

Burma's Path to Genocide

This exhibition explores how the Rohingya went from citizens to outsiders—and became targets of a sustained campaign of genocide.

View the full online exhibition at www.ushmm.org/burma-genocide.

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PERSONAL STORIES

These members of the Rohingya community lived in the village of Maung Nu in Burma. It was one of hundreds of villages the Burmese military attacked in August 2017. On that day of violence, the Burmese military destroyed their homes, schools, and mosques. Up to 100 people were killed in Maung Nu.

They are among the more than 700,000 Rohingya who have fled Burma since 2017. These stories show what their lives were like before and how decades of persecution culminated in genocide.

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Haunted by Loss

Mohammed, a Rohingya man, found his purpose in fatherhood and now struggles to move forward after a genocide that claimed his children.

“When I see those children who used to play with my children, I’ve felt ... like my insides are burning.”

Photo: © Greg Constantine

The holidays trigger the madness he struggles to repress.

Watching children receive gifts from their parents as part of the Muslim Eid celebration, Mohammed remembers the bicycle and new clothes that he purchased in another life. A life he shared with his wife, three teenage sons, and a baby on the way.

The daily indignities from those years—when the government restricted access to higher education, most job opportunities, and travel—had not dimmed his ambitions for his sons. He smiled remembering how hard they studied in school and how much they enjoyed riding their new bike along the road near their home. His own parents had not been able to afford a bike for him, and he took great pride in surprising his own children.

During this time he held himself together even as daily life deteriorated and curfews prevented him from attending the neighborhood mosque, where he was a Mullah, for evening prayers.

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But now, without three of his children, he feels lost.



STAYING POSITIVE FOR HIS FAMILY

Survival and sanity in Maung Nu required relentless optimism. That is what Mohammed tried to model for his family. When his children were banned from school, he took them to religious studies at the mosque. When the curfew prevented them from going to the mosque, his family recited their prayers at home. And on and on.

When there is nowhere to go, you look at the person sitting across from you, and Mohammed's large and close-knit family looked to him. Even before the Burmese authorities placed such severe restrictions on their lives, Mohammed tried to set an example. He prioritized education. His entire extended family made sure that the youngest generation attended school—in whatever capacity the authorities would allow. After, they made sure these same teens found work, no matter how limited the opportunities.

Mohammed Anwar witnessed his two older brothers being dragged away and killed.

Photo: © Greg Constantine

As the restrictions on daily life multiplied, Mohammed and the elders in the family made sure that the younger generation knew

what had once been possible.

“Do you know, my boys, there was a time when Rohingya could attend college?”

“We could be police officers and politicians. We too could serve in the military. We could travel freely throughout our country.”

Knowing their history would inspire his family and keep them going. That had been his most fervent hope.

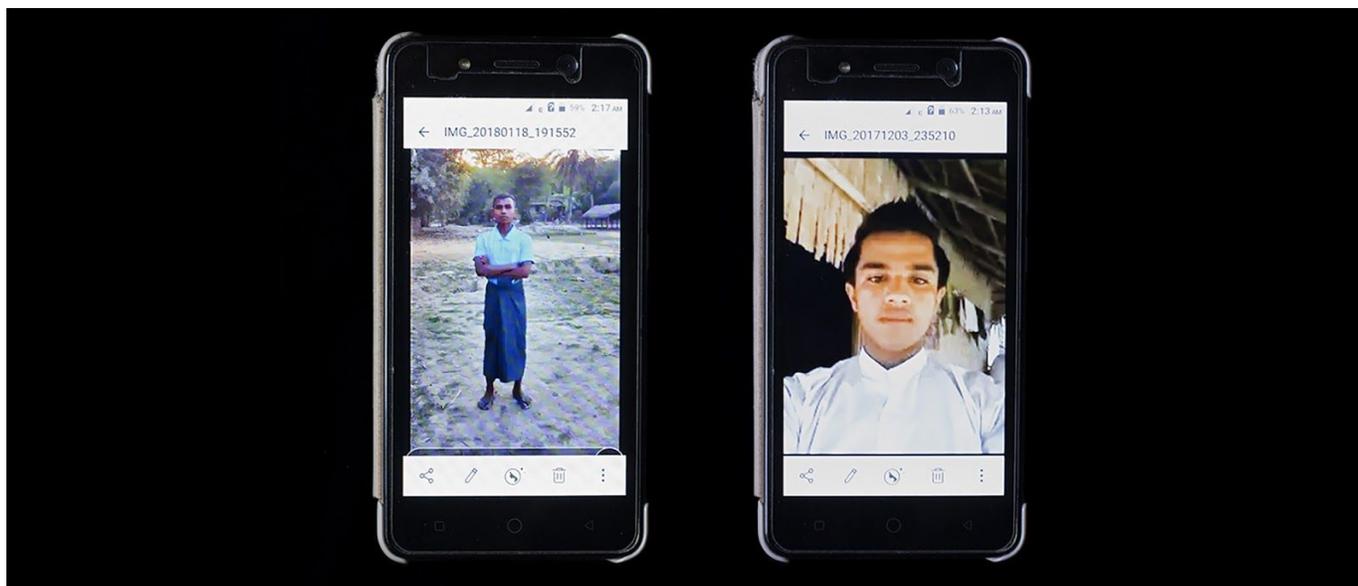
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When Mohammed heard the Burmese military entering his village on the morning of August 27, 2017, he was with his youngest son, Mohammed Anwar. He grabbed the 13-year-old's hand and started to run.

They ran as fast as they could alongside family, friends, and neighbors. In the chaos, his son let go of his hand and fled in a different direction.

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Mohammed raced toward the forest outside of town. He searched everywhere for his boys. He finally found his youngest in the forest. The boy told his father what had happened during their separation. He had fled into a large, nearby compound, crowded with other children who sought safety in numbers. But the home he had entered would turn out to be the site of the mass slaughter of up to 100 Rohingya. He told his father he saw his older brothers—Salamat and Zahid Ullah—dragged away and killed.



Soldiers killed Mohammed's sons, Salamat Ullah, 17, and Zahid Ullah, 16, during the attack on Maung Nu. *Photos: Greg Constantine*

STILL IN PAIN

With almost no food and none of their possessions, Mohammed, his son, and his pregnant wife arrived at the border with Bangladesh. But the loss would not stop. Soon after settling in a camp, Mohammed's wife delivered a baby boy. He died almost immediately.

As time passes, Mohammed says his pain is slowly getting better. But the masses of displaced Rohingya and the constant noise and stress of camp life make escaping the memory of his lost boys and other relatives nearly impossible.

“At night or when we gather at festival time, when I see those children who used to play with my children, I’ve felt very uncomfortable,” Mohammed says. “Like my insides are burning.”

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Visible and Invisible Scars

Showife and Mohammadul, Rohingya brothers, survived terror and now struggle to move forward.

“The memory keeps coming back. What they did to us, and the faces of my brothers. I don't feel at peace.”

Photos: Greg Constantine

“Showife! Come outside. We won't do anything to you,” a military commander shouted as his soldiers surrounded the Hassan family compound.

The family had been eating breakfast when the military trucks pulled up.

“Showife, come out, we can see you! We won't harm you!” yelled the commander. He had been harassing the family's oldest son for months.

Showife made a decision that he believed would save his family. If they couldn't find him, they would leave. With that thought, Showife secured the lock on the front door and ran upstairs.

By hiding, he was sure he would divert the men with guns who were after him. Instead, the soldiers barged inside the home. As a helpless Showife listened from the attic, they attacked his female relatives. They dragged his male family members outside, including his teenage brother Mohammadul.

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BEFORE THE VIOLENCE

For Showife and Mohammadul, life was a daily search for freedom in a community that felt more and more under siege.

Both young men excelled in school before the authorities made it impossible for them to continue their studies. But the brothers persevered. Showife purchased a motorcycle that he turned into a taxi service. Mohammadul opened up a little shop, selling vegetables and gas. They lived at home with a large extended family. They attended mosque regularly and socialized with their friends from school.

But things kept getting worse. Before long, there was a 6 p.m. curfew, preventing attendance at evening prayers. Next, authorities shut down the mosques. At least several times a week, soldiers ordered Showife to hand over his motorcycle. They forced him to pay for the full tank of gas they would use.

“We could not make our livelihood or live our lives peacefully,” Showife said.

In June 2017, military trucks rolled into their village of Maung Nu. Soldiers confiscated kitchen knives and machetes. They even tore down wooden-fence posts that surrounded family homes for privacy. Even with the curfew, no lights could be turned on after 6 p.m., not even to cook a meal.

“We felt that we were being stripped naked.”

Later, the military returned. This time, the soldiers tied pieces of red cloth around several mango trees in front of Rohingya homes and near a mosque.

Showife's mother watched from a window as a soldier tied the cloth around the tree in front of their home. “They're eyeing this place,” she said. “I worry what they'll do here.”

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Nose pressed against dirt, his arms touching men to his right and to his left, Mohammadul could only guess at what was happening around him.

He heard an officer make a phone call. The officer paused, turned to the nearby soldiers and gave the order. “Get started!”

Soldiers dragged Mohammadul out of the compound. They forced him into a seated position with his two male relatives on either side. Before they could process what was happening, soldiers shot each man.

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“We fell to the ground. My brothers dropped dead on the spot. I woke up from being unconscious, and opened my eyes to only meet with the eyes of a soldier who was watching. He came and shot me right in the chest once more.”

Mohammadul faded away again.

LEAVING A LOVED ONE BEHIND

From the attic, Showife could hear screams and gunfire. He peeked through a hole in the wall and looked down on the street below. He recognized the arms and the legs of men and boys he knew now being hauled toward military trucks. A few were barely alive, but many were dead. Some had been decapitated. The soldiers counted “1, 2, 3 ...” as they heaved the bodies into the trucks. Overwhelmed, Showife passed out.

When he woke up he heard yelling outside the home, and someone was calling his name. “Showife!”

It was Mohammadul.

Mohammadul called out again, yelling and knocking on the door. “Showife!”

Foyas, 30, pictured here holding his daughter, was a relative of Mohammadul. He and another male relative were tied up next to Mohammadul and killed during the massacre of Maung Nu. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

Showife found his younger brother on the ground. At first, he believed Mohammadul's injuries must be minor. But a bloody shadow formed around Mohammadul's broken body, and he began to scream. He was coughing up blood. Mohammadul's screams rocked the walls even as Showife tried to calm him. Showife was terrified the yelling would alert the soldiers.

Mohammadul only howled louder.

Unable to move him or get any medical attention, his family assumed he wouldn't live much longer. They decided he couldn't survive a trip to reach safety. They calmed him and tried to make him comfortable.

The next morning before dawn, Showife climbed over the furniture that barricaded the door, and fled towards Bangladesh. His surviving family members followed shortly after—and left Mohammadul behind.



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THE AFTERMATH

Showife made it to the river bank outside of Maung Nu. As he boarded a boat, he felt wrenched with guilt from leaving Mohammadul to die. He reunited with his mother across the river in another village.

Just as they started the trip toward Bangladesh, Showife's mobile phone rang. It was a boat driver, saying his brother had just crawled to the river from Maung Nu. The driver brought Mohammadul across the river. Showife rushed over and saw men carrying him. He was still suffering but, miraculously, holding on.

Showife and his brother-in-law lifted Mohammadul onto their backs and began to walk. Fourteen days later, they arrived in Bangladesh and got Mohammadul to a hospital. He remained in treatment for nearly two months.

Today, Mohammadul's body has healed, but everything else has changed.

"If I could just work," he says, his voice trailing off.

"The memory keeps coming back. What they did to us, and the faces of my brothers. I don't feel at peace."

Showife alone must now provide for his extended family. But it's not his younger brother's inability to work that haunts him. It's the lasting impact on his mind. This has affected his personality. "He used to be so bright that he would remember exactly what you had told him a year earlier," he says.

"The military had persecuted us for a long time, and we never had hard proof to show," Showife adds.

"Mohammadul is now living proof of the beatings and murders they inflicted on us."

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Holding a Family Together

Jomila, a Rohingya woman, survived the genocide that took her husband and son but remains tormented by their loss.

“We thought that the military would just come to take his books away, but it turned out they murdered him instead.”

Photo: © Greg Constantine

Jomila couldn't carry her husband and her 15-year-old son with her from Burma to Bangladesh.

They would never experience the bruising, the blistering under the exposed sun, or the soaking rainstorms. They couldn't advise or act when she encountered yet another military checkpoint. The Burmese military had murdered them during a violent attack on her village, Maung Nu.

As she trudged on, she looked down at her three youngest surviving children and wondered if they understood. Their clothes had mostly been ripped from their bodies during the massacre they were now fleeing. They wanted food. They wanted water. They didn't yet know what it would be like to miss their father and older brother. So, she continued on, carrying her children from Burma to Bangladesh.

One baby balanced on her waist, the other two on each side. For 15 days, the added weight of one child molding into her abdomen and another onto her lower back, pulling on her hair, had rooted her to this reality: she needed to keep

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going. If not for the children that depended on her, she was certain her own body would have collapsed from grief. Part of her welcomed that thought.



Burmese authorities made Jomila's family stand for this household registration photo in 2010. Her husband Abdul Aziz, 38, is second from the left. Jomila is standing to his right. Her son Jahingir, 15, is wearing a blue shirt and standing in the center, front row. Both Abdul Aziz and Jahingir were killed during the massacre in Maung Nu on August 27, 2017. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

SAVING HER SON'S BELOVED BOOKS

Jomila had spent the previous year planning for her oldest daughter's wedding. She often found herself distracted by her eldest son, Jahingir. He loved to have her undivided attention so she could hear about what he was learning in school.

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At 15, he had expressive features and bright, inquisitive eyes. He was too preoccupied with reading to even contemplate being disrespectful of his parents. His world revolved around school and prayers. When military officers first arrived in their village, he was terrified the soldiers would confiscate his books, so Jomila helped him hide them.



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The Burmese military piled villagers into a large compound. They moved women inside of a building and lined men up in a courtyard. They stripped the women and inspected their bodies with flashlights for anything of value—especially the cell phones, gold, and jewelry that many had grabbed when fleeing. The military used the women's head scarves to gag their husbands and sons and forced them to lie on the ground face down. They tied the men and older boys together, kicked, and beat them so they couldn't move.

The ways in which the military would then kill them varied. Some surrounded the men and older boys and shot them. Others used ropes and swords. As bullets flew through the air, Jomila saw children shot in the head. She witnessed men being decapitated. Women shoved each other to get near the window as they heard the screams of loved ones.

Jahingir's school bag. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

Jomila ran outside into the crowded courtyard when she heard Jahingir screaming her name. He was slamming his head against the brick-lined well where soldiers tied him. He had just seen his father murdered in front of him.

Military officers surrounded Jomila, pointing a gun and a sword at her. They cut off part of her finger as she rushed past them to get to her son. Some other women ran out after her and dragged her back inside. The officers turned to her son.

They didn't kill Jahingir in the same place as his father. Instead, they took him up to an orchard on the compound where others were being murdered. She recognized his screams instantly. She made another desperate attempt to reach him before he died, but soldiers restrained her.

"We thought that the military would just come to take his books away," she later says, "But it turned out that they murdered him instead."

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HOLDING ON TO WHAT REMAINS

Early the next morning, the women and children left in the compound set out for the river. The military had slaughtered nearly 100 Rohingya in Maung Nu the day before. As they made their way to the river, they crept past an orchard filled with the dead bodies of Rohingya men.

Before leaving Maung Nu, Jomila asked her oldest daughter and sister to sneak back to their house. “Bring me the bag that was hanging in our kitchen.”

Jomila’s daughter handed her the school bag. She and her four surviving children began their long journey to Bangladesh. Her youngest daughter rested on her hip, two others walked at her sides. Her oldest daughter carried the younger ones when they couldn’t walk any longer. On her back, Jomila carried the school bag, which represented her dead son. The bag, stuffed with a shirt and instant coffee he had packed, is all she has left.

Jomila holds all she has left of her son. *Photo:*

© *Greg Constantine*

“I wore the bag on me like a backpack, walking and crying my

way here [to Bangladesh].”

Years have passed since that morning, but Jahingir’s bag and its contents remain next to her in the tent she shares with her daughters and surviving family. Her boy remains next to her. Sometimes she has to hide the bag when she is overcome with sorrow, but she will carry it with her for the rest of her life. She has told her daughters to bury her with it when she dies.

She sees other boys studying or praying in the camps in Bangladesh, and it is like looking at ghosts. She asks Allah, “Where is my child? Where is my child?” She imagines hugging him to her chest and listening as he reads to her like he did on so many nights before.

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A Young Life Interrupted

Tasmina, a Rohingya teenage girl, lost her home, her privacy, and her freedom.

“And just like that, when we got here, we are no longer able to live like we used to I can't be happy here.”

Photo: © Greg Constantine

There is nowhere to go. Some days Tasmina sits in the same spot inside her family's hut for hours.

She watches the shadows dance along the plastic sheets serving as a makeshift roof. She both wishes for and dreads the rain that will break the heat. From inside the hut, she can hear those on the outside seeking shelter from the downpour.

She listens to the sounds of refugee camp life surrounding her. Instead of feeling jealous of life on the outside, she just wants quiet.

She wants to relive what her days were like before.

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Tasmina spends most of her days sitting behind this divider. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

LIFE IN MAUNG NU

Tasmina lived in a large compound with her parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. For some special occasions and holidays, she and her best friends got together in each other's backyards. They planned what kinds of cake and snacks to share.

At 13, she was largely shielded from the hardships faced by the Rohingya residents of her village, Maung Nu. The restrictions on the daily life of the Rohingya began before Tasmina was born, but they had recently gotten worse. Burmese authorities limited travel outside the village and stopped youth from receiving higher education. The authorities introduced a curfew that meant Rohingya could no longer leave their homes for evening prayers.

Still, Tasmina's family worked hard to ensure she lived a normal life. She looked forward to celebrating New Years. She spent all of her free time with Lalu and Tatu, friends she affectionately referred to as her "big sisters."

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On the morning of August 27, 2017, the Burmese military entered the village of Maung Nu. Tasmina's life changed forever.

Soldiers killed Tasmina's uncles. She and her parents and aunts were able to escape. They joined neighbors, teachers, and friends walking toward an unknown future in Bangladesh.

They left behind their burning homes and the bodies of loved ones.



LIFE IN THE CAMPS

"I can't bring my friends over because the hut is so small."

She no longer sees friends at school. There are no schools for teenage girls in the refugee camp where she and her family have temporarily settled in Bangladesh.

The last time she saw Lalu and Tatu was before the raid on her village in 2017. If she could see them now, she wonders what they'd have to talk about. "I could ask how they are, and I know that they are not happy," she says. "I could tell them that I will visit them, but there's not much else we could talk about."

Drawing is one of the few things Tasmina can do from inside her family's hut. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

She lives in this room 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is her imaginary school, her home, her world. Though she is never alone, not even for a moment, she feels completely isolated,

caged. Her parents rarely allow her to leave the hut because they fear potential predators in the overcrowded camps.

GUILT AND RELIEF

Often she feels guilty for resenting her circumstances. "I still grieve over some of my uncles who were slaughtered and killed. The fact that my parents are in front of me makes me very happy."

Still, she is a young girl, a young girl old enough to remember a life where she was free to leave her home without the threat of predators or disease. A world where her friends could visit and sit together on her balcony in front of a

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little electric fan during the balmiest days of the year. A world where she did not have nightmares about the sounds of gunfire.

She'd like to have a cell phone, a symbol of autonomy, a bit of privacy, and a means to communicate with the world outside. But her family no longer has money for food, or a decent roof, so she keeps her wishes to herself.

“My parents can live here in this condition, so why wouldn't I be able to live like this too?”

She goes back to staring up at the plastic roof. She listens to the sounds outside. If she concentrates, she can sometimes recognize voices or follow conversations taking place in the world just beyond her reach.

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Safeguarding Life

Sumida, Rabiya, and Harsa are three Rohingya women who saved the most vulnerable.

“If I hadn’t found him, how would his mother live?”

Photos: Greg Constantine

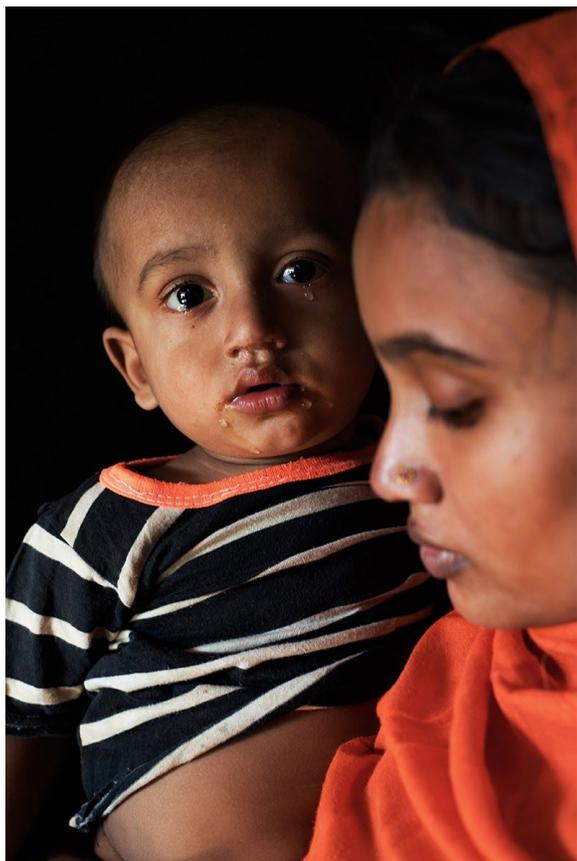
The youngest children begged and cried for water. They did not understand.

Thankfully, they did not understand that their fathers and their older brothers had been murdered. They did not understand that this endless journey across rivers, through mountains, and past military checkpoints was a last-minute escape. They did not understand that they were mostly naked because there was no time to grab clothing. They did not understand that their school books and toys were now ash. They did not understand that some of their grandparents, siblings, cousins, uncles, classmates, and neighbors had not survived.

They begged and cried for water because they were thirsty and hungry and exhausted. Their mothers looked down at their young children, alive—thankfully, still alive—and picked them up or urged them onward.

This is the story of three mothers whose lives became forever linked on August 27, 2017.

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SUMIDA

One year before, Sumida celebrated her first wedding anniversary with her husband and his big, boisterous family. Her brothers-in-law brought home fish, and she and the other women in the family cooked rice around the fire. She felt grateful for her new life on that day.

She knew she was fortunate to have a generous father-in-law who had been able to afford the bribe necessary to make her wedding legal. If he had not paid the Border Guard Police, Sumida would not have been able to live with her new husband.

Now married with a child, the same guards who had insisted on the bribe refused to let her visit her own family for more than a few hours at a time. Still, she made the best of the hostile circumstances and felt welcomed and cared for by her husband's many relatives.

Sumida lost her son during the chaos on August 27, 2017. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

RABIYA

Rabiya and her husband tried to make sure their seven children could continue to attend school.

As farmers, they faced extortion and increasing demands to turn over their crops as bribes.

Recently, both the children's school and the mosque where they attended religious studies had been closed. Rabiya paid for her son to take private classes just to make sure he could learn Burmese and continue his education.

HARSA

Harsa and her large family had created a warm and meaningful life despite the Burmese authorities' restrictions. She and her husband were raising seven daughters and a 12-year-old son. They lived alongside her husband's parents and younger brother.

The entire extended family prioritized education, and even the young girls attended both regular school and religious studies. All of the children idolized their uncle, Harsa's favorite brother-in-law, who was himself a teacher and about to get married.

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Sumida could hear the baby crying as she slowly regained consciousness. Before she opened her eyes, she felt someone place a small, warm body into the curve of her arms as she lay on the ground.

“Who was this? Is this my baby? Where am I?”

The thoughts rained down upon her as she struggled to understand what was happening.

“Yes, yes, this is your baby,” she heard voices say. “Take your baby!” She nodded, but when she looked at the infant, she knew the truth. This was not her son.

She brought the abandoned infant up to her chest and fed him as if he were her own.

She saw dirty water in a nearby bowl and drank from it, giving some to the baby. She gently washed his head and chest and rocked him in between feedings.



Those hiding alongside her said it was time to leave, and she followed them. It took a while for the memories of the past day to return. The tidal wave of relived trauma crashed over her all at once.

The military had come to drag her family away. As soldiers fired shots nearby, a stray bullet ripped through her home. Sumida's son, who she'd been cradling on her lap, began to wail. Her father-in-law grabbed the child to sooth and quiet him. In the chaos that followed, she lost sight of them both.

She was clutching desperately to her husband's arm as a soldier dragged him away. She tried to pull her husband back to her, and, suddenly, the soldier shot him in the chest. The soldier then shoved Sumida to the ground. She lost consciousness.

Harsa lost track of her baby during the chaos in Maung Nu. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

“WHERE IS MY BABY?”

Soldiers stole all of Harsa's possessions, ripping her jewelry from her body. She handed her baby to an uncle and tried to follow the

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soldiers leading her son and husband away. She did not see her uncle, watching over her baby, sneak into a nearby compound.

Harsa saw her husband tied up, pushed face down on the ground, and shot.

A soldier lunged toward her, ripped her oldest boy from her arms, and dragged him away. The soldier forced her son to lie face down, and a group of military men stomped on his head and neck while Harsa screamed. “Did they break his neck?” Harsa thinks. She is not sure. She’s forced back inside.

“Where is my baby?” Harsa asks upon seeing her uncle. To keep the infant from crying, her uncle had asked another woman to breastfeed the child. Now, he can’t find her.

“I SAW MORE BODIES”

On that same morning, Rabiya set out in search of her husband and children. She had been in a neighboring village when the military began its massacre in Maung Nu. She heard conflicting reports from others about whether her family had escaped to the river or had returned home.

Rabiya eventually made her way to Maung Nu. She opened the door to her uncle’s home and saw his body lying lifeless from a gunshot wound.

“I walked to another uncle’s house, then to another. I kept asking myself why I decided to come back to this,” she says. “I saw more bodies . . . I looked at the floor and it was flooded with blood from the slaughter. I went inside Zahid Hussein’s house, and I found a baby still alive.”

Rabiya reached for the tiny boy who she instantly recognized.

“O Sumida, Sumida. Your child is crying, where did you go leaving the baby by himself?”

She searched for Sumida without luck and kept the baby on her hip as she looked for her own children. She called for her daughter again and again, but heard only silence in response.

Rabiya continued to hear conflicting accounts about where her family had ended up. She crossed over the river to join others who had fled Maung Nu. She was urged to give the baby away, but she refused. She bathed the baby and found cola for him to drink until she was able to ask young mothers to share their milk.

REUNITED

People began to crowd around Sumida saying, “Your son has been found!” Even her aunt came to her. “Sumida! Sumida, your son has been found.”

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It wasn't until she held him to her heart, fed him, and met his eyes that she knew. "Only then, I could convince myself it was my son and found peace in my mind."

"I became extremely happy after getting him back."



As overjoyed as she felt, she regretted not saying a prayer to spare her children's father as well. "I feel if I had done that, I would have probably found my husband."

Harsa too was reunited with her baby girl. It was her beloved younger brother, the teacher Hareth, who brought the child to her. He heard that a woman had been caring for the infant. The woman turned out to be Sumida.

Rabiya's son was killed in Maung Nu. *Photo:*
© Greg Constantine

HAUNTED BY LOSS

Though Harsa feels blessed to have her youngest daughter back and her six other daughters by her side, she cannot suppress the memories of her son and husband. She longs to return to Maung Nu for a closure she can't find in the camp in Bangladesh where she now lives.

"Is there any explanation to what the heart wants? My heart still feels like they just went out to the market and will come back."

Having reunited Sumida with her son, Rabiya's thoughts turned back to her own children. She felt that God rewarded her for rescuing the baby because she soon heard that her own daughter had been spotted crossing the river. Rabiya rushed to her side.

During the reunion she learned about the murder of 12 men in her family, including her only son. On the journey to Bangladesh, she and her daughter reunited with her husband, who had fled to the mountains for safety.

Sumida has brought her son to visit Rabiya. "I miss him, and think to myself that if I hadn't found him, how would his mother live?" Rabiya explains.

Living is a question that haunts all three women.

"We feel restless and sorrowful," Rabiya says. "I am missing my lost son and homeland. Now, only God knows what the future of remaining children will be like."

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Remembering When They Belonged

Ayub carries the knowledge of what life was like before the persecution of the Rohingya began.

“It will take us a hundred years to get back the life we had been living since our forefathers.”

Photo: © Greg Constantine

In elementary school, Ayub identified himself on official forms as “Mohammed Ayub and a Rohingya.” By the time he reached middle school, Burmese authorities had ordered students to write “Bengali” instead of “Rohingya.” That change classified Rohingya as immigrants from Bangladesh instead of Burmese citizens.

The 56-year-old has held on to his old documents in order to prove that the Rohingya were once citizens and belonged.

“They refused us admission to school when we refused to identify ourselves as ‘Bengali,’” recalls Ayub. He was born and raised in the village of Maung Nu in Burma.

“They tried to trick us into calling ourselves foreigners.”

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Ayub's life mirrors the trajectory of many Rohingya. Their identities, rights, and resources have been dependent upon the Burmese government's definition of citizenship. With that comes access to education, jobs, health care, and freedom from persecution.

"You can't plant and grow a tree overnight," he says, referring to the generations of his family impacted by what's happened. "It takes years to grow after planting."



Ayub's original National Identification Card. Photo: © Greg Constantine

NEW RESTRICTIONS

Ayub is desperate to prove that his government used to recognize his people as "legitimate."

"Both of my parents have [National Registration Cards]. So do I," he says. "This is the evidence that we are the citizens of the country." The government once issued those cards to everyone in Burma, regardless of race or religion.

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Things changed as Ayub grew up. He points to family members who served in government and public service jobs until the early 1980s when authorities stopped hiring Rohingya. When the government confiscated their identification cards, many Rohingya kept them in secret. They were holding onto their only proof of Burmese citizenship.

From the 1980s on, the government ordered Rohingya to write “Bengali” as their ethnic name. The government would no longer allow them to call themselves Rohingya.

“We tried to protest against [erasing our ethnic identity] but were not successful.”

After that, the restrictions came quicker. Travel limitations meant they now had far less access to health care, education, and job opportunities. The list kept expanding. Soon jobs were seized. After 2012, Rohingya were not permitted to attend Sittwe University. Travel was restricted even further. A nightly curfew was put into place. Rohingya could no longer gather for prayers because no more than a few people could meet in public.

Authorities restricted almost every element of daily life to make the Rohingya as miserable as possible. Then came the violence.

AUGUST 27, 2017

On the morning of August 27, 2017, military trucks drove into Maung Nu filled with soldiers carrying weapons. Ayub and other villagers tried to hide for safety.

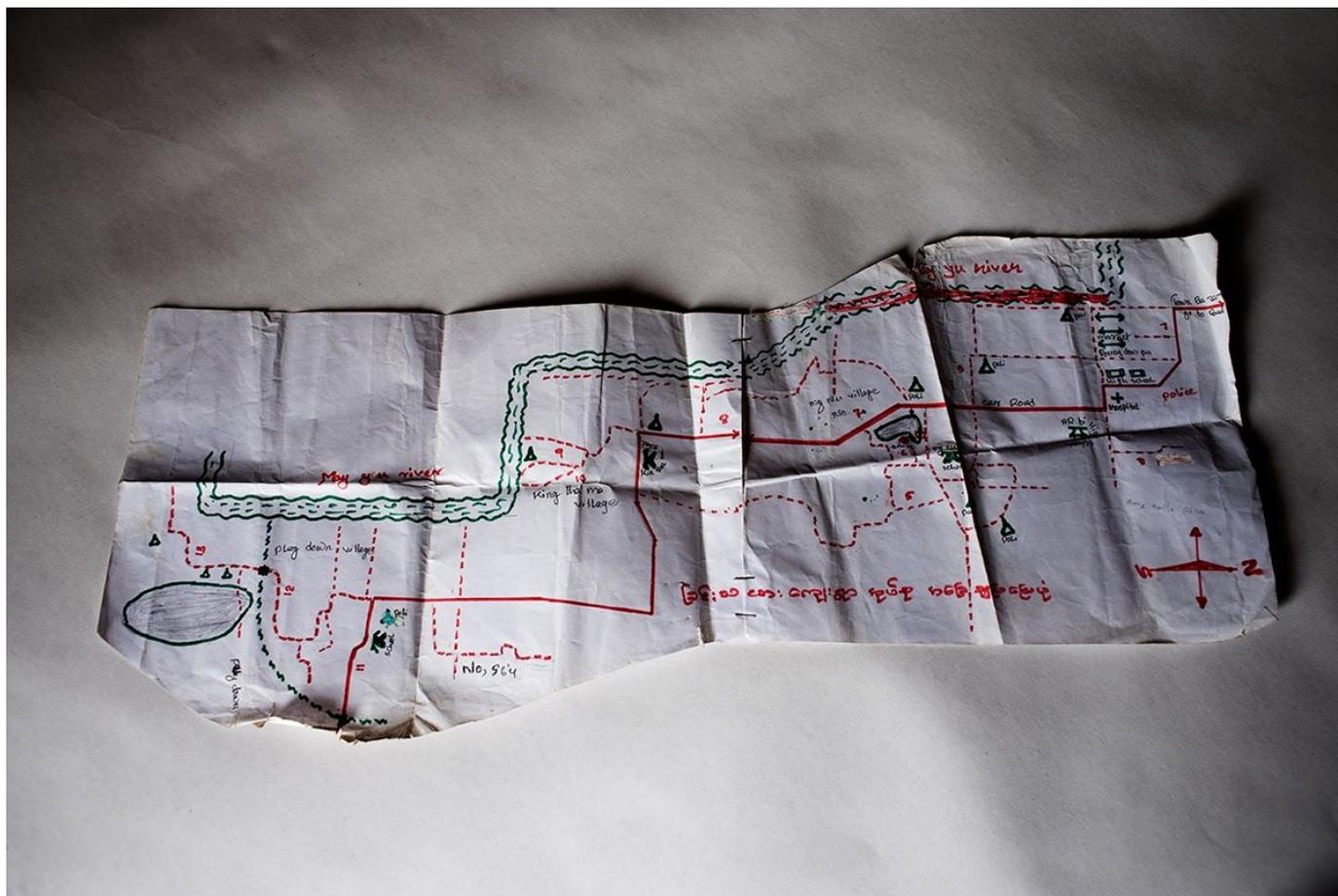
A friend saw Ayub and waved him into his large family compound. “I went inside Bodru’s house and saw so many people were hiding by the gate of the house: men and women all together.”

Bodru’s family was wealthy and influential. Many villagers hid inside their compound, believing the family’s status might win them mercy from the local military. Instead, soldiers surrounded the home and began to beat the men and older boys. Ayub recognized familiar faces from Maung Nu, including a young man named Mohammadul.

“[Mohammadul] collapsed on the ground and started to roll over,” Ayub recalls. “There were many other people like him, soaked in blood rolling over on the ground, while some were already dead.”

As what was happening sunk in, Ayub managed to escape and raced toward the forest outside of town. “They are killing people here. Please go into hiding,” he shouted to the children he passed, confused and scared.

Burma's Path to Genocide



Ayub drew this map of Maung Nu. Photo: © Greg Constantine

DOCUMENTING GENOCIDE

Ayub waited for the military to leave before making his way out of the forest. As the smoke rose up from their homes, he returned to the scenes of slaughter.

“I visited all these places, risking my life, and made a list of the people who were killed and how they were killed,” Ayub says. “I made all these lists not just to keep for my records but to show to the world in order to get justice.”

“They destroyed our religion by killing our religious scholars; our education by killing our teachers; and our economy by killing our businessmen and traders.”

“They destroyed every aspect of our lives.”

Ayub joined other survivors on the long journey to Bangladesh.

Burma's Path to Genocide

Sitting in a makeshift hut in a refugee camp, Ayub shakes his head. He thinks about how the Burmese authorities worked so hard for so many years to erase the Rohingya community from Burma.

“It will take us a hundred years to get back the life we had been living since our forefathers,” Ayub says.

Burma's Path to Genocide

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This online exhibition explores how the Rohingya, a religious and ethnic minority in Burma, became targets of a sustained campaign of genocide. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has raised concerns about the risk of genocide facing the Rohingya since 2013. The Museum determined in 2018 that there was compelling evidence that the Burmese military committed genocide against them. Curator Greg Constantine is a photographer who has documented the Rohingyas' plight for more than 14 years. The exhibition includes many of his photographs and personal stories based on his interviews.