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Issue Brief

Atrocities against Myanmar's Rohingya

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The Rohingya are on the run again! Hundreds of Rohingya Muslims are fleeing their homes in Myanmar and seeking shelter elsewhere from the escalating violence. The violence erupted again on October 9, 2016 after a number of "unknown assailants" (that the government claims to be Islamic militants) attacked three security outposts along the border with Bangladesh killing 9 policemen.¹ Since then, the government of Myanmar has mounted a massive security operation against the Muslims (majority Rohingya) in the country. More than 100 people have been killed, hundreds have been detained by the military, more than 150,000 aid-reliant people have been left without food and medical care, dozens of women claim to have been sexually assaulted, more than 1,200 buildings appear to have been razed and at least 30,000 people have fled for their lives.²

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority group living primarily in Myanmar's western Rakhine state. Small factions of Rohingya also live in neighbouring states of Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The Rohingya trace their origins in the region to the fifteenth century when thousands of Muslims came to the former Arakan Kingdom. Many others arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth century's when Bengal and the Rakhine territory were governed by colonial rule as part of British India. Since independence in 1948, successive governments in Burma, renamed Myanmar in 1989, have refuted the Rohingya's historical claims and denied the group recognition as one of the country's 135 ethnic groups. The Rohingya are largely identified as illegal Bengali immigrants, despite the fact that many Rohingya have resided in Myanmar for centuries.³

Although Rohingya are persecuted in every country they reside, but the case of atrocities against the Rohingya is the worst in Myanmar (predominantly Buddhist and remained under military rule for more than 5 decades).⁴ Amnesty International termed the Rohingya Muslims as, "the most persecuted refugees in the world."⁵

Myanmar's 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims are denied citizenship and face intense discrimination from the government as well as the society. The government denies basic rights, healthcare and education to the

¹ <http://time.com/4576079/burma-myanmar-arakan-rakhine-rohingya-tatmadaw-suu-kyi/>

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563>

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org.au/rohingya-people-most-persecuted-refugees-in-world/>

Rohingya.⁶ Over 60 per cent of the Rohingya youth have never been to school. Rohingya women and children are denied basic rights of utilities and healthcare. Men and women are subjected to intense labour and forced to work for minimal wages that are not enough for bare sustenance.

Since 2012, the government of Myanmar along with the security forces, the Buddhist monks and local Arakanese groups (local Buddhists) started a deliberate operation of "ethnic cleansing" against the Rohingya Muslims starting from the northern province of Rakhine, also known as Arakan. Hundreds and thousands of Rohingya Muslims were brutally butchered to death in front of their families, their homes destroyed and their women raped and killed in an attempt to drive them out of Myanmar. The government claims to have been trying to protect the Rohingya Muslims from the Arakanese mobs, but the refugees who were 'lucky enough' to escape the wrath of those mobs tell a different story (as also reported by Human Rights groups working in the region).

The government on November 10, 2016, 'cleared' the villages in 'retaliation' for alleged ambushes on police posts, according to Human Rights Watch.⁷ The government however claims that the villagers set ablaze their own homes. According to the Human Rights Watch, approximately 430 plus homes were turned to ashes.⁸ The government also blocked the food aid for 80,000 Rohingya Muslims.⁹

Despite a long history in the country, the Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants in Myanmar by the government. Human Rights groups in the country and adjoining regions report that the Rohingya Muslims are subjected to police crackdowns, rape, torture, arson and starvation. Human Rights Watch calls this treatment of the Rohingya Muslims, "ethnic cleansing."¹⁰ In the last 5 years, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar due to the atrocities and oppression that they are subjected to by the government, Buddhist monks and the society.

The havoc wrecked by the military of Myanmar which ruled the country for more than fifty years wasn't enough that now the democratic government under the leadership of Noble Prize winner Aung San Suu

⁶ <http://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-situation-human-rights-rohingya>

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/13/burma-massive-destruction-rohingya-villages>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/food-aid-80000-rohingya-blocked-myanmar-161019135600701.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims>

Kyi is also failing to stop the military violence against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.¹¹ The government rejects allegations that the soldiers have raped Rohingya women, burned houses, aided the Arakan mobs in attacking and destroying Rohingya villages and killing civilians.¹²

Serious attention towards the issue and quick action by the international community against the atrocities being committed against Rohingya Muslims is the need of the hour. The world just cannot turn a deaf ear towards such oppression and such blatant violations of human rights. Regional and extra-regional powers should take note of this issue and should take steps to contain this monstrosity on emergency basis. A majority of the refugees crossed the river border from Myanmar into Bangladesh to escape the brutalities. The Bangladesh government is also sending them back by force to Myanmar stating it to be Myanmar government's responsibility to deal with them. A large number also escaped into nearby provinces of China as well. Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand also refused to accept more Rohingya refugees into their countries who escaped on boats after the government's recent crackdowns. Myanmar also rejects responsibility for the migrants. Although the United States took in more refugees from Myanmar (mostly Rohingya Muslims) than from any other country (according to the US State Department), but even this is not enough.

The world needs to do more to stop this marginalisation of the Rohingya Muslims. The Rohingya Muslims are human beings and have every right to citizenship. The international community should pass a resolution through the UN persuading the Myanmar government to recognise them as legal citizens of the country. The Myanmar government should be convinced by the international community in general and regional powers in particular to lift discriminatory policies towards the Rohingya and should be given due rights as laid down in the UN Charter such as right to marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement. Strict measures need to be taken against the military of Myanmar which is actually the main culprit behind the marginalization of the Rohingya population. Arms embargo should be levied and if necessary, decisive military action should be taken against the Myanmar military to curb its atrocities. The government of Myanmar should be facilitated accordingly to stop such heinous crimes being committed against humanity by providing economic assistance and ensuring the access of human rights organisations and NGOs to aid in rehabilitation activities of the Rohingya.

¹¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/aung-san-su-ki-violence-rohingya-muslims-myanmar-failing-a7436121.html?cmpid=facebook-post>

¹² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-idUSKBN13D255>