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Rohingya Muslims: Myanmar's Forgotten People

Nyi Nyi Kyaw

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The stateless Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar have been discriminated and excluded by consecutive governments since the 1960s, causing an exodus to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries. The mounting jihadist propaganda of today may push the desperate ones amongst the Rohingyas towards extremism. To defuse a future problem, international action and support may be necessary.

THE ROHINGYA Muslims from northern Rakhine (originally 'Arakan') state in Myanmar, number about two million, including a substantial diaspora community. They are among Myanmar's largest ethno-religious minority groups. But the military regime still does not recognise the Rohingyas as a distinct ethnic group. According to Medicins Sans Frontieres, an international NGO which has been involved in humanitarian assistance projects in Bangladesh, the human rights violations of the Myanmar military government towards the Rohingyas are among the world's top ten most under-reported stories of 2007.

The Rohingyas have a history which dates back to the beginning of 7th century when Arab Muslim traders settled in Arakan. The vast majority of Rohingyas live in the Rakhine state, a geographically-isolated area in western Myanmar consisting of coastal plains and a network of streams and rivers. The area is separated from central Myanmar by a mountain range. The Naaf River marks part of the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar. An estimated 200,000 Rohingyas also live across the border in Bangladesh, where they mostly live in abject poverty. A small number of around 26,000 reside in refugee camps scattered along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.

Origin of status problem

They were recognised as an indigenous ethnic group by the then-U Nu government during the parliamentary era in the 1950s. But the community lost their political and constitutional identity when the military government of General Ne Win promulgated the Citizenship Act of Burma (Myanmar's previous name) in 1983, which effectively denied the Rohingyas recognition of their status as an ethnic minority group. Harsh discrimination against the Rohingyas soon followed.

Their lack of citizenship status has severely curtailed economic opportunities and access to health and educational facilities. The plight of the Rohingyas has been compounded by social customs which forbid females to work, thereby contributing to the problems of sustainable livelihood. Not surprisingly, such conditions have sparked massive outflows of people in search for a better life overseas.

Aside from Bangladesh, Rohingyas have fled to Thailand and Malaysia, at times through precarious channels such as overcrowded boats. According to some sources, about 15,000 Rohingyas entered Thailand via these channels in 2007 alone. In many instances however, they are often arrested upon arrival as illegal immigrants and repatriated back to Myanmar. While a large number of those refugees were repatriated to Myanmar over time, the outflow of Rohingyas from Northern Rakhine state fleeing persecution continues today.

Government Policy

The military junta maintains a clearly articulated stance on the Rohingya people. In a press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar on 26 February 1992, the government declared: "In actual fact, although there are (135) national races living in Myanmar today, the so-called Rohingya people is not one of them. Historically, there has never been a 'Rohingya' race in Myanmar."

However, in response to criticisms from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 2004, the junta replied that it had granted full and equal treatment to the Rohingyas, as with other races, in matters relating to birth and death registration, education, health and social affairs. Moreover, the junta also mentioned that the Rohingyas are listed as a Bengali racial group of the Bengali race and recognised as permanent residents of Myanmar.

However, in practice the rights of the Rohingya population remained greatly restricted. The presence of the UNHCR and some other international NGOs in northern Rakhine state can only ameliorate the current plight of the Rohingyas. Without political will from within the Myanmar military junta, the plight of the Rohingya cannot be resolved.

The military junta continues to deny full citizenship to the Rohingyas, restrict their movements, and control the growth of the Rohingya population through restrictions in birth, death, and marriage registration. Many Rohingya communities have been used as forced labour to build "model" villages in northern Rakhine state as part of resettlement initiatives targeted at increasing the non-Rohingya population in traditional Rohingya lands.

Rohingyas and the temptation of militancy

The plight of the Rohingyas has spawned several armed groups since the advent of military rule in 1962. These include the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), both of which in 1996 jointly formed the Rohingya National Alliance (RNA). In 1998 two RSO factions and ARIF merged into the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO).

After the arrival of Rohingya Muslim refugees during 1991-92 in Bangladesh, some of the Rohingya armed groups became active in the refugee camps there, where they reportedly attempted to recruit refugees. According to Amnesty International, these groups have split into several smaller factions in recent years as a result of internal differences. They are reportedly operating from small bases in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area, and do not appear to command a large following.

Against the current international security climate, there remains an abiding concern for the potential

links between Rohingya resistance groups and foreign extremist organisations. Several reports have surfaced regarding the activities of foreign extremists among Rohingya populations, though the evidence marshalled is sketchy and hypothetical at best. That said, there are several points of concern. For one, some 350,000 Rohingyas are purportedly now living in Pakistan, where a climate of sectarianism and religious extremism looms large.

Time for international assistance?

While it is difficult to see light at the end of the tunnel, there have been some developments that have worked towards ameliorating the plight of the Rohingyas. For example, Bangladeshi authorities have softened their position on Rohingya refugees on their soil, and humanitarian support has been permitted to trickle through to the camps.

The European Union donated US\$15 million in December 2007 to assist the relocation of thousands of Rohingya refugees from their over-crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh to new shelters. These efforts notwithstanding, there is much more that the international community can and should do in order to improve living and educational standards of Myanmar's forgotten Rohingya minorities, and well as pressing for their political recognition.

Indeed, these considerations are of great significance if the increasingly marginalised Rohingya community of Myanmar is to be insulated from the forces of extremism and jihadism that is ever on the lookout for new and fertile soil to spawn.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw is an MSc (International Political Economy) candidate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. A Muslim native of Myanmar, he has lived all his life in Myanmar before coming to Singapore to do his MSc at RSIS.