

# ARAKAN

Photographic documentary by

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Arakan is a stolen paradise that needs to be won back. This is just what a large majority of the Buddhist Rakhine ethnic group thinks regarding this former tropical kingdom. Located in the Bay of Bengal, the Kingdom of Arakan was independent until the 18th century. Conquered by Burmese Empire, then by the British, Arakan is today one of the fourteen provinces of Burma.

Arakan has been situated at the crossroads between Muslims and Buddhists for centuries. But from the start of the colonial period, the British disrupted its fragile ethno-religious balance. Burmese nationalists accused Muslims from Arakan of collaborating with the British colonists and of being disloyal to the Burmese nation. Then, more recently, the military junta's discriminatory policies repressing ethnic minorities have intensified resentment up to bursting point. Fearing increased domination by the Burmese government, the Rakhine minority has been pushed into separatist activity and affirmation of its ethnic identity. For years, the Rakhine people have been trying to reclaim their stolen paradise, ideally independent and Buddhist. Those considered to be foreigners will have to leave, especially the Rohingyas, one of Arakan's Muslim minorities. In 1982, the Rohingya people were excluded from the official listing of the 135 ethnic groups formally recognised as by the Constitution as belonging to the Burmese nation; to underline their exclusion, they are called "Bengals". Rejected by the people of Arakan, stripped of any civil rights by the Burmese government, the Rohingyas live a terrible life as outcasts.

When I first came to Arakan State in 2010, it seemed to me that the Rohingya women and men were dirt; that they represented impurity like in the Indian caste system, as I saw them standing outside the market in Sittwe, forbidden entry.

In 2012 and 2013, a long series of pogroms against Muslims set fire to the whole region. More than 200 people were killed, and around 140 000 were forced to migrate.

Nowadays, Muslim figures and faces have been banished from Sittwe, the capital of Arakan. They stick to the outskirts, spending the day hidden behind the fences of makeshift camps, waiting for their own disappearance.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which answers to Aung San Suu Kyi, requested the United States of America to cease using the term "Rohingya". The winner of the Nobel Peace prize would appear to want to bury this "problem" for good.

These pictures were taken in 2010 and 2015.

