The Rohingya People in Burma: The world's most persecuted minority

Memorandum by Society for Threatened Peoples
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Society for Threatened Peoples is an international human rights organization which campaigns with and on behalf of threatened and persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, nationalities and indigenous peoples. STP has an advisory status at the United Nations (UN) since 1993 and participant status at the Council of Europe (COE) since 2005.

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Table of Contents

The Rohingya People in Burma – The World’s most persecuted Minority

1. Summary 5
2. Who are the Rohingya? 7
3. Situation since June 2012 - Escalation of Violence 9
4. The 969 Movement and Buddhist Extremism 14
5. Rohingya on their Escape to Neighboring Countries 17
6. Demands of the Society for Threatened Peoples 20
7. What can you do yourself? 21
The Rohingya People in Burma
1. Summary

During the past two years, many of the people in Burma (officially: Myanmar) were granted more freedom: Political prisoners were released; there is more freedom of the press, freedom of expression and a right to demonstrate. The situation of the Rohingya Muslim minority, however, has not improved. For decades, they were systematically marginalized in their own homeland by the state authorities and the Buddhist population majority. Instead of recognizing them as citizens with equal rights, the government even fuels the persecution of the Rohingya.

The Citizenship Act of 1982 left the Rohingya stateless. The Rohingya do not appear on the official list of the country’s 135 peoples, even though they have been living in Burma since the 8th century. The government of Burma claims that the Rohingya are "Bengali immigrants" that must to be sent back to Bangladesh. President Thein Sein has even threatened to expel the entire ethnic group. Because the Rohingya are no longer considered to be citizens, they are treated as people without rights – and they don’t get official ID documents. Couples who want to get married need a permit, which often takes years to be granted. Spouses – if they belong to the Rohingya – are not allowed to have more than two children. Rohingya people are often exploited as forced laborers and the authorities tend to collect arbitrary taxes from them or to confiscate their land.

Most of the Rohingya in Burma live in Rakhine State (formerly Arakan). They are scattered around the local capital Sittwe, living in small villages and – since June 2012 – also in refugee camps. Their situation in the city is similar to an open-air prison: They are not allowed to leave the Aumingalar district of Sittwe, even if they need to be treated in a hospital. They are trapped in their own city.

Those who reside in the villages live in a permanent state of fear of being attacked by Buddhist extremists. Many of them have lost one of their few opportunities to grow food: often, family members don’t return from the rice fields because they were murdered.
Religiously motivated violence against the Rohingya has increased significantly since June 2012. Many villages and Rohingya settlements were burned down by angry mobs, women are raped and men beaten to death with sticks while the Burmese police simply watch or even participate in the attacks. Rohingya who survive the massacres have no other choice than to flee to refugee camps.

There, the conditions are disastrous: no fresh drinking water, not enough food, no blankets, tents or sanitary facilities. The police are in charge of the camps. The authorities regulate access for international humanitarian aid workers strictly. It seems impossible to provide supplies for all the people living in the camps. Sometimes, but often only by paying a bribe or only by means of support from a humanitarian organization, the refugees may leave the camp for a few hours. Among the Rohingya, the infant mortality rate and the rate of women who die during pregnancy have risen significantly – twice as high as compared to the entire population of Burma. The public authorities do nothing to stop the hatred against the Rohingya and the police rarely bother to protect them.

Only four percent of the Burmese population is Muslim. Nevertheless, Buddhist nationalists are trying to incite hatred with slogans such as "If we show weakness, our country will become Muslim". Activists of the nationalist Buddhist movement 969 travel the country and encourage the public to marginalize the Rohingya and to expel them from their settlements and villages. Regularly, there are outbursts of violence a few days after these proclamations, attacks of the Buddhist majority against the Rohingya.

Impoverished and traumatized, many Rohingya try to find safety in the neighboring countries. In reality, however, their dreams of a better life don't come true. The Rohingya are forced to take a dangerous journey to the Burmese coast where the police are waiting to be bribed: When they arrive at the coast, the Rohingya are forced to put themselves in the hands of smugglers who promise to bring them to the neighboring countries for $1,000. Having to endure the journey in small fishing boats, sitting in the same position for several days, the Rohingya fight against thirst, hunger and violence by the boat crew. Quite often, Rohingya drown while trying to escape.

Even if they manage to reach the coasts of the neighboring countries Thailand, Indonesia or Malaysia, their odyssey is not over: The Rohingya often become victims of unscrupulous traffickers who sell them as slaves on farms and fishing boats. Rohingya women and girls are frequently abused as sex slaves. Although the international community tried to convince Burma's neighboring countries to take further measures against human trafficking, it is still a thriving business. Being stateless people, the Rohingya are particularly vulnerable to become victims of traffickers, because they will not be missed. None of the neighboring states is really committed to their safety.
The Rohingya People in Burma

Burma’s neighboring countries have not signed the UN Refugee Convention, so they do not recognize the Rohingya as refugees but continue to deport many of them back to Burma, despite the fact that they are facing persecutions and imprisonment when they return. More than 65,000 Rohingya people have fled to neighboring countries, where they live in internment camps they may not leave. The living conditions there are terrible.

The legal situation of the Rohingya will not improve without pressure of the international community. Europe must demand the Burmese government to put an end to the Rohingya’s fatal situation of rightlessness.

2. Who are the Rohingya?

The now approximately 800,000 to 1.3 million Muslim Rohingya have been living in the multiethnic state of Burma, where the majority of the population is Buddhist, since the Eighth Century – descending from traders who once settled in the region. Today, most of them live in the state of Rhakine (formerly Arakan). The Rohingya do not appear on the official list of the country’s 135 peoples. The government of Burma and the Buudis population majority treat the Rohingya as "Bengali immigrants" who must to be sent back to neighboring Bangladesh, although they do not speak Bengali.

With the Citizenship Act of 1982, the Rohingya lost their citizenship. Thus, the government managed to deprive them of all their rights. Until today, they are exposed to violence, discrimination and racism – and they suffer from the utter arbitrariness of the government authorities. They have no civil rights; their freedom of movement, their rights to marry and to have children are severely limited. Often enough, their children don’t even receive official birth certificates.

Apart from the Rohingya, there are also other Muslim groups in country, such as the Kaman, who are officially recognized as a local ethnic community. The Rohingya are often
The Rohingya People in Burma

pressured into forced labor (40% of the forced laborers are children). Their land is confiscated and they are arbitrarily detained, tortured, raped, and murdered. The government regularly tries to thwart reports on human rights violations against the Rohingya. In January 2014, Buddhist nationalists carried out a massacre against the inhabitants of the Rohingya village Du Chee Yar Tan. According to the United Nations, at least 48 Rohingya got killed. The Burmese government denies this incident and speaks of "unacceptable accusations".

Aung San Suu Kyi has publicly denied that the Rohingya are to be seen as an ethnic group. Although she calls for the "Rule of Law", she is trying to embezzle the fact that the laws in Burma systematically discriminate the Rohingya.

Concerning the human rights violations against the Rohingya, she also said literally, "No, these are not ethnic cleansing" and added that there are both Buddhists and Muslims residing in refugee camps in Rakhine State. Yet, she did not mention that the overwhelming majority of the camp inmates are Muslims. Her Party teamed up with a nationalist party in order to have better chances in future elections.

In 1946, her father Aung San, who earned a name fighting for Burma to become independent from Great Britain, recognized the Rohingya as an ethnic community – with equal rights, which would include a right to citizenship in Burma.

"I do protect human rights, and I hope I shall always be looked up as a champion of human rights.“

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi

General Aung San
3. The situation since June 2012 – Escalation of Violence

In the federal state of Rakhine, the violence between the Buddhist majority – the Arakanese – and the Rohingya escalated in June 2012. Since then, more than 140,000 people were forced to flee from the violence within their own country. They now live in more than two dozen camps around Sittwe, the capital of the federal state Rakhine. About 65,000 fled to neighboring countries.

The Beginning of the Unrest

The unrest started when a group of Muslim men had allegedly raped and killed a 27-year-old Buddhist Arakanese woman on May 28, 2012. Three Muslims were arrested the next day. On June 3rd, 300 Buddhist Arakanese dragged ten Rohingya off of a bus and lynched them. Pamphlets had been distributed throughout the federal state shortly before, demanding revenge for the murder of the woman. On June 8, Rohingya people rioted after the Friday prayers: Several homes were destroyed and seven people got killed. Over the next four days, the violence spread to other settlements in Rakhine. Rohingya and other Muslims reported assaults, rapes, arbitrary arrests and the destruction of their property by security forces and Arakanese mobs. 100,000 people, most of them Rohingya, became refugees. About 5,000 homes – most of them Rohingya property – were destroyed.

On October 21, there were again outbursts of violence in other parts of Rakhine. Rohingya and other Muslims – like the ethnic group Kaman – were attacked systematically. Approximately 32,000 people, most of them Muslims, were expelled. The organization Fortify Rights was able to identify four mass graves containing the bodies of killed Rohingya. Satellite images demonstrated the massive destruction wrought by Buddhist extremists.

Since March 2013, there have also been riots in other parts of Burma: Now other Muslim communities were also repeatedly attacked. Groups such as the nationalist Buddhist Movement 969 (See Chapter 4) continue to stoke sentiments against Rohingya and Muslims in Burma. In the town of Meiktila – in the Mandalay region in the center of the country – 1,500 houses and 12 of the 13 mosques in the city were destroyed by Buddhists’ attacks on Muslims at the end of March 2013. The entire Muslim Quarter Mingalar Zayyone was destroyed. In a Muslim school, 44 people were killed, including 20 students and their teacher. 12,000 people were displaced.
Thomas Ojea Quintana, UN Special Rapporteur for Burma, was attacked by Buddhists during his visit to Meiktila on August 21, 2013: A group of 200 Buddhists had approached his car, shook it and cursed at Quintana. He was asked to leave the region. Two months earlier, he had declared the human rights violations against the Rohingya to be "widespread and systematic" and thus incurred the wrath of the Buddhist extremists.

The year 2013 was not only the year of violence against the Rohingya. It was also the year of the rise of the 969 movement and the increasing hatred towards all Muslims in Burma – thus bringing about religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims also in the neighboring countries.

**January 2014: Attack on the Village Du Chee Yar Tan**

On the January 13, 2014, Burmese security forces and extremist Buddhists attacked the village Du Chee Yar Tan in the Maungdaw District in the state of Rakhine. Eyewitnesses reported to the *Society for Threatened Peoples* that up to 40 Rohingya were killed in the attack. A majority of the 4,000 residents fled. According to a report by the *United Nations* about the massacre, Rohingya had previously kidnapped and killed a policeman. A
surviving Rohingya woman, Zaw Patha, told a journalist from the *New York Times* that she was forced to watch helplessly as her 15-year-old son Mohmach was dragged away and beaten with a rifle. She herself fled into the surrounding rice fields. She assumes that her son is dead. Her possessions were burnt and her cows were stolen.

At least ten Rohingya were beheaded during the massacre. Their heads were found in a water tank. Residents of the neighboring village told the *United Nations* that they had witnessed how Arakanese security forces had carried 20 bodies to the surrounding hills, assuming to conceal the murders. The aid organization *Doctors Without Borders* (*Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF*) reported that – shortly after the massacre – they had treated 22 wounded and traumatized Rohingya in their clinics. Survivors of the massacre tried to reach a refugee camp located nearby, where soldiers first denied access and only let the Rohingya in after they had paid bribes.

The Burmese authorities refused to give international observers and Rohingya access to the village – despite pleas from Western embassies and by the Human Rights Commissioner of the *United Nations*, Navi Pillay, to conduct independent investigations. The national Burmese Human Rights Commission asserted that there had been no attacks on the Rohingya. Two journalists of the *New York Times* and one photographer were detained for a short time as they tried to do an on-site research.
The Rohingya People in Burma

The Ghetto Aumingalar

Following the escalation of violence in 2012, many Muslims fled from Sittwe to a large refugee camp near the city. Some Rohingya and other Muslims remained in Sittwe in the district of Aumingalar, where the authorities continued to restrict their freedom of movement.

They cannot venture to other districts, especially those with a high proportion of Buddhists. The Aumingalar-District is strongly controlled by the police. For security reasons, the Rohingya cannot go outside anymore. By the end of January 2014, police and soldiers fenced the city district Aungmingalar with sticks of bamboo and betel. The Rohingya, who have been living in the area for decades, are not allowed to take on jobs in other districts, nor to have visitors. Anyone who wants to visit, will have to pay bribes to the security forces, The Burmese authorities explained that all this is to be seen as a measure to ensure safety for the Rohingya.

140,000 Rohingya are still living Refugee Camps today

140,000 Rohingya have been living in registered and non-registered camps in Rakhine since 2012. The living conditions are devastating: the lack of food determines the everyday lives of the people. The ones living in registered camps receive small rations of oil, rice, salt and chickpea – barely enough for one meal a day. But at least the people in the registered camps can receive help by national and international organizations – while the people living in the non-registered camps receive no support whatsoever from the outside. They survive only thanks to the help from other Muslims and even some Buddhists.
Aid Organizations that work in the camps reported that children under six and women are especially helpless. Due to malnutrition, there are diseases and even deaths. Also, there is a lack of water and safe accommodations. During the dry season between November and May, the displaced persons in the camps have difficulty to find water. This leads to increased rates of diarrhea, digestive system diseases, and Hepatitis A.

During the rainy season, other problems occur: Most camps are located in dry rice fields or areas that are flooded at the beginning of the monsoon season. The makeshift houses set up in the registered camps by the government can’t really withstand the masses of rain – just as little as the mud houses, bamboo constructions and sheet metal roofs.

The Rohingya have no civil rights. As mentioned, before they are not even recognized as citizens. As disenfranchised people they are not allowed to leave the camps. They cannot go to a hospital or buy food and medicines from the nearest market. Some of the Rohingya who forced to go to the camps by security forces are now confined and have no way of returning to their possessions. A temporary situation turned into a permanent one: The Rohingya are cut off from the rest of the population. In the camps, they repeatedly become victims of physical violence by the security forces. The police, who should provide their safety, only guard them. Once one arrives in a refugee camp, there are few chances of leaving it again. The Rohingya are only able to get out of the camps for short periods of time by bribing corrupt police officers.

The Burmese government allows only a few international aid agencies to provide help for the camp inmates and carry out educational programs. Despite their great efforts, aid organization employees report enormous problems with the distribution of relief supplies, because they are treated with hostility by the local population. Many Arakanese accuse the aid agencies of favoring the Rohingya.

The security conditions in the camps are devastating as well. The police abuse the refugees, physically and mentally. It is no secret that the police and army were involved in the destruction of Rohingya villages, instead of protecting the settlements.
Interview with a Rohingya, who lives in a camp for internally displaced persons

Where are you from?
I come from the Kondan district in Sittwe, close to the Auminglar district downtown.

How did you end up in the refugee camp?
After my neighborhood and my house burned down, I was forced to go to the refugee camp. I now live in the camp That Key Pyin – a camp for internally displaced persons. Life in the camp is terrible.

Do you have any hope, despite the terrible conditions in which the Rohingya are trapped?
I have no hope. For how long will we have to endure the suffering? We are human beings as well! The government treats us worse than animals. Living in the Sahara desert would be better than under these circumstances.

What should the international community do?
I expect the international community to exert pressure onto the government so that we Rohingya are finally recognized as citizens of this country.

If you had the opportunity to go back to Sittwe tomorrow, would you?
Of course, I want to go back to Sittwe. That is the place I was born.

4. The 969 Movement and Buddhist Extremism

„I am proud, when they call me a radical Buddhist“

„If we are weak, our country will be Muslim“

„We must take care of our religion and our race. That is more important than Democracy.“

- Ashin Wirathu, Leader of the movement 969

In recent years, the violence of Buddhist extremists towards Muslims has escalated. Buddhist leaders from other countries such as the Dalai Lama and the Thai monk and scholar Phra Paisal Visalo condemned the religious motivated violence and recalled that the classification of "us against them" by extremist Buddhists in Burma is incompatible with the true teachings of Buddhism.
The Rohingya People in Burma

Despite these calls, groups that warn about the Islamization of Burma are becoming more and more popular. Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk from a monastery in the Burmese city of Mandalay, and leader of the so-called 969 movement, is the "most prominent" extremist Buddhist throughout the country.

According to the followers of the movement, the numbers 969 symbolize the beliefs of Buddha, the Buddhist practice and the Buddhist community. Meanwhile, stickers of the 969 movement can be seen throughout Burma on cars, bikes, at bus stops or in stores.

Members of the 969 movement challenge businessmen to only do business with other Buddhists. They denounce those who associate with Muslims as traitors to their religion and collaborators of an imminent "Muslim invasion". The extremists oppose of marriages and friendships between Buddhists and Muslims and call for laws against inter-religious marriages. Even committing violence against Muslims is touted as "self-defense" and being conducive towards one's own karma. Wirathu indicated a massacre of extremist Buddhists towards Muslims in the town of Meiktila to be a "sign of strength".

Activists of the movement travel to different parts of the country and – via public speeches – demand the expulsion of Muslims from settlements and villages. Regularly, a few days later, there are outbreaks of violence against the minority. The remains of burnt Muslim shops are tagged with the digits "969".

An important aspect of Wirathu’s conspiracy theory is based on the alleged infiltration of the Burmese economy by Muslims. Despite generally known fact that the Burmese military controls the most important parts of the economy and that none of the major economic leaders are Muslim, this crude theory is a popular means to stir up fear of Muslims.
Wirathu’s sermons (left picture) – that attract thousands of people – are sold as CDs and DVD copies by hundreds and thousands throughout the country. His deceptively soft voice is to be heard from loudspeakers in many restaurants and shops. Buddhist monasteries that are connected to the 969 movement are opening community centers and offer programs for children nationwide. The 969 movement also spreads their hate propaganda via Facebook and Youtube.

Those who reject this propaganda are punished: A Muslim who had removed a sticker of the 969 movement from a shop on April 20, 2013, was sentenced to two years of imprisonment for "Defamation of Religion" only three days later.

Instead of campaigning for a dialogue between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, Burma’s President Thein Sein praised the leader of 969, Wirathu. Last year, he ensured that an issue of the American Time magazine was banned.
The Rohingya People in Burma

in Burma, because it critically described Wirathu’s role in Burma under the title of "The Face of Buddhist Terror". The 969 movement called Thein Sein a "sign of peace." In February 2014, the leaders of the 969 movement began to advertise a draft law on the "Protection of Race and Religion." Convinced by Wirathu, 1.3 million people signed the petition. It requires Buddhist women to get a permission from their parents and from the local authorities before they may marry a man of another religion. The ability to convert to another religion is also limited.

On March 7, President Thein Sein assigned a new Commission and urged the High Court to submit a draft law on these points. It is expected that the tensions between religions in Burma, but also in the neighboring countries, will increase due to the fatal religious policy of the government.

5. Rohingya on their Escape to Neighboring Countries
The Rohingya People in Burma

Between 2012 and 2013, more than 65,000 Rohingya fled from violence and persecution in Burma. Almost all of them are now housed in refugee camps and detention centers. Escaping from Burma is dangerous: The boats are built for fishing, but are not designed to transport people from one country to another. But, often enough, the Rohingya have no other option to flee Burma.

Smugglers demand up to $1,000 for the transportation of Rohingya people, who have no rights in Burma. Although the Rohingya would rather go to countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, the coasts of Bangladesh or the beaches of Thailand are often the first and last port of call.

Between Burma’s neighboring countries Thailand and Bangladesh, there are human-trafficking gangs that "supply" the entire south-east Asian region. Police officers from Burma and other countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia and India are involved in the human-trafficking. The Rohingya may not move freely due to their lawless state; but by paying bribes they can reach the Burmese coast and get in touch with smugglers.

During the trip, the Rohingya are forced to remain in the same position for several days. Often, they are exposed to physical violence by the crew. Women are separated from their male relatives and brought to the upper deck of the boat, where they are often raped. Those who ask for water are thrown overboard to drown.

Once ashore, a new nightmare begins. Thus, Rohingya who arrive in Thailand are brought to internment camps or are sold to traffickers straight away. According to newspaper reports, Thai employees of the immigration authorities can ask the traffickers to pay about 300 dollars for a Rohingya. Only half a day away from Phuket by boat – a popular tourist paradise – there are several camps that are under control of the traffickers. In these camps, Rohingya are held captive until they can either be sold to fishing boats or farms or set free for a ransom payment. Those who are lucky enough are brought to Malaysia, Indonesia or Australia if they pay exorbitant sums.

Rohingya who have only little or no money left at all, are put under pressure by the traffickers to try and gain the trust of other Rohingya in the government-led camps in Thailand. After paying bribes, the traffickers have free access to government-led detention camps and shelters, where they recruit or kidnap Rohingya. Frequently, criminal gangs promise the Rohingya a safe place to live, the reunion with their family, a job or even identity documents. Women and children that are left on their own are especially dependent on a reunion with their families and the most vulnerable ones. They are often kidnapped by those who promise to bring them to their families or to Malaysia for free.
The Rohingya People in Burma

In Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugees live in miserable conditions. Registered and unregistered refugee camps are breeding grounds for crime: women, men and children are victims of sex trafficking. They are abused as domestic slaves or are pressured into forced labor.

Despite frequent reports of abductions and sexual violence in the refugee camps, the Bangladeshi authorities do nothing to investigate the allegations because the victims are stateless and disenfranchised subjects.

In the country, women are not only threatened by rapists: they are compelled into forced marriages or used as domestic slaves. Due to the extremely poor living conditions, many Rohingya flee from Bangladesh to India in search of a better life.

Forced by strict border controls and due to their statelessness, the Rohingya once again find themselves in a situation where they have to contact traffickers or corrupt policemen to get to India. In India, they are only able to find poorly paid work such as in factories for walnut packaging in the Indian-controlled Kashmir. Since the Rohingya have no documents, they have to pay large sums in bribes to police checks. If they have no money, they go to jail. Sometimes, the police even take Rohingya women as payment, separating them from their families.

In Malaysia – and Indonesia as well – human trafficking is a big problem. Once the Rohingya arrive at the shore or the moment they are discovered by the authorities at sea, they are taken to internment camps for illegal immigrants, just as in Thailand. The camps are overcrowded: the men sleep in rooms together with dozens of other prisoners and may only leave it for taking meals. Rohingya refugees only have two choices left: they can either register at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which however can take up to three years. Or, with the help of traffickers or corrupt police officers, they escape from the camps. Since they have no identity papers and are without rights, they are dependent on criminals, because there are no legal work opportunities for them – except from the informal sector, as construction workers, domestic servants or at local markets. They cannot negotiate their wages or prosecute their employer if they aren’t paid. Most Rohingya must still pay the smugglers who transported them. Others try to save money to try and get their relatives to join them.

Human trafficking is a transnational crime. In addition to the signing of international agreements and conventions, it is also important that the international community works together closely. Strict laws against human trafficking are not enough. The crime of
human trafficking cannot effectively be treated only by short-termed laws – but only by establishing and maintaining international standards as well.

None of the Asian countries has signed the Refugee Convention of 1951. Without legal protection and international aid, traffickers may freely allure victims. Even without signing the Refugee Convention, these countries could offer a minimum of protection for the refugees and not send them back to the countries where they are severely persecuted. The Rohingya are stateless. Their lack of rights does not stop at the state borders of Burma; it follows the Rohingya into the countries in which they seek protection. Without citizenship rights and international protection they are easy prey for traffickers.

6. Demands of the Society for Threatened Peoples

The Society for Threatened Peoples demand that:

- The human rights violations against the Rohingya must be punished. The Rohingya must be protected by the state authorities;

- The government must launch a campaign for religious tolerance;

- The Burmese government must repeal the Citizenship Act of 1982 and grant the Rohingya citizenship rights;

- The Burmese government has to publicly criticize, not praise, extremist movements that foment the hatred between religions. The 969 movement must be banned;

- Human rights violations against the Rohingya must be investigated independently. Journalists must have free access to the places where human rights violations take place;

- The persons responsible for human rights violations must be brought to justice. The Burmese judiciary must fight impunity for human rights violations;

- Aid agencies and the United Nations must get free access to the Rohingya that are distressed and in need of assistance.

7. What can you do yourself?
Many might ask this question after they heard or read about the Rohingya. We would like to give you a few tips:

1) Inform: Tell others about the Rohingya. This minority, even if it is considered as the world's most severely threatened one, is not very well known. So, please help to make the Rohingya known. Tell your friends about the Rohingya.

2) Visit our Facebook page about the Rohingya (www.facebook.com/rightsbehindyou), click on "I like" and share this page with your friends and acquaintances. On this page you may find plenty of information about the Rohingya and the issue of human rights. You can support our photo campaign, in which you may upload your own photo plus a slogan.

3) Support The Society for Threatened Peoples and other human rights organizations in their struggle against discrimination and the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities and of indigenous communities.