

BURMA'S REFUGEES: REPATRIATION FOR WHOM?

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Introduction

We are well over 600,000 new Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, all of whom have arrived since late August. They fled a campaign of genocide organized by the country's military dictatorship, and with ideological support from racist Buddhist monks and Aung San Suu Kyi. They joined Rohingya who were already in the country, having fled earlier purges, most recently last autumn and in 2012. The International Organization for Migration estimates that there are now over 1,000,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

The genocide since late August has shocked the world. The stories of the refugees are so terrible that there is no question that it is genocide, although major parties such as the U.S. and the E.U. still refuse to describe it as such, since this would convey upon them a responsibility to act. Nonetheless, the International Community does recognize that one million refugees is untenable and that they have to be allowed to go home. There is great pressure being imposed on Burma's leaders to permit this, and which will continue when the U.S. Secretary of State visits the country on November 15th.

All elements of the anti-Rohingya racist alliance - the Tatmadaw, Suu Kyi and the monks - want to prevent repatriation, but they will probably fail. With this many refugees just across the border, the pressure will never go away.

Right now, they are negotiating for partial and only grudging admission. First, they are using absolute denial of repatriation as a threat. When the Security Council released its latest "statement" (not a "resolution," which China prevented), they reacted to even this watered-down condemnation by saying that it would "seriously harm" repatriation. At the same time, they are systematically seizing and rezoning Rohingya land, as they have already stolen their crops and livestock. The Rohingya may someday be able to return, but if the dictatorship has its way this will only be to new concentration camps.

Indeed, recognizing the inevitability of repatriation, they are organizing a plan with many different hurdles, to reduce as far as possible the number who actually return. They have said that the refugees must present what for many if not most will be non-existent documentation.

(Children are the largest group - they do not have any papers.) Next, anyone they do let in will be issued the despised NVC identification, which explicitly states that they are not citizens of Burma. (Repatriation therefore must be accompanied by the granting of citizenship.) And finally, the dictatorship will of course resist the demand to provide a safe environment for the returnees, meaning protection from additional attacks by regime soldiers, police, and Rakhine racists. (To have a guarantee of safety, there must be international peacekeepers.)

In summary, repatriation will happen, but we are a long way from the dictatorship yielding such that everyone is accepted back, with citizenship, and to an environment free of repression.

Repatriation for whom?

However, even with all of these bad signs, the process of refugee repatriation does raise one distinct opportunity. This concerns the question: Repatriation for whom? It is not enough to allow only the most recent Rohingya refugees the right to return. This should be extended to the entire Rohingya exodus population. Moreover, the issue should be expanded to include other ethnic nationality refugee populations, such as the Karen, Shan and Kachin. If the world is going to address the problem of refugees from Burma - how can a country that is a “democracy” even have them - it should broaden the discussion, and action, to everyone.

A process needs to be established to enable the free and peaceful return of any Rohingya refugee who wants to go home to Burma, no matter how long ago he or she was forced to flee, and the free and peaceful return of refugees from all the other ethnic nationalities as well. International activists and media should keep pressure on the generals and Suu Kyi until this is achieved.

In fact, this is why their efforts to deny repatriation are so strong. They understand that once they start letting non-Burmans come back, they will have to open the door to everyone.

Conditions inside Burma

The best way to understand a refugee crisis is to get a feel for it from the victims’ perspective - what they have experienced. Vulnerable groups understand that they are at risk and recognize when things are turning against them. They see and hear the hate propaganda. This of course causes them to be afraid, and also to make plans for if things get worse, if they are actually attacked. This in turn varies from changing how and where one works and travels, to avoid danger; having key belongings packed in a Go Bag, so they can flee at a moment’s notice; sending copies of documents to safe locations, if possible to friends and relatives abroad, so essential ID and papers aren’t lost forever; harvesting crops as earlier as possible and also moving livestock; preparing shelters in nearby hills, with food, clothing and other essential supplies; and creating village warning systems with guards and dogs.

Then, if and when the attacks come, they are ready to flee. Typically, entire villages flee. If their homes are not destroyed and the village is not mined with explosives, they may return when the soldiers, police and rampaging mob leaves. During this period away from their homes, they are “internally displaced persons.” If they are not able to return home, if it has been burned or mined or is in some other way still too dangerous, they may continue living in the hills as IDPs, move to established IDP camps in safe areas (these are typically guarded by ethnic nationality armies), or - if all else fails - flee over the nearest border at which point they formally become “refugees.”

In these types of situations, and as we have seen with the Rohingya, the refugee camps can grow extremely quickly and to a monumental scale. At this point the international humanitarian aid community typically intervenes (unless it is blocked) to provide the refugees with basic shelter, food, sanitation, health care, and education for children.

Some refugee crises are short-lived, but others are very long-term. For the latter, the refugees can get trapped in their camps, if the host country refuses them travel and work privileges. Ultimately, they can get desperate, as new generations are born and begin to spend their entire lives in the camp. In some cases this becomes so bad that the number of refugee suicides skyrockets. Criminal problems may develop in the camps as well.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees together with the International Organization for Migration and other agencies and groups have a process whereby refugees may be resettled to other countries. This involves first being registered as a refugee and getting a refugee document; waiting, often for years; applying for resettlement; and then waiting again for a long time before finding out if any country is willing to accept you. Given the huge number of refugees around the world today, from Burma and other countries with widespread and severe civil conflict, the ability of other nations to take them in is being overwhelmed.

In these cases refugees often take matters into their own hands. They try to organize transportation to other countries where they can have more freedom. This may be with people they know and trust from their community, who for a fee will arrange the transportation, to using groups with which they have no connection, who also will arrange transportation for money but who cannot be trusted. These are the human trafficking gangs. With the Rohingya, many refugees have found their circumstances so desperate that they have used human traffickers to try to get to Malaysia, which for some led to their drowning at sea or to imprisonment and death in jungle camps in Southern Thailand. We can see a similar level of desperation in all of the Rohingya who have drowned while trying to cross the Naf River to Bangladesh. When a refugee is escaping genocide, he or she will take any risk, no matter how great it might be, to escape.

Refugee locations and numbers

Because the Rohingya have suffered many major attacks over the last forty years, there have been numerous mass departures from their homes in Burma. At this point the population of the group has been dispersed roughly as follows (Source: Al Jazeera and agencies):

Bangladesh - 1,000,000 plus
Pakistan - 350,000
Saudi Arabia - 200,000
Malaysia - 150,000
India - 40,000
UAE - 10,000
Thailand - 5,000
Indonesia - 1,000
Remaining in Burma - probably less than 500,000, of which some 100,000 are in internment - concentration - camps, and with almost no rights.

At this point, there has been limited resettlement of Rohingya refugees to Western countries, including Europe, the U.S., Canada, and also Australia and New Zealand.

This makes a total population estimate for the group of roughly 2.2 million, with less than a quarter remaining in their native Burma homeland.

The conditions for the refugees vary widely. In Bangladesh, Indonesia and also Thailand, they are effectively illegal and are greatly restricted. Rohingya who have made it to Malaysia, Pakistan, India and the Middle East have a better situation and more freedom, including to form communities and to have jobs, although there is also a propaganda campaign against them in India. The few refugees who have been able to make it to the West in some ways have the best situation of all, since they are legal and receive state assistance to get established in the societies.

But, as mentioned above, the Rohingya are not the only ethnic group under duress in Burma. There has been massive state repression against the ethnic nationalities of Eastern and Northern Burma as well, for the last fifty-five years.

The Internally Displaced Monitoring Center estimates that excluding the Rohingya there are over 500,000 IDPs inside Burma, with the largest groups being the Karen, Kachin and Shan. There are a further 100,000 verified refugees in a series of camps on the Thai side of the border, comprising mainly Karen and also Karenni. The actual number though is higher, since registration has ended and new arrivals are not included in the count. On the plus side, many refugees from these groups have been resettled to the West over the last ten years. For the United States alone, it is well over 100,000.

Rohingya in Indonesia

The situation for the Rohingya, and for all the refugees from Burma, can also be understood more clearly by looking at the population in Indonesia. There are 800 to 1,000 Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, most of whom initially fled Burma following the attacks in 2012. This purge resulted in almost 170,000 people fleeing to Bangladesh, and where most of them remain.

Many of the Rohingya in Indonesia experienced the following. They were registered by UNHCR, after which in 2013 they were taken by IOM to Jakarta. There, they spent a year in another refugee camp, really an immigration detention center - an open jail. Following this they were moved in smaller groups to other areas around the country, where they have been ever since. But, while they now have a little more freedom, they are not allowed to work or to go to school.

The Rohingya refugees in Indonesia are desperate. They can see no end to their plight. They are also frustrated because other groups of refugees in the country, such as from Afghanistan and Somalia, are being resettled to the West, and where they are given rights. It is a very curious question, why Afghani and Somali refugees would be accepted but not Rohingya. To me, the core factor underlying this must be that the Western countries, and which have already taken so many other Burma refugees, don't want to anger Aung San Suu Kyi. She has told the world to not even say the name "Rohingya." I have no doubt that she doesn't want anyone in the West accepting them, either, and which signal diplomats clearly understand and are following.

The Rohingya refugees in Indonesia are like all refugees everywhere. They have the same goals. What they would like most is to be able to go home, to Burma. Until this is possible, they want the government of Indonesia to grant them rights. If the U.S., Canada and Europe can embrace refugees, why not Indonesia (and Thailand!)? Finally, if they can't get this, they would like to be resettled to the West.

I encourage all journalists, starting with journalists in Indonesia and with pan-Southeast Asia media outlets, to investigate this situation. Please get in touch. I can connect you to Rohingya in Indonesia who can tell you their stories.

Conclusion

Burma, once again, is a mess. It is absolutely a failed state. When you have a genocide of a vulnerable group that is perpetrated by one arm of the government and openly backed by the other, this is the highest level of failure. Even though things may be peaceful in Rangoon and Mandalay (no public protests or free press, though), elsewhere the country is no different from Yemen or Somalia. There is perpetual conflict, never-ending oppression and exploitation, and for the Rohingya the most severe of the crimes against humanity.

The Rohingya must be allowed to return home, meaning any and all Rohingya who have fled over the last forty years. Indeed, all the IDPs and refugees in and from Burma must be allowed to go home. The greatest task of the government, after providing potable water, food and medical care, is enabling - helping - these people to come home. Everything else, including commercial and resource development, is by comparison meaningless.

This is another aspect of Burma as a failed state - that no one, certainly not the Suu Kyi government, has prioritized the problem of helping people return, and not only the IDPs and

refugees but also the millions of economic migrants who fled the country. The core objective is simple: Bring everyone home who wants to come back, and then have them get to work rebuilding Burma and in a well-designed and sustainable way.

The barrier of course is obvious. All of the above would require ending the power and privilege of the military dictatorship and its cronies. Until this is accomplished, Burma is simply a mafia gang, a massive criminal enterprise, and which Suu Kyi has joined. It is a country in name only.