

## “Burma’s Path to Genocide”

In his determination of genocide by the Myanmar Armed Forces delivered in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum on 21 March 2022, US Secretary of State Anthony J Blinken drew significantly on materials in [the special exhibition “Burma’s Path to Genocide”](#) set up in 2021. In [a series of tweets](#) between 20 and 26 March 2022 I drew attention to what seemed to me to be inaccuracies and distortions in the Exhibition’s presentation. Indeed, of the five Chapters in the online presentation, many of the captions do not in my view reflect historical fact, and this is particularly true of Chapters 1 and 2.

The main problem is that the Exhibition reflects not an independent analysis of who the Rohingya are, their origins and identity, but an idealised, ideology-based narrative which ignores the reality that they are mainly descendants of British-era (1824-1948) agricultural migrants from the Chittagong Region of Bengal. [Some studies](#) have highlighted the several waves of migration over the centuries from which today’s Rohingya are descended, while [other studies](#) have concentrated on migration from Bengal. [Jacques Leider](#) has presented a seminal paper on “Chittagonians in Colonial Arakan”.

Rohingya activists have long denied that their community absorbed any substantial migration from Bengal and beyond after the Burmese invasion of 1784. But the weight of evidence of British colonial archives shows beyond any reasonable doubt that by the time of the 1931 decennial Census, British-era migrants and their descendants in Arakan outnumbered the descendants of indigenous Muslims by a ratio of 4 to 1. The activist lobby variously contends that no credence should be attached to British archives because they reflect colonialist designs, or that British-era migrants were in fact the descendants of returnees who had fled from Arakan decades previously in the wake of the Burmese invasion of 1784. I am not persuaded by these arguments.

Closer to the truth is Wai Wai Nu, a 2020 Simon-Sklodt Centre Genocide Prevention Fellow, [who has reportedly argued](#) that: “The British used a divide and rule strategy, which brought other ethnicities into colonies, to stir conflict and sustain their control. This strategy compelled the British to bring Indians into the Rakhine state, the area of residence for most Rohingya Muslims. The relocated Indians faced much discrimination and hate from the local Burmese population”. The British certainly encouraged Chittagonian migration to Arakan with tax and land rental incentives, but only in a very few cases were Chittagonians individually recruited and their passages paid. The vast majority arrived in Arakan under their own steam, first as seasonal labourers and later as settlers. If the British can be criticised, it is on the grounds that they upset the demographic balance in Arakan between Buddhist, Muslim and other communities.

For the record, the figures recorded in [the 1931 Census](#) are that in Arakan migrant British-era Chittagonians and their descendants numbered 186,327 and other immigrant British-era Bengalis and their descendants 15,585, a total of **201,912**, while the descendants of indigenous (that is, pre-1824) settlers (Yakhain-kala, Kaman, Myedu, Zerbaidis etc.) numbered only **56,963**. (Yakhain-kala means “Stranger-Arakan” and was the description used by Rakhine Buddhists. The interplay of Rooinga/Yakhain-kala/Arakan Muslims is discussed in detail [at this link](#).)

The Exhibition makes anachronistic use of the term “Rohingya” which is not to be found in any British-era or post-independence Burmese primary or secondary legislation. International use of the designation [dates only from the 1991-92 exodus](#). The origins of the designation, in a score or more variations, may be [found at this link](#).

I am also indebted to the Israeli scholar and diplomat Moshe Yegar, with whom I was in touch in 2020, for his writings on the Rohingya whom he identifies as the indigenous inhabitants of Arakan in contrast to what he describes as the migrant “Chittagongs”. Quotations from his writings [may be found at this link](#). It is both ironic and poignant that I need to refer to an Israeli scholar to highlight misleading and erroneous captions in a specialist Exhibition held in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in order to establish historical truth.

It will be evident from my brief presentation above that, in my view, most of the captions in Chapters 1 - 5 of the specialist Exhibition need revision by a panel of independent historians. I would however expect the Museum’s own experts and advisers to cling passionately to their own interpretation. The synthesis of contending narratives though is fundamental to reconciliation among the communities in Rakhine State.

It is sadly the case that the present Exhibition is less than supportive of the Rohingya themselves who have suffered so grievously from victimisation and persecution over the years; indeed, a properly appointed national or international court of law might well deliver a judgement of genocide against the Myanmar Armed Forces. The Exhibition is counterproductive in that it promotes an ideological narrative of the Rohingya which is anathema to most non-Muslim Burmese because the “path to genocide” is based on contested historical fact. At this critical time it is so important that avenues of reconciliation between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Rakhine State should be explored and pursued. A divisive narrative can only increase tensions and engender confrontation.

At the same time, the Museum should be aware that the website which I have created contains abundant materials for study and dissemination on such issues as the 1978 and 1991-2 exoduses, the 1982 Citizenship Law and illegal post-independence immigration. The website aims to provide research materials from a range of perspectives, Muslim, Buddhist and non-denominational.

The Board of Trustees of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum might wish to take note of my views and encourage, as they see appropriate, a revision of the materials in the Exhibition. I would be happy to recommend independent scholars of international repute, Burmese as well as non-Burmese, who might be willing to assist the Museum.

**Derek Tonkin - 29 March 2022**

UK Diplomatic Service 1952-1990

[d.tonkin@btinternet.com](mailto:d.tonkin@btinternet.com)