

## Commentary from Burma Campaign UK

Thousands of Rohingya refugees from Burma lie starving in boats off the coasts of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Dehydrated and desperate, they are forced to drink their own urine in sight of countries which should be offering them sanctuary. Attention is rightly focussed on these countries for refusing to accept these refugees, and on the traffickers who abandoned them there. These countries must allow the boats to land and give sanctuary to Rohingya refugees. Action also needs to be taken against traffickers and the authorities which co-operate with them.

However, without tackling the root causes of this crisis, Burma's persecution of the Rohingya, there will be no long term solution. The simple truth is that the government of Burma has a policy of trying to drive the Rohingya out of the country. Boat loads of trafficked Rohingya heading for other countries are exactly what they want to see. For President Thein Sein, this is a policy success.

Although President Thein Sein has been praised as a courageous reformer by much of the international community, since becoming President he has significantly stepped up repression of the Rohingya. Two recent briefing papers by the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK explain the twin tracks the Burmese government uses to try to drive the Rohingya from Burma.

One approach is the deliberate impoverishment of the Rohingya. Most attention now is on the appalling conditions in camps for internally displaced people who fled attacks in 2012, but for decades a policy of systematically impoverishing the Rohingya has been pursued.

"Increasing poverty and blocking economic development of the Rohingya is a deliberate and integral part of the Burmese governments Rohingya policy," states the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK.



A Rohingya IDP camp © Steve Gumaer/PRAD May 2013

.....

Their report describes the many ways in which the government applies this policy; “Restrictions on Rohingya travelling from some townships to others, and even within some townships, checkpoints on roads targeting only Rohingya which include body searches and extortion of money, restrictions on marriage through a tax fee requirement, arbitrary taxation on a wide range of activities, even including death of cattle, forced labour, land confiscation, arbitrary arrests and extortion for releasing the person arrested, almost no provision of government services such as health, education or infrastructure in Rohingya areas.”

This policy of deliberate impoverishment has been very successful. Forty-four percent of the population of Rakhine State lives below the poverty line, almost 20 percent higher than the average in most parts of Burma. An irony is that the ethnic Rakhine population has also suffered greatly from the deliberate impoverishment of the Rohingya, and yet many blame the Rohingya, not the government, for their problems.

The second tactic used to try to drive the Rohingya from Burma are human rights violations and repressive laws. These have escalated significantly since Thein Sein became President. The violence against the Rohingya in 2012, in which hundreds died and more than 140,000 Rohingya were forced to flee their homes, was stoked and encouraged for more than a year beforehand. Not only did the government not take action to prevent this, there was active state involvement in the violence, which Human Rights Watch has reported meets the criteria of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.



Ethnic Arakanese with weapons walking away from a village in flames while a soldier stands by. Arakan State, Burma, June 2012. © 2012 Private/HRW

President Thein Sein has asked the United Nations for assistance in deporting all Rohingya. His government has refused to take action against those inciting violence against Rohingya and other Muslims in Burma, and instead defended them. He has refused to conduct a genuine investigation into the violence in 2012. He has proposed a plan to more efficiently apply the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law against the Rohingya, which would result in hundreds of thousands of Rohingya being placed in what are effectively giant concentration camps, awaiting deportation. Most recently President Thein Sein took away one of the last rights that many Rohingya did have, the right to vote.

The government and their sympathisers try to disown responsibility for many of these policies. They want them all to be viewed in isolation. Excuses used are that they are down to local authorities, the state government, local communities, corrupt officials, or badly trained police. You name it, there is an excuse for it. The truth is though, that all these policies are part of a deliberate and systematic policy with the goal of making life in Burma so unbearable that Rohingya people leave the country.

.....

---

The former Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma has also identified this complex web of government policies being used to target the Rohingya. In a report in April 2014 he stated: "...the deprivation of health care is deliberately targeting the Rohingya population, and that the increasingly permanent segregation of that population is taking place. Furthermore, he believes that those human rights violations are connected to discriminatory and persecutory policies against the Rohingya Muslim population, which also include ongoing official and unofficial practices from both local and central authorities restricting rights to nationality, movement, marriage, family, health and privacy."

It's a policy that is working, as the boat loads of refugees off the coasts of Asian countries give testament to. The UN estimates that at least 130,000 Rohingya have fled Burma by boat since 2012. This figure only documents those leaving from northern Rakhine State and Bangladesh, and so is likely to be a significant underestimate. Most estimates put the Rohingya population in Burma at around 800,000 to one million. Since Thein Sein became President, it is possible that as many as twenty percent of the Rohingya population have fled Burma.

The current boat crisis is once again throwing a spotlight on the Rohingya. Those stranded at sea must be rescued and given sanctuary. So far neither local nor western governments seem willing to help do this, let alone address the root causes. President Thein Sein can rest easy. His policy of driving the Rohingya out of Burma is working, and not one country has the courage to call him out on it, let alone take action. He created this crisis, but he's is not being held accountable.



*This article was originally published in the Huffington Post on 18 May 2015.*

The briefing papers by the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK are available here:

- [brouk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The-Humanitarian-Crisis-Of-Rohingya-In-Rakhine-State1.pdf](http://brouk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The-Humanitarian-Crisis-Of-Rohingya-In-Rakhine-State1.pdf)
- [brouk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/International-investigation-urgently-needed-into-human-rights-abuses-aga....pdf](http://brouk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/International-investigation-urgently-needed-into-human-rights-abuses-aga....pdf)

**Published by Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT  
[www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk) [info@burmacampaign.org.uk](mailto:info@burmacampaign.org.uk) tel: 020 7324 4710**



**for Human Rights, Democracy  
& Development in Burma**