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**Forum: United Nations General Assembly Third Committee Issue: The question of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar**

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**Introduction**

In the 19th century, Britain colonized large territories in south Asia including modern day Myanmar, then known as Burma. Migration from India and Bangladesh into Burma was common and seen as an internal population movement, considering the British held all three territories. After Burma’s independence in 1948, these migrants remained in the Rakhine State of Burma and became known as the Rohingya. Later that year, the state government passed the Union Citizenship Act defining which ethnicities were authorized to obtain citizenship, excluding the Rohingya people. Individuals whose families had resided in Myanmar for at least two generations were originally given special identification cards allowing the Rohingya to reside in the state, mostly as non-citizens.

After a military coup in 1962, Myanmar citizens were required to carry national registration cards; the Rohingya, however, were given foreign identity cards that came with several academic and career limitations. This discrimination was followed by widespread destruction and assault on the Rohingya people. The first wave of extreme violence began in 1978 from the Myanmar military. In an effort to expel the Rohingya from the state, so-called “illegal immigrants,” including the Rohingya, were identified and encouraged to leave the region. This resulted in rape, arbitrary arrests, destruction of mosques and villages, and land confiscation leading to over 200,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. New laws in 1982 further limited the rights of the Rohingya to study, work, travel, marry, practice religion, vote, and access health care. Since then, there was another wave of violence in 1992 leading to another influx of refugees to Bangladesh; although the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) assisted in the repatriation of many refugees in the early 2000s, it is reported that they returned to Myanmar to continued violence and discrimination.

Today, the government of Myanmar recognizes 135 official ethnic groups in its state. However, the Rohingya people, who primarily inhabit the Rakhine State of Myanmar and total over one million individuals, have been denied status as an official ethnic group and denied citizenship since 1982. In the past several decades, the Rohingya people have faced persecution as well as political and social discrimination with state laws and policies that deny them fundamental human rights. Tensions between the Rohingya, the state military, and other actors have led to ethnic and religious-related violence since the beginning of the discriminatory laws which has escalated in the past few years.

A new political party was voted into Myanmar government office in 2015 led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and now the Myanmar State Counsellor, with hopes of ending the refugee crisis. The government has not played an active role in the violence against the Rohingya, as under the current constitution the Myanmar military acts independently of the governing party.

Despite the new developments in the Myanmar political leadership, the military retains control over all defence and border operations without opportunity for the government to intervene. New violence in the past half-decade has worsened conditions for the Rohingya as their villages were raided and soldiers have committed violence that has been compared to an “ethnic cleansing campaign.” This has threatened the safety and security of Rakhine State, leaving many stateless and relying on UN aid for survival. In August 2017, new violence incited significant amounts of Rohingya to seek refuge in nearby states. Due to the ongoing persecution, nearly one million Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian states.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**International And Regional Framework**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) guarantees several fundamental human rights that relate directly to the situation of the Rohingya people.

This includes the right to “life, liberty, and security of person” in articles two and three, entitling each person to the same rights regardless of several distinctive factors including national origin. There are several other freedoms enshrined in the UDHR that are relevant to the situation in Myanmar, including the right to work and free choice of employment in article 23, access to healthcare in article 25, and the right to education in article 26.

Other human rights agreements adopted by the international community are useful in the context of the situation in Myanmar, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (1965). The ICCPR states that no state shall restrict one’s fundamental human rights including liberty, security of person, freedom to leave any country, religion, right to opportunity, and equal rights without discrimination of national origin. While Myanmar is not currently a party to the ICCPR, the agreement is considered part of customary international law and can be universally applied. Meanwhile, the ICERD condemns and prohibits all forms of racial discrimination, calling for the complete removal of all racial barriers.

The General Assembly first discussed the situation in Myanmar in General Assembly resolution 46/132, adopted on 17 December 1991. This resolution focuses on promoting the creation of a democratic state and addressing the ‘human rights situation’ in Myanmar. In recent years, the General Assembly has continued considering topics on the situation in Myanmar, focusing on the human rights issues and the continued persecution of the Rohingya people. In General Assembly resolution 72/248 adopted 24 December 2017, the body calls upon the government of Myanmar to end the violence and allow for the peaceful delivery of aid to those in need, along with several other provisions to address the needs of the Rohingya and create a peaceful state. This recent resolution adopts measures to support refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) by increasing efforts for humanitarian access and fact-finding missions, supporting the return and relocation of Rohingya refugees and IDPs, and encouraging assistance from the international community through diplomatic measures to uphold the rights and security of the Rohingya.

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has also addressed the crisis and the need to protect the human rights of the Rohingya. HRC resolution 37/32 adopted on 23 March 2018 addresses the violence in the Rakhine State and calls upon the government to resolve the mistreatment of the Rohingya, including addressing all human rights abuses, the lack of rule of law, and mistreatment of women and children, and to work toward a lasting peace. The Special Rapporteur, nominated by the HRC in resolution 1992/58, published a report on 8 September 2017 describing an improved human rights situation within the Myanmar national parliament, while also noting room for improvement in enhancing state accountability and an apparent climate of impunity.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), part of the Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by General Assembly resolution 70/1 in 2015, outline 17 major goals for states and the UN to achieve globally. State laws that restrict the Rohingya people from access to services, work, and limit their movement and freedoms prevent the region from reaching several goals including SDG 3 covering good health and well-being, SDG 4 on quality education, and SDG 8 on providing decent work for all. In light of the continued persecution of the Rohingya people and the number of refugees and IDPs among this population, several other goals must be addressed to ensure sustainable living for the Rohingya. In order to reach a level of sustainability, the international community must address SDG 2 on zero hunger, SDG 4 on clean water and sanitation, and SDG 16 on achieving peace, justice, and strong institutions.

**Key Issues**

**Security Of The Rakhine State**

On 25 August 2017, following an attack against Myanmar border guard police by Rohingya armed groups, violence in Rakhine State escalated as local military forces started a new wave of “clearance operations” against Rohingya individuals. The violence included raids on houses and villages, random shootings and stabbings, widespread destruction of homes and personal property, and sexual violence. This led nearly 700,000 Rohingya to flee from Myanmar to the district of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, a district already inhabited by several hundred thousand refugees from

previous violence, to avoid further persecution. During an interview with Rohingya individuals residing in refugee camps, half of the participants reported having a family member killed and half of the women interviewed experienced sexual violence from the security forces. A September 2018 report from the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar confirmed the wrongdoings of the Myanmar military as actions that are “grossly disproportionate to actual security threats.” The report contains several suggestions for further action by the UN, including a suggested Security Council tribunal to try suspected perpetrators or refer them to the International Criminal Court, imposing an arms embargo on Myanmar, and placing sanctions on those with the most responsibility for crimes against the Rohingya. In September 2018, the International Criminal Court opened a preliminary examination of the “forced displacement of the Rohingya people” and the violence committed against them.

The Myanmar-owned newspaper, Global New Light of Myanmar, reported that extremist groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army have contributed to the continued violence. Reports state that these groups originate from Rohingya extremists working to fight against the state using violence, as well as Buddhist extremists empowered by the state’s persecution of the Rohingya. To counteract the violence, the Myanmar government is working to increase the presence of state security forces in the region. The UN General Assembly has condemned the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army for their attacks against police and military posts. Myanmar forces have combatted extremist and terrorist groups by enacting counter-terrorism legislation, partaking in counter-terrorism training courses led by the International Criminal Police Organization, and participating in regional information-sharing initiatives. However, challenges remain in establishing rule of law and transparency. The government continues to deny the allegations against the state military and prevent further information dispersal about conditions within Rakhine State. Terrorist groups as well as the state military continue to create unsafe conditions in the region and threaten the safety of civilians.

Refugees And Internally Displaced Persons

Sharmeela Rassool, Chief Technical Advisor on Justice and Human Rights for UNDP Bangladesh, has called the situation in Myanmar the “fastest, largest,

and the most concentrated” refugee crisis in recent times. Due to continued violence against the Rohingya people in their native Rakhine State, over one million refugees have fled to neighbouring states. Many have fled to Bangladesh while others have immigrated to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. However, the main refugee crisis centres in Bangladesh, which houses an estimated 905,000 refugees in Cox’s Bazar, a single district in Bangladesh. Additionally, there are approximately 241,000 IDPs residing in camps in different states of Myanmar. There are safety risks to consider in refugee camps in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. Camps in Bangladesh are reported to be “large, densely packed, poorly constructed, unplanned, and extremely vulnerable.” Further, extreme weather is expected during the upcoming monsoon and cyclone seasons, increasing the safety risks for all refugees currently in these camps with threats of landslides, flooding, and the spread of diseases. A reported 100,000 refugees face life-threatening conditions during this extreme weather.

The IOM, UNHCR, humanitarian partners, and government agencies have partnered to assist Rohingya in refugee camps. There are several organizations working to improve conditions including UNHCR in their work with the Medecins sans Frontieres, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Children’s Fund to distribute medical supplies in Bangladeshi camps. Aid organizations including OCHA, UNHCR, and IOM have noted several challenges faced in aid distribution that are harming the safety and security of refugees, including: congestion of the camps, contaminated water, disease outbreaks, extreme climate, psychosocial issues, lack of access to fuel, and the unique needs of women. UNHCR, IOM, and OCHA have requested $951 million to carry out a joint response action plan that would properly address the worsening humanitarian crisis and specific issues faced by refugees and IDPs in these camps. However, the financial tracking service used by OCHA has reported that thus far only $321 million in funding has been provided.

**Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

**The Role Of The Myanmar Government**

The UN Security Council has confirmed that Myanmar military forces are playing an active role in perpetuating the violence against the Rohingya community; because of the separation of powers, the government is unable to intervene. The Myanmar military rejects any accusation that excessive violence was used on the Rohingya people during the 2017 raids. However, the international community has taken steps to enact justice against those responsible for the recent violence against the Rohingya. The European Union and Canada have imposed sanctions including asset freezes and traveling restrictions against senior officials in the Myanmar military for their abuse of power and the actions they have taken against the Rohingya.

Despite recent democratization in the state government of Myanmar, the government has supported the military’s actions, claiming that there is no ethnic cleansing or excessive force from the state military. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has stated that the government hopes to regain control of the military in order to establish peace, however she has yet to denounce the military’s actions as unlawful since entering office. In order to assist the Rohingya people on a political platform, the government has formed a Central Committee for the Implementation of Peace and Development in Rakhine State in order to discuss security, citizenship verification, and other issues to develop the region, however there are no reports of further action from the committee. However, it was reported that the government will not consider reforming the laws that prevent the Rohingya from gaining citizenship. The government of Myanmar signed a memorandum of understanding with UNHCR and UNDP agreeing to create conditions for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh. The memorandum provides greater access for UN organizations to operate in parts of Rakhine State in order to build local capacity to ensure safe conditions before the repatriation process begins. However, the likelihood that the region will ever reach such safety levels is contested by the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights who states that, despite decreased violence, the Myanmar military are continuing a forced terror and

starvation campaign, preventing Rohingya refugees from returning anytime in the conceivable future.

**Development of Issue/Timeline**



**Date** **Event**

| **1977** | Myanmar, the country then known as Burma, launches Operation Dragon King (Naga |
| --- | --- |
|  | Min) in Rakhine state. The Rohingya ethnic minority are considered "illegal" after being |
|  | stripped of their citizenship, thus beginning a cycle of forced displacement. |
|  |  |
| **1977-1978** | Operation Dragon King includes mass arrests, persecution, and horrific violence, driving |
|  | some 200,000 Rohingya across the border to Bangladesh. The neighboring country opens |
|  | refugee camps, where the UN provides medical aid. But by 1979, most of the Rohingya |
|  | were repatriated to Burma. Of those remaining in Bangladesh, some 10,000 people die, |
|  | the majority children, after food rations are cut. |
| **1989** | After a military crackdown that follows the suppression of a popular uprising, Burma is |
|  | renamed Myanmar. The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council increases its |
|  | military presence in northern Rakhine state, and the Rohingya are reportedly subject to |
|  | compulsory labor, forced relocation, rape, summary executions, and torture. Some |
|  | 250,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh. |



**1992**

Rohingya refugees arrive in Bangladesh, bringing only what they can carry. The governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar sign an agreement to repatriate refugees, and the camps are closed to new arrivals in the spring. By fall, forced repatriation begins, despite protests by the international community. Over the following years, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are sent back to Myanmar, and new refugees attempting the journey are denied entry to Bangladesh.

| **2003** | Of the 20 camps that were built in Bangladesh in the early '90s, two remain: Nayapara |
| --- | --- |
|  | camp near Teknaf and Kutupalong camp near Ukhia. Living conditions remain dire—a |
|  | study finds that 58 percent of children and 53 percent of adults are chronically |
|  | malnourished. |



| **2006** | Some 79 percent of the shelters in the two remaining camps in Bangladesh are flooded |
| --- | --- |
|  | during the rainy season. The substandard conditions contribute to cases of diarrhea, |
|  | respiratory infections, and malnutrition. |
| **2009** | Only a small percentage of Rohingya seeking refuge in Bangladesh are officially |
|  | recognized as refugees. Unrecognized Rohingya refugees are vulnerable to harassment |
|  | and exploitation. |

**2016** The October 9 Rohingya militant attacks on border police in Myanmar’s Rakhine state triggered reprisals against the Rohingya community, bringing a new wave of refugees across the border.

**2017** Following Rohingya militia attacks on several police and army posts in Myanmar on August 25, state security forces launched a campaign of horrific violence and terror targeting the Rohingya community. More than 530,000 Rohingya are driven out of



Myanmar. The cycle of mass displacement begins again, this time on an unprecedented scale.

| **2018** | An outbreak of diphtheria rages in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Though diphtheria is |
| --- | --- |
|  | covered by the most basic vaccine packages, the deadly childhood disease spreads quickly |
|  | through the camps in Bangladesh, where most children have not been immunized. |

**Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

**Subheading**

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN Security Council called on Myanmar's government to end its military campaign against the Rohingya Muslims. The 15-member Security Council met behind closed doors on the 12th September 2017, at the request of Sweden and Britain, to discuss the crisis for the second time since it began and agreed to condemn the situation publicly. Speaking before the meeting, Antonio Guterres called the situation for the Rohingya refugees "catastrophic" and "completely unacceptable," acknowledging that the minority group was being ethnically cleansed in the Buddhistmajority nation. "I call on the Myanmar authorities to suspend military action, end the violence, uphold the rule of law and recognize the right of return of all those who have had to leave the country," the UN chief said at the press conference in New York.

Guterres also called on the authorities to allow the UN and NGOs into Rakhine State to provide humanitarian aid. The UN describes the Rohingya as the world's most persecuted people. The Rohingya have suffered years of discrimination and have been denied citizenship in Myanmar since 1982. Guterres has been urging the Myanmar government to grant the Rohingya nationality or legal status that would allow them to live a healthy life.

The United Nations migration agency and its partners are supporting Bangladesh in coordinating assistance for the influx of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees, with clean water and sanitation, shelter, food and psychosocial care for the most vulnerable.

The Bangladesh Government has confirmed that it will move an estimated 15,000 people currently stranded in a so-called “no man's land” near the Anjuman Para border crossing point in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia District, into more appropriate settlement areas.

Since late August, IOM (International Organisation for migration) has scaled up quickly, providing: shelter to 379,000 people; health consultations to 47,000 individuals; over 11,000 dignity kits; 678,000 litres of water; and 200 staff to assist the

Health Ministry in vaccinating 679,000 people against cholera. IOM staffing has also been boosted with 443 staff and in- country volunteers. One must keep in mind that as of now no sanctions have been imposed on Myanmar, despite the significant human right violations they are conducting. This could be the result of the already depleting economy of Myanmar; therefore sanctions may not be a solution, as it may not incentivize the government to stop their actions against the Rohingya Muslims, instead, it may act as a catalyst to further threatening the lives of the Rohingya minority.

**Conclusion And Questions A Resolution Must Answer (Qarma)**

Violence in Rakhine State has left many Rohingya people homeless, stateless, and in need of protection. This violence and displacement denies the Rohingya people several fundamental human rights guaranteed in the UDHR. The UN General Assembly has confirmed that the continued violence caused by both the Myanmar state military forces and non-state terrorist groups threaten the safety of Rohingya within Rakhine State. In attempts to engage the government on protection of the Rohingya, the UN Security Council and the Myanmar government have had meetings on how to increase security, prevent further harm to the Rohingya people, and promote peace. The current situation in Myanmar has been called one of the fastest

growing refugee crises as the Rohingya people flee to neighbouring countries, mainly Bangladesh, in search of safer conditions; this continues despite Myanmar government’s denial of the responsibility of the state military. UNHCR, UNDP, and IOM have supported the refugee camps and worked to create living conditions with increased access to food, water, and supplies. However, due to extreme weather and low funding, the plans to ensure refugee safety have not been completely enacted. Despite repatriation agreements, the security levels required by the memorandum of understanding between Myanmar and UNHCR to ensure a safe return for the refugees has not yet been met.

The world is carrying the weight of Myanmar's misdeeds. And now, the world is bracing for another challenge. After a genocide, Myanmar is now pulling off a coup.

The terror is far from over. And its threat is spreading beyond the country's borders. Myanmar is becoming a security nightmare for the region. It may sound like a sweeping statement. This is a period of worrying uncertainty. So far, Myanmar has sparked a refugee crisis, threatened border security and political stability. What else qualifies as a security threat?

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