The Plight of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar

Overview:

The **Rohingya Muslims**, a minority group in the southeast Asian nation of **Myanmar**, are described by **Human Rights Watch** as “the most persecuted minorities in the world”. Effectively since the 1970s, a series of crackdowns on the Rohingya, who live in the poor state of Rakhine, have pushed the Rohingya around in their own state and sent hundreds of thousands fleeing across the border to **Bangladesh**. Myanmar, a traditionally Buddhist state does not recognize the Rohingya as an established ethnic minority, despite recognizing 135 other minorities within the country. Rather, the Buddhists in Myanmar classify them as Bangladeshi illegal immigrants, which seeks to legitimize the discrimination. The leader of Myanmar, **Aung San Sun Kyi**, a Nobel Peace prize winner and a former political prisoner in her own nation, has been criticized heavily for her failure to address the clear-cut ethnic cleansing that has occurred in the Rakhine state. Some groups have even advocated that she be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize for her failure to prevent genocide. The international community has noted the crisis occurring in the Rakhine state, yet little has been done to provide aid and security. The UN Human Rights Council must act to keep the peace in Myanmar and end the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

Country Overview

Myanmar, formerly known as **Burma** during the period of British Colonial rule, is a small nation in Southeast Asia. They are bordered by Bangladesh and Thailand, with the Bay of Bengal to their southwest. To the south, their topography consists of mostly tropical lowlands with dense forests and steep rugged mountains make up their terrain to the north. Myanmar suffers from

frequent earthquakes and monsoons/cyclones, with a particularly devastating cyclone striking the nation in 2008 with resulted in 138,000 deaths.

Myanmar is a densely populated country with 55 million people living within its borders. Of those 55 million, nearly 88% are Buddhists, 6% are Christians, and 4% are Muslims. Myanmar recognizes 135 minority ethnic groups with the largest group being ethnically Burmese at 68% and the rest divided amongst the various ethnic groups. It is important to remember that the Rohingya are not recognized as an official ethnic group.

Myanmar, or the Union of Burma, is a parliamentary republic government with a law system that blends together English Common law and customary law. They recently emerged from 50 years of military Junta Rule in 2008 when a new constitution was drafted and approved in a nationwide referendum. However, the military still exerts considerable influence as 56/224 seats in the upper house and 110/440 seats in the lower house are directly appointed by the military. Myanmar is a member state of the United Nations and belongs to other intergovernmental organizations (IOs) such as the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), World Health Organization (WHO), and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Myanmar's economy is still recovering from decades of economic mismanagement, isolationist policies, and antiquated banking and licensing policies that were in place under the Junta government. As a result, they are one of the poorest nations in Asia, with 25% of their population living in poverty. However, the country is rich in natural resources and has a young population, which is attractive to foreign investment.

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China has invested heavily into the nation since transitioning to democracy in 2011. The investment has come in the form of infrastructure and modernization of the nation.


**Historical Context/ Background**

Myanmar was organized from several smaller kingdoms in the 11th century and existed as a coalition of Buddhist states for hundreds of years until British expansionism in the Indian subcontinent collided with the states in the early 1800s. Following three wars, the British completed their imperialization of Burma in 1866, taking advantage of Myanmar’s political instability. As seen in other colonial countries, the British favored certain ethnic groups over others, creating ethnic conflicts within the state.

Following World War I, the first protests against British rule began with Buddhist monks protesting in the 1920s and a student group called “Students Union” leading the charge by 1935 out of Rangoon University. The new national movement picked a young law student named Aung San to be its leader, and several student strikes at the university gathered attention for its cause.

With the onset of World War II, Aung San initially allied with the Japanese, and he and 29 others known as the 30 comrades went to Japan for military training. When the Japanese invaded Myanmar, Aung Sun and the comrades fought with them. However, Sun believed that the Japanese would not hand over control to the Burmese people, and switched his alliance to that of the British.

In 1947, during the British decolonization period that was happening all over the world, Aung Sun negotiated the British release of Myanmar and drafted a new constitution. However, in July of 1947, Aung Sun and most of his cabinet were assassinated when an opposition group attacked them in a meeting with machine guns. A surviving member, U Nu, was chosen to replace Aung Sun, and Burmese independence was granted on January 4th, 1948.

Over the next decade, Myanmar attempted to rule itself for the first time in a century but was plagued by communist and ethnic groups who felt left out in the 1948 constitution. In 1958, U Nu was removed from power by General Ne Win, who
allowed elections that resulted in U Nu to be re-elected to Prime Minister in 1960, but only two years later U Nu was removed from power and Ne Win became a military dictator.

Ne Win instituted a military rule in Myanmar that eliminated all human rights and freedoms of expression. His reign was marked by superstition, xenophobia of outsiders and ethnic minorities, and the brutal suppression of human rights. In July of 1988, Win announced that he was retiring, and in response, thousands of people took to the streets to demand a transition to democracy and an opening up of Myanmar to the world. This “Democracy Summer” as it was called was seen as Myanmar’s transition to peace, however, on August 9th, 1988 troops began firing into the crowds, and over the course of 4 days at least 10,000 protesters were killed around the country.

During this time, daughter of Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been living abroad, returned home to take care of her sick mother. Facing heavy criticism from the international community, the military announced that it would hold multi-party elections. The National League for Democracy (NLD) was quickly founded and Kyi was put forth as its candidate. Just prior to the elections, Win returned during a coup, and took control of the country, establishing a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Kyi was placed under house arrest during a nationwide anti-democracy crackdown, despite the NLD winning 82% of the vote in the elections that went on. Source: [http://www.cfob.org/HistoryofBurma/historyOfBurma.shtml](http://www.cfob.org/HistoryofBurma/historyOfBurma.shtml)

**Transition to Democracy**

Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 during her time in house arrest and continued to advocate for the transition to democracy. Throughout the 1990s the SLORC attempted to draft a new constitution that would legalize military control over the state but the constitution was never fully written. In 1997 the United States place economic sanctions on Myanmar, which was joined by trade restrictions from the European Union in order to place pressure on the state. In 2007 the monks once again protested the military rule, and when the military cracked down hard, the international community did so as well, forcing the Myanmar military to reexamine its role as governors. A new constitution was finally drafted in 2008 and put to a national referendum, but
that was interrupted by Cyclone Nargis which struck Myanmar, killing over 138,000 people. The government failed to respond quickly enough, and rejected foreign aid and workers from entering the country, once again drawing hard criticism from the rest of the world.

The new constitution was ratified in late May of 2008, despite the heavy skepticism surrounding the accuracy of the referendum from outside observers, especially reports from areas devastated by the cyclone. A bicameral legislature was established, with guarantees that the military would have 1/4th of the members in both houses. **Thein Sein** became the executive authority in the country, while Kyi became the Prime Minister. Democracy had finally come to Myanmar.


**The current crisis in the Rakhine State**

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority ethnic group who live primarily in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. They are not recognized as one of Myanmar’s official 135 ethnic minorities and are falsely believed to be illegal immigrants from the neighboring nation of **Bangladesh**. The Rohingya had lived relatively peaceful lives in the western state of Rakhine until 1982, in which a new national citizenship law was passed in Myanmar. When the Rohingya were not granted citizenship, it effectively became illegal for them to even be in their home country. Restrictions on travel, marriage, and educational opportunities were placed upon the Rohingya to limit their ability to organize against the Myanmar authorities.

The history of the Rohingya can most likely be traced back to the 8th century when seafaring Muslims from the middle east came to the Kingdom of Arakan, which is now the Rakhine state. In the 17th century, thousands of Bengali Muslims who were captured by the Arakanese also settled in the region. Rohingya means “Inhabitant of Rohang” which was the early Muslim name for Arakan. The Kingdom was conquered by the Burmese in 1785 which was then taken by the British in 1825. Following the end of British colonialism, the Rohingya were treated as second-class citizens and started the chain of hatred and mistrust between them and the Myanmar government.

The violence erupted in 2012 and then again in 2015 following Myanmar’s transition to democracy. This conflict occurred when the Rohingya were upset that they could not vote in 2012 elections for the new government. Rohingya were in possession of ID cards called, “white cards” which were temporary identification cards but could guarantee the right to vote.
In 2014, the government held a UN-backed national census, the first in over 30 years for Myanmar. The Rohingya were initially allowed to identify as Rohingya on the census but after Buddhist nationalists called for a boycott, the government rescinded their earlier statements and the Rohingya were only allowed to register as Bengalis.

In 2015, the President at the time, Thein Sein canceled the temporary identity or white cards, revoking the Rohingya right to vote. This caused massive protests in the Rohingya community in which the government responded with overwhelming violence, prompting thousands of Rohingyas to flee across the border to Bangladesh.

More recently, in 2017, clashes erupted between the Myanmar government and a militant group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) who claimed responsibility for attacks on police and military posts. ARSA is declared a terrorist organization by the Myanmar government, but as saviors amongst the Rohingya community. The government’s military response forced 700,000 Rohingya to flee their homes. Doctors without Borders stated that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed between August 25th and September 24th, 2017 and that Myanmar’s security forces were shooting fleeing civilians and planted landmines along border crossings used by the Rohingya into Bangladesh.

In 2018, Myanmar began clearing out abandoned Rohingya villages and built homes, security bases, and other infrastructure in their place. The government claims that this is for when the refugees return to Rakhine, but human rights activists believe the Myanmar government intends to settle other populations in the Rakhine state.

Source: https://www.britannica.com/place/Myanmar/Myanmar-since-1988
https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis

Preventing a Genocide
The situation in the Rakhine state is so desperate that many have stated that the Myanmar government is committing genocide against the Rohingya Muslims to achieve ethnic purity. Not only do they differ from most Burmese in terms of religion (Muslim vs Buddhist), but they are linguistically and ethnically different as their ancestors came from the middle east over a thousand years ago. Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, described “the
violence as ethnic cleansing and the humanitarian situation as catastrophic.” Nearly 1/3rd of the estimated 3.5 million Rohingyas have been forced to flee their homes and have settled mostly in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.

Professor Penny Green, of the International State Crime Initiative at the Queen Mary University of London has identified five steps that indicate a genocide is being waged upon an ethnic group. The five stages are stigmatization, harassment, isolation, systematic weakening, and mass annihilation. Professor Green has concluded that four, of the five steps, have been accomplished against the Rohingya.

Professor Green notes that although the fifth step has not been accomplished yet, the Myanmar government is quickly marching towards that point. Since 2012 not a single person has been arrested or charged with any crime related to the extrajudicial killings, rapes, and assaults against the Rohingya people. In its current state, Professor Green notes, it would only take a spark to ignite a full-blown war of extermination against the Rohingya. This spark could come from the ARSA stepping up their attacks against Myanmar security forces. As the ARSA continues to fight for the Rohingya, the designation of terrorist is legitimized in the eyes of all other Burmese people which would allow for and promote more violence against the Rohingya.

Source: https://www.economist.com/asia/2015/06/13/the-most-persecuted-people-on-earth

### Involved Actors

**Myanmar:**

A state plagued by decades of violence and repression, Myanmar recently re-emerged from its self-imposed isolation in 2012 with promises of democracy and openness to the world. Although the country has made great strides in removing the junta military government, their inability to protect the rights’ of the Rohingya people has drawn severe international criticism.

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Rohingya/Refugees:
Called the world’s largest stateless people, the Rohingya are Muslims living in a majority Buddhist country. Despite tracing their roots back to the 8th century in the Kingdom of Arakan, now the Rakhine state, the Rohingya are falsely labeled as Bangladeshi immigrants in the view of the Myanmar government. With a global population of 3.5 million, over 1/3rd of the Rohingya have been forced to flee from Rakhine.

ARSA:
The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is a paramilitary group made up of Rohingya men who decided to strike back against the Myanmar security forces. The ARSA attacked several military and police checkpoints in the summer of 2017 which triggered a brutal response from the government that sent 750,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border.

Bangladesh:
The neighboring, Muslim majority nation that borders the Rakhine state, Bangladesh has taken in more refugees from the crisis than any other country. Bangladesh is already the world’s most densely populated nation, with 150 million people living in a country the size of Colorado. As a result of the refugees, Bangladesh is facing a humanitarian crisis and has stated that the refugees will not be allowed to stay indefinitely. They are currently building a new camp that will house a quarter of a million refugees.

Myanmar Security Forces:
The military has, and continues to exert enormous influence over the country. Since emerging from a fifty-year military rule, the military is constitutionally mandated to maintain a 1/4ths presence in both the upper and lower houses of parliament. As Myanmar’s democracy is young, and therefore weak, the civilian-led government has been careful not to ostracize the military as fears of a coup are always possible.
Source: https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/key-players-in-myanmars-refugee-crisis

UN Resolutions and Activities
Selected Security Council Presidential Statements:
S/PRST/2017/22- A statement from the security council on the situation in Rakhine

Selected Secretary-General’s Reports:
S/2017/1099- A statement from the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict in Myanmar

Selected Security Council Letters:
S/2016/113- A letter from the UK requesting the retention of the situation in Myanmar
**Selected Security Council Meeting Records:**
- S/PV.8255 - A briefing on the Council’s visiting mission to Myanmar
- S/PV.8179 - A briefing by High Commissioner for Refugees
- S/PV.81330 - A briefing on sexual violence in Myanmar

**Selected General Assembly Documents:**
- A/C.3/72/L.48 - Resolution on the situation of human rights in Myanmar

**Other Documents:**
- A/72/382 - A report from the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar


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**First person account of the Rohingya crisis**

Last night, says Mayyu Ali, there was panic in the camp. It was shortly before midnight when
the storm alarms went off and the refugees – hundreds of thousands of them, in the pitch black –
scrambled to secure their shelters with rope or whatever else they had from winds that might
flatten them.

A long time later they understood it had been a false alarm, and that they should try to soothe
their children, get some rest and let their terror pass until a future occasion when it might be
more appropriate and useful.

Words catch a little in Mayyu’s throat as he speaks. It is Ramadan, and no water will pass the
lips of those observing the fast until the sun sets at 6.30pm. That is three hours away. Behind
Mayyu, in this makeshift café in the Bakkhali camp, tempers are starting to fray: a dispute has
broken out and a customer spends 15 minutes screaming his response to some slight.

The heat and humidity leave plenty of room for argument: a couple of Bangladeshi men talk
about it in wonder; some people look likely to pass out.

Around here, the largest refugee settlement in the world, the murderous heat is good news. It
means the rains haven’t arrived yet.

Born in 1991, the year that Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Mayyu is a
budding poet and writer whose work about the plight of his stateless Rohingya people has
appeared on some international news sites, including CNN and Al-Jazeera. But right now he is,
first and foremost, a Rohingya refugee.
“Even though this has been happening to us, the Rohingya population, for a decade, every
day and every year many people have been killed, many women have been raped, but still
there is no hope for a sustainable resolution for this crisis,” he says. “This really makes me feel
very bad. It’s like feeling extremely desperate and lonely. It’s like we have no one. It’s like we
have no idea what is going to happen tomorrow.”

Ethnic cleansing
The savagery reported in last year’s military
response to attacks by Muslim militant group
Arsa on police outposts in Rakhine, described
by the UN as “a textbook example of ethnic
cleansing”, weighs heavily on Kutupalong.
Human rights groups and media have
registered a vast array of atrocities, including
gang rapes, murders and groups of men
slaughtered in cold blood.

There are multiple accounts and amateur
videos of fleeing men being shot in the back
and living or dying with their terrible injuries. The worst stories carry an unfathomable cruelty:
soldiers snatching babies from their mothers and throwing them on fires.

There are no official figures for those killed – Myanmar has dismissed the reports as a
fabrication – but surveys by Médecins Sans Frontières put the number at more than 6,700,
including at least 730 children, in the first month of the crackdown.
In perhaps the starkest illustration of what took place, the Reuters news agency mapped hundreds
of villages burnt down between August 25th and November 25th in an area stretching 110 km
from the green hills of Rakhine northern tip to beaches near the state’s southern capital, Sittwe.

Burmese authorities said these villages were burnt down either by Rohingya militants or by the
villagers themselves before they left.
Rahima Khatun, a 30-year-old mother of five, does not recall events unfolding that way in Siddhar Para, her village in Rakhine Maungdaw district. The family had heard news of neighbouring villages being attacked by the army, but Siddhar Para was safe for a time.

“Then one day we were at home and suddenly we heard a crowd screaming outside and we found our home was burning,” she says.

Rahima and her husband Mohammad Ali took their children and joined neighbours on the road to Bangladesh, walking for 12 days to reach the Naf river, foraging to stay alive. When they finally got to the border they spent a night with a local family before moving on.

Source:

**Questions to consider**

What can be done to assist the Rohingya still in the Rakhine state? What can be done to assist the Rohingya who are refugees in other countries? Can the Myanmar government be held responsible for crimes against the Rohingya people? How can a genocide be prevented in the Rakhine state? How much responsibility should be placed upon Aung San Sun Kyi? What is the continued impact of the influence of the military in Myanmar? How can a state remain in control with so many ethnic groups? Should the security council place sanctions on Myanmar leaders? Would sanctions be effective in curtailing the violence?

What is your country’s perspective on the crisis? Has your state taken in any Rohingya refugees? What is your state’s refugee policy? Should Myanmar be forced to take back the Rohingya? What is your country’s perspective on the refugee camps apparently being built in the Rakhine state? Should other states like Bangladesh and Indonesia be forced to take in refugees? Should these states be compensated for refugees? Which UN documents or treaties relate to the status of refugees?

Should the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army be held responsible for war crimes? Does your state view them as freedom fighters, terrorists, or something else? Are there other groups in Myanmar that complicate the matter such as the Karen people? How can a country with such a militaristic background achieve peace through diplomacy?
Highlighted Timeline of Events

8th Century- The Rohingya exist in the independent state of Arakan, modern-day Rakhine state

1057- First unified Burmese state is founded with Buddhism adopted as the official religion

1784- Burma conquers the Arakan state

1824-86- Britain wages two wars and conquers the Burmese kingdom

1937- Burma is separated from India in British colonial view and becomes a crown colony

1942- Japan occupies Burma, Burmese nationalists attack Muslim communities

1945- Burma liberated by British with help of Aung San and Rohingya fighters

1947- Leader Aung San is assassinated along with 6 of his cabinet, U Nu becomes the leader

1948- Burma becomes independent with U Nu as Prime Minister but the country is weak and plagued with ethnic nationalist and communist militias fighting for territory throughout the country

1962- General Ne Win leads a coup against U Nu and the military takes over, establishing “The Burmese way to Socialism”

July 1988- Ne Win announces his “retirement” but still strongly influences the country as chairman of the Socialist Programme Party

August 1988- Thousands are killed in riots around the country and the SLORC is founded, Aung San Suu Kyi is placed under house arrest

1990- Elections are held with the NLD winning a landslide but results ignored by the military

May 2004- A constitutional convention is held despite strong protests from international observers and the NLD who see it as the military’s attempt to legitimize their junta government

April 2008- New proposed constitution published, the military is given ¼ of the seats in parliament, Suu Kyi barred from holding office

May 2008- Cyclone Nargis kills 300,000+ but constitution passed with 98% of the vote, fraud obvious to outside observers

March 2011- Thein Sein is sworn in as president of a nominally civilian government

July 2012- President Sein declares that Myanmar is not responsible for what happens to Rohingya since they are a threat to national security and illegally here from Bangladesh

October 2012- A meeting of highly respected Buddhist monks urge towns to band together to “help solve” the “Rohingya problem

November 2012- After riots against the Rohingya leave tens of thousands homeless, Human Rights Watch declares the violence as “crimes against humanity” and as part of “a campaign of ethnic cleansing”

February 2014- Buddhists and Muslims are forbidden from intermarrying and Doctors Without Borders are expelled from Myanmar

April 2014- In the first census in 30 years, Muslims cannot register as Rohingya, forcing them to either ignore the census or mark themselves as Bengali ie. illegal immigrants from Bangladesh
March 2015 - White cards (identification cards) held by Rohingya are invalidated, further identifying Rohingya as non-citizens

March 2016 - Htin Kyaw is sworn in as president with Suu Kyi as quasi-Prime Minister, fully ending the 50+ year junta government

September 2017 - Suu Kyi denies reports of atrocities against the Rohingya

Source: https://thewire.in/external-affairs/rohingya-myanmar-timeline

Note: It is highly recommended that you follow this link and read the full timeline in order to better understand the history of Myanmar and how the Rohingya crisis developed