



Rohingya children look on at a refugee camp in Palong Khali near Cox's Bazar, October 4, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/FILE PHOTO

Caravan of the Dispossessed

Over the last four decades the Rohingya people of the Rakhine State of Myanmar have been subjected to ongoing, planned, systematic oppression. Gradually, the international community is beginning to acknowledge the acts of the Myanmar government as genocide. Understanding Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya as genocidal is critical in light of narratives framing the plight of the Rohingya as a "humanitarian crisis" or "ethnic cleansing" and the Myanmar government's consistent denial of abuse. The latest exodus of Rohingyas that began on August 25, 2017 is an integral part of the realisation of the genocidal agenda. This essay is based on field-work interviews conducted in the first half of October in the Ukhia, Teknaf region by a three-member team of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU). The narratives of the survivors provide a glimpse of the gruesome reality that Rohingyas had to endure in their own country and during their flight.

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"Suddenly all hell was let loose. We felt *keyamat* (the last day of judgment) had arrived. We rushed out of the house and began to run aimlessly. My paralysed granddad stayed put at home, hoping the army would take pity on him. Later we learnt he was charred to death when our house was torched," says Nur Mohammad, 35, from Buthidaung. The guilt continues to haunt Nur as he struggles to eke out a subsistence in a Kutupalong shack surrounded by hundreds of refugee families of northern Rakhine. Nur was not the only one bearing such burden. There were many.

The indiscriminate torching of property by the army was accompanied by killing, torture and abduction. Young

widened. Not everyone was consumed by the flames of communal hatred as Noor Hakim of Maungdaw (24) informs, "When I begged my late father's Rakhine friend for shelter he didn't say a word. I could see the pain in his eyes. He gave me some money instead and his blessings. I realised that's the best he could do."

Faced with brutality of epic proportion, residents of Buthidaung started fleeing the area. Their obvious option was crossing the border for safety. Men, women and children endured a lot of hardship on the way. Within days some families ran out of dried food and cans of water that they had managed to carry with them. "It was quite a trek that

"When the armed *moghs* arrived my husband and mother ran in one direction, and I, with my child, in another. More than a week later I learnt that they managed to find shelter in a camp (in Bangladesh) where my relatives were already staying. I contacted them over the phone. I am not sure if I will be allowed to go there but I am dying to see them."

Twelve-year-old Sharu Shaikh was not that lucky. "As we reached the beach (in Rakhine) there was a huge crowd trying to get into the boat that was about to set sail. My father pushed me onto it. It was packed to the brim, and he and my mother failed to board. (After arriving here in Shah Pori) I waited for the whole day hoping they would come in the boats that arrived (subsequently). I do not know if I would ever get to see them," he says with tears rolling down his dried cheeks, refusing to take a packet of food that was offered to him by relief workers.

As the Rohingyas gradually settle down in their land of sanctuary despite all uncertainty and difficulties, refugees express their gratitude for the warm hospitality that the people of Cox's Bazar, Teknaf and Ukhia offer. They also recognise the outpouring of support of people from other parts of the country as the young and the old distribute much-needed water, biscuits, food, medicine, ortsaline and the like. While they wait patiently for improved shelter and a better relief distribution mechanism to emerge, news of missing children, particularly those of young girls, has become a major source of concern. "I have been told that touts are bringing in offers of job and marriage and many fell prey to their deceit. Young girls had also gone missing when they went to the woods to fetch firewood and water, or respond to the call of nature. I have two daughters and I constantly worry about them," says Rahim Mollah (55).

The effort of Bangladesh authorities to register Rohingyas is being viewed by some refugees with suspicion. The registration process was not preceded by any awareness campaign on why it was necessary. Misgivings prevail. Some think it may lead to their forced repatriation to Myanmar. For Roshida Banu (55), who was waiting in the landing station in Kutupalong, the reason is somewhat different. "No, I am not going to register with men in



Over 600,000 Rohingyas have fled Rakhine State for Bangladesh since late August, many walking for days through thick jungles before making the perilous boat journey across the Naf river.

PHOTO: AFP

WAVES OF GENOCIDAL KILLINGS OF ROHINGYAS BY MYANMAR AND THE RESULTANT EXODUS SINCE 1978

1978 1991-92 2012-15 JUNE - OCT 2016-17 OCT-JAN 2017 AUG-SEPT

PRETEXT
"ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION CHECK"

EXODUS
290,000 PERSONS
180,000 REPATRIATED

GOVERNMENT
PRO-AUNG SAN SUU KYI SUPPORT & "ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION"

260,000 PERSONS
200,000 - 220,000 REPATRIATED

"COMMUNAL VIOLENCE" & "YUGOSLAVIA-LIKE TRANSITION"

225,000 PERSONS
IDP's 125,000 - 100,000 REFUGEES

GOVERNMENT
"BENGALI EXTREMIST MILITANCY"

100,000 PERSONS

"30 GOVERNMENT SECURITY POSTS ATTACKED"

582,000 PERSONS

GOVERNMENT
The military gov. of ex-General Ne Win

GOVERNMENT
The military gov. of Gen. Saw Maung, V.Sen. General Than Shwe & Gen. Khin Nyunt

GOVERNMENT
The quasi-civilian gov. of ex-general Thein Sein

GOVERNMENT
The Military - Aung San Suu Kyi Gov

GOVERNMENT
The Military - Aung San Suu Kyi Gov

girls were their explicit targets. Many were taken away in military vehicles never to be heard from again; others were raped or gang-raped in public, often in front of near and dear ones. Some were even gored to death. Narrating such experience, 21-year-old Amena from Maungdaw notes, "I am dirty (meaning dark) and poor. I always wondered why God was so unkind to me. When two good looking sisters of a rich family of our neighbourhood were picked up by the army only then I realised what God had in store for me."

Rakhine militant Buddhists led by monks were partners in crime of the Myanmar army. The army crafted a clever ploy to divide the communities, and, over the years, the cleavage

lasted for days. In order to avoid the scorching sun and detection by the Myanmar army we used to begin (our journey) in the evening, walked through the night braving jungles and streams. One of our fellow travellers died of snake bite. During the entire journey I do not think my two eyelids met even once as I was scared of my teenage daughter being kidnapped. So far, God was kind to me. I am not sure what fate lies ahead of me," says Sakhina, 34, a resident of Gundam camp.

The mayhem that accompanied army atrocities in northern Rakhine split many families. Family members did not have the time and opportunity to plan their escape. While some were at home, others were away. Rumana (22) recalls,

uniform. I am scared of them." The trauma of having to endure protracted army violence has had a permanent negative imprint on her psyche about the security forces.

A stark contrast between earlier flows of Rohingyas and the current stream is the composition of the refugee population. After talking with key functionaries in refugee management, both in government and in the non-government sectors, we learnt that members of many well-to-do families have also joined the caravan of the destitute.

Mohammad Haroon, who until late August was the owner of several buses, a motor parts store and a modest house in Maungdaw, recounts, "When we were preparing for Eid, little did we know that my family would have to live a destitute life on that auspicious day. Anticipating trouble I managed to send quite a bit of money to my relative in Chittagong through hundi. (After coming to Bangladesh) We had plans to join them but the restrictions on our movement have stalled the plan."

Haroon is hiding with his family of six in a private house in Cox's Bazar in constant fear of being apprehended for violating government stipulation to live in designated site/camps. He dreads at the prospect of being sent to the squalid camps. Haroon is well aware that like graveyards, camps are great levellers.

Visiting the refugee sites one cannot but have an unqualified appreciation of

the sacrifice being made by the locals whose daily life is massively disrupted by the almost overnight presence of tens of thousands of uninvited guests. For Renu Bala (41), a local resident of Harinathpur, Kutupalong, hosting refugees of her own faith poses the question, "How could we turn away someone who sought refuge? Yes, it is difficult to share the house with strangers but that is perhaps what God ordained."

After talking with dozens of refugees in different locations, young and old, male and female, we noted one common stand, "Of course, we will go back." Nishat Ahmed, a school teacher, argues, "We are grateful for the hospitality extended to us but this is no life. The Myanmar government did not respect our Rohingya identity, nor does the Bangladesh state. The international community is an accomplice to Myanmar's genocide. One day their leadership will be made to stand on the dock along with the Myanmar army and Suu Kyi."

Hopefully, Rohingya refugees do not have to wait for long for that day to arrive.

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