

You've forgotten about the Rohingya, haven't you?

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It has been over a year since the renowned Burmese political activist Aung San Suu Kyi was elected to the Burmese parliament signalling a groundbreaking change in the country's government. It has also been over a year since the first story emerged about the plight of the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority in Burma, leaving nothing but a slight murmur on the global conscience.

In this time, Burma's international relations have markedly improved, with visits to the United States as well as the removal of economic sanctions. Even prominent global corporations have travelled to the country to set up shop. Behind this veil of prosperity and change lies the persecution of the biggest population of stateless people in the world.

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority that have been in Burma since 9th century. Despite the clear ethnic differences, they are for all intents and purposes, Burmese. Unfortunately, they have been victims of systematic persecution since the Burmese junta government took over in 1962. Prior to this, Rohingyas were recognized by the state and even served as representatives in Burmese parliament. In 1982, the Rohingya were declared "non-nationals" and "foreign residents" and were banned from participating in elections. Since then, they have been subject to large scale ethnic cleansing that in the past year has led to grave bloodshed on both sides of the divide.

Currently, there is still a significant population of Rohingyas living in their native Rakhine State in Western Burma, but apartheid-like restrictions have prevented them from accessing things they need for everyday life, including their jobs. This has led an estimated 35,000 to seek refuge across the border in neighboring countries, but even then they are hardly welcome.

The most recent development in this story is the fact that Rohingyas fleeing from sectarian violence into Thailand are being held in immigration facilities that are akin to prisons. According to Human Rights Watch, the cells in these facilities are "cage like" and there is barely enough place to sit. The women detainees are subject to sexual assault and exploitation.* Even worse, many Rohingya are ending up at Turutao Island in Thailand, which whilst being a spectacular national park, is also the site of some of the most intricate human trafficking rings in the region, leaving many Rohingya as not only victims of sectarian violence, but victims of human trafficking.**

All in all this does seem like a helpless situation. How can anyone help a population that is stateless and belongs nowhere—how can we document approximately how many have gone missing—and how many have disappeared into the clutches of human trafficking? Wouldn't it just be easier to collectively forget?

Ethnic tensions and wars of identity are very much akin to the modern condition. It may be easy to turn a blind eye to the Rohingya now, but this will only enable harsher consequences a few years down the line. Identity divisions that have gone unanswered and unsolved have produced some of the gravest conflicts today; from Syria to Iraq and even to Egypt. And these are not conflicts that we haven't seen before. The post Cold War era of the 1990's taught us lessons from the dissolution of Yugoslavia to the genocide in Rwanda, stories like this are all too familiar.

International actors can choose to forget, or they can choose to take steps towards a more stable future. Today, the Rohingya are a helpless minority, but you never know what tomorrow brings. Their identity as a Muslim minority resonates with many unstable organizations active today and collective political memory is a powerful tool—just pick up any history book.