

## **Rohingya Crisis: Policy Options and Analysis**

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Bangladesh has a new crisis to deal with apart from the terrorism and corruption: the Rohingya refugee crisis. The incident that triggered the current influx happened on 25 August 2017, when a group under the banner name of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked several police stations and outposts with barely some weapons and machetes in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. The result was a major crack down by the Tatmadaw (Myanmarese Army) on the local Rohingya population. Atrocities, rape, destruction of properties that included burning of several Rohingya villages by Tatmadaw forced the Rohingya population to cross the border and seek shelter in Bangladesh. This has led Bangladesh to a precarious situation of providing basic human assistance to approximately 600,000 Rohingya refugees arriving since 25 August 2017.

The fresh influx of the Rohingyas is not a standalone incident. Bangladesh has (unwillingly) provided refuge to several Rohingyas since 1978, when the first riot broke out in the Rakhine (then Arakan) state in the west of Myanmar. Although both during 1978 and 1992 UN intervention led to repatriation of a significant number of Rohingyas back to Myanmar, there are several who stayed back. The total number of Rohingya presently in Bangladesh is unknown as only 32,000 of them are registered with UNHCR and the Bangladesh government.

The report is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- What could Bangladesh do domestically to deal with this problem?
- What can India and Bangladesh do together to face the crisis?
- What should be the regional approach?

### **Issues to be answered by Bangladesh**

Off the 1million, Rohingyas are now reduced to half of its population in the Rakhine state of Myanmar which shares an immediate border with Bangladesh. The border is porous and demarcated by hill tracts and the Naf River. The Rohingya community are followers of Sufi variant of Sunni Muslims and are significantly different from the Rakhine Buddhists who form the majority in the Rakhine State, not only religiously but also linguistically and culturally. This differences form the basis of the rift between the two communities in the state.

These rifts have time and again made significant numbers of Rohingyas homeless and forced them to seek shelter in different neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan and significantly Bangladesh. Since 2012 the conflict is no more an intrastate religious conflict but with the involvement of the army and Buddhist radical groups (like Ma Ba Tha) it has acquired a nationalist rhetoric.

Rohingya were stripped off their citizenship rights by the 1982 Citizenship Law, excluded from the listed 135 ethnic members in Myanmar and unanimously (domestically) segregated as the Bengali migrant due to their similarities in religion, colour, and culture with Bangladesh. In 2014 National census, Myanmar tried to introduce the word Rohingyas in the census list but changed it to Bengali following vehement protest from the Buddhist nationalist and radical groups. Rohingya were not part of the census not only because of de-recognition of their ethnic identity but also because they opposed to being registered as Bengalis. The 2015 election in Myanmar which is often hailed as the first free and fair election ushering in a democracy did not include votes of any Rohingyas along several others in the IDP camps thereby cementing the national narrative of ousting the Rohingyas off the collective imaginings of Burma. Apart from civil and political rights there are several other restrictions on them which include free movement, marriage, education and other basic human rights. The situation was further aggravated by the 2016 attack which was claimed by insurgent group called Harakah al-Yakin (HAY). The present ARSA is said to be the regrouped version of the old HAY group. These facts predicament worse for Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries those who are unprepared to deal with influx of masses. About 500,000 of Rohingya have sought refuge in different countries as mentioned above. The major brunt of this is been faced by Bangladesh who was caught unprepared with the inpouring of the sheer number of people. The rapid influx might have severe bearing on the society, polity and economy of Bangladesh. These issues could be listed out in several categories:

- **Social-** The fresh batch of Rohingya refugees have become the Achilles heels for the country. The number is huge; the problem becomes worse due to the fact that they are not the only Rohingya refugees in the country. There are several others, whose second generations are born in Bangladesh. Before the arrival of the new batch, the previously present Rohingya have also been a major cause of concern for the government. In 2013-14 there were several debates about shifting the refugees to an island. This was meted out with lot of protest from the refugees as the island was beyond liveable. Bangladesh is itself facing the cost of a population upsurge with around 163 million people living in the small country. The additional numbers of Rohingya are burden that the government has to manage. In addition, even if the government has been receiving the Rohingyas, the locals in Chittagong where the Rohingya

have taken refugee were never happy with the uninvited guest. The biggest issue for them is land acquisition. The Rohingya who come and settle in any piece of land and mostly take up private property of some localities. They sometimes also unwillingly destroy crops. With every new batches of influx there have been incidents of squabble with the local. Furthermore Chittagong is a tourist destination due to its vicinity to Bay of Bengal. The refugee crisis has also severely impacted tourism. Another reason that has irked the locals is the constant fear of security. Lack of education and job among the refugees has increased the petty crimes and smugglings. The Teknaf area is already infamous for smuggling and trafficking, the involvement of the Rohingya especially those who have arrived previously makes the situation murky.

- **Economy**-Refugees have not only hampered the tourism industry but they have also impacted the local economy that has seen an upsurge in prices of daily consumption. Apart from the local economy these refugees are huge burden on the national economy. This underdeveloped economy does not know how to deal with providing basic necessities to this large influx. The aids from different groups, Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) are assisting in this process. However there is huge gap between the demand and the supply of food, water, medicines and medical facilities.
- **Demography and challenge to security**- Bangladesh similar to many of its neighbour is facing a youth bulge, as majority of its population are young. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic (BBS) two million youth of working age are unemployed. Terrorism has time and again affected the country. Added to this, a number of refugees comprising of young, uneducated and jobless youth is a reasonable cause of concern. These youths and men who have faced violence in their homeland make a vulnerable bunch for recruitment in the business of smuggling, crime and also by terrorist groups. Although ARSA and previously HAY have denied any linkages to any international and terrorist groups, but link to Pakistan (the leader Ata Ullah is a Rohingya from Karachi and also been brought up in Saudi Arabia) or rather future linkages cannot be ruled out completely. If not ARSA, the young refugee could be easily lured into the local terrorist group.

Another aspect which is distressing is the fact that the new bunch saw the arrival of children, women and old men. The men in the family have been the major target of Tatmadaw. There are several women with small children with no other family member alive. These make them vulnerable and also there are several reports on some women taking up prostitution for survival. However presently the number is insignificantly low, as the Rohingya community is orthodox and secondly the Bangladesh army has strictly restricted the movement. But fear and the concern remain.

- **Politicisation of the issue and impact on the domestic politics-** This section can be bifurcated into two sub divisions, namely:

**Media Propaganda and its impact-**Rohingya refugees have sought refuge in Bangladesh since 1978. However this was the first time it has garnered enormous empathy from the general masses especially the urban middle and upper middle class in Bangladesh. Academicians recognised the problem but however this was the first time Rohingya became the hot topic to discuss in every news primetime and national newspaper. The credit for this change goes to the media propaganda. The continuous coverage of the human stories the atrocities garnered huge public sympathy for the Rohingyas both within and outside Bangladesh. Rohingyas were time and again referred as brothers due to the religious affinity. In fact the Eid prayers in different mosque included special mention about the Rohingya. Interestingly the reference of Rohingya is also a new trend in Bangladesh. It seems that the sympathy of masses has enabled the refugees to garner their ethnic identity as a Rohingya, the cause they have been fighting for, at least within Bangladesh.

**The role of the Civil Society and Religious groups-**the support for the Rohingya as a cause was evident by the protest marches by the Civil Societies such as Gono Jagoron Moncho. Similarly, a rally was led by religious group like Hefazat e Islam on 6 October in Cox's Bazar with the demand for immediate stoppage to the atrocities on the Rohingyas. The support for the refugees is appreciable but this can have dangerous fallout which could result into politicisation of the Rohingya issues. Bangladesh is preparing for its next general elections in 2018, if politicised this issue could play a major role in shaping the public opinion prior to the election.

- **Environmental-** The refugee camp built up has a bearing on the agricultural fields and natural habitat of the area. Several camps have been built on the tracks that elephant follows: the result has been unfortunate trampling of refugees by the elephant. This might soon give rise to the man and animal conflict which will further impact the refugees' equation with the localities.

### **Issues to be answered by India and the Region**

Similar to Bangladesh there are several Rohingya refugees who have settled in India since 1990s. According to the UNHCR there are 40,000 of them settled in

different parts of India like Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Jammu and others. Problem flared up this year with the launch of 'Rohingya Go Back' slogans and

billboard by a local political party in Jammu and careless statement made by the prominent office bearer of the Jammu and Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry. With this turn of event, in May this year the national government suddenly claimed that the 40,000 refugees will be deported on the grounds of national security threat. Although some Rohingya were in India for several years it was the first time they become household names being discussed in news channels and being commonly featured in newspapers. This resulted in two groups one supporting the deportation and other not supporting it and requesting the government to see the issue from the humanitarian side. Presently, the debate is pending in the Supreme Court (highest Judicial Court of India).

Although the security fear is not baseless it has been exacerbated to a certain extent. The Bodh Gaya bomb blast in 2014 became the main evidence for the government as it was supposedly done to avenge the Rohingya cause. However there is no evidence of any Rohingya refugees' involvement in it. Similar to Bangladesh, the refugees in India are also vulnerable to terrorism, crime and smuggling rackets, but this being the basis for deportation and not taking stand in behalf of them has been uncalled for.

The security concern as mentioned above is genuine, however this could flare up and let loose worms out of the can. Firstly, Rohingya who are mostly Muslims, the centre's stand against them can be perceived by some (especially the Muslims) in India as perpetuating the already existing religious difference now being enveloped in the name of national security. Thus the larger social religious fault lines, if ignored can in fact further lead to various terrorist groups taking up the immediate 'Rohingya Cause' in the name of revenging the governmental (in) action towards the Rohingya. Secondly, it will have a major impact on the Northeast India where the issue of refugee is already sensitive. The repatriation or deportation will make the situation worse in Northeast where anti Bangladeshi feeling is prevalent.

### **Bangladesh: A difficult task at hand**

**A long term solution rather than a short term one**-Representative from Myanmar and Bangladesh have several rounds of discussion on the crisis. A draft of repatriation document has been exchanged between the officials of both the countries. The Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali has stated the success of the meeting. But is repatriation of all the refugees a solution to this crisis? If it is, then the problem would not have continued after

1978 or 1992 repatriation. There has to be a long term solution rather than a short term one.

Although these aforementioned discussions between the two countries may paint a strong bond between Bangladesh and Myanmar, however this is not true. Bangladesh and Myanmar have never shared a strong equation plus the contention regarding the Rohingya issue has further worsened it. Myanmar army has time and again violated Bangladesh air space in the past few months. Therefore it is commendable on behalf of Bangladesh to retain its cool and initiate the talk along Myanmar to discuss the repatriation. However Bangladesh should push for complete resolution of the conflict in Rakhine by genuine efforts on behalf of the Myanmar government and most importantly the army.

Bangladesh should emphasise on the implementation of the Kofi Annan's report. There should be peace talks or at least a dialogue initiated between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya representative. It is not easy as said. The first difficult task will be to find a Rohingya representative, but it is not impossible. There are a small number of Rohingya refugees settle in different part of Europe who could be an ideal representative as they are educated and do know how a democracy should work.

**Rohingya Policy**-Bangladeshis is one of the developing countries with a population of nearly 160 million and annual GDP of \$246 billion. Hence a rising number of refugees are an emergency the country has to deal with. Although the nation has a special task force on Rohingya but their domestic policy towards Rohingya are still not clear. Bangladesh handles the situation as and when it comes, this is surprising as they have been facing the brunt of their neighbour's action since 1970s. This is especially necessary to answer the grievances of the locals near the borders who are unhappy with the huge number of Rohingya refugees. In fact Bangladesh still lacks a strong refugee policy. It is high time that Bangladesh establishes a Refugee Commission. This will also institutionalise and legalise Bangladesh government's initiative to provide special identity cards to Rohingya's.

The issuing of identity cards has enabled the government to estimate the exact numbers of refugees but there has to be some system developed that addresses the problems such as inadequate aid, lack of water, health concern, and unemployment. Government have been questioned on their idea of 'safe zone' and also on the fact that the army have created a ghetto for the refugees who are not allowed to move out of their designated areas and work. The government policy could be put in question if seen the security implications and contention of the local. The best way out is to pressurise Myanmar for not only to repatriate but to solve the issue in Rakhine by addressing the ethnic question.

In Myanmar, Rakhine state is the least developed with its poverty rate at 78 percent. As aforementioned, difference such as religion, colour and culture are the main fault lines however the lack of development, unemployment and high poverty rate could also be another cause that aggravates the tension among these two ethnic groups. This aspect has to be highlighted to the Myanmar government who should be pushed to take genuine efforts to redress the problem rather than just repatriate.

**India-Bangladesh and the Region**-Bangladeshis diplomats have already reached out to different countries including China and India and several regional organisations such as Organisation of Islamic Countries, Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), European Union and BIMSTEC (a sub-regional organisation) expressing their situation and seeking a redresses. However none of them have been of much help except the offer of aid that has poured in from different countries.

India, China and the region should realise the magnitude of the problem and how persisting it can get. Problem will not be limited to Bangladesh with time it will have a huge implication on the entire region. As explained above, India has taken a stand more on the security grounds. Pushing back these refugees will give no solution but will rather jeopardise the security to an extent that several generation will have to bear the consequences.

India should look at its own religious divide and caution against its possible fuelling/spill over into the Rohingya conflict. So it is high time that they under play the Rohingya topic because sever actions against them will further the divide. Instead India could join Bangladesh for a diplomatic pressure on Myanmar. Plus the Indian investments such as Kaladan project which connects the Sitwe port to India and other investment gives a cause for which India should rally for peace in the Rakhine state. Especially the close equation the present Indian government shares with the NLD government of Myanmar and also the army.

Similarly when it comes to region, ASEAN's ineffectiveness regarding this issue is a known corner. Therefore Bangladesh should seek help from Malaysia and Indonesia, who are not only their co-members in OIC but also the only vocal ASEAN members regarding the Rohingya crisis. Indonesia and Malaysia to some extent holds a stronger clout in ASEAN. Therefore one could be hopeful of their support.

India and Bangladesh together should also work towards forming a group with other investors in Myanmar such as Japan, South Korea and other European countries. This will act as a pressure group on Nay Pyi Taw to implement genuine efforts to resolve the problem.

To conclude, Rohingyas are stateless people who have been burden for every country, but apart from the humanitarian aspect one cannot underplay other issues which are seeded by them when they seek refuge in other countries. Bangladesh being the next door neighbour is always the first one to bear the brunt. Bangladesh as mentioned above is developing countries, is in fact one of the fastest growing economy in Asia therefore this crisis can hamper the economy to sever degree along with all other issues such as social, security and others. But both India and the region should take the matter seriously as it is not Bangladesh's sole problem and if continued will soon upsurge which will have an impact in the region. It is high time that the problem should treat from its roots rather than an easy way out.

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