

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.

Burma's Path to Genocide

A Timeline of Rohingya History

A chronology of key events in Burma's history with an emphasis on those impacting the Rohingya.

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

— Ayub, a Rohingya man

Pre-Independence (1784–1940s)

1784



The kingdom of Arakan.

Burmese King Bodawpaya invades the Kingdom of Arakan, located in present-day Burma. Rohingya trace their history back to Arakan. [Learn more.](#)

1824–1886

Great Britain Invades Burma

Great Britain invades Burma multiple times resulting in three wars.

1886–1942

Burma becomes a province of British-controlled India and is later separated into a British colony.

1942–1945

Japanese Occupation

Japan invades British-controlled Burma during World War II. People in Burma support different sides of the invasion. Members of the Muslim Rohingya fight alongside the British, and many Rakhine Buddhists side with the Japanese. Tens of thousands of people flee the violence to what is now Bangladesh.

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1945

Burmese General Aung San and other local leaders fight alongside the British defeating the Japanese.

Independence and a Military Coup (1940s–1960s)

1947

In January, Gen. Aung San signs an agreement with the British that guarantees Burma full independence within a year. Gen. Aung San is elected the leader of the transitional government. Rohingya are elected as members of Burma's governing body, the Constituent Assembly. [Learn more.](#)

In July, political rivals assassinate Gen. Aung San and six cabinet ministers.

1948

Burmese Independence

Men stand in a government building.

Prime Minister U Nu takes the oath of office in the Constituent Assembly on January 2, 1948. Photo: Getty Images

Burma becomes an independent republic. The new Parliament passes the Union Citizenship Act. It recognizes all citizens as equal. This includes the Rohingya and other minority groups.

1949

Burma sets up its first form of national identification. The government begins issuing registration cards to all citizens, including the Rohingya.

1951–1960

Burma holds three general elections. All citizens have the right to vote, including the Rohingya. Voters elect several Rohingya as members of Parliament.

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1962

Military Overthrows Government



A March, 1962, copy of The Guardian newspaper covers the military coup.

The Burmese military, led by General Ne Win, overthrows the elected government and establishes military rule.

Military Rule and Stripping Away Rohingya Citizenship (1970s–1980s)

1974

Burma's military-run government enacts a new constitution. It establishes one-party rule.

Later this year, Parliament passes the Emergency Immigration Act. The law limits the rights of individuals seen as “foreigners” from Bangladesh, China, and India. Authorities begin confiscating Rohingyas’ national registration cards.



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1978



Rohingya refugees flee from Burma into Bangladesh in August 1978. They are carrying their few remaining belongings. *Photo: Getty Images*

Burmese authorities launch Operation Naga Min, or “Dragon King,” to register and verify the status of citizens and people viewed as “foreigners.” Soldiers assault and terrorize Rohingya. [Learn more.](#)

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1982

Government Limits Rohingya Citizenship



A copy of The Working People's Daily newspaper shows Ne Win addressing members of the government days before it passed the new citizenship law. *Image: Rangoon Central Library*

Parliament passes a new law, which bases citizenship on ethnicity. The law excludes the Rohingya and other minority communities. [Learn more.](#)

1988

Pro-democracy protests flourish throughout Burma, including in Rakhine State. This leads to a brutal crackdown by the military across the country.

1989

The government requires everyone to apply for new identification cards, called Citizenship Scrutiny Cards. Rohingya never receive the new cards. [Learn more.](#)

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Targeted Violence Against the Rohingya (1990s)

1990

The National League for Democracy Party wins Burma's national elections. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Gen. Aung San, is the party's leader.

The military refuses to recognize the results and remains in power.

1991

Violence Against the Rohingya



Rohingya refugees set up shelters at a camp in southern Bangladesh. *Photo: Liba Taylor Photography*

The Burmese military launches Operation Pyi Thaya, or "Clean and Beautiful Nation," during which soldiers commit widespread violence. Roughly 250,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh. [Learn more.](#)

1991–1992

The government creates a special border security force, called NaSaKa, to harass and persecute the Rohingya. [Learn more.](#)

1992

Roughly 150,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh return to Burma.

1994

The government starts to deny Rohingya children birth certificates.

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1995



A white card belonging to a Rohingya man. Photo: © Greg Constantine

The government issues Rohingya a new form of identification, known as a temporary registration card or “white card.” It does not serve as proof of citizenship. [Learn more.](#)

Escalating Violence and Displacement (2000–2012)

2008

The government revises Burma's constitution without input from minority group and civil society leaders. This paves the way for democratic reforms but also guarantees continued military rule.

2010

The military-backed political party wins Burma's first national elections held since 1968. It appoints General Thein Sein as president. The opposition party, National League for Democracy, boycotts.

April 2012

Burma holds local elections in some areas. Aung San Suu Kyi's area elects her as their member of Parliament.

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June and October 2012

New Waves of Anti-Rohingya Violence



Local Buddhists carrying weapons walk away from a burning village during the violence in June 2012. A soldier stands by. *Photo: Human Rights Watch*

Clashes between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State erupt into state-supported violence against the Rohingya. [Learn more.](#)

2012

Some Buddhist citizens and monks establish “The 969,” a Buddhist nationalist movement. The movement is later banned for encouraging violence against Muslims in the country. [Learn more.](#)

2012–2014

Tens of thousands of Rohingya flee Burma by boat due to escalating persecution.

Catastrophic Atrocities and Hate Speech (2014–2017)

January 2014

Ultra-nationalist monks create MaBaTha, a social and religious movement that aims to preserve and protect Buddhist values. It becomes the most prominent anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya organization in Burma. [Learn more.](#)

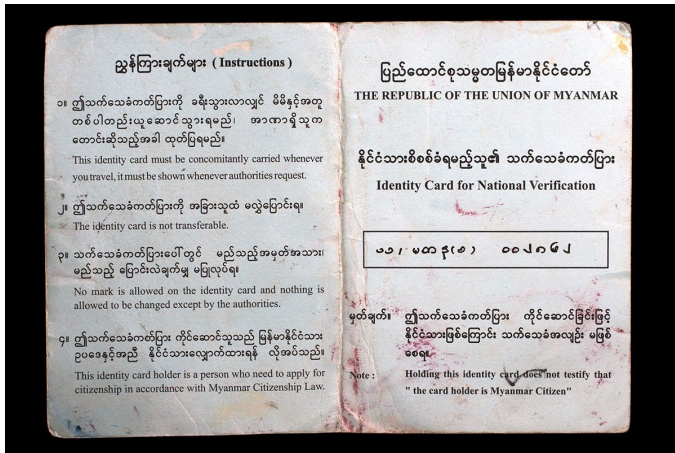
April 2014

A national census is conducted for the first time in 30 years. The government excludes the Rohingya.

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March 2015

Rohingya Lose Identification



A national verification card. Photo: © Greg Constantine

The government invalidates Rohingya white cards, their only form of identification. The Rohingya are required to obtain national verification cards. These cards incorrectly identify Rohingya as immigrants from Bangladesh. Most Rohingya reject the new cards. [Learn more.](#)

August 2015

The government passes Race and Religion Laws. These laws, which relate to issues including interfaith marriage, religious conversion, and childbearing, are seen to specifically target Muslims, as well as the rights of women.

November 2015

Burma holds national elections but denies Rohingya the right to vote or run for political office. The National League for Democracy wins in a landslide.

April 2016

Aung San Suu Kyi becomes State Counsellor, a new role created with authority over the president. She is now the de facto head of the Burmese government. The NLD party takes control of parliament.

September 2016

The Burmese government appoints an Advisory Commission, led by former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, to look at the situation between Buddhists and the Rohingya in Rakhine State. The following year, the commission makes 88 recommendations to improve the situation.

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October 2016



Smoldering debris of burned houses in a Muslim village located in Rakhine State on October 14, 2016. Photo: YE AUNG THU/AFP via Getty Images

A small group of Rohingya men attack several Burmese police posts in Rakhine State, and nine officers are killed. In response, the Burmese military launches a “clearance operation,” killing people, raping women, and destroying Rohingya villages throughout northern Rakhine. The violence forces roughly 86,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. [Learn more.](#)

March 2017

The United Nations Human Rights Council establishes an Independent International Fact Finding Mission to investigate human rights abuses in Burma. The Burmese government refuses to cooperate.

August 2017

Military Unleashes Campaign of Atrocities



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Rohingya arrive in Bangladesh after crossing the Burmese border in 2017. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

After a Rohingya rebel group known as ARSA attacks several military posts in Rakhine, Burma's military launches a disproportionate attack on Rohingya. Soldiers destroy several hundred Rohingya villages and more than 700,000 Rohingya flee to Bangladesh. More than 9,000 Rohingya are estimated to have been killed during the violence. [Learn more.](#)

Aftermath of Violence and International Response (2017–2020)

2017–2019

The United States imposes sanctions on military leaders and other officials who oversaw military attacks throughout Rakhine.

2018–2019

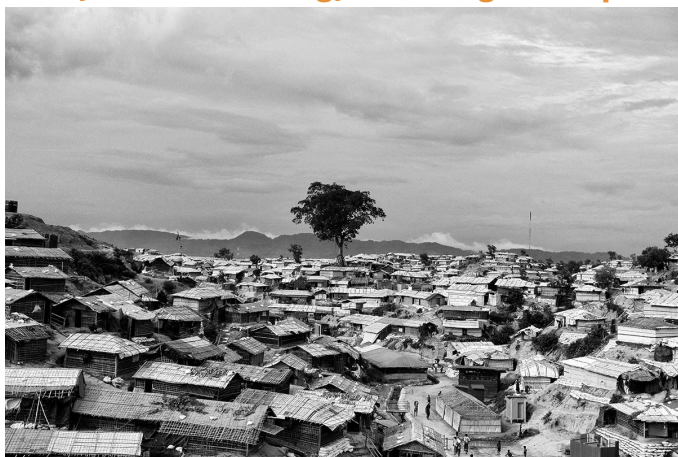
The United Nations Human Rights Council issues results from its fact-finding mission, which refer to genocide and crimes against humanity in Burma.

2018

A global pro bono law firm, the Public International Law & Policy Group, conducts an investigation into the 2017 assault on the Rohingya with a grant from the US Department of State. It finds reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes were committed against the Rohingya.

2019

Nearly 1 Million Rohingya in Refugee Camps



Rohingya refugee camp in southern Bangladesh. *Photo: © Greg Constantine*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than 914,000 Rohingya are living in refugee camps around Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

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2019–2020

Gambia brings a case against Burma before the International Court of Justice, asserting that Burma violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention. It may take many years before the Court reaches a final decision. In January 2020, the Court issues a preliminary ruling, which includes ordering Burma to prevent future acts of 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.