

COVER STORY

in the town's drug trade. "There have been problems in the past with drugs among our young people," he said. "We have succeeded in resolving these issues, but we are always concerned about protecting our youth."

The ambiguous position of Burmese Muslims in Thailand has been further complicated in recent years by the government's delicate relationship with its own Muslim communities. As the IHRC report notes: "Thailand...has a long history of persecuting its Muslim minorities and 2004 saw the massacre in police detention of 84 in Southern Thailand." That event helped to revive a deadly insurgency movement in which nearly 2,000 people have been killed since January 2004.

The ongoing unrest in southern Thailand has affected the Muslim community in Mae Sot. The city's rapidly growing Muslim population (Thai and Burmese) has drawn the attention of government authorities concerned that the insurgency could spread. According to several local clerics, Thai military intelligence agents make frequent visits to monitor activity in the mosques and interview local Muslims about possible connections to militant groups operating elsewhere in the country.

By all accounts, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot have no connection to militant Muslim factions in Thailand or elsewhere. By virtue of their refugee status in Thailand, they are even cut off from their religious peers in other Muslim countries—some-

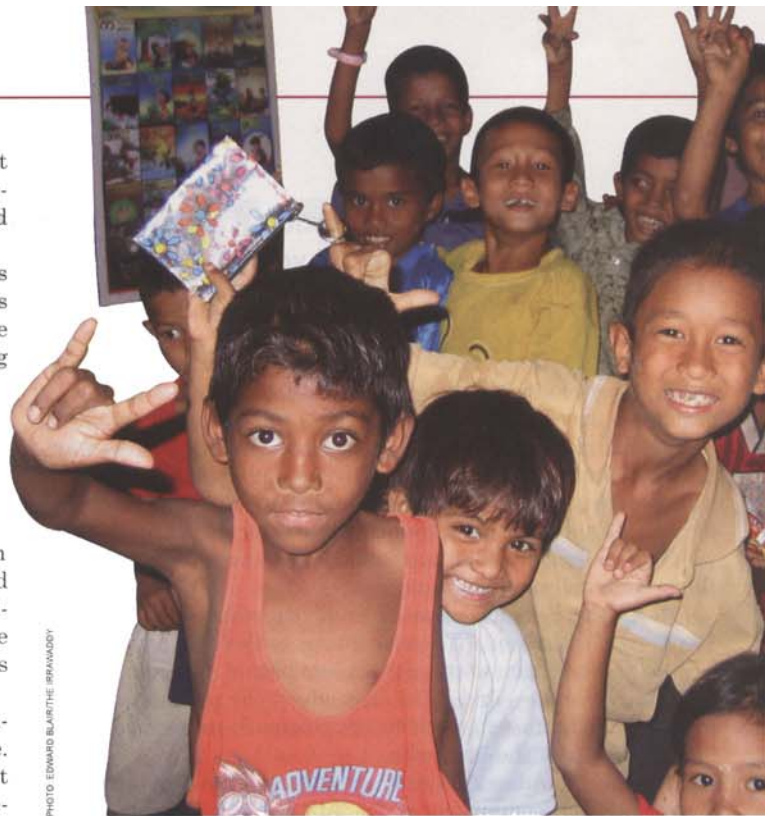


PHOTO: EDUARDO BLARITHE/IRRAWADDY

STATELESS IN ARAKAN

Burma's contentious Arakan State has long been a sore spot for the country's ruling military dictatorship. Physical brutality and draconian measures to stifle the region's Muslim Rohingya population have produced waves of refugees over the western border to Bangladesh (formerly eastern Bengal) since the 1970s.

Some historians suggest that Muslims in northern Arakan State—predominantly ethnic Rohingya—can trace their lineage back to Muslim merchants of the 8th and 9th centuries who made their living as tradesmen in coastal ports. Never ones to let historical facts get in their way, the generals in Rangoon tell quite another story.

"Historically, there has never been a Rohingya race in Myanmar [Burma]," says a 1992 press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The fastidious scholars of the State Peace and Development Council claim that Rohingyas are simply illegal immigrants who have infiltrated the country from the borders with Bangladesh and India since the British established colonial rule over the region in 1824.

Under Burmese citizenship laws, no individual or group can claim citizenship (and therefore documentation or access to education and healthcare) who did not reside in Burma prior to British colonial rule. Nationalist campaigns, initiated by the government and often with the support of local Buddhist communities, have painted Rohingyas as enemies of the state who threaten national culture and life.

Violence against Rohingyas in Arakan State—widespread killings, rape, forced labor—led to two mass migrations of refugees in 1978 and 1991. Most were repatriated, sometimes forcibly, under an agreement between Bangladesh and Rangoon, and in 1991 with the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

In 2001, violence erupted again in Arakan State, as thousands of mosques were destroyed and 10 Muslims and two Buddhists were killed. The outbreak was prompted in part by the destruction of ancient Buddhist artifacts by the Taliban in Bamayan, Afghanistan, as well as by a defamatory anti-Muslim pamphlet allegedly circulated by Buddhist monks and members of the SPDC's pseudo-political group the Union of Solidarity and Development Association.

In recent years, violent clashes between Muslims and Buddhists have become less frequent. Government suppression, however, continues to make life for Rohingyas a constant struggle. Restrictions on mobility since 2001 have made it difficult for Rohingyas to secure employment and engage in trade—as they are restricted from traveling outside their villages without official permission. The government has reportedly also imposed various marriage restrictions—exorbitant fees for marriage licenses and lengthy waiting periods, and even proposals that make the shaving of a man's beard a requirement for marriage.

The UNHCR estimates that more than 20,000 Rohingyas

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Oppression of local Rohingyas has been on the upswing

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thing that the All Burma Muslim Union hopes to change.

Based in Mae Sot, the ABMU has attempted since its creation in 1980 to provide political leadership for Burmese Muslims in exile. A member of the Democratic Alliance of Burma and the National Council of the Union of Burma, the ABMU also maintains a company of troops that has served with soldiers of the Karen National Liberation Army in Karen State's Brigade 4 district since 1983.

"The ABMU is fighting for a democratic Burma and a federal union, like other national races," said Hamid, secretary-general of the group. "We have a duty to be involved in the affairs of Burma, and the first duty is to bring down the military dictatorship."

The organization's influence to date, however, has been slight. Its soldiers in Karen State number only about 100 and they have seen little military action beyond light skirmishes since 1995.

"Recruitment is hard," said Chartade, a former captain in the ABMU's KNU Muslim contingent and a resident of the Bangladeshi Barracks. "Our young

people are more interested in finding work in the larger cities like Bangkok instead of fighting in the jungle."

In concert with its armed opposition to Burma's military regime, the ABMU has also made efforts to bring the plight of Burmese Muslims to the attention of the international community.

The group issued a joint statement with the All Burma Young Monks' Union in May 1997, urging Asean to reconsider their decision to admit Burma that year. "To accept SLORC [Burma's then ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council] into your association will further frustrate the efforts of the Burmese people to build a free and prosperous country," the statement concluded.

According to the secretary-general, the ABMU's goals are much the same as other ethnic opposition groups. "We want to play a role in a future federal union in Burma to represent the interests of Burmese Muslims," said Hamid. "We are not extremists. We simply want equal protection under the law."

The desire for equal protection—at home and in exile—seems to be the order of the day for Mae Sot's Burmese Muslim community. Like the majority of refugees, they wait for the opportunity to return to a free Burma. Meanwhile, they do what they can to provide for their families, practice their religion without constraints and hope that greater attention is given to what the IHRC calls "the oppressed of the oppressed." ■

Rohingyas have struggled for decades to legitimize their presence in the country, and their fight looks to be anything but over

By **Yeni**

refugees still live in two camps along the Bangladeshi border with Burma. Unwelcome at home, the residents of the camps face pressure from Bangladesh to return to Arakan State, often compelled by authorities to sign voluntary repatriation documents.

Refugees in the camps also face routine harassment by security personnel, and a violent police raid in late 2004 left three dead and 42 (including women and children) under arrest on arbitrary charges. Rohingyas are often blamed for political violence in Bangladesh, including bombings by extremist Muslim organizations.

Following the ouster of former prime minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004, the junta's direct assault on Rohingyas appeared to ease. Since early 2005, however—after the SPDC increased its presence in Arakan State—oppression of local Rohingyas has been on the upswing, including an increase in the instances of forced labor, often for development projects aimed exclusively at local Buddhist communities.

Despite calls by aid organizations such as the UNHCR and Amnesty International for a reassessment of Burma's discriminatory citizenship laws and greater protection for Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi border camps, the junta continues to turn a blind eye to the plight of Muslims in Arakan State and throughout the country. ■

PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD



A Rohingya refugee family at Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhiya, 35 kilometers from the southeastern tourist town of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Learning with the Irrawaddy 10

To accompany January 2006 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine

Selected article: *Stateless in Arakan*, pages 22-23

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Prediction: Title

You are about to read an article called *Stateless in Arakan*.
What do you think will be in the article?

Activity 2

Brainstorm: Rohingyas

What do you know about Rohingya people?

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 3

Paragraph Summaries

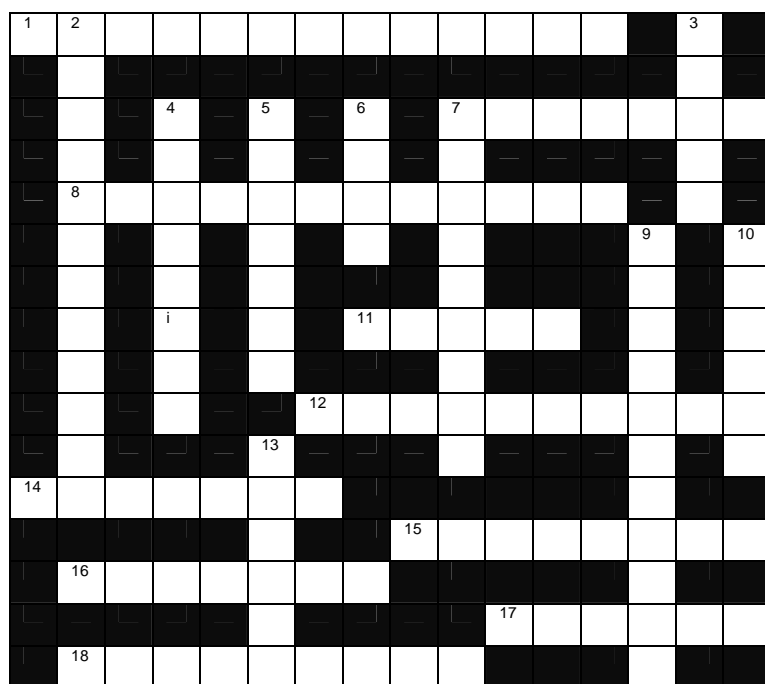
- a) Read these paragraph summaries. Match the summaries with the paragraphs in the article.
- A. The Bangladesh government does not want the Rohingyas to live there.
 - B. SPDC and other historians disagree when the Rohingyas arrived in Burma.
 - C. International organizations are asking the Burmese government to give better treatment to the Rohingya.
 - D. The SPDC claim the Rohingyas are illegal immigrants
 - E. Life in Burma got better for Rohingyas after Khin Nyunt was arrested, but now it is getting worse again.
 - F. Although many Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh, most were repatriated.
 - G. Rohingyas in Arakan State have been fleeing, as refugees, to Bangladesh.
 - H. Life for Rohingyas in the refugee camps is very difficult.
 - I. There was a lot of violence against Rohingyas in 2001.
 - J. The Burmese government makes a lot of rules that make life for Rohingyas very difficult.
 - K. The Burmese government and Buddhist communities don't want the Rohingyas to have Burmese citizenship.

Activity 4**Vocabulary: Crossword**

All the answers to this crossword are in the article.

Across

1. mostly (*paragraph 2*)
7. beside the sea (*paragraph 2*)
8. looking again at something, and deciding whether to change it (*paragraph 11*)
11. demands (*paragraph 11*)
12. happening a lot (*paragraph 5*)
14. violent attack (*paragraph 10*)
15. ability to travel from place to place (*paragraph 7*)
16. against the law (*paragraph 3*)
17. suffix meaning 'not real' (*paragraph 6*)
18. doing things without good reason (*paragraph 9*)

**Down**

2. laws that stop you doing something (*paragraph 7*)
3. a fight, small battle (*paragraph 7*)
4. very strict (*paragraph 1*)
5. increase (*paragraph 10*)
6. large numbers of people or things (*paragraph 5*)
7. forced to do something (*paragraph 8*)
9. has a lot of problems (*paragraph 1*)
10. to live somewhere (*paragraph 4*)
13. bad situation (*paragraph 11*)

Activity 5**Noun phrases**

- a) Do you know what a *noun phrase* is?
- b) Read the information in the box on the next page.

A *noun phrase* is like a normal noun, except contains more words, e.g.

1. He is going to work.
2. The teacher is going to work.
3. A man with a red coat is going to work.
4. That tall, thin man over there is going to work.

All the underlined parts of above sentences are nouns. When you are reading, it is very useful to identify noun phrases. It helps you to understand complex sentences.

A noun phrase can contain a noun + determiners and/or modifiers, e.g.

The tall man: The is a determiner, *tall* is a modifier, *man* is the main noun.

c) Identify the noun phrases in these sentences from the article, e.g:

Burma's contentious Arakan State has long been a sore spot for Burma's ruling military junta (3 noun phrases)

1. The generals in Rangoon tell quite another story (2 noun phrases)
2. Under Burmese citizenship laws, no individual or group can claim citizenship (2 noun phrases)
3. Restrictions on mobility since 2001 have made it difficult for Rohingyas to secure employment. (1 noun phrase)
4. The residents of the camps face pressure from Bangladesh to return to Arakan State. (2 noun phrases)
5. Rohingyas are often blamed for political violence in Bangladesh. (1 noun phrase)
6. Since early 2005, oppression of local Rohingyas has been on the upswing. (2 noun phrases)

Activity 6

Timeline

What order did these things happen?

Put the events on the timeline.

- The Burmese government restricts movement and marriage for Rohingyas.
- Rohingya refugees start fleeing to Bangladesh
- The British establish colonial rule on the India/Burma border.
- SPDC increases its presence in Arakan State.
- The UNHCR is involved in repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh.
- Violence in Arakan State: 10 Muslims and 2 Buddhists are killed
- Bangladeshi police raid refugee camps, many Rohingyas are arrested, 3 killed.
- Khin Nyunt is arrested. Life improves a little for Rohingyas in Burma.
- Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that historically, Rohingyas did not live in Burma.



Activity 7**Comprehension questions**

Answer the questions.

1. The Burmese government disagrees with historians about something. What is it?
2. When does the Burmese government think Rohingyas arrived in Burma?
3. According to the Burmese government, which ethnic groups are allowed to be citizens?
4. Did all the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh volunteer to return to Burma?
5. How many Rohingya refugees are still in Bangladesh?
6. How did life change for Rohingyas in Burma after Khin Nyunt's arrest?
7. The article mentions one big problem facing Rohingyas nowadays. What is it?

Activity 8**Identify the main point**

a) What is the main point of this article?

1. Rohingya people are in a bad situation, whether they live in Burma or in Bangladesh.
2. Refugees in Bangladesh face many hardships, including police harassment.
3. Many people in Burma, especially Arakan State, do not like Muslims because they are afraid of them.
4. The Burmese government says that Rohingyas have no rights to live in Burma, and doesn't allow them full citizenship.

b) Look again at the options above. One option is the main point. Which of the other options are:

- *supporting points?*
- *not a point of the article?*

Activities to do After Reading**Activity 8****Sarcasm**

a) *The fastidious scholars of the State Peace and Development Council claim that the Rohingyas are simply illegal immigrants...*

What does 'fastidious scholars' mean?

b) Does the author think that the SPDC scholars are fastidious?

This is an example of *sarcasm*. Sarcasm is often used by English speakers, in conversation or writing. It is a popular type of humour.

When you are being *sarcastic*, you say the opposite of what you really think, but you say it in a way that everyone knows you don't mean it. Usually sarcasm is meant to be funny. Here are some more examples of sarcasm:

- *I love the hot season - I usually wear a thick coat all day.*
- *Teachers get too much pay! I think they should be paid less.*

Can you think of any other examples?

Activity 10	Discussion
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- a) Why do you think the SPDC dislikes the Rohingya?
- b) Many people around the world are afraid of Muslims. They think all Muslims are terrorists, even though most Muslims do not support the activities of extremists. What can be done about this problem?