

## **Editorial Brief: A Series on the Rohingya Repatriation Crisis for Canada Global**

### ***Executive Summary:***

*The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group in Myanmar's Rakhine state, of which nearly a million have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh to escape persecution and violence since 2017. A pilot repatriation project to return Rohingya to Rakhine state has been proposed in March 2023, as Bangladesh and Myanmar have faced economic and regional pressure to address the refugee problem. The human rights conditions in Rakhine state have not improved, and the repatriation plans have been criticized for violating international standards and norms. Canada has provided international assistance to the Rohingya and other Myanmar populations since 2018, but has no commitments to take in Rohingya refugees.*

### **Introduction**

*Canada Global* is considering a series on the recent Rohingya refugee repatriation crisis. The Story Development Team provides the following brief to demonstrate four topics for this potential series: (1) the problem/background context; (2) current repatriation plans; (3) the state of human rights in Rakhine state; and (4) Canada's role. We propose specific Canadian angles to these four topics, which would allow *Canada Global* to inform and lead a conversation about Canada's role in this unfolding global crisis.

### **Problem/Background Context**

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. The Myanmar government has not recognized them as citizens, denying them access to basic human rights such as education, healthcare, and freedom of movement. In 2017, violence broke out in the Rakhine state, leading to the displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees to the neighboring country of Bangladesh. Since a military coup in 2021, foreign aid blockages have worsened the living conditions in the 34 camps housing more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. They have suffered fires, flooding, the spread of COVID-19, strict lockdowns, and a number of significant security events.

The Myanmar government has been accused of committing genocide against the Rohingya, resulting in international condemnation and humanitarian aid to the refugees. Ongoing efforts are underway to hold the Myanmar government responsible, with human rights organizations monitoring the repatriation process to protect the rights of Rohingya refugees.

### **Current Repatriation Plans**

There is currently a pilot repatriation project by Bangladesh and Myanmar that has been in motion since mid-March 2023. It is the latest attempt to repatriate in a series of negotiations between the two countries and China over the question of Rohingya refugees since 2018. Though no clear timeline has been provided, around 1,140 refugees (out of a total population of over one million) are slated to be repatriated under the pilot project. The sudden push to repatriate seems to come from three factors: (1) mounting financial and humanitarian strain on Bangladesh to support the considerable Rohingya refugee population; (2) increasing perception that the large refugee population is a potential source of unrest, illicit trade, and insurgency; and (3) Chinese pressure on Myanmar and Bangladesh to accelerate repatriation as a way to bolster Chinese influence and defend Chinese economic interests in the area.

*Canada Global's* reporting could further explain why repatriation projects are being proposed now, and how these efforts could further exacerbate the refugee crisis.

## **State of Human Rights in Rakhine State**

The human rights situation in the Rakhine State has not improved, and hostilities between the Myanmar military and the local separatist group, Arakan Army, continues to escalate, resulting in civilian casualties. The Rohingyas who remained in Rakhine State are facing systemic abuses that are described as crimes against humanity, of apartheid, persecution, and deprivation of liberty. Increases in arrests for land migration has also forced people to make dangerous sea crossings, resulting in casualties. The continued support from China to the Arakan Army with money and arms in order to protect their investments in their Belt and Road Initiative is expected to prolong the escalating conflict and human rights abuses in the Rakhine State.

There has also been no promise of giving land or properties back to repatriated Rohingyas, nor have there been commitments to providing them with the same rights as Myanmar citizens. According to the UNHCR, the current conditions in Rakhine State are not conducive to the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, and the current plans violate international standards according to the UNHCR's International Protection handbook on voluntary repatriation.

## **Canada's Role**

The Canadian government has responded to the crisis by calling to end the violence, providing humanitarian assistance, and supporting the people of Myanmar towards an inclusive democracy. However, unlike Canada's commitment to resettling 40,000 Afghans, an unlimited number of Ukrainian refugees, and vote to accept 10,000 Uyghur refugees from Xinjiang, there have been no government commitments to resettle large numbers of Rohingya refugees. According to the Rohingya Centre of Canada, 600 of Canada's 1,000 Rohingya live in the Waterloo Region, with the largest diaspora living in Kitchener, Ontario.

In 2017, Canada introduced a \$300M humanitarian strategy on the Rohingya crisis. Since then, Canada's parliament voted unanimously to recognize the campaign against Rohingya in Myanmar as an act of genocide. The government has also issued a business advisory for Myanmar, issued targeted sanctions, offered support in the International Court of Justice hearings on the Rohingya genocide, and voiced concerns over the repatriation of Rohingya. Canada extended the Rohingya strategy in 2022 for another three years, dedicating over \$288M in funding. Within the new Indo-Pacific Strategy, Canada has committed to appointing a new Special Envoy on the crisis and expanding support to journalists, human rights defenders, civil society activists, and other anti-junta forces.

Given the current human rights concerns in the Rakhine State, *Canada Global* could explore why the Canadian government is not focused on resettling more Rohingya refugees in Canada.

## **Conclusion**

Given the above context, there are still significant risks of repatriation alongside existing dire conditions in the refugee camps. Canada's new focus on the Indo-Pacific region raises questions about whether current Canadian commitments meet these challenges. A four-part series by *Canada Global* could initiate a national conversation on Canada's role on this issue and launch informed debate.

## **Sources**

We based this brief on information collated from the Government of Canada, the Australian Government, UNHCR reports, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, the Transnational Institute, Human Rights Watch, the Lowy Institute, and local, national, and regional news outlets.

## Sources

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<https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/07/joint-statement-of-canada-and-the-kingdom-of-the-netherlands-regarding-todays-decision-of-the-international-court-of-justice-in-the-rohingya-genoci.html>

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<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/myanmar-abuses-mount-military-coup>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/31/bangladesh-halt-pilot-plan-return-rohingya>

## Parking Lot

Legacy of colonialism and political instability (coupled with military crackdown to attacks by Rohingya militant groups)

Cultural context

Human trafficking

Violence including killing, rape and burning of villages leading to exodus to Bangladesh

Current largest "stateless" community in the world

- political , economic and social reforms
- the freedom, security, and right to life of an individual.
- the right to request refuge and safety from harm.
- the right to information access as well as the freedom of speech.
- the right to freedom of movement, health treatment, and education.
- the right to not be subjected to prejudice because of one's race, religion, or nationality.
- the right to an unbiased and fair legal system.
- the right to take part in choices that will influence their life, including the process of being repatriated.
- The Canadian government could assist with actions or policies support nor continue the abuses of the Rohingya people's rights.
- The world community and the Canadian government can be made aware of the Rohingya's plight through Canadian human rights organizations who can work for the preservation of their rights.

## Background

Roots in colonization and parallels to Canadian history.

During British colonization, ethnic and racial divisions were strengthened in Myanmar using a "divide and conquer" strategy. These divisions resulted in conflicts between various groups.

After gaining independence, Myanmar's leaders continued to use these divisions to hold onto power, resulting in violent disputes.

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group, have been particularly marginalized due to this legacy. There are several other ethnic groups in Myanmar, with the majority religion being Buddhism(Buddhism is the de facto official religion of Myanmar). However, conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups have led to violence in the nation.

During British colonization, ethnic and racial distinctions in Myanmar were created and strengthened, as the British used a "divide and conquer" strategy to maintain power. This resulted in various ethnic and religious enclaves, and conflicts between them.

After gaining independence, Myanmar's leaders continued to use these divisions to hold onto power, resulting in violent disputes between various groups. The persecution and marginalization of minority groups, such as the Rohingya, has been exacerbated by this colonial legacy.

There are several ethnic groups in Myanmar, including the Bamar, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, and Chin. The majority religion in the nation is Buddhism, but there are sizable Muslim, Christian, and Hindu groups as well. However, conflict and bloodshed in the nation have been worsened by ethnic and religious conflicts, notably towards the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Many have stated that the marginalization of ethnic minorities in Myanmar is a result of this mixing of race and religion. Bamar, the majority ethnic group in the nation and making up around 70% of the populace, are largely Buddhists, with Buddhism serving as the de facto official religion of Myanmar. In Myanmar, 90 percent of the population claims to be Buddhist.

Ethnic and cultural identity align with the dominant understanding in Myanmar, which has led to violent ethnic relations. This understanding can be traced back to social divisions constructed by British colonial administrators in the 19th and early 20th century, which were exploited for power. Successive authoritarian regimes have continued to use these categorizations for their own violent purposes.

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Myanmar, number around one million and are one of many ethnic minorities in the country. Despite living in Myanmar for generations, they are denied citizenship and excluded from the census.

The government sees them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Many Rohingya have migrated across the region, and in recent years, thousands have fled Myanmar to escape communal violence and alleged abuses by security forces.

Why Flee homes Context

*In 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked police facilities in Myanmar, leading to a crisis in which the military used brutal force, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths.*

*The situation has been described as ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide.*

*Terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have called for attacks against Myanmar.*

*The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar's Rakhine state, fled to Bangladesh, creating the world's largest camp for displaced persons, where they face threats of disease, malnutrition, human trafficking, and gender-based violence.*

*Bangladesh plans to relocate 100,000 Rohingya refugees to a remote and vulnerable island called Bhasan Char, and over 530,000 school-age refugees lack access to formal education.*

*The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Myanmar to protect the Rohingya from persecution and killings, but Myanmar denies carrying out genocide and says it is investigating the matter. However, the country's Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) admitted that members of the security forces may have committed war crimes and serious human rights violations.*

Crisis following attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on police facilities in 2017 with Myanmar military crimes using brutal force leading to the estimates of thousands of civilian deaths.

Allegations of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and possibly genocide have come to describe the situation. Concerns over the possibility for transnational Islamist terrorist organizations to take advantage of the ongoing war have also been highlighted. Organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have called for attacks against Myanmar and its leaders.

2017 large number of Rohingya (Rakhine state) fled to Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh, creating "world's largest camp for displaced persons" with 80% mostly women and children. (population of 920,000) (Japan government) FS - women friendly spaces and sanctuary

The government claims that "clearance operations" against militants ended on 5 September, but evidence shows that they continued after that date. At least 288 villages in northern Rakhine state were partially or completely destroyed by fire in August 2017.

ARSA denies links to terrorism groups with no evidence of connection.

Amnesty International alleges that ARSA is responsible for at least one massacre of up to 99 Hindu women, men, and children in August 2017.

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh face the ongoing threat of disease, malnutrition, killings, human trafficking, and gender-based violence.

The Bangladeshi Government plans to relocate 100,000 Rohingya refugees to a remote and vulnerable island called Bhasan Char. Additionally, over 530,000 school-age refugees lack access to formal education as Bangladesh does not want them to stay long-term. (

A UN report accused Myanmar's military of carrying out mass killings and rape with "genocidal intent". The International Court of Justice (ICJ) case was lodged by The Gambia on behalf of dozens of other Muslim countries.

Aung San Suu Kyi rejected allegations of genocide, but in January 2020, the court ordered Myanmar to take emergency measures to protect the Rohingya from being persecuted and killed.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) approved a full investigation into the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar in November, as Bangladesh is a member of the court. Myanmar denies carrying out genocide and says it is carrying out its own investigations.

However, the country's Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) admitted that members of the security forces may have carried out "war crimes, serious human rights violations, and violations of domestic law".

Current state

*Myanmar and Canada both faced colonization, which affected human rights. In Myanmar, the British used a strategy of dividing and conquering, causing conflicts and the marginalization of minority groups like the Rohingya. In Canada, Indigenous people experienced forced assimilation and lost their land, culture, and language due to colonization.*

- 1.
2. *Myanmar must guarantee Rohingya citizenship rights, education, healthcare, and freedom of movement.*
3. *Advocacy by human rights organizations can raise awareness of the Rohingya situation to the international community.*
4. *The international community can provide financial and technical support to Myanmar for the safe and dignified return of the refugees.*

*The Canadian government could advance the rights of Indigenous peoples and aid in attempts to resolve the Rohingya situation in order to protect human rights both at home and abroad. Recognising the historical effects of colonization and acting to solve these concerns are essential.*

Situation is still in the same state due to lack of accountability and Myanmar investigating allegations or criminalize genocide.

The United Nations investigators blamed a lack of accountability and failure by Myanmar to fully investigate allegations or criminalise genocide for the situation that led to "killings, rapes and gang rapes, torture, forced displacement and other grave rights violations" in 2017, which still remained unchanged.

Moreover, the ongoing conflict between the army and rebels from the Buddhist-majority Rakhine ethnic group in Rakhine province adds to the situation.

The army and insurgents from the Buddhist-dominated Rakhine ethnic group are engaged in a continuing struggle in the province of Rakhine.

Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis, BBC, 23 January 2020  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>

Rohingya Refugee Crisis: <https://news.un.org/en/focus/rohingya-refugee-crisis>

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UN - cleansing

- Sources:

- International and regional news reporting (Reuters, Al Jazeera, the Diplomat, Himal Southasian)
- UNHCR and HRW statements in response

- Links

- [Myanmar team in Bangladesh camps for Rohingya repatriation pilot project | Reuters](#)
- [Myanmar, Bangladesh Readying Repatriation of More Than 1,000 Rohingya – The Diplomat](#)
- [UN Participating in Pilot Rohingya Repatriation Project, Despite Safety Concerns – The Diplomat](#)
- [Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the global game over Rohingya repatriation - Himal Southasian](#)
- [UNHCR statement on Bangladesh, Myanmar bilateral pilot project on Rohingya returns](#)
- [Bangladesh: Halt 'Pilot' Plan to Return Rohingya – Human Rights Watch](#)

- Key facts

- Pilot repatriation project under joint collaboration of Bangladesh and Myanmar
  - Ambassadors of Bangladesh, China, India, and eight ASEAN countries invited by Myanmar junta to tour Rakhine state on March 10, 2023 to survey preparations for repatriation
  - Myanmar delegation arrived in southeastern Bangladesh refugee camps on March 15, 2023
  - Total of 1,140 Rohingya (out of over a million in southeastern Bangladesh) slated for repatriation
  - No clear date given for when the repatriation will occur.
- Key actors involved
  - Bangladesh
    - Has hosted over a million Rohingya refugees since 2017, when a military campaign in Rakhine state initiated a wave of flight

- Considerable financial and humanitarian strain
- Previous stopgap measures include controversial relocation to remote islands in the Bay of Bengal
- Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, August 2022: “Rohingya are Myanmar nationals and they have to be taken back”
- However, lingering concerns from Bangladesh foreign ministry over the citizenship status of the Rohingya repatriates upon their return to Rakhine state, as well as the housing and safety conditions upon their arrival
- Myanmar
  - Junta took power in February 2021 coup, with some speculating that interest in revitalizing the repatriation plans only began with significant Chinese pressure
  - Cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh militaries over cross-border drug trade and insurgency groups (particularly the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) that have arisen from the persistence of the refugee crisis and stasis.
- China
  - China's ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen: “hoped that the first batch of displaced Rohingya would be repatriated to Myanmar soon while China continued its role as mediator”
  - Trilateral agreement and mechanism since 2018 between Bangladesh, Myanmar and China to facilitate repatriation of Rohingya; multiple failed attempts for negotiation over the past five years
  - Chinese investment into building housing in Rakhine state for potential repatriates
  - Chinese interests in Rakhine state due to China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative
- UNHCR
  - UNHCR is not involved in these arrangements, though UNHCR-owned boats (stripped of their identifiable markings) were used to transport Myanmar officials
  - The official position of the UNHCR is that “conditions in Rakhine state are not conducive to the safe and sustainable return of refugees.”
  - 2023 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis in Bangladesh is the current framework between Bangladesh, the UNHCR, and donor governments. It does not include
- Rohingya organizations
- Human rights organizations