News



Rohingya Muslim refugee Mohammad Karim, 26, center, shows a mobile video of Gu Dar Pyin's massacre to other refugees in Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh, on Jan. 14, 2018. On Sept. 9, a villager from Gu Dar Pyin captured three videos of mass graves that were time-stamped between 10:12 a.m. and 10:14 a.m., when he said soldiers chased him away. When he fled to Bangladesh, Karim removed the memory card from his phone, wrapped it in plastic and tied it to his thigh to hide it from Myanmar police. (AP/Manish Swarup)

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Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh — February 1, 2018
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The faces of the men half-buried in the mass graves had been burned away by acid or blasted by bullets. Noor Kadir finally recognized his friends only by the colors of their shorts.

Kadir and 14 others, all Rohingya Muslims in the Myanmar village of Gu Dar Pyin, had been choosing players for the soccer-like game of chinlone when the gunfire began. They scattered from what sounded like hard rain on a tin roof. By the time the Myanmar military stopped shooting, only Kadir and two teammates were left alive.

Days later, Kadir found six of his friends among the bodies in two graves.

They are among at least five mass graves, all previously unreported, that have been confirmed by The Associated Press through multiple interviews with more than two dozen survivors in Bangladesh refugee camps and through time-stamped cellphone videos. The Myanmar government regularly claims such massacres of the Rohingya never happened and has acknowledged only one mass grave, containing 10 "terrorists" in the village of Inn Din. However, the

AP's reporting shows a systematic slaughter of Rohingya Muslim civilians by the military, with help from Buddhist neighbors — and suggests many more graves hold many more people.

"It was a mixed-up jumble of corpses piled on top of each other," said Kadir, a 24-year-old firewood collector. "I felt such sorrow for them."

The graves are the newest piece of evidence for what looks increasingly like a genocide in Myanmar's western Rakhine state against the Rohingya, a long-persecuted ethnic Muslim minority in the predominantly Buddhist country. The U.N. special envoy on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said Thursday (Feb. 1) that the military's operations against the Rohingya bear "the hallmarks of a genocide."

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said in a statement that the AP report "raises the stakes for the international community to demand accountability from Myanmar."

"It's time for EU and the U.S. to get serious about identifying and leveling targeted sanctions against the Burmese military commanders and soldiers responsible for these rights crimes, and for the U.N. to lead the charge for a global arms embargo, and an end of training and engagement for the Tatmadaw," he said, using the local name for Myanmar's military.

Repeated calls to Myanmar's military communications office went unanswered Wednesday and Thursday. Htun Naing, a local security police officer in Buthidaung township, where the village is located, said he "hasn't heard of such mass graves."

Myanmar has cut off access to Gu Dar Pyin, so it's unclear just how many people died, but satellite images obtained by the AP from DigitalGlobe, along with video of homes reduced to ash, reveal a village that has been wiped out. Community leaders in the refugee camps have compiled a list of 75 dead so far, and villagers estimate the toll could be as high as 400, based on testimony from relatives and the bodies they've seen in the graves and strewn about the area. A large number of the survivors carry scars from bullet wounds, including a 3-year-old boy and his grandmother.

Almost every villager interviewed by the AP saw three large mass graves at Gu Dar Pyin's northern entrance, near the main road, where witnesses say soldiers herded and killed most of the Rohingya. A handful of witnesses confirmed two other big graves near a hillside cemetery, not too far away from a school where more than 100 soldiers were stationed after the massacre. Villagers also saw other, smaller graves scattered around the village.

In the videos of the graves obtained by the AP, dating to 13 days after the killing began, blue-green puddles of acid sludge surround corpses without heads and torsos that jut into the air. Skeletal hands seem to claw at the ground.

THE MASSACRE

Survivors said the soldiers carefully planned the Aug. 27 attack and then deliberately tried to hide what they had done. They came to the slaughter armed not only with rifles, knives, rocket launchers and grenades, but also with shovels to dig pits and acid to burn away faces and hands so the bodies could not be identified. Two days before the attack, villagers say, soldiers were seen buying 12 large containers of acid at a nearby village's market.

The killing began around noon, when more than 200 soldiers swept into Gu Dar Pyin from the direction of a Buddhist village to the south, firing their weapons. The Rohingya who could move fast enough ran toward the north or toward a river in the east, said Mohammad Sha, 37, a shop owner and farmer.

Sha hid in a grove of coconut trees near the river with more than 100 others and watched as the soldiers searched Muslim homes. Dozens of Buddhists from neighboring villages, their faces partly covered with scarves, loaded the possessions they found into about 10 pushcarts. Then the soldiers burned down the homes, shooting anyone who couldn't flee, Sha said.



Rohingya Muslim refugee Mohammad Younus, 25, from the Myanmar village of Gu Dar Pyin, stands on a hill of Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh, on Jan. 14, 2018. When Younus heard explosions from hand grenades and rocket launchers, he ran to the road. He was shot twice while trying to call his family. One of the bullets, still in his hip, can be seen when he pinches the skin. (AP/Manish Swarup)

At the same time, another group of soldiers closed in from the north, encircling Gu Dar Pyin and trapping villagers in a tightening noose.

When Mohammad Younus, 25, heard explosions from hand grenades and rocket launchers, he ran to the road. He was shot twice while trying to call his family. One of the bullets, still in his hip, can be seen when he pinches the skin.

His brother found him crawling on his hands and knees and carried him to some underbrush, where Younus lay for seven hours. At one point, he saw three trucks stop and begin loading dead bodies before heading off toward the cemetery.

Buddhist villagers then moved through Gu Dar Pyin in a sort of mopping-up operation, using knives to cut the throats of the injured, survivors said, and working with soldiers to throw small children and the elderly into the fires.

"People were screaming, crying, pleading for their lives, but the soldiers just shot continuously," said Mohammad Rayes, 23, a schoolteacher who climbed a tree and watched.

Kadir, the chinlone player, was shot twice in the foot but managed to drag himself under a bridge, where he removed one of the bullets himself. Then he watched, half-delirious, for 16 hours as soldiers, police and Buddhist neighbors killed unarmed Rohingya and burned the village.

"I couldn't move," he said. "I thought I was dead. I began to forget why I was there, to forget that all around me people were dying."

Near dawn, three boys creeping toward the bridge from another village to see what had happened heard Kadir's groans and brought him back with them.

For days, Rohingya from the area stole into Gu Dar Pyin and rescued people who'd been left for dead by the soldiers. Thousands of people from the area hid deep in the jungle, stranded without food except for the leaves and trees they tried to eat. More than 20 infants and toddlers died because of the lack of food and water, villagers said.

A day after the shooting began, another group of survivors watched from a distant mountain as Gu Dar Pyin burned, the flames and smoke snaking up into a darkening sky.

THE MASS GRAVES

Six days after the massacre, Kadir risked his life to dodge the dozens of Myanmar soldiers occupying the local school so he could look for his four cousins. That's when he found his teammates half-buried in the mass graves. He also saw four plastic containers that turned out to contain acid.

In the next days and weeks, other villagers braved the soldiers to try to find whatever was left of their loved ones. Dozens of bodies littered the paths and compounds of the wrecked homes; they filled latrine pits. The survivors soon learned that taller, darker green patches of rice shoots in the paddies marked the spots where the dead had fallen.

As monsoon rains pounded the sometimes thin layer of dirt on the graves to mud, more bloated bodies began to rise to the surface.

"There were so many bodies in so many different places," said Mohammad Lalmia, 20, a farmer whose family owned a pond that became the largest of the mass graves. "They couldn't hide all the death."

Eleven days after the attack, Lalmia set out to see if the soldiers had destroyed the Quran in the village mosque. He walked quickly along the edge of the jungle to the mosque, where he found torn pages from the Muslim sacred book scattered about.

As he tried to clean up, someone shouted that the soldiers were coming. He fled through an open window, looking back over his shoulder at about 15 patrolling soldiers.

When he turned back to the path, he stopped abruptly: A human hand stuck out of a cleared patch of earth.

Lalmia counted about 10 bodies on the grave's surface. Although he was worried about the military finding him, he used a six-foot bamboo stick to check the pit's depth. The stick disappeared into the loose soil, which made him think that the grave was deep enough to hold at least another 10 bodies.

"I was shocked to be that near so many bodies I hadn't known about," Lalmia said. He and other villagers also saw another large grave in the area.



Rohingya Muslim men carry a body to a cemetery in Kutupalong refugee camp on Nov. 26, 2017, in Bangladesh. Since late August, more than 620,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar’s Rakhine state into neighboring Bangladesh, where they are living in squalid refugee camps. (AP/Wong Maye-E)

He estimates that soldiers dumped about 80 bodies into his family's pond and about 20 in each of the other four major graves. He said about 150 other bodies were left where they fell.

Three of the big graves were in the north of the village. Two of those pits were about 15 feet wide and 7.5 feet long, villagers said. The pond, which Lalmia had helped dig, measured about nine feet deep and 112 square feet.

Many other smaller graves with three, five, seven, 10 bodies in them were scattered across Gu Dar Pyin. During a short walk, Abdul Noor, an 85-year-old farmer, saw three dead bodies stuffed into what might have been a latrine hole and covered with soil. He saw another two near some banana plants, and three in the corner of a compound.

"I tried to see more, but the stench was overwhelming and the soldiers were still at the school," he said.

Two other men separately said they saw another latrine filled with bodies and covered with a thin layer of soil. They said it contained between five and 10 bodies on the top, and thought there were at least five more corpses below.

After 12 days, Younus went to try to find four family members who'd been killed. He saw people in the graves without hair or skin who he thought had been burned with acid, and dozens of decomposing bodies in the rice fields.

The next day, on Sept. 9, villager Mohammad Karim, 26, captured three videos of mass gravesthat were time-stamped between 10:12 a.m. and 10:14 a.m., when he said soldiers chased him away. When he fled to Bangladesh, Karim removed the memory card from his phone, wrapped it in plastic and tied it to his thigh to hide it from Myanmar police.

In the Bangladesh refugee camps, nearly two dozen other Rohingya from Gu Dar Pyin confirmedthat the videos showed mass graves in the north of the village. They

easily picked out details from a geography they knew intimately, such as the way certain banana plants were positioned near certain rice paddies.

The videos show what appear to be bones wrapped in rotting clothing in a soupy muck. In one, the hands of a headless corpse grasp at the earth; most of the skin seems melted away by acid that has stained the earth blue. Nearby are two bloated legs clad in shorts. A few paces away, the bones of a rib cage emerge from the dirt.

The AP saw several other videos that appeared to show graves in the village, but only Karim's contained the original time stamps. In some cases, villagers said Myanmar soldiers took their phones and memory cards, sometimes at knife and gun point, at the checkpoints they had to pass through on the way to Bangladesh.

Some survivors never found the bodies of their loved ones.

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Rohima Khatu, 45, recounted her story as tears streamed down the face of her 9-year-old daughter, Hurjannat, who sat silently by her mother's side.

Khatu was determined to find her husband, even though women risked not only death but rape if they were caught by the soldiers. Villagers said her husband was shot after he stayed home to protect their 10 cows, five chickens and eight doves, along with their rice stockpiles.

So 15 days after the massacre, she searched for him in the graves at Gu Dar Pyin's northern entrance, trying to identify him by the green lungi and white button-down shirt he had been wearing. Only 10 minutes passed before someone shouted that about 20 soldiers were coming.

"There were dead bodies everywhere, bones and body parts, all decomposing, so I couldn't tell which one was my husband," Khatu said. "I was weeping while I was there. I was crying loudly, 'Where did you go? Where did you go?'"

"I have lost everything."