

PORTFOLIO

Fleeing Burma

SAIFUL HUQ OMI

DHAKA—From the moment Burma won its independence from Britain in 1948, the Rohingya—a Muslim minority community in this largely Buddhist nation of 55 million—have been targeted by a succession of repressive governments intent on controlling and marginalizing a host of non-Burmese ethnic groups in some of the most remote portions of the country. The best-known of these minority groups is the Karen, around 140,000 of whom have fled attacks by the Burmese military and live in refugee camps just across Burma’s northeastern border with Thailand. But across the country, in the northwestern Rakhine state, the Rohingya—whose numbers are difficult to estimate, but likely total around one million—face a cruel form of oppression, denied the most basic rights of citizenship in the nation where they have made their homes for centuries.

In 1978, Burma’s military junta launched a systematic program of persecution against the Rohingya, a campaign that combined the destruction of the Rohingya’s mosques with the blunter methods of murder and rape. Today, those who survived and stayed in Burma are subjected routinely to extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, eviction and destruction of their homes.

In the late 1970s, as Burmese military persecution accelerated, more than 167,000 Rohingya fled the country, crossing the porous border on foot into neighboring Bangladesh. After intense international pressure, many were

allowed to return to Burma. Then, in 1991 and 1992, a new wave of repression and pogroms forced at least 250,000 back into Bangladesh. Here, across the border in their new homes, the Rohingya are immune from Burmese military attacks and summary executions. But life is still incredibly difficult.

Today, the UNHCR recognizes about 29,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh as refugees. The Bangladeshi government disagrees, insisting on classifying the Rohingya as illegal immigrants. As a result, the Rohingya receive virtually no support and live in often sub-human conditions. It’s common for 16 or more to live together in a single room of barely 30 square feet. Many suffer from chronic malnutrition. As stateless people, their movements are sharply restricted, and even here they are subject to extortion. They are often targets of human traffickers who sell women and men into servitude or sex slavery. Unable to leave their squalid refugee camps, they are prevented from seeking employment or engaging any activities on the outside. Formal schooling is banned in the camps, though recently the Bangladeshi government has allowed some schools to be opened there. Women are often gang-raped or forced into marriages with Bangladeshi thugs.

Yet none of this has curbed the influx of Rohingya from Burma, where violence and repression continue. Even a life of misery in Bangladesh seems more appealing than a return

When asked what she thinks about the plight of the Rohingya today and what their future might hold, Khadija Begum looked to the heavens and replied, “Why ask me? Ask Him.”

Previous Spread: Life in the camps that house undocumented Rohingya refugees is damp, cruel, and crowded—a harsh existence with little food, no permission to work, no medical care, and no prospects for the future.

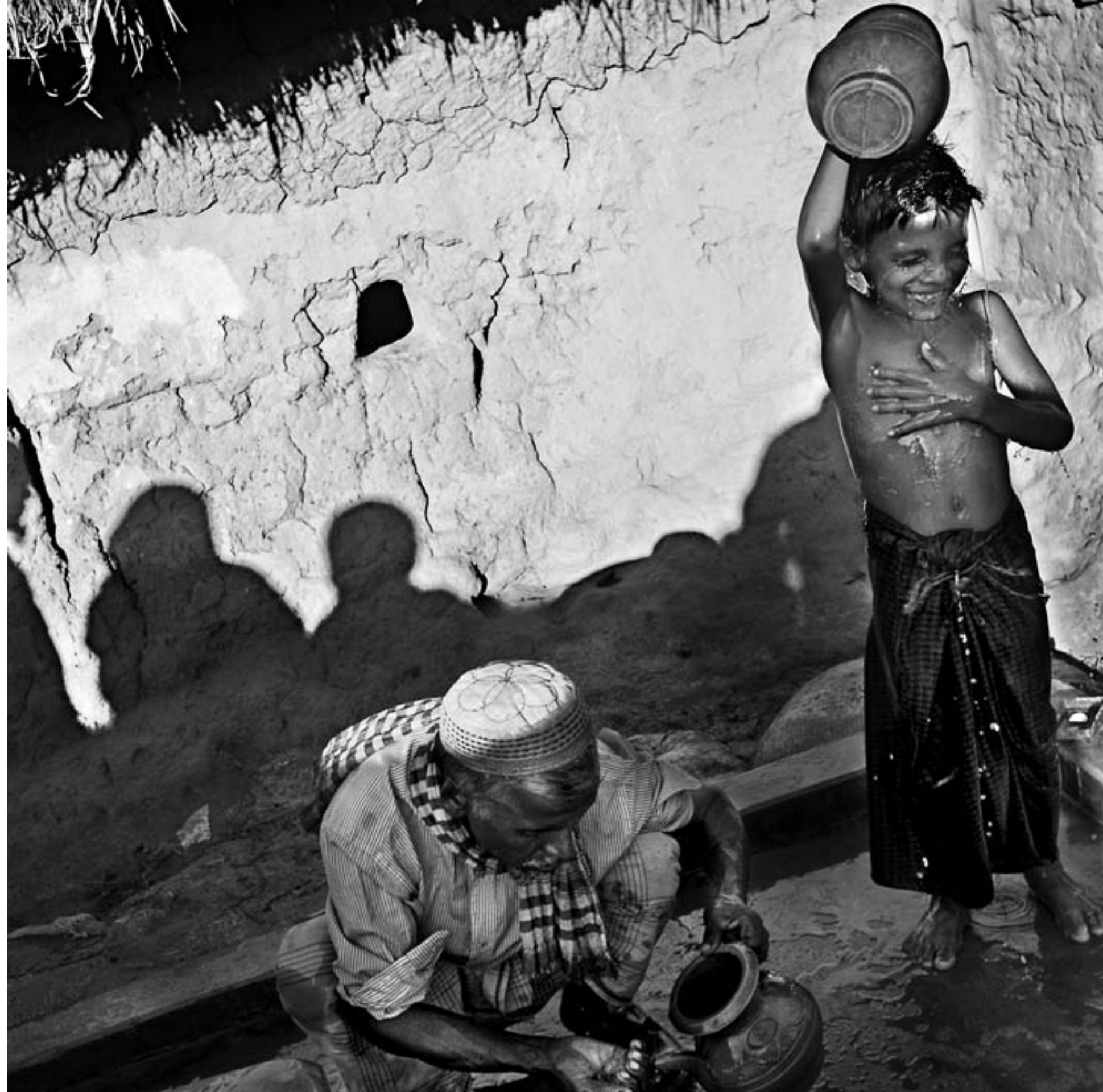


Saiful Huq Omi is a Bangladeshi photojournalist based in Dhaka. His photos have appeared in The New York Times, The Economist, The Guardian, and other publications. His work on Rohingya refugees is supported by the Magnum Foundation.

to Burma. In addition to the few thousand or so living in refugee camps run by the UNHCR in Bangladesh, between 300,000 and 500,000 are believed to be living beyond the camps, scattered through squalid villages along the coastal regions of Bangladesh. These low-lying areas are prone to floods that inundate villages, destroy crops, and spread disease and famine in their wake.

Since March 2009, I have been documenting the lives of Rohingya in three refugee camps in Bangladesh, and others living clandestinely beyond the camp's confines. I've also traveled to Malaysia, where another large Rohingya community lives in desperate conditions as illegal immigrants without any safety net. Faceless, and with few advocates in either their native or their adopted nations, there is little chance their lives will improve anytime soon. A fortunate few have been aided by a small number of international relief agencies and human-rights groups who have helped them resettle in the United States, Sweden, Australia, and Britain. Those destinations present their own kinds of challenges for the Rohingya, many of whom still long to be free to return to a more traditional lifestyle in their native land. As long as that remains impossible, however, exile in the West seems far preferable to the despair faced by those left behind in Burma and Bangladesh. ●

Right: From five-year-olds to 90-year-olds, everyone—girls and boys, men and women—bathes in the public bath.





The unregistered refugees cannot obtain work permits. But work they must, so employers seize every opportunity to exploit them. A Rohingya man will always be paid less than a Bangladeshi worker—sometimes as little as half of as much—for the same long, hard day in the hot fields.



To see Omi's photos of Rohingya refugees in Britain on *World Policy Journal's* website, go to www.bit.ly/rohingya-britain, or scan this barcode with your mobile device.

Facing Page: When it rains in the unregistered camps, dirt paths become small rivers. And when it rains heavily, there is a risk of landslides. But the Rohingya have no other place to go.

Below: In the camps, children do not receive medical care, and some residents become sick and die without ever meeting a doctor in their lives.



Far from their homeland in the Burmese interior, the Rohingya have learned new skills along the coast of Bangladesh—collecting shrimp from the sea and selling to local processors. If caught working, they face certain arrest and indefinite imprisonment.

