



# **Plight of the Damned: Burma's Rohingya**

**By David Scott Mathieson**

**Burma's Rohingya Muslim minority may be the most blighted ethnic minority in Asia. The blame for treating them so badly is shared far and wide.**

**But as Burma human rights expert David Scott Mathieson writes, their plight has long been known to the international community. So, why isn't anything being done to help them?**

THE IMAGES OF HUNDREDS of men crammed into rickety boats, emaciated, bloodied and expressing equal parts shock and surprise at having reached land were almost from another time. These forlorn travelers, predominantly ethnic Rohingya Muslims from western Burma, landed in southern Thailand and the Indonesian island of Sumatra late last year as the latest influx from an annual sailing season for people escaping poverty, misery and almost medieval human rights violations in Burma and Bangladesh.

Thailand's military was accused of towing several boatloads of Rohingya back out to sea after they landed. In late December 2008, hundreds of bodies washed ashore in the Indian controlled Andaman Islands. Survivors told Indian authorities that they had landed in Thailand, been held for two days on a deserted island, and then towed back out to sea with a few sacks of rice and a little water. Other survivors told officials and doctors that during their long journey they had been tortured by Burmese sailors who stopped their vessel. In all, more than 6,000 men are estimated to have made the journey in dozens of fishing boats from Burma and Bangladesh beginning in November 2008. The Arakan Project, a Bangkok-based non-governmental organization, has been tracking the movements of boat people from Western Burma and Bangladesh for several years.

What made this season different was the sharp increase in numbers, double a year earlier, and the media attention that accompanied it. Graphic pictures of Rohingya in detention on Thai tourist beaches appeared first in the *South China Morning Post*, the BBC and then on CNN, and as international concern grew, almost on cue, more boats began arriving. The international outcry centered on Thailand's vicious "push-back" policy, which the new administration of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva at first denied, then announced it would investigate. Ultimately, Thai officials blamed media distortion, saying that the Rohingya were economic migrants not refugees and that Thailand could not absorb the problem.

In Thailand, proposals to set up temporary holding centers for the Rohingya to ascertain their status as either refugees or migrant workers were dismissed, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was granted only limited access to the hundreds of detainees in Thai custody. Most of the men were fined for illegal entry, and prepared to be sent back to Burma. This is what all of them fear, given their harsh reception there. They are often imprisoned for illegal departure, even though many have no Burmese identity cards. In their absence, their names are removed from Burma's draconian household registration system that keeps track of people's movements, and they are often handed stiff fines.

Regional leaders announced that they would discuss the issue of the Rohingya boat people on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Thailand in late February. A regional solution was clearly needed. Little was done by the regional grouping, however, except to postpone decisions on stemming the flow until a meeting in April of the Bali Process, a multilateral mechanism for discussing human trafficking and smuggling. ASEAN's failure to adequately address the issue demonstrated a few key facts about the Rohingya: that it was a relatively minor case of illegal human movement affecting Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India; the men do not pose a great threat to national se-

curity, as some governments contend; and that the blame for all this misery rests squarely inside Burma. So why the harsh treatment and seeming absence of mercy?

All told, the Rohingya number about two million people. Approximately 800,000 remain in Burma and 200,000 in Bangladesh, with 30,000 of them in squalid refugee camps. An estimated half a million live in the Middle East as migrant workers, and 50,000 in Malaysia. Some make it to Japan, while others attempt the even longer sea voyage to reach Australia. They are leaving for good reasons: their living conditions in Burma are atrocious. The Rohingya inhabit the worst position in Burma's dreadful human rights landscape. The men and young boys risk the dangerous journey across the Andaman Sea to seek employment and to send money back to families barely surviving in their homeland. The distinction between a refugee fleeing persecution and one seeking a better life doesn't mean much to the Rohingya. And anyway, both are true.

The Rohingya have borne the brunt of the Burmese military regime's brutal state building for decades. They are an ethnic minority descended from a merging of Arakanese Buddhists, Chittagonian Bengalis and Arabic sea traders. Their dialect is distinct, if Bengali in origin, with smatterings of Persian. Centuries of co-existence with Arakanese Buddhists was bifurcated by British colonialism, when the boundaries of India and Burma were demarcated. As a result, the Rohingya became a people caught between states, with the majority situated in newly independent Burma in 1948.

Burma's treatment of its Muslim minority has generally been characterized by neglect punctuated by scapegoating. In the 1960s, the military-socialist regime of Ne Win expelled hundreds of thousands of South Asians from Burma during its "Burmese Way to Socialism" nationalization program, similar to the treatment Idi Amin meted out to Asians in Uganda a few years later. The Rohingya have been subjected to particularly harsh treatment, possibly more than any other ethno-religious minority in Burma. While almost every non-Burman ethnic group has staged an

armed rebellion against the central government in the past 60 years, fuelling decades of low intensity conflict in which civilians have suffered the most, successive military governments have harbored a uniquely vicious aversion to the Rohingya.

In 1978, the Burmese army mounted a murderous ethnic cleansing campaign they called Operation Dragon King (*Naga Min*) that drove more than 200,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. After staying for a year in such squalid conditions that 10,000 of them starved to death because the Bangladeshi authorities withheld food aid, most of the survivors returned to Burma.

The socialist government completed a nationwide census in 1983 in which the Rohingya were not counted, rendering them stateless through exclusion. The 1982 Citizenship Act legalized this exclusion, creating two categories of people, full citizens of Burma, including most ethnic groups, and then "associate" citizens, such as the South Asian and Chinese minorities. The Rohingya were disqualified from either group because they could not prove their lineage as "associates" before 1948. Western Arakan's isolation and underdevelopment meant that few Rohingya were registered at birth, or had documentation. The Rohingya are officially an alien and illegal community, not listed as one of the 135 recognized "ethnic nationalities" in Burma, and thus the majority of them are not entitled to national identity cards. This stateless status has provided the security forces with impunity to perpetrate routine abuses against Muslims in Western Burma.

In 1991, the Burmese army repeated its pogrom. More than a quarter million Rohingya were driven out of Arakan into Teknaf and Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. Hundreds were killed as the army slashed and burned its way through villages to force them out. The refugees were not welcomed in Bangladesh and were herded into rank refugee settlements. A few years later most of them were forced back over the border in a violent, United Nations-sponsored repatriation process.

The survivors of this experience, and the remaining Rohingya in Arakan State, have been largely kept alive by foreign development agen-



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cies such as UNHCR and the World Food Program (WFP). A stark indicator of living conditions in Western Arakan State is contained in the WFPs recent food security survey in Burma, where more than half of young boys and girls were seriously malnourished, and most households had no independent sources of food.

The Burmese military's routine abuses against the Rohingya exacerbate the chronic poverty. They are denied travel permission between villages, which limits employment opportunities, education and trade. Permission for even limited travel must be obtained from local military units, and is often denied. Some Rohingya communities are herded into "new villages" where the military can monitor them and also seize their land for military-connected business projects. Forced labor and expropriation of property is

a daily reality. Religious persecution is widespread, with many mosques destroyed or ordered to be emptied. Extra-judicial killings are common. This treatment reflects not just the instrumental use of violence to force the Rohingya to leave, but an unofficial policy of discrimination whose ultimate aim is the forced removal of a minority group.

The ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) stayed quiet during the recent drama on the Thai and Indonesian coastlines. Eventually, the junta announced that the Rohingya were not Burmese citizens and had nothing to do with Burma, creating the impression for some that the tragedy involved only Bangladeshis. At the time of the recent ASEAN summit, the regime disingenuously announced that any "Bengali" who could prove that they were born in Burma could return. The exiled pro-democracy movement from Burma was largely silent. Indeed, many exiled opposition activists have also been dismissive of the Rohingya and routinely exclude them from multi-ethnic gatherings. Arakanese Buddhists become apoplectic when the issue of the Rohingya is raised and routinely deny that the Rohingya even exist.

It's hard to understand the origin of this hatred toward the Rohingya, beneath the excuses of national security, legal measures against illegal immigration, or even nationalism. Racism obviously plays a big part. This was demonstrated by the Burmese Consul-General in Hong Kong, Ye Myint Aung, who in February sent a letter to his fellow heads of mission in which he stated: "In reality, Rohingya are neither 'Myanmar People' nor Myanmar's ethnic group. You will see in the photos that their complexion is 'dark brown.' The complexion of Myanmar people is fair and soft, good looking as well... (They are as ugly as ogres)." South Asians are derogatorily referred to as *kala* (foreigner) in Burma by every other ethnic group, but the Rohingya are even beneath this level of disdain.

There are few security reasons that could possibly justify Burma's treatment of the Rohingya. A short-lived *Mujahid* rebellion in the early 1950s in Arakan didn't attract widespread Rohingya



support. Contemporary Rohingya armed resistance is small and militarily insignificant, and the political and armed resistance groups are splintered and constantly bickering. Small numbers of Rohingya men who have traveled to the Middle East for terrorism training have evidently not returned with any *jihadi* designs. There has never been a Muslim-connected terrorism incident in Burma, and as the Australian security analyst Andrew Selth has pointed out, Muslims in Burma are more likely to be terrorized by the Burmese military than to be terrorists.

Since the early 1990s, the militarization of Western Burma has been dramatic, with a rise in the number of army battalions from 3 to 43, the biggest increase in the country. The Burmese army uses the local population to maintain their presence, stealing food, appropriating land and forcing civilians to build camps, excavate roads and forcing civilians to build camps, excavate roads and carry supplies. The SPDC has been building up its strength to safeguard massive infrastructure projects. In December 2008, the Chinese energy company PetroChina signed a 30-year lease with the Burmese to buy natural gas off the coast of Western Arakan, in the Shwe Gas field; the consortium involves Indian, Thai, South Korean, Chinese and Burmese interests. The gas will be transported across Burma to Yunnan by pipeline, with a second pipeline running beside it that will transport crude oil from the Middle East. Although the majority of Rohingya communities are northwest of these planned pipeline routes,

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the increased troop presence has adversely impacted their already dismal existence.

Thailand’s so-called push-backs, while shocking, should not have come as a surprise. The steadily increasing numbers of Rohingya arriving in Southern Thailand have sparked a tough Thai deterrence policy. In 2007, hundreds of Rohingya caught near Ranong in southern Thailand were detained to the north in the Thai-Burma border town of Mae Sot. Soon after, over 80 of them

were sent back to Burma in an area controlled by the pro-SPDC militia, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The DKBA is notorious for its involvement in drug trafficking, illegal logging and extortion of migrant workers. Most of the men couldn't pay to be smuggled home, so they trickled back into Thailand and were eventually trafficked down to Malaysia.

Thailand has cast the Rohingya as a threat to national security. Military officials routinely accuse the men of being Muslim mercenaries masquerading as migrant workers, coming to Thailand to volunteer with Southern Thai Muslim separatist militants. It is true that some of the smuggling networks are also involved in arms smuggling from Cox's Bazaar, but no Rohingya has ever been implicated in violent attacks in Thailand, nor been linked with the shadowy separatist cells fighting in Thailand's deep South. In 2008, former Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej threatened to intern the Rohingya on a "desert island." This seemed absurd bluster at the time, but he must have been serious. Thai security forces used remote Ko Sai Deang (Red Sand Island) as a holding center for captured Rohingya before they towed them out to sea in late December.

Royal Thai Army officer Colonel Manas Kongpan of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), who was implicated by a Thai court in a massacre of Thai Muslims five years ago at a mosque, was in charge of the operation. He was unapologetic about his forces' treatment of the Rohingya, denying any harsh measures and saying Thailand's policy was in line with international humanitarian practice. "The issue has become a scandal because of a newsman slandering the military and bad-mouthing Thailand," he told the *Bangkok Post*. Prime Minister Abhisit has announced an investigation, but there is little likelihood that complicit officers will be punished.

Malaysia is the preferred destination of Rohingya men looking for work. There is a thriving Rohingya community within the large migrant worker population from Burma in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, yet all migrant workers live a precarious existence subject to arbitrary

arrests, beatings and intimidation. In Indonesia, the nearly 400 Rohingya who arrived appear to have won a temporary reprieve after Indonesia threatened to send them back. Conditions in the remaining Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh have marginally improved in the past two years, but living standards are still primitive and options slim.

Not all the men in the boats are destitutes fleeing oppression, some are ethnic Bengali's from Chittagong blending in to get a job in Malaysia or refugee resettlement opportunities in a third country. And a few of the Rohingya must be relatively prosperous to have paid the fees - \$300 for the journey from the Burmese or Bangladesh coast to southern Thailand, and later another \$500-700 in trafficking fees. The average annual wage in Burma is less than \$300, although most Rohingya would earn well below this.

Finally, the Rohingya are not a "forgotten people," as many headlines described them. They are more a foresworn people. No one wants them, even though the world is well aware of their predicament. In the past 20 years, there has been probably more international attention devoted to the Rohingya than to any other ethnic group in Burma. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières and many other groups have been reporting on their plight since the 1991 campaign against them. Their persecution has been a litany of horrors the international community has been well aware of, but helpless or unwilling to rectify.

While Burma is the key to stemming the exodus, other Southeast Asian states need to observe international standards over their treatment of migrant workers. ASEAN's collective failure to address the root causes of the flight of the Rohingya from Burma will ensure its continuation.

**David Scott Mathieson is Burma Researcher for New York-based Human Rights Watch.**