

Exiled to Nowhere: Burma's Rohingya

By Serena Romeo, Human Rights Without Frontiers

From the 25th to the 29th November, the European Parliament hosted a photo exhibition entitled '*Exiled to Nowhere: Burma's Rohingya*' by the award-winning photographer Greg Constantine. The exhibition was complemented by a panel discussion on the 28th November about the Rohingya situation, hosted by MEP Jean Lambert.

The Rohingya is an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority settled in the North-Arakan State (or Rakhine) in Burma. Rohingya people are Muslims, while the majority of the Burmese population profess Buddhism. The community is recognised as one of the most persecuted in the world, whose basic rights and citizenship are systematically denied.

The 1982 Citizenship Law sets the legal basis for the arbitrary treatment against the Rohingya community, dividing Burma citizens into three classes. Furthermore, in 1989 all the population was provided with colour-coded Citizens Scrutiny Cards (CRCs). Each card has a colour designating the citizenship status of the person: pink for full citizens, blue for associate citizens, green for naturalised citizens and white for foreigners. Rohingya people do not fall under any of these categories, nor do they appear in the list of 135 'national races' settled in the country before 1823. Thereby, Rohingyas are *de facto* stateless. They lack protection from the state and are victims of systematic violation of human rights: forced labour, extortion and restrictions on employment, marriage and movement within the country.

The panel examined the Rohingya situation and discussed EU relations and policy toward Burma. In her opening remarks, Ms Lambert highlighted the horrible situation of up to 200,000 Rohingyas who have escaped to Bangladesh. These are considered illegal migrants rather than refugees, thereby lacking protection from any authority. The European Parliament has passed two resolutions over the past few months on the situation of the Rohingya people, denouncing the violation of their basic rights by the Burmese authorities.

Greg Constantine started the project *Nowhere People* in 2005, working with several stateless communities. He observed and interviewed Rohingya people on the ground, and his work exposes how the community has been 'denied of any right to have rights'. Although Burma's government does not consider them Burmese, Rohingyas feel like they belong to the country. Over the last two years, the number of Rohingyas who leave for Bangladesh, often putting their lives in the hands of traffickers, has increased significantly. Although most want to go back to Burma, the campaign of ethnic cleansing initiated by the government in Rakhine State was disastrous for the region, leaving nothing for Rohingyas to go back to.

Lotte Leicht, EU Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), and a representative of the Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) discussed the role of EU institutions in addressing the Rohingyas' situation. The European Parliament has led the way in keeping the situation in the public eye, but it has to go beyond rhetoric, said Leicht. The climate of total impunity in Burma documented by HRW needs to be addressed both by improving humanitarian assistance and by taking concrete political actions.

Tun Khin, President of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation in the UK, gave a key intervention, calling for an international investigation to document the crimes against humanity and to stop the apartheid-like segregation imposed by the Burmese government. Tun Khin also pointed out the importance of establishing dialogue between the Rohingya and Burmese community as a critical step toward national reconciliation.