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sc_charlotte@srmun.org

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Ethnic-Based Conflict in Myanmar

Introduction

A series of attacks against police outposts in the Rakhine province of Myanmar throughout October 2016 drew a substantial amount of international attention. According to the Myanmar Government, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, (RSO) a Muslim-minority organization, is to blame for these attacks.¹ In response to this and other attacks, the Myanmar government has opted to take repressive measures on the Rohingya population in the Rakhine province in the form of military intervention and denial of humanitarian aid.² Since August 2017, the Myanmar government has obstructed vulnerable communities in the northern Rakhine province from all types of humanitarian aid and assistance, specifically access to healthcare.³ In an effort to aid these vulnerable communities, independent humanitarian agency Doctors Without Borders commenced treating the Rohingya people and providing over 11,000 primary, reproductive, and emergency health care consultations per month at their four clinic sites.⁴ However, three of these four clinic sites were burned down, leading to increase in casualties and fatalities in the region.

The violent and inhumane attacks on the health and welfare of the Rohingya people has resulted in approximately 6,700 deaths and forced approximately 700,000 people to flee northern Rakhine.⁵ This is merely one example of the operations performed by the Myanmar Army to block assistance and aid to the Rohingya people.⁶ Continued lack of aid is sure to magnify the ongoing issues involving migration and casualties and abuses against civilians.

Scale of Violence

Subject to decades of persecution even prior to the recent influx of violence, the Rohingya Muslims have been living disparately within a predominantly Buddhist state.⁷ In September of 2017, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein stated that the violence committed by the state of Myanmar against the Rohingya minority appears to be a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing."⁸ Bearing their own language and culture, the Rohingya people have been denied citizenship and are not recognized by the Myanmar Government as a people. In 2014, Rohingya people were even excluded from the census in an effort to further support the Government's

¹ "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State." International Crisis Group. Accessed February 26, 2019.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/283-myanmar-new-muslim-insurgency-rakhine-state>

² "The Rohingya Crisis." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 26, 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>

³ "The Rohingya Crisis." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 26, 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>

⁴ "One Year On, Rohingya Refugees Live in Dire Camps, Facing an Uncertain Future and Legal Limbo." Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International. Accessed February 24, 2019.

<https://www.msf.org/one-year-rohingya-refugees-live-dire-camps-facing-uncertain-future-and-legal-limbo>.

⁵ Myanmar continues to block humanitarian access in Rakhine state. (2018, August 10). Retrieved February 17, 2019,

<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/myanmar-continues-block-humanitarian-access-rakhine-state>

⁶ Myanmar continues to block humanitarian access in Rakhine state. (2018, August 10). Retrieved February 17, 2019,

<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/myanmar-continues-block-humanitarian-access-rakhine-state>

⁷ Solomon, F. (2017, September 12). Rohingya Crisis: Why Myanmar Is Accused of Ethnic Cleansing. Retrieved February 17, 2019, from <http://time.com/4936882/myanmar-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya/>

⁸ Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis. (2018, April 24). Retrieved February 17, 2019, from

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>

reliance on the cultural and religious differences of the Rohingyas to maintain the distinctions between those populations who the Government represents.⁹ The decades of persecution led to the inevitable push back from the defeated Rohingya population, who began the aforementioned October 2016 series of police attacks against the Myanmar government.¹⁰ The accounts of militants of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya extremist group, stated that their attacks were intended to commence a good-faith effort to gain global attention of their undeniable decades of suffering.¹¹

Migration Crisis

Currently, there are estimates that at least 900,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees are within Bangladesh.¹² As of April 2018, there were at least 781,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps and settlements.¹³ Additionally, 117,000 people were staying outside of these camps in host communities.¹⁴ The need to support these refugees is great. Roughly, 70 percent of these refugees are in need of food aid, with, so far, 100,000 people being treated for malnutrition.¹⁵ The majority of these 900,000 refugees have settled in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, which has led to additional negative implications on the already overcrowded and under-resourced State, such as political challenges, social strains, economic declination, and namely, security concerns.¹⁶ The ARSA militant group has vowed to push forward in its insurgent campaign against the Myanmar government and its state-sponsored terrorism.¹⁷ Bangladeshi authorities are concerned by the idea that ARSA may attempt to recruit within the camps and that ARSA may further use the camps as a base to incite cross-border fighting.¹⁸ Additionally, it is unclear if ARSA is linked to other regional or international terrorist organizations, but it is clear that both Bangladeshi and Burmese extremist networks are gaining influence, which could not only further negatively impact the region, but potentially the international community as a whole.¹⁹

⁹ Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis. (2018, April 24). Retrieved February 17, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>

¹⁰ "What Forces Are Fueling Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis?" Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>.

¹¹ Head, J. (2017, October 11). Rohingya crisis: Finding out the truth about Arsa militants. Retrieved February 17, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41521268>

¹² Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹³ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁴ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁵ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁶ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁷ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁸ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

¹⁹ Alam, M. (2018, February 12). How the Rohingya crisis is affecting Bangladesh - and why it matters. Retrieved February 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-the-rohingya-crisis-is-affecting-bangladesh-and-why-it-matters/?utm_term=.a85a7e63d928

Violence Against Civilians

Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar have claimed, in interviews conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), that abuses against civilians by the Myanmar military have, since the first attack on October 9, 2016, continue to be widespread.²⁰ The OHCHR was able to interview 204 individuals from neighboring Bangladesh only, as the Myanmar government would not permit their entrance into the state to conduct any study.²¹ Of those interviewed, 65 percent report witnessing killings of their fellow Rohingyas by the Myanmar military.²² Additionally, 56 percent report witnessing forced disappearances, particularly of prominent members of the community, mainly Imams.²³

The OHCHR was also able to interview victims of violence. Of these self-identified victims, 47 percent reported a murdered family member.²⁴ Furthermore, 52 percent of women and girls interviewed reported being sexually assaulted and/or raped.²⁵ The OHCHR further noted that these statistics are very likely an underestimation, as some victims and witnesses fear reprisal against themselves and family members for speaking out or participating in the study.²⁶ Additionally, reports of sexual violence pose a specially challenging statistic due to cultural beliefs prompting many to refrain from reporting these types of incidents.²⁷

Conclusion

The ongoing clash and outbreak of violence between ethnic armed organizations in the Rakhine State in Myanmar and its Government has created one of the world's fastest-growing refugee outflows in recent years. This issue has thus created an immediate necessity to effectively address the security crises occurring within the Myanmar borders and in the surrounding regional area. The immense outflow of refugees into surrounding regional areas has triggered humanitarian crises within host communities and refugee camps or settlements. The rise of regional and international terrorist organizations stemming from this ethnic conflict has been one of the many alarming security issues within the region and outwardly, the global community. Without direction from the Security Council, the ongoing ethnic cleansing, regional migration crisis, and rise of terrorist organizations will not resolve itself.

²⁰ "Flash Report: Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016." February 3, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf>.

²¹ "Flash Report: Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016." February 3, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf>.

²² "Flash Report: Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016." February 3, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf>.

²³ "Flash Report: Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016." February 3, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf>.

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