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➤ **FORCED CONSCRIPTION OF ROHINGYAS : A BARRIER TO
PEACE IN MYANMAR'S QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC
FEDERALISM**

➤ **IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. KAWSER AHMED**

➤ **AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES FOR ROHINGYA CAUSE**

— In this Issue

- Forced Conscription of Rohingyas : A Barrier to Peace in Myanmar's Quest for Democratic Federalism 02
- In conversation with Dr. Kawser Ahmed 07
- American Bar Association Advocates for Rohingya Cause 12
- A Voice of Courage: Razia Sultana's Fight for Rohingya Women 14
- ARNA's Recent Advocacy Activities 18
- Press Release: APhR Urges Indonesia to Act Swiftly to Protect Stranded Rohingya Refugees 20
- Press Release: Urgent Statement on the Rohingya Crisis and the Need for Regional Protection 21

Editorial

Forced Conscription of Rohingyas

A Barrier to Peace in Myanmar's Quest for Democratic Federalism



Forced conscription of Rohingyas by both the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar's military adds a troubling layer to Myanmar's ongoing crisis. By coercing members of the Rohingya minority into military service, both factions exacerbate the challenges of an already complex situation, threatening prospects for a peaceful resolution and undermining the possibility of a united, democratic Myanmar. Rohingyas are being exploited as human shields by both the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, placing them in extreme danger amid ongoing conflict and intensifying their vulnerability and suffering.

Background and Historical Context

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist society, have faced severe repression for decades, particularly since the military junta gained power in 1962. Discrimination, exclusion from citizenship, and systematic violence led to widespread Rohingya displacement, notably following the violent military crackdown in 2017, which prompted nearly a million to flee to Bangladesh. Today, those remaining in Myanmar, primarily in Rakhine State, face extreme restrictions on movement, forced to flee from place of origin, limited access to education and healthcare, and, increasingly, forced conscription into military roles. The Arakan Army (AA), established in 2009, initially garnered local support for advocating Rakhine State's autonomy and seeking greater rights for its largely Buddhist Rakhine population.



Photo courtesy: Free Malaysia Today

However, in recent years, the AA has been reported to forcibly recruit Rohingyas to bolster its forces. Similarly, the Tatmadaw has continued this practice, treating the Rohingya as expendable soldiers, further exploiting a community already on the brink of survival. These forced conscriptions threaten to prolong Myanmar's crisis by alienating the Rohingya and weakening any foundation for peace.

Forced Conscription as a Human Rights Abuse

Forced conscription represents a severe human rights violation. When the Tatmadaw and AA forcibly conscript Rohingya, they breach international standards that protect civilians from military coercion and abuse. The practice exploits the Rohingya's vulnerable status and perpetuates a cycle of suffering, trauma, and displacement.

Forced conscription removes individuals from their families, exposing them to physical harm and depriving them of safety and livelihood. Reports indicate that some Rohingya conscripts are used for labor-intensive tasks, while others are forced onto the frontlines, increasing their risk of death and injury.

Impact on Myanmar's Crisis and Prospects for Peace

Entrenched Distrust Between Ethnic Groups: The forced recruitment of Rohingya drives a wedge between ethnic groups in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State. The AA's tactics risk alienating both Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya, undermining any sense of ethnic solidarity that could be crucial for a united peace process. The Rohingya, treated as expendable assets rather than allies, are left with few reasons to trust either the Myanmar military or the AA, creating a situation in which the Rohingya become increasingly marginalized.

For the AA, which has positioned itself as a force for ethnic autonomy, the forced conscription of Rohingya threatens its legitimacy. By mirroring the oppressive practices of the Tatmadaw, the AA risks alienating local support and casting doubt on its commitment to autonomy, justice, and ethnic unity. This dynamic exacerbates ethnic tensions, weakening the possibility of cooperation and trust needed for peace.

Hindrance to Federalism and Democratic Aspirations: Myanmar's crisis is fueled by a longstanding struggle for autonomy among its various ethnic groups. Ethnic minority groups, including the Kachin, Karen, Shan, and others, have called for a federal democratic system to ensure equal representation and protect minority rights.

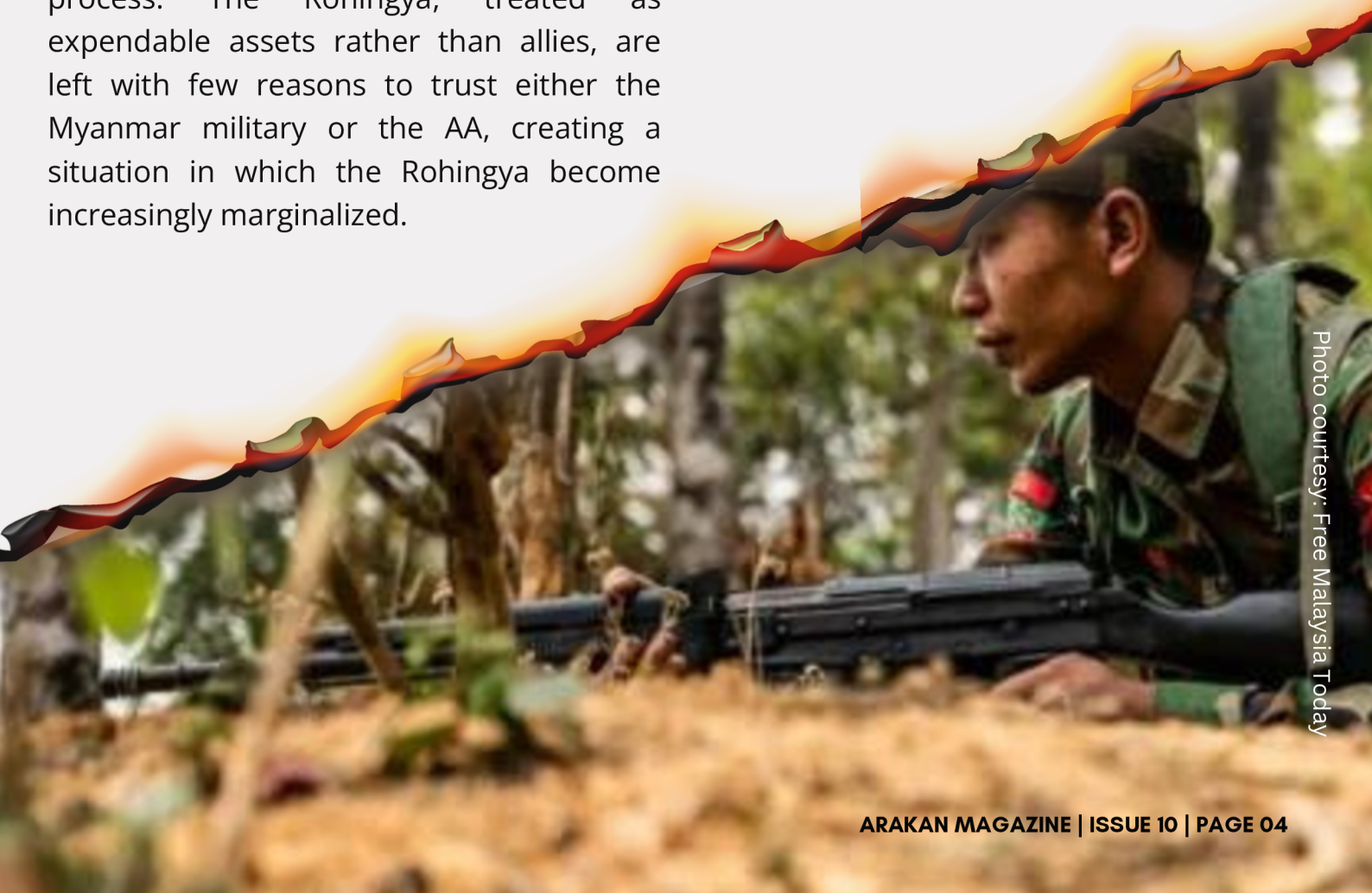


Photo courtesy: Free Malaysia Today

However, the forced recruitment of Rohingya undermines these aspirations, signaling that minority groups could still be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation even under an ostensibly democratic framework. The Rohingya, systematically denied citizenship and basic rights, are now caught in a cycle of violence that further diminishes their trust in any future governance model. For Myanmar's ethnic minorities, federalism is seen as a path to fair representation. Still, with forced conscription in play, particularly involving a historically oppressed group like the Rohingya, federalism appears increasingly elusive, and minority rights are left in jeopardy. These dynamics complicate national reconciliation efforts and prolong Myanmar's path toward stability.

Loss of International Support: Forced conscription damages Myanmar's international standing, limiting its access to diplomatic support, financial aid, and humanitarian assistance. The international community, which has criticized Myanmar's human rights record, views the ongoing abuse of Rohingya as further evidence of the country's human rights crisis. This has led to sanctions, economic isolation, and a reduction in international engagement, which only deepens the crisis by limiting Myanmar's avenues for external assistance. For the AA, international condemnation of forced recruitment risks isolating it from potential diplomatic allies. While initially supported by some international observers for its stance against the Tatmadaw, the AA's participation in forced conscription of Rohingya diminishes its credibility. As scrutiny grows, both the AA and Tatmadaw could face increased pressure, pushing them further from diplomatic resolutions and prolonging the cycle of violence.

Moving Toward a Resolution: A genuine resolution to Myanmar's crisis requires a commitment from all parties to uphold human rights, end forced conscription and respect the autonomy and dignity of all ethnic groups, including the Rohingya. Both the Tatmadaw and the AA must cease the practice of forced conscription and instead seek peaceful methods for building trust within their communities. Several steps could help mitigate this crisis:



1.International Oversight and Monitoring: Internationally supervised peace processes and human rights monitoring could help deter forced conscription practices and foster accountability.

2.Community Engagement and Trust-Building: Involving Rohingya leaders and other ethnic representatives in peace talks would help lay the groundwork for inclusive governance.

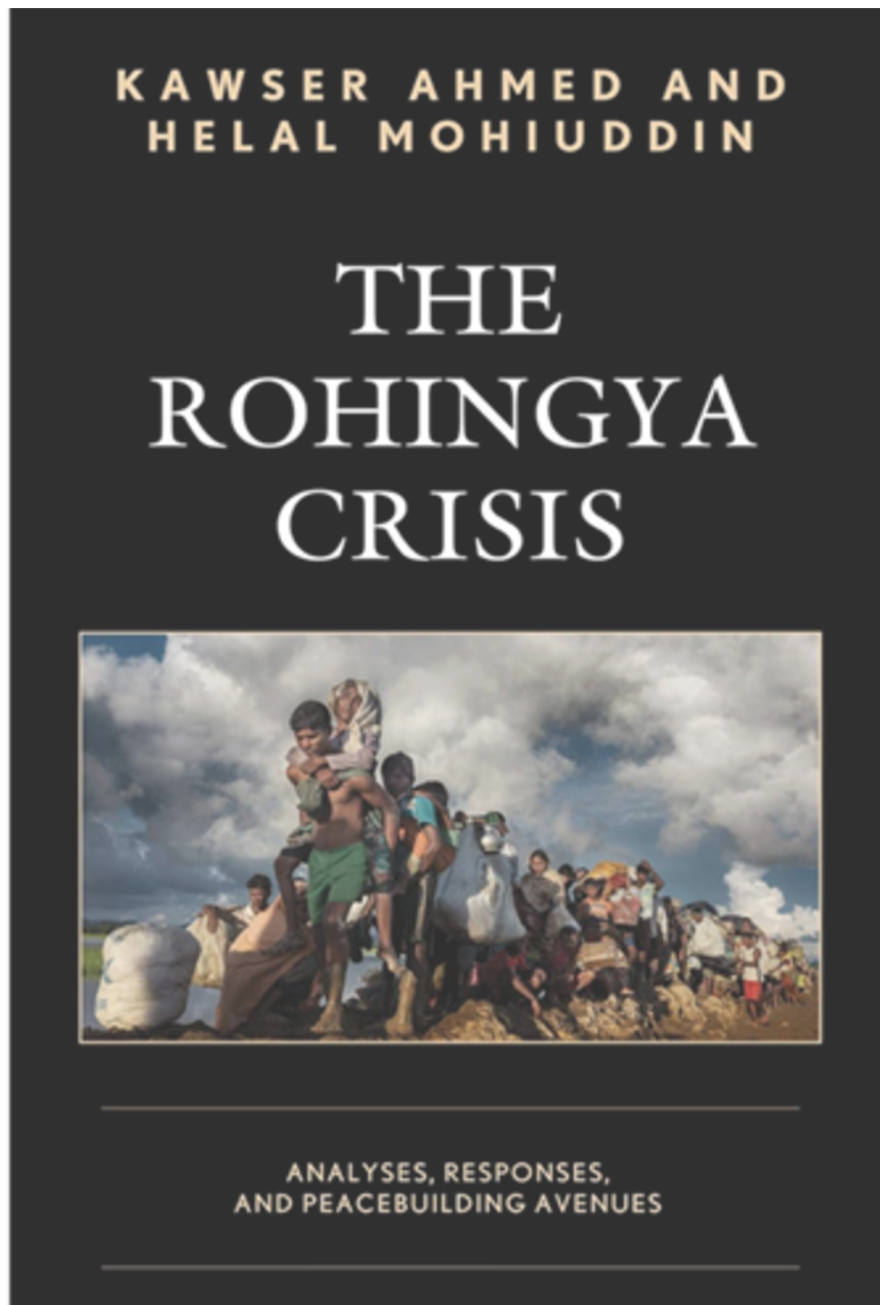
3.Human Rights Protections: Legal protections, overseen by neutral international actors, are essential to ensure the safety of all ethnic groups within Myanmar and bolster confidence in the peace process.

4.Pathways to Citizenship and Inclusion for Rohingya: Addressing the Rohingya's legal status is crucial. Granting citizenship and ensuring access to education, healthcare, and employment would mitigate exploitation and foster inclusion.

Conclusion

The forced conscription of Rohingya by the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military stands as a significant obstacle to peace. This exploitation of a marginalized group further complicates Myanmar's path toward a democratic future, fueling distrust and threatening ethnic unity. Without a concerted effort to end forced recruitment, respect ethnic minority rights, and foster genuine federalism, Myanmar's crisis will only deepen, and the prospects for a peaceful, inclusive resolution will remain out of reach. The road to peace and stability in Myanmar depends on the protection of human rights, the cessation of exploitative practices, and a commitment to equitable governance that includes and protects all ethnic groups.





IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. KAWSER AHMED



Dr. Kawser Ahmed, an esteemed educator and researcher in peace and conflict studies, brings a unique perspective to the understanding of social conflict and its peaceful transformation. His experience in UN peacekeeping operations in conflict zones has honed his skills in peacebuilding, mediation, and transformative dialogue, particularly in resolving inter-group conflict. His research on community-focused conflict intervention, refugee crisis (with emphasis on the Rohingya crisis), and youth extremism in Western and non-Western contexts has further enriched his understanding of these complex issues. He currently serves as an adjunct Professor at the University of Winnipeg (Pol Sc) and the University of Manitoba (NRI), and leads the Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada in Winnipeg, MB, Canada.

You can find more details about him here: <https://www.kawserahmed.website>

What motivated you to write and examine the Rohingya genocide, with a focus on repatriation?

My motivation to write and examine the Rohingya genocide, particularly focusing on repatriation, stems from a deep commitment to understanding and addressing the complexities of forced migration, mass atrocity, and human rights violations. The Rohingya crisis represents one of the most significant humanitarian issues of our time, characterized by systematic persecution, statelessness, and displacement. This crisis is not just a distant tragedy, but a pressing issue that demands immediate attention and action. It also shows how international communities can prefer to address one conflict over others despite the humanitarian toll is equal or more.

My work in peacebuilding and mediation in conflict zones has exposed me to the specific challenges faced by the Rohingya community. The enduring suffering of displaced communities and the often-inadequate response from the international community have fueled my desire to analyze the crisis, especially for the Western audience. The challenges of repatriation, as a durable solution, are fraught with political, social, and security issues. After seven years with no hope in sight, the situation is increasingly frustrating. My aim is to delve into these complexities, advocate for a rights-based approach to repatriation, and contribute to the ongoing discourse on justice, accountability, and sustainable peace for the Rohingya people.

What new information did you learn about the Rohingya people that you did not know before through your research and interviews?

Through my research and interviews, several critical insights emerged about the Rohingya people that deepened my understanding of their plight, particularly concerning their resilience, the vulnerability of children, the risks faced by female children, human trafficking, and the potential for radicalization.

Resiliency of the People: One of the most striking aspects of my research was witnessing the incredible resilience of the Rohingya community. Despite facing systemic persecution, statelessness, and living in extremely harsh conditions in refugee camps, the Rohingya have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt and endure. Their sense of community, cultural identity, and hope for a dignified future have persisted despite the overwhelming challenges, indicating an enduring strength that often goes unnoticed in broader narratives of victimhood. This resilience is not just a survival strategy, but a testament to the human spirit and the power of community in the face of adversity.

Children at Stake: The plight of Rohingya children became a particularly heartbreaking discovery. Many children in refugee camps are deprived of primary education, healthcare, and the safety needed for healthy development. These conditions make them highly susceptible to exploitation, trauma, and a future devoid of opportunities. The lack of access to formal education means that an entire generation risk being lost, perpetuating the cycle of poverty, marginalization, and displacement.

Highly Vulnerable Female Children in Camps: Female children, in particular, face heightened vulnerabilities in the camps. They are at risk of gender-based violence, early marriage, and trafficking, with many experiencing multiple layers of trauma from displacement and insecurity. The lack of safe spaces and protection mechanisms exacerbates their exposure to harm, making addressing their needs through targeted interventions crucial.

Human Trafficking: My research uncovered the alarming prevalence of human trafficking within the Rohingya community, both within refugee camps and during their perilous journeys to seek safety. Traffickers exploit the desperate circumstances of Rohingya families, luring them with false promises of employment or safety, only to subject them to forced labor, sexual exploitation, or even organ trafficking. This exploitation further compounds the trauma experienced by the community, deepening their vulnerabilities.

Risk of Radicalization to Violence: The protracted nature of the crisis and the lack of meaningful solutions have created fertile ground for the radicalization of some Rohingya individuals, particularly the youth (check the increasing violence between RSO and ARSA in camps). The sense of injustice, hopelessness, and abandonment can make them susceptible to extremist narratives that promise empowerment or retribution. This potential for radicalization is not just a future risk, but a current reality that underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of the crisis and providing avenues for meaningful engagement, education, and livelihood opportunities to prevent the escalation of violence and extremism.

These insights highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by the Rohingya community and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, rights-based approaches to support their resilience, protect the most vulnerable, and foster sustainable solutions.

Given the recent events in Bangladesh, the Arakan, and the continued coup in Myanmar, what suggestions do you have for a successful repatriation to take place?

Considering the recent events in Bangladesh, Arakan, and the ongoing coup in Myanmar, a multifaceted and coordinated approach is crucial for successful Rohingya repatriation. Here are several suggestions:

Regional Peace Initiative: A regional peace initiative led by ASEAN, with support from South Asian neighbors, is vital. This initiative should actively engage Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations and the National Unity Government (NUG) to create dialogue channels.

International Engagement: The international community, particularly the UN and Western powers, must put consistent pressure on Myanmar's military regime while facilitating negotiations for safe repatriation. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure should aim to create a conducive environment for dialogue.

Involvement of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs): Given that EAOs like the Arakan Army have gained ground, their involvement in peace negotiations is essential. They can help establish localized security arrangements that enable safe and voluntary repatriation.

Humanitarian Access and Safe Zones: Establishing humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas and setting up safe zones for returning Rohingya populations can help build confidence in repatriation.

Empowering the National Unity Government (NUG): Efforts should be made to strengthen the NUG's credibility and engagement with international actors to create a legitimate alternative to Myanmar's military regime, advocating for Rohingya rights and repatriation.

These strategies must work simultaneously, prioritizing dialogue, humanitarian aid, and pressure on the military regime while fostering collaboration between regional actors and the international community to create sustainable conditions for Rohingya repatriation.

You also do much work in peacebuilding. How can civil society in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya community, integrate peacebuilding into its efforts?

The complete absence of a functioning civil society in Myanmar presents a significant challenge to peacebuilding efforts, especially for the Rohingya community. In the past, I tried to connect with Rotarians in Myanmar; however, with no avail. However, there are still potential avenues to explore:

Diaspora Advocacy: The Rohingya diaspora can play a crucial role in peacebuilding by advocating for their rights internationally, raising awareness, and lobbying for diplomatic interventions.

Digital Platforms: Social media and other digital forums can create a virtual civil society by building solidarity, sharing narratives, and organizing peaceful advocacy.

Collaboration with Regional NGOs: Establishing partnerships with NGOs in neighboring countries (e.g., Bangladesh and Thailand) can facilitate cross-border peacebuilding initiatives, education, and capacity-building programs.

International Civil Society Networks: Leveraging global civil society organizations to support the Rohingya cause can bring international attention, resources, and pressure for change in Myanmar.

These efforts can help maintain momentum for peacebuilding even in the face of severe restrictions within Myanmar.

What tips do you have for activists and scholars in the Rohingya community who want to advance the conversation about repatriation?

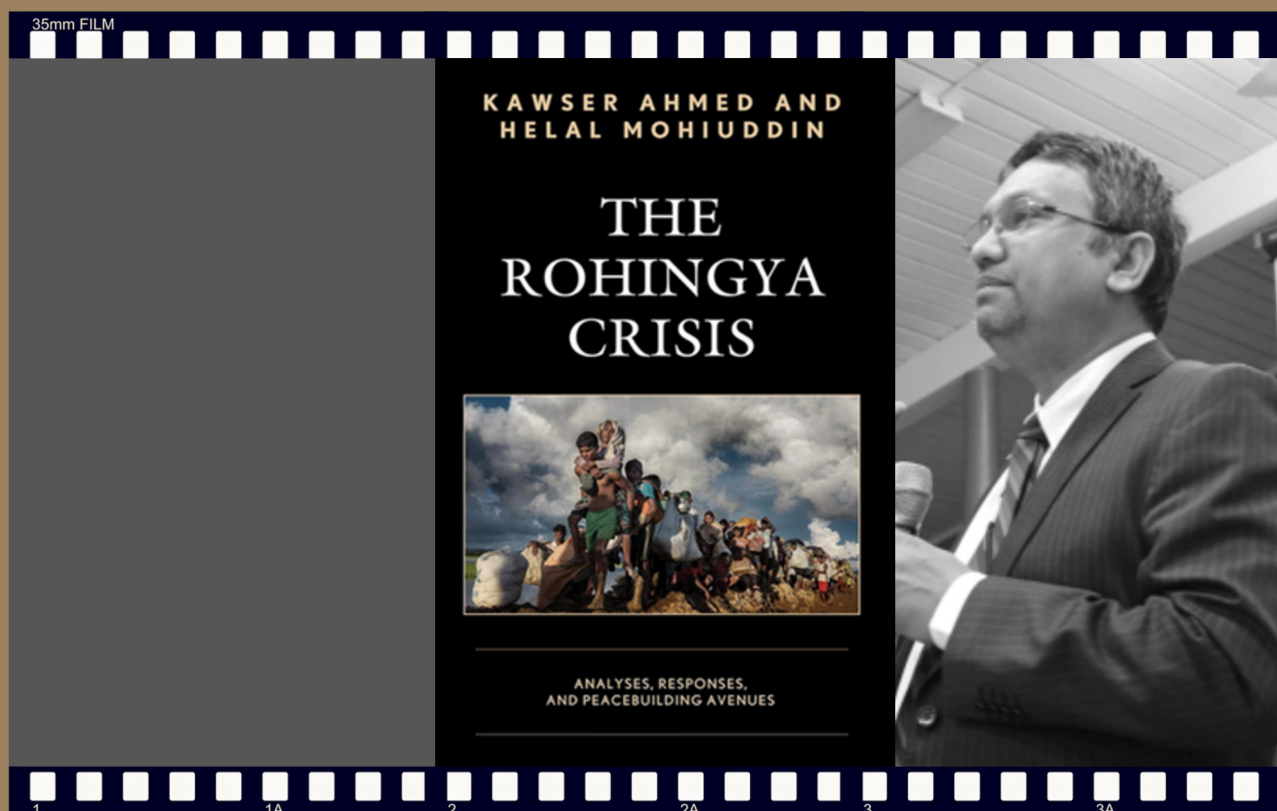
For activists and scholars in the Rohingya community aiming to advance the repatriation conversation, consider these tips:

Engage in Policy Advocacy: Work with international organizations, governments, and NGOs to ensure the Rohingya issue remains a priority on the global agenda.

Utilize Research and Data: Use evidence-based research to highlight the crisis's human rights and humanitarian aspects, making a stronger case for repatriation.

Amplify Voices through Digital Platforms: Use social media, blogs, and webinars to share stories, raise awareness, and mobilize support.

Build Alliances: Form coalitions with other marginalized communities to amplify collective calls for justice and repatriation.





American Bar Association Advocates for Rohingya Cause

The American Bar Association (ABA) is an organization based in the United States, made up of thousands of lawyers across the United States and around the world. It is the largest voluntary association of lawyers around the world. Lawyers work in different areas of the law, including health care, criminal justice, environment, and international law. Since 2017, the ABA has made numerous statements to support the Rohingya and passed two resolutions so that the ABA can take a more proactive role in addressing the Rohingya issue. In 2017 ABA President Hilarie Bass issued a “presidential statement” calling upon the international community to stop the violence in Myanmar and requesting the international community to provide “critical assistance” to the Rohingya.¹

In 2019 the ABA House of Delegates (the policy making body of the ABA) passed a resolution which urged the US government to make a determination of the crimes committed against the Rohingya, impose targeted sanctions against the junta, and allow access for humanitarian aid in the Rakhine.



In 2024, the ABA House of Delegates then updated the resolution to be consistent with the finding of the US State Department that the crimes committed against the Rohingya were genocide and emphasized the participation of Rohingya in the repatriation process and their safe return to the Rakhine.



Photo courtesy: Philip N Young

There have been four “presidential letters” sent by former Presidents of the ABA to address challenges facing the Rohingya. In 2020, ABA President Judy Perez Martinez wrote a letter to Bangladesh Minister Momen to prosecute human traffickers and smugglers who are taking advantage of the Rohingya people.² ABA President Judy Martinez also sent a letter to Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hussein (that same year) to request Malaysia also prosecute human traffickers and prevent human trafficking of Rohingya people.³ In 2021 ABA President Patricia Lee Rufo wrote a letter to Minister of Law and Justice Prasad to refrain from deporting the Rohingya back to Myanmar who were in India.⁴ In 2024, President Mary Smith sent a letter to ASEAN requesting that the issue of trafficking and smuggling of Rohingya people be addressed by the regional body under its frameworks.⁵

ARNO commends these efforts by the ABA to keep focus on the issues relating to the Rohingya and particularly express its concern over issues involving the genocide, human trafficking, and the repatriation.

1. The full statement can be found here:
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/human_rights/reports/statement_of_abapre1/
2. The letter can be found here:
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/human_rights/rule-of-law-letters/bangladesh-2020.pdf
3. The letter can be found here:
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/human_rights/rule-of-law-letters/rohingya-2020.pdf
4. The letter can be found here:
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/government_affairs_office/rohingya-refugees-letter.pdf?logActivity=true
5. This letter can be found here:
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/human_rights/rol-letter-to-asean-apr-24.pdf

A Voice of Courage:

Razia Sultana's Fight for Rohingya Women



Photo courtesy: Exchanges Photos

Razia Sultana is a Rohingya woman who has emerged as one of the most prominent human rights defenders for her community, shining a global spotlight on the plight of the Rohingya people, especially women and children. Her story is one of perseverance, courage, and unwavering dedication to justice in the face of immense adversity. From her birthplace in Rakhine State, Myanmar, to receiving international recognition, Sultana has made significant contributions to the global understanding of the Rohingya crisis. She has been serving as central committee member of Arakan Rohingya National organization (ARNO) and founder of Rights for Women Welfare Society (RWWS).

Early Life and Education in Rakhine

Razia Sultana was born in 1973 in Maungdaw, a township in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The region has long been a hotbed of ethnic tensions, with the Rohingya community subjected to severe discrimination and systematic oppression. Her family fled to Bangladesh during her early years to escape escalating violence and persecution. In Bangladesh, she pursued her education and was determined to build a better life for herself and others in her community.

Driven by a passion for education and the desire to make a difference, Razia Sultana earned a degree in law and became one of the few Rohingya women to achieve such a level of academic success. Her legal background provided her with the tools necessary to advocate for the rights of her people.

Becoming a Voice for the Voiceless

In 2014, Sultana began actively working as a human rights activist. She focused her efforts on documenting the extensive human rights abuses faced by the Rohingya, particularly the violence inflicted on women and girls. With courage and determination, she traveled to refugee camps in Bangladesh to speak with survivors of the brutal military campaigns conducted by Myanmar's security forces. Her work brought to light the unimaginable suffering of her people.

Razia Sultana published several groundbreaking reports based on firsthand testimonies from Rohingya women. Her reports, "Witness to Horror" and "Rape by Command," exposed the systematic sexual violence and other atrocities committed by the Myanmar military. Through these publications, she provided irrefutable evidence of the crimes against humanity endured by her community, and her work became a key resource for human rights organizations and international bodies.



Recognizing the need for organized support and empowerment for Rohingya women, Sultana founded the Rights for Women Welfare Society (RWWS) in 2018 alongside with her role as an important member of Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO). The organization operates in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and provides psychosocial support, education, and advocacy for Rohingya women and girls. RWWS has played a vital role in training female volunteers to assist survivors of trauma, address domestic violence, and combat human trafficking in the camps.

Through her work with RWWS, Sultana has empowered numerous women to become advocates for their rights, encouraging them to reclaim their dignity and voice in a world that has marginalized them. Her tireless efforts have built a sense of hope and resilience among Rohingya women, many of whom have lived through unimaginable horrors.

Addressing the United Nations Security Council

One of the defining moments of Razia Sultana's advocacy was in April 2018, when she became the first Rohingya woman to address the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). During an open debate on sexual violence in conflict, Sultana shared the harrowing stories of Rohingya community take action to hold the perpetrators accountable and to ensure that justice was served for the victims.

Her address was a historic moment, marking the first time a Rohingya woman had spoken at such a significant international forum. Her courage in recounting the brutal experiences of her people resonated with policymakers and human rights advocates worldwide.

Recognition and the Woman of Courage Award

In recognition of her extraordinary bravery and commitment to human rights, the U.S. Department of State honored Razia Sultana with the International Women of Courage Award in March 2019. This prestigious award celebrates women around the world who have demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. Receiving the award was a pivotal moment in Sultana's journey. It not only acknowledged her unwavering dedication to the Rohingya cause but also amplified the voices of the many Rohingya women she represented. The award brought her work to a wider international audience, inspiring further action and advocacy for the Rohingya people.

Continuing the Fight for Justice

Despite facing numerous challenges, Razia Sultana remains committed to her mission. Her advocacy continues to focus on securing justice for victims of human rights abuses and building a better future for Rohingya women and girls. She collaborates with international organizations, governments, and activists to push for accountability and lasting solutions for her community.



Sultana's work has not only provided a platform for Rohingya women but also created a global awareness of the ongoing persecution faced by the Rohingya people. Her courage, resilience, and dedication to human rights serve as a powerful example of how one person can make a difference, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Legacy and Impact

Razia Sultana's story is a testament to the strength and determination of the human spirit. From her humble beginnings in Rakhine State to becoming an international advocate and a recipient of the Woman of Courage Award, her journey reflects the power of courage and advocacy.

Her legacy is not just one of highlighting the injustices faced by the Rohingya but also one of empowering women and fighting for a world where every individual's rights are respected and upheld. Her work continues to inspire many, and her efforts remind the world of the ongoing struggle for human rights and justice for the Rohingya people. Razia Sultana remains a beacon of hope for her community, showing that even in the darkest times, the light of courage and compassion can shine through.



ARNA's Recent Advocacy Activities

1. Productive bilateral meeting between ARNA and Special Envoy Julie Bishop. We discussed the evolving Rohingya crisis in Northern Rakhine, focusing on sustainable solutions and humanitarian efforts. Cooperation is key for peace.



2. ARNA's leadership continues to push for justice: Dr. Hla Myint met with UN's Tom Andrew to discuss critical Rohingya rights issues in Myanmar.



3. Excellent meeting between ARNA and StateDept on the crisis in Rakhine. Discussed the need for US leadership to address the humanitarian crisis and welcomed US efforts to increase pressure to end anti-Rohingya atrocities perpetrated by Arakan Army and the Junta.

4. Important and constructive meeting between the ARNA and NUG Myanmar Deputy Foreign Minister. Discussed the worsening crisis in the Rakhine and the steps towards an inclusive political process that safeguards the rights of all, including the Rohingya.



5. Important briefing on the situation in Rakhine cohosted by New Lines Institute, Rohingya. Welcomed NGOs' support on accountability efforts & urged greater collaboration with #Rohingya community, including organizations working inside Rakhine and Cox's Bazar.

6. Engaging meeting with Norway UN officials on the situation in the Rakhine and the need to hold accountable the perpetrators of human rights crimes against the Rohingya. Norway's steadfast support for our community will not be forgotten.

8. ARNA diplomatic engagement in NYC continues with meeting Liechtenstein Political Coordinator Matthew Edbrooke. Detailed exchange on upcoming UN resolutions and how to ensure impact on the ground from protection to accountability for the Rohingya.

7. Warm and engaging meeting with OIC Ambassador Opoloyeru at UN. Re-affirmed the strong focus on the protection of the Rohingya and support for ARNA-led efforts towards unity of the Rohingya on the diplomatic stage.

APHR Urges Indonesia to Act Swiftly to Protect Stranded Rohingya Refugees

October 24, 2024

The ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) expresses grave concern over the report that was received on 23 October regarding the safety and well-being of hundreds of Rohingya refugees who have been stranded for nearly a week in Indonesia's Aceh province. APHR calls on the Indonesian government to take immediate action to save their lives.

According to reports, more than a hundred Rohingya refugees, primarily women and children, attempted to enter Indonesia by sea on a wooden boat. After reaching the shore near Labuhan Haji in Aceh, they have remained stranded due to resistance from residents, who have denied them entry.

Tragically, two people have died, and 11 others—among them a pregnant woman—have been evacuated to a local hospital. Meanwhile, three individuals have reportedly been arrested on human trafficking charges.

"We urge President Prabowo Subianto's administration to prioritize the safety of these vulnerable people," said Charles Santiago, APHR Co-Chairperson and former Malaysian Member of Parliament. "Let them in so that they can receive the critical care they need, and to ensure their safety and dignity."

The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group, are one of the world's most persecuted communities. Since 2017, approximately one million Rohingya have been forcibly displaced from Myanmar by the military junta, seeking refuge and safety in other countries.

In recent years, many have risked perilous sea journeys to Southeast Asian nations, including Indonesia, where they hoped to find safety in a predominantly Muslim community. Yet, despite Indonesia's tradition of hospitality, frustration among residents has grown due to the increased influx of refugees. The United Nations estimates that around 7,300 Rohingya refugees have reached Indonesia since 2006.

APHR stands in solidarity with the Rohingya and all survivors of Myanmar's brutal regime. We remain deeply troubled by the ongoing violence inflicted on civilians by the Myanmar military and continue to condemn the persecution of the Rohingya people.

"We cannot stand by as the Rohingya and others suffer," said Mercy Chriesty Barends, APHR Chairperson and Member of Indonesia's House of Representatives. "We call on ASEAN Foreign Ministers to act together to end the persecution of Rohingya refugees and other civilians facing violence in Myanmar."

Urgent Statement on the Rohingya Crisis and the Need for Regional Protection

October 5, 2024

We express our deep concern over the ongoing Rohingya crisis and the lack of a comprehensive and coordinated regional response to protect refugees in Southeast Asia. As the situation continues to deteriorate, we call for immediate action from ASEAN, its member states, and the international community.

Current Situation

Nearly seven years after the mass exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar which has seen a resurgence of the conflict since November 2023, decades of persecution and conditions for Rohingya have continued to deteriorate. The complete lack of durable solutions and comprehensive and coordinated approaches to build a regional protective environment for the Rohingya reflects and reinforces a normalisation of violence against and marginalisation of Rohingya in every context - in Rakhine state in Myanmar, in the camps in Bangladesh, on dangerous boat journeys onward in search of life and liberty, in immigration detention centres, and in the struggle for basic human rights in every aspect of their lives.

The crisis has become protracted, and responses to it remain chronically underfunded. As of August 2024, the Joint Response Plan in Bangladesh, which supports the basic humanitarian needs of over 1,006,574 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar and on the island of Bhasan Char, is only 40 per cent funded. The Humanitarian Response Plan in Myanmar, including Rakhine State, has received funding only at 28 per cent with only 40 percent of people reached. This lack of funding has led to dire consequences. While it is commendable that from June, there has been a raise in entitlement from US\$10 to US\$11 per person per month in Cox's Bazar camps, it is still far from reaching the full ration target of US\$12.50. The cuts of 2023 have increased hunger and insecurity, driving more Rohingya, who have very limited livelihood opportunities in the camps, to flee again, embarking on risky boat journeys.

The Rohingya refugees in the camps are extremely vulnerable to a variety of natural hazards, including flooding, landslides, fire outbreaks, cyclones, and the adverse impacts of climate change. As funding declines, the capacity of the humanitarian community to respond to these emergencies and to prepare for the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters is increasingly strained. These incidents, combined with increased violence by armed groups and a lack of livelihood and education opportunities, have driven large numbers of Rohingya to undertake risky journeys by sea.

In the last weeks of 2023 and early 2024, the pace of boat arrivals and the number of individuals disembarking in Indonesia rapidly increased. From mid-November 2023 to date, 15 boats carrying 2,026 Rohingya refugees (73 percent of whom are women and children) landed in Aceh and North Sumatera. While many have since departed Indonesia, 1,175 remain in informal and temporary accommodation in Aceh, North Sumatera, and Riau Provinces. UNHCR has obtained only 11 per cent of the USD 2.2 million funding needed for the 2024 Rohingya boat response. The response remains critically underfunded, and more support is needed to scale up assistance in the sites and to respond to anticipated Rohingya boat arrivals in the coming months. The deaths of 569 individuals who had embarked on these perilous journeys in 2023 was the highest reported figure in the last decade.

The crisis in Myanmar continues to escalate. According to recent official UN figures, since the coup on 1 February 2021, at least 5,350 civilians have been killed, more than 3.3 million displaced, and over half the population is living below the poverty line, primarily due to military violence. Armed clashes between the military and Arakan Army continue to impact the lives of Rohingya civilians. There have been several instances of setting fire to buildings throughout major townships, including Rohingya homes and public buildings, where large numbers of displaced Rohingya were sheltering. Witnesses have described extensive displacements in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships after the Arakan Army began firing on Rohingya civilians. An OHCHR report finds that nearly 27,400 individuals have been arrested in Myanmar since the coup, with arrests on the rise since the military's implementation of mandatory conscription in February 2024. Credible sources indicate that at least 1,853 people have died in custody, including 88 children and 125 women. Many of these individuals have been verified as dying after being subjected to abusive interrogation, other ill-treatment in detention, or denial of access to adequate and timely healthcare. Recent escalation of violence, including drone strikes and torture, coupled with continued persecution and forced displacement, has exacerbated the Rohingya crisis, yet despite condemnation, concrete initiatives to address root causes or protect civilians remain notably absent.

Given the escalating violence and entrenched violation of human rights and discrimination that remains largely unaddressed, the alarming conditions in the camps and in Myanmar is deeply concerning. Khair Ullah, Human Rights Defender, Refugee Advocate and a member of the APRRN Rohingya Working Team says, "We are not asking for much—only the right to live freely, to be counted among humanity, and to nurture the dreams of our children in a world that sees, hears, and understands our pain. In a world that turns a blind eye to our suffering, our cries for freedom and justice go unheard, echoing in silence as we long for the dignity and peace that has been denied to us for far too long."

The crisis is further compounded by rising xenophobia in many host countries where misinformation campaigns have fuelled violence towards Rohingya communities. Xenophobic responses have particularly been an issue in Malaysia where rights groups have implored the government to take a stand against xenophobic social media campaigns targeting Rohingya. Leadership from Malaysia on this issue is critical as it prepares to take on Chairmanship of the ASEAN.

We recognise that no one state or stakeholder can solve the Rohingya crisis alone. A coordinated and comprehensive regional response is urgently needed to address this ongoing humanitarian catastrophe. As a key regional cooperation mechanism, ASEAN must show leadership in developing localised solutions that protect the human rights and dignity of all Rohingya people. All ASEAN Member states bear responsibility for perpetuating this crisis by not abiding by their obligations under customary international law in relation to all refugees, including the obligation of non-refoulement; through silence and neglect, and through a failure to share responsibility and failing to uphold the Principles of the Charter.

The Rohingya crisis demands a comprehensive, coordinated regional response, and ASEAN is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. This humanitarian catastrophe affects the entire South and Southeast Asian region's stability and prosperity. By taking decisive action, ASEAN can fulfil international obligations, uphold its Charter's principles, and demonstrate global leadership in refugee crisis management. While the crisis originated in Myanmar, its resolution requires collective effort from all member states. This is ASEAN's opportunity to alleviate suffering, strengthen regional integration, enhance its global standing and set an example of humanitarian leadership.

Urgent Calls to Action

We urgently call upon ASEAN and its member states to:

1. Establish a regional protection framework guided by the Bangkok Principles⁴ to ensure human rights-based responses to refugee crises.
2. Implement a clear roadmap for the Five-Point Consensus⁵ on the situation in Myanmar including the Rohingya, with a special focus on concrete actions and timeframes that address the root causes of the protracted crisis.
3. Design and implement domestic laws that are aligned with the protection standards and rights set out in the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol.
4. Cease arbitrary arrests and detention of Rohingya and other refugees.
5. Explore and pursue all possible durable solutions, including complementary legal pathways, increased resettlement, work rights, and access to education and livelihoods.
6. Include refugee rights education in national school curricula to promote acceptance and understanding.
7. Combat xenophobia and meaningfully include Rohingya in policy and decision-making processes

8. Recognize the term 'Refugee' in ASEAN deliberations and develop a regional refugee protection policy.
9. Strengthen regional collaboration for search and rescue operations at sea and disembarkation.
10. Review the ASEAN Charter, particularly the non-interference principle, in light of human rights concerns and the prevention of genocide.

To the international community:

- Increase funding for humanitarian responses in Bangladesh and Myanmar to address the critical shortfall.
- Increase funding for human rights and humanitarian NGOs in Asia who work on Rohingya issues
- Support ASEAN's efforts to develop a regional protection framework and share global best practices.
- Expand resettlement opportunities for Rohingya refugees.

For further information or comment, please reach out to Amrita Paul, Consultant, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, at rc@aprrn.org

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of over 280 civil society organisations and individuals from 30 countries. We are committed to protecting and promoting the rights of refugees and other vulnerable groups on the move in the Asia Pacific.

1 UNHCR Indonesia - Rohingya Boat Arrivals Emergency Update 20 September 2024; Available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111317>

2 A/HRC/57/56: Situation of human rights in Myanmar - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Advance unedited version; Available at - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5756-situationhuman-rights-myanmar-report-united-nations-high>

3 Ibid

4 Bangkok Principles on the Status and Treatment of Refugees ("Bangkok Principles"), Asian-African Legal Consultative Organisation (AALCO), 1966; Available at <https://www.aalco.int/39thsession/strcairolV.pdf>

5 Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, 24 April 2021, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, Republic of Indonesia; Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>



Jama mosque, Sittwe, Arakan

About ARNO

The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) emerged in 1998 as a broad-based organisation of the Rohingya people with a pledge to promote 'Rohingya unity' and to realise the hopes and aspirations of the Rohingya people.

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