

The Rohingya Crisis

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group, have fled persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State, fueling a historic migration crisis.



Rohingya refugees help each other after crossing the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters

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Summary

- For decades, Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority group, in Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, have faced institutionalized discrimination, such as exclusionary citizenship laws.
- The Myanmar government launched a military campaign in 2017 that forced seven hundred thousand Rohingya to flee. Rights groups suspect the government has committed genocide against the Rohingya, but officials deny the accusations.
- The United States and other countries have sanctioned military officials and given aid to Rohingya refugees who have fled to nearby countries, such as Bangladesh.

Introduction

Discriminatory policies of Myanmar's government since the late 1970s have compelled hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya to flee their homes in the predominantly Buddhist country. Most have crossed by land into Bangladesh, while others have taken to the sea to reach Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Beginning in 2017, renewed violence, including reported rape, murder, and arson, triggered an exodus of Rohingya, as Myanmar's security forces claimed they were carrying out a campaign to reinstate stability in the country's western region. The United Nations has said that those forces showed "genocidal intent," and international pressure on the country's elected leaders to end the repression continues to rise.

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Who are the Rohingya?

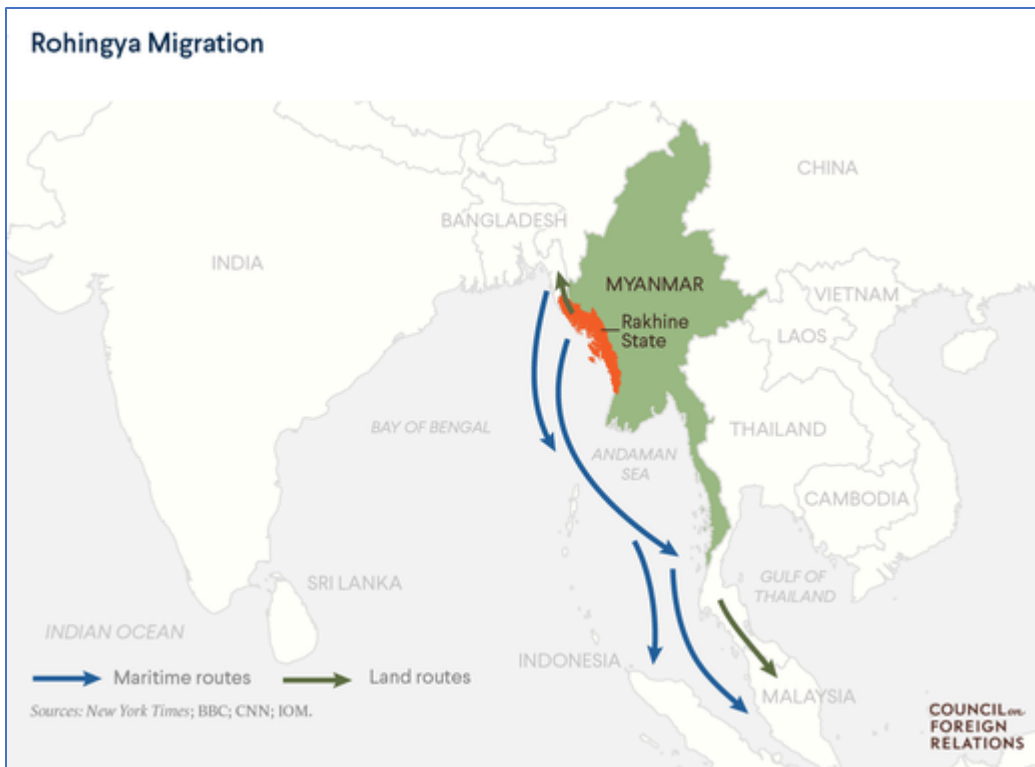
The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority who practice a Sufi-inflected variation of Sunni Islam. There are an estimated 3.5 million Rohingya dispersed worldwide. Before August 2017, the majority of the estimated one million Rohingya in Myanmar resided in Rakhine State, where they accounted for nearly a third of the population. They differ from Myanmar's dominant Buddhist groups ethnically, linguistically, and religiously.

The Rohingya trace their origins in the region to the fifteenth century, when thousands of Muslims came to the former [Arakan Kingdom](#). Many others arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Rakhine was governed by colonial rule as part of British India. Since independence in 1948, successive governments in Burma, renamed Myanmar in 1989, have refuted the Rohingya's historical claims and denied the group recognition as one of the country's [135 official ethnic groups](#). The Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many trace their roots in Myanmar back centuries.

Neither the central government nor Rakhine's dominant ethnic Buddhist group, known as the Rakhine, recognize the label "Rohingya," a [self-identifying term](#) that surfaced in the 1950s, which experts say provides the group with a collective political identity. Though the etymological root of the word is disputed, the most widely accepted theory is that *Rohang* derives from the word "Arakan" in the Rohingya dialect and *ga* or *gya* means "from." By identifying as Rohingya, the ethnic Muslim group asserts its ties to land that was once under the control of the Arakan Kingdom, according to Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a Thailand-based advocacy group.

What is the legal status of the Rohingya?

The government refuses to grant the Rohingya citizenship, and as a result most of the group's members have no legal documentation, effectively making them [stateless](#). Myanmar's 1948 citizenship law was already [exclusionary](#), and the military junta, which seized power in 1962, introduced another law twenty years later that stripped the Rohingya of access to full citizenship. Until recently, the Rohingya had been able to register as temporary residents with identification cards, known as white cards, which the junta began issuing to many Muslims, both Rohingya and non-Rohingya, in the 1990s. The white cards conferred limited rights but were not recognized as proof of citizenship.



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In 2014 the government held a UN-backed [national census](#), its first in thirty years. The Muslim minority group was initially permitted to identify as Rohingya, but after Buddhist nationalists threatened to boycott the census, the government decided Rohingya could only register if they identified as Bengali instead.

Similarly, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists protesting the Rohingya’s right to vote in a 2015 constitutional referendum, President Thein Sein canceled the temporary identity cards in February 2015, effectively revoking their newly gained right to vote. (White card holders were [allowed to vote](#) in Myanmar’s 2008 constitutional referendum and 2010 general elections.) In the 2015 elections, which were widely hailed by international monitors as free and fair, [no parliamentary candidate](#) was of the Muslim faith.

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In recent years, the government has forced Rohingya to start carrying [national verification cards](#) that effectively identify them as foreigners and do not grant them citizenship, according to a report by the advocacy group Fortify Rights. Myanmar officials have said the cards are an initial step toward citizenship, but critics argue that they deny Rohingya their identity and could make it easier for the government to [further repress their rights](#).

Why are the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar?

The Myanmar government has effectively institutionalized discrimination against the ethnic group through [restrictions](#) on marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement. For example, Rohingya couples in the northern towns of Maungdaw and Buthidaung are only [allowed to have two children](#) [PDF]. Rohingya must also seek permission to marry, which may require them to bribe authorities and provide photographs of the bride without a headscarf and the groom with a clean-shaven face, practices that conflict with Muslim customs. To move to a new home or travel outside their townships, Rohingya must gain government approval.

Moreover, Rakhine State is Myanmar's least developed state, with a poverty rate of [78 percent](#), compared to the 37.5 percent national average, according to World Bank estimates. Widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of employment opportunities in Rakhine have exacerbated the cleavage between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. This tension is deepened by religious differences that have at times erupted into conflict.

Slideshow

The Rohingya Crisis: Expulsion and Exodus

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What's caused the recent exodus?

Clashes in Rakhine broke out in August 2017, after a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) [claimed responsibility](#) for attacks on police and army posts. The government declared ARSA a terrorist organization and the military mounted a [brutal campaign](#) that destroyed hundreds of Rohingya villages and forced nearly seven hundred thousand Rohingya to leave Myanmar. At least [6,700 Rohingya were killed](#) in the first month of attacks, between August 25 and September 24, 2017, according to the international medical charity Doctors Without Borders. Myanmar's security forces also allegedly [opened fire](#) on fleeing civilians and [planted land mines](#) near border crossings used by Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has described the violence as ethnic cleansing and the [humanitarian situation as catastrophic](#). Rights groups and other UN leaders suspect acts of genocide have taken place, and in September 2018, a UN fact-finding panel [released a report](#) [PDF] that claimed the Myanmar government had "genocidal intent" against the Rohingya. The chair of the UN panel said it found [clear patterns of abuse](#) by the military, including systematic targeting of civilians, committing sexual violence, promoting discriminatory rhetoric against minorities, and creating a climate of impunity for security forces.

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Since early 2018, Myanmar authorities have also reportedly [cleared abandoned Rohingya villages](#) [PDF] and farmlands to build homes, security bases, and infrastructure. The government says this development is in

preparation for the repatriation of refugees, but rights activists have expressed concern these moves could be intended to accommodate populations besides the Rohingya in Rakhine.

Furthermore, some have raised doubts that the government's tactics have been in response to ARSA attacks, with reports showing that the military began implementing its policies nearly a year before ARSA struck. Sectarian violence is not new to Rakhine State: security campaigns in the past five years, notably in 2012 and 2016, also resulted in the flight of tens of thousands of Rohingya from their homes.

Where are the Rohingya migrating?

Bangladesh: Most Rohingya have sought refuge in nearby Bangladesh, which has limited resources and land to host refugees. More than [nine hundred thousand Rohingya refugees](#) are in the country, according to the UN refugee agency. Many live in crowded camps in [Cox's Bazar district](#), now home to the world's largest refugee camp. Nearly four hundred thousand children in the camps [lack access to education](#), since teachers are banned from using both Bangladeshi and Myanmar curricula in the camps and Rohingya children are barred from enrolling in schools outside the camps. At the same time, the risk of disease outbreak in camps is high, with health organizations warning of possible outbreaks of measles, tetanus, diphtheria, and acute jaundice syndrome. More than [60 percent](#) of the available water supply in refugee camps is contaminated, increasing the risk of spread of communicable and water-borne diseases. Some refugees have turned to smugglers, paying for transport out of Bangladesh and Myanmar and risking exploitation, including [sexual enslavement](#).

Malaysia: As of October 2019, nearly one hundred thousand Rohingya were in Malaysia, according to the United Nations. Rohingya who arrive safely in Malaysia have no legal status and are unable to work, leaving their families cut off from access to education and health care.

India: Eighteen thousand Rohingya refugees have registered with the UN refugee agency, though Indian officials estimate there are [forty thousand Rohingya](#) throughout the country. The Hindu nationalist government considers Rohingya to be illegal immigrants and has [worked to repatriate](#) them. Since late 2018, India has reportedly sent dozens of refugees back to Myanmar, moves criticized by the United Nations and human rights groups.

Thailand: The country is a hub for regional human smuggling and serves as a common transit point for Rohingya. Migrants often arrive by boat from Bangladesh or Myanmar before continuing to Indonesia or Malaysia. The military-led Thai government [cracked down](#) on smuggling rings after the discovery of mass graves in alleged camps where gangs held hostages. But some experts say that while punishing traffickers disrupts the networks, it does not dismantle them.

Indonesia: The Rohingya have also sought refuge in Indonesia, although the number of refugees from Myanmar there remains relatively small because they are treated as illegal immigrants. Indonesia has rescued migrant boats off its shores and dispatched humanitarian aid and supplies to Bangladesh's camps.

Has civilian leadership changed the Myanmar government's policies?

In 2016, Myanmar's first democratically elected government in a generation came to power, but critics say it has done nothing to help Rohingya and other Muslims for fear of alienating Buddhist nationalists and threatening the [power-sharing agreement](#) the civilian government maintains with the military.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader, has denied that [ethnic cleansing](#) is taking place and dismissed international criticism of her handling of the crisis, accusing critics of [fueling resentment between Buddhists and Muslims](#) in the country. In September 2017, Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, said her government had "already started defending [all the people in Rakhine](#) in the best way possible." Later that year, the Myanmar government denied access to the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar and suspended cooperation for the remainder of her term. At the International Court of Justice in December 2019, Suu Kyi continued to [reject charges of genocide](#), and said that "if war crimes have been committed by members of Myanmar's defense services, they will be prosecuted through our military justice system."

The UN fact-finding panel reported in September 2019 that the situation in Myanmar [has not improved](#) [PDF] and that the risk of genocide continues for the six hundred thousand Rohingya still in Rakhine. The panel had recommended a year earlier that Myanmar army leaders be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to be [prosecuted for genocide](#) [PDF].

How is the region responding?

Protesters have at times [gathered in cities](#) in Pakistan, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh to denounce the killing and persecution of Rohingya. Bangladesh's foreign minister [condemned the violence](#) in Rakhine as "genocide" in September 2017 and Indonesia and Malaysia called on the Myanmar authorities to halt their campaign and bring an end to the violence.

"As grim as the situation is for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh...their prospects back in Myanmar are even worse." --- Joshua Kurlantzick, *Senior Fellow for Southeast Asia*

Authorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar have held discussions aimed at repatriating Rohingya refugees, but the efforts have so far foundered. In late 2019, the countries agreed to repatriate several thousand refugees, but none in the designated group [was willing to return](#) to Myanmar. Leaders of the Rohingya community said they will not return until their citizenship rights are guaranteed. Meanwhile, the United Nations has criticized the repatriation plans, saying that conditions in Myanmar are still unsafe for Rohingya. "As grim as the situation is for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh . . . their prospects back in Myanmar are [even worse](#)," writes CFR's Joshua Kurlantzick. Experts say the Bangladeshi government must decide whether to continue its struggle to provide shelter for so many refugees or to expel them and draw the ire of Western governments and aid organizations.

Other governments in Southeast Asia generally lack established legal frameworks to protect refugees' rights, and the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have not coordinated a response to the deepening crisis. Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—all ASEAN members—have yet to ratify the UN refugee convention or its protocol. ASEAN itself has been mostly silent on the plight of the Rohingya and on the growing numbers of asylum seekers in member countries, largely because of its members' commitment to the [principle of noninterference](#) in each other's internal affairs. "They aren't going to [take collective action on Myanmar](#), with Myanmar as one of its members," says Kurlantzick.

How has the rest of the world responded?

In November 2019, Gambia, on behalf of the fifty-seven-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, filed the [first international lawsuit](#) [PDF] against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, accusing the country of violating the UN Genocide Convention. The court unanimously ruled in January 2020 that Myanmar must [take emergency measures](#) [PDF] to protect Rohingya from violence and preserve evidence of possible genocide. A final ruling in the case could take years. Separately, the ICC [authorized an investigation](#) into alleged atrocities in November 2019.

The UN fact-finding mission recommended that the Security Council impose an arms embargo and other sanctions on Myanmar and top military officials. But some Security Council members, including Russia and China, have [resisted increasing pressure](#) on Myanmar's government because they say it is trying to restore stability. Additionally, a report commissioned by Secretary-General Guterres documented "[systemic failure](#)" [PDF] by UN agencies in 2010–2018 to curb violence in Myanmar.

In December 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama lifted sanctions against Myanmar, saying it had made strides in improving human rights. The move came amid a crackdown on Rohingya and was criticized by some as premature. A year later, under President Donald J. Trump, new U.S. sanctions were imposed on a Myanmar general for his alleged role in the military's attacks in Rakhine. The Trump administration continued to [widen its sanctions](#) regime on Myanmar military commanders in 2018 and 2019, as evidence of atrocities by the military has grown. Australia, Canada, and the European Union have also imposed sanctions on military leaders.

Meanwhile, many countries, including the [United States](#), [Canada](#), [Norway](#), and [South Korea](#), as well as international donors, have upped their humanitarian assistance. Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Arakan Project, and Fortify Rights continue to appeal for international pressure on Myanmar’s government. For example, in November 2018, Amnesty International stripped Suu Kyi of the [Ambassador of Conscience Award](#) it had conferred on her during her fifteen-year house arrest.

Still, resentment of the minority group has run deep for generations. Without overhauling “[a culture of pervasive prejudice](#)” and ensuring that Rohingya are treated as human beings, the situation in Rakhine State is unlikely to improve, says journalist and author Francis Wade.

Recommended Resources

This 2018 Amnesty International report [documents infrastructure development](#) [PDF] on land abandoned by the Rohingya.

This *New York Times* interactive [traces the influx](#) of Rohingya into Bangladesh. returned to Myanmar.

This Reuters series investigates the [exodus of Rohingya](#) from Myanmar.

A [CFR Backgrounder](#) charts Myanmar’s political evolution.

Tags: [Myanmar](#), [Rohingya](#), [Refugees and Displaced Persons](#), [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), [Humanitarian Crises](#), [Immigration and Migration](#)

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Source : <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>