

“THEY WANT US ALL TO GO AWAY”

Early Warning Signs of Genocide in Burma



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FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM's work on genocide and related crimes against humanity is conducted by the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multipronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

Cover: Rohingya men outside of the town of Sittwe, in Rakhine State, near the Bay of Bengal



**“This country is under pressure.
It can explode at any time.”** —Civil society leader

In March 2015, staff of the **SIMON-SKJODT CENTER FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE** traveled to Burma, also called Myanmar, to investigate the threats facing the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group that has been subject to dehumanization through rampant hate speech, the denial of citizenship, and restrictions on freedom of movement, in addition to a host of other human rights violations that put this population at grave risk of additional mass atrocities and even genocide.

Children look out from Aung Mingalar, a Rohingya ghetto in the town of Sittwe, where approximately 4,250 Rohingya are segregated from their Rakhine neighbors. Police officers and barricades mark the boundaries of the ghetto. Many Rohingya refer to it as an “open prison.”



IN BURMA WE WENT TO INTERNMENT CAMPS and spoke with Rohingya who had been violently displaced from their homes. We also met with others who are living in cordoned-off ghettos, separated from their Buddhist neighbors, who predominantly belong to the Rakhine ethnic group. We saw firsthand the physical segregation of Rohingya, resulting in a modern form of apartheid, and the devastating impact that official policies of persecution were having on the Rohingya.

We heard harrowing accounts from Rohingya survivors of persecution and violence. “All of the warning signs [of genocide] are happening to us today,” one Rohingya advocate told us. This feeling was shared by other Rohingya with whom we spoke—that genocide will remain a serious risk for the Rohingya if the government of Burma does not immediately address the laws and policies that oppress the entire community. When asked what the Burmese government wants to do with Rohingya, another Rohingya advocate answered, “they want us all to go away.”

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is mandated to monitor early warning signs of genocide and other atrocities and catalyze international action to prevent those crimes. We left Burma deeply concerned that so many preconditions for genocide are already in place. With a recent history of mass atrocities and within a pervasive climate of hatred and fear, the Rohingya may once again become the target of mass atrocities, including genocide. However, there is still an opportunity to prevent this devastating outcome. This report sounds the alarm about the need to take urgent action to address these warning signs and prevent future atrocities, including genocide, from occurring.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is indebted to all those who shared their stories with us.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

STARKEST EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF FUTURE MASS ATROCITIES

This list represents some of the concerns we heard the most often from Rohingya leaders and survivors:

- Physical violence targeted against Rohingya people, homes, and businesses
- Physical segregation of the Rohingya from members of other ethnic groups
- Blockage of humanitarian assistance, including necessary health care
- Deplorable living conditions for those displaced from their homes
- Rampant and unchecked hate speech against Rohingya and other Muslims
- Restrictions on movement
- Stripping of citizenship
- Destruction of mosques, onerous processes for Rohingya to maintain or fix mosques, and other restrictions on freedom of religion
- Extortion and illegal taxation
- Land confiscation
- Two-child policy and restrictions on marriage in some areas of Rakhine State
- “Supply checks” or raids by security forces on Rohingya homes
- Sexual violence and arbitrary arrest and detention
- Abuses in detention
- Revocation of legal or other documents
- Inability to pursue livelihoods and restrictions on business opportunities
- Lack of opportunities to pursue education
- Restrictions on voting
- Government blockage of information flow in and out of Rohingya communities

National Context

We visited Burma during a political transition. After decades of military dictatorship and international sanctions, since 2010 Burma has been shifting to a nominally civilian government and re-engaging with the international community. Foreign observers have applauded this shift, citing greater political openness, the conditional release of some political prisoners, and increased freedoms for civil society. One Rohingya advocate described the international praise for Burma as the “euphoria of change,” but stressed that none of these changes have reached the Rohingya people. In conversation after conversation, Rohingya leaders, journalists, and civil society activists with whom we met stressed that the dominant narrative of reform that often reaches international audiences does not reflect the experiences of the majority of people in the country. One civil society leader told us that there are changes evident to visitors, like new construction, luxury brands, and increased tourism, but that these changes belie the reality of oppressive policies that continue to harm ethnic and religious minorities. The stories we heard from Burma’s peripheries, where many ethnic minority communities live, of violence and persecution, present a stark contrast to the narrative of rapid development for the elite few in Yangon, the former capital.

The persecution of Rohingya stands out as an especially alarming problem that has received inadequate international attention. The following outline summarizes some of the early warning signs of future mass atrocities against Rohingya that we observed during the trip.

Left: A Rohingya child stands in an internment camp outside of Sittwe. Rohingya children living in these camps have limited opportunities to pursue an education. Below: A man looks through a gate of a mosque in an internment camp outside of Sittwe.



Burma's recent history includes mass atrocities against ethnic minorities.

Burma is home to many ethnic and religious minority groups, and many have endured gross human rights violations at the hands of the government over the past several decades. United Nations officials, human rights defenders, and international investigators have tracked patterns of mass atrocities at the hands of Burmese government officials against members of various ethnic minority groups. Targeted attacks on civilians, including crimes of sexual violence and torture, have marked conflicts in Karen, Shan, and Kachin States. Members of ethnic minority groups in parts of the country where there is no armed conflict have also reported violence with impunity by members of the military or other security forces. Our trip focused on the particular situation of the persecution of the Rohingya, which then-United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar Tomás Ojea Quintana said in 2014 may amount to crimes against humanity. One woman told us that the government's policy regarding the Rohingya is the natural extension of broader policies of so-called "Burmanization" and other efforts to target the country's ethnic minorities.

Rohingya are the targets of state-sponsored discrimination and face severe restrictions on basic freedoms.

Rohingya face a set of oppressive policies promulgated by the national, state, and local levels of government that are either codified in law or written as policy orders. Rohingya suffer from a combination of state sponsored discrimination and popular hatred, which together create a climate of racism, xenophobia, and hate that has primed the country for future violence, including potential genocide. One Rohingya advocate described the government's strategy as one of "soft elimination" of the Rohingya.

Rohingya are excluded from citizenship under Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law. The law renders most Rohingya stateless, which fuels extremist rhetoric that the Rohingya are foreigners who should not be in the country. One Rohingya advocate told us, "By denying us citizenship, they are denying our entire existence, our struggle, and our survival."

Most Rohingya live in Rakhine State, in western Burma. Local orders, enforced in northern Rakhine State, place onerous restrictions on basic freedoms by requiring official permission for Rohingya to travel, marry, and





WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?

Government restrictions on Rohingya have become so unbearable for many that they take to the sea, risking their lives to find refuge in another country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that approximately 120,000 people fled from the Burma/Bangladesh maritime border from January 2012 through 2014. Rohingya who flee by boat are subject to physical abuse, extortion, and trafficking. Burmese government officials have supported the smuggling and trafficking operations.

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority group in Burma who have been subjected to targeted restrictions on their basic freedoms. Approximately one million Rohingya live in Burma, and most live in Rakhine State, which is in western Burma near the border of Bangladesh. Many Rohingya have lived in Burma for decades and the Rohingya community has historical roots in the country that date back to ancient times. However, many Burmese people today, including Burmese government officials, consider Rohingya to be foreigners. The government uses the term “Bengali” to refer to Rohingya.

Burmese law excludes Rohingya from citizenship, leaving most Rohingya stateless and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Rohingya in northern Rakhine State are subject to restrictions on basic freedoms, like marriage and childbearing, which do not apply to members of other ethnic groups.

The Rakhine people, a Buddhist ethnic minority group, comprise the majority of Rakhine State. The Rakhine people have also been subjected to state-led discrimination, but they are not expressly denied citizenship nor are they subjected to the local policies in Rakhine State that limit the fundamental rights of Rohingya.

**“People see us Rohingya as a burden. But we are not a burden—
this is their responsibility for humankind.”** —Rohingya advocate

A destroyed mosque remains in the central part of Sittwe, a physical reminder of the violence in 2012 that targeted the Rohingya and their Muslim faith. Waves of violence across the country included targeted attacks on mosques. Rohingya leaders said that some mosques were completely destroyed, some were turned into Buddhist temples, and some were turned into police stations. As one Rohingya leader observed, “The freedom of religion is a litmus test for other human rights violations.”

make repairs to buildings. There is a two-child policy enforced in the northern Rakhine townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung that only applies to Rohingya. Although the policy is enacted at the local level, politicians at the national and state level support the measure and describe the population control method as necessary and even beneficial for Rohingya. Penalties for disobeying the orders include fines or imprisonment. One Rohingya leader described the government’s policy as “an attempt to depopulate the Rohingya people.”

Outbreaks of violence have cemented a system of apartheid in Rakhine State.

After violence broke out against Rohingya in 2012 in Rakhine State, an estimated 140,000 Rohingya were displaced from their homes. We spoke with numerous people who described how their houses were burned during the attacks, and how they fled for safety with few if any of their personal belongings. One man told us that he had his life savings of approximately \$5,000 in his house, and that it was destroyed when his house was set on fire. For him, losing that money meant losing any kind of social safety net.



OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE IN 2012

Brutal violence broke out in parts of Rakhine State in June and October of 2012, killing hundreds and leaving approximately 140,000 displaced, the vast majority Rohingya. The violence erupted following the killing of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men and the subsequent killing of ten Muslims.

Some witnesses to the 2012 attacks told us that they recognized their neighbors participating in physical attacks on people and the burning of homes. Others told us that some outsiders came to their village to perpetrate the crimes. We spoke to many Rohingya who were displaced by the 2012 violence when their houses and belongings were burned, and they often reported police complicity in the attacks. One woman told us that her grandson was killed in the violence and that the child's father tried to retrieve his body. The police present at the scene physically attacked him and blocked him from retrieving his son. To date, the family of the deceased has not received any compensation, official apology, or acknowledgement of the child's death. People told us of mosques that were destroyed during the violence in 2012—some that were not totally destroyed have since been converted into police stations or Buddhist temples.

There are current reports of violence in Rakhine State and other parts of the country where Rohingya and other Muslims were victims of brutal attacks in the months and years following the 2012 violence.

Some people described how Rakhine civilians—members of another minority group in Burma and neighbors of Rohingya—perpetrated the abuses, and some people indicated that police officers or other local government actors were implicated in the violence. One woman recounted that she saw the fire brigade approaching when Rohingya houses were ablaze, but instead of extinguishing the fires the members of the brigade poured petrol and helped the fires spread. Tens of thousands of Rohingya remain in forced internment camps outside the Rakhine State capital of Sittwe, prevented from accessing what might be left of their former homes and jobs. Some of the camps are just a few miles from the town of Sittwe, but there is a division between the town and camps that physically segregates Rakhine and Rohingya. Our Rakhine driver and translators refused to go into the Rohingya camps outside of Sittwe, and our Rohingya assistants could not leave the areas around the camps. One Rohingya leader told us that living in this kind of situation is unbearable, saying that “when your movement is restricted, it’s like being in prison.”

Some Rakhine people also lost their homes in the 2012 violence and live in relocation camps, but their living conditions are far superior to those in the Rohingya camps. The differences we saw were glaring: dilapidated and overcrowded structures in the Rohingya camps, well-constructed homes wired with electricity in the Rakhine areas. The local government perpetuates these differences by, for example, supporting areas where Rakhine people live while keeping necessary services, such as health care, from Rohingya communities.

Rohingya are harmed by restricted and inadequate humanitarian assistance.

Government actors as well as extremist Rakhine groups have blocked humanitarian aid from reaching Rohingya in need in a number of ways. The government has implemented administrative barriers that hinder the provision of humanitarian assistance, and aid organizations have endured hostility and attacks from extremist groups. Mob attacks in March 2014 forced organizations to temporarily suspend their work, leaving people without essential



A Rohingya woman nurses a sick baby in an internment camp. The Burmese government has blocked humanitarian assistance from reaching Rohingya, and many people said they have had to go without basic medical care.

services. Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders, the largest nongovernmental health care provider in the area, was expelled from Rakhine State in early 2014. Although the group has been invited to return, there is still a severe lack of necessary services. Some groups are allowed to deliver aid, including medical assistance, to Rohingya, but they have not been allowed to provide the extensive care necessary to meet the needs of Rohingya communities. The purposeful blocking of necessary assistance has left many of the Rohingya with whom we spoke with no reliable source of health care. Some Rohingya told us of children who recently died from preventable illnesses in the absence of proper care. Everyone we met expressed desperation at the inadequacy of food rations and the lack of medical assistance. People told us of a mobile clinic that would come through once or twice a week, but they said the visits were inadequate.

“I think I’ll have to live here forever.”

—Rohingya resident in an internment camp near Sittwe

Hate speech against Rohingya and other Muslims is rampant.

Violence against Rohingya has occurred against a backdrop of hate speech targeting Rohingya and other Muslims. Well-known and well-resourced Buddhist monks have used their influence to promulgate hateful rhetoric against Muslims, often referring to Rohingya and other Muslims as foreigners, invaders, and people who seek to harm Buddhism. The hate speech against Rohingya is dangerous because of the high profile of the speakers, the lack of any effective government response countering the speech, and insufficient resources for those who seek to promote tolerance and acceptance of minority groups. Even the most prominent members of the democracy movement have not used official platforms to counter anti-Rohingya or anti-Muslim hate speech, and those who are trying to address this urgent issue are doing so with few resources.

In areas of the country where Muslims have been attacked, anti-Muslim campaign stickers were prominently posted on homes and other buildings. One human rights activist told us it is difficult to change people’s minds once they have been conditioned to hearing hateful speech. She described how her Buddhist mother was persuaded by anti-Muslim campaigns and that it took a month of speaking with her mother at length every day before she took it upon herself to remove an anti-Muslim sticker from her home. The anti-Muslim campaigners have expanded their efforts at the national level, where they now support legislation that would restrict interfaith marriage and other basic rights. Those who have spoken out about the legislation have received threats and harassment.

One of the first pieces of evidence we noticed upon arriving in Sittwe was a “white card” sign, which are omnipresent on shops and homes. These signs indicate opposition to a decision allowing Rohingya to vote in an upcoming constitutional referendum—a decision that was later reversed. The identical and ubiquitous nature of the signs was an unsettling reminder of popular opposition to granting Rohingya their fundamental rights.

ANTI-MUSLIM CAMPAIGNS

The Buddhist extremist nationalist movement, led by monks and supported by various government officials, has spearheaded anti-Muslim campaigns in Burma. The extremists have led sermons and public speeches against Rohingya and other Muslims, orchestrated efforts to boycott Muslim shops, and distributed anti-Muslim stickers that people could post on their homes and businesses. Hate speech is disseminated through public rallies as well as online through social media platforms.

Anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim hate speech is especially harmful because it comes from well-known religious leaders and politicians, and is not countered by official government spokespeople or other powerful people in the country. People told us that extremist monks were inciting civilians to attack Rohingya, and that the government was refusing to address hate speech and the connection to attacks on Muslims. There are interfaith groups and courageous individuals seeking to counter this dangerous speech, but they have insufficient resources and have been unable to stem the tide of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the country. One strategy of anti-Muslim campaigners is to promulgate laws that purportedly “protect race and religion” by targeting Muslims. Some of these laws seek to restrict interfaith marriage, religious conversions, and birth rates.

“There are oppressive laws on the books, and more to come. Investors won’t be targeted, but ordinary people will be.” —Civil society leader

“IT WASN’T ALWAYS LIKE THIS.”

Older Rohingya told us stories about how they were accepted by their neighbors and classmates of other ethnicities several decades ago, even though they were regarded as minorities. While there was discrimination and some violence in the past, they told us that the extreme levels of sheer vitriol coming from extremist groups is relatively new and is a break from how Rohingya communities used to be treated. One Rohingya man showed us the identification cards for his deceased parents, which did not include information about ethnicity or religion. His son’s card, however, lists his ethnicity as “Bengali”—the term the Burmese government uses to cast Rohingya as foreigners—and lists his Muslim religion.

There is impunity for violence against Rohingya.

A pervasive culture of impunity persists in Burma, especially for government perpetrators of crimes against ethnic minorities. Violence against Rohingya, whether at the hands of police officers, members of the military, or civilians, has not been properly investigated and perpetrators have not been held accountable. In March 2015, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee reported that “no independent and credible investigations” were conducted into the violence in Rakhine State in 2012 that largely targeted Rohingya people. The state and national government’s unwillingness to investigate past violence complicates any efforts to prevent future attacks.

Rohingya risk further vulnerability as their identification cards expire.

Many Rohingya hold so-called white cards, which serve as temporary identification cards. The Burmese parliament passed the Referendum Law on February 2, 2015, giving white-card holders the right to vote in a constitutional referendum, and the decision met a backlash from extremist groups who protested allowing Rohingya to vote. President Thein Sein’s office issued a statement on February 11 announcing that white cards will expire on March 31 and that white-card holders would be required to surrender their documents to the government by May 31, 2015. In addition to denying white-card holders any form of identification, and therefore denying them temporary legal status and preventing them from accessing some social services, this executive decision also automatically revoked white-card holders’ right to vote in the referendum.

In the town of Sittwe, we saw identical and ubiquitous signs affixed to storefronts and homes expressing opposition to Rohingya voting rights. There is little information about what sort of identification card would replace the white cards for Rohingya, and Rohingya leaders expressed frustration and uncertainty about what would happen after the expiration of the cards. Stripping an already vulnerable population of their only formal identification may leave Rohingya even more susceptible to violence and abuse.



Upcoming Elections and the Way Forward

The early warning signs described above show that Burma is primed for future atrocities against Rohingya, including the possibility of genocide. Forcing an entire community to live under burdensome restrictions and excluding them from opportunities to seek out livelihoods and basic services creates a situation so untenable that a single spark, even unplanned or unintentional, can ignite widespread violence. Without concerted efforts to address the root causes of violence, including discriminatory laws and policies at various levels of government, Burma will remain at risk for future mass violence.

Such a spark could be the national elections planned for fall of 2015. Elections are sometimes trigger points for increased violence, especially in places marked by past violence and long-term oppression. Several Rohingya told us that they had voted in several of the previous elections, but, as of the writing of this report, it remains unclear whether Rohingya would be able to vote in the upcoming national election. If they are denied the right to vote, Rohingya would lose even more of a presence in the political life of the country. We spoke with many people who expressed little hope that the elections would produce significant improvements for Rohingya, even if opposition parties gained greater power.

Signs posted on many storefronts and homes in Sittwe protest Rohingya voting rights. Many Rohingya have “white cards,” or temporary identification cards. The central government announced that the white cards would expire in March 2015, and that white-card holders would not be able to vote in an upcoming election.



Above: A woman stands in an internment camp outside of Sittwe, where living conditions are crowded and services are inadequate. Right: A woman looks out from her home in a camp outside of Sittwe. Many residents have been confined to camps for more than two years.

One activist said that the international community’s relationship with Burma is “structured so that the Burmese government wins increased favors from other countries, no matter if they address Rohingya issues.” Policies regarding Burma should look past the veneer of change in Yangon and press for substantial efforts to address the structural violence against Rohingya. The world is eagerly watching Burma’s transition to democracy, but a Rohingya leader stressed that “the changes with a transition will not be sustainable if they do not include the Rohingya people.” Policymakers within Burma and internationally should address Burma’s transition with an eye to atrocity prevention in order to translate political change into true improvements for the country’s minority groups.

We asked Rohingya survivors of violence what could be done to improve the situation. Some said that the Burmese national government and Rakhine State government should allow more assistance to reach displaced Rohingya. Some called for greater international pressure. Some called for efforts to change hateful mindsets against Rohingya and other Muslims. In the meantime, one woman living in a camp outside Sittwe said, “we can just stay here, pray, and wait.”

ANNEX: Possible Next Steps for Preventing Atrocities

Addressing the early warning signs of genocide requires long-term strategies to counter hate and build resiliency, but from discussions with local authorities and international diplomats, policy planning for further reform does not appear to extend beyond national elections in late 2015. Even though the elections have the potential to further alter the disposition of the government, and could themselves be a trigger for new violence, significant, immediate effort is required by Burma's politicians, religious leaders, and civil society organizers to address policies of discrimination and deep-seated hatred against Rohingya and other minorities. That is the only way to make genuine progress in protecting and re-integrating this community into the political, social, and economic life of the country. Listed below are some intermediate steps that can be taken by the Burmese government and the international community as the people of Burma pursue this ultimate goal.

THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- End all discriminatory laws and policies targeting the Rohingya, including those that restrict the freedom of movement and infringe on marriage rights and family choice.
- Revise the 1982 Citizenship Law so that it conforms to internationally recognized legal standards and does not exclude any ethnic group from citizenship. Clearly and publicly outline the process for applying for citizenship under any new law.
- Ensure that Rohingya living in camps and other restricted areas in Rakhine State have adequate access to food, health care, and education.
- Provide physical protection for humanitarian aid organizations delivering assistance throughout Rakhine State, and allow humanitarian organizations unhindered access to displaced populations so that they can serve more individuals and expand the services provided.
- Investigate attacks on Rohingya and other minority groups, and hold perpetrators accountable in accordance with internationally recognized legal standards.
- Partner with other governments and international agencies to monitor potential violence against Rohingya and other groups.
- Work with other governments and international organizations to coordinate strategies for preventing future violence and mass atrocities.
- Reject, or significantly revise in accordance with international human rights law, discriminatory pieces of legislation designated to purportedly “protect race and religion.”
- Encourage the free flow of information throughout Burma, including by promoting unimpeded access for local and international journalists and investigators to all areas of Rakhine State.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD:

- Condition any agreements—including on preferential trade status, military training and provision of military equipment, concessionary lending by international financial institutions, or new large-scale development packages—on clear benchmarks that must be met by the government regarding increasing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya, protecting Rohingya voting rights, and ensuring that those responsible for anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence are held accountable.
- Articulate a credible set of consequences if the Government of Burma does not adhere to the benchmarks listed above.
- Privately support local civil society and interfaith leaders working to counter hate speech and promote tolerance through the provision of funding and technical assistance.
- Be prepared to introduce a new UN sanctions regime targeting funders and organizers of anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence.
- Press for the establishment of an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burma and ensure that this office can freely access and report on the condition of the Rohingya.



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Over the past two years, the Museum released a statement of concern about the Rohingya, hosted a panel of experts on the issue, and projected photographs that capture their plight on its exterior walls.