

The War on the Rohingya

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To: The Pulitzer Prize Advisory Panel

For two years, Reuters reporters have been tirelessly investigating a conflict in a forgotten corner of the Muslim world: the dirty war against the Rohingya of Myanmar.

The Rohingya are a stateless and friendless Muslim people living in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and their oppression has triggered one of the biggest movements of boat people since the Vietnam War. Reporters Jason Szep and Andrew R.C. Marshall in 2012 documented how majority-Buddhist Myanmar's democratization was unleashing long-suppressed hatreds. In one report, they exposed how a Buddhist-nationalist political party organized the country's bloodiest pogroms in decades, amounting to ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. Myanmar ignored these abuses as it drew praise abroad for its shift from dictatorship.

They stayed on the story in 2013, producing powerful investigations that brought the international dimensions of this overlooked injustice to world attention. Two stories uncovered evidence of Thai government involvement in the trafficking and abuse of Rohingya Muslims who were seeking haven abroad. The news had dramatic impact: Citing Reuters coverage, Thai police in late January this year rescued hundreds of refugees held at a human-trafficking camp and arrested three suspected trafficking ringleaders.

Each story submitted here required extensive and often dangerous field work in several countries, including remote, rarely traveled areas of Myanmar and next-door Thailand.

The April 8 story, "Buddhist monks incite Muslim killings in Myanmar," revealed a massacre of Muslims in the city of Meikhtila. Reuters was the first news organization to report and reconstruct the March 21 massacre of at least 25 Muslims, including children. The story uncovered a mass grave where bodies were being burned, prompting a follow-up investigation by New York-based Physicians for Human Rights. The challenges were formidable. When Szep arrived, on March 25, the killers were still on the streets. Some tried to intimidate the journalists, warning them away from certain areas. Soldiers refused to let Szep speak with Muslims at refugee centers. Some survivors would speak only in dark alleyways. It took weeks or months for rival news organizations to produce similar accounts.

Szep's May 15 story, "In Myanmar, apartheid tactics against minority Muslims," revealed how tens of thousands of displaced Rohingya were kept in permanent, prison-like ghettos near the city of Sittwe in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Szep and a Reuters photographer concealed themselves in a motorized trishaw to enter Sittwe's last remaining Muslim quarter, which was locked down by soldiers. Szep skirted the barricaded checkpoints to document the rise of apartheid in modern-day Myanmar.

One of the most disturbing trends in Myanmar is the rise of a radical Buddhist movement known as “969,” widely blamed for triggering violence as far away as Malaysia. In a June 27 report, “Myanmar gives official blessing to anti-Muslim monks,” Marshall was the first to document how the movement enjoyed the support of senior Myanmar government officials. In a startling interview, the minister of religion expressed support for 969’s most incendiary Buddhist monk and for its boycott of Muslim businesses.

On July 17, “Thai authorities implicated in Rohingya smuggling networks,” Szep and Stuart Grudgings produced an unprecedented and moving reconstruction of how Rohingya fled Myanmar by sea, including horrific personal accounts by survivors. In a major scoop, Szep and Grudgings conducted rare interviews with human smugglers who identified some Thai naval security forces as profiting from Rohingya smuggling.

The team probed deeper into the trafficking networks. On December 5, in “Thailand secretly supplies Rohingyas to trafficking rings,” Szep and Marshall exposed a disturbing truth: With immigration detention centers overflowing with Rohingya refugees, the Royal Thai Police had come up with a secret new policy called “option two”: Thailand would tell the Rohingyas they were being deported, put them on boats – and let traffickers pick them up. The Rohingya are then transported across southern Thailand and held hostage in secret camps hidden near the border with Malaysia until relatives pay thousands of dollars to release them.

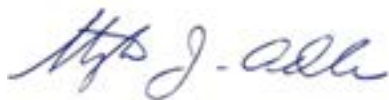
This shocking story caused an uproar. The United Nations and the U.S. State Department called for an investigation. In late January this year, Thai deputy national police chief Chatchawan Suksomjit announced that authorities had freed 531 men, women and children from an illegal camp identified by Reuters. “After Reuters gave us information, we ordered an investigation into the camps,” he told journalists.

The Reuters coverage also drew praise around the world. The reports were cited by the Harvard Ash Center and the International Crisis Group, which play crucial roles in advising Myanmar on reforms. The Physicians for Human Rights, which documented the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, summed up Reuters’ coverage as follows:

“The Reuters investigations out of Burma/Myanmar over the last year have helped raise awareness about a range of crucially important issues, including violence against Muslims and other ethnic groups, and the plight of the Rohingya, one of the world’s most persecuted ethnic groups. ... This kind of in-depth journalism is truly crucial for bringing attention to human rights violations that are occurring in this part of the world, and ensuring they do not go unnoticed.”

Szep, Marshall, Grudgings and their colleagues produced courageous journalism with tremendous practical impact and great moral force. I am proud to nominate them for a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

Sincerely,



Stephen J. Adler

Editor-in-Chief
Reuters