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Ethnic cleansing in Myanmar No place like home

The Rohingyas need the help of the Burmese government, Aung San Suu Kyi and the outside world

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THE political transformation in Myanmar this past year or more has so far seemed one of history's more remarkable revolutions. It has seemed, indeed, to be a revolution without losers. The army, which brutalised the country for half a century, remains influential and unpunished. Political prisoners have been freed by the hundreds. The opposition and its heroine, Aung San Suu Kyi, have successfully entered mainstream politics. What had seemed a purely ornamental parliament is showing it has a function (see [article \(http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565636-derided-not-long-ago-gutsy-parliament-now-challenging-president-power-grab\)](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565636-derided-not-long-ago-gutsy-parliament-now-challenging-president-power-grab)). Foreign countries that shunned the dictatorship, hemming it in with sanctions, can exploit Myanmar's untapped

market and treasure-house of natural resources.

One group, however, has lost, and lost terribly. Around 1m members of the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority remain in Myanmar's impoverished western state of Rakhine. They are survivors of relentless rounds of persecution that have created a diaspora around the world that is perhaps twice as big. As *The Economist* went to press, more than 100 boat people, mostly Rohingyas, were missing in the Bay of Bengal. They were fleeing hideous peril at home in Myanmar. Members of the ethnic-Rakhine majority, who are mostly Buddhist, have seen the greater liberties the country now enjoys as the freedom to resume persecution. Members of both ethnic groups are guilty of abuses in the violence that flared in June and again in October (see [Banyan \(http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565638-why-buddhists-and-muslims-rakhine-state-myanmar-are-each-others%E2%80%99-throats-unforgiving\)](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565638-why-buddhists-and-muslims-rakhine-state-myanmar-are-each-others%E2%80%99-throats-unforgiving)). But its main contours are clear: a vicious and bloody campaign of ethnic cleansing by the Rakhines that is intended to drive Rohingyas out. Rakhine politicians say frankly that the only alternative to mass deportation is a Burmese form of apartheid, in which more Rohingyas are corralled into squalid, semi-permanent internal-refugee camps. Most Rohingyas have lived in Myanmar for generations—at least since British colonial days. But Rakhines and other Burmese citizens see them all as fairly recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Dozens have died, thousands of homes have been destroyed and tens of thousands of people have been displaced. This must stop, not just because it is a cruel injustice but also because it threatens reforms and even the future of Myanmar itself. The violence offers an excuse to those hardliners who have always equated democracy with anarchy, fearing that, without the army's firm hand, Myanmar's borderlands, all inhabited by disgruntled ethnic minorities, would descend into bloodletting.

In fact, for once, the army really does need to be firmer—but in stopping violence, detaining perpetrators, and helping Rohingyas

survive the unofficial commercial boycott that is leaving many hungry and thirsty. Parliament and the government, for their part, need to revise the Citizenship Act of 1982, which has been used as the tool to render most Rohingyas stateless. Rohingyas with a good claim to citizenship should have it. And their claims should be examined generously: it is not easy to prove your lineage when everything you have has been reduced to ashes.

Responsibility to protect

Citizenship is not enough, however. Leaders need to speak out in the Rohingyas' defence. The one person in Myanmar with genuine moral authority, Miss Suu Kyi, has confined herself to calling for respect for the rule of law.

When the law is unjust and unfairly applied—as it long was against her—that is a betrayal of the high moral principles she has always espoused.

Elsewhere, Bangladesh must accommodate fleeing Rohingyas. The West has tended to regard the Rohingyas' plight as a peripheral problem that should not deflect it from lifting sanctions and engaging with the new Myanmar. Yet it should make clear that ethnic cleansing on this scale is central to its concerns. The test of a fledgling democracy is not just how it cares for the majority, but how it protects its minorities.

from the print edition | Leaders

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