



Human Rights Violations, Traumatic Events, Daily Stressors and Mental Health of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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Abstract

It is widely agreed that the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar are currently named as the most persecuted minority in the world. The racial prosecution is triggered by the decades of longstanding insurgency between the Government of Myanmar and the Rohingya Muslims over the issues of religious and ethnic discrepancy. This article presents the measures taken by the international community to stop these mass killings. The article offers critical insights into strategies used by Myanmar's government to suppress the Rohingyas. This study highlights the rights violation and humanitarian struggle faced by the Rohingya people and the humanitarian response to the crises by the international community. Almost 900,000 Rohingya refugees currently reside in refugee camps in Southeastern Bangladesh. Prior to fleeing Myanmar, Rohingya experienced years of systematic human rights violations, in addition to other historical and more recent traumatic events such as the burning of their villages and murder of family members, friends and neighbors. Currently, many Rohingya struggle to meet basic needs in refugee camps in Bangladesh and face mental health-related concerns that appear linked to such challenges. The purpose of this study is to describe systematic human rights violations, traumatic events, daily stressors, and mental health symptoms and to examine relationships between these factors.

Keywords: Rohingya Muslims, traumatic events, mass killings, daily stressors etc.



Background

The military staged a coup on 1 February and arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, along with other senior leaders from the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). The military formed the State Administrative Council (SAC) to govern the country led by General Min Aung Hlaing, who was also appointed as prime minister when the role was re-established in August.

Following the military takeover, thousands of people throughout the country took part in protests, and public and private sector employees participated in a mass civil disobedience movement.

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of NLD-led elected members of Myanmar's parliament, formed a National Unity Government. It was led by Duwa Lashi La as acting president in place of the imprisoned U Win Myint. The National Unity Government, which also included some representatives of ethnic minority groups, was declared a terrorist group by the military.

On 5 May, the National Unity Government announced the establishment of the People's Defence Force (PDF) to counter SAC "violence against the public and its military offensives".

On 7 September, the National Unity Government declared a "people's defensive war", which was followed by escalating violence throughout Myanmar. Fighting between the military government's forces and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) also escalated.

INTRODUCTION

Rohingya

The Rohingya have faced decades of discrimination and repression under successive Myanmar governments. Effectively denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, they are one of the largest stateless populations in the world.



About 900,000 Rohingya are currently living in overcrowded camps in Bangladesh,¹ most of whom fled Myanmar since August 2017 to escape the military's crimes against humanity and possible genocide. The estimated 600,000 Rohingya² who remain in Rakhine State are subject to government persecution and violence, confined to camps and villages without freedom of movement, and cut off from access to adequate food, health care, education, and livelihoods.

Rohingya Muslims³ are still awaiting justice and protection of their rights five years after the Myanmar military began a sweeping campaign of massacres, rape, and arson in northern Rakhine State on August 25, 2017, Human Rights Watch said today. More than 730,000 Rohingya fled to precarious, flood-prone camps in Bangladesh, while about 600,000 remain under oppressive rule in Myanmar. No one has been held accountable for the crimes against humanity and acts of genocide committed against the Rohingya population. This anniversary should prompt concerned governments to take concrete action to hold the Myanmar military to account and secure justice and safety for the Rohingya in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and across the region.

“Governments should mark the five-year anniversary of the devastating campaign against the Rohingya with a coordinated international strategy for accountability and justice that draws on

Rohingya input,” said Elaine Pearson, acting Asia director at Human Rights

¹ Available at www.hrw.org

² Available at <http://www.interventionjournal.org>

³ Available at <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya>

Watch. “Donors should support Rohingya refugees to study and work freely and safely so they can build independent and self-reliant futures.”



Since August 2017, Human Rights Watch has interviewed⁴ hundreds of Rohingya in Bangladesh who fled the Myanmar military's atrocities. They described incidents in which soldiers systematically killed and raped villagers before torching their homes. Altogether, the security forces killed thousands and burned down nearly 400 villages. Those who escaped to neighboring Bangladesh joined a few hundred thousand refugees who had fled earlier waves of violence and persecution.

"Myanmar authorities brutalized us," said Abdul Halim, 30, a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh. "They burned down our houses, raped our mothers and sisters, burned our children. We took shelter in Bangladesh to escape that brutality. Now I've been living in Kutupalong camp for five years." Abdul carried his very ill mother on his back when they fled Myanmar in 2017. She died shortly after reaching Bangladesh.⁵

The Rohingya who remain in Rakhine⁶ States face systematic abuses that amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid, persecution, and deprivation of liberty. They are confined to camps and villages without freedom of movement, cut off from access to adequate food, health care, education, and livelihoods.

"Since we were children in Myanmar, we never had any freedom," Abdul said. "They called me 'kalar' [a slur for Muslims], to say we are like animals." Rohingya are effectively denied citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, rendering them stateless. The 2017 atrocities were rooted in decades of state repression, discrimination, and violence.

⁴ Available at <https://www.hrw.org/tag/rohingya>

⁵ Available at <https://apps.who.int>

⁶ Available at <http://www.interventionjournal.org>



“In Myanmar, we struggled through life,” Hasina Hatu, 40, said. “When we raised goats, the border guard forces took away the goats. When we raised cattle, they took away the cattle. When we farmed paddy fields, they took away the rice.” Hasina’s father died after falling down a muddy slope as they fled in 2017.

In February 2021, the generals who had orchestrated the atrocities against the Rohingya staged a coup and detained Myanmar’s elected civilian leaders. The military junta responded to mass demonstrations with a nationwide campaign of mass killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, and indiscriminate attacks that amounted to crimes against humanity and, in conflict areas, war crimes.⁷ Military units that had been implicated in the 2017 atrocities – since sanctioned by the United States and United Kingdom – have been deployed in renewed operations around the country.

The junta has imposed new movement restrictions and aid blockages⁸ on Rohingya camps and villages, increasing water scarcity and food shortages, along with disease and malnutrition. Since the coup, security forces have arrested an estimated 2,000 Rohingya, hundreds of them children, for “unauthorized travel.” Many have been sentenced to the maximum five years in prison. Increased fighting between the Myanmar military and ethnic Arakan Army has also left Rohingya caught in the middle.

In Bangladesh, about one million Rohingya refugees live in sprawling, overcrowded camps in Cox’s Bazar and the isolated silt island of Bhasan Char⁹. For five years, the Bangladesh government has respected the international principle of non refoulement, the right of refugees not to be returned to a country where their lives or freedom would be threatened.

⁷War crime is a violation of the laws of war that gives rise to individual criminal responsibility for actions by combatants in action.

⁸ Available at <https://www.hrw.org>

⁹ Available at <https://www.hrw.org>



However, Bangladesh authorities have recently intensified restrictions on livelihoods, movement, and education that make many refugees feel unwelcome and at risk. Officials have closed community-led schools, arbitrarily destroyed shops, and imposed new obstacles on travel.

“If our children can’t be educated here in Bangladesh either, then anywhere we go, we will still be persecuted,” Abdul said.

Bangladesh authorities have moved about 28,000 Rohingya¹⁰ to Bhasan Char, where they face severe movement restrictions, food and medicine shortages, and abuses by security forces. Despite the involvement of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹¹ Many continue to be transferred without full, informed consent, and have been prevented from returning to the mainland. Bangladesh authorities should lift the new restrictions and end forced relocations of refugees, Human Rights Watch said.

“How long will we live like this?” Hasina said. “I don’t think the world will solve our condition.”

The 2022 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis¹² has received only a quarter of its requested US\$881 million in funding. Donors including the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and Australia should increase funding to meet the massive needs of the refugee population to help Bangladesh support the Rohingya and host communities. The Bangladesh government and Myanmar junta have renewed discussions around repatriation, announcing in January joint plans to “expeditiously complete the verification process.” Two prior repatriation attempts failed, with Rohingya refugees unwilling to

¹⁰ Available at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

¹¹ Available at <https://www.ohchr.org>.

¹² Available at <https://www.unrefugees.org>



return due to the ongoing persecution and abuse in Myanmar. Michelle Bachelet, the outgoing UN high commissioner for human rights, announced on August 17, following a visit to Cox's Bazar, that "the current situation across the border means that conditions are not right for returns."

"We want to go back to Myanmar but to go there we want justice," Mohammad Ayaz, 21, said. "How long will we have to live in a tarpaulin house? It's been five years. Who knows how long we have to live here. Who knows whether the world will help us get justice or not." Mohammad was shot while fleeing his village of Tula Toli on August 30, 2017. At least 12 members of his family, including his parents and sisters, were killed.

In Malaysia, India, and Thailand, thousands¹³ Rohingya refugees are being held indefinitely in immigration detention sites or living without adequate support and protection.

The international response to the 2017 violence¹⁴ was fragmented and halting, with governments favoring quiet diplomacy that achieved little over strategic measures to place real pressure on the military, Human Rights Watch said.

Building conditions for the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of Rohingya refugees will require a cohesive international response to establish rights-respecting rule in Myanmar and achieve justice for the crimes in Rakhine State. A future Myanmar under democratic civilian rule will entail full citizenship rights for Rohingya and reparations for the atrocities, including for stolen or destroyed land and property.

¹³ Available at <https://www.wfpusa.org>.

¹⁴<https://www.thedailyherald.sx/international/myanmar-government>.



The UN Security Council¹⁵ should end its inaction borne of anticipated vetoes by China and Russia and urgently negotiate a resolution to institute a global arms embargo on Myanmar, refer the situation to the International Criminal Court, and impose targeted sanctions on the junta and military-owned conglomerates.

The US, UK, EU, and other governments should together strengthen international sanctions to cut off the Myanmar military from the revenue funding its abusive operations, including in Rakhine State. Governments should target the junta's gas revenues, its largest source of foreign income, totaling about \$1 billion in annual profits. The EU sanctioned the junta-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise in February, but other governments have so far failed to follow suit. .

Ongoing and severe human rights violations continue to plague several areas of Myanmar, according to a new report¹⁶ issued by UN Human Rights this month.

Governments should explore every avenue for justice and accountability for the Myanmar military's atrocity crimes,¹⁷ including by formally supporting the case under the Genocide Convention¹⁸ brought by Gambia against Myanmar before the International Court of Justice. Canada and the Netherlands have publicly declared their intention to support the proceedings.

Presenting the report at the 45th Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said that "no concrete measures" have been taken by the Government of Myanmar towards

¹⁵ Available at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Bangladesh refugee emergency: Population factsheet. 2018

¹⁶ Available at <https://www.ohchr.org>.

¹⁷Fortify Rights. Policies of persecution: Ending abusive state policies against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. 2014

¹⁸ In November 2019, Gambia – with the backing of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – filed a case, *The Gambia v. Myanmar*, before the International Court of Justice in The Hague.



accountability and that national initiatives to address the situation have been “inadequate and fallen short of international standards.”

Conflict continues to intensify in Rakhine and Chin States with increasing clashes between the Myanmar army and the ethnic armed group known as the Arakan Army. An already fragile zone following years of conflict and crisis, civilians continue to pay a heavy price.

In recent years, thousands have fled their homes seeking safety. Today, there are around 860,000 Rohingya refugees¹⁹ in neighboring Bangladesh, and since 2018, around 200,000 from all communities have been internally displaced in Rakhine and Chin.

The UN Human Rights report details the increasing effects of the armed conflict on the Rakhine, Chin, Mro, Daignet and Rohingya communities. This includes disappearances and extra-judicial killings of civilians; massive civilian displacement; arbitrary arrests, torture and deaths in custody; and the destruction of civilian property. Civilian casualties have also been increasing.

According to the report, while violence affected all communities in Rakhine²⁰ and Chin, ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya civilians have borne the brunt of the impact of the conflict. In 2020, at least 500 civilians have reportedly been killed, including women, children and elderly persons.

¹⁹ Available at <https://www.msf.org>.

²⁰ Available at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>



A “complex and delicate” situation

Addressing the Human Rights Council, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, Permanent Representative of Myanmar, said that the issue of Rakhine poses huge challenges for the Government, describing the situation as very “complex and delicate.”

He said the Government is prioritizing finding a sustainable solution, and that ahead of Myanmar’s general elections in November, exerting undue political pressure on the country should be avoided. He asked the international community to “render genuine cooperation, constructive engagement and helping hands” towards Myanmar.

A call for accountability

The Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly have repeatedly called for the Government of Myanmar to be held accountable for human rights violations, a call supported by many in the international community.

“We are watching, and those perpetrating violence should know that evidence is being recorded and preserved,” said Nicholas Koumjian, Head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM). Koumjian was presenting the second annual report of the IIMM²¹, a body mandated by the Human Rights Council to collect evidence of the most serious international crimes.

Khin Omar, a speaker on the panel and the chairperson of Progressive Voice, a Myanmar human rights organization, also reiterated the demand for accountability.

²¹ Available at <https://iimm.un.org>



“Three years have passed since the genocide of the Rohingya,” said Omar. “Yet there has been no justice or accountability and no sign of their safe return home. Those who remain in Rakhine State continue to endure apartheid-like conditions.”

Omar urged that the international community refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court²² or establish an ad-hoc tribunal, with the purpose to pursue criminal accountability for genocide against the Rohingya, and crimes against humanity and war crimes against other ethnic minorities.

November elections an “important opportunity”

Bachelet specified that the general elections being held in November would be an “important opportunity for all parties to demonstrate their commitment to democratic norms.” At the same time, she expressed disappointment that the vast majority of Rohingya would not be able to vote, as they have been stripped of this right.

Also expressing alarm at the ongoing crackdowns on human rights defenders, journalists, and critics of the Government and Army, she urged that action be taken now to “properly remedy the serious violations the Rohingya have suffered.”

“Given Myanmar's stated commitment to democracy, I also encourage the Government to remove the barriers that impede democratic freedoms and undermine the equal enjoyment of human rights by all in Myanmar,” she concluded.

Understanding forced migration in Myanmar

The term forced migration has been debated internationally because of the prevalent recognition that a continuum of agency exists rather than a voluntary/forced dichotomy.

²² Available at <https://www.icc-cpi.int>



The term forced migration has been used to describe the movements of refugees, displaced persons and, in some instances, victims of trafficking (IOM 2019). According to the IOM²³, forced migration can be defined as “A migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion” (IOM 2019, P77).

South et al.²⁴ argued that there are three kinds of forced migration operated in Myanmar. Firstly, armed clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims led to the successive displacement. Secondly, the military occupation of this border state led to displacement. Thirdly, is the vulnerability of livelihoods which caused internal as well as external migration (Meheub Sahana 2019; Jolliffe 2015).

Forced migration from Myanmar to Bangladesh and beyond

The systematic violation of human rights of the Rohingya by Myanmar’s military junta has forced thousands of Rohingya to flee the country. Subsequently, compelling thousands to live as refugees, mainly in Bangladesh, while others flee to countries like Malaysia, Singapore and the Middle East. For many, taking refuge in Bangladesh was something that has never been expected. However, seeking refuge in Bangladesh did remove them from their suffering (Parnini 2013).

Some of the migrants have been denied access to refugee camps, and they often survive in extreme poverty in villages or slums near Cox’s Bazar and Teknaf. They are invisible and at times labeled as economic migrants by the authorities in Bangladesh (Ullah 2011; Holloway and Fan 2018).

²³ Available at <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-releases-2019>

²⁴and others/latin phase



Myanmar and Bangladesh share a 168 km border, but security and political issues occasionally disturb the bilateral relationship between the two countries. For example, the Rohingya refugees who cross the border temporarily and continue to live in camps bordering Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. The government of Myanmar has shown excessive hesitation to accept these Rohingyas as citizens, and in short, they consider them as foreigners (Parnini 2013; Ullah 2011). Moreover, Rohingyas in Bangladesh are unhappy to be sent back to Myanmar as they believe that the authorities would persecute them. The fear of being persecuted has been raised by the refugees, and the foreign minister of Bangladesh has raised this issue in her visit to Myanmar.

The 1977 Nagamin census²⁵ was conducted in order to screen out foreigners and register citizens, which resulted in the oppression of Rohingyas, and as a result, 200,000 fled from Myanmar for Bangladesh in 1978. A mass exodus of more than 300,000 Rohingyas fled persecution in the Arakan State within a period of 4 months, from December 1991 to March 1992 (Ullah 2011).

Despite several negotiations between the government of Myanmar and the Government of Bangladesh for over 12 years, 226,576 were repatriated to Myanmar. Nonetheless, persecution has not stopped as Rohingyas continue to suffer in the hands of the military. In 2009, in just 3 days, 1000 Rohingya Muslims entered Bangladesh claiming the increasing persecution they face from the military. They were forced out of their homes and threatened. For example, in Rakhine, Rohingyas were forcefully evicted, and the military cleared their spaces and built army barracks (Ullah 2011).

However, Bangladesh has failed to provide enough protection as UNHCR was unable to give adequate support. For example, the average household size in the camps is between six to seven persons regardless of the family size. Although the UNHCR standard guideline of 15–20 L of water per person a day was still an issue due to the large number

²⁵ Available at <https://www.hrw.org>



of people. The operating time of the tap water was 2 h daily, while in many cases it opened for less than 2 h and that was not enough for all those in the camp.

Additionally, informal primary education was also established in 2001. The school started to operate with 5532 children. Moreover, the Rohingyas were not allowed to search for employment beyond the camp; however, some engage in small petty business outside the camp along the roadside mostly throughout the camp. Notwithstanding, many young female Rohingyas resorted in the sex trade business²⁶, though the restriction on their movement has some negative impact on their quality of life. These have resulted in a high rate of pregnancy and birth rate outnumbering the number of deaths and repatriation if combined in recent years (Ullah 2011).

UNHCR Intervention

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)²⁷ became a prime international actor in the Rohingya refugee catastrophe. The UNHCR has played an integral role in the Rohingya refugee crisis during the 1990s, branding Aung San Suu Kyi as its ambassador. Starting its campaign in Myanmar, UNHCR enormously exposed the status of Aung San Suu Kyi as its “messenger of peace” in Myanmar by flourishing the idea of harmonious neighborhoods between the Rohingya community and other Myanmar’s major ethnic groups. From the 1990s onwards, UNHCR established a national office in the Capital of Myanmar, Yangon, following the support of Aung San Suu Kyi. Moreover, leading to the turbulent domestic political contest between Junta and Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League of Democracy (NDL) party, UNHCR had to bear resistance from the Military junta administration.

²⁶ Available at <https://www.pbs.org>

²⁷ Available at <https://www.unhcr.org>



In 1993, during a meeting held to discuss the possible solutions for the 250,000 Rohingya refugees who fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, a senior UNHCR staff member was quoted saying “these are primitive people (referring to the Rohingyas). At the end, they will go where they are told to go”. This statement reflects the exemplarity of the organization's engagement with the Rohingyas for years and the lack of willingness to uphold the UNHCR protection principles. Moreover, Jeff Crisp²⁸ also highlighted that from the unpublished material by UNHCR, in the 1970s and 1980s, many refugees were sent back to Myanmar in a way that was untimely, involuntary and unsafe (Crisp 2018)

Contrary to the UNHCR protection responsibilities, refugees were not consulted about the repatriation process and what waited on them. The UNHCR did very little effort to halt the abuses faced by the Rohingyas in the camps, although two field staff have tried to raise the issue, they were removed from the operation. In an effort to deflect criticism, the UNHCR has stated that it has little involvement in the repatriation and argues that they did not have the mandate responsible for determining the voluntary character of the decision taken by refugees to return.

During this time, any form of advocacy on human rights issues in Myanmar was perceived as a threat to the ruling power, predominantly those that talked about the Rohingya crisis. The failure of this intervention by the UNHCR threatened the lives of their officials working in the country.

It is important to note that one of the characteristics of Southeast Asian states is that the majority of them are not signatories to international treaties concerning migrants and refugees that might provide protection for the rights of Rohingya migrants. Additionally,

²⁸ [https:// Available at www.rsc.ox.ac.uk](https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk)



ASEAN member states are legally sealed by a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation within the ASEAN constitutional framework which strictly preserves the prevention to breach domestic issues of the other member-state (ASEAN 1976²⁹).

It is also important to stress that immigration officers of the third state are obliged to guarantee the safety of refugees so as not to experience the same human rights abuse in the destination country. Based on this principle, the UNHCR provides two options. First is to offer voluntary repatriation to Rakhine state or to set up a new relocation site to enable local community integration with the host native inhabitants (voluntary consent). This is to prevent migrants being forced which can result in another causality.

Results

Respondents reported high levels of systematic human rights violations in Myanmar, including restrictions related to expressing thoughts, meeting in groups, travel, religious practices, education, marriage, childbirth, healthcare, and more. Events experienced in Myanmar included exposure to gunfire (99%), destruction of their homes (93%), witnessing dead bodies (92%), torture (56%), forced labor (49%), sexual assault (33%), and other events. More than half (61%) of participants endorsed mental health symptom levels typically indicative of PTSD, and more than two thirds (84%) endorsed levels indicative of emotional distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression). Historic systematic human rights violations, traumatic events, and daily stressors were associated with symptoms of posttraumatic stress, as well as depression and anxiety. Respondents reported numerous stressors associated with current life in the camps in Bangladesh as well as previous stressors, such as harassment, encountered in Myanmar.

²⁹ Available at <https://asean.org>



Conclusion

What is shown above is the structural nature of violence via law which specifically discriminates against Rohingya alone. The consistent pattern of discrimination dates back at least to 1993 when the Burmese SLORC began issuing Regional Orders to curtail movement, marriage, procreation, education, health services and the like to this one single ethnic population. It can be assumed by the rhetoric of Myanmar's leaders pertaining to the illegal alien nature of these people that they have created second class humans which are in close proximity to other ethnic groups. As such it is easy to understand the othering taking place with regard to cultural markers, stereotyping and cultural asymmetry between different ethnic groups. When authorities purposely place a group of people in a subservient position and allow other groups to take advantage of them due to government instigation, all that is needed is a trigger for direct violence to occur. This occurred in 2012 when three Rohingya men allegedly raped and murdered a Buddhist woman and led to major rioting where some 70 plus Rohingya men were selectively killed and thousands of homes burned. Cultural violence was demonstrated as finding its source largely in religion and nationalism but also in the charismatic individual. This deep seeded aversion and hate for Muslims is very pervasive and plays a significant role in justifying the continued violence towards the Rohingya. The nature of this direct violence is instructive in that an assault on one person led to a massive outpouring of hate and violence against an entire group of people. This indicates that underlying this violence was a large degree of pent up anger and hate towards Rohingya which indicates a large degree of cultural violence already existing. The circular nature of cultural violence leading to structural violence which sparks direct violence which creates more of the same is not only disturbing but instructive in how discrimination and state policy mix to create desperate situations. At the base of this is both cultural discrimination and human rights abuses coming together to prevent the establishment of peace as they are both consistently feeding off of one another to create deeper animosities and marginalization.