

ROHINGYA JUSTICE SHABBAT 2018

RESOURCE GUIDE

Overview of the Rohingya Crisis

On August 25, 2017, the Burmese army embarked on a massive and deadly ethnic cleansing campaign targeting the Rohingya people. After a group of Rohingya men attacked a police post, the Burmese army [responded](#) with disproportionate violence, indiscriminately firing at Rohingya civilians, setting entire villages aflame, and committing sexual violence against women.

Since August, more than 671,000 Rohingya people have fled their homes in the western Rakhine state of Burma and made the perilous journey to crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh. Those who remained in Rakhine State now live in danger of starvation and continued attacks.

The Burmese government [denies](#) that it is carrying out human rights crimes against the Rohingya people and has blocked journalists, aid organizations, and U.N. officials from entering Rakhine State and conducting any kind of investigation. Their barricade has limited international aid workers to interviewing and collecting information solely from refugees who have fled from Burma. Based on their findings, the U.N. Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee has stated that the violent actions of the Burmese military against the Rohingya constitute [“hallmarks of a genocide.”](#) Additional U.N. human rights experts shared that their body of findings from a fact-finding mission “points at human rights violations of the most serious kind, in all likelihood amounting to crimes under international law.” The Burmese government claims that these reports are not legitimate and lack evidence. Aung Sun Suu Kyi, the Burmese civilian leader, has not issued any statement on the Rohingya, condemned the violence, or called for an end to the conflict.

“The military stabbed my head inside my home, they stabbed me twice. My father was shot. While he laid on the floor he asked for water, then was shot twice again and died. My younger brother was taken away from my mother’s lap and slammed on the ground. His hand is broken. I saw all this.”

—8-year -old Rohingya girl from Maungdaw township, Rakhine state
Burmese Rohingya Organisation of the UK (BROUK),
[“I Thought I Would Die: Physical Evidence of Atrocities Against the Rohingya”](#)

Who are the Rohingya people?

The Rohingya people are a majority Muslim ethnic group who have lived in Burma for centuries. Before the surge in violence and subsequent exodus of refugees this fall, there were an estimated 1.1 million Rohingya people in Burma. Most resided in the western Rakhine State, where historians trace their roots back as early as the 12th century.

The Rohingya people have a long history of persecution in Burma. The Burmese government refuses to use the name “Rohingya,” instead labeling them illegal Bengali immigrants. The Rohingya people have been denied citizenship in Burma since 1982, effectively rendering them stateless. And because the Rohingya community is not recognized as one of the country’s [135 ethnic groups](#), their rights to work, travel, marry and access health services in the country are severely restricted. Even before the most recent outbreak of violence, the Rohingya community was already one of the poorest and most oppressed in Burma.

What is the current humanitarian situation for refugees?

Since the conflict escalated in August, 671,000 Rohingya refugees [have crossed into Bangladesh](#)—joining more than 300,000 other Rohingya people who had fled previous violence and are now living in refugee camps. The speed and scale of the influx has created a critical humanitarian emergency. According to [UNICEF](#), the refugee settlements of Kutapalong and Balukhal in Bangladesh, which now comprise the [largest refugee camp in the world](#), are home to nearly 600,000 people alone. Approximately 400,000 refugees—58 percent of all new arrivals to Bangladesh—are children who are deeply in need of psychosocial support for their trauma. Sixty percent of the refugee population are women and girls, many of whom are malnourished.

“After they first shot the men and boys, they selected some women from the group and put the women on top of the hill. While the soldiers were killing and cutting the others, these women were then taken to the riverbank. Groups of around ten soldiers took about six women three times. They took them to the bushes of the bank. And then they came again and took six more. I couldn’t see what happened to them, but the women never came back. I believe they were raped and killed.”

—51 year old Rohingya man who survived the Min Gyi massacre in August 2017

Fortify Rights & U.S. Holocaust Museum, [“They Tried to Kill Us All: Atrocity Crimes Against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar”](#)

The Rohingya refugees are now facing yet another perilous obstacle: the [upcoming monsoon season](#), which experts predict will be even more intense than usual due to warmer sea temperatures caused by climate change. April promises to bring heavy rains, flash floods, and landslides to a region which is already one of the wettest parts of a very wet country. These early rains are particularly feared, as they come when the soil is still dry and especially susceptible to mudslides. The United Nations [reports](#) 100,000 refugees are at acute risk from landslides and floods.

The rains also heighten concern over the outbreaks of waterborne diseases, such as cholera, which can spread quickly in the overpopulated refugee camps that lack proper sanitation facilities. The camps currently suffer from insufficient medical care as well, with only one hospital facility per 130,000 people.

Meanwhile, while many Rohingya refugees would like to return to their homeland in Burma, the Burmese government is preventing repatriation from occurring. For those Rohingya people still remaining in Rakhine state, violence has continued. The Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, [reported](#) that “[Burmese government] forces are continuing to drive [Rohingya] into Bangladesh” and that “safe, dignified, and sustainable returns are, of course, impossible under current conditions.” Based on interviews with newly arrived refugees in Bangladesh, it is apparent that there is a “lower intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation” underway that is intended to drive the remaining Rohingya out of Rakhine state altogether. Furthermore, [satellite images](#) captured by the Associated Press in March show that Burma is starting to build military bases on sites where Rohingya villages were razed.

Why is the Rohingya crisis a Jewish issue?

As people who have long faced religious and ethnic persecution ourselves, the suffering, mass murder and forced displacement of the Rohingya community speaks deeply to the Jewish experience.

There are many parallels between the persecution of the Rohingya and that faced by European Jews in the 20th century. From 1933 to 1939, [nearly 400,000 Jews](#) fled Nazi Germany and Austria due to mounting physical violence and targeted legal repression. During that time, before the atrocities of the Holocaust heightened, international authorities, including the [U.S. government](#), were slow to speak out. This history compels us to speak out now.

That’s why a coalition of Jewish organizations has come together to create the Jewish Rohingya Action Network, a united response to this crisis led by American Jewish World Service, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and all the major American Jewish denominations. Together, we are working to mobilize hundreds of American rabbis and communities across the U.S. to take a strong stand and advocate for a swift U.S. response.

In February, the Network mobilized 24 American Jewish national organizations, 48 local organizations and 248 rabbis and communal leaders to petition the Senate to pass the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2017. This bill would increase humanitarian aid, establish U.S. sanctions against the Burmese military, and create a mechanism to help provide accountability for crimes committed against the Rohingya people and other minorities in Burma.

We were pleased to hear that on March 6th the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [announced its decision](#) to rescind its prestigious Elie Wiesel Award from Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In an open letter addressed to the 2012 award recipient, the museum explained that its decision to revoke her award was based on her failing to halt, or even acknowledge, the ethnic cleansing happening in her country. The museum further explained that under Suu Kyi’s leadership, the Burmese government “has refused to cooperate with United Nations investigators, promulgated hateful rhetoric against the Rohingya community, and denied access to and cracked down on journalist trying to uncover the scope of the crimes in Rakhine state.”

The Holocaust Museum's rebuke is an important reminder that the Jewish community has a moral responsibility and a strong moral standing in the international community with which to speak out on the injustices against the Rohingya people.

How can we take action?

The U.S. government plays a critical role in alleviating human suffering, creating conditions for the Rohingya to return home to Burma, and holding the perpetrators of these injustices accountable. We now have a significant opportunity to move through Congress bipartisan legislation advancing these goals. **We are urging Senators across the country to co-sponsor the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act, and specifically calling on Senator Mitch McConnell to schedule a vote on the bill this spring.**

The bipartisan [Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2018](#) (S. 2060) is currently co-sponsored by 17 senators, including Senators John McCain, Marco Rubio, Tim Kaine and Dianne Feinstein (see box for complete list of co-sponsors). This legislation lays out U.S. policy on the Rohingya crisis on a number of fronts. In addition to authorizing additional humanitarian aid funding, it also imposes targeted sanctions against Burmese military officials and supports restoration of full citizenship for the Rohingya people.

The Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act has moved out of committee, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell must now schedule it for a full vote. However, Sen. McConnell's concerns over the impact of this bill on Aung San Suu Kyi's position has led him to hold up the bill. With your public pressure and advocacy, we believe we can push Sen. McConnell to move the bill forward.

If this bill passes the Senate with bipartisan support, we will then work to forge a path for this critical legislation to be adopted in the House and ratified by the Administration.

Here's what your community can do:

- 1) **Write to your senators asking them to co-sponsor the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act (S. 2060). If they are already co-sponsors, urge them to rally their Senate colleagues to sign on, and encourage Sen. McConnell to call for a vote.**

Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act (S. 2060)

Co-Sponsors (updated March 21)

Sen. Baldwin (D-WI)
Sen. Booker (D-NJ)
Sen. Cardin (D-MD)
Sen. Casey (D-PA)
Sen. Collins (R-ME)
Sen. Coons (D-DE)
Sen. Durbin (D-IL)
Sen. Feinstein (D-CA)
Sen. Gillibrand (D-NY)
Sen. Kaine (D-VA)
Sen. Markey (D-MA)
Sen. McCain (R-AZ)
Sen. McCaskill (D-MO)
Sen. Merkley (D-OR)
Sen. Rubio (R-FL)
Sen. Schatz (D-HI)
Sen. Shaheen (D-NH)
Sen. Van Hollen (D-MD)
Sen. Warren (D-MA)
Sen. Young (R-IN)

This is an important opportunity for our nation and our elected officials to demonstrate real moral leadership on the international stage, and work toward a lasting, peaceful solution for the Rohingya people.

2) Educate your congregation about the Rohingya crisis.

In order to end the atrocities in Burma, more people must be made aware of the devastation occurring there. Today, many Americans have little knowledge of the plight of the Rohingya people. Educating each other is one of the best ways that we can encourage others to take action.

Hold an event in your community. Invite a speaker from AJWS or a human rights group working to aid the Rohingya. Reach out directly to 10 friends and ask them to send a letter to their Members of Congress.

3) Encourage your community to donate to the Jewish Rohingya Justice Network's [disaster relief fund](#).

[This fund](#) will provide immediate and longer-term humanitarian aid—including food and water—to refugees who have fled across the Burmese border into Bangladesh. We are also supporting Rohingya human rights activists in Burma and around the world in their efforts to stop military violence against the Rohingya community. One hundred percent of this fund goes directly to American Jewish World Service's aid and grantmaking in response to the Rohingya crisis.

To learn more about the Rohingya crisis and the work of the Jewish Rohingya Action Network's* campaign to aid survivors and stop the violence, visit:

[American Jewish World Service](#)
[Jewish Council for Public Affairs](#)
[Jewish World Watch](#)
[Anti-Defamation League](#)

***Jewish Rohingya Justice Network Members include:** American Jewish Committee, American Jewish World Service, Anti-Defamation League, HIAS, JACOB, Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Jewish World Watch, Rabbinical Assembly, Reconstructing Judaism, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, T'ruah and The Union for Reform Judaism. **Allies:** Foundation for Ethic Understanding, Hebrew College, The New York Board of Rabbis, The Shalom Center and Uri L'Tzedek