

# The Rohingya Crisis

*Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events*

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## Topic Summary

The Rohingya people are an ethnic minority group (the vast majority of whom are Muslim) in the country of Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country. The Rohingya numbered about one million people at the beginning of 2017 and represent the largest percentage of Muslim people in Myanmar, with the majority living in the Rakhine state. The Rohingya people have their own language and culture and trace their history to descendants of Arab traders and other groups who have been in the region for generations. The government of Myanmar denies the Rohingya citizenship, and excluded them from the 2014 census.

Since August 2017, about 655,000 Rohingya people have fled into neighboring Bangladesh to escape violent and deadly persecution in Myanmar. This includes discriminatory policies and recent violent attacks by the Myanmar military, including reported rape, murder and arson. A number of Rohingya villages in the Rakhine state were burned down by Myanmar security forces. Some of the Rohingya people have also traveled by land and sea to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand where they live in refugee camps.

The United Nations' top human rights official called what is happening to the Rohingya a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." Ethnic cleansing is defined as: "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove from a given area persons of another ethnic or religious group." However, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has denied that ethnic cleansing is taking place and dismissed international criticism of her handling of the crisis. Although this crisis has intensified recently, the targeted and sometimes violent discrimination against the Rohingya has a long history.

The international community has reacted in a variety of ways to the Rohingya crisis:

- The Bangladeshi government has permitted the Rohingya people to live in refugee camps in Bangladesh. However, because Bangladesh lacks many resources and is densely populated, there could be a serious health crisis given the increased need for sanitation, medical services and clean water, according to Doctors without Borders.
- In December 2017, the United Nations Security Council condemned the violence taking place in Myanmar and called for "immediate steps to end the violence in Rakhine, de-escalate the situation, re-establish law and order and ensure the protection of civilians." It has called for an investigation into the recent allegations of human rights abuses, as well as for humanitarian access to be given.

- The United States' Trump Administration imposed sanctions on Myanmar General Maung Maung Soe, who oversaw this year's brutal crackdown against the Rohingya people. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has stated that the situation in the Rakhine state "constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya." Since August, the U.S. has given a total of \$87 million dollars in humanitarian assistance in response to the crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh; the total U.S. humanitarian assistance for displaced people has reached \$151 million since October 2016. In December 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives condemned the "ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya" and passed a resolution calling for an end to the attacks against the Rohingya people. In February 2018, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously passed a bill which would establish targeted sanctions against high-ranking Myanmar military officials, provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya people, and enhance accountability for crimes against humanity. That bill currently awaits a full U.S. Senate vote.
- Other countries including Canada, Norway, and South Korea have increased their humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya people.
- There have been protests in countries in the region (including Pakistan, India, Thailand, Indonesia and Bangladesh) to condemn the killing and persecution of the Rohingya people. However, the ten members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) have not coordinated an official response. ASEAN has a general principle of non-interference in other country's internal affairs.
- Non-governmental organizations such as Action Against Hunger, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and others are providing aid and assistance to the Rohingya people.

To learn more, watch this video together from Vox: [The "ethnic cleansing" of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims, explained.](#)

## **Age**

13 and up

### **Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What do you know about what is happening with the Rohingya people in Myanmar?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about what is happening?
- What more do you want to know about the crisis?
- What are the United States and other countries around the world doing about it?
- Can you think of other cases of “ethnic cleansing” in recent history?

### **Questions to Dig Deeper**

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What do you think life might be like for those fleeing Myanmar and/or living in refugee camps in other countries?
- What more do you think countries around the world should be doing about the crisis?
- Why do you think this kind of religious persecution and “ethnic cleansing” still exists in the world?
- What types of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors do you think may have set the stage in the years before the crisis for something like this to happen?

### **Ideas for Taking Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions might make a difference?

- Help to organize an educational forum in school to share information and discuss the Rohingya crisis. Make connections to other examples of “ethnic cleansing” and other refugee crises around the world. Discuss possible actions you can take as a school or community to help.
- Write to your representative in Congress that expresses your views about the crisis in Myanmar and that urges them to take further action. You can use [this link](#) to find your representative.
- As a family, school or community, organize a fundraiser in order to donate money to one of the recognized organizations (listed above) that is providing aid and assistance.

## Additional Resources

- [Who Are the Rohingya People in Myanmar?](#) (ADL lesson plan)
- [We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art](#) (ADL lesson plan)
- [Refugees, Reactions and World Response](#) (ADL Table Talk)
- [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#)
- [Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate](#)
- [The Rohingya Crisis](#) (Council of Foreign Relations)

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