

**Myanmar's Rohingya Are in Crisis—What You Need to Know**

**They've been called the world's most persecuted minority. Learn who they are and why they're fleeing.**

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By [**Sarah Gibbens**](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/contributors/g/sarah-gibbens.html)

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The Rohingya, a mostly Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar, have been called the "world's most persecuted minority," and recent events have added dramatically to their misery.

At least 500,000 Rohingya have fled to neighboring Bangladesh since August of this year. Although the crisis has intensified in recent months, the targeted, sometimes violent, discrimination of this minority group is anything but new.

National Geographic spoke with three experts on Myanmar to learn more about who the Rohingya are and what's been happening to them.

**WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?**

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority group from Myanmar's Rakhine state, just south of Bangladesh, who have at times numbered 1.1 million.

Officially, Myanmar's government does not recognize the Rohingya as lawful citizens. The government claims they were brought to Rakhine from Bangladesh during the time when Myanmar was a British colony, and the government says they are living in Myanmar illegally. Ask the Rohingya and [they’ll tell you](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/malaysia/maybr008-01.htm#P254_42515) they have been in the region for over a century, and some claim to have been in the region from as early as the eighth century.

“The answer to that question is highly contested, particularly by those who want to politicize the issue,” said John Knaus, the associate director of the Asia division at the [National Endowment for Democracy](http://www.ned.org/region/asia/).

Small group that rules a country

Without a home nation

Well planned. intentional

Regardless of *when*the Rohingya arrived in Myanmar, the military junta that controlled Myanmar until recently denied them citizenship in 1982, leaving them stateless and vulnerable.

**WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THEM?**

Attacks on the Rohingya have been systematic and widespread, reportedly at the hands of the Myanmar police and military, leading to what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called a "[textbook example of ethnic cleansing."](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22041&LangID=E)(The term is often used to refer to the forced removal of an ethnic or religious group by intimidation or violence.)

[A controversial report](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38505228) by the Myanmar government found no evidence of systematic violence against the Rohingya, but the country has refused to allow the UN or outside organizations or journalists to conduct an independent investigation.

Most of what’s known about the Rohingya crisis is being collected from interviews and information gathered at the Bangladesh border from those fleeing across it. Last February, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a[report](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MM/FlashReport3Feb2017.pdf) in which refugees told stories of gang rape, mass killings, and brutal beatings. More than half of the women interviewed reported having been a victim of sexual violence.

[Satellite images](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/09/myanmar-video-and-satellite-evidence-shows-new-fires-still-torching-rohingya-villages/) have shown Rohingya villages burning. Refugees blame the Myanmar military, while the Burmese military has claimed the Rohingya burned their own homes. The [BBC's Jonathan Head](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41222210) was one of the few journalists allowed into the Rakhine state, but under strict government surveillance. During a tour of the region's villages, he was given photos showing Rohingya allegedly burning their homes—photos he later discovered were faked.

Group within a larger group

Payback

There are 40,000 Rohingya refugees settled in India, 16,000 of which have obtained official refugee documentation. The majority of Rohingya fleeing Myanmar have not made it past Bangladesh. [Devastating floods](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-floods/myanmar-floods-kill-two-displace-tens-of-thousands-idUSKBN1A90QA) in India and Bangladesh over this past summer have worsened conditions in refugee camps and led to a cholera outbreak, water shortages, and malnutrition.

**WHY ARE WE HEARING ABOUT IT NOW?**

Myanmar has more than 100 different ethnic groups, with the Burmese making up about two thirds of the country. And while the Rohingya have long been persecuted as a minority, the scale of recent violence is unprecedented. It ramped up on August 25 after a small faction of Rohingya militants called the [Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/myanmar-arakan-rohingya-salvation-army-170912060700394.html) attacked police posts, killing 12 members of Myanmar’s security forces. In retribution, Myanmar’s military vowed to root out militant groups, and they’ve responded on a massive scale that has left many innocent civilians dead, injured, or homeless.

[Kyaw Hsan Hlaing](http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ahda_2017_bios.pdf) is executive director of an organization he founded called the Peace and Development Initiative, which documents stories of the violence in Myanmar. Following the August attacks, his organization paused its work in Rakhine in fear of retribution. Though he now attends Columbia University in New York, Hlaing is intimately familiar with the violent discrimination long seen in Rakhine.

He's Burmese and grew up in Rakhine with a Buddhist family, but following student protests against the Myanmar government, Hlaing was held as a political prisoner for five years and subsequently exiled to Thailand.

Hlaing says he believes Myanmar’s security forces are exploiting the late August events to push the Rohingya out of the region…

**IS THERE HOPE FOR THE ROHINGYA?**

Ethnic minorities in Myanmar describe regular mistreatment from those in the government and surrounding communities.

“[They] feel like second-class citizens,” said Hlaing. Hlaing was struck by the atrocities he witnessed growing up in Rakhine and participated in protests against the government as a teenager. While the military's attacks have been the most devastating, the Rohingya also face violence from Myanmar’s Buddhist majority, Hlaing added.

“There’s a fear, especially among Burma's Buddhist nationalists, of Burma losing its unique Burmese culture,” said Knaus. “Whether that’s from Muslims coming into the country or influences from places like China, and the rest of the outside world, there’s a real fear that Burma is going to be changed by all of these influences. The Rohinyga are the most obvious examples of this. They’re Muslim and perceived to be from Bangladesh so to many they are the prime example of this foreign cultural and social invasion.”

Hlaing says his curriculum from Rakhine state schools emphasized the country’s Buddhist origins as what made Myanmar unique. Even his own family, he said, struggles to understand his work advocating for the rights of minorities.

While the UN and Red Cross have increased aid to the Bangladesh border, where so many Rohingya have fled, experts are hard pressed to see a short-term future in which the Rohingya can live peacefully and with equal rights within Myanmar’s borders.