

UNGA: Plenary

Agenda: Human rights and the persecution of minorities in South East Asia with special emphasis on the Rohingya of Myanmar



Dear Delegates,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to the United Nations General Assembly Plenary committee at DPSHMUN 2017. The agenda for this committee is one of great historical relevance, the assault on the dignity of the Rohingya people and other systematic oppression of minorities. This committee is all about understanding the human rights violations that take place in juxtaposition to the structural factors that allow such abuse to remain unchecked. It is also about examining government mechanisms that can potentially be implemented to curb violence. Hopefully, committee will culminate in a comprehensive resolution that analyses the different core issues of the agenda and provides a framework to combat the issue.

This agenda, apart from being one that places the world most vulnerable at the locus of the global community's moral caring, is also one that calls for empathy and introspection. Given that we live in an institutional world, where we ourselves form the institutions that govern us, are we culpable in some way for the atrocities inflicted on minorities. How do we reshape the global order, such that it is premised on cosmopolitanism rather than distinctions based on the narcissism of small differences? How do we tackle pernicious ideologies, and develop mechanisms that offer the most oppressed some semblance of justice. These are definitely difficult questions, but we hope that you will grapple with them.

We are excited to be a part of this committee and we are looking forward to an inspiring conference. We would advise you to do as much research as possible. The more you engage with the agenda, the better the learning experience will be. Start thinking about ideas for resolutions and what the central elements of the agenda are. Also, we know that background guides can seem confusing and other research related documents can be dense, maybe even boring, but it is important that you read them anyway. There are also other great resources available online, especially videos that will explain different international issues in minutes. Feel free to reach out to us if you have any questions about committee or just to say hi. We wish you all the best and look forward to meeting you.

Best,

Vignesh Valliyur

Dhruv Maroo

Introduction

South-East Asia is a geographical region which has over 625 million people which includes a vast amount of ethnic minorities. Some countries in this region take the presence of ethnic minorities as a strength and core of their country's identity, while others take ethnic minorities as liabilities or ineligible to be part of their society due to their background.

Central to this committee will be the issue relating to the recent incidents involving Myanmar and its Rohingya minority. Many activists consider the Rohingya as the "most persecuted ethnic minority in Asia". This committee will aim to bring out a comprehensive and progressive solution to the Rohingya crisis.

Myanmar and the Rohingya

The epic victory of the National League for Democracy in the landmark national election in Myanmar in November 2015 grabbed worldwide headlines, unlike the Rohingya refugee crisis. In fact, the Rohingya emergency has received far less media attention than its magnitude would seem to warrant, possibly due to the concurrent migration crisis in Europe. Indeed, the differences in media coverage between the two humanitarian emergencies are striking, especially considering their many similarities, including the thousands of lives at risk, the hundreds of deaths at sea, the involvement of smugglers, and the ambiguous behaviour of the concerned countries regarding the migrants' acceptance and their international protection. However, one of the biggest (and most important) differences between the two emergencies is that in the Rohingya case, unlike in the European context, none of the involved states is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor its 1967 Protocol. Furthermore, the lack of a formal regional asylum framework has made the Rohingya emergency that much more acute—and tragic.

With an estimated 90,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees fleeing Myanmar via the Andaman Sea in the past two years, the Rohingya Refugee Crisis has quickly escalated into one of Southeast Asia's most pressing issues. With its roots deeply entrenched in the protracted conflict between Myanmar's Rakhine Buddhists and the minority Rohingya Muslims, this crisis must be examined in the light of Myanmar's history of sectarian strife. The Rohingya people of Myanmar have long been embattled in ethnic strife. Their presence in the area can be traced back to the 1826 relocation of Bengali Muslims from Bengal, to the sparsely populated Rakhine – then known as Arakan. With a predominantly Buddhist local population, the presence of Muslim Rohingya in an area of majority Buddhists set the precedent for rising tensions in the state for years to come.

Two centuries later, these tensions have been exacerbated to the point where sectarian violence has engulfed the entire nation. Part of this has been due to the systemic oppression experienced by the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Many ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and the Myanmar government view the

Rohingya as ‘Bengali’ – a term that implies the Rohingya are in Myanmar are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. In 2012, President Thein Sein even publicly pleaded with the United Nations for help in deporting the Rohingya people from Myanmar. As a manifestation of these attitudes, the previous Myanmar government has enacted institutionalised discrimination against the Rohingya minority. By law, the Rohingya people are denied the basic right to citizenship, thus rendering them stateless and without any proper access to education, healthcare and other basic welfare services. In 2012, simmering ethnic tensions finally came to a head when riots erupted in the state of Rakhine, catalysed by the gang rape of a 27-year-old Rakhine woman. This sequence of brutally violent events included the slaughter of ten innocent Muslim bus passengers by a mob of Buddhists, the death of nearly a hundred civilians, and the displacement of tens of thousands. In addition to this, a Rakhine-wide state of emergency was declared by President Thein Sein. Clearly fighting an evidently losing battle against both the Buddhist majority in Rakhine and the Myanmar government, many Rohingya in Rakhine have set out to migrate to the more receptive Southeast Asian countries by fleeing across the Andaman Sea. Indeed, this now sets the precedent for the current crisis that threatens to loom over the entire region.

The Origin of the Rohingya Emergency

The United Nations refers to Rohingya as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, and probably among the most forgotten ones. The roots of the pattern of discrimination they have long faced are ethnic and religious, as they represent a minority that primarily resides in Rakhine State (western Myanmar).

The story of their persecution dates back even before the establishment of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, precisely during Second World War. During the war the Rohingya declared their loyalty to the British, while the remaining part of the population, the Arakanese (Arakan is the former name of Rakhine State), decided to side with the Japanese. Even after the establishment of Myanmar in 1948, this Muslim minority had to face a constant anti-Rohingya campaign characterized by denial of their rights and discrimination. The anti-Rohingya events culminated in violent episodes carried out by the military junta in 1978 and again in 1991 which drove 200,000 and 250,000 Rohingya, respectively, out of the country to Bangladesh, where they immediately found protection. In addition to the violence against Rohingya in subsequent years—including the destruction of mosques and schools in Rakhine State—discrimination against them was institutionalized politically with the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law.

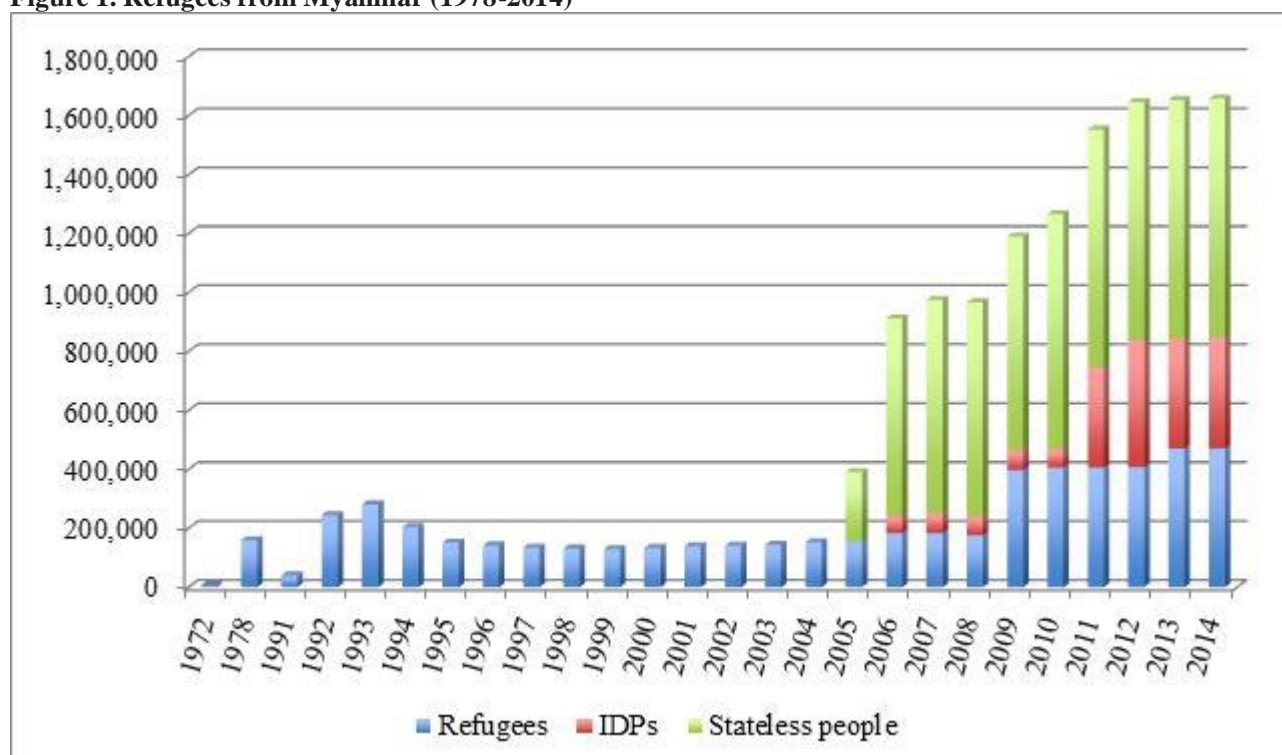
The new law denied them Burmese citizenship making them stateless. Myanmar’s government does not recognize Rohingya among the national races (like it does for Barman or Arakanese) even if there is evidence proving they were born in the country, and thus refers to them as “Bengali,” illegal immigrants.

By virtue of being deemed stateless, or even worse, regarded as illegal migrants, Rohingya have no standing to protest against discrimination before national authorities. Their situation is further

compromised by the fact that none of the surrounding states are signatories to the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, or its 1967 Protocol; nor has a regional refugee protection framework yet been developed.

The Rohingya community has suffered the abridgement of fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement, religion, employment, and access to education—a situation made worse by additional measures taken against ethnic identity that limit their rights to get married or even to have children. Consequently, over the years Myanmar, and especially the Rakhine State, has registered an increase in the number of people fleeing the country, mainly towards safer neighbouring States.

Figure 1. Refugees from Myanmar (1978-2014)



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (U.N.H.C.R.)

Although this data refers to all Myanmar refugees, and therefore also includes those escaping other forms of persecution, what is interesting here is the escalation of the exodus occurring in 1978 and 1992-1993, during discriminatory measures undertaken by Burmese authorities against Rohingya. The data also shows, beginning in 2005, a sharp rise in the number of stateless people and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)—undoubtedly including some Rohingya.

It is also important to note that the persecution of Rohingya has fuelled widespread tension among local ethnic groups, as confirmed by several episodes of violence caused by Rohingya. This is demonstrated in 2012 when a young Arakanese woman was raped and killed by three Rohingya giving rise to fights and

several deaths in a number of villages. Fighting ensued, including Arakanese and Buddhist monks, as well as the national army, which instead of securing the region, watched or even joined the Arakanese mobs. Inevitably, thousands of individuals were forced to flee, crossing borders illegally, through the Naf River or alternative maritime routes, in order to reach safer states, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and—more recently—Indonesia.

Therefore, the 2015 exodus, during which thousands of Rohingya fled the country on hazardous journeys by boat, is just a consequence of the escalation of discrimination and violence occurring in the Rakhine region.

Where Are They Going?

Since 1978, Bangladesh has represented the first destination of Rohingya asylum seekers, considering the proximity, the common religion, and—most importantly—because Bangladeshi authorities initially recognized the humanitarian needs of these undocumented Myanmar migrants. According to U.N.H.C.R., about 32,000 registered Rohingya currently live in two government-run camps, near Cox's Bazar, in Kutupalong and Nayapara, while it is estimated that an additional 200,000 unregistered Rohingya refugees live nearby in unofficial camps. Although it might seem a relief that this contingent of asylum seekers settled in a safer country, life in these camps is dire, as many of them live without enough food, and have very limited access to education and work opportunities.

Although Bangladesh has proven to be open to this minority, it is clear that it is not, or maybe cannot be, totally committed to finding a durable solution to this issue. After all, Bangladesh ranks among the poorest and most populated country in the region. This leads to national authorities being more focused on internal questions (in particular with reference to a possible labour market unbalance, as Rohingya would accept unskilled jobs at lower wages). Furthermore, Bangladeshi politicians have always regarded Rohingya acceptance and settlement as temporary. Paradoxically, Bangladesh itself has considered this Myanmar minority as illegal migrants, denying them the possibility to obtain citizenship.

Moreover, following the spring 2015 migration emergency, Bangladesh has turned away new migrants, and has declared on several occasions the intention to start a repatriation program. Luckily, this plan was not accomplished; however it gave rise to a “Ping-Pong” strategy with the other destination countries, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia that evidently shows their reluctance to take any international responsibility.

All of these countries have recently experienced a consistent flow of migrants. Malaysia not only represents an Islamic country, but thanks to U.N.H.C.R., Rohingya can be granted refugee status there. Thailand, especially Ranong province, is easy to reach by boat; some migrants have been able to settle there, and even to gain citizenship. In addition, a portion of these migrants consider their initial point of arrival as a temporary base, from which to reach another destination; some Rohingya have attempted to cross to Indonesia, and from there Australia, a signatory to the Geneva Convention.

Figure 2. Rohingya Migration Map



Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM)

What the media described during May and June 2015 is just the tip of the iceberg with long-lasting humanitarian crisis, which, worst of all—apart from the numbers of refugees, the human trafficking, and the deaths—has an absence of any international attention. Instead, regional actors inevitably are more involved in refugee protection.

At the same time, rejection of migrants and projects for refugees' assisted return are not the proper answer at the moment, since their lives are still at risk. In fact, a top official in Aun San Suu Kyi's administration has said that addressing Rohingya tension is not a top priority of the nation. Moreover, Myanmar cannot be considered politically stable, especially from the ethnic point of view. Besides the Rohingya issue, the country has still to manage tensions (which often turn into conflicts) among other minorities (Shan, Karen, Kachin, and Lisu) that, together, account for 40 per cent of Myanmar's population. Not even the recent national ceasefire agreement, signed with eight armed groups, would grant some sort of stability in the region.

Consequently, it is hard to see a reachable independent and internal solution to the Rohingya emergency. It is instead more suitable to seek an international alternative.

Committee Goals

This committee is all about understanding all the moving parts. The agenda a complex bundle of elements that have cross national and cross sectoral implications. Delegates must break down the agenda into suitable sub sections and discuss each area thoroughly. Additionally, delegates must consider past actions and financial burdens as well. Lastly, there should be heavy importance given to the resolution writing process. Delegates should take great effort to refine their ideas and to work them into a comprehensive resolution.

Questions a Resolution must Answer

1. What are the structural issues that minorities, and more specifically, the Rohingya people face?
2. What are the short terms actions that can bring about a change in the region?
3. What are the long terms changes that can bring about some change in the region?
4. How will different nations react to the actions taken by the committee?
5. What past action has been carried out?
6. How has the international community reacted in the past?
7. What are the various issues that need to be incorporated into the resolution?

Useful Research Links

[http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fbd5&id=5445f0238.](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fbd5&id=5445f0238)

[http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651.](http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651)

[http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/06/17/why-is-no-one-helping-myanmars-rohingya/.](http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/06/17/why-is-no-one-helping-myanmars-rohingya/)

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/rohingya_en.pdf

[http://www.unhcr.org/50001ae09.pdf.](http://www.unhcr.org/50001ae09.pdf)

[http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/14/migrant-crisis-south-east-asia-rohingya-malaysia-thailand.](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/14/migrant-crisis-south-east-asia-rohingya-malaysia-thailand)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/burma/12006208/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-aide-Rohingya-are-not-our-priority.html>

<http://www.reuters.com/article/asia-migrants-idUSL3N13T38820151204>

<http://khmerstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/4.-Ethnic-Minorities-and-Indigenous-Peoples-in-Southeast-Clarke.pdf?lbisphreq=1>

<http://shapesea.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Textbook-Vol2-complete.pdf>

