

# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

## Myanmar: Religious Minorities Besieged

Bodies found in mass graves; rape, arson, razing of whole villages -- it is no wonder that in May 2019 a UN fact-finding team recommended that key Myanmar military leaders be prosecuted for carrying out genocide against the Rohingya, who are Muslim in a predominantly Buddhist country. Sustained violence is what drove over 700,000 Rohingya men, women, and children to flee and seek shelter in Bangladesh, a poor country ill-equipped to handle this massive forced migration. Yet the Myanmar military claims these were merely anti-terrorist operations.

Myanmar was ruled by a military junta from 1962 to 2011. In 2015 Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party came to power through peaceful elections. Hopes for political, economic, and social reforms were high, even though the military retains considerable control over the government and resources throughout the country. But the NLD has failed to criticize military attacks against minority religious groups.

When the UN called recent deadly military crackdowns against the Rohingya "textbook ethnic cleansing," the Myanmar government blocked independent investigations and rejected these accusations. Aung San Suu Kyi has received heavy international criticism for not doing more to uphold human rights although her ability to control the military appears limited. Animosity toward the Rohingya is so deep-seated and wide-spread that the military has been able to attack them with virtual impunity.

Myanmar's population is about 88% Buddhist, 6% Christian, and 4% Muslim. Prior to the escalation in conflicts in 2016, the Rohingya numbered over 1 million. Buddhists claim the Rohingya are recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, vying for scarce resources, despite evidence of some Rohingya presence going back centuries.

Myanmar denies citizenship to Rohingya so they are stateless. Many Rohingya who remain in the country live in internal displacement camps in Rakhine State and suffer from hunger and malnutrition. In 2017 and 2018, refugees reported the military's starvation tactics, locking down villages, preventing them from farming, fishing, or working to buy food.

While the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a November 2017 agreement to begin repatriating Rohingya back to Rakhine State, those returns were de-

layed due to safety concerns. A key UN official said in order for return to be "right, sustainable, and actually viable," crucial issues such as the Rohingyas' access to citizenship, freedom of movement, services, and livelihood would have to be resolved.

Other ethnic groups with large numbers of religious minorities, e.g. Kachin, Shan, and Chin, have suffered the same discrimination and violation of religious freedom and human rights. These groups, many of whom are Christian, have been fighting since 1948 for equality and justice against the military, resisting the loss of their culture, land and its rich resources. The military has seized property and forced Christians into labor. The military offensive against Kachin rebels led to 5,000 being displaced in April 2018, some into remote jungles where they are unable to receive aid. More than 100,000 from Kachin and Shan States have been displaced since 2011, most remaining internally displaced and others seeking refuge in Thailand and China.

In 2015, laws promulgated and passed by militant Buddhists regulate conversions, marriages and births, and generally restrict religious freedom of non-Buddhists. The State Department has listed Myanmar as a Country of Particular Concern since 1999 due to its religious freedom abuses. In March 2019 a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution expressed grave concerns over human rights violations occurring in Myanmar and called on the military "to end all violence," particularly in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states.

Pope Francis called for solidarity with the Rohingya people. During his 2017 visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh, he met with Buddhist leaders and prayed that "wisdom continue to inspire every effort to foster patience and understanding and to heal the wounds of conflict that through the years have divided people of different cultures, ethnicities, and religious convictions." Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon actively promotes interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and peace building.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops urges ongoing humanitarian support and pursuit of durable solutions to the root causes of conflict for the Rohingya and all groups from Myanmar who are part of a protracted, national and regional crisis of forced displacement affecting over 1.6 million people.



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