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Reviews:
**The Hidden Genocide: Humanizing the Struggle of the Muslim
Rohingya of Myanmar**

By Amie Bauer

“Only God knows how much we were tortured,” shares a Muslim Rohingya refugee as he recounts his experience of the genocide being waged on his community. Although these atrocities will never receive the international coverage they deserve, Al Jazeera Investigates’ powerful documentary, *The Hidden Genocide*, gave voices and faces to the genocide of the Muslim Rohingya community in Myanmar despite the government’s attempts to conceal this tragedy.

The Myanmar government has actively worked to silence journalists and to prevent the dissemination of information. On July 10th, 2014, five journalists were sentenced to ten years hard labor for disclosing information about an alleged chemical weapons factory, and on October 17th, 2014, another five journalists were jailed for reporting an activist group’s claim that opposition should replace the ruling government. These actions and others have earned Myanmar a rank of 145 out of 180 countries in the 2014 World Press Freedom Index.

The Hidden Genocide was also subject to government censorship. Its honest and unfavorable portrayal of the Myanmar government’s involvement in the genocide, including revelations of secret memorandum of detailed plans and systematic government action to eliminate the Rohingya population, was met with a formal rebuke from Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “The government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar strongly opposes and rejects the attempt made by Al Jazeera to broadcast the documentary by exaggerating and fabricating the incidents in Rakhine State.”

The Hidden Genocide is a success and a must-see because it allows viewers to witness the struggles of the Rohingya people through their own voices. It uses powerful interviews from both the Rohingya and the Rakhine community to create a narrative of the genocide and a portrayal of the current struggle of the Rohingya. Finally, the film demands governmental transparency and accountability by advocating that the term genocide be used to characterize the violence towards and systematic eradication of the Rohingya people.

Summary of the Conflict

The Muslim Rohingya are a distinct ethnicity who lived primarily in southwest Myanmar. The Rohingya trace their heritage back to neighboring Bangladesh from where they migrated to Myanmar during colonial British rule of the subcontinent. Though the Rohingya have lived on these lands now for generations, the controlling majority of Myanmar rejects them and views them as illegal immigrants. Due to the ethnic and religious conflicts, the Buddhist community in the same area distinguished themselves from the Bengali Muslims by referring to themselves as the Rakhine.

In May of 2012, a twenty-seven-year-old woman belonging to the Rakhine community was raped and murdered. Shortly after the attack, three Muslim men were

charged for the crime. Despite the arrests, graphic photos of the young woman were spread over the Internet, as were the rumors of a secret Rohingya plan to harm the Rakhine. As tensions continued to rise, ten Muslim men who were taking a bus through a conservative Rakhine town were stopped by a crowd of nearly three hundred people, forced off the bus and beaten to death.

Again graphic pictures of the violence were spread, and the animosity grew between the communities. In response, the Myanmar/Burma government banned Friday prayers at the Mosque. However, Rohingya ignored the ban and gathered at the Mosque to pray. In response, the police and NaSaKa, a military force whose purpose is to control the Rohingya, came armed, and violence broke out. Easily hundreds, more likely thousands, of people in the Rohingya community were killed over the following months.

The Documentary's Portrayal

Beginning with the tragic rape of the twenty-seven-year-old Rakhine woman in May 2012, *The Hidden Genocide* takes the audience through the genocide chronologically, mirroring the escalation of the religious conflict, all while expertly weaving in the narratives of both the Rohingya and Rakhine people. The documentary allows the Rohingya people to tell the story of the genocide giving the film authenticity, while also humanizing the violence through the voices and faces of children, fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters.

The documentary also interviews Jannat Ara, who shares what she can remember of being raped by twenty men. After her attack, she shares how she was smuggled into Bangladesh and finally received medical care in Chittagong, where she ultimately died due to her injuries. We listen to a young girl describe the horror of watching her cousins being picked up and thrown into fires. We listen to an elderly man who was captured, tortured, and escaped. We listen to a father who was severely beaten in his home as his wife and children watched helpless. We know their names, their voices, their faces, their scars, and their pain. These sounds, images, and stories evoke empathy and create lasting impression on every viewer.

However, what may be the most interesting elements of the documentary are the narratives offered from the Rakhine community. In the wake of destruction, the documentary interviews members of the Rakhine community to narrate and explain what happened to the Rohingya. Just as the Rohingya are allowed to tell their story in their voices, the Rakhine are permitted to do the same.

In an interview with a Buddhist Monk, U Nan Daw Ba Tha, the monk explains that the Rohingya are to be blamed for their current situation. He states, "[t]he Bengalis set their homes on fire and then blamed Rakhines for doing so. Another thing is their guile. Rakhines are no match for Bengalis in deception. Bengalis can easily laugh and cry at the same time." Aye Maung, Kakhine, a member of the Rakhine Nationalist Development Party further explains that the Rohingya's actions are all part of a massive deception to seize power: "We believe they intend to seize land, fabricate facts and make our state their own."

Additionally, the film does an excellent job of portraying the current struggle of a now stateless Rohingya. Their homes and businesses were burned, and their families raped and killed. The Myanmar government considers them to be self-made refugees.

Without a home country, some have turned to the motherland of Bangladesh. They pay bribes and make dangerous trips in the middle of the night to reach Bangladesh. Unfortunately, there too, they are unwanted and are categorized as illegal immigrants. *The Hidden Genocide* makes it clear these people physically do not have anywhere to go.

Lastly, the film strongly advocates for the violent experience of the Rohingya to be characterized as genocide. Professor William Schabas from the International Association of Genocide Scholars explains that the “persecution goes beyond racist oppression, but is aimed at the extermination of the group.” By preventing births and denying the identity of people, the history, the legitimacy of right to live where they live, the Myanmar government is strategically and systematically eliminating an entire population of the Muslim Rohingya. *The Hidden Genocide* demands government accountability through accurately employing the term genocide.

The Hidden Genocide's heartfelt narratives of surviving refugees, disturbing interviews with Rakhine leaders, and advocacy for the proper characterizing the government's actions as genocide make this a must-watch documentary.

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