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Forum: United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC)

Issue: The Rohingya conflict in Myanmar

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Committee Introduction

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is a UN body dedicated to promoting and safeguarding human rights worldwide. It consists of 47 members elected for three-year terms, with its headquarters located at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland.

Created by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006 to succeed the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), the Council collaborates closely with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Council was created to address shortcomings in its predecessor and to provide a more effective, transparent, and inclusive forum for human rights dialogue and action.

Its primary role is to investigate human rights violations and address concerns within UN member states, including issues like freedom of religion and the protection of racial and ethnic minorities. Through mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), human rights experts, and commissions of inquiry, the UNHRC investigates allegations of abuses, promotes adherence to international human rights standards, and recommends actions to improve human rights conditions globally. It also plays a key role in shaping international norms and encouraging cooperation among states, civil society, and other UN bodies.

Despite its important role, the UNHRC has faced criticism, particularly regarding the membership of certain countries with poor human rights records. Nonetheless, the UNHRC remains a central platform for advancing human dignity, justice, and equality

worldwide, striving to hold governments accountable and empower individuals through the protection of their fundamental rights.

Background Information

The Rohingya: historical and ethnic context

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group who have lived for centuries in Rakhine State, a coastal region in Western Myanmar. Their presence in this area dates back at least several hundred years, with some historical accounts tracing their roots to medieval times when the region was part of various kingdoms and empires.

Despite their long-standing presence, the Rohingya have been viewed by many in Myanmar as outsiders or immigrants, largely due to their distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity compared to the majority Buddhist Rakhine and Bamar populations.

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the Rohingya's status became increasingly precarious. The new government and successive regimes questioned their citizenship and loyalty, often portraying them as foreigners from Bangladesh, despite many Rohingya families having lived in Myanmar for generations.

Legal exclusion and marginalization

In 1982, a new Citizenship Law was enacted by Myanmar's military government, thus excluding the Rohingya from the list of recognized ethnic groups entitled to citizenship. Instead, they were classified as "foreigners" or "stateless," denying them basic rights such as freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, and political participation.

This legal exclusion institutionalized discrimination and marginalization, making it difficult for the Rohingya to access public services. Thus, they were left vulnerable to harassment, arbitrary arrests, and violence.

Rising Tensions

Over the decades, tensions between the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist Rakhine majority escalated. Both communities experienced cycles of violence, often fueled by nationalist rhetoric, economic competition, and political manipulation.

The rise of Buddhist nationalist groups like Ma Ba Tha and political parties promoting anti-Rohingya sentiment intensified hostility between groups. The Rohingya were frequently scapegoated for economic problems and accused of being a threat to Myanmar's national identity.

The Crisis

The Rohingya conflict's crisis centers on the systematic persecution and violent displacement of the Rohingya. Within the country, tensions have escalated into cycles of communal violence and military crackdowns. The crisis reached a critical point in August 2017, when Myanmar's military launched a large-scale "clearance operation" in response to attacks by Rohingya militants. This operation was marked by widespread reports of atrocities, including mass killings, sexual violence, and the burning of villages.

The international community has condemned the violence and called for accountability, but efforts to resolve the conflict remain stalled amid Myanmar's internal politics and military influence.

Human rights abuses

The Rohingya's statelessness strips them of basic rights, including access to education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement. Restrictions on marriage and family size further marginalize the community, trapping many in a cycle of poverty and exclusion.

The campaigns since 2017 involved systematic forced displacement, where entire Rohingya villages were razed, homes burned, and communities uprooted. The scale and brutality of these actions have been described by many observers as ethnic cleansing, with the intent to drive the Rohingya from their ancestral lands. Survivors recount horrific massacres, with security forces executing men, women, and children indiscriminately.

Sexual violence has been used as a deliberate weapon of war against Rohingya women and girls. Numerous reports detail widespread gang rapes and other forms of sexual abuse perpetrated by soldiers, leaving deep physical and psychological scars. Survivors often face stigma and lack access to adequate medical care or psychological support, compounding their trauma.

In addition to killings and sexual violence, Rohingyas endure arbitrary arrests, torture, and detention without due process. Many are held in overcrowded and inhumane conditions, denied legal representation or the ability to challenge their detention. Movement restrictions, including curfews and checkpoints, severely limit their ability to seek work, education, or medical care, further eroding their dignity and well-being.

The systematic destruction of cultural and religious sites, such as mosques and cemeteries, aims to erase the Rohingya's identity and heritage. This cultural erasure is part of a broader campaign to marginalize and dehumanize the community.

Together, these abuses constitute grave violations of international human rights law, creating a humanitarian crisis marked by immense suffering and displacement.

Displacement

A large segment of the Rohingya population have been displaced due to this crisis. Since 2017, 700,000 Rohingyas have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, creating one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. This sudden mass exodus added to the tens of thousands already displaced by earlier waves of violence. Today, the majority reside in the sprawling Cox's Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh, the largest refugee settlement in the world. Conditions there are extremely challenging, with limited access to clean water, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities, which severely impacts the refugees' well-being and dignity.

Beyond Bangladesh, many Rohingyas attempt perilous journeys to other countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. These routes often expose them to human trafficking, exploitation, and dangerous sea voyages. Their legal status in host countries is usually precarious, complicating their access to protection and basic rights.

UN Efforts

The UN has undertaken a range of efforts to address the Rohingya crisis by making sure to focus on humanitarian aid, advocacy accountability, protection and long term solutions.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), along with the World Food Programme (WFP), has been providing essential services such as food aid, shelter, clean water,

sanitation, and healthcare. These efforts aim to alleviate the dire living conditions in overcrowded camps and reduce the risk of disease outbreaks and malnutrition.

Beyond emergency aid, the UN has prioritized education and health programs to support the Rohingya community's resilience. UNICEF and partner organizations have implemented vaccination drives, maternal and child health services, and mental health support to address both physical and psychological trauma. Education initiatives target displaced children and youth, offering informal and formal learning opportunities despite the challenges of displacement and limited resources. The UN also plays a critical role in coordinating the humanitarian response through the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), ensuring that aid delivery is efficient, comprehensive, and reaches the most vulnerable populations.

On the advocacy and protection front, the United Nations has been vocal about the human rights abuses faced by the Rohingya. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented widespread violations, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement. These reports have been crucial in raising global awareness and pushing for international accountability. The UN has repeatedly called on Myanmar's government and military to end violence, grant citizenship rights to the Rohingya, and create conditions for safe and voluntary returns.

Additionally, the UN supports international legal efforts, including proceedings at the International Court of Justice. In early 2026, the ICJ held hearings for the first time in over a decade regarding a genocide case against the Myanmar military, brought forward by Rohingya victims seeking justice for the atrocities committed against them. This marks a significant step in international legal efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for alleged crimes against humanity and genocide.

Possible Solutions

The UN general assembly and HRC emphasize the importance for the conditions in Myanmar to be favorable for the voluntary, safe and dignified returns of Rohingya refugees. This includes ending violence and taking accountability for the past violences and abuses.

Humanitarian support: The UN continues to give life saving assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (food, shelter, medical care etc...) but there have

been some funding shortfalls which have forced some aid programs to be temporarily halted.

Protection and accountability: The UN has called for aid in strengthening the protection for Rohingya people such as men, women and children and has demanded accountability for human rights violations such as the Right to Life (Art. 3) (mass killings and massacres), Right to Freedom from torture (Art. 5), Right to education (Art. 26) and more.

Resettlement: The UN has urged for countries to offer a safe haven for the Rohingya people yet few countries have offered resettlement or help with local integration.

Call for restraint: The Secretary General has condemned all violences and urges all parties to uphold international human rights and humanitarian laws to ensure aid organizations safe access.

Definition of Key Terms

Rohingya:

A stateless Indo-Aryan ethnolinguistic group who predominantly follow Islam from Rakhine State, Myanmar.

Statelessness:

The condition of being without citizenship in any country.

Ethnic Minority:

A group distinct by ethnicity, language, or religion, often facing discrimination.

Genocide:

The deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group.

Crime against humanity:

A widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.

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