Rohingya Crisis

Global Politics

To what extent has the UN achieved its goals in the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar?
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Introduction

In 2012, sectarian disputes led to clashes between the Rakhine Buddhists backed by the army of Myanmar and the Rohingya Muslims living in Rakhine (Why). A total of 80 people lost their lives and 100,000 Rohingyas are believed to be displaced (Why). In the aftermath of this conflict, an insurgent group or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army was created. This is because the political tensions in the region cause many difficulties to the already difficult life of the Rohingya. Most of the displaced farmers lost their livelihood as they didn’t have the resources to farm (Myanmar). This increased the poverty in the region (Myanmar). Terror groups thrive in such regions as the spreading of extremist ideas is easier when people in the region do not have access to basic facilities and are struggling with poverty.

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked military border posts in October 2016. This was followed by a heavy military crackdown by the Myanmar Army and police. Though the crackdown initially seemed to be regular crackdowns that the Rohingya have faced since 1948, this time the army was under a pro-democratic government, with a Nobel peace prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, leading the government (Caged). The issue escalated when the UN found evidence of gross human rights violations that are underlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. These violations include systematic extrajudicial killings, arson, gang rapes on civilians by army officials and infanticide. Not only the UN but Amnesty International, the government of neighbouring Bangladesh, and the government of Malaysia and the U.S. Department of State have all identified this as ethnic cleansing (Fresh ; Government). The
government of Myanmar has dismissed these UN findings by calling them "exaggerations". Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said that “The situation seems like a textbook example of ethnic cleansing,” (UN human rights). Despite the statements of the UN, many have criticised the UN for not stepping in and taking concrete actions and help the Rohingya who are in a dire situation (Lau). This raises the question: To what extent has the UN achieved its goals in the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar? This is an imperative political issue to discuss as not only is this a geopolitical issue, it also questions the legitimacy and effectiveness of intergovernmental organisations, like the UN, to solve issues that concern minorities in a particular country.

**History of Rohingya**

Myanmar gained independence from the British Raj in 1948. The first government lasted until 1962 when the military of Myanmar staged a coup d’etat to overthrow the government because of uprisings from ethnic groups to become federalistic. When the military was the legitimate government of Myanmar they interpreted the term ‘federalism’ as being anti-national (Al-Mahmood). Due to this many ethnic minorities in Myanmar were suppressed and lost their rights. One of these ethnic groups were the Rohingya, who predominantly lived in the state of Rakhine.
When Britain unified India under the British rule, internal migration in was on the rise as India was never unified thus internal migration was not very common. This rise of migration caused many Bengali workers to settle in Arakan in search for work (Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar). The British also encouraged these workers in order to migrate so that the British would get cheap labour to work in the paddy fields in Arakan. According to Thant Myint-U, a historian "At the beginning of the 20th century, Indians were arriving in Burma at the rate of no less than a quarter million per year (Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar). These immigrants also are known as the ‘Chittagonians’ merged with the already settled Muslims through intermarriage as they had similar religious beliefs. Soon it was difficult to differentiate between the two communities thus they started calling themselves the Rohingya (Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar)."
The worries began in 1947 when the Buddhist majority of Burma supported the Japanese in World War II but the Muslims fought with the British, against Japan, as they were promised a separate Muslim state at the end of the war by the British. In 1947, when the partition of India and Pakistan took place, the Rohingya approached the governor general of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah to incorporate Northern Arakhane as a part of East Pakistan but this was rejected. Burma gained its independence the following year (Al-Mahmood). A new government was elected and the Republic of Burma was established. Soon after the Union Citizenship Act was passed, which recognised 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar but didn’t recognise the Rohingya (Al-Mahmood). Many historians believe that the Rohingya were not included as an ethnic group because the popular public sentiment during those times was that the Rohingya betrayed Burma by supporting the British during World War II and that was the reason why Japan lost the war.

In 1962, when the coup d’état saw the fall of democracy and established the military dictatorship in Burma. Discrimination against the Rohingya increased during this time as the socialist government promoted discrimination against minorities. In the 1970’s following the crackdown on the government proclaimed terror organisations by the military several Rohingya fled the country and settled in countries like Malaysia, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. The socialist government cracked down harder and passed new citizenship laws which required Rohingya to provide sufficient proof of their ancestry in order to fall under one of 3 types of citizenship being offered. The Rohingya were unable to provide such proof and subsequently denied citizenship (Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar).
The unsuccessful policies of the military junta caused Myanmar to become the world's most impoverished country in the 1980’s. Tensions started to rise in the country causing a revolution to start in the country, followed by the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi in the 1990 general elections (Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar). The military junta refused to cede power and continued its rule till 2011 when it ceded power to a government chosen by the military. In 2015 though the Nobel peace prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi’s party won the election and she currently holds the position of the State Counsellor of Myanmar, which according to many critics yields the same if not more power than the presidency.

**Current status of Rohingya**

The conditions of the Rohingya haven’t been better since the elections of the new democratic government of Myanmar. They have faced constant persecution in the Buddhist-majority country (Rohingya Refugee). Following the atrocities committed by the former government of Myanmar lead by Thein Sien, the Rohingya hoped that they could finally receive citizenship and could be treated as normal citizens but Aung San Suu Kyi’s have taken no actions against the military crackdown (Rohingya Refugee). The recent outflux of the Rohingya was caused due to the 2012 Rakhine State Riots. A State of emergency was declared in Rakhine, allowing the military to participate in the administration of the region (Myanmar: Fresh). This worsened the situation as the army was targeting Rohingya through mass arrests and arbitrary violence. An estimated 90,000 people were displaced by the violence. About 2,528 houses were burned; of those, 1,500 belonged to Rohingyas (Rohingya Muslims). The riots finally came after weeks of sectarian disputes including a gang rape and murder of a Rakhine woman by Rohingyas and killing of ten
Burmese Muslims by Rakhines. This caused the Thein Sien government to declare that the Rohingya were ethnically different and were unwelcome in Myanmar (Myanmar country). Even though the current government hasn't explicitly stated this, their actions suggest otherwise.

Following these riots, the military regularly attacked Rohingya settlements. In 2015, 32 shallow graves of Rohingya refugees were found in Thailand (Thailand). These refugees died while illegally migrating to Malaysia (Thailand). On 25 August, according to the government of Myanmar, Rohingya insurgents armed with knives and home-made bombs attacked more than 30 police posts in northern Rakhine (Rakhine). The army, backed by local Buddhist mobs responded by burning Rohingya villages and attacking and killing civilians in response to the 25 August attacks (Rakhine). This caused another exodus of the Rohingya into neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and India. According to the UN, more than 410,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since the attacks (Rakhine).

**The United Nations**

The United Nations is based on the theory of international liberalism, a utilitarian and rationalistic ideology, which believes that international organisations will increase cooperation between states and help in solving conflicts (Meiser). Out of the 195 countries existing today, 193 are members of the UN and help finance it voluntarily (About). The UN is made up of six components that are supposed to work coherently in order to make sure the UN functions effectively. The components of the UN are:
1. **United Nations Security Council**:

   This council is the most important and influential part organisation as it is the decision making organ of the UN; tasked with maintaining international peace and security.

   (Security Council) This council determines if there is a threat to peace or an act of aggression by another country. (Security Council)

2. **United Nations General Assembly**:

   This is the main deliberative organ of the UN. (General) It consists of all 193 member states of the UN. This assembly decides the budget of the UN, decides the non-permanent members of the UNSC, reviews the work of all the other parts of the UNSC and also recommends the UNSC in the form of recommendatory resolutions. (General)

3. **International Court of Justice**

4. **United Nations Secretariat**

5. **UN Trusteeship Council**

6. **UN Economic and Social Council**

**Principles and Goals of the UN**

- Maintaining international peace and security
- Help in creating friendly relations between countries
- Achieving international cooperation on social, political or economic issues
- Be a mediating force in conflicts.
Considering the UN has plenty of resources and has been able to gain the support of 193 countries, it can be assumed that the UN would have been able to achieve its goals until now but on balance the UN has failed to achieve its objectives because it also has some principles that it needs to adhere to, which can hamper the progress the UN can potentially make. The UN works on these fundamental principles that all states should adhere to are:

1. All states are equal
2. All states should fulfil their obligations to the UN
3. Peaceful means should be used to settle international disputes
4. Member states should refrain from using force or threatening any other state
5. All states should provide the UN assistance in any action it takes
6. No member state should meddle in internal disputes of another country.

These principles have not been followed by many countries in the past, but the UN has not taken any action against them. This is because the permanent members of the security council also known as the ‘big five’ have the veto power, which means that a resolution will be tabled if any one of the ‘big five’ votes against the resolution (Security Council). These privileged countries include USA, China, Russia, Great Britain and France (Members). This privilege that the big five have has been abused as 248 resolutions have been vetoed by the big five leading to the UN not taking immediate action on issues such as the Syrian Civil War, the Iraq Iran war and other such conflicts (Research). Many critics have pointed out that the UN’s inability to take action against its key members have made it like its former counterpart League of Nations, where the
organisation was as strong as the key members in the organisation (Grigorescu). This was one of the reasons that the League of Nations was unsuccessful and was dissolved.

**Why does this conflict fall under the UN’s purview?**

Even though many classify this conflict as an internal conflict, a civil war, these conflicts affect others in the region. The Rohingya migrants that are looking to settle in India, Bangladesh, Thailand or Malaysia are putting pressure on the already limited resources that these countries have (Rakhine). This outflow of migrants from Rakhine makes this issue a regional conflict and not a national conflict. Another thing that obligates the UN to take action is that the UN has taken action in many such situations in the past. For example, from 1989 to 1992 the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was going through political reforms. A civil war broke out and countries declared de facto independence (BBC). The UN passed several resolutions, formed a special task force and also station troops in the area (BBC).

Also one of the principal factors in creating the UN was the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the ethnic cleansing of Jewish people by the Nazi Germans. That was to a ‘textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. The entire international community stood together to save the Jews but what is different now? Why isn’t action being taken by individual states or intergovernmental organisations like the UN?
Current status of UN action

The UN has been in providing aid and helping in the rehabilitation of the Rohingya. In early 2018, the UN launched a Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. In this plan, the UN has pledged $1 billion to help the displaced Rohingya (UN appeals). According to, the UN High Commissioner For High Refugees, Filippo Grandi, the UN plans to use this money to provide for the “critical needs of the Bangladeshi communities who have so generously opened their doors, and of a stateless and refugee population that even prior to this crisis was among the world’s most marginalised and at risk” (UN appeals). Alongside this, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Efforts has set up multiple refugee camps and provided the refugees with basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter (Myanmar OCHA). According to their website, they have distributed 3,134 metric tonnes of food assistance and made cash-based transfers worth US$ 488,779 million. Even though the UN has made a significant contribution to the welfare of the refugees there are many problems with their works. Firstly according to the Guardian, all UN agencies have been stopped from providing vital aid like food, water and medicines to the Rohingya who are still stuck in Rakhine (Holmes). This makes us question if the aid is reaching the people it should because the people in Rakhine are in desperate need of aid. According to the UN World Food Program, the blocking of aid to Rakhine has left around 250,000 people without regular access to food (Holmes). The UN has not taken concrete action against Myanmar for blocking all the aid given to the Rohingya in Rakhine. The government of Myanmar has also stopped the UN from taking action in other instances like when human rights examiners were denied access to the district of Rakhine, multiple times in the past (Rohingya
Crisis). In June 2017 a group of UN human rights officials were denied visas and in February
2018 a Security Council visit was deferred on the grounds that 'the time was not right to visit
Rakhine State (Rohingya Crisis). The UN though despite all of this has not been able to take
concrete action against the government of Myanmar. This makes us question the power the
intergovernmental organisations like the UN have on sovereign member nations.

As discussed earlier in the essay, one of the main ways the UN takes actions is through
resolutions. The UN though has only passed general assembly resolutions on this issue but these
resolutions are non-binding thus Myanmar doesn’t have to follow these resolutions (General).
The UNSC has passed a non-binding resolution regarding the Rohingya crisis even though the
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described it as the world’s fastest developing refugee
emergency. Since 1966, the Security Council has established 30 sanctions on different countries
(Research). These sanctions can be the following types: diplomatic, travel bans, asset freezes,
arms embargoes and commodity interdiction (Research). According to the website of the UN,
these sanctions are placed by the UNSC to support “peaceful transitions, deter non-constitutional
changes, constrain terrorism, protect human rights and promote non-proliferation”(Research). In
this case, the UN itself has found evidence against the state of Myanmar but still has not taken
actions against it. The UN has decided to use soft power in the form of diplomacy and
negotiations instead of using hard power in the form of sanctions. This strategy has proved to be
ineffective.
One of the main reason that the ‘decision making’ body of the UN has failed is because of the VETO power that all P5 members possess. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation put forward a resolution in the general that called on Myanmar to allow access for aid workers, ensure the return of all refugees, and grant full citizenship rights to the Rohingya. This resolution passed but both China and Russia had voted against it. This trend carried on in the SC when China and Russia blocked a brief UNSC statement when the 15-member body met to discuss the situation in Rakhine state (China). Also, China has shown unwavering support to Myanmar in the SC. This shows how a country using soft power can influence the security council to not take action against them, no matter how gross the actions they have committed are. Another reason why China and Russia are supporting Myanmar is that in the past they also have been accused of violating the human rights of minorities in their country. China is accused of one million Uighur Muslims, a minority group, in secret prison camps. China, like Myanmar, has declined these accusations despite enough evidence present which shows the contrary (How). This situation is just like the treatment of the Rohingya and thus China is protecting Myanmar. The security council has taken no action in both cases (How; Rohingya Crisis). This is not only a trend with China and Russia but with all the P5 countries trying to VETO any resolution that is against their ideology. This can be supported by the realist theory, which states that countries will always act in self-interest (Kirsch). Furthermore according to offensive realism countries will try to be ‘power maximisers’ as there is no limit to their desire to control the international environment (Kirsch). In this case, China and Russia are trying to be the ‘power maximisers’ and trying to control the environment in their neighbouring countries. China is also using this strategy in the South China Sea and with their other neighbouring countries like Nepal.
Another reason why the security council has failed to take action is due to a lack of interest from the so-called ‘superpowers’. We have seen that in the past, the USA the global hegemon, has taken action in various regions of the world in order to protect regions that are suffering from human rights violations like Syria or Iraq in 2003. At least that was the official reason for their interventions in these states. A coincidence could be that both of these middle eastern countries are rich in oil and could potentially be a huge source of natural resources for the US. Myanmar, on the other hand, is not as rich in oil and doesn’t offer the USA any incentive to intervene. This ties back with the theory of realism, which states that countries only act in self-interest and clearly here the USA does not have a lot to gain thus is not intervening directly (Kirsch). On the other hand, The United States, France and the United Kingdom have all condemned Myanmar for the denial of the ethnic cleansing campaign. To add to that the human rights investigations and increased pressure from the US and France induce more forceful action in the future (Rohingya Crisis). From a neoliberalist point of view, this gives both the UN and the world hope that the members of the security council can cooperate with each other in order to come up with a solution (Kirsch).

Even though the United Nations stands for preserving the security of nations around the world, the UN is not interested in sending a UN peacekeeping mission in Myanmar. The United Nations peacekeeping force is a force of the UN that is sent into conflicted territories to uphold peace (United Nations Peacekeeping). The government of Myanmar does not make the UN’s job easy. Considering the views of Myanmar on Muslims it would not accept peacekeeping officers of
Muslim origin. If so it would be difficult to find personnel for the UNPKF as the major Asian contributors to it are Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia (Rohingya Crisis). This could be the reason why the United Nations has not shown its hard power in Myanmar till this moment. But if the United Nations is not prepared to tackle a situation such as this one where it cannot dedicate enough resources to a geopolitical issue its effectiveness can be questioned. This problem has arisen multiple times in the past when the UN has not been able to dedicate enough resources. For example, the UN was unable to carry out humanitarian operations in Africa due to lack of resources (Lack).

**Conclusion**

The United Nations has helped many Rohingya since the ethnic cleansing campaign, organised by the State of Myanmar. They have and are doing this by providing humanitarian and monetary aid to the refugees and the Government of Bangladesh respectively. Even though a lot of aid has been given to the victims of this crisis, not a lot has been done to stop the crisis itself. It can be said that the UN has worked in reducing the effects caused by the problem instead of eradicating the problem. It can’t be denied that in providing aid the United Nations is one of the more effective non-governmental organisations in the world as not only are they able to secure resources from most of the countries in the world they also have sub-bodies that ensure that the aid is used effectively (About). This is an advantage of intergovernmental organisations compared to aid directly given by one state to another. This was seen in Haiti during the 2010 earthquake when the aid given by nations to the Government of Haiti was not used effectively (Unhappy).
The United Nations though has not been able to stop the state of Myanmar from persecuting the Rohingya (No other). This could be because of many reasons but predominantly because of the lack of interest from nations, the structural issues of the UN like the veto power. Thus on balance, the UN has not been effective in achieving its goals in the Rohingya conflict as they have failed to: maintain international peace and security, and achieve international cooperation on social, political or economic issues, which are two of the main goals of the United Nations.

One of the many ways of avoiding this in the future could be limiting the usage of the VETO power. The number of times a country can use their VETO should be capped to a certain amount. Also, the UNSC could be expanded and more permanent member states could be included in it. This would provide more perspectives on pressing issues like the Rohingya crisis but more members could also reduce the efficiency of the UNSC. Another solution to this problem could be allowing the general assembly to pass binding resolutions and sanctions. Even though a method to do that already exists the security council has never implemented the Resolution 377A – “Uniting for Peace” because it would show the world that the UNSC is ineffective (United Nations Audiovisual). Instead of the UNSC to have the power to give the general assembly the power, there should be a standard procedure of this. For example, if the UNSC is unable to take action on important issues like ethnic cleansing in a certain time the responsibility should be given to the general assembly.
Most of these solutions will not be implemented because the permanent five members of the security council will oppose them as if implemented they will reduce the power the P5 hold. This ties in with the realist idea that all states act in self-interest and will take actions accordingly (Kirsch). There is nothing that can be done to change how states react to a particular issue. Thus it is important that the United Nations adapts and reforms itself in order to make it a more sustainable and effective organisation. This is because if the UN does not adapt to the changing nature of global politics then it will make the same mistake as the League of Nations did back in the mid-1900’s.

This essay could contain a fair amount of bias because this is an ongoing issue thus it is unfair to predict the UN’s role in the future. It could be possible that the UN end up achieving all their goals. Since this essay is written in mid-2018, it is a possibility that not enough time has passed by to judge the UN’s current tactics of solving this issue by diplomacy instead of using hard power. Also, there could be a sense of bias as most of the sources used are from the UN and western media which could have tried to exaggerate the situation of the Rohingya as they want to gain the sympathy of the audience. Even though this bias will affect the severity of the actions of Myanmar it won’t deny that they have treated the Rohingya unfairly as multiple sources support this claim.
Works Cited


