

A BRIEF ACCOUNT ON THE HISTORY OF THE MUSLIM POPULATION IN ARAKAN¹

The first settlers in Arakan were the Kanran, a tibeto-burman tribe. Migrating down from the Himalayan mountains, they and related tribes occupied the Chittagong Hills and subsequently also the Arakan region. At a later stage, in the 9th century, Burmese tribes arrived and assimilated the Kanran as well as mixing to some extent with Indian tribes (indorian/draviden) entering the area in small numbers at the same time. The Burmese element in this new Arakan or Rakhine race dominated however, and the people continued speaking a Burmese language and were culturally oriented towards East-Asia rather than the Sub-Continent.

The first Muslims who arrived in Arakan were Arab sailors who settled along the coast in the 8th and 9th centuries. Their numbers were small and, mixing with the local population, they and their offspring soon lost their cultural identity, though continued to practice their religion.

The first large wave of Muslims arrived in Arakan in the 15th century. In 1404 Naramekhla, the king of Arakan, had fled to Bengal due to Burmese pressure. He was reinstated as ruler of Arakan by Nadir Shah in 1430. The Muslim army which brought him back to power remained in Arakan and became the backbone of the Arakan forces. Since his return and until 1637, Arakan remained in a kind of loose vassalage to the Bengal court and had to pay tribute to the Sultan. In addition to their Arakanese names the kings adopted Muslim cognomina and titles.

The period after 1430 saw a constant influx of Muslims, mainly mercenaries from Afghanistan, Persia and even Turkey, as well as traders from North India and the Arabian Peninsula. They merged with the existing Muslim society and became the so-called Rohingya², with a distinct culture and language, which can be considered a mixture of Persian, Urdu, Pushtu, Arakanese and Bengali. The Rohingya, however, did not significantly change the demographic profile of Arakan as they mainly lived at the court in the capital city and surrounding villages.

The next group of Muslim immigrants did not significantly change the demographic structure either. They were a few thousand refugees from northern India who arrived in 1660, lead by prince Shah Shujah who had lost the Mogul throne. The prince's subsequent involvement with Arakan politics lead to the first real clashes between Arakanese and Muslims which culminated in a massacre against Muslim refugees. In the course of this bloodbath many Rohingyas living at the court were also killed.

¹For the sake of consistency the old terms "Arakan" and "Arakanese" rather than the official "Rakhine" and "Rakhines" are used in this paper. It should, however, be noted that the latter terms are also ancient colloquial terms for the area and the Buddhist people living there.

²The origins of the word "Rohingya" are not absolutely clear. Some authors believe that it means "The Compassionate Ones" or "The Dear Ones". However it could also be a corruption of the Arakanese word "Rwa-haung-ga-kyar" which means "The Tiger From The Old Village" or in other words "The Brave Ones".

Already in the beginning of the 16th century Portuguese (and Italian³) pirates arrived at the Arakan shores and founded settlements along the coast. The Arakanese, by nature seagoing people, adopted new sailing and war techniques from the Portuguese and joined them in their numerous raids into neighbouring Bengal. On the occasion of these raids, captives - Muslim and Hindu - were taken and sold as slaves in Arakan. The slave-hunting in Bengal reached its peak in the 17th century - in 1630 more than 3,000 Bengali captives were sold as slaves in Arakan. These slaves and their offspring were used for cultivation work all over Arakan and could be found in almost all rural Arakanese villages. Although they kept their native language (Bengala) and their religion (Islam and Hinduism), they became Arakanese in dress, habit and social customs. They called themselves Rohingyas but the Arakanese and the real Rohingyas referred to them as Heins, which meant "low cast".

In 1785 the Burmese conquered Arakan and during the following decades of guerrilla warfare almost two third of the population - Arakanese and most of the Rohingyas and Heins - left Arakan for the Chittagong area.⁴ This was the definite end of the Rohingya culture and language, since they could not maintain their social structure as minority in the diaspora.

During the 1st Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) the British conquered Arakan and annexed it to British India. During the British period many of the above-mentioned refugees returned together with new settlers from Bengal who flowed into the depopulated country bringing with them Bengali culture and language. In this context the British census may be of interest:

Increase of Population in Northern Rakhine State (then called Akyab district)

1831	95,100
1911	530,000

Compared with other districts in Burma this increase can only be explained by large scale immigration. For example, in Pegu district:

1831	95,700
1911	293,100

This immigration pattern becomes even more visible by the population figures concerning Maungdaw Township at the Bengali border where UNHCR is working at present:

1831	18,300
1911	101,100

That most of these new immigrants were mainly Muslim (a smaller number were Hindu) also becomes evident from the British figures concerning the Akyab district:

Year	Muslim	Arakanese & Burmese
1872	50,900	225,800
1911	203,100	326,800

³The place where the Italians settled was called Napoli (Naples) and is now known as Ngapali.

⁴Cox's Bazar for example was founded as a settlement for Buddhist Arakanese refugees in 1798.

Although Arakan faced a major influx of Indians (mainly Muslim) until the early 1920s, the relations between the two segments of the population were good, and no major conflicts were reported during the British period. The new Bengali settlers "pushed" the Arakanese to the south and the east but this was more or less a peaceful process since most of the Arakanese were new settlers (returnees) themselves, who easily gave up their homes in which they had only lived for a few years. Another reason why the Arakanese did not resist the migration pressure has to be seen in the light of their attitude towards the Bengali settlers, namely that they were somewhat reluctant to live together as equal partners with an ethnic group they had for centuries considered to be inferior and slaves.

The first major clash between the two ethnic-religious groups occurred during World War II, when as a result of the Japanese advance tens of thousands of Indians from Burma proper fled via Arakan to the Bengal province of British-India. These refugees also triggered the movement of Muslims out of Arakan: First, the exodus of Indians has to be considered a mass phenomenon and as in all mass refugee movements members of the same minority living in relative safety joined the stream of refugees. Second, the refugees heading through Arakan towards British-India were desperate and on their way looted Arakanese villages in order to obtain food and other supplies. In revenge Arakanese villagers attacked them as well as the Muslim neighbours. In this warlike situation old accounts were settled and the Muslims, refugees and residents alike, were driven north.

With the support of the withdrawing British army, the Muslims stopped the Arakanese advance at Rathedaung and subsequently - inflamed by the refugees' harrowing reports of Arakanese cruelty - turned savagely on the Arakanese minority in their midst. As a result thousands of Arakanese fled to the southern part of Arakan and westwards across the Naf river to the Bengal province of British-India. The subsequent occupation of the area by the Japanese brought back some peace, however during the following years of war the Muslims remained loyal to the British whilst the Arakanese more or less supported the Japanese. As a reward the British promised the Muslims of Northern Arakan autonomy.

After the war tens of thousands of refugees, Muslim and Arakanese, returned from the Bengal province of British-India to Arakan. Whilst a large number of the Muslim refugees originating from the southern part of Arakan returned to their native areas, most of the Arakanese returnees were reluctant to repatriate to northern Arakan and preferred to settle South of Rathedaung. As had been the case during the return of refugees after the first Anglo-Burmese War, new settlers from Bengal entered together with the returnees into the depopulated country.

This previously-mentioned promise of autonomy for the Muslim minority was not kept by the British, and after the war the Arakanese-Burmese administration took over the northern part of Arakan (Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships). Their rather colonial style of administration and efforts to repatriate Arakanese, displaced and refugees from British-India, who had lost their home during the 1942 events, led to the creation of the Mujahid movement in 1948, which successfully prevented the further return of Arakanese refugees and triggered the exodus of some thousand old Arakanese settlers. The aim of the Mujahid was to separate northern Arakan from Burma and to unite it with East-Pakistan. Though they failed to reach their ultimate aim they succeeded in finalizing what had already started with the 1942 massacres committed by both sides. The division of Arakan into two separate areas, one mainly Arakanese/Buddhist and the other almost exclusively Bengala/Muslim.

The area remained under constant civil war and was eventually appeased only in 1961. However in 1954, the forces of the central government already had two major victories: a military one (operation monsoon) by capturing the Mujahid Headquarters, and a political one by convincing the Pakistan government to significantly reduce their support for the Mujahid movement. As a result of the latter, Mr. Cassim, the leader of the guerrillas, was arrested in Chittagong and the remaining Mujahids (about 700 fighters) found it increasingly difficult to survive. Their arbitrary tax system, which most of the local population considered sheer

looting, lost them grass-roots support, and as a result of this and various crimes committed by the guerrillas against their own people, many villagers shifted to the towns to protect themselves from Mujahid excesses. In 1961, when the central government established the Mayu Frontier Administration Area by combining Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the northern part of Rathedaung Township, the Muslim leaders saw no further reason to continue with the armed struggle and the Mujahid movement ceased to exist.

Whilst the creation of the Mayu Frontier Administration Area did not grant the Muslim population autonomy, since the area was directly administered by the central government in Rangoon, the Muslims no longer felt oppressed by the Arakanese administration. The new administration implemented by army officers succeeded in bringing order and security as well as some prosperity to the region. The experiment ended in 1964 when the Revolutionary Council abolished the Mayu Frontier Administration Area and put the area again within Arakanese jurisdiction and administration. As a reaction, the old idea of autonomy was revived and led to the creation of the "Rohingya Patriotic Front" in 1964, which resumed guerrilla activities in northern Arakan - albeit at a much smaller scale than its predecessor organisation, the Mujahid movement.

During the civil war the Mujahids had encouraged immigrants from East-Pakistan to settle in the area controlled by the guerrilla movement. The influx continued and apparently became even larger after 1961, as the area became more prosperous and attracted businessmen and smugglers.

Soon after having gained independence, the Burmese State addressed the burning questions related to naturalisation and citizenship by granting minorities living in Burma full citizenship. Only the Indian (amongst them the Muslim of Arakan) and Chinese⁵ minorities were left out since they were considered immigrants who had settled in Burma only recently. The reluctance of the new Burmese State to grant citizenship to the Indians did not impact heavily on the average Muslim of Arakan, and certainly did not distract new immigrants from entering the country. As simple farmers and fishermen they were concerned with their daily life and not about problems which seemed to them rather hypothetical. As long as the authorities did not interfere in their life by discriminating against them because of their legal status, they saw no reason to oppose any citizenship regulation. Furthermore, it seems that at this time an identity document could be obtained easily whenever required. In other words, the authorities provided National Registration Cards (NRCs) as well as Foreigners Registration Certificates (FRCs) upon request, without paying much attention to the regulations governing the issuing of these documents. Furthermore, these documents could be easily forged and hence could be obtained by illegal immigrants without difficulty.

As this was a countrywide phenomenon - albeit certainly most serious in northern Arakan - the central government decided in 1977 to "scrutinize each individual living in the State, designating citizens and foreigners in accordance with the law and taking actions against foreigners who have filtered into the country illegally".⁶ The operation *Nagamin* (Dragon King⁷) designed for this purpose commenced in the beginning of 1978, focusing on certain areas in Kachin and Arakan States. In Kachin State the operation proceeded without difficulties in a calm atmosphere and the authorities arrested only a few illegal immigrants, e.g. in Myitkyina 45 persons out of 15,524 screened. In Arakan, however, the number of arrests was much higher (e.g. 1,025 out of 36,824 in Akyab township) and triggered tension and unrest among the Muslim population as well as an increase in guerrilla activities by the

⁵The Kokan, a Chinese minority living at the Chinese border in Shan State, however, was granted full citizenship.

⁶Statement made by the Home and Religious Affairs Ministry on 16th November 1977.

⁷*Nagamin* statues guard the entrances to Buddhist temples and pagodas. Hence this term might have been chosen to symbolize the aim of the operation being mainly to guard the country against illegal immigrants.

Rohingya Patriotic Front. The latter led to army involvement as the armed forces were requested by the central government to assist in the operation and to protect the civil administration in carrying out the screening process. With a growing number of arrests the situation became more and more tense, and finally resulted in a mass exodus of Muslims to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Apparently both sides were responsible for the deterioration of the situation. The Muslims, among them indeed a significant number of illegal immigrants, resisted the screening and resorted to violent demonstrations as well as to acts of terrorism and sabotage, the latter mainly in Buthidaung township. On the other hand it seems that the authorities dealt with the Muslim population in a quite rigid manner. However, it is apparent that the army was not directly responsible for most of the incidents reported by refugees in Bangladesh. These cases of looting, murder, torture and rape were mainly a result of Arakanese hostility towards the Muslim population. In other words, the Arakanese minority in northern Arakan used the unrest created by the Nagamin operation as a perfect opportunity to seek revenge for what they considered unjust Muslim domination.

In the course of these events - according to statements made by Bangladesh officials - 252,000 persons left Arakan and sought refuge in the Cox's Bazaar area. According to official Burmese sources 143,900 Person "absconded to Bangladesh in order to escape the Nagamin Project". Already in May 1978 UNHCR became involved and started a humanitarian assistance programme to cover the basic needs of an estimated 200,000 refugees staying in camps in Bangladesh. In July 1978 both countries signed an agreement governing the repatriation of all refugees who had resided lawfully in Burma prior to their departure. The repatriation operation *Hintha*⁸ assisted by UNHCR commenced on 31st August 1978 and ended on 29th December 1979. In the course of the repatriation 187,250 refugees repatriated voluntarily to the northern part of Arakan State.

The events which led to the mass exodus in 1991/92 and to the ongoing voluntary repatriation are known and do not require further explanation. It should, however, be mentioned that the problem of the Muslim population in, and illegal immigration to, northern Rakhine State remains unsolved and that UNHCR is facing the challenge to safely anchor the returnees in order to avoid a further exodus. So far the authorities have been more than willing to work together with UNHCR to accomplish this aim.

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⁸The reason why this name was chosen is unknown. *Hintha* is a ducklike migratory bird which visits Burma during winter. It also appears in the Mon mythology and represents the ideal qualities of purity and gentleness.

⁹The paper reflects the opinion of the author which is not necessarily shared by the United Nations and /or the UNHCR.

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