



THE REFUGE OF VOICE

THE OFFICIAL MSSUNHCR NEWSLETTER

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"Beginners" from *We The Trees* photo series by Míra Chacín. Sunnyside Beach, Toronto, 2017

"Beginners" is a metaphor for refugees' fresh start and resilience in their new home country. The younger they arrive, the more chance to defeat barriers, adapt and flourish; whereas elders might endure cultural grief and uprooting.

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On Friday, February 12, MSSUNHCR successfully hosted our first-ever Coffee House to raise money and awareness for the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

With over forty students in attendance, the impactful night was filled with performances surrounding the theme of acceptance and resilience. Powerful songs and spellbinding spoken-word from students kept everyone engulfed in the message of hope, while a thought-provoking presentation from the event's guest speaker, **Mirna Chacín**, allowed everyone to appreciate the power of empathy amid such a dire crisis. By the end of the evening a total of...

\$859

were raised through raffle tickets, with the raffle's gift baskets provided by **Coffeecology** and **CaféOranje**. Not only did the Coffee House meet its fundraising goal, but ended up surpassing it. The money raised will provide food, water, shelter, and medicine for three individual refugees and one refugee family for one year.

CLUB UPDATES

What were we up to this month? •

MSSUNHCR also successfully ran a social media campaign in the month of February in order to promote three of UNHCR's current campaigns: the **#IBelong** campaign which discusses topics of statelessness, the **#IWASAREFUGEE** campaign which recounts Canadian refugee success stories, and the **#IAMANADVOCATE** campaign which outlines ways in which citizens can assist refugees and advocate with them. Information about each topic was provided, alongside links for those who wished to learn more or get involved with the campaigns.

Now, the MSSUNHCR team is busy organizing an upcoming conference, set to be held sometime in early April, with the goal of raising funds and spreading awareness about refugees, their journeys, and their struggles. The conference will run as a virtual event, packed with speakers, performers, and workshops. Several guests will shed light on different perspectives of refugee experiences and ways in which university students can be impactful advocates – stay tuned for more details to come!

MIRNA CHACÍN

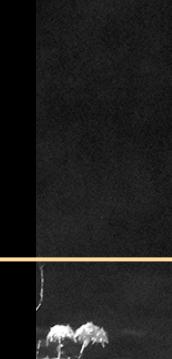
Mirna is a Venezuelan-born Canadian visual artist and an immigrant to Canada.



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LOCAL NEWS

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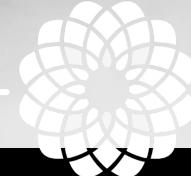
ACCT

The Arab Community Centre of Toronto



@ ACCT

Photograph from www.acctonline.ca



MSSUNHCR not only aligns itself with UNHCR in its efforts to support refugees globally, we also commit to empowering refugees and immigrants locally in and around our community. One of the ways we achieve this is through forming meaningful connections with organizations in our very own community that are involved in the work of providing support and services to refugees in Canada. **The Arab Community Centre of Toronto (ACCT)** is one such organization that we have had the privilege of connecting with in these past months. We believe not only would it be in our best mutual interest for MSSUNHCR to highlight their presence in our community, but it would also be to the benefit of our refugees and immigrants for us to assist in establishing better awareness of the valuable resources and services available for newcomers in our community.

ACCT was established in **1972**. In the early years following its inception, as its name suggests, it served Arab Canadians in our community. Being the non-sectarian organization that it is, ACCT has expanded its services to those of all heritage, religious and ethnic backgrounds over the years to reflect the growing diversity among our newcomers. As a not-for-profit organization, ACCT strives for equity and inclusivity in its delivery of settlement and social services for newcomers through socially-just means. It also provides employment services, support

groups, information sessions, translation, interpretation, transportation, and various classes, among many others, to empower immigrants to become self-sufficient, productive, and contributing members of society. This support continues even after the individuals they serve become Canadian citizens, which reinforces their strong commitment to accountability. To support newcomers in obtaining citizenship and integrating into Canadian society, ACCT provides citizenship test preparation classes on an ongoing weekly basis, as well as classes to help individuals improve their English proficiency.

ACCT remains responsive in its provision of crucial services to immigrants and newcomers through continuous improvements to adapt to the changing needs of those they serve. As members of this very community that we share with ACCT and all of our immigrants and refugees, we have a responsibility in empowering all those who contribute to its **vibrance** and **diversity**. The first step to this is to get involved, for which ACCT provides many opportunities.

Everyone is welcome to donate and/or volunteer with ACCT. To learn more about the Arab Community Centre of Toronto and ways to help, **visit or contact**:

Website: www.acctonline.ca



@acctonline @acctyouth



The Arab Community Centre of Toronto



(416) 231-7746



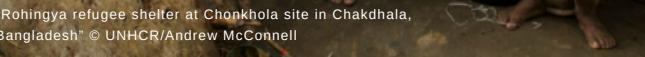
info@acctonline.ca



GLOBAL NEWS

THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

/ by Jayanti Jerath



"Rohingya refugee shelter at Chonkhola site in Chakhdala, Bangladesh" © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

IDENTITY OF THE ROHINGYA

The Rohingya are a Muslim stateless ethnic minority group living in Myanmar (formerly Burma) and are identified by the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, as "one of, if not, the most discriminated people in the world." The name "Rohingya" provides a collective cultural and political identity to the group.

The Myanmar government does not recognize the Rohingya as citizens as they claim the group is Bangladeshi. However, most of them do reside in the Rakhine state. It is the least developed state in Myanmar, with a poverty rate of 78% compared to the national average of 37.5%, in addition to inadequate infrastructures and fewer employment opportunities.

In the international community, the group is recognized as stateless because the citizenship laws of Myanmar are discriminatory and exclude the Rohingyas. The Rohingya people were given "white cards" as a form of identification cards, but the cards provided fewer rights and more restrictions. Critics believe that those cards deny the group's cultural identity and violate their rights.

ROOT CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

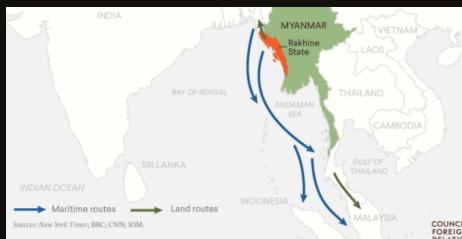
In 2017, violence broke out in the Rakhine state as the Myanmar government initiated a military campaign against the villages where the Rohingyas lived, forcing more than 742,000 "to seek refuge in Bangladesh." In addition to the violence, the Rohingya residents experienced arson, murder and rape. The security forces of Myanmar provided the defense that it was giving stability in the region, while the United Nations said the actions of the military showed "genocidal intent" in a factual report of September 2018. Another fact-finding report released in 2019 states that the military was "creating a climate of impunity for security forces." The security forces "planted landmines" around border crossings where the Rohingyas cross to seek a better life in Bangladesh.



Congestion shown in the new Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site (UNHCR/Roger Arnold).

THE JOURNEY TO SEEK STABILITY & PEACE

Most Rohingya refugees seek refuge in Bangladesh, and the Government of Bangladesh identifies Rohingya as "forcibly displaced Myanmar Nations". The refugees reside in Cox Bazar, a southeast coast in the nation. The Kutupalong refugee settlement is recognized as the world's largest refugee camp. However, UNHCR does identify the humanitarian needs that are unable to be met, along with the impacts of the monsoon rains on the refugee camps. In December 2020, the government began to relocate refugees from Cox Bazar to Bhasan Char's island. Human rights organizations criticize this decision as many refugees are forcibly being relocated against their will.



The migration paths Rohingya Refugees take to seek stability.

THE RESPONSE FROM THE UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency is closely working with the government of Bangladesh to provide the refugees with humanitarian needs. The agency airlifted "more than 1,500 metric tons of emergency life-saving aid" to Bangladesh when the crisis initially started. The aid included basic needs such as blankets, sleeping mats, family tents. With partners, the UNHCR has been working on construction sites to accommodate refugees' sanitation needs, such as "building wells" and improving water.

On March 16, 2018, UNHCR initiated the Joint Response Plan, also known as JRP for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, "calling for US\$951 million." This financial support helped to deliver necessary assistance from March to December 2018.

The fact-finding report released in 2019 by the United Nations recommended that army leaders of Myanmar be referred to the International Criminal Court and be prosecuted for genocide.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT

The first democratic election of Myanmar happened in 2016 and recognized Aung San Suu Kyi as the state Councillor. Initially, the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar had hoped that the leader would establish peace and provide citizenship for them. However, under her governance, the military has increased the violent oppression. Critics of her leadership accuse her of not taking any action to stop the

violence and injustices faced by the Rohingya community. She denied the allegations of ethnic cleansing, genocide and accused such critics of creating divisions amongst the country's Buddhists and Muslims.

Last year her political party won again with more votes than the 2015 votes. However, on February 1, 2021, the military claimed election fraud, establishing the power to rule the nation, and arrested Aung San. The army forces believe that the coup helps eradicate the "irregularities in the country's democracy." The new leader of Myanmar is General Min Aung Hlaing, who is the commander that initiated and "led the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2017." There was hope under Aung San, but now there isn't any left after the military takeover.

IMPACT OF COVID-19



The COVID-19 pandemic impact is hard on the Rohingya refugees and impoverished Bangladeshi citizens. The lockdowns have disrupted income and decreased access to essential services. The Gender and Adolescent Global Evidence study identified the impact of the lockdown during the pandemic on adolescents' education, nourishment, and overall mental health. In this sample study, 735 Rohingya adolescents in refugee camps and 1097 Bangladeshi adolescents living in "host communities" said there wasn't much food available. The poor food consumption score increased from 5% to 15% in refugee communities, and 3% to 8% in host communities. Both Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents reported having good health; however, 78% of adolescents remain anxious and fearful of the pandemic.



Rohingya refugees "en route to camps near Cox Bazar were temporarily stranded in the rice fields that flooded near the Bangladeshi border."



MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES ARE NOT PAWNS ON THE CHESSBOARD OF HUMANITY

- POPE FRANCIS



OPINION PIECE



PROMPT:

There are many opposing views on the benefit of refugees in society, relating to a perception of them being a cultural and economic threat.

What factors play a role in someone developing their views towards refugees and asylum seekers? How can you have an open and safe conversation with someone to try and change their views?

/ by Simran Lohit & Taim Saeed

Throughout my childhood, I developed an interest in learning about history and culture. I would go up to my parents and ask them to quiz me in order to show off my extensive knowledge of history, or at least what I thought history was.

Who was the first Prime Minister?

Easy, Sir John A. Macdonald.

What are two of Canada's most globally influential impacts in the World Wars?

I would argue D-Day or their contributions at Vimy Ridge.

But, if you asked me about the Islamic Golden Age, I might not know much; if you asked me about the ancient human technological achievements in Africa, I would not be well-versed; or if you asked me about the extensive discoveries and inventions of the Maurya and Gupta empires, I would just shrug my shoulders.

I now realize that what I was taught was not even close to history, and what I was taught as "culture" mainly focused on Canadian pride and patriotism. Now, there is always a place for pride, but I argue that if there was more diversity in our education, the general perception of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants would look a lot different.

When I was growing up and Christmas would roll around, I remember people would never ask me,

"Do you celebrate Christmas?",

but the question was,

"Why don't you celebrate Christmas?"

As I grew up, small things like these stick out more to me. So, when I am asked, "what factors play a role in someone developing their views towards refugees and asylum seekers, or even immigrants?" I can't answer as though it is black and white. The truth is, the factors that go into someone developing their views are an intermingle between societal views, family upbringing, dominant cultural influence, and the "accepted status quo" that society is rolling with.

Now this is not an exhaustive list by all means, but it addresses several factors that come to mind when attempting to answer this complex question. We are taught values of what is "right" and "wrong" and are likely to accept that as cast-iron. This planted inability to evolve or change can be detrimental when you start considering that some people's well-being is impacted by our values. Additionally, I find the cultural gap is broadened where it becomes an "us" vs. "them" mentality, as opposed to "we." We are taught to think of each other as citizens, rather than humans. Foreign cultures, religions, and ways of life are only known to those who actively seek to learn about them.

So, how can you have an open and safe conversation with someone about their views towards refugees and asylum seekers?

Open that person's mind and challenge their way of thinking. To be truthful, nobody is going to change if you tell them "what you think is wrong," but someone's views are only changed after you have helped them explore the other side of the discussion. So I urge you – be the person to point out the flaws in our school system, be the person to point out how refugees are not that different than non-refugees, and most importantly, be that person who points out that we are all one and the same.





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