

# The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects

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**Abstract:** The Rohingya in Myanmar are often described as the most persecuted minority in the world. In the former Burma, the Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants and have been denied citizenship for decades. Since the end of August 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh. After explaining the historical background, this paper aims to investigate the reasons behind the most recent violence and subsequent mass flights of Rohingya. The research is based on extensive literature and media analysis, interviews and discussions with researchers, academics in Dhaka and NGO representatives in Cox's Bazar as well as a visit to a refugee camp in LEDA/Cox's Bazar in February 2018. The public usually discusses mainly the ethnic-religious and humanitarian causes and effects of conflict. However, this paper shows that there are massive political, economic and geopolitical interests of directly and indirectly involved actors behind the conflict. As of today, no solution of the crisis is in sight. Therefore, further analysis is needed to find practical approaches for either repatriation or finding new living spaces for the Rohingya.

**Keywords:** Myanmar, Rohingya, refugees, Rohingya conflict, displacement, geopolitical background, Bangladesh

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Since the mass exodus in August 2017 the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar is getting attention in the international public media. The ethnic-religious causes and humanitarian aspect of the refugee situation are put in the foreground. This article reviews first the historical background of the Rohingya as an ethnic group and their discrimination in the recent past, followed by a description of the escalation of the violent persecution, the subsequent mass flight as well as the international reactions and relief actions. Next the economic and geopolitical interests of different international players are pointed out. Finally the most recent problems and concerns in the refugee camp areas are exposed.



Source of all photos: Stefan Bepler, February 2018.

Figure 1: Water is allocated twice per day, Leda camp, Bangladesh



## Etymology and today's spread

The word "Rohingya" was used for the first time as "Rooinga" (= inhabitant of Arakan, today's province Rakhine) in 1799 in the "Journal Asiatic Researches" for a long-established population in Rakhine (Ibrahim 2016, Gill 2015). Later they were called "Muslim Arakanese".

Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diversified societies of the world. 135 "ethnic nationalities" with numerous subgroups are officially recognized in the Burma Citizenship Law from 1982, but the ethnic Rohingya were not included (Farzana 2017, 2018). In the first constitution of Myanmar in 1947, all people living at that time in "Frontier Areas" and who intended to stay permanently were considered citizens and accepted as "The People of Burma" (Farzana 2018). However, when General Ne Win came to power in 1962, the Rohingya were deemed as not compatible with other ethnic groups in Burma. Other Muslims, who do not belong to the Rohingya, have Myanmar nationality (Ibrahim 2016).

The Muslims in Rakhine have not always identified themselves as an independent group. But a uniform concept with an identifying name had political advantages, since recognition as an ethnic group would increase the chances to gain the right to citizenship. The common experience generated by decades of discrimination contributed further to the identity formation of the Rohingya. The term "Rohingya" as an ethnic group spread only after the major refugee movements with the human rights debate through international organizations (Farzana 2017; Bochmann 2017).

In early 2017, around one million Rohingya lived in Rakhine (see Fig. 2). At that time about another million Rohingya lived already as refugees in neighbouring countries and in the Middle East. The government of Myanmar avoids the term Rohingya and speaks instead of "Bengalis" that immigrated illegally from the neighbouring Bangladesh. The home state of the Rohingya, Rakhine, remains one of the poorest provinces of Myanmar despite its rich natural resources such as oil, gas and uranium (Zoglul 2017).



Figure 2: Map of Rakhine state in Myanmar / the refugees camps are in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

## Historical Background: From the Kingdom of Arakan to the colonial era

Since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Arab and Persian merchants settled in Southern Burma and the then independent Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan. This region was geographically isolated from the neighbours by the Yoma-Mountain Range and the Naaf River. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Arakan Muslim population had close relationships to the Bengal king. Increasing Islamization occurred until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but a tolerant attitude between the religions prevailed. In 1784, the Burmese king conquered Arakan. After massacres and the introduction of forced labour, the first major exodus followed to the English colony of Bengal (today divided into India and Bangladesh).

From 1824 to 1886 England colonized Burma. Through Arakan they invaded the lowlands and were supported by the local population. Afterwards, artificially defined ethnic and territorial administrative units

separated the ethnic minorities and thus created the political and social conditions for local liberation movements.

This common British policy of "divide and rule" (divide et impera) was a key cause of ethnic tensions. Minorities were "positively discriminated". Ethnic and religious groups that collaborated with the British were preferably recruited into the army and appointed to senior government positions. Until 1937, Burma remained a province of colonial India, after which it became an independent colony. For labour in plantations and ports, the British organized enormous intraregional labour migration movements from India to Arakan (Zöllner 2008; Farzana 2017).

During the Second World War, a national liberation movement under Aung San collaborated with the Japanese at their "Anti-imperialist invasion" of Burma. Most minorities remained loyal to the British Empire. After their victory, the Japanese placed



Figure 3: Waste disposal is a problem, Leda Camp

ethnic Burmese in administration positions and abolished protection measures for the minorities. This led to bloody attacks of the Burmese independence army of Aung San and others. After the end of World War II, Burma was again integrated into the British colonial empire.

### Independence and further development

Burma gained independence in 1948. Aung San succeeded first in getting the support of the ethnic groups for a federally organized state. However, after his early death, a change of policy towards Burmese dominance and national unity took place. The minorities perceived a breach of Aung San's promises and a threat to their identities. Conflicting legislation led to unequal treatment of ethnic groups and erupted in violent conflicts in the border regions. In the late 1950s almost all ethnic groups took up arms against the regime (Bochmann 2017). The military leadership finally took advantage of the situation and staged a coup on March 2, 1962. In some cases, General Ne Win revoked civil rights of opponents against the military government (Bochmann 2017; Farzana 2017). Because of their collaboration with the British, the Rohingya were seen as enemies and not considered as Burmese nationals.

After an administrative reform in 1964 a centralist state was

established. The 1974 constitution divided the country in Burmese-dominated divisions and minority-dominated states, the latter without true autonomy. Social and political organizations of the Rohingya were successively dissolved (Ibrahim 2016). In late 1977 military actions against "illegal immigrants" caused massive exodus and over 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. With the "Burma Citizenship Law" (1982), the Rohingya finally became stateless. They were not recognized as one of the national ethnic groups and were denied citizenship as well. Subsequently they were largely defenceless in the arbitrariness of the violent treatment of police, military and authorities.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya left their home since the independence of Myanmar in 1948. In 1978 around 220,000 left, and in 1991/92 another 250,000 fled to neighbouring Bangladesh because of the violence of Tatmadaw, the army of Myanmar. This led to the conclusion that the Rohingya are the most persecuted minority of the world (GfbV 2014 and others).

The daughter of Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi resisted the military regime and was forced to live for 15 years under house arrest. In 1991 she received the Nobel Peace Prize. Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), finally won the election in 2015. Her political

power, however, is fragile. Through a constitutional clause, the presidency is denied to her. Military generals still occupy a quarter of all seats in parliament, and three ministries and the army is not subject to any civilian control. This was one of the reasons why she never really addressed the Rohingya issues when they became critical.

Since the beginning of political reforms in Myanmar in 2011 the situation of the Rohingya has worsened again. Influential and radical Buddhist Monks pressured the government to issue laws to "protect race and religion". In 2012, the militant Buddhist movement Ma Ba Tha triggered a violent wave against the Rohingya (Ibrahim 2016). Their right to vote was revoked and no party - not even the NLD of Aung San Suu Kyi - nominated Muslim candidates for the parliamentary election in November 2015.

With increasing release of its power to civilian institutions, the military has deliberately constructed the image of a threat by Muslims to the Buddhist Society and thus created a new enemy. The military government thereby cleverly increased their acceptance and redirected the former rejection of the military dictatorship as a unitary- and identity-forming social integration movement against the Muslim minorities, especially the Rohingya (Wade 2017).





Figure 4: Shelters in Leda camp

### Latest violence and mass exodus in 2016/2017

Persecution, statelessness and poverty of the Rohingya made it easy for extremist groups to find followers. The ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) was founded, in exile in Saudi Arabia, in 2016. The International Crisis Group (ICG, based in Brussels) asserts that the ARSA have contacts with Islamists, although the ARSA denies this (Zoglul 2017).

In October 2016, the ARSA attacked checkpoints and killed numerous police officers. Myanmar security forces responded with great severity. Both sides accused each other of burning villages and mass killings. The United Nations spoke of "genocide" and "crimes against humanity". On August 25, 2017, insurgents attacked again. The army violently went against Rohingya rebels. According to human rights groups, arbitrary killings, systematic rape, burning down houses and evictions occurred. What the government claimed as "cleansing actions" against terrorists, the UN Human Rights Commissioner called a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". In the aftermath, around 702,000 Muslims fled to Bangladesh (ISCG 2018).

The government of Myanmar still sees the "Bengali Muslims" as illegal immigrants. Unlike other minorities, the Rohingya are assumed to withhold

their loyalty to Burma. A government official stated that people who are fleeing are not citizens of Myanmar (Farzana 2017). Back in 1979, Myanmar let the refugees return, but not as citizens. A Muslim State in the area of Burma was feared. After the ARSA attacks, state media and official government spokespeople have actively propagated and inflamed anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiments (Amnesty International 2018).

Aung San Suu Kyi, as the de facto national leader, largely keeps out of the conflict. For the West, this looks like a betrayal of her old values, but for Aung San Suu Kyi it might be a necessary means to not weaken her already fragile position towards the military and her influence on a democratic future. Domestically, with a commitment to the unwanted, stateless minority she could lose the support of the majority of the population (among others: Ibrahim 2016).

Despite heavy flood damage and its own poverty issues, Bangladesh in 2017 has initially taken the refugees (Figures 4 and 5). The government of Bangladesh admits a cultural, linguistic and religious proximity to the Muslim Bengalis in Chittagong, but sees the escape movements primarily as an internal problem of Myanmar. The Rohingya are not considered original Bangladeshis and are not accepted

as their own ethnicity and according to official viewpoint should return to Myanmar. A recognition of the refugees would legitimize Myanmar's policies that they are originally non-Burmese and could lead to even more expulsion and escape. An acceptance could also lead to conflicts with the local population and influence elections in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government therefore avoids responsibility by identifying the Rohingya as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals - FDMN" and not as "Rohingya" or "refugees" (Farzana 2018).

Bangladesh and Myanmar both want to avoid more conflicts because of refugees, yet there are unresolved questions on maritime boundaries (gas and oil resources), international pressure and foreign investment and trade interests, which are more important for them. After bilateral negotiations in November 2017, the governments of both states signed a Letter of Intent on the voluntary repatriation of the Muslim minority "in safety, protection and dignity". Almost no refugees returned since these conditions are not recognizable for them.

In August 2018 a fact-finding mission was undertaken by the Human Rights Council and wrote a report based on information obtained by interviews with victims and eyewitnesses, satellite imagery,





Figure 5: Main "shopping street" in Leda camp

photographs and other documents. The report highlights serious human rights violations in Rakhine since August 2017, demands investigation and prosecution for genocide and crimes against humanity and draws up a list of alleged perpetrators (Human Rights Council 2018).

### Reactions from UN and other countries

UN organizations such as UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), WFP (World Food Program) and WHO (World Health Organization), initiated a first aid program for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in 1978. After the mass flight in 1991/92, UNHCR tended to repatriate refugees and participated in the control of "voluntary return" of over 230,000 Rohingya between 1993 and 1997. The UNCHR was criticized because the repatriation was according to independent observers not always voluntary. UNHCR sees the conflict primarily as a humanitarian crisis; a political solution was never part of the strategy (Farzana 2017, Ibrahim 2016).

According to OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) 1,3 million people (refugees and receiving communities in Bangladesh) urgently require help. Bangladesh provided public land for camps and founded a national task force. The UN Inter

Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) comprises 45 INGOs (international NGOs) and UN organizations. Needed until spring 2018 were at least 434 million USD (ISCG 2018 (1); OCHA 2017). According to a new plan for March-December 2018, more than 950 million USD are needed for the camps and host communities (ISCG March 2018). As of May 24 2018, there are 915,000 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh; the government of Bangladesh reports 1.118.426 Rohingya refugees as of June 5 2018 (ISCG 2018 (2)). More than 620,000 are living in Kutupalong, making it currently the largest refugee camp in the world.

According to recent surveys the refugees are afraid of returning. They feel they belong to Myanmar, but they do not want to be repatriated by coercion and hope for security and equal civil rights. They are pleased about the reception in Bangladesh but demand from the government to solve security issues such as sexual violence and human trafficking, which are not included in the bilateral agreement (Amnesty International 2017; OXFAM 2017).

Since 1997, the US and the EU have imposed sanctions on Myanmar, and gradually expanded them. Trade and investments were largely banned. After political and economic reforms in Myanmar the sanctions were mostly annulled from 2012, except for

the arms trade (Gill 2015). In spite of the still on-going refugee crisis, new sanctions are not planned.

Germany contributed 60 million euros to EU humanitarian aid activities (Spiegel Online 2017). There are also some aid projects in Rakhine. Focus of the German involvement is on the prevention of a still wider spread of the humanitarian emergency. Federal Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel visited in November 2017 a Refugee camp in Bangladesh and promised further emergency assistance. In the German public, the conflict is almost exclusively seen from a humanitarian point of view. Donations are collected and aid distributed from almost all major German aid organizations.

### Geopolitical and economic interests

There is more behind the conflict than just religious and ethnic tensions. Key factors for the persecution of Rohingya are political and economic interests.

The Rakhine state plays a strategically important role for Myanmar neighbours. China's cross-border economic initiative "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) aims to connect the west of China and the Bay of Bengal with pipelines and a highway (Fig. 2). Oil and gas transports from the Middle East and the oil and gas reserves in Myanmar are necessary





**Figure 6: Toilets in Leda camp, provided by international aid project. The toilets are connected to a biogas plant.**

for China's energy security. The OBOR project will bring substantial economical advantages, namely by bypassing the security concerns and politically fragile bottleneck in the Strait of Malacca. One pipeline begins in the Bay of Bengal in the Rakhine state. After local protests, Rohingya coastal communities were vacated in 2012 to clear ways for the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (Zoglu 2017).

India is building the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project through Rakhine state, to connect its Northeast directly with the Bay of Bengal. The harbour works in Sittwe, where the Kaladan Project begins, are almost complete.

With the new special economic zone, OBOR and the deep-sea port Kyaukphyu, China's influence is growing within Myanmar and the entire region. The Rakhine state could become one of the most important strategic centers for China and pave access to the Indian Ocean. It is in China's vital interest to restore and maintain the internal security of Myanmar to not endanger the economic Initiatives between Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (Bequelin 2017).

Numerous companies from Europe and Asia have invested in onshore projects and are involved in exploration. Different states are also interested in the mining of uranium deposits. For the USA, unrest and

pressure from the outside could delay or break off the negotiations with China and lead to a turn to the West. The conflict gets even more complexity due to rumours about insurgent connections to international drug trafficking.

In Myanmar the military have been grabbing huge pieces of land since the 1990s. Because of the military-economic interests, Rohingya have been expelled from their land. In the Rohingya area, more than 1.3 Million hectares of land has been allocated for corporate rural development recently and since 2012 the country was opened to foreign investors (The Guardian 2017). The Rakhine State is one of the poorest regions in the country, although it is rich in natural resources. The Burmese elite sees the Rohingya as an economic burden, and as competition for the few existing jobs as well as for opportunities to do business (Deutsche Welle 2015).

### **Ecological impacts and new threats in summer 2018**

The many areas now used as campsites had previously been pristine forests with wild elephants. The need for space and fuel-wood is resulting in continued cutting of trees and loss of biodiversity. Makeshift shelters on the hills are in danger of landslides during the monsoon season. Some shelters and roads were damaged already by

heavy rains. Fortunately, because of relocation of the most vulnerable families, building drains and training people in emergency management by Bangladesh government and international agencies, so far major catastrophes have been avoided (UNHCR 2018).

Waste management, water and sanitation are also rising concerns (figures 3 and 6). Indoor air pollution and fire hazards in the camps are addressed by setting up communal cooking places and raising awareness.

Local agriculture is increasingly negatively affected by loss of land, pollution, water crisis, thefts of produce and livestock, and falling market prices due to inflow of aid goods. Local people are growing more impatient by a worsening local economy: unemployment is raising, wages are decreasing (caused by illegal labour), less fishing opportunities in Naf river due to Myanmar military patrols, raising costs for transport, house renting and firewood, road damage by heavy trucks of aid organisations. There are security concerns since there is hardly any police presence at night and woman trafficking, prostitution and drug trade is increasing. Finally, the education of local children is negatively affected due to less available transportation to schools and the departure of teachers for better paid relief jobs (COAST, 2018).

## Conclusion and outlook

The conflict is neither new nor exclusively a religious problem. Complex political and economic reasons are important underlying factors. There is obviously a deep-rooted islamophobia within the population of Myanmar. In general, Muslims are perceived as a threat to the Buddhist culture and society in Myanmar, and this is fuelled by interests of different groups. Economic aspects are important as well: despite its abundant resources, the Rakhine State is one of the poorest regions in the country. The Rohingya are considered as an economic burden and as a competition for business and the few existing jobs.

Many international observers and scientists assume that the Rohingya conflict is the result of the geopolitical interests of external global players (Zoglul Kamal 2017).

Recent surveys show that the refugees are afraid of returning. They feel they belong to Myanmar, but they do not want to be repatriated by coercion and hope for security and equal civil rights. They are pleased about the reception in Bangladesh but demand from the government a resolution of security issues such as sexual violence and human trafficking, which are not included in the bilateral agreement (Amnesty International 2017; OXFAM 2017). In January 2018, refugees submitted a letter to the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar stating several demands in the event of repatriation, including citizenship, equal rights, justice and return of their land (Farzana 2018). Former Rohingya villages are meanwhile replaced by military bases and settlements for other people (Amnesty International 2018). Any repatriation in the near future seems quite impossible.

Other solutions, such as an autonomous region in Rakhine state or distributing refugees to various countries, are equally problematic. To resettle in a special region, the Government of Myanmar must solve the citizenship issue first. Third country

resettlement cannot be negotiated between Bangladesh and Myanmar and they cannot compel a third country to accept them (Farzana 2018). At the time of writing, no solution of the crisis is in sight. Therefore, further analysis is needed to find practical approaches for either repatriation or finding new living spaces for the Rohingya.

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