

Repression of Myanmar Muslims amid Media Blackout

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As the Muslims around the world cheerfully get prepared for the holy month of Ramadan, the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar are painfully subject to the barbaric and appalling atrocities of the extremist Buddhists, finding their life in a constant state of trepidation and suffering.

Branded by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities of the world, Rohingyas are a Muslim people living in the Rakhine State, located in west of Myanmar. With a population of 3 million, Rakhine state is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the west and the majority of its residents are Theravada Buddhists and Hindus.

The suppression of the Rohingya Muslims of the Arakan region dates back to the World War II. On March 28, 1942, about 5,000 Rohingya Muslims were brutally massacred by the Rakhine nationalists in the Minbya and Mrohaung Townships. After this worrying incident, the Muslims of the region were frequently subject to harassment by the Burmese government which has so far refused to grant them official citizenship. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, this lack of full citizenship rights means that the Rohingyas should tolerate other abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory limitations on access to education, and arbitrary confiscation of property.

It's said that as a result of dire living conditions and discriminatory treatment by the government, some 300,000 Rohingyas have so far immigrated to Bangladesh and 24,000 of them also escaped to Malaysia in search of a better life. Many of them have also fled to Thailand, but neither Bangladesh nor Thailand has received them warmly. Bangladesh is negotiating with the Burmese government to return the Rohingyas and Thailand has sporadically rejected the hopeless immigrants. There have been instances where boats of Rohingyas reaching Thailand have been towed out to sea and allowed to sink, sparking international anger among Muslims and non-Muslims.

Human Rights Watch says that the government authorities continue to require Rohingya Muslims to perform forced labor. According to HRW, those who refuse or complain are physically threatened, sometimes with death, and children as young as seven years old have been seen on forced labor teams.

Writing for The Egyptian Gazette, University of Waterloo professor Dr. Mohamed Elmasry has enumerated the different hardships the Rohingya Muslims have historically undergone. He writes that they are subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction and house destruction and financial restrictions on marriage.

Rohingyas continue to be used as forced laborers on roads and at military camps.

The Myanmar government's mistreatment of the Rohingyas, however, has long been contested and protested by the international organizations. For several years, human rights activists have decried the arbitrary measures leveled against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar by the government and the extremist Buddhists. In May 2009, Elaine Pearson, the Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia director issued a statement in protest at the deteriorating conditions of the Rohingya Muslims, calling on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to press the Burmese government to end its brutal practices: "the treatment of the Rohingya in Burma is deplorable – the Burmese government doesn't just deny Rohingya their basic rights, it denies they are even Burmese citizens."

Now, the conflict has escalated in the Rakhine State again and the Muslims are once more experiencing difficult days as a black shadow of violence and unrest has been just cast over their already trembling lives. It was on the reports that 10 Rohingya Muslims were killed by a mob of 300 Rakhines while on their way back from the country's former capital Rangoon. According to a group of UK-based NGOs, 650 Rohingyas were massacred from June 10 to 28. The United Nations estimates that between 50,000 and 90,000 Rohingyas were displaced since the eruption of violence in the Asian nation. However, due to the absence of independent reporters and monitors in the country, it's impossible to verify the exact number of those who have been displaced. It's also reported that some 9,000 homes belonging to the Muslims in the western state of Rakhine were destroyed. On July 20, Amnesty International called the recent attacks against minority Rohingyas and other Muslims in Myanmar a "step back" in the country's recent progress on human rights, citing increased violence and unlawful arrests following a state of emergency declared six weeks ago.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has voiced its concern over the recent violence in the state of Rakhine and the varying reports which have leaked out as to the number of the Muslims killed. As reported by the TimeTurk News Agency, over 1,000 Rohingya Muslims have been murdered thus far in the conflicts broke out in the region.

The mainstream media in the West have been largely silent about the massacre of Muslims in Myanmar and the ordeal that has befallen them. They have found other interesting topics to give coverage to, and as always, bigotry against Muslims hardly moves them.

Amid the shameful silence of the Western governments and their affiliated media who outrageously boast of being independent and professional, it's a moral responsibility, not only for Muslims, but for all the conscious citizens around the world, to stand shoulder by shoulder with the subjugated Muslims of Myanmar and demonstrate that Islamophobic prejudice, intolerance and discrimination will not remain unanswered.

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