

Situation Report on the Rohingya People in Arakan State of Burma

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There are over three million Rohingya people, living both inside and outside Myanmar (Burma). Due to widespread persecution, prejudice and ethnic cleansing inside Myanmar, nearly a half of the population (over 1.5 million) have been compelled to live in exile, particularly in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Malaysia, and Thailand. Rejection of Citizenship: The Burmese military regime has declared the Rohingya non-nationals or non-citizens. The Burma Citizenship Law of 1982, which violates several fundamental principles of the customary international law, has reduced them to the status of "Stateless";

Colonization of the Rohingya Homeland: There is a systemic program by the ruling Myanmar regime to alter the demography of Rohingya homeland of North Arakan. This includes extermination of the Rohingya population, confiscation and demolition of Rohingya properties, and construction of Pagodas, monasteries and Government buildings on the sites of demolished mosques and Muslim shrines, and confiscated Rohingya properties. As if these measures are not enough to obliterate Muslim identity, new non-Rohingya settlements with Pagodas and Buddhist monasteries are being built at every nook and corner of the North Arakan, Rohingyas are compelled by Government officials to "contribute" money, food, material, or free labor to state-sponsored projects of colonization and de-Muslimization of Arakan. In the name of setting up "model villages" Rohingya properties are being handed out to outsiders while the original Rohingya owners are forcibly displaced. There is also a concerted effort to rename Muslim towns and places with Buddhist names so that Muslim or Islamic heritage of these places is lost forever to future generations. De-Muslimization: Of particular concern is the fact that as of 2004, Rohingya villagers are forced to practice Buddhism and take part in various Buddhist festivities. As has been confirmed lately by the US State Department Report on Religious Freedom Report, November 8, 2005, there is a Burmese Government campaign to convert or "Burmanize" ethnic minority regions through coercion or otherwise. The campaign has coincided with increased military presence in the region. The SPDC troops have intensified their attacks on the Rohingya and Islam. In particular, they target the Rohingya Ulema (religious leaders), women and youngsters. Last year, in Maungdaw Township, after a Rohingya girl was raped by Buddhists, when Rohingya religious leaders condemned the matter, they were arrested. Subsequently, one of the religious teachers was tortured to death in detention. Most of the Rohingya-community leaders are now serving long prison times on false charges, related to citizenship. Others are forced to opt for a life of uncertainty as refugees outside. Mosques and Muslim holy shrines have been demolished all over Arakan. All these crimes are done so as to efface Islamic heritage and Muslim identity of the Arakan. To expedite this criminal objective, often times Buddhist-Muslim riots are engineered that invariably result in heavy losses to Muslim lives and properties. Anti-Muslim propagandas are routinely fed in the government controlled media. As of February 2003, books and taped speeches, insulting Islam and Muslims, have become quite common and are being openly sold and distributed. Even Muslim cemeteries are not immune from desecration and abuses of the government. Buddhist dead bodies are now routinely buried at Muslim cemeteries, while the Rohingya are forced to pay the funeral fees. Lack of Religious Freedom The SPDC restricts most Islamic religious services and has frequently abused the right to religious freedom. Muslim students attending state-run elementary schools are required to recite Buddhist prayer daily. Authorities often refuse requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Muslim holidays and restrict the number of Muslims that can gather in one place. In 2002, local authorities scheduled demolition of nearly 40 mosques and religious community centers in Arakan. Thirteen mosques were destroyed before the authorities desisted at the request of the UNHCR. The Government subsequently gave permission to repair existing mosques in some area. However, to ensure that destroyed mosques were not rebuilt, they were replaced with government-owned buildings, monasteries, and Buddhist temples. Rohingyas are not allowed to construct new places of worship. They experience tremendous difficulties in obtaining permission to repair existing mosques. They cannot import religious literature into the country. Muslim religious leaders are routinely arrested or harassed. All these are done meticulously so that within a few years the Rohingya will lose touch with their Islamic heritage. Depopulation: The SPDC authorities have been making efforts to "dilute" Rohingya population by practicing what may more appropriately be called genocidal campaigns to "ethnically cleanse" the Rohingyas from their ancestral lands. Frequently, they launch drive operation, create communal riots, and make forced relocation to sweep off the Muslim population. They force Buddhist-Burmans to relocate into Muslim territories. Certain townships, such as Thandwe, Gwa, and Taung-gut, have been declared "Muslim-free-zones" by government decree in 1983. There are still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, but new Muslims are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Muslims are no longer permitted to reside in Taung-gut and Gwa. In January of 2005, Government authorities led Buddhist monks to attack Rohingyas in Kyauk Pyu just before the Muslim Eid holidays. Two Muslims were killed and Muslim homes and properties were destroyed. In May 2004, local Buddhist villagers in Kyun Su Township attacked and destroyed properties of 14 Muslim families. Despite a complaint from Muslim leaders, the Government did not take any action to stop the violence. Many immoral and deplorable measures (like denying rights to or delaying marriage) are also routinely applied by the Government agencies against the Rohingya population to reduce and control their birth rates. But more appalling is the fact that rape of Rohingya women by Buddhists (civilians and military alike), committed in public or in detention camps or training centers, is encouraged and included as an official military strategy to depopulate Rohingyas from their ancestral homes. Because of the devastating effect rape has on the Rohingya community, rape is becoming an effective weapon to terrorize the Rohingya community and convince them to flee or leave Burma. It is the most horrendous and degrading way of "Ethnic Cleansing". Unfortunately, without any international agency to monitor and take effective measures to stop this crime against humanity, this method of "ethnic cleansing" is succeeding. Confiscation

of land: Large tracts of Rohingya farmlands, including Waqf (Endowed) properties, have been confiscated. The Rohingya villagers are frequently uprooted and relocated from their ancestral land. Hundreds and thousands of confiscated lands belonging to the Rohingya have been distributed among the Buddhist settlers who are invited from both inside and outside the Arakan, including nearby Bangladesh. Some of the confiscated lands are used for military establishments. These atrocious measures have forced the Rohingya to become increasingly landless, internally displaced and to eventually starve - forcing them out to cross the border into nearby Bangladesh for life and shelter.

Militarization: The North Arakan has turned into a militarized zone with increased violations of human rights. Forced labor still exists despite increasing pressure from ILO. The armed forces routinely confiscate property, cash and crop from the Rohingya. The Rohingya people are exploited as forced laborers into building military establishment, roads, bridges, embankments, pagodas, schools dispensaries and ponds without earning any wage. They are not only forced to "Contribute" their farmlands, agricultural tools, cattle, house-building materials and funds to the new settlers but also forced to pay for Buddhist festivals held every so often. The forced labor situation has become so excruciating that the Rohingya have been rendered jobless and shelter-less.

Restriction of Movement: There is restriction on movement of the Rohingya inside Myanmar. They cannot go outside the Arakan, nor are they allowed freedom of movement within Arakan from one place to another without permission from the local authority. This humiliating restriction has further been tightened by the regime. No Rohingya is permitted to travel to Rangoon or Myanmar (Burma) proper even on serious medical ground. This inhuman measure has forcibly divided many Rohingya families. It has seriously affected them in all their national activities—social, cultural, religious and educational.

Deprivation of Rights to Education: Since promulgation of the new Burma Citizenship Law in 1982, the Rohingya students are denied their basic rights to education. The Government reserves secondary education for citizens only. The Rohingya do not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education. They cannot pursue higher studies while professional courses are also barred to them. It is important to point out that all professional institutes are situated outside Arakan. Thus, the Rohingya students are unable to study there because of such travel prohibition. Rohingya students, who passed the selection tests and got formal admission into various institutions of learning, located in Rangoon and Burma proper, are unable to pursue their studies as they are disallowed to travel. The Rohingya are restricted from even religious learning. Many local Imams (religious leaders) have been arrested for conducting group classes or prayers. In recent years, the Rohingya students are prohibited from even going to Akyab (Sittwe), the capital of Arakan, to attend Sittwe University for their studies. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya students face uncertainty with their future studies. These draconian measures, barring the Rohingyas from attending university and professional institutes, are marginalizing them as the most illiterate section within the Myanmar population. They cannot find jobs in civil service, military and most professional areas requiring higher education, and are, therefore, forced to embrace a very bleak future.

Restriction on Marriage of Rohingya: Since 1988, the Government has permitted only 3 marriages per year per village in the primary Rohingya townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw in northern Arakan State. Later the Government extended this edict to other townships of the Arakan. In today's Myanmar, imposition of restriction on marriage between Rohingya couples has further intensified resulting in human rights violations. For example, not a single marriage contract was allowed in May 2005. Without huge sums of bribe money, unbearable for most Rohingyas to pay, even an ordinary permission to get married is impossible to obtain. Yet, after such payments, thousands of applications for the permission to get married remain pending in Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships. But, today, the condition of marriage is terrifying. The SPDC Government requires that every Rohingya be registered before they marry. The women applicants are then required to attend a government-sponsored training program in camps and centers that can last for 3 or more days, away from their family members. It is in these camps and centers, that Rohingya women are raped by people affiliated with the camps and centers. These camps have, in essence, become the slave camps with the only difference that women are then returned to their families. This practice is done in order to humiliate and terrorize these women and their family, and force them to leave Burma and migrate to Bangladesh.

Arbitrary Taxation: Traditionally, Rohingyas are a farming community that depends on agricultural produce and breeding of cattle and fowls as domestic livestock. They are taxed heavily on food grains, including their main staple food — rice, and various agricultural produce. Recently the authorities have imposed a new taxation that included taxes levied on everything that a Rohingya may possess from shrimp, vegetable, tree, animal or bird (for cow, buffalos, goats, and fowl) to roof and house. Even for a minor repair of their homes, they are forced to pay tax. They are required to report birth and death of a livestock to the authority while paying a fee. The Rohingya have to pay taxes on everything, from cutting bamboos or woods in the jungle to fishing in the rivers and breeding of animas at homesteads.

Other forms of Human Rights Abuses: Widespread violations of human rights against the ethnic "Rohingya" continue unabated even in places not out of the sight of the UNHCR. In fact, there is no security of life, property, honor and dignity of the Rohingya. Extra-judicial killing and summary executions, humiliating movement restriction, rape of women, arrest and torture, forced labor, forced relocation, confiscation of moveable and immovable properties, religious sacrileges, etc., are regular occurrences in Arakan. As a result, severe poverty, unemployment, lack of education and official discrimination are negatively affecting every Rohingya, especially its youths and workforces. The future of the community remains bleak and exodus into Bangladesh has become a recurrent theme.

Forced Eviction and Refugee Exodus: Forced eviction of the Rohingya villagers is launched occasionally throughout the year. Many centuries-old Rohingya settlements have already been uprooted throughout the North Arakan. The exodus of the Rohingya into Bangladesh constitutes human rights violations. They are merely branded as "economic migrants" without realizing their unbearable plights. The new arrivals often face arrests and/or "pushback" from the Bangladesh security forces. Due to poor condition within the refugee camps, sometimes tense situation has surfaced between camp authorities and the refugees, resulting in the detention, arrest and punishment of many refugees.

Refugees in Bangladesh: In Bangladesh today there are approximately 20,000 "documented" Rohingya refugees, out of a quarter million that had arrived in 1991-2,

escaping military persecution in Burma. They live in two camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara. Most of the original refugees were forcibly repatriated into the lawless country of Burma, where they continue to face all sorts of human rights abuse in the hands of Myanmar authority. The remaining refugees have refused to return because they fear human rights abuses, including religious persecution. Unfortunately, the condition within those two refugee camps is not great and lack adequate facilities for a healthy living. Children are deprived of their basic education and healthcare. Besides, hundreds of thousands of "undocumented" Rohingya are living outside these two camps in sub-human condition with all their uncertainty. Many refugees are camped at a roadside facility at Teknaf, a border town in south-east end of Bangladesh under unpleasant conditions. Unfortunately, there is no help from any quarter for these refugees. These refugees are also blocked from nominal opportunities of re-settlement in a third country or settlement within Bangladesh. The NGOs, international human rights and humanitarian bodies are not allowed to visit the areas of undocumented refugees. Situation in other countries: There is no international agency to look after the interest of the stateless Rohingya. Because of their lack of legal identity, they are not allowed to work or hold work permit by any name. An estimated 15-20,000 Rohingyas work as illegal workers in Thailand. Their children are deprived of basic human rights. In other parts of the world the situation is not much better because of lack of their citizenship. Final Words: There is a very systemic, organized, concerted and criminal design by the SPDC authorities, which can appropriately be termed as ethnic cleansing, genocide and socio-cultural degradation of the Rohingya people in Arakan state of Myanmar. If the process of marginalization and gross violations of human rights against the Rohingya people are allowed to continue there won't be a single Rohingya left in Arakan within the next fifty years. They will be an extinct community, much like the fate of the native population of Tasmania. Since 1999, the USA has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. It is high time that the world body take appropriate measures so that the basic human rights of the Rohingya people are protected and guaranteed under the UN supervision. Date: December 20, 2005 _____ Dr. Habib Siddiqui (saeva@aol.com) is an anti-war activist.

His essays appear in a number of websites and newspapers. He has written six books.

His book on "Islamic Wisdom" is now available in the United States and Canada