

## Rohingya Muslims have nowhere to go

Once again, the Myanmar military has gone on a rampage in Rakhine, burning homes, razing villages, intimidating, threatening and expelling the stateless Rohingya Muslims. Many have been killed and women have alleged rape. Credible reports suggest some bodies have been burnt to destroy evidence. Many are desperately trying to escape to Bangladesh, which appears to have, at least for now, shed its hostility towards the influx and is letting them in.

Rohingya Muslims' rights are severely curtailed in Myanmar—they can't practise their religion (Islam) freely, cannot meet in large gatherings, face discrimination when they look for work, and there are restrictions on the number of children they can have. They are not included in the census, and they do not have voting rights. In June, Myanmar didn't let UN investigators visit Rakhine.

Senior army general Min Aung Hlaing has called the recent crackdown "unfinished business" dating back to World War II. Over the weekend, the world's youngest Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai, appealed to Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's state counsellor (and de facto president) and a fellow laureate, to save Rohingyas. She is silent.

Aung San Suu Kyi was once among the world's most well-known prisoners of conscience. She led a non-violent struggle for democracy against military might, earning global respect and many honours, including the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1993 when she was under house arrest. But since her release in late 2010, the world has discovered a different Suu Kyi. Her reluctance to criticize the military was earlier seen as strategic, until she had won elections. Those hopes have been misplaced.

She appears to hold the majoritarian view that Rohingya Muslims are not citizens of Myanmar. In private conversations, she has blamed Myanmar's poor immigration controls for the crisis, reinforcing the idea that Rohingyas are illegal immigrants, even though they have lived in western Myanmar for centuries. Even in her acclaimed collection of essays, *Letters From Burma* (1997), the word "Rohingya" does not appear. Myanmar's 135 ethnic groups do not include Rohingyas. Since her party came to power, Myanmar has complained to the US state department, saying it should not use the term Rohingya, and instead call them Bengalis.

Explaining her reticence, in 2012 Suu Kyi had said that she wanted to work towards reconciliation between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, which would be difficult were she to take sides. Since then, the violence has worsened, with the overwhelming blame falling on the army. While Suu Kyi has been the army's prisoner, she feels kinship with the army. In 2012, on BBC's radio programme *Desert Island Discs*, she had said that all Burmese soldiers were like her family, since her father, General Aung San, was the father of the Burmese army.

The army's antagonism towards Rohingyas dates back at least to World War II, when the Burmese army under General Aung San had initially sided with the Japanese (before switching to the British towards the end of the war), while many Muslims supported the British. The Japanese had expelled Rohingyas to northern Arakan (as Rakhine was known then), which was under British control. At Burma's independence from the British in 1948, Arakanese Muslims wanted to join East Pakistan, but Mohammed Ali Jinnah refused. When Bangladesh became independent in 1971, Burma asked Bangladesh to take the Rohingya Muslims, but Bangladesh declined. Since the late 1970s, Myanmar's army has frequently attacked Rohingyas, forcing many to make a hazardous journey through the narrow Naf river and reach south-eastern Bangladesh, where they settle in ramshackle tents in sprawling camps like Kutupalong. Many others are trafficked to South-East Asia.

Rakhine forms the frontier between Muslim and Buddhist Asia, so violence there has wider implications. As the South-East Asia expert Michael Vatikiotis notes in the *Nikkei Asian Review*, there have been protests near the Myanmar embassy in Kuala Lumpur, and Indonesia's second largest Muslim group, Muhammadiyah, has called for Myanmar's expulsion from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). Other Asean countries—including southern Thailand and parts of the Philippines—have long-running insurgencies involving Muslim groups, and continued oppression of Rohingya Muslims can ignite the region.

It is in this context that the Indian home ministry's advisory to states to detect and deport Rohingya Muslims is so perplexing and inhumane. The National Human Rights Commission has cautioned the government, saying that even if the refugees are not citizens, the government should consider that they might face persecution if they are pushed back. Next week, the Supreme Court will hear a challenge to the home ministry note.

India has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, but it has abided by its spirit, and generously hosted refugees from Tibet, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan over the years. In 1996, the Supreme Court ruled that refugees have certain rights, including the right to life and liberty, and in 2015, asked the Centre to extend citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh.

Indian law, India's practice of abiding by international expectations, long tradition of compassion, and humanitarian impulse, all suggest that India should let the Rohingyas remain, and join the collective global outrage which seeks to remind Aung San Suu Kyi of who she used to be, or was believed to be, so that she lives up to the image she once had.

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