



# Malaysia Police: Rohingya Extortion Syndicate Funds Myanmar Rebels

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Malaysian police counter-terrorist chief Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay speaks with journalists at Royal Malaysia Police headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, in file photo.

AFP

A Rohingya-based extortion syndicate in Malaysia has been channeling thousands of dollars to fund Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army militants in Myanmar, a senior Malaysian police official said Monday.

Authorities have determined that about 80,000 ringgit (U.S. \$19,450) was channeled to ARSA in 2019 through an intricate money transfer system called “hawala,” Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, who heads the Malaysian police’s counterterrorist wing, told BenarNews, an RFA-affiliated online news service.

“The 80,000 ringgit was only this year alone. We believe the amount was bigger,” he said, adding that police also suspected that the syndicate was adept in covering its tracks.

Ayob said that money was obtained from Rohingya living in Malaysia.

“They gave their money out of fear. Some believe in ARSA’s fight, some don’t but had to give because they were threatened,” Ayob said.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity because of fear, a 24-year-old Rohingya and his friend in Kuala Lumpur told BenarNews they knew about the extortion scheme.

“We are in the same situation,” he said. “It is hard to find money here and that all was burned up, having to pay them,” the 24-year-old said, adding that the extortionist claimed to know where his family was in Bangladesh and threatened to attack them if not paid.

“They asked for a certain amount, but they take whatever they can get. We don’t know if their threat is real, but we are scared,” the Rohingya said.

Described as “money transfer without money movement” by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and Interpol, Hawala uses an intricate network of trusted agents and secret passwords to transfer money through a proxy. The ancient banking system that originated in the Middle East and South Asia leaves little or no trace as it relies on trust and the extensive use of connections such as family relationships.

Founded in 2012 as Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement) to fight for “the liberation of persecuted Rohingya,” ARSA was declared as a terrorist group by Myanmar authorities on Aug. 25, 2017.

In its official Twitter account, ARSA claims that it “only legitimately and objectively operates as an ethno-nationalist movement within its ancestral homeland of Arakan in Burma” and reassures that its activities will not transcend beyond its country.

Authorities in Myanmar blamed ARSA rebels for launching deadly raids on police and military outposts in Rakhine state that provoked a brutal crackdown on the country’s stateless Rohingya Muslim minority in August 2017, forcing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh and other countries.

About 95,000 Rohingya had settled in Malaysia as of the end of June, according to figures from the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

Zafar Ahmad of the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia said he welcomed efforts by Malaysian authorities to enforce the law, but cautioned them against linking the Rohingya community with militant groups such as ARSA and the Islamic State.

“The Myanmar government has been using terrorism as a basis to exterminate the Rohingya in Arakan, and for an Islamic country like Malaysia to directly link Rohingya

to these terror groups is like giving bullets to Myanmar to justify their actions,” Zafar told BenarNews.

He said that he did not know of any Rohingya in Malaysia who were victimized by such schemes, but heard about them on social media and in the news.

“I met with the police special branch three or four times about this and I have said the same thing to them – what they heard is also what I heard, all through other people,” he said.

It is possible that there are Rohingya who were duped into the cause that they do not necessarily understand, he said.

“Many of us are deprived of basic education. Perhaps someone told them that this is jihad and you get to go to the highest heaven, but that does not mean they are ARSA,” Zafar said.

### **Syndicate expansion**

The extortion syndicate apparently started in the northern state of Kedah along the Thai border and expanded to other states including Penang and Perak, according to Ayob.

In June, counter-terrorism police arrested two Rohingya men in Kedah who they said supported ARSA. One of the men allegedly posted a video online calling for the assassination of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Ayob said one of the men allegedly belonged to the extortion syndicate and is one four Rohingya arrested this year for alleged involvement in terror-related crime.

During a meeting of counterterrorist security professionals in Kuala Lumpur last year, Malaysian Defense Minister Mohamad Sabu warned about potential security issues involving Rohingya who could be manipulated to become suicide bombers or recruited into terrorist cells.

***Reported by BenarNews, an RFA-affiliated online news service.***