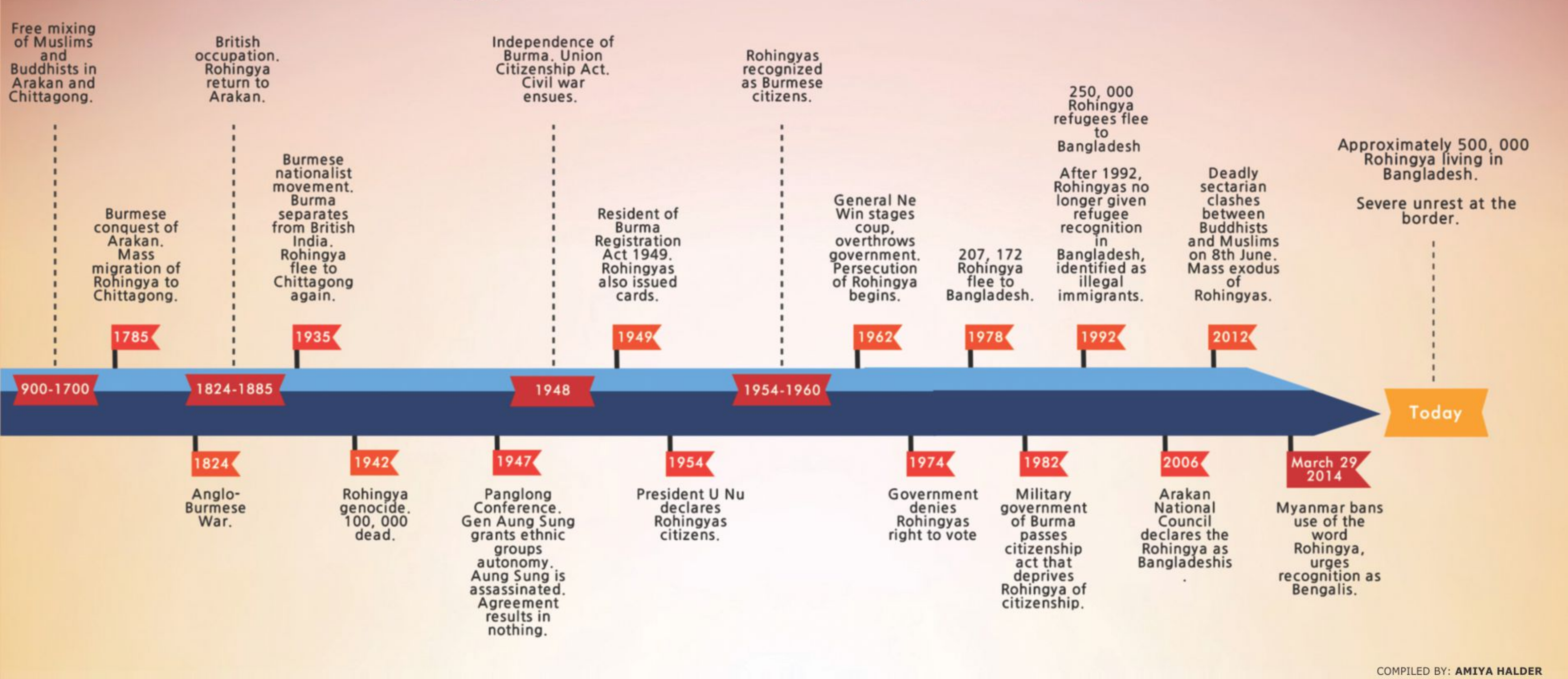


The Rohingya: A history of persecution



COMPILED BY: AMIYA HALDER

AHMAD IBRAHIM

THE UNHCR estimates that at the moment there could be as many as 500,000 unregistered Rohingya refugees inside Bangladesh. This number is in excess to the 25,000 that are registered refugees and are living in two of the camps provided by the UNHCR. What it means is that half a million people are living on Bangladeshi soil without any legal rights or provisions. They exist like ghosts in the wind because the government of Bangladesh does not recognise their presence.

The real problem, though, starts in Myanmar, where Thein Sein's military backed government fails to acknowledge their presence as well, often turning a blind eye to the massacre of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine and the crimes against humanity being committed on Myanmar land. On March 29, the Myanmar government banned the word 'Rohingya' and insisted that the Muslim community register as 'Bengalis.' Critics will point to the fact that it is a political ploy to gain Buddhist votes before elections but it is just another move in a series of oppressive ones that can be seen to span across the best part of the last three centuries. Today, the Rohingyas are the most persecuted minority in the world, according to UNHCR reports. Their presence inside Myanmar continues to be widely contentious issue and, for the Myanmar government, mum's the word is the policy that has served them best for the past century.

The topic of debate centres on the belief that the Rohingyas are not people of Myanmar but an ethnicity that migrated into Myanmar from Chittagong. Proponents of this school of thought point to the fact that the Rohingya dialect and the Chittagonian dialect are very similar to each other. The truth is, though, that the Rohingya dialect of the people of Arakan developed sometime during the 8th century with the confluence of Arabic, Persian, Portuguese and Sanskrit. In fact, the ethnicity now referred to as Rohingya existed in Myanmar's land for longer than the last millennium. The free mixing of populations on both sides of the Naf river led to the similarities in dialects of the two regions. It was only in 1785 that the first instance of displacement of the Rohingyas occurred. Burmese king Bodapawpaya's conquest of Arakan led to the mass migration of the Mogh and the Rohingya to Chittagong. The Muslim population of Arakan was tortured indiscriminately and they had no choice but to flee. Fast forward to the three Anglo-Burmese wars stretching from 1824 to 1885 and we can see that the British occupation of Burma led to the reentry of Rohingyas into



their homeland after decades in exile. Little were they to know of the nightmare that awaited them in the coming years.

With the rise of ultra nationalist movements throughout Burma, British India was finally separated from Myanmar in 1935, at a time when the Rohingyas fought to break away from the shackles of Imperialism. But this was the time when the communal flames of the Buddhist-Muslim dichotomy started spreading throughout Arakan, now renamed by the Mogh Buddhists as Rakhine. 1938 saw the first serious Buddhist-Muslim riots in Rakhine, and it was only about to get worse.

Things came to a head in 1942, when Japanese occupation forces moved into Burma and colluded with Burmese ultra nationalists to massacre the many minorities of Myanmar, including the Rohingyas, who were now termed as Chittagonians, in-line with the anti-India sentiment that made the people of Myanmar averse to anything or anyone that came in contact with British India. The British, however, reoccupied Burma in 1945 and the Rohingyas were again allowed to settle back into Rakhine, albeit in acrimonious circumstances.

In 1948 came the independence of Burma and the implementation of parliamentary democracy. In Aung

San's mandate, the Rohingyas were recognised as citizens of independent Myanmar. Even though Aung San was assassinated, his work towards peaceful coexistence was carried forward to some extent by U Nu, under whose rule Rohingyas were allowed to vote and enjoy basic rights. But it was to be the calm before a violent storm as General Ne Win came to power through a military coup and the systematic Rohingya genocide began in earnest from 1962. They were denied the right to vote and lost their status as citizens. That was when the exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh started. An estimated 207,172 refugees sought shelter in Bangladesh in 1978. Repatriation occurred in small bursts but another large wave of refugees came to Bangladeshi shores in 1992, this time almost 250,000 of them. The Bangladeshi government stopped registering Rohingya refugees in 1992 but the influx has not abated since then. Repatriation is a thorny topic as movement of the Rohingyas back into Rakhine puts them back into the scene of horrific persecution.

The situation hardly gives any reasons for us to be optimistic. Aung San Suu Kyi remains mysteriously mum on this topic while communal hatred spurs on in Rakhine. The Constitution of Myanmar states that any ethnic group that has lived within Burmese territory before 1823 are natives. It is strange, then, that Rohingyas are not included in this definition. In one of the most blatant instances of genocide in recent history, the government of Myanmar has decided to turn a blind eye to the fate of its people. And what of the hopelessly lawless border? They are often left with no choice but to turn to drug trafficking and militancy to gain their place back in their homeland.

The recent rise of militant organisations such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) should hardly be surprising. Reports published in The Myanmar Times say that infiltrators from Bangladesh (presumably RSO) shot and killed four police officers in Myanmar on May 17. It might just have been the tipping point that resulted in the shootout on May 28 that killed Mizanur Rahman. The situation now has become too glaring to ignore. The government of Myanmar can no longer sit and watch as hundreds burn everyday in Rakhine. It's time for them to accept the fact that the Rohingyas belong in Myanmar as much as anyone else. It's time for them to step out of the tactic of using religious bigotry for political expediency.

The writer is Editorial Assistant, The Daily Star.

Budget 2014 -2015: A case for plain land ethnic groups

ALBERT MANKIN

BD ANGLADESH houses multi-ethnic groups which include Bengalis as well as small ethnic population. Though there is confusion about the exact number of the adivasi population, it is assumed that it is around 3 million (the only disaggregated data on tribal population was available in 1991 Census). About 2.2 million live in 41 plains districts of Bangladesh.

In the 2012-2013 budget, the government recognised this fact and put in a Section headed "Minority and Underprivileged Community" with Sub-sections from 218 to 221. A careful look would show that it focused solely on the ethnic groups of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Moreover, in 2013-2014 there were special budgets for Dalits, Hijras, Bedes etc. The adivasis of the plains, as usual, were deprived. The plains land adivasis belonging to 37 ethnic groups -- Garos, Santals, Hajongs, Oraon, Mundas, Monipuris, Khasis, Burmans, Koch etc. -- are equally or more deprived, voiceless, and at the lower strata of the society economically.

According to the Prime Minister's Secretariat (2011-2012), the total allocation in the budget year 2011-2012 for the plains land adivasis was Tk. 15 crores. The Special Affairs Division (SAD) of the Prime Minister's Secretariat oversees the fund, and it is alleged that it hardly engages the key stakeholders in planning and strategising at the central and grassroots -- upazila -- levels. The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs looks after the overall socio-economic, education and health issues of the adivasis of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Participation in the War of Liberation: It can be mentioned that the small ethnic communities/tribal peoples from the plain land participated in the Liberation War of 1971 en masse. Many died in the war. Their property and households were destroyed, cattle stolen, women raped and land grabbed during the War. Those communities, however, did not receive due recognition and were rather neglected and excluded from development initiatives. Therefore, the development needs of the ethnic minority groups of the plain land cannot be overlooked. The government needs to make positive contribution to uplift the most vulnerable people of the country.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed the CHT Accord in 1997 and created the CHT Ministry. We believe that it is she who will also be able to create a ministry for the plains land small ethnic communities and allocate budget for their development. Perhaps some steps given below will consolidate their active participation in national development and pave the way for their integral development:

1. Allocation of budgetary provisions for plains land ethnic groups in the budget of 2014-2015;
2. Creation of a new ministry for the plains land ethnic minority communities; or any existing ministry could extend its portfolio to include their affairs;
3. Formation of development consortium for the socio-economic development of the plain land adivasis.

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