

# "Ending the genocide is not profitable"

Dr Maung Zarni, a UK-based Burmese genocide scholar and human rights activist who campaigns for the end of Myanmar genocide against Rohingyas, talks with The Daily Star's Naznin Tithi about how the international community has failed to take concrete and effective actions to end the state-directed persecution spanning 40 years.

**What made you take up the role of an activist on the Rohingya issue?**

Personally, there are layers of connections with this issue. First, I have been a human rights and political activist for the last 29 years. I can't call myself a human rights defender and turn my back on my own country's genocide, like most human rights defenders in Myanmar are doing today.

Second, and on a more personal level, my own late great uncle was the deputy commander-in-charge of Arakan in the late 1950s when Rohingyas were considered both an ethnic group of the Union of Burma and full citizens. Since my own relative was directly involved in this issue at a time when the army treated them well, I felt that I needed to get involved when the army is treating them so brutally.

The third reason is that I am a Buddhist. And I cannot keep quiet when I see genocide, the most anti-Buddha Dharma, being committed by the military, aided and abetted by the Buddhist society at large, including monks. Every time Suu Kyi denies and dismisses genocide allegations she too is guilty. For denial is part of genocide.

**You said genocide has been going on for a long time. How then did it manage to evade international attention?**

The problem is not that the UN-clustered world of governments and human rights organisations had not known this. They have known this for a long, long time. But they did not take the persecution of Rohingyas seriously enough to see the genocidal nature of the persecution, much less take any effective policy measures to end it.

Bangladeshi governments since the 1970s have known what has been happening

because refugees were flowing into Bangladesh by the hundreds of thousands. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been aware of this issue since 1978 because it was brought in to help with the first refugee crisis in mid-1978. So if UNHCR knew, it means the UN knew. Countries like the US and UK and key UN agencies have known this for the last 39 years. In 1978, the late US Senator Ted Kennedy, John F Kennedy's younger brother, came to Bangladesh and the US Congress donated about USD 150,000 to manage the refugee crisis.

*Dawn, Bangkok Post and Far Eastern Economic Review* based in Hong Kong all knew about this. Back in 1978 news headlines were something like "Burmese Muslims, machine-gunned down by the Burmese government troops" or "Burma's brand of apartheid".

Around two weeks ago, Amnesty International published a report saying dehumanising "apartheid" is ongoing in Myanmar. Well, the word "apartheid" was used as early as July 1978 in a magazine article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. "Burma's brand of apartheid" was the title! It seems the world's oldest human rights watchdog was asleep throughout these decades. For Amnesty International to characterise a full, institutionalised genocide in slow motion as "apartheid" is utterly unconscionable. It is just infinitely pathetic!

The UN has passed resolution every year for the last 25 years with the exception of last year. We have had at least six special rapporteurs since 1993 investigating inter alia the persecution of Rohingyas.

UNHCR has a huge operation in Myanmar. To my deep dismay, it has even issued orders to its staff in Myanmar telling



Dr Maung Zarni

them not to say the word "Rohingya" in any writing but to call them "Muslims from Rakhine" in clear violation of the group's fundamental right to self-identify. The UN Resident Coordinator in Myanmar and World Food Programme were concealing information about the genocide!

So the world did not just "discover" this, it's a lie. Those in international politics and the humanitarian world are not even lifting a finger because helping the Rohingyas is not profitable. Ending genocide is not profitable. Working with the killers is profitable. Because the killers have monopoly over natural gas, strategic coastlines, deep sea ports, visas, etc. So it's not the lack of knowledge. It's self-interest and the pretence of not knowing that are in play.

**The UN has not gone so far as calling it genocide. Your comments?**

Legal scholars, genocide scholars and even practitioners of international law from Yale Law School and Queen Mary U Law, from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum to the Permanent People's Tribunal on Myanmar, have all called it genocide.

Because there is no political will to use force to end the genocide, the UN, US and UK play what Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein called "language games". But some of us including renowned genocide scholars such as Greg Stanton and Daniel Fierstein refuse to use the word "ethnic cleansing": it is a euphemism that was originally released into mass media by Milosevic, the Serbian genocidal leader.

We now have a new doctrine called "Responsibility to Protect" or R2P, post-Rwanda and Srebrenica. And if a UN member state fails to protect people, not just citizens, who live within its territory, the neighbours and the entire UN system have a responsibility to go in and protect that community and to punish the perpetrating regime such as Myanmar. And that principle can be invoked if four crimes take place; one of them is ethnic cleansing which has legal basis in international law. My Rwandan friends are outraged that UN is letting another genocide unfold.

So yes, the UN should call it genocide. But even if it is not prepared to call it genocide, ethnic cleansing is enough of an inhuman deed for the international community to intervene. NATO bombed Milosevic's palace, and the genocidal bully was forced to accept a deal to stop the genocide.

**How would you assess Bangladesh's role in this crisis?**

I want to separate Bangladesh's role in two

different ways. There is palpable and genuine compassion and outrage among the Bangladeshi people regarding the genocide next door. This is such a positive and welcome shift in public opinion. Previously, Rohingyas were seen as potential criminals, or exploitable cheap labourers.

The Bangladeshi government does not feel that resolving the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar is its main concern; its main concern is to make sure that the Rohingyas return to their country. Bangladesh is a very populous country. So understandably, Dhaka places its primary emphasis on repatriating the Rohingyas, who belong in Myanmar.

But there is a major problem with that. The Rohingyas did not come here voluntarily nor were they merely displaced across the border. They came as survivors of Myanmar's genocide. These attacks need to be stopped and their safety in Myanmar established with armed UN protection. The solution lies in ending the genocide in Myanmar. Repatriation is just a temporary relief.

Sending the Rohingyas back while what I call "slow-burning genocide" is ongoing will not work and has not worked in 39 years. Dhaka needs to come to terms with the fact that the fate and wellbeing of the Rohingyas have become interlinked with its national interests and stability—they are not two separate issues. Bangladesh has played an exemplary humane role in the world's opinion. This newfound prestige and moral influence should be fully capitalised on, not simply to repatriate the survivors, but also to end the genocide.

Dr Maung Zarni is co-author (with Natalie Brinham) of the pioneering genocide study "The Slow Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingyas" (*Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal*, University of Washington School of Law, Spring 2014).

# Citizen 'Muslim' in Trump's America



Shafiq Rahman

MUSLIMS have been on the receiving end of bigotry, prejudice and assault since Donald Trump began running for the office of the President of the United States. The most recent example of his bigotry towards Islam and Muslim is his infamous retweet of a series of videos showing Muslims committing atrocities against Europeans and symbols of Christianity. The US media have already called Trump out for spreading anti-Muslim sentiments. The British Prime Minister Theresa May criticised Trump for giving legitimacy to the extremist British political party that posted the video. It has now been revealed that some of the videos were not even real! In fact, they were propaganda videos posted by hate groups.

President Trump's retweet of the hateful videos was so outrageous that one British MP called him "racist, incompetent, or unthinking, or all three."

This is not the first time Trump stirred anti-Muslim hysteria. He has been spreading a conspiracy theory that thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated 9/11 terrorist attacks. He claimed that a tape of the celebration exists—except that the tape was nowhere to be found. The media challenged him to present those tapes but he evaded the questions. However, he continued to spread those unfounded rumours.

Trump making similar unfounded claims is not new. He pushed the so-called birther conspiracy theory that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States, for years. He claimed that hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants voted in the 2016 presidential election, without presenting a shred of evidence. It's now a fact that Trump has a sketchy relation with facts. However, his rhetoric on Islam and Muslims is especially corrosive, because it undermines Muslim Americans' sense of belonging and their citizenship.

Muslims in the United States endured a major backlash after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The media did not cover those adequately but research studies have documented those



Demonstrators protesting Trump's executive orders restricting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries earlier this year. PHOTO: AFP

amply. Donald Trump's ascendance made Muslim citizens nervous, given that he showed a tendency to rile up his political base by invoking fear about immigrants in general and Muslim immigrants in particular. He announced his "Muslim ban" proposal in a campaign rally amid the battle cry of his followers. Aside from inflammatory rhetoric, he also surrounded himself with people who showed anti-Muslim sentiments. Michael Flynn, his disgraced former national security adviser, took aim at Islam saying that Islam in fact is not a religion.

No citizen should be singled out for his or her background, belief or ethnicity by anyone, let alone the president. Sometimes majority groups do not fully grasp the trauma that incendiary rhetoric can cause. I vividly remember an incident when we were visiting a university where our daughter applied for admission. As we opened the door of our

hotel room and turned on the TV, Mr Trump's voice greeted us with a shock. He was talking to a reporter and casually saying that Islam hates America. Tired and exhausted of travel, we looked at one another in dismay. It dampened our enthusiasm quickly. A sour mood and a feeling of extreme frustration gripped us. We sat there silent for a few minutes. Our daughter broke the silence. "I am not staying in this country," she said. She is in college now and she is planning to settle in the United States, a country where she grew up. But her feeling at that moment was raw and real.

This was reminiscent of what I heard repeatedly during my fieldwork with Bangladeshi-Americans on the effects of the post-9/11 backlash. I documented those in my book titled *The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States After 9/11: From Obscurity to High Visibility*. Many parents told me at that time

that they migrated to the US for a better life for their children. At the same time, they told me that they were concerned about the future of their children seeing constant demonisation of Muslims in mediated and political discourse. Bangladeshi-Americans, many of whom attained economic and professional success, invoked the nature of their citizenship in their adopted home country. They told me that in spite of their success, they felt that they would remain as second-class citizens in the country they called home.

President Obama showed extreme caution when he talked about terrorism. His government even stopped using the phrase "Islamic terrorism/extremism" arguing that the use of the phrase might perpetuate the negative image of Islam and paint Muslims as inherently associated with terrorism. The Obama administration, especially Obama

himself, was bludgeoned by critics but the policy was not changed. Obama used his office to educate Americans about Islam, at times risking his political capital. It was shocking to Muslims to see that President Trump is not relenting on his rhetoric that most find to be anti-Muslim. His retweeting of the propaganda videos is the most recent example of his series of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Anti-Muslim hate crimes have spiked recently in the United States. Trump's rhetoric is adding fuel to it. It is unleashing the hate groups that already exist in the country. Trump's rhetoric gave rationale to those who already harboured anti-Muslim views. The mediated image of Islam in the West does not match the reality of Islam practised throughout the world. Islam has been under the spotlight since 9/11. Liberals and conservatives alike made references about Islam that did not accurately reflect theological and historical Islam and the lived experience of Muslims. A slew of academic research has pointed out that since 9/11 Islam has been portrayed narrowly, primarily through the prism of terrorism, in US media. And Muslims were being portrayed as the "Other" whose values were not compatible with American values. They were deemed as an "enemy" population who must be controlled.

Candidate Trump had reignited and accentuated the "Otherness" of Muslims to stir up his political base, which constituted mainly of the working class white population in the industrial states. This population was economically devastated because of joblessness due to globalisation, but they were also nervous about the changed identity of America they had known, due to non-white immigration. Donald Trump found it politically convenient to single out Muslims and even proposed to halt Muslims from entering into the country. Many believed Trump would scale down his anti-Muslim rhetoric once he became president. But he is not stopping.

There is a silver lining. President Trump is under media scrutiny because of a whole host of reasons. The media call out when he maligns Islam and Muslims. But can he be restrained?

Shafiq Rahman is a professor and the chair of communication and social sciences department at Chadron State College in Nebraska, USA.

## A WORD A DAY



**NIVEOUS**  
Adjective

Snowy or resembling snow

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Precious
  - 5 Cracked
  - 9 Painter
  - 10 Judicial garb
  - 12 Bitter
  - 13 Deeply impressed
  - 14 Risky undertaking
  - 16 Rowing team leader
  - 17 Hydrocarbon suffix
  - 18 Breeding
  - 20 "Silkwood" star
  - 22 Invites
  - 23 Showy flower
  - 25 Relaxing places
  - 28 Irish province
  - 32 Foster
  - 34 Metal source
  - 35 Compass trace
  - 36 Prof's delivery
  - 38 Violinist Stern
  - 40 Add up
  - 41 Narrow shelf
  - 42 Blissful spots
  - 43 Glade grazer
  - 44 Former senator
  - Chris
- DOWN**
- 1 Suitably dressed
  - 2 Breadwinner
  - 3 Landed
  - 4 Lessons
  - 5 Disney mermaid
  - 6 Singer Bon Jovi
  - 7 Old counter
  - 8 Overhaul
  - 9 Makes a lot
  - 11 Sides in an ongoing battle
  - 15 Burst
  - 19 Old salts
  - 21 Compass point
  - 24 Sent to Washington
  - 25 Slow mover
  - 26 Puckered
  - 27 Gaming spot
  - 29 Praised loudly
  - 30 Gofer's work
  - 31 Stagger
  - 33 Peptic problem
  - 37 Commotion
  - 39 Period of history

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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

## BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

