

**BOOK REVIEW OF ROHINGYA SURVIVORS: REGIONAL SECURITY
IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE BY ZARINA OTHMAN,
MAHBUL ALHAQUE AND BAKRI MAT, NILAI, UNIVERSITI SAINS
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Based on extensive research conducted by lecturers from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the University of Songkhla, Thailand and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), this book captures the plight of the Rohingya (whom they describe as “forgotten survivors”), which has attracted attention from a significant segment of the international community in general, and from within Southeast Asia in particular. Countries in the region, especially Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, are concerned about the issues facing the Rohingya, particularly due to the influx of refugees. The local refugee situation reached its climax in late 2016, as seen in the massive arrival of Rohingya which drew nationwide attention, coupled with the Malaysian government’s criticisms of Myanmar’s government over its harsh treatment of this minority Muslim group which created some tensions between the two countries. At the same time, it raised a considerable amount of awareness among NGOs and members of the public alike regarding the suffering of the Rohingya, especially the atrocities committed against women and girls (who became victims of gang rape and other forms of sexual violence) perpetrated by Myanmar’s military. The book begins with discussions on security concepts, including human security, thus providing an essential framework within which to situate the Rohingya as a group collectively deprived of security. Human security, as its authors note, encompasses freedom from want, fear and other threats to human survival, daily life, and dignity. All these elements are lacking in the daily conditions of the Rohingya within Myanmar.

Their focus is on the victims of military atrocities. Their collective fate became a

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subject of great concern for the international community especially after October 2016's violent encounters between Myanmar's authorities and the Rohingya community in Rakhine state, which began after attacks by some Rohingya Muslims on the border police and other law enforcement authorities in the Maungdaw township. In response, the military and police had a pretext to launch a massive crackdown on the civilian population, accompanied by "unprecedented violence, committing serious human rights violations against the civilian minority living in the Rakhine State". As a result of the four-month military operations in its north, an estimated 70,000 Rohingya fled the country, mainly to Bangladesh. Thousands died and disappeared during the process. This wave of violence also prompted criticism from the international community, which demanded urgent actions to stop the violence, but not much has been done with regard to this issue.

The plight of victims of rape and sexual violence in these operations is especially highlighted in Chapter Two. The research took the authors to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where they gained first-hand knowledge of these conditions through interviews with rape survivors, Rohingya community leaders, human rights activists and humanitarian aid agencies. The results are presented as case studies in Chapter Three, which is essentially an account of young rape victims recounting their experiences. Their main objective is to "alert readers and open the eyes of all parties, create awareness and provoke a response to address this crisis immediately", further highlighted in Chapter Four, which is accompanied by explanations of the factors leading to the harsh treatment of the Rohingya by Myanmar's authorities. The authors suggest that the Rohingya are "ethnically closer to the Bangladeshi Muslims", and that they are now *de jure* stateless within Myanmar, although their exact identity was not questioned before the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law (which deprived the Rohingya of their rights to citizenship). Accounts by victims of the 2016 operation point to the abuse of girls and women by the military. Returning to their vulnerability, in some villages, there were no Rohingya men around to protect them, thus allowing the military to take advantage by raping and assaulting them as a form of "punishment". Besides this sexual violence, the military also looted their properties, seizing gold and other valuable possessions.

The authors also bring into view the massive human rights violations conducted by the Myanmar government through its security agencies, while denying entry to the northern part of Rakhine State by international fact-finding missions. According to the authors, the National League for Democracy civilian government failed to take any effective measures to stop the violence, although several investigative commissions meant to address the issue were formed. Aung San Suu Kyi, formerly the *de facto* head of government until the recent coup, denied that any ethnic cleansing of Myanmar's Muslim minority was taking place, even while agreeing that investigations into the allegations against the army should be held, since it was "not free to rape, pillage and torture". The authors also briefly mention the non-refoulement principle (i.e., one of the principal elements of international refugee law) which would protect Rohingya refugees from being sent back to Myanmar, out of concern that by doing so, their lives could be placed at risk.

Chapter Five attempts to relate their suffering to regional security, beginning with a brief description of Myanmar's foreign policy and its relationship with countries such as Malaysia, China, and the United States (US). While there is not much insight into how such relationships affect Myanmar's policy on the Rohingya, it does explain how refugees (i.e., the Rohingya) inadvertently pose security threats to host countries (e.g., Bangladesh and some Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] member states), albeit only briefly. A more meaningful discussion would have resulted from highlighting how these threats may take shape, which would have given readers a better understanding of how their respective host countries behaved and responded, and why they did so. The authors also mention ASEAN's failure to collectively address the Rohingya crisis and its refusal to intervene. As far as the role of major powers in putting effective pressure on the government of Myanmar to change its policy is concerned, the authors rightly note that not much has been done—and that there is also not much that they can do due to the geopolitical and economic interests of these states in maintaining their support for the regime, among others.

In conclusion, the issues surrounding the Rohingya, and their treatment are not new, and a lot has been written about it. Regardless, the contribution of this book lies principally in its extensive research and first-hand information, meant to affirm the truth about their suffering and subsequent fate as refugees, as well as highlighting the use of rape as a weapon in conflict or war. Despite pressure from the international community, it has not been successful at changing the actions of the Myanmar government. As to the authors' intentions of relating this issue to regional security, they have successfully done so, albeit not too directly. This discussion could perhaps have been more succinct had it been articulated within a human security framework, within which the authors could have amply described the concept (perhaps in Chapter One). Nevertheless, this well-researched book remains a valuable contribution to the literature and for those who want to know more about the suffering of and systematic discrimination against the Rohingya.