

Trump provides new fuel for Myanmar's Rohingya genocide

Trump's UN speech railing against migration gave a green light to repressive regimes everywhere to target minorities



By PHAR KIM BENG And LUTHFY HAMZAH

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Rohingya refugees reflected in rain water along an embankment next to paddy fields after fleeing from Myanmar into Palang Khali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh November 2, 2017. Photo: Asia Times Files / Reuters / Hannah McKay

When US President Donald Trump addressed the United Nations General Assembly on its 80th anniversary, his rallying cry against the “[globalist migration agenda](#)” gave a gift to regimes bent on exclusionary nationalism everywhere.

For Myanmar, which has long pursued [a strategy of rendering the Rohingya stateless and unwanted](#), the speech was more than rhetorical—it was legitimizing.

Trump urged nations to close borders, expel foreigners and guard against migrants “you’ve never seen before, that you have nothing in common with.” He [painted migration as an existential threat](#), warning of countries being “ruined” or “destroyed” by outsiders.

Such framing, delivered from the podium of the United Nations, cannot be dismissed as mere political theater. It carries symbolic weight, suggesting that great powers will not only tolerate but may tacitly endorse such exclusionary measures.

For Myanmar’s military generals, who for decades have denied the Rohingya citizenship and rights, Trump’s language is validation. The Rohingya’s marginalization is deeply rooted.

Since the [1982 Citizenship Law](#), they have been stripped of recognition as one of Myanmar’s “national races,” rendering them stateless in their own homeland. Successive governments have labeled them “[Bengali](#)” interlopers from Bangladesh, despite the group’s presence in Myanmar’s western Rakhine state for centuries.

Over time, legal exclusion escalated into systemic violence. On [August 25, 2017](#), Myanmar’s military launched a brutal “clearing” campaign in Rakhine, marked by mass killings, widespread sexual violence and the burning of villages.

Within weeks, over 700,000 Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, joining hundreds of thousands already displaced in previous waves of persecution.

[Human Rights Watch](#) has since documented how, eight years on, the Rohingya remain trapped between refugee camps in Bangladesh and apartheid-like conditions in Myanmar, with no justice, no freedom and no path to citizenship. Several credible organizations, not least the [US government](#) itself, have branded the persecution a “genocide.”

By rebranding chauvinistic expulsion as national self-preservation, Myanmar’s military rulers now find a powerful international voice of support in Trump. When the leader of the world’s most powerful nation normalizes the idea of expelling foreigners, authoritarian regimes everywhere will hear permission.

They will calculate that [international norms have shifted](#), that condemnation of expulsion may be muted and that human rights obligations are now optional, not mandatory. For persecuted minorities like the Rohingya, the implications of Trump’s speech are chilling if not fatal.

The UN, established to [uphold human dignity](#), risks being repurposed into a stage for justifying its erosion. International law rests not only on treaties and institutions but also on the power of precedent and example.

If the norm of protecting minorities is abandoned at the rhetorical level, it erodes the will to act at the policy level. Trump’s speech, therefore, is not just a domestic political message; it is a global signal that undermines decades of fragile progress on human rights.

Myanmar’s generals, of course, do not require external encouragement to repress the Rohingya. [Its policies](#) of forced displacement, denial of citizenship and violent crackdowns predate Trump’s return to the presidency.

Yet external affirmation matters. It will necessarily embolden the generals, reduce their fear of isolation and complicate the efforts of ASEAN, the UN and humanitarian actors to hold Myanmar accountable. In geopolitics, perception shapes behavior as much as capability.

The broader danger is that Trump’s speech contributes to a global climate where scapegoating the vulnerable becomes politically defensible. Across regions, governments facing [economic crises or security dilemmas](#) may find it easier to blame migrants or minorities. The Rohingya’s plight then becomes part of a wider trend—the normalization of expulsion as statecraft.

This is precisely why rhetoric at the UN matters. Words from its podium are not just fleeting soundbites; they are signals that shape norms. In the 20th century, leaders used the General Assembly to rally against [apartheid](#), to [denounce colonialism](#) and to [call for global solidarity](#). Today, the same stage risks being used to justify exclusion and persecution.

ASEAN, in particular, cannot afford to be silent. Myanmar is part of the regional community, and its treatment of the Rohingya undermines ASEAN’s credibility as a body committed to peace and stability.

When the language of a major power seems to embolden policies of expulsion, ASEAN must [reaffirm its own principles of inclusivity and human dignity](#). Otherwise, the region risks complicity by silence.

Trump's UN speech may have been aimed at shoring up his domestic political base, but its international consequences will likely be far-reaching. For Myanmar, it sounded like a green light. For the Rohingya, it deepened the shadows of uncertainty.

For the international community, it was a reminder that words can empower either protection or persecution. Governments and multilateral organizations everywhere have a choice: to allow the normalization of expulsion or to defend the universality of rights.

In this sense, Trump's address was not just another fiery speech. It was a moment that will embolden those who see minorities as targets. Myanmar is already acting on this logic. The world must decide whether to challenge it—or to allow Trump's regrettable rhetoric to imperil the world's most vulnerable.

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