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HRWF (08.11.2019) - Freedom of Religion or Belief has been legally guaranteed by most nations. However, it's rare for these legal protections to be fully implemented or complied with. Increasingly, converting or changing religions, sharing religious or non-religious beliefs, and being a member of a religious community that is not mainstream is resulting in workplace discrimination and unemployment. Moreover, legal remedies are often not accessible or effective when people are harassed by fellow citizens or local magistrates on the basis of their ethnicity, tradition, or religious affiliation. In extreme cases, States themselves structurally sponsor discrimination or commit genocide against certain religious or ethnic groups.

One such case is that of the Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma). Since the 1960s, more than a million Muslims living in Myanmar have fled to neighbouring countries. Over the past few years alone, 200 thousand Rohingyas fled to Saudi Arabia; 10 thousand to the United Arab Emirates; 350 thousand to Pakistan; 40 thousand to India; 5 thousand to Thailand; 150 thousand to Malaysia; 100 to Indonesia; and 890 thousand to Bangladesh, which greatly overstretched the country's already insufficient resources. This has been described as the [world's fastest growing refugee crisis](#). Half a million of Rohingya are currently living in makeshift camps with inadequate facilities, meager food, and a bare minimum of medical assistance.

The latest outburst of atrocities began in August 2017 when local Buddhist extremists in Rakhine province, supported by the military, began what the then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein described as a "[textbook example of ethnic cleansing](#)". There was looting, burning shops and villages, torture, arbitrary detentions, forced labor, forcible recruitment, extortion, gang rapes, trafficking, beatings, and mass killings with an estimated [36 thousand people literally thrown into fire](#). More than [43 thousand Rohingya parents](#) have been reported lost since then, and are presumed dead.

State-sanctioned discrimination began in 1982 with the so-called Burma Citizenship Law. This law denies people of Rohingya ethnicity, the majority of Myanmar's Indian and Chinese population, and other so called "[Bengali](#)", their legal status as citizens which is a fundamental human right. For the Rohingya, this is particularly illogical as they have lived in Myanmar for centuries. This citizenship law renders them stateless and thus refugees within their own country of birth. The consequences of this law is that they are severely restricted from accessing basic human rights. Without citizenship, it is nearly impossible to study, work, travel, marry, practice Islam, access health services, vote, practice medicine or law, or run for office in Myanmar. They have no National Registration Cards, nor ID numbers, which deprives them of the ability to [buy or sell goods and services](#).

Freedom of movement, too, is a fundamental human right. However, Rohingya are not allowed to leave their village to find work, trade, fish, attend the funeral of a relative, or

even visit a doctor without permission from military officials which is often at the cost of steep bribes. They are disproportionately over-taxed on their belongings and anything they catch, produce, buy or sell. This includes taxes for the birth of a child or the death of a family member. Such discrimination and restrictions make them vulnerable to confiscation of land, extortion, theft, rape, torture, arson, displacement, and even murder, without avenues for retribution. Additionally, Myanmar has been using forced labor to build the infrastructure of the North Arkan state, and specifically targets the Rohingya population for this. Many thousands of those workers have died of malnutrition. According to [Amnesty International](#), sixty percent of the 650 thousand that fled the Rakhine State recently are school aged children, [many of them without living parents](#).

The Myanmar government has denied both the severity of the situation as well as its contribution to it. The army chief told Pope Francis in November 2017 that there was "[no discrimination in this country](#)", and praised the military for maintaining peace and stability. Surprisingly, the country's de facto civilian leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, declined to discuss the plight of the Rohingya and instead blamed the whole matter on a "[huge iceberg of misinformation](#)". Simultaneously, in January 2018, the government proposed that tens of thousands of Rohingya should be "[forcefully relocated](#)" to the uninhabitable island of Thengar Char in the Bay of Bengal. This proposal is illogical and concerning since this island floods each year during the monsoon season.

Putting aside accusations of government complicity in ethnic cleansing, there are many questions regarding underlying issues within this current human rights crisis. Why would Myanmar deny millions of their own people the right of citizenship and other basic human rights? How does the government explain the large numbers of men, women and children who risk their lives on hazardous roads with landmines laid by the military, or on the [treacherous waters of the Bay of Bengal](#) and [the Andaman Sea](#), just to escape? Why does the international community seem relatively powerless when it concerns ethnic cleansing, a severe crime against humanity? Where are the trials that the UNHCR High Commissioner has called for to bring justice to the generals responsible for alleged acts of genocide? Why are journalists and aid workers not allowed to enter the Rakhine state? Why are UN investigators denied visas to investigate the violence there? Where is the outcry and media campaigns in the West that makes the general public aware of these atrocities? Many are unaware of the Rohingya crisis and most people are deeply shocked to hear the extent of the atrocities that have occurred.

That being said, it is important to point out the enormous sums of money donated by various [UN agencies](#), the [EU](#), the [USA](#), and [some States](#), as well as the efforts of neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan in receiving the influx of Rohingya. Despite official denial of the government that there is a crisis, the Myanmar government responded across Ministries and agencies by designating land for the Rohingya, coordinating relief, and allowing private individuals to donate. As a result of international cooperation, almost 100 thousand people have been treated for malnutrition, and hundreds of thousands of children have been vaccinated for diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Meanwhile, the US House of Representatives has exerted great political pressure, declaring the crisis in Myanmar as a genocide. The EU Parliament has raised concerns with its resolution [2576 of 14 June 2018](#), and some Fact Finding Missions have been conducted.

However, more action is needed such as: the lifting of limitations for journalists and other monitors; large scale media attention to raise awareness; supplies, such as food and clean water, feminine hygiene products, and cooking utensils; maternity care, cyclone resistant shelters, sanitation facilities; basic medicine and hospital facilities to treat and avoid measles, diarrhea, and cholera. Schooling is needed for the estimated 300 thousand children who were displaced. Additional immediate assistance should

include financial support to help rebuild homes, and coordination with neighboring countries to combat the trafficking of Rohingya women. Lastly, Bangladesh, which has taken in the highest number of Rohingya refugees, needs more assistance from the international community.

Creating stability and sustainable peace in Myanmar must go beyond these short-term measures. The Rohingya population urgently need to receive legal recognition. This would allow them to settle permanently and enter the formal labour market, which would boost the economy, something that is sorely needed. Additionally, the Myanmar government would legitimise its authority over the Rankine and other states where the Rohingya outcasts settled centuries ago. Another long-term action would be investigating Myanmar's top military brass, including General Ming Aung Hliang, for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Furthermore, the government needs an overhaul with the aim of creating a political climate that respects human rights. Stockholm needs to re-think their refusal to strip certain laureates of the Nobel Prize such as Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kiy unless it is willing to risk losing its credibility.

The crisis and suffering in Myanmar highlight the need for a regional commission that would be organised at the top level and have a clear and strong mandate to act, facilitate, coordinate, and inform regarding the Rohingya crisis. This proposed regional commission would consist of government representatives from the neighboring countries and would need the backing of global powers such as the UN, EU, USA, and the OSCE. It would create pressure on Myanmar to adhere to international law and would design and help implement a long-term road map to resolve the issue.

The Rohingya are known as "[the world's most persecuted minority](#)", and have been subjected to crimes against humanity at appalling levels. Every nation, aid organization, religious community, and human being should be alarmed by this situation and take action. The Rohingya need to be given their home back in a situation that guarantees their long-term safety and be given ample opportunity to thrive. While this may not be the first case of structural and severe mass suffering, we must strive that it be the last. We fail all of humankind when we do not act to uphold human dignity.