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Who are the Rohingya

And why are they fleeing Myanmar?

Some 300,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar's Rakhine State to seek shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh since violence erupted there last month. There have been reports of extra-judicial killings and entire villages burned to the ground. Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UN's top human rights official, has called the actions of Myanmar's government a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'. We take a look at the background to the attrocities.

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority. Although many of the 1.1 million Rohingya have been living in Myanmar for generations, the Myanmar government does not recognise them as Myanmar nationals. In the eyes of the government, and of most of the Buddhist Myanmar population, they are a group of Muslim immigrants. Systematic discrimination denies them access to State services and education and prevents them from moving freely. The way Rohingya have been marginalised for decades, and the underlying historical conflict, can be traced back to the time of British colonial rule, when the kind of clashes we see today occurred on a regular basis.

How did the latest wave of violence start?

On 25 August, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a hitherto little-known extremist group, carried out a coordinated attack on around 30 police and border control checkpoints run by the Myanmar government. This triggered a fresh wave of violent clashes between the Rohingya and the Buddhist majority. Myanmar's security forces, who still very much pull the country's strings despite democratic reforms, reacted by launching an 'anti-terrorist' military operation, as they did previously in 2016. This time, though, it was much more heavy-handed. So far 400 people have died in the violent clashes. Many who have fled describe air attacks, killings and violence. Several villages have reportedly been burnt down.

How many people are on the move?

Over the course of two weeks, an estimated 300,000 people have crossed the border. International aid organisations expect that number to rise, with around 30,000 people trying to enter Bangladesh every day. They say the government in Myanmar has cut off access to all northern areas of Rakhine State.

This is not the first time that Rohingya have fled Myanmar *en masse*. In 1978, 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, with another 250,000 making the same journey in 1991. On both occasions, Myanmar and Bangladesh reached a broadly successful agreement on resettlement. Only a few Rohingya have moved on to other Muslim countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia. In 2016, over the course of just a few months, clashes between the Myanmar army and ARSA led to 90,000 people fleeing to Bangladesh.

How has Bangladesh reacted to the latest influx?

Earlier this year, the Bangladeshi government established a resettlement plan for Rohingya living in Bangladesh which sought to transfer them to a remote island in the Gulf of Bengal. Many experts considered the plan to be more a deterrent than a feasible solution. Others said it was a way of securing extra international aid for Bangladesh, the world's most densely populated country.

According to UNHCR figures, there are 32,000 documented refugees in a camp in the coastal city of Cox Bazar and up to half a million undocumented refugees. The recent clashes in Myanmar have seen these figures increase dramatically. Staff and resources are now completely overstretched. Continuous monsoon rains have also blocked access to the camps. The Bangladeshi government has just announced it will set up new camps and enlarge existing ones. Most Bangladeshis are tolerant of the fleeing Rohingya, not least because they too were displaced during the war of independence in the 1970s. Many have taken to social media to drum up support. However, the Bangladeshi government fears the situation may pose a risk both to the country's economic development and its security, because some Rohingya Muslims may be tempted to join forces with extremist groups.

How has Myanmar's government

reacted to the violence?

Aung San Suu Kyi, the democracy champion and Burmese state counsellor, has broken her silence on the unrest in Rakhine by defending the government. She described the attacks by Rohingya militants as 'terrorism' in an address to the nation, but she has failed to condemn the violence that is forcing ordinary Rohingya to flee their homes. She is in a difficult position. She doesn't want to criticise the armed forces publicly, for fear she might jeopardise the support she so desperately needs for her historic reforms.

Fellow Nobel Peace Prize winners Desmond Tutu and Malala Yousafzai have both publicly called on Aung San Suu Kyi to end the Rohingya persecution in her country. Across the Islamic world, people are expressing their anger on social media.

Myanmar itself is on the defensive. Many people feel the criticisms levelled against their country are unfair, and do not take into account the historical background. ARSA's supposed international Islamist links (its leader was born in Pakistan and reportedly grew up in Saudi Arabia) and its call to strengthen Rohingya independence mean many in Myanmar feel they are living in a 'besieged fortress'. Indeed, there's hardly been any mention of non-Muslim victims of the violence in the international press. Some 12,000 Buddhist Rakhine have fled inland, finding shelter in monasteries and schools.

What should the international community do to help resolve the conflict?

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned of a humanitarian disaster and the Pope has announced that he will be visiting both countries at the end of this year. Both are aware of the desperate need to alleviate human suffering, especially in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

More money needs to be pumped into the relief effort, to accommodate the tens of thousands crossing into Bangladesh each day. International aid agencies need to be able to recommence their work in Rakhine. Currently it's unclear what will happen to the several hundred thousand Rohingya who have stayed in Rakhine state. A further 20,000 are stranded in the border area. International aid organisations need to be able to restart their work in Rakhine. At the moment, very little information is filtering through to the outside world. Media coverage is difficult, if not impossible.

Many Muslim countries have expressed their support for the Rohingya and the Indonesian Foreign Minister has spent time in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. However, the large Asian economies such as China and India have shown little interest in the conflict.

Shortly before violence broke out, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by Kofi Annan and founded by none other than Aung San Suu Kyi, set out proposals on how to improve the situation. The key message of the report was that the peaceful return of the Rohingya to Myanmar can only be successful in the long-run if Myanmar amends its citizenship rules and offers the Rohingya prospects for the future.



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