

WIDE ANGLE

THE DRAMA OF THE ROHINGYA: ONE OF THE MOST PERSECUTED MINORITIES IN THE WORLD



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Cover photo: Rohingya escaping from a fire in Sittwe, June 10, 2012.

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The humanitarian crisis that is taking place on the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh involves one of the most persecuted minorities in the world: Rohingya Muslims. For decades the military in Myanmar have accomplished severe repression against this minority, causing hundreds of deaths and thousands of refugees according to NGOs and the media, but denied by Burmese authorities.

The violence against the Rohingya has intensified since 25 August 2017, when Burmese security forces were attacked by militiamen from the Rohingya paramilitary group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

ARSA said this attack was the result of increased harassment of Rohingya communities, but its direct result has been systematic violence and violent eviction by Burmese security forces and Buddhist civilians against their Rohingya neighbours. The clashes have caused hundreds of deaths in the state of Rakhine and have initiated an exodus that has forced at least 600,000 Rohingya Muslims to cross the treacherous border with Bangladesh. The majority are women and children, who are among more than 300,000 refugees who found shelter in Bengali territory since August.

Humanitarian organizations including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced the murder, rape and property burnings against Myanmar's Muslim community and their villages.

These acts, loudly denounced by the United Nations – which has been criticised for perceived lack of action on the matter –, have raised the accusation against Myanmar of implementing a policy of ethnic cleansing, a hypothesis rejected by the country's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1991, Suu Kyi has been widely accused by the international community for failing to intervene in the growing crisis, and for remaining silent about the violence against the Rohingya.

Keywords: migratory crisis, Rohingya exodus, Myanmar, rights denied, ethnic cleansing, Aung San Suu Kyi, ARSA.

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Introduction

Europe is not the only area of the world dealing with a progressive increase in migration flows. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group not recognized as legally residing in any country, are fleeing renewed violent persecution in Myanmar (Burma until 1989), fueling a deep migratory crisis across southern Asia that has attracted a lot of concern from the international community and several local Muslim nations.

Although a significant number of Rohingya live in Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Malaysia, a million Rohingya have settled for generations in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where they account for nearly a third of the population in a region mainly populated by Buddhist. Having being considered a threat to national security because of their ethnic and religious affiliation (the community practice a variant of Sunni Islam influenced by Sufism), for decades they have lived in conditions similar to apartheid, being victims of discriminatory policies and violent repression by the Buddhist majority, which justifies such actions based on fears of infiltration into the country of Muslim extremist groups.

Since 2012, violent unrest in Sittwe district in Rakhine, has seen reports of hundreds of people killed, and whole villages burnt down. Before the uptick in violence in August, over 140,000 civilians had been displaced¹, most of them Rohingya. Since August, a further 600,000 Rohingya² have fled to refugee camps in Bangladesh following widespread violence against Rohingya communities by Burmese military forces and local Buddhist residents.

In addition to the direct violence they have faced, the Rohingya have for generations faced severe restrictions on their freedom to move, and have often been forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary camps, with limited access to medical care, education or livelihood opportunities.

The Burmese authorities have been accused by international community of not intervening to stop the violence that has pushed increasing numbers of Rohingya to flee, and even of encouraging the persecution, of not recognizing Rohingya rights and citizenship, and limiting the access to humanitarian organisations. This situation has not changed with the rise to defacto power of the 1991 Nobel Peace winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who, despite international pressure, has refused to support the Rohingya, and defended the actions of authorities in Rakhine State.

Moreover, those who manage to escape from Burmese hostilities are facing the harsh refoulement policies implemented by Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, which fear an influx of migrants. Therefore, it becomes easy to understand why this stateless population were awarded with the title of "the most persecuted minority in the world" by the United Nations in 2013.

Who are the Rohingya

The origin of the Rohingya is disputed: some claim they are immigrants from what is now Bangladesh and that they were sent to Myanmar during the British colonial period (1824-1948). However, the widely-accepted historical understanding is that they are descendants of Muslim traders who settled in the current state of Rakhine over a thousand years ago, then known as Arakan. This is supported by the etymology of the term Rohingya, with 'Rohang' being a dialect derivation of 'Arakan,' while 'gya' means 'coming from.'³

While Muslims have lived for centuries on this strip of land that now connects Myanmar and Bangladesh, the term Rohingya has emerged only since the 1950s. The term was probably imported from Bangladeshi immigrants in Arakan during the British colonial period.

The director of the human rights organisation Arakan Project, Chris Lewa, argues that the Sunni ethnic group identified itself as "Rohingya" with the intent to establish a link with the homeland, and to appeal for the rights denied by both the Burmese government and the dominant Buddhist class in the Rakhine region. Buddhist authorities have denied even the name "Rohingya" in all official documents, as an accurate term to call the ethnic group, because of the strong association to a particular social and political identity. Instead, for Rakhine's estimated 1 million-strong Muslim community, they use the derogatory term "Bengali".

Despite efforts by Burmese authorities to disenfranchise the Rohingya, they themselves remain firmly convinced of their claim to the same territorial rights as the Buddhist community. In this regard, Abdul Rasheed, chairman of the Rohingya Foundation said: "We are not illegal immigrants because the Rohingya did not arrive in this country after Independence. We are indigenous citizens of this state."⁴

A population without land: legal status of the Rohingya

Despite the attempts of the Rohingya to seek recognition of their centuries-old residence in the state of Rakhine and their rights of citizenship through domestic courts and local government institutions, every Burmese government since independence in 1948 has refused to recognize the community as one of the 135 ethnic groups in the country, on the grounds of perceived ethnic, linguistic and religious differences between Buddhist and Muslim identity. While under British colonial rule these differences largely only manifest themselves in prejudices and resentment, religious and linguistic affiliation were used as a precondition to obtaining citizenship after independence. As part of the new Burmese national identity, in which Buddhism represented the state religion, the Muslim population of Rakhine was considered "non-native." The British encouragement of Bangladeshi Rohingya to migrate to Myanmar to meet labor shortages led to a tripling of the Muslim population in Rakhine State, and created fear amongst the Buddhist residents of an invasion. A large portion of the blame for the current crisis can therefore be attributed to British colonial action.

The democratic transition that followed independence in 1948 did not remain stable for long: in 1962, the coup by General Ne Win established a military dictatorship and

twenty years later a law concerning citizenship was enacted that excluded the Rohingya from the full recognition of their rights. Starting from 1982, some managed to register as temporary residents through an expensive military-administered temporary identity card known as the 'white card'. In order to get the card, Rohingya had to self-declare as Bengali, as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and thus rejecting their ethnicity in exchange for an identification document.

This compromise allowed at least a few Rohingya to enjoy a limited number of rights, including being able to move freely, the right to vote (the white card holders were able to vote in the constitutional referendum of 2008 and in the general elections of 2010), to attend school, and buy land.

However, the temporary identity card did not confer permanent benefits. In March 2014, the Burmese government prohibited the use of the word 'Rohingya' in the first national censuses for 30 years, insisting on using 'Bengali', and fuelling the existing climate of mistrust and prejudice against the Rohingya. In April 2015, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists during the country's historic democratic transition, President Thein Sein, eliminated the use of white cards revoking all rights to the Rohingya.

The parliamentary elections of 2015, ensured the success of the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the new State Councillor of Myanmar after almost 26 years under house arrest. Despite the victory of Suu Kyi's party, which has seen the beginnings of democratization after years of military dictatorship, the situation for the Rohingya has worsened. Given small reprieve in June 2016 by Ms. Suu Kyi after she announced that the former 'Bengali' tag would be replaced by 'Muslim community in Rakhine,' the Rohingya remained state and landless. Ms. Suu Kyi has chosen to preserve relations with the majority Buddhist population, and the military, rather than recognise the rights of the Rohingya. Any assertion presented by the Rohingya community of political or economic rights is seen by the Buddhist population as an attempt to weaken the ethnic identity of Rakhine. U Wara Thara, a Buddhist monk from Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine, said: "This land is owned by us, the Buddhists, the people of Rakhine.... As their population is getting bigger, they shouldn't be here any more. If they live here honestly, it doesn't matter to us, they are now appropriating our lands."⁵

The military has retained much of its power in Myanmar, and they continue to exert authority over media, public life, government public and foreign policy. Efforts to boost popularity among Buddhists has seen the military use increasingly violent tactics against Rohingya.

Rights denied

Victims of institutionalized discrimination, the Rohingyas suffer not just from violence, but also from many legal restrictions. Having being deprived of any legal recognition, they have not access to education, to healthcare, can not vote, and are often forced to work for minimal wages and menial tasks. They can not own land and they are not allowed to travel without official permission. Rohingya couples are required to apply

for special marriage permits, which often involve hefty ‘fees’ to local authorities. In addition, Muslim couples who live in northern cities like Buthidaung and Maundaw are forced to respect an obligation from local government not to have more than two children, or pay a hefty tax. Due to these restrictive living conditions, many Rohingya families have decided to live in overcrowded camps in Sittwe district, one of Myanmar’s least developed areas with more than 78 percent of families living below the poverty line, according to World Bank estimates.⁶

None of the recent violence against Rohingya is a new phenomenon, only the scale and severity of it. A 2004 Amnesty International Report documented widespread human rights violations against Myanmar’s Muslim community. In describing their condition, have been used these words: “The Rohingyas’ freedom of movement is severely restricted and the vast majority of them have effectively been denied Myanmar citizenship. They are also subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation; land confiscation; forced eviction and house destruction; and financial restrictions on marriage. Rohingyas continue to be used as forced labourers on roads and at military camps, although the amount of forced labour in northern Rakhine State has decreased over the last decade.”⁷

Economics interests

The Amnesty report noted that many Rohingya are exploited as a labor-force in the areas where they live, often in military camps and for road construction. This is not simply due to ethnic and religious reasons; the expropriation of lands that has been taking place for years, without any form of compensation, hides the economic interests behind disenfranchising Rohingya claims to residency. The removal of Rohingya into refugee camps also serves to make way for more profitable economic activities in the cleared areas, facilitating the financial recovery of the country. The grabbing of Rohingya land began in the early 1990s as the ruling military junta sought to increase natural resource exploitation across Myanmar, and saw the country become a major teak exporter. The situation worsened with the new land law of 2012 that opened the doors to international investors such as China and India, driving up the need for land to be allocated to major projects. In Rakhine State, this resulted in violence clearing of Rohingya communities by Burmese authorities, often using arson and forced deportation. Furthermore, poor living conditions among the disenfranchised Muslim community are further aggravated by recurrent natural disasters such as cyclones and floods: in just Sittwe district, the passage of Tropical Cyclone Mora of May 30, 2017 caused the destruction of more than 1,600 structures, including homes, schools, public buildings and latrines, and similar damage was recorded across the region. The only solution to the combined threats of weather and the authorities has been for the Rohingya population to seek find better shelter elsewhere.

First Rohingya exodus: four years of humanitarian crisis 2012-2016

Following the gradual opening up of the country in 2010 that led to the official end of the military dictatorship, the sectarian violence against Rohingya has increased. The

more democracy advance, the more violence appears to increase: it seems apparent that the military is still very much in charge of Myanmar. This is the paradox of a country where in the past seven years a campaign of violence against the Rohingya has increased to levels where the Burmese authorities have been accused of ethnic cleansing by UN Rights Chief⁸. In June 2012, the tension between the two ethnic groups erupted into a series of clashes that have since claimed the lives of about 280 people and the homes of 140,000 displaced persons, mainly Rohingya, forcing the authorities to declare a state of emergency in Rakhine State.

The episode blamed for starting violence was the rape and murder of a Buddhist girl in the area of Tangup, by three Rohingya boys, according to local authorities. A few days later a group of Buddhists attacked a bus from Myanmar's capital Yangon carrying Muslim refugees, killing a dozen people. ARSA, the Rohingya militia, have violently responded by attacking police stations along the border with Bangladesh, and escalating the tit-for-tat sectarian violence in the process.

ARSA, which is considered a terrorist organisation by the Burmese government, stated in March 2017 that they "have the legitimate right under international law to defend [them] selves in line with the principle of self defence."⁹

The violence has led to a mass exodus of Rohingya that has seen Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia struggle to cope with the influx.

For many, Bangladesh is the first country they reach, after crossing the Naf River. From here, refugees have to navigate a several-week-long journey across the Bay of Bengal, often in inadequate boats and insufficient supplies – leading to beriberi and death.



Rotte migratorie dei rohingya.

Crediti: Eleanor Albert and Julia Ro/Council of foreign relations.

Fonte: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>

According to UN estimates, between January and March 2017, about 25,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis tried to arrive in Malaysia and Australia in smuggler's boats. Many spent months adrift in search of a chance to safe harbor, since the states where they have sought asylum have adopted very strict refoulement policies.

The 271 kilometer-long border between Myanmar's Rakhine State and Bangladesh means this is the main escape route for many Rohingya, and has led to a number of huge refugee camps being set up in Bangladesh. Since 1978, hundreds of thousands of refugees have been forced to pass through such camps, and some have never left.

The mass exodus of refugees in recent months has led to the United Nations asking Myanmar to open its borders with Bangladesh, but this has been ignored.

The Rohingya fleeing military operations in progress in Rakhine State have thus found the border with Bangladesh militarized, and therefore uncrossable legally. Yet despite this, many have decided to leave Myanmar with boats, crossing the Naf river that marks much of the border. The risks for tired, unequipped and scared refugees is great, as recalled by those who have survived: "A group of people crossed the river by boat to come here, but suddenly the boat sank. Many were able to swim. Seven people are still missing, including my three children."¹⁰

Reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have suggested that many of the refugees would prefer to live in the camps rather than return to Myanmar, and yet the conditions in the camps are often shocking.

While some Rohingya have turned to smugglers in the area, paying dearly for transport out from Bangladesh and Myanmar and risking exploitation and death at sea, most of the Muslim community, including women and children, have stayed in the refugee camps. According to a report by medical NGO Doctors Without Borders¹¹, the Bangladeshi camps have less than a liter of water per day per person. To put the humanitarian crisis they face in perspective, the minimum daily water provision to ensure a dignified survival in emergency conditions is recommended to be 15 liters of water per person.

And yet Rohingya have continued over the years to risk the border crossing to escape violence in Myanmar. Between October 2016 and January 2017, in a period of severe repression following a number of clashes between Islamists and Myanmar border police, 66,000 people crossed the border into Bangladesh. In September 2016, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) estimated that over 32,000 people were registered in the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps, in the coastal district of Cox's Bazaar in southern Bangladesh.¹² Not recognized as Rohingya or as refugees from Bangladesh or Myanmar, camp residents remain confined and waiting for someone to find solutions to the problem. The solution most feared by the Rohingya population is forced return to Myanmar, an action that if implemented by the Bangladeshi authorities would violate the international principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the repatriation of refugees to unsafe areas.

Always looking for solutions, Bangladesh in 2014 advanced the idea to place the Rohingya on the uninhabited island of Thengar Char. The proposal made by the Dhaka

government is based on the belief that the island allows for the better provision of food and adequate facilities. But not all agree. According to Phil Robertson, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, if the relocation plan is implemented, it will result in a humanitarian disaster if the refugees were not relocated to safer place.¹³ Criticism of the plan from NGOs has noted the extreme weather the island is prone to, as well as a lack of drinking water and opportunities for residents to grow their own food.

In recent months, international agencies, governments and NGOs have been largely unable to access northern Rakhine state where much of the violence has taken place. According to the Myanmar government, more than 750,000 Rohingya still reside in the Rakhine State towns of Maungdaw and Buthidaung, contradicting accounts of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing the area. The lack of access to areas where refugees speak of burning villages and mass violence has made on-the-ground verification impossible.

Compounding the situation for this northern Rohingya community is the suspension of humanitarian aid imposed by the government. Those in central and southern areas, where there are estimated to be about 120,000 internally displaced persons, are registered at government camps.



Una sete disperata.

Crediti: Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters

Fonte: <https://widerimage.reuters.com/photographer/soe-zeya-tun>

Exodus of 2017 in Bangladesh

The most recent surge in violence against Rohingya has awakened international public opinion to the case of the Rohingya and arousing reactions of outrage from international leaders and various humanitarian organizations. Reuters, reporting from from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, "we are not in a position to make a finding of genocide or not, but this should in no way detract from the seriousness of the situation which the Rohingya population is currently facing."¹⁴

The first clashes were reported on the morning of August 25, 2017, with the killing of 500 people following the claim of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in having attacked post offices and police. The Burmese government has promptly accused ARSA of being a terrorist organization that undermines peace in the country and has launched a military campaign that destroyed hundreds of Rohingya villages and forced to flee half of the population on the Rohingya Burmese territory.

In addition to the number of Rohingya targeted by military and militia units, has been the unprecedented violence. On many occasions defenseless masses have been fired upon, whole villages burned down, and anti-personnel mines planted near the border with Bangladesh¹⁵ – forcing refugees to risk crossing to escape, and dissuading any return. The Burmese military have been accused by surviving refugees, and UN observers, of being responsible for heinous crimes, such as murder, rape, the destruction of villages and places of worship, and forced deportation. The Burmese authorities have defended themselves against claims of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing by placing the blame on ARSA, who started the first attacks. Nevertheless, there is an obvious disproportion between the actions of the Muslim guerrilla group and the official response. The fighting and the exodus has created what UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called a “humanitarian and human rights nightmare” to the Security Council of 28 September 2017.¹⁶

According to UNICEF, there are about 340,000 Rohingya children living in extreme conditions in the refugee camps in Bangladesh: one out of five suffer from acute malnutrition and is in need of medical care.¹⁷ In addition, the majority of them are not registered refugee with access to education.

Access to clean water and latrines is lacking in most cases, increasing the risk of diseases caused by contamination of water, such as cholera.

In order to cope with the emergency situation, various UN agencies have planned a budget of \$ 344 million for the Rohingya refugees but for the moment the funds used are far from reaching this figure. While the World Food Program (WFP), dealing with food shortages, only secured \$37 million dollars for 2017 out of the \$76 million requested by UNICEF for the Rohingya refugees was funded for only 7% the moment.¹⁸

The international response

In recent months, dozens of demonstrations have been held in cities across Pakistan, India, Thailand, Indonesia and Bangladesh; all to condemn the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Although the outrage in the region is high, the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have not yet developed a coordinated response to the humanitarian emergency plan. This is because many members have decided to adhere to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country, leaving unresolved the question of the Rohingya crisis.



Protesta contro il trattamento dei rohingya a Jakarta, Indonesia.

Crediti: Darren Whiteside/Reuters.

Fonte: <http://www.businessinsider.com/myanmar-working-with-china-russia-to-avoid-un-rebuke-over-persecution-of-muslims-2017-9?IR=T>

A call to restore order has instead come from the UN Headquarters in New York. Addressing the Burmese government, the UN have renewed long-standing calls for an improvement the treatment of the Rohingya, and a recognition of their citizenship and social status.

In response to recent violence, the Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres invited Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar security forces to stop their persecution, but as with earlier calls this has been ignored.

Through her management of the crisis, the Burmese leader has shown her desire not to jeopardize the ongoing efforts to improve the democratic future of the country for a conflict that the overwhelming majority of the country considers marginal and irrelevant from national interests.

In this way, Myanmar takes a very defensive and protectionist behaviour in front of the international community. Since 2014, during its turn to head ASEAN, Myanmar has made sure not to mention the Rohingya issue. On the rare occasions when the Burmese government has released official statements regarding the conditions of the Rohingya, it has clearly demonstrated its attitude to the matter, such as in the statement by General Min Aung Hlaing, who told the United State Ambassador in October that reports of a mass exodus of Rohingya, whom he dismissed as “Bengali,” had been exaggerated by the media.¹⁹

UN Secretary General Guterres is not the only senior international figure to demand a ceasefire. Jyoti Sanghera, bureau chief of UN human rights office in the Asian and Pacific region, asked Suu Kyi to end the violence. Sanghera expressed fear that the Rohingya refugees who return from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia might be interned in refugees camps or jailed by local authorities. In this regard, Yang-

hee Lee, Special Representative on the situation of human rights in Myanmar to the 72nd General Assembly session of the United Nations, said: “verification of residency/citizenship should be submitted according to a different process: once they are back, they must be allowed to return to their place of origin and not live in temporary camps, because these camps may not be temporary but permanent, as those who have been displaced in 2012 have learned.”²⁰

Following international pressure, the Nobel Peace Prize has ensured that Myanmar will allow the repatriation only to Rohingya refugees who can prove their residence in Myanmar.

A governmental statement that sounds almost like a provocation, given also the strong access restrictions imposed on international aid workers, accused of helping the ‘terrorists’ Rohingya to improve their housing conditions in the state of Rakhine.

During a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley called on countries to stop sending weapons to the Burmese military. This request forms part of the economic sanctions that the US and European Union are beginning to use against Myanmar with the specific objective to stop the violence, as they seek to protect both the Rohingya and the fragile early steps in Myanmar’s democratic transition.

To ensure a normal life for Rohingya in Myanmar appears like a desperate challenge.

A first step is certainly to frame the crisis as a long-running one and to increase funding for assistance programs in order to improve the poor conditions in which the Muslim population has lived for years. A second step is to ensure that the army and the Burmese government stops their persecution; the Rohingya have lived in the same territory for centuries, and this fact should be enough to ensure that their human rights are respected.

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