CLIMATE MIGRATION AND ROHINGYA REFUGEES
AN OVERVIEW
Described by the United Nations as “the most persecuted minority in the world,” the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar, have faced decades of persecution, mass violence, displacement, and disenfranchisement.\(^1\) Over 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar since 2017 alone.\(^2\)

### Environmental Conditions

Myanmar’s coastline totals nearly 1,500 miles. According to the Othering and Belonging Institute, sea level rise of 20 to 41 cm is predicted by 2050, and between 37 to 83 cm by 2100, with devastating impacts for the country’s 6.2 million coastal residents. According to the 2016 Climate Risk Index, Myanmar is the second most vulnerable country in the world to the effects of climate change.

### Extractive Industries

Myanmar is the third largest exporter of rare earth minerals in the world, which are largely found in the Rakhine state, where the majority of Rohingya live. Land that once sustained Rohingya fishing and farming villages has been sold by the military to foreign companies, with most of the minerals exported to China for military technology. The military also forces the Rakhine and Rohingya to compete for access to food, land, and other necessary resources, exacerbating ethnic conflict between these groups.

### Compounded Vulnerability in Refugee Camps

According to the UN, there are nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in refugee camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar region. Refugees live in makeshift shelters composed of tarp, bamboo, and dry leaves, easily blown or swept away by rain, winds, and

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\(^2\)“Rohingya Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR.
flooding.\textsuperscript{3} The lack of infrastructure is not only due to limited funding and capacity, but also the Bangladeshi government’s opposition to the resettlement and integration of refugees. Nearly 20,000 refugees have been forcibly relocated to Bhasan Char, a low-lying, uninhabited island two hours off the coast.\textsuperscript{4} The Bangladeshi government has stated their goal is to move 100,000 refugees to the island, which is highly vulnerable to flooding and sea level rise.

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\textbf{Responses}
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Organizations including Human Rights Watch have denounced both repatriation and efforts to forcibly relocate refugees to Bhasan Char Island, calling for permanent solutions which recognize the ongoing genocide in Myanmar and the threat of the climate crisis to current refugee camps. An international effort is necessary to resettle the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya stuck in a permanent state of precarity in overcrowded and unsafe camps.

\textsuperscript{3}``Rohingya Refugee Crisis,’’ UNHCR.  
\textsuperscript{4}Zarni, interview.
How does climate change contribute to the Rohingya being “the most persecuted minority in the world” and exacerbate existing conflict with the Rakhine?

Reading through “The Perfect Storm - Rohingya Refugees and the Climate Crisis,” by Dewi Zarni, consider the following questions:

In what ways can we trace some of the issues the Rohingya face today to the history of colonialism, imperialism and resource extraction in the region?

What are the specific challenges faced by Rohingya women who have been displaced? How could refugee women be better supported and protected?

Based on your interpretations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), analyze how Anwar’s and other Rohingya people’s specific human rights have been abused.

What can we do to support Rohingya people forced to flee their homes in Myanmar? Research five organizations that support Rohingya refugees or work in Myanmar to address the root causes of migration. Assess the potential impact of supporting each one.

Thinking about the Rohingya within the global context of this exhibit, what similarities and differences do you see between this region and others?
The following research brief is informed by interviews with Dr. Maung Zarni, Burmese scholar, activist, and coordinator of the Free Rohingya Coalition; Natalie Brinham, researcher at Queen Mary University and expert on statelessness; and Mohammed Anwar, a Rohingya refugee from the Rakhine state currently living in Texas.

Historical and Environmental Context

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is the largest country in Mainland Southeast Asia, with a population of nearly 55 million. It borders Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand, as well as the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

After a 60-year-long period known as the Anglo-Burmese wars, the British East India Company was successful in colonizing Burma. Colonial rule lasted from 1886 to 1948. After independence, the Anti Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) won a majority of the new democracy’s assembly seats and drafted a constitution that promised to recognize the autonomy of ethnic minority states after a period of 10 years. In 1962, the military staged a successful coup, felling the government and instating a military junta. The following decades saw an additional coup, violent repression, ethnic conflict, and fraudulent elections. After defeating an attempted democratic uprising, the military junta changed the country’s name to Myanmar in 1989.

The military’s isolationist policies, ongoing conflict, and corruption contributed to rising poverty rates. In 2008, a devastating cyclone hit Myanmar, killing over 70,000 people and forcing the dictatorship to relax its stance on international aid. Soon after,

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the government held its first elections in 20 years, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotted as a sham. Beginning in 2012, violence against the Rohingya Muslims, an ethnic minority in the Rakhine province, escalated, leading to U.S. sanctions and a national state of emergency. In 2015, another deadly monsoon season killed nearly 100 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. That same year the country held their first democratic parliamentary elections.

Myanmar’s economy is heavily based in agriculture and is therefore highly dependent on the climate. According to the Othering and Belonging Institute’s report “Climate Refugees: The Climate Crisis and Rights Denied,” 61% of the country’s workforce and 30% of its GDP are made up by the agricultural industry. A large majority of the population rely on agriculture, livestock, and fisheries for income and subsistence. Changing weather and natural disasters have already contributed to rising food insecurity in the country. Increasing drought threatens agricultural production and has led to an increase in pests, diseases, invasive species, and wildfires.

Myanmar’s coastline totals nearly 1,500 miles. The impacts of sea-level rise on the country are already visible and are likely to worsen in the coming years. According to the Othering and Belonging Institute Report, sea level rise of 20 to 41 cm is predicted by 2050, and between 37 to 83 cm by 2100, with devastating impacts for the country’s 6.2 million coastal residents.

As natural disasters increase in frequency and severity, millions of people are internally displaced in Myanmar annually. In 2015, monsoons, floods, and landslides displaced 1.7 million people and destroyed 2 million acres of farmland. Cyclones are also

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9 Ayazi and Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees.”
10 Ayazi and Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees.”
12 Ayazi and Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees.”
13 Ayazi and Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees.”
expected to increase as a result of the climate crisis. According to the 2016 Climate Risk Index, Myanmar is the second most vulnerable country in the world to the effects of climate change.

### Overview of Rohingya Genocide & Displacement

Described by the United Nations as “the most persecuted minority in the world,” the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar, have faced decades of persecution, mass violence, displacement, and disenfranchisement. In Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism, Harsha Walia writes, “The racist othering of Rohingyas is part of the project of Buddhist majoritarian domination and Buddhist Rakhine nationalism. Dating back to the British strategy of importing labor to extract rice profits from the region and colonial policies of divide and rule that exacerbated tensions between communities, Buddhist fundamentalism has now escalated with virulent Islamophobia.”

There are 135 officially recognized ethnicities in Myanmar, but the Bamar ethnic group comprises a majority (68%) of the population. Nearly 90% of the population is Buddhist, and only 4% Muslim. The Rohingya, who are not a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar, make up most of this 4%, but their population is rapidly declining due to ethnic cleansing and displacement. The origins of the genocide are multifaceted, with roots in British colonization, islamophobia, and land rights issues. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “Divisions purposely created under British colonial rule and ongoing discrimination have fueled lengthy armed conflicts between the [military] and more than twenty ethnic armed organizations, as well as dozens of smaller militia groups, producing what some analysts have described as

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14 Ayazi and Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees.”
19 Rieffelm, “Peace in Myanmar.”
20 Rieffelm, “Peace in Myanmar.”
the world’s longest continuing civil war.”

In 1982, the military dictatorship redefined nationality and citizenship by ethnicity, excluding Rohingyas and other ethnic minority groups from full citizenship. The government has since confiscated identity documents which would prove the Rohingya people’s citizenship, leading to statelessness for many Rohingya. The country’s military continues to perpetrate atrocities against the Rohingya, including mass murders, burning villages, and widespread sexual violence.

According to the UN, over 700,000 Rohingya have fled the country since 2017 alone.

**Resource Extraction, Conflict, and Displacement**

The majority of the Rohingya live in the Rakhine state, a fertile, agricultural zone on the western coast. Rakhine is referred to as the “Golden Land” for the sprawling fields of rice that long sustained the local economy. Approximately one third of the population in Rakhine is Rohingya, though that number is decreasing. Despite its rich natural resources, Rakhine is one of the most impoverished and food insecure areas in Myanmar.

Natalie Brinham, researcher at Queen Mary University and expert on statelessness, describes the food shortages as manmade—a result of conflict in the region and intentional deprivation meant to push the Rohingya out of Rakhine.

Mohammad Anwar grew up in Rakhine state, but today, his entire family has been displaced. He recalled the importance of the environment to his community: “They are born farmers, fishermen, their lives depend on the farms and the seas and the rivers.” As a Rohingya with a recognizably Muslim name, Anwar was unable to pursue higher education in Myanmar and traveled to Bangladesh to look into opportunities to study. Because of the

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22 Maung Zarni, interview by Dewi Zarni, August 8, 2021.
23 “Rohingya Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR.
24 Natalie Brinham, interview by Dewi Zarni, August 8, 2021.
25 Zarni, interview.
26 Brinham, interview.
precarious legal status and essential statelessness of the Rohingya, his return to Burma from Bangladesh was considered illegal entry, and in 2007 Anwar was forced to flee the country. Most of Anwar’s family—his parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews—were forcibly displaced and now live as refugees in Bangladesh. Surrounding villages were also seized by the military for rare mineral extraction and hotel construction for Burma’s growing tourist population.

Rakhine is the site of immense resource extraction. With the help of the Myanmar military, foreign companies such as Chevron have displaced a number of villages in order to construct natural gas pipelines and extract billions of dollars worth of natural gas from the region.27

According to Dr. Maung Zarni, Burmese scholar, activist, and coordinator of the Free Rohingya Coalition, a driving force behind the genocide is the conflict over commercial use of land. Myanmar is the third largest exporter of rare earth minerals in the world, which are largely found in the Rakhine state. Land that once sustained Rohingya fishing and farming villages has been sold by the military to foreign companies, with most of the minerals exported to China for military technology. The military forces the Rakhine and Rohingya to compete for access to food, land, and other necessary resources, exacerbating the ethnic conflict.

As climate change worsens, fueled by the very oil companies dispossessing Rohingya of their land, the Rakhine state is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters. Dr. Zarni notes that “the majority of the Rohingya live in the coastal Rakhine state, which is highly susceptible to cyclones, floods, landslides, and saltwater intrusion. Cyclones and floods contribute to displacement, major crop loss, and water-borne disease outbreaks. Resource scarcity caused by environmental disaster contributes to the demonization and targeting of Rohingya.” In other words, environmental degradation is a direct cause of displacement and a contributor to ethnic tension and genocide.

Researchers have found a causal link between climate crisis

27Brinham, interview.
related degradation and increases in armed conflict, especially in ethnically fractionalised societies, such as Myanmar.\textsuperscript{28} The relationship between environmental stressors and human conflict is referred to as the “climate-conflict nexus.” Marcel Bandur of the Asia Research Institute writes, “While policies of systematic ethnic-cleansing are the leading driver of communal violence, the destabilizing effect of climate change acts as a threat multiplier.”\textsuperscript{29} Although the climate crisis is not the sole origin of the genocide and displacement of the Rohingya, environmental factors exacerbate the existing religious, ethnic, and land-based conflict.

\textbf{“Their Home Is Not Their Fortress”: Compounded Vulnerability in Refugee Camps}

According to the UN, there are nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in refugee camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar region, which sits between Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal.\textsuperscript{30} Rohingya refugees are especially vulnerable to the worst effects of the climate crisis, both due to the geographic location of the camps, as well as the lack of infrastructure and resources to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters. According to Dr. Zarni, Bangladesh’s 100-mile coastline is one of the most vulnerable in the world to cyclones and flooding. Monsoon season lasts from June to October, during which floods and landslides are common. Heavy rains also bring diseases including hepatitis, malaria, dengue, and chikungunya, compounded by unsanitary conditions in the dense camps.\textsuperscript{31} Studies show that monsoons will only get worse, and Cox’s Bazar is predicted to be the most heavily impacted area in South Asia by 2050.\textsuperscript{32}

Within the camps, Rohingya refugees live in makeshift shelters composed of tarp, bamboo, and dry leaves, easily blown or swept away by rain, winds, or flooding.\textsuperscript{33} While people living in two-story concrete or wooden houses can seek shelter on a roof or inside,

\textsuperscript{28}Marcel Bandur, \textit{Climate Justice in the Rohingya Crisis},” Asia Research Institute, Aug 6, 2018.
\textsuperscript{29}Bandur, “Climate Justice.”
\textsuperscript{30}Bandur, “Climate Justice.”
\textsuperscript{31}“Rohingya Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR.
\textsuperscript{32}“Rohingya Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR.
the Rohingya do not have that option. As Dr. Zarni told me, “Their home is not their fortress.... this is the kind of dwelling that will be washed away in any flood or mudslide.” Anwar, who worked in the refugee camps in Bangladesh also described the impact of flooding: “Forget a storm, even if you just have a heavy rain during monsoon all the camps get flooded, they get submerged in the water. It just happened recently. People died, many people lost their shelter.”

The lack of infrastructure is due to limited funding and capacity and to the Bangladeshi government’s opposition to the resettlement and integration of refugees. While it is clear that Rohingya refugees will not be able to return to Myanmar in the near future, if at all, the Bangladeshi government insists on their return, opposing resettlement in Bangladesh, or even other countries willing to accept them.34 According to Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh authorities have prohibited the construction of stronger shelters capable of withstanding not just the annual monsoon, but also frequent dry-season fires. This prohibition is a constant reminder to the Rohingya living in the world’s largest refugee camp that their stay in Bangladesh is temporary.”35

The refugee camps themselves also have a negative impact on the surrounding environment, which contributes to tension between refugees and the locals. Deforestation to create and power the camps harms local farmers and wildlife.36 Additionally, “This forest fragmentation aggravates the exposure of refugee camps to deforestation-related disasters, such as landslides, desertification, and the depletion of groundwater supplies.”37

As a response to overcrowding and flooding, nearly 20,000 refugees have been forcibly relocated to Bhasan Char, a low-lying, uninhabited island two hours off the coast.38 The Bangladeshi government has stated their goal is to move 100,000 refugees to the island, which is highly vulnerable to flooding and sea level rise. According to Dr. Zarni, “the Bangladeshi government has

34Mohammed Anwar, interview by Dewi Zarni, September 13, 2021.
37Bandur, “Climate Justice.”
38Zarni, interview.
privileged maintaining cordial relations with Burmese perpetrators over according Rohingya refugees their rights.”

For decades, Bangladesh has remained committed to the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. But, as conditions have only worsened for the Rohingya in Myanmar, there is little hope for repatriation. According to Anwar, those who are repatriated are held in what are essentially concentration camps. These camps, which hold over 100,000 Rohingya, are located in low-lying regions in the Rakhine state and are highly vulnerable to flooding and monsoons.

Gender and Religious Element

Across the world, refugee women experience unique vulnerability due to their gender. Over 50% of those in Bangladesh’s refugee camps are women, and single mothers are responsible for one sixth of households.39 Already marginalized and displaced, Rohingya women face sexual violence, human trafficking, and other forms of abuse. According to the UN, “Almost every woman and girl in the Rohingya refugee community in Cox’s Bazar has either experienced or witnessed incidences of gender-based violence.”40

Climate disasters only compound this vulnerability. According to Natalie Brinham, “Women-only spaces are extremely important for their safety but also from a cultural perspective.” In the aftermath of flooding, fires, and landslides, women are often forced from private dwellings into crowded communal spaces with men from outside of their household. Brinham says there are “a lot of worries around that and how to keep yourself safe in those situations.”

Not only are the Rohingya persecuted and displaced because they are Muslim, but their religion also makes resettlement more difficult. According to Dr. Zarni, “refugees are demonized

40Nelson, Reyes Saade, and Greenough, “Gender-based vulnerability.”
irrespective of their faith, but being muslim becomes an obstacle for resettlement because the assessment criteria appear to be much more stringent and racially motivated.”

**Policy Responses**

Given the magnitude of the refugee crisis and the ongoing genocide in Myanmar, Bangladesh’s insistence on repatriation is both unrealistic and inhumane. Policies which prohibit the construction of permanent and safe structures bear responsibility for the numerous deaths as a result of natural disasters and must be ended as the climate crisis only worsens. The government needs to not only allow, but also facilitate the integration of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, as well as their resettlement in other countries. Long term, international solutions, such as the recognition of and support for climate refugees, the end of fossil fuel use and other mitigating actions, and international aid to create safe infrastructure, are also needed in the face of climate related displacement.

Global education around climate refugees is a necessary first step which must happen as soon as possible. Regarding the lack of awareness, Anwar states, “Wherever Rohingya live, in most parts of the world, they are most of the time living as refugees... They live unprotected from violence, from climate change, from any sort of disaster... They’re seen as being just victims of genocide or political violence. It is not just that. They could also become victims of climate change. That’s what I want people to understand.”