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Roots of Discrimination Against Rohingya Minorities: Society, Ethnicity and International Relations

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Diotima Chattoraj**

Abstract: According to the United Nations, the Rohingya people are the most persecuted minority group in the world. The atrocities perpetrated by Myanmar authorities could by any reckoning be called ethnic cleansing. This paper delves into the level of discrimination against the Rohingya population perpetrated by Myanmar authorities in myriad of ways. A team of researchers interviewed 37 victims. The pattern of persecution goes back to 1948 – the year when the country achieved independence from their British colonizers. Today, this population group is the single largest “stateless” community after Palestinians in the world. Their “statelessness” or lack of citizenship increases their vulnerability owing to the lack of entitlements to any legal protection from the government. Without citizenship, they are deprived of basic rights such as access to health services, education and employment. The illiteracy rate among the Rohingya, for example, is a staggering 80 percent. However, so far, no unified responses either from the ASEAN or the EU were provided to the crisis. As a result, the level of discrimination against and brutality towards them kept escalating.

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Key words: Rohingya, minorities, discrimination, international relations, ethnicity.

Abstrak: Menurut Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu, orang Rohingya adalah golongan minoriti terbesar yang dianiaya didunia. Kekejaman yang dilakukan oleh pihak berkuasa Myanmar boleh dikategorikan sebagai pembersihan etnik. Kertas kajian ini akan melihat kepada tahap diskriminasi ke atas populasi Rohingya yang dilakukan oleh pihak berkuasa Myanmar dalam pelbagai cara. Sekumpulan penyelidik telah menemu bual 37 mangsa isu ini. Corak penganiayaan ini adalah sama seperti pada tahun 1948 di mana negara baru mendapat kemerdekaan daripada kolonial British. Pada hari ini, kumpulan ini adalah satu-satunya komuniti tanpa kewarganegaraan terbesar didunia selepas orang Palestin. Ketiadaan atau kekurangan kewarganegaraan mereka telah meningkatkan keterdedahan mereka kepada kekurangan dalam mendapatkan hak perlindungan daripada kerajaan. Tanpa kewarganegaraan, hak asasi mereka akan dilucutkan daripada mendapatkan perkhidmatan kesihatan, pendidikan dan pekerjaan. Kadar literasi dalam kalangan orang Rohingya adalah pada 80 peratus. Walaubagaimanapun, sehingga kini tiada tindakan bersatu daripada ASEAN dan EU yang telah dijalankan untuk menguruskan krisis ini. Keputusannya, kadar diskriminasi ke atas kekejaman ini terus meningkat.

Kata kunci: Rohingya, Minoriti, Hubungan antarabangsa, Etnik

Introduction

The population size of Rakhine state is around 3.2 million with Buddhists comprising an estimated 2.1 million and Rohingya Muslims around a million (John & Thomas, 2014). An accurate statistics is notoriously difficult to establish as they were excluded from participating in the 2014 census (Green et al, 2015). According to the estimate of uncounted persons in the 2014 census, the total number of Rohingya in Rakhine state is estimated over a million (Green et al, 2015; HRW, 2014).

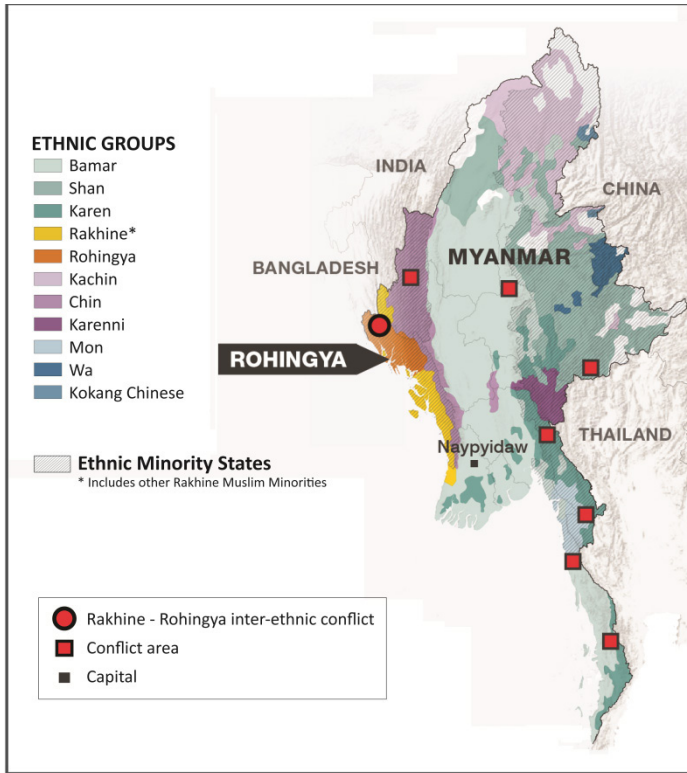
Debates are ongoing about the presence of Rohingya in the state of Rakhine in Myanmar. Historians document a longstanding stint of the Muslims in Rakhine state. Their presence is corroborated by ancient mosques and the use of coins and Islamic titles by Arakan rulers (Chan,

2005; Galache, 2014). While the etymology of ‘Rohingya’ is unknown, the Rohingya and their chosen ethnic designation were accepted by the Burmese State in the 1950s (Ba, 1958). The first President of Burma, Sao Shwe Thaik, a Shan, claimed in 1959, that the ‘Muslims of Arakan’ certainly belong to the indigenous races of Burma (Rogers, 2012; Buchanan, 1992). The Rohingya people were issued citizenship/ID cards (Moore, 2015) and granted the right to vote under Burma’s first post-independence Prime Minister, U Nu. In addition, they held important positions in civil service. In the 1960s, the official Burma Broadcasting Service (BBS) relayed a Rohingya-language radio programme three times a week as part of its minority language programming, and the term ‘Rohingya’ was used in journals and school text-books until the late 1970s (Green et al, 2015).

Since the beginning of the current Rohingya crisis in August 2017, the gruesome brutality perpetrated upon the Rohingya civilians has turned to the most massive episode of ethnic cleansing the world has seen in the recent years (Illius, 2017). By any reckoning, what is happening in Myanmar on Rohingya population today is a humanitarian catastrophe. The UNHCR terms the attack on innocent children, women and civilians as ‘text book example of ethnic cleansing’. As a result of the horrific human crisis, Rohingya people, due to the proximity, chose Bangladesh as a safe zone for them to take refuge. By January 2018, reports (Daily Sabah, 2018) show that the number of registered Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to be around 1,004,742. This is too large a number for Bangladesh to take care of them. These people merit to be taken back with a guarantee of total safety and to be free from persecution.

Rohingya people have inhabited Myanmar continuously for centuries prior to colonial rule. Burma’s first Prime Minister U Nu in a public speech on 25 September 1954 clearly mentioned that the people living in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships are Rohingya. On 3-4 November 1959, the Prime Minister and Minister for Defence U Ba Swe at a public gathering in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships reiterated that the Rohingya has the equal status of nationality with Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. The Frontiers Administration office under the Prime Minister’s Office on 20 November 1961 announced that the people living in Mayu Frontier is ethnic Rohingya. To mention, Mayu Frontier is composed of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung

Townships where around 1-1.5 million Rohingya are concentrated (Ullah, 2016:286).



Upon enacting discriminatory policies on Rohingya by General Ne Win in 1970s, National Registration Cards (NRCs) were revoked from them by a range of measures. Again, the Nagamin (the Dragon) operation in 1977-78 was designed to force out Rohingya from Burma. Despite all the systematic discriminatory and exclusionary policies were in place and IDs and other legal documents were seized, Rohingya people were citizens of Burma until 1982. The Citizenship Act, however, was promulgated in 1982 to strip off their citizenship. Yet, the current atrocities against the Rohingya enacted by the Buddhist majority under the pretext that they are illegal immigrants.

For decades, Rohingya people have been systematically marginalized; historically deprived of basic rights and curtailed the freedom of mobility deliberately. Numerous check-points have been

erected to restrict their mobility. Their choice of marriages is restricted hence intermarriages (Rohingya-Buddhists or else is prohibited) and their choice for work is limited. Forced labour and gang rape by the Myanmar army have historically been widespread. Many cannot believe that in retaliation the unarmed poor and meagre Rohingya 'insurgents' launched attacks on security sites in August 2017 that killed 12 people. This attack has given the government of Myanmar an excuse to unleash a brutal crackdown against the defenseless minority. It seems that the government has been waiting for this moment to totally wipe them out from Rakhine. The Myanmar government recently declared that Rakhine district would be transformed into a business hub and called for foreign investments. The Guardian (2017) therefore asked a question 'is Rohingya persecution caused by business interests rather than religion?' and added that both Buddhist and Muslim smallholders have been victims of corporate land grabs in Myanmar. This means the government needed to wipe out Rohingya from their homeland to implement this plan. Countries like Japan and Korea, among others, known to be upholding human rights, have already invested in Rakhine, are keeping their eyes blind to this annihilation.

Aung San Suu Kyi's long silence and endorsement of the brutality and her cancellation to attend the UNGA speak about the fact that a deliberate ethnic cleansing drive has been underway (Illius, 2017). In her recent speech on the crisis, instead of promising a concrete action to protect the Rohingya, she appears to be downplaying the horrific brutalities that were transpiring. This is as well incomprehensible when she says her government is ready to accept refugees. However, this is fundamentally a wrong statement because Rohingya people are refugees to Bangladesh and other countries but not to Myanmar. She surprised many by her seemingly ignorant statement about what is happening on the ground, as she says, "we will have to consider why Rohingya people are failing". She has the responsibility to immediately stop the genocide and as a leader she must facilitate and expedite their safe repatriation to Myanmar from the destinations of their refuge (Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia and elsewhere). As a leader, she has to take initiative to give back their citizenship. Here lies the best solution to this protracted crisis.

A horrific reality that was revealed by the ISCI is heart wrenching and telling. The International State Crime Institute (ISCI) discovered a

leaked document apparently adopted by the regime in 1988 which reveals the State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) commitment to eliminating the Rohingya from Myanmar (Green, et al 2015). SPDC's Extermination Plan which outlines (hereunder) their gruesome tactics to eliminate this population group:

- I. The Muslims (Rohingya) are not to be provided with citizenship cards by identifying them as insurgents.
- II. To reduce the population growth of the Rohingya by gradual imposition of restrictions on their marriages and by application of all possible methods of oppression and suppression against them.
- III. To strive for the increase in Buddhist population to be more than the number of Muslim people by way of establishing Natala villages in Arakan with Buddhist settlers from different townships and out of the country.
- IV. To allow them temporary movement from village to village and township to township only with Form 4 (which is required by the foreign nationals for travel), and to totally ban them travelling to Sittwe, the capital of Arakan State.
- V. To forbid higher studies (university education) to the Rohingya.
- VI. No Muslim is to be appointed in government services.
- VII. To forbid them from ownership of lands, shops and buildings. Any such properties under their existing ownership must be confiscated for distribution among the Buddhists. All their economic activities must be stopped.
- VIII. To ban construction, renovation, repair and roofing of the mosques, Islamic religious schools and dwelling houses of the Rohingya.
- IX. To try secretly to convert the Muslims into Buddhism.
- X. Whenever there is a case between Rakhine and Muslim the court shall give verdict in favour of Rakhine; when the case is between Muslim themselves the court shall favour the rich against the poor Muslim so that the latter leaves the country with frustration.
- XI. Mass killing of the Muslim is to be avoided in order not to invite the attention of the Muslim countries.

This means that the actions such as genocide, discrimination, mobility and marriage restrictions seemed to have perpetrated against them as a part of Myanmar's long term plan.

There is visible scarcity of literature generated on this issue. It is clearly understandable that scientific research could not be conducted due to the restrictions on researchers and journalists from entering into the sites. There are, however, some reports from human rights organizations available. Most reports ignored the root causes of these atrocities. This paper explores the extent to which Rohingya, being the religious and ethnic minority community in Myanmar, has been discriminated against and the level of inequalities they face. This paper also explains the actions that the Myanmar government and governments of neighbouring countries as well as, the international organisations have taken for this marginalised group of population.

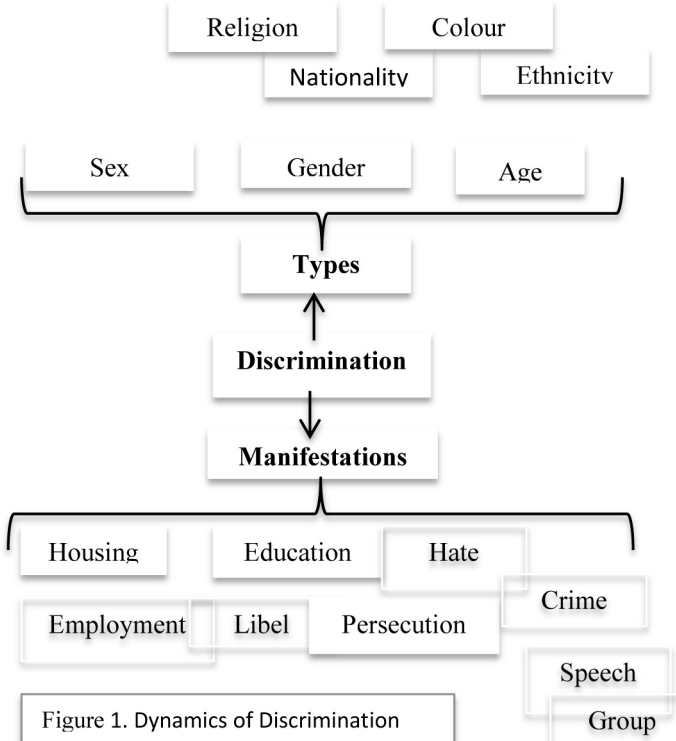
Methodology

This paper is based on a study conducted in Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia. Our research team spent about five months in the field (primarily in Chittagong, Bangladesh; Thailand and Malaysia). The team conducted 37 formal interviews with key participants including Rohingya, INGO staff, Rakhine civil society leaders and Rohingya activists. Fieldwork involved ethnographic observation on some 19 Rohingya. The ethnographic fieldwork, which combined interviews with observation, provided the opportunity to analyse social relations in Rakhine state. The interviews were designed to elicit the experiences and perceptions of both perpetrator and victim communities and to document the state of persecution. An important goal was to understand the reasons that animate hostility against the Rohingya within the Rakhine community (Zin, 2015; Smith, 1999).

In-depth interview was selected as a research method due to its emphasis on process, depth, and complexity when explaining any phenomena. The open structure of qualitative interviewing allows for unexpected issues to emerge. These relate to the research aims of attempting to gain insights into how refugees make decisions (Ullah, 2014). Interviews with Rohingya were conducted in English or with English interpretation (in case they declined to speak English or they could not speak English). All interviewees understood the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and the ways that the information

they shared might be used. We met most of the respondents during the Migration Day conferences in 2015 and 2016 held in Bangkok. As we were in an informal setting, they were enthusiastic in sharing their experiences. The interviews were scripted. Drafts of interview script were shown later on to the interviewees for validation.

Theoretical Consideration



Housing, employment, education, and other socioeconomic status are important indicators that characterize discrimination (Chae, et al, 2011). In employment, discrimination becomes evident during recruitment, advertisements, interviews, unequal pay for equal work, unjustified dismissals and harassment in the work place. Discrimination regarding goods and services occurs on the ground of race and ethnicity is widespread in accessing to goods and services in both the public and private sectors (Jah, 2013). This has the potential of seriously limiting a individual's rights and quality of life (e.g. not allowing to use public transport, or to enter clubs, parks, bars and restaurants). Rohingya people

face barriers in accessing healthcare and social protection services due to the fact that they often live in segregated areas and lack basic infrastructure and money for accessing these services. In relation to accessing social protection services, Rohingya may face challenges due to institutional discrimination, a degree of mistrust in public authorities and general lack of awareness of rights as well as the failure of the authorities to adequately explain procedures (Carroll, 2014). Barriers to accessing (quality) education, as well as high dropout rates prevail in the Rohingya community (Nicosia, 2017).

In order to explain the discrimination against Rohingya, we applied the theory of ethnic groups and boundaries of Frederik Barth (1969) who underpinned ethnic group in anthropological literature to designate a population which: 'is largely biologically self-perpetuating; shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; makes up a field of communication and interaction, and has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.' (Barth, 1969:10-11)

Most critically, boundary follows from the isolation which implies: racial and cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity. This also limits the range of factors to explain cultural diversity: each group developing its cultural and social form in a relative isolation through a history of adaptation by invention and selective borrowing (Barth, 1969).

Since the 1960s, the study of ethnicity has become core to social science disciplines. Derived from Max Weber to Fredrik Barth & Pierre Bourdieu this tradition ends with a group of contemporary writers who pursue similar analytical strategies (Wallman, 1986; Loveman, 1997; Wacquant, 1997; Zolberg & Woon, 1999; Lamont, 2000; Tilly, 2004; Alba, 2005). In this tradition, ethnicity is primarily looked upon as a process of constituting and re-configuring groups by defining the boundaries between them (Wimmer 2008). Presently, there are two blocs of thoughts emerged based on this concept: earlier work was comparatively static and focused on the features of the boundaries themselves and the processes of their maintenance; and newer research prioritizes the 'making' of the ethnic boundary either by political movements or through everyday interaction of individuals. This shift of

emphasis towards ‘boundary making’ is perhaps the consequence of the general trend away from structural determinism towards theories that emphasize ‘agency’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Many have argued that, to take this study of ethnicity a bit further, there is a need of having a further analysis of how ethnicity is ‘made’ and ‘unmade’ in the everyday interaction between individuals (Barth, 1994; Brubaker, 2002; Lamont & Molna’r, 2002). Different philosophers explored different avenues to arrive at such an ‘agency-rich’ understanding of ethnic boundary making. Some of them relied mostly on the varied circumstances under which ethnicity works while others believe in evolutionary (Boyd & Richerson, 2007) or game-theoretic approaches (Kroneberg & Wimmer, 2012). Agent-based modeling has also been used by some (Lustick, 2000) in addition to the use of pragmatist tradition of social theorizing (Lamont, 2000). Adding to this agenda, Wimmer (2008) intended to look at the different options that the different actors pursued to react to existing boundaries, to overcome or reinforce them, to shift them to exclude new groups of individuals or include others, or to promote other, non-ethnic modes of classification and social practice (1028 p). Like in this case of Rohingya crisis, the context which has been marked by ethnic cleansing, ethnic groups and boundaries bear a particular quality. People have been denied recognition of their status of citizenship, have no legal documentation and are therefore stateless which characterizes their state of being. They have been forced out to neighbouring countries (i.e. Bangladesh) where they live in dire conditions. Rohingya, since decades, have been marginalized in almost all sectors due to their ethnic origin. Thus, applying this theory helps us to analyze the different issues of Rohingya: being ethnic minority and getting discriminated against by the majority. We will now turn to the historical context of Rohingya crisis and trace recent developments in order to locate this crisis.

The Roots & the Extent of Discrimination

Since its independence in 1948, several regimes ruled Myanmar in rapid succession (Lederach, 2003; Huang, 2013). After a coup in 1962, led by General Ne Win, the military instituted an authoritarian government and banned all opposition parties (Huang, 2013; John & Thomas, 2014). While Myanmar is a Buddhist majority country, the Rohingya people are Muslim minority who mainly inhabited in the Rakhine state, located on the western coast bordering Bangladesh at the North. Historically, the Rakhine state was originally known as the region of the Arakans

and the Rohingya were originally known as the Arakan people, who inhabited the region since 3000 B.C. According to Sanskrit inscriptions and sources, the founder of the Arakan region were Indians, so their stint for centuries have also been endorsed by several timelines (Chan, 2005).

Throughout the history of the Rohingya forced migration, there have been several major migrations which began from 1942 and continuing until today (Topich, & Leitich, 2013; Al-Mahmood, 2016), involving unknown numbers of Rohingya leaving their homeland in search of political refuge. During the 4th - 6th century, the Arakan kingdom with Dhanyawadi being the first city, thrived economically. The etymology of Dhanyawadi is that it was derived from a Pali word Dhannavati meaning 'Blessed with grain' (Safdar, 2015). Dhanyawadi was a trading hub for traders from Persia, India and Arab because it is a large trading network connecting the southern silk road. During the 6th century, the city shifted from Dhanyawadi to Vesali in 788 BCE by the founder, Maha Taing Chandra. Vesali thrived as a trading port among Persians, Chinese and others and because of such wealth, they expanded their territory to Chittagong (Safdar, 2015). During the time, Buddhism excelled in Vesali and shrines, pagodas and temples were abundant. At the same time, arrival of Islam through Arab traders took place (Walton, 2017).

Between 9th and 14th century, Islam was adopted as the main religion due to the influence of Muslim Arab traders and interracial marriages between the Arab and locals. Hence, the Arab and the Bengals maintain strong ties. In 1784, King Bodawpaya conquered Arakan and hundreds of thousands of Arakanese Rohingya escaped to Bengal. The Burman King destroyed mosques, libraries, and houses in the annexation of Arakan with a great deal of bloodshed. However, in the 1790s (Chan, 2005), Hiram Cox, a British diplomat, was deployed to support the refugees and established a town in Cox's bazaar in Bangladesh which hosted the Rohingya population.

In 1824, the British captured Burma, and it became a province of British India. During that period, people migrated in various capacities (i.e. worker, engineers etc.) to Burma from other provinces of British India. However, in 1942, the Japanese occupation began and pushed the British away from Burma. During the time, the Burmese nationalists

(Buddhist) attacked the Muslims killing up to 40,000 people. This was because the Burmese believed that Muslims benefited from the colonial rule. The Japanese as well were involved in the Arakan massacre of 1942 (Crouch, 2016).

In 1945, again, the British rescued Burma from the Japanese occupation alongside Burmese fighters led by Aung San and Rohingya fighters. After the victory, the Rohingya felt betrayed as the British did not keep their words to grant full autonomy to the Arakan. The tension intensified in 1948 when the new independent Burmese government claimed Arakan state to be their own, while the Rohingya wanted Arakan to join Pakistan. The government backfired by excluding all the Rohingya from being civil servants and also from getting involved in political activities (Smith, 1999).

In 1962, a coup d'état began in which General Ne Win and his Burma Socialist Programme Party took power and removed the parliamentary system which impacted the Rohingya. Thus, the junta operation Nagamin conducted by the Burmese immigration and military authorities in 1977-78, aimed at registering citizens and screening minorities and foreigners out of the country (Tarabay, 2017). This led the Rohingya to lose their official documentation which made them stateless with more than 200,000 fleeing to Bangladesh. However, the Bangladeshi government negotiated in a UN brokered deal with the Burmese government for Rohingya repatriation (Ullah, 2011; 2014).

One form of discrimination is the deprivation of nationality and political and civil rights. The level of deprivation was aggravated during the socialist era of General Ne Win in 1962 who introduced several reforms in the period of 1962 to 1974 (Lall, 2016). The implication of the removal of government system has been widespread including the removal of Rohingya as members of parliament and from government offices. In 1982, a new immigration law redefined people who migrated during British colonial rule as illegal migrants which was applicable to the Rohingya population (John & Thomas, 2014). In the same year, a citizenship law was passed which as well did not recognize Rohingya as one of the nation's 135 ethnic groups. Defending this exclusion, the-then General Ne Win's government argued that the citizenship law recognizes those persons as citizens whose families had settled in the country before 1948 (Ullah, 2016; Tran, 2015; Tarabay, 2017; Equal

Rights Trust, 2014). The Burma citizenship law (Ullah, 2011) effectively denied the Rohingya recognition of their status. The law has three levels of citizenship where the main target is to achieve the essential naturalized citizenship as long as the person's family lived in Myanmar before 1948 and familiar with at least one of the local dialects. However, the immigration law stated that people who migrated during British colonial rule are considered to be illegal migrants which made them "resident foreigners" (Ullah, 2016:286; HRW, 2013). Section 6 under this law, Associate" and "Naturalised" citizenship were documented¹ and stated that the persons who became citizens in 1982 would continue to enjoy their citizenship (Ullah, 2016). However, the lack of adequate documentation forced them to become non-citizens in their own country. Much debate surrounds the reasons that have compelled Rohingya to migrate from Myanmar to Bangladesh (Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017; United Nations, 2017a; Unicef, 2017).

Continuing discrimination against, attacks upon, and widespread violations of the rights of Rohingya have led to fresh refugee outflows from Myanmar. In 1991, more than 300,000 Rohingya escaped to Bangladesh following brutalities (forced labour, rape, gang rape, killing, persecutions, restricted mobility, etc.) perpetrated by NASAKA members (Ullah, 2011; 2016; MSF, 2008; 2009; 2012). In 1991-92 alone, discrimination, violence and the imposition of forced labour practices by Burmese authorities triggered an exodus of some 300,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh (Zin, 2015). Most of these refugees returned between 1993 and 1997 under a repatriation program brokered by the UNHCR.

In 2012, two waves of violence, between Rohingyas and majority Buddhists in Rakhine State, took place across the country (BBC, 2012; Stokke et al, 2018; Ibrahim, 2016). This violence, according to Stokke (et al. 2018), is characterized as communal violence between Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya groups, and military violence between the military and Rohingya groups. The Rohingya, at present, are found

¹ Associate citizenship was given to those whose citizenship applications were being processed at the time of the law in 1982 and Naturalised citizenship to those who are not citizens but can establish that they and their predecessors lived in the country prior to independence (See Ullah, 2016 for details).

largely in the north, while the Buddhist majority is concentrated in the central and southern parts of the state (Crouch, 2016). These were followed by a state of emergency that placed the region under military administration and brought mass arrests and arbitrary violence. Both communities are generally impoverished, as Rakhine State is marked by chronic poverty and relative underdevelopment compared to the national average (Tisdall, 2016). Communal antagonisms and violence are thus rooted both in the local political economy of underdevelopment (ADB, 2017; Buchanan, 2016) and in the antagonistic politicization of ethnic and religious identities at the local and national levels (Jones, 2013; UNCHR, 2014). In August 2017, in retaliation of the past events of brutalities, ARSA is reported to have attacked border guard posts, killing 12 Myanmar security forces². The retaliation came in the form of most barbaric and brutal ways which killed thousands in gruesome terms and forced about a million Rohingya out of the country.

The recent violent crackdown committed by Myanmar security forces between August and October 2017 against civilian Rohingya has attracted widespread but ‘ineffective’ attention from the international community. Testimonies gathered by the United Nations (United Nations, 2017a) confirm that the Myanmar security forces had committed extrajudicial and summary executions, rape, and other forms of sexual violence, torture, the acts of which are cited as examples of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in a textbook.

There are a lot of discourses on the effects, causes and processes of statelessness. Governments, UNHCR, regional organizations, civil society organizations and other agencies have been working to end this issue of statelessness. However, Rohingya statelessness has been an issue which received the least attention from international community (Kerber, 2007). Presently, Rohingya are the single largest “stateless” community after Palestinians in the world. Their “statelessness” makes them vulnerable to a range of exploitations (Kerber, 2007) as statelessness strips off entitlements to any legal protection from the government. They are deprived of access to health services, education and employment. The illiteracy rate among them is exceedingly high because teachers mostly being Buddhist do not prefer to teach in the Muslim-dominant

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/at-least-71-killed-in-myanmar-as-rohingya-insurgents-stage-major-attack-idUSKCN1B507K>

areas (Frydenlund, 2017). Also, due to travel restrictions imposed upon them only about 5 percent of the population pursue higher studies as high schools are generally located in distant villages where they are not permitted to travel. They have been denied the right to practice religious rites freely. To add, the plight of the Rohingya had been compounded by social customs which forbid females to work, thereby contributing to the problems of sustainable livelihood (Kyaw, 2008). Laws do not allow Rohingya couples having more than two children. Those who break the law risk imprisonment, and blacklisting their children (Nicosia, 2017). All these discriminatory measures are in fact the manifestations of the Rohingya extermination plans as revealed by the ISCI.

The deliberate destruction of crops and the burning down of villages are unleashed to drive entire populations out of their homes (HRW, 2018; Buncombe, 2017). The horror of brutality could be understood when a midwife of the Medecins Sans Frontieres tells in the NBC report (2017) ‘I’ve never had a population talk so freely about the assault that they were experiencing. I have had women come in who were gang-raped or brutally raped and are now recovering from fistula but I have never heard so many stories of so many women being publicly raped and then killed.’ The Sun (2017) reports under the heading ‘Faces of Horror’ that women were Gang-raped while pregnant, watching their sons be beheaded and burned and beaten by soldiers. Children and adults had their throats slit in front of their families. The summary executions of teachers, elders and community leaders; helicopter gunships randomly spraying villages with gunfire; people shut in their homes and burnt alive; women in labour beaten by soldiers and their babies stamped to death have been common atrocities (HRW, 2018; Buncombe, 2017).

Economic and developmental neglect, together with oppression and discrimination following the military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962 have had a devastating effect on social relations between communities (Crouch, 2016; John & Thomas, 2014). Levels of poverty contrast starkly with the state’s abundance of natural resources and its strategic geopolitical location, both of which are exploited by foreign powers. Rakhine state is home to the Shwe Gas project, for example, which involves natural gas extraction off the coast and generates vast revenues for the military and for China (Green et al, 2015). The benefits never go the cause of welfare of the inhabitants in Rakhine.

International and Regional Response

International and regional responses to the crisis have been disappointing. Several governments remained silent while some supported Myanmar's fragile democratic reform (Lall, 2016; Edroos, 2017), and a few had strongly criticised the Government's failure to protect its population. Myanmar's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been criticised by the international community for not sufficiently condemning the renewed violence. In her first public address since the bloody military crackdown on the Rohingya minority in August 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi, did not criticise the army, and said she did not "fear international scrutiny". She insisted that there had been "no conflicts since September and no operations" against the Rohingya minority. There arose widespread demand that her peace prize be taken away as she has violated the principles of the prize by keeping silent about Rohingya annihilation which meant she is complicit in crimes against humanity.

While the scope of her actions is limited, she possesses one power in abundance: the power to speak out. Rather than deploying it, her response amounts to a mixture of silence and the denial of evidences (BBC, 2018). In response, to the massacre, Suu Kyi, in an attempt to shield the armed forces from criticism, has denied the atrocities, together with denying the very identity of the people being attacked, asking the US ambassador not to use the term 'Rohingya'. She has upheld the 1982 Citizenship Law, which denied the rights of these people. Her government ignored and obstructed UN officials who have sought to investigate into the atrocities and prevented aid agencies from distributing relief materials (Shivakoti, 2017).

Humanitarian organizations expected stronger sanctions on Myanmar from powerful countries (O'kane, 2018). This never happened. Instead, many countries involved in trade and business with Myanmar, which emboldened Myanmar to perpetrate atrocities on Rohingya. While there are criticisms that the international organizations have failed miserably to show that they care about humanity and human rights, their access to Rakhine district was restricted by the government.

The national government contemplated new legislation that would seek greater oversight of the work of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), including the United Nations, prompting concerns of a crackdown on their activities. The Draft Law on INGOs,

contains a vague definition of the groups it would regulate, proposes monitoring of aid groups' work by Myanmar staff and provides the affected organizations with few safeguards against the government suspending their work (The Dhaka Tribune, 2018). This could be used to restrict their work in Myanmar.

Southeast Asian leaders failed to take any action or at least to condemn atrocities perpetrated by Myanmar security forces despite a summit meeting was held in Manila at a time when the violence was at its peak. The crisis posed a critical test for the ASEAN member states and its institutions, highlighting ASEAN's lack of a political and legal framework to deal with issues related to refugees (Gotinga, 2017). The plight of the Rohingya has been compounded by the response of several Southeast Asian nations who in 2015 turned away boats carrying thousands of desperate Rohingya. Intensified international pressure and media scrutiny over their refusal to help the boat refugees finally resulted in Indonesia and Malaysia permitting to land on a temporary basis (Letchamanan, 2013). It also led to several crackdowns on the human traffickers engaged in transporting Rohingya. In May 2015, both Thai and Malaysian authorities found mass graves of Rohingya at abandoned human trafficking camps along their shared border (Hutcherson & Olarn, 2015). This led members of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime to acknowledge the need for an urgent and collective response to such issues. They agreed to have a mechanism that would grant the co-chairs Indonesia and Australia the authority "to consult, and if necessary, convene future meetings to discuss urgent irregular migration issues with affected and interested countries in response to current regional issues (ASEAN, 2007)."

A distinctive principle of the ASEAN Charter is the "non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States (ASEAN, 2007)". Despite this principle, due to increased tensions in the region some Muslim-majority countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, tried to show a strong stance on the protection of the Rohingya. Although Indonesia had stated that the Rohingya crisis is a regional problem, it has followed the non-intervention principle, emphasising that it would pursue its policy of 'constructive engagement' rather than putting pressure on Myanmar. Malaysia, on the other hand, was vocal in condemning Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya: its ex-Prime Minister Najib

Razak told in a rally in Kuala Lumpur in 2016 that the “world cannot sit by and watch genocide taking place (The Guardian, 2016)”. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also held an emergency ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur in January 2017 to discuss the situation, at the request of the Government of Malaysia. Malaysia has called for ASEAN to coordinate humanitarian aid and to investigate alleged atrocities committed against them (Holmes, 2017). However, while most of the countries in Southeast Asia stayed quiet, thousands have taken to the streets in Indonesia and Malaysia to protest against the atrocities. The president of Indonesia sent the Foreign Minister to Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Malaysian ex-Prime Minister led a protest against what he calls genocide in Rakhine. However, no visible diplomatic efforts were made. Thailand has been hosting thousands of Rohingya for quite some time as well. Since Myanmar government kept denying the right and citizenship of the Rohingya, the ASEAN along with the international community could have realistically addressed the root causes of deep-seated discrimination against them.

Conclusions

The Rohingya people have been struggling for identity, existence, peace and basic human rights. They want to work together with other citizens. However, according to the plan (revealed by ISCI), several policy reforms were taken by the government to exterminate the Rohingya people. They launched sophisticated de-nationalization tactics which automatically made them among the “most persecuted ethnic minorities in the world.

While there was no strong pressure from international community, some regional and international criticism resulted in the government of Myanmar taking some steps to try to ease concerns, if not to end the concern. At Malaysia’s request, Aung San Suu Kyi called a special informal meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers in Yangon in December 2016 to discuss international concerns over the situation. Suu Kyi promised that Myanmar would provide regular updates on the crisis to fellow ASEAN members and possibly work with them to coordinate aid efforts (Holmes, 2017). The Myanmar government allowed several pre-approved media members to visit one of the main sites of the conflict (Lederach, 2003; Asia Foundation, 2017). The Kofi Annan Commission recommended several ways in which to improve accountability and

find long-term solutions to them (Kerber, 2007). It also suggested that Myanmar could improve bilateral relations with Bangladesh and that both nations should facilitate the voluntary return of refugees to Myanmar through a joint verification (McLaughlin & Toe, 2014).

Years of conflict and violence in Rakhine State, which has attracted press coverage despite tight governmental control, have tarnished international goodwill. As Rohingya have fled to neighbouring countries, Myanmar can no longer insist that this is an internal issue and instead must work with receiving countries (such as Bangladesh) and members of ASEAN to address the situation (Shivakoti, 2017). As it is stepping into democracy, Myanmar must respect the different ethnicities and religions within the country, without systematically discriminating against any one group. Violations of the human rights of the Rohingya people may suggest “the possible commission of crimes against humanity, if established by a court of law (Green et al, 2015) by the ISCI concluded that “the Rohingya face the final stages of genocide”. Without looking at the root causes (reforms, changes in citizenship law, Nagamin) of these atrocities, motherhood statements about and against the human rights violation must not bring about any long-term solution to this humanitarian crisis.

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