

## **The Situation in Rakhine, Myanmar**

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In the early morning of 9 October, a group of some 250 armed men attacked two border police and outposts in Mungdaw and Rathedaung townships in Rakhine, Myanmar, resulting in the death of nine policemen. This was followed by clashes that killed five Myanmar army troops, with some 15 men reportedly killed and four other detained by the military in follow up operations after the attack in Mungdaw village. The border gates between Bangladesh and Myanmar were closed indefinitely and some 400 schools in the area were ordered to close on 10 October. Three days after the attack, the situation in Mungdaw township has reportedly returned to calm with no further attacks or clashes, even as government troops continue to inspect the area in search of the assailants.

A number of exiled Rohingya community organisations have denounced what they describe as “state violence” against the villagers (the majority of whom self-identify as Rohingya) during the search operations in Mungdaw. However, the state government in Rakhine has denied that the military’s follow-up operations targeted civilians and has asserted that the casualties were suspected militants. For their part, local Muslim civil society organisations in Myanmar condemned the border attacks and expressed concerns that these could lead to further violence in Rakhine. In particular, the head of Myanmar Muslim Lawyers Association considered these “terrorist attacks” as unacceptable, while other Muslim CSOs condemned “any destructive act as detrimental to the peace and stability” of Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi was careful not to accuse any individual or organization for the attacks until the evidence have been established on who the perpetrators are. She pointed out that her government would manage the situation in Rakhine fairly and in accordance with the law.<sup>2</sup> For his part, Al-haj U Aye Lwin, a Muslim member of the Arakan State Advisory Commission created by the NLD government to address the communal tensions in Rakhine, was also careful not to make any public statement about the Mungdaw attacks but said that he personally cannot accept acts of violence and that “harsh punishment must be given to the attackers.” At the same time, he also pointed out that extra caution must be taken so that those who are not involved in the violence are not adversely affected.<sup>3</sup> These cautious statements are laudable and in stark contrast to earlier statements made by other Myanmar officials who seem to immediately blame the Rohingyas in Rakhine for the attacks.<sup>4</sup>

We support the people and government of Myanmar and the international community in condemning these violent border attacks in Rakhine. The balanced approach that both the highest leadership in the NLD and state governments have taken in responding to the

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<sup>1</sup> Htun Htun, “Local Muslim Community Condemns Mungdaw Attacks,” The Irrawaddy, 12 October 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/local-muslim-community-condemns-maungdaw-attacks.html>, accessed on 13 October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Htet Naing Zaw, “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Responds to Arakan State Attacks,” The Irrawaddy, 12 October 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-responds-to-arakan-state-attacks.html>, accessed on 13 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Htun Htun, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “Security tightens in Rakhine State following police killings,” Eleven News, 10 October 2016, from <http://elevenmyanmar.com/local/6174>, accessed on 13 October 2016.

situation in Mungdaw clearly demonstrate their resolve to avert further violence which could exacerbate communal tensions in Rakhine. Other officials of the central government should support Aung San Suu Kyi's sober and prudent response to the situation in Rakhine. While the military conducts follow up operations in pursuit of those who responsible for these attacks, the NLD government and law enforcement agencies must bear the primary responsibility to protect affected civilians and ensure that fundamental human rights are protected. Alleged violations by any party should be thoroughly and impartially investigated. Media and civil society groups within and outside Myanmar can also contribute to averting further escalation of violence in Rakhine by preventing incitement of communal tensions through fair, accurate and balanced reporting and by promoting inter-faith dialogue and understanding.

ASEAN and the international community should encourage and support Myanmar and Bangladesh in giving priority to enhancing their border security cooperation following the Mungdaw and Rathedaung attacks, which is one of the root causes of communal conflicts in Rakhine.

We join the international community in condemning these attacks on Myanmar's security forces and in calling for prudence and restraint. Rakhine's problems cannot be solved through violence but only through dialogue, understanding and the fulfillment of the Responsibility to Protect principle.