

**Forum:** Advisory Panel

**Issue:** The Situation in the Rakhine State

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## **Introduction**

Every single day, there are thousands of refugees entering Bangladesh from Myanmar's western Rakhine State. This minority, known as the Rohingya, are being brutally treated by the Burmese military and government. The Burmese state military has launched a violent offensive against the Rohingya, who are an ethnic Muslim minority that has been living in that part of the region for hundreds of years. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights Violations reported that "since August of 2014, 400,000 Rohingya refugees have left the Rakhine State in order to seek asylum in another country." Reports claim that the military has burned down Rohingya villages and around 43,000 people have already been killed. As a result of the law, their rights to study, work, travel, marry, practise Islam, and access health services have been and continue to be restricted. As an ethnic minority, they cannot vote, and even if they navigate the citizenship test, they must identify as "naturalized" as opposed to being a Rohingya Muslim.

Living in a country where 88% of the country's entire population follows Buddhism, there has been no place for different minorities like the Rohingya that follow different beliefs to come in. Burma today is one of the most radical Buddhist countries in the world, and also the most religious Buddhist country in terms of the proportion of monks in the population and proportion of income that is spent on religion. Being subjected to "ethnic cleansing" in their home state, some Rohingya refugees have fled to Malaysia and Thailand in search of a better life, however most of them have ended up fleeing to Bangladesh. Once in Bangladesh, there are forced to live in overcrowded campsites where there is a lack of food, security, and access to necessities. Since 2015, around 900,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh as many international powers such as China and India have not allowed many refugees to seek asylum.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

## **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is a country located between the countries of India and Bangladesh. It has a population of about 164.7 million people and has been the largest country to take in a large population of Rohingya refugees. However, being just 142, 998 square kilometres long, the country is one of the most densely populated, with its people being crammed in major cities and rural villages. Hence, Bangladesh is extremely poor to manage such a massive exodus of Rohingya refugees coming in each day. Refugees today are arriving faster than the United Nations can look after as in the refugee camps, there is an acute shortage of safe water and sanitation. Today, approximately half of the Rohingya refugees have yet to be reached by healthcare and shelter.

## **Rakhine State**

The Rakhine State is located in Western Burma and is home to the Rohingya people. It is the poorest state in Burma with a poverty rate of 78 percent, compared to the 37.5 percent national average, according to the World Bank estimate. One of the leading causes of this problem is that the Rohingya people today are forced to live in ghetto-like camps, and due to this, there is a lack of essential services and opportunities for the Rohingya people and community. Rohingya's are descendants from the former Arakan Kingdom which was an independent coastal kingdom located on the Bay of Bengal.

## **Asylum-Seekers**

The United Nations defines asylum-seeking as “someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed as a refugee entering a new nation.” In regards to the Rohingya, most refugees have fled to Bangladesh hoping to seek asylum, however, countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and the UAE have also welcomed Rohingya refugees with open arms.

## **“Ethnic Cleansing”**

The term “ethnic cleansing” has been served for some of the worst human atrocities in history. Today, the United Nations defines this term as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means. The civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from a certain geographic area” Burma today is a textbook example, as the military has launched attacks on the Rohingya community that are the most significant minority living in the country.

## Background Information

### Burma's First Military Junta

In 1962, Myanmar was taken over by a military coup d'état, where the existing government was thrown out of office as the military took over the seat of government. Through this action, the military scrapped the constitution and created a military junta. As the main governing body of Myanmar, the military promoted fierce nationalism based on the country's Buddhist identity; and when they needed a common enemy to unite the country's Buddhist population, the Rohingya were singled out.

### Initial Tensions

Tensions between the Buddhist majority and Rohingya minority go back to the Second World War, where each group supported opposing sides. The Rohingya's sided with the British colonists who were ruling the country at that time, and who also helped Rohingya communities by providing them aid and other essential necessities. On the other hand; the Buddhist majority supported the Japanese invaders, as they believed that through their support, the Japanese could end the British rule

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
800 BC	During the eighth century, the Rohingya, a people of South Asian origin, dwelled in an independent kingdom called Arakan. The Arakan Kingdom was located in modern-day Rakhine State and had a population of about 160,000 people. Additionally, the community came into contact with Islam through the presence of Arab traders in the region. Under the influence of Islam, they cut all ties with the Indian empires and the western State of Bengal.
1784	In 1784, King Bodawpaya of Burma conquered the Arakan Kingdom which forced hundreds and thousands of Rohingya's to flee Burma and seek refuge in India. The ones that

continued are said to be the ancestors of the present-day Rohingya population.

1942 In 1942, Japan invaded Burma, pushing out the Rohingya backed British forces out of the country. This retreat caused Burmese nationalistic groups to attack Muslim communities that in the past, had been governed and ruled by the British. The Rohingya's had initially supported the British as they had promised this community an autonomous state which would have been called 'Arakan'.

1945 In the year 1945, towards the end of World War II, Britain recaptured Burma from Japanese occupation with the help of General Aung San. Upon this action, the Rohingya's felt betrayed as the British had not yet fulfilled their promise of granting the Rakhine State as an independent nation from Burma.

1962 In the year 1962, General Ne Win and his Burmese Socialist Programme Party seized power and took a hard line against the Rohingya minority. In addition to this, the general also created a sense of Burmese nationalism amongst the Buddhist majority.

1978 In 1978, a massive crackdown forced around 200,000 Rohingya's to flee to Bangladesh. The Burmese military used extreme violence and rape to drive many Rohingya's out of the nation. However, after these tensions eased down a few years after, around 170,000 of the total population that fled, returned to Burma to start a new life.

1982 In 1982, the Burmese government passed The Citizenship Act, which recognized 135 total ethnic minorities in the nation. However, the Rohingya with a population of about one million

people were excluded, and therefore, they officially became a “stateless minority.”

1991 In 1991, Myanmar's military launched yet another operation called “Operation Clean and Beautiful”. This time, around 250,000 Rohingya's fled to Bangladesh because of atrocities committed by the Burmese military. Being a Buddhist nationalist state, the Burmese government wanted to get rid of most ethnic Muslim minorities.

2017 In 2016, a Rohingya militant group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army emerged and coordinated small scale attacks on Myanmar's border police stations. The emergence of this militant group has sparked the current crisis against Rohingya civilians. A brutal retaliation by the state security forces has led to thousands of deaths and a mass exodus of Rohingya refugees. Since 2016, 210 villages have been completely burned to the ground causing the fastest-growing humanitarian crisis in years.

## **Major Parties Involved**

### **Myanmar**

Myanmar's government has been accused of extrajudicial killings, local militia burning down villages, and Myanmar's military forces have been accused of planting landmines near Rohingya villages, preventing them from escaping the nation. 90% of Burma's total population is Buddhist, and therefore, the government has not yet recognized Rohingya's as citizens; as they don't have passports or have freedom of movement. Today, they've been called “the most unwanted people on the planet,” as countries around the world are rejecting giving them citizenships. The very few countries that are allowing such a significant exodus of Rohingya, such as Bangladesh, have become too overpopulated to cope with the number of refugees that are coming into the nation. Myanmar's leader Aung Saan Su Kyi has been heavily criticized for this matter as she has been relatively silent on

this issue. In addition to this, the military government controls 25% of the Burmese government and therefore have quite a vast majority in parliament. Today countries with a significant amount of Rohingya include Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

### **United Nations**

The United Nations have set up refugee and aid camps all over the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and in August 2017 received around 723,000 refugees. Since UN intervention, sanitation has improved, and Rohingya refugees are safe and living in a clean environment. As refugee camps are getting overfilled, the United Nations has set up new tents with medical facilities, housing, and access to safe drinking water for all of the refugees coming in from Burma.

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