

**FOREWORD FROM THE BOOK THAT ACCOMPANIES THE  
EXHIBITION, A CHANCE TO BREATHE: AZIMUL HASSON,  
DIL KAYAS AND OMAL KHAIR, ON SHOW AT M7 AS PART OF THE  
TASWEER 2023 PHOTO FESTIVAL QATAR,  
18 MARCH – 20 MAY, 2023**

**Matthew Smith and Taimoor Sobhan**

**What you hold in your hands is evidence.**

**Evidence of community. Evidence of longing. Evidence of  
belonging. Evidence of exile. Evidence of identity. Evidence of  
resilience. Evidence of hope.**

**The three photographers featured in this book are ethnic  
Rohingya from Myanmar. For years, Myanmar authorities  
targeted the Rohingya for genocide, forcing these authors and  
hundreds of thousands of others from their homes in Rakhine  
State.**

**Om al Khair dreamed of becoming a professional photographer  
– a forbidden occupation in her indigenous homeland. Azimul  
Hasson used to study and play football back at home, and he still  
dreams of pursuing higher education there. Dil Kayas is a mother  
of two. Like Om al, she harbored a passion for photography, but  
the Myanmar government denied her the right to pursue it.**

**These three Rohingya photographers have been visually  
documenting life in the sprawling refugee camps of Cox’s Bazar,  
Bangladesh, since 2018. The book you hold in your hands is  
a selection of their photography and poetry. Om al Khair, Dil  
Kayas, and Azimul Hasson could make a living as professional  
photographers. They are talented, creative and hard-working.  
They just need what most of us take for granted: basic  
protections and the right to a nationality, or what Hannah Arendt  
called, “the right to have rights.”**

**For decades, the authorities in Myanmar have denied the  
existence of the Rohingya people. The government passed a**

discriminatory law in 1982 to deny them access to citizenship and the rights that come with it. And to this day, the Myanmar military and its henchmen confine upwards of half a million Rohingya to their impoverished villages, denying them freedom of movement, access to health, education and livelihoods. Beyond those effectively trapped in their villages, at least 125,000 other Rohingya are, at the time of writing, detained in upwards of 20 modern-day concentration camps located in five townships in Rakhine State.

The Rohingya people suffered the worst attacks in 2016 and 2017, when the Myanmar military planned and carried horrendous “clearance operations” against them. In the span of just a few weeks, soldiers slit throats, raped, and killed their way through Rohingya territories. They burned hundreds of villages to the ground, forcing more than 700,000 to flee into neighboring Bangladesh.

The Rohingya knew they faced genocide. Others would come to know it too. On March 21, 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced, “Beyond the Holocaust, the United States has concluded that genocide was committed seven times. Today marks the eighth, as I’ve determined that members of the Burmese [Myanmar] military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya.”

While the genocide brought the plight of the Rohingya to households globally, this book is a testament to the fact that the Rohingya are more than survivors of atrocities. And the refugee camps in Bangladesh are more than a massive tent-city of victims. In these pages you will see the lived experience of Rohingya people through Rohingya lenses.

All three authors of this book are inaugural graduates of a “media fellowship” supported by Fortify Rights and Doha Debates. They were equipped with mobile phones and trained in photography and Instagram, and they have since been documenting Rohingya lives in the world’s largest refugee camp. Through their photographs and earnest commentary, Omal Khair, Dil Kayas and Azimul Hasson have given the world

an intimate look into their world. As this book goes to print, all three of the authors are still among more than one million Rohingya in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, and they are still dreaming of returning home.

Unfortunately, that dream is more distant now. Following elections in Myanmar in November 2020, which the military's party lost in a landslide, the senior generals claimed widespread voter fraud. On February 1, 2021, the military launched a coup d'état, seizing power and arresting elected leaders.

The people of Myanmar protested nationwide. Like clockwork, and sticking to its core competency, the military fanned out around the country and murdered thousands of citizens, burned entire villages to the ground, and arrested more than 14,000 people who dared to want freedom.

Unexpectedly, these crimes fomented a domestic sea-change in popular sentiment toward the Rohingya in Myanmar. For decades, the military and democratically elected civilian leaders saw eye-to-eye on the Rohingya, cultivating popular hatred toward them. They each held up the Rohingya not as one of their own, but as a common enemy in perverse attempts to garner popular support in the election booth. This trickled down to the general population. It was a genocidal race to the bottom.

Following the coup, however, millions throughout Myanmar experienced the type of deadly violence the Rohingya knew all too well. And in a tragic twist of fate, many in the country came to empathize with the Rohingya, almost overnight. Some even made high-profile, public apologies for failing to come to the aid of Rohingya when the military was attacking them.

The newfound allies even include the National Unity Government (NUG)—a body formed after the coup, comprising democratically elected officials leading the country's democratic revolution. Cabinet members of the NUG apologized to the Rohingya and the NUG even went so far as to commit to recognizing Rohingya rights and ensuring accountability for the atrocities against them.

These commitments will mean more when democratic forces

in Myanmar prevail, but even in the current context, they are an important shift. They, too, might help create a chance for Rohingya to finally breathe.

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