



Forum: General Commission 4 - Culture

Issue: The issue of ethnic cleansing with a special emphasis on the Rohingya people of Myanmar

Student Officer: Can Sağtürk

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

When states run into problems with ethnic minorities, which might range from minor unrests to all-out riots, it is their responsibility to calm the situation down. But when they decide that they cannot tolerate the minority, they start to persecute the culture as a whole, rather than prosecuting the responsible. While even this attitude must be frowned upon, it unfortunately is not uncommon for such actions to be followed by an "ethnic cleansing", an act which targets minorities to establish an ethnically and culturally uniform region, by any means necessary. (Except systematically murdering the members of the indigenous group, in which case it would be regarded as genocide.)

The reality that such cruelty still lingers within human minds was recently reminded to everybody when thousands of Rohingya refugees flocked to the borders of Bangladesh. The state of Myanmar was ethnically cleansing its centuries old minority, the Rohingya, and it continues to do it to this date. The international community could only send aid to the refugees and their hosts, but could not stop the atrocity.

Definition of Key Terms

Ethnic Cleansing: While the action itself may not be new, its word is a rather contemporary one. It was created after the series of mass displacements and massacres exercised by both the Serbian and Croatian forces during the Yugoslavian Wars. "... rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area." was the exact definition given to ethnic cleansing by an interim report of United Nations Commission of Experts written regarding the Yugoslavian Wars, during 1990s. To this day, it still is one of the definitions recognized by the UN. However, it has a very different meaning compared to genocide, both from a legal and a conceptual viewpoint.

Forced Displacement: Forcefully moving people living in a specific location to another area, which does not have to be capable of housing the displaced people, nor has to be in the same country. Does not necessarily involve manslaughter of any kind.





Genocide: This term is largely irrelevant to this issue, but must be mentioned to show the difference between itself and ethnic cleansing. Genocide means the systematic destruction of a specific ethnicity or a culture. Forceful displacement has nothing to do with it. Unlike ethnic cleansing, committing genocide is explicitly an international crime and even has its own convention regarding its prevention and punishment.

Rohingya: The name given to the minority living in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. They are descendants of speakers of Indo-Aryan language family, and are stated to have lived there since the 12th century. It is important to note that "Rohingya" is the name of the people and not that of a geographical location or political entity, since the name is commonly confused with other terms concerning the Rohingya people.

Rakhine State: The piece of located at the south-west of Myanmar, predominantly populated by the Rohingya people.

Background Information

To have a reasonable discussion on this topic, it is necessary to know the history behind the events and, more importantly, the current situation.

How did Ethnic Cleansing Originated?

The oldest documented ethnic cleansing, thus presumed to be the first, point towards the Assyrian Empire. The ancient state forced millions of members of different ethnic groups to resettle somewhere else than what was then claimed to be their land. Even though they were cleansing indigenous groups, it was loosely based on ethnicity and originated more from religious strife. Today, they are on par, practiced culture and accepted ethnic identity playing as significant role as religion.

International Law

Ethnic cleansing is currently not an international crime. That does not mean however, actions constituting it are not. The murder of innocent civilians during wartime and forced displacement without a legal reason are both crimes recognized by Geneva Convention, the founding treaty of the UN. The problem is, these crimes does not necessarily reflect the racist or overzealous intent lying within the heart of ethnic cleansing, and hence have relatively lesser punishments.

Because of all this, ethnic cleansing is considered a descriptive word, rather than a legal term, causing the evaluation of some crimes to fall into a limbo. Ethnic cleansing is considered a crime against humanity by many, but it is not legally recognized, causing fierce debates as to what kind of punishment must be given to the perpetrators of such horrors. This situation eventually leads to trials being constantly delayed, meaning the verdict is decided on years later, sometimes even decades.



Are There More to Come?

It is not a secret cultural strife originates from a thick ultra-nationalistic mindset, which



seems to be getting hold of even Europe, a continent which has lost millions of its children to a similar conflict arisen from a similar ideology. It cannot be said that we will be witnessing another atrocity in the near future, but it does not seem unlikely either. As more and more states embrace the idea of superiority over others nations, chances of such an incident happening increase tremendously as well. The decisions delegates are going to make will play a most significant role at resolving future of ethnic strife.

The Rohingya

Rohingya's History with Myanmar

The relationship between Rohingya and the State of Myanmar mainly originates from and dates back to British colonialism. It was a common colonial practice to give power to minorities in order to invoke hatred between indigenous ethnic groups, causing the natives to ignore their overlords. That was the case with Myanmar, then called Burma, as well. The Rohingya were given significant positions within the colonial government after supporting the British during the World War II. The numbers were hugely disproportionate to how many of them lived in Burma compared to the majority Burmese population, hence placing the seeds of animosity between two different racial groups.

After Myanmar declared its independence, the situation for Rohingya took a turn for the worse. The State denied recognizing them as citizens, virtually rendering them stateless. The heavily nationalistic agenda of the military junta governing at the time, which had come into power through a coup fourteen years after the liberation from the colonial rule, did not help solving the issue, only sow more hatred. All of these were happening amidst endless harassment, often taking the form of arbitrary killings, torture, and rape.

What is witnessed today in Myanmar, is not the first of its kind either. Rohingya have been forcibly displaced for decades now, and this is the fourth time an incident against them was so enormous and sinister that it was called an ethnic cleansing. This time it got international attention due to its scale.

Current Situation of Rohingya

To this very day, Rohingya have been stateless and suffer from intentional terror caused by Myanmar. They are restricted from practicing their own religion, can not possess more than two children, are exempt from basic services and their government takes no responsibility as to supplying them with necessities.

This whole incident started when an insurgent group called "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" attacked police stations to protest their state's attitude towards their people. It was far from peaceful however, as the group killed twelve police officers in the name of "advocating their rights". Myanmar, instead of prosecuting specifically those who were responsible, launched a brutal retaliation to the whole Rakhine State, hence everybody within it, starting the most dreadful ethnic cleansing operation in the country's history.



Myanmar continues to cleanse the Rohingya out of Rakhine. Burning villages, raiding houses and crushing anything that could be remotely perceived as an obstacle in process. Currently, there are approximately 600,000 displaced Rohingya, most of whom has sought refuge in Bangladesh – also Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to a lesser extent. While there are aid packages delivered through airplanes, there has been no tangible step to end the barbarity.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Myanmar: Mentioned countless times in this document, they are the perpetrators of the most recent ethnic cleansing. Interestingly, they state that their forces are cautious to not to harm innocent civilians and infrastructure, a statement which is obviously false. It is also important to note that in Myanmar, even though the de facto head of the state is elected democratically, is mostly governed by the military, which also is the entity undertaking the current campaign.

Bangladesh: The country which hosts most of the Rohingya refugees. Unfortunately, it lacks the capacity to fully support them as the nation already is overcrowded beyond measure.

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: The insurgent group behind the attack which triggered the brutal



counter-attack of Myanmar.

United Nations Security Council: The most powerful UN body, one of the responsibilities of which is taking care of such atrocities. Ironically, it has a famous history of failing to act when such times come, this time being no exception. The Council did not even issue an arms embargo to Myanmar.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

There unfortunately has not been a solid attempt to solve the problem once and for all, mostly due to the fact that the incident is happening within a single country. This limits what can be done from



outside as many international laws restrain other states from interfering the domestic policies of a nation, to protect its sovereignty. The other aspect is a rather heartless one, and a prominent one nonetheless. Because the cleansing is taking place within only one state, others simply do not see the need to interfere.

Possible Solutions

1. To prevent further cleansing, it is possible to amend the Geneva Convention or its protocols. Unfortunately, the resolutions written by the General Assembly cannot be binding, and hence cannot amend the Convention directly. However, that does not mean the GA is not capable of recommending amendment and what should be amended.
2. About the issue of Rohingya, UN Security Council is still one of the best options to resolve the problem, as they possess the power to easily cripple the operation Myanmar is executing right now. Once again, the GA has to call upon the Security Council and advise what must be done, meaning that they cannot directly intervene.
3. It was mentioned that Bangladesh cannot sustain the refugees at the moment. Measures must be taken to take the weight off of them or have them capable of sustaining 600,000 refugees.
4. UN and UNHCR can shift some of their focus towards the Rohingya, as there are many who could benefit from their aid.

Useful Links For Further Research

- <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/17966/Abdelkader.pdf;sequence=1>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2017/09/13/no-simple-solution-to-the-rohingya-crisis-in-myanmar/>
- <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>
- <http://www.history.com/topics/ethnic-cleansing>
- <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf> (You definitely do not need to read all of this, just the relevant parts would help you tackling this issue.)
- <http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/whic/ReferenceDetailsPage/DocumentToolsPortletWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&jsid=75898fe2d961db962eed4e93afd43f3&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CCX3434600118&u=pl2660&zid=1e82111b7979345bd36ecb3f5682deb2>

Bibliography

“United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.html.

Staff, Al Jazeera. “Myanmar: Who Are the Rohingya?” *Humanitarian Crises | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 5 Feb. 2018, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/rohingya-muslims-170831065142812.html.



MUNESCO

History.com Staff. "Ethnic Cleansing." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/ethnic-cleansing.

Acquaviva, Guido. "Forced Displacement and International Crimes." May 2011, pp. 9–10.

Engy Abdelkader Rutgers University. "The History of the Persecution of Myanmar's Rohingya." *The Conversation*, 2 Mar. 2018, theconversation.com/the-history-of-the-persecution-of-myanmars-rohingya-84040.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) - Norwegian Refugee Council. *IDMC » How Many Internally Displaced Rohingya Are Trapped inside Myanmar?*, www.internal-displacement.org/library/expert-opinion/2017/how-many-internally-displaced-rohingya-are-trapped-inside-myanmar.

Roth, Richard. "UN Security Council Finally Losing Patience with Myanmar." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 28 Sept. 2017, edition.cnn.com/2017/09/28/asia/myanmar-un-security-council/index.html.

Allen, Kate. "The UN Has Failed the Rohingya – It's Time for Every Nation to Step up and End This Horror." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 29 Sept. 2017, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/29/un-has-failed-therohingya-time-every-nation-step-end-horror/.

"How the Geneva Conventions Are Changing." *The Globe and Mail*, 27 Mar. 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/how-he-geneva-conventions-are-changing/article1379880/.