Rohingya Crisis and the Reaction of International Communities

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Abstract

The Rohingya crisis, one of the gravest humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century, involves the persecution and mass displacement of the Rohingya Muslim minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State. This paper investigates the underlying causes of the crisis, the evolution of the crisis, and the global fallout. It offers a critical assessment of how the crisis was politicized in regard to the geopolitical, humanitarian, and legal components of the global response, with particular attention to the international response among the United Nations, regional organizations, like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and major powers, like the United States, China, and India. The research adopted a qualitative approach to stakeholder assessment, drawing on reports, resolutions, and academic literature. The papers conclude highlights an apparent gap between condemnatory rhetoric and actionable support, as the nature of international engagement varied, if not largely inconsistent, as states attempted to navigate their strategic interests and obligations to sovereign states. While humanitarian relief and sanctions were eventually set in place, the absence of a determinate and coordinated international response to the mass human rights crisis, and the continued inaction on the refugee crisis meant continued human rights violations and the continuing suffering of refugees. The paper concludes with a brief set of policy recommendations related to multilateral accountability frameworks, the deepening of regional cooperation, and strengthening the formal regulatory norms around an international legal framework to address statelessness and genocide.

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, genocide, international response, human rights

1. Introduction

There are deep-rooted ethnic and religious grievances underlying the Rohingya crisis, which is a complex, multi-layered humanitarian disaster that has garnered international attention due to the extent of human suffering and the geopolitical factors surrounding it. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group mainly located in Myanmar's Rakhine State, and for decades they have experienced systematic discrimination, statelessness, and targeted violence. Though the Rohingya have been living in Myanmar for generations, they are not listed as one of the official ethnicities under the 1982 Citizenship Law, which resulted in the Rohingya being effectively stateless and stripped of basic rights like movement, education, health care, and work (Farzana, 2017; Leider, 2021).

Ethnic grievances stem from colonial migration policies, post-independence nationalism, and the ascendency of ethnic Bamar Buddhist supremacy that conceived the Rohingya as foreign usurpers (Cheesman et al., 2021). Tensions escalated periodically, with major episodes of violence in 1978, 1991–1992, and most notably in 2012 and 2017. The 2017 military crackdown—triggered allegedly by attacks from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)—led to mass atrocities including extrajudicial killings, gang rapes, and the burning of villages, which international observers have widely described as ethnic cleansing or genocide (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Over 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh during the 2017 crisis alone, creating the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. The influx overwhelmed local infrastructure, prompting a massive international humanitarian response. However, international reactions have varied significantly in scope, tone, and effectiveness. While Western countries imposed sanctions and offered humanitarian aid, regional actors such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) struggled to address the crisis due to their non-interference policy. The United Nations condemned the violence, yet structural limitations and geopolitical divisions impeded decisive action (UN News, 2019).

2. Research Questions

This paper investigates the response of the international community to the Rohingya crisis, focusing on diplomatic, legal, and humanitarian dimensions. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How have major international actors and institutions responded to the

Rohingya crisis?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of their actions?
3. What steps can be taken to ensure accountability, support displaced populations, and address the root causes of persecution?

Through a review of academic literature, policy documents, and reports from international organizations, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the international community's role and proposes actionable recommendations.

3. Materials & Methods

This research adopts a qualitative, analytical methodology. Data were primarily collected from secondary sources, including academic journals, legal documents, international organization reports, and reputable news outlets. Peer-reviewed articles provided theoretical frameworks and historical context, while policy papers and UN documentation offered insight into real-time responses and international legal proceedings.

The analysis was conducted in three stages: First, historical and political background literature was reviewed to contextualize the crisis. Second, data on international responses—humanitarian, legal, and diplomatic—were synthesized and categorized by actor (e.g., United Nations, ASEAN, individual states). Finally, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in the reactions, such as geopolitical constraints, effectiveness of humanitarian aid, and legal accountability efforts.

The selection of sources prioritized materials published within the last five years to ensure contemporary relevance. The report also included publicly available documents from organizations like UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Médecins Sans Frontières wherever possible to reflect the realities on the ground. Given the delicate and complicated nature of the topic, special care to triangulate information from multiple sources was given to ensure accurate and credible reporting (Cheesman et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2022).

4. Results & Discussion

4.1. Global Diplomatic Reactions

The international diplomatic response to the Rohingya crisis has proven complex, with a mix of condemnation, calls for accountability, and expressions of solidarity. The UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council have both passed several resolutions condemning the military of Myanmar for the violations perpetrated against the Rohingya population (UNHRC, 2018). The resolutions have called for independent investigations and for Myanmar to ensure that the Rohingya community is afforded its protection and its rights. However, the UN Security Council was never able to adopt any substantive resolutions, primarily because of veto threats from permanent members China and Russia, who prioritized non-interference and their strategic relationships with Myanmar (Albert & Maizland, 2021).

Western countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada imposed targeted sanctions against military leaders and Myanmar military-related entities committing human rights abuses. The European Union imposed restrictive measures as well, aiming to increase diplomatic pressure. However, these sanctions were limited in scope and lacked a coordinated global strategy, reducing their potential impact on Myanmar's military leadership (Cheesman et al., 2021).

China and India, two regional powers with significant strategic and economic interests in Myanmar, pursued more cautious and pragmatic approaches. China maintained its alliance with Myanmar, defending the principle of non-interference in internal affairs while continuing infrastructure investments under its Belt and Road Initiative (Haacke, 2020). India, concerned about its northeastern insurgency and regional stability, emphasized humanitarian aid without direct condemnation of Myanmar, reflecting a balancing act between security interests and human rights concerns (Kripalani, 2021).

4.2. Regional Response: ASEAN and Bangladesh

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), adhering to its founding principles of sovereignty and non-interference, offered a muted response. While member states like Malaysia and Indonesia voiced concern and called for humanitarian assistance, ASEAN's overall action was limited to establishing a humanitarian task force without directly challenging Myanmar's military regime (Kurlantzick, 2022). This demonstrated structural limitations in ASEAN that limit collective action on crises affecting member states.

Bangladesh experienced the greatest humanitarian burden, with more than one million Rohingya refugees sheltered in Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh began the initial stages of the refugee crisis by maintaining an open-door policy, and provided shelter/refugee support for the Rohingya refugees through humanitarian assistance and public support agencies, despite limited resources. However, as the crisis has dragged on, the humanitarian implications have exceeded local infrastructure and public service limitations, undermined social capital and social cohesion, and necessitated calls for international support and sustainable solutions. Bangladesh has become an energetic advocate for voluntary and safe Rohingya refugee repatriation; however, this has fallen short because of continued violence, lack of clear citizenship guarantees, and fearful memories and experiences of further persecution in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2023).

4.3. Humanitarian Impact on the Rohingya Population

The humanitarian crisis is profound and ongoing. Refugees in overcrowded camps face malnutrition, limited access to clean water and sanitation, and inadequate healthcare facilities. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, with high rates of gender-based violence, trauma, and psychosocial distress (MSF, 2020). Education access is severely constrained; formal schooling is restricted by host country policies, and informal learning centres lack accreditation, limiting future opportunities for refugee youth (UNICEF, 2021).

Humanitarian aid has been substantial but insufficient. In 2022, only half of the requested funding for Rohingya emergency response was met, leaving critical gaps in food security, health services, and shelter (UNHCR, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, disrupting aid delivery and increasing health risks among already vulnerable populations.

4.4. International Political Economy Perspectives

International responses are deeply influenced by geopolitical interests. China's investment projects and strategic partnership with Myanmar shape its protective stance, viewing criticism as a threat to its regional ambitions. India's Act East policy similarly informs its cautious engagement, balancing security concerns against regional diplomatic pressures (Haacke, 2020). Western countries' moral and legal advocacy efforts are undermined by their limited leverage, as Myanmar's military retains strong external support and access to alternative economic partnerships.

These geopolitical dynamics expose the limitations of the global governance system. The United Nations, particularly the Security Council, is hampered by power politics, reducing its ability to enforce collective security or impose effective sanctions (Cheesman et al., 2021). This paralysis creates a permissive environment for continued abuses.

4.5. Legal Frameworks and Challenges

The case brought by The Gambia against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) marked a significant step toward international legal accountability. The ICJ's provisional measures in 2020 demanded Myanmar halt genocidal acts and preserve evidence. However, enforcement remains weak, as Myanmar has shown limited cooperation and the Court lacks direct enforcement power (ICJ, 2020).

Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened a preliminary examination into crimes against humanity related to the forced displacement of Rohingya. Jurisdictional challenges and political complexities limit the ICC's effectiveness, as Myanmar is not a party to the Rome Statute, and cooperation from the military government is unlikely (ICC, 2019).

Statelessness remains a core legal challenge. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law excludes the Rohingya, denying them nationality, rights, and protections. Myanmar is not party to key international treaties addressing statelessness, and regional legal instruments provide limited safeguards. This legal vacuum perpetuates Rohingya vulnerability and impedes durable solutions (UNHCR, 2021).

Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis stands as one of the most urgent and complex humanitarian, legal, and political challenges of the 21st century. Despite extensive international documentation of atrocities and global awareness, the response from the international community has been inconsistent, often symbolic, and largely insufficient to halt ongoing human rights violations or to provide durable, sustainable solutions for the displaced Rohingya population.

Western countries have taken meaningful but piecemeal steps, including targeted sanctions against Myanmar's military leadership and the provision of humanitarian aid to refugee populations. But these efforts still lack a

coherent global strategy and implementation mechanisms, reducing their effectiveness. National and international efforts have vexed the United Nations system, and the geopolitical rivalry between China, Russia, and the West, combined with the lack of effectiveness of the Security Council consensus model, has meant that binding resolutions cannot be taken and sanctions cannot be effectively implemented.

Regional actors, normative principles such as non-interference, and the consensus-based decision-making practices of organizations like ASEAN constrain Member States and their ability to take strong collective measures against fellow Member States. Bangladesh is strained from bearing the overwhelming burden of the humanitarian disaster and has done a heroic job in managing the situation with minimal resources, however, continued refuge need is reliant on the international community.

While legal avenues to hold Myanmar accountable for crimes against humanity, or genocidal impact, such as processes at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court investigative steps, offer promising frameworks to pursue accountability, they are not without challenges of jurisdiction and enforcement and the willingness to act on political will.

If the international community is going to address the Rohingya crisis, a coordinated multi-dimensional response must be embraced.

- Strengthen international legal mechanisms by ensuring compliance with ICJ provisional measures, supporting ICC investigations, and encouraging Myanmar's ratification of statelessness conventions.

- Enhance humanitarian assistance with predictable, adequate funding, focusing on health, nutrition, education, and psychosocial support for refugees, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children.

- Advocate for reforms in Myanmar's citizenship laws to recognize the Rohingya as a legitimate ethnic group, guaranteeing rights and protection against persecution.

- Promote regional cooperation that transcends traditional non-interference norms to prioritize human security and human rights protection, enabling ASEAN and neighbouring countries to play more active roles.

- Support sustainable solutions, including safe, voluntary repatriation with guarantees of safety and citizenship, alongside integration options in host countries where appropriate.

Only through principled, sustained, and collaborative international action—balancing humanitarian imperatives with respect for sovereignty and geopolitical realities—can justice, dignity, and hope be restored to the Rohingya people. The crisis demands not only moral commitment but also political courage and innovative diplomacy to break the cycle of violence and displacement.

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