

Myanmar's forgotten people

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The Rohingyas have a history which dates back to the beginning of the 7th century when Arab Muslim traders settled in Arakan (Rakhine).

They were recognised as an indigenous ethnic group by the U Nu government during the parliamentary era in the 1950s but lost their political and constitutional identity when the military government of General Ne Win promulgated the Citizenship Act of Burma in 1983. This effectively denied the Rohingyas recognition of their status as an ethnic minority group. Harsh discrimination against them soon followed.

The military junta maintains a clearly articulated stance on the Rohingya people. In a press release issued by the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of Myanmar on 26 February 1992, the government declared: "In actual fact, although there are [135] national races living in Myanmar today, the so-called Rohingya people is not one of them. Historically, there has never been a 'Rohingya' race in Myanmar."

In response to criticisms from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 2004, the junta stated that it had granted full and equal treatment to the Rohingyas, as with other races, in matters relating to birth and death registration, education, health and social affairs. Moreover, the junta also mentioned that the Rohingyas are listed as a Bengali racial group and recognised as permanent residents of Myanmar.

However, in practice, the rights of the Rohingya population

remain greatly restricted. The presence of UNHCR and some other international NGOs in northern Rakhine State can help ameliorate the current plight of the Rohingyas but without political will from within the Myanmar military government, their plight cannot be resolved.

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