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RUDDERLESS & DROWNING IN TEARS **THE ROHINGYAS OF MYANMAR**



Roomana Hukil & Nayantara Shaunik
Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

Within Myanmar there appears to be a decisive state policy designed in the interest of the government, military junta, Buddhist Rakhine, nationalist parties and other ethnical factions. With the 1978 'ethnic cleansing' propaganda targeted against the Rohingya community, Myanmar, has witnessed one of the most devastated large-scale sectarian strife's in history. Albeit, political pressure, Myanmar, till today, maintains its ideological fancy in its inhumane treatment exhibited towards the Rohingya. This national venture whilst supported by other Buddhist nations predominantly of Burman and Rakhine majority groups has left the Rohingya community a dismantled lot. However, it was only until 2009, when a worldwide coverage of the plight of the Rohingya vehemently spurred the international community in providing immediate reprieve to the issue. Within the larger framework of social dynamics in Myanmar, this brief focuses on the ethnic conflict affecting

What has been the internal perceptions of the Rohingya conflict within Myanmar?

And what has been the response of the international community so far? Will the Rohingyas continue to remain as, what has been termed by the UN - one of the most persecuted minorities in the world?

I **THE BOAT PEOPLE: RUDDERLESS & DROWNING IN TEARS**

The Rohingyas identify themselves as the native settlers of Myanmar backed to the 7th century and disregard all literature that propagates them as illegal migrants. For them, they are the native settlers who are being persecuted due to their varying linguistic and cultural traits.

The Rohingya highlight their grievances by advocating the atrocities directed towards them. They re-emphasize that they have been clustered into forced labour with their lands confiscated by the Myanmar Army. Their freedom of movement restricted; impermissible marriage within their community without prior official approval that is further accustomed with a heavy fee. With no

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access to higher education or employment opportunities, 20% of Rohingya are malnourished wherein their life enhancing options are extremely fatal. Due to their statelessness, most countries are reluctant to consider the Rohingyas as refugees and often label them as economic migrants. Moreover, they are quite frequently forcibly pushed back by the neighbouring states, being considered as socio-economic and security threats, as and when they navigate across seas seeking refuge in these countries.

For the Rohingya, the conflict is not a mere struggle to reduce the widened ethnic disparity gap, there is mounting evidence that suggests the government opposes the community due to the perceived threat of an economical-strain propaganda which has directed further revulsion towards the Rohingya populace. While the Rohingya fear the government of eventually propagating a human genocide against them, thus, wiping off their core existence in the near future. Therefore, they emphasize an urgency of international humanitarian intervention sought with an aim to promoting awareness among cross-transnational borders about their current ordeal. Although, the international media in 2012, played a crucial role in garnering attention to the grave plight of the Rohingya, it is generally skewed towards emphasizing the perceived unsympathetic role played by Bangladesh and Thailand in turning back genuine refugees, and criticizes the country's overall approach towards the

accommodation of vulnerable individuals.

The Rohingya identify the conflict as a massive human rights violation. They believe the claims of the state government and other pre-dominant Buddhist factions are unsubstantial as they have birthrights in the state. Urging for justice at the earliest, the Rohingya seek support from regional organizations as well such as the OIC, ASEAN etc to help provide them with basic sustenance rights from within the state. They question the Muslim solidarity when it comes to issues and perpetual conflicting violence administered against other Middle Eastern states or even Non-Middle Eastern Muslim states. The Rohingya languish their Muslim counterparts of not providing significant heed to their plight considering them as followers of Islam as well. Juxtaposing such reasoning to their varying linguistic characteristic.

The Rohingya issue has historical foundations, but it has only received global attention in the recent years, whenever it has contributed towards destabilizing either existing or emerging power configurations in the region. The interest in the new influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh, a trend that continues to date, is connected to the broader politics of Burma's democratic 'opening'. The new refugees are fleeing bloody clashes between the Muslim Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists in Burma's remote but resource-rich Rakhine State. Their desperate escape from the present circumstances depicts their anxiety in the hope of a better future. Armed gangs from both communities have killed dozens, burned down several villages, and displaced tens of thousands of people.

The Rohingya plight has embarrassed the state and the international community who pin for a seamless transition of Myanmar to democracy through the reforms being pushed forward by Burmese president Thein Sein and

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supported by Aung San Suu Kyi. Inside Burma, Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that the international obligation to protect the Rohingya is often sidelined in favour of economic and geo-strategic considerations. A timely look to help us awaken to the reality of our stupor and apathy towards the Rohingya voices is essential. But unfortunately, the impetus for humanitarian action often comes more from the dictates of realpolitik than it does from the state itself.

II INTERNAL PERSPECTIVES: THE STATE AND OTHER MAJORITY-MINORITY GROUPS

What has happened recently is just more of a symptom of a long history of discriminatory treatment toward the Rohingya. With the 1982 Citizenship Law, the then military ruler Ne Win stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship. The government, particularly the military junta, has handled this situation badly for decades, encouraging a perception that the Rohingya are stateless, and making little effort to integrate them or resolve this problem in a sustainable way.

Aside from being stateless, the Rohingya are subject to a rule, embedded in marriage licenses, that they are only permitted to have two children. They lack access to health care, food, and education and are subject to forced labour and travel restrictions. The religious dimension of the Rohingya problem is also particularly troubling, since the military junta over the past 20 years particularly emphasised Buddhism as the religion of the 'true' Burmese people.

The current government of President Thein Sein, which has been lauded for implementing political and economic reforms over the last year, has also come under criticism for continuing the junta's discriminatory policies towards the Rohingya. The Rohingya were given voting rights in Myanmar's landmark 2010 elections, with the promise of citizenship if

More disturbing is the fact that even some pro-democracy dissidents, refuse to acknowledge the Rohingya as compatriots. Pro-democracy organisations view the Rohingya not as a Burmese ethnic group, and that the root cause of the violence largely comes from across the border and foreign countries.

they voted for the military regime's representatives. Citizenship, however, is still not restored. The plight of the Rohingya has yet to be made an integral part of any reconciliation program involving ethnic groups, which is a dismaying warning sign.

More disturbing is the fact that even some pro-democracy dissidents from Myanmar's ethnic Burman majority, refuse to acknowledge the Rohingya as compatriots. Pro-democracy organisations are of the view that the Rohingya are not a Burmese ethnic group, and that the root cause of the violence largely comes from across the border and foreign countries. Their nationalist stance further adds that countries that criticise Myanmar for its refusal to recognise the Rohingya should respect the country's sovereignty. They are not alone in this position.

Thein Sein has said that the violence in Rakhine, known as Arakan State in British colonial times, was fuelled by dissatisfaction harboured by different religious and ethnic groups and the desire for vengeance, warning that it could scuttle his reform agenda which is key to lifting of international sanctions. Thein Sein's reform plans include negotiations with armed ethnic groups fighting for autonomy. However, even the new democratic reforms have not altered the perception of the Rohingya with President Thein Sein suggesting in July 2012, in the wake of this violence, that he would not recognise the Rohingya or their rights and wished to turn over the entire ethnic

group to the UNHCR. Buddhist monks, contrary to the teachings of the Buddha, staged anti-Rohingya marches in September to declare their support for the president's proposal.

In mid-June 2012, in the name of stopping such violence, the government declared a state of emergency. But it used its border security force to burn houses, kill men and evict the Rohingya from their villages. In July 2012, the Myanmar government did not include the Rohingya minority group - classified as stateless Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh since 1982 - on the government's list of more than 130 ethnic races and thence, the government stated that the Rohingya had no claim to Myanmar citizenship.

As state-sanctioned abuses against the Muslim community continued, Thein Sein urged neighbouring Bangladesh to take in the Rohingya. In the process, Thein Sein attempted to hand over the group to the UN refugee agency. Interestingly, later in October 2012, in an assurance to the international community, he refurbished his stance by stating his government will consider resolving contentious rights issues facing the Muslim Rohingya minority, including the possibility of providing them citizenship. Thein Sein also said the government was prepared to look into the resettlement of tens of thousands of Rohingyas displaced by months of deadly communal violence with Rakhine Buddhists in western Rakhine state during 2011-12. It has been the clearest indication yet that the government is moving to address the plight of the

Rohingya. Curiously, the move came ahead of US President Barack Obama's historic visit to Burma, the first by a sitting American president.

Human rights activist, head of opposition and NLD leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has also been criticised for failing to speak out. Aung San Suu Kyi has taken a neutral stance, despite earlier pleas from the EU to take a stand on the issue. The parliament's Rule of Law Committee - chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi - and ethnic leaders to discuss steps to prevent new clashes between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhines requested the government to clearly define its citizenship policies, maintain transparency in its efforts to secure the region, and to act in accordance with Myanmar law, thus washing its own hands off the citizenship issue. Interesting to note here is, that although the Committee spoke about bringing the violence to an end, it made no specific mention of the Rohingya themselves. Rather, it seemed to pass the onus to do so largely on the government.

In conclusion, it seems the State under President Thein Sein has changed its stance over the issue although whether these measures will remain sustainable is yet to be seen. It cannot be undermined that the purpose of this change in perception has widely been viewed as a move to engage more with the outside world and build confidence on Myanmar's democratic reformation, rather than an ideological shift in the people's perception of the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi's telling silence and diplomacy on the issue further problematizes the crisis.

III

EXTERNAL INTERPRETATIONS: THE UN, ASEAN, OIC, EU, THAILAND, BANGLADESH, AND THE US

The UN has faced many impediments in its efforts to provide relief and aid in the affected zones. Besides being sometimes denied access to these regions, they incur

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hostile attitudes towards them. The reality is that the Rohingya are a hated minority in the state, and therefore, any agency helping them is going to incur local hostilities.

Thein Sein's statement in July 2012, finding it impossible to accept the Rohingyas as their ethnic nationals was rejected by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Later, before President Obama's visit in November 2012, Thein Sein took a new stance on the issue, which has since allowed the UN and its agencies to largely gain access to the affected zones.

The suffering of the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state also led then ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan to make a statement and predicting that the Rohingyas could become radicalized and the entire region destabilized. The ASEAN fears that if the Rohingya become radicalised, the area risks becoming a zone of violence, which could damage cooperation in ASEAN and East Asia. The ASEAN has been focusing on providing humanitarian engagement to help defuse the humanitarian fallout from the Rohingya crisis. It has offered to work closely with the Myanmar government and the UN in the same way that this tripartite arrangement effectively provided relief to the victims of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. However, Myanmar has rejected the offer.

In August 2012, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemned the Myanmar authorities for the "violence" against Rohingyas and the denial of the group's citizenship, and vowed to bring the issue to the United Nations General Assembly. It announced before the summit that it had received a green light from Myanmar to assist displaced Rohingya. It said Myanmar gave its agreement following talks in the capital Yangon between a delegation from the pan-Islamic body and President Thein Sein on the "deplorable humanitarian situation in Rakhine state." The delegation assured Thein Sein that Islamic humanitarian organisations were willing to provide aid

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to all residents of the strife-torn state. The Myanmar government, however, later reversed the decision following protests by Buddhist monks and laymen. The Myanmar government even blocked the OIC from opening an aid office to assist displaced Rohingya due to the violence in Arakan state.

Several protests took place in Iran in 2012, condemning the attacks and called on other Muslim states to take a "firm stance" against the violence. In Pakistan, too, protests against the anti-Muslim riots were lodged by various political parties and organisations, who called for the government, the UN, the OIC and other human rights organisations to take notice of the killings and hold Myanmar accountable. In Saudi Arabia, the Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia also condemned the "ethnic cleansing campaign and brutal attacks against Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya citizens" and urged the international community to protect "Muslims in Myanmar". Further, King Abdullah ordered \$50 million of aid sent to the Rohingya, in Saudi Arabia's capacity as a "guardian of global Muslim interests".

In 2009-10, Thailand's military was accused of towing hundreds of Rohingya out to sea in poorly equipped boats with scant food and water after they tried to flee Myanmar, a charge Thailand "categorically denied" back then. The accusations had surfaced after nearly 650 Rohingya were rescued off India and Indonesia, some saying they had been

beaten by Thai soldiers. Hundreds of the boat people are still believed to be missing at sea. The case had raised the profile of the group's struggle at that time.

However, a change in policy was visible in the aftermath of the Rohingya-related violence in 2011-12. Thailand's "help on" policy was introduced to replace the "pushbacks" campaign, which had previously led to the deaths of hundreds of boatpeople. Under the "help on" policy, the Thai Navy and onshore paramilitary volunteers intercept the Rohingya boats in open waters to provide passengers with food, water, medical assistance, and mechanic help if required. But they will not allow the boats to land in Thailand. Additionally, in November 2012, Thailand also provided US\$100,000 in humanitarian aid to the Myanmar government to assist victims of violence in Rakhine state, a paradigm shift from its previous stance on the issue.

According to an editorial in Open Democracy, there is a dichotomous portrayal of the Rohingya as both victim and problem by countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, which acknowledge that there is a problem but are engaged in a stalemate with regard to solutions. Each is unwilling to act first, for fear of attracting still more Rohingya. They call for a "holistic" or "regional" solution, which largely underscores the position that Myanmar must concede that the Rohingya are citizens of the country, and therefore, should welcome all Rohingya back, regardless of the fact that they may have been born and

brought up in Bangladesh or Malaysia. Intriguingly, in Malaysia, the UNHCR is allowed to register the Rohingya but not to protect them as refugees.

There is a narrative of convenience, in the case of Bangladesh, where a small number (less than 30,000) of Rohingya are recognised as refugees, and a much larger group (over 300,000) who share the same characteristics are viewed as economic migrants. After deliberations between the two countries, the erstwhile junta-led Myanmar government took back most of the 1991 refugees leaving about 28,000 who still live in UN-run refugee camps on the Bangladesh side of the border. However, since 1992, Bangladesh has also refused asylum to them.

Already, such fears have aroused anti-Rohingya sentiment among some Bangladeshis, and initially Bangladesh's government tried to force the refugees back without assisting them. It increased border security in response to the riots. Numerous boat refugees, escaping from the riots into the bordering territories of Teknaf and Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh by crossing the Naf River in their rickety wooden trawlers, were turned aside by the Border Guard. About 1500 Rohingyas were returned from Bangladesh by their border guard forces despite pressure from the HRW and UNHRC. The Bangladesh government, citing high population pressure on the existing limited resources in an impoverished region, refused to take in these refugees and asylum seekers. It was only after some villagers risked arrest by sheltering refugees in their homes that the government began to offer humanitarian aid, before sending them back on their boats.

Other countries, particularly those that do not have to deal with large numbers of Rohingya arriving unannounced on their shores, acknowledge that the Rohingya are victimised by Myanmar; and also, that receiving countries fall short of their protection obligations. This narrative seemingly says the right things, but is not

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loud, forceful or timely. The West, including the EU, United Kingdom and the US, whilst remaining “deeply concerned” by the situation and calling for “all parties to exercise restraint, added that they would continue to watch developments closely. Myanmar has become a destination for capital investment now that the US, the EU, and Canada have accepted the government’s narrative of democratic transition and have largely lifted the economic sanctions they began applying after 1988. It is crucial to highlight here that these measures did not prevent China, India, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and multinational oil companies from doing business with the Myanmar. The US, EU, and the UK have welcomed Myanmar’s first steps toward democratisation, but have also set down conditions for strengthening ties, including an end to ethnic violence. Increasingly, however, this has not impeded the countries from indulging in economic ties with the nation.

This juxtaposing narrative finds its roots in several factors. One is that the West does not want to be viewed or portrayed as meddling in the internal affairs of the country. A connected reason may be a reluctance to step in and share responsibility. Taking a strong stance on the issue would make it obligatory to take prompt actions under international human rights law and the doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P). There is more rhetoric at play here, which shrouds the deeper realpolitik agenda behind these countries’ foreign policy agendas vis-à-vis Myanmar. Geo-political and economic strategies with regards to China, which has dominated the Myanmar economy for several decades now, are of primary concern to the West.

Myanmar is considered the last frontier market of a world. In a scenario of several economic crises, the desperate search for new resources, markets, and spheres of influence, Myanmar’s “opening up” and democratisation process has been a welcome change. Therefore, in a quest

The peace process has also gained momentum in the first ever Myanmar Development Co-operation Forum held at Naypyidaw on 20 January 2013 wherein a number of representatives of the International Community met with President Thein Sein to sign an agreement for a smooth process for international aid to flow into Myanmar for the next few years.

for fulfilling self-interests, sanctions (which were considered hardy leverages to direct the reforms process) are being rapidly lifted and international obligations to step in to protect the most vulnerable have sadly been relayed to nothing but rhetoric.

IV CONCLUSIONS

Not only does the exclusion of the Rohingya pose a threat to the process of national reconciliation, it also poses a serious security threat and economic loss. Due to the state’s denial to gainfully employ them, the youth remains in a state of frustration and is ripe for indoctrination by militant outfits. They are also vulnerable to human trafficking all over the Southeast Asian region. The cost of not handling this issue is much higher than the government of Myanmar has so far estimated. Considering that their concentration is in the Rakhine state, Kyakphue and Sittwe being two of the cities with a comparatively high Rohingya population, it might impact Myanmar’s investment prospects adversely.

Rakhine state has an international border with Bangladesh, access to the Bay of Bengal and consequently, all the countries in the BoB region, including India and the offshore oil and Natural Gas blocs where major exploration work by international companies is being carried out. In fact, Kyakphue port is the origin of the oil and gas pipelines being built by China National Petroleum Corp. that

connects it to the Yunnan province. Therefore, having simmering tensions in the state may not be in the best interest of the country as that affects the safety of institutional infrastructure that supports investments.

It is important for Myanmar to be seen as a stable state. It will perennially have to contend with the fact that it is one of Asia's most ethnically diverse states, and therefore, people are watching to see how the government handles the tensions. The first step is for Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar government to acknowledge that the Rohingya exist.

The continued clashes have consistently raised concerns about the fragility of Myanmar's democratic reforms process. It is crucial, in this regard, to contextualise Brad Adams, Human Rights Watch's Asia director views on the issue whilst developing a roadmap ahead. He asserts that so much justified excitement about Myanmar's reforms and emergence could imply that the chances of the Rohingya issue being taken seriously will be even lower than usual. He adds, and this could well be a moot point, that, "If the atrocities in Arakan had happened before the government's reform process started, the international reaction would have been swift and strong. But the international community appears to be blinded by a romantic narrative of sweeping change in Burma [Myanmar], signing new trade deals and lifting sanctions even while the abuses continue." Therein lies the dichotomy of a people in crisis, which must be

expeditiously addressed in times to come.

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