

Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen

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ABSTRACT *The world is standing by and failing to act as the ethnic Rohingya Muslims in Burma are subjected to a systematic campaign to drive them out of the country, including a military offensive and deliberate starvation of communities. The United Nations has described it as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. More than half a million people have fled so far, on top of hundreds of thousands who have fled escalating human rights violations in recent years. The current crisis was predicted and preventable but it is still not too late for the international community to act with targeted sanctions and other measures.*

Introduction

Burma¹ has one of the worst human rights records in the world; so for the current Rohingya crisis to be described as the worst human rights crisis the country has faced since independence in 1948, gives an idea of just how serious the situation is. The Rohingya, previously described by the United Nations (UN) as the most persecuted ethnic group in the world, are currently experiencing the most serious military and human rights violations in their history.

The latest crisis began on August 25, 2017 when a new armed Rohingya

organisation, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), attacked police stations and government offices. Several police and government personnel were killed. Similar attacks by ARSA had taken place in October 2016. At the time, the military responded in a similar way to how they have treated other ethnic groups in Burma for decades, including the Kachin, Shan, Karen and Karenni. They indiscriminately targeted civilians, burned villages, shot people on sight, raped women, looted, and blocked humanitarian aid.

This time the military was prepared. Within hours, a massive military offensive targeting Rohingya civilians

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 19 / No. 4 /
2017, pp. 43-53

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was launched. It had clearly been pre-planned. In the weeks beforehand there had been troop build-ups. Ethnic Rakhine civilians had been given training and weapons, acting in effect as local militias. The civilians led by the government had been stoking up fears of Islamic extremists for weeks, heightening tensions. Using the pretext of the attacks as an anti-terrorism operation, the military launched a campaign to drive most of the Rohingya out of the country. The UN has described it as ‘a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.’ Within hours of the military offensive, civil organizations such as *Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK* began to receive reports of the most horrific human rights violations. Soldiers were arriving at villages and opening fire indiscriminately, shooting at people, even children, as they ran for their lives. In many attacks, ethnic Rakhine mobs were working side by side with soldiers, hacking people to death, beheading them, even killing children.

Within two days it was clear this was a military operation on a scale

we had never seen before. Areas of northern Rakhine State, where most Rohingya live, were being systematically cleared. Homes were destroyed and soldiers returned the next day to burn and demolish anything left standing. Food stores were stolen or destroyed, livestock taken. They were ensuring that there was nothing left for people to return to. Within a week of the offensive beginning, more than 200,000 people were fleeing, making the dangerous trek to Bangladesh with only what they had on them when they were forced to run for their lives.

The UN has described the situation for the Rohingya in northern Rakhine State as ‘unimaginable suffering.’ Husbands have seen their wives and children killed, mothers had their children snatched from them and thrown into fires, children have witnessed their brothers and sisters shot or hacked to death. Those who manage to escape the attacks face many dangers and starvation on the way to Bangladesh. It has been heart breaking to hear stories of how the young, the elderly and the injured died on the journey, or drowned trying to cross rivers into Bangladesh. Even in Bangladesh, many more have died as the UN and aid agencies have been slow and have struggled to scale up and provide the support needed.

Less than two months after the military offensive began, around two thirds of the Rohingya in Burma had fled their homes and arrived in Bangladesh. Military attacks, as well as attacks and threats by Rakhine mobs



Forced to leave their homes, Rohingya refugees wade after crossing the Naf River from Burma into Bangladesh in Whaikhyang on October 9, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / FRED DUFOUR

continue, but not on the same scale. Instead a new tactic is being used to drive the Rohingya out of Burma, starvation.

Since the military attacks began, the military and government imposed severe restrictions on the Rohingya population in Rakhine State. The UN and international aid agencies have been refused access to the crisis. Only the government and the Red Cross have any access, and what they have is limited. Threats and lack of security stopped the Rohingya from working, farming, and trading as usual. Trapped in their homes and villages, after a few weeks, food began to run out. People, who were already impoverished in areas where there were already high levels of child malnutrition, were now starving. Those well enough to travel also began to leave their homes, and a

second exodus of the Rohingya began. It is likely that tens or even more than a hundred thousand more will be forced to flee Burma because of starvation. Hunger has joined bullets and bombs as a weapon used against my people.

In the weeks and months to come, many thousands more will inevitably leave. With the attacks by the military, defended by the government of Burma, and no action from the international community, they feel that there is no future for them in their homeland any more. By early next year, perhaps only around a hundred thousand will remain. Compare that to the estimated 1.1-1.3 million Rohingya in Burma in 2012. Almost an entire race has been expelled from their homeland, and the international community stood by and did nothing as it happened.

At the time these attacks took place, a new military backed government in Burma was receiving international praise for introducing reforms

Burmese Government's Rohingya Policies

The expulsion of people from their homeland has been a long time coming. Since the military took power in Burma in 1962, they have gradually increased repression against the Rohingya. They adopted a twin track policy of trying to drive the Rohingya people out of the country, using human rights violations and deliberate impoverishment. Increasing poverty and blocking economic development of the Rohingya is a deliberate and integral part of the Burmese government's Rohingya policy. A series of laws and policies designed to repress and impoverish the Muslim ethnic Rohingya, were introduced. These include the notorious 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively denies citizenship to the Rohingya, and the 1988 banning of the Rohingya from travelling outside Rakhine State.

Other policies and laws introduced include: restrictions on the Rohingya travelling from some townships to others, and even within some townships; checkpoints on roads, which include body searches and extortion of money, targeting only the Rohingya;

restrictions on marriage through a tax fee requirement; arbitrary taxation on a wide range of activities, including even the death of cattle; forced labour, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests and extortion for releasing the person arrested; almost no provision of government services such as health, education or infrastructure in Rohingya areas. All of these policies are part of a systematic approach of impoverishing and oppressing the Rohingya in order to drive them out of Burma. They are deliberately designed so that there can be an element of deniability by the central government, which tries to blame some of these policies on local authorities, rogue individual police and security officers, as well as on a lack of adequate training.

While the government has traditionally failed to provide adequate services to the entire population in Rakhine State, including to the ethnic Rakhine, services were even more limited for the Rohingya. Rohingya are frequently denied access to hospitals and clinics. More than seventy percent of the Rohingya have no access to safe water or sanitation services. In some Rohingya areas there is just one doctor per 160,000 people. The World Health Organisation recommends one doctor per 5,000 people. Only two percent of Rohingya women give birth in hospital. 80,000 Rohingya children are estimated to be malnourished.

The repressive 1982 Citizenship Law effectively denies many Rohingya citizenship and underpins legal discrimination against the Rohingya. It means the Rohingya are denied access to

education and employment, and face unacceptable restrictions on movement, marriage, and reproduction. Many Rohingya children cannot even have their birth registered. This violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international norms prohibiting discrimination of racial and religious minorities. The legal and practical constraints imposed by the Burma Citizenship Law in 1982 render it almost impossible for the Rohingya to be recognised as full citizens of Burma. The Burma Citizenship Law 1982 created three categories of citizens: citizens, associate citizens and naturalised citizens. Full citizenship is restricted to nationals of specific ethnic groups who settled in Burma prior to 1823. Burma does not consider the Rohingya to be a national ethnic group. The Rohingya are therefore excluded from full citizenship.

Since the so-called reform process began in Burma with rigged elections in 2010, things began to get worse for my people. In the election campaign some ethnic political parties were allowed to take part, and ethnic Rakhine parties used the new limited amount of public space to incite hatred and fear of the Rohingya as a political tactic to build support, playing into existing prejudices against the Rohingya. In 2011 Rakhine nationalists were allowed freedom to organise and incite hatred of the Rohingya that other ethnic groups or political activists did not enjoy, and would have been arrested for. In 2012 rising tension led to the first large scale attacks on Rohingya villages, with tens

of thousands of Rohingya forced to flee their home villages as local Rakhine nationalist mobs attacked them. Police and security services stood by and even took part in the attacks.

In October 2012 a new wave of attacks took place. Subsequent investigations by media and human rights organisations revealed that they were systematically planned and met international legal definitions of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. These attacks resulted in more than 140,000 Rohingya living in squalid camps receiving little aid. Described as humanitarian camps for internally displaced people, they are in fact prison camps where Rohingya are detained and not allowed to leave.

At the time these attacks took place, a new military backed government in Burma was receiving international praise for introducing reforms. Former general Thein Sein oversaw the drafting of a new military constitution, and became President following elections in 2010. These elections were rigged with many political parties unable to take part, and mass stuffing of ballot boxes to ensure the new military backed party, the Union Solidarity Development Party, won a landslide victory. Despite President Thein Sein having previously been blamed by the UN for ordering soldiers under his command to commit human rights violations which meet the definition of war crimes and crimes against humanity, despite his being a senior general in the top ranks of the dictatorship for many years, and despite his being a chief ar-



Rakhine mobs walk past a burning house in Gawdu Tharya village near Maungdaw in Rakhine State. Besides the violence of the military, the Rohingya were the target of the Rakhine mobs' attacks as well.

AFP PHOTO / STR

chitect of Burma's new undemocratic constitution, the international community was quick to embrace him.

President Thein Sein allowed Rakhine nationalists to whip up hatred of Rohingya and his state security forces allowed and even took part in attacks against the Rohingya in 2012. He used anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim prejudice as a political weapon against Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). He stated that Rohingya do not belong in Burma and he asked the UN for assistance to keep the Rohingya in camps and find third countries they could go to so they could be deported from Burma. Government ministers stepped up complaints when UN officials and diplomats used the word Rohingya, protesting there was no such group in Burma, only Bengali.

Present Thein Sein tactically released some political prisoners, allowed more freedom of speech and expression, and opened up the country more to the international community. At the same time he increased repression of the Rohingya and military attacks against the Kachin, Shan and Kokang. As usual, the international community showed little interest in what was happening to ethnic minorities in the country, instead focusing on developments in the capital, Naypyidaw.

Rohingya People and Suu Kyi's Government

Rohingya people had hoped that when the NLD won elections in 2015, and took power in 2016, they might see a different approach from the government. Rohingya put forward four steps the NLD government could take to start to address the cri-

sis they faced. These were to tackle hate speech, to repeal or reform the 1982 Citizenship Law, to allow unrestricted humanitarian access, and to either investigate and hold to account those responsible for human rights violations against them, or support the UN in conducting such an investigation. Rohingya people hoped for positive change, they were braced for disappointment and no change, but they never imagined that under a government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, human rights violations would increase to a level worse than they had ever seen in their history.

The new NLD led government which came to power in 2016, following the elections in 2015, was not a democratic government as Rohingya would normally expect. The military had only partially handed over power. The military is independent of the government. It sets its own budget, and decides what military operations to conduct. The head of the military, Min Aung Hlaing, appoints the Defence Minister in government. He also appoints the Minister of Border Affairs and the Home Affairs Minister. The military also has 25 percent of the seats in the Parliament.

Despite this, in early 2016, for many issues relating to the Rohingya, it was within the power of the government of Burma to act. Tackling hate speech was something in the power of the government. Aid restrictions were being implemented by the government. A landslide election victory and parliamentary majority meant changing the 1982 Citizenship Law

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was within the power of the government. And the government could have conducted a genuine investigation into human rights violations or supported the UN inquiry. At that time the NLD government came to power, this was within their remit and the military were not involved.

By the time the NLD government came to power, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya had already fled Burma, going to neighbouring Bangladesh and many other regional countries. The NLD led government chose not to act. They took some steps against Ma Ba Tha, one of the main anti-Muslim nationalist groups, but this was due in large part to Ma Ba Tha backing the pro-military USDP party in the election and telling people not to vote NLD. Restrictions on aid to Rohingya held in prison camps were kept in place. These restrictions kill people, including children, and cause terrible suffering for the Rohingya people. Reforming the 1982 Citizenship Law was ruled out by senior government officials. No one spreading hate or inciting and organising violence against the Rohingya was arrested and held to account.

Turkey has led the world both in condemnation and aid to the Rohingya, for which they are very grateful. We need the help of Turkey to lead in other ways as well, supporting a UN mandated global arms embargo and supporting a referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court

Aung San Suu Kyi did establish a commission chaired by Kofi Annan to review the situation, but human rights violations were excluded from its mandate. They were given a year to report and in the meantime the commission was used by Aung San Suu Kyi and her government to deflect criticism of the treatment of the Rohingya. Her spokesperson described it as a shield. For some Rohingya the endless suffering, the increasing repression, the failure of the international community to act, and then the failure of the NLD government to act, was just too much.

In October 2016 ARSA attacked police stations. The military responded brutally, targeting civilians rather than ARSA members. Around 80,000 Rohingya fled the military offensive into Bangladesh. The human rights violations committed by the military were horrific. Mass use of rape was employed. The UN documented cases of gang rape and even of a baby hav-

ing its throat cut by soldiers because it was crying for milk as soldiers gang-raped its mother. What the military was doing to the Rohingya was similar to what they had been doing to other ethnic groups for many years. What was different this time was how the NLD led government responded.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government were under no constitutional and political pressure to support what the military were doing, but that's what they chose to do. They launched a propaganda campaign defending the military, denying human rights violations were happening, and set out to intimidate local media who were reporting the truth. On Aung San Suu Kyi's website and Facebook page a flashing fake rape sign denied mass rape was happening despite overwhelming evidence. The military and the NLD led government were united as one against the Rohingya.

Reactions of International Community

The international community, in particular those who should have defended the rights of the Rohingya such as the UN agencies, and those who had previously defended human rights in Burma such as the U.S., the UK and the European Union, began a betrayal of the Rohingya people which has led to the genocide we are witnessing today. In early 2012 the EU suspended sanctions, but stated that for them to be lifted there had to be an improvement in the situation of the Rohingya. In 2013, despite

the two waves of attacks constituting ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya, the EU lifted sanctions. The U.S. also lifted sanctions. The betrayals then came thick and fast. The U.S. ambassador Derek Mitchell, the EU diplomats and UN officials stopped using the word Rohingya in meetings and public statements. The denial of Rohingya ethnic identity is a key part in the policy of the government to claim Rohingya is not an ethnic group that belongs to Burma, and by extension that Rohingya people are then illegal and deserve what happens to them. Instead of standing up for their rights, they backed down to government demands.

Severe restriction on aid to camps, where the Rohingya were detained, were put in place, but no significant consistent high level pressure was put on the government to end those restrictions. Nationalist groups with government backing whipped up hatred against the Rohingya and all Muslims in Burma but the international community continued to back President Thein Sein, despite his role in encouraging and facilitating them.

Rohingya were excluded from the census which was organised by the UN and funded by the international community, but they went ahead anyway. Rohingya had their right to vote taken away but when the 2015 elections were held they were still hailed as a success and mostly free and fair by the international community. At every stage as repression against the Rohingya increased, the UN, the EU

and the U.S. failed to stand up for them. The message to the government and military was clear. As far as they are concerned, the Rohingya don't matter. Rohingya people are expendable. They got the message loud and clear, stepping up their efforts to drive the Rohingya out of Burma.

Considering the latest crisis, if there was to be any hope for the Rohingya, it would come from the international community. Yet despite these new atrocities, they still failed to act. The UN in Burma still failed to defend their rights, even though the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated what was happening to the Rohingya could constitute crimes against humanity. Even as Min Aung Hlaing's soldiers raped Rohingya women, he was invited to the EU to speak at a conference of EU military leaders, and then invited to Italy, Germany and Austria and taken around factories manufacturing military equipment.

Rohingya people were grateful to the government of Malaysia for organising a crisis meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in January 2017, but apart from pledges of aid, no practical action, such as support for a UN inquiry into human rights violations against the Rohingya people, were made.

Moreover, since the new crisis began in August 2017 many countries have been outspoken in condemning the human rights violations taking place, and we have been grateful to see many pledge aid to the Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh. Turkey has

Turkey's first lady Emine Erdoğan and a delegation including Turkish politicians and heads of Turkish aid agencies visited a refugee camp in Bangladesh hosting Rohingya Muslims fleeing violence in Rakhine State, in September 2017.

AA PHOTO / ABDÜLHAMİD HOŞBAŞ



led the world both in condemnation and aid to the Rohingya, for which they are very grateful. We need the help of Turkey to lead in other ways as well, supporting a UN mandated global arms embargo and supporting a referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Despite the UN Human Rights Council reluctantly agreeing in March to establish a Fact Finding Mission into violations of international law against the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Burma, the U.S. developed plans, only recently cancelled, to expand training and cooperation with the military in Burma.

A report published by *Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK* in May 2017,

“Burned Stabbed and Shot,” warned that further attacks by ARSA would happen and that there would be a similar response from the military. Other human rights organisations warned the same, and diplomats in Yangon were saying the same. Still no action was taken to try to prevent a new military offensive or to prepare for the refugees who would flee to Bangladesh. Throughout 2017 the government kept talking up fears of Islamic extremist insurgents, inciting more fear and hatred, and now the expected attacks and response materialised. It was all predicted. It was all preventable. It was allowed to happen. Rohingya people paid for this failure with their blood and with the blood of their children.

Of up to 1.3 million Rohingya in Burma five years ago, they now probably number less than 250,000. Ro-

hingya is a nation displaced, depending on the hospitality of Bangladesh. The government of Burma says they are negotiating with Bangladesh on a system to take the Rohingya people back. Rohingya people see this for the hollow promises and public relations exercise that it is. A government that supported the genocide of the Rohingya people is not going to let them return to their homeland. Even if a few are allowed to return to placate the international community, they will end up in prison camps, starving and poor, stateless without rights and living in constant fear.

Real international pressure is now needed to persuade the government and the military in Burma to stop their abuses against the Rohingya people and allow them to return to their homeland as full citizens, compensation, and an end to impunity to those who violated international law in their abuses against them. There must be a global arms embargo against Burma. No equipment should be supplied to them, and military training and co-operation must end. Countries should ban investment and business partnerships with military owned companies in Burma. Visa bans against all members of the military should be introduced. Support and aid to the government of Burma must be conditional on it changing its policy and approach to the Rohingya. As long as the government supports genocide of Rohingya people, and denies what is happening, it should not be supported. The situation should be referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The UN Security

The lack of practical action is what has allowed the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Rohingya people to happen. If action isn't taken even after what has happened since August 25, before long, there won't be any Rohingya left in Burma

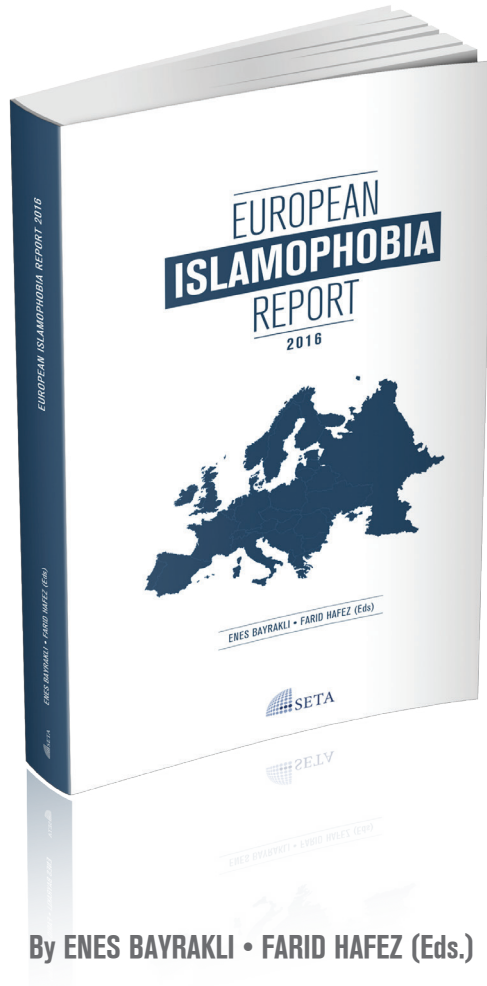
Council members should do this, and sympathetic countries should be lobbying the UN Security Council members to take this action.

Every government, which has spoken up for the Rohingya people's rights, should implement these steps. The lack of practical action is what has allowed the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Rohingya people to happen. If action isn't taken even after what has happened since August 25, before long, there won't be any Rohingya left in Burma. ■

Endnote

1. Burma is at a strategic geographical location positioned between China and Thailand to the east, and Bangladesh and India to the west. It has people of many ethnicities and religions. Most Rohingya live in Rakhine State in the east, bordering Bangladesh. The main ethnic group living in this state are the ethnic Rakhine, who are mostly Buddhist. The Muslim Rohingya are the second largest ethnic group in the state. In 1989 the military dictatorship ruling Burma changed the name of the country to Myanmar. Many people continue to call the country Burma as they do not recognise the right of the military to arbitrarily change the name of the country.

EUROPEAN ISLAMOPHOBIA REPORT 2016



By ENES BAYRAKLI • FARID HAFEZ (Eds.)

The second annual European Islamophobia Report (EIR) scrutinizes the developments of Islamophobia in 27 European countries for 2016.

