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The plight of the Rohingyas

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THE Rohingyas have often been called the world's most persecuted minority, and with good reason. They form the largest single group of "stateless" people in the world, about 1.5m out of a total of 10m, and thus have no legal rights in the country that 1.1m or so of them live in, namely Myanmar. With no



protection, the Rohingyas have been subject to decades of discrimination and violence in the western Myanmar state of Rakhine. This culminated in the wholesale ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas from the state capital of Sittwe in 2012, after which about 140,000 of them were forced into squalid refugee camps. Some have begun to call this a new "genocide (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/04/economist-explains-21>)". Since then, out of desperation, thousands have tried to flee by boat to start new lives in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. In the first quarter of this year alone 25,000 people paid traffickers to flee by boat from western Myanmar and Bangladesh. They were mostly Rohingyas, from both countries, as well as Bangladeshis. About 300 died doing so. An international conference on their plight was held in Thailand on May 29th, but nothing concrete was decided. But just who are the Rohingyas?

The Rohingyas are a Muslim people in a Buddhist-majority country. Some Rohingyas can trace their ancestry in Rakhine state back hundreds of years, to a time when it was an independent kingdom called Arakan (and Sittwe was called Akyab). Hundreds of thousands more, however, migrated from what was then Bengal after the British seized Akyab in the 1820s, beginning the gradual conquest of the whole of what was then Burma. In contemporary British records these immigrants were listed as Chittagonians or Mahommedans. They came to get jobs mainly in the booming port city of Akyab, which

exported most of the country's rice. By 1920s Burma was the biggest rice-exporter in the world.

However, this mass immigration was bitterly resented by the local Buddhist Rakhine, who viewed the incomers merely as satraps of their hated colonial masters. The Rakhine had no control over immigration policy, which, as Burma was administered as part of Britain's Indian empire, was entirely in the hands of the colonial power. To this day the Rohingya are merely called "illegal immigrants" by the Rakhine, or at best by the pejorative term "Bengali". Hatreds were stirred further during the second world war when the retreating British armed some of the Rohingya to help them fight the advancing Japanese. The Rakhine claim that these weapons were then turned against them. The Burmans, the majority ethnic group of Myanmar, also resented the influx of Rohingya and since Burma won independence from the British in 1948 have consistently refused to give them citizenship. The Rohingya were not included as one of the country's 135 official indigenous ethnic groups in the notorious 1982 citizenship act.

From then on, the Rohingya were subjected to waves of attacks by the Burmese army as well as the Rakhine. Hundreds of thousands crossed the border into Bangladesh. The ethnic cleansing of 2012 in Sittwe and in other parts of Rakhine has established a de facto system of apartheid in the state, with the Rohingya rigorously cut off and excluded from the economic and political life of the Rakhine. Most have thus lost their livelihoods, and the consequent poverty has persuaded many to take their chances at sea. The local emergency committee set up to deal with the problem of the Rohingya boat people does not even have a Rohingya representative on it. The much vaunted reforms in Myanmar since 2011 has done little to help. Indeed, it might even have worsened their plight as the quasi-civilian government has helped whip up anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, to try to win the forthcoming general election due in November. Even Aung San Suu Kyi, who will be contesting the election, a Nobel peace-prize winner who campaigns relentlessly for human rights, has been loath to stand up for the Rohingya. They see little prospect of improvement in their situation, which means that once the current monsoon season is over, thousands more will take to the boats, and hundreds more will drown.

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