

## SUU KYI IS STILL THE STAR IN MYANMAR

**BANGKOK:** Aung San Suu Kyi's global image is in tatters over her stubborn refusal to protect the Rohingya-but her stance has been widely applauded inside Myanmar where hatred abounds for the Muslim minority. Desperate Rohingya have fled Rakhine state since August 25 in droves, trudging through mud-slaked hills and paddy fields in a human tide that has shocked the international community.

Nearly 164,000 Rohingya have so far made it to Bangladesh, fleeing burning villages and alleged atrocities by Myanmar security forces and Buddhist mobs. It is the latest violent turn in the torrid history of the stateless minority, who are denied citizenship in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and given the caustic label of illegal 'Bengali' immigrants. Suu Kyi, feted for her years of peaceful opposition to Myanmar's junta rulers, has been urged to speak up for the Rohingya, with Muslim nations and the UN leading condemnation of her government. But the 72-year-old has not bent to pressure, in a country where the Rohingya question has overshadowed Myanmar's emergence from full military rule.

Rights groups who once held Suu Kyi aloft as a beacon of freedom now accuse her of being at best unmoved by their plight, and at worst, complicit in them being driven out of Myanmar. "By not speaking out against these abuses, she is increasingly losing her moral and political credibility," said James Gomez, of Amnesty International, which campaigned tirelessly for her release from house arrest.

It is a far cry from 2012 when then US president Barack Obama lionised the Nobel Peace Prize winner, known as The Lady, from the garden of her Yangon villa as "an icon of democracy who has inspired so many people". This week Malala Yousafzai aimed a tweet at her fellow Nobel laureate for staying silent on the "tragic and shameful treatment" of the Rohingya, while 365,000 people have signed a petition calling for Suu Kyi's Nobel to be rescinded. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan went even further, accusing her government of presiding over a "genocide".— AFP

## BANGLADESH BURIES THE ROHINGYA SHOT DEAD

**COX'S BAZAR:** Five Rohingya villagers whose distraught relatives say they were shot dead by the Myanmar military were buried yesterday in Bangladesh at a mass funeral attended by hundreds of people after their bodies were carried across the border. The relatives said the victims had been killed by the Myanmar military on Wednesday, a claim that could not be independently confirmed but tallies with multiple accounts of killings in Rohingya villages.

Their bodies were brought across the Naf river on a boat, landing on a remote stretch where thousands of Rohingya refugees have been streaming into Bangladesh over the last fortnight. Sufia Begum, an elderly Rohingya woman aboard, said she had relatives among the dead. "They were all killed," she wept, pointing to a lifeless man covered in plastic sheeting and another corpse wrapped in cloth.

They were buried on Thursday in a Muslim graveyard along with a sixth man who died of unknown causes. One victim, identified by survivors as the imam of their village mosque in Myanmar, had sustained a gunshot wound to the head. "Five of them had bullet wounds," Chailau Marma, deputy police chief of Cox's Bazar, which borders Myanmar, told AFP. "Relatives of the deceased carried the bodies into Bangladesh after they failed to bury them in Myanmar. They all died yesterday."

Myanmar's more than one million Rohingya are denied citizenship and face severe restrictions in the majority Buddhist country, which has come under increased criticism over its apartheid-like treatment of the Muslim minority. UN investigators have said a military crackdown that followed ambushes by Rohingya militants in October last year has unleashed "devastating cruelty" on civilians which may amount to ethnic cleansing.

Yesterday the UN said 164,000 refugees have now crossed into Bangladesh in the last fortnight to escape fighting between militants and Myanmar's military. The fighting is the fiercest Myanmar's western Rakhine state has witnessed in years. Columns of Rohingya civilians arrived steadily throughout Wednesday from the jungles along the border, carrying infants, chickens and their belongings bundled in sacks.—AFP



**TEKNAF:** A Rohingya Muslim refugee carries a child as they arrive from Myanmar through Lomba Beel after crossing the Naf river, in the Bangladeshi town of Teknaf. —AFP

## UN CLAIMS MORE THAN 250,000 ROHINGYA HAVE FLED MYANMAR

### REFUGEE CAMPS ARE BURSTING AT THE SEAMS

**COX'S BAZAR:** More than a quarter of a million mostly Rohingya refugees have entered Bangladesh since fresh violence erupted in Myanmar last October, the United Nations said yesterday, as more bodies washed up a day after boats sank attempting to cross the river that divides the two countries. In the last two weeks alone 164,000 mostly Rohingya civilians have fled to Bangladesh, overwhelming refugee camps that were already bursting at the seams triggering warnings of a humanitarian crisis.

Scores more have died trying to flee the fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where witnesses say entire villages have been burned to the ground since Rohingya militants launched a series of coordinated attacks on August 25, prompting a military-led crackdown. Police in Bangladesh say they have recovered the bodies of 17 people, many of them children, who drowned when at least three boats packed with Rohingya refugees sank at the mouth of the Naf river that runs along the border. Bangladesh border guards say desperate Rohingya are attempting to cross the river using small fishing trawlers that are dangerously overcrowded.

At least five have capsized leaving more than 60 people dead, police and border guards say. Rohingya refugee Tayeba Khatun said she and her family had waited four days for a place on a boat to take them to Bangladesh after fleeing her township in Rakhine. "People were squeezing into whatever space they could find on the rickety boats. I saw two of those boats sink," she told AFP. "Most managed to swim ashore but the children were missing."

#### 'Starving to death'

Those flocking into Bangladesh have

brought with them harrowing testimony of murder, rape and widespread arson by Myanmar's army. Most have walked for days to reach Bangladesh and the United Nations says many are sick, exhausted and in desperate need of shelter, food and water. Existing camps which hosted around 400,000 refugees before the latest influx are now completely overwhelmed, leaving tens of thousands of new arrivals with nowhere to shelter from the monsoon rains.

Mazor Mustafa, a Bangladeshi businessman handing out food and rehydration fluids, said the situation was getting worse as more people arrived. "It is not at all enough food," he told AFP of the ration kits being distributed. "These people are hungry, starving to death together." The latest figures mean that nearly a quarter of Myanmar's 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims have fled since fighting first broke out last October. Impoverished Bangladesh initially tried to block them from entering, but has now given up attempting to stem the tide.

On Wednesday its foreign ministry summoned the Myanmar ambassador to demand immediate measures to curb the violence. The Rohingya are denied citizenship in mainly Buddhist Myanmar, which is under growing international pressure over its apartheid-like treatment of the stateless minority. UN investigators have said a military crackdown that followed ambushes by Rohingya militants in October last year may amount to ethnic cleansing.

#### Bullet wounds

The recent fighting is the fiercest in Rakhine, Myanmar's poorest state, in years. Cattle rancher Mohammad Shaker, 27, crossed into Bangladesh yes-

terday suffering a gunshot wound to his chest that he said was inflicted by Myanmar soldiers. "I tried to flee with our stock near the river when the military started shooting at us," he told AFP, nursing his untreated wound. "I fell on the ground and later my relatives found me. We hid in the hills for days, and this morning managed to come here."

Scores of refugees have arrived in Bangladesh needing treatment for serious bullet wounds, while others have lost limbs after apparently setting off landmines along the border. Yesterday a mass funeral was held at a mosque near the border for five men whose relatives said they had been shot dead by the Myanmar military. The relatives carried their bodies over the border so they could be buried in Bangladesh.

Myanmar says some 27,000 mainly ethnic Buddhist Rakhine have also fled in the opposite direction since August 25, accusing Rohingya militants of targeting their communities. Myanmar's government, led by Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has rejected allegations of atrocities, accusing the international media, NGOs and the UN of fabrications.

It has placed the blame for the violence squarely on the militants, saying they are setting fire to their own homes. Myanmar said Thursday that 6,600 Rohingya homes and 201 non-Muslim homes had been burned to the ground since August 25. They added some 30 civilians had been killed—seven Rohingyas, seven Hindus and 16 Rakhine Buddhists—in the fighting. Myanmar's army has previously said around 430 people had been killed in the fighting, including militants and soldiers. — AFP