

Pathway to peaceful resolution in Myanmar's Rakhine State

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Loud nationalistic voices and powerful vested interests stand in the way of cooperation between the Rakhine and Muslim communities and solving displacement.

In 2012 communal violence erupted between Rakhine State's Muslim and Buddhist populations. The Muslims – known as 'Rohingya' – bore the worst of the conflict and continue to bear the brunt of the consequences. The ensuing 'solution' has involved actively separating Muslim and Buddhist communities and severely limiting Muslim rights. An estimated 140,000 people, mostly Muslims, remain in internally displaced people's (IDP) camps or trapped in the Aung Mingalar quarter of the state capital, Sittwe. As their lives have become increasingly fragile, marginal and insecure, many have taken to the Bay of Bengal in rickety boats in an effort to migrate. Life for the state's Buddhist majority is also far from

rosy. Rakhine State is the second poorest in Myanmar with a poverty rate of 78%, almost twice Myanmar's national average.

The ethnic conflict appears to have reached a stalemate but there is widespread uncertainty about what is likely to happen next. Reducing ethnic tensions and preventing communal conflict are crucial to ensuring a better future for all the residents of Rakhine State, including the reduction of further displacement of Muslims and the potential for ending their internal displacement.

When undertaking research in poor and urban communities in the north of the state in 2015, we had expected to find two communities wanting little or nothing to do with each other and having little or no respect

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UNHCR staff visit villagers living in makeshift shelters after their homes were burnt down in inter-communal violence in Kyauk Tauw township, north of Sittwe, Rakhine state, Myanmar, 2012.

for one another. What we found, however, was people ready to consider putting aside their prejudices and fears of the other.

There was, at times, among the Rakhine a naivety about the Muslims' plight and maybe a willful blindness to the systematic marginalisation of Muslims but, far from displaying an aggressive anti-Muslim attitude, the overwhelming majority of urban and rural Rakhine expressed a cautious desire to live peacefully with their Muslim neighbours whom they were willing to see granted human rights and opportunities for greater integration – in the right circumstances. They wanted to see the laws applied transparently and without corruption and for the Muslim community to demonstrate a commitment to the responsibilities of citizenship. But official recognition of the name 'Rohingya' they see as a political claim which they cannot accede to.

The peaceful and conciliatory tone of the Rohingyas' responses in turn surprised us. Those in the IDP camps were keen to talk about the specific injustices they have suffered but after that they were ready to talk about peaceful solutions and reintegration.

A common theme throughout was that the government and military should be seen

as those most responsible for the conflict of 2012, having permitted, if not instigated, the extreme nationalism that fuelled the violence. A widespread opinion was that Rakhine nationalism was being used rather than it being a primary driver of the conflict. Each community we spoke with expressed the view that the problem was caused more by the state than

by either the Rakhine or the Muslims.

The Rakhine and Muslim communities each suggested the government's aim was to distract them from the appropriation of the region's gas and other resource revenues by the state. And since they each see the government as having fuelled the crisis, they each believe the government has the power to fix the issue whenever it is willing to address it. Optimism about the potential for Myanmar's new government to address long-standing local grievances was shared by both the Rakhine and the Rohingya Muslims.

The Muslims want to return to their former lives in the community, they want peaceful relations with their neighbours, and they want to have their rights recognised, granted and respected. They believe the government can easily address their situation if there is the necessary political will and leadership.

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