

## Why Don't We Know About Myanmar?

Imagine being stuck in a crowded refugee camp with limited resources for years, not knowing what lies ahead. Even being a history nerd, I was unaware of what is happening in Myanmar and other 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries around the world. Why don't we know about what is happening there? Is it because of their brown skin? We all know about the situation in Ukraine, yet when I asked my own parents about Myanmar, they did not even know about the crisis? I am here to educate you about this crisis.

First, let me describe Myanmar. It is in Southeast Asia on the coast of the Indian Ocean. The country borders China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, and Thailand. Myanmar's landscape is covered in tropical rainforest, home to bears, tigers, crocodiles, and the Burmese python, one of the biggest snakes in the world. Tibetan mountains stand in the north and flat plains lay in its southern panhandle. The country's population mainly identifies as Burmese and Buddhist with Burmese being the official language. Myanmar has had multiple dynasties come to power until the country was eventually united under one empire. They fought three wars against the British until Myanmar eventually surrendered. Then the Japanese took over in the 1940s taking Myanmar from Britain. Finally, they got their independence after WWII. Myanmar is incredibly poor with 40% of the government's profits coming from opium. It is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest opium producer in the world.

The crisis in Myanmar results from a military coup, turning Myanmar into a communist police state. Myanmar is a Buddhist country with a small Muslim population (the Rohingya

people), who the military has blamed as a scapegoat for all the chaos. The Buddhists wanted these Muslims to leave. So, when the military came to power, it began a process known as ethnic cleansing, killing all the Muslims in Myanmar. Many Rohingya are trying to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, according to unher.org, over 700,000 Rohingya have fled the country as of 2019. Unfortunately, the Muslim refugees in Bangladesh are not living any better than they were in Myanmar. Huge masses of people gathered in refugee camps in Bangladesh have made the Myanmar-Bangladesh border one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Fresh water is hard to come by, communal showers are in place, but privacy is impossible to find. As for Muslims still in Myanmar, entire villages have burned down, people are in danger of being shot, and guerilla warfare rages on. Protests against the military authority have been openly fired upon and protesters often disappear.

The impact of the crisis is affecting over 1.3 million people (both refugees and volunteers) in Myanmar and Bangladesh according to unhc.org. Education in these camps is not ideal. Bangladesh is losing money by having to take care of these refugees who are not paying taxes mainly because refugees struggle to find jobs and shelter. Some may take a while to leave these camps. With a lack of resources and the fact that Bangladesh already has a problem with overpopulation, these refugees are not receiving the same kind of treatment you might see in other, more prosperous countries. Mental health is affecting many refugees in Bangladesh, suffering from trauma after leaving Myanmar, as well as not knowing if they will do better in the future. Understanding these issues will allow us to make change through protests, letters, phone calls, donations, or just plain spreading the word about what is happening.

To fight the military government of Myanmar and support the refugees in neighboring countries, I believe the U.S. should pass embargo acts and sanctions against the Myanmar military and deliver supplies and equipment to Bangladesh and organizations focused on helping the refugees in Myanmar. One of the organizations helping refugees in Myanmar is World Vision. According to the website: [Worldvision.org](http://Worldvision.org), they do work in all 34 Rohingya camps across South-East Asia, providing help for over 500,000 refugees. They help by teaming up with World Food Program or W.F.P. as they are their primary implementing partner. By teaming with W.F.P. they help prevent malnutrition in these camps by providing food and fresh water. They even provide hygiene and sanitization products. Another way Rohingya are being supported is through media. For example, according to a NewsELA article, "Sesame Street" has introduced Rohingya Muppets into the show to help represent younger refugees in the media. Any help to improve the lives of these refugees is important to the mental and physical health of these people.

As I learn more about these refugees in Myanmar, the more I think about how difficult the lives of these people must be. Refugees could be in these camps for 10 years before being relocated, and to get citizenship where they have been relocated could take another three years according to GK, an immigration lawyer who visited my class. Even when they have gained citizenship, they still may never see their community or family again. As previously stated, the refugees that are not relocated often get a poor education, are left hungry, and are in poor mental and physical health. It is time to stop blaming refugees for the situations they face and quit turning a blind eye to third world countries. I can help the Myanmar refugees by making donations to companies like KIND (Kids in Need of Defense) or Refugee Strong, or sign up for

KIDS BY KIDS, an organization that connects refugee children with other kids to help them learn English via internet call like zoom. I can welcome refugees into my community by taking the steps to accept and treat refugees as part of the community. I want to help these refugees and you can, too.

Resources:

Britannica School: [school.eb.com](http://school.eb.com)

The UN Refugee Agency: [unhcr.org](http://unhcr.org)

[worldvision.org](http://worldvision.org)

Class Interview with GK – immigration lawyer

NewsELA: "The Plight of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and IDPs Around the Globe"

Geography Now

NewsELA: "Sesame Street" unveils Rohingya Muppets to help refugee children