Anatomy of Rohingya crisis

Both institutionally discriminated and denied basic human rights in a legally-sanctioned manner as well as removed from the mainstream, over a million Rohingyas have no land they can call home.

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What is Rohingya Issue?

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- Rohingya Muslims in **Myanmar's Rakhine state**, neighbouring Bangladesh, are not recognised by the Myanmar government as an official ethnic group and are therefore denied citizenship.
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- Most Rohingyas are not qualified to be citizens of Myanmar as per the **1982 Citizenship Law**, which was promulgated by the erstwhile military junta.
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- While it is claimed that there were no Rohingyas in Myanmar before the British brought 'Bengalis' to Burma, there is sufficient evidence to show that the Rohingyas pre-existed the British-engineered migration (during the British occupation of the Arakan State in 1823) from present-day Bangladesh to Burma.
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- Even those who arrived in Burma post-1823 could not go back to Bangladesh now given that they have no citizenship claims there. This effectively makes them a stateless people.
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- A large number of those escaping the brutal violence end up in the well-oiled trafficking networks of the region who smuggle them out for huge amounts of money. Some die en route, some make it to the borders of neighbouring countries only to be turned away: hordes, including little children, often get stranded at sea.
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- What makes the anti-Rohingya violence in Myanmar even more distressing is that all of this is now happening under the stewardship of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous and inspiring "non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights".
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How Aung San Suu Kyi responds?

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- Clearly, Ms. Suu Kyi's precarious political position makes it hard for her to respond to the crisis as effectively as she could have.
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- Despite the return of democracy in 2015, the military continues to have a strong hold over the civilian government in Myanmar, especially on key issues such as defence, border affairs and home affairs.
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- **The country's constitution also reserves one-fourth of the seats in Parliament for the military.**
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- And though Ms. Suu Kyi's party is in power, she herself is barred from becoming the country's president (she holds the post of State Counsellor) since her children are British citizens. Under such circumstances, her ability to take on the powerful military establishment remains limited.
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- She is clearly floundering in her attempts to reconcile the political utility of Myanmar's quasi-democracy, which is a result of her decades-long struggle, and the moral question of the Rohingyas' human rights.
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- In August last year, Ms. Suu Kyi formed an advisory commission on Rakhine State under the chairmanship of Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations.
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- However, the commission, which "has been founded as a neutral and impartial body which aims to propose concrete measures for improving the welfare of all people in Rakhine state", seems to be an advisory body for development and reconciliation rather than one that can objectively investigate violence committed against the Rohingya community.
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What are the geostrategic considerations?

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- The Western world is busy with the unfolding of events in Syria and the resultant refugee crisis.
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- Hence they would not want to get bogged down with the Rohingyas, whose plight has no direct bearing on the West's interests.
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- Having steadfastly invested in the pro-democracy movement led by Ms. Suu Kyi, and by recently lifting the 20-year-long sanctions against Myanmar, the U.S. finds itself in no position to bargain or put pressure on the country.
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- The UN has also proven to be powerless on the Rohingya question, as it has been on most questions lately.
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- In May 2015, when the UN Security Council held a closed-door briefing on the human rights situation in Myanmar, China made it clear that it was an internal matter of Myanmar.
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- For Beijing, its relationship with Myanmar's Generals is important to gain access to the country's natural resources, and recruiting Myanmar for **China's larger economic goals** which include opening a land corridor to the Bay of Bengal.
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- India, a traditional home for Myanmar's pro-democracy activists, has been reluctant to either speak out about the violence against the Rohingyas or accommodate them in significant numbers.
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- Beijing's closeness to Myanmar clearly worries New Delhi. Its reluctance also comes from the fact that Myanmar's assistance is seen as significant in dealing with the insurgency in the Northeast. In any case, the **Rohingyas are of no strategic value to anyone**.
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How India responds?

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- New Delhi's record of accommodating the Rohingyas is manifestly better than that of Beijing as it has accepted thousands of Rohingyas over the past many years.
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- Yet, this policy may already be undergoing some changes, slowly but steadily. Today, many Rohingyas are either turned away while trying to enter the country or sent to jail for illegal entry.
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- Recall that India has not signed the **1951 United Nations Refugee**

Convention or its 1967 Protocol which require countries to accept refugees.
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- The Bharatiya Janata Party's Jammu and Kashmir unit has also demanded that Rohingya refugees from Jammu be sent away. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has called them a security threat. Now let's read it with the BJP government's controversial proposal to amend the country's citizenship laws.
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- The new bill, **the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016,** proposes that Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis and Christians entering India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan not be considered as "illegal immigrants". While the proposed amendment is technically 'pro-minority', it certainly is **anti-Muslim.**
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What sort of diplomacy India needs to follow?

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- Although New Delhi's reluctance to speak out publicly about the violations against the Rohingyas is understandable, it can ill afford to ignore the crisis in Myanmar.
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- Even if human rights considerations are the least of New Delhi's worries, it is clearly in its interest to ensure that stability and peace return to the Rakhine state.
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- When peace returns to Myanmar, India can ask the latter to rehabilitate the Rohingyas (like it did vis-à-vis East Pakistan refugees after the 1971 war).
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- A stable and democratic Myanmar will naturally gravitate towards New Delhi.
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- The Rohingya crisis, if it remains unsettled, can become a path toward radicalisation and pose **a greater security threat** for India.
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- There are reports of increasing radicalisation among sections of the Rohingya community. A December 2016 report by the International Crisis Group spoke precisely about this challenge and highlighted how rights violations can lead to radicalisation.
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- New Delhi should use creative diplomacy to persuade Myanmar to resolve

the Rohingya crisis.
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- It should perhaps consider appointing a **special envoy** for this purpose who should hold tactful negotiations with Myanmar’s military, Ms. Suu Kyi, Dhaka and Beijing in order to bring an end to the crisis.
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