

Rohingyas were no longer living in the rich political and social heritage of precolonial times, but there was no question about their place in Burma's mainstream public life. In the two general elections of 1951 and 1956, at least 11 Rohingyas, including women, returned to Burmese Parliament as MPs.

During the 1990 general election that followed the anti-military resistance led by Suu Kyi, Rohingyas were her political allies and won four

Nazi Germany. It's an irony that Suu Kyi's ascendancy to Myanmar statecraft coincides with the collateral destruction of her erstwhile political allies.

The current problem of the Rohingyas, resulting in occasional "genocidal" atrocities on them, is traced back to the 1982 "Burma Citizenship Law" that enabled the revocation of citizenship of the Rohingyas, excluding them from the pool of 135 recognised ethnic groups

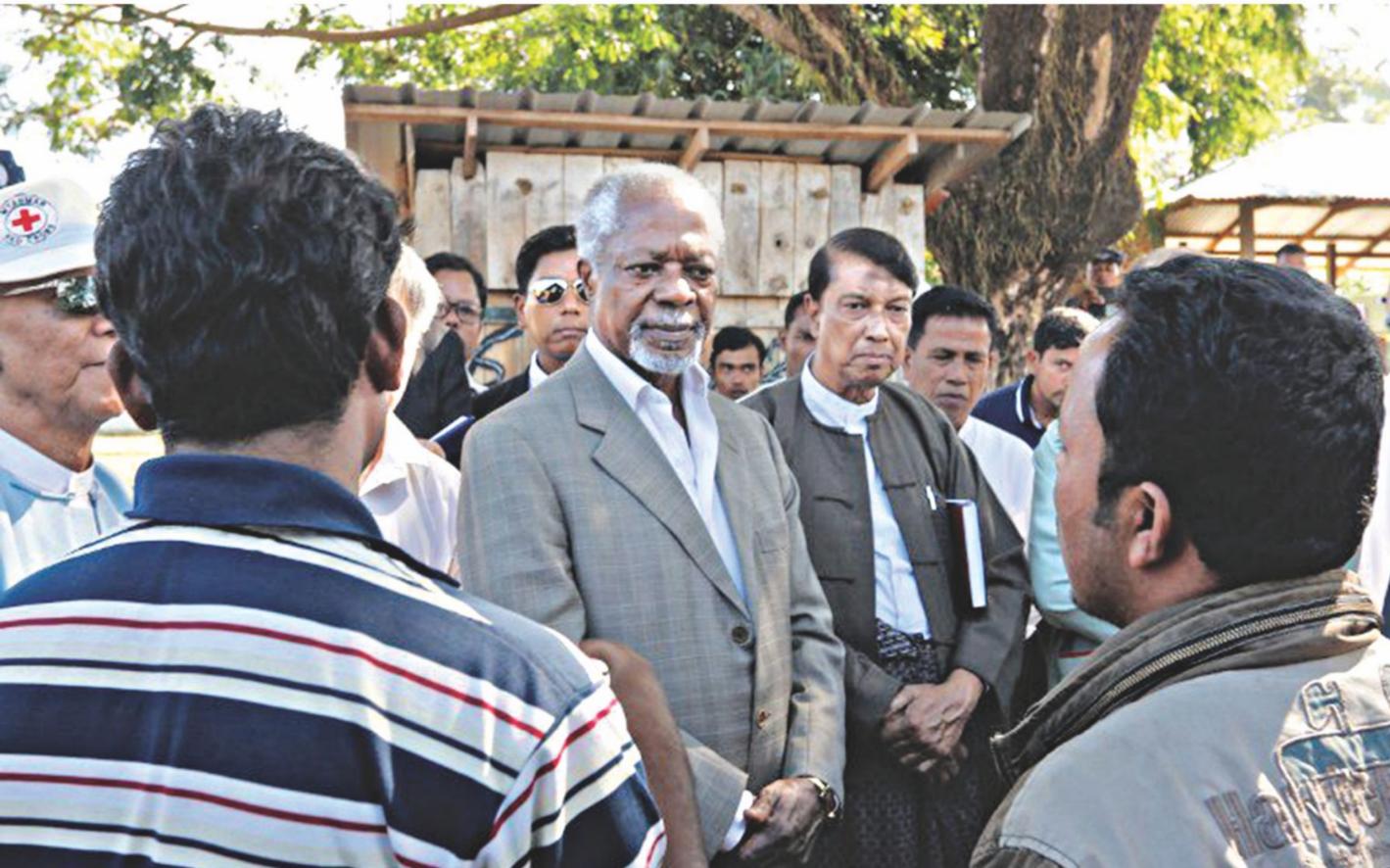
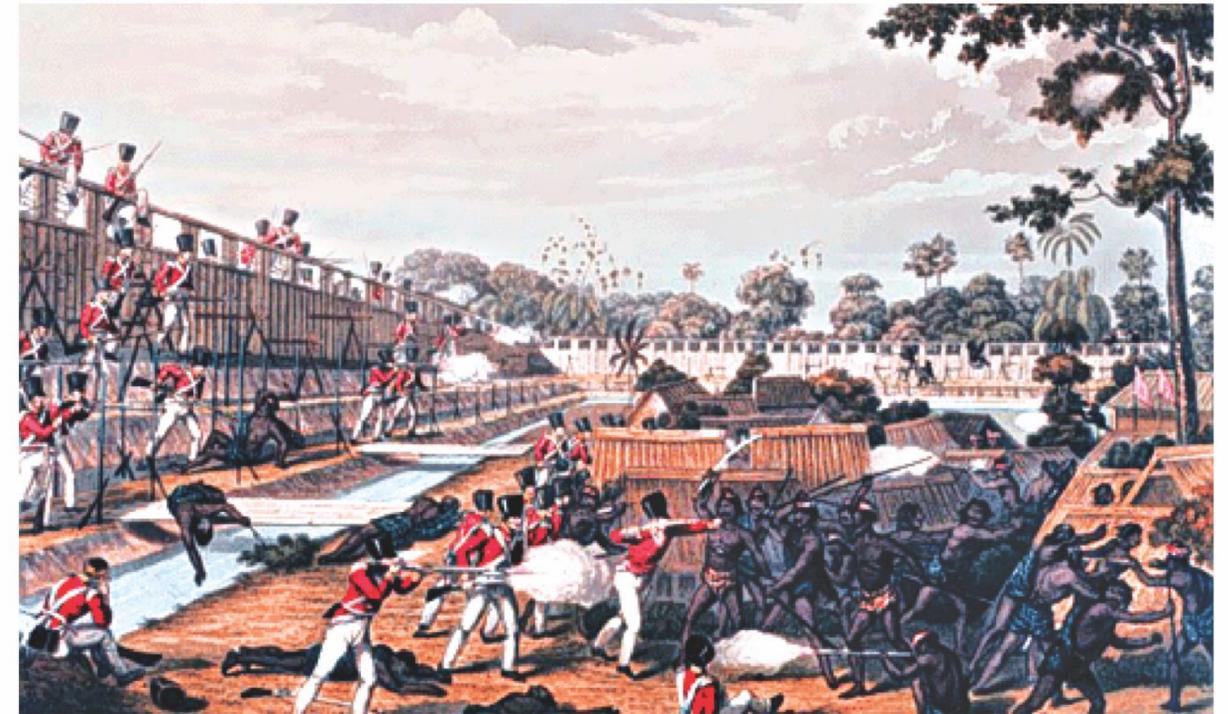


PHOTO: AFP

Former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, centre, and commissioner Aye Lwin, right, of the multi-sector advisory commission meet with the Muslim community in Kyatyoepeyin village in Maungdaw, located in Rakhine State near the Bangladesh border.

seats for her National Democratic League for Human Rights. But in the next stage of the unfinished journey to democracy in Myanmar, the paths of Suu Kyi and her erstwhile Rohingya allies diverged tragically. As of 2017, no Rohingyas could vote and there is no Rohingya MPs left in Myanmar. There is no instance in the world where after decades of experience of citizenship and of exercising the rights to electing their representative to parliament an entire population becomes stateless without security to life, property and honour, except of course in

across Myanmar. But the law came as an utter shock and surprise, given the positive developments in the preceding years. In the middle of a renewed spell of the flow of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, heads of states of the two countries had exchanged state visits before the signing of a historic "Repatriation Agreement" in Dhaka on July 9, 1978. In the agreement, the Burmese government promised the "repatriation at the earliest of the lawful residents of Burma" and also to repatriate those who were "able to furnish evidences of their



British attack in Burma, 1824, "The Storming of one of the principle stockades on the 8th of July 1824"

residence in Burma, such as addresses or any other particulars".

Under this agreement the Burmese government launched the Hintha project which oversaw the repatriation of more than 29,000 families comprising 177,000 refugees from Bangladesh to their former places of residence. The current practice of burning the habitat and homestead of the Rohingyas by the Burmese security forces seems to aim at pre-emptively forestalling any chance of return of the Rohingyas as Myanmar citizens in light of the agreement of 1978.

### What's next?

The Annan Commission was formed at the request of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Bangladesh government agreed with most of its recommendations. This initial consensus must build on the recognition of the Rohingya identity—because seen either in historical, political, legislative or diplomatic antecedents, the Rohingyas cannot be considered as anything but citizens of Myanmar. True, as many commentators suggest, there are other powerful agents that complicate the situation. The idea of liberal democratic practice drawing on cosmopolitan and pluralistic world views may not find an easy place in this quagmire where geo-strategy, trade routes and pipelines call the shots.

But taking away one's honour is not going to solve the existential threat posed to the Rohingyas. What it all takes is the pressing of the softer button of goodwill, empathy and justice. Who has the hand on this button is not clear to those outside Myanmar, but there are two clear paths of other kinds for Suu Kyi which can set a positive tone in the current situation and taking up one of them can secure her rightful place in history.

Both Gautama Buddha and Emperor Ashoka were tormented by the existential sufferings, bloodshed and death in society. Buddha renounced all earthly ambition because he found no path higher than the path of ending these sufferings of humanity through annihilation of desire. On the other hand, the great Ashoka, who spread Buddhism in Myanmar among other places, consolidated and used his power in order to spread the word and practice of non-violence. Suu Kyi may wish to let the world know, sooner than later, about her own pathfinder: Gautama Buddha or Ashoka? Anything shorter than that would be equal to an aggression on the very core of Buddhism itself.



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