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WORLD

'We'll Turn Your Village Into Soil': Survivors Recount One of Myanmar's Biggest Massacres

Security forces went door to door, shooting anyone who emerged, including children, in a Sunday afternoon massacre

By Jon Emont and Niharika Mandhana Photographs by A.M. Ahad for The Wall Street Journal

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On a Sunday afternoon last August, Ahammed Hossain hid for four hours in a pond in his village of Chut Pyin, screened by bushes and thorns. Around him, he recalled, there was gunfire and the cries of men, women and children trying to outrun the deadly force of Myanmar's 33rd Light Infantry Division.

About a quarter of the village's Rohingya Muslims, more than 350 people died that day, Mr. Hossain said, which would be one of the largest massacres by Myanmar's security forces since the military initiated its campaign against the minority group last year. The campaign's death toll, estimated in the thousands, compares with notorious ethnic killings of the recent past, including Albanians targeted in Kosovo and deadly gas attacks against Kurds in Iraq.

After the shooting stopped, Mr. Hossain, the 25-year-old village leader, stumbled from his hiding place toward a neighboring village. Hours earlier, he had shared a breakfast of chicken and vegetable stew with his wife and their 2-year-old daughter. He had visited his younger sister, married just three weeks. As he fled the burning village, he didn't know if any of them were alive.

Myanmar's military operations since August have driven 700,000 Rohingya Muslims into neighboring Bangladesh. Dozens of villages in western Myanmar's Rakhine state have been destroyed. Few incidents match the scale of what happened in Chut Pyin on Aug. 27.

The Myanmar government has restricted access to Chut Pyin and surrounding villages. Authorities don't allow aid workers, United Nations investigators or Western

Ahammed Hossain, 25 years old, was the village leader of Rohingya Muslims in Chut Pyin, located in Rakhine state, Myanmar.

journalists free travel there.

The Wall Street Journal reconstructed the mass killing in Chut Pyin, gleaned from more than two dozen interviews with Rohingya villagers and local Buddhists. The interviews broadly match reports gathered by Amnesty International as well as Physicians for Human Rights, a New York-based investigative organization that conducted a study of Chut Pyin, including forensic analyses of gunshot wounds.

Given the scale and manner of deaths in Chut Pyin, Physicians for Human Rights said the village would likely be included in international inquiries under way. An International Criminal Court prosecutor in April filed a motion to begin investigating the Rohingya deportations as a potential crime against humanity. The U.S. is weighing sanctions against senior military officers.

Myanmar’s military officials said they were hunting Rohingya militants and have denied committing atrocities against civilians in Chut Pyin. Authorities have accused Rohingya Muslims of burning their own homes. In a statement, the military said security forces “did not commit persecution.”

Tin Maung Swe, spokesman for Rakhine state government, said no more than 10 people died in Chut Pyin that day and there were no rapes or thefts.

Mr. Hossain, Chut Pyin’s Rohingya leader, said he visited former villagers in Bangladesh refugee camps over several weeks and tallied the names of 358 Rohingya killed in the Aug. 27 attack. Another 57 or so people were taken away at gunpoint and have not been seen since. At least 19 women were raped, he said.

One of them was Hasina Begum, 20 years old. She escaped a schoolhouse filled with women who were bound and sexually assaulted by security forces. Earlier that day, she said, she had handed off her 2-month-old baby boy to her mother-in-law, praying they would survive.

The warning

Soldiers from the 33rd Light Infantry Division had arrived in mid-August. An Amnesty International report last year accused the military unit of widespread human-rights violations, including torture. Marzuki Darusman, who chairs a U.N. fact-finding

mission investigating crimes in Rakhine state, said light infantry divisions such as the 33rd need to be spotlighted for their "random killings and oppression."

Dozens of soldiers settled on the Buddhist side of Chut Pyin, a village where Buddhist and Muslim residents had once worked together and joined in soccer games. Troops filled a police station, monastery and other buildings.

Local Rohingya leaders were summoned to an Aug. 22 meeting at the Chut Pyin schoolhouse, recalled Mr. Hossain, who attended. The 33rd Division's regional commander, Aung Myo Thu, told the leaders that if they disobeyed his orders, their villages would be destroyed, Mr. Hossain said.

"We'll turn your village into soil," the commander said, according to Dil Mohammed, the Rohingya leader of a nearby town.

"Maybe you heard about the Kachin or the Karen?" the commander told the Rohingya leaders, referring to two other ethnic minorities living in Myanmar, Mr. Hossain said. "Killing is nothing to us. So we will kill you, too, if you don't follow what we say."

Rohingya heading to safety in Bangladesh from Myanmar in late August last year. . PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

The commander urged cooperation with a government plan to issue national verification cards. Authorities said Rohingya residents needed to register before they could get citizenship. Rohingya villagers refused, believing the ID cards would only cement their diminished status.

Until further notice, the commander said, Rohingya residents were confined to their village: No working in the fields, no grazing livestock.

Three days later, militants of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked police and military outposts in other areas of Rakhine state, killing 12 people.

The next day, Aug. 26, word spread among neighboring villages that militants hiding in Chut Pyin had attacked soldiers with homemade bombs. Rohingya villagers said no

such attack ever took place.

Run or hide

Early on Sunday, Aug. 27, Mr. Hossain, the eldest son of a relatively well-off Muslim family, was home eating breakfast. It was a hot day, near the end of rainy season. Roads were still soft with mud.

His wife, Nur Ankis, was eight months pregnant with their second child. She had been asking him for weeks to let her return to her father's village, which she hoped would be safer.

He told her the trip there would be too dangerous. A few days earlier, he had been beaten with a rifle butt wielded by a soldier from the 33rd Light Infantry Division. Mr. Hossain said he had been helping Rohingya villagers retrieve cattle from farmland that the military had declared off-limits.

After breakfast, Mr. Hossain went to the center of town to speak with other men. He got a call that he put on speakerphone for the others to hear. It was from the village's Buddhist leader, Aung Thein Mya, who summoned him to a meeting that morning.

"Stay where you are and you die, come here and you're saved," Mr. Aung Thein Mya said. Efforts to reach him with a phone number provided by the government were unsuccessful.

Mr. Hossain didn't believe it was safe. He went instead to the home of his sister, Rajuma, the 17-year-old newlywed. They had always been close, he said, and he often bought her clothes and sweets. He left just after 2 p.m.

Outside, he saw dozens of Rohingya villagers running and shouting warnings. Soldiers, police and local youth wearing borrowed military uniforms were arriving from the direction of the Buddhist section, on the northeast side of the village. Soldiers also set up positions on the village's south side, where Mohammad Teher, 21, said he saw them put heavy machine guns in place.

"The military had the village surrounded," he said.

Once the shooting started, residents had two choices: Hide or run west, across about 650 yards of open rice fields, toward the forest.

Mr. Teher said he ducked into a nearby house. Mr. Hossain ran into a farmer's bamboo hut. Inside, a crowd of mostly women and children lay flat, peering through cracks in the thatch. Mr. Hossain said he pressed the women to silence crying children.

Another man hiding there, 50-year-old Mohammed Yahiya, said he saw his cousin shot and killed trying to run. Mr. Yahiya said he heard the man's wife yell, "Oh, my God, they killed my husband!" Then, she, too, was shot. As the woman's children ran to her, they were also shot and killed.

Messrs. Hossain and Yahiya said they could see soldiers going door to door—knocking and then shooting any villagers who emerged.

After about 15 minutes, the soldiers began to shout, "Burn the houses!" Moving through the village, north to south, soldiers doused houses in a flammable liquid and then set fire to the bamboo thatch, villagers said. Other troops fired rockets that exploded buildings.

"We have to get out of this house!" Mr. Hossain recalled yelling.

About six women with children ran out and headed south. They avoided drawing gunfire in those moments, Messrs. Hossain and Yahiya said.

Another woman ran with her 2-year-old son toward a graveyard where others were hiding. After a few steps, she and the child were shot and killed.

Those still in the farmer's hut were afraid to leave. With fires burning around them, Mr. Hossain decided to take his chances. He crawled about 30 feet to a pond where villagers farmed tilapia, a freshwater fish. He dove in, joined by a half-dozen other men who also fled the house.

The air was hazy and hot with smoke from the fires, Mr. Hossain said, which probably kept away soldiers. He waited there, gasping for air and praying.

Once neighbors

Social conflict has festered for decades in the ethnically mixed Rakhine state. The Rohingya consider themselves natives of western Myanmar; the government denies them citizenship, regarding many Rohingya as illegal immigrants.

In October 2016, months after Aung San Suu Kyi became Myanmar's de facto civilian leader, militants of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army launched their first attack against security forces, sparking an initial military crackdown.

Last June, the conflict grew more tense in Chut Pyin, a farm town known for its okra and pungent bitter gourd. The government released photos showing a tunnel, tents and weapons in nearby mountains. Authorities called it a terrorist training camp.

A few weeks later, a relative of the highest-ranking Buddhist in Chut Pyin disappeared while foraging in the mountains. Buddhists suspected Rohingya militants, according to six Buddhist villagers. Three of them had joined a search party for the missing man, Than Htay.

During the search, they found tents, cooking pots and rice. Buddhist villagers considered it evidence that Rohingya militants had killed Than Htay. His body was never found.

Chut Pyin had largely avoided clashes during the state's past conflicts, but fear shook

its

Part of the fields where villagers fled from Chut Pyin toward the forest. **PHOTO:** CHUT PYIN VILLAGERS

Buddhist residents. About 1,400 Rohingya Muslims lived on one side of the village, and roughly 400 Buddhists clustered in an adjoining community.

Since 2012, security forces have kept a sundown curfew on many of the state's Rohingya residents, who also were forbidden from using lights at night. In Chut Pyin, Rohingya children were barred from attending school with Buddhists.

Rohingya locals came under tighter restrictions after Than Htay's disappearance. In one village, Buddhists erected a fence of bamboo and barbed wire around Rohingya homes to confine families. And security forces stepped up arrests of Rohingya men accused of ties with militants.

At the end of July, the mutilated bodies of three Rohingya sharecroppers were found near Chut Pyin. Security forces told Buddhist locals the men were likely killed by militants targeting Rohingya police informants.

> Rohingya villagers suspected Buddhists had killed the sharecroppers to avenge the presumed death of Than Htay.

Growing tension between the two communities of Chut Pyin prompted some Buddhist families to move away. Young Buddhist men shared on Facebook pictures of alleged Rohingya militants with weapons. "We need to be alert," read one post. "We welcome troop deployment," another said.

'This is hell'

As soldiers fired at Chut Pyin villagers, Hasina Begum made a dash across the muddy rice fields toward the forest, carrying her infant son. Her husband ran alongside them as bullets flew by.

When they finally neared the forest, Ms. Begum said, they saw soldiers with rifles and machine guns waiting ahead of them on the road bordering the rice fields. Her family was trapped. "This is hell," she recalled thinking.

They crawled toward the only shelter, a large fallen tree by a brook. About 100 others were there, a group large enough to draw attention.

Soldiers approached them, joined by Buddhist village chief Aung Thein Mya, who was dressed in military uniform and holding a knife, said Ms. Begum and two other women who were there.

Soldiers forced the villagers to kneel with their faces in the mud. The men, about 50 of them, including Ms. Begum's husband, were marched toward the Buddhist side of Chut Pyin. They haven't been seen since. A village shopkeeper, a disabled man in a wheelchair, was shot in the head.

The soldiers grabbed valuables from the women—earrings, nose rings, bracelets and phones, survivors said.

Then the women were divided by age. Younger women were told to hand their children to older women or be shot. Ms. Begum gave her baby to her mother-in-law. The older women were ordered to a nearby village.

Roughly 20 younger women were walked to a tin-roofed government school on the Buddhist side of Chut Pyin.

Ms. Begum said approximately 100 men—including soldiers and police—crowded outside a classroom. Inside, she said, three men used her head scarf as a blindfold, bound her hands with rope and forced her onto the concrete floor, where she was raped by several men. She said she lost consciousness. Two other women recounted similar assaults at the school.

Lost and found

The soldiers left around dusk. Mr. Hossain said it was about 6 p.m. when he heard men shouting: "If you're alive, come out of hiding!"

Mr. Hossain and the other men left the pond. They made their way past scores of corpses, toward the neighboring village of Ah Htet Nan Yar.

At the schoolhouse, Ms. Begum said, she regained consciousness and removed her blindfold. She saw several women on the floor, apparently dead. She ran outside, naked, with a few other survivors. Her hands were still tied.

The women hid themselves in bushes until a boy, hiding nearby, relayed a call for help to relatives. Ms. Begum said her father, who hid from soldiers in a straw pile, found her, and they walked to Ah Htet Nan Yar.

She joined hundreds of Chut Pyin survivors who gathered in the neighboring village. One resident was a trained surgeon, 60-year-old Shofi Ullah. Patients stretched across mats and blankets on the floor of his home. He and his adult children worked through the night to remove 35 bullets and stitch some 70 wounds, he said: "My body and clothes were all soaked in blood."

At the village, Ms. Begum learned her baby son was alive, as well as her 2-year-old girl. A neighbor handed Mr. Hossain his own squirming daughter. The toddler had been found alone in the mud. He feared his wife and mother were dead.

Mr. Hossain's younger brother had survived by hiding in a different pond. Neighbors

Hasina Begum, 20, and her baby son.

saw their father and another brother taken away at gunpoint. His teenage sister Rajuma also was missing.

After midnight, Mr. Hossain said, his neighbor Mohammad Ismail arrived with news. Mr. Ismail had been hiding in an irrigation pit. After the soldiers left, he came across Mr. Hossain's sister, who was naked and bleeding from a bullet wound in her thigh. He was too weak to carry her, but she was alive.

Mr. Hossain and his surviving brother returned to Chut Pyin and found Rajuma in the bushes. They wrapped her in a sarong and carried her to Ah Htet Nan Yar. The bullet had stripped the flesh from her thigh. From her pallor it was clear she had lost a lot of blood.

The brothers washed her mud-covered body and brought her clothes. She told them she had been caught by soldiers. She fought and kicked until they shot her in the thigh. Then, she said, the men raped her.

Mr. Hossain said he asked Rajuma to forgive him for failing to protect her. By early morning, she was dead. The brothers found spades and dug a spot in the Ah Htet Nan Yar graveyard. They placed their sister there and said funeral prayers. Other Chut Pyin families also buried their dead there.

The next day, Mr. Hossain learned his mother and pregnant wife had made it to the forest. They were alive.

Rumors soon spread that Ah Htet Nan Yar would be the military's next target. Mr. Hossain and his surviving family began the long trek to Bangladesh.

Days later, Ah Htet Nan Yar was burned to the ground.

Nur Ankis, the wife of Ahammed Hossain, comforts her son who was born after the attack on Chut Pyin.

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