thompson noted in 1955: "movement across this frontier [...] was quick, easy and cheap".⁴

The lands north and south of the Naf share the same ecology. Historically, people fleeing violence sought for shelter within the borderlands. Locations of camps across the Naf barely changed for 70 years. The habitual mode of refugee cycles also had a limited impact on bilateral relations because Pakistan or Bangladesh never saw themselves as strategic rivals of Burma.

Mobility does not contradict belonging. Most Rohingya agriculturists own the land they cultivate. The affective dimension of repatriation is unvarying even as the parameters in the debate on repatriation may have shifted with the unparalleled level of recent violence. Emotional bonds of territorial and social belonging are shared by Buddhists, Muslims and others; they are not in conflict with transborder movements or erased by involuntary displacement. Rather, the normative pressures of the sovereign states have energized ethnogenesis and sub-nationalisms as forms of local Buddhist and Muslim cultural resilience and resistance.

3. Arakan's Evacuees in Bengal, 1942

When British rule broke down with Japan's victorious invasion of Burma, Muslim villages were attacked by Buddhists in central Arakan triggering a mass flight northward, where Muslims retaliated driving the Rakhine out of Maungdaw and partly Buthidaung (April-May 1942). Chittagonian Muslims crossed the border into Bengal and 20,000 were transferred by the British to a camp in Shubirnagar; 5,000 Arakanese were evacuated from Maungdaw town by Gurkha troops and hosted at a camp in Dinajpur. Both groups were repatriated after 1945, a challenging logistical feat because of the mutual hostility. Internal dislocation, famine and evacuation were memorialized in differing ways by Buddhists and Muslims.

The 1942-1947 evacuation and repatriation may not fit the cast of later mass departures. But the cycle prefigures the unresolved territorial discontent perpetuated after WW II, and the states' failure to investigate crimes, rectify injustice, and promote integrating policies.

To assess the traumatic experiences of both groups, one must take one step back. The transformation of North Arakan into a majority Muslim area between the 1850s and the 1930s was experienced by the Rakhine as a story of their own domestic displacement. Any later real (or imagined) immigration from across the river was bound to re-ignite Rakhine fears and anger. The Muslims, on the other hand, who in 1948 looked back at over half a century of building their lives thanks to hard work in North Arakan, took the lesson from the 1942 experience that they could find shelter across the Naf, while, in times of crisis, they depended on external support. On both sides, mistrust and resentment became ingrained. The border was unfenced and people kept on passing largely unimpeded, economic and social life in the borderlands picked up again, arms were stocked, rice was smuggled, and the next crisis was looming.

4. Refugees and Rebels, 1948-50

From 1946 to 1949, Arakan's internal situation went from bad to worse. Poverty was rampant, crime was rife, and taxation discredited. Public order, defended unsteadily, imploded after Burma's independence (4 January 1948). Always a zone of marginal concern, Arakan made occasional headlines with its Buddhist and Muslim separatist leanings. U Seinda, a nationalist monk who had resisted the Japanese but disagreed with Burma's dominant political alliance (Aung San's AFPFL), tried to gain recognition and co-operated with the illegal Communist Party of Burma ('Red Flags'). Muslim leaders, disappointed when an unproven British promise for a Muslim frontier state did not materialize, were torn between those who wanted Akyab district to join Pakistan and those who fashioned a Muslim state within Burma. These were the Mujahids who effectively controlled North Arakan's countryside from April 1948 to the early 1950s and could count on unofficial support of local Pakistani officers. Burmese forces were stretched, parliamentary investigations stillborn, and the intervention of paramilitary units and the air force worsened relations with the civilian population.

Terrorized by the fighting, people fled. In late December 1948, "100 boats" crossed the Naf River.⁵ Some 5,000 refugees reportedly arrived up to January 1949.⁶ Some had local family

⁴ Richard Adler and Virginia Thompson, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1955, p. 151.

⁵ National Archives ('NA'), FO 371-75660, High Commissioner for the United Kingdom ('HC UK'), Karachi, to Commonwealth Relations Office, London ('CRO'), 17 December 1949.

⁶ Mujtaba Razvi, "The Problem of Burmese Muslims", *Pakistan Horizon*, 1978, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 87.

contacts to join. Those who did not were hosted in several camps. The government in Karachi, mistaken about the actual number of Muslims in Arakan, feared an influx of half a million.⁷ A Pakistani editorialist predicted a “large influx of refugees into East Bengal if nothing is done to meet the aspirations of the Arakanese Muslims for a measure of local autonomy”.⁸ Some refugees seem to have returned in July 1949. Yet in December, a “Central Arakanese Muslim Refugee Organisation” based in Nilla (Cox’ Bazaar) wrote petitions to both governments alleging a “pre-planned conspiracy” of the “extremist Arakanese leadership” to “wipe out” the Muslims. In January 1956, a report in the *Pakistan Observer* stated that “at one time there were as many as 30,000 Arakan refugees in East Bengal”, but two months later Pakistan’s Foreign Minister made clear that a large number had actually returned.⁹ In 1955, the Burmese government tried, for the first time, to settle Buddhists in North Arakan to push back against the dominant Muslim population.¹⁰ Annual military campaigns had meanwhile minimized the threat of the Mujahids.

5. Border Control and ‘Genuine’ Illegals, 1959

A mass exodus of allegedly 13,500 Muslims (17,600 according to Pakistani media) took place between March and August 1959.¹¹ Information drawing on Pakistani authorities stated that first, “deportees” were “simply dumped by the Army or Police on the Pakistani bank of the River Naff”, or on islands mid-stream; later, “life was made so unpleasant” for the Muslims that they had “no option but to take refuge”. An “Arakanese Muslim Refugee Organisation” was founded in East Pakistan and made “allegations of atrocities of all kinds”. In early September 1959, Burma gave the nod to the return of long-time residents while refusing “genuine” illegals, an agreement confirmed by General Ne Win visiting Karachi in October.¹²

The immediate context of the mass flight was an attempt made under Ne Win’s care-taker government (October 1958–April 1960) to improve the registration of foreigners, exert a stricter control on the border, and check illegal migrants.¹³ For the Burmese, as an official put it in 1956, “illegal immigration of Pakistanis was a much more serious problem than that of Indians and Chinese”, because “Moslems of Pakistani origin are only too ready to help their friends and compatriots to cross the border”, while Burmese immigration officers were few and could not count on Pakistan’s help.¹⁴ In the eyes of British diplomats, the “steady movement of permanent immigrants southwards towards the rich and relatively thinly-populated rice lands of North Arakan” was real.¹⁵ While the threat of rebels faded, Maungdaw’s Jamiat ul-Ulama and emerging Rohingya organizations in Rangoon advocated for an autonomous Muslim state. Simultaneously, Arakanese Buddhist parliamentarians denounced the economic neglect of Arakan by the government and called for their own ethnic state. Some were accused of exploiting the issue pressing for the resettlement of

Muslims or their expulsion. For the government, pushing people over the border was politically risk-free.¹⁶ A military spill-over in relations with Pakistan was unlikely as Pakistan’s military strategy was entirely focused on India. Sympathies in East Pakistan for Muslims across the border were tangible, but politically ineffective.

6. Internationalization of the Borderland Issues, 1978

North Arakan Muslims started to arrive by the thousands in Bangladesh in late March and April 1978, reaching over 100,000 when Bangladesh appealed for help to the United Nations (‘UN’) on 12 May 1978. Figures kept on growing over the next months. The total recorded in camps went from 126,505 (23 May) to 193,603 (15 August 1978).¹⁷ Refugees were given shelter in 14 camps situated as in previous decades south of Cox’ Bazaar. Repatriation officially started on 31 August 1978 following an agreement of early July between Bangladesh and Burma. Preparations to accommodate families in reception camps in Arakan were inspected by UN officers. The return process came to an end in late December 1979.

The 1978 mass departure made international headlines, and substantial archival and media sources allow a hindsight review. Bangladesh was criticized for urging refugees to repatriate by restricting food deliveries. The UNHCR came under fire for being complicit. But assessments of the exodus of 1978 were already conflicting at the time of the events. Interpretations have since undergone further change with the globalization of the Rohingya issue.

The British *Observer*’s “Burma drives out 130,000 Muslims” (4 June 1978) echoed Bangladesh’s view of a “forcible expulsion of members of one of the ethnic minority communities residing in the Arakan province”.¹⁸ The Rohingya Patriotic Front had expressed its griefs about “criminal atrocities” to the UNHCR since September 1976; no later than 11 April 1978, it published “Genocide in Burma against the Muslims of Arakan”, a brochure documenting excesses of the army in Akyab and Buthidaung as the authorities launched ‘Operation Nagamin’.¹⁹ This operation had been decided by Ne Win’s government on 16 November 1977 to investigate the identity of citizens and foreigners and “take action against foreigners who have filtered into the country illegally”.²⁰

International reports did not contradict the allegation of illegal immigration, but expressed horror at the accounts of loot, rape and arson by security forces and conniving Arakanese. Fleischmann’s research concludes that the Burmese authorities had no intention to drive out the Muslims.²¹ It evaluates factors such as transborder mobility, smuggling, physical resistance to identity controls and the combined impact of Arakanese and Rohingya insurgents on regional security to explain an increased willingness of the state for violent coercion. Such an understanding is radically different from post-2017 interpretations. Still, the geopolitical and constitutional context of the late 1970s was dissimilar, too. Issues of citizenship and Rohingya ethnic identity (the term itself being rarely

⁷ NA, FO 371-75660, British Embassy, Rangoon to HC UK, Karachi, 28 February 1949.

⁸ NA, FO 371-75660, Weekly report, Deputy HC UK, Dacca, 28 May 1949.

⁹ Razvi, 1978, pp. 87–88 see *supra* note 6.

¹⁰ NA, FO371-117037, HC UK, Karachi to CRO, 26 July 1955.

¹¹ NA, FO371-144475, HC UK, Karachi to CRO, 9 September 1959; Razvi 1978, p. 88, see *supra* note 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ NA, FO371-135774, British Embassy, Rangoon, to Foreign Office, London (‘FO’), 21 January 1958.

¹⁴ NA, FO371-123327 British Embassy, Rangoon, to FO, 3 March 1956.

¹⁵ NA, FO371-135774, see *supra* note 13.

¹⁶ NA, FO371-144475, see *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ UNHCR Archives Geneva, Central Registry, Box 356 ARC-2/A44. Numbers peaked at over 200,000 in July, but more accurate censuses turned out lower figures.

¹⁸ UNHCR Archives Geneva, Central Registry, 100.BIB.BMA, Box 56 ARC-2/A42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Klaus Fleischmann, *Arakan – Konfliktregion zwischen Birma und Bangladesh Vorgeschichte und Folgen des Flüchtlingsstroms von 1978*, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, Hamburg, 1981, p. 110.

²¹ Fleischmann, 1981, p. 163, see *supra* note 20.

used) were not operative. Humanitarian and rights organisations with an international mandate had barely emerged. A Rohingya Refugee Welfare Organization lobbied for Rohingya Patriotic Front's political demands but played a limited role trying to stop people from returning. Rohingya activists earned shows of Muslim solidarity and capitalized on the crisis to claim armed support from Libya or Saudi-Arabia. Thousands of Rohingyas absconded from the camps, blended into the host society, or moved illicitly to an uncertain future in the Middle East. Burma, however, took some pride in the repatriation process and rapidly mended its relations with Bangladesh. Visits at government-level and cultural missions peaked in 1979 and both countries signed a boundary agreement on 23 May 1979 for the demarcation of their frontier.

7. Militarization and Ethnicized Politics, 1991-92

Starting November 1991, thousands of Rohingya Muslims entered Bangladesh, leading a steeply rising outflow. In December, the crisis was complicated by Myanmar military gunfire across the border against Rohingya Solidarity Organization fighters. News were slow to be reported in the international media. In February 1992, Bangladesh appealed again to the international community for emergency support. Until June 1992, 250,877 arrivals were registered.²² Ninety per cent came from the townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung.

As the troops' violence provoked criticism, Myanmar's government made clear that it would not take back 'illegal immigrants', rejected accusations of an anti-Muslim stance, and denied the legitimacy of Rohingya claims. Bangladesh was keen to see a quick repatriation and undercut the bilateral agreement worked out through UN involvement (28 April 1992) with a protocol signed with Myanmar (5 May 1992) ignoring their engagement for a 'safe and voluntary' return under UNHCR auspices. Activists in the camps also militated against repatriation without UNHCR supervision. The process, as it ran from September 1992 to late 1993, has been considered by outsiders as taking place under duress.²³ Only in November 1993, a bilateral agreement with Myanmar paved the way for UNHCR's supervisory role. Repatriation stood at 200,000 in June 1996 and reached 236,599 by July 2005 when Myanmar stopped the process. This left 24,135 registered refugees in the camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara while Rohingyas still left Rakhine State intermittently in great numbers.²⁴

To account for the mass flight, a cluster of interlocked developments can be subsumed under the captions of ethnicization, border securitization, and militarization, factors which hence reinforced oppressive policies and played an increasingly detrimental role in the 'boat refugee crises' of 2009 and 2015, and the violence of 2012 and 2016-17. Humanitarian and human rights

actors, who began to play an unprecedented role since the 1990s, have described the mass flight as the result of the brutal militarization of the border. The ethnicization of politics is rightly mentioned, too, but for Rohingyas, the systemic alienation portraying them as 'illegal Bengalis' and the creation of administrative and civic precarity was more decisive than 'Burmanization'. The 1978-79 cycle had likely impacted the formulation of the 1982 citizenship law which precluded Rohingya ethnic claims of indigeneity. The perception of a rapidly growing population along a poorly secured border internally framed the North Rakhine Muslims as a threat long before Islamophobia became a driver of rejection. The state-centric view was bolstered by Rakhine interpretations of 'Bengali' as a 'bad colonial legacy'.

In 1988, a popular revolt hastened the end of the Ne Win regime but did not lead to democratization. Rohingya leaders, too, saw an opportunity to assert their rights, participated in the 1990 elections, and were largely crushed like other democratic actors. The conditions of the mass departure were created when the army doubled the number of its troops and asserted greater territorial control with border garrisons, expropriations, corvée labour and brutalities. In 1991-92, emerging international interest for Myanmar focused on Aung San Suu Kyi, not the Rohingyas. This barely changed the next two decades.

8. Prior to 2017

Despite their cyclic and ferocious nature, mass departures and the negotiation of conditional returns have worked as a marginal mode of self-protection. While the habitual mode of migrant flows was not essentially altered by the 1991-92 mass departure, the "Rohingya cartography of the Islamic zone of migration" widened, including Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries.²⁵ Advocacy increased the visibility of Rohingya victimhood. But the mediatization of persecution has not impacted the domestic isolation and international impotence of Rohingya political agency. Intra-community, mostly religious, leadership is functional in crisis situations, though it has never generated a consensual morally representative direction. However, the flight of the weak shames the might of the powerful. Mass departures have ultimately tainted the state, denouncing its policies of carelessness and exclusion.

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²⁵ Wong and Suan, 2012, p. 80, see *supra* note 3.

²² UNHCR data (on file with the author).

²³ Carl Grundy-Warr and Elaine Wong, "Sanctuary under a Plastic Sheet: The Unresolved Problem of Rohingya Refugees", in *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, 1997, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 86.

²⁴ UNHCR data, see *supra* note 22.