

# Genocide: Hear the Rohingya Cries

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TAWAKKOL Karman, co-recipient of the 2011 Nobel peace prize asks of the Rohingya genocide, “Why is this happening? Why is this human holocaust happening right before our eyes, not being stopped?”

The Rohingya, an ethnic group that has been a part of Myanmar for centuries, has been a target of systematic ethnic cleansing since 2010. In plain sight of the world, these people were burned alive, their houses razed to the ground, women were gang-raped and their children murdered in the most horrific of ways. The tyranny and persecution became so severe that the United Nations, which usually remains detached in the face of local conflicts, declared the Rohingya as the “world’s most persecuted people” and called their treatment “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. Since then, many world leaders, in addition to countless human rights organisations, have joined the UN to condemn the attacks and called the actions genocide, but the relentless violence pushed on.

Vicious attacks forced hundreds of thousands of innocent people to seek shelter in neighbouring countries. However, most of the time, they ran into the cold face of rejection. Australia, despite its richness and vast land, refused to lend a helping hand to the Rohingya, even when they were stranded in the ocean on dingy boats.

In addition, the persecution and tyranny didn’t remain only physical. There is a systematic effort underway to erase the ethnic group from the collective history and memory of the country. Myanmar’s authorities are unabashedly denying the Rohingya’s past, claiming that they are illegal migrants from Bangladesh and refuse to call them by their name, Rohingya. The identity, heritage and legacy of this ethnic minority, which was a thriving community with ministers in the government until a couple of decades ago, are brazenly denied.

Hannah Beech, the Southeast Asia Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*, expresses her shock:

“Myanmar’s sudden amnesia about the Rohingya is as bold as it is systematic. Five years ago, Sittwe, nestled in an estuary in the Bay of Bengal, was a mixed city, divided between an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist majority and the Rohingya Muslim minority. Walking Sittwe’s crowded bazaar in 2009, I saw Rohingya fishermen selling seafood to Rakhine women. Rohingya professionals practised law and medicine. The main street in town was dominated by the Jama mosque, an Arabesque confection built in the mid-19th century. The imam spoke proudly of Sittwe’s multicultural heritage. But today, the state-enforced amnesia seems to have affected everyone: ‘Sittwe’s psyche has adapted to the new circumstances. In the bazaar recently, every Rakhine resident I talked to claimed, falsely, that no Muslims had ever owned shops there.’”

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Myanmar’s authorities are trying to “effectively erase all signs of memorable landmarks in the geography of the Rohingya landscape and memory in such a way that a return to their land would yield nothing but a desolate and unrecognisable terrain.”

The remaining Rohingya, those that Myanmar’s army didn’t manage to force out, have to live in ghettos and face restrictions on their freedom of movement, marriage, health-care and education. Even if it is as something as mundane and trivial as needing to visit a neighbouring village, they must apply for travel pass.

Similarly, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, although a little bit late, called the actions of Myanmar’s army — and authorities — an act of ethnic cleansing and said: “No provocation can justify the horrendous atrocities that have ensued. These abuses by some among the Burmese military, security forces, and local vigilantes have caused tremendous suffering and forced hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to flee their homes in Burma to seek refuge in

Bangladesh. After a careful and thorough analysis of available facts, it is clear that the situation in Northern Rakhine state constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.”

Despite these calls to stop the violence and establish peace, Myanmar’s authorities remained unaffected and continued their crimes. Extreme hostility against the Rohingya continues.

Sending these traumatised and helpless people back into a hostile and potentially violent environment, without even addressing their most basic needs such as security or settlement, would clearly be a serious mistake, and one with potentially horrific consequences.

Needless to say, human rights organisations are vehemently opposing the idea. Amnesty International explains: “The Myanmar military’s horrific campaign against the Rohingya in Rakhine State amounts to crimes against humanity. The very first condition that must be met before any repatriation plan becomes reality is an unconditional end to the violence. But this is not enough – the Myanmar government must also end the entrenched discrimination that has trapped the Rohingya in a cycle of deprivation and abuse for decades.”

It is time that the UN and the world stepped up and take real action to save helpless people from horrendous savagery. Islamic countries can take the lead and make a decision to form a joint naval force and send capital ships to the region. Their presence off the coast of Myanmar as observers to ensure that no human rights violations occur would surely be a deterring factor. This move could be supported by economic sanctions by those among the international community that wish to be more than mere by-standers to ongoing crimes. The world can do far more than issue criticisms when helpless people are being brutally massacred in a clear-cut case of genocide.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20171207064845/https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2017/12/311674/genocide-hear-rohingya-cries>

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