

## Nowhere people: the Rohingya crisis

India took extraordinary care to stay on Myanmar's right side this week by resisting any show of sympathy to the Rohingya people. On his first bilateral visit to the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he [shared the Myanmar government's concerns](#) about "extremist violence" in Rakhine state, which has seen unprecedented violence over the past fortnight. Meanwhile, at the World Parliamentary Forum on Sustainable Development, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan [abstained from the Bali Declaration](#) because of a reference to "violence in Rakhine state". New Delhi has traditionally been wary of internationalising the internal affairs of its neighbours; on Myanmar, it has concerns about keeping the country from spinning back into the Chinese orbit. But India must adopt a humane position when dealing with a refugee population that is stateless and has no place to call home. This week, when the matter of Rohingya refugees now in India came up for hearing in the Supreme Court, government counsel refused to guarantee they would not be deported. This was in line with the [government's indication to Parliament](#) last month that all illegal immigrants, including the Rohingya, who number around 40,000, will be deported. The insensitivity of this plan is exposed by the unfolding crisis in Rakhine, where the Rohingya people had been living for generations.

There is a Rohingya in all of us

The Rohingya have been fleeing, mostly on rickety boats, for years now. But this [exodus has picked up pace since August 25](#), when an attack on police posts by an extremist Rohingya group invited sustained reprisal from the army and local Buddhist mobs. [The UN estimates that about 270,000 people](#), more than a quarter of the entire Muslim Rohingya population in Rakhine, have fled since then, mostly to Bangladesh. The Rohingya have been the ultimate nowhere people since 1982, when a Burmese law rendered them stateless, with the government arguing that they are Bengali. Violence has targeted them in phases, most notably beginning in 2012 when inter-religious conflict forced them out in the thousands. In 2014, the Burmese census refused to enumerate the Rohingya, giving them only the option to identify themselves as Bengali. It is an irony that the period of Myanmar's transition to democracy, that too on Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's watch, has coincided with the most heartless alienation of the Rohingya. A UN report has called them victims of "crimes against humanity", while Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has referred to the violence as "ethnic cleansing". This backdrop should worry Delhi, not just because its official stance is casting it on the wrong side of the humane position, but also because its deportation plans are perceived as being drawn by the sectarian pulls of domestic politics. And as a regional power, India must answer the question: if it is driving out a stateless people, where does it hope to send them?

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