

Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh: A Security Perspective

Background

Ethnic tension had flared up in Myanmar in recent years, while Rakhine state is being most severely affected. Rohingya population had been persecuted for years and the crisis had sent a mass exodus into neighboring Bangladesh for a number of years, pouring over the border areas. This ethnic tension within Myanmar has given birth to a new armed organization Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – recently called for an all-out resistance for Rohingya population and Myanmar army had launched a counter offensive, triggering one of the largest refugee influx into Bangladesh in decades.

Recent wave of refugees

The initial influx of Rohingya to Bangladesh dates back to 1978, with a large arrival in 1991-1992. Presently, a large number of unregistered refugees are living in two official camps managed by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Nayapara and Kutupalong. During more than 100 years of British rule (1824-1948), many labours migrated to Myanmar from India under British rule and what is now Bangladesh. Under the British administration, Myanmar was a province of India, such migration was considered to be internal, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). The recent rise of The Buddhist nationalist "969" campaign designed to reincarnate a form of religious nationalism that is different from gentle image of Buddhism, gave the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric targeting Muslim minority Rohingya population. The MaBaTha, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, an organisation led by the two Buddhist monks Ashin Wirathu and Ashin Wimala, made claims of a Muslim plot to take over the country and accused Muslims of marrying and converting Buddhist women. These extremist narratives led campaigns that triggered the anti-Muslim drive that was responsible for the Rohingya mass exodus of people totaling almost 800,000 into Bangladesh throughout decades.

Security Analysis

The current Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh poses security threats and challenges on the full spectrum of security landscape. The challenges will range from human or non-traditional security, transnational security, internal security, militancy and terrorism, border security etc. Analyses of some of the key issues are as follows:

Human Security:

Human Trafficking

The Rohingya refugees who are completely marginalized are most vulnerable to the human trafficking. It has been reported that international human trafficking gangs are actively looking at this situation to exploit the vulnerability of the Rohingya for profiteering. It is also known that many Rohingya families arriving in Bangladesh are without any male family members. Therefore, many young women and children will fall victim of the trafficking gangs and end up in international markets for prostitution and slave labour.



Food Security

There is gross food insecurity within the displaced Rohingya refugee population arriving in Bangladesh. This is resulting in malnutrition and allied problems of food insecurity with refugee population. Unless the food situation improves on an urgent basis, there is a possibility that more Rohingya children could die of food shortage and malnutrition. The country has to rely on the food grains for domestic consumption. Bangladesh is most likely to experience food shortage as more influx of the refugees keep pouring over the borders. The undetermined number of people arriving in Bangladesh would contribute to price hike in the local market. This will create instability in the local food grain market as the number of refugee increases. The lack of food grain would create a series of complex problem. The recent flood has already created more demands of the food grains, thus the possibility of shortage can drag on to the next harvest season.

Health Security

The health security of the Rohingya refugees is also a cause of concern. Any contagious diseases that rely on the human host has the potential to become an epidemic as refugees are living in densely packed camps. Refugees arriving in the camps in Bangladesh are living in subhuman conditions without access to adequate hygienic facilities. The health conditions of thousands of migrants in the camps are not documented. Many of the arriving refugees are already carrying a number of diseases, including TB, skin diseases and HIV/AIDS etc. These epidemic diseases could overwhelm the health service resources in the refugee camps, also poses a risk of spreading among the general population within Bangladesh as refugees continue to move from one place to another for work. The absence of the safe drinking water might contribute to Diarrhea and Cholera that could spread to the local population. The examples from the Haiti and Yemen must be kept in mind this regard.

Livelihood Security

The labour market revolves around dynamics of demand and supply. The stability of the market is achieved through constant balance between the availability of work and the workforces. The mass exodus of Rohingya in Bangladesh would jeopardize the market balance. The labour market will be unstable as supply will be more than the demand. This could disrupt the cohesion in the society and more problems would arise as the number of the jobless people will seek whatever means necessary to make a living. A possible resistance could come from the host community due to the situation that may create pockets of instability.



Internal Security

The massive exodus of Rohingya refugee might alter the internal security scenario of Bangladesh. It is quite likely that refugees will get out of the camps and mingle with the local population in the vicinity and beyond. These are vulnerable people in dire need of a living and are likely to be involved in petty crimes for their survival. Criminal groups will also exploit the vulnerable migrants coming over the borders. This will have a severe negative impact on the law and order situation of the country.

Public sentiments and emotions are running high on the Rohingya issues in Bangladesh. The continuous atrocities on Rohingya population in the Rakhine state by the radical militant Buddhists has given rise to strong resentment by the local population. This may be exploited to trigger a backlash on the Buddhist minority population in Bangladesh. This could pose a major challenge to our communal peace and harmony.

Transnational Security

Rohingya population will also pose a number of transitional security threats to Bangladesh and the region. The geographical proximity of the golden triangle and golden crescent makes Bangladesh a viable route for drug smuggling. The international gangs will exploit the population as gangs would use Rohingya as carriers for the drugs and small arms smuggling. The ease of availability of small arms and drugs can greatly jeopardize the security situation in Bangladesh, as more drug cartels and criminal gangs would mushroom near the border areas. The prevalence of illicit drugs and small arms would not only jeopardize the local law and order situation, terror organisations would also benefit from this situation as this would help them to fuel their activities.

Militancy and terrorism

Many militant and terrorist groups have called for jihad regarding the prolonged Rohingya crisis in the Rakhine state. Transnational terror organisations are calling for recruitment for 'jihad' in Myanmar as stories of thousands of Rohingya victims float around internet. A recent video has been uploaded by several Islamist groups released on September 3, 2017, titled "Anak Pengungsi Rohingya Siap Balik ke Myanmar Untuk Berjihad – dari Aceh" (Children of Rohingya in Aceh Ready to Return to Myanmar for Jihad). The video clip shows a group of uniformed personnel from Aceh undergoing physical training without weapons in preparation for their self-proclaimed jihad in Myanmar. Another video, "Laskar FPI Berangkat ke Myanmar" (Soldiers of FPI Departing to Myanmar) demonstrates the attempt by Indonesia's right-wing Islamist organisation, Front Pembela Islam's (FPI) to involve itself in the crisis. FPI has opened registration for 1,200 mujahideen volunteers to join in the humanitarian jihad in Myanmar. More established terror outfits such as al Qaeda in

Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) as well as Islamic state (IS) both threaten to attack on Myanmar's interest. The situation in the Rakhine state triggered interest of IS, the region already declared by the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as where jihad is to be conducted, from as early as 2014 when the so-called caliphate was established. The possibility of prolonged ethnic conflict in Myanmar might create a hotbed of terror as foreign fighters set eyes on the region. The security dilemma comes at a time when IS responding to setbacks in Syria and Iraq is planning on expanding operations beyond the Middle East.

Border security

The prolonged refugee crisis in Myanmar is making our border vulnerable and unstable. Bangladesh had encountered a border incursion by Myanmar armed forces in the 1980's. In November 2008, there was a maritime boundary dispute between the two states and intrusion of ships of Myanmar in our water for oil rigs establishment that almost brought the two countries to a naval conflict. Given such history, Bangladesh has to be vigilant as the possibility of border conflict cannot be ruled out. There has been report of violation of air space of Bangladesh by the Myanmar air force in last few days. This is a bad symptom which is not conducive to the maintenance of border security and stability. It is impossible to completely seal off a border of this nature due to the porous nature of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Thus the instability and violence in the Rakhine state, especially activities of terror groups with linkage with Rohingya group will pose a threat to Bangladesh border security. The instability at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border would give rise to the non-state actors that can jeopardize the internal security of the states.

Environmental Security

Due to the large influx of the Rohingya refugees, many fail to find accommodation within the camps. As a result, many of them have spread out in the nearby hills. They have resorted to wide spread deforestation, causing severe degradation of the locality. Bangladesh is already vulnerable to the environmental challenges. The country now is facing a new threat from human induced degradation of the environment that can have a long term impact on our environmental security.

A new diplomatic alignment

Our key allies are realigning with Myanmar on Rohingya issues. Bangladesh finds itself alone as the key allies such as China and India realign their position and side with Myanmar. Both countries have a huge strategic and economic interest in Myanmar. Russia has also taken a stand to support Myanmar on this issue. They are also playing a strategic game of increasing their footprint and enhancing their capacity of strategic denial to the other. Therefore, a new game of power realignment is taking place in our neighborhood, which is detrimental to our interest on the Rohingya crisis.

Conclusion

The Rohingya situation is urgent and complex. The mass exodus of Rohingya is already putting enormous stress on the limited resources of Bangladesh. As more Rohingya arrives on a daily basis, there are a number of states and non-state actors that might try to exploit the security situation in this country. Bangladesh must find a comprehensive solution to the refugee crisis and must work out a cohesive security strategy to deal with all the potential threats. Otherwise, this situation will threaten the security of the state.



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