

The Rohingya Crisis: Its History and How We Can Solve This Humanitarian Emergency

In August of 2017, news channels around the world were reporting the same story. Thousands of people were fleeing the nation of Myanmar. The one thing these people had in common? They were all Rohingya. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority group that have been mistreated by the government of their country, Myanmar, for centuries. Over the years, many Rohingya have been seeking refuge in other nations, mainly Bangladesh, as periods of violence have come and gone. What is happening to the Rohingya people is, at its core, ethnic cleansing, and they must be given their lives back.

The Rohingya are an ethnic group that have been residing in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, since the 12th century. They mostly identify as Muslim, although some are Hindu as well. Currently, there are about 1.1 million Rohingya in Myanmar. They all live in Rakhine, a coastal state on the west side of the country. The government of Myanmar has set up camps within Rakhine in which all Rohingya must reside. No individual is allowed out of the camps without permission from the government. The conditions of these camps are poor, to say the least. The mortality rate from malnutrition and disease is much higher here than in any other part of Myanmar. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has become all the more obvious. The reason that the Rohingya live in these camps is that they aren't eligible to be citizens of Myanmar, unlike several other ethnic groups. Because they are denied citizenship, the Rohingya have been rendered stateless. This leaves them vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation and abuse.

The Rohingya have had a long history in Burma (Myanmar). During the 8th century, several Muslim traders relocated to Mrak-U, a kingdom within the Arakan region of Burma. Another influx of these traders arrived in both the 12th and 13th centuries, after which Muslim presence in the area was established. During the 14th century, soldiers from neighboring kingdoms tried to invade Mrak-U. An army of Muslims aided the kingdom and succeeded in expelling these invaders. After this, relations between the Muslims and Mrak-U were solidified. Unfortunately, though, civil unrest began in 1784 when Arakan was conquered by the neighboring Ava Kingdom. The Rohingya were dissatisfied with the rule of the Ava king, and many fled to Chittagong, East Bengal, a British-controlled area. Several years after, starting in 1824, Burma was also ruled by the British. In the 120 years that the British controlled Burma, relatively few incidences of violence against the Rohingya were reported. During this time, both Burma and Bangladesh were registered as provinces of India. This meant that any movement within this area was considered internal migration. Labor jobs were potent in Burma, so several Rohingya moved back for the work. But in 1942, during WW2, Japan invaded Burma. This led to an eruption in violence against groups who had benefited from British rule, including the Rohingya. When Burma became an independent nation in 1948, tensions between the government and Rohingya were at their highest point in centuries. Over the years to come, the Rohingya would be slowly pushed out of Burmese society, and then denied citizenship altogether in 1982. The government's argument for this? The Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The truth is that this claim is simply false.

It is clear to see that what is happening in Myanmar is ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing is defined as “the mass expulsion or killing of members of an unwanted ethnic or religious group in a society.” It is one of the 11 crimes against humanity. The government of Myanmar attempts to cover up their misdeeds with a weak argument, stating that they refuse the Rohingya citizenship because they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. This cannot possibly be the case. The Rohingya have ties to Myanmar dating as far back as the 12th century. It is unconscionable to invalidate a history of 800 years like that. No matter what they say, the government of Myanmar isn’t doing this because they believe the Rohingya are illegally residing in their country. According to many human rights activists, the true reason behind these cruel actions is simply nationalism-fueled racism.

Over the years, several attempts have been made to repatriate the Rohingya. Repatriation is the return of someone to their own country. These attempts have all been headed by Bangladesh, which makes sense considering that it is the country where most Rohingya have fled to. But Bangladesh isn’t working with the Rohingya for the right reasons. At times, it seems as though instead of helping the Rohingya, Bangladesh is instead pushing them out. The one request the Rohingya have before returning to Myanmar is that they will be able to gain citizenship of the country and be accepted into its society. Bangladesh has repeatedly ignored these requests and has tried to rush the repatriation process. Another thing is that the conditions of the camps that house the refugees have been steadily declining for decades. The main reason for this is that Bangladesh doesn’t consider the Rohingya to be refugees at all. According to the nation’s Foreign Minister, AK Abdul Momen, the Rohingya are “persecuted and displaced people whom we extended temporary shelter to here in Bangladesh”. And although it was remarkable of the Bangladeshi government to keep the Myanmar border open for so long, especially after the huge crisis in 2017, on March 1st, 2019, Bangladesh announced that they would no longer be accepting new refugees. This was a huge blow to the efforts made to help the Rohingya.

So, what is the best course of action to take? The most important thing that needs to happen is that the Rohingya must stop being treated like a burden. For the longest time, they have just been looked at as more mouths to feed. Instead of viewing them so negatively, we should start looking for more opportunities that could mutually benefit both the refugees and the host country. If the Rohingya were to be integrated into Bangladeshi society, the results could be favorable for both. Although it does cost host countries to house refugees, there are several greater benefits that come along with this. Some of these benefits include higher productivity, cultural enrichment, and an economic boost. One of the easiest ways to start the process of integration would be to give the Rohingya a proper education. Providing the Rohingya with an education could be the first step towards giving them a home in Bangladesh. With the proper knowledge, many of the potential troubles they could face with integration would no longer be an issue. If Bangladesh were to see how the Rohingya could be a bolster to the welfare of their country, the crisis would be much closer to being resolved.

Of course, the solution mentioned above is only short-term. The final solution to this crisis is complete repatriation. Being able to live in their home country is the Rohingya’s basic

right. Repatriation with the guarantee of citizenship is the least we can do for them after all they have been through. The question is, how would we go about doing this? The government of Myanmar is not budging from their racist and inhumane position, and they are the only ones who can grant the Rohingya citizenship. Well, the answer lies in the recent coup that occurred in Myanmar last February. On February 1st, 2021, the military of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw, seized control of the government. Dissatisfied by the results of the nation's 2020 election that had sided with the democratic government of Myanmar, the National League of Democracy (NLD), they turned to violence and took the country by force. Although this occurrence was terrible and had negative consequences for ethnic minorities, there is a silver lining. Since the coup, the NLD has been working in exile. Recently, they formed a group called the National Unity Government (NUG). The vision of this group is to "build a peaceful Federal Democracy Union which guarantees freedom, justice, and equality." Within this vision is a vow to repeal the 1982 law that denied the Rohingya citizenship of Myanmar. This is a game-changer, as previously, both the military and democratic governments were against the Rohingya altogether. But before the repeal can happen, the NLD has to be back in power. The overwhelming majority of people in Myanmar support the NLD. They have been fighting for democracy in their country for more than a year now. The international response, on the other hand, has varied. While some countries have taken productive measures, others have shied away from taking the necessary action to overthrow the Tatmadaw. In order for democracy to be restored, a few things need to happen. The first of these is international acceptance of the NLD as the true government of Myanmar. France and the European Parliament have already done this, stating that they "support the NLD as the legitimate representatives of Myanmar." Other countries must follow suit. After this, measures must be taken to limit the military's resources. A large part of doing this would be to place sanctions on natural gas. Finally, nations must supply aid to those working on the front lines in Myanmar. Once the NLD is back in power, we must also make sure that they follow through on their promise to accept the Rohingya. After this, repatriation of the Rohingya can officially begin.

The road to repatriation seems long and difficult. Some may even say it isn't worth trying. But after what they have suffered through, we owe it to the Rohingya to give them the life they deserve. Since 1982, they haven't had a home, and for years before this, they were treated like outsiders. After the violence in 2017, the crisis has slowly faded into the background. People have stopped thinking about the Rohingya altogether. But just because we aren't thinking about them doesn't mean their suffering is any less. We need to make solving this crisis a priority. After all, as Martin Luther King Jr once said, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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