

Nawadir (Nosa) Ali
 Des Moines Roosevelt High School
 Des Moines, Iowa
 Myanmar (Burma), Factor 15: Human Rights

Human rights:

When most people are asked, “What are your human rights?” they would state something along the lines of, “The right to live how a person wants” or “be free and happy.” Some would also say depending on where a person lives and how much they are valued; they either gain or lose rights. The true universal definition of human rights is “rights to which everyone is entitled regardless of where they live or who they are.” Human rights are much broader than just being able to live, be free, and happy. It includes choice and opportunity; a person’s ability to decide on a job, career, and wage. It is without a doubt that people’s rights are infringed upon on a daily basis in every part of the world and that the goal for universal human rights is still more of a dream than a reality, especially in underdeveloped countries like Myanmar (Burma).

Myanmar (Burma):

In isolation from the rest of the world, Myanmar, also known as Burma is located in Southeast Asia and is populated with 48.7 million people (UN, 2012). Agriculture is the most dominant industry running the economy in Myanmar. It includes crop production, hunting, fishing, and forestry. This industry is responsible for about 60% of GDP income and 65% of the labor force. The most dominant crop produced is rice, which is a staple in the people’s diets. Teak, beans, pulses, and opiates are also other dominant crops. The crops are cultivated along river valleys, coastal areas, and other river areas. The farmers greatly depend on the monsoon, but sometimes it either brings too much rain or too little rain. Although the citizens control production, they have no control over the market and distribution of what they produce (Oxford Myanmar Alliance, 2014).

Life in Myanmar:

Although Myanmar is quite well known for its agricultural practices in the world economy, the people of Myanmar continue to suffer from hunger and poverty. A third of rural households do not have access to basic land, but about half of Myanmar’s 45 million acre of arable land is uncultivated which leaves many of its people hungry. So how can Myanmar be one of the leading agricultural countries but have its people suffer from poverty and hunger? The Myanmar government violates its peoples’ rights in various ways but one major issue is the complete control over agricultural practices. Instead of feeding its people, the government would rather export almost all of its products and make profit. This issue can no longer be ignored and needs to be addressed.

In Myanmar a typical rural household is considerably large and usually consist of three generations of a family living in a poorly constructed bamboo house with no running water or electricity (UKCO, 2005). A household can include grandparents, aunts and uncles, and relatives as distant as seventh cousins. Burmese children do not move out until marriage; most even continue to live with their parents after marriage (UKCO, 2005). A typical family needs about 7-10 acres or 15-10 acres of poor quality land to be able to sustain a minimal standard of living (USAID, 2012)

Education is highly respected in Myanmar, but the quality is very low considering it is strongly centered on memorization and recitation. Education is only enforced for five years and after that a great majority of children dropout (Oxford Myanmar Alliance, 2014). Schools are poorly equipped, and materials are often outdated. Although primary education in Myanmar is free, families hesitate to send their children to school because of high school fees that amount to about 100 US dollars. (Oxford Myanmar Alliance, 2014) This greatly affects poor rural families because they not only have to pay for school fees but also for transportation fees they cannot afford. There are also other discrimination factors that affect school

attendance such as ethnic conflicts and gender inequality. Girls are the least likely to be sent to schools because families greatly depend on their support at home or on the farms.

The majority of Burmese people live in rural areas, which means access to healthcare and hospitals is very limited. For that reason, Burmese families greatly depend on home remedies as their source of treatment. Health care is also very limited because the government roughly spends about 2% of its GDP on health care. Doctors are also in very short supply. Due to ineffective health care the infant mortality rate in Myanmar is 41% and the life expectancy is 65 (UNICEF, 2012).

Bei Ra Tha, a sophomore at Roosevelt high school describes his life in Myanmar as being a life of struggle and hardships. He states that growing up his life was completely different in comparison to a typical child. For most of his life Tha and his brothers were sent to live far away on a corn farm their grandpa managed. They worked at the farm year, after year, never attending school but looking for an opportunity to send money back to support the family or buy gifts for their only return back on holidays. Age didn't matter at the farm. The young, mature, and elderly all worked together chopping down acres of land and carrying all the produce on their backs during harvesting season.

Effects of Human Rights Violations:

In Myanmar alone, there are 135 different ethnic groups. Within these groups are eight major minority groups that do not identify themselves as Burmese. These include Karen, Chin, Arakhan, Karenni, Mon, Shan, Kachin, and the Rohingya who are actually denied the right to identify themselves as citizens of Myanmar (UKCO, 2005). These groups grasp a strong hold to their identity and easily become offended when being referred to as another group. So how exactly did these ethnically and culturally diverse groups come to live in the same area? Myanmar was a colony of the British Empire who forced several independent groups together into one nation. After the British departed in 1948, major civil wars broke out as independent groups sought to claim a piece of the unclaimed land. With no clear group or leader to rule, the military took control and created a hierarchal government. The government does not take into consideration the various ethnic groups in the country but instead imposes laws that feed into the conflict. Those who try to protest are often brutally tortured, forced into labor, or killed by execution (UKCO). The major issue is not about the ethnic conflicts but about the oppression of the Burmese people by the government who constantly violates their human rights—specifically the Rohingya people. The Rohingya ethnic group is amongst the most adversely affected of all the groups and is considered to be the most prosecuted minority group in the world (The Economists, 2015). This group represents the Muslim population in Myanmar. The government along with anti-Rohingyas, hold belief that the Rohingyas are illegal Bengali immigrants and therefore have no rights to citizenship. Even if the Rohingyas may be considered illegal immigrants of Myanmar, they have no place to get deported to since they have been residing in Myanmar for several generations and have no relations with other nations. The Rohingyas, amongst other groups, have been denied various rights including the right to vote, hold leadership positions in jobs, or run for government offices. They have never been considered citizens and to this day are not recognized as one of the 135 indigenous ethnic groups. The government has not made any efforts in reaching out to the Rohingya but instead has come out strongly against any policy that would accommodate the Rohingyas.

Other violations include land confiscations, arbitrary arrests, forced labor, child labor, torture, human trafficking, rape and sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, and ethnic cleansing. The refugees escaping persecution flee to nearby countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, or Bangladesh. The Rohingyas that manage to escape often live in terrible living conditions such as in shipping containers on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital (The economists 2015). Thousands have managed to escape this year with more than 100,000 believed to already be living in Malaysia, a country full of Islamic culture. Since 2012 alone, 140,000 Rohingyas were forced to live in dirty unsanitary refugee camps. Although the living conditions are beyond bearable, they are better off than the cruel treatments faced within Myanmar. Excluding the millions that have been killed and displaced from their homes

in the past couple of decades, hundreds of thousands of Burmese people have been killed and more than two million have been displaced (Genocide Watch, 2012).

Human rights violations are currently causing many devastating issues in Myanmar and are leading to an ongoing civil war. This war torn nation has very limited access to aid and food and it's once plentiful and resourceful land has become a mass graveyard. The government has shifted to taking even more residential land and continues to benefit from it through foreign investment while the people work and cultivate it under terrible working conditions. The Burmese people most likely never benefit from anything they produce. The government exports it and makes major profits. Since agriculture is the most important economic driver and farming is a dominant form of employment, the people directly feel the effects of human rights violations when the government continues to seize land, remove residents off the land, and violate the people's rights. Besides the fact that productivity greatly decreases, there are basically much fewer people working and producing crops than before causing a major decrease in market ready produce. The decrease in agricultural production eventually affects food security by limiting the amount of food available for the population. This is a direct result of ethnic cleansing and other violations that eventually lead to death, imprisonment, and mass emigration to nearby countries.

Attempts to solve issue:

Several attempts since the end of British rule have been made to stabilize as well as democratize the country of Myanmar. One attempt was made at the National Convention, which set up the military as the central power and aimed to unionize the different ethnic groups. As result of the convention, Myanmar was divided into seven states and seven divisions-each occupied by an ethnic group. The major problem that has not been addressed to this day and which has been one of the leading causes of conflict was deciding what form of government to set up. Myanmar would have either been introduced to a direct democracy, where the majority would make decisions, or indirect democracy where representatives are elected by citizens to make decisions. Neither of these policies were implemented because military hierarchy and ethnic Burmese are split against a great majority of other ethnic nationalities who also represent a large majority of the population.

Not only is there a barrier in decision making within the Burmese citizens, but the Military also lacks meritocracy, which is defined by the encyclopedia as "a system of government based on rule by ability (merit) rather than by wealth or social position. Instead structure rule is based on cronyism- the appointment of friends and associates to positions of authority, without proper regard to their qualifications but rather on favoritism (Encyclopedia of the Nations). This system hurts Myanmar and it citizens more than it helps. In this way brain draining is promoted, as fewer intellectual Burmese citizens and farmers are willing to stay and help progress their country since very few opportunities are provided. Human rights groups have warned that if the situation in Myanmar is not addressed, mass atrocities and even genocide will take more Rohingya lives than ever before. With little to no assistance from the government, refugees will continue to flee in thousands on unsafe boats putting their lives even more in danger for a small taste of freedom. Along with the government, local citizens and popular organizations are unwilling to help better the living situation of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. They fear that support for the unpopularity of the Muslim ethnic group could potential also damage their image. This view is also shared by many politicians in Myanmar.

Also outside of Myanmar, very few people and organizations are willing to deal with the issue. Usually when refugees are admitted into surrounding countries, a refugee card is required in order to keep track of the number of refugees entering while also monitoring for unwelcomed visitors. Many of the Rohingyas entering countries like Malaysia do not have a refugee card or a single proper document to secure their safety. Doctors like Zafar Ahmad who was also once a Rohingya refugee seeking asylum have dedicated most of their practices to not only providing medical care to Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar but also towards providing proper documentation to lessen the refugees' chances of getting deported back (The Economist,

2015). Although these letters cannot forever protect the refugees' lives, they are what are keeping them alive until refugee cards can be granted.

Other Major Issues:

Deforestation is also another major issue that is one of the factors that are leading to more human rights violations. As stated by Tha, about 1.65 acres were cut down by government workers almost every day. Burmese people greatly depend on these rainforest for not only shelter but also for medical remedies and food sources. With increased deforestation Burmese people will have fewer and fewer options on where to live as the majority of land is being turned into commercial farms by the government.

Pollution is also an ongoing problem in Myanmar. In recent years the air pollution has been 60% over the recommend maximum by the World Health Organization (Myanmar Times, 2012). The increasing pollution is mainly due to an increase in automobiles and also in increase in deforestation. Myanmar's streets were once flourishing with various types of trees but over time streets sides have become very polluted and treeless. This is a human rights issues because it is greatly effecting the health of the Burmese people, but the government does not enforce very many policies to insure that the environment is not extremely polluted.

First (Long Term) Solution:

The most effective solution to this problem would be to have the UN intercede and monitor/regulate refugee camps while investigating the crimes occurring against the minority groups. There also must be a policy that will promote integration, an environment of peaceful coexistence, and the ability for all minorities to obtain equal protection under the law. The UN also has the power to grant refugee status cards for those seeking asylum. As stated earlier the refugee cards and papers are often the first priority for Rohingya refugees. Obtaining one is quite difficult and can often take years. Asylum seekers do not have the time to wait so immediate possession of the card is crucial. Other than the receiving country, the UN refugee agency is the only other organization that has the ability to grant refugees these cards. The card provides protection from deportation and even traffickers. Cardholders also enjoy some limited freedom such as the ability to receive medical care (The Economists, 2015).

Human rights organizations would also like to see a constitutional change for Myanmar. Opposition leader and once political prisoner, Aung San Suu Kyi, calls for a dramatic change in the constitution along with president Barack Obama (RFA, 2014). The conversation for a constitutional change is nothing new, but needs more attention drawn to it like before. It will more than definitely help towards eliminating the social prejudice between the minority groups and the human rights violations caused by the government.

Second (Short Term) Solution:

A short term solution that is as effective in granting back some independence for the Burmese people is helping purchase back the land that once belonged to local farmers since ultimately all land is owned by the government (military). Developing a new policy or implementing a new constitution may be a bit of a stretch for a start but repurchasing back land from the government will give the citizens the support and financial stability to help regain their complete independence and human rights.

This can be done by having the UN and/or other powerful organizations support the development of a written land policy on land use and require that the majority of land be given back to its citizens whether it be free or by purchase. The Burmese government states that they already have a land use policy implemented, however it is not written in their constitution or stated clearly in any state documents, and therefore is not enforced. The UN and other potential donors would help provide technical, legal, and other forms of support for the foundation and implementation of this land policy.

By giving the Burmese citizens their land back, it takes away a great majority of power from the central government and also gives responsibilities back to the citizens. The UN and other organizations obviously cannot implement these policies alone. They depend on the corporation and support of the citizens as well. That means the citizens need to leave all conflicts aside, unite, and use their votes wisely in all elections and voting opportunities.

Recommendations:

Short-term recommendations that could also be effective include the startup of independent community gardens and farmers markets to promote and showcase the hard work of the Burmese people. Opening these gardens requires very minimal cost and is a great form of employment for the unemployed. The resources that are needed include small pieces of land and gardening tools, which can be provided by funding organizations such as the American Community Garden Association in Myanmar. Myanmar has access to various types of plants so obtaining seeds and plants for the gardens would not be an issue. The produce grown in these gardens can also be sold to the citizens- providing them with cheap healthy food. The start up of these gardens can even be promoted at refugee camps where Rohingyas and other prosecuted groups reside.

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