This village in northwest Myanmar has the besieged air of a refugee camp. It is clogged with people living in wooden shacks laid out on a grid of trash-strewn lanes. Its children are pot-bellied with malnutrition. But Takebi’s residents are not refugees. They are Rohingya, a stateless Muslim people of South Asian descent now at the heart of Myanmar’s worst ethnic strife between a tiny Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority threatens the Burmese Spring.

The war of the Rohingyas

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL
TAKEBI, MYANMAR, JUNE 15, 2012

A STATELESS PEOPLE: A Rohingya family at a slum in the town of Sittwe. The UN has declared the ethnic minority “virtually friendless” in Myanmar.

REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ
sectarian violence in years. The United Nations has called them “virtually friendless” in Myanmar, the majority-Buddhist country that most Rohingya call home. Today, as Myanmar opens up, they appear to have more enemies than ever.

Armed with machetes and bamboo spears, rival mobs of Rohingya Muslims and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists this month torched one another’s houses and transformed nearby Sittwe, the capital of the Western state of Rakhine, into a smoke-filled battleground. A torrent of Rohingyas has tried to flee Rakhine into impoverished Bangladesh, but most are being pushed back, a Bangladeshi Border Guard commander told Reuters on Thursday.

The fighting threatens to derail the democratic transition in Myanmar, a resource-rich nation of 60 million strategically positioned at Asia’s crossroads between India and China, Bangladesh and Thailand. With scores feared dead, President Thein Sein announced a state of emergency on June 10 to prevent “vengeance and anarchy” spreading beyond Rakhine and jeopardizing his ambitious reform agenda.

Reuters visited the area just before the unrest broke out. It is now off-limits to foreign reporters.

Until this month, Myanmar’s transformation from global pariah to democratic start-up had seemed remarkably rapid and peaceful. Thein Sein released political prisoners, relaxed media controls, and forged peace with ethnic rebel groups along the country’s war-torn borders. A new air of hope and bustle in Myanmar’s towns and cities is palpable.

But not in Rakhine, also known as Arakan. It is home to about 800,000 mostly stateless Rohingya, who according to the United Nations are subject to many forms of “persecution, discrimination and exploitation.” These include forced labour, land confiscations, restrictions on travel and limited access to jobs, education and healthcare.

Now, even as the state eases repression of the general populace and other minorities, long-simmering ethnic tensions here are on the boil - a dynamic that resembles what happened when multi-ethnic Yugoslavia frac-

**Suu Kyi ‘Tight-lipped’**

Even the democracy movement in Myanmar is doing little to help the Muslim minority, Rohingya politicians say.

Democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi last week urged “all people in Burma to get along with each other regardless of their religion and authenticity.” But she has remained “tight-lipped” about the Rohingyas, said Kyaw Min, a Rohingya leader and one-time Suu Kyi ally who spent more than seven years as a political prisoner. “It is politically risky for her,” he said.

NLD spokesman Nyan Win wouldn’t comment on Suu Kyi’s position, but said: “The Rohingyas are not our citizens.” Suu Kyi is now on a European tour that will take her to Oslo, Norway, to accept the Nobel Peace Prize she won in 1991.

The violence could disrupt Myanmar’s détente with the West, however. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on June 11 called for “Muslims, Buddhists, and ethnic representatives, including Rohingya . . . to begin a dialogue toward a peaceful resolution.”

The United States suspended some sanctions on Myanmar, including those banning investment, in May as a reward for its democratic reforms. But the White House kept the framework of hard-hitting sanctions in place, with President Barack Obama expressing at the time concern about Myanmar’s “treatment of minorities and detention of political prisoners.”

The European Union, which also suspended its sanctions, said on Monday it was satisfied with Thein Sein’s “measured” handling of the violence, which the president has said could threaten the transition to democracy if allowed to spiral out of control.
Rohingya activists claim a centuries-old lineage in Rakhine, which like the rest of Burma is predominantly Buddhist. The government regards them as illegal migrants from neighboring Bangladesh and denies them citizenship. “There is no ethnic group named Rohingya in our country,” immigration minister Khin Yi said in May.

Communal tensions had been rising in Myanmar since the gang rape and murder of a Buddhist woman last month that was blamed on Muslims. Six days later, apparently in retribution, a Buddhist mob dragged 10 Muslims from a bus and beat them to death.

Violence then erupted on June 9 in Maungdaw, one of the three Rohingya-majority districts bordering Bangladesh, before spreading to Sittwe, the biggest town in Rakhine. Scores are feared dead, and 1,600 houses burnt down.

One measure of the pressure the Rohingyas are under is the growing number of boat people. During the so-called “sailing season” between monsoons, thousands of Rohingya attempt to cross the Bay of Bengal in small, ramshackle fishing boats. Their destination: Muslim-majority Malaysia, where thousands of Rohingyas work, mostly illegally.

Last season, up to 8,000 Rohingya boat people - a record number - made the crossing, says Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group based in Thailand. She has studied their migration patterns since 2006.

**BANNED IN BANGLADESH**

The violence in Rakhine could cause a surge in Rohingya boat people when the next sailing season begins in October. Rohingyas leaders say. “The amount of boat people will increase and increase,” said Abu Tahay, chairman of the National Democratic Party for Development, a Rohingyas political party.

In what could be the start of a regional refugee crisis, many Rohingyas are already attempting the shorter voyage to neighboring Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, like Myanmar, disowns the Rohingyas and has refused to grant them refugee status since 1992. Now, according to a Bangladeshi commander, hundreds have been turned away.

At Shah Pari, a Bangladeshi island on the Naf River dividing Bangladesh and Myanmar, Lieutenant Colonel Zahid Hassan of the Bangladesh Border Guard said the force has sent back 14 wooden country boats since the violence flared in early June, bearing a total of some 700 men, women and children.

Hassan said the boat people were given food, water and medicines before being turned back. His men are now holding back local Bangladeshis villagers and limiting how far fishermen can go out into the river to prevent them from helping would-be “illegal intruders.” Peace has been restored since Myanmar imposed its state of emergency, he said, and his men are telling the boat people it is safe to return.

Asked to explain why majority-Muslim Bangladesh did not feel an obligation to take the Rohingyas in, he said: “This is an over-populated country. The country doesn’t have the capacity to accommodate these additional people.”

Government officials say they already harbor about 25,000 Rohingyas with refugee status, who receive food and other aid from the United Nations, housed in two camps in southeastern Bangladesh. Officials say there are also between 200,000 and 300,000 “undocumented” Rohingyas - with no refugee status and no legal rights. These people live outside the camps, dependent on local Bangladeshis in a poverty-plagued district for work and sustenance.

Among them is 48-year-old Kalim Ul-Ullah, a Rohingyas father of three living in a slum where children bathe in a chocolate-brown pond. He fled here in 1992, after violence that followed the watershed 1990 vote won by Suu Kyi and overturned by the military. He holds up a hand to show a half-stump where his thumb had been before he says it was shot off by a Myanmar soldier.

“They tortured me and I was evicted from my house so we came to Bangladesh,” he said. “Now I am waiting for repatriation, I am waiting for democracy in my own country.”

Myanmar’s neighbors have quietly pressed the country to improve conditions in Rakhine to stop the outflow of refugees. Perhaps as a result, Thein Sein’s government this year began easing some travel restrictions, says Rohingya leader Kyaw Min. But these small gains look likely to be suspended or scrapped after the recent bloodshed.

---

**250,000**

The number of Rohingya refugees estimated to be living in Bangladesh
The Rohingya in Myanmar are usually landless as well as stateless, and scratch a living from low-paid casual labour. Four in five households in northern Rakhine State were in debt, the World Food Program reported in 2011. Many families borrow money just to buy food.

UNDER THE ‘NASAKA’
Food insecurity had worsened since 2009, said the program, which called for urgent humanitarian assistance. A 2010 survey by the French group Action Against Hunger found a malnutrition rate of 20 percent, which is far above the emergency threshold set by the World Health Organization.

The Rohingya are overseen by the Border Administration Force, better known as the Nasaka, a word derived from the initials of its Burmese name. Unique to the region, the Nasaka consists of officers from the police, military, customs and immigration. They control every aspect of Rohingya life.

“They have total power,” says Abu Tahay, the Rohingya politician.

Documented human-rights abuses blamed on the Nasaka include rape, forced labor and extortion. Rohingya cannot travel or marry without the Nasaka’s permission, which is never secured without paying bribes, activists say.

The former military government has in the past called these allegations “fabrications.”

“There are hundreds of restrictions and extortions,” says Rohingya leader Kyaw Min. “The Nasaka have a free hand because government policy is behind them. And that policy is to starve and impoverish the Rohingya.”

Burmese officials say the tight controls on the borders are essential to national security. Speaking in Myanmar’s parliament last September, immigration minister Khin Yi made no mention of alleged abuses, but said the Nasaka was vital for preventing “illegal Bengali migration” and cross-border crime.

At Takebi’s market, an agitated crowd gathered before the violence erupted to tell a reporter of alleged abuses by the authorities and ethnic Rakhine: a Rohingya rickshaw driver robbed and murdered, extortion by state officials, random beatings by soldiers at a nearby army post. The stories couldn’t be verified.

Some Burmese officials have betrayed bias against the Rohingya in public statements. Rohingya people are “dark brown” and “as ugly as ogres,” said Ye Myint Aung, Myanmar’s consul in Hong Kong, in a 2009 statement. He went on to extol the “fair and soft” complexions of Myanmar people like himself.

Last week, the state-run New Light of Myanmar published a correction after referring to Muslims as “kalar,” a racial slur.

The sectarian hatred in Rakhine towns and villages is echoed online. “It would be so good if we can use this as an excuse to drive those Rohingyas from Myanmar,” one reader of Myanmar’s Weekly Eleven newspaper comments on the paper’s website.


A nationalist group has set up a Facebook page called the “Kalar Beheading Gang,” which has almost 600 “likes.”

Meanwhile, the Kaladan Press, a news agency set up by Rohingya exiles in the Bangladesh city of Chittagong, blamed the violence on “Rakhine racists and security personnel.”

Not far from Sittwe is Gollyadeil, a fishing village with a jetty of packed mud and a mosque that locals say dates back to the 1930s. The stateless Rohingya villagers here face fewer restrictions than their brethren in the sensitive border area to the north. They can marry without seeking official permission and travel freely around Sittwe district.

Even so, jobs are scarce and access to education limited, and every year up to 40 villagers head out to sea on Malaysia-bound boats. They each pay about 200,000 kyat, or $250, a small fortune by local standards. But the extended Rohingya families who raise the sum regard it as an investment.

“If they make it to Malaysia, they can send home a lot of money,” says fishmonger Abdul Gafar, 35.

Many Rohingya in Myanmar depend upon remittances from Malaysia and Thai-
A Takebi elder with a white beard tinged red from betel-nut juice said he gets 100,000 kyat ($125) every four months from his son, a construction worker in Malaysia.

Remittances have lent a deceptive veneer of prosperity to Takebi, where a few houses have tin roofs or satellite dishes.

Ask shopkeeper Mohamad Ayub, 19, how many villagers want to leave Gollyadeil, and he replies, “All of us.”

For every Rohingya who makes it to Malaysia, hundreds are blocked, or worse. Many are arrested before even leaving Myanmar waters. Others are intercepted by the Thai authorities, who last year were still towing Rohingya boats back out to sea, Human Rights Watch reported, “despite allegations that such practices led to hundreds of deaths in 2008 and 2009.”

“When someone tries to enter the country illegally, it’s our job to send them back,” says Major General Manaspan, a regional director of Thailand’s Internal Security Operations Command, which handles the boat people. “Thailand doesn’t have the capacity to take them in, so people shouldn’t criticize so much.”

TOSS OVERBOARD
Sayadul Amin, 16, set sail in March 2012 in a fishing boat crammed with 63 people, a third of them boys and girls. The weather turned bad, and Sayudul’s boat was pounded by waves.

“I felt dizzy and wanted to throw up,” he said.

By day five, they ran out of water and his friend, also a teenager, died. They prayed over his body, he said, then tossed it overboard.

The boat eventually ran aground somewhere on Myanmar’s Andaman coast, where local villagers summoned the authorities to arrest the boat people.

The adults were jailed in the southern Myanmar town of Dawei, while immigration officials escorted Sayadul and the other minors back to Sittwe by bus. The journey took several days and he saw more of Myanmar than most Rohingyas ever do.

“There were satellite dishes on all the houses,” he said with wonder.

On her historic visit to Myanmar last year, Hillary Clinton praised the country’s leaders for trying to resolve decades-old wars between government troops and ethnic rebel armies. But the Rohingyas stir far greater nationalist passions that could prove even more destabilizing and intractable than conflicts in Kachin State and other ethnic border regions.

Rohingya leaders have long called for the scrapping of the 1982 Citizenship Law, which was enacted by the former dictatorship and rendered stateless even Rohingyas who had lived in Myanmar for generations.

“We are demanding full and equal citizenship,” says Kyaw Min, the Rohingya leader.

Judging by the inflammatory rhetoric pervading Myanmar, that demand is unlikely to be met before next year’s potentially controversial census.

The last one, in 1983, left the Rohingyas uncounted.

Additional reporting by John Chalmers in Shah Pari, Bangladesh. Editing by Bill Tarrant and Michael Williams.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Andrew R.C. Marshall
andrew.m@thomsonreuters.com

Bill Tarrant, Enterprise Editor
william.tarrant@thomsonreuters.com

Michael Williams, Global Enterprise Editor
michael.j.williams@thomsonreuters.com