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A genocide is taking place. Luckily we are distracted

by [Christian Caryl](#)



Rohingya refugee children carry supplies through Balukhali refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on Monday. (Hannah McKay/Reuters)

Here in the United States we have a lot of important stuff to think about. Justin Timberlake has been picked to perform at the next Super Bowl. One of those celebrities whose name I can never remember is suing the Kardashians. The president of the United States [is trading insults](#) with a congresswoman. And best of all, the stock market has hit new highs.

Off on the other side of the world, 600,000 people are [crouching in the mud](#), shivering with terror, [telling the same stories](#) of how a husband was shot, a sister was raped, [a baby was thrown on a fire](#) – stories multiplied tens of thousands of times. They’ve been forced out of their homes by soldiers who mocked them, beat them, torched their houses. The whole point of this state-sponsored campaign of terror – for that’s exactly what it is – was to drive them across a nearby border into a neighboring country, which can’t really afford to harbor hundreds of thousands of refugees, since it is already one of the poorest in the world. (Close to a million Rohingya now live as refugees in Bangladesh; 600,000 of them arrived since August.)

The terror is still going on. Right now – even though there aren’t a lot of people left in their homes to terrorize. And that has left some of us who follow this situation to ask a simple question:

Is it time [to use the word](#) “genocide”?

The people I’m talking about are the Rohingya, who are sometimes referred to as “the most persecuted people on the face of the earth.” The government of the country they used to live in, known as Burma (aka Myanmar), hates them so much that [it even stripped them of their citizenship](#) 35 years ago. I remember many Burmese telling me, during my last visit a few years ago, that the Rohingya were just vermin, not truly human at all. After all, didn’t I know that they had really, really dark skins? And that they were Muslim – not at all like the majority Buddhists, who were, in general, so much nicer, more cultured, more pure?

And it’s true, the Rohingya don’t have a lot of friends right now – but that has more to do with geopolitics than imagined personal traits. The Chinese (who support Burma’s military) and the Russians (who would like to tap into the country’s natural resources) couldn’t care less about the Rohingya’s human rights. The Europeans, who don’t want to offend anyone, might send a strongly worded letter or two.

As usual, that leaves the United States. Ah yes, I can hear my compatriots groan – another distant land that’s trying to draw us into its problems. But this isn’t about sending the military or getting mired in conflict. It’s about finally raising our voice, a powerful voice that everyone in the world listens to – or [used to listen to](#), at least. The United States can demand and orchestrate sanctions against the Burmese military and government. It can organize pressure in international bodies. And it can demonstrate [its visible opposition](#) to those responsible and its support for the refugees.

Now here’s a thought: We Americans have always prided ourselves on straight talk. What if our United States government were to come straight out and officially designate what’s happening to the Rohingya as a “genocide”? That could potentially transform how the rest of the world discusses the issue. Genocide [is defined](#) as “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.”

That is a pretty good description of current Burmese state policy toward the Rohingya. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, have already been killed; we don’t know precisely how many, since the government of Burma isn’t allowing independent witnesses into the area.

What's eminently clear is that Burma's military is doing its best to drive these poor, stateless people out of the country and never let them back in again. And once that's done, the foundations of Rohingya life in Burma will be over. Their refugees will be scattered among the nations that host them, but their life in Burma will be beyond reconstruction. Burma will have "finally solved the Rohingya question," [to paraphrase](#) a certain German statesman.

Isn't this something that our country, at least, should go on the record as opposing?

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