



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: BURMA

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USCIRF's Mission

*To elevate and promote
international religious
freedom as a norm
and practice.*

Insights from USCIRF's Visits to Burma and Bangladesh

By Tina L. Mufford, Senior Policy Analyst

In November 2017, USCIRF Commissioners and staff traveled to Burma (also known as Myanmar) to meet with government officials, civil society, and religious representatives in Rangoon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. In January 2018, USCIRF staff traveled to Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to gather information on the situation of Rohingya Muslim refugees.

This document provides an overview of what USCIRF learned during these visits about the religious freedom challenges Burma faces and violations specific to Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State.

Overview—Burma's Religious Freedom Challenges

Successive governments in Burma have failed to ensure that all religious communities are able to practice their faith freely, openly, and without fear, and in some cases have directly perpetrated, tolerated, or ignored religious- and ethnic-based discrimination and abuses. Religious and ethnic minorities are disadvantaged by:

- Institutionalized discrimination;
- Increasing anti-Muslim sentiment and the related rise of Buddhist nationalism, which has affected all religious minorities;
- A culture of impunity and lack of accountability for human rights abuses and crimes committed by military and nonstate actors; and
- Decades of ethnic armed conflicts and internal displacement.

The deprivation of Rohingya Muslims' rights became even more acute following 2012 communal violence in Rakhine State, including:

- Restricted access to obtain citizenship and register births;
- Restricted freedom of movement, which includes confining 140,000 Rohingya Muslims in internal displacement camps;
- Limited access to food, water, shelter, education, health care, and the means to earn a living;
- Limited political rights to vote and run for office; and
- Restricted ability to practice their faith.



Conditions markedly worsened when military and security forces in Rakhine State brutally responded to attacks carried out by Rohingya insurgents against border guard and law enforcement personnel in October 2016 and August 2017. In addition to existing human rights violations, new abuses include:

- Looting, burning, and property destruction;
- Arbitrary detentions and arrests;
- Rape and other sexual violence;
- Forced starvation;
- Enforced disappearances; and
- Extrajudicial killings.

Why are Rohingya Muslims Targeted?

Rohingya Muslims in Burma are targeted for their:

- Ethnicity, which is not currently among the officially-recognized ethnic groups and subgroups;
- Muslim faith, which has been ensnared in a pernicious wave of anti-Muslim sentiment and parallel anxiety within the majority Buddhist community;
- Language, which is a distinct dialect; and
- Features, for example their skin color, which is often darker than others in Burma.

Collectively, this construct of Rohingya Muslims as different, as “the other,” has made it easy for some within Burma’s government and society to label the community as interlopers, Bengalis (to support the flawed claim that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh), or other more derogatory terms.

What are the Religious Freedom Conditions for Rohingya Muslims in Burma?

Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh reported the following religious freedom violations in Rakhine State, Burma, perpetrated by military and nonstate actors, including some civilians:

- Interference with Ramadan and Eid festivals;
- Madrassas and mosques locked and burned down, preventing Rohingya Muslim children from attending madrassas, imams from receiving training, and Rohingya Muslims from worshipping;
- Qur’ans desecrated and burned;
- Interference with conducting burial and funeral rites according to Muslim tradition; and
- Imams targeted for detention, torture, and killings.

Even if these restrictions and violations in some cases are not motivated by religion or specifically intended to deny religious freedom, they disrupt or interfere with religious practices and threaten Rohingya Muslims’ ability to observe their faith. Also, several Rohingya refugees with whom USCIRF spoke noted that they felt targeted in Burma because of their faith, their ethnicity, and generally for being different.



A mosque sits atop a hill inside the Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site in Bangladesh where nearly 600,000 Rohingya Muslims refugees from Burma currently reside. January 30, 2018. Photo credit: USCIRF.

What are the Religious Freedom Conditions for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh?

In contrast, Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh described generally favorable religious freedom conditions in the camps:

- Adequate numbers of mosques (according to one camp official, there are approximately 2,000 mosques across all the camps);
- Some access to religious materials, although certain areas are in need of more Qur'ans, madrassas, and teacher/student materials for the madrassas; and
- Imams have some ability to obtain training.

Without prompting, refugees expressed sincere gratitude to the government of Bangladesh. That said, refugees stated that they do not wish to remain in Bangladesh, but do not feel comfortable returning to Burma until their safety and security is assured.

Snapshot—A Look at the Refugee Camps

By the numbers—USCIRF's visit to the refugee camps in Bangladesh:

- **688,000**: number of new Rohingya arrivals that had fled into Bangladesh from Burma between August 25, 2017 and January 27, 2018 (the time of USCIRF's visit), according to the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG); since then, the number continues to rise

- **584,854**: total population in the Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site camp, which USCIRF visited, as of January 27, 2018, according to ISCG
 - this number makes the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp the 5th largest city in Bangladesh
- **10**: total number of makeshift camps and refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar
 - USCIRF visited two (2) of these camps—Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site and Nayapara refugee camp
- **36,373**: number of Rohingya orphans (children with no parents or only one parent) under the care of the Bangladeshi Ministry of Social Welfare as of January 2018
- **63**: number of Rohingya Muslim refugees with whom USCIRF spoke
 - **44** men; this includes **29** imams
 - **19** women; this does not include four (4) children accompanying the women

For more information, see *USCIRF's Annual Report*.



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Rohingya Muslims refugees live inside bamboo and tarpaulin shelters—like the ones pictured here in the Nayapara refugee camp in Bangladesh—that provide little protection from the elements. January 31, 2018. Photo credit: USCIRF.

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