

Pressure on Myanmar as region holds Rohingya talks

YANGON — Myanmar faced growing pressure from its neighbours yesterday over claims its army has carried out a bloody campaign of abuse against its Rohingya minority as ministers held emergency talks on the crisis.

More than 27,000 from the Muslim ethnic group have fled northwestern Myanmar for Bangladesh since the start last month to escape a heavy-handed military counter-insurgency campaign.

The army says it is hunting militants behind deadly raids on police posts in October.

But Rohingya survivors have described rape, murder and arson at the hands of security forces — accounts that have raised global alarm and galvanised protests in capitals around Southeast Asia.

The exodus has caused an unusual open spat within Asean, the regional 10-member bloc that usually prides itself on consensus diplomacy and non-interference.

Yesterday, foreign ministers met in Yangon for emergency talks on the crisis.

Malaysia called for an

commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein criticised the government's "callous" handling of the crisis, describing it as "a lesson in how to make a bad situation worse".

In a new report released yesterday, Amnesty International said the army's "widespread and systematic attack on a civilian population" may amount to crimes against humanity.

The plight of the Rohingya, who rights groups say are among the world's most persecuted, has long been a flashpoint within Southeast Asia.

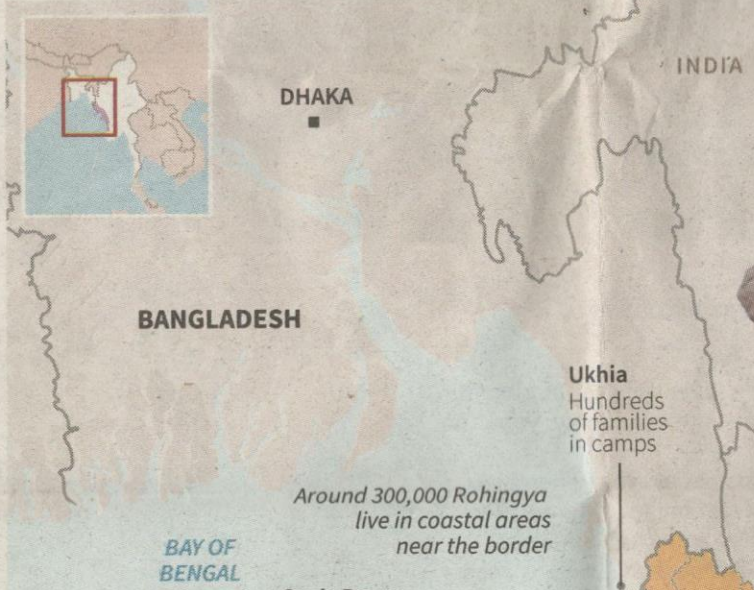
Last year, thousands of the stateless group were stranded at sea after authorities closed off a well-worn trafficking route through Thailand.

The overcrowded boats were ping-ponged between countries reluctant to accept them until global pressure eventually spurred Indonesia and Malaysia to let them land.

Independent media and observers have been denied access to northern Rakhine state. Some Rohingya communities have also been off-limits to aid agencies on security grounds for more than

Myanmar's stateless Rohingya

More than 27,000 Rohingya have fled northwestern Myanmar for Bangladesh since the start of November to escape a counterinsurgency campaign



Muslim Rohingya at a displacement camp, Sept 7
AFP Photo: Romeo Gacad

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Malaysia called for an independent Asean-led investigation into the allegations and for complete humanitarian access to the locked-down area, where more than 130,000 people have been without aid for two months.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman warned the crackdown could trigger a repeat of last year's boat crisis, when thousands of starving Rohingya were abandoned at sea.

"We believe that the situation is now of a regional concern and should be resolved together," Anifah told the meeting, according to a transcript of his speech provided by the Malaysian Foreign Affairs Ministry.

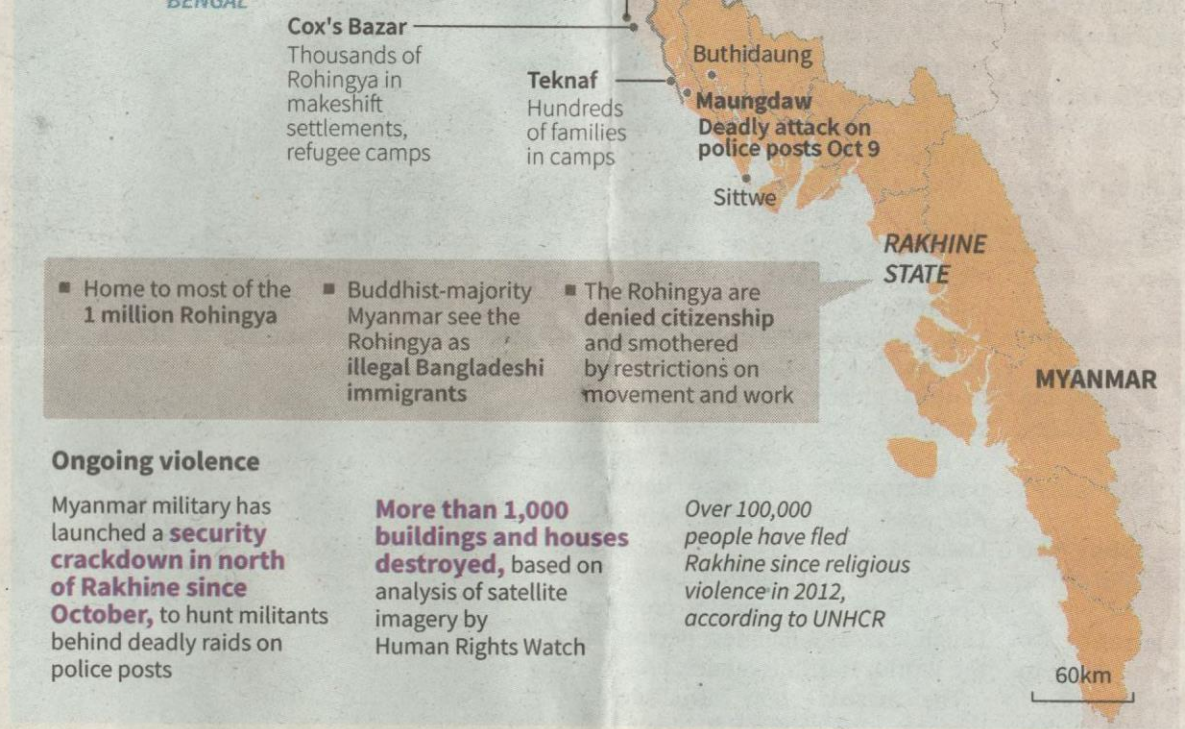
"Myanmar must do more in trying to address the root causes of this problem," he said.

Progress in improving the human rights of the Rohingya had been "rather slow", he said, noting the stream of reports about abuses being committed in Rakhine state.

Anifah, who appeared to leave the meeting early, also warned that Islamic State militants "could be taking advantage of this situation".

Almost all of Myanmar's Rohingya are denied citizenship and have lived for years under movement restrictions that many have likened to apartheid.

Thousands have fled over the years on rickety boats, seeking sanctuary in Muslim majority



countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The latest crackdown in Rakhine state has generated a fresh wave of public anger, particularly in Malaysia, where tens of thousands of Rohingya eke out tough lives as undocumented workers.

This month, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak accused Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi of allowing "genocide" on her watch — an unusually strong rebuke by one

Asean state of another.

Myanmar, which has vehemently denied the allegations of abuse, responded by summoning Malaysia's ambassador and suspending its workers from going to the country.

Suu Kyi also held talks with the foreign minister of Indonesia this month after cancelling a visit following protests and an attempted attack on the Myanmar embassy.

Ong Keng Yong, a former

secretary-general of Asean, said neighbouring nations feared the Rohingya crisis could spiral.

"This kind of issue, if it's not well managed, will impact on the general picture of our peace and security in Asean," he said.

Myanmar has also seen a cascade of criticism from outside the region over its handling of the Rohingya crisis, including from the United States, the European Union and the United Nations.

Last week, UN rights

officials have been cited on security grounds for more than two months, raising fears about the welfare of a population that was already experiencing high rates of malnutrition.

A group of journalists chosen by the Ministry of Information to represent domestic and international media was set to visit Maungdaw, the main site of the conflict, yesterday. Officials did not invite most media organisations that have reported on the alleged abuses, including Reuters.

Efforts to rebut accusations of army abuses were undermined by the release of a lengthy report from Amnesty International yesterday, accusing Myanmar of "a campaign of violence against Rohingya people that may amount to crimes against humanity".

The rights group cited satellite images and testimony from Rohingya in Rakhine state and Bangladesh. Among myriad abuses, it alleged large-scale "enforced disappearances" of village elders and religious leaders in Maungdaw.

"While the military is directly responsible for the violations, Aung San Suu Kyi has failed to live up to both her political and moral responsibility to try to stop and condemn what is unfolding in Rakhine state," said Amnesty International director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Rafendi Djamin. — Agencies