

Violence in Myanmar Against the Rohingya

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Violence in Myanmar Against the Rohingya

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The Rohingya people are a Muslim group that live alongside the Buddhist Arakan in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Currently, the Rohingya are under attack by government and police forces, with the help of local Arakan. These attacks are part of a larger history of violence between the Rohingya, the Arakan, and the central government of Myanmar. The root of the conflict is that the government of Myanmar has long claimed that the Rohingya are not citizens of the country. Instead, the government claims that the Rohingya are illegal transplants from Bangladesh (and formerly Pakistan). This stance is the result of the Rohingya supporting the British during World War II, while most of the Buddhists supported the Japanese.

Upon independence, the government moved to evict the Rohingya from the country. This led to civil war in which a group of Rohingya called the Mujahid attempted to secede from the country with Pakistan's help. After the government defeated the insurgency, it renewed its efforts to remove the Rohingya through a military operation known as Dragon King in which the military engaged in widespread destruction of villages, murder, and rape against members of the group. By 1978, the military drove over 200,000 Rohingya out of the country and killed nearly 8,000 others. The violence stopped once the United Nations promised the regime increased foreign aid following the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. Similar events occurred in 1991, when the military drove another 250,000 Rohingya into neighboring Bangladesh. Again, pressure from the United Nations eventually led to cessation of violence and the return of the Rohingya population.

However, the repatriation of the Rohingya has not been a smooth process. Myanmar's military continues to abuse the population resettled in Rakhine and those still attempting to return. Such violence creates continued refugee outflows among the Rohingya. Complicating the situation now is that Bangladesh has begun refusing the refugees, blocking UN and NGO access to refugee camps and forcibly returning refugees back to Myanmar, where the military waits.

Government violence has not been the only threat to the Rohingya. They also face communal violence from neighboring Arakan. In 2012, communal violence flared as local Arakan politicians attempted to forcibly relocate the Muslim population because of the murder of an Arakanese woman by three Muslim men. Mobs representing both sides engaged in arson and killing. As the violence intensified, Myanmar's military deployed to Rakhine. However, these troops assisted in the murdering of Rohingya and the razing of their villages. As the organization of violence became more formal between the Arakan and military, Human Rights Watch and other NGOs called on the international community to recognize the violence as ethnic cleansing on the part of the government. In response, the UN and the United States condemned the violence. Yet, repression of the Rohingya continued.

Today's violence is tied to a new insurgency growing out of the Rohingya—the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). ARSA's stated goal is to force the government to recognize Rohingya citizenship. They believe that such recognition would force the government to grant the Rohingya basic rights. According to ARSA, violence is the only option left for the Rohingya since the international community has failed to provide protection and the government has shown itself willing to persecute the minority group. They believe that if Rohingya are unable to gain concessions from the government soon, the regime will eventually destroy the group. Following this logic, ARSA began launching attacks in 2016 against state police and military forces.

ARSA fights using guerrilla tactics because of its severe power asymmetry vis-à-vis the Myanmar military. Its fighters hide among the population and often operate as small cells. Unlike the larger armed groups fielded by other ethnic groups fighting the regime in the past, the government sees ARSA as a terrorist group. It has used ARSA's violence and style of fighting as grounds to raze Rohingya villages and kill civilians as it searches for the ARSA fighters. This violence has created over 400,000 Rohingya refugees and ARSA appears to be losing support from its kin group that see no prospect of victory. After suffering significant casualties, ARSA has called for a ceasefire to allow for humanitarian aid to the population. The government refused, sensing that it has the insurgents on their heels. ARSA has begun forcibly recruiting fighters and executing Rohingya suspected of providing information to the government. It has also begun killing non-Muslim civilians.

Such violence against non-combatants has muddled the picture for international actors. Nonetheless, several NGOs and the UN have accused Myanmar of crimes against humanity. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has labeled the regime's actions a textbook example of ethnic cleansing, as the military is using arson, rape, torture, and indiscriminate killing to drive the Rohingya from the geography of the Rakhine State. They are now escalating their crimes by planting landmines along the border with Bangladesh to pen in the refugees as they shoot at the fleeing civilians. Several leaders from majority Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, have condemned Myanmar. Bangladesh has called on Myanmar to address the Rohingya's grievances, and Turkey has called the violence genocidal.

Previously, such international condemnation has been an important factor in stopping violence against the Rohingya. However, this time is proving different. In the face of such condemnation, Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi continues to deny attacks against civilians and blames ARSA for the burning of Rohingya villages. She denies that the military is engaged in any clearance operations in Rakhine. In an address to her country, Ms. Suu Kyi further stated that she does not fear international scrutiny of the regime's handling of the crisis. She has also decided not to attend the UN General Assembly in New York. Myanmar's defiance places the international community in a tricky situation as it now faces limited options on how to handle the crisis. Escalating beyond words could mean sanctions, though sanctions are rarely successful. It could also mean the deployment of UN peacekeepers, though such forces tend to be successful only when they are deployed early in the conflict, in great number, with the mandate to use force, and a willingness to remain engaged in the conflict zone long term.