

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How do groups who are victimized by crimes against humanity respond to these injustices?
- What impacts does mass migration have on regions where persecution and ethnic cleansing take place?
- What role can individual citizens in the United States play in supporting humanitarian efforts to address refugee crises?

Overview

In this activity, students review the meaning of the terms “persecution” and “ethnic cleansing,” brainstorm examples of actions taken by groups who are threatened by these injustices, and consider the impact mass migration and refugee crises have on regions where persecution and ethnic cleansing take place. Students then analyze secondary sources and USC Shoah Foundation testimonies to document key events in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and learn about efforts by international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and individual countries to address global refugee crises. Finally, students develop action plans for supporting international relief efforts to help refugees.

Target Audience

Middle School Social Studies

Activity Duration

Two class periods, 45–60 minutes each

Enduring Understandings

- A common response of groups threatened by crimes against humanity is mass migration, resulting in refugee crises.
- The experience of the Rohingya people in Myanmar provides a case study on how refugee crises compound the humanitarian costs of human rights abuses.
- International organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and individual governments provide humanitarian aid to address global refugee crises. Individual citizens in the United States can make a difference by supporting these efforts.

Handouts

- Definitions of “persecute” and “ethnic cleansing” to display
- Myanmar/Burma Country Profile graphic organizer
- Cause-Event-Effect Chart
- The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Testimony Notetaking Guide (one per testimony, totaling five per student or group)
- Study and Home Group Relief Effort Profile and Relief Profile Summaries guides
- [“8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees”](#) article
- How We Can Help: Evaluating Citizen Actions guide
- Planning Student Action to Help Refugees guide

Background Information/Links

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a South Asian country bordered by Bangladesh and India to the northwest, China to the north and northeast, Laos and Thailand to the east, and the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal to the south and southwest. Although nearly 90% of Myanmar’s population is Buddhist, several minority ethnic groups maintain independent armies and control territory within the country. One such ethnic minority group, the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, live primarily in the country’s western Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh in the north.

Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims share a language and culture that is distinct from those of the country’s Burmese majority. Many claim to have first settled in Rakhine centuries ago when Muslim traders passed through on the Silk Road. Myanmar’s government has never recognized the citizenship of the Rohingya. It claims the Rohingya illegally migrated from Bangladesh in the late 1800s and early 1900s when Myanmar was a British colony. The government has excluded the Rohingya people from the national census. On several occasions since the 1970s, Rohingya have migrated to Bangladesh to escape persecution.

In August 2017, a Rohingya militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army attacked dozens of police posts, killing 12 members of Myanmar’s security forces. The government’s response, which it portrayed as a crackdown on Rohingya extremists, resulted in over 6,700 Rohingya civilians killed, the destruction of Rohingya towns, and widespread homelessness. Eyewitness testimonies revealed sexual violence, mass murder, and beatings. Satellite images showed Rohingya towns burning. Although Myanmar’s security forces claimed the Rohingya burned their own homes, reporters covering the story discovered that photos used to support this claim had been faked. In September 2017, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, referred to the Myanmar government’s treatment of the Rohingya as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

In response to the events of 2017, more than 723,000 Rohingya refugees—nearly 60 percent of whom were children—fled Myanmar for neighboring Bangladesh. They settled in dozens of refugee camps, including Kutupalong, the largest refugee camp in the world, which is home to more than 600,000 Rohingya. As of 2018 there were at least 1.1 million Rohingya refugee’s living in Bangladesh and the number continues to grow. Many residents of the camps live in inadequate shelters that are exposed to the elements and vulnerable to floods and extreme weather during

Teaching with Testimony

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Bangladesh's typhoon season. They also must confront health hazards such as malnutrition, poor drinking water, exposure to diseases such as cholera, and, more recently, Covid-19. In addition, refugees in the camps experience extreme traumas common in victims of sexual crimes, identity-based persecution, and other human rights abuses.

The international community has taken actions to address the refugee crisis created by human rights abuses against the Rohingya. In January of 2020, the International Court of Justice imposed provisional measures against Myanmar. Under these orders, Myanmar must comply with the obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The United Nations Human Rights Organization (UNHCR) continues to collect donations from around the world and provides refugees with food, shelter, medical care, and educational resources. Individual countries also support relief efforts. For example, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has assisted with water treatment efforts and stationed epidemiologists in Bangladesh to support disease prevention. Nongovernmental organizations such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent have also provided relief supplies and supported efforts to reunite separated families. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the USC Shoah Foundation have documented evidence of atrocities committed on behalf of Myanmar's government against the Rohingya.

Sources

- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>
- <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis>
- <https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/09/rohingya-refugee-crisis-myanmar-burma-spd/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/fieldupdates/spring-2019/rohingya-refugee-crisis.html>
- <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-timeline/>
- <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/2019-joint-response-plan-rohingya-humanitarian-crisis-january-december-enbn>
- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/26/myanmar-imagery-shows-200-buildings-burned>



Procedure

Ask

- 1 The teacher will direct pairs of students to briefly discuss the meaning of the term “persecute.” In full class discussion, the teacher will solicit ideas and clarify the meaning of the term, ensuring that students realize that persecution involves a group’s attempts to harass or punish others in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict specifically; to cause to suffer because of one’s identity. As needed, the teacher can ask students to provide real-world examples of persecution of various groups.
- 2 The teacher will tell students that ethnic cleansing is one example of persecution and display the definition: the *mass* expulsion or killing of members of a targeted ethnic or religious group in a society. The teacher will ask students if they can identify examples of ethnic cleansing from history or from what they may have heard from the news.
- 3 The teacher will direct pairs of students to brainstorm a list of immediate actions groups targeted by persecution and ethnic cleansing might take in response to these injustices and then facilitate a brief full class listing of responses. Anticipated responses include moving or migrating to other places, hiding, fighting back, appealing to international organizations or other countries for assistance, going into hiding, and appealing to authorities within the country. The teacher will announce that, in this lesson, the class will focus on one response to persecution: mass migration to other places.
- 4 The teacher will present the essential question: “What impacts does mass migration have on regions where persecution and ethnic cleansing take place?”

Analyze

- 5 The teacher will ask students what, if anything, they might know about the country of Myanmar (Burma) in Southeast Asia and introduce students to the country by locating it on a map of the world and providing some basic information from [CIA Factbook](#). Students will complete a graphic organizer to document basic information about the country.
- 6 The teacher will provide news accounts of key events from the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Possible sources include CNN, the BBC, and National Geographic. Students will complete Cause-Event-Effect graphic organizer documenting key events from the crisis.
- 7 The teacher will announce that the USC Shoah Foundation has collected videotaped testimonies of Rohingya refugees describing their experiences. The teacher will pose the following questions: “Why are eyewitness accounts from Rohingya refugees’ valuable sources of information for learning about events in Myanmar? What can we learn from them that we cannot learn from news accounts?” Pairs of students will discuss responses to these questions, and the teacher will facilitate a brief full group discussion of the responses, listing reasons why testimonies are valuable sources of information on a blackboard or whiteboard.

- 8 Students will view the following testimonies, completing notetaking organizers for each:
- Hansu Mala, recalling anti-Rohingya attitudes prior to the mass violence of 2017
 - Abdul Karim, recalling the beginning of violence against Rohingya in Rakhine
 - Nurusseher, describing the journey to the refugee camp
 - Shafike Begum, describing life in the refugee camp and the possibility of return to Myanmar
- 9 The teacher will provide students with a scenario: “Think about all of the sources you have consulted: the news accounts and eyewitness testimonies. What problems need to be addressed to help the Rohingya people?” Pairs of students will brainstorm a list of problems. In full class discussion, students will categorize the problems they identified as immediate humanitarian needs for ensuring refugees’ survival, longer term needs for returning the Rohingyas to Rakhine, and long-term needs for maintaining peace.

Apply

- 10 The teacher will announce that the class will examine efforts from the past and present designed to address short- and long-term problems confronted by refugees, and the class will think about how individual citizens can make a difference for refugee groups such as the Rohingya.
- 11 The teacher will divide the class for a jigsaw: students in “home” groups will be split into study groups to read about and document one relief effort each. Study groups will then return to their “home” groups to provide fellow students with information about the effort they learned about. Relief efforts include the following:
- the Kindertransport, which sent Jewish children threatened by persecution in Nazi Germany and German-occupied Europe to England (<https://www.kindertransport.org/>)
 - the International Rescue Committee’s partnership with Sesame Workshop (<https://www.rescue.org/sesame>)
 - efforts by the UN’s International Court of Justice to protect the legal rights of Rohingya in Myanmar (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/myanmar-rohingya-un-orders-myanmar-government-to-prevent-genocide-today-2020-01-23/> and <https://www.icj-cij.org/en>)<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1055841>
 - foreign assistance provided by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/fieldupdates/spring-2019/rohingya-refugee-crisis.html>)
- 12 In study groups, students will read about the international effort they have been assigned and complete information organizers to facilitate sharing information with students in their home groups. In home groups, students will complete a table describing each of the relief efforts they learned about in the jigsaw discussion.

Teaching with Testimony



Act

- 13 The teacher will raise the question, “What can individuals in the United States, including members of our class, do to support efforts to help the Rohingya people?”
- 14 The teacher will distribute or provide access to the article “8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees” and distribute the accompanying ratings list. Students will briefly summarize and rate each suggestion according to the following criteria on a scale of 0–3: effectiveness for the targeted group, unintended effects, financial costs, feasibility, acceptability/community buy-in.
- 15 With the ratings list as a starting point, pairs of students will identify a single action they as students can take to help Rohingya refugees and use the planning organizer to draft action plans for implementing and reflecting on their solutions.

Connections

Connection to Student Lives	Connection to Contemporary Events	Connection to the Future
Students will read about actions global organizations take to address refugee crises, learn about ways individual citizens can support these efforts, and draft action plans for student efforts to address the Rohingya refugee crisis.	Students will analyze secondary sources to trace and document key events in the Rohingya refugee crisis and connect USH Shoah Foundation testimonies to these events.	Students will participate in a replicable process of analyzing alternatives for citizen actions in response to injustice.

Clips of Testimony

- **Hansu Mala:** Hansu was born in 1982 in Min Gyi, Myanmar. Hansu was interviewed as a refugee living in Bangladesh on March 13, 2018.
 - Clips Synopsis: Hansu recalls anti-Rohingya attitudes prior to the mass violence of 2017
- **Abdul Karim:** Abdul was born in 1999 in Chut Pyin, Myanmar. Abdul was interviewed on March 11, 2018 in the refugee camp of Chattogram in Bangladesh
 - Clip Synopsis: Abdul recalls the beginning of violence against Rohingya in Rakhine
- **Nurusseher:** Nurusseher was born in 1968 in Chut Pyin, Myanmar. She was interviewed on March 7, 2018 in a refugee camp in Chattogram, Bangladesh
 - Clip Synopsis: Nurusseher describes the journey to the refugee camp

- **Shafike Begum:** Shafike was born in Min Gyi, Myanmar in 1998. She was interviewed on March 13, 2018 in the refugee camp of Chattogram in Bangladesh
 - Clip of Testimony: Shafike describes life in the refugee camp and the possibility of return to Myanmar

National Standards

College, Career and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards

D2.Civ.7.6.8 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school and community settings.

D2.Civ.10.6-8 Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

D4.2.6-8 Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.

D.4.4.6-8 Draw on multiple disciplinary lenses to analyze how a specific problem can manifest itself at local, regional, and global levels over time, identifying its characteristics and causes and the challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address the problem.

D4.7.6-8 Assess the individual and collective capabilities to take action to address local, regional, and global problems, taking into account a range of possible levers of power, strategies, and potential outcomes.

D.4.8.6-8 Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms and schools, and in out-of-school civic contexts.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

RI.8.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly.

SL.8.2 Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

W.8.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



Persecute

to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict specifically; to cause to suffer because of identity (adapted from Webster's Dictionary, online)

Ethnic cleansing

the mass expulsion or killing of members of an ethnic or religious group in a society (adapted from Oxford Dictionaries, online)



Where is it?

In what region of the world is it located? What countries and/or bodies of water border it to the north, south, east, and west? How large is the country?

What are the most important physical characteristics?

Describe the climate and vegetation. Are there any prominent landforms or bodies of water

How do people make a living there?

What are the most important natural resources and industries?

Who lives there?

What languages are spoken there? By percentage, what are the most prominent ethnicities and religious groups?

What questions do you have about the country?

What would you like to know more about to understand the country better?

Cause-Event-Effect Chart: The Rohingya Refugee Crisis



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you read the news account of the Rohingya refugee crisis, list causes and effects of each event listed on the organizer below.

CAUSE(S)	EVENT	EFFECT(S)
	Persecution of Rohingya after Myanmar gains independence (1948-2016)	
	Myanmar's military operations against Rohingya in Rakhine state (2017)	
	Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh (2017-Present)	

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Testimony Notetaking Guide



STUDENT HANDOUT

<p>1. Identify the speaker Name, age or date of birth, experience group.</p>	
<p>2. Topic What aspect of the crisis is the witness speaking about in the selected segment? Summarize the content of the testimony.</p>	
<p>3. Tone What is the speaker's attitude towards the subject? What diction or word choices provide clues about the speaker's point of view?</p>	
<p>Why is this segment of testimony an important source of information for learning about the Rohingya refugee crisis?</p>	
<p>What questions does the testimony raise?</p>	

Relief Effort Profile: Study Group



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you read about the relief effort your study group has been assigned, complete the organizer below.

Name of organization responsible for effort:

This group is a/an (circle one):

International organization Government organization Nongovernmental/private organization

What problem is the group trying to solve?

Summarize the actions this group is taking to address the problem.

Describe 2 challenges this group must overcome.

How can/did normal citizens help this group achieve its goals?

Relief Effort Profile Summaries: Home Group



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you learn about each relief effort from the other members of your home group, complete the table below.

Name of Effort and/or Relief Group	Problem the Group Addresses	Actions Taken to Solve Problem	Challenges	How Citizens Can Help
1. Kindertransport				
2. Sesame Workshop				
3. International Court of Justice				
4. CDC Water Project				

8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees



STUDENT HANDOUT

Sept. 14, 2016 / Melissa Flemming

When a million refugees showed up in Europe this past year, the world began to take notice of a problem that has been steadily growing before our eyes. Ten years ago, 38 million people had been driven from their homes because of war or persecution; right now that number stands at over 65 million. That's equivalent to the population of France...drifting, stranded, with little hope of returning home, and few chances to thrive in neighboring countries.

In Europe, the lack of a unified system to manage the influx of refugees and migrants is exacerbating the problem. People are either welcomed or shunned. They can face fences of barbed wire or cheering locals. Around 50,000 people are stranded in Greece, waiting to be relocated to other European countries or sent back home.

On the streets of European cities, I have seen both remarkable generosity and irrational fear. People carry signs with the slogan "Refugees Welcome"; others set asylum homes on fire. While many push for values of tolerance and openness, others are full of fear, afraid of the arrival of so many people from a different continent, with different religions and cultures. Opportunistic right-wing politicians exploit these fears to make gains in elections.

People often ask me what they can do to help. It's certainly possible to do small, practical but meaningful things to combat the feeling of helplessness that can all too easily become paralyzing. Already, I've been struck by the overwhelming outpouring of meaningful acts of kindness by individuals, local charities, religious groups and students who have made their way to borders and train stations to help arriving refugees and migrants (check out the inspiring work done by a team on Lesbos to coordinate efforts to greet the 5,000 refugees arriving on the Greek island every day). Their message is clear: they stand for a Europe that offers refuge to victims of war and compassion for those who are seeking a better life.

But of course you don't have to volunteer in person. Here are eight other equally meaningful ways you can help:

1. **Host refugees and asylum seekers in your home.**

Help refugees where you are. A friend of mine is offering a vacant room in his home to a family of Palestinian Syrian asylum seekers. Hekla Stefansdottir was part of the inspiring move within Iceland to offer homes to Syrian refugees. The Refugees Welcome initiative began in Germany as a way to match those with a spare room with refugees in need; it now has chapters working in 20 countries. Open Homes, an Airbnb project, allows volunteer hosts to open their homes to refugees and displaced people without charge. Local religious groups can offer a way to be connected with refugees who could use your spare room; if you want to be involved, ask for a recommendation. My organization, the UN Refugee Agency or UNHCR, recently published an inspiring series of stories profiling Europeans who have taken refugees into their homes.

2. **Volunteer your specific skill.**

One young university student I know teaches German to asylum seekers in Austria during their long wait for their refugee status to be determined. Angered by growing racism, a football coach in Italy started a team for refugees and migrants. A Swedish team developed the Sync Accelerator, an employment matchmaking program that helps newly arrived engineers and programmers to get a qualified job at a Swedish company. The What Design Can Do Refugee Challenge in Amsterdam invited designers to create new solutions for people on the move. In Germany, one professor built an online network to keep refugee scientists active in their field by linking them with German academics.

8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees



STUDENT HANDOUT

3. Help refugees to integrate into a new culture.

The movie *The Good Lie* did a great job of portraying the feelings of isolation that refugees can feel when they are relocated to a new country and then try to get over their trauma and restart their lives. Even small gestures of friendship can mean a great deal, so see if you can volunteer with an organization in your community that's working with refugees. (Religious groups and local nonprofits like Access California Services or US Together in Ohio often have refugee programs; a quick Google search can show you what's active in your area.) In Canada, private individuals or groups can apply to sponsor refugees to come to Canada and help them integrate. A European organization called United Invitations invites people to welcome refugees to dinner or to accept an invitation to dinner at the home of a refugee.

4. Encourage your university to offer refugee scholarships.

For refugee students, losing the chance to pursue their studies is devastating. Since 1992, the DAFI program from the UNHCR and the German government has offered scholarships to refugees worldwide. The University of Canberra in Australia offers scholarships to refugees; a program at the World University Service Canada gives student refugees a chance to enroll at a Canadian university or college as a permanent resident. In the US, Southern New Hampshire University has launched a major \$10 million initiative to bring university degrees to refugees at home and abroad, allowing it to educate up to 50,000 refugees a year by 2022. Students at Oxford University in the UK recently raised more than \$300,000 to fund scholarships for refugees. Encourage your local university or college to support refugees too.

5. Employ refugees.

In some overwhelmed countries, refugees are seen as guests and are not permitted to work. But in others, they can. Hamdi Ulukaya, the CEO of the American yogurt company Chobani, is not only giving away half of his wealth to aid refugees, he employs 300 refugee workers at his factories. In January 2017, Starbucks pledged to hire 10,000 refugees globally. The website Natakallam.com gives refugees the opportunity to teach Arabic. Refugees in Berlin are working as tour guides in museums showing tourists cultural riches from home. Could your company hire refugees? Where are you circulating job advertisements? Find a local resettlement center in your community and see if workers there can connect you with qualified talent.

6. Offer opportunities for refugees to volunteer.

In places where refugees can't work legally, volunteering can lend the days more purpose. In Kotka, Finland, some refugees have found a sense of community by volunteering at a local retirement home. In Denmark, 12 former journalists were given the opportunity to edit the daily newspaper for a day, producing a 48-page special issue showing the refugee crisis from the perspective of those experiencing it. A farm in the UK allows refugees and asylum seekers the opportunity to learn different skills such as painting, weaving, ceramics, cooking and agriculture.

8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees



STUDENT HANDOUT

7. **Hold awareness and fundraising events.**

Do this wherever you are, in your communities, schools or workplace. Run a half marathon, do a sponsored swim, put on a raffle or a yard sale. Online websites make it easy for your supporters to donate – just register your event, spread the word, and your friends, family and colleagues can all donate securely online. If you'd like to use UN Refugee Agency materials and resources such as banners, T-shirts or posters, contact your local UNHCR office.

8. **Donate.**

There's always money. UNHCR has launched a campaign called Nobody Left Outside to provide shelter to two million refugees. If you prefer to support refugees living in poverty in Jordan, this cash assistance program helps individual families make ends meet. Or, in the US, you can make a tax-free donation to USA for UNHCR. Seriously, every dollar helps.

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<https://ideas.ted.com/8-practical-ways-to-help-refugees/>

How We Can Help: Evaluating Citizen Actions



After you read the article “8 Practical Ways to Help Refugees,” complete the table below by working with your partner to assign a score from 1 to 5 for each of these three questions:

- *Is this action feasible for students?* (0 = not at all feasible; 5 = most feasible)
- *Is this action effective, i.e., will it make a difference by solving problems that confront Rohingya refugees?* (0 = not helpful; 5 = most helpful)
- *Will this action have an unintended consequences or costs that need to be accounted for?* (0 = very costly unintended consequences; 5 = no unintended consequences)

Action	Feasibility for Students	Effectiveness	Costs/Consequences	Total Score
Hosting refugees				
Volunteering skills				
Helping refugees integrate				
Encouraging university scholarships				
Employing refugees				
Offering volunteer opportunities				
Holding fundraising events				
Making donations				

Planning Student Action to Help Rohingya Refugees



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you read about the relief effort your study group has been assigned, complete the organizer below.

Based on what you've read, identify a student action that you think presents the best alternative for providing assistance to Rohingya refugees. Why did you choose this action?

What might critics of your choice say to convince your classmates to select a different action? How will you respond to this criticism and provide support for your option?

What steps will you need to follow to be sure your plan is implemented fully?

What will you do to reflect on the plan when its finished to improve next time?