Francis Wade is the author of *Myanmar’s Enemy Within*, the book that debuted just ten days before violence erupted in the Rakhine state against the Rohingya population in August 2017. Since the publication of his book, around 650,000 Rohingya have been displaced, principally into Bangladesh. Wade and YJIA Multimedia Editor Rebecca TeKolste discuss the political factors that led up to the outbreak, as well as the history of the country which makes it much more vulnerable to this kind of ethnic violence.

In late August, a group of Rohingya insurgents attacked security posts in Rakhine State, which prompted a military campaign that, by all accounts, appears to have been completely indiscriminate.

YJIA: Can you start by telling us about what’s going on in the Rakhine State and provide us with some of the backstory?

Francis Wade: Nearly 650,000 Rohingya have been pushed out of western Myanmar since August 2017. They now reside in Bangladesh, and join a preexisting refugee population of around 350,000. What we know is that, in late August, a group of Rohingya insurgents attacked security posts in Rakhine State, which prompted a military campaign that, by all accounts, appears to have been completely indiscriminate. They attacked Rohingya villages and torched houses. We know now, following MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] research done with the refugees who fled into Bangladesh, that hundreds (if not a thousand-plus) children have been killed. At least 6,700 Rohingya were killed, and these are from military campaigns with troops acting in concert with Rakhine civilians.

Myanmar was under outright military rule for half a century, until 2011. We have to go further back in history to understand the foundations of this crisis. For much of the prior 150 years before military rule began in 1962, it was a British colony.
For much of Myanmar’s early modern history, there were very fluid boundaries between both political territories in the region, and the ethnic and religious groups inside of and between those territories. But the way the British administered the country meant that fluid relations between ethnic groups and religious groups soon hardened, and distinct identity groups formed. Once the military came to power, it played on this idea, that the country is home to a select number of indigenous groups but that it was threatened by what it called “internal destructive elements.” Because the military knew it could profit from fear, it persistently peddled the idea that if you weren’t Buddhist or from the majority ethnicity, then you were to be treated with deep suspicion.

YJIA: How did this crisis actually start?

FW: The trigger for the violence in August was the attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which formed in the years since the first wave of communal violence in Rakhine State, in 2012. They launched their first attack in October [of] last year. The military responded much as it has done now, and pushed around 80,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.

The processes underway in Myanmar, and in Rakhine State in particular, over years, if not decades, provided the kindling for the violence. What we’ve seen in Rakhine is, particularly since 2012, acute repression and persecution of the Rohingyas. They’ve been confined to camps, ghettos, and villages. Their freedom of movement has been severely restricted. They are not allowed to access university, suffer from an acutely racialized health care system, and have been denied all political voice. Their denial of citizenship sows the seeds for, understandably, a great deal of resentment toward the state in Myanmar. It’s perhaps no surprise that we’ve seen Rohingya, having undergone decades of severe persecution and victimization, begin to mobilize.

YJIA: Why do you think that the Rohingya lack the support that other ethnic groups might have had from the majority?

FW: Much of it goes back to British rule and the fact that, when the British were in power in Myanmar, they eliminated the border separating Myanmar from India, and encouraged unfettered immigration from India into Myanmar. This planted this deep, pervasive suspicion and hostility toward cultures from the subcontinent, seen as stooges of the colonial power, and that has somewhat mutated since then.

The influx of Indian workers spurred the nationalist independence movements that began to agitate against British rule. But that planted the foundation for what has become a siege mentality felt particularly by Rakhines, that if they had not defended the border between Myanmar and what is now Bangladesh, then their cultures, belief systems, and resources would be overwhelmed. The Rohingya are seen to be evidence that that border is weak, that people from the subcontinent are crossing over, and threaten society there.
YJIA: Do we see any spillover effects of violence already happening, and if we do, what do we think might be the long-term consequences for Bangladesh?

FW: Even back in 2012, when the first waves of communal violence hit Rakhine State, it did have a ripple effect in Bangladesh. It pitted, on a much smaller scale, the Muslim community there against the Buddhist community. Remember that the borders that exist in much of Southeast Asia were drawn long after communities had settled in their places, and so it’s natural that there are Rakhine Buddhists, or people who are perhaps indigenously Rakhine who exist in Bangladesh, and who have lived there for centuries, identifying more with Rakhine ethnicity than Bangladeshi cultures, and the same with the Rohingya and other groups. Those borders are artificial. They don’t respect the communities that existed there before, but because they’re now solidified as boundaries, it creates this whole territorial issue.

Many Bangladeshis have been very welcoming to the Rohingya. The government has sheltered them, ensured they’ve had as much aid as they can get, but there are still these tensions in Bangladesh now that we’ve had this influx of more than a half-million refugees into an already overcrowded space. My fear is that it will triangulate tensions between Bangladeshis who lived there, between the old Rohingya refugee population, and this incoming refugee population. I think that provides the seeds for potential violence in the future, if not long-simmering tensions.

YJIA: Do you see the Bangladeshi government having the capacity to host a long-term refugee population of this scale?

FW: I think it places a huge burden on both the Bangladeshi government and the local population there. They are already under-resourced. Since the exodus began, food prices have doubled, if not more in some places. That’s going to cause great antagonism, and the Bangladeshi government will have to manage that as well as the material needs of the refugee population. It’s said that it [the Bangladeshi government] won’t keep them in that place for more than a year. It’s moved to the idea of shifting them onto a very low-lying island off the coast of Bangladesh, which strikes me as a disastrous move, given how prone Bangladesh is to flooding and to natural disaster.

YJIA: Could you talk about the division between the head of state role and the army, and then the structure of the government?

FW: In Myanmar, the military is the preeminent institution. It’s the one that still holds power despite the ostensible transition to civilian government. When Aung San Suu Kyi became state counselor, which is the highest position she’s allowed to take given the constitution bars her from becoming the president, she entered into a very delicate power-sharing agreement with the military. That has greatly limited what she can do with regard to the actions of the military, but now she’s accused of silence. She’s not really been silent, and is actually echoing the line of the military, so there’s this dualism between the two institutions.
Rohingya Muslim women and kids sitting in a school housing new refugees from Myanmar in Kutupalong refugee camp.
She should be calling out the military. She should have long ago called out the propagation of this nationalist ideology that I think has underpinned much of the support for the violence.

Yet the military is still primarily responsible for what’s happening. It controls the Home Affairs Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and the Border Affairs Ministry. The commander-in-chief [Min Aung Hlaing] will have orchestrated this campaign. It would have been designed long before the campaign began. We know that because troops were sent to that part of the country before the insurgent attacks began in August. I think this needs to be understood as part of a long-term strategy by the military, and we see evidence of acute repression of Rohingya going back years, if not decades. The government certainly isn’t directly responsible for it, but it’s essentially peddled the military line that the Rohingya are a dangerous entity in the country that needs to be addressed.

**YJIA**: What do you think that Aung San Suu Kyi should be doing? What should she say? What are the things that she can do, given her limited role?

**FW**: She should be calling out the military. She should have long ago called out the propagation of this nationalist ideology that I think has underpinned much of the support for the violence. Instead, she’s remained quiet on that issue. She knows that to antagonize her constituency would threaten the sizeable support she has and fears that, were she really to speak out and sympathize with the Rohingya, then she would inflame her support base. But none of that really provides an excuse for not speaking out in defense of the community. It seems as if she sees them as a disposable community if it means that she remains in power, and that the transition goes as it has been going with this power-sharing agreement between the government and the military remaining intact.

She wants to maintain power. Some suggest that, if she antagonizes the military, then they might stage a coup — an outcome she’s trying to avoid. I don’t believe that at all. I think the military is very happy with the situation it’s found itself in, in which Suu Kyi provides a foil for its actions, its abuses. The military has actually choreographed this transition, long prior to the 2010 elections. It spoke, back in 2003, of a so-called roadmap to democracy. It’s followed that process and has retained its substantial economic interest. By having Suu Kyi in a position whereby she takes the slack for much of the military abuse of the population, it benefits greatly from this current situation, materially and economically.

**YJIA**: What are some potential remedies within the country itself and within the region? How could people respond to alleviate some of the crisis?
FW: This is a very difficult question. My fear now is that the situation’s come too far to be solved by any short-term approaches. Much work needs to be done inside the country to overhaul this cultural prejudice toward the Rohingya. But there’s no one in a position of power or influence in the country who’s willing to challenge that culture.

Suu Kyi has shown that she’s unwilling, if not unable, to speak out against this virulent, venomous Buddhist nationalist sentiment that is gaining popularity across the transition, and I think without that we’re always going to have this deep, volatile antagonism between communities. The international community is realizing, too little too late, that there was always this potential for violence, and is only really acting now, once that violence has materialized and we’ve had this huge flight of Rohingya to Bangladesh.

It must engage in very close dialogue with the government and the military, and let them know that there will be severe repercussions — such as those accompanying the charges of ethnic cleansing and genocide — should things continue as they are, or should the Rohingya not be guaranteed security if they return to the country. But now, all we can do is ensure that there are enough humanitarian provisions going to the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh, and that new channels of dialogue are opened with the government, with Suu Kyi, because this is going to be a huge stain on the country. She is going to be partially responsible for that, and if she wants that to be her legacy, then so be it, but I don’t believe she does.

YJIA: Do you think there is a role for countries getting involved bilaterally, or regional institutions, or potentially the United Nations?

FW: The United States has already tabled the idea of instating targeting sanctions on those in the military who are responsible for the violence. I think that’s a good move. There are concerns that that will push the military closer to China and cause it to block off communication channels between the West and Myanmar. I think that’s certainly a potential risk, but there needs to be material action now, because
we have a situation that ranks as one of Southeast Asia’s biggest humanitarian tragedies in generations. One cannot really rely on some soft dialogue with the government or the military anymore. At the moment, it seems to believe that it can dodge any repercussions. Perhaps it can, because the instruments of law are weak when it comes to a country like Myanmar, but I think it will feel threatened by the prospect of being called to court, and hopefully that can be used as leverage.

YJIA: Do you think that a sanctions regime is the best approach for now?

FW: I think sanctions need to be targeted. They can’t instate a package of sanctions that hurt the population, given that there’s this already budding resentment toward the international community, who many in Myanmar believe are seeking to embolden or empower the Rohingya through international aid channels. That’s been a very powerful narrative that should caution against sweeping sanctions on Myanmar. The military figures who we know are directly responsible for this should be targeted.

YJIA: What obligation does the international community have to respond to the refugee crisis?

FW: The international community, if it can be described as one body, has to ask: if it doesn’t act, then who does? The Bangladeshi government only has so many resources. It’s already dealing with a desperately overcrowded country, one prone to periodic disasters itself, and now it has a huge burden for which it wasn’t prepared. I think the onus falls on the international community to step in and provide assistance for this community. We have a huge humanitarian disaster on our hands. It doesn’t stop here with the flight of refugees. This problem will deepen when disease starts to spread. There are already countless cases of sexual violence, witnessing of killings. We have more than half a million people who are potentially traumatized by this, and who need desperately food and medical provisions. Accordingly, there is an urgent need for the international humanitarian community to step up its work, for governments and the UN to provide more resources. Otherwise, the chances are that this could spiral beyond even its current point.

YJIA: Do you see any particular government being the most open to responding to this crisis?

FW: The United States and the United Kingdom have been the most vigorous supporters of the transition in Myanmar, and they’re the ones who have sought to brush these simmering crises under the carpet in the hope that the transition will just proceed naturally as it has been. Now they’re starting to realize that things have gone very much awry in the country, and that they need to recalibrate their approach.
YJIA: You mention that the international community broadly missed this crisis in a sense. It erupted in 2017, but there have been five years of ongoing unrest. How did we miss it in the first place?

FW: I think there are various reasons. I don’t necessarily think it was missed; it just perhaps wasn’t acknowledged. That’s down to two principal reasons. One is that there are political interests at play here, particularly amongst the usual crop of Western liberal interventionist states like the United States and the United Kingdom, who had so enthusiastically supported the transition, and had supported Aung San Suu Kyi. To recognize the impending disaster in Rakhine State would have chafed hugely with that narrative of a reforming country that they had championed so vigorously.

But I think there’s also an ongoing inability, despite what we know from Rwanda, from Srebrenica, to acknowledge genocide and ethnic cleansing as a process rather than an act. Every campaign of mass violence such as this, that’s designed to either kill off or expel a community, is preceded by particular processes that are well-recognized by those who study these processes, but that aren’t really acknowledged in policymaking circles, or at least there’s no real, substantial effective prevention strategy. ■

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Francis Wade is a freelance journalist and analyst covering Burma and south-east Asia. His work has been published in the Guardian, Al Jazeera English, and Foreign Policy, among other outlets. He writes on Southeast Asia, especially Myanmar.