



# stand BURMA

STAND Summary:

## Civil Wars with Ethnic Minorities

Burma is characterized by a large degree of ethnic and religious diversity with significant demographic variation throughout geographic regions of the country. Of particular importance in recent years has been the demographic shift due to ongoing sectarian violence in Rakhine state, a relatively small state at the country's western border to Bangladesh.

The state's two main cultural groups are the ethnic Rakhine, a Theravada Buddhist people closely related to the national majority Bamar ethnic group, and the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim Indo-European ethnic minority. Today, the ongoing conflict between these two ethnic groups has garnered significant international attention and is considered by many to be one of the worst contemporary examples of genocide in the world, claiming over 24,000 lives and displacing upwards of 1,400,000 people.

*Note: "Burma" was the name given to the country by the British; it was renamed "Myanmar" in 1989 by the military junta. Many Burmese diaspora and human rights organizations choose to use "Burma" in solidarity with the Burmese still suffering at the hands of the government.*

## Context

Tensions between the two groups came to a head during World War II, when two simultaneous military campaigns and nationalist ideologies violently collided in Rakhine state. The Rakhine allied themselves strongly with imperial Japan in the hope of dismantling the colonialist legacy of British conquest and viewed the Burma campaign as a struggle for independence; the Rohingya, in contrast, were recruited by British forces in exchange for the promise of a "Muslim National Area"—a separate nation. Following independence in 1948 at the conclusion of the war, Burma adopted a nationalist and exclusionary vision of Burmese citizenship, which was consolidated by the military junta 34 years later with the passage of a citizenship law which effectively rendered the Rohingya people stateless.

Since 1982, the Rohingya have been subjected to unfettered ethnic violence on the part of the government of Burma and have been steadily stripped of their rights and autonomy. Paradoxically, the democratic transition of 2011 further marginalized the Rohingya minority, hastening the subversion of the group's fundamental human rights and ability to participate in civil societies. The current conflict ostensibly began on August 25, 2017, when the insurgent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army coordinated an attack on 24 police outposts, leaving 71 people dead. The government of Burma swiftly retaliated, branding the Rohingya as terrorists and launching a devastating counterinsurgency campaign which included burning entire Rohingya villages and opening fire on fleeing civilians; according to Doctors Without Borders, within the first month of the conflict 6,700 Rohingya were slaughtered by military officials.

## TIMELINE

**1948:** Burma gains independence, establishes constitutional democracy

**1962:** Military coup overthrows democratic government; military dictatorship established

**1982:** Law passed denying Rohingya Burmese citizenship

**1988:** Pro-democracy marches initiated by students, violently suppressed & thousands killed

**1990:** National League for Democracy (NLD) wins elections, results ignored by ruling junta

**2007:** Peaceful anti-government protests initiated by Buddhist monks and violently suppressed

**2008:** Constitutional referendum overwhelmingly passes, mixed civilian-military government is established

**2010:** Elections held, Thein Sein becomes President

**2012:** Parliamentary elections held, NLD participates, winning 43 of 45 available seats

**2015:** First contested general election in 25 years with NLD winning majority

**2016:** Htin Kyaw elected President and Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi appointed as State Counsellor



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## Recent Dynamics

Since 2017, the conflict has continued to worsen with the military continually carrying out indiscriminate attacks on Rohingya villages and encouraging Rakhine villagers to do the same. The result has been what top United Nations human rights official Zeid Ra'ad al-Husein branded a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing," an ongoing campaign of terror taking the form of landmines, rampant extra-judicial killings, and sexual violence.

Today, more than 730,000 Rohingya have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, straining existing infrastructure in refugee settlements and accompanied by devastating illnesses that continue to exact a toll on the refugee population. The government of Burma has responded by blocking access to humanitarian workers attempting to deliver much-needed aid to Rohingya communities, effectively placing a strangle-hold on all internally displaced Rohingya migrants.

The Burmese government has continuously denied evidence of the nation's ongoing atrocities: in late 2017 two Reuters reporters were jailed for investigating murders in Rakhine state, and State Counsellor Aung San Su Kyi, a Nobel laureate, famously exclaimed that Rohingya refugees were "exaggerating [their plight] so that everything seems worse than it really is."

Violence towards the Kachin and Shan ethnic groups have also seen an increase in recent years, where displaced Kachin and Shan civilians numbered over 30,000 in 2018. While conflicts between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups has intensified between 2018-2019, the UN fact-finding mission has determined the militia's action in the Kachin and Shan states as war crimes and crimes against humanity since 2011.

Sex trafficking and sexual exploitation have risen as a major problem in particularly the northern Shan and Kachin states: war-torn homelands have increased desperation amongst women and girls, making them vulnerable to being lured and sold to China. The Burmese government continues to fail to recover victims or work with the Chinese government in preventing future trafficking.

Today, top humanitarian priorities in the region are an immediate and sustained end to the conflict as well as repatriation of Rohingya refugees back to their homeland. For this to be made possible, substantial developments must be made in the institutional framework of the Burma government as well as international solidarity and support in the struggle of the Rohingya people.

