

## **40 Days of Prayer—Lenten Focus on Refugees**

### **Week 4: Myanmar (Burma)**

**The current situation:** With about half a million refugees and almost an equal number of internally displaced persons, Myanmar is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest source country for refugees worldwide, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest within the Asia-Pacific region, after Afghanistan.

Ethnic and religious conflict have affected almost all areas of Myanmar for several decades, but in the past five years an increase in state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya—a Muslim minority group that differs from Myanmar’s dominant Buddhist groups ethnically and linguistically as well—has resulted in a humanitarian crisis with regional implications. By the end of Oct. 2016, the United Nations had registered some 55,000 Rohingyas in Malaysia and 33,000 in refugee camps in Bangladesh, while another 300,000 to 500,000 refugees are estimated to have settled elsewhere within Bangladesh. Refugees have also been temporarily situated in Thailand, Indonesia, and India.

Violence spiked in late 2016, with a horrific attack on Rohingya men, women, and children by Burmese security forces in response to the killing of police officers on the border with Bangladesh by unidentified insurgents. The attack—which included extrajudicial killings, the slaughter of children and babies, gang rapes, arson, and other brutalities—has drawn criticism from the United Nations, Amnesty International, and the US State Department. The Burmese government has repeatedly denied allegations of persecution against Rohingya, rejecting any evidence as “propaganda.”

**Why are the Rohingyas being persecuted?** A xenophobic revival of Buddhist nationalism has resulted in increased violence against religious minorities—Christians as well as Muslims. From *The Diplomat* (10.14.15): “For the past fifty years, under successive military juntas, Myanmar has followed a strategic project of Burmanization, i.e., the promotion of a single religion (Buddhism), language (Burmese), and culture (Burman). At its mildest, this is a policy of cultural assimilation. At its worst, it has verged on – and arguably pursued – ethnic cleansing. Ceasefires with ethnic armed groups have reduced military activity and human rights violations in several ethnic states. But the treatment of Rohingya shows the continued potency of Burmese nationalism ... with deep-seated racism ... entrenched in existing law and pursued through new laws.”

Despite the fact that the Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for centuries, the Burmese government does not recognize them as citizens: they have no legal representation or voting rights, are prohibited from working outside their villages, cannot marry without government authorization, and—due to travel restrictions—lack sufficient access to jobs, education, and medical care. The majority live in apartheid-like conditions in the Muslim-majority Rakhine state in the north. In 2015 *The Economist* described the Rohingya as “the most persecuted people on earth.”

**What to pray for:**

- Revelation of religious nationalism as a crime against humanity
- Healing of all trauma—physical, psychological, emotional, and moral
- Demilitarization of ethnic areas and safety for those who have fled their homes
- Dignified and voluntary repatriation, with assurance refugees will not return to the same injustices that led to their departure in the first place
  - Wisdom for recently elected State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, who won a Nobel Peace for her pro-democracy advocacy during Burma's military rule, to be an effective arbiter for humanitarian leadership
- Legal reforms to end discrimination based on ethnicity and religion, and to restore citizenship to the Rohingya
- Peace and justice for all ethnic and religious communities

*For more information, check out the Council on Foreign Affairs (<http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651>), International Rescue Committee (<https://www.rescue.org/country/myanmar>), and European Commission on Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection ([http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/rohingya\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/rohingya_en.pdf)).*