

Rohingya Identity Crisis: A Case Study

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| Received: 08.04.2019 | Accepted: 17.04.2019 | Published: 30.04.2019

DOI:10.21276/sjhss.2019.4.4.3

Abstract

For a long time, the Rohingya crisis has been a long debated issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Recently, the same issue got an influx and major attention of nations and international organizations as millions of Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh. This paper aims to highlight this form a very close range. The authors went to the Rohingya refugee camps located in Cox's Bazar and collected data through direct interview with the refugees. In addition to that, information from different published sources like media, websites and articles were collected to write this paper. At the end, the authors urged international communities to help solving this crisis. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of research in this issue. The authors are expecting that this article can be used as the base paper for further research in Rohingya issue.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Humanitarian crisis, Myanmar, Bangladesh, International community.

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INTRODUCTION

Discriminatory policies of Myanmar's government since the late 1970s have compelled hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya to flee their homes in the predominantly Buddhist country [1-3]. Most have crossed by land into Bangladesh, while others have taken to the sea to reach Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Beginning in 2017, renewed violence, including reported rape, murder, and arson, triggered an exodus of Rohingya amid charges of ethnic cleansing against Myanmar's security forces. Those forces claim they are carrying out a campaign to reinstate stability in the western region of Myanmar, but international pressure on the country's elected leaders to rein in violence continues to rise.

Many Rohingyas are currently residing at the refugee camps inside Bangladeshi territory being internally displaced and stateless by the Myanmar government [4]. According to a recent UNHCR report, from 1948 to 1999, more than 250,000 refugees have arrived in Bangladesh. In a recent influx, of more than 70,000 new refugees (Rohingya) arrived only in October, 2016. The southeast part of Bangladesh has 2 big refugee camps (world's largest) for the Rohingya refugees, but even those two camps are not enough for the big number of refugees. In the meantime, many Rohingya refugees are giving money to the brokers to

take them on dangerous voyages to Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh) and to Thailand or Malaysia [5, 6]. Many international organizations are working for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, such as UNHCR, Red Crescent, Red Cross, WFP, WHO, Human Rights Watch etc.

However, it is very hard to say that there is no clear consensus among the international responses. A few international organizations highlighted the impact social construction and violence of Rakhaine State. Understanding the role of daily or environmental stressors in mitigating mental health symptoms in humanitarian environments, such as the condition of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, it is necessary to highlight the activity of the international organizations to the Rohingya refugees. Since August last year, more than 700,000 Rohingya have taken shelter in Cox's Bazar District of Bangladesh due to the violence in Myanmar making it the world's largest and fastest growing refugee camp; and putting pressure on the environment, existing infrastructure and social services that were already constrained. Still now, Rohingya refugees are coming to Bangladesh for the shelter and so far there is not any suggestion from international community for how to solve this problem [7]. It is the bitter truth that near about 10 million Rohingya refugees is roaming around the world as homeless and stateless people. Therefore, the question arises is it a good identity for representing them as a stateless people

in the modern generation? This crisis should be solved as early as possible otherwise it will be giving birth to another numerous problems. If international community does not take care of Rohingya refugee crisis, it indicates that we are giving chance to create another minority group for distorting civilization like Al Qaeda or ISIS. If Rohingya refugee people do get any specific identity, it would be a catastrophe for the civilization. That is why; the issue must be solved as early as possible. Myanmar should take back Rohingyas from Bangladesh and prepare for reconstructing their housing, health and education.

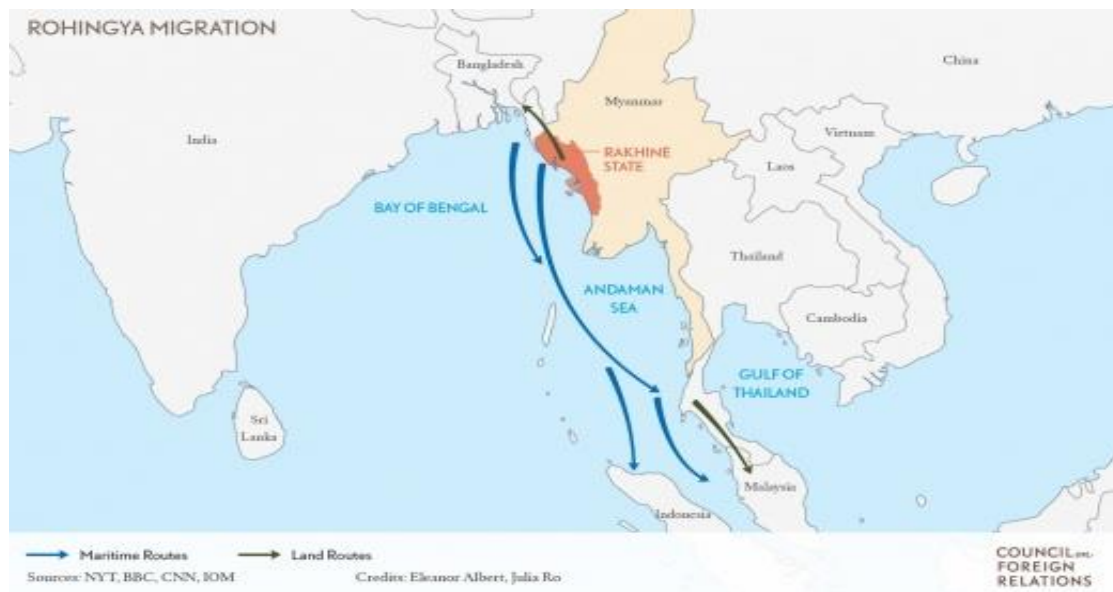
LITERATURE REVIEW

Rohingya: Who are they?

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority who practice a Sufi-inflected variation of Sunni Islam. There are an estimated 3.5 million Rohingya dispersed worldwide. Before August 2017, the majority of the estimated one million Rohingya in Myanmar resided in Rakhine State, where they accounted for nearly a third of the population. They differ from Myanmar's dominant Buddhist groups ethnically, linguistically, and religiously [8].

The Rohingya trace their origins in the region to the fifteenth century, when thousands of Muslims came to the former Arakan Kingdom [9]. Many others arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Rakhine was governed by colonial rule as part of British India. Since independence in 1948, successive governments in Burma, renamed Myanmar in 1989, have refuted the Rohingya's historical claims and denied the group recognition as one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups. The Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many trace their roots in Myanmar back centuries.

Neither the central government nor Rakhine's dominant ethnic Buddhist group, known as the Rakhine, recognize the label "Rohingya," a self-identifying term that surfaced in the 1950s, which experts say provides the group with a collective political identity. Though the etymological root of the word is disputed, the most widely accepted theory is that *Rohang* derives from the word "Arakan" in the Rohingya dialect and *ga* or *gya* means "from." by identifying as Rohingya, the ethnic Muslim group asserts its ties to land that was once under the control of the Arakan Kingdom, according to Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a Thailand-based advocacy group.



Source: Council of Foreign Relations, UK (2018)

What is the legal status of the Rohingya?

The government refuses to grant the Rohingya citizenship, and as a result most of the group's members have no legal documentation, effectively making them stateless. Myanmar's 1948 citizenship law was already exclusionary, and the military junta, which seized power in 1962, introduced another law twenty years later that stripped the Rohingya of access to full citizenship. Until recently, the Rohingya had been able to register as temporary residents with identification cards, known as white cards, which the junta began

issuing to many Muslims, both Rohingya and non-Rohingya, in the 1990s. The white cards conferred limited rights but were not recognized as proof of citizenship. Still, they did provide some recognition of temporary stay for the Rohingya in Myanmar [10].

In 2014, the government held an UN-backed national census, its first in thirty years. The Muslim minority group was initially permitted to identify as Rohingya, but after Buddhist nationalists

threatened to boycott the census, the government decided Rohingya could only register if they identified as Bengali instead.

Similarly, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists protesting the Rohingya's right to vote in a 2015 constitutional referendum, then President Thein Sein canceled the temporary identity cards in February 2015, effectively revoking their newly gained right to vote. (White card holders were allowed to vote in Myanmar's 2008 constitutional referendum and 2010 general elections.) In the 2015 elections, which were widely touted by international monitors as free and fair, no parliamentary candidate was of the Muslim faith. "Country-wide anti-Muslim sentiment makes it politically difficult for the government to take steps seen as supportive of Muslim rights," writes the International Crisis Group.

Muslim minorities continue to consolidate under one Rohingya identity despite documentation by rights groups and researchers of systematic disenfranchisement, violence, and instances of anti-Muslim campaigns.

Why are the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar?



Source: Field survey, 2018

What's Caused the Recent Mass Departure?

Clashes in Rakhine broke out in August 2017, after a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for attacks on police and army posts [13]. The government declared ARSA a terrorist organization and the military mounted a brutal campaign that destroyed hundreds of Rohingya villages and forced nearly seven hundred thousand Rohingya to leave Myanmar. At least 6,700 Rohingya were killed in the first month of attacks, between August 25 and September 24, 2017, according to the international medical charity 'Doctors Without Borders'. Myanmar's security forces also allegedly opened fire on fleeing civilians and planted land mines near border crossings used by Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

Rakhine State is Myanmar's least developed state, with a poverty rate of 78 percent.

The Myanmar government has effectively institutionalized discrimination against the ethnic group through restrictions on marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement. For example, Rohingya couples in the northern towns of Maungdaw and Buthidaung are only allowed to have two children. Rohingya must also seek permission to marry, which may require them to bribe authorities and provide photographs of the bride without a headscarf and the groom with a clean-shaven face, practices that conflict with Muslim customs. To move to a new home or travel outside their townships, Rohingya must gain government approval [11].

Moreover, Rakhine State is Myanmar's least developed state, with a poverty rate of 78 percent, compared to the 37.5 percent national average, according to World Bank estimates. Widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of employment opportunities in Rakhine have exacerbated the cleavage between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. This tension is deepened by religious differences that have at times erupted into conflict [12].

Since the start of 2018, Myanmar authorities have reportedly cleared abandoned Rohingya villages and farmlands to build homes, security bases, and infrastructure. The government says this development is in preparation for the repatriation of refugees, but rights activists have expressed concern these moves could be intended to accommodate other populations in Rakhine State. Furthermore, some have raised doubts that the government's tactics have been in response to ARSA attacks, with reports showing that the military began implementing its policies nearly a year before ARSA struck.

Security campaigns in the past five years, notably in 2012 and 2016, also resulted in the flight of tens of thousands of Rohingya from their homes.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has described the violence as ethnic cleansing and the humanitarian situation as catastrophic. Rights groups and other UN leaders suspect acts of genocide have taken place. At an emergency UN Security Council meeting, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said Myanmar authorities have carried out a “brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority,” and she called on members to suspend weapons provisions to the military. Other Security Council members, including Russia and China, have resisted increasing pressure on Myanmar’s government because they say it is trying to restore stability. Sectarian violence is not new to Rakhine State. Security campaigns in the past five years, notably in 2012 and 2016, also resulted in the flight of tens of thousands of Rohingya from their homes.

Where are the Rohingya Migrating?

Bangladesh: Most Rohingya have sought refuge in nearby Bangladesh, which has limited resources and land to host refugees. More than 1.1 million people are refugees in the country, according to Bangladeshi authorities. The World Health Organization projects the birth of sixty thousand babies in Bangladesh’s crowded camps in 2018. Meanwhile, the risk of disease outbreak in camps is high, with health organizations warning of possible outbreaks of measles, tetanus, diphtheria, and acute jaundice syndrome. Moreover, more than 60 percent of the available water supply in refugee camps is contaminated, increasing the risk of spread of communicable and water-borne diseases. Vulnerable refugees have turned to smugglers, paying for transport out of Bangladesh and Myanmar and risking exploitation, including sexual enslavement. In November 2017, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a deal for the possible repatriation of hundreds of thousands of refugees, though details remained vague and the plan was postponed. Planned repatriations were delayed repeatedly throughout 2018.

Malaysia: As of October 2018, eighty thousand Rohingya were in Malaysia, according to the United Nations, though tens of thousands of others are in the country unregistered. Rohingya who arrive safely in Malaysia have no legal status and are unable to work, leaving their families cut off from access to education and health care.

Thailand: Thailand is a hub for regional human smuggling and serves as a common transit point for Rohingya. Migrants often arrive there by boat from Bangladesh or Myanmar before continuing on foot to Malaysia or by boat to Indonesia or Malaysia. The military-led Thai government has cracked down on smuggling rings after the discovery of mass graves in

alleged camps where gangs held hostages. But some experts say that while punishing traffickers disrupts the networks, it does not dismantle them.

Indonesia: The Rohingya have also sought refuge in Indonesia, although the number of refugees from Myanmar there remains relatively small because they are treated as illegal immigrants. Indonesia has rescued migrant boats off its shores and dispatched humanitarian aid and supplies to Bangladesh’s camps. Indonesian President Joko Widodo pledged more help during a visit to refugee camps in Bangladesh in January 2018.

Has civilian leadership changed the Myanmar government’s policies?

In 2016, Myanmar’s first democratically elected government in a generation came to power, but critics say it has been reluctant to advocate for Rohingya and other Muslims for fear of alienating Buddhist nationalists and threatening the power-sharing agreement the civilian government maintains with the military.

Some observers saw the establishment in August 2016 of an advisory commission on ethnic strife led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a positive development. However, subsequent outbreaks of violence and several long-simmering conflicts between other ethnically based insurgent groups and the government have curbed this optimism.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s de facto leader, has denied that ethnic cleansing is taking place and dismissed international criticism of her handling of the crisis, accusing critics of fueling resentment between Buddhists and Muslims in the country. In September 2017, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate said her government had “already started defending all the people in Rakhine in the best way possible.” That December, the Myanmar government denied access to the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, and suspended cooperation for the remainder of her term. Nevertheless, in September 2018 the UN’s fact-finding panel released a report recommending Myanmar’s army leaders be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and urging the UN Security Council to impose arms embargoes and sanctions [2].

How is the Region Responding?

Protesters have at times gathered in cities in Pakistan, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh to condemn the killing and persecution of Rohingya. Bangladesh’s foreign minister condemned the violence in Rakhine as “genocide” in September 2017 and Indonesia and Malaysia called on the Myanmar authorities to halt their campaign and bring an end to the violence. Bangladesh and Myanmar have held bilateral discussions aimed at repatriating the

Rohingya and guaranteeing their rights in Myanmar, but these have been ad hoc and have yet to produce a breakthrough.

In October 2018, authorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to repatriate several thousand Rohingya but offered few specifics on how those refugees would be selected [14]. Human Rights Watch suggested that those slated for repatriation had not volunteered, but rather were chosen at random by Bangladeshi authorities. Moreover, Myanmar officials did not specify whether returning refugees would be granted full citizenship rights, including freedom of movement.

Alongside criticism of the plan from the United States and human rights groups, the United Nations urged a cancellation and warned that conditions in Myanmar were still unsafe for Rohingya. Ultimately, the Rohingya in Bangladesh refused to return until their citizenship rights were guaranteed. Experts say the Bangladeshi government must decide whether to continue to struggle to provide shelter for so many refugees or expel them and draw the ire of Western governments and aid organizations.

Other governments in Southeast Asia generally lack established legal frameworks to protect refugees' rights, and the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have not coordinated a response to the deepening crisis. Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—all ASEAN members have yet to ratify the UN refugee convention or its protocol. ASEAN itself has been mostly silent on the plight of the Rohingya and on the growing numbers of asylum seekers in member countries, largely because of its members' commitment to the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

How has the rest of the world responded?

In December 2016, U.S. President (former) Barack Obama lifted sanctions against Myanmar, saying it had made strides in improving human rights. The move came amid a crackdown on Rohingya and was criticized by some as pre-mature. A year later, new U.S. sanctions were imposed against a Myanmar general for his alleged role in the military's attacks in Rakhine, and the U.S. government has continued to widen its sanctions regime on Myanmar military commanders in 2018, as evidence of the military's atrocities mounts.

Meanwhile, countries including the United States, Canada, Norway, and South Korea, as well as international donors, have upped their humanitarian assistance as the flow of Rohingya to Bangladesh has grown, and in early 2018 a team of UK medics led an emergency response to help stem the spread of disease in camps. The United Nations requested \$951 million in

immediate relief funds for 2018. At the November 2018 ASEAN summit, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence ramped up pressure on Suu Kyi, saying that Myanmar's "violence and persecution" toward the Rohingya were inexcusable.

Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Arakan Project, and Fortify Rights continue to appeal for international pressure on Myanmar's government. In November 2018, Amnesty International stripped Suu Kyi of the Ambassador of Conscience Award it had conferred on her during her fifteen-year house arrest. Earlier in the year, the ICC's chief prosecutor launched an investigation into alleged war crimes that forced the exodus of Rohingya.

Still, resentment of the minority group has run deep for generations. Without overhauling "a culture of pervasive prejudice" and ensuring that Rohingya are treated as human beings, the situation in Rakhine State is unlikely to improve as Myanmar government is still ignoring them as Bangladeshis [15].

The End Story

So far, there is no notable improvement of the solution. The international sides have not yet shown any serious interest to come to a unified agreement regarding Rohingya. The aids and human rights organizations only working with the government of Bangladesh in providing food, clothes and other necessities. But, the real solution lies on the returning of these people either to go back to Myanmar with all basic citizen rights or arrangement of permanent shelter in some other countries as refugees recognized by those governments. Bangladesh government is almost fighting this battle alone from 1980s to manage all these helpless people for humanitarian reason. Without a permanent solution for this problem, these people can be involved with some terrorist organizations for money as they are in a vulnerable state. In that case, the whole South-east Asian region will be in grave danger. Therefore, urgent and solid solution to necessary that can only be possible with a unified agreement between Myanmar, Bangladesh and the international negotiators.

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