

Myanmar – Rohingya Genocide

1. Overview

Myanmar, in Southeast Asia, has faced decades of military rule and ethnic conflict. The Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State has faced systematic discrimination and statelessness.

In 2017, a military crackdown forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

2. Timeline of Events

- 1962** – Military coup establishes authoritarian rule.
- 1982** – Citizenship law excludes Rohingya.
- 2016–2017** – Military operations in Rakhine State.
- 2017** – Mass displacement to Bangladesh.
- 2021** – Military coup overthrows civilian government.

3. Root Causes

The persecution of the Rohingya stems from decades of institutionalized discrimination and exclusion. The 1982 Citizenship Law effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless by denying them recognition as one of Myanmar's official ethnic groups. This legal exclusion restricted access to education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement.

Ethno-nationalist ideology, rooted in the idea of protecting Buddhist identity, fueled anti-Rohingya sentiment. Political leaders and extremist groups used hate speech to portray the Rohingya as foreign threats, despite generations of residence in Rakhine State.

The military's dominant role in politics and history of suppressing ethnic minorities created an environment where large-scale operations could occur with limited accountability.

4. Consequences

The 2017 military crackdown forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, creating one of the largest refugee crises in the world. Thousands were killed, and entire villages were burned. Survivors now live in overcrowded refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, facing limited access to education, employment, and long-term security.

Inside Myanmar, remaining Rohingya communities face ongoing restrictions and statelessness. The crisis has damaged Myanmar's international reputation and contributed to sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

The long-term effects include generational trauma, disrupted education, and uncertain prospects for repatriation.

5. Global Response

The global response to the Rohingya crisis intensified after the 2017 mass displacement. The United Nations established a Fact-Finding Mission that concluded there was credible evidence of genocidal intent. Subsequently, The Gambia filed a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing the state of violating the Genocide Convention. The ICJ issued provisional measures ordering Myanmar to prevent acts of genocide and preserve evidence.

Several Western countries imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar's military leadership. Humanitarian agencies mobilized significant assistance to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, particularly in Cox's Bazar, one of the largest refugee settlements in the world.

However, repatriation efforts have stalled due to safety concerns and lack of guarantees for citizenship rights. Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, international diplomatic efforts became more complicated, as the military regained full control of the government.

The global response has included legal action, sanctions, and humanitarian aid, yet durable political solutions and safe return for refugees remain unresolved.

6. Lessons Learned

The Rohingya crisis demonstrates how institutionalized discrimination can escalate into mass atrocity. Denying citizenship and legal identity created a system of structural exclusion that made the population highly vulnerable. Prevention therefore begins with equal citizenship rights and legal protections for minority groups.

Another key lesson is the danger of unchecked hate speech and extremist narratives. Prior to the 2017 crackdown, inflammatory rhetoric spread widely, contributing to public hostility. Governments and civil society must monitor and counter incitement to violence before it becomes normalized.

The crisis also highlights the risks of concentrated military power. When the military operates without civilian oversight, accountability mechanisms weaken. Democratic governance, judicial independence, and international monitoring are essential safeguards.

Finally, refugee protection systems must be strengthened globally. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya demonstrates the need for international burden-sharing and durable solutions, including safe repatriation agreements and long-term integration support.