

The demography defining the Rohingya crisis

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How international inaction has created a lost generation of children with no ties to their past – or their future

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The Rohingya crisis is a decades-long story of displacement and suffering. It is also a story of resilience and survival. Despite the immense challenges they face, the Rohingya people continue to hope for a better future in which they can live in peace and with dignity.

But that prospect continues to look less and less likely with each passing month. Policymakers must start to face up to the demographic catastrophe the Rohingya are facing, in which plummeting prospects, a young and rudderless population and their de facto expulsion from their homeland means the group is facing terminal decline.

Researchers and reporters often underplay the role of demography in understanding and reporting on humanitarian crises. When an ongoing crisis is likely to constitute a genocide, it does not only mean that tens of thousands of people are being killed or tortured, it means that children are being raised in schools that do not teach their language, that the conditions of life imposed upon them are calculated to bring about their destruction as a separate ethnic group, and that entire generations

have no memory of living outside of a refugee camp. Ignoring demography risks leaving the Rohingya a scarred and diminished people, even if they can one day be returned safely to their homeland.

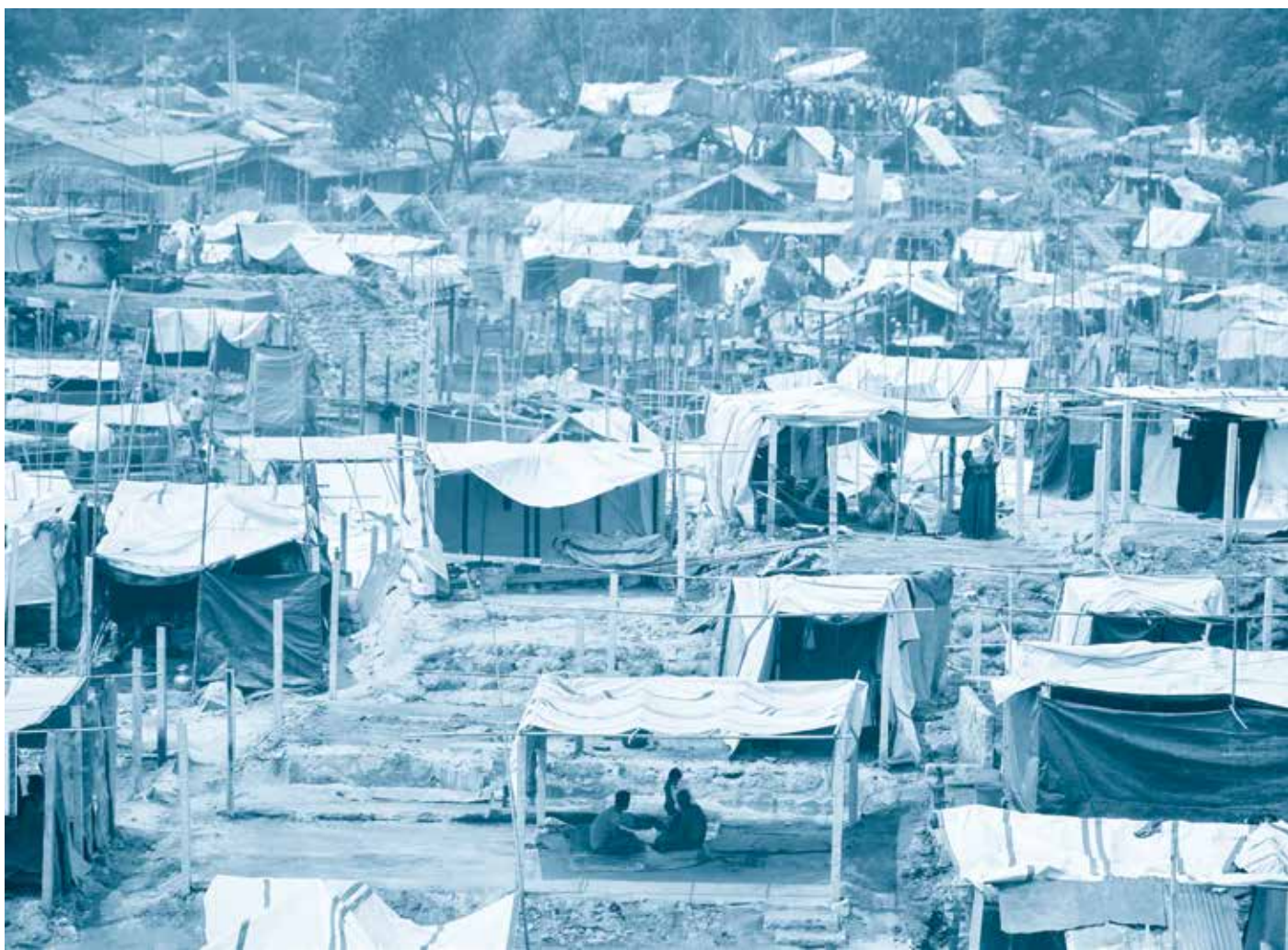
It was intercommunal conflict — the genocidal desire of authorities in Myanmar to ethnically cleanse their own demography — that culminated in the displacement of the Rohingya. Genocide, the crime of crimes, is never more than a few steps removed from demographic fears as a motivator, and the genocide of the Rohingya is no exception. Therefore, understanding the ethno-demographic dynamics that motivated this conflict is key to preventing further escalations.

The Rohingya crisis, a humanitarian disaster that has been unfolding for years, is worsening again and the trend shows little sign of abating. The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, have faced systemic discrimination and violence, leading to mass displacement and an ever-worsening refugee crisis.

Rakhine State, which lies along the country’s northwestern coast, epitomizes the post-colonial failures of poverty, militarization and ethno-religious hatred.¹



Researchers and reporters often underplay the role of demography in understanding and reporting on humanitarian crises



The acts of genocide there are under investigation at the International Court of Justice in a case brought by the Gambia² based on the application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and separately in Argentina in a unique case focusing on the application of the legal principle of universal jurisdiction³.

The Rohingya, often described as “the world’s most persecuted minority,” have been denied citizenship in Myanmar since 1982, effectively rendering them stateless. This denial of basic rights has been accompanied by restrictions on movement, limited access to education, arbitrary confiscation of property, and other forms of discrimination⁴.

The situation escalated dramatically in August 2017 when a brutal military crackdown, in response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents, led to a mass exodus of the Rohingya to neighboring Bangladesh⁵.

Refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, are now home to nearly 1.5 million Rohingya, making it the largest refugee settlement in the world. The conditions in these camps are dire, including overcrowding, gang activity, forced conscription,

A Rohingya refugee family rests in a temporary shelter days after a fire burnt their home at a refugee camp in Ukhiya, in the southeastern Cox’s Bazar district. AFP

inadequate access to healthcare, and a lack of educational opportunities.

There is always a need to delve deeper into the factors that cause and sustain suffering and conflict. In the case of the Rohingya crisis, demographics — by which we mean race, religion, population, language, education and the myriad socioeconomic factors that determine and are codetermined by them — is key to understanding the cause of the conflict and to bringing about a durable resolution.

This includes understanding the changing demographics of the largely incarcerated Rohingya population, the challenges faced by the new generation growing up in the refugee camps and facing forced conscription, and the fresh ethnographic grievances that have arisen as a result of their displacement.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE REGION

In recent months there has been a resurgence of violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar, although it has drawn little attention away from the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. The situation is fluid and there remains the risk of reescalation.

A web of official statements and



ABOVE: Arakan Army troops, an ethnic rebel group, pose in front of the junta's Western Regional Headquarters in Kyauktaw after capturing it.
AA Info Desk

NEXT: Leaders of the Arakan Army meet with other rebel leaders and representatives of various Myanmar ethnic rebel groups at the opening of a four-day conference in Mai Ja Yang, northern Kachin State. AFP

counterstatements make ascertaining the realities on the ground challenging. Nonetheless, we know that tens of thousands of Rohingya civilians are once again being displaced by fighting in northern Arakan (the historical geographical name of Rakhine State). About 4,000 individuals have crossed into Bangladesh in the past month, joining the 1.5 million already there.

There have been reports of widespread arson attacks targeting Rohingya homes, resulting in the displacement of more than 100,000 people. Both the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) and the Arakan Army (a Buddhist separatist group in Rakhine State) have been implicated in these actions.

Coastal towns have been seized and UN World Food Program warehouses used to store aid supplies have been looted and burned⁶. The confiscation of food and resources from the Rohingya has been reported as part of scorched-earth tactics designed to force the population to flee.

Additionally, forced conscriptions carried out by the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army have been documented in recent months, with both sides using fear and misinformation about enemy abuses to drive enlistment activities. Estimates suggest that 5,000 Rohingya have been forcibly conscripted by the Tatmadaw, and they are often used as human shields or placed in perilous positions to cover military retreats. Such

conscripts are typically untrained and treated as expendable by commanders⁷.

The renewed violence in Rakhine State is driven principally by ethnic and communitarian divisions, though it is not principally, this time at least, related directly to the Rohingya themselves. Instead, the desire of Rakhine Buddhists for independence from the centralized, authoritarian regime in Myanmar has once again brought their Arakan Army, a force of between 30,000 and 40,000, into armed conflict with the Tatmadaw.

Both sides have been hostile to Rohingya, who are caught in the middle of these warring factions, both of which appear to view further displacement of Rohingya as the removal of an inconvenient and troublesome minority. During the events of August 2017, in contrast, the Rohingya population was targeted more directly, militarily and demographically, in what constituted a "textbook" example of genocide⁸.

The broader context of this violence, therefore, is the status of Myanmar as a near-failed state. Approximately half of the country's territory is controlled by a variety of rebel groups, including the Arakan Army. In regions such as Kayah, groups such as the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force and the Karenni Army have seized significant areas from the military regime, although their control remains tenuous⁹. The influence of the central government is increasingly



The Myanmar regime perceives the conscription of Rohingya as a strategic necessity to bolster its weakening control





The regime's strategy includes instigating ethnic violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya to undermine the separatists' objectives



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limited to urban centers, with the Bamar majority's authority waning in rural areas.

Rohingya living in refugee camps in Bangladesh are not immune to the predations of these groups. They face abduction and violence for resisting the recruitment efforts of rebels, including the Arakan Rohingya Army.

The dire conditions in refugee camps, and false promises of citizenship or a stable income, entice some Rohingya into conscription¹⁰. These individuals often find themselves in hazardous situations with little regard for their well-being, as evidenced by testimonies from conscripted Rohingya who describe being treated with complete disregard for their safety.

Meanwhile, the regime in Myanmar perceives the conscription of Rohingya as a strategic necessity to bolster its weakening control. The Arakan Army has gained substantial ground in Rakhine State, capturing nearly half of the region despite the best efforts of the Tatmadaw.

The regime's strategy includes the instigation of ethnic violence between Buddhists and Rohingya in Rakhine to undermine the separatists' objectives. The aim of this tactic is to weaken the Arakan Army's push for greater autonomy.

The National Unity Government, Myanmar's legitimate government in exile, is striving to provide leadership. Operating from Washington, D.C., it comprises precoup political figures

NEXT: Ousted Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina speaks at the UN General Assembly in New York. AFP

ABOVE: Myanmar after hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. The UN's World Food Program has provided food and emergency aid to manage the ongoing crisis. AFP

and remnants of Aung San Suu Kyi's government¹¹. However, limited international recognition hinders its ability to influence the situation on the ground.

For the Rohingya, the options for escape are increasingly limited. Humanitarian aid is tightly controlled by the regime in Myanmar, which prevents non-governmental organizations from accessing affected areas and exacerbates the plight of the people.

Bangladesh, overwhelmed by the influx of refugees, has closed its borders to new arrivals. Other neighboring countries, including Thailand, Malaysia and India, have placed similar restrictions on entry, leaving the Rohingya with no safe haven.

Recent democratic upheaval in Bangladesh resulted in the abrupt ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August this year after 15 years in government. Once seen as a pro-democracy icon, Hasina had responded to what began as student protests with a violent crackdown in which 300 people were killed.

High unemployment and the ring-fencing of key jobs for her supporters had also drawn concern from human rights organizations, which warned that she and her government were heading toward becoming a one-party state. Her attempts to further repress dissent with harsh curfews and internet blocks united broad swathes of the population in opposition against her. After she fled to India from her residence



in Dhaka, rioters looted her estate¹².

Hasina viewed the effects of refugees from Myanmar as destabilizing and unsustainable for Bangladesh. She initially took a hard-line approach, refusing entry in 2012, but granted aid and refuge to about 1 million Rohingya refugees following the events of 2017. Her interim replacement, 2006 Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, shares a history of encouraging peace in Myanmar but any far-reaching change in Bangladesh's stance on refugees remains unlikely.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY

One key challenge facing demographers is the refusal of governments in Myanmar for decades to officially record the numbers of Rohingya. This means academics have had to rely on local surveys to build demographic data in the absence of any official census.

The role of Buddhism has been central to intercommunal tensions throughout the history of hostilities between Buddhists and Rohingya in Rakhine. Extreme elements of the Theravada school of Buddhism have proved to be highly susceptible to the politics of race and violence, with leaders of monastic groups, including Ashin Wirathu, leading progenitors of the peculiarly Burmese nationalist and anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Although Buddhism is thought of as a pacifistic religion, rhetoric about the clash of civilizations and the risk of

ABOVE: A motorcyclist rides past soldiers in a military armoured vehicle in Myitkyina, Kachin state.
AFP

NEXT: Rohingya refugee men build a temporary shelter days after a fire burnt their home at a refugee camp in Ukhia, in the southeastern Cox's Bazar district in March 2021.
AFP

ethnodemographic destruction — the supposed prospect of being “wiped out” or “outbred” by the Rohingya — reveals that Buddhism can be used to stoke ethnic tensions.

When the junta regime in Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw, exploits the tensions between the Buddhists/Arakan Army and the Rohingya, it does so in the knowledge that both groups are receptive to inflammatory messaging. The repression of the Rohingya is linked intrinsically to the extremism of those who believe there can be no place for “foreigners” in a Buddhist religious ethnostate¹³.

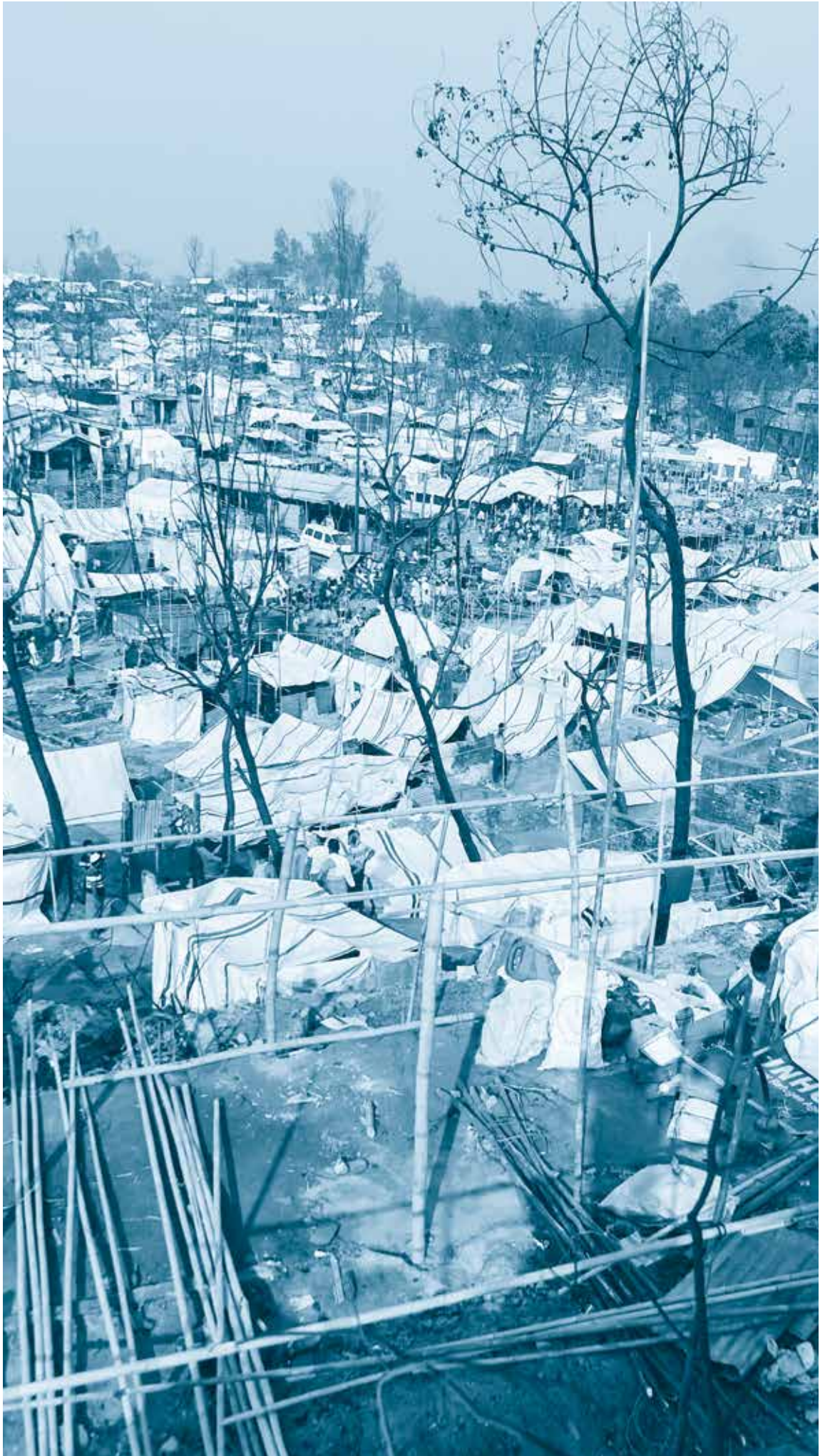
Burmese authoritarianism, and the always-present threat of military takeover, has meant that funding for the armed forces often finds its way to extremist Buddhist factions, which will eventually be used to justify another military coup in the name of restoring order¹⁴.

In Rakhine State the Rohingya minority, which comprises about 30 percent of the local population, is viewed as a security threat by the majority Buddhist community. This perception is fueled by anxieties over differences in population-growth rates, and amplified by politicized¹⁵.

These groups exploit the demographic fears to propagate anti-Muslim sentiment, portraying the Rohingya as a demographic menace poised to overwhelm Buddhist communities. Such rhetoric not only exacerbates communal tensions but



A “lost generation” has been created, one which cannot remember the times when the Rohingya lived in Rakhine state





The question of demography and demographic survival in the context of refugees is always likely to invoke the language of genocide





also seeks governmental support for discriminatory policies and actions against the Rohingya, perpetuating a cycle of fear, prejudice and conflict in the region.

This challenge mirrors closely the security dilemma first advanced by Robert Jervis and further developed in a study of demography by Christian Leuprecht¹⁶. This dilemma posits that the demographic patterns of minority ethnic groups are shaped by political, economic and social marginalization carried out by the majority. When these minorities are politically and economically suppressed as a result of perceived security threats, it can provoke an unexpected demographic response: an increase in fertility rates among the minority that is viewed by the dominant majority as a growing security risk, prompting a vicious cycle of further repression.

The birth rate in Rohingya refugee camps is high but it would be a mistake to infer from this that the group is demographically secure. Throughout the many years Rohingya refugees have spent in Bangladesh, the basic healthcare provided for children, and even the issuing of birth certificates, has been lacking.

Birth certificates are critical as part of the efforts preserve the right of return for the Rohingya, as are identity cards. By 2022 some progress had been made on this, with 38,830 births officially registered by Bangladeshi authorities¹⁷. However

NEXT and ABOVE: Supporters and monks from the hardline Buddhist group MaBaTha hold placards during a rally at the US embassy in Yangon. The ultra-nationalist group condemned the embassy's statement on the deaths of the Rohingya Muslim minority. AFP

many of the documents have been lost in fires¹⁸ or landslides within the camps¹⁹.

Such documents would help secure the future of the Rohingya in Myanmar should a resolution ever be reached for their safe and peaceful return to the country. But while they are a necessary condition for this they are not, on their own, sufficient. For the Rohingya to survive as an ethnic group, they must also be able to preserve their language, culture, skills and opportunities. Their diminished lives in camps do not allow for that.

EDUCATION, LITERACY AND OPPORTUNITY

Globally, refugee children are twice as likely to be out of school as other children. For the Rohingya, this disparity is even more pronounced. More than 326,000 Rohingya refugee children and youths in Cox's Bazar are in need of educational services, ranging from early childhood development to vocational training. Despite efforts by humanitarian agencies, about 83 percent of adolescents and youths have no access to educational or skills-development activities, a situation made worse by their displacement from Myanmar²⁰.

Humanitarian agencies have tried to provide informal education services in Cox's Bazar under the UNICEF-developed Guidelines for Informal Education Programming. However, only the initial levels of the guidelines



have been approved by the government of Bangladesh, leaving many young people without access to education.

Even if the higher levels of the guidelines were approved, the program faces other significant challenges including lack of certification, access barriers, inconsistent teaching quality and low enrollment rates among older children and youths.

These issues are compounded by the educational challenges faced by host communities, and exacerbated by the influx of refugees and hangovers from the COVID-19 pandemic²¹. Efforts to introduce the Myanmar curriculum to middle-grade students in Cox's Bazar were halted by pandemic lockdowns, for example.

There is a critical need to expand the provision of and access to quality, certified education services, as the current situation denies refugee children the basic right to education, increases risks regarding their protection, and limits their future opportunities. This breeds resentment and compounds the ethnodemographic issues, because even in a world in which they might one day be able to return to Myanmar, their qualifications would carry no weight there.

Conversely, the provision of certified education can positively affect host nations and help support the sustainable return of refugees when conditions improve.

One of the major challenges to the provision of education in Bangladesh is

ABOVE: Rohingya refugee children receive food donated by a representative of the Aceh Ulema Council (MPU) at a temporary shelter, after being forced out of their previous shelter by students in the latest persecution of this kind. AFP

NEXT: Rohingya children read and pray with religious books near their homes at the Baw Du Pha IDP camp in Sittwe, Rakhine State. Getty

limited and short-term funding. As of August 2020, the education sector was only 5 percent funded. The COVID-19 response plan in the country sought an additional \$2.5 million of funding but none was allocated because education services were classified as non-essential by the Bangladeshi government.

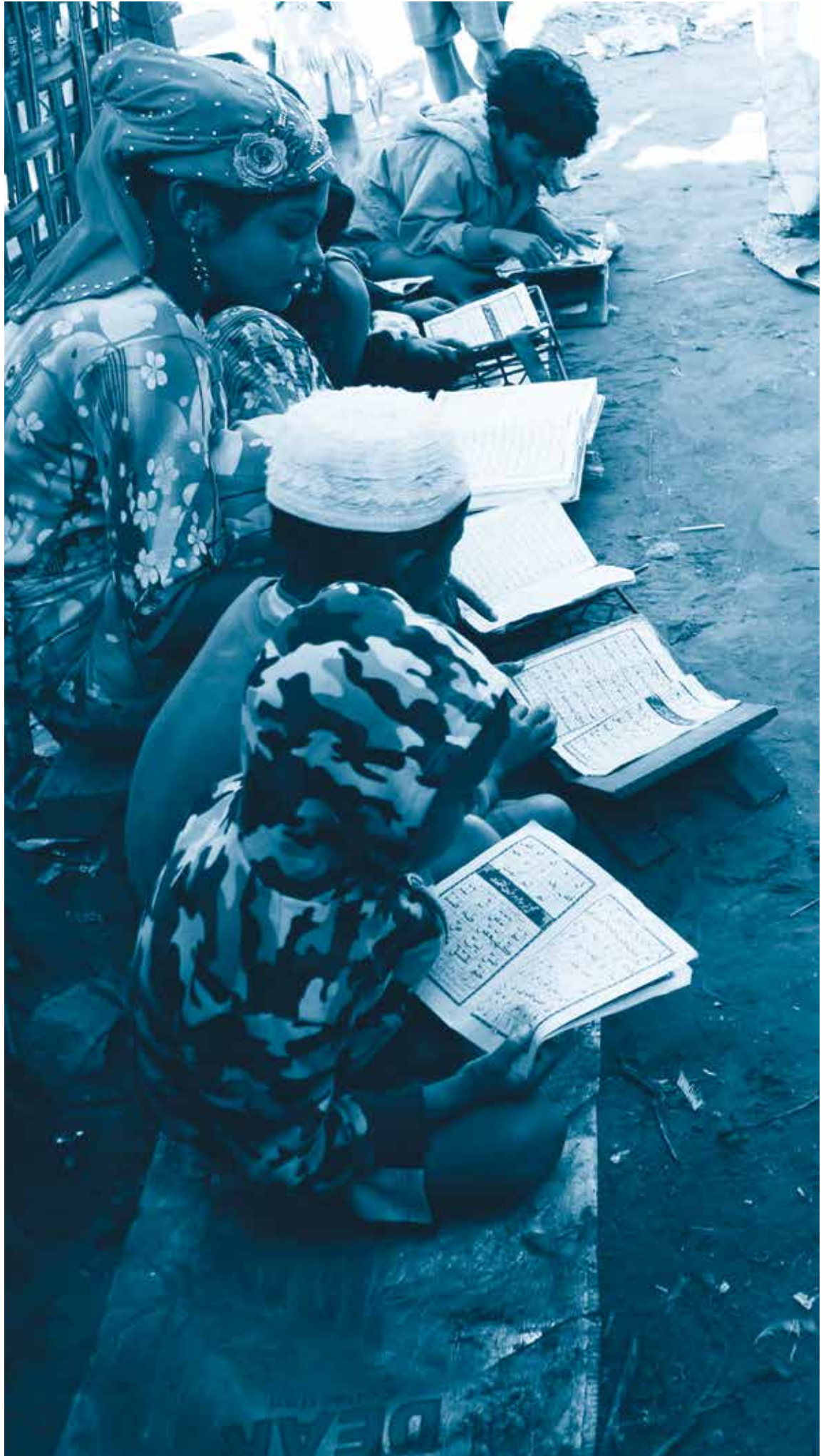
Short-term funding disrupts the continuity of education, as projects often run for less than a year and children are forced to drop out when funding ends. Only 36 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attended education programs consistently, and dropout rates for older children were higher.

Adolescents and youths have minimal educational opportunities because government restrictions have prevented access to vocational skills training since 2017, and cultural norms limit participation by girls²².

The quality of teaching in Cox's Bazar is also low. An International Rescue Committee study found there was no agreed-upon approach to basic teacher training or quality control. A shortage of qualified teachers results in overcrowded classes, and language barriers further hinder the effectiveness of teaching²³; most lessons are taught in Bengali, which itself presents significant challenges for the Rohingya in terms of maintaining their own linguistic culture. Teaching materials are often unavailable and there

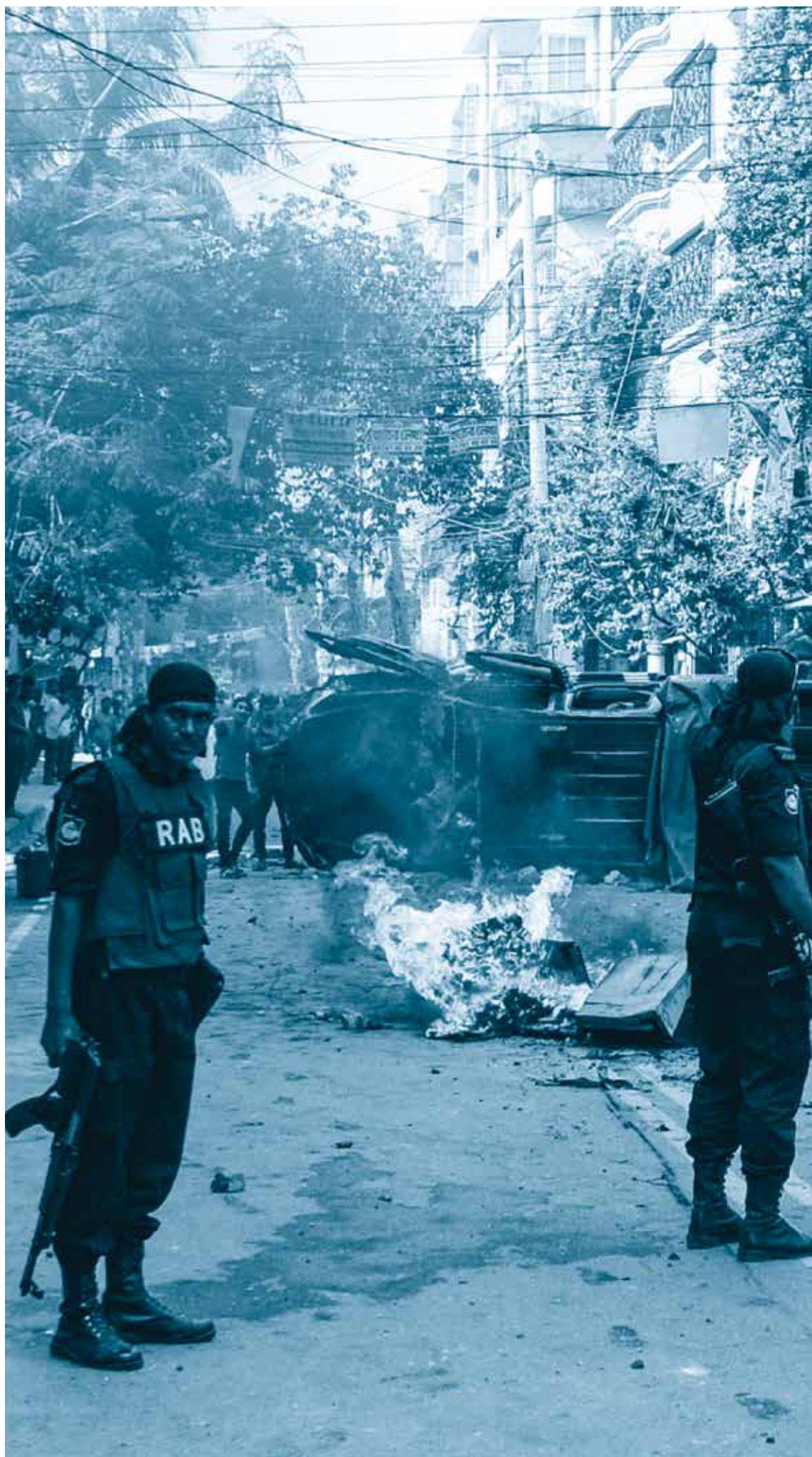


*The failure of
Myanmar's
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about state
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*Ethnographic
grievances,
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are no opportunities for secondary or tertiary education, limiting the scope for formal education reintegration²⁴.

Rohingya refugees at the Kutupalong Camp in Bangladesh additionally face the severe risk of forced conscription into the Myanmar military amid escalating tensions and activities by armed groups²⁵. School-age children are, unfortunately, not spared from this. Armed groups have intensified their efforts to recruit Rohingya boys, some as young as 14, to fight against the Buddhist separatists of the Arakan Army in Myanmar.

This situation, exacerbated by Myanmar's civil war since 2021, has led to widespread fear and unrest among the Rohingya community. Reports indicate that more than 1,000 Rohingya men have been abducted and forcibly recruited, with families facing beatings and arrests for non-compliance²⁶. The methods employed within the camps by armed groups include intimidation, threats and even arson, resulting in further insecurity and prompting mass exoduses to safer locations²⁷.

Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion has been accused of complicity in these activities, contributing to an atmosphere of fear and vulnerability in which refugees feel trapped in perilous conditions without adequate protections or recourse.

The gangs in the camps do, however, offer some degree of meaning, hierarchy and income in a world for refugees that lacks opportunities, employment and a clear

NEXT: Rapid Action Battalion personnel stand next to the wreckage of a police patrol car vandalized by stranded Bihari residents during a clash with security forces at Geneva Camp in Dhaka.
AFP

ABOVE: RAB members of the Bangladesh police baton-charge secular activists for protesting against alleged extrajudicial killings during the country's anti-drug drive, in Dhaka.
AFP

future. Their activities have filled a vacuum left by camp authorities and restrictive laws, and are making it even harder to resolve the problems. They feed the narrative that the Rohingya are “foreigners,” a problematic troublemaker population, driving them ever further from a potential reconciliation²⁸.

The result of all this has been the creation of a generation of Rohingya without even informal schooling in their own cultural pantheon. This “lost generation” cannot remember a time when the Rohingya lived in Rakhine State; it has lived in Bangladesh and learned in Bengali for as long as collective memory allows.

Collectively, the members of this generation do not have the opportunity to gain a proper education, find gainful employment, or express their culture outside of the environment of a refugee camp or gang violence. This points to the risk of the de-facto elimination of Rohingya culture within a generation. Nongovernmental organizations are belatedly waking up to this very real possibility.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The aid provided by these NGOs, whether food, shelter or medical care, affects the living conditions in the camps. These conditions can, in turn, influence birth rates, death rates and migration patterns.

Furthermore, advocacy work carried out



by NGOs can lead to policy changes that affect the demographics of the Rohingya population. In recent years, however, progress on this has largely stalled due to a hardening of Bangladesh's stance. In May, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said no more Rohingya, or anyone else from Myanmar, would be allowed to enter his country, following in the footsteps of Thailand and others who similarly restrict entry²⁹.

Legal issues and human-rights violations are linked intrinsically to demography. Policies that deny citizenship to a group or restrict their movement can result in forced migration, which alters the demographic composition of both origin and host regions. The denial of basic rights, such as the right to work or access to education, can also affect demographic factors, such as fertility rates and life expectancy but, as we have seen, not always in the ways we might expect.

The availability of healthcare in refugee camps and outbreaks of diseases remain a great concern. The population density of Cox's Bazar is up to 40 times that of Bangladesh as a whole, which is already one of the most densely populated countries on the planet.

NGOs have also investigated gender-specific issues, such as the ways in which sexual violence or differing access to resources can result in skewed gender ratios within the refugee population.

ABOVE and NEXT: Rohingya children are seen in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, crossed the border and took refuge in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Rohingyas seek support from the international community to return to their homeland. Getty

In the early stages of the crisis, for example, 80 percent of those who fled to Bangladesh were women and children³⁰.

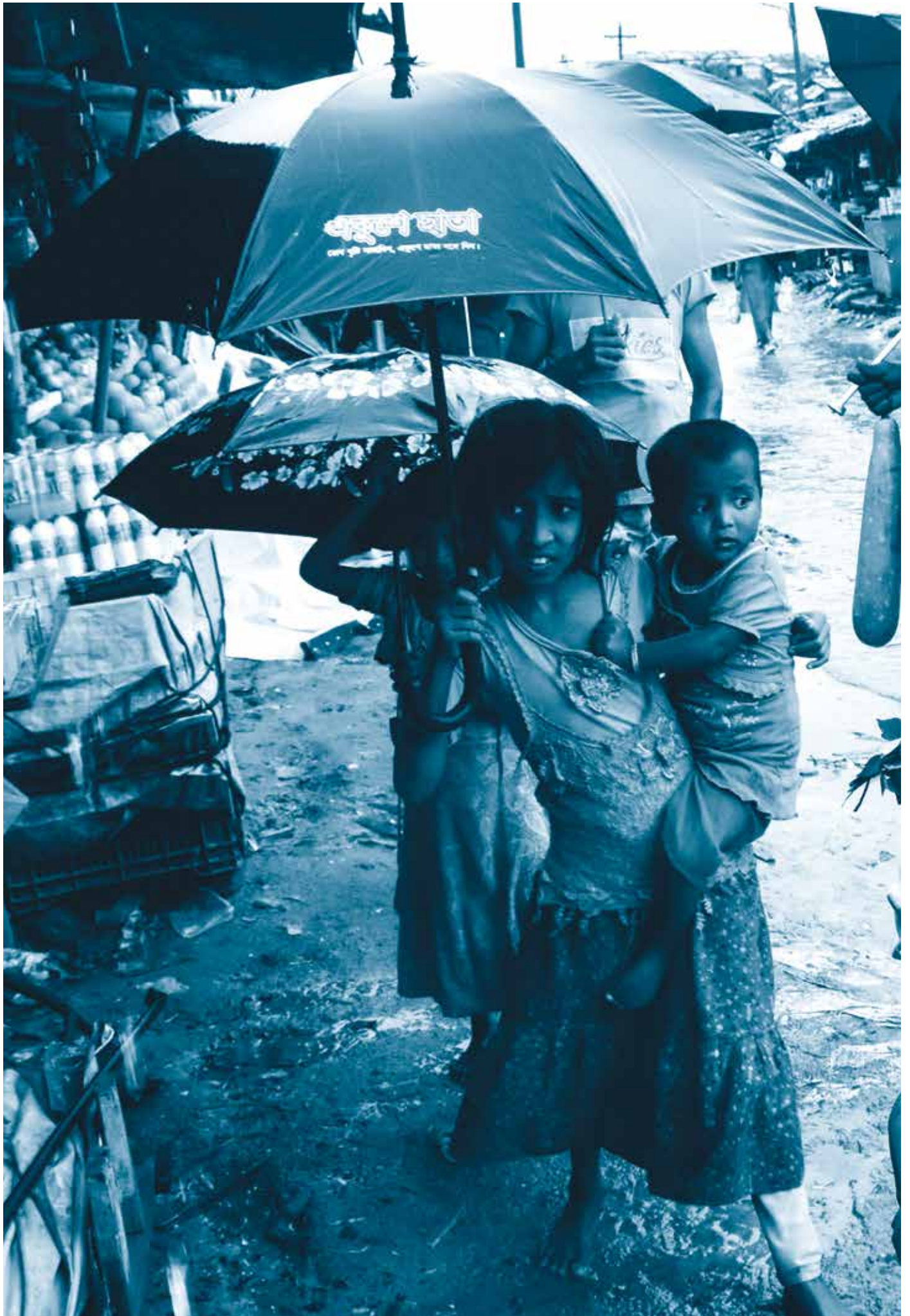
Without access to education, recognition, or a formal political representation to support the Rohingya's identity, needs, and aspirations, future solutions — such as repatriation or resettlement programs — have largely depended on humanitarian organizations from abroad and will likely continue to do so.

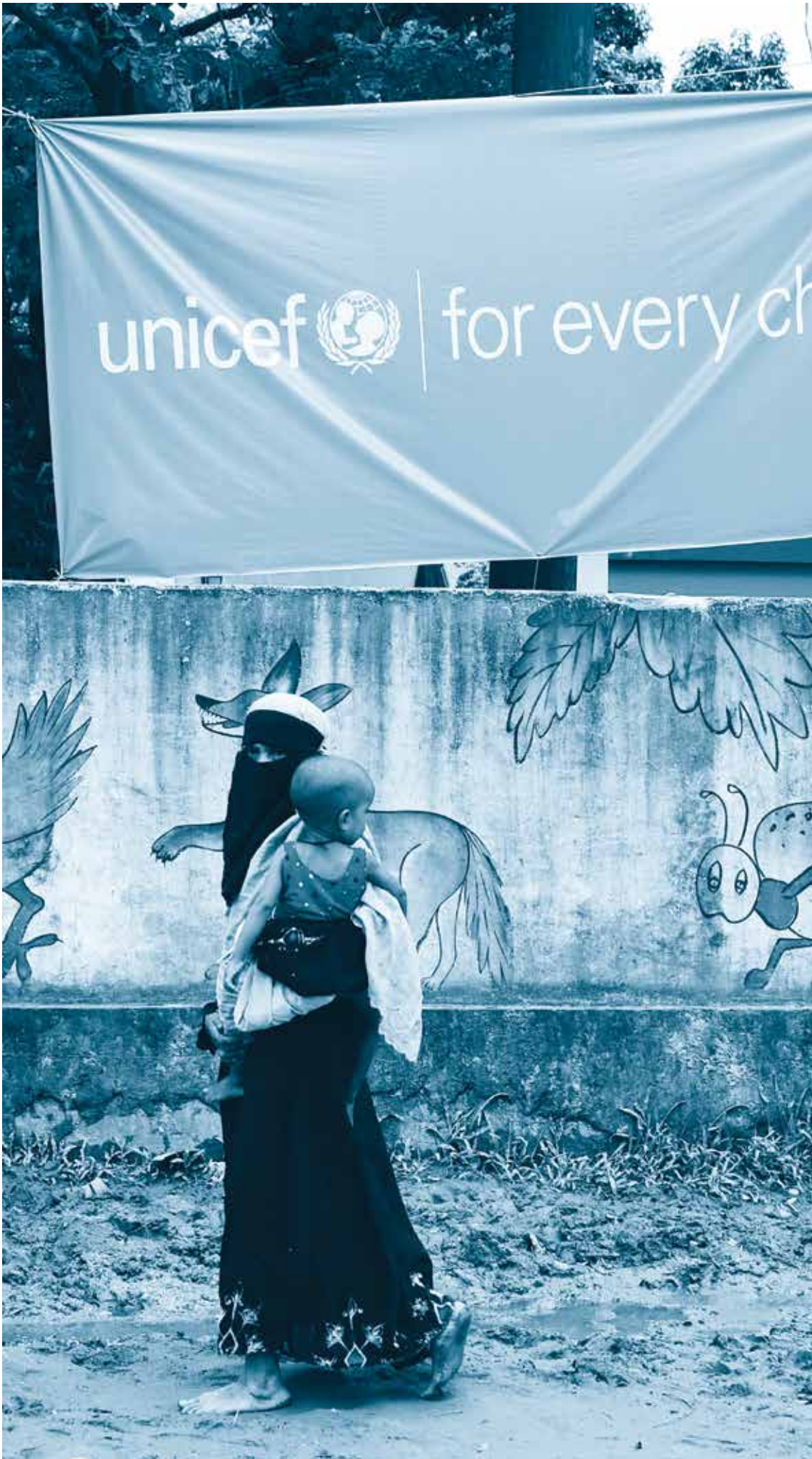
The National Unity Government is attempting to provide some degree of leadership from exile in the US. But it focuses mainly on the situation in Myanmar itself, and has faced accusations that it is too close to the pro-democracy forces, such as the Arakan Army, that were involved in the forced displacement of the Rohingya in the first place.

THE NEW GENERATION

As noted, the conditions in the refugee camps are clearly challenging. Overcrowding is a significant issue, with many families living in cramped and unsanitary conditions. The camps lack adequate infrastructure and services³¹, leading to issues such as lack of access to clean water, healthcare³² and education.

It is important to note that the Rohingya people nevertheless continue to show remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. They have formed communities within the camps,





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occasionally setting up well-functioning markets³³ and, in some cases, schools³⁴.

They have also found the space and resources for cultural and religious events, despite the cramped conditions and high levels of poverty. Such activities represent an attempt to create a sense of normality and maintain some semblance of social cohesion among the refugees. However, the sociocultural costs of camp life are high³⁵.

The rapid population growth in camps puts additional strain on already limited resources. It also, as previously noted, increases the risk of disease outbreaks and other public-health issues. Members of the “lost generation” face unique challenges that threaten not only their cultural identity but their psychological well-being.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

One of the most significant challenges the new generation faces is the loss of the connection with its culture and history. Growing up in refugee camps, these children have limited exposure to their cultural heritage. The harsh conditions are anathema to the traditional sociocentric Rohingya culture. An egocentric or individualistic society has been blamed for causing additional distress and psychological alienation for adults and children.

Preventing the loss of cultural identity is not only a matter of the need to preserve traditions and customs, it

NEXT: Rohingya refugee woman walks with her child past the UNICEF office at the refugee camp of Kutupalong near in Ukhiya, Bangladesh. AFP

ABOVE: Arakan Army troops stand in front of armoured vehicles after seizing Paletwa, one of the westernmost towns of Myanmar. AA Info Desk

also has profound implications for the psychological well-being of Rohingya children. Cultural identity provides a sense of belonging and self-esteem, which are crucial for good mental health. The loss of cultural identity can lead to feelings of alienation and confusion, contributing to psychological distress³⁶.

The harsh conditions in the refugee camps further exacerbate these psychological challenges. Many Rohingya children grow up in extreme poverty, with limited access to basic necessities, without any aspirations for the future. They witness the daily struggles of their families and communities, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Studies reveal a high incidence of mental-health issues among children, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and insomnia³⁷. However, beyond simply medicalizing their plight, it is crucial to understand the psychosocial challenges they face through the concept of “social suffering³⁸,” which stems from a complex mix of social, political, environmental and geographical factors³⁹. This means also taking into consideration damaged social identity, continual trauma, human rights violations and social injustices, rather than only the physical aspects of their suffering.

Psychologists refer to this effect of socioeconomic denigration as “minority stress⁴⁰.” As Nivetida Sudheer and Debanjan Banerjee point out in their paper on



the issue, there is a gap in the research where NGOs and the media focus only on PTSD and other acute mental-health issues while overlooking the long-term social damage caused by the destruction and humiliation of families and the wider ethnic group. These continuing grievances will not easily disappear with time.

ETHNOGRAPHIC GRIEVANCES

The Rohingya crisis has given rise to a multitude of ethnographic grievances. These stem from the harsh realities of life in refugee camps and the broader sociopolitical context of the crisis. They appear in demographic surveys as mental health concerns, but also in the ways in which they drive extremism, frustration and violence.

Many Rohingya children are growing up as beggars, a reality with severe implications for their psychological well-being. Their constant struggle for survival, a lack of opportunities for personal growth and development, and the stigma associated with begging can lead to feelings of despair, shame and low self-esteem. The psychological effects of these experiences must not be underestimated.

And the Rohingya are well aware of the brutal trauma to which they have been subjected. They recognize the loss of their human potential, and community pride, as a significant ethnographic grievance, exacerbated by their

ABOVE: Rohingya refugees look through the debris of their houses charred by a fire at the Ukhiya camp in Cox's Bazar. AFP

NEXT: Children at a refugee camp. The absence of formal and non-formal education for Rohingya children in refugee camps has a significant impact on their ability to become an active member of society. Getty

treatment as a “subhuman” people⁴¹.

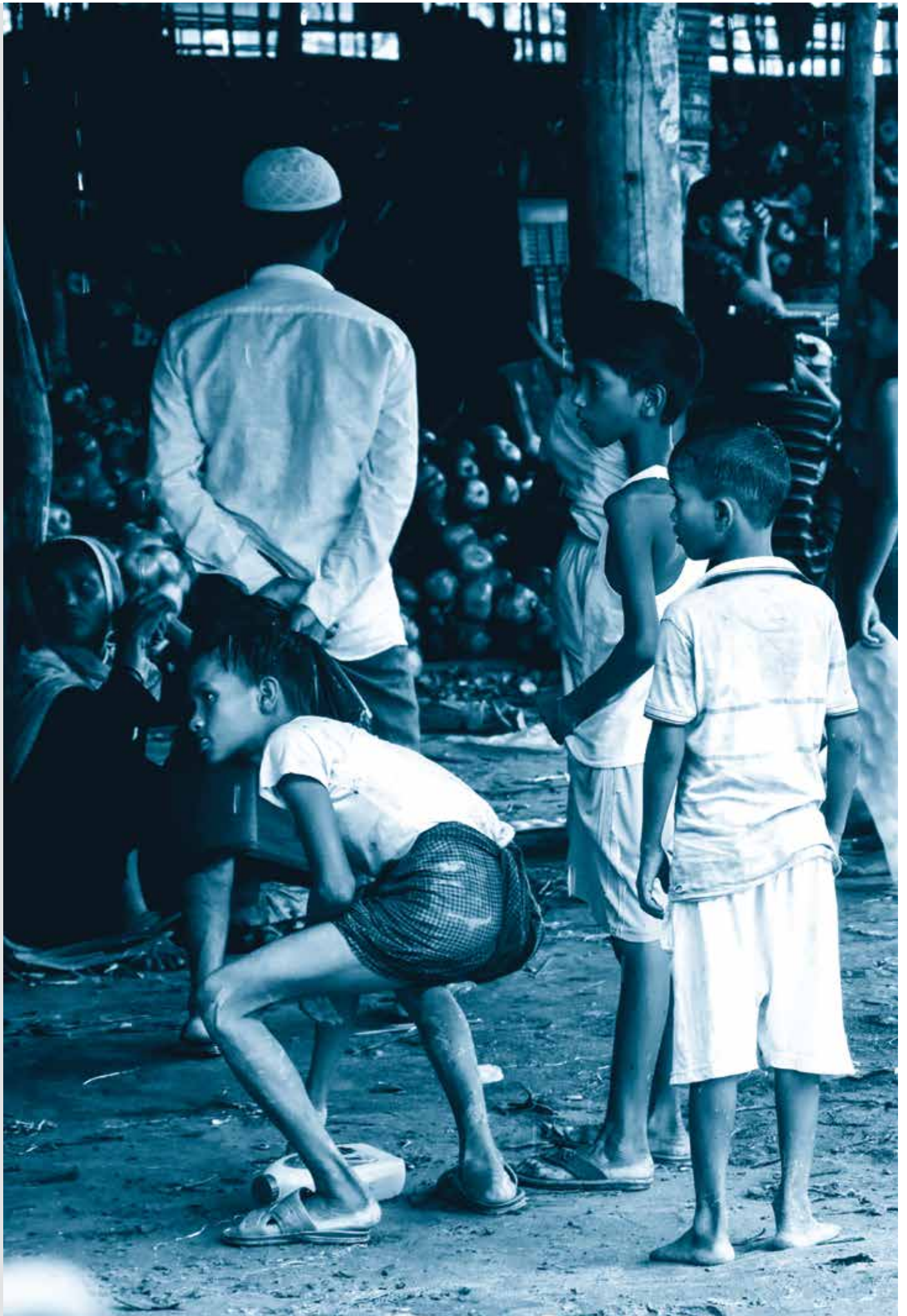
More than half of Rohingya refugees are under the age of 18⁴². In a similar way to how they are attracted to the allure of gangs in camps, young people, particularly the males, are vulnerable to radicalization, which is defined as the acquisition of beliefs and attitudes that justify the use of violence^{43 44}.

Ethnographic grievances, left unaddressed, perpetuate existing violent conflict and fuel future instability, especially in environments such as refugee camps where family structures have been eroded or destroyed by forced displacement⁴⁵. The trauma experienced by children has long-term implications for their mental health and development, highlighting the need for child-focused interventions and support systems⁴⁶.

The use of demography to keep track of feelings of collective anger and, conversely, to understand how demographic fears can drive that collective anger, is therefore key to any solution to the problem. In other words, solving ethnographic grievances can bring about positive downstream social changes.

Some scholars of collective anger point to the rise of the Arakan Army as a force for shifting the context; its inclusive vision for Rakhine State, embracing all ethnic and religious groups, created space for constructive engagement.

Recent studies highlight the positive





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potential of collective anger in peace-building efforts. When anger-inducing stimuli are followed by constructive action, anger can drive meaningful change. Costas Laoutides, an associate professor in international relations at Deakin University in Australia, points to a post-2018 trend toward greater cooperation and a transition toward “violence-reducing behavior” between Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists.

The Arakan Army exemplifies this potential through its focus on the “Arakan Dream” and non-aggressive approaches. It claims not to attack the Rohingya and has sought to adopt inclusive rhetoric, in an apparent attempt to signal a departure from hatred. However, arson attacks targeting the Rohingya in May 2024 in Maungdaw townships seem to have taken place while the Arakan Army was in control of villages. The fog of war prevents any detailed analysis of these events so soon but clearly, sustained efforts are necessary to build trust and address deep-rooted grievances.

Understanding the interplay of context, emotions and collective action remains essential for efforts to resolve intractable conflicts such as the Rohingya crisis⁴⁷. It also reveals that solving the headline issue of ensuring the Rohingya can return to their homeland is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to end to the persecution and strife.

JUSTICE AND GENOCIDE

The question of demography and demographic survival in the context of refugees is always likely to invoke

NEXT: Rohingya Muslim children at Pan Taw Pyin village in Maungdaw, northern Rakhine State, where frequent clashes between the army and Muslim insurgents have sparked a refugee crisis, with millions of Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh. AFP

ABOVE: Rohingya refugee children carry food donated by a representative of the MPU at a temporary shelter in a government building in Banda Aceh. AFP

the language of genocide. The brutal genocide perpetrated by the government of Myanmar is no exception.

From a legal standpoint, this crisis involves grave violations of human rights and international law. The systematic targeting of the Rohingya population through mass killings, sexual violence and forced displacements constitutes crimes against humanity.

The failure of Myanmar’s government to prevent or address these atrocities raises questions about state responsibility and accountability, both for those directly involved in the military government and those who were part of the civilian government under Aung San Suu Kyi.

The international community has called for justice for the Rohingya but achieving this remains a complex challenge due to political dynamics, lack of cooperation and the absence of an effective legal framework to hold perpetrators accountable.

In cases of genocide, restorative and punitive justice look very similar from the perspective of the victims. Seeing their persecutors stand trial and face punishment is its own form of restoration. It recognizes and defines their experience by its proper name and provides them with an opportunity to share that experience and confront the perpetrators⁴⁸.

By fully involving victims in the process, restorative justice acknowledges their suffering and empowers them to reclaim agency. Moreover, it contributes to the process of overcoming collective



anger and extremism, and reinforces the collective commitment to the prevention of future atrocities⁴⁹.

Referring to a genocide as a genocide also helps to prepare policymakers and demographers for the challenge that lies ahead: in this case, recognizing that the continued existence of the Rohingya as a culturally and linguistically distinct group with a homeland is in peril.

CONCLUSION

The critical role of demographic factors in both the genesis and perpetuation of this crisis illustrates the ways in which demographic fears and policies have driven the suffering of the Rohingya people over the past four decades. Understanding of these factors is not just an academic requirement, it is an essential step in formulating effective, durable solutions.

The ongoing genocide of the Rohingya is not limited to mass killings and other acts of physical violence, it extends to cultural erasure and forced assimilation. The deliberate imposition of conditions designed to destroy the Rohingya identity — denying them access to education in their own language, restricting their movement and confining them to refugee camps — constitutes a demographic assault designed to eradicate their existence as a distinct ethnic group. This understanding broadens the conventional perspective on the genocide; justice for the Rohingya is not only about a return to their homeland, it is about assuaging demographic fears and securing a future for Rohingya culture.

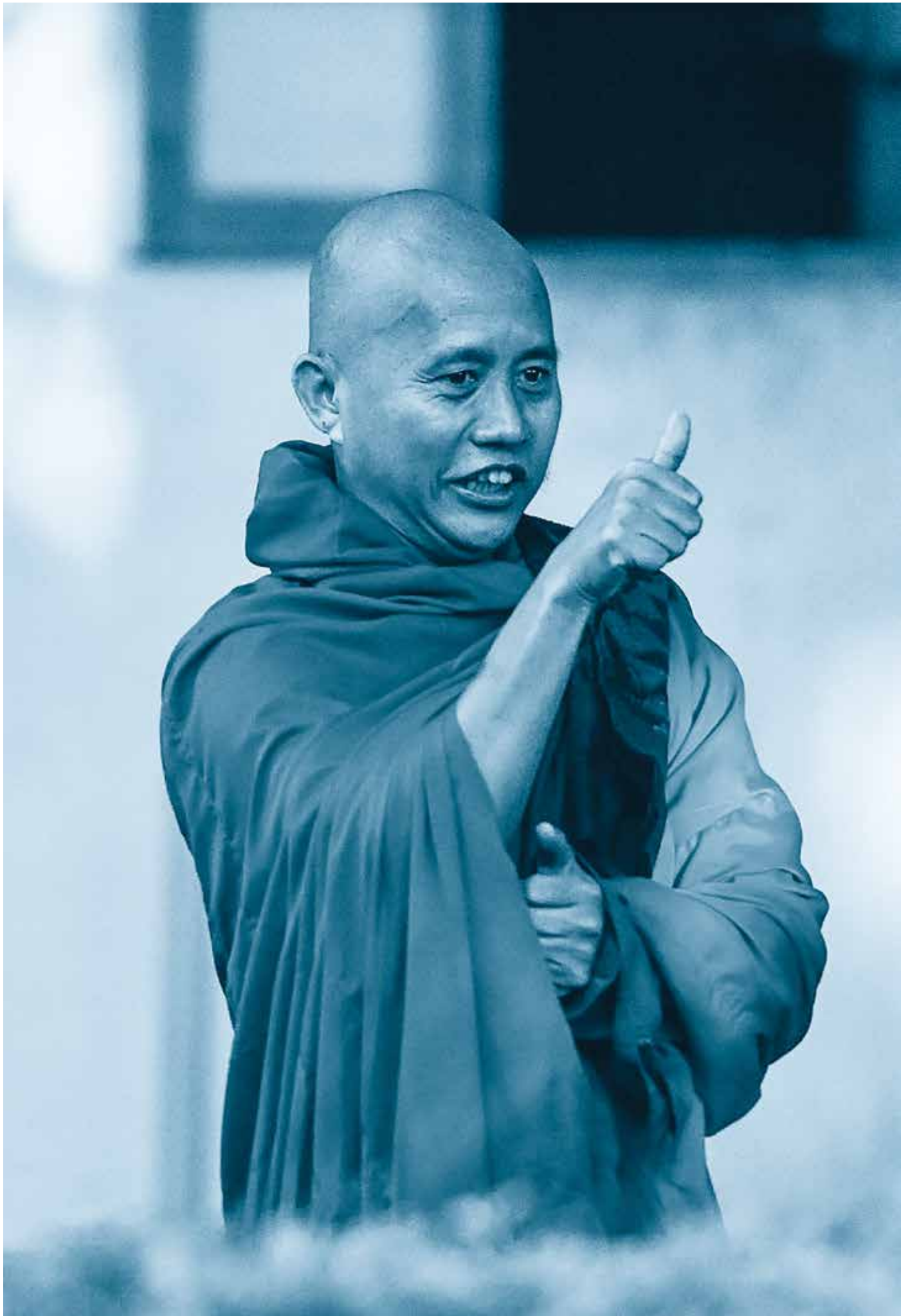
The demographic dynamics driving the Rohingya crisis are complex and deeply

ABOVE: Nationalist Buddhist monks hold posters with the image of detained monk Ashin Wirathu during a demonstration in Yangon. AFP

NEXT: Hardline Buddhist monk Wirathu gestures to his followers before turning himself in at a Yangon police station in 2020. AFP

rooted in historical and sociopolitical contexts, including the post-colonial legacy. The intercommunal conflict in Myanmar, exacerbated by extremist Buddhist nationalism and a militarized state apparatus, has been a significant factor in the displacement of the Rohingya. The fears of being “outbred” or overwhelmed by the Muslim minority fueled policies of exclusion and violence even during the decades of relative peace before the full-scale displacement began in earnest in 2017. Although some movements have started to use more inclusive rhetoric, the results of this so far have not been convincing.

The current situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the dire conditions in the refugee camps at Cox’s Bazar, present severe challenges and are causing long-term damage to the Rohingya and their social and economic capacities. Recent escalations in violence, forced conscriptions, and the strategic use of ethnic tensions by both sides point to an insecure future in both countries. The humanitarian crisis in the camps, marked by overcrowding, inadequate healthcare and limited educational opportunities, has created a “lost generation” of Rohingya children, deprived of their cultural heritage and with nothing to tie them to their past — or guide them to a better future. Formal recognition of the genocide will allow these issues to be brought more sharply into focus but scholars and policymakers must acknowledge that there is a good chance that Rohingya culture is already in severe decline. So far, ineffective international action has allowed this attempted ethnic cleansing to succeed.



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