

The Humanitarian Corridor between Bangladesh and Rakhine: A Strategic Lifeline or Security Risk for Bangladesh?

Abida Farzana Muna¹

Introduction:

Rakhine State located in western Myanmar, has been the epicenter of multiple humanitarian crises, including the long-standing persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority and violent clashes between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army. The situation has been further compounded by the devastating impact of natural disasters, including a powerful earthquake in May 2024 that displaced hundreds of thousands and destroyed vital infrastructure². According to the United Nations, 13.3 million people are facing emergency levels of food insecurity, lack of medical services, and over 3.1 million people have been displaced by armed conflict³. Driven by the urgency to prevent a famine and mass mortality event, the UN has proposed a humanitarian corridor for delivering aid directly from Bangladesh into Rakhine. However, the scale of the crisis makes it a logistical and political challenge⁴.

¹ Abida Farzana Muna is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She has completed her Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) and Master of Social Science (MSS) in International Relations from Bangladesh University of Professionals.

² Shohel, M. Mahruf C., Md. Ashrafuzzaman, and Sariya Shabnam. "The Rohingya Crisis and the Global Impact of the Refugee Influx," 298–322. Brill, 2023. doi:10.4018/979-8-3693-2837-8.ch014.

³ UN, "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar," Agenda (United Nations General Assembly, October 25, 2024), <https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?OpenAgent&DS=A/79/550&Lang=E>.

⁴ Sm Najmus Sakib, "Bangladesh Agrees to UN Call to Open Humanitarian Corridor for Myanmar Citizens," Anadolu Ajansi, April 28, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-agrees-to-un-call-to-open-humanitarian-corridor-for-myanmar-citizens/3550294>.

Bangladesh has already faced significant repercussions from the Rakhine crisis in Cox's Bazar, which hosts nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees who fled earlier military crackdowns in 2017⁵. The prospect of opening a humanitarian corridor for delivering aid directly into Myanmar through the corridor might reduce some pressures on Bangladeshi border areas that currently host refugees, but raises concerns about further refugee influxes if the situation in Rakhine deteriorates further. History suggests that violence and deprivation often trigger mass movements of people seeking safety and sustenance⁶. If the humanitarian corridor fails to stabilize the situation or inadvertently draw displaced persons towards the Bangladesh border, it could overwhelm already strained infrastructure, exacerbate environmental degradation and heighten tensions between refugees and host communities.



Fig 1: Rohingya Muslims proceeding towards a refugee camp, at Palong Khali, Bangladesh on October 19, 2017⁷

Implementing a humanitarian corridor inevitably raises security challenges for Bangladesh. The border with Rakhine is porous and rugged, making it vulnerable to exploitation by militant groups, human traffickers, and transnational criminal networks. The Arakan Army has been active in

⁵ UNHCR, "Rohingya Emergency," April 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/rohingya-emergency#:~:text=In%20August%202017%2C%20over%20750%2C000,and%20services%20has%20been%20im mense.>

⁶ "Migration Continues to Be Part of the Solution in a Rapidly Changing World, but Key Challenges Remain," World Migration Report 2024 (IOM, 2024), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-047-1-world-migration-report-2024_13.pdf.

⁷ Taylor, Alan. "The Rohingya Refugee Emergency in Bangladesh." *The Atlantic*, October 19, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/the-rohingya-in-bangladesh-the-fastest-growing-refugee-emergency-in-the-world/543417/>.

Rakhine, and its activities have already contributed to regional instability in that region⁸. A humanitarian corridor could inadvertently provide cover for militant movements or smuggling operations, especially if oversight mechanisms are weak or if Myanmar's internal security structures collapse further. Moreover, maintaining the integrity of humanitarian operations to ensure that aid does not fall into the hands of armed groups would require close coordination with international organizations and adherence to strict verification protocols.

Security Vulnerabilities and Militant Infiltration Risks:

The Bangladesh-Myanmar border has long been a hotspot for cross-border militancy. The porous and often unmonitored stretches of this border have facilitated the movement of various insurgent groups, smugglers, and traffickers. Historically, groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) have operated in the region, exploiting the lack of stringent border controls to carry out their activities. The complex terrain, including dense forests and hilly areas, further complicates surveillance and enforcement efforts⁹. These historical patterns underscore Bangladesh's persistent security challenges along its southeastern frontier.



Figure 2: Amid a conflict between the Myanmar military and the armed rebel group, Myanmar Border Guard Police (BGP) took shelter in Bangladesh, escorted by Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) in Naikhongchhari upazila of Bandarban on Monday, March 11, 2024.¹⁰

⁸ Taha Husain, "Cross Border Security Challenges for Bangladesh: A Thematic Analysis," *Society & Sustainability* 6 (May 30, 2024): 21–34, <https://doi.org/10.38157/ss.v6i1.617>.

⁹ Md Tareq Mahmud, Abu Faisal Md. Khaled, and Nafisa Islam Fariba, "A Conflict Profile On The Rohingya Conflict in Myanmar," *JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH* 14 (August 30, 2019): 3313–24, <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v14i0.8407>.

¹⁰ Dhaka Tribune. "Another 13 Myanmar Border Guards Take Shelter in Bangladesh." Accessed June 2, 2025. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/344350/another-13-myanmar-border-guards-take-shelter-in>.

The establishment of a humanitarian corridor, while aimed at facilitating aid delivery, could inadvertently provide insurgent groups with opportunities to exploit the increased movement and logistical operations. Groups such as the Arakan Army (AA) have regained control over roughly two-thirds of the state. This includes 14 of Rakhine's 17 townships, including Paletwa township in the neighboring Chin state, which may use the corridor to infiltrate Bangladesh or to smuggle arms and resources¹¹. The increased traffic and the necessity for rapid aid delivery could strain the capacity of border security forces to thoroughly vet and monitor all movements, thereby creating vulnerabilities that insurgent groups might exploit.

Moreover, the infiltration of insurgent elements poses direct threats to Bangladesh's internal security. The presence of militant groups like ARSA within refugee camps has been documented, leading to concerns about radicalization and recruitment within these vulnerable populations¹². These developments complicate Bangladesh's counterterrorism efforts, as distinguishing between genuine refugees and potential insurgents becomes increasingly challenging. Moreover, the potential for these groups to establish operational bases within Bangladesh could escalate internal security threats and strain law enforcement resources.

Bangladesh's border surveillance infrastructure also faces several limitations. The challenging geography, including hilly terrains and dense forests, hampers the establishment of continuous physical barriers and surveillance systems. Additionally, there is a shortage of adequately advanced and well-equipped border outposts, which leads to gaps in monitoring and enforcement. These infrastructural weaknesses make it difficult to effectively control and monitor cross-border movements, thereby increasing the risk of unauthorized entries and the smuggling of contraband¹³. The situation is further complicated by Myanmar's internal conflicts and the military's focus on domestic insurgencies, which may limit their capacity or willingness to engage in joint border security initiatives. This lack of consistent and effective cooperation exacerbates the challenges

¹¹ Raisina Debates, "Arakan Army's Growing Influence in Myanmar: Implications for the Rohingyas," orfonline.org, January 24, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/arakan-army-s-growing-influence-in-myanmar-implications-for-the-rohingyas>.

¹² Md Uddin and Md Rahman, "Catalyst of Religious Extremism in Rohingya Refugee Camps: A Qualitative Analysis," 2021, 292–308, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6960-3.ch015>.

¹³ Taha Husain, "Cross Border Security Challenges for Bangladesh: A Thematic Analysis," *Society & Sustainability* 6, no. 1 (May 30, 2024): 21–34, <https://doi.org/10.38157/ss.v6i1.617>.

Bangladesh faces in securing its borders and managing the risks associated with the proposed humanitarian corridor¹⁴.

Geopolitical Dimensions and Regional Power Dynamics:

The crisis in Rakhine and the proposal for a humanitarian corridor are unfolding against a backdrop of intensifying regional rivalries. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has strategic investments in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine's Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port, which provides Beijing with direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the vulnerable Malacca Strait. China's involvement complicates humanitarian considerations because Beijing has been a key supporter of Myanmar's military regime, offering economic and diplomatic backing even amid international condemnation of the Rohingya crisis and recent conflicts¹⁵. On the other hand, India seeks to counterbalance Chinese influence in the region through its Act East Policy and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project connecting India's northeastern states to Sittwe port in Rakhine¹⁶. India's engagement in Rakhine has both economic and strategic dimensions, as it aims to secure access to Southeast Asia while supporting a stable Myanmar for its security interests in its restive northeast¹⁷.

The proposed humanitarian corridor intersects with these strategic interests, as it would potentially open an overland connection into Rakhine, which could later be adapted for commercial or military purposes. The dual-use potential of such corridors for facilitating aid during crises but also serving as logistics routes in peacetime raises questions about the long-term strategic intentions of the regional actors involved. Major powers may support or oppose these corridors depending on their strategic interests. China might view the corridor as a way to stabilize Rakhine and protect its investments, while India might see it as an opportunity to expand its regional influence and counter

¹⁴ F. Elahi, "The Protracted Rohingya Refugee Crisis: A Growing Incertitude for Bangladesh, the Rohingyas, and the Regional Countries," *Bangladesh Journal of Administration and Management* 37, no. 1 (January 11, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.56379/bjam.v37i1.87>.

¹⁵ Taidong Zhou, "Aligning the Belt and Road Initiative with Myanmar's Sustainable Development Plan: Opportunities and Challenges," *IDS Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (December 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2019.139>.

¹⁶ Thinn Thinn Latt, "India's Act East Policy and Neighbouring Powers: India-Myanmar Relations" (Springer Nature, 2023), 75–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4610-5_7.

¹⁷ Munmun Majumdar, "India's Act East Policy Begins in Myanmar" (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018), 287–300, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5320-7_14.

China's dominance. Both powers could use humanitarian justifications as diplomatic cover for advancing strategic objectives.

Socio-Economic and Environmental Strains:

The potential opening of a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine could paradoxically prolong or even intensify pressures on local Bangladeshi communities. Increased cross-border movements might slow repatriation if security conditions in Myanmar remain unstable, effectively locking in the refugee presence in Bangladesh. Currently, local markets in Cox's Bazar have been distorted by humanitarian aid, which has created dependence among refugee populations on host communities. The demand for resources such as water, housing, and healthcare has surged, often outpacing supply, leading to inflation of prices, overburdened facilities, and competition for jobs¹⁸. According to the World Bank (2019), Between August 2017 and May 2018, the average income of daily wage earners decreased by around 24%, raising the rate of poverty among the local population significantly¹⁹. A humanitarian corridor that facilitates sustained aid flows might inadvertently entrench these economic challenges. Besides, large tracts of forest have been cleared for makeshift shelters, firewood collection, and infrastructure expansion, leading to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and deforestation²⁰. 74% decrease in forest areas between 2015 and 2021, with forest areas shrinking from 1256.55 hectares in 2015 to 432.61 hectares by 2018 and further declining to 321.32 hectares by 2021²¹.

¹⁸ Habib, Md Reza, and Arnab Roy Chowdhury. "The Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Conflict with the Host Community over Natural Resources in Cox's Bazar District." *Area Development and Policy*, May 4, 2023, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2023.2193246>.

¹⁹ Hill, Ruth, and Maria Eugenia Genoni. *Bangladesh poverty assessment: facing old and new Frontiers in poverty reduction*. No. 143200. The World Bank, 2019.

²⁰ Hassan, Mohammad, Audrey Smith, Katherine Walker, Munshi Rahman, and Jane Southworth. "Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Forest Cover Change in Teknaf, Bangladesh." *Remote Sensing* 10 (April 30, 2018): 689. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs10050689>.

²¹ Bappa, Syed Alimuzzaman, Tanmoy Malaker, Md. Rimu Mia, and Md Didarul Islam. "Spatio-Temporal Variation of Land Use and Land Cover Changes and Their Impact on Land Surface Temperature: A Case of Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh." *Heliyon* 8, no. 9 (September 1, 2022): e10449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10449>.

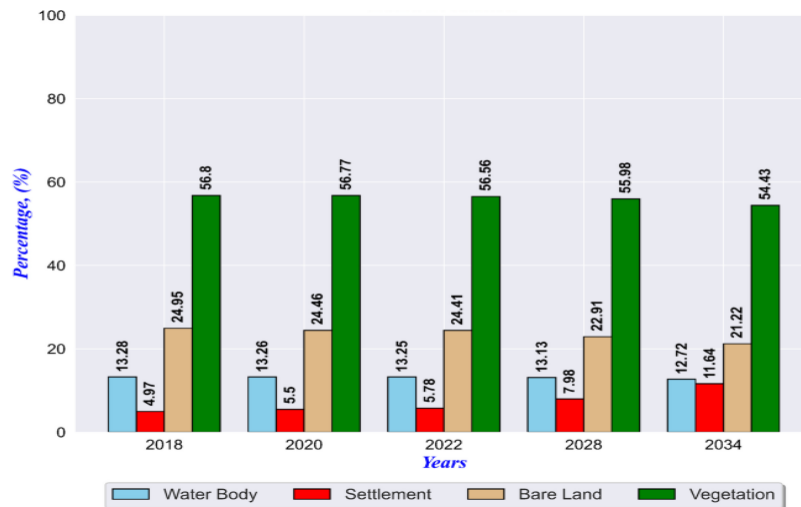


Figure 3: The trends and impact of land use patterns and possible prediction²².

A humanitarian corridor into Rakhine, while potentially alleviating some pressure by encouraging returns, could also fuel new environmental challenges. Increased movement of people and goods across the border may require road construction, supply depots, and logistical hubs, potentially encroaching on sensitive environmental zones. Furthermore, if returns to Rakhine are not sustainable or are met with renewed violence, refugees might cycle back into Bangladesh, exacerbating environmental stress and necessitating further unsustainable land use.

Over time, local tensions have escalated as refugees receive disproportionate aid, coupled with competition over jobs, education, and public services, which has fueled resentment and social friction²³. The Asia Foundation (2023) notes a rising incidence of localized conflicts and crime, as economic frustrations and cultural differences strain social cohesion²⁴. A humanitarian corridor theoretically could provide a pathway for safe return to Rakhine. However, if the corridor's operation is hampered by security risks or political obstacles, it might delay repatriation, exacerbating the burden on host communities. Additionally, militant infiltration risks associated

²² Ahmed, Faishal, Siam Alam, Ovi Ranjan Saha, and Afeefa Rahman. "The Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh: Assessing the Impact on Land Use Patterns and Land Surface Temperature Using Machine Learning." *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 196, no. 6 (May 18, 2024): 555. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-024-12701-3>.

²³ Ansar, Anas, and Abu Faisal Md. Khaled. "From Solidarity to Resistance: Host Communities' Evolving Response to the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh." *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 6, no. 1 (July 9, 2021): 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00104-9>.

²⁴ "Annual Report 2023." The Asia Foundation, 2023. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2023-Annual-Report_Revised-Sept-6.pdf.

with the humanitarian corridor might heighten security concerns among local populations, further eroding trust between communities and increasing the potential for social unrest. A humanitarian corridor can also complicate accountability mechanisms, especially in contested or insecure territories like Rakhine. If aid is funneled through local actors who are aligned with armed groups or corrupt networks, it risks fueling black markets and inadvertently financing conflict actors.

Way Forward: Policy Options for Bangladesh

Bangladesh's approach to the proposed humanitarian corridor into Myanmar's Rakhine State must carefully balance humanitarian imperatives with national security and geopolitical risks. While the corridor offers the potential for delivering much-needed aid to displaced populations and possibly facilitating repatriation, it also presents significant vulnerabilities. This decision could provoke diplomatic tensions and exacerbate regional instability, particularly given the interests of key powers like China, which has expressed opposition to unilateral humanitarian initiatives in Rakhine.

A critical challenge lies in the lack of transparency surrounding the decision-making process. Conflicting statements from different government actors of Bangladesh, along with insufficient consultation with military, political, and civil stakeholders, undermine the legitimacy and operational coherence of the corridor. Without clear, enforceable agreements, the corridor risks becoming a channel for insurgent groups to infiltrate Bangladesh, potentially worsening internal security challenges. Historical patterns of cross-border militancy, combined with a porous and poorly secured border, can heighten the danger of trafficking, arms smuggling, and organized crime under the guise of humanitarian efforts.

To navigate these complexities, Bangladesh will need a comprehensive policy framework that sets clear criteria for cross-border movements and enforces stringent security protocols. This framework needs to integrate diplomatic engagement with Myanmar to secure formal consent for any relief operations, thus avoiding breaches of sovereignty and ensuring the safety of aid convoys. In parallel, it should enhance border surveillance infrastructure through advanced technologies like drones, satellite monitoring, and biometric systems, while expanding the capacity and readiness of border security forces. Physical infrastructure such as checkpoints, secured corridors, and rapid

response units should be established to control and monitor the flow of humanitarian aid, minimizing the risks of smuggling and militant infiltration.

Moreover, Bangladesh's policy response should engage regional and international partners strategically. Diplomatic initiatives with Myanmar, ASEAN, and major powers, including India, China, and Western donors, must be carefully calibrated to balance humanitarian objectives with geopolitical realities. While securing international technical and financial support is essential, Bangladesh must also ensure that aid delivery mechanisms are transparent and insulated from potential corruption or exploitation by illicit networks. The social and environmental dimensions of the corridor cannot be overlooked. Influxes of aid and people into border areas already strained by the Rohingya crisis could deepen tensions between host communities and refugees, disrupt local economies, and degrade fragile ecosystems. A poorly managed corridor could thus exacerbate local grievances, fuel resentment, and undermine social stability. Policy responses must therefore incorporate community engagement strategies that address local needs and integrate development initiatives to build resilience and trust.

Ultimately, the corridor can present a trade-off between short-term humanitarian gains and long-term strategic risks. Without robust safeguards, it could erode Bangladesh's national security, destabilize border regions, and damage its diplomatic standing. Careful, phased implementation, backed by rigorous risk assessments and proactive regional diplomacy, is essential before deciding to make the humanitarian corridor.