

# Crimes Against Humanity

The Case of the Rohingya People in Burma



(http://aldersledge.blogspot.ca)

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# **Executive Summary**

Burma's Rohingya Muslims are currently subject to crimes against humanity by the Burmese government, witnessed in recent acts of murder, torture, forced displacement, imprisonment, religious persecution, and restriction of movement. Should the Burmese state fail to end such crimes against humanity, there is potential for the situation to escalate to genocide. Given its mandate "to ensure that the government of Canada does all that it can to prevent and protect civilian populations from genocide and crimes against humanity," the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity is urged to take immediate action. Notably, Canada should be encouraged to use regional diplomatic relations to lobby for amendments to Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law, strengthen diplomatic relations with Burma and establish and host a truth commission to overcome recent violence.





# **Burma's (Myanmar) Demographics**

Burma's¹ dominant ethnic group is the Burmese, accounting for 68% of the country's population of 55,167,330. A number of minority ethnic groups are also present, representing small portions of the population: Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), Mon (2%) and other (5%). Buddhism is the predominant religion in Burma, accounting for 89% of the population. Christians and Muslims represent ~4% of the population, respectively. While Buddhism is not the state religion, the majority of the Burmese tend to follow the Theravada school of Buddhism. Reports indicate that the Burmese government has increased the prominence of the Buddhist religion to the detriment of other religions.

# Organization of the Rohingya

The Rohingya is an indigenous group in Burma that practices Islam. The Rohingya constitute for ~1% of the total population, ~4% of the Arakan state population, and ~45% of the general Muslim population. The Rohingya population is territorially concentrated in the northern-western state of Arakan, sometimes referred to as the Rakhine state (Annex 1 – Map). The Rohingya is represented by the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), based in London, England. Established in 1998, the ARNO is a broad-based organization that is seeking self-determination of the Rohingya. The interests of the Rohingya are further represented by special interest groups such as the Arakan Project who collaborate closely with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma. Domestically the Rohingya population is not represented at any level in the Burmese political system.

#### **Causes of the Conflict & Current Status**

Persecution and the deliberate targeting of the Rohingya started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Burmese occupation forced large populations of both the Rohingya Muslims and the Arakanese Buddhists to flee the Arakan state. The British occupation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century provided the ethnic groups with a period of stability. During that period both the Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists lived side by side in peace. Nevertheless, in the years preceding independence, the Takhine Party, a predominant anti-colonial faction, began to provoke the Arakanese Buddhists against the Rohingya Muslims convincing the Buddhists that the Islamic culture was an existential threat to their people. In essence, the seed of hatred between the two sides was planted by the Takhine Party and the repression began immediately in 1938 when the Takhine Party took control of the newly independent state. Anti-Rohingya repression, maltreatment, and massacres have since been either overlooked or sponsored by different ruling governments (Annex 2 – Timeline of Rohingya History). At present, Buddhists, specifically the Rakhine minority group, have a primordial and entrenched fear of the Rohingya, and subsequently targeted the Rohingya population. Attacks have been justified by the Rakhine as a pre-emptive security measure for the greater Buddhist vitality.

Most recently, in June and October 2012, sectarian violence between the Rohingya Muslims and the Arakanese Buddhist killed almost 200 people, destroyed close to 10,000 homes and displaced 127,000. Another 25,000 Rohingya fled to India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Although 10 international agencies are operating in 90 camps for the displaced in Arakan, the camps are rudimentary shelters at risk

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Canada does not recognize the name Myanmar which was imposed by the Burmese regime in 1989, and continues to refer to the country as Burma.





of flooding and experiencing serve malnutrition. xvii Aid workers have been intimidated and their movement is restricted. While the Rohingya Muslims were largely subject to violence, the Kaman Muslims were also targeted. Tensions are still high between Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists and human rights violations persist. XiX

The ethnic conflict that exists in the Arakan region today has its foundations based in the isolationist and cleansing policies of the Takhine Party's provocation of Arakanese Buddhists against Rohingya Muslims. However, the continuation of the conflict has been fuelled by the arrogance of Burmese officials<sup>2</sup> and their ongoing campaigns against the Rohingya. The roots of the conflict can be classified as primordial, anti-Rohingyan, and a form of 'Myanmarinism' of the Arakan state. While the current threat is against the Rohingya, the actions of the Burmese government indicate that the Muslim population and the Islamic religion are primary targets.

#### **Chief Characteristics of the Conflict**

- **♦ Massacres** –Annex 2 reviews the massacres that affected the Rohingya overtime.
- ❖ Denial of Citizenship There are 64 native ethnic minority groups and more than 200 languages in Burma. The 1982 Citizenship Law does not include the Rohingya as an official ethnic group, labelling its people as foreigners in a native land, and making them stateless peoples. Ethnic Burmese often refer to the Rohingya Muslims as illegal Bengali immigrants. Burmese citizens aged 10 and above are eligible to apply for a national identity card which is essential for travel, business, medical care, and higher education. Persons who do not carry their identity cards with them may be detained and imprisoned. As per the Citizenship Law, the Rohingya population is not eligible to apply for the national identity card.
- Travel Ban- Muslims from the Arakan region are denied the freedom of mobility beyond the cities and townships they reside in. Those wanting to visit the Arakanese capital of Akyab and the national capital of Rangoon must acquire special travel cards issued by the government. These cards are often difficult to obtain and most applications are denied. In February 2001, a group of Muslims travelling with state issued travel cards were detained by the police and sentenced to seven years in prison. The lack of mobility has a significant impact on those seeking emergency medical treatment and the overall economic livelihood of the Rohingya.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In 1959, the general Rohingyan population was moving towards armed rebellion. During a visit to Arakan's capital, the Burmese Prime Minister promised equal citizenship to the Muslim population if they surrendered their arms. The Rohingya accepted this offer and abandoned their pursuit of an armed uprising, but the Burmese government never granted the Rohingya equal status in return.





- \* Restriction on Education The Rohingya and the general Muslim population are permitted to study in Burmese schools until they complete high school. While reports do not indicate a systematic trend of discrimination against students, general racial attitudes are negative towards the Rohingya. Many teachers talk down on the Muslim religion.\*\* Studies beyond the high school level require national identity cards.
- ❖ Restriction on Employment Urban work opportunities are virtually non-existent for the Rohingya population because of the lack of identity cards. Even if these opportunities were made available, the general Rohingya population lacks the educational skills to fill positions. Commuting to neighbouring communities and townships are restricted and only possible through special permission. As a result, Rohingya wanting to find jobs in industrial centers and those seeking to operate their own business find themselves at an extreme disadvantage. XXXX
- ❖ Marriage Difficulties It is extremely difficult for Muslims to get married. Marriage permits are issued by government authorities who demand high taxes ranging between 50 and 300,000 kyat. Applications take approximately 3 years to process and some who pay the taxes are not granted the permits after the long waiting period. These restrictions are perceived to be a component of the greater government policy to reduce the Muslim population.
- ❖ Discrimination Against Culture & Religion The central government has confronted all minority groups with a 'Myanmarization' policy. The Muslim culture is deemed foreign by the government, and believed to be a threat to the livelihood of the greater Buddhist population and their traditions. Mosques and Islamic schools, which are a staple of the Arakan urban landscape, are targeted, set on fire or replaced by Buddhist temples. XXXIII Communal prayers and gatherings have been banned since the 1962 coup. XXXIII

### **Trajectory of the Conflict**

The violence directed toward the Rohingya Muslims in 2012 appears to have been provoked by dominant ethnic groups in Burma, led by both the masses and the elite. Aligning with Kaufman, the recent conflict appears to have evolved from popular chauvinism, where dominant groups initiate hostility among the masses, to government jingoism, where the dominant elite create conflict in order to reinforce leadership. XXXXVIII This evolution is reflected in the shift from communal violence in June 2012 to the planned

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Bangladeshi authorities have not been permitting the UNHCR to register newly arriving Rohingya since 1992. Only those with complete documents are subject to the assistance of the handful of NGOs active in the camps.





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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> \$.05-380 in June 2013 (Canadian Dollars). As of 2012, GDP per capita in Burma is \$834.25 compared to \$52,209.92 in Canada. The average urban laborer performing unskilled work earns 1000-2500 kyat (\$1-2), rural agricultural workers generally earn less.

and organized violence by political and religious leaders in October 2012. Aligning with Michael Lund's conflict curve, the violence directed toward the Rohingya is escalating, having reached a stage of overt crisis in 2012 (Annex 3 – Lund's Conflict Curve). \*\*\*XXXVIII This represents a transition from instability to violent conflict.

Human Rights Watch reports that the crimes committed against the Rohingya in 2012 represent state-supported crimes against humanity, part of an overall campaign of ethnic cleansing. \*\*xxxix\*\* Indirectly, state forces did not prevent the violence directed toward the Rohingya by armed mobs of Arakanese Buddhists. \*\*I Further, the Burmese state has not taken accountability by failing to investigate or persecute those involved in the organization and execution of the violence. Directly, the Arakan state's religious and political leaders are accused of planning and executing the violence with the objective of removing the Rohingya from their territory. \*\*While the June 2012 violence appears to have been led by Arakanese Buddhists masses in response to crimes committed by Muslims, the October 2012 violence appears to have been highly organized and coordinated, resembling systematic crimes against humanity as defined by the Rome Statute. In support of this observation, Human Rights Watch refers to anti-Rohingya hate speech and propaganda that was widely distributed leading up to the October 2012 violence. \*\*Iii

Such claims are reinforced by Genocide Watch's 2012 Countries at Risk Report where Burma is identified to be at the extermination stage, the seventh of the eight stages of genocide. This is illustrated in the current massacres of the Rohingya Muslims and other minority ethnic groups such as the Shan, Kachin and Karen by the Burmese army. At the extermination stage, mass killings legally known as genocide, occur at the hands of armed forces in conjunction with local militias. On March 29, 2013, Genocide Watch issued an updated Genocide Emergency Alert for the Arakan State, calling on the authorities to cease human rights violations against the Rohingya and other minority groups and grant full citizenship to Rohingya. This report also urges the Bangladeshi government to allow the UNHCR to register Rohingya refugees.

In light of these claims, this report deems that the Rohingya are subject to crimes against humanity by the Burmese government. Considering an outbreak of violent conflict toward the Rohingya has not occurred since October 2012, genocide does not appear to be occurring at this point in time. Nonetheless, there is potential for the crimes against humanity to persist considering the ongoing human rights violations against the Rohingya and Muslims in the Arakan State. The United Nations Special Rapporteur notes ongoing religious persecution, arbitrary arrests and restriction of movement of the Rohingya Muslims. Vover 1,000 individuals, largely Rohingya men and boys, have been arbitrarily detained in poorly run prisons characterized by torture and maltreatment.

There is also potential for future incidents of violence to escalate to genocide given the systemic and structural repression of the Rohingya by the state, the involvement of political and religious leaders in the October 2012 violence, and the persistence of human rights violations.

### **Current Canadian Assistance**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> United Nations defines genocide as directed attempts to physically destroy a population, deliberate prevention of birth, and the forcible transfer of children.





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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In accordance the Rome Statute's definition of crimes against humanity which are adopted in the constitution of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity.

Current Canadian efforts regarding the situation are concentrated to assist the Rohingya refugees. A \$15.6 million, five year Canadian International Development Agency program (2010-2015) provides food and health care to Burmese refugees in neighbouring countries. Other contributions include a five year \$1.8 million Democracy Envelope of the Global Peace and Security Fund (2012-2017) which is aimed at increasing democratic capacity and supporting independent media. Also, the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok leads a \$100,000 small scale human rights awareness fund for Burmese relates issues.

#### Recommendations

Given its mandate, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity is urged to act on the following recommendations regarding the Rohingya in Burma.

First, the All-Party Parliamentary Group is urged to participate in a fact finding mission in Burma. Access to further credible and valid information may reveal that slow moving genocide has been occurring for decades or that genocide is in fact currently underway.

Second, the All-Party Parliamentary Group is urged to encourage the Canadian government to promote democracy in its bilateral dealings with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and at every international and regional forum for Burmese national reconciliation and reform. Efforts should immediately and primarily be aimed at reforming the 1982 Citizinsip Law in order to include the Rohingya and the greater Muslim population as eligible citizens. Canada must treat this issue with the same sense of gravity that the international community showed towards apartheid in South Africa. The All-Party Parliamentary Group is urged to priodically brief Canadian Members of Parliament, diplomats, and officials about Burmese human rights and the status of the Citinship Law, so that Canadian civil servants can campaign for the issue. Regional diplomats should be briefed on the importance of the 2014 Burmese census in order to promote the inclusion of all ethnic and religious minority communities. Further, Canada should be encouraged to take measures to advance bilateral dealings with Bangladesh regarding the restrictions it has placed on the registration of Rohingya refugees.

Third, in order to extend the reach of NGOs to the Arakan region, the All-Party Parliamentary Group should consider lobbying the government to continue to improve relations with the Burmese government. While these efforts may not be welcomed by the Burmese diaspora in Canada, the establishment of an embassy in Burma was announced in July 2012 which will give Canada the flexibility to extend aid to the Arakan region XIVIII. This effort would also create the capacity for establishing a Canadian fact finding mission.

Finally, the All-Party Parliamentary Group is urged to establish dialogue with prominent NGOs and all relevant stakeholders in the Arakan region to establish and host a truth commission in Canada. By unveiling the truth surrounding the events of the 2012 violence in the Arakan state, neighbouring ethnic groups can find ways to live together harmoniously. Depending on the success of this commission, an extensive and complete situational report of the Rohingya can be created, and valuable evidence can be passed on to the UN Special Rapporteur to further advance the issue internationally.

Annex 1 - Mapxlix

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Implemented by a Canadian NGO (InterPares).







Annex 2 - Timeline of Rohingya History  $\!^{l}$ 





(Highlighted text references major incidents of repression, maltreatment, or massacre)

#### Historic

- o Islam arrived in the Arakan state in the 8th Century with Arab merchants.
- In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century an Islamic kingdom was adopted in Arakan when the King
   Naramelkhla adopted Islam and the religion started to rapidly spread in the areas.
- Burmese and British Occupation
  - Burmese occupation began in 1784. At the time there were two Arakanese native groups Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine - both faced repression and persecution.
  - o Many natives fled to India for shelter.
  - In 1826 the British ended the Burmese rule in Arakan and held the region under colonial rule for over 120 years.
- Initial Conflict between Rohingya and Rakhine
  - The Thakin Party which aimed to end the British occupation of Burma provoked
     Rakhine and Rohingyans against each other.
  - o Burma was separated from India in 1937 and the Takhins seized power inside Burma.
  - o The seed of hatred was by this point planted in the Arakan society. Propaganda by the Takhine Party presented the Muslims as a serious threat to Buddhists.

#### • 1942 Massacre

- The first major attacks against Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims began after the British withdrew from the region.
- o Muslims were forced to once again seek refuge in India and Bangladesh.
- o On March 28 1942, Rakhines attacked the Rohingya in Chanbivillage of Minbya.
- Valuables and livestock were taken from the Rohingya by the Takhin party and looters.
- o The attack lasted 40 days and at least 150,000 Arakanese Muslims were killed
- o Villages were looted, demolished, and rebuilt by Buddhist settlers.
- The 1942 events made cohabitation very difficult for the Rohingya and the Rakhine.
- Encouraged by the anti-Rohingya policies of the state, the Buddhists stepped up their attacks on the Muslims without prevention from the government.
- Defore recovering from the 1942 massacre, Rohingya found themselves at the target of yet another **attack by the Burmese government in 1947**. As a response to these attacks some Rohingya factions launched armed resistance against the Burmese state.



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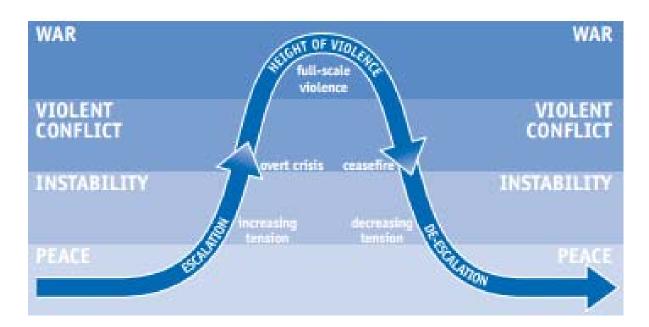
- In 1954 when the Rohingya got more organized the Burmese army launched a bloody attack called Operation Monsoon and eliminated armed Rohingya factions.
- The same year many Muslims were deported for their association with these armed groups.

# • 1962 Coup

- In 1962 the military took over power and nationalized all private enterprises and banks.
- o Rohingya who controlled major enterprises in the Arakan lost major **economic power**.
- The coup leaders issued a number of notices to Arakan authorities to restrict the movement of Rohingya.
- Media began to target the Rohingya with propaganda claiming that members of the ethnic minority groups were not natives of Burma. These broadcasts escalated tensions in the region.
- o Authorities urged Buddhists to act against the Muslim population.
- O The coup leader put the Buddhists in charge of Arakan administration. Almost all Rohingya police officers were relocated to distant parts of the country. Rohingya civil servants were threatened with dismissal and forced out of their positions. All but few of the civil servants were replaced with Burmese and Buddhists.
- Buddhists took over the inter-town trading that was once controlled by the Rohingya.
- o Injustice against the Rohingya was encouraged by authorities and the military who would often detain Muslims and release them after torture and interrogation.
- Immigrant Investigation Operation Physical torture, molestation of women, extortion, and similar treatment became a matter of ordinary life. Many Rohingya were labeled as illegal immigrants and arrested.
- King Dragon Operation Began in 1978 and aimed to intimidate the Rohingya into leaving the Arakan state.
  - Rohingyan's who were terrorized by brutal attacks and no longer had security
    of life were forced to leave their homes to protect their honor. Most Muslims
    fleeing mass killings in Arakan were killed while escaping.
  - 300,000 Arakanese refugees arrived in Bangladesh and placed in makeshift camps by the authorities.



# Annex 3 - Lund's Conflict Curveli





# $N_{otes}$

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