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Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)



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Editorial

Echoes of Desperation: Addressing the Rohingya Crisis and the Global Call for Action.

The humanitarian crisis engulfing the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State presents a profoundly disturbing scenario that demands immediate international attention. Stripped of citizenship and fundamental human rights, the Rohingya endure systemic discrimination, constrained mobility, and severely limited access to education and healthcare. The situation deteriorated alarmingly in 2017 following a severe military crackdown, which led to heinous atrocities against the Rohingya civilians. This brutal campaign, characterized by mass killings, sexual violence, and the torching of villages, forced hundreds of thousands to flee, seeking refuge from their dire circumstances.

The vulnerability of the Rohingya is not a recent development; it is an enduring issue, underscored by persistent discrimination, violence, and displacement. In a desperate bid for safety, many undertake hazardous sea voyages on overcrowded and ill-equipped vessels, risking drowning, starvation, and exploitation by ruthless traffickers. Countries such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand have become common refuges for these beleaguered individuals. The harrowing plight of the Rohingya at sea underscores the critical need for a comprehensive, humane strategy to address their persecution and uphold their fundamental human rights.

This defenselessness is exacerbated as the Rohingya frequently find themselves trapped in the crosshairs of ethnic and religious strife. While the international community has vocally condemned these human rights atrocities, tangible measures to shield the Rohingya and hold the culprits accountable have been markedly insufficient. The absence of self-defence mechanisms among the Rohingya notably contributes to the protracted nature and severity of their plight. This stark reality accentuates the necessity for a robust, effective international intervention that extends beyond mere humanitarian aid to confront the political, legal, and security hurdles confronting the Rohingya populace.

Moreover, the crisis is deepened by stark power imbalances rooted in historical, ethnic, and religious disparities, discriminatory policies, military dominance, and complex international dynamics, all converging to perpetuate injustice and exclusion. A comprehensive, coordinated international response is imperative. Governments, humanitarian entities, and the United Nations must collaboratively tackle the conflict's underlying causes, provide relief to those in distress, and ensure accountability for human rights infringements.

Additionally, championing the rights and dignity of the Rohingya is paramount, and this includes advocating for their right to ethnicity and citizenship and fortifying the protection of their human rights. Initiatives should be geared towards enabling the safe, voluntary repatriation of displaced Rohingya to their native lands under conditions that guarantee their security and welfare.

In conclusion, the plight of the Rohingya in Rakhine State is a clarion call for the global community to foreground human rights, justice, and a sustainable resolution to this humanitarian catastrophe. The international community must not overlook the defenselessness of the Rohingya. Instead, it should unite in concerted action to engender significant, positive change and safeguard the lives and dignity of this beleaguered community.



Hate Campaign: Plight of the Displaced Rohingya in Aceh

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There is no universally accepted definition of 'hate speech', but the devastating effect of hatred is nothing new phenomenon. Due to communications technologies development, a section of people constantly use various media and have disseminated hateful speech against ethnic and religious minorities. The United Nations and other regional forums have been working against hatred of all kinds to defend human rights and advance the rule of law. It can be stated that hatred has close links with discrimination, racism and inequality.

In most cases, minorities and vulnerable groups of people are victimized due to hate speech all over the world. In response to the alarming trends, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech on 18 June 2019 (UN, 2020). Still, this effort is not enough to stop the hate speech. This article intends to explore the hate campaign and the plight of displaced Rohingya in Aceh.

Indonesia currently hosts 12,805 refugees from 51 countries, and around 1,000 people (8%) of whom are Rohingya refugees (UNHCR, 2023). The current situation of Rohingya refugees in Aceh has been highlighted in the media. Aceh Province is one of the regions that tries to provide humanitarian support to the Rohingya refugees. Based on the data from UNHCR, as of 2016, there were 795 Rohingya refugees in Indonesia. Then, there are 244 who are still waiting for the determination of status or, in other words, are asylum seekers (Reuters, 2023).

During the informal discussion with boat survivors in the Rohingya community in Malaysia, they stated, "No Rohingya wants to go to Indonesia. They definitely have a first and foremost preference in Malaysia. Due to bad weather and lack of navigation at sea, boats reach offshore in Indonesian territory. In that context, they cannot enter Indonesia (interview, Rohingya community, October 2023, Kuala Berang, Terengganu, Malaysia). The Rohingyas continue to face vulnerabilities towards harassment and confinement, as they do not have proper legal mechanisms to ensure their safety. Despite their poor living conditions in Aceh, they still refuse to return to Myanmar due to statelessness and significant human rights violations.

Protecting Rohingya refugees and their status determination is not an easy process in Indonesia. The Rohingya journey started towards Indonesia in the aftermath of the 2012 Buddhist-Muslim riot in Myanmar. The local community and government were not hostile to forcibly displaced Rohingya. Former Deputy Governor Muzakkir Manaf gave remarks at the Rohingya shelter in North Aceh that "Rohingya are the same as us, share the same religion as us and even physically almost the same as us, so we will protect them. If necessary, do not go back to Myanmar; just stay in Aceh; we will provide agricultural land so that they can fulfil their own needs" (Novialdi et al., 2020). However, the situation has changed in Aceh; many locals believe that protracted displaced Rohingya people have changed the socio-economic order of the Acehnese community. This change will result in a cultural, social and even economic clash within and towards the Acehnese community.

The Aceh is the only one with a Sharia-based legal system and has generally tolerated Rohingya refugees in the past; a rising number of locals are now resisting attempts by the government to shelter them. A small section of Acehnese is frustrated with the prolonged presence of Rohingyas in their province. Simultaneously, a few incidents happened recently, and displaced Rohingya people were involved there. A few small-scale protests against the Rohingya's arrival occurred in 2021 and 2022 due to disagreements over where refugees should stay, but continued talks and engagement with locals eased this (Ratcliffe & Syakriah, 2024). A few political problems arise; Yogi Febriandi, head of the Department of Islamic Political Thought at IAIN Langsa, Aceh, mentioned that while local concerns about security and resources exist, people do not want to see aggressive protests against Rohingya. He also added that "they want Jakarta to come to Aceh to give clear information, [a] clear budget, to handle the issue" (Ratcliffe & Syakriah, 2024). It can be stated that some vested group of people spread misinformation against the displaced Rohingyas on social media, which escalated into more extensive protests.

There are various social media used for hatred campaigns against the Rohingya and UNHCR activities. Much of the anti-Rohingya campaign stems from online misinformation about refugees, as well as organized propaganda against the UNHCR presence in Aceh, human rights scholar Heru Susetyo stated in his online conversation (online interview, January 2024). To provoke the anti-Rohingya sentiment has a link with the upcoming election in Indonesia. "Why should we take care of thousands of Rohingya who cause many problems? They have a bad influence. Some of them escape and engage in sex outside of marriage and drugs. We demand to reject them all. They must leave. Because Sabang people are also having a hard time, they cannot accommodate any more people," one protester, Samsul Bahri, said to the Associated Press (Tahjuddin & Widianto, 2023).On the other hand, the local official in Aceh said there had been no criminal activity by Rohingya in his village. The only incident he could recall was an occasion when refugees took coconuts from villagers' trees because they were hungry. The case was settled amicably and never happened again (Ratcliffe & Syakriah, 2024).

More than 1,500 Rohingya Muslims have landed in Indonesia since November 2023, data from the United Nations refugee agency shows, including at least 300 arriving last weekend (Reuters, 2024). Some were denied landing by the residents in Aceh Utara district and Sabang island. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo stated that the Indonesian government will temporarily help the refugees. "For now, we will accommodate them, temporarily. We are still talking to international organizations, such as UNHCR ... since the locals don't accept them," (Saifullah & Tarigan, 2023). Some locals also accused the UN refugee agency of supporting and sheltering the Rohingya. The UN refugee agency officials said it was a misunderstanding (Idrus & Neelakantan, 2023). Some protesters and social media campaigners also targeted the IOM and UNHCR.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention; the government is not under any legal obligation to recognize refugees or asylum seekers in the country. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is therefore tasked with assessing whether an individual qualifies for refugee status, and it can then investigate comprehensive solutions, which include resettlement. Whilst they wait, the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) fills the gap for the state in providing RAS within the country with necessities for life. Despite legal barriers, Indonesia has hosted thousands of refugees over the last four decades. The journey aboard the illegal ferries is fraught with life-threatening risks, and hundreds have died during the journey in the past years.

According to a UN refugee agency report, since January this year, at least 161 mostly Rohingya refugees have died or gone missing during their perilous journey from Bangladesh and Myanmar to Malaysia (Rahman, 2022). Regarding the Rohingya refugee issue, in the case of Aceh, it is complicated. Earlier, the locals welcomed the refugee community, and now, some of them have become hostile to their presence. Several rescued boats carrying hundreds of Rohingya have disembarked in Aceh, Indonesia, after weeks at sea without food or water, with dozens dead. Others remain at sea. Many of the Rohingya embark on these high-risk journeys to escape growing restrictions and hopelessness in refugee camps in Bangladesh and unending oppression and violence in Myanmar's western Rakhine State. Rights groups highly criticize the hate campaign against the Rohingyas in Indonesia. Phil Robertson, a senior official at Human Rights Watch, stated that "the government should investigate and hold accountable whoever has been mobilizing an online campaign inciting violence against Rohingya arrivals.

The Indonesian government should ensure that Rohingya boat refugees are immediately brought ashore and protected, not pushed back to die at sea, or be attacked by anti-Rohingya mobs" (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In response to the anti-Rohingya Muslim hatred in Aceh, many human rights organizations have conducted advocacy and non-citizen rights awareness programs across Indonesia.



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Tatmadaw Assault Ravages Rohingya Settlement: Catastrophic Fatalities Feared

In a devastating assault on January 25, the Burmese military unleashed a heavy artillery onslaught on Fuimale, a village in Buthidaung, resulting in extensive destruction and a tragic toll of Rohingya casualties. Eyewitnesses believe the Tatmadaw targeted positions held by the Arakan Army (AA), but the attack left the village decimated, compelling survivors to flee, fearing further strikes.

The assault marks a grim escalation in the ongoing conflict between the Tatmadaw and the AA, with both factions reportedly engaging in the abduction of Rohingya villagers. The current whereabouts of Fuimale's residents remain unknown, with communication lines severed, intensifying concerns about their safety and the alarming extent of casualties.

Sources close to the situation express grave concerns, indicating that the death toll resulting from the Tatmadaw's artillery fire could be substantial. The military's increasing reliance on aerial assaults and long-range artillery, prompted by significant losses to guerilla tactics, has led to indiscriminate attacks. Such tactics have tragically resulted in civilian casualties, with innocent individuals, including women and children, perishing within the supposed safety of their homes.

Rohingyas were arrested for not collaborating with Tatmadaw against the Arakan Army

The Tatmadaw has detained over a hundred Rohingyas for not aiding in the conflict against the Arakan Army. Despite attempts to recruit Rohingyas as security personnel, the community remains uninterested.

The backdrop to this development is a genocidal campaign orchestrated by the Tatmadaw, which claimed the lives of an estimated 25,000 Rohingyas across Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung, triggering an unparalleled refugee crisis as survivors sought sanctuary in neighbouring Bangladesh.

Recently, the Tatmadaw faced considerable setbacks in Arakan and Northern Shan State, suffering losses against the Arakan Army and its allies. In response, some officers have considered recruiting internally displaced Rohingyas to counter the Arakan Army, a strategy compromised by the deep-seated mistrust stemming from past atrocities.

Most arrests occurred in Maungdaw and Sittwe, with the Tatmadaw alleging illegal emigration attempts. However, sources suggest the real reason is the Rohingyas' refusal to confront the Arakan Army. Despite the 2017 genocide, a minority within the Rohingya community supports the Tatmadaw, a stance seen as part of a larger divide-and-conquer strategy in the region.

Elite Bangladesh Police Apprehend Three ARSA-Linked Gang Members Near Refugee Camp

Bangladesh's elite Rapid Action successfully Battalion (RAB) has apprehended three individuals with alleged ties to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) near Refugee Camp No. 20 in the Teknaf region. The operation led to the seizure of crude firearms numerous and explosives at the site. Despite the capture, many suspects managed to evade the RAB by fleeing the area.

The detainees, identified as Osman, Nesar, and Imam Hossain, are believed to be part of a gang operating under Osman's leadership, with affiliations to ARSA and its leader, Ata Ullah. Reports suggest that this gang is one of around a dozen groups under Ullah's command, implicated in a series of violent crimes primarily targeting fellow Rohingyas.

The region, scarred by the aftermath of genocide and a burgeoning refugee crisis, has increasingly become a lawless enclave. Gangs, predominantly linked to ARSA, have been exploiting the challenging terrain and the area's proximity to densely populated refugee camps to establish kidnapping and torture sites, complicating law enforcement efforts.

ARSA Kills another Rohingya Community Leader in Balu Khali

In a troubling development, Karim Ullah, a prominent Rohingya community leader, was brutally murdered in an incident believed to be orchestrated by individuals linked to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Karim, aged 37, a respected former Majhi (camp leader) and local figure, was abducted from his residence in Balu Khali by masked individuals around 8:20 PM on January 12. His body was later discovered bearing the grim hallmark of ARSA's brutality—his throat slit.

Balu Khali has long been recognized as one of the remaining bastions of ARSA. This group has exerted its menacing influence over the refugee camps since the 2017 genocide, which tragically claimed the lives of hundreds of Rohingyas. Initially, ARSA garnered support among some Rohingyas for purportedly mounting a 'resistance' against the Tatmadaw. However, the group's inability to sustain military operations beyond a fleeting period has led to suspicions of their complicity in a broader scheme orchestrated by the Tatmadaw, ostensibly to justify the 2017 that resulted in the genocide loss approximately 25,000 Rohingya lives.

The group's grip on the refugee camps has been characterized by a relentless campaign of intimidation and violence, starting in late 2017. The Bangladeshi authorities intensified their crackdown on ARSA following the group's involvement in the high-profile assassination of DGFI officer Squadron Leader Ridwan Rushdee in late 2022. This latest incident marks a continuation of ARSA's campaign of violence. It underscores the urgent need for heightened security measures to protect the Rohingya community and dismantle the remnants of ARSA's influence in the camps.

Blaze Engulfs a Thousand Shelters in Kutupalong, Leaving Thousands Shelter-less.

A devastating blaze ripped through Camp 5 in Kutupalong, obliterating approximately a thousand shelters and displacing around 7000 refugees in a nocturnal inferno. Remarkably, despite the scale of the disaster, no fatalities were reported.

Initial suspicions of foul play surfaced, coinciding with the eve of the Bangladesh general elections. However, subsequent inquiries leaned towards an accidental origin, a not uncommon cause of conflagrations in the densely populated settlement currently recognized as the world's largest refugee camp.

Notwithstanding the presumed accidental nature of this incident, previous fires have been marred by suspicions of deliberate arson, inflicting immense hardship on the innocent refugee populace. In a notable case in January, vigilant locals detained an individual attempting to ignite homes, who later confessed his affiliation with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Investigations into potential arson remain ongoing for this latest calamity.

In a swift response, the local fire brigade mobilized promptly, managing to subdue the flames within two hours. The successful fire containment, without loss of life, is attributed to regular fire drills conducted within the camp, underlining the importance of such preparedness in averting a human catastrophe.

Nevertheless, the high concentration of shelters in the camp underscores a persistent vulnerability to rapid fire spread. Reports have emerged alleging that ARSA is orchestrating plans for arson attacks across various sectors of the camp, necessitating vigilant security measures and continuous risk mitigation efforts.

ARNO Press Releases

Support Needed for Victims of January 7th Fires in Refugee Camp 5

08 January, 2024

The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) expresses its condolences to our brothers and sisters who have lost their temporary shelters in Camp 5. Around 12:45, a fire started in Camp 5. The fire destroyed approximately 774 shelters and 12 learning facilities. The UNHCR has estimated that 7,000 people have been made homeless as a result of the fires.

Thanks to the prompt response by the Camp in Charge Officer, volunteer firefighters, Department of Fire Service and Civil Defense, and representatives of the APBn, the fire was contained by 4 AM, and there were no reported fatalities.

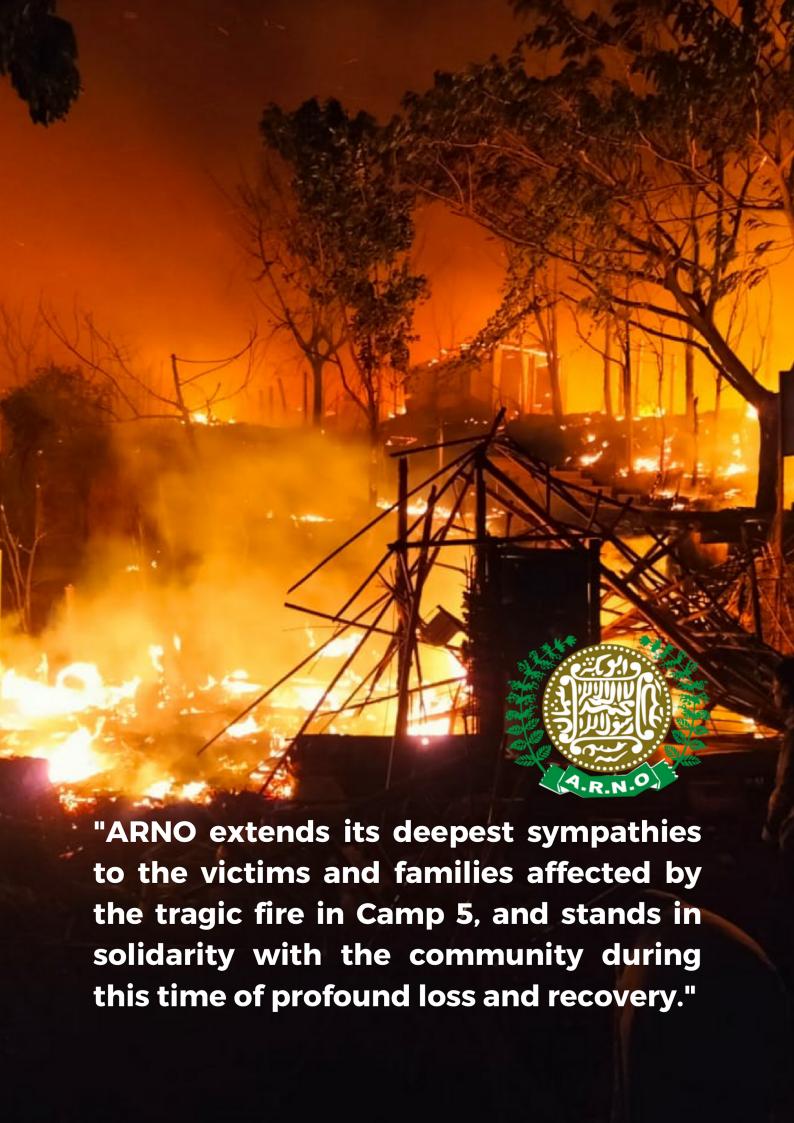
This morning, it has been reported that several organisations have begun working with refugees who are now without shelter. The <u>World Food Programme</u> began distributing food for people today as it has done so before in the past when Rohingya were impacted by fires.

ARNO calls upon officials in Bangladesh to investigate the cause of the fire. ARNO notes that the fires have been a regular occurrence since 2021 and last year it was reported that 12,000 were left homeless, 2,800 shelters and more than 90 facilities including hospitals and learning centres were destroyed. An investigative panel determined it was a "planned act of sabotage."

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ARNO Press Releases

ARNO requests coordinated efforts to stop hate speech and disinformation

05 January, 2024

During the last week of December 2023, disturbing reports emerged from Aceh, Indonesia, that student protestors stormed a shelter that was provided to Rohingya refugees who recently arrived by boat. The student protestors "evicted" the Rohingya. The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) understands that the students called upon the Government of Indonesia to turn away the Rohingya refugees because it would cause "social and economic upheaval to the community." These statements are inaccurate and unfounded and continue to appear in media outlets in various Asian countries as a result of upcoming election cycles.

While this incident took place before the new year, the Indonesian navy intercepted another boat of refugees at sea and had them turned away from reaching Aceh. To date, there is no information regarding the whereabouts of this boat.

ARNO warmly thanks the Government of Indonesia for their continued efforts in hosting Rohingya refugee populations which are arriving in the country. ARNO understands that despite not being a party to the UN Refugee Convention, Indonesia's actions are based on humanitarian principles.

ARNO further applauds the current efforts by Indonesia to arrest human traffickers and smugglers who are placing Rohingya people in danger by loading them on boats and abandoning them in the waters to be rescued.

ARNO calls upon authorities in Bangladesh to coordinate with ASEAN member countries to stop human smuggling routes and perpetrators from destroying Rohingya lives further.

ARNO calls upon the Office of the Special Advisor of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide to coordinate campaigns aimed at stopping hate speech and disinformation, consistent with the programs the Special Adviser is currently conducting.

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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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