

# The Rohingya Muslim Crisis

## Introduction

Denied the right to citizenship, displaced from their homes, and unprotected by their government, approximately one million Rohingya Muslims of Western Myanmar face what is considered to be one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. The Rohingya people are generally understood to be an ethnic and religious minority that lives in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Burma), a sovereign state located in Southeast Asia that borders India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos, and China. Most Rohingya live in Rakhine State, which is located in the west of the country and borders Bangladesh, and they are believed by many (though some academics dispute the claim) to have lived there since at least the beginning of the eighth century. The large minority within the Rakhine State has faced discrimination and obstacles for much of modern history, but over the past seven years, tension between local Buddhists and the Rohingya has generated explosive rioting. Riots include ideological disagreement to rampant looting, sexual violence, and murder—all committed against Rohingya Muslims.

Despite Myanmar's historic democratic election of 2016 and the 2017 election of humanitarian activist Aung San Suu Kyi as president, the government continues to ignore the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya minority who, as people, do not exist at all in the eyes of the Burmese government. More than 120,000 Muslims, the majority of whom are Rohingya, currently inhabit local internment camps, where rates of malnutrition, crimes against women, and infant mortality have skyrocketed. These occurrences, which have been ignored by Kyi and the new democratic government, hint at a far darker reality than simple ethnic clash. Media coverage of the atrocities committed against the Rohingya has stirred international criticism and even accusations of genocide. The United Nations, as well as individual foreign powers, have attempted several investigations, and although the Burmese government strongly denies all claims of human rights abuse, the testimonies of surviving Rohingya refugees say otherwise. Not only does this unfortunate escalation speak to the political and social instability in this young democracy, but also demands that some relief—humanitarian or otherwise—be granted to the oppressed. The plight of the Rohingya people has continued for generations and now requires international intervention.

## Background

Conflict between the Rohingya minority, the Burmese government, and the Buddhist majority in the Rakhine state of Myanmar has existed for centuries. In the early nineteenth century, Myanmar had, under the Taungoo and Konbaung dynasties, been an expansionist power with ambitions for colonization. However, the situation began to deteriorate rapidly upon the invasion of British forces in 1824, and at the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War, Britain had obtained control of most Burmese territories. Eventually, by 1885, Myanmar – called Burma by the British – had become a territory under British rule. After the end of World War II, with its empire having been greatly weakened, Britain gave control of Burma to a civilian government in 1948. This government lasted only briefly: in 1962, it was toppled in a coup d'état by the military.

The British obtained full control of Myanmar again in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and the Rohingya people were treated well, similarly to the other Burmese ethnic groups, as a ploy to keep control of the territory. Additionally, as part of their efforts to encourage agriculture in Myanmar, the British sent many Rohingya and Bengali laborers to Rakhine, which boosted the local Muslim population at the expense of the dominant Rakhine Buddhists. Even after Myanmar had attained independence in 1948, the Rohingya were mostly treated like other ethnic groups under the civilian government that had been installed. However, following the 1962 coup d'état, General Ne Win, the leader of the junta, took a hard line against the Rohingya on the basis of strict Buddhism and a narrow definition of Burmese identity. Consequently, in 1977, the first wave of military crackdowns against them forced nearly 200,000 Rohingya to leave the country. Finally, in 1982, the Burmese government passed a wide-ranging nationality law, which stated that “ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1185 B.E. [Buddhist Era], 1823 A.D. are Burma citizens.” Thus, the Rohingya were effectively stripped of their citizenship, removing what few rights they had before. This is the root of the occurrences of political upset between the minority and the government, as even the new democracy has continued to uphold this law.

Because of their unrecognized status, the Rohingya are considered to be a stateless people. In addition to their lack of citizenship, the group has been largely excluded from Myanmar's industrial development and associated socio-economic mobility. Without access to the adequate physical infrastructure, education, and job market that other regions of Myanmar utilize, Rakhine, the poorest state of Myanmar, is a hotbed of economic stagnation, which is largely blamed on the Rohingya minority, rather than the inhabiting Buddhists. This is a cycle, where the minority is not

permitted to leave the region nor are the Rohingya accepted as viable contenders for jobs or educational opportunities, and thus, can never overcome the poverty they are stereotyped as being a cause of. From 2012 to 2016, movement for the group was entirely restricted to their ghettos and refugee camps, further preventing their economic or social integration into local society.

Social prejudice against the Rohingya is culturally acceptable and even encouraged by the non-Rohingya Burmese-speaking, Buddhist majority. Discrimination against the group is not federally or regionally prohibited, and many Rohingya Muslim extremists – fighting for autonomy and ideological expression–have committed violence against the Burmese government, fueling official claims that the Rohingya are a dangerous population and must, therefore, be controlled. The growth of riots and conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in recent years over accusations of violence and discrimination against the minority have been encouraged by the Burmese government, forcing thousands of Muslim refugees into the neighboring states of Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Until 2017, numbers of refugees were expected to dwindle, with the goal of permanent resettlement seeming more attainable to the group in light of recent political regime change. Systematic oppression of all people in Myanmar was expected to come to an end in 2016 with the first democratic elections in Myanmar’s history and the election of activist and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi as president. Unfortunately, the local non-Rohingya Burmese population still continued to commit atrocities, facing little threat of governmental intervention. The nature of the president’s ascent to power involves a delicate power-share with the wills of the strong military that still effectively controls the government.

## **Current Situation**

The current crisis, which started in 2016, has far surpassed other clashes in its intensity and duration. It began with an attack on soldiers patrolling the Burmese border by Rohingya rebels based in Bangladesh; many border officers were killed. The situation continuously grew worse, as the Myanmar Army launched the largest crackdowns yet on the Rohingya population in retaliation and in an effort to combat the extremists. The resulting violence has been catastrophic: entire villages have been destroyed, and significant human rights violations, such as “the killing of babies, toddlers, children, women and elderly; opening fire at people fleeing; burning of entire villages; massive detention; massive and systematic rape and sexual violence; deliberate destruction of food and sources of food,” have now become commonplace,

leading, according to a UN report, to what is effectively ethnic cleansing, though the government of Myanmar has strongly disputed these claims. At present, nearly 500,000 Rohingya have been driven out of the country, and the response from the Burmese government has been slow.

State Counselor Suu Kyi has asserted that the government is merely searching for the militants who are putting Myanmar's security at risk, and has, in the past, "disputed the characterization of the violence being perpetrated against the Rohingya at the time as ethnic cleansing." Outrage from the international community has been faced primarily with denial by Aung San Suu Kyi's administration, which comes as a shock to the millions of international supporters Kyi had when she was under house arrest for speaking against the actions of the military government in previous decades. Unfortunately, Kyi has also had little success in completely bringing the military sector under the federal democracy's control, allowing for significant military action to occur, unchecked by the government.

As the military has perpetrated past violence against the Rohingya, skepticism around Kyi's lack of control has risen with the conflict, as it has been commonly reported that members of the military are still unofficially delivering their genocidal endgame on the ethnic group. This comes as a huge blow to Aung San Suu Kyi's integrity in the eyes of many international powers. While the federal conflict is the most obvious obstacle to resolution in the eyes of the international community, the regional governments—administrators of state governments, particularly those of Rakhine—have been the most ineffective in dealing with ethnic conflict. These state governments deny Rohingya locals access to government services—including social support and healthcare—because of their lack of citizenship and the institutional bias against them. Such attitudes have come in for harsh criticism from the international community.

According to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "the situation has spiraled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare" and, he later declared, the Rohingya people must be granted citizenship in order to help defuse tensions. The Rakhine Commission, chaired by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, agreed with this position in its final report, and recommended that the best way forward for Myanmar involves ending restrictions on the Rohingya people's freedom of movement and recognizing them as full citizens, particularly because, as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees noted in a press conference in Myanmar, "it is only a matter of time before terrorists...spring up from the situation of discrimination, of poverty, that [prevails] in that area" before declaring that the Rohingya crisis is "the most urgent refugee emergency in the world." As the situation stands, refugees from the area are without even the most basic necessities - although Bangladesh has been accommodating and continues to keep its

borders open for those who are fleeing - and the violence in Rakhine shows no sign of stopping, despite claims from the Burmese government that it will investigate the situation, making it likely that the number of refugees from Myanmar will only further increase.

The influx of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees has placed excessive pressure on the governments of the surrounding nations, generating resentment for the displaced Muslims on behalf of neighbor states. Representatives from Bangladesh have voiced their concern about the strain that the large amounts of refugees and illegal immigrants crossing into neighbor states from Myanmar. The Rohingya in extranational refugee camps number in the hundreds of thousands now, and with the Burmese government refusing to take any form of cohesive action to protect and retain the Rohingya, the issue of illegal immigration and ethnic flight only continues to grow. The excess of displaced people has decreased the quality of the refugee camps in neighboring regions, leaving those in temporary housing with little access to physical or economic resources and susceptible to personal violation and epidemic disease. Although reports of discrimination, rape, looting, assault, and murder committed by the anti-Muslim Buddhists in Rakhine, those Rohingya Muslims still within the borders of Myanmar face atrocities that are largely unknown to the outside world.

The United Nations has officially launched several investigations into the current status of the Burmese Rohingya, in the interest of revealing the extent of recent harm done to the population and determining whether an organized form of international aid or intervention should be required, but without the cooperation of the democracy, the investigations have been largely ineffective.

## **Committee Directive**

The situation in Myanmar requires a sensitive, coordinated response. The United Nations Security Council is called upon to use the resources at its disposal to alleviate the violence committed against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. The UNSC must address three main facets of the crisis: first, the immediate negative condition of the Rohingya, second, the long-term legal and governmental status of the Rohingya, and finally, the social and economic status of the people and the Rakhine region of Myanmar. Providing aid, implementing sanctions, or approving peacekeeping action may constitute immediate action. Outlining governmental cooperation programs for legal protection and recognition for the persecuted may constitute direct long-term action. Promoting education, economic support programs, and healthcare for the Rohingya within the borders of Myanmar may constitute indirect long-term resolution and humanitarian peace consolidation. The UNSC must

also resolve the impacts of the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya, particularly in reference to the refugee crisis it has generated and the strain that the excess of refugees has caused in neighboring nations of Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as the radical Rakhine freedom-fighting groups, who have retaliated against the Burmese government with acts of terror. Bearing in mind the federal government's denial of the extent of the crimes, and the belief of many Burmese that the Rohingya are a foreign group with a separatist agenda, the UNSC must weigh the importance of national sovereignty against the maintenance of order and the protection of human rights, further defining the Security Council's role in the United Nations and in global peacekeeping consolidation.

## **Questions to Consider**

1. What is the nature of your country's current relationship – political, economic, etc. – with Myanmar? Has your country issued an official statement on the conflict?
2. What action should the United Nations – more specifically, the Security Council – take, if any, in Myanmar in order to aid the Rohingya people?
3. Is your country participating in any efforts to assist the Rohingya people? If so, what do these efforts consist of, and have they had any measurable impact? If not, why?
4. What forms of aid or intervention are most effective when a government is withholding protection and humanitarian aid from a group of people within its own country?
5. Does your country have experience with ethnic conflict of a type comparable to that which is taking place in Myanmar? If so, what action, if any, did your country take to remedy the situation?
6. How does your country address the issues of externally and internally displaced people as