

Written Evidence submitted in October 2017 to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee for their Inquiry on Violence in Rakhine State

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<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/violence-in-rakhine-state/written/71712.html>

Memorandum by Mr Derek Tonkin

Executive Summary

- There are two mutually antagonistic narratives about the origins of the Rohingya community.
- The former President U Thein Sein told Mr António Guterres in 2012 that Bengali migrants who settled in Rakhine State under British rule did so legally.
- The designation “Rohingya” was unknown to the British. It is a political construction dating from post-independence after 1948.
- This post-independence coalescence of differing Muslim ethnicities has alarmed Rakhine Buddhists.
- Three recommendations for action: invite Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to confirm what U Thein Sein has already told Mr Guterres; seek to bridge the two narratives through a learned commission; and be discreet when using the term “Rohingya”

Main Report

1. The recent violence in Rakhine State and the tragic flight of well over 500,000 overwhelmingly Muslim residents into Bangladesh cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of the historical background. This understanding is vital to the search for solutions.
2. There are two diametrically antagonistic historical narratives about the origins of the “Rohingya” Muslim population in Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan State and to the British as The Arakan). One version, favoured by the Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and probably most people of Burman ethnic origin, is that the Rohingya are illegal Bengali migrants. The other version, favoured by the Rohingya themselves and their international lobby of support, is that they can trace their origins in Rakhine State back over 1,000 years and are as indigenous as other ethnicities. The truth most probably lies somewhere between these two extremes.
3. Neither narrative stands up to serious examination. This state of affairs is however one of several reasons for the longstanding tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State.
4. While it is true that during British rule from 1824 to 1948, and especially after the fall of Mandalay in 1885, there was a steady and substantial migration from the Chittagong region to Rakhine State, this migration was not only legal, but was positively encouraged by the British. The legality of this migration was fully acknowledged by the former President of Myanmar, U Thein Sein. On 11 July 2012 he told António Guterres, then the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and now UN Secretary-General, that Bengali agricultural labourers who chose to settle in Rakhine State during British rule did so legally and that the grandchildren of such migrants are entitled to citizenship. ¹ This did not apply, U Thein Sein said, to Bengalis who arrived after 1948 because they could only have settled

¹ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Guterres-11072012-English-revised.pdf>

illegally. The President, to the puzzlement of many outside Myanmar, used the word “Rohingya” to describe these illegal migrants. ²

5. The sole documented reference to anything resembling “Rohingya” prior to Burmese independence in 1948 is to be found in an article on *Languages of the Burma Empire* by the physician to a diplomatic mission sent by the East India Company to the Court of Ava in Burma in 1795. Dr Francis Buchanan recorded very briefly in his article published in the journal *Asiatick Researches* in Calcutta in 1799 that one of three dialects “evidently derived from the Hindu nation” was “spoken by the Mahomedans, who have been long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan”. ³

6. As for the meaning of “Rooinga” and its many variants, it is generally agreed by Muslim scholars that the name is derived from the Bengali word for Arakan, which is “Rohang” with the addition of the family taxonomic suffix -gya. The most we could safely conclude from Dr Buchanan’s article is that “Rooinga” means “Arakaner”, not necessarily as an ethnic designation but rather as a geographic locator, as much as one would say “I am a New Zealander” without any ethnic connotation. Anything beyond this is pure speculation, in the total absence of any supporting evidence.

7. The British arrived in Arakan in 1824, but until they finally departed in 1948, they made not a single reference in any document, private or official, to the “Rooinga” designation. It took some years for the British to decide on the most appropriate description of the several Muslim ethnicities settled in Arakan over the years. By the time of the 1921 decennial Census, the British had determined that those who could trace their settlement in Arakan back to before British rule should be classified as “Indo-Burman”, to reflect their dual Indian and Burmese heritage, while those who arrived during British rule from Bengal should be classed among the many “Indian” ethnicities which came to Burma in the 19th and 20th Centuries. (Indian, as opposed to Indo-Burman, migration into Burma in the 19th and 20th Centuries is examined in detail in the Report on Indian Immigration by Financial Secretary James Baxter and published in 1941). ⁴

8. The first group classified as “Indo-Burmans” consisted mostly of Rakhine Burmese-speaking settlers and included the Rooinga of Dr Buchanan from the 16th and 17th Centuries, whom the British first defined in the 1921 Census as “Arakan Mahomedans” and who also spoke an archaic Bengali patois. This was changed to “Arakan Muslims” in the 1931 Census. The group also included smaller communities like the still recognised Kaman who are descendants of the retinue of the Mughal Prince Shah Shujah who arrived in Arakan in 1660; and the Myedu, Burmese captives of the 16th Century who formed a Myedu Army contingent supporting the Burmese annexation of Arakan in 1785. ⁵

9. The second group of mainly Bengali-speaking “Indians” who settled in Arakan mostly came from the Chittagong region of Bengal and were agricultural labourers, encouraged by the British to settle on vacant land instead of only staying a few months for the rice harvest. By the 1931 Census, the British-era settlers outnumbered the precolonial settlers in Arakan by a ratio of about 4 to 1. Thus the 1931 Census records some 217,801 Indian settlers and descendants against 57,952 descendants from Indo-Burman settlers. ⁶

10. It is impossible to say how many illegal migrants settled in Rakhine State after independence in 1948. Diplomatic estimates range from 250,000 (West German Ambassador in Pakistan in a despatch

² <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/rohingya-07122012185242.html/> suggests that Mr Gutierrez too may have misunderstood the President’s reference to “Rohingya” as applying to all Arakan Muslims except the Kaman.

³ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Buchanan-1799-London.pdf> - Page 237

⁴ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Baxter-Report-On-Indian-Immigration.pdf> - Arakan Pages 49 +

⁵ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1931-Census-Report.pdf> - Paragraph 143 Page 230 +

⁶ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/1931-Census-Tables.pdf> - Pages 250 and 251

to Bonn in 1965)⁷ to 500,000 (Bangladeshi Ambassador in Rangoon speaking to his British colleague in 1975).⁸ This suggests, at a very rough guess, that some 30% of the current Rohingya population could be illegal migrants or their descendants; another 60% could trace a descendant to British-era arrivals; but only 10% could reasonably claim ancestry going back to before the British arrival in Arakan in 1824.

11. The distinct ethnicities of the British-era “Indo-Burman” and “Indian” groups broadly survived until the mid 1970s. At the 1973 Census, recognised quasi-indigenous Muslim groups in Burma included Arakan-Chittagong, Kaman, Myedu, Burmese Muslim, other Burmese Indian and Chinese Muslim in a national race listing of 144 ethnicities.⁹ This list of 144 was replaced in 1990 by a list of 135 national races from which all Muslim ethnicities except the Kaman were excluded, and which remains today the current list of national races.

12. On independence in 1948, there was thus not a single confirmed or conclusive reference to any historical “Rohingya” ethnicity in Arakan. It was at this point that the descendants of the Rooinga of Dr Buchanan, representing but a minority of the Muslim population in Arakan, let it be known that they had taken the name “Rwanga”. The meaning of this term was unclear, but was quite probably a rendering of Dr Buchanan’s Rooinga. So there might well be a link between the “Rooinga” of 1795 and the “Rwanga” of 1948. The Rwanga however differentiated themselves from the majority Chittagonians, who in turn said that they wished to be known henceforth as “Burmese Muslims” or “Arakan Muslims”. “Rohingya” was not yet on the radar screen.

13. By the late 1950s Muslim scholars were engaged in exploring in historical and cultural essays the origins of the Rakhine Muslim communities. Many of these articles appeared in the monthly *Guardian Magazine* published in Rangoon.¹⁰ Various designations were given to these disparate communities. Apart from Rwanga, we may note Rushangya, Roewengya, Ruhangya and Rowunhyar among several, some derived from the Bengali word “Rohang” but others with more fanciful derivations. The surrender in 1961 of separatist Mujahid rebels brought in “Rohinja” which later appeared as “Rohingya”. The Burmese authorities tolerated this last designation for a time, but it is not to be found in any legal instrument in the Burmese Civil Code such as laws and regulations concerned with population census, immigration or citizenship.

14. Since the late 1950s, the various Muslim ethnicities in Arakan have coalesced into the “Rohingya” colossus. The creation of this new ethnicity is at root a political construction, driven mainly by the security concerns of the Muslim community in an increasingly hostile environment. Memories of the ethnic cleansing of tens of thousands of Muslims from the Sittwe region in 1942 remain strong among this community.¹¹

15. The reaction of the Buddhist majority in Myanmar has been one of considerable alarm. In the wake of the Mujahid rebellion¹² which lasted from 1948 to 1961 and a plethora of subsequent insurgent movements using “Rohingya” in their title, a Muslim population, mostly descendants of 19th to 20th Century immigrant agricultural labourers from the Chittagong region of Bengal, has evolved into an expanding, allegedly indigenous community, now claiming ancestry within Arakan, dismissive of any suggestion of Bengali origins and proclaiming a direct lineage reaching back many centuries. The “Rohingya” were now aspiring to nationhood, on a par with the Mons and the Shans, but without

⁷ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Karachi-Scholl-1965.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Kaiser-OBrien-23-Dec-1975.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/List-of-144-national-races.pdf> - Appendix IX

¹⁰ <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Ba-Tha-critique.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.rvisiontv.com/muslim-massacre-arakan-1942/>

¹² <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Pearn-1952-rev.pdf>

any serious historical justification. They still have no written language, despite a supposed history of 1,000 years or more.

16. The emergence of this so-called “Rohingya” community must appear to many Burmese like a Trojan Horse. What had prior to the Second World War been a scattered mosaic of Muslim communities living on the whole peacefully with their Buddhist neighbours was now perceived as an existential threat to the Rakhine Buddhist population.

17. The narrative which proclaims “Rohingya” as an historical ethnicity is not in my view based on known historical fact. However, as a nascent, emerging ethnicity formed under pressures of intolerable victimisation and discrimination in post-independence Myanmar, “Rohingya” has now passed the threshold of international recognition and has become a reality.

18. The account above suggests the need for action in three particular areas:

1. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who in contrast to the Commander-in-Chief seems to favour the designation “Arakan Muslim” for all non-Kaman Muslims in Rakhine State, and her government should be invited to confirm the legality of British-era descendants already announced by former President U Thein Sein. With goodwill this could pave the way, initially, for the grant of citizenship to some 70% of Arakan’s Muslims.
2. In order to promote the reconciliation of the Buddhist and Muslim communities, an attempt should be made to bridge the mutually antagonistic historical narratives through the appointment (for example under UN auspices) of an independent Council of Wise Men with a majority of Myanmar scholars mandated to take evidence both nationally and internationally and to publish their findings.
3. The international community, while continuing at its discretion to use the designation “Rohingya”, should demonstrate in public statements a greater awareness of its controversial origins and uncertain applicability. There is no universal recognition of “Rohingya” as an ethnicity. Even within Myanmar there are many thousands, possibly tens of thousands of Muslims living outside Rakhine State who could claim to be “Rohingya”, but choose not to do so.

19. There are very few unbiased studies of Rohingya history. One work, which I can warmly recommend, is a 2014 article “Rohingya: The Name, the Movement, the Quest for Identity” by Jacques Leider of the École française d'Extrême-Orient.¹³

20. The references in this evidence may also be found online in the compendium of materials on the Rohingya issue at <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/Arakan.html> which FAC Members are most welcome to browse. British colonial and diplomatic archives, studies by the International Crisis Group and statements 1947-1951 from leading Rakhine Muslim authorities (Nos 1-5 of selected documents during the period 1750 to 1958) are especially illuminating.

¹³ <http://networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Leider-Rohingya.pdf>