

They can't hide their crimes...(who are we referring to?)

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Myanmar Government Can’t Hide Its Crimes

Dr. Habib Siddiqui



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In an article in the state-run New Light of Myanmar on Wednesday, August 22, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Myanmar, stated, “It is obvious that the violence in the Rakhine State are neither the conflict between two religious groups of different faith nor humanitarian issue.” “The incidents in the Rakhine State are sectarian conflicts which are purely internal affairs of a sovereign state. They are not relating to any kind of religious persecution or religious discrimination. Therefore, we will not accept, any attempt to politically regionalize or internationalize this conflict as a religious issue.” “The government of Myanmar has never practiced policy of violence against Muslims or any other faiths,” said the statement. “The government totally rejects accusations made by some organizations that the government is practicing such a policy of abuse.”

Well, I beg to differ with the Myanmar government. It is once again trying to whitewash its horrible record of racism and bigotry against the non-Buddhists (esp. the Rohingya) inside the country. When millions of inhabitants of the country are denied citizenship because of their race, ethnicity and faith, and such exclusion includes every Rohingya Muslim in spite of maintaining their existence in that country for hundreds of years, such claims are simply laughable. When a violent mob attacks a group of Burmese Tablighi Muslims (who were not even from the Rohingya community suspected in the death of a Rakhine woman) and lynches them to death in front of the members of the police forces, who do nothing to stop such horrendous crimes, it is difficult to sell such deep-seated hatred as anything but bigotry. How does the crime of a single individual (although no proof has yet been provided by the Myanmar government) become the justification for committing hate crimes against an entire ethnic group?

When the members of the state-run riot police (Lon Htin) selectively shoots to kill members of the Rohingya community when they had gathered for a funeral service and being provoked by a hostile rock-throwing, stick and knife-wielding Rakhine crowd, no one is fooled by such government explanation. When the members of the border security force NASAKA and Lon Htin are seen (and there are plenty of video tapes available in the Internet) to participate in burning Rohingya homes, businesses and villages, and killing them simply because they are different racially and religiously, if it is not a government sponsored persecution of a Muslim religious community, what is?

When Rakhine Buddhist mobs led by Buddhist monks attack and set fire to several Muslim shops, restaurants and mosques, and kill unarmed Rohingya men and children, while the local authorities (police and the Army) did nothing to intervene nor did the fire-fighters come to their aid, how can one deny or evade responsibility for such collusion?

When the political and military leadership within Myanmar and the Rakhine state promote hatred and xenophobia, and practice open discrimination while encouraging and providing material support to the Buddhist extremists to commit acts of violence including rape of Rohingya Muslim girls and women, it is ludicrous to hide such obvious signs of religious persecution or discrimination.

When the Rakhine Buddhist monks allow their monasteries to be used for hoarding lethal arms, and disallow the life-saving food items to be sold to and block humanitarian assistance from reaching the starving Rohingya people, it is criminal to ignore the ugly fact that racism and bigotry against the Rohingyas have become an acceptable national project towards their total elimination that is enthusiastically supported and participated by an overwhelming majority within the Buddhist population.

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What excuse does the Myanmar government have to offer on such monumental crimes against a religious minority? When the government forces not only allow the slaughter of the unarmed Rohingya but also participate in the gang rape of Rohingya women as a weapon of war so that they are pushed out of the country, and then the fleeing people are shot at — there is a name for such a crime — it is called ethnic cleansing, which has been going on for decades. For the information of the Myanmar government, the United Nations define 'ethnic cleansing' as "Purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas."

The Buddhist Myanmar has been practicing this crime for decades against many of the marginalized races and ethnic groups since the state got its independence from Britain in 1948. And of course, the Rohingyas have been the worst victims of this state policy. Per my count, there have been at least two dozen major campaigns to wipe out Muslim identity in Myanmar. As a result of such an on-again and off-again, slow but steady elimination strategy, nearly half the Rohingya population has been pushed out of the country and tens of thousands slaughtered, while the world almost forgot their sad plight. The 'stubborn' Rohingyas who continue to live inside this living hell are subjected to the worst forms of persecution and discrimination mankind has ever witnessed in the post-colonial era.

Towards transformational change of the multi-faith and multi-ethnic country to a unitary Burman dominated Buddhist country, there have been a systemic strategy since the days Ne Win (actually, one can go back to the time of Buddhist fanatic king Boddawpaya in 1784) to destroy religious monuments and insignia of other faiths. It is, therefore, not by chance that hardly a single historic mosque stands erect in Myanmar today. The state of Arakan whose shoreline once used to be dotted with Muslim shrines and mosques are now bereft of those Islamic symbolisms. The old Sandi Khan mosque (named after the very Muslim General who came to restore the throne of the fleeing Arakanese king Naramaikhla in 1430 CE is long destroyed. Even the ancient Han Tha mosque did not survive Myanmarism. Along with the Taungoo Railway station mosque, this historical mosque was razed to the ground on May 18, 2001 by bulldozers owned by the previous SPDC military junta. How about Akyab's historic Badr Makam mosque? [It is no accident either that Muslim sounding names of towns and places like Akyab (including that of Arakan state) have systematically been Burmanized to erase that Islamic connectivity.]

No religion can effectively survive or function without its places of worship. Every time a riot is initiated (often with full cooperation of the regime), the first targets are usually the mosques and madrasas because these are the only remaining institutions in Myanmar that are connected with the Islamic faith. [The Rohingya children are barred from government education beyond primary level, nor do they have freedom of movement.] And what is worse: mosques and Muslim graveyards are routinely closed down, destroyed or desecrated to make room for Buddhist model towns or expensive pagodas, where the Muslims must pay for such construction projects. [As I write, hundreds of Muslim mosques have been demolished or burned in the latest episode. All the mosques have been closed down without allowing Muslims to pray inside. So, no one could pray even on the Eid day, the happiest of Islamic festivals.]

As Dr. Shwe Lu Maung alias Shahnawaz Khan has noted in his book – *The Price of Silence: Muslim-Buddhist War of Bangladesh and Myanmar – A Social Darwinist’s Analysis* – the policy of the successive rulers in Myanmar for centuries has been to make “golden temple shiny shiny, stomach though empty empty.” Every Myanmar ruler that has come to power has always tried to outdo his predecessor by trying to build a bigger and more expensive pagoda so as to prove his unwavering ties with the Buddhist faith and people, most often however at the expense of other faiths and faithful followers.

Interested reader may like to read the reports from a multitude of human rights groups, plus the U.S. State Department’s annual report on Myanmar, or my books (esp., *The Forgotten Rohingya: Their Struggle for Human Rights in Burma*) to comprehend the colossal record of crime of the Myanmar government against the Rohingya Muslims.

The reports emerging from the Rakhine state, verified by several human rights groups, clearly show the regime’s dirty hands in targeted elimination of the Rohingya people. This was also obvious from the assessment made by Navi Pillay of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who said, “We have been receiving a stream of reports from independent sources alleging discriminatory and arbitrary responses by security forces, and even their instigation of and involvement in clashes.” “Reports indicate that the initial swift response of the authorities to the communal violence may have turned into a crackdown targeting Muslims, in particular members of the Rohingya community,” she said (July 27, 2012).

Benjamin Zawacki of the Amnesty International told BBC, “Most cases have meant targeted attacks on the minority Rohingya population and they were bearing the brunt of most of that communal violence in June and they continue to bear the lion’s share of the violations perpetrated by the state security forces.” “While the restoration of order, security, and the protection of human rights is necessary, most arrests appear to have been arbitrary and discriminatory, violating the rights to liberty and to freedom from discrimination on grounds of religion,” Amnesty said in a statement.

Similarly, Phil Robertson, Deputy Director, Asia Division, Human Rights Watch, said “state security forces and local Arakan communities worked together to target Rohingya communities, committing killings, rapes, and mass arrests.” On June 23, in a village near the town of Maungdaw, security forces pursued and opened fire on two dozen Rohingya villagers who had been hiding from the violence in fields and forest areas. Witnesses in Maungdaw township described several instances in which Rakhine men wielding sticks and swords accompanied the security forces in raids on Rohingya villages.

Not too long ago, a coalition of human rights group, led by Refugees International, the Arakan Project, and the Equal Rights Trust, issued a joint statement saying: “In Myanmar, what began as inter-communal violence has evolved into large scale state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya.” “Many Rohingya continue to be victims of violence and cannot leave their homes for fear of persecution, and are thus deprived of their livelihood and most basic needs,” said the advocacy groups. To, thus, say that the government of Myanmar has ‘never practiced policy of violence against Muslims or any other faiths’ or that there is ‘no religious persecution or discrimination’ is like saying that ‘violence is peace’ and ‘persecution is love’! With more than 100,000 internally displaced Rohingyas, it is also a grave humanitarian issue. With such hypocritical words, the Myanmar government can neither hope to hoodwink anyone nor evade its responsibility for being the author and executioner for its crimes against humanity.

Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director, Human Rights Watch, noted weeks ago, “Deadly violence in Arakan State is spiraling out of control under the government’s watch. Opening the area to independent international observers would put all sides on notice that they were being closely watched.” The UN and other human rights monitoring groups have also requested Myanmar government to allow international observers to be posted, but to no avail. Its reluctance points to the fact that the regime wants to hide its on-going crime against the Rohingya people.

Lately, President Thein Sein has announced the formation of a 27-member inquiry commission to submit a report on this latest pogrom. One may recall that soon after the pogrom had started in June, he promised a similar inquiry report by June 30, which, however, never saw the light. The inclusion of racists like Dr. Aye Maung, Khin Maung Swe, Aye Tha Aung, Zarganar, and Ko Ko Gyi, who had played an active role in the latest pogrom against the Rohingya people, once again shows that Thein Sein is not serious about fact-finding but only about international image. It is a face-saving measure to withstand international pressure. He is trying to buy time and hope that commotion would calm down so that he could rekindle the fire of extinction some time later.

As I have noted many times, at the heart of the on-going eliminationist project against Rohingyas and other persecuted minorities lies Burma’s notorious 1982 Citizenship Law, written during hateful dictator Ne Win era. It is sad to see that how such a blueprint for racial and religious discrimination and eventual elimination has now become an acceptable law even by the so-called democracy leaders. No one inside Myanmar is crying out foul for its violations of each of the 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not even Suu Kyi Aris, once touted as a voice of conscience for humanity. The recent tragedy has shown her real color and those of her NLD colleagues. They are basically neo-Fascists who are no better than the very regime that they want to unseat. That is what a national project for elimination would do to a nation!

If the Myanmar government is serious about bringing about a positive change towards inclusion, its 1982 Law needs to be amended or dumped altogether so that Rohingyas are not rendered stateless. Amnesty International says, “Under international human rights law and standards, no one may be left or rendered stateless.”

And this is also the recommendation from the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana. He has stressed the need for the authorities to take steps to address the “long-standing issues of deprivation of citizenship, freedom of movement, and other fundamental rights” that plague the welfare of the Rohingya people. There is no better time to amend the 1982 Law than now.

Is Thein Sein government ready to truly reform its 1982 Law that violates international human rights law and standards? If not now, when? Without such steps, he can’t escape being labeled as an executioner of an apartheid policy that leads to exclusion, discrimination, persecution and elimination. That is war crime in my book!