

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45: The humanitarian crisis facing the Rohingya in Myanmar

September 20, 2017

CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

JONATHAN STROMSETH

Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asian Studies

Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies,

John L. Thornton China Center

LEX RIEFFEL

Nonresident Senior Fellow

Global Economy and Development

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

STROMSETH: My name is Jonathan Stromseth. I'm a senior fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution covering Southeast Asia and China, and I'm here with Lex Rieffel, nonresident senior fellow in Global Economy and Development at Brookings, to talk about the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar.

Lex, about 400,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in recent weeks. But the history of this crisis goes much further back. Who are the Rohingya, and how did they find themselves in today's dire circumstances?

RIEFFEL: Jonathan I wish there were an easy answer to this question. There is no agreement who the Rohingya are or where they came from. The extreme views are that these are Muslim people who settled along the Indian Ocean coast, otherwise known as the Arakan coast, more than a century ago. And at the other extreme, there are people who say these are people who were born in what is now Bangladesh and moved into Myanmar as aliens, as undocumented aliens, and are sort of interlopers. And they have not been accepted into the larger Burmese society which is predominantly Buddhist.

And there have been tensions between Buddhist communities in that part of the country and the Muslim communities in that part of the country for a long time, certainly going back to independence in 1948, and it looks as though the tensions have gotten worse over the last 10, 15, 20 years. And especially, there was an outbreak of violence against this community in 2012. And then just last October there was also an attack on some border police posts that the military, the Myanmar military, reacted to quite aggressively. And then last month there was another set of larger attacks on military and police posts near the Burma-Bangladesh border and there was another great counterterrorist action by the military.

STROMSETH: Thanks for that background Lex. Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi finally spoke publicly about this crisis after facing mounting pressure from the international community. What did she say, and why didn't she speak out earlier?

RIEFFEL: She said what she has said many times before and in many places and that is violence is not justified by anyone, the violence doesn't help, and that the violence should stop. She also committed again, quite strongly, to implement the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Commission which she had convened or created a year ago to study the problem and make recommendations.

Their recommendations, 88 of them, happened to come out the same day of the attack on these military posts last month. And the short reason that she didn't say anything about it is that the sentiment among the Buddhist population in her country is strongly anti-Muslim. That in effect if she came out and condemned what the military had done to remove what they call terrorists from this area then she would have in effect been condemning the voters who elected her in 2015, and she will be condemning the military which is a sort of more powerful force in the country.

STROMSETH: Now turning to a kind of U.S. policy perspective, the White House has called on the Burmese security forces to respect the rule of law, stop the violence, and end the displacement of civilians from all communities. But realistically, what policy options are available to the U.S. to help resolve the current crisis?

RIEFFEL: I would have to say there are very few policy options. In fact I would say there are none that would obviously bring peace and order and prosperity to this part of the country. I don't see anything that the United States can do that can really alleviate the plight of the Rohingya people either those who remain in Rakhine state or of moving into Bangladesh besides humanitarian assistance.

Of course I hope that the United States government does contribute to any humanitarian assistance the U.N. and others can organize. But beyond that, I mean there are people who've been calling for sanctions against Burma and I don't think that would help the Rohingya or anybody else.

STROMSETH: Are we confident that humanitarian assistance if given would actually be delivered to the right places in Rakhine state?

RIEFFEL: Jonathan that's a tough question. I live on the other side of the world, I haven't been there for a year, I don't speak Burmese, and I can say that there are some reasons to be concerned that humanitarian assistance might not get that the right people. Look, very important but this problem is that there are 2 million of Rakhine Buddhists living in that state who feel seriously mistreated by the Burmese and the rest of the country and it's very important to make this population group feel as though they are more respected and appreciated.

STROMSETH: And finally, I know you've worked on this from the perspective of Southeast Asian countries, or the Association of Southeast Asian countries ASEAN, how is this current crisis sort of reverberating through the region? And is there any regional approach or solutions that we could look toward?

RIEFFEL: I'm a big fan of ASEAN. ASEAN has its own way of doing things. It has no great track record of solving conflicts within countries. There are other countries that have Muslim minority problems including Thailand and the Philippines for example. And so it's a real challenge for ASEAN to figure out what they can do usefully in this country.

It would be great for example if there could be an ASEAN peacekeeping force that moved into this territory and contributed to the peace, but I believe that can only happen if some brilliant general in the military decides that they really want this to happen.

PITA: If you've been listening to 5 and 45 and like what you're hearing, please take a minute to rate and review us on iTunes. And don't forget to follow us and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts.