

Why are Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh?

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Rohingya refugees from Myanmar walk toward Teknaf in Bangladesh. Photo by Ismail Ferdous for the Washington Post

Last week, a top human rights official named Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein criticized the military campaign against a minority group of Muslims in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar.

Al-Hussein is the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The United Nations, or U.N., is made up of representatives from nearly every country. Al-Hussein called the treatment of the Rohingya Muslims a "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."

Ethnic cleansing is the killing or removal of a particular group from a country because of their ethnic or religious background.

The U.N. official said Myanmar's military and Buddhist villagers are terrorizing the Rohingya, emptying and razing their villages, and attempting to drive them out of the country.

400,000 Have Fled To Bangladesh In Past Month

Of a total of 1.1 million Rohingya that remained in Myanmar despite repeated waves of violence since the late 1970s, more than 400,000 have fled to neighboring Bangladesh in the past month alone. New arrivals in Bangladesh are building makeshift settlements near established camps where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees already live. Most are women, children and the elderly.

Conditions are dangerous and unpleasant, food is scarce, aid agencies are having difficulties gathering the people and energy needed to help, and the monsoon rain is torrential.

Myanmar is also known by its former name, Burma. The name was changed from Burma to Myanmar by the military dictatorship in 1989. Those who have protested military rule, including Aung San Suu Kyi, tend to favor the name Burma.

The human disaster has captured the world's attention - and caused confusion. Didn't Myanmar just undergo a democratic transition? Isn't it led by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi? Why are Buddhists, a religious group known for seeking enlightenment and fair treatment, conducting an ethnic cleansing against Muslims?

How Did We Get Here?

The mass exit of the Rohingya from Myanmar has connections to events that took place centuries ago. It is also connected to events that took place in recent weeks.

The coast of what is now Myanmar's Rakhine state was the center of what was once called the Kingdom of Arakan, a name that has since morphed into Rakhine and Rohingya to describe both the native and Muslim populations of the region.

Muslims lived in Arakan both as traders and as slaves captured from nearby Bengal by the king's army. Over time, they developed a unique language that is not mutually intelligible with Bengali. The Muslims, however, have always been seen as outsiders by the Arakanese. They have stirred resentment by taking jobs from the local people. Sometimes the rivalry between the Muslims and the Arakanese has turned violent.

After past bouts of violence, many Rohingya would return and resettle. This time around, the Myanmar government has warned that only Rohingya with verifiable ties to Myanmar will be allowed back.

Government Doesn't Recognize Ethnic Group

The Rohingya are intensely unpopular in Myanmar. The government's official position is that the Rohingya ethnic group doesn't exist. Instead, they are referred to as "Bengali," a linkage to a foreign land that many have never stepped foot in, despite sharing cultural similarities. Myanmar doesn't recognize the Rohingya as citizens, limiting their access to public services.

Last week, the Myanmar military's commander in chief, Aung Hlaing, wrote in a Facebook post: "They have demanded recognition as Rohingya, which has never been an ethnic group in Myanmar."

The government of Myanmar has found further justification for an anti-Rohingya campaign in recent attacks on police and army posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a militia with ties to Saudi and Pakistani money that claims to be the Rohingya's defenders. Experts say there may be as few as 1,500 fighters in the group known as Arsa.

Suu Kyi canceled her trip to the U.N. General Assembly and instead gave a speech in English in Myanmar Tuesday.

How Much Power Does Suu Kyi Really Have?

Myanmar has been in a period of transition from a military dictatorship to democratic rule since 2010. That year, Suu Kyi, a critic of military rule, was released from house arrest. She was praised for her years of dedication. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar and embraced her. Suu Kyi won a free election by a landslide.

However, Myanmar's constitution prevents Suu Kyi from becoming president because she has a foreign-born husband and children.

While Suu Kyi is considered Myanmar's leader as "state counselor," the military still controls the country with significant representation in parliament and several other important government agencies.

That means the military could replace Suu Kyi if they felt she was interfering with their plans. The military has long wanted to expel the Rohingya. It calls them "illegal immigrants."

Brutal Military Assault On Minority Group

According to eyewitnesses, the military campaign against the Rohingya population has been brutal.

"Leave, or we will kill you all," an armed group of Rakhine Buddhist civilians told the Rohingya of one village, reporters described.

In some cases, that threat has been very real. Muslim refugees fled a village incinerated by Burmese soldiers. Fortify Rights, a Southeast Asia-focused human rights organization, estimates the death toll in Maung Nu and three nearby villages to be 150.

"We were all watching what the military did. They slaughtered them one by one. And the blood flowed in the streets," a 10th-grade teacher named Soe Win said.

The Myanmar government says at least 176 Rohingya villages have been emptied across three townships, or counties, of Rakhine: Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung. Slogging through dangerous terrain, muddied by the monsoons, hundreds of thousands have made their way to Bangladesh.

Treacherous Journey For Refugees

Those who have survived the attack in the villages face land mines planted along the border, presumably aimed at killing escapees. Others make the treacherous crossing of the wide estuary of the Naf River, which separates Myanmar from Bangladesh.

Hundreds have died in capsized boats. Sons carry their feeble, aging parents in bamboo baskets across raging streams, and mothers weep over their drowned babies. A group gathers on the banks of the Naf, gazing back at the smoke rising from the fields they once called home, doubtful of what lies ahead.