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The Plight of the Rohingya: A Peoples Fight for the Freedom to Live

Myanmar is one of the worlds least developed countries with one of the most troubling pasts. It’s political unrest, cultural development, and diverse bodies have impacted the nation, its choices, and people. It has faced famine, war, and loss of identity among many things. The nation is home to 135 different ethnic minorities and over 100 different dialects. However, their cultural and colonial pasts have caused turmoil within the nation and distrust with the world. Recently, the government has faced public view and criticism regarding one of their minority ethnic groups: The Rohingya Muslims. The UN calls the Rohingya, “the worlds most persecuted minority,” (Al Jazeera). In Myanmar, they face the threat of death, attacks, and violence as part of their daily lives. Abroad, they encounter hostile people and nations refusing to provide refuge. The Rohingya are in grave danger in Myanmar. The threats they face cultivated by the nation’s past, and the harsh violent lives these people endure constitute one of the world largest multi-faceted humanitarian crisis on the verge of genocide.

The Rohingya are the Muslim minority of Myanmar. They immigrated into current day Myanmar while it was still considered the Kingdom of Arakan in the present-day state of Rakhine. They claim to trace their origins back to the 15th century and declare themselves an ethnic population of the nation. (Nebehey and Birsel). Much of the tension they face arises from the immigration and colonial past of the nation. While, they may consider themselves “natives” the Buddhist majority views them as infiltrators aiming to take jobs. These tensions were caused by the institutionalized discrimination the British government imposed on Myanmar during their control and continued by the military regime that took over in 1948 (Nebehey and Birsel).

The Rohingya have been persecuted by the Buddhist majority nation for decades, but recently the militaristic regime and government have become more aggressive towards the minority. What has truly ignited further attack and persecution by the government is ARSA. This is a militant Rohingya resistance group that aims to “defend, salvage, protect the Rohingya community.” (Al Jazeera). In 2016, members of ARSA attacked and killed police and militant forces of Myanmar. This angered the government causing them to act by placing land mines, burning villages, and opening fire on anyone of the Rohingya. The government officially declared ARSA a terrorist organization. However, the rest of the Rohingya population on Myanmar claims that due to the actions of ARSA they are now, “being persecutes indiscriminately,” (Kuruvilla). The constant persecution and violence has forced Rohingya to leave their homes and find refuge from power elsewhere (Coclanis 28).

Much of the hate, violence, and tension are rooted in the colonial past, imperialism, and globalization. During colonial rule, the British imposed many restrictions on the people in culture. They divided groups, providing privilege and power to some and very little to others. The actions of Britain encouraged a strong sense of nationalism and cultural identity that unfortunately took to the roots of racism and xenophobia (Bowman 7). The want to remain pure and powerful as a Buddhist nation has led to discrimination acts against the Rohingya and sparked what the UN Humanitarian Aid Chief has declared, “the fastest developing refugee emergency,” (Nebehay and Birsel). Currently Myanmar is also fighting the globalized world. The strong sense of nationalism has kept them strong from outside influence. Part of globalization is the constant movement of people and goods. Myanmar does not necessarily want foreigners to change the culture and attitude since they faced so much loss in the past. Tensions are still high thus anything that could potentially harm their identity and power is threatening (Bowman 7) (Bray 3-4).

The high tensions in the nation have led the Rohingya to face many human rights violations. For decades, they have been marginalized, exploited, discriminated, divided, attacked, killed, and denied recognition. Officially, Rohingya Muslims are not recognized by Myanmar as one of its fundamental ethnic groups. They are also not recognized by Bangladesh, which is where the Myanmar government claims the Rohingya belong. In Bangladesh they are viewed as “infiltrators of the nation,” (Al Jazeera). Their dehumanization has allowed the government to ignore their pleas and deny their citizenship. In Myanmar, they are issued cards like a green card which states which rights they may or may not have, what they may do, and where they may live. These cards, comparable in a sense to the Nazi form of marking the Jewish people, marks Rohingya’s and provides people of the nation with a legal form of discrimination and oppression of freedom and right against the Rohingya. Furthermore, the people are places less and legally have no home or official nation they belong to, coining them the term stateless (Albert).

These legal discriminatory acts have had an immense impact on the lifestyles of the Rohingya. The lack of work means that 78% of the ethnic population is impoverished. (Kelly). They are not allowed to marry, may only have two children, limited education, limited practice of belief, and have no freedom to move. Many have fled to outside nations like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia often fleeing in unsafe boats, through swampy waters and narrow paths where the threat of cholera is eminent and delusion or death, particularly through sea travel is prominent. Once within the border of other nations, the Rohingya inhabit refugee camps, storage containers, and make shift shacks lacking the proper needs of food, water, and shelter. Thus, many are starving, becoming sick, suffering injuries from the long journey, and fatigue which can and have led to death (Editors of the Economist). What the Rohingya are facing is more than a simple human rights violation it’s what the UN Human Rights office declared as, “crimes against humanity,” (Ponniah). Further, the Rohingya are victims of dehumanization campaigns to help people see them as the lesser group.

Illegally the Rohingya are also facing many bloody violent acts. After the attack by ARSA, the military cracked down on the state of Rakhine which is home to nearly 1.1 million Rohingya. The have raped, killed, shot, and tortured people. They have raided and burn villages attempting to gain power and control, so they may eradicate the Rohingya population. Since the beginning of the crackdown, nearly 625,000 people have fled. The conditions of the mass exodus and cruel outings by the Buddhist majority has also led the UN to declare this, “a textbook case of genocide,” (Kuruvilla). The government has denied the claims made above. They have denied that these attacks, the exodus, and genocide against the Rohingya is occurring. Doing so could gain them international intervention. Myanmar has blocked of access to Rakhine and censored as much as they’ve been able to for outside sources. (Coclanis 28)

Referencing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Myanmar can be held accountable for violating at least 23 of 30 Articles in the declaration. The violations occurring in Myanmar go beyond simply the acts of violence. Myanmar is a UN nation and these violations should demand stronger action and attention by the members of the United Nations. This is also a crisis because of the exodus. People are dying because they are malnourished, and the world knows. People are being killed, attacked, and persecuted and the world knows. There is plenty that the world knows and not much is being done, but it is also a complicated situation to resolve. There has been international exposure and response from the world on the violence faced by the Rohingya people. It has been condemned by activists and sites like human rights watch. Prominent Muslim nations such as Malaysia have condemned the actions of Myanmar as well. The Pope recently visited the Myanmar and addressed the situation as well. What is fearful about finding a solution is that the repercussions of support for the Rohingya on them would be unpredictable. Triggering the nation and the military is not in the best interest of the people, but action is necessary.

This is not the first time that Myanmar has oppressed a certain ethnicity or group of people; however, the Rohingya people’s attacks are the most recent and violent case of human rights violation and modern-day genocide in the world. Fueled by the past and imperialism the Buddhist nation has learned to take any difference to their culture as an attack on them. The leaders limited in power and number by the controlling military sector of the regime are limited and unresponsive to the report. The Rohingya are dying. They are facing famine, sickness, discrimination, and torture among many other things. Many people are scared and many more are attempting to flee to save their lives despite the arduous dangerous journey, yet the world UN and certain nations remain primarily silent. It is true a solution is complicated to find, and the repercussions are unimaginable, but the fate of an entire ethnicity is at stake. The malnourished, impoverished, and injured Rohingya are facing more than common human rights violations, they are facing genocide fueled by the inhuman activities of Myanmar’s government.

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