

Myanmar bulldozes what is left of Rohingya Muslim villages

Mosques and cemeteries were destroyed—and possibly evidence of mass graves.

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This article appears in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue.



Rohingya Muslims crossing over from Myanmar and walking toward a refugee camp in Shah Porir Dvip, Bangladesh, in September 2017, nearly three weeks into a mass exodus because of violence. AP Photo/Dar Yasin.

First, their villages were burned to the ground. Then the Myanmar government brought out bulldozers to erase them from the earth in a vast operation that rights groups say has destroyed crucial evidence of mass atrocities against the nation's ethnic Rohingya Muslim minority.

Satellite images of Myanmar's troubled Rakhine State, released in late February by Colorado-based DigitalGlobe, show that dozens of empty villages and hamlets had been completely leveled by authorities in the previous weeks. The villages were all set ablaze in the wake of violence last August, when a brutal clearance operation by security forces drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into exile in Bangladesh.

While Myanmar's government claimed it is simply trying to rebuild a devastated region, the operation raised deep concern among human rights advocates, who see the government as destroying what amounts to scores of crime scenes before any credible investigation takes place. The operation also horrified the Rohingya, who believe the government is intentionally removing the remnants of their people to make it nearly impossible for them to return.

One displaced Rohingya woman, Zubairia, whose village was among those razed, said she recently visited her former home in Myin Hlut and was shocked by what she saw. (She asked that only one of her names be used because she feared reprisals.) Most of the houses had been torched last year, but now, "everything is gone, not even the trees are left," Zubairia said. "They just bulldozed everything. . . . I could hardly recognize it."

Zubairia, who is 18 years old, said other homes in the same area that had been abandoned but not damaged were also flattened. "All the memories that I had there are gone," she said. "They've been erased."

Myanmar's armed forces are accused not just of burning Muslim villages with the help of Buddhist mobs but of carrying out massacres, rapes, and widespread looting. The latest crisis in Rakhine State began in August after Rohingya insurgents launched a series of unprecedented attacks on security posts.

Aerial photographs of leveled villages in northern Rakhine State were first made public February 9 when the European Union's ambassador to Myanmar, Kristian Schmidt, posted images taken from an aircraft of an area south of the town of Maungdaw.

Satellite imagery from DigitalGlobe indicates at least 28 villages or hamlets were leveled by bulldozers and other machinery in a 30-mile radius around Maungdaw between December and February; on some of the cleared areas, construction crews had erected new buildings, including housing, and helipads. A similar analysis by Human Rights Watch said at least 55 villages were affected since late 2017.

The images offer a window into a part of Myanmar that is largely sealed off to the outside world. Myanmar bars independent media access to the state.

The government has spoken of plans to rebuild the region for months, and it has been busily expanding roads, repairing bridges, and constructing shelters, including dozens at a large transit camp at Taung Pyo, near the Bangladesh border. The camp opened in January to house returning refugees, but none have arrived, and Rohingya have continued to flee.

Myint Khine, a government administrator in Maungdaw, said some of the new homes were intended for Muslims. But that does not appear to be the case for the majority of those built or planned so far, and many Rohingya fear authorities are seizing land the Rohingya have lived on for generations.

One list, published by the government in December, indicated that 787 houses would be constructed, most of them for Buddhists or Hindus. Only 22 of the houses were slated for “Bengalis”—the description Myanmar nationalists often use for the Rohingya, whom they say are illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

Myint Khine said the government had no ulterior motive.

“Of course we have been using machines like earth removers and bulldozers, because we have to clear the ground first before building new houses,” he said.

Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, which monitors the persecuted Muslim minority’s plight, said the degree to which the villages had been razed would make it even harder for the Rohingya, who have no citizenship and few rights, to ever reclaim their land.

“How will they identify where they lived, if nothing is left, if nothing can be recognized?” Lewa said. “Their culture, their history, their past, their present—it’s all being erased. When you see the pictures, it’s clear that whatever was left—the mosques, the cemeteries, the homes—they’re gone.”

Richard Weir, a Myanmar observer with Human Rights Watch, said of the images he had seen, “there’s no more landmarks, there’s no trees, there’s no vegetation.”

“Everything is wiped away, and this is very concerning, because these are crime scenes,” he said. “There’s been no credible investigation of these crimes. And so, what we’re talking about really is obstruction of justice.”

Both Weir and Lewa said no mass graves were known to have been destroyed. But, Weir added, “we don’t know where all the graves are . . . because there is no access.”

Zubairia did not believe any of the newly constructed homes were intended for Rohingya.

“Even if they give us small houses to live in, it will never be the same for us,” she said. “How can we be happy about our houses being ripped off from our land?”

—Associated Press

A version of this article, which was edited on March 21, appears in the print edition under the title “Myanmar razes remains of Rohingya villages.”