

Myanmar

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Query:

Information on Rohingya refugees in Burma

Response:

Background

The Rohingya people are of Muslim descent and are native to the northern Arakan region of Burma, which borders Bangladesh. The name Rohingya originates from the name "Rohang" or "Rohan" given to the Arakan region during the ninth and tenth centuries. Another group, the Rakhine people, reside in the same area of Burma and are the ethnic majority, with a Hindu and Mongol background. (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

The Rohingyas have suffered a history of abuse, and since World War II have been fighting for recognition as a distinct ethnic group as well as an independent state. "By 1947, the Rohingyas had formed an army and had approached President Jinnah of the newly created Pakistan to ask him to incorporate northern Arakan into East Pakistan (Bangladesh)." (Human Rights Watch, 1996) Many observers speculate that it was this disloyal action by the Rohingyas that led to the group's present problems with the government because the state still views the Rohingyas as untrustworthy. (Smith, 1993)

The First Exodus

Shortly after the military coup in 1962, Rohingyas assert that the new government took measures to restrict their freedom and, ultimately, drive the group out of the country. For example, in the mid-1970s, Burma initiated the Emergency Immigration Act, requiring all citizens to possess National Registration Certificates (NRCs). However, Rohingyas were only given Foreign Registration Cards (FRCs), which many employers and local authorities did not accept. (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

In 1977, the Rohingyas experienced even greater obstacles. The government's Nagamin (Dragon King) program, aimed at taking action against foreigners, disintegrated into attacks on Rohingyas from both the army and the ethnic majority in Arakan, the Rakhines. By May 1978, over 200,000 Rohingyas fled over the border to Bangladesh. However, because of difficult conditions in Bangladesh, nearly all Rohingya refugees returned to Burma by 1979. (*Burma Issues*, 1998)

The 1991-92 Exodus

When the current military government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), took power in 1988, Burma's policy toward the Rohingyas changed very little. For example, under the 1982 Citizenship Law, a person must establish Burmese ancestry back to 1823 in order to be considered a citizen. Therefore, most Rohingyas along with other ethnic minorities are not able to qualify as citizens, and are denied many basic rights including access to education and even freedom of movement. (Islam, 30 July 1999)

The SLORC-dominated government continued to support such anti-Rohingya policies; however, the Rohingyas were permitted to participate in the 1990 elections. In fact, the Rohingyas were represented by two parties that won 80 percent of the vote in their districts. Unfortunately, the SLORC refused to relinquish its power. Many scholars believe that the subsequent 'attack' on the Rohingya populace was an effort by the SLORC to unite angry citizens against a common enemy and distract attention from the party's unwillingness to give up its position in the government. (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

In 1991 and 1992, the Rohingyas experienced widespread repression and abuse from security forces posted in northern Arakan. Once again, Rohingya refugees began flooding over the border to Bangladesh to escape human rights abuse, and by March 1992, 260,000 Burmese Muslims were living in refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar. (Carey, 1997) The refugees claimed that many ethnic minorities in the Rakhine State had been subjected to extrajudicial executions, rape, religious persecution and torture by the military. In addition, the Rohingyas were forced to work, unpaid, for security forces, building bridges, roads and barracks, digging fish and prawn ponds, and laboring as porters. (Amnesty International, 1997)

Repatriation

On April 28, 1992, the governments of Burma and Bangladesh signed a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and the SLORC agreed to accept the return of all refugees that could establish a "bona fide residence" in Burma and that the repatriation would be safe and voluntary. However, during the 1992-93 period in particular, the government of Bangladesh used force, withheld rations, imprisoned and often beat or threatened to beat refugees who did not agree to return. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) withdrew from all camps in protest of the abuse. In 1993 Bangladesh and Burma both signed an agreement with UNHCR, but, by that time, nearly 50,000 refugees had been forcibly repatriated. (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

The repatriation program was scheduled to end in December 1995, but natural disasters, political unrest and strikes, in conjunction with many refugees' reluctance to return home and delays by Burma in clearing refugees for return, slowed the process considerably, leaving more than 35,000 refugees still in camps. In addition, reports began to circulate that conditions in the Arakan State had not changed, and ethnic minorities still faced discrimination and persecution by the government because of their ethnicity. (*Burma Issues*, 1998)

According to a 1996 Human Rights Watch report,

Current Situation for Rohingyas in Burma

As of 1999, more than 21,000 Burmese Muslims remain in refugee camps in Bangladesh and new refugees continue to arrive every day. Lionel Rosenblatt, President of Refugees International, testified in March before the House International Relations Committee that the situation in Burma has worsened; political repression and practices such as forced relocations, forced labor and arbitrary arrests have intensified, and nearly one million people are internally displaced. Rosenblatt also discussed the Rohingya situation specifically, stating, "Although Bangladesh wants to close the camps where 21,000 Rohingyas remain, [Refugees International] recommends that the camps remain open because these refugees fear persecution if they return to Burma." (FNS, 9 March 1999)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC, including the World Wide Web.

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