

2019 John Sexton Essay Contest

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“We are scared to return to Myanmar because if we go, they will kill us.”

Chilling, these words uttered by Rohingya refugee Majeda lay bare the egregious extent of the Rohingya genocide (Regan). Nevertheless, Majeda’s story is only one small page in a great book of human suffering brought about by the crisis in Myanmar. Erupting at the volatile intersection of historical and religious tensions, the appalling persecution of the Rohingya has seen rising death tolls as well as a slew of human rights abuses, ranging from rape to torture (Barbaro). This ethnic cleansing is an odious miasma, engulfing countless lives and prompting thousands to flee to Bangladesh for refuge.

In response, Bangladesh and Myanmar have bucked warnings from the United Nations as they forcibly repatriated refugees back to Myanmar (Hughes). Although Myanmar remains a dangerous environment for the Rohingya, both Myanmar and the international community ought to take three essential steps to uphold the safety of the returning refugees: prosecute war criminals to reduce state-sponsored violence, grant citizenship to the Rohingya, and monitor social media for hate speech.

At the helm of this genocide, bellicose Myanmar generals have perpetuated systemic human rights violations. Leading military officers orchestrate ruthless campaigns with heinous disregard for the dignity and lives of the Rohingya. Indeed, it is not a surprise that the United Nations has declared the military’s actions of “genocidal intent” (McPherson). To prevent further persecution, the United Nations and the International Criminal Court should prosecute Myanmar generals for these crimes against humanity. Global efforts to pursue such charges would not only curtail the ongoing campaign to oppress the Rohingya but also deter others from committing genocide in the future.

In addition, Myanmar ought to grant full citizenship to those returning. Eroding the legal status of the Rohingya for decades, Myanmar has denied them citizenship; however, conferring full citizenship to repatriated refugees would allow for the basic guarantees of human rights and would expand their access to state facilities (Albert and Chatzky). Moreover, this measure would broaden legal recourses available to refugees and send an unequivocal message to the entire country that reaffirms the humanity of the Rohingya.

Although important and effective, the actions outlined above still do not address the root cause of such violence: deep-rooted prejudice against the Rohingya. Bigotry must be addressed, which also necessitates Myanmar and the global community to remove hateful content on social media. On platforms such as Facebook, toxic rhetoric proliferates and galvanizes even ordinary citizens to participate in hate crimes (Berntson). Through properly regulated social media, the Rohingya would not be demonized, reducing wanton hysteria over the returning refugees.

At the end of the day, it not about the issues we bring to light but rather the people we leave in the dark. In the face of unbridled genocide, the international community must staunchly stand in solidarity with the Rohingya. By weaving together a litany of measures, a multifaceted solution shines a path forward to champion the dignity and rights of the Rohingya.

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