

| MEDIA |

# STORIES FROM INSIDE RAKHINE

*How Rohingya citizen journalists have been documenting the crisis over the years and what's changed now*

MALIHA KHAN

For years now, the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar has been broadcast to the world largely through volunteers who use smartphones to send photos, audio and video clips out to the Rohingya diaspora, larger Muslim community and the world. In the camps in the south of Bangladesh, refugees show images and videos of scenes of violence back home on their phones. Members of these WhatsApp or Facebook groups include the Rohingya diaspora in countries as wide-ranging as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and the UK.

Rakhine state has been "closed" to the outside world with the government restricting access to the region to independent observers, journalists, rights groups, and the UN. "Due to the denial of access to the region, it is essentially impossible to get information," says Rohingya refugee Mohammed Rafique, founder of *The Stateless*, a Rohingya community news portal.

What little has come out has been through social media, community outlets, and blogs. Two prominent sources of news online include the *Rohingya Blogger* and *The Stateless*.

Nay San Lwin, based in Germany, runs the *Rohingya Blogger*. The blog has become an important news media outlet for documenting human rights abuses against the Rohingya as well as featuring major international articles doing the same. Lwin's father, U Ba Sein, founded



A Rohingya reporter photographs a man allegedly shot by security forces in Rakhine.

PHOTO: NOOR HOSSAIN/ROHINGYA MOBILE REPORTERS

the website in 2005 and Lwin himself has been blogging since 2012. "We have gathered a great deal of evidence which arguably amount to show genocide has occurred against the Rohingya," stated Lwin recently at a conference organised by the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) in Dhaka.

The year 2012 marked deadly riots between Buddhists and the Rohingya in the state of Rakhine, with allegations that the subsequently deployed military committed human rights abuses in Rohingya villages. As the national media largely ignored the violence, Rohingya community leaders and members of the diaspora set up their own media outlets to document and report on atrocities being committed in the state.

It was at this time that both *Rohingya Blogger* and *The Stateless* came into being. Lwin formed a team of volunteers based in northern Rakhine state. His team members keep tabs on all the villages in the area to document actions of the

Border Guard Police (BGP), military and civilian authorities against the Rohingya.

"We also have volunteers in central Rakhine state who are reporting about the situation of refugee camps," says Lwin. Around 120,000 internally displaced Rohingya have been interned in camps across Rakhine State since 2012 with the government restricting the UN and aid groups from distributing vital food aid or providing healthcare services.

The *Rohingya Blogger* also has volunteers this side of the border, who have covered several incidents in the camps. They do not have problems recruiting, says Lwin, because they are well-known and many are willing to cooperate for the sake of getting information of their plight out to the world.

The *Rohingya Blogger* team works discreetly, even among the villagers who are their sources. They are also anonymous online as they could all be sentenced to long imprisonment for their activities, says Lwin.

"Two of our team members were arrested two years ago but they managed to get released by themselves. We didn't publicise that they were our members as they would have been sentenced to imprisonment for their work. Some non-members who sent reports to us were arrested as well and four people from Buthidaung township have been sentenced for six years," says Lwin.

Mobile phones have been available in the villages of Rakhine state only since 2014. Even without, says Lwin, his sources are tenacious. Lwin says of his experiences over the years, "I used to receive handwritten information. They know how to send information and they know how to reach me. I have even received handwritten reports from prison cells."

What's changed in 2017? For one, half of Lwin's team is now in Bangladesh, having fled there since the most recent spate of violence August onwards. The

*Continued to page 5*



PHOTO: TAUSIF RAHMAN

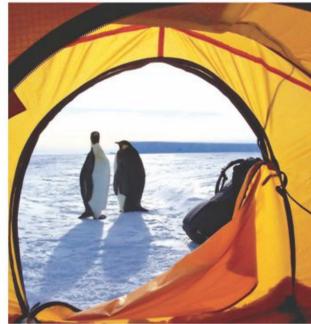
"Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple."

— Dr Seuss

**SNAPSHOT**

## MAILBOX

Please note we have a new email address:  
starweekendtds@gmail.com



### Ice camping with penguins in Antarctica

This story was like going on an adventure. I was totally absorbed in this travel-story, as if I was there with her. I learnt things like how seasick one can become on such a voyage. From this article, I also learnt about ocean life, the continent of Antarctica, and whales and penguins (albeit not very much). This story has captured my imagination and I hope that *The Daily Star* will frequently publish ripping and adventurous travel stories.

Farid Islam  
Rajshahi University



PHOTO: NAVID NOOREN

### Be humane to animals

Thanks to *Star Weekend* for revealing the deplorable scenario of zoos at the district level in its last issue of December 1, under the title "Death camps for wildlife". The article was thought-provoking as it made me think of the importance of zoos in the context of present day. Earlier, the lack of availability of satellite channels and the internet was an issue. As a result, zoos were developed for the entertainment of children. Visiting zoos help people know about animals of different species in different parts of the world. But in the present day, people can know about animals easily through the internet as well as TV channels such as

Discovery or National Geographic. So, the idea of entertaining people by giving so much pain to these wild creatures seems illogical to me.

There can be one central zoo in the country. The government must also restrict such parks or rich people from creating their own personal zoos. Zoos at the district level should also be closed as it has been exposed that they are not properly maintained. Seeing the skeletal bodies of animals at zoos will only make children sad instead of making them happy and learn about wildlife. So, we should all come forward to save these wild creatures and must be humane to them.

Nafis Sadik  
Merul Badda  
Dhaka

### Living with HIV

I was shocked after reading the article "Living with HIV" published in the *Star Weekend* on December 1. Every year, December 1 is observed as World AIDS Day. Many remain unaware of their HIV-positive status. It is also disheartening to learn that many in the medical community feel that people who have HIV/AIDS should not be allowed to mix freely with other people. Those who are HIV-positive often have to hide their status from their families.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

A concern is the current high use of drugs. Drug addicts are at high risk of being infected due to the use of shared needles. Following religious bindings and rules can be a guide here. The government should also provide holistic care for HIV-positive people and take more initiatives to prevent this disease. We can hope that our country will be HIV-free one day.

Marshia Afrin  
Mirpur, Dhaka



**THE COLOSSUS RISES OUT OF THE MIGHTY PADMA**

**BSRM**  
building a safer nation