

“Who Are the Real Hands Behind the Drug Trade?” — Gen. Twan Mrat Naing

Interview with The Irrawaddy — Episode 2

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Interviewer:

We’ve seen reports that international actors are filing cases against you, General Twan Mrat Naing, and other leaders in international courts regarding the Rohingya issue in Rakhine. How do you respond?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

Times have changed. It’s not a major obstacle. In fact, it gives us another opportunity to present our perspective and explain our work to those we engage with internationally.

We stand on the side of truth. Even as we return and operate in our own homeland, we act with caution for the people’s safety. There’s no other country we could or would go to — we remain in Rakhine.

Those engaging in what I call **“legal harassment” or “lawfare”** claim to pursue “peaceful repatriation.” But how do they intend to achieve that? If they truly seek justice, they should bring their cases before the **courts of our People’s Arakan Revolutionary Government**, where the truth can genuinely be uncovered — not in international courts designed for political pressure.

Interviewer:

To recap, there’s extensive documentation of Myanmar military human-rights violations for over a decade — including in Rakhine. My question is: in the past ten years, are you denying that the Arakan Army (AA) has committed any human-rights violations against Muslims?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

There were indeed isolated incidents involving undisciplined members who committed crimes. We took firm action and punished them — these actions were reported publicly in the media. Some offenders even deserted.

But under **ULA policy**, there has never been and will never be any “collective punishment” based on ethnicity. That would contradict our principles and destroy our vision. Without peace and stability, progress is impossible.

As a matter of policy, we do not commit human-rights violations. In wartime, when we arrest those who incite violence, burn houses, or threaten peace, we do so under legal grounds. At the same time, we have also taken disciplinary action against our own officers who violated our rules.

Interviewer:

Beyond human-rights concerns, many accuse the AA of practicing ethnic discrimination against Rohingya Muslims. What has the AA actually done in terms of administration and justice, particularly in including Muslim religious leaders?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

Disputes over ethnic labels and identities did not begin today. Once the name “Rohingya” was politicized, it sparked conflict both in Rakhine and across Myanmar.

History books — whether from the Pagan era or Rakhine’s own — contain distortions, rewritten by different groups for their own agendas. These deep-rooted issues cannot be solved overnight; they require long-term, patient efforts.

Focusing only on “human rights” while ignoring the broader **legal and political systems** of a country is misguided. Powerful nations often use the language of international law to pressure smaller nations.

Should we protect those who violate our domestic law in the name of international law? Citizens must respect their own nation, its flag, and its constitution — that’s a fundamental duty.

Instead of chanting “human rights violations,” we must **gradually address inequality in citizenship rights**. But as long as external interference and agitation continue, resolution will remain difficult.

Interviewer:

Please return to the question of participation — especially in justice and administration.

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

To build an orderly, peaceful administration and ensure development in Rakhine, **no community can be excluded** — and we have no intention to exclude anyone.

People must be viewed both as **individuals and citizens**. We have to balance compassion and state responsibility.

When I was a student, I once visited a Muslim village where a child was ill and lacked medicine. We immediately bought medicine and treated the child. That compassion has guided us since our youth.

Now, in leadership, we must translate that compassion into fair policies. For **Rohingya Muslims**, we continuously encourage participation in public services — including **security, justice, health, education, and disaster response**.

In the **military sphere**, participation remains limited — not from exclusion, but from practical concerns about trust. In some past cases, recruits absconded with weapons. I've spoken candidly about this with Muslim community elders.

We **do not forcibly recruit** anyone. Even voluntary recruits must be endorsed by community leaders.

Meanwhile, some so-called “activists” fabricate stories to stir division in the media. Administratively, we are **training new human resources** and have begun **administration and legal courses** for all communities.

Interviewer:

About arming — the junta has, for the past two or three years, been training and arming Rohingya Muslims to attack the AA. Is this true?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

Yes. It happened — and it continues today.

Interviewer:

Have these armed groups become an effective force for the junta? What is the reality on the ground?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

It's extremely dangerous. With short-term thinking, the junta has opened a door to long-term instability for the entire region.

In the camps, students are being **indoctrinated daily with jihadist narratives** while being trained militarily.

Our findings indicate:

- There are around **4,500 people** gathered, not 4,500 weapons as some claim.
- These camps are situated **near Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) posts**.
- When essential goods such as fuel or medicine head toward Rakhine, it's **Rohingya armed groups** — not the BGB — who seize them.
- They **ambush, attack, and retreat across the border** after carrying out missions.

This situation stems not from national policy but from certain officers who support extremist agendas. We handle these challenges with patience and responsibility.

Interviewer:

You often refer to “external activists.” Do Rohingya activists abroad and those in the camps share a common stance? What about those living inside Rakhine — in Buthidaung and Maungdaw — compared to diaspora “camp leaders”?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

No — their views differ greatly.

- **In central towns**, many Rohingya prefer peaceful coexistence.

- **Along border areas**, militants exert stronger influence.
- **In camps**, some genuinely want to return home peacefully, while others are taught in madrasas to wage jihad and destroy the AA.

Many families have already returned to Rakhine, but the **UN and some Bangladeshi officials** highlight only those who fled — never those who returned.

They cite wildly differing numbers — 20,000, 120,000, even 200,000 — supposedly from “UN statistics.” When **local UN staff themselves are sympathetic to militants**, how can those figures be trusted?

They demand that NGOs enter to assess conditions — which we accept, provided we can vet who they send.

Diaspora activists, on the other hand, **don’t want to see progress or coexistence**. They depend on portraying Rakhine as a failed, divided region to maintain their relevance and funding. Their agenda is to push “**genocide**” **narratives** and calls for **foreign intervention (R2P)** — not peace or development.

Interviewer:

You said some UN staff are effectively part of militant networks. Can you explain that?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

After the junta’s loss of control, **new power figures** emerged — especially **Dil Mohammad**, who has been empowered by **Bangladesh’s DGFI** because ARSA’s leader no longer commands full obedience.

Dil Mohammad acts as a **key agitator in the refugee camps**. If camp leaders refuse to attend his meetings, **aid is withheld**.

International aid has become a **tool for coercion and extremism**. Some UN and NGO staff collaborate in these networks, knowingly or not.

When we controlled **Buthidaung** and were about to take **Maungdaw**, we spoke with senior Bangladeshi border officials. They asked us to prevent refugee outflows — which we agreed to, on the condition that they allow life-saving supplies in. They accepted in

principle — but once fighting resumed, they **blocked aid** and blamed us for refugee movements.

The reality is stark:

- Myanmar remains at war.
- People have no jobs.
- Bombs fall daily in the supposed “repatriation zones.”
- Bangladesh blocks livelihood routes, forcing people to flee.

Most actual violence in and around the camps comes from **human-trafficking gangs**, not our side. When vague allegations of “violence” arise, we ask — who exactly are the perpetrators?

Interviewer:

A frequent allegation is that the AA is involved in the **drug trade**. Myanmar Alinn recently ran a photo story showing seized stimulant pills allegedly linked to AA members. Bangladesh’s border forces have made similar claims. How do you respond?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

This is a deliberate smear campaign. Repeat a lie often enough, and people start to believe it.

Those making the allegations know exactly **where the drugs are produced and who controls the routes**.

Sometimes I say, half-jokingly — *“If we had that kind of money, we could swat their planes like flies.”*

This accusation is part of a **broader strategy** to cut off our political legitimacy and portray us as a “drug cartel.”

When the junta controlled these borders, **they** managed the drug trade. Since we took control, the flow has changed drastically.

Consider the facts:

- Methamphetamine moves by **sea from Yangon Port and Ayeyarwady River**, all under **navy control**.
- If they can intercept a pistol in Karen State, how do **tons of meth** slip through Yangon?
- We've even heard of shipments flown from **Yangon to Lashio**, possibly on **military transports**.

They know who the real culprits are — and so do we. Yet every drug seizure in Myanmar is blamed on us to weaken us politically.

As we gained control of strategic border zones, **Bangladesh's attitude shifted from cautious cooperation to hostility**. They now **blockade Rakhine by sea**, with warships from **Yangon to Haingyi and Gwa** — while most drug seizures occur at sea, beyond our control.

We operate only within **5–7 km of the coast**, mainly to stop illegal fishing. The major maritime drug flows are outside our reach.

So the narrative that the AA is behind the regional drug trade is simply **false and politically motivated**.

Despite military, diplomatic, and media assaults, **we remain calm and committed to our mission** — not out of fear, but because escalation helps no one.

Interviewer:

Finally, how would you summarize AA's current posture toward Bangladesh?

Gen. Twan Mrat Naing:

At first, we thought relations could evolve positively. We had shared interests regarding refugees and stability.

But as time passed, **Bangladesh shifted to a coercive approach** — using pressure and manipulation instead of trust-building.

They should have focused on security and livelihoods for returning refugees, but instead, they tried to force our compliance through deception and threats.

Even so, our message remains consistent:

Let's rebuild our relationship based on **mutual recognition, cooperation, and shared benefit** — not on pressure or coercion.

End Note

In this wide-ranging interview, **General Twan Mrat Naing** challenges the prevailing narratives on human rights, refugee politics, and the regional drug trade. He frames the accusations as part of a broader **information and political warfare campaign** waged by external powers and local actors against the **United League of Arakan / Arakan Army (ULA/AA)**.

He reiterates the ULA's commitment to **inclusive administration, accountability, and regional stability**, emphasizing that the real perpetrators behind Rakhine's instability — including the drug trade — lie within **junta-aligned networks, cross-border syndicates, and intelligence-linked actors**, not within the AA itself.
