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Rohingya Ethnic Group

Who are Rohingyas? Why there are so many controversial debates regarding their citizenship? Rohingya, an ethnic minority group in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, has been levelled as one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in contemporary times. For the last five decades, they have been subjected to consistent torture ranging from deprivation of citizenship to mass killing and forceful eviction from their inhabitants, murder, rape and other forms of violence. There are also restrictions on their freedom of movement, access to state education and civil service jobs. The legal conditions faced by the Rohingya in Myanmar have been compared to apartheid by some academics, analysts and political figures, including Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu, a South African anti-apartheid activist. Understanding the complexities of their plight requires delving into their history, struggles, and prospects for their future.

Historical Background

The Rohingya's origin is traced back centuries with historical records suggesting them being Arab traders, Bengali Muslims and other groups who settled in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. During the colonisation period of Britishers in Burma from 1824 to 1948, a large number of Rohingyas migrated from Bangladesh to Rakhine state due to economic opportunities as Britishers encouraged migration for labour needs. After Burma gained independence in 1948, Rohingyas were denied nationality under the Burmese Nationality Law 1982. This denial of citizenship rights by the Myanmar government is the burning issue which aggravates their marginalisation.

Systematic persecution

The Rohingya's plight surged dramatically with the rise of Myanmar's military rule. This crisis escalated in 2017 when Rohingya militants attacked several security forces outposts in Rakhine State which resulted in a violent reaction by the Myanmar military personnel. The Myanmar security forces began "clearance operations" against the Rohingya killing thousands, brutalising thousands more, and driving hundreds of thousands out of the country into neighbouring Bangladesh while their villages burned with the Myanmar military claiming that their actions were solely a response. In August 2018, the study estimated that more than 24,000 Rohingya people were killed by the Myanmar military and the local Buddhists since the "clearance operations" started on 25 August 2017 and more than 18,000 Rohingya Muslim women and girls were raped, 116,000 Rohingyas were beaten, 36,000 Rohingyas were thrown

into fire. This triggered the mass movement of Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine state to neighbouring Bangladesh seeking safety across borders. The speed and scale of displacement overwhelmed the humanitarian agencies of Bangladesh. Many arrived exhausted, wounded and hungry seeking shelter in makeshift camps and settlements in Cox's Bazar, one of the poorest and densely populated districts of Bangladesh.

Challenges in Bangladesh

The influx of Rohingya refugees led to the overcrowding of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, which became the largest refugee settlement in the world. The camps were overpopulated and had inadequate access to necessities such as food, clean drinking water, healthcare and shelter posed significant humanitarian challenges. They were subjected to various environmental risks and the spread of infectious diseases. The Bangladesh government condemned Myanmar for such action against the Rohingyas and labelled the violence against them as Genocide. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited these refugee camps and called on the United Nations and other international communities to pressure Myanmar's government to allow the return of Rohingyas. As a result, Myanmar decided to relocate refugees to a remote, flood-prone island which was labelled as 'uninhabitable' by human rights groups.

International Response

The international community has labelled the Rohingya the "most persecuted minority in the world". The Myanmar military's crackdown on the Rohingya people drew criticism from various parties. The human rights organization Amnesty International and organisations such as the United Nations have labelled the military's crackdown on the Rohingya minority a crime against humanity and they have also stated that the military has made the civilians the targets of "a systematic campaign of violence". The UN has said that it is "very likely" that the military committed grave human rights abuses in Rakhine that may amount to war crimes, allegations the government denies. International organizations, including the United Nations and human rights groups, have documented the violence and advocated for a peaceful resolution. However, efforts to hold Myanmar's military accountable for their actions have faced obstacles, including diplomatic challenges and Myanmar's reluctance to engage with international mechanisms.

Empowering Rohingya Community

Empowering Rohingya communities to rebuild their lives, regain their dignity and provide basic human rights is essential for long-term stability and peace. This includes ensuring access to education, proper healthcare, livelihood opportunities and employment both in refugee camps and in potential resettlement areas. Empowering Rohingya voices in decision-making processes and promoting intercommunal dialogue can foster understanding and reconciliation within the people of Myanmar society. Achieving peace and justice for the Rohingya requires a multifaceted approach addressing both the immediate humanitarian needs and the underlying structural and functional issues. Myanmar must undertake comprehensive reforms to end discrimination and grant Rohingya citizenship rights and fundamental freedom. Additionally, accountability for human rights violations, including those committed during the 2017 crackdown, is crucial for reconciliation and preventing atrocities in future. The international community plays a vital role in supporting these efforts through diplomatic pressure, humanitarian aid, and legal mechanisms.

Conclusion

The plight of the Rohingya ethnic group is a stark reminder of the challenges faced by marginalized communities worldwide. Their history of persecution, displacement, and ongoing struggles stresses the urgent need for concerted international action to address the root causes of their suffering and the deep-rooted issues prevailing around the world. By advocating for justice, supporting humanitarian efforts, and empowering Rohingya communities, we can work towards a future where all individuals, regardless of ethnicity or religion, can live with dignity and equality.