

Rohingya cleansing: International silence deafening

REZAUL KARIM

It is quite appalling that despite the continuous reports of killing, raping, burning down of villages of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine by the Myanmar security forces over last one month, there is still no global outrage.

The United Nations, United States, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and some others have voiced concern, but world governments seem still not so vocal in forcing the country to avert further bloodshed. Is it to give more time to newly installed government of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung Sung Suu Kyi, that won a landslide victory in the elections late last year, ending more than two decades of brutal military rule.

There is also argument that major countries and blocks, who have already started investing in Myanmar wish to remain silent and so have not yet issued any statement against the persecution apparently to protect their investment and do trade and business.

The US, UN and some others so far have expressed "concern" over the violence but there is still no such global move to force the Myanmar government to establish control over the military for halting the atrocities. The new democratically elected Myanmar government continues to follow the military ruler's official position that denies recognition of the term "Rohingya" and regards them as illegal Bengali migrants.

The United Nations and its different organs have made several statements calling for urgent action to find a solution to the crisis, while the United States called for international observers to be allowed to investigate and for aid groups to have their access restored.

On the other hand, Bangladesh is under great pressure as desperate people from the Rakhine State are entering into Bangladesh seeking safety and shelter across borders. Despite Border Guards effort to

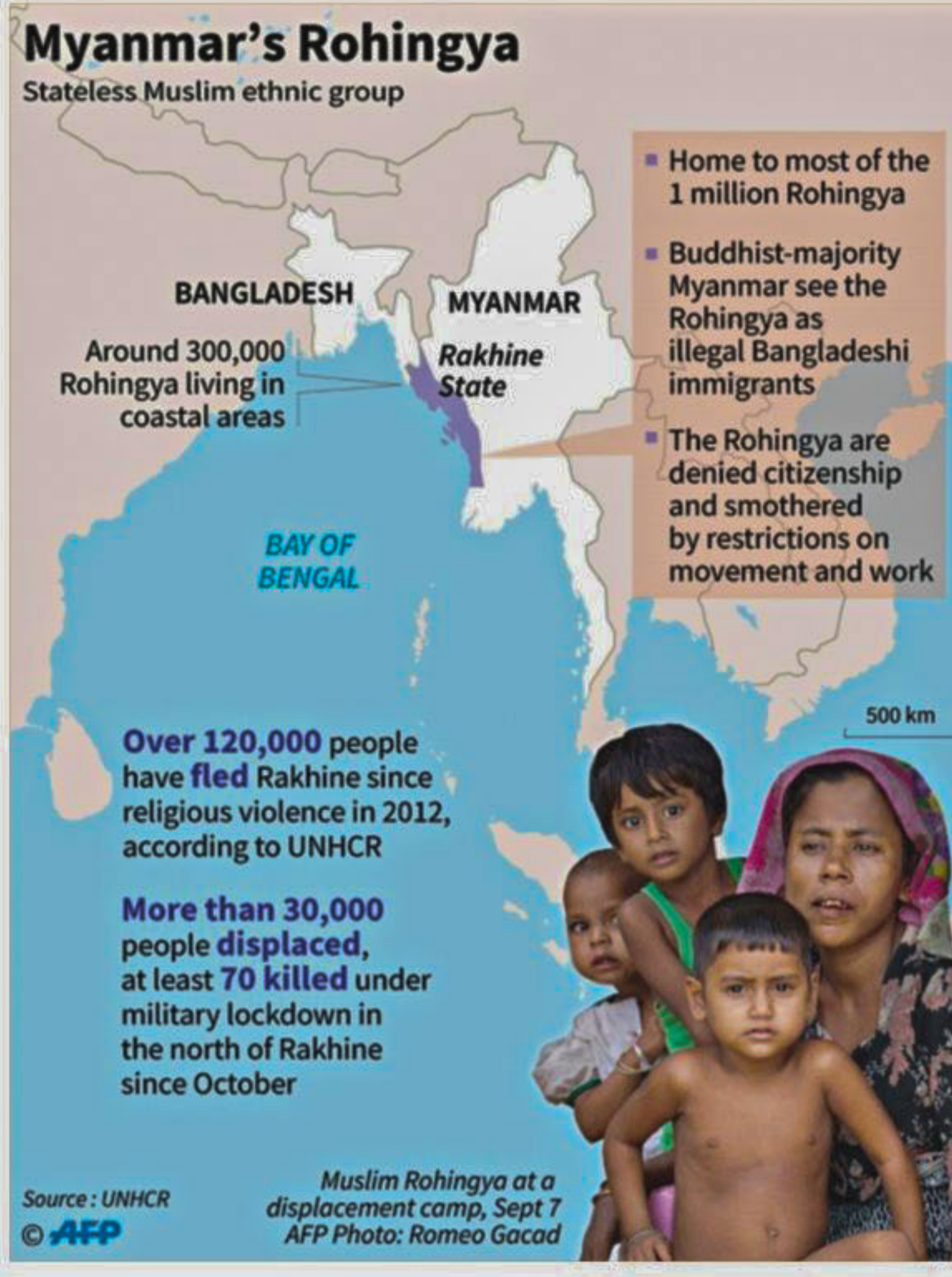
prevent the influx, thousands of distressed Myanmar's citizens including women, children and elderly people continue to cross the border into Bangladesh. Thousands more have been reported to be gathering at the border crossing. Dhaka has made requests to Myanmar to assist Bangladesh to ensure the integrity of its border to prevent influx of people from Rakhine State into Bangladesh. Dhaka also protested against the tendency in the Myanmar's media of trying to implicate Bangladesh in the incidents in Myanmar.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), which has released new satellite images on November 21, revealed that hundreds of buildings in Rohingya villages have been torched. There seems to be no end to the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar as HRW's images brought the total number of razed buildings to 1,250. Over 30,000 people have also been displaced because of the violence.

Rakhine State is predominantly the home of Rohingya Muslims. Stripped of their citizenship rights in 1982, the minority are among the world's largest stateless populations. The Myanmar government's official position denies recognition of the term "Rohingya" and regards them as illegal Bengali migrants. The Rohingyas have been subjected to decades of persecution, culminating in massacres in 2012, when Human Rights Watch had described the violence as a campaign of "ethnic cleansing," and "crimes against humanity" perpetrated by local mobs, at times with the support of state agencies.

The most recent spate of violence began in early October, when 17 soldiers and police personnel were killed by a group of armed men that sparked an intense crackdown by the Myanmar's military in which 70 people have been killed and at least 230 arrested.

Rights groups estimate the total



death toll could be in the hundreds. Human Rights Watch on November 21 said the latest satellite images bring the total number of razed buildings to 1,250. The bloodshed is being considered the most serious since hundreds were killed in communal clashes in Rakhine in 2012.

However, Myanmar authorities claimed that media reports of widespread destruction in the area were "false news" and yet to respond to the call for inviting the United Nations to assist in an impartial investigation to the widespread destruction of villages and killing of

civilian and reports of rape of Muslim women.

Diplomatic sources in Yangon told this writer that Myanmar's military has tightly-controlled information about their operations in the region and denies reports from activists that troops are killing civilians, raping women and torching homes. Heavy restriction on access to the area has also made it difficult for foreign journalists and independent observers to verify the government reports or allegations of army abuse.

US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, at a November 17

UN Security Council meeting on the deteriorating situation in Rakhine State, called for international observers to be allowed to investigate and for aid groups to have their access restored.

After a short visit by diplomats to the area, Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar, said on November 18, "the security forces must not be given carte blanche to step up their operations under the smokescreen of having allowed access to an international delegation. Urgent action is needed to bring resolution to the situation."

Expressing concern, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said "I wish to express my deep concern over the recent violence in northern Rakhine State, which is plunging the state into renewed instability and creating new displacement."

United Nations envoy Zainab Hawa Bangura has also expressed grave concern over allegations of rape and sexual assault of women and girls in Rakhine as part of a "wider pattern of ethnically motivated violence" in the region.

OIC Secretary General Yousef A. Al-Othaimeen called for an immediate cessation of violence and urged the authorities of Myanmar to ensure that the security services act in full compliance with the rule of law and to allow humanitarian aid agencies access to the affected region to provide needed relief to the victims.

Amid growing international concerns over the month-long persecution, the Myanmar government allowed a 10-member diplomatic delegation from the UN, US, UK, and several other countries travelled to the area on November 2 and said the government had agreed to the restoration of humanitarian aid.

Bangladesh meanwhile is stuck between a rock and a hard place. The UNHCR has appealed to Bangladesh to keep its borders open and on humanitarian grounds; it would be

the most humane thing to do. But the country is already feeling the pressure of being host to several lakh Rohingyas since they came in 1991 in addition to around half a million documented and undocumented Rohingyas, which is why it has declined the appeal. In fact, Dhaka has conveyed its message to the international community that it does not want any more Rohingyas to enter the country. It may be mentioned that Bangladesh has not deported any Rohingyas who have been living in the country since 1991.

Bangladesh has urged Myanmar to give due consideration to the demand from the international community to conduct impartial investigation of the alleged human rights violations during the ongoing military operation in the Rakhine State and stressed that rule of law and due judicial process should be allowed to function without hindrance. It would be best for the Myanmar government to establish a United Nations-assisted investigation without any delay. Buying time would only give the message that the new civilian government is not able to control its military. The voices of the international community should therefore be louder to protect the world's most persecuted people from further anguish.

Foreign affairs experts have stressed that the international community must remain fully engaged in monitoring human rights issues in Myanmar, and committed to providing necessary support for further reforms in line with international standards. It is important that the international community should not understate Myanmar's human rights priorities and world actors must work together to ensure human rights are respected and protected across Myanmar. Establishing business relations cannot take precedence over human rights.

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Rethinking Bangladesh's stance on Rohingya refugees

RASHAAM CHOWDHURY

THE Rohingya are in the 'final stages of genocide' in Burma. Gross human rights violations - death squads, enforced hunger, forced labour, rape, torture, denial of basic healthcare, education, freedom of movement and basic citizenship rights define their existence. Bangladesh's response to these realities in Burma has been to close down its borders. In addition, since 2012 an ad hoc policy framework has been pursued. This includes, intercepting and pushing back boats carrying the Rohingya; banning NGOs providing emergency assistance to Rohingyas arriving at our shores; enforcing a five-year jail term for 'illegal foreigners'; and the banning of marriage between Rohingyas and Bangladeshis.

The bleak reality is that a vast majority of Rohingyas are likely to become victims of the genocide unfolding in Burma. Some will still attempt to cheat death. Knowing that the borders in Bangladesh are closed, they will seek to reach Thailand/Malaysia via the Bay of Bengal, which the UNHCR has called these routes three times more dangerous than crossing the Mediterranean. Since Bangladesh closed its borders in 2012, conservative estimates suggest over 5000 Rohingyas have died while undertaking this journey. How many of us have shared the photo of little Aylan's lifeless body lying face down on the Turkish beach after being outraged by European policy? Turns out when Rohingya children are dying at sea, we fail to feel similar levels of anger, indignation and shock.

People smuggling/trafficking networks between Bangladesh, Burma and Thailand have emerged to fulfil the demand of refugees attempting to reach safety. These are ruthless criminal syndicates, involved in holding refugees for ransom and using them as slave-labour in the jungles of Thai-Malaysia borders. Refugees are violated in 'torture chambers', and images of their tortured bodies are sent back to families with demands of ransom. The mass

graves discovered in Thai jungles bear testament to the Rohingya experience. Those who are fortunate enough to survive these camps suffer from beriberi, loss of sight, and inability to move properly (due damage to nervous system), not to mention post traumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses.

Against all odds, some Rohingyas will manage to trickle into Bangladesh. While the BCB and police patrol the villages in the bordering areas and arrest the so-called 'infiltrators'- poverty-stricken Bangladeshis have

This is our chance as a country, whose first government was formed and operated in exile, to reciprocate the kindness the world and our neighbours showed us in times of our dire need.

stepped in to provide protection to refugees. They share whatever little food they have with the starving Rohingya. However, in the long run, the very real threat of a five-year jail term for entering the country illegally means that some locals take advantage and inflict criminal harm on Rohingyas.

These harms are borne disproportionately by Rohingya women. In 2014, a minor girl was gang raped by local men, but the Rohingya family refused to go to the authorities in fear that they will be sent to jail. Similarly, there

have been reports of Rohingya women being repeatedly abducted and raped by local gangs along and other authority figures in the area. When their fathers or husbands attempted to intervene, they were taken away, beaten, falsely accused and subsequently imprisoned.

Moreover, due to the vulnerability of the Rohingya youth caused by their 'illegal' status, they are used as drug mules by established local criminal syndicates operating in the Bangladesh-Burma bordering areas. Rohingyas working in 'legal' areas are also exploited - with employers often underpaying or even refusing to pay for the work carried out, knowing fully well that the refugees have no formal means of redress against them. Thus, the reality of death, disease, violence and the brutalisation of women are utilised as tool to deter Rohingyas from seeking refuge in Bangladesh.

Politics of fear and hate have been employed to paint Rohingyas as terrorists, criminals and prostitutes. While conditions of marginalisation prompt some to turn to crime, police statistics from two areas with the highest levels of undocumented Rohingyas (Teknaf and Ukhiya) demonstrate that crimes committed by Rohingyas account for only 5 percent of the total crimes in those areas (Abrar, CR, Shikdar, J 2014 'Cross-border Movement of the Rohingyas from Burma: Exclusion, Vulnerability and Survival Strategies', RMMRU). Moreover, most of were cases of petty theft, and instances of Rohingya involvement in heinous murders and rapes were extremely rare. This is in stark contrast to the official narrative of Rohingya criminogenic tendencies.

Does this technique of scapegoating seem familiar? It is the same burden us Bangladeshis bear for being Muslim (and brown) in the US, Australia and Europe. This is the politics of hate and fear peddled by Trump and other politicians in the west - the vitriolic speech that the masses believe despite limited evidence to support it. We know what it feels like to be

victims all too well. Yet we have failed to recognise that we have become victimisers ourselves.

On the other end of the spectrum, statements which do not vilify Rohingyas but justify their exclusion are also commonplace. 'We are a poor and weak country and cannot afford to host them'- just imagine if India had said the same in 1971! 'The Rohingya issue is a long term problem and they will keep coming'- firstly, humanity should not operate on deadlines. Secondly, the majority of Rohingyas who came during previous waves have returned to Burma or have been resettled elsewhere. Regardless of the time frame - opening our borders saves

them from immediate and certain danger. 'Hosting them would affect our relationship with Myanmar' - If saving lives affects our short term ties- that is a sacrifice we should be willing to make for justice and humanity.

We should be embarrassed of our inertia in questioning false propaganda that paints helpless refugees as criminals and terrorists. This is our chance as a country, whose first government was formed and operated in exile, to reciprocate the kindness the world and our neighbours showed us in times of our dire need.

The writer is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne and researches on state crime, refugees and genocide.

QUOTABLE Quote

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Scout settlements
- 6 Messing on TV
- 11 Island greeting
- 12 Snowy bird
- 13 Sport to cast a ballot
- 15 Rock's Brian
- 16 Write hastily
- 17 Penguins' org.
- 18 Sunday talks
- 20 "Sprechen -- Deutsch?"
- 21 Employ
- 22 Word processor choice
- 23 Packing box
- 26 German thanks
- 27 Wash
- 28 Pot cover
- 29 Holiday lead-in
- 30 Crude book-marks
- 34 Ventilate
- 35 Low digit
- 36 Week part
- 37 It gives you a say at the annual meeting
- 40 Choose
- 41 Low digit

DOWN

- 1 Grottos
- 2 Unes-corted
- 3 Car part
- 4 Letter after upsilon
- 5 Home of the Sharks
- 6 Owned amounts
- 7 Swelled head
- 8 "Death Wish" star
- 9 Freshly consider
- 10 Olympics hopeful
- 14 Vanished
- 15 Voiceless
- 22 Grow paler
- 23 Butcher's tool
- 24 Stuffed pasta
- 25 Turned aside
- 26 Assimilates
- 28 Protracted
- 30 Forbidden acts
- 31 dote on
- 32 Sprinted
- 33 Comic Wanda
- 38 Bar need
- 39 English article

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	A	B	E	R	J	O	A	N	
A	L	I	V	E	A	D	I	O	S
T	I	D	E	S	N	E	R	V	E
U	K	E	T	I	E	B	I	D	
P	E	N	N	A	N	T	R	A	C
	I	T	S		U	S	E	R	
S	H	A	V	E	B	L	E	S	S
C	O	R	E	S	U	E			
H	A	R	N	E	S	S	R	A	C
E	R	A	M	E	T	M	A	X	
L	I	N	G	O	L	O	I	R	E
L	E	G	I	T	E	A	G	E	R
R	E	N	E	S	T	A	R	T	

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