The Cost of Blindness

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Introduction

The 2017 genocide against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (formerly Burma) should not have come as a surprise to the international community. Indicators of systematic violence had been documented since 2010, with the Irish Centre for Human Rights signalling that Crimes Against Humanity had been taking place against the Rohingya people. Despite early warning signs, historical evidence, and documentation of these horrific crimes, the international response remained limited. This can be explained partly by the context that Myanmar was undergoing a process of democratisation and economic liberalisation, which was widely supported by Western States

and international institutions. As a result, this period was often referred to as a rare opportunity for democratic transition, which tempered external pressure on the government. Political gains were also to be made by China if Myanmar remained unstable, tarnishing regional desire for lasting peace. While the warning signs that a mass atrocity was brewing were clearly visible, support for presidential candidate Aung San Suu Kyi, who promised democratisation, took precedence over preventing this large-scale human rights violation.

This attempt was labelled a 'textbook case of ethnic cleansing' by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2017, so while the case for genocide is ongoing in the ICJ as of 2026, this article will operate under the understanding that this event was an act of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Background to the State of Myanmar and the Rohingya

The United Nations has identified the Rohingya as one of the world's most persecuted minorities and one of the largest groups of stateless people (Kiragu et al., 2011), described as an ethnoreligious group of Muslims in North Rakhine State, Myanmar (Leider, 2018), who first gained international attention through reports of human rights abuses during the 1990s. The authoritarian regime in Myanmar between 1962 and 2011 not only diminished hopes of ethnic recognition but also paradoxically accelerated a process of shared identity formation, giving rise to various nationalist movements, some armed, seeking official recognition (ibid.).

Tensions came to a head in 2012, when riots broke out between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist Rakhine. Certain evidence suggests that the Burmese government encouraged the ensuing violence, allegedly motivating Rakhine men with food and knives in exchange for their participation (Rohingya Culture Center). Official figures put the death toll at 78 people, with 140,000 displaced as a result of the burning of villages. In the aftermath, the Burmese government instituted curfews and deployed the military in surrounding neighbourhoods, which in turn led to an increase in targeted arrests and violence towards the Rohingya people (ibid.). By 2016, the violence in Rakhine had claimed at least 1000 lives and internally displaced over 140,000 (Arnold, 2016).

After decades of discrimination and repression under successive Myanmar authorities and being effectively denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, violence intensified in 2016, which escalated to ethnic cleansing in 2017.

The Early Warning Signs

On 25 August 2017, a mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims began, as hundreds of thousands fled from Rakhine State to Bangladesh following a campaign of extreme violence by the Army and State. More than ¾ million people

sought out refuge in hastily constructed camps and settlements (UNOCHA, 2017). The question is whether this large-scale humanitarian crisis could have been prevented, what the early warning signs were, and ultimately why a timely and effective response to these findings was not carried out.

In October 2016, attacks launched by militant Rohingyas on a police station in northern Rakhine State triggered a violent response by the Burmese military (HE, 2022). Disguised under the label "clearance operations", attacks targeted the general Rohingya population, including men, women, and children, and approximately 65,000 were forced to escape to Bangladesh. Despite decades of tension, such violence was unheard of, and allegations of ethnic cleansing from officials at the UN Refugee Agency in Bangladesh were made on the part of Myanmar officials (FIIA, 2020). Reports included evidence of rape, arson, torture and extrajudicial killings, all indicators that should have alerted the international community to the risk of genocide.

Under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, these reports could have triggered stronger preventative action by the international community. Instead, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi claimed that Myanmar's government was defending the country's unity and sovereignty against Muslim terrorists, while the international community focused on a 'rare and fading opportunity' (International Crisis Group, 2016) of a peace process, willing to overlook the human rights abuses occurring simultaneously.

Violence erupted again in August 2017 when 7,000 Rohingya were killed, and half the population fled to Bangladesh. The Rohingya in Bangladesh formed one of the largest refugee sites in the world, living in inhumane conditions. Safe water only reaches 30% of the community; 85% of the refugees have no access to latrines (Islam, Nazhath, 2018). Measles, diphtheria, and skin diseases have been widely reported (ibid.). It is important to note that among the refugees, 720,000 are children; 14,740 orphan Rohingya children were identified in September 2017; 250,000 children under 8 require life-saving interventions; and 240,000 children under 5 need malnutrition prevention treatment (ibid.). Nevertheless, reports on crimes against humanity failed to incite concrete international action or robust Security Council action.

Blindness and Inaction of the International Community

The limited international response to the Rohingya crisis can be understood through several interrelated factors: the prioritisation of Myanmar's democratic transition, economic appeal, institutional constraints of the Security Council, and the geopolitical influence of major powers, particularly China and Russia.

To begin, Suu Kyi brought in great national and international favour through her non-violent democratic movement (Zahed & Jenkins, 2022).

Her top priority was to amend the constitution, which was aiming to sideline her from politics. This was interpreted as a turning point for Myanmar, and supporting this transition became a key objective for international actors.

However, due to the army's implementation of power to veto legislation and decisions of the parliament, every initiative failed to regain a democratic system (Huang, 2017). It was evident that a constitutional amendment and, therefore, a real democracy would not be possible without the cooperation of the military. Optimism of real change brewing led to a degree of caution in challenging the military over human rights abuses, and as a result, a democratic facade was built. Winning the election to bring back democracy was Suu Kyi's priority, and also that of the international community. Taking no steps to prevent the crimes against humanity during her tenure, she instead appeared to tacitly allow the genocidal activities of the army.

The international community also prioritised the facade of democracy in economic activity over human rights. In October 2016, the US lifted economic sanctions on Myanmar despite protests from human rights organisations, who argued that now was not the time to give up the leverage on the generals which sanctions bring (Barany, 2018). Furthermore, investment from abroad continued to pour in in 2016, with an increase of $1.48 bn following the year before, citing Myanmar's "great, untapped economic potential" (World Bank, 2017).

Furthermore, the structure of the UN Security Council failed to induce sufficient measures to deal with the growing crisis. Until the violence of 2016, the Security Council had only discussed Myanmar incidentally until Secretary-General Guterres urged the Security Council to react to Myanmar's human rights situation following 2017. Even then, it took the Council two weeks to arrange a meeting, whereupon no resolution was reached (FIIA, 2020). Some momentum occurred in 2018, with Council Members urging Myanmar to allow access for UN agencies and requesting an independent investigation. The SC was pushed to adopt targeted sanctions against involved individuals and to impose an arms embargo on Myanmar. However, the SC was unable to agree upon a result, with China and Russia blocking all draft resolutions mentioning accountability or the threat of sanctions (ibid.). China's vested interest in keeping Myanmar in a conflict-laden condition draws from multiple factors. Myanmar offers China an outlet to the Indian Ocean and strategic new trade routes. During the 2017 conflict, China made efforts to be directly involved in the primary conflict issues Myanmar faced and to (unsuccessfully) mediate between Myanmar and Bangladesh (United States Institute of Peace, 2018). However, China ultimately benefits from neither a hot nor a complete war. A reduction of fighting along its border safeguards stability; however, continued friction between central authorities and the population provides a major source of influence, which could be used to weaken democratic ties with the US (ibid.). By using its pro-government position on the Rohingya situation and protecting Myanmar from punitive actions in the UNSC, support

for China's political and economic interests is garnered. Including a port in Nyaukphyu and a Special Economic Zone in Rakhine State (ibid.). These benefits that occur without a lasting peace contribute to an explanation as to why tensions were not resolved quickly in the region, and early warning signs were ignored. Ultimately, the West was sold the illusion of a turning point in Myanmar's history and openly supported Suu Kyi's ascent into politics despite her not condemning or taking a stance against the treatment of the Rohingya Muslims. They saw the economic potential in not blocking trade or implementing sanctions in time, as well as balancing China's growing influence over its neighbour (Business Standard, 2017). The Security Council was slow to react and did not have the necessary mechanisms to protect the Rohingya people. Meanwhile, the East saw tensions in Myanmar as a geopolitical advantage in the region, blocking resolutions and engaging in 'salami-slicing' tactics in order to expand its sphere of influence across the world (Mahmud, Rai, 2023).

Consequences

The consequences of global inaction were far-reaching and long-lasting. Not only are there still 1 million post-2017 refugees living in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2026), often in terrible camp conditions, subjected to flooding and landslides, but political violence has continued to plague the country. Prolonged instability and military influence created the conditions for a military coup, which saw Aung San Suu Kyi ousted in 2021. Lethal force has been used against protesters, killing 1,500 people, including 100 children (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The international community has again been slow to react, forgetting the lessons learned from 2016. The Asia Director of Human Rights Watch asks, "How many more people does Myanmar's military have to detain, torture, and shoot before influential governments act to cut off the junta from its flow of money and arms?" highlighting just how inefficient states have been in coming to the aid of Myanmar's citizens. This pattern of inaction is not an inevitability but rather a choice made by governments not to act.

Conclusion

However, accountability after the fact has not entirely stalled. In 2019, Suu Kyi stood before the International Court of Justice while the International Criminal Court announced its investigations into the responsibility of Myanmar's top leaders for international crimes (FIIA, 2020). The attention of the international community has finally been caught despite the failure of the UN Security Council to firmly address the situation (ibid.).

To conclude, the lesson that must be learned from these atrocities is indisputable: The international community must act on early warning signs, whether that is withdrawing support for political candidates who are

unwilling to address the human rights failures in their own country, placing sanctions, or reducing investment. Never again must mean never again.

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