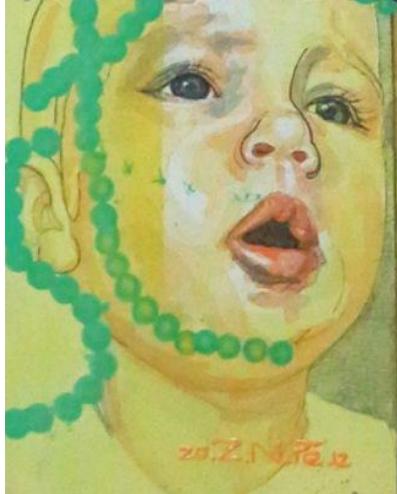
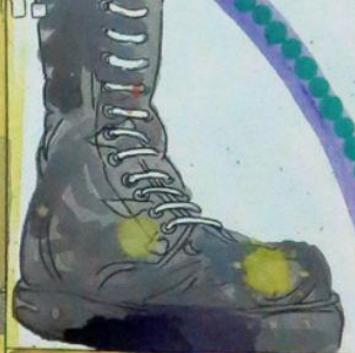


Der Kampf  
Dummheit  
erst bego

gegen die  
at gerade  
nen.



2012.11.12



## Militarization in Northern Rakhine State: How, Who and Why

Wai Moe

### Abstract

This article discusses the violence against Rohingya people in northern Rakhine State in 2017, contextualizing the premeditated campaign by outlining the region’s militarization and the Tatmadaw’s entrenched warfare practices. It attempts to shed light on the five commanding officers most responsible for the pogrom and also explains the role that soldiers’ education at Tatmadaw institutions plays in shaping the thinking and culture of regular soldiers. Not only are soldiers indoctrinated with Buddhist Bamar nationalism, but a select few are also increasingly educated in advanced information warfare techniques from foreign countries. While the Tatmadaw’s propaganda department has existed for seventy years, the effective use of hate speech and misinformation by the Tatmadaw increased exponentially following the National League for Democracy’s by-election win in 2012, contributing to the national context behind the man-made ethnic cleansing disaster in 2017.

### စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

ယခု စာတမ်းတွင် ၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ်အတွင်း ဒေသတွင်းရှိစစ်ဘောင်သွပ် သွင်းမှုများနှင့် တပ်မတော်၏ အသားကျနေပြီဖြစ်သည့် စစ်ရေးဆိုင်ရာ အလေ့အကျင့်များကို အနှစ်ချုပ်ဖော်ပြခြင်း အားဖြင့်ရည်ရွယ်ချက်ရှိရှိ ကြံရွယ်ထားသည့် စစ်ဆင်ရေး အခြေအနေများကို ပုံပေါ်လာစေကာ ရခိုင်ပြည်နယ်မြောက်ပိုင်းရှိ ရိုဟင်ဂျာလူမျိုးများအပေါ်အကြမ်းဖက်မှုများကျူးလွန်ခဲ့ပုံကို ဆွေးနွေးတင်ပြထားပါသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းတွင် စစ်ဆင်ရေးပြု လုပ်ရာတွင်တာဝန်အရှိဆုံးပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များဖြစ်သည့်

အမိန့်ပေးသူ အဆင့်မြင့်အရာရှိငါးဦးကိုမီးမောင်းထိုးပြသကာ တပ်မတော် အင်စတီကျူးရှင်းများရှိ စစ်သားများ၏ပညာရေး အခန်းကဏ္ဍသည် သာမန်စစ်သားများ၏တွေးတောစဉ်းဆင်ခြင်နိုင်မှု နှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှုတို့ကို ပုံသွင်းရာတွင် အရေးပါကြောင်းကိုလည်း ရှင်းလင်းပြသထားပါသည်။ စစ်သားများသည် ဗမာလူမျိုးနှင့် ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာအပေါ်အခြေခံသည့် အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒကိုအဓမ္မရိုက်သွင်း ထားခံရရုံသာမက အထူးရွေးချယ်ခြင်းခံရသည့် စစ်သားအချို့မှာ စစ်ရေးနည်းပညာများ ဆိုင်ရာ အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရပ်များကို နိုင်ငံခြား တိုင်းပြည်များ မှသင်ယူလာကြသည်ကိုလည်းတွေ့ရပါသည်။ တပ်မတော် ပြည်သူ့ဆက်ဆံရေးနှင့် စိတ်ဓါတ်စစ်ဆင်ရေးဌာနသည် နှစ်ခုနစ်ဆယ်ကျော်ကြာတည်ရှိခဲ့ပြီး တပ်မတော်၏ အမုန်းစကားနှင့် သတင်းအမှားများဖြန့်ချိမှုသည် ၂၀၁၂ ခုနှစ်ကြားဖြတ်ရွေး ကောက်ပွဲအတွင်း အမျိုးသားဒီမိုကရေစီအဖွဲ့ချုပ်ပါတီ (NLD) အနိုင်ရရှိခဲ့သည့် နောက်ပိုင်း တိုးမြင့်လာခဲ့ကာ ၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ်အတွင်း လူသားများမှ ကျူးလွန်သည့် မျိုးနွယ်စုရှင်းလင်းရေး စစ်ရာဇဝတ်မှုကြီးအား ကျူးလွန်စေရန် ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာစေသည့် နိုင်ငံတော်အဆင့်နောက်ကွယ် အခြေအနေကိုများစွာအထောက်အပံ့ဖြစ်စေခဲ့ပါသည်။

## Introduction

This article discusses how and why the military crisis in northern Rakhine State in 2017 unfolded as well as who was most directly responsible. Following attacks on 30 police and military installations in northern Rakhine State<sup>1</sup> on 25 August 2017 the Myanmar armed forces, or Tatmadaw, carried out aggressive military operations in civilian areas that were officially termed “clearance operations”. Both the Government of Myanmar then headed by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw alleged that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) bore responsibility for the attacks and declared it a “terrorist organization”.<sup>2</sup> During the Tatmadaw’s “clearance operations” in northern Rakhine State, thousands of Rohingya people were killed and 700,000 fled to neighboring Bangladesh according to the United Nations and Bangladesh officials.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations called the 2017 atrocities against the Rohingya a textbook example of ethnic cleansing and international human rights groups claimed it to be genocide.

There were four main contexts for the aggression and swiftness of the Tatmadaw’s operation. The first was Myanmar’s militarization in western Myanmar since the late 1990s, second was the Tatmadaw’s reliance on its infamous “Four Cuts” counterinsurgency doctrine, third was the military leadership and command behind the Rohingya operations, and fourth was how the Tatmadaw used social media to create hate speech and disinformation against their political opponents and the Rohingya minority. This article runs through these contexts sequentially, first discussing militarization in Rakhine State in the 1990s, the kinds of troops and troop numbers deployed there, and then the events leading up to 2017. Following that, the 2017 deployments behind the “clearance operations” are described, focusing on the fact that mass deployments were premeditated weeks before

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<sup>1</sup> According to Myanmar government and military state media announcements (Myanmar News Agency).

<sup>2</sup> Myanmar Anti-Terrorism Central Committee, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Safi, 2007.

the attacks. The Tatmadaw's methods are then detailed with a discussion of the infamous "Four Cuts" strategy. The article details five of the high-level Tatmadaw personnel behind the 2017 atrocities before concluding with a discussion of the Tatmadaw's information warfare practices.

## **Militarization and Key Rakhine State Events in the 1990s**

Since Rakhine State neighbors Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal and is of economic and geopolitical interest to China, it is a very important military strategic zone. Before the 1990s, the Tatmadaw did not mobilize troops often in Rakhine State. Back then, the region hosted only offices of the Western Regional Military Command (RMC) and the Danyawaddy Navy Command. But the Myanmar military junta's<sup>4</sup> program to modernize its military throughout the 1990s saw Tatmadaw troops more than double in Rakhine State.

Military operation commands (MOCs) were introduced to the Tatmadaw in the 1990s. A MOC is the same as a Light Infantry Division (LID) and is also composed of ten battalions. It is commanded by brigadier general or colonel ranking officers. The Tatmadaw established three MOCs in Rakhine State: the MOC-15 in Buthidaung Township, the MOC-9 in Kyauktaw Township, and the MOC-5 in Toungup Township.<sup>5</sup> The Tatmadaw also created a regional operation command (ROC) in Sittwe Town, the capital of the state, after the Western RMC was moved to Ann Township in the mid-1990s. ROCs are subregional military commands. They control four infantry battalions and are commanded by a brigadier general.

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<sup>4</sup> Following decades of military and one-party rule, a new military junta ruled Myanmar from 1988 to 2011, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council from 1988 to 2007 and then the State Peace and Development Council from 2007 to 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p. 80.

The Rohingya crisis in 1992/93 was related to the Myanmar military regime expanding its troops along the Burmese-Bangladeshi border in northern Rakhine State. At that time, between 210,000 and 250,000 Rohingya refugees<sup>6</sup> from Maungdaw and Buthitaung townships fled to Bangladesh when army commands were set up in the area.<sup>7</sup> During that operation, there were claims of rape, torture, summary killings, confiscation and destruction of homes, property and mosques, physical abuse, religious persecution, and forced labor by the armed forces.<sup>8</sup>

General Khin Nyunt,<sup>9</sup> the then-third ranking general and military intelligence chief of the military junta, designated a project to create non-Muslim villages in northern Rakhine State under the title of border development. Hundreds of prisoners including criminals were granted amnesty if they chose to live in northern Rakhine State. The state provided them with two cows, a bicycle and other sundries for setting up their new lives there. Some who were resettled to northern Rakhine State went back to their original homes, as they felt they could not live there.

Another controversial event during the Rohingya crisis in the 1990s was giving birth control doses to women in the Rohingya community. Under the command of General Win Myint, the commander of the Western RMC, military medical units injected birth control drugs into Rohingya women without their acknowledgement or consent. For running this birth control operation, Win Myint gained favor from the junta head Senior General Than Shwe. He was made one of the top generals in Myanmar when Than Shwe appointed him as secretary-3 of the military junta as well as the head of the powerful military firm, the

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<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Former government officials, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See reports released by Amnesty International from that time, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/page/2/?qlocation=1821&sort=date-asc>.

<sup>9</sup> General Khin Nyunt was powerful from 1988 to 2007 when he and his military intelligence officers were purged from the junta.

Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. General Win Myint was later dismissed for corruption in 2003.

## **Troops and Troop Numbers in Rakhine State**

Since the establishment of the military commands in Rakhine State in the 1990s, the Tatmadaw gradually deployed approximately 46 infantry battalions in Rakhine State, excluding navy personnel and border police force. Sixteen infantry battalions are under the Western RMC including four battalions under the ROC in Sittwe Township while thirty infantry battalions are from three other MOCs.

Although a standard military infantry battalion is supposed to have 778 troops, observers of the Myanmar military reported to the author that battalions have far fewer troops than 778 and there are presently only around 250 troops within a battalion.<sup>10</sup> By this logic, Rakhine State hosts more than 11,000 fully armed troops and at least 81 military officers at lieutenant colonel rank and above. Apart from army troops, Myanmar also deploys at least three “Combat Police Battalions” (CPBs) in Rakhine State. Police forces serve under the military according to the military’s 2008 constitution. Police battalion No. 12 is based in Sittwe Township and Nos. 2 and 13 are in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships. Since a combat police battalion is formed with 400 police personnel, at least 1,200 individual police are deployed in the region. A police operation command in Sittwe Township headed by a police colonel oversees the three CPBs<sup>11</sup> and a police brigadier general ranking officer is commander of all police forces in Rakhine State. CPB police forces are formed and trained more like military troops than as regular police. Military operations in northern Rakhine State since the 1990s have had CPBs deployed alongside Tatmadaw troops.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Military observers, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Information obtained from official documents on police structure in Rakhine State.

<sup>12</sup> A former senior military officer, personal communication, 2017.

## Militarization and Events Leading up to August 2017

After the 1992 Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh, sectarian conflict in northern Rakhine State was relatively quiet until May/June 2012. Overall, Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims lived and traded together peacefully. The situation dramatically changed in late May and early June 2012. Brutal sectarian violence struck northern Rakhine State following the rape and murder case of a Rakhine woman allegedly committed by three Muslim men. The initial violence killed at least 300 and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. At that time, ex-General Thein Sein's<sup>13</sup> government mostly used CPBs backed by the army to control the situation and the transitional government was seeking legitimacy at home and abroad following the 2010 election. In other words, the Thein Sein government only used Rakhine State-based CPBs and 46 army battalions to contain the violence in the region. The government did not use extra troops based outside of Rakhine State.

The situation of northern Rakhine State worsened when Myanmar security forces responded to the unknown attackers who attacked three border police posts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships on 10 October 2016. On the following day, the Tatmadaw launched "clearance operations" in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships, which triggered 80,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. In addition, summary executions, civilian casualties, and burning of villages were reported.<sup>14</sup>

Although the government and the military announced Rohingya militants were responsible for the attacks on police posts, some Rohingya community leaders said it might have been revenge from drug gangs on the Myanmar-Bangladeshi border as 40 million methamphetamine pills were seized<sup>15</sup> by the Bangladeshi police in 2017 alone. During an interview in an IDP camp

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<sup>13</sup> Former General Thein Sein was President of Myanmar 2011-2016. He was also chairman of the military proxy party the USDP.

<sup>14</sup> Wai Moe, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed & Liton, 2018.

in November 2016, the late Rohingya community leader and former political prisoner, U Kyaw Hla Aung, said he had learned the attacks on police posts there were not related to the Rohingya resistance movement.<sup>16</sup> This alternative narrative was repeated by other Rohingya community leaders.

The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also noted escalating drug issues in their 2017 report stating: “Drug trafficking through Rakhine – typically following the route from eastern Myanmar, via Maungdaw and Buthidaung, to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh – seems to have increased significantly in recent years”.<sup>17</sup> The commission report also stated that the drug trade in northern Rakhine State funded non-state armed groups such as the Arakan Army (AA) and ARSA and Myanmar government officials were also alleged to be involved. AA officials denied involvement in the drug trade in interviews with newspapers prior to the Commission’s report.<sup>18</sup>

Like the 2012 operations, the 2016 military operations were not as large as the 2017 operations, with less militarization and no extra LIDs brought to Rakhine State.

## **Military Deployments in Northern Rakhine State in August 2017**

Myanmar’s largest military operation in Northern Rakhine State in decades started following the killing of ethnic Mro<sup>19</sup> villagers in the Mayu mountains area in early August 2017. State-owned media reported that Myanmar troops had discovered six bodies: “The villagers, all members of the Mro-Arakan ethnic groups, had been killed with machetes and gunshots by violent attackers,”<sup>20</sup> and the incident was soon reported by private Burmese

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<sup>16</sup> U Kyaw Hla Aung, personal communication, November 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ye Mon, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Mro is one of the ethnic groups identified by the government in Rakhine and Chin states.

<sup>20</sup> Six villagers killed, 2017.

media, with photographs. Many Burmese shared the reports on social media, particularly Facebook, and public outrage escalated within a few days.

At that time, the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's armed forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, was in Japan for an official visit. On his return, Min Aung Hlaing prepared for "clearance operations" in northern Rakhine State and held a meeting with leaders of the Arakan National Party (ANP)<sup>21</sup> including Dr Aye Maung<sup>22</sup> on 9 August in Nay Pyi Taw. General Min Aung Hlaing's Facebook page posted a short note on the meeting stating it was to discuss cooperation for the sake of "tranquility and development" in Rakhine State.<sup>23</sup> After the meeting, Aye Maung told reporters: "We planned to submit a proposal to the Lower House and Upper House regarding the security situation of Rakhine State. But the parliament rejected our initial proposal. So, we decided to approach the Tatmadaw. We accept the security management of the military".

General Min Aung Hlaing elaborated with Rakhine politicians on the details of security operations in Rakhine State at the meeting, according to Aye Maung.<sup>24</sup> Although General Min Aung Hlaing held the meeting with Rakhine politicians, the military chief did not meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto head of state and government, to brief them on the upcoming military operations in Rakhine State. Instead, he used two key liaisons between himself and Aung San Suu Kyi: the deputy commander-

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<sup>21</sup> The ANP was formed from a merger between the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) in 2015. The RNDP formed by Rakhine nationalists won many constituencies in the 2010 elections and the ALD was the biggest political party in Rakhine State during the 1990 elections. The ANP is extremely electorally popular in Rakhine State.

<sup>22</sup> Aye Maung is a controversial Rakhine nationalist and member of parliament who once said he would throw Rohingya Muslims into the Bay of Bengal.

<sup>23</sup> General Min Aung Hlaing's official page was removed by Facebook in August 2018 after Mark Zuckerberg testified about hate speech against the Rohingya population on the social media platform at the US Senate in April.

<sup>24</sup> Ye Mon, 2017.

in-chief of the armed forces, Vice Senior General Soe Win and Defense Minister Lieutenant General Sein Win<sup>25</sup> to “inform” her on the planned operations.<sup>26</sup>

When asked about the meeting between the State Counselor and the liaison generals, Aung San Suu Kyi’s spokesman Zaw Htay told a Burmese media outlet that the meeting was about “labeling” the ARSA “a terrorist organization”.<sup>27</sup> Following that meeting with the liaison generals, on 11 August the State Counselor’s office released a statement noting 59 people, reportedly village authorities or those who worked with authorities, had been killed and 33 missing in northern Rakhine State in August 2017. The statement also confirmed the government’s approval for militarization in the area and granted special powers to the military in operations against “extremists”. Myanmar’s State Counselor’s Office issued a statement saying:

To protect the innocent civilians, security enforcement will be in the region...the Government is working together with Tatmadaw security forces to quell these stepped up terrorist acts including the issuance of a Section 144<sup>28</sup> curfew in necessary areas in order to establish and maintain peace, stability and security in the region.<sup>29</sup>

According to reports and photos in the Burmese language media and on Facebook of military accounts and pages, the Tatmadaw

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<sup>25</sup> General Sein Win has been the minister of defense since August 2015. He was reportedly set to retire in 2017, but there has been no official announcement yet.

<sup>26</sup> Diplomats and other officials, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Zaw Htay is a former major ranking military officer. He has served as spokesman for both Aung San Suu Kyi and Thein Sein. He was also director-general of the State Counselor Office.

<sup>28</sup> Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code is not martial law. Myanmar’s colonial era Penal Code states “whoever, being armed with any deadly weapon, or with anything which used as a weapon of offence, is likely to cause death, is a member of an unlawful assembly, shall be punished with imprisonment of their description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both”.

<sup>29</sup> Myanmar State Counselor’s Office, 2017.

sent troops from two LIDs to western Myanmar on 10 August 2017, the day following General Min Aung Hlaing's meeting with the ANP. Military observers noted troops were deployed by air-lift, considered unusual as the Tatmadaw conventionally uses road convoys for troop mobilizations. Officials and those related to military members in Sittwe Township posted photos on Facebook of fully equipped LID 33 infantry troops landing at Sittwe Airport.<sup>30</sup> The LID 33 was then airlifted further west and six battalions under two tactical operation commands of the LID 99<sup>31</sup> were sent over by navy vessels.<sup>32</sup> International TV network and line agencies reported massive troop deployments in early August 2017.<sup>33</sup>

LID troops were deployed in Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, and Kyauktaw townships in Rakhine State and to Paletwa Township in Chin State. By 11 August, more than 70 battalions had been deployed to Rakhine State – 16 battalions under the Western RMC in Ann Township and the ROC in Sittwe Township, 10 battalions from the MOC-5 headquarters in Toungup Township, 10 battalions under the MOC-9 headquarters in Kyauktaw Township, 10 battalions from the MOC-15 headquarters in Buthidaung Township, four battalions from the ROC in Pyay Township, four battalions from the South-West RMC headquarters in Patheingyi Township, the No. 274 Light Field Artillery Battalion and Nos. 9 and 818 Signal Battalions. These deployments were in addition to at least three navy vessels deployed along the coast of northern Rakhine State at that time. The likely reason for deploying navy vessels in addition to ground troops was the Tatmadaw's Army, Navy, Air Force coordination strategy

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<sup>30</sup> The LID 33 headquarters is near Mandalay. The LID 33 has been involved in military offensives in Northern Shan and Kachin states. It is notorious for human rights violations.

<sup>31</sup> The LID 99 headquarters is in the military town of Meiktila. It has also been involved in offensives in Kachin and Northern Shan states in recent years and is infamous for human rights violations.

<sup>32</sup> Military observers, personal communications, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Agence France-Presse, 2017.

and the Tatmadaw's deployment of so many troops early in August 2017 shows it was preparing for "clearance operations" weeks before 25 August 2017.

## The Four Cuts Strategy

The Tatmadaw's use of the Four Cuts strategy has its root in Myanmar's long enduring history of wars against ethnic insurgencies. Shortly after Myanmar's independence in 1948 and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Tatmadaw faced powerful insurgencies across the country. In the Tatmadaw's propaganda, it proudly says it survived and saved the country despite being a so-called "Yangon government".<sup>34</sup>

Although the Four Cuts strategy is now best known for its use in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw first adopted the notorious tactic from the British who pioneered it during counterinsurgency operations in Malaysia from 1949 to 1960. At that time, the British army fought against Malay communist guerrillas.<sup>35</sup> The Four Cuts strategy refers to terminating and controlling insurgents' resources such as food, finance, manpower/recruitment and information. Forced relocation and control of freedom of movement is also a part of the Four Cuts strategy.

The Tatmadaw started using the Four Cuts effectively during the 1970s-80s campaigns against Burmese communist guerrillas and Karen ethnic rebels in the Bago Region mountain ranges under General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party regime. Two well-known commanders, General Tun Yi and General Than Tin, were leading proponents and developers of the Burma Four Cuts strategy. By classifying pro-insurgent areas as white, brown, or black, the Tatmadaw zoned territory and practiced the strategy in the Bago Mountains. The counterinsurgency operation was named Alin Yaung or "the light". Hundreds

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<sup>34</sup> The so-called "Yangon government" refers to the situation in the 1950s. At that time, Burma's government faced massive multiple rebellions across the country and the government and Tatmadaw only controlled mainly Yangon areas.

<sup>35</sup> Komer, 1972.

of thousands of people in offensive areas were believed to be affected during the Alin Yaung operation.

Both the Four Cuts strategy and the Alin Yaung operation are in textbooks taught from and used at Myanmar military schools. According to a textbook titled “Subject of the Rooting Up Insurgency” used as a part of the curriculum of the General Staff College,<sup>36</sup> the Four Cuts strategy was successfully practiced during the Alin Yaung operation. The Four Cuts’ strategy includes cutting off insurgents from supplies, finance, communication, and recruitment, with the text clearly stating, “executing insurgents.”<sup>37</sup> The current military leadership, including commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing, learned the Four Cuts strategy with its execution paradigm before they even became a colonel.

Meanwhile, Min Aung Hlaing told US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Nay Pyi Taw on 15 November 2017 that the Rohingya exodus became so large because family members of “terrorists” fled, denying that the more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees were innocent civilians: “ARSA extremist Bengali terrorists were not successful in attacking security outposts, and they fled to Bangladesh for fear of retribution from the security troops. As the terrorist took their families together with them, the number of people who fled became large.”<sup>38</sup>

It seems the Four Cuts strategy in northern Rakhine State in 2017 targeted the entire Rohingya community by branding them terrorists and associates of terrorists. This tactic drives out people and destroys the rest of the community and villages in operation areas in order to prevent insurgency and to prevent them from returning. A critical question is whether displacing more than 600,000 Rohingya since August 2017 (and more than

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<sup>36</sup> The General Staff College is one of Myanmar’s military graduate schools for tactical officer candidates of colonel rank.

<sup>37</sup> According to a copy of the textbook shown to the author by a military officer.

<sup>38</sup> Posted on Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s Facebook page on 15 November, 2017 and subsequently removed by Facebook.

800,000 since October 2016) to Bangladesh is part of a policy to decrease the Rohingya population by 40/50 percent in the area.

During my interviews, a military observer who spoke on condition of anonymity said: “The tactics in Rakhine operations aim: 1) to make it empty by clearance operations, as part of the Four Cuts; 2) to deploy more troops in the areas for security reasons and to fence the area off to prevent the flow of people from Bangladesh; 3) to create more land for the resettlement of native Rakhine people in the name of development and so on— especially to balance the ratio of population at least 40 percent of Rakhine and 60 percent of Rohingya; 4) to accept back the fleeing refugees under the scrutinizing process of the 1982 citizenship law; and 5) to show the international community that they are very cooperative”.<sup>39</sup> The “clearance operation” achieved some of these aims, especially one, two and three.

There was also acknowledgement in 2017 from a senior government official of the dramatic population decreases in the area. The spokesman of the State Counselor’s office, Zaw Htay, admitted during a press briefing in Nay Pyi Taw in the second week of September 2017 that 176 out of 471 villages in northern Rakhine State targeted by the military’s “clearance operations” were now empty and 36 others were abandoned,<sup>40</sup> although the government information committee previously denied the United Nations’ allegation that approximately 40 percent of Rohingya villages were burned down in the area.

In fact, driving off or containing the Rohingya population has been an agenda of extreme nationalists for years. Aye Maung said in July 2012 amid sectarian violence:

We have been asking for thorough verification in accordance with the 1982 Myanmar Citizen Law and to have the people who illegally came into our country stay in refugee camps. Just like refugees in other countries, feed them with the UNHRC’s support and there’ll be third countries

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<sup>39</sup> Military observer, personal communication, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Holmes et al., 2017.

who sympathize with them and are willing to provide them with citizenship in their countries.<sup>41</sup>

The above sentiment was echoed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing who talked about “local ethnics” (non-Muslim) resettling northern Rakhine State when he visited Maungdaw Township in September 2017:

It is necessary for local ethnics not to abandon their places and villages and return there without fail. The Tatmadaw will prioritize their security. The Union government and the state government will be advised with regard to the resettlement of villages. The current population ratio of local ethnics to Bengalis is totally reversed compared with that of the past. Regarding possession of businesses, Bengalis were previously hired workers when native people owned the businesses. But due to various reasons, they have become owners now. Therefore, it is required to consider the long term by taking lesson from this.<sup>42</sup>

Another point in the Four Cuts strategy in counterinsurgency operations such as those in northern Rakhine State is the “People’s War” strategy.<sup>43</sup> A Tatmadaw academy textbook clearly states the People’s War means “people themselves defend, terminate and execute insurgents”<sup>44</sup>. People’s War means using paramilitary forces to terminate insurgents and their supporters alongside regular troops. But there are no guidelines or rules of engagement for paramilitaries in operation areas. People’s

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<sup>41</sup> Nang Mya Nadi & Aye Nai, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Posted on Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s Facebook page and subsequently removed by Facebook.

<sup>43</sup> Sighted in *The Brief History of Myanmar and Tatmadaw’s Role from 1948 to 1988*, published by the Myanmar military, in Burmese.

<sup>44</sup> According to a military textbook seen by the author. The military textbooks in Myanmar are highly classified and not available publicly.

War could cause human rights violations and atrocities in northern Rakhine State and other operational areas, providing a layer of protection or tactical excuse for the Tatmadaw. A military source told the author many atrocities and villages burnings in 2017 were committed by ethnic Rakhine villagers who went to Rohingya villages with security forces. The source also emphasized that the paramilitaries “were difficult to control during the operations there.”<sup>45</sup>

The Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) or Doctors without Borders announced on 12 December 2017 that based on six surveys in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh at least 9,000 Rohingya people died within the month of 25 August to 24 September. Of these, 6,700 were killed during violence and 730 were children.<sup>46</sup> At the time of writing, the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw had not responded to the MSF’s statement. But the office of the Tatmadaw commander-in-chief announced on December 18, 2017 that a mass grave was found in Indin village of Maungdaw Township, saying “the security forces were ordered to follow ‘rules of engagement’ and anyone found breaking the rules of engagement will have action taken against them according to the rule of law and if security forces were involved in the incident, they would be prosecuted by law.”<sup>47</sup> However, up to the end of 2017, Myanmar still did not allow any independent investigation and international investigators were not allowed to travel to northern Rakhine State. This makes it hard to evaluate whether the security forces followed the rules of engagement emphasized in the military’s 18 December statement.

## **Backgrounds of the Commander-in-Chief and the Commanding Line**

Although more than a dozen military officers at colonel ranking and above were involved in the military operations in northern

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<sup>45</sup> Military source, personal communication, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Statement posted on the Facebook page of the office of the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw. Facebook removed the page in August 2018.

Rakhine State,<sup>48</sup> Burmese military sources expressed to the author that it was “General Min Aung Hlaing’s War” and that he was the person who ordered the “clearance operations”.<sup>49</sup> It is possible Min Aung Hlaing was considering his political ambitions when he did so; he is also reported to be superstitious and regularly visits fortunetellers like other military officers.<sup>50</sup>

Min Aung Hlaing was born in Dawei, Tanintharyi Division in southern Myanmar, but grew up in Yangon and went to a downtown high school. After graduating from school, he briefly studied law at Yangon University, then joined the Defense Services Academy (DSA) in Pyin Oo Lwin in 1974, graduating in 1977 in cohort 19. As a low-ranking military officer, he first served in Mon State. He became commander of the LID 44 headquartered in Thaton Township, Mon State in 2001.<sup>51</sup>

However, the general is no stranger to Rakhine State. After his posting at the LID 44, he was promoted to commander of the Western RMC in 2004.<sup>52</sup> He was also chairman of the Rakhine State Peace and Development Council. After two years he was shuffled to command the Triangle RMC in Kengtung, Eastern Shan State in 2006.<sup>53</sup> He was then promoted to chief of the Bureau of Special Operations (BSO)-2 overseeing operations under the military’s northeastern Regional, Eastern and Triangle commands in Shan and Kayah states.

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<sup>48</sup> Tay Za is the Tatmadaw’s Officer Training School for non-graduated young men. Commanders involved include Western RMC’s commander, Major-General Maung Maung Soe, from DSA intake 27, the Southwestern RMC’s commander, Major-General Tay Za Kyaw of officer training school intake 73, Commander of the Sittwe ROC Brigadier-General Hla Myint Soe, Brigadier-General Myint Aung, graduate of Tay Za 11, LID 33 Commander Brigadier-General Aung Aung, LID 99 Commander Brigadier-General Khin Hlaing who graduated from Tay Za 17, Brigadier-General Khin Maung Soe, commander of the MOC-15; Colonel Aung Aung of Tay Za 19, commander of MOC-9; and Brig-General Aung Zayar of Tay Za 22, commander of MOC-5.

<sup>49</sup> Military sources, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Wai Moe, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> The Daily Eleven’s interview with Min Aung Hlaing in 2015, no link available.

<sup>52</sup> There will be three gateways, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Funds for treatment, 2006.

General Min Aung Hlaing was low profile before he was appointed chief of BSO-2. He became a well-known figure in the media following a Tatmadaw snap offensive overrunning the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) at the Sino-Burmese border town of Laogai (Laukkaing Town) in August 2009. The Tatmadaw troops easily took Laogai in only three days. There was looting and as many as 37,000 Kokang-Chinese refugees fled to the Chinese border area.<sup>54</sup> As chief of BSO-2, Min Aung Hlaing oversaw the success and received the favor of top junta generals Than Shwe and Maung Aye. A year later, he was promoted to joint chief of staff of the armed forces, considered the third-highest post in the Tatmadaw. During the junta's transfer of power to Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government when Than Shwe officially stepped down at the end of March 2011, Min Aung Hlaing was named commander-in-chief of Myanmar's armed forces.<sup>55</sup>

With backing from the retired Than Shwe,<sup>56</sup> General Min Aung Hlaing created an iron grip on the Tatmadaw. He sacked or forced to retire at least four high ranking generals from DSA cohort 22: Lieutenant General Kyaw Pyoe, Lieutenant General Tin Ngwe, Major General Tun Than and Major General Hla Myint Shwe, who reportedly challenged him.<sup>57</sup> In mid-2017, General Kyaw Pyoe may have attempted to sue General Min Aung Hlaing for sacking him in 2011.

Min Aung Hlaing went on to move his confidants into key positions in the military such as deputy chief of military intelligence and general secretary of Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. Since Myanmar's retirement age for government staff was sixty at that time, most of his contemporary generals were already out of military uniform, and most contemporary

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<sup>54</sup> Over 30 gov't soldiers killed, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Wai Moe, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Military sources in 2017 said Min Aung Hlaing still visited Than Shwe regularly and reportedly listened to advice from the old general (personal communications, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Another Military General, 2011.

Tatmadaw commanders are at least ten years younger than Min Aung Hlaing.

Min Aung Hlaing tried to rebuild the Tatmadaw's public image as a national guardian at home, and as a reformer abroad, traveling to capitals in Europe and Asia. While in Brussels in November 2016, a symbolic location for western democracy, he addressed a speech to military representatives from the European Union and defended the military's role in Myanmar's politics.<sup>58</sup> He has also showed his public support for the Bama Buddhist nationalist movement, visiting extreme nationalist Buddhist monks including the controversial Ashin Wirathu<sup>59</sup> and offering donations to them. He also attended the ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the death of King Thibaw's<sup>60</sup> family in Ratnagiri, India in 2016. It was unusual that a military chief attended an event of the former Burmese monarchy. He was seen there with the chairman of the State Sangha Committee Bamo Abbot Bhaddanta Kumara and Vice President ex-Lieutenant General Myint Swe.<sup>61</sup> Shortly after his trip to India, he went to meet a well-known nationalist monk Sitagu Abbot Ashin Nyanisara.

Min Aung Hlaing is married to Daw Kyu Kyu Hla who is an ethnic Rakhine from southern Rakhine State. His son is owner of the Yangon Gallery and Aung Myint Mo Insurance Company. Controversially, Myanmar military personnel have to buy insurance from the Aung Myint Mo Company. The company is alleged to be involved in arms brokering for the Tatmadaw, helping purchase aircrafts from Pakistan and other strategic arms from former Soviet countries and Israel. The business community in Yangon guessed Min Aung Hlaing's family wealth was worth \$800 million in 2017.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Unspecified article in *the Global New Light of Myanmar*, November 6, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Wirathu is an extreme Buddhist monk from Mandalay who makes public anti-Muslim racist talks.

<sup>60</sup> King Thibaw (1859-1916) was the last king of the Konbaung Dynasty. He was overthrown by the British in 1885 and deported to India, where he died.

<sup>61</sup> Ceremony marking 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Military and business sources, personal communications, 2017.

Leading up to the 2017 atrocities in Rakhine State, then-State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing's relationship was in question. During the first one and a half years of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, there were no regular meetings between the two. Under Myanmar's current military constitution, there is a regular meeting point between the civilian and military leadership in what is known as the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC). The NLD government did not call an NDSC meeting up to 2017, unlike the previous USDP government which called NDSC meetings at least 200 times in five years.<sup>63</sup> The NLD leadership's reason for bypassing the NDSC is because the military chief has the power to appoint six out of the eleven members of the council while the elected civilian leader can only select five. However, a military source told the author that NDSC decisions were based on consensus rather than majority vote.<sup>64</sup>

There was an institutional dilemma for Aung San Suu Kyi calling a meeting with the military chief. Because Aung San Suu Kyi or the elected President<sup>65</sup> did not attend the NDSC, the general rebuffed her at other occasions. Min Aung Hlaing preferred to send his deputies when requested or when he wanted to brief/inform the State Counselor.<sup>66</sup> In the case of the August 2017 atrocities, Min Aung Hlaing deigned to directly inform the State Counselor, sending his deputies instead to request the government's approval for martial law in Rakhine State. The negotiation failed and Aung San Suu Kyi only reportedly agreed to a kind of special authority to the deployed military troops and for a declaration of Penal Code 144 and a curfew. Some military sources said the military had to use maximum force in the Rakhine State operation because the government only approved the special authority in Rakhine State for two weeks (but later

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<sup>63</sup> According to several interviews with senior officials working with both the USDP and the NLD governments.

<sup>64</sup> Military source, personal communication, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> According to the military's 2008 constitution, the President has the authority to call a meeting with the commander-in-chief.

<sup>66</sup> Civilian and military sources, personal communications, 2017.

the government expanded the period of the special military power).<sup>67</sup>

Another tension between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military leadership was over her close relationship with General Shwe Mann. Although Shwe Mann is called a “traitor” by the military leadership,<sup>68</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi trusted him.<sup>69</sup> As a candidate for the USDP, Shwe Mann was defeated in the 2015 elections to the NLD party candidate in his native town, Pyu. But shortly after the NLD came to office, Suu Kyi appointed Shwe Mann as chief of the Parliament’s Special Commission on Reviewing Laws. There was a rumor in Naypyidaw that Shwe Mann was a potential replacement for then-President Htin Kyaw if he resigned in 2017.

Apart from Min Aung Hlaing and according to Myanmar’s military protocols, the deputy commander-in-chief, Vice Senior General Soe Win, the joint chief of staff General Mya Tun Oo, and the BSO-3 chief Lieutenant General Aung Kyaw Zaw were the ranking commanders that oversaw the “clearance operations” in Northern Rakhine State from the War Office in Nay Pyi Taw. Another key officer at the War Office during the atrocities against the Rohingya in 2017 is Lieutenant General (then-Brigadier General) Kyaw Swar Lin, the general staff officer at the commander-in-chief’s office.

### **Vice Senior General Soe Win**

General Soe Win graduated from DSA cohort 22 in 1980, starting at the military academy as a junior student when Min Aung Hlaing was a senior final year student. In his military career, as lieutenant colonel, he was tactical commander in the LID 88 that Than Shwe used to command in the early 1980s.<sup>70</sup> He was posted as commander of the LID 99 in Meiktila, Mandalay Region, was

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<sup>67</sup> Military sources, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Military sources, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Former staff of Aung San Suu Kyi, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> According to military documents seen by the author.

head of the officer training school in Bahtoo, Shan State and MOC-21<sup>71</sup> in Bahmo Township, Kachin State from 2004-2008.

The 2008/2009 time was when the Burmese military junta was pressuring all ethnic ceasefire groups to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under Tatmadaw command, which sparked new iterations of civil war, particularly along the Sino-Burmese border.<sup>72</sup> All the large ethnic armed groups such as the United Wa State Army rejected the military junta's pressure saying it was a plan to disarm them before a political solution was found in the country. Then-General Soe Win was promoted as the commander of the Northern RMC that confronts one of the biggest ethnic armed groups, the Kachin Independence Army.

Like Min Aung Hlaing and other junior generals, General Soe Win was promoted while older generals took off their uniform and prepared for the 2010 elections in the military shuffle in August 2010. Soe Win became chief of BSO-6 overseeing the capital Nay Pyi Taw and surrounding areas. In March 2011 he replaced General Maung Aye as deputy commander-in-chief. After the NLD took office in March 2016, Soe Win served as a key liaison between the State Counselor and the commander-in-chief until 2017.

### **General Mya Tun Oo**

Currently the third-highest ranking general of the Tatmadaw, Mya Tun Oo is at least six years younger than Min Aung Hlaing. He graduated from cohort 25 of the DSA. He was general staff officer-1 of Military Affairs Security, the renamed Military Intelligence unit, after the removal of General Khin Nyunt and his intelligence officers in October 2004. Mya Tun Oo was at that time a key negotiator with the Karen National Union (KNU), the oldest ethnic rebel group in Myanmar.<sup>73</sup> In February 2008, he was alleged to be a mastermind of the assassination of Pado

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<sup>71</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p. 213.

<sup>72</sup> Wai Moe, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Shah Paung, 2006.

Mahn Sha Lan Pan, the then-general secretary of the KNU.<sup>74</sup> Later after the incident, he was promoted to commander of the LID 101 in Pakokku Township, central Myanmar, then to a commandant of the DSA in August 2010.

In late 2010, he became commander of the new Central-Eastern RMC in Kolam, Southern Shan State. During the military junta era, he was called a “golden boy” by senior generals tipping him to become a potential general. In 2012, he was appointed to three posts within the military: chief of staff of the army, chief of Military Affairs Security and chief of BSO-6. In August 2016, he became the joint chief of staff of the army, navy, and air force.

### **Lieutenant General Moe Myint Tun**

General Moe Myint Tun was chief of staff-army when the Tatmadaw launched the “clearance operations” in western Myanmar in the summer of 2017. He was a key senior military officer in the commanding War Office, implementing the orders of the commander-in-chief and the deputy commander-in-chief.<sup>75</sup> As a lieutenant general, he was chief of BSO-5 in early 2017 and was promoted to chief of staff-army in May 2017, just three months before the “clearance operations”,<sup>76</sup> becoming the youngest ever chief of staff-army. Before that he was promoted to commander of the Nay Pyi Taw RMC in 2015.<sup>77</sup> He graduated from intake 30 of the DSA and was favored by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, being promoted after Min Aung Hlaing became military chief in 2011, with military observers tipping Moe Myint Tun as his possible successor.

Moe Myint Tun worked as a Staff Officer role during the 1988-2011 military junta period rather than commanding battle-

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<sup>74</sup> Intelligence (April 2008), 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> Moe Myint Tun, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> အငယ်ဆုံးတိုင်းမှူး စစ်ဦးစီးအရာရှိချုပ်ဖြစ်လာ။ ၂၀၁၇။

fields. In this way, he became familiar with supreme commanders including former commander-in-chief General Than Shwe and the former deputy commander-in-chief, General Maung Aye, at the War Office. Like Min Aung Hlaing, Moe Myint Tun used to be personal staff officer to Maung Aye.<sup>78</sup> After the Rohingya operations, he was promoted to lieutenant general and after the coup on February 1, 2021, Min Aung Hlaing made him chairman of the powerful Myanmar trade council, now named the “Working Committee on Ensuring the Swift Flow of Trade and Goods”.<sup>79</sup>

### **Lieutenant General Aung Kyaw Zaw**

In the overall military structure, as the head of BSO-3 covering Rakhine and Chin states, Ayeyarwady and Bago regions and some parts of Karen State, Lieutenant General Aung Kyaw Zaw most directly oversaw the “clearance operations” in Northern Rakhine State. As a lieutenant colonel ranking officer and the general staff officer-1 of the LID 77,<sup>80</sup> Aung Kyaw Zaw was in Yangon Region during the crackdown on monks in September 2007 when dozens of protesters were believed to be killed by security forces. It seems it was a turning point for Aung Kyaw Zaw and other junior military officers as they were then noticed by senior generals and tipped for promotion.

After his post at LID 77, he was promoted to commander of the LID 33 in 2009. During his time at the LID 33, he achieved closer relations with General Min Aung Hlaing, especially as the LID 33 took part in the 2009 military offensive against the MNDAA in August 2009, described earlier. Aung Kyaw Zaw was promoted to commander of the Northeast RMC headquarters in

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<sup>78</sup> Military source, personal communication, 2017. Min Aung Hlaing was the PSO to commander of Eastern RMC, General Maung Aye in Taunggyi, Shan State for two years. Moe Myint Tun was the PSO to deputy commander-in-chief General Maung Aye in 2005-2007.

<sup>79</sup> Myanmar News Agency, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Acts Adopted, 2017.

Lashio Township, Northern Shan State in the August 2010 shuffle ahead of the election in November that year. During his time commanding the RMC, ceasefires broke down in northeast Myanmar and wars broke out along the Sino-Burmese border between the Tatmadaw and four armed groups representing the Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang/Palaung and Rakhine ethnicities. There were reports of human rights violations in conflict zones<sup>81</sup> and martial law was imposed in the region.<sup>82</sup> This was his last legacy in the area before he was promoted to be one of the top generals. Alongside other regional military commanders, Lieutenant General Aung Kyaw Zaw was promoted to chief of BSO-3 overseeing areas including Rakhine State at the time.<sup>83</sup>

### **Lieutenant General Kyaw Swar Lin**

During the “clearance operations” in 2017, Kyaw Swar Lin was the general staff officer (brigadier general)<sup>84</sup> at the office of the commander-in-chief. The general staff officer has to communicate between the commander-in-chief/deputy commanders-in-chief and the commanders in the field.<sup>85</sup> Shortly after the “clearance operations”, he was promoted to major general rank and commander of a key region, the Central RMC, headquartered in Mandalay, in 2018. He graduated from DSA intake 35 and is said to be one of the rising stars among younger generals aged in their late 40s. Two years after his regional commander promotion, he was upgraded again to a higher position,<sup>86</sup> quartermaster general, and head of a military conglomerate, the Myanmar Economic Corporation Ltd.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, he became one of two

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<sup>81</sup> One year on, no justice, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Myanmar declares martial law, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Military reshuffle, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> The general staff officer post at the War Office was upgraded from colonel to brigadier general rank in 1988 (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p. 73).

<sup>85</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Htet Naing Zaw, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Myanmar Economic Corporation is another military-managed economic organization. It is perhaps the most secretive business organization of the Tatmadaw (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009).

generals who had significant promotions in a single decade along with General Moe Myint Tun.

## **Social Media and Hate Speech in the Rohingya Atrocities**

Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg was called to give testimony at the United States Senate in April 2018 about issues that included the Tatmadaw's hate speech and disinformation with genocidal purpose against the Rohingya people. The Tatmadaw has a long history of psychological and propaganda warfare in Myanmar,<sup>88</sup> using psychological warfare in the 1950s to fight against insurgent groups, particularly the Communist Party of Burma, who were very good at counter-psychological warfare. The Tatmadaw's first Directorate of Education and Psychological Warfare was formed in 1950 with assistance from the United States' Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>89</sup> The main purpose was to counter the strong communist movement in rural and urban populations and foster a better relationship between the army and the public. Senior General Than Shwe is an expert in psychological warfare and all officers of the Tatmadaw have to learn psychological warfare tactics. A tactic of psychological warfare is to mix 25 percent of 'accurate' information with 75 percent of 'inaccurate' information.<sup>90</sup>

The internet has become a new platform and tool for psychological warfare. In the early days of the internet, Myanmar's online media were not free, and the state agencies monitored citizens' internet usage. Using the internet freely was an elite privilege until the political reform process from March 2011, when the internet opened for citizens. Likewise, the Burmese generals used to tightly control the media through the censorship board but decided to abolish censorship in September 2012. The government allowed two international telecom corporations, Qatar's Ooredoo and Norway's Telenor, into the country in 2013-2014.

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<sup>88</sup> Maung Aung Myo, 2009; Mozur, 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Former Tatmadaw officials, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Current and former Tatmadaw officials, personal communications, 2017.

For the Burmese ruling generals, there are two role model authoritarian states for understanding how to combat dissident movements online – Russia and the People’s Republic of China. Chinese authorities block social media networks and websites from western democracies such as Facebook and employ their own social media networks such as Weibo and WeChat. Russian authorities, instead of closing the internet, leave it open so the Kremlin can pursue its own agenda with many information technology technicians and psychological warfare experts hired. The Tatmadaw-backed government chose Russia’s model during its first step of liberalization.<sup>91</sup>

Facebook was founded in 2004. It began to be popular among overseas Burmese, particularly from Singapore, the US and Russia around 2007-2008. Facebook rapidly became the most popular social media platform in Myanmar in September 2011.<sup>92</sup> In response, the Tatmadaw leadership immediately decided to use Facebook more in 2011, with many troll accounts, pages and groups created since 2012,<sup>93</sup> though military officials had been opening real and fake Facebook accounts since 2007. After mobile phone SIMs became more readily available in 2013-2014, Facebook only became more popular. The Tatmadaw commander-in-chief’s office opened Facebook pages for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the office of the commander-in-chief, and other official military accounts in 2013 in order to craft a positive public image for the general and to facilitate more interactive relations with the general public.<sup>94</sup>

Before 2011/12, cyber warfare mostly consisted of online arguments between Aung San Suu Kyi’s supporters, particularly in exile, and Tatmadaw students in Russia. This changed after the by-elections in April 2012 when the NLD party won. Suddenly, there was an immediate rise in print and online hate speech

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<sup>91</sup> Former Tatmadaw officials, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Poetranto, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Officer in the Public Relations and Psychological Warfare Department, personal communication, August 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Tayninga Institute of Strategic Studies officials, personal communication, 2017.

against Muslim/Rohingyas. According to my interviews with military sources, this hate speech is a central long-term strategy of the military and military-backed political parties such as the USDP. Because the Tatmadaw commander-in-chief appoints 25 percent of the seats in the Hluttaw under the 2008 military constitution, the pro-military party and alliances only have to win 26 percent of Hluttaw seats to form government. The Tatmadaw and pro-Tatmadaw parties were confronted by popular opposition and the widespread favorability of Aung San Suu Kyi. The Tatmadaw and pro-Tatmadaw parties found an alternative doctrine to counter this opposition in Burman Buddhist nationalism, which had already been propagated at military academies for decades and in propaganda books and other outputs.<sup>95</sup>

## Case Studies

During my interview with sources, a former senior official of the USDP explained:

*Shortly after the elections (in April 2012), the military and the USDP leadership met with the senior general (Than Shwe). We all were shocked by the result of the by-election and the senior general scolded us over the result. He instructed us to prepare for the next elections. In May, the USDP formed its Buddhism committee. The main purpose of the Tatmadaw's psychological warfare on Facebook is to promote the Tatmadaw's main doctrine of Burman Buddhist nationalism. It could promote hatred against Muslim minority in a conservative Buddhist country.*<sup>96</sup>

Attempts at portraying Rohingya/Muslims as “alien” by calling them Bengali and portraying the NLD party as the pro-Muslim party began on Facebook. Muslims were shown as “rapists” and denouncements were made against “Muslim old men being forced to marry younger Buddhist women under instruction from

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<sup>95</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

<sup>96</sup> USDP official, personal communication, 2017.

the mosque”. Former military officers such as General Shwe Mann, who works with Aung San Suu Kyi, was portrayed as a “traitor of the Tatmadaw,”<sup>97</sup> implying former military officials like him were betraying the Burman race and Buddhist nationalism.

Many troll accounts of Myanmar celebrities were created and some anti-Muslim celebrities such as Shwe Eain Si and Nay Toe were involved in spreading hate speech against Rohingya on Facebook.<sup>98</sup> Usually, troll accounts and other accounts such as fake celebrity accounts post normal news and stories most of the time but are sometimes activated to promote hate speech or attack opponents. Tatmadaw agents create these popular celebrity accounts, pages, and groups and grow them to at least 5,000 followers. Once an account, page or group becomes well-known, troll operations take it over. The troll accounts and pages are not always typical celebrities and can be named for soldiers, monks, government officers, artists and ordinary citizens. Example of Facebook pages and accounts are: Wirathu, Ye Moe, Maung Maung Aung, Hla Shwe, Nay Zin Latt, Ye Htut, and Zaw Htay. The current and former officials involved in cyber warfare operations on Facebook were fed the same propaganda at military academies. They studied and were brainwashed with anti-Muslim nationalism textbooks.

Hate speech and disinformation is systematic and institutionalized. We can even call it state-sponsored hate speech against a particular minority religious group. Four departments in the military play significant roles in the Tatmadaw’s psychological warfare on Facebook, which is known among the military leadership as “cyber warfare”, under the instruction of the commander-in-chief. They are the Directorate of Psychological Warfare and Public Relations, Military Affairs Security, the office of the chief of military training and the Directorate of Computers. In the military’s command structure, the top three men at the center of these efforts are commander-in-chief Min Aung Hliang,

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<sup>97</sup> Former Tatmadaw officials who received psychological warfare training, personal communications, 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

deputy commander-in-chief Vice Senior General Soe Win and joint chief of staff General Mya Tun Oo. Under them other key people are Lieutenant General Soe Htut, Lieutenant General Tun Tun Nyi, Lieutenant General Maung Maung Aye and Colonel Aung Khine Soe (as of January 2018).<sup>99</sup>

The involvement of the military training department is noteworthy. There is a military think tank called the Office of Strategic Studies under the chief of military training. The think tank is one of the brains of the Tatmadaw’s psychological and cyber warfare on Facebook. At first, the Office of Strategic Studies was formed under the Directorate of Defense Service Intelligence in the 1990s, which was abolished in late 2004. In the late 2000s, it was established again under the chief of military training with generals who were designated as a “reserve force” after Military Intelligence was purged.<sup>100</sup> According to an official who worked at the psychological warfare department:

*Coordination and teamwork are principles of cyber operations. For example, when the bodies of Mro ethnic villagers were found in the Mayu mountains, they coordinated the framing of the news and collectively designated the issue a threat to national sovereignty, race, religion and security and launched the ‘Save Myanmar, Save Rakhine’ campaign on Facebook.<sup>101</sup>*

Hundreds of soldiers have been reported to be working three shifts a day at military units in Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Pyin Oo Lwin. The operations are overseen by general staff officers. Approximately 3,000 soldiers have studied in Russia since the early 2000s. Making fake news, hate speech, and character assassinations were a part of the operation, and while staff coordinate with each other, they play different roles—the military intelligence collects information, then based on this information, they work

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<sup>99</sup> Former high ranking military officer, personal communication, September 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

<sup>101</sup> Official working at psychological warfare department, personal communication, 2017.

together to produce and spread hate speech and fake news on social media. During my interviews, a former official who has a wealth of knowledge about the issue said:

*There is up to an estimated 700 staff working for military propaganda on Facebook in Naypyidaw, Yangon and Pyin Oo Lwin ... They were overseen by a general staff officer-1 who is a colonel (also known as 'Colonel GS-1'). In the operation structure, there are three general staff officers-1 at each department of the military. Hence about 12 general staff office-1 are involved in overseeing the operation.*<sup>102</sup>

The author traveled in late February 2018 to Mrauk-U Township, Rakhine State and met Maung Kyaw Nyunt, a Rakhine village headman. He said he found on Facebook that the photos of a dispute between Rakhine Buddhists in his village were framed as Rohingyas attacking ethnic Rakhines in Maungdaw Township. He stated, "I know the photos are of the issue in my village. That is why I noticed the post was fake. But other (ethnic) Rakhines will believe it is real".<sup>103</sup>

Spreading misinformation and hate speech across multiple platforms is part of the Tatmadaw's tactics. The way official pages, media pages and troll accounts portrayed the AA, the new and growing insurgent group in western Myanmar in early 2019, is an example. The AA was framed as having an "alliance" with ARSA. The proposition was first spread by troll accounts, pages, and groups on Facebook. Then the Myanmar Cable Network, founded and funded by the Ministry of Information, did a series of reporting and roundtable talks framing the AA as an ally of ARSA.<sup>104</sup> Then, similar stories were published in other media outlets such as Eleven Media.<sup>105</sup> An independent news outlet, *The Irrawaddy*, also reported the information. The media reports were followed by the State Counselor Office's spokesman Zaw Htay's

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<sup>102</sup> Unspecified personal communication.

<sup>103</sup> Village headman in Mrauk-U Township, personal communication, 2018.

<sup>104</sup> MCN TV News Channel, 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Phyo Wai, 2019.

press conference<sup>106</sup> and then a Tatmadaw press conference. This loose network of reporting and repeating fake news and disinformation is part of the reason why the campaign was successful in convincing some followers and bystanders.

The pattern of the anti-Rohingya, anti- democracy movement and pro-military trolls accounts and pages on Facebook in Myanmar is very similar to Russian tactics, although the Tatmadaw has reportedly sent students to four countries, Russia, China, India and North Korea, to study information technology. Burmese military students were reportedly in St. Petersburg where many Russian technology companies are based. A noticeable one is the Advanced Internet Agency which is on the US blacklist for making fake news. The Tatmadaw purchases technology from China, particularly from ZTE and Huawei. There was also a news report of Israel helping the Tatmadaw and Myanmar authorities in this regard, including with wartime communication equipment.<sup>107</sup>

When Facebook deleted several accounts associated with the Myanmar military, the military did not know it was an action by Facebook and first thought it was cyber-attack. The military suspended key generals' trips on the day and held an emergency meeting. Troll accounts accused the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi of being behind the action. The Tatmadaw uses Telegram and Twitter, but Min Aung Hlaing's official Twitter account was frozen in May 2019. The Tatmadaw created an account and page for Min Aung Hlaing on Vkontakte, often known as VK, a Russian social media website, but VK also banned his account. An official web page of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was also created and remains active.<sup>108</sup> In early 2018, a brigadier general level official at the War Office was sacked after he posted about a staff reshuffle in a Viber group and now all officials except the commander-in-chief and the deputy commander-in-chief are not allowed to use smartphones while on duty at the War Office.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Gov't Accuses AA, 2019.

<sup>107</sup> McLaughlin, et al., 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, 2021.

<sup>109</sup> Tatmadaw computer department official, personal interview, 2018.

## Conclusion

The militarization and military crackdown against the Rohingya people in northern Rakhine State under the title of a “counter-terrorist” campaign remains a man-made humanitarian crisis. As of early 2018, both the government and the military of Myanmar are under escalating international pressure including at the United Nations Security Council. In response, the Myanmar government formed two commissions in October and December.<sup>110</sup> A border guard police chief in Rakhine State, Police Brigadier General Thura Saw Lwin was replaced with Police Brigadier General Myint Toe from Mandalay in October after serving one year. The Rakhine State police chief reshuffle was not in response to atrocities but related to providing information directly to the civilian chief minister of the state, rather than to the military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>111</sup> The LID 99 which was mobilized in August 2017 was withdrawn from northern Rakhine State in late November that year.<sup>112</sup> Commander Major General Maung Maung Soe of the Western RMC was also moved on, but his removal from the commander post was unlikely due to a crisis within the military, and was more likely for failing to defeat the AA in Rakhine and Chin states in later months.<sup>113</sup> U Zaw Htay, the then-State Counselor’s Office Director General who posted fake photos about the situation on government social media pages was moved on to be director general of the Union Peace Making Commission. However, until the time of writing, there has been no proper response to the atrocities and no real action taken on those responsible.

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<sup>110</sup> The Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State with government officials chaired by then-Minister of Social Welfare, Reliefs and Resettlement Dr Win Myat Aye and the new Advisory Commission on Rakhine State chaired by Dr Surakiart Sathirathai, former deputy prime minister of Thailand.

<sup>111</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

<sup>112</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

<sup>113</sup> Unspecified personal communications.

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