

Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 4: Myanmar (Burma)

March 26, 2017

In the past three weeks we've traveled from Syria in the Middle East, to Afghanistan in Asia, and to Somalia on the eastern coast of Africa. These are the three largest so-called "source countries" for refugees; together they make up 53 percent of the world's total refugee population.¹ If we were to continue going down the list of source countries in order, we would go next to South Sudan, then Sudan, then the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and then the Central African Republic.²

But instead we're going to spread the map a bit today and go farther east in Asia to Myanmar, also known as Burma, which is eighth on the list.³ Here, the primary perpetrators of violence are not Islamic fundamentalists but ultra-nationalist Buddhists.^{4,5}

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Myanmar, practiced by 85 to 90 percent of the population. Since the country's independence from Britain in 1948, successive military juntas have conflated Buddhism with Burmese national identity and made life difficult for Burmese Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and other religious and ethnic minorities. State-sanctioned discrimination, forced conversions, desecration of churches, human rights abuses, armed conflict, and land confiscations have resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Burmese minorities to Bangladesh, Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia since the 1970s.^{6,7,8,9} In the past decade, more than 160,000 Burmese refugees have resettled in the US—more than any other nationality.¹⁰ Most of them are Christians, predominantly American Baptists, as a result of that denomination's long-term missionary efforts there.¹¹ They account for nearly 25 percent of new US refugees since 2007.¹²

Myanmar recently has been seeking to transition to a more democratic form of government, but religious and ethnic minorities are still suffering, arguably more so now than ever—the most grievous example being that of the country's Rohingya Muslims. The UN and other human rights organizations have referred to them as the most persecuted persons in the world.^{13,14}

The Rohingya practice a Sufi variation of Sunni Islam and differ from Myanmar's dominant Buddhist groups ethnically and linguistically as well.¹⁵ They live primarily in the western Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh. It is one of the country's least developed and poorest states, with half to three-quarters of the population living below the poverty line.¹⁶ Although Rohingya communities have lived here for several centuries, the Burmese government does not recognize them as citizens and has imposed extensive restrictions on their basic freedoms, limiting movement to within townships, requiring government permission to marry, limiting the number of children, and severely restricting access to education, medical care, and employment.^{17,18}

Their plight briefly caught international attention in 2012 when the Burmese government was accused of collective punishment against the Rohingya in retaliation for an alleged gang rape of a Buddhist woman by three Rohingya men. Local Buddhists—organized and encouraged by radical Buddhist monks, Burmese officials, community leaders, and state security forces—killed more than 200 Muslim men, women, and children, burned down almost 3,000 homes, and razed entire villages, displacing more than 140,000 residents.^{19,20,21}

Human Rights Watch described the anti-Rohingya violence then as crimes against humanity carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Since then, the region's displaced population has been forced to live in squalid, prison-like internment camps that lack adequate food, shelter, water, and sanitation.²²

Tens of thousands of others fled to Bangladesh or other neighboring countries. The refugees' desperate conditions have made them particularly easy prey for human trafficking rings, which take advantage of people by force, fraud, and coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. United Methodist Women has raised awareness of the Rohingya people along with other vulnerable populations in its work to *end* human trafficking.²³

This past October a series of attacks on police officers on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border revived violence in Rakhine state. Local authorities blamed Rohingya militants for the attacks, prompting military and police forces to launch a manhunt for those responsible. The UN estimates that more than one thousand Muslims died in the crackdown, tens of thousands have been displaced internally, and somewhere between 65,000 and 85,000 have fled to Bangladesh.²⁴ Satellite imagery obtained by Human Rights Watch shows thousands of homes were destroyed.²⁵ Interviews with hundreds of Rohingya who fled the raids detail numerous abuses associated with the military operations, including widespread arson, extrajudicial killings, systematic rape, and other sexual violence.²⁶

One mother recounted how her five-year-old daughter was trying to protect her from rape when a man “took out a long knife and killed her by slitting her throat,” while in another case an eight-month-old baby was reportedly killed while his mother was gang-raped by five security officers. In another case, recounted by a number of refugees in separate interviews, an army of Buddhist villagers locked an entire family, including elderly and disabled people, inside a house and set it on fire, killing them all. Several children told of siblings being thrown into burning buildings.^{27,28}

Many witnesses and victims also described being taunted while they were being beaten, raped or rounded up, being told: “What can your Allah do for you? See what we can do?”²⁹

Linnea Arvidsson, one of the UN workers who interviewed survivors, said, “I’ve never encountered a situation like this, where you do 204 interviews and every

single person you speak with has a traumatic story, whether their house was burnt, they've been raped, or a relative was killed or taken away.... To say these are area-clearance operations looking for insurgents who killed police officers doesn't make any sense. You don't slaughter eight-month-old babies because a police officer was attacked. It's because you just don't consider the child as human."³⁰

The Burmese military has dismissed allegations of persecution as propaganda, and suggested the Rohingya set their own homes on fire to solicit international sympathy.³¹ They have locked down the area, and denied access to humanitarian aid groups, independent media, and human rights monitors.³²

The international community is calling for immediate and full access for aid agencies to conduct needs assessments and distribute food. Human rights organizations are also calling for an international inquiry into possible crimes against humanity committed against Rohingya—and for government recognition of their citizenship.

Speaking at a US congressional hearing organized by the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission last week, Mohamed Naeem, an ethnic-Rohingya advocate from Myanmar said, "The authorities must reinstate unconditional citizenship rights to Rohingya. We want to be treated with respect, dignity, and equality—no more, no less."^{33,34}

As we travel this hard journey with refugees this Lent, we do so knowing Jesus kept company with the most rejected and vulnerable people of his time. Let us give thanks for all those who are providing aid, raising international awareness, and working for justice. Let us thank God that thousands are finding safety, and pray for those still in danger. And let us repeat the words of our opening prayer, asking God to "Fill us with your light, that we may more fully be the body of Christ, bringing light to an aching, broken world. Amen."

As we have been doing throughout this series, let's close out this time by singing the first two verses of "Now It Is Evening," #2187 in *The Faith We Sing*.

*Note: In addition to banning visas to the US from several Muslim-majority countries, President Trump's proposed travel ban "includes a 55 percent reduction in refugee visas overall, from a planned 110,000 to 50,000 this year. This means, in some of the most desperate places in the world, 60,000 refugee visas are not going to be issued after all."*³⁵

¹ UNHCR, "Figures at a Glance," <http://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015," page 16, Figure 4: Major source countries of refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Usaid Siddiqui, "Muslim Minorities in Peril: The Rise of Buddhist Violence in Asia," *Al Jazeera*, September 8, 2016, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/09/muslim-minorities-peril-rise-buddhist-violence-asia-160908090547506.html>

⁵ Usaid Siddiqui, "Myanmar's Buddhist Terrorist Problem," *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/2/myanmars-buddhist-terrorism-problem.html>

⁶ Ava Rezai, "To Be Burmese Is To Be Buddhist," Center for Contemporary Buddhist Studies, September 19, 2016, <https://centerforcontemporarybuddhiststudies.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/to-be-burmese-is-to-be-buddhist-the-root-of-buddhist-extremism-among-monks-and-the-laity-in-contemporary-burma/>

⁷ Kirsten McConnachie, "Myanmar's Refugee Problem: It's Not Just the Rohingya," *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/myanmars-refugee-problem-its-not-just-the-rohingya/>

⁸ Ana Lehmann, "Religious Minorities Face Persecution in Myanmar," *Deutsche Welle*, October 14, 2010, <http://www.dw.com/en/religious-minorities-face-persecution-in-myanmar/a-6112583>

⁹ Adelaide Mena, "Muslims and Christians in Burma Still Face Persecution, US Officials Warn," *Catholic News Agency*, December 14, 2016, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/muslims-and-christians-in-burma-still-face-persecution-us-officials-warn-29007/>

¹⁰ Associated Press, "Refugees from Myanmar Hurt Most by Trump Cuts," *VOA*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/refugees-from-myanmar-hurt-most-by-trump-cuts/3768538.html>

¹¹ Bob Allen, "In Burma, Missions Come Full Circle for American Baptists," *The Baptist Standard*, July 11, 2013, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/baptist/15289-in-burma-missions-comes-full-circle-for-american-baptists>

¹² Associated Press, "Refugees from Myanmar Hurt Most by Trump Cuts," *VOA*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/refugees-from-myanmar-hurt-most-by-trump-cuts/3768538.html>

¹³ Beina Xu and Eleanor Albert, "Understanding Myanmar," Council on Foreign Relations, March 25, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/understanding-myanmar/p14385>

¹⁴ Bobins Abraham, "Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar: World's Most Persecuted Minority Is Being Uprooted from Their Homes, Once Again," *India Times*, December 8, 2016, <http://www.indiatimes.com/news/world/rohingya-muslims-of-myanmar-world-s-most-persecuted-minority-is-being-uprooted-from-their-homes-once-again-267006.html>

¹⁵ Eleanor Albert, "The Rohingya Migrant Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, January 12, 2017, <http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ European Commission: Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, "The Rohingya Crisis," December 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/rohingya_en.pdf

¹⁸ Eleanor Albert, "The Rohingya Migrant Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, January 12, 2017, <http://www.cfr.org/burmamyanmar/rohingya-migrant-crisis/p36651>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "All You Can Do Is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0413webwcover_0.pdf

²¹ US Foreign Affairs Committee, Press release on human rights of Rohingya people, March 17, 2017, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/remarks-chairman-royce-human-rights-rohingya-people/>

²² Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters, "Myanmar Must 'Allow Rohingya to Leave Camps,'" *Al Jazeera*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/myanmar-rohingya-leave-camps-170316152518296.html>

²³ United Methodist Women, Action Alert "Women at Risk: Plight of the Rohingya," January 26, 2014, <http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/women-at-risk-plight-of-the-rohingya#IVAWA>

²⁴ Agence France-Presse, "65,000 Rohingya Flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh Following Crackdown: UN," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/65000-rohingya-flee-from-myanmar-to-bangladesh-following-crackdown-un>

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, Statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing, March 17, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/17/us-call-burma-cease-persecution-rohingya>

²⁶ Nikhil Kumar, "Reprisals, Rape, and Children Burned Alive: Burma's Rohingya Speak of Genocidal Terror," *Time*, December 11, 2016, <http://time.com/4596937/burma-myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh-refugees-crimes-against-humanity/>

²⁷ May Bulman, "Burma: Rohingya Muslim Babies and Children 'Being Slaughtered with Knives,' UN Warns," *Independent*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-rohingya-muslim-babies-children-slaughtered-knives-massacre-genocide-un-warns-a7561711.html>

²⁸ Benar News/Radio Free Asia, "Rohingya Children Give Eyewitness Accounts of Atrocities in Myanmar," January 23, 2017, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/rohingya-children-01232017172058.html>

²⁹ May Bulman, "Burma: Rohingya Muslim Babies and Children 'Being Slaughtered with Knives,' UN Warns," *Independent*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-rohingya-muslim-babies-children-slaughtered-knives-massacre-genocide-un-warns-a7561711.html>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ellen Barry, "There Are No Homes Left': Rohingya Tell of Rape, Fire and Death in Myanmar," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/world/asia/rohingya-violence-myanmar.html>

³² Human Rights Watch, Statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing, March 17, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/17/us-call-burma-cease-persecution-rohingya>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fortify Rights, Press release supporting international inquiry into violations in Myanmar, March 17, 2017, <http://www.fortifyrights.org/publication-20170317.html>

³⁵ Associated Press, "Refugees from Myanmar Hurt Most by Trump Cuts," *VOA*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/refugees-from-myanmar-hurt-most-by-trump-cuts/3768538.html>