

Plight of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar/Burma

The brutal military crackdown since October 2016 in Myanmar/Burma's Rakhine State has highlighted the tragic situation of Muslim Rohingya, often described as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Deprived of citizenship and basic freedoms at home, those who risk their lives to escape can at best hope for a precarious existence abroad.

Thousands of Rohingya flee a brutal military crackdown

On 9 October 2016, nine police officers were killed and weapons looted in coordinated attacks on police bases in Rakhine State, along the Myanmar/Burma-Bangladesh border; the attack may have been carried out by [Harakah al-Yakin](#), a little-known Rohingya insurgent group led from Saudi Arabia. Security forces responded by closing off the area and carrying out heavy-handed repression; those fleeing the violence have [described](#) rape, torture and soldiers firing at villagers from helicopter gunships. [At least 89](#) have been killed, and satellite pictures show that over [1 500 buildings](#) have been burned down. Some 66 000 Rohingya have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, and thousands of those who remain face life-threatening malnutrition, as humanitarian aid deliveries have largely been cut off.



Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority in Myanmar/Burma; around 1 million live in Rakhine State, where they make up nearly one third of the population, the remainder being Buddhist Arakanese. Pre-colonial [historical documents](#) show that Muslims have lived in the region and identified themselves as Rohingya for centuries; however, many of the Rohingya are descended from Indian and Bangladeshi workers who arrived under British rule (1824-1948). The Myanmar/Burma authorities refuse to accept them as a native ethnic group, instead treating them as illegal immigrants and referring to them as 'Bengali' rather than 'Rohingya'.

A long history of persecution

Unfortunately, there is nothing new about the recent violence. The Rohingya were targeted by previous military [crackdowns](#) in 1978 and 1991. In [June 2012](#), mob violence broke out after the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, and again in [October](#) of the same year. Security forces, while not actually instigating riots in 2012, [did little](#) to protect Rohingya, and in some cases sided with Buddhist mobs against them. Each of these incidents left hundreds dead and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Since the 2012 riots, over 100 000 Rohingya (around 10 % of this minority's population) have been interned in [overcrowded camps](#), which they are not allowed to leave. Outside the camps, they also face severe discrimination. The 1982 [Burma Citizenship Law](#) excludes them from the list of 135 recognised ethnic groups, meaning that individual Rohingya can only acquire citizenship by proving that they had ancestors in the country prior to its 1948 independence. The difficulty of doing so has left all but [40 000](#) stateless. As non-citizens, they must obtain official permits to leave their townships, even for a few hours, and are forbidden to have more than two children. They were allowed to vote in the 2010 elections, but in 2015 this right was [taken away](#) from them. Rohingya-majority areas have up to 100 times as many patients per doctor as neighbouring non-Rohingya areas, and child mortality is [four times](#) higher. In some townships, nearly [one in five](#) children were afflicted by acute malnutrition, even before the current crackdown [cut off most aid](#).

The Rohingya diaspora

One million or more Rohingya have fled violence in Myanmar/Burma to other countries, including Bangladesh (an estimated [300-500 000](#)), Pakistan ([500 000](#)), Saudi Arabia ([250 000](#)) and Malaysia ([55 000](#)). None of these



countries has signed the [UN Refugee Convention](#), and none accepts Rohingya as refugees. At best, the Rohingya are reluctantly tolerated as illegal migrants, living on the fringes of society without access to proper housing, healthcare or education. Many are even less lucky; in 2015 Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia refused to allow starving Rohingya in rickety boats to land, putting their lives at risk by [towing them](#) back out to sea. Those following the overland route often fall prey to human traffickers, who hold them in [jungle camps](#) to seek ransoms from relatives or sell as slave labour to [Thai fishing boats](#).

Persecution reflects popular fears and prejudices as well as government policy

Prejudice against the Rohingya and Muslims in general is widespread among the Buddhist majority – due among other things to [historical tensions](#) and fears of becoming outnumbered, although Muslims only make up 4 % of the country's population, and there is [no evidence](#) of the Muslim minority growing at a faster rate than the rest of the population. Democratic reforms and greater freedom of speech have aggravated tensions, by allowing Buddhist extremists to whip up hatred against Muslims, for example in October 2012, when anti-Rohingya riots were apparently incited and [orchestrated](#) by monks and local politicians.

Responses to the Rohingya crisis

For the Rohingya, little has changed under Myanmar/Burma's new government

Though herself the victim of persecution for many years and a Sakharov Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi – de facto leader of Myanmar/Burma since April 2016 – has [failed](#) to speak out in defence of the Rohingya. Her government has blocked access to international observers, and [denied](#) human rights abuses took place during the crackdown which began in October 2016, describing them as [fake news](#). This line is echoed in the [interim report](#) of the commission set up in December, with an ex-general at its head, to investigate the violence.

The weakness of the government's response reflects its lack of control over the situation: under the [2008 Constitution](#), the military retains considerable power, forcing the civilian government to rely on its cooperation. Aung San Suu Kyi also has to be careful not to alienate voters; protests in 2015 against the preceding government's [proposal](#) to allow the Rohingya to vote, and in 2016 against the US Embassy's [mere use](#) of the term 'Rohingya', show how unpopular the minority is.

Still, there have been a few positive gestures: in August 2016, the government asked former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to head an advisory [commission](#), including international experts and Muslim representatives, to study ethnic tensions in Rakhine State; its recommendations are expected later in 2017. The [arrest](#) in January 2017 of four policemen captured on video beating Rohingya could be a step towards ending impunity for such attacks. In the same month, 41 Myanmar/Burmese NGOs, including Buddhist organisations, [expressed concern](#) about the situation, in a rare show of solidarity with the Rohingya.

Despite accusations of genocide, most of the international community refrains from direct criticism

Even before the latest violence, in June 2016 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, [suggested](#) that Myanmar/Burma's treatment of the Rohingya could amount to crimes against humanity. In December 2016, breaking with a tradition of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other south-east Asian countries, Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, led a rally [denouncing](#) the 'genocide' of the Rohingya. In the same month, over a dozen Nobel Prize winners signed an [open letter](#) warning of potential impending genocide. However, most world leaders have held back from open criticism, acknowledging the fragility of Myanmar/Burma's democratic transition. Several countries including Malaysia are sending [humanitarian aid](#), but none are offering to take in more Rohingya.

In 2016, the EU contributed [€16.7 million](#) of humanitarian aid to Myanmar/Burma and committed [€163 million](#) of development aid. A large part of this supports the Rohingya, for example through healthcare for those living in camps, as well as longer-term programmes to reduce rural poverty.

Like most of the international community, the EU has refrained from direct criticism of Myanmar/Burma's government. However, a December 2016 [statement](#) by the European External Action Service called for the resumption of humanitarian aid in Rakhine State, and for an objective investigation into the current violence.

The European Parliament has been more outspoken and has adopted several resolutions condemning the persecution of the Rohingya. In its most recent [resolution](#) adopted in December 2016, it called for an immediate end to military harassment, demanded that the Myanmar/Burma government restore citizenship to the minority, and insisted on an end to 'terrible discrimination and segregation'.