

Volunteer Culture Guide:

BURMA: THE ROHINGYA

In the following pages, you will find information regarding the history of the country that your refugee partner once called home. We recognize that it is impossible to encompass the whole story of the Rohingya of Burma in 8 short pages, nor is it our story to completely tell, but we hope that you will find this a good introduction and primer as you begin to develop a relationship with your new friend. Don't forget to ask questions, but respect boundaries as he or she processes a transition that is often fraught with trauma.

Please note: We have done our best to present the history and cultural tips for Burma and the Rohingya people in an unbiased manner. You may find different sources with alternate perspectives, but know this is our best effort at providing impartial information.

What's in a Name: Burma or Myanmar?

Myanmar and Burma are two names that describe the same country. In 1989, the country's State Peace and Development Council changed the name from Burma, its colonized name, to Myanmar. The United States and much of the rest of the world do not recognize the name Myanmar because of its oppressive implications for the people of Burma.



Inle Lake / Marc Veraart/Wikimedia Commons



Mohammed / RefugeeOne

"This summer, I became a U.S. citizen. Of all my accomplishments, this is one that I am the most proud of. For the first time in my life, I am recognized as a citizen."

*Mohammed
Rohingya refugee
Resettled by RefugeeOne
February 2012*

His story on page 4



Displaced Rohingya People in Rakhine State / Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Wikimedia Commons

A Brief History of Burma

In the 9th century, Burmans migrated from the eastern Himalayas and established a kingdom, unifying the region into one entity for the first time. The following centuries saw many battles and power struggles among rival kingdoms and ethnic groups. **In the 19th century, a series of major conquests began** that bled into British-ruled India, which sparked wars and eventually led to the complete British colonization of Burmese territory by 1885 after three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1885). However, during this time, Burmese language and culture managed to dominate the entire region.

British colonial rule, officially beginning in 1886 and continuing through independence in 1948, had a wide range of consequences. The British brought Christian missionaries, who built schools and hospitals and encouraged many ethnic groups to convert. The colonial system also built roads and other transportation infrastructure, as well as a framework for representative government.

The British drew clear lines between various ethnic groups and communities, discouraging national unity.

In 1937, a separate Burmese colony was

created with its own prime minister, removing it from the larger British Indian colony. Shortly thereafter, World War II brought divisions and violence as the various ethnic groups aligned themselves with the allied powers, including with Britain or Japan. Just as the Second World War ended, after disastrous fighting had taken place throughout Burma, Aung San, a Burman, led an independence movement. He was assassinated in July 1947, just months prior to **independence in January 1948**. Civil wars have plagued Burma ever since.

Burmese nationalism opposed non-Burman ethnic groups and communist parties vying for control. **The military staged a coup in 1962** and began a period of nationalization of the economy, media, and more. Any opposition to the military rule was suppressed with violent force. Military rule came with violence, ethnic cleansing, burning of homes and farmland, and mass executions. **Military rule finally ended in 2011** after controversial elections in the prior year. Aung San Suu Kyi, a daughter of Aung San, gained de facto power when her party won the 2015 general election. (See page 4 for a history specifically of the Rohingya.)

General Info about Burma

Population: About 55 million people as of July 2017

Area: 676,578 km² (slightly smaller than Texas)

Capital: Pyinmana/Naypyidaw

Leadership: Htin Kyaw, President, and Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor

Ethnic Groups: Burman (Bamar) 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, and more than 130 indigenous ethnic groups that are recognized by the government. The Rohingya are not recognized by the government.

Languages: Official: Burmese.
Unofficial: minority ethnic languages

Religion: 88% Buddhist, 6% Christian, 4% Muslim, 1% Animist, plus some Hindu and unaffiliated

Climate: Three seasons: dry, rainy monsoon, and cool

Economy and Industry: Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia, with just over one-fourth of its population living in poverty. While most of the population (70%) work in agriculture, primarily as rice growers, 23% work in the service industry and 7% work in other industry-related jobs. Burma exports textiles, footwear, pulses (the edible seeds of plants in the legume family), beans, minerals like jade and gems, and wood products like teak. Burma is also the second largest producer of illegal opium.

Agricultural Products and Natural

Resources: Rice, corn, peanuts, beans, oil, seeds, sugar cane, petroleum, timber, tin, antimony, zinc, copper, tungsten, lead, coal, marble, limestone, precious stones, natural gas, hydropower, and arable land.

Infrastructure: Years of corrupt governance has left Burma severely lacking in adequate infrastructure.

Education: Education in Burma is overseen by the Ministry of Education. Compulsory schooling ends at the end of elementary school at about age 9.

Healthcare: The government spending on healthcare ranks among the lowest in the world. The healthcare system is severely lacking in funds, facilities, and equipment.

Family and Gender Roles: Men and women both participate in agricultural work; however, their genders dictate which specific tasks they are to complete. Men and women also partake in handicraft production and other arts. Most of the domestic work is completed by women, as well as teaching and nursing.

Cuisine: Food in Burma is primarily centered around fish and seafood products, supplemented by starches like rice and noodles. The national dish is *mohinga*, a fish soup dish.

Statistics gathered in this section were compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the PEW Research Center.



Map from <http://toursmaps.com/burma-map.html>

A Refugee Story

*Mohammed Anas fled
Burma in 2007*

*Resettled by
RefugeeOne
February 2012*

“My country is very beautiful, but the government is not. They have such hate. Here in the U.S., the government saves lives. But there, the government takes them.

“I was so excited when I found out I would be coming to this great country,” Mohammed said of the day he found out he would be resettled in the U.S. “I was finally given a life of freedom and safety.”



Mohammed / RefugeeOne

The Rohingya People and the Current Conflict

The Rohingya, who mostly lived in the Arakan region, have faced hundreds of years of persecution and are not considered citizens by the government. They have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, and subjected to ethnic cleansing; as a result, large numbers have fled Burma at multiple points over the past decades. Approximately 1.2 million Rohingya lived in Burma prior to the 2016-2017 conflict

9th to 14th Centuries: Through Arab traders from the Bay of Bengal, the Rohingya came into contact with Islam, and they developed close ties with the Arab merchants.

1784: After the Burman king conquered the Arakan region, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fled to Bengal, where they found help from British diplomats.



Displaced Rohingya women in 2017 / Tasnim News Agency/Wikimedia Commons

1942: Burmese nationalists attacked the Muslim communities they thought had benefited from British rule.

1945: Rohingya helped the British liberate Burma from the Japanese, but the British failed to fulfill their promise to grant Arakan autonomy in the Rakhine State region.

1948: Tensions increased between the newly independent government and the Rohingya, many of whom wanted Arakan to join the majority-Muslim Pakistan. In retaliation, the Burmese government further ostracized the Rohingya.

1982: A citizenship law created categories of citizenship based on race, ancestry, and even language. The law effectively denied the Rohingya people the possibility of qualifying for any one of them. After this, the Rohingya were known legally as “resident foreigners,” meaning they had limited freedom of movement, were denied land, property rights and ownership, and faced restrictions on livelihood, education, and family life.

1989: The ruling military junta officially changed the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar. In 1991 more than 250,000 Rohingya fled persecution by the Myanmar army, citing forced labor and rape.

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Fall 2012: Clashes broke out between the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists after 3 Rohingya men were arrested on suspicion of raping and killing a Buddhist woman. A state of emergency was declared after violence spread across the state destroying homes and lives. The military was deployed and thousands of Rohingya were driven into neighboring Bangladesh and into camps in Rakhine state.

May 2015 boat crisis: Thousands of Rohingya ended up stranded at sea, with limited food and water; countries including Thailand and Indonesia turned them away or refused to let them land.

Fall 2016: Rohingya militants attacked border police, killing several soldiers, and the army retaliated by attacking villages.

June 2017: UN investigators attempted to explore allegations of ethnic cleansing but were refused entry. In late August, violent conflict erupted again in retaliation against the Rohingya after Rohingya militants attacked police posts. There are widespread accounts of the Burmese military burning hundreds of Rohingya villages, raping Rohingya women and girls, and massive shootings.

January 2018: According to the UNHCR, over 647,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since August 25, 2017, the vast majority being women, children and the elderly.

The Rohingya Refugees

As of January 2018, almost 800,000 Rohingya were living in UN camps and other shelters in Bangladesh. In Malaysia, there are 150,000 Rohingya refugees registered with the UNHCR as of November 2017.

A group of nationalist Buddhist monks are fanning anti-Rohingya sentiment; some groups call them “Bengali” illegal immigrants and say they’re not a Burmese ethnic group. This stokes a fear of terrorism and forced conversions. And, like Burmese people in general, the Rohingya have also experienced smuggling, trafficking of men, women, and children, and forced labor.

Burma’s government prohibits stating the word “Rohingya” because it does not want to recognize their rights and existence.

UNHCR Worldwide Fast Facts

65.6 million forcibly displaced people

which includes:

40.3 million internally displaced people

22.5 million refugees

2.8 million asylum-seekers

UNHCR statistics as of 2017



Refugee Camp in the Rakhine State in western Burma / United Kingdom DFIB - Burma/Wikimedia Commons



Kaladan River, Rakhine State / Anne Dirkse/Wikimedia Commons

Helpful Tips—Rohingya

Helping someone to adjust to his or her new life in the United States can be a very rewarding experience. However, there is no clear roadmap on how to do it. How you relate to your refugee partners may change over time, as they better understand American culture, integrate into this country, and become self-reliant..

There are different philosophies on how to best assist in that integration. Some recommend just being your self, however you define that culturally, because the refugee needs to learn how to interact with Americans. Another school of thought might recommend a more gentle approach by adjusting your behavior and dress to be culturally sensitive to your partner's values upon arrival, and especially when visiting in his or her home. One's home should be an oasis, a place that feels safe and familiar. As time goes on, you can explain more and more about American culture in general and expected behavioral norms outside the home.

Consider the following tips as you embark on this journey. Please use your best judgment as to how to apply them in your relationship with your partner.

Greetings

In the US, most Rohingya are comfortable shaking hands regardless of gender. However, some may abide by their traditional customs where only men shake hands. Not sure what to do? Observe and respond according to their cues.

Religion

A lack of religious freedom for their Muslim faith was a reason many fled; we can help support those needs here. Help your partner find mosques, halal food, appropriate burial places, and Islamic classes for children and adults. Religious groups can provide community, support, and counseling-like services.

Variety of backgrounds

Recognize that there are subgroups even within the Rohingya, and, in addition, families will have come from different first-asylum countries or camps.

Food

Because Rohingya are Muslim, they only eat halal meat and don't drink alcohol. Their culture's sweets are not very sweet, so U.S. sweets might be too much. If you're going to a dinner, fruit might be a good choice to bring to share. Don't refuse if they offer you food -- food is one of the few things left of their culture, and they love to share.



Tea Leaf Salad / Alison Spiegel/Huffington Post

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Clothing

Take your shoes off when visiting someone's home; wear socks if you're uncomfortable going barefoot. Wear modest clothing. Show them how to dress for winter. Men and boys may wear clothing with bright colors, so give them a heads-up about the teasing that might come with that here. Differentiate between pajamas and regular clothes, etc.



Children

Some Rohingya may let their kids roam outside alone or play in parking lots or nearby streets; discuss how that's dangerous (or at least seen as dangerous) here. Talk about holding their hands while walking and seeing them off to school.

Mixed-gender interactions

While there don't appear to be restrictions on mixed-gender interactions, they do separate for religious activities. Also, women may be shy to speak up around men.

Timeliness

Time is very fluid for them, and they may be late or not show up at all. In addition to making clear the importance of punctuality, explain the expectations for sick days and other absences from school and jobs. Other countries have more lax rules about missing for illness, but doing so improperly here may lead to being fired from a job.

Literacy

Most Rohingya will come with little knowledge of English and, most likely, low overall literacy. Take time to really make sure they understand what you're saying, as they won't tell you if they don't. Don't rely too much on workbooks and writing to teach them English, as a lack of literacy in their own language will hinder that teaching strategy.

Smoking

Explain where and when they can and can't smoke.

Appliances

Some might not have ever had a refrigerator or a stove, so talk about how to maintain those. After long stays in refugee camps many will need help getting acquainted with modern technology.

Orientation

RefugeeOne provides newly-arrived refugees with a cultural orientation which they must attend. Feel free to review the topics we cover in this orientation:

- General information about Chicago, including public transit and shopping
- How to access public benefits, healthcare, and RefugeeOne services
- Laws regarding smoking, alcohol use, and safe driving
- What to do in an emergency, how to interact with the police, and how to maintain personal safety
- Rules for childcare, family life, and other relational guidelines
- How to maintain personal hygiene and keep a clean home
- Payment of rent, utilities, and other home care procedures

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Interacting with authorities

They may have a distrust of police due to experiencing abuse and corruption by authorities in their previous homes. Help them talk to police if a crime happens, as they might be inclined to just suffer through it or write it off as not as bad as where they were.

Mental Health:

Mental health may be a new concept to them. Some may face PTSD and other problems and could benefit from learning coping mechanisms. *If you become concerned about the emotional health of your refugee partners, please encourage them to contact someone in RefugeeOne's Wellness Program for support.*

Rohingya Culture Center

The Rohingya struggle with a lack of community, since they have only been resettling in the U.S. for the past five years or so. There's no major established community here. They do not find support with the rest of the Burmese refugee community due to the deep conflicts amongst the ethnic groups. Rohingya is an unwritten language that is only spoken by the Rohingya people.— thus they face a lack of translation support. Connect your partner with the Rohingya Culture Center, which offers Quran classes for children, ESL classes for adults, open meal events, and other resources.
(rccchicago.com; 2740 W Devon Ave, Chicago, IL 60659)

Final Words

While there is much more to learn, we are confident that much will be revealed through the continued development of a friendship with your refugee partner. We hope this is a helpful tool as you begin down this road of mentoring or tutoring.

About Us

Since 1982, RefugeeOne has helped more than 18,000 refugees build new lives in Chicago after fleeing war, terror, and persecution. Alongside donors and volunteers like you, RefugeeOne is there to greet refugees at the airport, support refugee children in school, help adults learn English and employable skills, connect them to their first jobs, and assist with integration into American culture. With your support, a refugee will begin his or her journey to self-reliance this year.

Sources

Material for this handout was gathered from the UNHCR, BBC, CIA World Factbook, PEW Research Center, Rohingya Culture Center, Country Carlow in Ireland, Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Resource Center, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post. Reviewed by Rohingya staff members at RefugeeOne.

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