

A critique of “The Slow Burning Genocide of Myanmar’s Rohingya”

Derek Tonkin – revised 7 May 2016

In two messages dated 18 April 2016, I responded to Maung Zarni’s solicitous enquiries about my "vested interests" in Myanmar, which are and always have been non-existent, and his belief that the previous administration made use of my "arguments" to support their wrongdoings, though there is no evidence that they have ever done so.

In this commentary, might I refer to such criticisms as I may have made about what Maung Zarni describes as "research conferences" in London, Harvard and Oslo in which he was engaged? I am not aware that I have said anything of substance on either London or Harvard, but I have indeed done so in what I described in May 2015 as the "[Shenanigans in Oslo](#)". I will also use this opportunity to examine critically [the article which he wrote](#) with Alice Cowley *aka* Natalie Brinham in June 2014.

The connection which he makes to the mass flight of Arakan’s Muslims to Bangladesh in the year 1978 as the supposed start of the persecution and discrimination against Muslims merits close attention. Their woes have however been a problem since even before independence in 1948. There was the slaughter of many thousands of Arakanese, Buddhist as well as Muslim, in 1942. After independence in 1948, [as early as 1951 there were appeals from Arakan Muslims to "Stop Genocide"](#). Indeed, his article would have been all the more powerful if he had taken into account the action taken against Arakan Muslims during the three decades 1948-1978 instead of giving the impression that everything during that period was hunky-dory.

[The Mujahid rebellion](#), after all, lasted from 1948 to 1961 and both the Tatmadaw and the rebels made life pretty miserable for both Muslims and Buddhists in Arakan during that period. [In a despatch to the Foreign Office in January 1964](#), the British Ambassador in Rangoon spoke of the “extremely oppressive measures” being used to root out illegal immigrants, whose number might be in the region of 250,000 ([German Ambassador in Karachi in February 1965](#)) or even 500,000 ([Bangladeshi Ambassador in Rangoon a decade later in December 1975](#)). Wrote Sir Gordon Whitteridge:

“The Moslems in that portion of Arakan which adjoins the border with East Pakistan number about 400,000 and have lived there for generations and have acquired Burmese nationality. But they are patently of Pakistani origin and occasionally some Pakistanis cross into Arakan illegally and mingle with the local population. As part of a drive to detect these illegal immigrants the local Burmese authorities have for some time employed extremely

oppressive measures. The Pakistan Government are anxious that these Arakanese Moslems should not be goaded into leaving Burma and taking refuge in East Pakistan which cannot support them. Mr. Bhutto therefore urged the Burmese to modify their attitude towards these people and offered the maximum cooperation in dealing with any genuine illegal immigrants.”

Maung Zarni's interest in 1978 is set out [in the article “The Slow-burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya”](#) which he wrote in June 2014 with Alice Cowley *aka* Natalie Brinham. While I have no reason to doubt the authenticity of the evidence which they present in the latter part of their article and which has led them to conclude that “genocide” is taking place, the basis on which their arguments are founded is the alleged launching by General Ne Win in 1978 of what is controversially described as “the first large-scale campaign against the Rohingya in Rakhine State with the intent first of expelling them *en masse* from Western Burma and subsequently legalizing the systematic erasure of Rohingya group identity and legitimizing their physical destruction”. I suspect that version of events is entirely the interpretation of Maung Zarni and that Natalie Brinham was in no way responsible. My remarks are accordingly addressed to him, and not to Natalie Brinham.

The bulk of evidence which I have seen from contemporary diplomatic and United Nations archives as well as from press reports, other than Bangladeshi, is that no such intent was ever contemplated during what was after all only part of a nation-wide campaign in the border regions to verify citizenship documents under the, for Arakan unfortunately named (because of its historical Buddhist connotations) Operation Naga Min or Dragon King.

Many of these original reports are archived [at this link](#), none more illustrative than a [US Embassy report from Rangoon dated 14 June 1978](#) entitled “Chittagonian Refugees from Arakan” and from which I now quote:

“At dinner on June 13, the Ambassador discussed Burmese-Bangladeshi issues with the British, Australian, West German and Malaysian Ambassadors. To a man the other diplomats agreed that on the basis of their information the Bangladesh charges [of deliberate expulsion] appeared to be considerably exaggerated and inconsistent. They also noted that journalists.....saw normally functioning Muslim villages in the Arakan which were not being harassed by GUB [Government of Burma] authorities.....We remain sceptical that the GUB [Government of Burma] has embarked on a systematic campaign to drive Muslims of Chittagonian ancestry from the Arakan or that the refugee-alleged atrocities have occurred.”

My conclusion is that if General Ne Win had really wanted to expel Muslims from Arakan, he would never have allowed them to return. He was totally impervious to protestations against his deliberate expulsion of some 300,000 Indians – Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus – from Burma between 1963 and 1966 and the notion that in 1978 he might have relented under external pressure from his original alleged intent I find unconvincing. [The British Ambassador at the time went so far as to congratulate the General for his intervention in resolving the issue and his First Secretary gave a persuasive account](#) of the peaceful and voluntary return of three groups of refugees encountered during his visit to repatriation centres in Arakan.

If Maung Zarni's German is good enough, I would warmly recommend that he read the comprehensive and detailed study published in 1981 by Klaus Fleischmann "Arakan: Konfliktregion zwischen Birma und Bangladesh: Vorgeschichte und Folgen des Flüchtlingsstroms von 1978" which he will find in both the British Library and the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies . Even if his German is not up to it, there are some excellent tables in this publication which are easily comprehensible and there are also extensive quotations in English from English-language sources. In a section "Expulsion or Verification?" Fleischmann concludes (my translation):

"From everything that we know about this operation, there is nothing to suggest that an expulsion of all Muslims from Arakan was planned. It seems rather that setting such an intent was fostered internationally in certain localities, above all at the start in Pakistan (see pages 130 +), as a deliberate, rabble-rousing exaggeration and later, because of the growing number of refugees and events connected with this, was disseminated by others, who did not have any knowledge of the background, out of fear - understandable however in the circumstances."

I think we should be careful not to demonise General Ne Win. His established record of incompetence and ruthlessness is bad enough as it is. In this context it is worth noting that the Mayu Frontier District, which Maung Zarni says was established under U Nu's premiership, was the brainchild of Ne Win himself. This is confirmed in [a letter from the Head of the Political Section in the British Embassy in Rangoon](#) to the Burma Desk in the Foreign Office in October 1965. It was Ne Win who set up the Frontier Areas Administration (FAA) in October 1959 during his caretaker administration.

Again, to put this all in context as with Operation Naga Min, the FAA set up at the time a number of special administrative zones in border localities which were internationally sensitive. Some were given their own radio programmes and other local support. When the situation was thought to have

stabilised, the zones were returned to normal administration. Neither Naga Min nor the Mayu Frontier District were, as has been so often depicted, exclusively Arakan operations, but should be understood in a nation-wide context.

By way of further confirmation of Ne Win's direct responsibility, [Jacques Leider has recorded](#) (Footnote № 65 at the link) that:

“General Ne Win the Head of the Caretaker Government and now Chairman of the Revolutionary Council was pleased to fulfil the repeated demand of the Rohingyas on 1st June 1960 by creating a District consisting of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and a part of Rathedaung Township in the shape of Mayu Frontier District and placed it under the Frontier Administration. This single act of service to the Rohingyas by General Ne Win is uppermost in the mind of every Rohingya and will be remembered for generations.” Extract from a letter of the President of the United Rohingya Organisation of Mayu District to Gordon H. Luce, 3 May 1963. National Library of Australia (NLA) MSS Collection, Papers of Gordon Luce MS6574. Copy of the letter kindly provided by Pamela Gutman, 7 November 2013.”

I am not about to suggest that today's Rohingyas might wish to honour the memory of General Ne Win for his support for their welfare in the 1960s and 1970s, but I would suggest that historical facts should be given due weight in our assessment of that period.

Maung Zarni says in the paper that “Rohingya is not simply a self-referential group identity, but an official group and ethnic identity recognized by the post-independence state.” While it is true that between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s occasional references to Rohingya are to be found in official documents and speeches, and while organisations using the name “Rohingya” were permitted to register, I have been struck by the relative paucity of such references. [He has himself listed some of them](#), but I am doubtful that this evidence taken together amounts to official recognition.

The acid test is surely whether the designation “Rohingya” was ever incorporated in Burmese legislation. I have found no evidence that this was the case. In those areas where I would have expected to find it, such as the post-independence censuses, “Rohingya” was not a classification on offer. The 1953-54 census used the British nomenclature, with suitable modifications. By the time of the 1973 Census, the list of national races included [some 144 designations](#), six of them Muslim including “Arakan-Chittagonian” which would have covered most Muslims in Arakan. If “Rohingya” had been officially recognised, that is surely where it would have appeared.

It would in my view have been so much better if Arakan Muslims had stuck to this and other designations (as the Kaman have done) instead of reaching for the stars with their ill-advised “Rohingya” enterprise which has brought the full fury of Rakhine Buddhists down on them. It may not be too late to revert to “Arakan Muslims” or something of that kind.

This list of 144 had, intriguingly, not been amended by the time [the 1982 Citizenship Act](#) came into force. What happened at the 1983 Census is not clear, but the actual census reports only contain the eight main group ethnicities and most Arakan Muslims were wrongly bundled into a supposed foreign ethnicity called “Bangladeshi”. The list of 144 was formally reduced to the present list of 135 only when a new list was published in Loktha Pyithu Neizin (*Working People’s Daily in Burmese*) on 26 September 1990, or eight years after the Act. (Footnote № 34 in Maung Zarni’s article refers to Col. Hla Min’s 2001 publication, but it is always better to quote original sources if available). It follows that when he says that the 1982 law “draws on a list of 135 ethnic groups, which excludes some minority groups such as the Rohingya”, he is mistaken. [As the Australian scholar Nick Cheesman has put it](#), the exclusion of the Rohingya is *de facto* rather than *de jure*, it is a result of administrative obstruction and mischievous regulation under the 1982 Act, not because of the Act itself, despite its manifest faults.

Maung Zarni says that “there are clear references [sic] to the Rohingya even before the colonial period” and he quotes Buchanan (visit to Ava in 1795) and Paton (1826). Buchanan is in fact his sole reference and it is debatable whether this isolated reference is an ethnic designation or a geographic locator. Neither Buchanan nor anyone else ever used it again, which strongly suggests that it had no currency as an ethnicity. Paton does not of course mention “Rohingya” and his one-line reference (actually, it was his colleague Thomas Paterson who completed the survey) to 60% Mughls and 30% Mussulmans in 1826 should be contrasted with what the British actually found as their administration got under way in Arakan and should be compared with the annual capitation censuses from 1829 onwards and the full decennial censuses from 1872 onwards.

These give a totally different picture - an initially eight to one dominance of Buddhists to Muslims in Arakan as a whole, reducing to a two to one dominance in Akyab District (present-day Sittwe and Maungdaw Districts combined) in Northern Arakan by 1931. This was a result of course of massive Chittagonian migration of agricultural labour in the intervening years, though this is generally denied by Rohingya ideologues who would build an impenetrable “Chinese” wall between Bengal and Arakan. As the Muslim Council of North Arakan [put it incredulously to Prime Minister U Nu on 25 October 1948](#):

“We are dejected to mention that in this country we have been wrongly taken as part of the race generally known as Chittagonians and as foreigners. We humbly submit that we are not. We have a history of our own distinct from that of Chittagonians. We have a culture of our own. Historically we are a race by ourselves.....”

The good news is that former [President Thein Sein has publicly stated](#) that migrants from Bengal came legally to Arakan during British rule and that their descendants are recognised as Myanmar citizens. This would seem to be an excellent point of departure in negotiating citizenship for Arakan Muslims today and which [the Oxford Conference](#) might wish to recommend as one of several nodal arguments to be put to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Maung Zarni mentions by name a number of worthy persons who have commented on the depressing state of affairs in Arakan. I have read carefully what they say, and find myself in full agreement with the general thrust of their concerns. None of them however is what I would call an authority on Burmese affairs. Those who provided messages for the Oslo Conference took care not to use the term “genocide” as their personal characterisation of recent events. [Soros went so far as to say](#) that: “Fortunately, we have not reached a stage of mass killing”. [Bishop Tutu was the closest](#) to “genocide” when he said that “I would be more inclined to heed the warnings of eminent scholars and researchers, including Amartya Sen.....[on] the slow genocide being committed against the Rohingya people.” Quite who these “eminent scholars and researchers” might be who supposedly hold these views he does not say, and I do not know, but what is clear from Bishop Tutu’s statement is that he has been briefed by mischievous propagandists who have fed him a line which is seriously inaccurate. Thus we read that:

“The Rohingya people were not consulted when the British drew the Burmese border on the map. With those strokes of a pen, they became a borderland people; people whose ancestral land traverses political boundaries. Burma’s post-colonial government elected in 1948 officially recognized the Rohingya as an indigenous community, as did its first military government that ruled from 1962 to 1974.”

According to the Bishop, it was not [the natural boundary of the Naf River](#) which has historically divided Bengal from Arakan well before the British came to India and the Burmese to Arakan, but the wicked British imperialists who, inspired perhaps by Moses, parted the Red Sea of Naf and split the Rohingya (or should I say Bengalis?) into two, leaving some on the Bangladeshi side of a wet, but artificial border and some on the Myanmar side. Bangladesh denies that there have ever been any historic (pre-1948) Rohingya communities on their side. Some like myself might ask whether there are any historic (pre-1948) Rohingya communities on the Myanmar side either.

Does the Bishop understand the implications of what he has said? Today's Rohingya must be furious that he has effectively stated that Bengalis and Arakan Muslims are all of the same ethnicity. Some might feel even so that he is not far wrong. I hope too that the Bishop has not gone soft on General Ne Win who headed the military government after his 1962 coup.

In the article there are many other points of detail whose accuracy I would contest. At Annex I have selected five examples of how Maung Zarni has ventured away from scholarly analysis to unsubstantiated propaganda. At some point he and Natalie Brinham might feel that they should revise their article in the interests of historical accuracy. Account should always be taken of all available material. We should not just cherry-pick what supports an argument and overlook what does not. That is the path of the propagandist and ideologue, not of the scholar and researcher.

Maung Zarni seems concerned lest my interventions might reflect some action involving the US and UK governments to undermine his genocide-thematic conferences in the interests of wider US and UK politico-strategic objectives. I am happy to reassure him that this is not the case. Tony Blair, who visits Myanmar regularly, could do that far more effectively than I ever could, and I for sure have not been asked.

He is welcome to circulate this critique to Oxford Conference participants. As he will appreciate, the observations recorded in this document would be very difficult to make through interventions from the floor.

Derek Tonkin

Annex

[A critical examination of five selected statements in "The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya" by Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley](#)

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"In contrast, the international community continues to recognise the Rohingya as an ethnic group."

It is not the practice of individual countries to "recognise" the ethnic composition of another State. Many countries use the description "Rohingya" as a term of reference for Arakan Muslims suffering discrimination and persecution in Northern Rakhine State. But there is no common international practice and some countries decline to use the term at all, notably Buddhist neighbours of Myanmar like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia. China and Russia are also most cautious in their

use of the designation. Even some European countries are reluctant to use the term. [To the dismay of Rohingya activists](#), the Norwegian State Secretary of Foreign Affairs Morten Høglund “choose [sic] not to even mention the word ‘Rohingya’ in his entire speech [at the conference on the Rohingya in Oslo last May] in an apparent compliance to Myanmar’s government stand”.

The position of most countries would be close that of the British Government, as explained by UK Ambassador Andrew Patrick in Yangon:

“Generally in the UK, and in Europe, ethnic groups are allowed to call themselves by the name they want to use, whether or not that name has any historic validity. Of course when we use it, that’s not to say we’re expecting some sort of special status or a recognition of the Rohingya as an ethnic group. That is for the Burmese parliament to decide.” - Mizzima Business Weekly 8 May 2014.

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“Official Myanmar state histories and law.....exclude the Rohingya from the list of 135 state-recognised ethnic groups of Myanmar that is enshrined in the citizenship law and the constitution.”

Neither [the 1982 Citizenship Act](#) nor [the 2008 Constitution](#) enshrines or incorporates any definitive list of ethnicities. The 1982 Act alone makes reference in Article 3 to “the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D.” while Article 4 provides that: “The Council of State may decide whether any ethnic group is national or not.” The Constitution only provides in Article 346 that: “Citizenship, naturalization and revocation of citizenship shall be as prescribed by law.

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“The fact that the British census and other official records did not include the category Rohingya says more about the short-comings of British pre-World War II social-science methodologies and political and economic power relations during the British colonial period than they do about the history of Rohingya identity.”

This explanation is, with respect, baloney. The reason “Rohingya” was not included in any report compiled during the period of British rule, which in Arakan lasted from 1824 to 1948, is quite simply because the term was unknown throughout these 124 years to any British, Burmese or Indian official, librarian, author or scholar. British censuses went into considerable detail about ethnicity in Arakan, noting for example in the 1921 and 1931 Censuses that the (Buddhist) designation

“Arakanese” [A2 – Page 135] [was also known as “Rakhaing and “Yakhaing”](#) – a fact unknown to many Rohingya activists who continue to argue that “Rakhine” did not appear in British censuses either, when in fact it did.

In the case of Arakan’s Muslims, there is a detailed and erudite account of their varied [ethnicities on pages 229-231 of the 1931 Census](#). This account records that in both the 1921 and 1931 Censuses instructions were given that if designations such as Kawtaw, Barua, Barnuji and Magh were offered, they should be recorded as “Chittagonian”, but that “Magh” was confusing because it was used in Bengal to refer to Arakan Buddhists generally (and I would add somewhat pejoratively) while the term was used in Arakan for Buddhist cooks from Chittagong. What you will not find on any of the decennial censuses or other reports is any reference to “Rohingya” as a possible alternative.

Pages 705 and 706

“Forced repatriation of the Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh followed the exodus under a bilateral agreement between the governments of Bangladesh and Burma.”

Footnote № 127 attributes this to [“C.R. Abrar, Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees \(1995\)](#). In fact Abrar’s study only states that “in the negotiations conducted between Bangladesh and Burma during June and July 1978, an agreement was finally reached on the repatriation of refugees to Burma. The operation commenced on 31st August 1978 and ended on 29th December 1979 and involved repatriation of a total of 187,250 refugees to Arakan.” Nowhere is there any reference to their “forced” repatriation, a claim repeated on Page 706: “In all, 187,250 Rohingya were forcibly returned to Burma.”

[Another study by Alan C Lindquist](#), referred to in Footnote № 128, records in graphic detail the appalling treatment accorded to refugees by the Bangladeshi authorities as well as the resistance to repatriation. He records: “Very few were ready to go back, and those who were willing were subject to pressure and intimidation from militants among the majority who opposed return.” Nonetheless he eventually concludes: “The Bangladesh government’s pressure on the refugees to make them go back to Burma was ‘successful.’ More and more showed themselves ready to go back to escape the terrible conditions in the Bangladesh camps. And their fears of torture and persecution on return there did not seem to materialise.”

[First Secretary Rex Farrar at the British Embassy in Rangoon](#), reporting in February 1979 on his trip to Arakan to observe the repatriation, said that:

“My conclusion is that everyone on the Burmese and Bangladesh side involved in the repatriation exercise is determined to make it a success. It is running smoothly. I did not detect any sign of heavy-handedness or hostility with the officials.....The camps have a holiday atmosphere now, but I would hate to go there in the Monsoon wind and rain and mud.”

[British Ambassador Charles Booth reported in the same vein in July 1979:](#)

“Once the project was underway and messages getting back to the Bangladesh camps reassured the inmates of the goodwill and tangible help being given on arrival in Burma, there was a snowballing effect.....”

In short, I have found no evidence to support Maung Zarni’s assertion of “forced repatriation”.

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“The United Nations considers the Rohingya ‘one of the most persecuted groups in the world’; they are the only ethnic group in Burma who are barred from having more than two children, and subject to arbitrary mass arrests and chronic waves of massacres.”

The UN has never made any such statement. Footnote № 136 refers the reader to [Associated Press in Yangon, ‘UN Urges Burma to Investigate Rohingya Deaths after Latest Violence’, The Guardian, 24 January 2014](#) . However, this article only states that: “There are around 1 million Rohingya in Burma. The United Nations has called them one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.” It does not quote any UN official or body to this effect. The AP article concerns the alleged killing on 8 January 2014 of 8 Muslim men near Maungdaw and of at least another 40 men, women and children a few days later. It subsequently emerged that neither the deaths on 8 January 2014 nor those on 13 January 2014 could be confirmed and probably never happened.

UN Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana has indeed described the Rohingya as "[the most vulnerable and marginalised group in Myanmar](#)", which may well be true, but no UN spokesperson, agency or representative is on record as having described the Rohingya in the global terms suggested.

[Local laws limiting family size](#) were mostly abused to extract bribes. The laws are no longer valid. A new national law on family planning has yet to be implemented through Regulation, but remains a cause for international concern.