Rural Access Denied or Difficult: Foreign News Journalists from Germany Face Obstacles in Reporting about the "Rohingya" Conflict in Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State

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Introduction

In September 2017, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent Jonathan Head (2017) and 17 other local and foreign journalists were given the chance to visit Maungdaw district in Myanmar, just one district of those on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border from which hundreds of thousands of people had fled in the weeks before. The journalists were confronted by conflicting realities: the refugees reported that soldiers, policemen and civilians had murdered, raped and burned houses down, whereas the Myanmar government alleged that the refugees were terrorists and had burned down their houses themselves. After his journey to Maungdaw, Head considered himself in a position to unmask attempts at manipulation by the government, but the final truth about the mass exodus from Myanmar remained uncertain. Since that unsuccessful press trip, the attitude of Myanmar's government towards foreign journalists has changed, and work has become even more difficult for reporters covering the so-called Rohingya[1] conflict—"the fastest-growing refugee emergency in the world today" (UNHCR, 2017).

This chapter explores how foreign news journalists (particularly from Germany) experience this conflict and what obstacles they face in reporting it. In addition to their own views on their work, it will examine their work practices, the internal structure of their media outlets and the external influences on their work in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The empirical part of this paper is based on findings drawn from qualitative semi-

1 The use of the term Rohingya is controversial. Whereas a group of Muslims in Rakhine State uses this term to name their ethnic group, neither the Myanmar government nor the majority of the population accept the Rohingya as an ethnic group, preferring to call this group of Muslims in Rakhine State "Bengali". This chapter does not aim to advance any position in the discussion on naming. It uses the term Rohingya because it is commonly used and well-known.

structured in-depth interviews (conducted in 2018) with eight foreign news journalists working for German media. After an overview of the conflict and its effect on the media in Myanmar, the results of the interviews will be discussed.

Historical and Political Background of the Rohingya Conflict

It is impossible to deal with the conflict in Rakhine without considering the complex history of multi-ethnic Myanmar. Before the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), politics in the region that is today known as Myanmar were completely different. Although it is unlikely that all tribes lived peacefully next to each other, as Myanmar history books oftentimes aver, there was still a stable system of rule and power. Numerous authorities ruled the area in a complex system of relations, obedience and patronage (Grein, 2015; Zöllner, 2015).

After their defeat by Great Britain in three wars, the precolonial dynasties were supplanted not only by new rulers but also by a totally new understanding of politics, states and nations (Grein, 2015). The area between the Andaman Sea and the Himalayas became part of the British Raj from 1886 until it was finally separated from India and given its own administration in 1937 (Grein, 2015), at which time the British defined the border that separated the Indian provinces from Burma and today separates Myanmar from Bangladesh. This demarcation of the border can be seen as one of the main reasons for the long-lasting conflict in Rakhine State (Zöllner, 2015). Furthermore, the British administration contributed to a schism in Myanmar society because during colonial rule several positions were specifically assigned to members of distinct ethnic communities. This maximised the peoples' perception of ethnic differences and their political significance and prevented the growth of a united Myanmar society (Grein, 2015; Kipgen, 2016).

When Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948, it was by no means a united nation. During the following tumultuous decades, ethnic tensions led to several conflicts. The colonial structures left their mark, as did events in World War II, when the Burma Independence Army (BIA) under General Aung San's command fought for the Japanese whilst ethnic minorities from the border regions kept their loyalty with the British (Grein, 2015).

In 1947, some ethnic groups were pushed by the British to negotiate the Panglong Agreement (Kipgen, 2016). Actually, the British were surprised by the willingness of ethnic groups to accept the agreement (Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Helbardt, 2015). The Bamar majority led by Aung San promised the minority groups several rights and concessions. However, the fact that the agreement was never completely implemented led to further mistrust (Kipgen, 2016). There have been several ethnic conflicts in Myanmar in the past decades, and every conflict has its own origins. The conflict in the Rakhine State centres on the following questions: Are the Rohingya an ethnic group? If so, are they entitled to be designated 'thaingyintha' (native ethnic race) and are they entitled to Myanmar citizenship?

Answers to these questions are widely contested. Leider (2014) tracked the history of Muslims in Rakhine back to the 15th century. At this time, the kingdom of Arakan

and its capital Mrauk U were strongly influenced by the neighbouring sultanate in southern Bengal. The kingdom was home to many Muslims in all parts of the society, even at the Buddhist palace. From the late 17th century the Burmese expanded their rule and in 1785 they conquered the kingdom of Arakan, extinguished the former elites and brought some Bengal Brahmans back with them to Burma. When Francis Hamilton came to Burma in 1795, he was the first one to write down the term 'Rooinga' as a designation of origin, from the word which Muslims from Arakan used in their own accent to describe where they came from. Further mentions of Muslims in Rakhine are from the early 19th century, at which time an estimated ten to 15 per cent of the population in the region were Muslim (Leider, 2014). However, there is no historical evidence that this community perceived itself as an ethnically independent Muslim people that significantly influenced the history of the country, as some of the Rohingya like to state nowadays (Leider, 2014).

There are very few reliable sources about the population in Rakhine during the colonial era; nevertheless, there is evidence that a large number of Muslims migrated from Bengal to Burma, and in 1911 more than one third of Rakhine's population were Muslims. In 1942 many Indian immigrants fleeing from the Japanese entered Rakhine, where the first violent clashes between Muslims and Buddhists took place. For the next two years, Rakhine was virtually divided into a Muslim north and a Buddhist south. After World War II, the Muslim population of Rakhine hoped that their home would become part of Pakistan, and when this did not happen, a militant organisation aiming at autonomy for Rakhine was founded under the name 'Mujahids'. The 'Mujahids' were outmanoeuvred in 1954 and finally laid down arms in 1961. During their resistance, they rediscovered the name Rohingya, using it for the first time in 1951 to name an ethnic group living in Northern Rakhine. Since the 1960s, several militant groups have been founded to combat the military government using arms and violence (Leider, 2014).

Many scholars place responsibility for the repression of the Rohingya on the 1982 Citizenship Law. The law was passed after a national census and violent suppression of minority resistance forced about 200,000 Muslims to flee the country (Southwick, 2014). This law, which groups the Myanmar population into four categories (Kyaw, 2017), is often cited as the main reason for the desperate situation the Rohingya face today because it denied them citizenship (Crouch, 2016). But a closer look at the text of the Burma Citizenship Law from October 15th, 1982 shows that, since neither the Rohingya nor the other commonly cited 135 ethnic groups[2] are named, the law does not directly deny the Rohingya citizenship. The more likely reason for the statelessness of the Rohingya is the fact that this law was never properly implemented. Thus, the statelessness has to be understood de facto, not de jure (Cheesman, 2017; Kyaw, 2017).

Today, the conflict is mainly a dispute between two opinions. The Rohingya, whom Leider (2014: 66) refers to as a "political movement"[3], insist they are an ethnic group that has been living in Rakhine for millennia and has shaped the history and culture

2 The origin of this list, which was published by the military junta in 1990, is still unknown. Different population censuses in the 20th century identified very different numbers of ethnic groups. The lists range from 135 to 160 groups (Cheesman, 2017).

3 All non-English quotes have been translated by the authors.

of the country. They disregard the wave of Muslim immigration into the region during the colonial era. In contrast, the Buddhist majority denies the long history of Islam in Rakhine and is convinced that all Muslim immigration started during the colonial era, considering most of it to be illegal.

A Timeline of the Recent Conflict

Although the outburst of violence in 2012 turned the eyes of the world on Rakhine, the region was far from calm and peaceful during the previous decades. As depicted by Kyaw (2017) and Cheesman (2017), the persecution of the Rohingya since Burma's independence is a story of displacement and resettlement, with the two phases of exodus and return occurring twice. The first exodus, which began in 1978, was triggered by a brutal military operation ahead of a national census which aimed to re-establish the residence status of people in Burma. Between 156,000 to 250,000 people fled to Bangladesh (Cheesman, 2017; Kyaw, 2017). Shortly after, the Burmese government agreed to take the Muslims back from Bangladesh, and by the end of December 1979 almost 187,000 refugees had been brought back (Kyaw, 2017).

In 1988, the military took power in Burma for the second time[4] and a wave of militarisation followed, causing human rights violations and abuses, especially in the border regions. This forced Muslims to flee the country again, and by May 1992 Bangladesh had registered approximately 263,000 refugees from Burma (Kyaw, 2017). Myanmar and Bangladesh then agreed on a second resettlement, and between 1992 and 2005 hundreds of thousands of people were compelled to return to Myanmar in a resettlement that was internationally criticised as a forced relocation. However, in 2005 Myanmar did not renew the agreement, and several thousand Rohingya stayed in Bangladesh, living in refugee camps or as unregistered illegal immigrants (Kyaw, 2017).

The second resettlement phase was still ongoing when Myanmar entered on a new political age. Although the military regime did not accept its results, the 1990 election became the first milestone on Myanmar's path towards democracy by proving the clear support of the people for the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, who in 1991 became a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. In 2008, the military junta passed a new constitution, after which new elections brought in a civil government led by former general U Thein Sein. In a by-election in 2012 the NLD won a landslide victory, and in 2015 achieved an absolute majority in the general election, after which the office of State Counsellor, as de facto leader, was created for Aung San Suu Kyi—who, as the widow and mother of foreigners (with British citizenship), is not eligible for the presidency according to the 2008 constitution.

As democracy in Myanmar developed, it brought economic liberalisation and internationalisation and raised hopes within the international community of peace in

4 There was a successful coup in 1962, which was followed by twelve years of military government. In 1974, the military junta passed a new constitution and Ne Win, who until then had ruled as a general, became head of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. After the unrest in 1988, he resigned (**?**, 2015).

Myanmar. However, it did not bring peace to Rakhine. In 2012, the Rohingya conflict attracted the attention of the international media (Leider, 2014). This time, attention was not triggered by a military operation, but by a cruel crime committed by Rohingya.

In July 2012, in the village Kyaw Ne Maw three men raped and murdered a 28-year-old woman. One of the three men later committed suicide and two were arrested and sentenced to death, but this was not the end of the story. When the public learned that the victim was a Rakhine Buddhist whilst the murderers were Rohingya, hundreds of Rakhine Buddhists vowed revenge and beat ten Muslim bus passengers to death. Violence then spread to several townships in Rakhine, in which both Muslims and Buddhists burned houses and killed each other. The security forces did not interfere, some even joined the Buddhists. In October 2012, many Rohingya settlements were attacked in what human rights organisations identified as planned and well-coordinated attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In the clashes between June and October 2012, around 200 people died and 150,000 more lost their homes. An observation committee set up by the Myanmar government in August 2012 to analyse the situation in Rakhine and find solutions included not one Rohingya. Nevertheless, the report called for compliance with human rights and international treaties and recommended that giving Myanmar citizenship to the Rohingya be considered. Furthermore, it demanded a more transparent handling of information and news from Rakhine (Southwick, 2014).

Towards the end of 2012, tens of thousands of Rohingya were still fleeing to refugee camps within Myanmar or outside the country. When the government of neighbouring Bangladesh decided to close its borders, thousands of refugees tried to reach southern neighbours by crossing the ocean by boat. To keep them out of the country, Thailand gave them enough food, water and fuel so that they could travel to Malaysia. By the end of 2012, an estimated 13,000 Rohingya reached Malaysia and another 6,000 were stranded in Thailand. Several hundred probably did not survive the dangerous crossing (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Throughout 2013, the riots still did not cease. This second year of fighting forced a further 35,000 Rohingya to leave the country by boat, and at least 785 drowned (Southwick, 2014).

In the following years, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)[5] attacked several police stations and military outposts. The country's response was oppressive and in 2016 unreasonably violent. The last and until now most serious outburst of violence started in summer 2017, again triggered by an ARSA attack. On August 25th, 2017, eleven people were killed when ARSA militants attacked 30 police stations and one military post. The revenge of the military, border police and civilians targeted not only ARSA fighters, but entire Rohingya villages. Interviews with refugees and satellite images helped human rights organisations to understand what happened in Rakhine during those days. Many interviewees reported that military personnel surrounded their villages, shot down

5 The ARSA was founded under a different name after the outburst of violence in 2012. Members call it an ethno-nationalist movement. It had started as a small underground organisation with a few hundred followers, but in 2016 and 2017 it represented thousands of Rohingya, who supported the trained fighters with their own means. It is contested whether or not the ARSA also gets international support (Amnesty International, 2017).

people who tried to run away, and at the end looted huts in which families and the elderly or diseased were hiding. In some places, there were also reports of mass rapes and soldiers killing toddlers (Amnesty International, 2017; Bouckaert, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2013).

According to estimates given by Doctors Without Borders, between August 25th and September 24th, 2017 at least 6,700 people died due to violence; 730 of them were children under the age of five. The main causes of violence-related deaths were gunshots, burning, beating to death and sexual violence (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2018). Furthermore, at least 59 men, women and children were killed when ARSA fighters and militant Rohingya attacked Hindu communities, and 46 Hindus went missing (Amnesty International, 2018).

Myanmar's government and army refute all accusations against the security forces and only accept the results of their own investigations. However, the role of (some sections of) the Myanmar military in the Rohingya conflict remains highly controversial. By 2018, only the mass execution of ten Rohingya villagers by soldiers, policemen and civilians had been conceded and penalised, after Reuters journalists presented undeniable evidence (Han, 2018). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), approximately 900,000 refugees live in camps in Bangladesh, of whom approximately 700,000 (BBC, 2018) arrived after August 25th, 2017, and people are still arriving.

Since the end of 2017, Myanmar and Bangladesh have been negotiating a resettlement of refugees to Myanmar. In April 2018, the BBC (2018) published an article on unconfirmed reporting by the Myanmar government that the first Rohingya refugee family had returned to Myanmar in full view of the world's cameras. After a visit by the United Nations (UN) Security Council representatives, the Myanmar government signed an agreement on the voluntary return of Rohingya. This agreement was concluded by UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), but does not seem to be really practicable. Experts consider the camps designated as the Rohingya's future homes in Myanmar poorly prepared (Siddiqui, 2018). Furthermore, new clashes in Rakhine State between ARSA and the national military displaced more people from different ethnicities in Rakhine and neighbouring Chin State during the first quarter of 2019 (Gerin et al., 2019), and most of the Rohingya involved hesitate to follow Myanmar's calls to return. They are waiting for the promise to provide them with citizenship, freedom of movement and security (Siddiqui, 2018). Thinking about their homeland fills many Rohingya with despair.

In the recent Rohingya conflict, several international human rights activists have accused Myanmar of alleged 'ethnic cleansings', 'systematic human rights abuses', 'crimes against humanity', 'war crimes' or even 'genocide'. The country has always refuted those accusations. In this context, international human rights activists also have demanded that Myanmar's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, be divested of her Nobel Peace Prize.

In November 2019, The Gambia, a predominantly Muslim west African state and a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), filed a "Rohingya genocide case against Myanmar" at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in the Netherlands (Bowcott, 2019a).

In December 2019, after a three-day "ICJ hearing into accusations of genocide" and "[i]n a defiant closing address to the UN's highest tribunal, Aung San Suu Kyi […] pleaded with its 17 international judges to dismiss allegations that Myanmar has committed genocide and urged them instead to allow the country's court martial system to deal with any human rights abuses". According to "an American lawyer speaking for [T]he Gambia" an earlier UN (fact-finding) mission had "warned about genocide and recommended criminal charges" (Bowcott, 2019b).

In January 2020, the ICJ ordered Myanmar "to prevent genocidal violence against its Rohingya Muslim minority and preserve any evidence of past crimes". This court's "unanimous decision" was reported to be "momentous": the ICJ "imposed emergency 'provisional measures' on the country – intervening in its domestic affairs by instructing the government of Aung San Suu Kyi to respect the requirements of the 1948 genocide convention" and said "that there was prima facie evidence of breaches of the convention". Moreover: "The ICJ's orders are binding on Myanmar and create legal obligations that must be enforced. The provisional measures imposed by the court require the government to prevent genocidal acts, ensure military and police forces do not commit genocide, preserve evidence of genocidal acts and report back on its compliance […]. The orders are automatically sent to the UN security council, where Myanmar's response will be assessed." (Bowcott and Ratcliffe, 2020)

Effects of the Conflict on Media Freedom in Myanmar

The Rohingya conflict not only attracted the international media's attention, it also directly affected the situation of media in Myanmar. When democratisation started in the country, media freedom improved and the censorship enforced since 1962 was lifted in August 2012. In 2013, the government allowed private daily newspapers that had been banned for 50 years to be published. Mass media of all political stripes, and even popular exile media such as The Irrawaddy or Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), were able to open offices in Myanmar (Amthor, 2015). Although it can be argued that the state is still able to put media under pressure and encourages self-censorship (Amthor, 2015; Khine, 2015), Myanmar improved its position in the Reporters Without Borders' (2018) World Press Freedom Index significantly between 2013 and 2017. However, in 2018 Myanmar fell again slightly in the ranking.

Reporting on ethnic conflicts in Shan State and Kachin State and especially on the conflict in Rakhine has become more and more difficult for journalists. Even in 2012, the conflict in Rakhine put the new media freedom to the test. The riots after the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman were not fuelled just by the dynamics of social media, information published by traditional media also led to overreactions in the already tense situation in Rakhine (Ismaïl, 2012). Journalists working for international media reported pressure from Myanmar officials as well as civilians. In several open protests, media outlets such as the BBC or DVB were accused of deliberately reporting biased and false stories. DVB was even threatened in an online smear campaign and was attacked by hackers (Ismaïl, 2012).

In 2013, approximately 200 enraged Buddhists attacked the car of a UN human rights expert on his visit to Meiktila. During this time, several journalists were also threatened and hindered in their work (Southwick, 2014). In 2015, as elections approached, the number of detentions of media workers increased; the closer the elections came, the more serious the situation became. Amnesty International (2015) reported several detentions, massive self-censorship and a climate of fear. In an atmosphere where Buddhist extremism, nationalism, and the persecution of Rohingya frequently made headlines, journalists were not able to cover the conflict without endangering themselves or their informants.

Even before the ARSA attacks in 2017 it was very difficult for journalists to get admission to enter Rakhine State (Bodewein and Diettrich, 2017; Head, 2017), but after the attacks it became impossible. When the riots escalated and international media reported Buddhist mobs, plundering Buddhist monks, brutal military and a passive government, Aung San Suu Kyi (cit. in Safi, 2017) gave her first public statement on the issue; she was reported as blaming the media for spreading "a huge iceberg of misinformation". Clear governmental information and a strategic communication policy has been seriously lacking so far. However, the government invited selected national and international journalists on a trip to Rakhine to show them the extent of destruction and the fear of Rakhine people of alleged Muslim 'terrorists'. In fact, a different scenario unfolded. By accident, the group of journalists passed a burning Rohingya village and interviewed those who had set fire to it, only to find they were Rakhine Buddhists (Head, 2017). Since this incident, investigation of international media in the conflict area is virtually impossible.

Two journalists from Myanmar became internationally known because they were seriously prevented from doing their job for international media. Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, two local Reuters journalists, were part of a team of investigative reporters covering a massacre in the coastal community Inn Din. Together with two other colleagues, they covered the murder of ten Rohingya, took pictures as evidence and interviewed witnesses and culprits (Lone et al., 2018). But before the article was published, police arrested the two Reuters reporters in December 2017. On September 3rd, 2018 they were found guilty of breaching the colonial-era Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years in prison (Chalmers, 2018). However, they were released on May 7th, 2019 after having received a presidential pardon, after, in April 2019, "[t]he pair were awarded a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting" (Lewis, 2019).

Besides political restrictions and logistical problems, the strong polarisation in the Rohingya conflict is an obstacle for journalistic investigation (Brooten and Verbruggen, 2017). There are several aspects that influence how journalists tell the story of the conflict; for example, access to certain regions, interviewees and informants, or the use of translators and interpreters. In this emotionally loaded conflict, ethnic descent can cause bias.

Foreign News Journalists (from Germany) in the Conflict

In recent years, the circumstances under which foreign news journalists work in Myanmar have changed dramatically. To offer an overview, this chapter presents the results of explorative qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight foreign news journalists working for German media. All interviewees covered the conflict during recent years. They live in South East Asia, South Asia or Germany and work for print and online media, news wires, radio and/or TV. The interviews were conducted in the first half of 2018 via video or audio telecommunication. Table 1 provides details of the interviewees (made anonymous).

Table 1: List of interviewees (made anonymous)

No. of the respondent	Media affiliation and position	Date of interview
R1	South East Asia correspondent (TV)	April 3, 2018
R2	Freelance correspondent (news wires, print and online media)	April 14, 2018
R3	South Asia correspondent (radio)	April 16, 2018
R4	South and South East Asia correspondent (print media)	April 17, 2018
R5	Reporter and 'parachute' correspondent (print media)	June 13, 2018
R6	South East Asia correspondent (TV)	June 15, 2018
R7	Freelance correspondent (print media)	June 18, 2018
R8	South East Asia correspondent (radio)	June 27, 2018

Source: table compiled by the authors

The Influence of Internal Structures on Working Practices

With regard to collaboration with their editorial offices in Germany, the respondents reported a strong fluctuation in interest in the Rohingya. One interviewee dubbed the Rohingya conflict a topic "that has boiled over very quickly" (R8). Another described "waves" (R2) of ups and downs in reporting the topic. Following the events of August 2017, newsrooms of all media genres were highly interested in the topic, but previously there had been only a few flashes of international media interest. Two respondents also noticed that their editorial offices seemed to follow other national and international media in their agenda setting (R2; R7).

Interviewees explained that the growing interest of international media in the Rohingya case had different causes: according to some, the reason for the lack of interest in the conflict before 2017 may have been the huge geographical and cultural distance between Germany and Myanmar (R1; R8). Some respondents mentioned the following possible causes for the suddenly growing interest: surprise about the cruelty of a Buddhist majority persecuting a Muslim minority (R3); the extreme extent of the mass exodus

(R4; R7); and the prominence of Aung San Suu Kyi as an "icon of democracy" (R1; R7). In the time before August 2017, journalists witnessed the strong competition that this topic faced from other national and international events as well as from news within their own area of coverage (R1; R2; R4). Foreign news journalists covering the Rohingya conflict particularly considered the huge regional size of some areas of coverage to be a tremendous challenge. A public service TV correspondent (R1) reported difficulties in reacting promptly to unexpected happenings in Myanmar while being, for instance, on a film tour in Australia or Indonesia. In such a situation, editors in Germany would have to deal with those events on a simple news level, without in-depth background information supplied on-site. The huge area of coverage, which included all South East Asian countries plus sometimes parts of South Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Oceania, could lead to difficulties for the on-site correspondents.

In the case of the Rohingya conflict, some interviewees faced other challenges arising from internal structure. The border between Myanmar and Bangladesh is not only the location of the conflict, but it also separates South East Asia from South Asia, and thus is the border between two areas of coverage for several media. Although Myanmar was not in the area of coverage for which he was responsible, one of the respondents from Bangladesh reported on the conflict as an exception (R6). Another respondent felt dissatisfied with the fact that he was not able to travel to Myanmar at the right time in order to collect first-hand information himself (R1). Two journalists—one working in Myanmar, the other one in Bangladesh—experienced an unforeseen cooperation between the radio stations they worked for, to produce a joint feature containing information from both sides of the border (R3; R8).

Two of the respondents investigated in Bangladesh only, whilst one did so exclusively in Myanmar. The other five journalists investigated the Rohingya conflict while based in several countries over the last few years: in Myanmar and Bangladesh, but also from Thailand and Malaysia.

External Factors that Complicate Reporting

In addition to the obstacles due to internal structure, the respondents also reported external factors that hindered their work. They named problems typical for the area of coverage of South Asia and South East Asia, such as time difference to Germany (R1), travel time and distances (R1; R5), travel costs (R2; R7), visa difficulties and bureaucratic barriers (R1; R3) and poor infrastructure (R3). With regard to covering the Rohingya conflict, they stated that it was difficult to plan research trips in advance and to get an overview of the situation on-site (R6; R7). One TV journalist realised that his on-site presence changed the situation of his informants and thus also the reality he wanted to record, because people he filmed were treated differently in front of a camera (R6).

A team of TV and radio journalists even experienced physical threats during their work in Myanmar (R8). They were attacked by a mob while interviewing people and eventually needed to take shelter in their hotel. One interviewee mentioned feeling severe emotional strain as a consequence of the impressions received in camps in Bangladesh (R3).

Other obstacles arose from working together with local stringers. Six respondents chose local stringers they knew already from previous reporting projects, and two contacted local stringers recommended by colleagues. The most important criteria for choosing a local stringer were knowledge of the region, local language skills and an existing network of informants in the area. Some interviewees chose to work with local journalists or members of human rights organisations (R3; R7). One journalist worked as a 'parachute' correspondent and was invited to Bangladesh by a non-governmental organisation, whose international workers provided stringer services, such as trip organisation, on-site support, or recruiting interpreters (R5). Stringers working with the other respondents came from Myanmar or Bangladesh, and in two cases they were former Rohingya refugees themselves.

Most of the respondents did not fear that the ethnicity of their local stringer influenced the reporting, and several emphasised their trust in the local stringers (R1; R2; R8). Only one journalist mentioned difficulties in verifying information while working together. He explained that double-checking information was impossible for economic reasons (R6). One of the respondents even had to rely completely on information provided by his local stringers because it was impossible for him to travel to Myanmar in late summer 2017 (R7). Two interviewees expressed their concern at endangering their local stringers. They admitted that they postponed some investigation trips and resorted to using information from social media to protect their local stringers (R2; R8).

Despite their deep trust in local stringers and interpreters, six out of eight interviewees stated that language barriers impeded their work. One journalist compared the transfer of information from the Rohingya language to Bengali to English and then to German without the help of professional interpreters to a game of "Chinese whispers" (R3). This journalist remarked that information can get lost in translation and the process is also very time-consuming (R3). Furthermore, several journalists complained that some interpreters tended to summarise and explain statements given by informants instead of translating literally (R3; R5; R6; R8). Several journalists admitted to having these language difficulties in most countries of their area of coverage (e.g. R3).

Irrespective of the language barrier, journalists experienced very different levels of access to information and interviewees in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some respondents stated that, after the opening of the country, Myanmar would accept and support journalists in their work (R1; R4). Some interviewees described Bangladesh as more difficult for news coverage in general (R3; R4). According to several respondents, prior to the escalation of the Rohingya conflict in 2017 journalists were allowed to visit at least some internal refugee camps in Sittwe and other areas of Rakhine, but from the summer of 2017, Myanmar closed Rakhine State completely for journalists and started to restrict their movements more and more; obviously, it became more difficult for journalists to get a visa to enter Myanmar in general, even when they did not aim to cover the Rohingya conflict (R2; R4). According to some respondents, the government would offer only very limited information about the Rohingya topic; therefore, some respondents decided to continue their investigations and reports from neighbouring Bangladesh (R2; R4; R6).

In Bangladesh, some interviewees experienced an exceptional freedom of reporting. They got almost unlimited access to refugee camps and were not affected by any con-

trol or censorship (R3; R5; R6), though for some months access to the direct border area changed and was partly restricted (R3; R5; R6). They also reported that contacting politicians in Bangladesh was easy for journalists. However, one South Asia correspondent experienced a change in behaviour: whereas she always used to have problems getting statements by politicians in Bangladesh because of complex hierarchies, this changed within the Rohingya context. Politicians who came to the refugee camps to observe the situation or to make donations were happy to be interviewed and reported by journalists (R3). Some of the interviewed journalists assumed that the reason for this sudden openness by Bangladesh is obvious: in the Rohingya conflict, many international media portrayed Bangladesh predominantly in a positive way so that the country did not have to fear negative headlines. Furthermore, Bangladesh depended significantly on international support (R3; R6).

Some respondents assessed their working conditions in Bangladesh as free to find and talk to their informants directly and spontaneously (R1; R5; R6). In addition, they named several other sources, especially local and international media reports, humanitarian aid and human rights organisations and UN bodies. Sometimes, they also referred to official statements issued by the Myanmar government. Only one interviewee stated using news wires intensely because, by contrast, social media were not reliable or important sources (R3).

The Difficulty in Finding Reliable Information

Almost all respondents had doubts about the credibility of the information they got, "because in such conflicts, you cannot trust any of the parties involved" (R1). One respondent did not criticise anyone for purposefully releasing propaganda or even lies to journalists but stated that uncertainty and rumours might lead to unintended false statements by the refugees (R6). Another interviewee stated that in refugee camps in Sittwe and in Bangladesh many traumatised victims gave journalists information that might not be trustworthy (R4). Some respondents doubted the reliability of information issued by Myanmar's government. One respondent stated bluntly that "the government lies" (R2) and another one added that "government members as well as the military or Buddhist monks tell you, to be honest, a pack of lies" (R8).

In order to check information coming from refugee camps in the best way possible, some journalists used the following technique: first, they asked for detailed information; secondly, they asked whether or not their informants had eye-witnessed what they described; and thirdly, they compared the statements of several persons with each other (R3; R4; R5; R6). One respondent checked the plausibility of information with the help of international aid workers who knew Northern Rakhine State well and another interviewee checked information with the help of her local stringer and other colleagues (R5; R2).

One respondent mentioned problems in talking with some female refugees. Probably because they were embarrassed about what had happened to them, some women used paraphrases to describe that they had been raped. This way of talking was interpreted by this respondent as evidence that the women were probably not lying (R3).

Some respondents agreed that, despite journalistic techniques and knowledge of human nature, it was impossible to finally check all the information they got. Hence, they trusted their intuition (R5; R6; R8) or considered the suffering they eye-witnessed onsite and the behaviour of people they met in Myanmar (R2; R3; R8).

Three respondents insisted on the importance of telling the audience that their news stories about the Rohingya conflict could not be checked one hundred per cent and that quotes should be understood as the personal opinion of their informants (R1; R3; R6). One interviewee added that the audience should also be informed about the difficult situation for journalists in Myanmar (R3).

Doubtful Neutrality in Reporting the Conflict

The difficulties in gathering and checking information about the Rohingya conflict led to the question whether or not a balanced news coverage was possible at all, and the majority of the respondents shared doubts about neutrality in reporting the Rohingya conflict. Two correspondents conceded that the Rohingya's situation triggered "strong compassion" (R1) and that it was not easy to be unbiased when dealing with Myanmar's government and in an allegedly hostile environment for journalists (R2). Several journalists admitted that international news reporting about the Rohingya conflict was not one hundred per cent balanced and unbiased. They conceded a "Muslim bias" (R2), "hardening attitudes in the different parties" (R4) and one-sided reporting by some international journalists (R6). Nevertheless, all respondents proved to have extensive knowledge and sophisticated opinions about the conflict. Some of them questioned neutrality against the backdrop of working conditions under which journalistic investigation was basically limited to refugee camps, and interviews were conducted predominantly with Rohingya, not with other people affected by the conflict who were living in Rakhine State (R2; R3; R6). One respondent noted that the common use of the term Rohingya in international media already showed there was bias in reporting the conflict (R4).

Some respondents said the main reason for the one-sided reporting was that restrictions hindered journalists from investigating in Myanmar and particularly in Rakhine State (R2; R3; R4). Furthermore, the information provided by Myanmar's government and military was allegedly untrustworthy, and additionally the fear of those Burmese who refused mainstream opinion and hatred towards the Rohingya made it difficult to interview people who were neither pro nor contra the Rohingya (R2). Some respondents considered that the difference between what they saw in refugee camps and what they heard in conversations with radical Buddhist monks in Myanmar was evidence of people accepting unbalanced and biased news reporting (R3; R8).

The respondents had differing views on the possible influence of their reports on the conflict. On the one hand, interviewees linked reports by international media with international political pressure on Myanmar's government and military (R5; R6), with Aung San Suu Kyi's decision to speak out on the conflict (R3; R8) and also with the first official and juridical investigations of a few crimes that were uncovered by journalists (R1; R2). One respondent added the episode in which Myanmar's government told what he dubbed a "giant PR story" (R8) about the return of a single Rohingya family to Myan-

mar. On the other hand, one interviewee saw no notable effects at all of international media reporting on Aung San Suu Kyi's policies or the military's attitude (R7).

Some respondents acknowledged that international news coverage even caused resistance to and criticism of the international political pressure on the country and possibly led to a "circle-the-wagons mentality" (R8) within Myanmar's society. Nevertheless, they did not hold the reporting journalists responsible for those dynamics (R2; R4). Some interviewees wished that media could have a stronger influence on the conflict and hoped it might lead to an "attitude change in Myanmar" (R1).

Moreover, some respondents would welcome media reports on the Rohingya conflict having a stronger influence on their German audience. They hoped to attract the audience's attention to the conflict and motivate recipients to make donations to humanitarian organisations active in Rakhine State and refugee camps, or even to push the German federal government to intervene politically (R2; R4; R6). They were convinced that public awareness of the conflict and a deeper understanding of its complexity have arisen since they intensified the news coverage (R1; R3; R4). However, according to some interviewees, readers' letters to the editor or online comments oftentimes did not express serious concern about the conflict, but mistakenly equated the conflict with the situation of refugees in Europe or even with jihadism (R2; R5). Some respondents remembered readers' comments which were Islamophobic or criticised journalists for being too credulous (R2; R3).

Conclusions and Perspectives

To conclude, the doubts shared by many respondents about neutrality in reporting the Rohingya conflict indicate a serious dilemma in international media reporting; on the one hand, the respondents tried to adhere to the scheme of balanced and unbiased reporting, but on the other hand, they admitted there was an inevitable imbalance and even accepted, to a certain degree, a lack of neutrality due to this conflict's complexity. Foreign correspondents from other countries must face the same or similar problems as their colleagues from Germany.

Ethnicity has been an important factor in social cohesion in Myanmar society, ever since Myanmar's borders were defined by the colonial power. Especially in the rural border areas such as Northern Rakhine State, ethnicity has been a source of severe conflict. In reporting about ethnic minorities or conflicts, foreign correspondents—even those who live in Myanmar—still depend on the support of local stringers and interpreters. This is even more true for those foreign correspondents based not in Myanmar but in neighbouring Thailand, India or Singapore. The barriers of culture and language cannot be denied and cannot be overcome without the help of local stringers and interpreters who play an important role in the system of international reporting.

According to the journalists interviewed, the climax of violence in 2017 can be also seen as a turning point in the situation of media workers. Since August 2017, they have focussed on reporting the mass exodus of the Rohingya to Bangladesh. In parallel with this exodus, the work of journalists has become more and more restricted by Myanmar's government, as respondents stated. Meanwhile, the attitude of parts of the population

of Myanmar towards international reporters also seems to have dramatically changed and, as do workers for human rights or aid organisations, many of them face concrete problems, some even physical threats. Furthermore, access to rural Northern Rakhine State, which had always difficult for political and infrastructural reasons, has become nearly impossible.

The conflict that has been unsettling Rakhine State for decades obviously involves many different truths and the question remains as to who holds the power to define the truth? The Rohingya conflict is a long-lasting dispute between Myanmar's central government and a Muslim population group fighting for recognition as an ethnic minority. Probably, this conflict will not and cannot be solved in the near future. Due to the climax of violence and the mass exodus in 2017, this conflict has developed extreme dynamics that mean it is impossible to predict when or why the conflict will be the focus of international media again. But thus far in the field of communications, this conflict can be considered a textbook example of how limiting the freedom of the media can lead to unbalanced and biased reporting which, in turn, might lead to positions hardening even further.

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