

AP: Rohingya Methodically Raped By Myanmar's Armed Forces

[Associated Press](#)

The soldiers arrived, as they often did, long after sunset.

It was June, and the newlyweds were asleep in their home, surrounded by the fields of wheat they farmed in western Myanmar. Without warning, seven soldiers burst into the house and charged into their bedroom.

The woman, a Rohingya Muslim who agreed to be identified by her first initial, F, knew enough to be terrified. She knew the military had been attacking Rohingya villages, as part of what the United Nations has called ethnic cleansing in the mostly Buddhist nation. She heard just days before that soldiers had killed her parents, and that her brother was missing.

This time, F says, the soldiers had come for her.

The men bound her husband with rope. They ripped the scarf from her head and tied it around his mouth.

They yanked off her jewelry and tore off her clothes. They threw her to the floor.

And then the first soldier began to rape her.

She struggled against him, but four men held her down and beat her with sticks. She stared in panic at her husband, who stared back helplessly. He finally wriggled the gag out of his mouth and screamed.

And then she watched as a soldier fired a bullet into the chest of the man she had married only one month before. Another soldier slit his throat.

Her mind grew fuzzy. When the soldiers were finished, they dragged her naked body outside and set her bamboo house ablaze.

It would be two months before she realized her misery was far from over: She was pregnant.

The rape of Rohingya women by Myanmar's security forces has been sweeping and methodical, the Associated Press found in interviews with 29 women and girls who fled to neighboring Bangladesh. These sexual assault survivors from several refugee camps were interviewed separately and extensively. They ranged in age from 13 to 35, came from a wide swath of villages in Myanmar's Rakhine state and described assaults between October 2016 and mid-September.

Foreign journalists are banned from the Rohingya region of Rakhine, making it nearly impossible to independently verify each woman's report. Yet there was a sickening sameness to their stories, with distinct patterns in their accounts, their assailants' uniforms and the details of the rapes themselves.

The testimonies bolster the U.N.'s contention that Myanmar's armed forces are systematically employing rape as a "calculated tool of terror" aimed at exterminating the Rohingya people. The

Myanmar armed forces did not respond to multiple requests from the AP for comment, but an internal military investigation last month concluded that none of the assaults ever took place. And when journalists asked about rape allegations during a government-organized trip to Rakhine in September, Rakhine's minister for border affairs, Phone Tint, replied: "These women were claiming they were raped, but look at their appearances — do you think they are that attractive to be raped?"

Doctors and aid workers, however, say that they are stunned at the sheer volume of rapes, and suspect only a fraction of women have come forward. Medecins Sans Frontieres doctors have treated 113 sexual violence survivors since August, a third of them under 18. The youngest was 9.

The U.N. has called the Rohingya the most persecuted minority on earth, with Myanmar denying them citizenship and basic rights. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees now live in sweltering tents in Bangladesh, where the stifling air smells of excrement from a lack of latrines and of smoke from wood fires to cook what little food there is. The women and girls in this story gave the AP their names but agreed to be publicly identified only by their first initial, citing fears they or their families would be killed by Myanmar's military.

Each described attacks that involved groups of men from Myanmar's security forces, often coupled with other forms of extreme violence. Every woman except one said the assailants wore military-style uniforms, generally dark green or camouflage. The lone woman who described her attackers as wearing plain clothes said her neighbors recognized them from the local military outpost.

Many women said the uniforms bore various patches featuring stars or, in a couple cases, arrows. Such patches represent the different units of Myanmar's army.

The most common attack described went much like F's. In several other cases, women said, security forces surrounded a village, separated men from women, then took the women to a second location to gang rape them.

The women spoke of seeing their children slaughtered in front of them, their husbands beaten and shot. They spoke of burying their loved ones in the darkness and leaving the bodies of their babies behind. They spoke of the searing pain of rapes that felt as if they would never end, and of dayslong journeys on foot to Bangladesh while still bleeding and hobbled.

They spoke and they spoke, the words erupting from many of them in frantic, tortured bursts.

N, who says she survived a rape but lost her husband, her country and her peace, speaks because there is little else she can do — and because she hopes that somebody will listen.

"I have nothing left," she says. "All I have left are my words."

Two months after the men came quietly in the night for F, they came boldly in the daytime for K.

It was late August, she says, just days after Rohingya insurgents had attacked several Myanmar police posts in northern Rakhine. Security forces responded with swift ferocity that human rights groups say left hundreds dead and scores of Rohingya villages burned to the ground.

Inside their house, K and her family were settling down to breakfast. They had only just swallowed their first mouthfuls of rice when the screams of other villagers rang out: The military was coming.

Her husband and three oldest children bolted out the door, fleeing for the nearby hills.

But K was nearly 9 months pregnant, with swollen feet and two terrified toddlers whose tiny legs could never outpace the soldiers' strides. She had no place to hide, no time to think.

The door banged open. And the men charged in.

There were four of them, she thinks, maybe five, all in camouflage uniforms. Her young son and daughter began to wail and then, mercifully, scampered out the front door.

There was no mercy for her. The men grabbed her and threw her on the bed. They yanked off her earrings, nose ring and necklace. They found the money she had hidden in her blouse from the recent sale of her family's cow. They ripped off her clothes, and tied down her hands and legs with rope. When she resisted, they choked her.

And then, she says, they began to rape her.

She was too terrified to move. One man held a knife to her eyeball, one more a gun to her chest. Another forced himself inside her.

When the first man finished, they switched places and the torture began again. And when the second man finished, a third man raped her.

In the midst of her agony, she thought of nothing but the baby inside her womb, just weeks away from emerging into a world that would not want him, because he was a Rohingya.

She began to bleed.

She blacked out.

As she awoke, her great aunt was there, tearfully untying her. The elder woman bathed her, clothed her and gave her a hot compress for her aching thighs.

When K's husband returned home, he was furious: not just at the men who had raped her, but at her. Why, he demanded, had she not run away?

She was pregnant and in no condition to run, she shot back. Still, he blamed her for the assault and threatened to abandon her, because, he told her, a "non-Muslim" had raped her.

Fearful the men would return, she and her family fled to her father's house in the hills above the village. When they saw soldiers setting fire to the houses below, they knew they had to leave for Bangladesh.

K was too crippled by pain to walk. Her husband and brother placed her inside a sling they fashioned out of a blanket and a stick, and carried her for days.

Inside her cocoon, she wept for the baby she feared was dead.

A few days after the men burst into K's house, 10 soldiers arrived at R's.

She was just 13 years old, but R had already learned to fear the military men.

Her parents had warned her to steer clear of them, yet it was her father who first fell prey to their wrath. One day last year, R says, soldiers stabbed him in the head with a knife, killing him.

Yet R's family had nowhere else to go. And so they stayed in the village. R busied herself by learning Arabic, dotting on her chicken and its hatchlings and caring for her two younger brothers.

And then one day in late August, R says, the soldiers barged into her house. They snatched up her little brothers, tied them to a tree outside and began to beat them. R tried to run out the front door, but the men caught her.

Her body is barely pubescent, her limbs still gangly like a child's. But her youth could not protect her.

R fought back against the men, but they dragged her out of the house. The skin tore away from her knees as her legs scraped along the ground.

The men tethered her arms to two trees. They ripped off her earrings and bracelets, stripped off her clothes.

R screamed at them to stop. They spit at her.

And then the first man began to rape her.

She froze. She was a virgin. The pain was excruciating.

The attack lasted for hours. She remembers all ten men forcing themselves on her before she passed out.

One of her older brothers later found her on the ground, bleeding.

R's two little brothers were missing, but their mother had no time to search for them. She knew she had to get her daughter over the border and to a doctor quickly to get medicine in time to prevent a pregnancy.

R was barely conscious. So her two older brothers carried her across the hills and fields toward Bangladesh. R's mother hurried alongside them, terrified for her daughter, terrified that time was running out.

That R's family sought treatment for her at all is an anomaly. Despite still suffering pain, bleeding and infections months after the attacks, only a handful of the women interviewed by the AP had seen a doctor. The others had no idea free services were available, or were too ashamed to tell a doctor they were raped.

In a health center overflowing with women and wailing babies, Dr. Misbah Uddin Ahmed, a government health officer, sits at his desk looking weary. He pulls out a stack of patient histories for those treated at his clinics and begins to flick through them, reading the case summaries out loud:

Sept. 5, a patient 7 months pregnant says three soldiers burst into her home 11 days ago and raped her. Also Sept. 5, a patient says she was asleep at home when the military broke in 20 days ago and three soldiers raped her. Sept. 10, a patient says the military came to her house one month ago and beat her husband before two soldiers raped her.

Ahmed says the women who manage to overcome their fear and make it to his clinics are usually the ones in the deepest trouble. So many others, he adds, are suffering in silence.

Though the scale of these attacks is new, the use of sexual violence by Myanmar's security forces is not. Before she became Myanmar's civilian leader, Aung San Suu Kyi herself condemned the military's abuses. "Rape is rife. It is used as a weapon by armed forces to intimidate the ethnic nationalities and to divide our country," she said in a 2011 videotaped statement to the Nobel Women's Initiative.

And yet Suu Kyi's government has not only failed to condemn the recent accounts of rape, it has dismissed the accounts as lies. In Dec. 2016, the government issued a press release disputing Rohingya women's reports of sexual assaults, accompanied by an image that said "Fake Rape."

Ahmed seems bewildered that anyone would ever doubt these women. Look at what I have just shown you, he says, gesturing toward his stack of files chronicling one atrocity after another.

Gynecologist Arjina Akhter has witnessed the results of those atrocities. Since August, so many women began showing up at her two clinics, she stopped asking them to fill out patient history forms so she could treat them faster. Among other women, she estimates between 20 to 30 rape survivors visited her clinics in September and October.

She ticks off the injuries: Two women with lacerations to their cervixes they said were caused by guns shoved inside their bodies. One woman with horrific tearing she said was caused by a nail driven into her vagina. Several women with severe vaginal bleeding.

More recently, she says, women who were raped months ago have been coming to her in a panic, asking for abortions. She has to explain to them that they are too far along, but reassures them that officials will take the babies if they cannot care for them.

Still, for some Rohingya women, giving up the babies they never asked for was not an option.

Which is how it was for F.

More than three months had passed since the men burst into F's home, and her despair had only deepened.

Neighbors had taken her in and cared for her. But her house was gone, her husband was dead. And the timing of the attack left little doubt that the baby growing inside her belonged to one of the men who had caused all her grief.

She could only pray that things would not get worse. And then, one night in mid-September, they did.

F was asleep along with the neighbors — a couple and their 5-year-old son — when the men broke down the door, jolting everyone awake.

There were five of them this time, she remembers. They quickly grabbed the boy and slashed his throat, and killed the man.

Then they turned to the man's wife, and to F. And her nightmare began again.

They stripped off the women's clothes. Two of the men noticed the swell of F's stomach and grabbed it, squeezing hard.

They threw the women to the floor. F's friend fought back, and the men beat her with their guns so viciously the skin on her thighs began to peel away.

But the fight had gone out of F. She felt her body go soft, felt the blood run between her legs as the first man forced himself on her, and then the second. Next to her, three men were savaging her friend.

When it was finally over and the men had gone, the two women lay immobile on the floor.

They lay there for days, so crippled by pain and catatonic from the trauma that they could not even lift themselves to use the toilet. F could smell the blood around them. As the house baked under the punishing sun, the stench from the decaying bodies of her friend's husband and son finally overwhelmed her.

She would not die here. And neither would her baby.

She reached out for her friend's hand and clasped it. Then F hauled herself to her feet, pulling her friend up with her. Hand in hand, the women stumbled to the next village. They spent five days recovering there and then, alongside a group of other villagers, began the 10-day journey to Bangladesh.

The monsoon season had begun, but there was nowhere to shelter. So F kept walking through the downpours. She was starving, and her battered body ached with each step. Generous strangers offered her sips of their water, and one man gave her a few sweet rolls.

One day, she came across a 9-year-old boy lying along the side of a road, wounded and alone. He had lost his parents, he told her, and the soldiers had tortured him. She took him with her.

Together, the two made it to the shores of the Naf River and boarded a boat to Bangladesh.

Which is where they live now, in a tiny bamboo shelter between two filthy latrines. And it is here that F prays her baby will be a boy — because this world is no place for a girl.

For now, the women are left to wonder how long they will live in the bleak limbo of Bangladesh, and if they will ever return to their homeland.

R, the teen, is not pregnant. Her mother sold all her jewelry and got her to the hospital in time. But R can't stop thinking about her little brothers, and her sleep is plagued by nightmares.

Since the rape, she has struggled to eat, and her once-curve frame has shrunk. Before the rape, she says softly, she was pretty.

K, who feared the baby inside her had died, gave birth to a boy on the floor of her tent in a dizzying rush of relief. She had kept her son alive through it all.

But her trauma persists. The thrum of a helicopter hovering over the camp sends her into a panic and she recites the Muslim prayer for the moments before death. She is convinced the aircraft is Myanmar's military, coming to kill them all.

When told she is strong, she looks up with tears in her eyes.

"How can you say that?" she asks. "My husband says he is ashamed of me. How am I strong?"

F, whose body is starting to ache under the strain of her pregnancy, finds her mind often drifts toward how she will care for the child in the future. She believes God has kept them both alive for a reason.

Her parents, her brother, her husband are gone now. This baby will be the only family she has left. For her, the most haunting reminder of the agony she endured also, somehow, represents her last chance at happiness.

"Everybody has died," she says. "I don't have anyone to care for me. If I give this baby away, what will I have left? There will be nothing to live for."