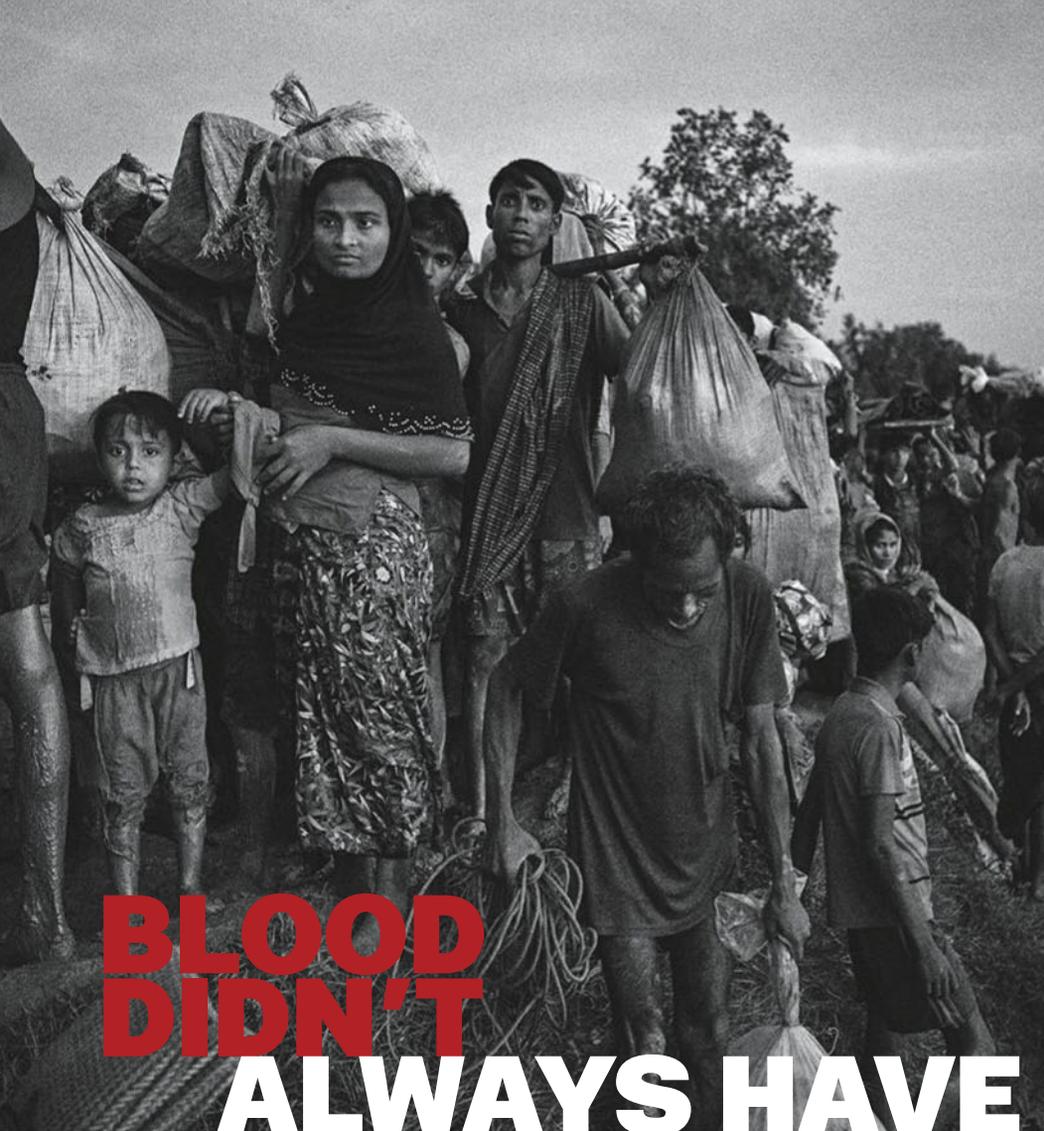
A close-up photograph of a hand holding a white sign. The sign has the words "FALLEN IDOL" written in large, bold, red, hand-painted letters. The hand is positioned on the right side of the sign, with fingers gripping the edge. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

FALLEN IDOL

FOR YEARS, MYANMAR'S AUNG SAN SUU KYI WAS HERALDED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AS A FREEDOM FIGHTER, ACTIVIST AND HUMAN RIGHTS PIONEER. BUT AN EPIC CRISIS HAS SEEN HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF HER PEOPLE FLEE THEIR HOMES - AND COULD LEAVE HER REPUTATION IN TATTERS.

WORDS KAYLEIGH LONG



BLOOD DIDN'T ALWAYS HAVE A PRICE.

But as of late last year, a bag of a common O-type would cost roughly \$8, and the rarest, AB, around \$20. The market fluctuates slightly depending on the security situation, but prices are much the same as they've been since 2012.

This is true on one side of the tall razorwire fence, beyond which more than 120,000 stateless Rohingya Muslims live in abject squalor in the flyblown internment camps of Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State in western Myanmar. In need of blood transfusions or often just basic medical attention, many are left wanting. Before the violence in 2012, blood was free.

But first, a geography lesson. From the Andaman Sea up to the Bay of Bengal, the flood-prone Rakhine littoral reaches up to the frontier with Bangladesh.

The northern district of Maungdaw is Muslim majority, and anything south is predominantly Buddhist. Sprinkled throughout are enclaves of minority groups that are recognised as citizens. The Rohingya, with a handful of exceptions, are not and have had their documentation voided. Rakhine State is home to three million people. Or, rather, it was.

In the last year, that has dipped significantly, as almost 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled what the Myanmar army insists were counter-insurgency operations, but the UN has branded a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. It's the swiftest exodus of such a large population since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

In its most conservative estimate – the only one anyone's officially ventured to make just yet – Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) suggested that, at a minimum, almost 7000 people were killed in one month.

Following an intense period of fighting that started in 2012, Sittwe was all but purged of its Muslim population. The rape-murder of a Buddhist woman, and subsequent killing of 10 Muslims, had unleashed communal violence that ripped through the State.

Since 2012, almost a million Rohingya have also been subject to movement restrictions. They have been disenfranchised, skipped over in a census and lost any semblance of political representation.

There are now more Rohingya outside the

country than in: one million reside in Bangladesh alone, with large populations having been there since the exoduses of '78 and '92. There are also significant numbers in Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Saudi Arabia.

Over 100,000 Rohingya have fled by boat and untold thousands have died anonymous deaths at sea, or at the hands of traffickers in jungle camps littered along the border between Thailand and Malaysia. Thousands have been sold into slavery, or into marriage. Hundreds also remain interned in Australian detention facilities.

For U Shwe Maung, life has changed drastically. He is a Rohingya and until 2016 was a sitting member of parliament. Now living in exile, we speak over Skype, as there is an outstanding warrant for his arrest. It seems like he still can't quite believe what's happened.

“We heard [in 2016] that there was [militant] training going on inside Rakhine State. I told media, ‘No, this is nonsense! These are old photographs, some are from Indonesia.’”

In the small hours of October 9, 2016, a new Rohingya insurgency group reared its head. Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement) launched attacks on three security outposts.

“I was really, really shocked,” he says. “Once I heard about it, a big worry came to my mind: maybe the government and security forces will take advantage of the situation and our people will be in danger.”

He did a live broadcast on Facebook.

“I warned all Rohingya people not to do any kind of activity like [the Faith Movement] did on October 9. If they do so, maybe they will have a huge problem... Maybe ethnic cleansing. Maybe genocide. This kind of [militant] activity may jeopardise our non-violent, civilised movement. I warned of this.”

The group of villagers had been armed with little more than machetes, sticks, slingshots, and the guns they managed to raid from the sleeping policemen. The army response was swift and brutal, and tens of thousands poured across the border to escape the violence. But 2016 now seems like a footnote, compared to what came next.

He shakes his head.

“Finally, again, after August 25, 2017, the consequence was as I had predicted.”

On August 25, the Faith Movement struck once more. This time, they reportedly hit almost 30 security posts. Clashes between Tatmadaw – Myanmar's military forces – and the poorly armed villagers played out in the days and weeks that followed, as civilians desperately sought to flee.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
 Just a few of the many Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh to escape the violence; refugees queue for food and water inside Kutupalong camp; map of the region; aerial view of Balukhali camp in Bangladesh.



The August 25 attacks were met with a retaliatory campaign of shocking brutality. Refugees have told of indiscriminate violence: men, women and children killed. In some cases, violent gang rapes resulted in horrific injuries that medical doctors would treat some days after the women had hobbled across the border.

For many, that journey through the mountains on foot took upwards of a week. Ragged people gathered on the shore, fleeing in anticipation of violence. Many became stranded, unable to pay the boatman, as it were.

September comes and my phone is full of bodies. As a journalist who has reported extensively on the crisis, my Buddhist and Rohingya sources regularly send images with evidence of alleged atrocities. I came to associate the low clarion of my WhatsApp tone with the arrival of a new anonymous corpse. I view them with a kind of scientific detachment. Had the throat been slit, or were they hacked up? Was that an entry or exit wound?

Once, when a particularly nasty stack came through, a Google search suggested what I was looking at might be ‘meat’. But it was five people, some said a family, the names of whom are lost to the annals of internet history.

When MSF announced its figures – nearly 7000 in the first month – it was hard to wrap my head around what it means for that many people to die. And not just to die, but to be killed.

Most of the photos were attributable to the conflict, but others offer clues they’ve come from elsewhere. One, ostensibly of a Buddhist man hacked to death by Muslim militants, was wearing jeans rather than the traditional *longgyi*, a kind of Burmese sarong. It turned out to be from an unsolved murder in Borneo. A photo of a dead woman and her baby was sent by people believing she was a Rohingya, when it was in fact one of the more iconic images to emerge from the Sri Lankan civil war.

Ten years ago, a SIM card in Myanmar cost about \$2500, with a state-backed monopoly on telcos. They’re now a little over a dollar, and people are wild about Facebook. It also means misinformation and disinformation flies on all sides – a dangerous thing in a country where digital literacy is low.

The Myanmar government has seized on any and all misreporting as proof that nothing was happening, or that the international press was deliberately seeking to distort the truth. The official Facebook page for the office of Aung San Suu Kyi issued a series of shouty posts decrying “FAKE RAPE”, as news reports spread of alleged atrocities by security forces.

Amnesty International has called the conditions for the Muslim population of Rakhine State “apartheid”. Yet a lot of people in Myanmar do not believe the stories of horror that have poured out from across the border. There’s a widespread belief that the Rohingya are going back to where they belong, and that they’re making up tall tales in order to get aid handouts – and third-country resettlement.

The government has refused to issue visas to a UN-mandated fact-finding mission. Independent media access to the northwest has been systematically barred. The handful of media trips that have been allowed into the region have been under the watch of security forces and organised by the extraordinarily named Directorate of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare.

During the years of military rule, foreign media outlets such as the BBC were branded rather poetically by the state propaganda mouthpiece as “A Sky Full of Liars”.

The last few years, with the relative gag removed, has seen the emergence of a particularly bellicose brand of nationalism in the public discourse. Despite a honeymoon period after censorship was lifted in 2012, things have taken a fairly sinister turn.

Journalists who report on the Rakhine conflict are seen as traitors and a number have received threats. Two local journalists from Reuters, one a former colleague, have been jailed for their reporting on atrocities in Rakhine State. Their arrests have been linked to the discovery of a mass grave.

In its heyday, the ancient Rakhine kingdom of Mrauk-U was reputed to be something like a fortified and cosmopolitan Venice of the East. The kingdom was overthrown by invading Burmese forces in 1785. Arakan, as Rakhine was then known, was ceded to the British after the first Anglo-Burmese War.

Mrauk-U is now known for its ruins.

Many Rakhine people regard the downfall of the kingdom as when their problems began. World War II looms large: the region, like the rest of Myanmar, is still in the throes of a hangover from British colonial rule. The Buddhists of Arakan have not forgotten that the British, in retreat, armed the Muslims. Thousands were apparently slaughtered.

Killings of recognised Rakhine minorities go uninvestigated inside northern Rakhine State. People believe the plight of the Rohingya is given a disproportionate amount of attention, and that the Western media harbours a pro-Muslim bent.

For their part, modern day Rakhine Buddhists also encounter intense hardship. While they do not necessarily face the same level of systematic discrimination as the Muslim population, it's hard to make a living and tens of thousands of men have gone overseas for work.

Burma was led toward independence by Bogyoke Aung San, the founder of the modern military. He was assassinated in 1947, when his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi – the Nobel Peace Prize-winning, internationally feted democracy icon – was just two years old. She spent almost two decades of her life under house arrest, a prisoner of the erstwhile junta who claimed she was likely to “undermine community peace and stability”. Myanmar's politics are nothing if not deeply Shakespearean.

In 2011, the military junta was dissolved and a quasi-civilian government was installed. Prior to this, Myanmar had languished under sanctions and was firmly in the diplomatic naughty corner, alongside the likes of Iran and North Korea.

When Myanmar held elections in 2015, the world was enraptured with the fairytale of Aung San Suu Kyi and it wasn't long before sanctions were lifted. In the often-reductive ‘good guys and bad guys’ narrative perpetuated by the Western press, she cut an appealing figure – a quick-witted, elegant, Oxford-educated beacon of peaceful resistance against the mean men in green who kept her locked up for all those years.

The country is administered from its capital city, Nay Pyi Taw – a sort of dystopian Canberra, its empty 20-lane highway more runway than road. It was believed the military decamped there in order to better manage threats from the periphery. Or it was decided

on the advice of an astrologer to the former dictator. No one really knows.

The military's role in the country's political system is enshrined in the constitution. The army retains 25 per cent of seats in the parliament, and wields an effective veto power over constitutional change. The man who was angling to change the constitution, Ko Ni, the legal advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, was gunned down in broad daylight at the airport in January last year. All this, to say they're not going anywhere.

There has been an international chorus of condemnation over Suu Kyi's perceived failure to speak out on abuses against the Rohingya. But she insists she has been anything but silent: people outside the country simply haven't liked what she's had to say.

Still, it is difficult to reconcile the Suu Kyi who in 2011 delivered a speech in Canada, saying, “Rape is used in my country as a weapon against those who only want to live in peace,” with the one who delivered a diplomatic briefing saying that she hoped to find out “why this exodus was happening”.

Today, Myanmar sits firmly on atrocity watchlists. It has been named as a country of concern by the UN special advisor on the prevention of genocide. The UN fact-finding mission is due to release its findings mid-year, but that will not include any on-the-ground investigation.

One military leader has been targeted with sanctions by the US over the Rohingya purge, but the general vibe is that diplomats are at a bit of a loss as to what to do. Things are, as one recently departed diplomat put it rather un-diplomatically, “pretty fucked”.

For the hundreds of thousands who have fled to Bangladesh, life is even more tenuous. They've arrived in the most densely populated country on earth, marked as one of two most vulnerable to climate change. The region is beset by cyclones each year.

The camps that have swelled to cope with the influx are now the largest in the world. Widespread deforestation makes the area prone to landslides, and then there's the flooding from the relentless monsoons. Bangladesh had eradicated diphtheria, but it's back. The outbreak of catastrophic disease, aid workers say, is a matter of when, not if.

Counterterrorism experts also fear this is a volatile breeding ground for extremism. There is the concern that the plight of Rohingya, the majority of whom just want citizenship and security, will be seized on by opportunistic outsiders.

All of this comes amid a palpable US retreat from the region, and a general pivot away





"WHEN I TALK ABOUT BLOOD, TEARS COME TO MY EYES. ALL ARE HUMAN BEINGS."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Not all of Myanmar has turned against Aung San Suu Kyi – the Inter-religious Gathering of Prayer for Peace in October 2017 was held in support of the maligned leader; Moroccans showing solidarity with the Rohingya; life inside therefugee camps; a group of Rohingya wait, hoping there is space inside the camps; crossing the border to Bangladesh.



from democracy toward authoritarianism. The landmark address given by Obama in 2012, where he referred specifically to Rohingya abuses – to a near-audible gasp – feels a million years ago. The lack of transparency and engagement from the Myanmar government means most analysts, journalists and even diplomats are left with little choice but to engage in guesswork.

But for most in central Myanmar, life goes on. To walk the streets of downtown Yangon, its largest city, is to see a country oblivious to the hellstorm of fury being unleashed within its borders. The expat community has spent a disproportionate amount of time only half-jokingly bemoaning a shortage of tonic water in recent months. The truth is that most people in Myanmar have more pressing concerns than speaking up for a minority they fear and loathe, and in most cases have never met.

While the violence in Rakhine has made international headlines, less airtime is given to the conflicts playing out elsewhere in the country, and the myriad other challenges that populate the government's triage list.

The country's peace process is perhaps the world's most complex: sporadic conflict endures in the borderlands between the Tatmadaw and some 17 armed groups. The country is also home to a vast number of militias, the number of which can only be guessed at.

There's more fighting going on, in more places around the country than there has been in years. One source messaged over Christmas to say the "Myanmar government is delivering presents". He was referring to mortars that had been dropping on the rebel-held city of Laiza, near the border with China.

Since 2012, healthcare for the Rakhine State's Muslim population has been extremely limited. But a man named Nu Maung has set about finding blood donors. Myanmar has 135 recognised ethnic races, but Rohingya is not one of them. The majority in the country refer to them as 'Bengalis', which implies they are of foreign origin. When it comes to labelling vials of blood, Nu Maung has adopted an approach born of pragmatism.

"I leave it blank because if we write 'Rohingya', it will create a problem. We don't want to write 'Bengali', either. I write 'Islam' for religion," he explains, when we speak to him at the camps for internally displaced people outside Sittwe last year. "Even then – sometimes I write it, sometimes I don't. Because there are not two different spaces for race and religion. There is only one space for both race and religion. I mostly leave it blank."

Buddhists prefer monk blood, due to its perceived purity. In an emergency a Rakhine Buddhist civil society group facilitates donations from laypeople. U Maung Maung is a friend of Nu's and runs the Rakhine blood service, shows me the over 2000 contacts in his phone, all with their blood type before their name. If he needs to find a match, he makes a call and picks them up to go to the hospital. It's all free. In Buddhist-majority Myanmar, donating blood (and sometimes even organs) is seen as a meritorious act. Many people give blood on their birthdays.

He had been organising blood donation for some years, and it had always been free. Now, his donor base of 500 or so are scattered throughout the ramshackle tarpaulin cities on the boggy land that abuts the Bay of Bengal. With medical services all but stripped away, people had to be incentivised to donate.

The price isn't for the blood, per se, but for the trouble of going to the clinic. With most of Rohingya cut off from any means of earning a living, this cost has arisen as a way of encouraging donors and is incurred by the recipient patient's family. Many harbour a deep-seated fear of the state hospital due to the fact that many don't make it back. Simply getting the referral can take so long that by the time they get there it's too late.

For his part, Nu has given blood more than 40 times and enthusiastically shows me his dog-eared donor book.

"When I talk about blood, tears come to my eyes. All are human beings. Our belief is 'one bottle of blood is one life', whatever race or religion. Whatever community the person belongs to, it is essential to save that life."

For Aung San Suu Kyi's government, the handling of the situation in Rakhine State goes far beyond the fallout from the recent violence. They are tasked with reconciling two communities which have lived under enforced segregation for nigh-on five years.

"We want to live together again, like before," says Maung, gesturing toward the vast expanse of shelters. "In a garden, it looks beautiful only when there are different kinds of flowers." ■