



Rohingya Muslim women and children sit in a boat after they were intercepted by the Bangladesh Border Guard members in Teknaf, Bangladesh. (EPA/Stringer)

# Stateless Rohingya

An Interfaith Cooperation Forum Dossier on Burma's Rohingya Minority

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# Introduction

Amnesty International recently wrote the Rohingya Muslim minority of Burma are the most oppressed refugee group in the world. Other non-governmental organizations have called their plight the South Asian equivalent of the Holocaust.

The Rohingya are people with no homes or citizenship. The Burmese government disputes the Rohingya's status as citizens, and passed a law in 1982 to deny their citizenship. Rohingya people are among the world's least wanted refugees, and are rejected everywhere they seek safety. Many live in limbo across Southeast Asia.

Three years ago, religious and ethnic tensions escalated between the Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists, who hold the majority in Burma. The result was widespread and deadly rioting. The violence persists, and an estimated 140,000 people are internally displaced within Burma. 86,000 have made the harrowing journey to neighbouring countries where they often live in fear of being discovered and sent back to their violent homeland.

The purpose of this dossier is to heighten awareness of the status of Rohingya people in Burma. It is not a complete case study, but rather a collection of media articles, videos, and reports from non-governmental organizations. The Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) is an organization committed to building true peace, which cannot exist without social, political, and economic justice, or "justpeace."

Following this dossier, we have included a statement or position paper highlighting the issues of religious extremism, national and ethnic identity, the politically diverse landscape that this plays out on, and how this affects our work as an interfaith peacebuilding organization.

**Disclaimer** While the official name of the country is now Myanmar, many people, especially those living along the Thai/Burma border, still use the old name of Burma. The military did not consult with the people when they changed the name to Myanmar in 1989 and thus the change does not represent the will of the people. Furthermore, many feel that the name change was a ploy by the military junta to convince the international community the diverse peoples of the country are now united as one. Indigenous communities want to make it clear the issues for which they have been struggling these many years have not yet been addressed and so there is no unity in the country.

To show respect to these indigenous groups still struggling for equality in the country, ICF chooses to call the country “Burma” in this document, unless we are quoting a document or report that uses the new name.

## Background

### Burma’s Development Status

According to the UN’s Human Development Report for 2014, Burma (named in the report as Myanmar) is ranked 148 out of 188 countries and territories. Its HDI value is 0.536 (Myanmar, Human Development Report 2015), whereas Hong Kong, which ranks 12th, holds an HDI value of 0.910.

### Language

The Rohingya are a Sunni Muslim minority in Burma who speak the ethnic Rohingya language - an Indo-European language associated with Bengali. Many live in western Burma. The majority reside in the northern part of Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal, which, according to Google Maps, is the area highlighted in red (Safdar, “Who are the Rohingya?”).

### Population

Estimates for how many Rohingya Muslims live there vary, but most hover between one million and 1.5 million. Another several hundred thousand have fled Burma in favour of Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Thailand or Malaysia.



### Ethnic origins

The Arkan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) says the Rohingya have been in Burma “from time immemorial,” however they do not have documentation to prove it. The Burmese government disputes their citizenship (ARNO, “Facts about the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan”) and claims they are actually Bengali, a term which implies they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, not indigenous to the Rakhine state (Ferrie, “Myanmar gives citizenship to 209 displaced Muslims, including Rohingya”).

# Denial of Citizenship

In 1982, the Burma government issued a law that only grants citizenship to those who settled in the country before 1823, that is, the year of the first British military campaign on Burma and with it, a wave of immigration from India and China (“The Burma Citizenship Act”, Harvard Divinity School). Minority groups who want to be officially recognized have to present documents that prove their ancestors lived in Burma for at least 60 years. The law is deeply problematic, as paperwork is often unavailable or is denied to Rohingyas. As a result, the Muslim minority is not considered one of the country’s 135 ethnic groups (Safdir, “Who are the Rohingya”).

The law was enacted as part of a series of actions taken by the nationalist Burmese government meant to increase Burmese ethnic power. The law created three categories of citizenship: pink, blue, and green (“Discrimination in Arakan,” Human Rights Watch). The pink category applied to ethnic Burmans, and members of the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Arakan Buddhists, Shan, and any other ethnic group present in the country prior to 1823 (with the exception of Rohingya), and granted them full citizenship (“The Burma Citizenship Act”, Harvard Divinity School).

The second category, or blue, granted partial citizenship to children of mixed marriages where one parent had pink citizenship, as well as to individuals who had lived in Burma for five consecutive years, or to individuals who lived in the country for eight out of the ten years prior to independence. These citizens could earn an income, but could not serve in political office. The third category applied to the offspring of immigrants who arrived in Burma during the period of British colonial rule (“The Burma Citizenship Act”, Harvard Divinity School).

Children born of non-citizens, like Rohingya, are denied Burmese citizenship. In order for a child to attain citizenship, at least one parent must already hold citizenship (“Discrimination in Arakan,” Human Rights Watch).

According to the International State Crime Institute which operates out of Queen Mary University in London, this “stigmatisation and dehumanisation” was a “key moment in re-positioning the Rohingya outside the state’s sphere of responsibility” and the start of the process of genocide (Green, MacManus, de la Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*, 53).

## A lack of rights

As a result, Rohingya don't have the same rights as citizens in Burma. Their rights to vote, work, study, travel, marry, practice their religion, and access health services are restricted ("Discrimination in Arakan, "Human Rights Watch).

In 2014, the Burmese presented a controversial plan to solve the issue. It said Rohingya people can seek citizenship if they change their ethnicity to Bangladeshi. Many Rohingya reject this idea as it implies admission the group is illegal (Ferrie, "Myanmar gives citizenship to 209 displaced Muslims, including Rohingya").

Burma has been criticized widely for not granting the Rohingya citizenship.

### International scrutiny

In 1993 Yozo Yakota, the U.N. special rapporteur, called on the Burmese government to "abolish its over-burdensome requirements for citizens in a manner which has discriminatory effects on racial or ethnic minorities."

The UNHCR has also called on the country to review its citizenship laws. It has even offered financial, technical, and legal support for the country. To date, the ruling party has made no progress in addressing this legal obstacle for the Rohingya.



A man walks through a burnt Rohingya village in June of 2012. (Reuters)

# Escalating Violence

The Rohingya face violence on top of their restricted rights and liberties. It began to escalate in 2012 when waves of deadly violence inundated the Rakhine state ("Why is there communal violence in Myanmar?" BBC). Local disputes and accusations of sexual assaults brought the regional conflict to a boiling point.

## Communal Violence

In June widespread rioting and clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims left 200 dead and displaced thousands. According to the BBC, the tragic rape of a young Buddhist woman sparked the deadly chain of events ("Why Is There Communal Violence in Myanmar?" BBC).

A year later in March 2013 an argument in a gold shop in Meiktila once again led to violence between Buddhist and Muslims left entire neighbourhoods destroyed and more than 40 people dead (Ibid).

Five months later a Muslim man was arrested and accused of raping a Buddhist woman. Police refused to hand him over to rioters, so the rioters burnt Muslim-owned houses and shops in Kanbalu (Ibid).

In January of 2014, the UN reported that 40 Rohingya men, women, and children were killed in the Rakhine state. This violence apparently stemmed from the unfounded accusation that Rohingyas had killed a Rakhine policeman (Ibid).

And in June of the same year, two were killed and five hurt in Mandalay following a rumour spread on social media that, once again, a Buddhist woman was raped by one or more Muslim men (Ibid).

## Police Collusion

According to Human Rights Watch, the aforementioned abuses against Rohingya muslims are sometimes occurring with the help of the authorities. Local police, the military, and a border security force known as Nasaka have committed numerous abuses in predominantly Muslim townships in 2012. (Human Rights Watch, Burma: Mass Arrests, Raids on Rohingya Muslims) Local police and the Nasaka, claiming to be searching for Rohingya criminal suspects involved in the sectarian strife, have conducted mass round-ups of Rohingya.

In some cases, local authorities and police have been involved in committing violence against Rohingya communities alongside Arakan groups. These include killings and beatings, and burning down Muslim homes and villages (Human Rights Watch, Burma: Mass Arrests, Raids on Rohingya Muslims).

In several villages, police and Nasaka security forces dragged Rohingya from their homes and violently beat them. Witnesses in villages outside of Maungdaw told Human Rights that dozens of people, including women and children, were taken away in mid-June in Nasaka trucks to unknown locations, and have not been heard from since. Mass arrests of Rohingya have also taken place in other townships, including Buthidaung and Rathedaung. Witnesses in Maungdaw township described several instances in which Arakan men wielding sticks and swords accompanied the security forces in raids on Rohingya villages.



A Rohingya village that was set on fire during riots in 2012. (United to End Genocide)

## Genocide

Many non-governmental organizations and governmental bodies have named Burma's treatment of the Rohingya minority the middle stages of a genocide. These organizations warn the final stages are imminent and the international community must act to protect the vulnerable people in Burma.

### What is Genocide?

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the word "Genocide" didn't exist before 1944. Prior to that time, the widespread killings of Armenians and European Jews had taken place, but there was no name for the atrocities, and as a result there were not any international laws that the UN could use to intervene. In 1944 genocide was finally defined as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: Killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (USHMM, "What is Genocide?").

According to Daniel Feierstein, there are six stages of genocide: stigmatization (and dehumanization), harassment, violence and terror; isolation and segregation; systematic weakening; mass annihilation, and symbolic enactment involving the removal of the victim group from the collective history (Countdown to Annihilation, International State

Crime Initiative). Research from the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI) of Queen Mary University of London has found evidence of the first four stages of genocide in the country and believes the following two stages are imminent (Green, MacManus, de la Cour Venning, *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*).

### Stage One: Dehumanization

ISCI believes the first stage of stigmatization and dehumanization started more than 30 years ago when the Burmese government essentially made the Rohingya a “non-people” through their citizenship laws (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 56). Since then the government refers to them as “Bengali” and refuses to use the term Rohingya. On numerous occasions, government bodies espoused anti-Islamic, anti-Rohingya narratives in which they stigmatized Rohingya as illegal Bengali immigrants with questionable morals and violent tendencies. The anti-Rohingya rhetoric isn’t a thing of the past -- it continues to be spread.

In a leaked military presentation for use in training cadets in Burma about working with Muslims is revealing. Under the heading ‘Bengali Muslims’ it claims the following:

- They infiltrate the people to propagate their religion.
- Their population increases by way of mass illegal immigration.
- They take advantage of Burmese people whenever there is an opportunity (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 55)

The hateful narratives are spread by governmental representatives, the military, but also some of the most powerful religious leaders.

### Support from the “Sangha”

He calls himself the Burmese Bin Laden, but his real name is Wirathu. He’s among those who are stoking religious hatred across the country. Wirathu warns that Muslims “target innocent Burmese girls and rape them”, and “indulge in cronyism” (Hodal, “Buddhist monk uses racism and rumours to spread hatred in Burma”). Wirathu presides over 2,500 monks at the Masoeyein monastery in Burma and has a great deal of influence with the Buddhist majority in Burma. The 500,000 monks in the country are collectively known as the Sangha. Under the leadership of Wirathu, they campaign for race and religious purity.

The Ma Ba Tha movement and the 969 campaign are two of the most prominent nationalistic movements within the Sangha. Both are very extreme in their anti-Islamic narratives and encourage an apartheid state. In the 969 campaign, ethnic Burmese Buddhists are encouraged to “buy Buddhist and shop Buddhist”, to mark their homes and business using numbers related to the Buddha. The number 969 refers to Buddha’s nine attributes, the six attributes of his teaching, and the nine attributes of the Buddhist order (Ibid). Ma Ba Tha, a powerful nationalist grouping of monks, was established in

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2015 and delivers sensationalized sermons about Islam overtaking the Buddhist country (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 63).

Because of the years of hateful rhetoric spread by the nation's most powerful people and organizations, harassment, violence and terror against the Rohingya is widely accepted.

### Stage Two: Harassment, Violence and Terror

Burma's Rohingya population faces institutionalized discrimination and are constantly under state surveillance. The population faces strict race and religion laws meant to curb the religious activity and even population growth.

In 2005 Rohingya Muslims were restricted to having two children and in 2013 the policy was renewed. The discriminatory two-child rule has been enforced alongside regulations that require Rohingya couples seeking to marry to obtain permission from the authorities by paying hefty bribes. Couples often have to wait for extended periods, sometimes as long as two years, before receiving permission. Officials have also forced many women to undergo pregnancy tests as part of the marriage application process (Human Rights Watch, Burma: Revoke 'Two-Child Policy' For Rohingya).

The discrimination against Rohingya went further in 2012 where rallies against Muslims took a bloody turn, as mentioned earlier in the dossier. According to ISCI interviews with Rakhine Buddhist perpetrators suggests "the conflict involved planned, highly organised state-sanctioned attacks" (*Countdown to Annihilations*, 74). It appears that no perpetrators of these attacks have faced legal action of any kind. A general of the Rakhine state said "It happened at night time so there is no evidence" (ibid). Many years of dehumanizing rhetoric from monks, the government, and the military contributed to the violence.

### Stage Three: Isolation and Segregation

ICF recognizes there are many internally displaced ethnic groups in Burma who have a lack of rights, but Rohingya face exceptional isolation and segregation. In 2013 the Rakhine State Action Plan set out six-point plan with the primary aim to control and contain the Rohingya population. The plan moves to increase border security, prevent "illegal aliens" from entering Burma, preventing further violence in the state, and restoring stability and calm.

To do this, the government has erected more fences, forced Rohingya into detention camps and prison villages. Segregation between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya is not technically enforced, but they basically live in a ghetto. There are rigid travel restrictions for Rohingya as they must gain permission to travel between towns. Rohingya also face extreme danger outside of the ghetto, so many don't feel safe to leave (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 83).

Many Rohingya are forced to live in squalid camps, supposedly for their own protection, however, inside they succumb to starvation, disease and despair. (Motlagh, "These Aren't Refugee Camps, They're Concentration Camps and People Are Dying in Them")



An unregistered Rohingya camp in the Sittwe camp complex. (ISCI)

### Stage Four: Systematic Weakening

According to ISCI, “Rohingya have been systematically weakened – physically, psychologically and collectively – to such an extent that their agency and purposefulness has effectively been destroyed” (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 90).

This has been “orchestrated” as ISCI says, through planned illness, hunger, loss of livelihood and the removal of basic human rights (Ibid). Rohingya are denied even basic health care, and as a result of living in squalid camps, ghettos, and prison villages with little access to food, death by disease and starvation is rampant.

In addition to this weakening due to illness and hunger, the Rohingya suffer “sporadic and unpunished violence, torture and killings. As a result the Rohingya have effectively been deprived of the capacity to organise politically, to campaign, protest or otherwise resist the policies of the State” (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 90), thus weakening their agency and purposefulness as previously mentioned.

### The Final Stages are Imminent

According to the ISCI, the Rohingya are looking down the barrel of the gun and facing the final stages of genocide. “Decades of persecution have taken on a new and intensified form since mass killings in 2012. The marked escalation in State-sponsored stigmatisation, discrimination, violence and segregation, and the systematic weakening of the community, make precarious the very existence of the Rohingya” (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 99).

There are startling parallels between the treatment of Rohingyas and other cases of genocide, the report also states. The 'othering' of the Rohingya as outsiders illegal Bengali immigrants and potential terrorists, and the campaigns of race and religious hatred is reminiscent of Germany in the 1930s and Rwanda in the early 1990s (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 99)

For instance, in Rwanda, the state mobilized ordinary Hutus to commit mass murder of Tutsis through propaganda, terror techniques, and the elimination of moderate Hutus and political opposition. Similarly, in Burma the Sangha is stigmatizing the Rohingya to such an extent that daily violence against the ethnic group is a reality (Ibid.).

Likewise, in both Germany and Rwanda identity cards noting the bearer's ethnicity or religious background were important ways to implement the respective genocides. While the vast majority Rohingya don't have identity cards, that denotes they are people without the rights inherent in citizenship (*Countdown to Annihilation*, 100). Given these parallels with other genocides and the evidence of current ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, the probability the final two stages of genocide will take place is likely, unless something is done to protect the Rohingya.



Rescued migrants weep upon arrival in Sim pang Tiga, Aceh province, Indonesia Wednesday, May 20, 2015. (AP Photo/Binsar Bakkara)

## Fleeing from Horrors

Conditions are so bad for the Rohingya in Burma that as many as one in ten are making dangerous sea voyages to seek shelter elsewhere. Unfortunately for the Rohingya, their home country doesn't want them, nor do many of the surrounding countries. Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia closed their borders in 2015 (Holmes, Rohingya in Burma: claim that one in ten have fled on boats).

### Unwelcome Migrants

Rohingya are often kept in detention camps along the Thai border with Malaysia when they're smuggled from Burma. In 2015, Thailand cracked down on these illegal camps, shaking the trade and making it too risky for "people smugglers" to dock (Ibid).

Some of these smugglers abandoned their human cargo in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, leaving Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants thirsty and exposed. The UNHCR believed about 2000 people were stranded on these boats (Ibid).

Following the crackdown, more than one hundred Rohingya were rescued off the coast of Indonesia by Muslim fishermen who found them starving, scared, and exhausted. The Rohingya, who included 140 women and children, were "totally exhausted" after being repeatedly towed out of Thai waters and then forced at gunpoint to leave Malaysian waters, said Chris Lewa, whose Arakan Project monitors migrant journeys across the Bay of Bengal (Marletta, "Fishermen wept as they rescued starving migrants off Indonesia").

There are thousands of Rohingya who face this same fate.



Aung San Suu Kyi with Thorbjorn Jagland, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, in Oslo during her Nobel Lecture. (Daniel Sannum Lauten/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images)

## Hope for the Future?

It's well established the Burmese government, military, along with the very powerful Buddhist monk group Sangha are responsible for spreading hate speech for many years and authorizing violence against Rohingya since about 2012. The country's previous president Thein Sein took office in 2011 and was praised for sweeping reforms, however improving the Rohingya humanitarian crisis was not a part of his agenda, in fact, he was actually anti-Rohingya (Safdar, "Who are the Rohingya?").

During the latest election, 15 Rohingya candidates were barred from running on account of their parents being foreign-born (Bengali). Furthermore, 700,000 people, mostly Rohingya, were disenfranchised when it declared holders of "white cards" ineligible to vote. The cards had been issued as temporary identification documents, and white card holders had been permitted to vote in the 2010 election (Safdar, "Who are the Rohingya?")

The Burmese people elected Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party to replace Thein Sein as leader of the country in 2015 and many have expressed hopes she will take steps to include ethnic minorities and settle the many conflicts plaguing the country. Unfortunately, Burma's beacon of human rights isn't blameless in this genocide.

Silence from "The Lady"

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In 1991, Suu Kyi won the Nobel Peace Prize. In her acceptance speech, she said, "My party, the National League for Democracy, and I stand ready and willing to play any role in the process of national reconciliation... Ultimately our aim should be to create a world free from the displaced, the homeless and the hopeless" (Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize 1991).

Even Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in a Guardian article that the people of Burma "desperately need the kind of moral and principled leadership that Aung San Suu Kyi would provide" (Tutu, Desmond Tutu: my tribute to Burma's opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi).

However, the newly elected leader has not lived up to the hype since receiving the Nobel. She has not challenged, and has actually endorsed the anti-Rohingya rhetoric in the past. According to ISCI, "there is, as a result, no effective counter-narrative within Myanmar that challenges government propaganda and defends and asserts the existence of the Rohingya" (Countdown to Annihilation, 55).

Despite her status as a moral icon, "her refusal to condemn, or even fully acknowledge, the state-sponsored repression of her fellow countrymen and women, not to mention the violence meted out to them by Buddhist extremists inspired by the monk Ashin Wirathu (aka "The Burmese Bin Laden"). makes her part of the problem, not the solution" (Hasan, "Aung Saan Suu Kyi's Inexcusable Silence").

Concerns have also been raised that "The Lady" blames the victims, namely the Rohingya, for exacerbating the situation. In an interview with the BBC, she denied Muslims in the country have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, but said the violence in the country is due to a climate of fear. "I think the problem is due to the fear felt by both sides... Muslims have been targeted but Buddhists have also been subjected to violence," she said. "This fear is what is leading to all this trouble" (BBC News, "Suu Kyi blames Burma violence on 'Climate of Fear'").

Suu Kyi and the NLD will take power in March. In late January she met with local leaders and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken who pointed out there is an urgent need to make sure the new government respects the human rights of all people when it takes power in March.

Suu Kyi is taking some action to end festering conflicts between Burma's military and armed ethnic groups, and "promises to strengthen fragile democratic institutions and bring economic opportunity to Myanmar's people" ("Ending the Horror of Myanmar's Abuse of Muslims," New York Times). So far she has named three members of parliament of ethnic minorities, though none from the Rohingya minority ("Aung San Suu Kyi's Party Names 3 Ethnic Minority MPs to Myanmar's New Parliament," The Straits Times).

Prior to Suu Kyi's leadership, the United States put economic sanctions in place to deter the government from abusing human rights to such an extent. These sanctions are still in place.



Undernourished Rohingya are a common sight at concentration camps in Sittwe, Myanmar. (Tomas Munita/The New York Times)

## Position Paper

We at the Interfaith Cooperation Forum want to begin our position paper by stating our support for the existence of the Rohingya in their home country and their rights. We also wholeheartedly condemn the persecution of Rohingyas, including the ethnic violence, crimes against humanity, and genocide against them. In the strongest possible terms, we urge the new government of Burma, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), to

give equal rights and opportunities to the ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya. We also call upon the international community to put pressure on the government of Burma to protect the rights of the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities in the country.

ICF recognizes the world is in crisis. According to the UNHCR's annual Global Trends Report: World at War says the number of people displaced



by war has reached a “staggering new high” (UNHCR, Worldwide displacement hits all time high). At the end of 2014, 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced, compared to 51.2 million a year earlier (Ibid). Globally, one in every 122 humans is either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. Since 2013, Burma is among the countries of the world producing the most displaced people, as the graph adjacent indicates (Mid-Year Trends, June 2015, UNHCR). Aside from the Rohingya, there are many other ethnic groups living in camps including the Karen, Kachin, and Shan people.

Violence due to religious extremism is one of the reasons so many people are displaced from their homes. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus alike are committing atrocities in the name of their religions.

ICF believes in seeing one another -- even those who are different from ourselves -- as siblings. We believe in the transformative power of interfaith dialogue because we have seen people shake hands when they used to point guns. We have seen people become friends when they used to be enemies.

We at ICF know there are millions of refugees in the Middle East due to the crisis in Syria and Iraq and extremist groups in the area, not to mention many displaced by violence elsewhere in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. ICF affirms the humanity, rights, and dignities of all people, no matter their geographical location, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or ability.

We are all humans and all deserve support in our times of need. Let us open our hearts to see the humanity in one another.

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