

The Myanmar Conflict, by Charlotte Marlor, Lancaster University BA Hons student, 2018

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WARNING: In preparing for the role play scenario, students must only research the conflict using reputable mainstream media sources, such as The BBC, CNN, ITN, The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, etc. Briefing papers are provided to explain the broader context of the conflict.

Background and Context

- Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a sovereign state in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos and the People's Republic of China. Its capital city is Naypyidaw.
- **Environment:** About one third of Myanmar's total perimeter of 5,876 km (3,651 mi) forms an uninterrupted coastline of 1,930 km (1,200 mi) along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Although a naturally biodiverse area, Myanmar has recently had challenges with reports of high levels of deforestation, pollution and species extinction. Environmental concerns have been given low priority by the government.
- **Politics:** Myanmar has struggled to establish democratic structures amidst conflicting factions. The transition from a closely held military rule to a free democratic system is believed to have still be causing tension. State Secretary of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's, National League won the 2015 general election, which has raised hope for a successful culmination of the transition to democracy from a military controlled government. However, the military still holds a great amount of power with all top cabinet and ministry posts usually held by military officials. Myanmar currently rates on the Corruption Perceptions Index with a rank of 136th out of 176 countries worldwide, with 1st being least corrupt, as of 2016.
- **Culture:** Has a wide range of cultures between groups. The culture has been heavily influenced by Buddhism and the Mon people. British colonial rule has also influenced aspects of culture, including language and education.

Background to the Conflict

- Community tensions between Rohingya Muslims (an ethno-religious group) and Buddhists (who have a majority population) have been ongoing since before independence of Burma (Myanmar), when in 1948 the newly-formed government denied citizenship to the Rohingya people.
- It is thought that the conflict has displaced many, caused strain on neighbouring states and created the need for humanitarian assistance in surrounding areas. Recent clashes between the Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists have resulted in many deaths and it is alleged that over 123,000 have fled the area since August this year to Bangladesh, around 40,000 to India in the last decade, and 60,000 are settled in Malaysia. After placing strain on bordering countries, disputes have been caused about the rights of refugees to reside there.
- Rioting and violence between the Rohingya people, the Buddhist majority and the Myanmar government has ensued. Attacks by Rohingya groups on government authorities has been over disputes surrounding the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, in areas where the Rohingya people had a majority population, calling for separatism, while the state claimed them to have only Bangladeshi citizenship.
- The problem has intensified between the communities over citizenship. International reaction has recently focused on pressuring Aung San Suu Kyi to condemn the atrocities and address human-rights issues. Her power is restricted under the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, which places key ministries like home, border affairs and defence under military control and reserves 25 percent of seats in the Myanmar parliament for serving military officers.
- In this role play, each of the parties will attempt to influence a divided UN Security Council as it considers a response to the bloodshed. In what ways might states in the region and local actors within Myanmar and Bangladesh advance their interests? How should UN Security Council Members see their responsibilities?

Table 1: Population of Key Countries and religious composition

Country	Population	Religious Composition
Myanmar	52.89 million	90% Theravada Buddhist 4% Christian 4% Muslim 1% Hindu 1% Other
Malaysia	31.19 million	61.3% Muslim 20% Buddhist 9% Christian 7% Hindu 1% Other
Bangladesh	163 million	90% Muslim 9% Hindu 1% Buddhist and other
India	163 million	80% Hindu 14% Muslim 6% Other



Figure 1: Map of Myanmar and state borders. (UN: 2013)

Aims

- To improve understanding of the complexities of a current international conflict including the interactions and roles of the various actors.

Objectives

1. Researching and understanding the background to the Myanmar conflict and the nature of the participants involved.
2. Adopting the aims, roles and motivations of the country/organisation that is being represented.
3. Interacting with other actors in line with these aims, roles and motivations and acknowledging the potential implications of decisions that are taken.
4. Understanding and utilising of the role of the media in political communications.

5. Enabling reflection on the successes and failures of strategies adopted by each participant group.

Guidance to roles

Ideally, the role play is modelled for around 50 students divided between 10 groups. Preferably, this number should be divided evenly, (for example, 5 students in a group) with the exception of the **UN group which should have at least 7 students**.

However, the number of students participating can differ as groups can still operate well with 3 members and above. **Try to prioritise the International NGO, Media and Myanmar groups to have the designated number of at least 5 members** as there may be insufficient numbers to sustain these group activities with fewer than the ideal number.

If there are too few students to allocate the optimal numbers of students to each group, it is wise to reduce the number of groups. **Start by reducing/ withdrawing: India and Malaysia.**

Key Actors

External Organisations

United Nations

The UN's aim is to maintain international peace and security by being a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations, can offer advisory reports to states.

Special Rapporteurs representing the UN Human Rights Council: (2 or more students)

The Special rapporteurs should communicate between the different groups, collect information to report back to the UN Security Council.

Five Powers representing the UN Security Council: China, Russia, UK, USA, France: (5 or more students with 1 or more students representing each country)

Will have no access to official reports, must rely upon the information collected by the Special Rapporteurs on the situation and the report by the international NGO.

Security Council's objective is to decide upon policy response and the degree of intervention in the conflict. If the UN decides to intervene: there must be a unanimous verdict with no member of the UN Security council vetoing this decision. There must be a justification for this decision in a written report which will be published and distributed amongst groups.

International NGO

Aim: To move towards long-term sustainable peace. Interested in protecting human rights worldwide and creating reports on human rights violations which can then be used to gain media attention or impact policy responses.

Task: Prepare a report on the dynamics of the situation in Myanmar by communicating with all actors to create a picture of the situation. The report should include some suggestions for different groups for resolving the conflict. This should be distributed amongst all groups and to the UN Security Council.

Media

Role is to report on everything that happens, students are encouraged to be creative in the way media reports are delivered.

This can include reporting on NGO campaigns, conducting interviews with state representatives and representatives from ethno-religious groups in Myanmar. Can request short reports from the UN and NGO groups. Groups can go directly to the media with issues they would like to be reported.

External Countries

Aim: To stop the inflow of refugees from Myanmar coming into the country. To maintain regional security.

Willing to work between countries and other groups to come to a solution to implement policy and stop the crisis. Averse to intervention of Myanmar in the country.

Within countries groups can designate roles: Head of State, Press and Communications officer, Foreign Minister, Minister for External Affairs, Home Secretary.

- ***Bangladesh***
- ***Malaysia***
- ***India***

Internal Actors

Rohingya Muslim Representatives

Myanmar has refused citizenship to the Rohingya people, which has created frustration and anger among the Muslim community. In the 1950s, the minority defined its identity as the Rohingya, a community that was both Muslim and they believed belonged to Myanmar, an area they had been occupying for centuries although the government refused to recognise this. Currently living in Myanmar with the potential threat of violence, persecution and being made homeless.

Interests: Citizenship and equal rights in Myanmar, freedom from fear and securing immediate safety for refugees fleeing the conflict, gaining international support.

Myanmar Buddhist Representatives

Theravada Buddhists make up the majority population in Myanmar, there have been numerous violent conflicts with the minority Rohingya.

Aims: Upholding the interests of the majority population, maintaining international respect, unwilling to see the Rohingya gain citizenship and equal rights.

Myanmar Government and Military (Tatmadaw)

The military (Tatmadaw) hold a great amount of power over political and judiciary decision-making. They have an interest in maintaining power within the government and currently exercise power in the constitution to control the police, security forces and key cabinet positions. The military is more concerned with power than international respect, often coming into conflict with the government.

Within the group designate: Aung San Suu Kyi (State Councillor), Minister of Home Affairs, Minister of Foreign Affairs and two military representatives.

Government interests: Economic power, political power, national unity, keeping the peace and approval from the international community.

Agree to negotiate but does not seem willing to make compromises and has been keen to assert power by not budging. Aung San Suu Kyi has stayed publicly silent on the conflict and it has not been visible if she has engaged in negotiations for change.

Kachin Independence Army (KIA)

Formed in 1961, the KIA is a military wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) made up of a political group of ethnic Kachins. It is one of the many armed groups present in Myanmar and a main opponent to the regime. Since 2011, clashes between the Tatmadaw and KIA forces have been ongoing. The violence is a result of the call by the KIO for autonomy and ethnic rights. It has partly been caused by an increased economic and strategic interests by the government for the Kachin lands.

Interests: Gaining regional and political autonomy. So far, has not been willing to negotiate with other groups.

Within the group designate: Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Co-Secretary, Treasurer.

Important Considerations

All groups can interact with each other by any reasonable means such as group meetings, written communication, injunctions aided by the facilitator and via the media for press release. This is excluding the main powers of the UN Security Council who must rely upon the official reports of the special rapporteurs and international NGO group.

Groups can choose to make their own interventions, they should be first approved by a facilitator to ensure the action is realistic within the context. Groups can choose whether or not to release the news of these interventions to the media. The aim is for group interactions to culminate in a press conference facilitated by the media.

Preparation for facilitators

in advance of the event,

1. Create a spreadsheet of participants with names and allocated groups.
2. Print out the *Table 2: Role, aims and strategy* sheet to be filled in individually by students.

at the event,

3. Allocate all students to their designated groups and to their tables/ space.
4. Distribute role play outline, timetable, background information, ‘**table 2**’ and resources.
5. Conduct interventions when scheduled/ necessary to keep groups engaged.
6. Encourage students to interact within groups by prompting questions if necessary and encourage interactions between groups.

Preparation for students

in advance of the event,

1. Conduct preliminary research into the conflict and prepare for roles through engagement with the online sources and background information.

at the event,

1. Allocate roles within groups for individual participants.
2. Identify the interests, aims and objectives of their roles and the roles of others.
3. Co-ordinate within groups in developing a strategy to pursue those objectives.
4. With the above in mind, fill in ‘**Table 2**’.
5. Engage with other groups in pursuing these objectives through communication through various means e.g. investigative reports, communication with the media, policy decisions, discussions between groups.

after the event,

6. reflect upon the dynamics of conflict, the successes and failures of the strategy taking for fulfilling the objectives.

Timeline:

This timeline is indicative, it may need to be amended to suit the number of students participating and the resources available. Ideally, students should be allocated and given their roles one week ahead of the role play so they can get to grips with their roles and conduct background research to make the day flow better. A five-hour timeframe with a one-hour break should allow for sufficient research and preparation time within the groups.

Time	Activity	Additional details
9:30	Arrival at venue	

9:45	Welcome talk by facilitators	Facilitators will give an overview of the days plan, rules, answer any queries
10:00	Separation into groups and hand out of resources by facilitators	UN Security Council moves into separate room. Groups decide upon roles within the designated groups
10:10	Research and preparation period. Groups should decide upon strategy and tactics	Students should fill in 'Table 2'
11:00	Short break	
11:20	Group interactions and interventions begin	Special Rapporteur should communicate between groups and report back to the UN Security Council
12:00	Lunch break	
12:45	Continue Interactions	The UNSC and NGO groups should finalise their reports by 13:15 for release at the latest. Groups should decide on responses to the reports by 13:30
13:30	Press conference: The Media should conduct a conference between all groups willing to participate	The media can ask questions to one spokesperson to attain information from groups; groups can choose whether to respond. The media can also take requests from groups for questions to be posed to other groups
14:00	End of Press Conference, return to groups and final activities can continue	
14:15	Debrief and whole group reflective discussion about the outcomes of the role play	Groups should report back on their aims, successes and failures with reference to table 2
14:30	End of day	

Interventions

- a) **11:25am:** Human rights scandal

The facilitator should reveal to the **Myanmar government, Rohingya and Buddhist groups** the fact of a conflict breaking out in the Rakhine State, with 1,000 Rohingya casualties and that the military have been heavily involved.

Reveal only a rumour of this conflict to the NGO, media delegates and rapporteurs as they should try and ascertain the details from relevant groups.

- b) **11:35am:** Reveal to media and relevant countries of a report of increase outflow of Rohingya refugees. Over the past month an estimated refugee increase of:

Bangladesh: 10,000

India: 1,000

Malaysia: 4,000

Information Resources

The following resources are links to news reports giving general background information to the complexities of the conflict. You should read through this material and make notes in advance of the event:

- a) Background to the conflict and the prevailing narratives of the internal situation: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/understanding-the-myanmar-conflict-and-the-rohingya/231806/>.
- b) Introduction to the Rohingya people and why they are fleeing Myanmar: <http://www.theitem.com/stories/what-is-the-rohingya-conflict-and-why-does-it-persist,247454>.
- c) 'Fear and Freedom in Myanmar', BBC Our World documentary on ethnic tensions and freedom in Myanmar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OB5kcKpcjY>.
- d) The Rohingya refugee surge in Bangladesh: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41158703>.

Practical Resources

Room space:

- a) Large room space suitable for about 50 students, where groups can be kept reasonably separate.
- b) The UN Security Council should have a separate room to other groups.

Equipment:

- c) **All groups** should preferably have access to one or more laptops between them. Pens, pencils, and paper should be distributed between the groups.
- d) **The Media team** should have editing access to sharing software like Google Documents to publish media updates which can be accessed online by other groups on their laptops.
- e) **The NGO group and UN Security Council** should have access to a printer to print and distribute finished reports amongst the groups.

Table 2: Role, aims and strategy sheet to be filled in individually by students.

Group:		
Role Job, title, position within your group.	Aims What do you want to achieve?	Tactics and Strategy What is your plan to go about achieving your aims?