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## CFR Backgrounders

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### The Rohingya Migrant Crisis

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#### Introduction

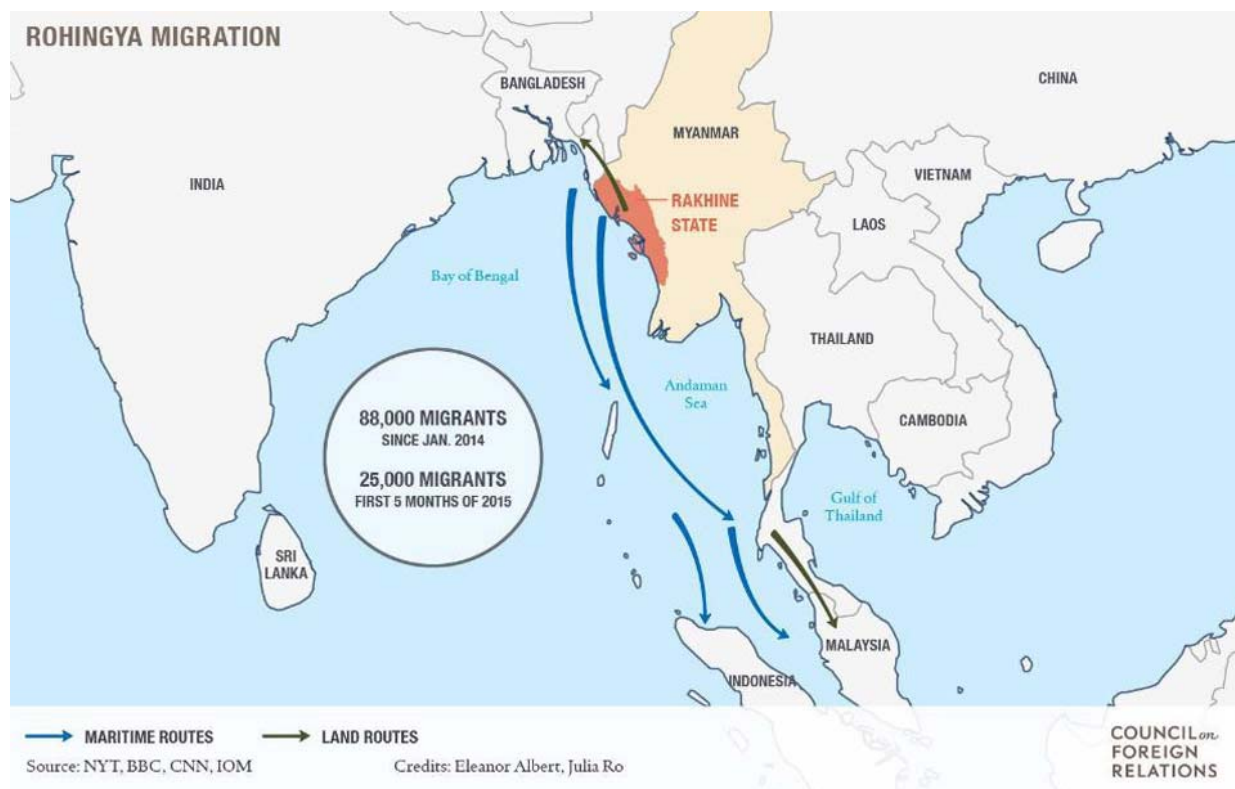
Tens of thousands of Muslim Rohingya have fled Myanmar in the past year, many of them taking to the sea in the spring of 2015 to try to reach Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The latest surge in refugees was prompted by a long-building crisis: the discriminatory policies of the Myanmar government in Rakhine State, which have caused hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee since the late 1970s. Their plight has been compounded by the responses of many of Myanmar's neighbors, which have been slow to take in the refugees for fear of a migrant influx they feel incapable of handling.

#### Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority group living primarily in Myanmar's western Rakhine State; they practice a Sufi-inflected variation of Sunni Islam. The estimated one million Rohingya in Myanmar account for nearly a third of Rakhine state's population. The Rohingya differ from Myanmar's dominant Buddhist groups ethnically, linguistically, and religiously.

The Rohingya trace their origins in the region back to the fifteenth century when thousands of Muslims came to the former [Arakan Kingdom](#). Many others arrived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Bengal and the Rakhine territory were governed by colonial rule as part of British India. Since independence in 1948, successive governments in Burma, renamed Myanmar in 1989, have refuted the Rohingya's historical claims and denied the group recognition as one of the country's [135 ethnic groups](#). The Rohingya are largely identified as illegal Bengali immigrants, despite the fact that many Rohingya have resided in Myanmar for centuries.

Both the Myanmar government and the Rakhine state's dominant ethnic Buddhist group, known as the Rakhine, reject the use of the label "Rohingya," a [self-identifying term \(PDF\)](#) that surfaced in the 1950s and that experts say provides the group with a collective, political identity. Though the etymological root of the word is disputed, the most widely accepted origin is that "Rohang" is a derivation of the word "Arakan" in the Rohingya dialect and the "ga" or "gya" means "from." By identifying as Rohingya, the ethnic Muslim group asserts its ties to land that was once under the control of the Arakan Kingdom, according to Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a Thailand-based advocacy group.



## What is the legal status of the Rohingya?

The Myanmar government refuses to grant the Rohingya citizenship status and, as a result, the vast majority of the group's members have no legal documentation, effectively making them **stateless**. Though Myanmar's 1948 citizenship law was already **exclusionary**, the military junta introduced a citizenship law in 1982 whose strict provisions stripped the Rohingya of access to full citizenship. Until recently, the Rohingya have been able to register as temporary residents with temporary identification cards, known as "white cards," which Myanmar's regime began issuing to many Muslims (both Rohingya and non-Rohingya) in the 1990s. The white cards **conferred (PDF)** some limited rights but were not recognized as proof of citizenship. Although the temporary cards held no legal value, Lewa says that the IDs did represent some minimal recognition of temporary stay for the Rohingya in Myanmar.

In 2014 the government held a UN-backed **national census**—its first in thirty years. The Muslim minority group was initially permitted to self-identify as "Rohingya," but after Buddhist nationalists threatened to boycott the census, the government decided the Rohingya could only register if they identified themselves as Bengali.

Similarly, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists protesting Rohingyas' right to vote in a 2015 constitutional referendum, President Thein Sein **cancelled** the temporary ID cards in February 2015, effectively revoking their newly gained right to vote—white card holders were **allowed to vote** in Myanmar's 2008 constitutional referendum and 2010 general elections. "Country-wide **anti-Muslim sentiment (PDF)** makes it politically difficult for the [central] government to take steps seen as supportive of Muslim rights," writes the International Crisis Group.

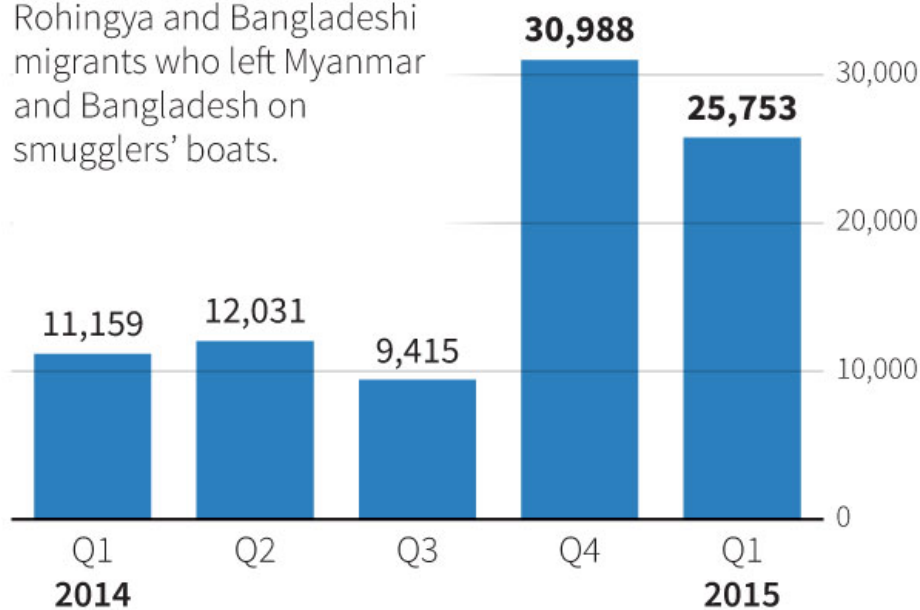
Despite the documentation by rights groups of systematic disenfranchisement, violence, and instances of **anti-Muslim campaigns (PDF)**, Muslim minorities continue to "consolidate under one Rohingya identity" says Lewa.

## Why are the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar?

Government policies, including [restrictions \(PDF\)](#) on marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, and freedom of movement have institutionalized systemic discrimination against the ethnic group. The United Nations calls the Rohingya one of the [most persecuted](#) minorities in the world. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Parliamentarians for Human Rights wrote in April 2015 that "the longstanding persecution of Rohingya has led to the [highest outflow](#) of asylum seekers by sea [in the region] since the U.S. war in Vietnam."

## Migrant movements

Estimated number of Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants who left Myanmar and Bangladesh on smugglers' boats.



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

W. Foo, 18/05/2015

REUTERS

Mistrust and suspicion run high between the Rakhine State's Buddhist majority and Muslim Rohingya minority. Violence between the two groups broke out in 2012, when a group of Rohingya men were accused of raping and killing a Buddhist woman. Groups of Buddhist nationalists burned Rohingya homes and [killed](#) more than 280 people, prompting an estimated 120,000 people to flee the country. Human Rights Watch described the anti-Rohingya violence as amounting to [crimes against humanity \(PDF\)](#) carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing." Since 2012, the region's displaced population, mostly Rohingya, has been forced to take shelter in squalid refugee camps. Approximately 140,000 Rohingya are still housed in camps in western Myanmar.

Many Rohingya have turned to smugglers, choosing to pay for transport out of Myanmar to escape persecution. "The fact that thousands of Rohingya prefer a dangerous boat journey they may not survive to staying in Myanmar [speaks volumes](#) about the conditions they face there," says Amnesty International's Kate Schuetze. Fleeing repression and extreme poverty, more than eighty-eight thousand migrants have [taken to sea](#) from the Bay of Bengal since January 2014, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

### Where are they migrating?

Many Rohingya have sought refuge in nearby Bangladesh, which [hosts](#) more than thirty-two thousand

registered refugees; more than two hundred additional unregistered Rohingya refugees are believed to live in the country, according to UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates. However, conditions in the most of the country's refugee camps are [dire \(PDF\)](#), driving many to risk a perilous voyage in the Bay of Bengal.

More than 137,000 refugees from Myanmar were [registered](#) in Malaysia as of September 2014, according the UN, including tens of thousands of Rohingya. The Global Emergency Overview, which tracks humanitarian crises, tallied more than 40,000 UN-registered Rohingya as of last December, but activists say there are roughly an [equal number \(PDF\)](#) of unregistered Rohingya in the country. Kuala Lumpur has recently signaled a growing unease with the migrant influx. In May 2015, Malaysian Deputy Home Minister Wan Junaidi Jafaar said "We have treated [migrants] humanely but they cannot be [flooding our shores](#) like this."

The Rohingya have also begun to seek refuge in Indonesia, although the number of refugees there remains relatively modest, with an estimated [two thousand](#) Rohingya as of June 2015. Earlier in May, Indonesia's military chief expressed concerns that easing immigration restrictions would [spark an influx](#) of people.

Thailand is a hub for regional human smuggling and trafficking activities and serves as a common transit point for Rohingya leaving Myanmar. Migrants often arrive by boat from Bangladesh or Myanmar before moving on foot to Malaysia or continuing by boat to either Indonesia or Malaysia. A 2013 Reuters report [found](#) that some Thai authorities were colluding with smuggling and trafficking networks in the exploitation of detained Rohingyas, with the deputy commissioner general of the Royal Thai Police conceding that officials might have profited from smuggling. In its [2014 Trafficking in Persons report](#), the U.S. State Department downgraded Thailand to Tier 3, the bottom rank, as a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children who are subject to trafficking. Recently however, the military-led government in Bangkok has [prioritized](#) a crackdown on smuggling and trafficking rings following the discovery of mass graves in what are believed to have been detention camps. But some experts say that new punitive measures directed at traffickers are responsible for the uptick in abandoned vessels at sea—a development that has worsened the humanitarian crisis.

In May 2015, amid international pressure, Indonesia and Malaysia offered [temporary shelter](#) to thousands of migrants, Malaysia [launched](#) search-and-rescue missions for stranded migrant boats stranded, and Thailand agreed [to halt push backs](#). Myanmar's navy also conducted initial [rescue missions](#) at the end of the month. Joe Lowry, the Asia spokesman for the IOM, characterizes the ad hoc regional response to the crisis as, "a game of [maritime ping-pong](#)."

*"An international response that consists primarily of assigning blame for this humanitarian tragedy is no longer tenable. It is time for the international community to organize a realistic, workable solution."—senior advisor at the United States Institute of Peace and former U.S. mission chief in Myanmar Priscilla Clapp.*

### **What is the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and international actors in resolving the migration crisis?**

No unified or coordinated ASEAN response has been proposed or developed to address the deepening crisis. States in Southeast Asia also [lack established legal frameworks](#) to provide for the protection of rights for refugees.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—all ASEAN members—have yet to ratify the UN Refugee

Convention and its Protocol. ASEAN itself has remained silent on the plight of the Rohingya and on the growing numbers of asylum-seekers in member countries largely because of the organization's commitment to the [fundamental principle](#) of noninterference in the internal affairs of member-states. Lilianne Fan of the London-based Overseas Development Institute says that while ASEAN has the capacity to manage this crisis, member states lack the [political will](#) to resolve it.

Advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch, the Arakan Project, and Fortify Rights, a Southeast Asia-based advocacy group, continue to appeal to major international players to exert pressure on Myanmar's government. Some, like *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, argue that the United States should not have [normal relations](#) with the country until its persecution of the Rohingya ends. Others, like senior advisor at the United States Institute of Peace and former U.S. mission chief in Myanmar Priscilla Clapp, say that placing sole blame on Myanmar [oversimplifies](#) and misrepresents the complexities of the country's historical ethnic diversity. "An international response that consists primarily of [assigning blame](#) for this humanitarian tragedy is no longer tenable. It is time for the international community to organize a realistic, workable solution," writes Clapp.

To date, the United States and other global powers have urged the central government in Myanmar to do more to protect ethnic minority groups from persecution. On a visit to Myanmar in the fall 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama said, "[Discrimination against a Rohingya](#) or any other religious minority... does not express the kind of country that Burma over the long term wants to be."

Though no coherent regional or international response to the migrant crisis has come to fruition, more pointed international pressure appears to be mounting against Myanmar's central government. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Anne Richard said in May that resettlement fails to address the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar. "The answer to the issue is [peace and stability and citizenship](#) for the Rohingyas in Rakhine State, and that is the solution."

## Additional Resources

This 2013 Human Rights Watch [report \(PDF\)](#) describes the role of the Myanmar government and local authorities in the displacement of and violence against Rohingya and other Muslim communities.

This 2014 International Crisis Group [report \(PDF\)](#) explores the complex political climate in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

This [CFR Backgrounder](#) charts Myanmar's political evolution.

This 2015 [report \(PDF\)](#) by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum concludes that conditions are ripe for genocide in Myanmar.

This [interactive](#) by the International Organization for Migration illustrates irregular migration patterns in Southeast Asia.

Adam Ellick and Nicholas Kristof explore the plight of the Rohingya in this *New York Times* [documentary](#).

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