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Myanmar, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

Persecution and Malnutrition of the Rohingya People of Myanmar

In the tropical land of stunning pagodas, a glaring issue affects Myanmar- its weak food security. Despite being a resource-rich country, Myanmar remains one of the least developed nations in the Southeast Asian region and has a high poverty rate (ScalPELLI). In fact, Myanmar is one of 24 countries identified as “high-burden” with chronic malnutrition (Sherwell). The malnutrition has a detrimental effect on Myanmar and the Rohingya people who live there. They, however, are systematically persecuted by the Myanmar government. While as a whole the food security situation is improving, the malnutrition among the Rohingya has not and will not improve anytime soon.

The typical Burmese family consists of 2 parents and an average of 2.4 children (“The Population”). The literacy rate of Myanmar is about 93% for males and 87% for females, however, Myanmar has a weak education system that is poorly funded (“Education”). Only 5 years of school are mandatory and over half of students drop out before secondary education (“Education”). Healthcare is poorly funded in Myanmar too. For those who manage to get access to healthcare, the quality is often poor (Latt, et al). The diet of the average Burmese citizen consists of white rice, fish, and vegetables (ScalPELLI). Due to particularly heavy reliance on white rice, much of the population lacks the vital nutrients from dairy, fruit and meat products (ScalPELLI). This means much of the population lacks the necessary vitamins, minerals, and protein that they need to live. The dietary issues have been attributed to a few problems. People in impoverished areas often grow rice for a living, eating that and any vegetable they can grow or afford, resulting in an undiverse diet failing to meet calorie requirements.

Poverty is the main cause of the malnourishment in Myanmar, as a result of economic stagnation under the military which has ruled since 1962. (Sherwell) The nationalized economy had suffered from mismanagement compounded with decades of sanctions from Western countries. While the military has been easing its rule and promoting economic liberalization in recent years, the situation is still not ideal (“Burma: US”). Natural disasters, such as cyclones, have destroyed key crops which in turn results in higher prices for food (ScalPELLI). Poor farmers are also dependent on successful yields to be able to eat and make money (ScalPELLI).

The malnourishment has detrimental effects on the population. Around 35% of children under five have stunted growth directly related to malnutrition (ScalPELLI). Stunted growth has been found to cause digestive track disorders which affect the body’s extraction of nutrients from food. This compounds the effects into the child’s adult life with health problems and other issues (“Impact”). Malnourishment, particularly among young women, can cause increased rates of birth defects and malnourishment in their children (ScalPELLI). This factor alone can have an estimated cost of 11% of the GDP in economic value (ScalPELLI). Additionally, malnutrition in a child’s formative years can impair their cognitive abilities, hurting their ability to break away from their cycle of poverty (Wright). These complications divert health resources which could be spent on other issues (Wright). Most importantly, malnutrition has the potential to lead to death. 45% of child deaths in Myanmar are caused by inadequate nutrition (Sherwell).

Due to the seriousness of the problem, the Myanmar government and various relief organizations have been scrambling to solve the malnutrition problem. Many NGOs have food programs in which they provide the local population with nutrient-rich meals, yet these programs are massively underfunded and fail to afford enough meals and education services about the importance of proper nourishment (Scapelli). Education plays a key role in these programs as many Burmese citizens don't understand malnutrition, selling the nutrient-rich meals for extra money (Scapelli). Similarly, attempts to fortify rice with nutrients currently lacks the funding to become effective and is not a long-term fix (Scapelli). Programs to provide wider crop variety are currently small-scale and often are lacking in the nutrient areas which are of priority (Scapelli). The Myanmar government, seeing the problem, has also increased its attempts to rid the country of malnutrition. It has set up the LIFT program to provide relief to areas with high poverty and malnutrition (Sherwell). This program was successful in helping some in the Rakhine state after a cyclone in 2010. Myanmar has also, in early February 2017, announced its first initiative against malnutrition. This large scale initiative which is funded by the Myanmar and British governments bolsters and expands the current LIFT program (Sherwell). The goal is to end child malnutrition in Myanmar. By 2050. While the program is promising, funding is prohibited from going to the worst hit by malnutrition - Rohingya people.

The Rohingya people are an ethnic group within Myanmar who live within the Rakhine state and are the group most affected by malnourishment ("Burma: US"). Approximately 1.1 million Rohingya people live in Myanmar mostly near the Bangladeshi border. While Myanmar is a majority Buddhist nation, the Rohingya people are predominately Muslim. They also are of Bengali ethnicity unlike other ethnic groups in Myanmar ("Burma: US"). In efforts to marginalize them, the military has periodically conducted raids on villages and instituted discriminatory laws within Myanmar, such as denying Rohingya people citizenship (Wright). Raids are often retaliatory for attacks from resistance group who are angry with the government due to the lack of rights. Much of the Rohingya are poor and suffer severe malnourishment from this discrimination. Over 50% of Rohingya children have stunted growth from malnutrition and are, by far, the most affected by malnutrition within Myanmar (Scapelli). To contrast that, they are also the least helped by the Myanmar government Due to recent escalation of raids by the military, aid to certain parts of Rakhine have been cut off while many people fled over the border to Bangladesh (Wright). Bangladesh has not helped much and is planning to move the overcrowded refugee camps to a recently formed island Thengar Char, which submerges underwater during the wet season (Sattar). This is an attempt to keep refugees out of tourist areas. Many refugees are likely to return to Myanmar, regardless of the circumstances if this relocation plan goes ahead. Some refugees have also tried their chances by floating on rafts in the Indian Ocean hoping to reach Malaysia and other countries in that region. The military is still harassing the people according to refugees. An accurate assessment of current hostilities can't be made because the military has restricted the area. Humanitarian aid groups are hampered or prevented from reaching the area. Without action, the situation could be catastrophic to the Rohingya people with little hope for improvement.

To help the Rohingya people, a solution would first need to address the issues of the conflict then help address other issues such as living in an area prone to natural disasters and poverty. Understanding Myanmar's bureaucratic structure is key in understanding the conflict. The military has made recent efforts to promote more democracy within the government to try to appease other countries in the world.

Appeasing the foreign governments would bring more economic prosperity, which the country lacked under tighter military rule. Despite the transition to a more democratic government, the military still exerts a control on the government. 25% of parliamentary seats are held by the military. This is significant in constitutional matters where more than 75% support is required to make changes to a constitution the military has drafted. The constitution is what bars Rohingya people from obtaining full citizenship and from receiving assistance from the government. Within the executive branch, the military is in charge of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Border Affairs, and Ministry of Home Affairs. This means the military can carry out its will without control from a higher authority. Myanmar's Supreme Court of the Union is also stacked with pro-military justices from the previous military administration. Most importantly the military has the power to coup at any time, like was done during their initial rise to power in 1962. Some democracy does exist within the government. After reforms in 2011, the National League for Democracy (NLD), the largest pro-democracy party in Myanmar, decided to participate in elections. They won majorities in the Burmese parliament and won the presidency. With the limited power, the NLD hasn't been able to do much and has had to stay silent on the potential human rights abuses by the military. Due to viewing the Rohingya people as Bangladeshi migrants, many in the country, especially others from Rakhine, have negative views of the Rohingya, complicating the problem ("Unforgiving").

With internal changes unlikely, solving the conflict will likely require foreign pressure and help from non-governmental organizations. Similarly to prompting the democratization, the military is receptive to international pressure especially involving economic sanctions ("Burma:"). The removal of US sanctions on Myanmar in 2015 and 2016 was seen as a victory for the government. In addition, reimposing sanctions would likely target the military regime's assets specifically. Using pressure from threatening sanctions will likely yield success and be key in shaping Myanmar's quasi-democracy (Kipgen).

Another issue will be the dealing with the Myanmar refugees in Bangladesh. Many of the refugees express interest in going back home if the situation were to be stable or safe. A solution would likely need to involve resettling the refugees back in Myanmar or find a long-term solution to the refugees in foreign countries. Resettlement would likely take time and improved infrastructure to rebuild villages that have been destroyed. It also requires stabilizing the conflict first or face resistance from the refugees. Building long-term refugee facilities in foreign countries would be tough since most countries would oppose them.

To enforce the opening of northern Rakhine to humanitarian groups and resettle refugees, foreign powers could arrange a treaty with Myanmar which could solve the problem. A treaty requiring that the Myanmar provide access to some key humanitarian groups in northern Rakhine and not conduct any more "clearance operations" in the region in return a foreign power such as the US, EU, or China or a group such as the UN could provide financial and logistical support for Myanmar's current malnutrition initiative. By helping with the malnutrition initiative in Myanmar, the foreign power wouldn't be perceived as biased towards Rohingya by local residents. Additionally, sanctions could be also imposed if the treaty is broken providing incentives for the Myanmar military to follow the treaty. The treaty ratification would also bypass many of the military-controlled institutions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs whose job would be to negotiate the treaty is controlled by the NLD. The actual ratification only requires a simple majority of Myanmar's parliament and the approval of the president.

A possible option to prevent military raids against the Rohingya people would be to resettle them across Myanmar specifically into safer areas. A redistribution of the population would be met with fierce resistance from Buddhists. By including other foreign governments who are willing to put aid towards the malnutrition program or including Bangladesh to straighten out the resettlement of refugees, the treaty would be strengthened, and the treaty would become multilateral in nature. While the difference between multilateral and bilateral is usually negligible, Myanmar's Supreme Court of the Union has special powers regarding bilateral treaties which it lacks for multilateral treaties. While such a treaty is unlikely to be able to grant citizenship to the Rohingya people or require the government to include Rohingya people under its malnutrition initiative, the treaty would be able to provide a framework for humanitarian groups to be able to step in and stabilize in the area. Then, humanitarian groups could begin the resettlement efforts for the refugees.

The treaty would be a successful short-term solution, however it does lack important steps to solving the issue at its roots such as giving citizenship to the Rohingya people and the military's control on the government. While the military might disapprove of such a treaty, they will likely not end the "Path to Democratization" that they are currently headed down. Similarly to enforce compliance with the treaty, fear of sanctions and international pressure will ensure that they don't change its course. Additionally, information about the extent of the persecution can help generate public pressure on the military. Finding a strong foreign country or entity that would be willing to participate in the treaty is one of the weak points to the treaty solution. While China's strong economic ties would provide stronger leverage than other countries, these ties also would discourage China from threatening sanctions. The current administration in the US have stated their opposition to expanding foreign aid which would be required for the treaty. The European Union has other issues which are currently at the forefront of their attention such as the large influx of migrants. The treaty's success would depend on one of these governing bodies to overcome their aversion to funding this initiative. With no other options, the Rohingya people, stateless, persecuted, and malnourished, would be given a glimmer of hope by a successful treaty.

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