



THE ROHINGYA REFUGEES: A REVIEW OF SECURITY THREATS FOR BANGLADESH

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Abstract— In 2017, The military crackdown of Myanmar forced more than 750,000 Rohingya people, a stateless Muslim ethnic minority in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, to flee into Bangladesh. Afterward, the number of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh increased to more than 1.1 million. Later, through bilateral discussions, Bangladesh formally tried two times for refugees' repatriation to Myanmar in 2018 and 2019, but they ignored to return without citizenship and safety in Myanmar. At present, these refugees are creating grave security concerns for Bangladesh. However, for this critical review, related literature was analyzed to explore the nature and extent of security threats creating by refugees for Bangladesh. The article finds these threats so critical- especially in political, social, economic, and environmental sectors. It also reveals that initiatives such as imposing strict rules and regulations and providing more aids in the refugee camps can tackle the threats temporarily, but the repatriation of refugees to Myanmar can give a stable/permanent solution to these threats.

KeyWords: Bangladesh, Citizenship, Myanmar, Repatriation, Rohingya Refugee, Security Threats

1 INTRODUCTION

IN 2017, the military crackdown of Myanmar in the Rakhine state forced the Rohingya people to enter into Bangladesh. On the other hand, emphasizing security, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) initially ignored them to accept but finally opened its border considering their vulnerability, national and international communities' urges for saving, and its commitment to humanity. However, refugees are no longer satisfied with the facilities provided by the GoB and other agencies. Instead, they are getting involved in criminal and militant activities making the existing problems diversified and exacerbated. These activities are also creating a continuous burden on the economy and posing a grave threat to foreign affairs (Wolf, 2014). Considering the dimension of the problems, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina has termed the refugees as a 'threat to the security' for Bangladesh and the region; therefore, she has urged the global community to extend its helping hand to resolve the crisis ("Rohingya's 'threat to'", 2019). In this case, the steps being taken by governmental

authorities, aid agencies, and influential countries can temporarily help Bangladesh minimize security threats but do not lead to a permanent solution that is Rohingyas' repatriation to Myanmar.

2 THE EMERGENCE OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES

The Rohingya people, a Muslim minority group, are inhabitants of the Rakhine Province, Myanmar. The term "Rohingya" comes from Rohang, the ancient name of Rakhine State (Ullah, 2016b). Rohingyas speak Bengali, don't speak Burmese or Rakhine (Rahman, 2010) and at the same time, they are Muslim. That's why Myanmar considers them as Bengali Muslims and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. On the other hand, their living history shows that they have been living there from the ninth century. Hence, Bangladesh considers them 'forcefully displaced Myanmar nationals' (Siddique, 2019).

An article of Buchanan (1799) stated that the Mohammedans who have been long settled in Arakan, called themselves 'Rooinga' or natives of Arakan which was also known as 'Rovingaw'. But some in Myanmar consider the term 'Rooinga' as labourers visiting Burma from neighbouring Bengal (Rakhine

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Inquiry Commission, 2013). Moreover, in 1931, statisticians who didn't refer to the Rohingya when they classified the population of Burma into 15 indigenous races and 135 sub-races (Bennison, 1933), contributed to their statelessness (Rohingyas). After the independence of Burma in 1948, some Rohingyas were issued national registration cards (Power, 2014). However, after the military coup in 1962, the Rohingya systematically became deprived of their civil and political rights. As an instance, they were not given the rights to elect their representation in the 1974 national election. Thus, the military government gradually isolated the Rohingya people from other Arakan people as the Bengali migrants due to their similarity in religion, color and culture with Bangladeshi (Bhattacharjee, 2017).

In the beginning of 1978, the military government launched the operation Nagamin (Dragon King) to exclude Rohingyas as the immigrants from the Arakan state (Abrar, 1995). The operation forced more than 200,000 Rohingyas to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh in 1978 (Abrar, 1995; Mahmood, Wroe, Fuller, & Leaning, 2017). However, by the end of 1979, a total of 187,250 Rohingya refugees were repatriated to Burma through an agreement between Bangladesh and Burma (Abrar, 1995) and around 15,000 refugees were left behind in Bangladesh. In 1982, the citizenship law completely ignored the race of Rohingya and limited their movement, marriage, employment, education and religious practices (Islam, 2006). In 1989, the military government changed the name of the nation from Burma to Myanmar. In the 1990s, the name of Arakan State was also changed to Rakhine State (Arakan, 2020). Myanmar's military ruler, General Sau Maung launched 'the Pyi Thaya operation' and forced 250,877 to take shelter in Bangladesh (Mohiuddin, 2020). Then, in August, 1992, both countries reached an agreement with a four-point formula to start repatriation of Rohingyas but by March, 1995, a large number of refugees was done, though a large number of them opposed to this repatriation at the first stage but throughout this duration, repatriation of 54,000 remaining refugees became uncertain (Saha, 2001). In 2012, when the violence between the Rohingya and the Buddhists began and forced them (Rohingyas) to flee, Bangladesh, for the first time, refused to accept the Rohingya refugees due to its national security. During the violence, 200,000 Rohingya people left Myanmar and another 120,000 were internally displaced (Martin, Margesson, & Vaughn 2018). More than 90,000 Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar to the Bangladesh border, only to be denied access ("Multimedia: Rohingya Refugees", 2012). In 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2013) reported that there were 30,000 registered refugees and an estimated 200,000 undocumented refugees in Bangladesh. Lastly, a large-scale violence following a military crackdown in 2017, forced more than 750,000 Rohingya to flee into Bangladesh (International Crisis Group, n. d.). The Inter Sector

Coordination Group (ISCG) (2019b) stated that there are 914,998 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar District; among them, 805,673 have been registered through the GoB-UNHCR registration exercise and as a whole, Bangladesh now hosts 1.1 million Rohingya refugees (Palma, 2019).

3 THREATS TO THE POLITICAL SECURITY

The Rohingya refugees are adding threats to the existing political problems such as instability, smuggling, trafficking, and killings at the border with India (Lewis, 2018). In particular, their derelict conditions and immediate earnings allure them to get continuously involved in smuggling and human or drug trafficking, even by hiding themselves in the local jungle with small arms. Besides, among more than 1.1 million refugees living in Bangladesh, 805,673 have been registered through the GoB-UNHCR registration exercise (ISCG, 2019b), and the rest are living sporadically and posing security threats being mixed with Bangladeshis and getting involved in clashes with the local people. For instance, Bengalis and tribal groups involve frequently in ethnic conflicts that couldn't be solved through Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), located at south-eastern border areas with India and Myanmar. In such conflictual situations, refugees are getting involved in criminal activities and communal violence there; even they may engage in 'Inter and Intra groups' conflicts (Yasmin, 2017).

Considering these issues, the GoB is not granting freedom of movement for refugees (Joseph & Shandrilingam, 2018). But by ignoring this restriction, they continuously seek the ways of going out-legal or illegal. Perhaps, for this tendency, Lewis (2018) showed the possibility of joining militant activities by Rohingya youths who face problems with religion, education and work. Besides, Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), and Tehrek-Azadi Arakan remain active at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and demand a separate Islamic state (Milton et al. 2017). These militant groups are also getting assistance from different middle-east based agencies (Yasmin, 2017). For example, the Islamic State (IS) highlighted in its online publications, particularly in Dabiq, that the group would develop a stronghold in Bangladesh so that they could attack Myanmar (Bashar, 2017). These activities are threatening to both countries. Furthermore, some Rohingya groups have active links with the banned Islamist groupings like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) or Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (Huji) (Wolf, 2014); therefore, they are potentially threatening the security of Bangladesh.

Apart from these, the Government of Myanmar (GoM) has been delaying the current repatriation following its previous strategies in the 1990s when it delayed the process by showing several conditions but didn't make any commitment to Rohingyas' citizenship and safe stay in Myanmar. Similarly, refugees

have repeated their refusal of returning in the 1990s and ignored the proposal of going back without the guarantee of citizenship, safety in Myanmar, and freedom of movement. As a result, two attempts of the repatriation- on November 15, 2018, and on August 22, 2019- have failed. In this regard, newborn 91,000 (in the last two years) and 10,000 upcoming children (10,000 women pregnant) (Hasan, 2019) are adding extra difficulties to this repatriation process. Besides, perhaps, following the strategies of the GoM, India started to deprive Muslims of Indian citizenship through its controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC). For example, Bangladeshi Muslims living in India for decades, have already been forced to flee into Bangladesh due to the crackdown and arrests, often with the help of smugglers. As a result, an influx of people from India to Bangladesh has been observed in recent months ("Bangladeshis in India", 2020). Consequently, both Myanmar and India might make the refugee crisis more complex for Bangladesh.

4 THREATS TO ECONOMIC SECURITY

Refugees are creating several economic challenges such as taking local jobs, increasing the price of dailies, and claiming extra budget from the GoB. Job competition between the locals and refugees remains the same as it was before 2017 when some registered Rohingyas managed to collect firewood, drive rickshaws, involve in small businesses, and work as fishing and construction laborers for their earnings (Farzana, 2016; Ullah, 2011). Besides, they generally engaged in clandestine jobs in the informal labor market (Ullah, 2011). Thus, severe job competition existed between refugees and the local population (Farzana, 2016). However, the influx of 2017 forced the GoB to apply strictness to their activities and limit them in the camps. But refugees are continuing their earning activities-legal or illegal. For example, Rohingyas' involvement in lower-income jobs helps local employers prefer to have a cheap refugee labor force than the local labor force (Joseph & Shandralingam, 2018). On the contrary, the presence of about 35,000 aid workers in the Rohingya camps increased the prices of daily commodities, which reduced the locals' ability to buy these commodities and created a grave dissatisfaction among the locals against refugees (Alam, 2018).

Another critical issue is that meeting the needs of refugees is claiming an extra budget from the GoB. In this regard, being unable, it has called upon the global communities to come forward with their humanitarian aids. But the aid gap remains about 300 million USD (ISCG, 2019b) and continues economic pressure on the GoB for meeting the demands of food, water, medicines, and medical facilities. Besides, the GoB has worked for making roads with bricks, giving spaces for their living, and providing electric facilities, and these activities have caused extra-cost from its national budget (Noor, Islam, & Fo-

rid, 2011). Moreover, due to the severe impact and the density of camps, the GoB needed to relocate about 100,000 refugees to the island of Bhasan Char as a longer-term solution, which caused 280 million USD (Spicer, 2018). Consequently, the economic activities and needs of refugees are posing threats to the economy of Bangladesh.

5 THREATS TO SOCIAL SECURITY

Meanwhile, Rohingyas' involvement in trafficking, smuggling, prostitution, and other illegal activities have increased fear, anger, and hatred among the locals about themselves (Bhattacharjee, 2017). For example, the scarcity of sanitation, medicine, education or entertainment materials, and the requirement of extra-food during pregnancy lead women and girls to prostitution (Haque, 2018) which could cause sexually transmitted infections(STI) among the locals and themselves, and threaten the social life (Rahman, 2010). Rohingyas' 'unforced assimilation' and merging with Bangladeshis also could create social problems in the local society. Besides, new-born children in the camps are increasing the concerns of the GoB. Furthermore, giving extra-economic facilities by the GoB for refugees' development and special treatment creates social animosity between two ethnic groups-local Bengali and refugees (Haque, 2018). Moreover, local media negatively portray Bangladeshi women staff working for refugees in Cox's Bazar. This portrayal is adding to the existing social stigma and security threats (ISCG, 2019a).

Another critical point is that the Rohingya crisis created the possibility of communal conflicts between the local Muslims and Rakhaine people, an ethnic group living in Cox's Bazar and Patuakhali districts in Bangladesh. Because in terms of origin, religion, and language, local Muslims consider Rakhaine people as like Myanmar considers Rohingyas. For example, in 2012, during the violence against Rohingyas, a small portion of the local Muslims sometimes gave anti-Rakhaine slogans and raised the fear of being attacked among Rakhaine people. Hence, Rakhaine people used to conduct surveillance at the entrance gates of the village (Ahmed, 2015). Though no such conflicts happened till now, there is no certainty that it will not happen.

6 THREATS TO ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

Rohingyas are threatening the local environment living over lands and causing negative impacts on it through their activities. Labib (2018) found that around 572 hectares' areas were deforested to set up camps. For instance, the massive influx of 2017 rapidly increased the settlement area from 175 hectares to 1530 hectares between December 2016 and December 2017 across the Kutupalong-Balukhali, Unchiprang, and Nayapara-Leda refugee camps (Hassan, Smith, Walker, Rahman, & Southworth, 2018). They are also causing severe harm to the

local environment, ecology, and biodiversity. For example, they live over fragile hills and use trees to make their homes (Rahman, 2010), which tends to cause landslides there. Besides, Rohingya families in Cox's Bazar are collecting wood as the main source of fuel, mainly from the protected forest reserves of Cox's Bazar (FAO & IOM, 2017). They have also heavily degraded Teknaf Game Reserve (TGR), a forest and conservation area in southern Bangladesh, by using its resources for their livelihood. Chowdhury (2018) showed that in the past, local people depended on nearby forests to collect honey and use dead branches and leaves as firewood. Consequently, refugees' presence is causing the disappearance of these forests and harming the habitat of many animals.

Their presence is also responsible for decreasing the water level of Ukhiya, which has become a grave concern for both locals and refugees (FAO & IOM, 2017). Besides, soil erosion, sea-level rise, natural calamities e. g. flood or cyclone, and landslides in Cox's Bazar are common formidable environmental threats to both-the locals and Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar (Alam, 2018). Overall, refugees have caused an approximate loss of 493,567 USD per year (Labib, 2018). However, considering deforestation and severe impacts on the environment for the long term, the GoB must relocate refugees to other safe places immediately and provide alternative fuels for their cooking. As a result, this relocation would protect the environment, wildlife, and tourism industry there (Hassan et al., 2018).

7 THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY

Though Bangladesh didn't sign the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, 1951 and its Protocol of 1967, it has become a member of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Executive Committee since 1995. So, the GoB should protect the security of asylum seekers and refugees in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010). Despite limited resources, the GoB has been providing them with several facilities such as shelter, food, and medical care (Tarikul Islam, 2018; László & Schmidt, 2018). In support of refugees, UN agencies working in Bangladesh have appealed to the international community for adequate funds to provide the basic needs for their survival (Tarikul Islam, 2018). The GoB and several international agencies have been trying their best, but the aid gap continues the human insecurity of refugees.

Regarding human security, ISCG (2019a) report has emphasized to increase the number of households and food items for ensuring food security and establish another 11 primary health centers (24/7) for meeting the minimum standards. The report has also identified lengthy procedure and fear from social stigma as causes for creating a critical gap in access to justice and legal services. Besides, László and Schmidt (2018) predicted that the GoB would need to cost 3.5 % of its revenue yearly for refugees in the future. But this finance is impossible

for this country. In this regard, Tarikul Islam (2018) expressed his concern that if refugees stay in Bangladesh for a long time, then, the status of human security will deteriorate further.

8 THREATS TO FOREIGN RELATIONS

Refugees are causing threats to the foreign labor market, remittances, and relations of Bangladesh, especially with Myanmar. Many unregistered Rohingyas went to the Middle-East with Bangladeshi fake passports or identity cards and kept trying to introduce themselves as Bangladeshi and involving different crimes that tarnish the image of Bangladesh (Yasmin, 2017). For example, Saudi Arabia captured many Rohingyas for their criminal activities, which could decline the labor market and foreign remittance of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010). Despite the disputes over maritime boundaries, arms trafficking, and cross-border insurgency between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Parnini, 2013), the GoB has been trying to solve the crisis through bilateral discussions from the outset. But Myanmar has not taken any fruitful steps except its verbal commitment to take back the Rohingya. Thus, the crisis could create extreme tensions between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Haque, 2018).

China's mediating role and India's silence regarding the crisis could increase the concern of Bangladesh. As a mediator, China has not been taking steps to that extent, by which Myanmar must take necessary steps for Rohingya repatriation. The reasons might be China's deepwater port and special economic zone in Rakhine state. Consequently, China's role could irritate Bangladesh. On the other hand, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi during his visit to Myanmar, expressed his concern about 'extremist violence' in Rakhine and solidarity with the GoM to its fight against terrorism but remained silent about Rohingya. India's silence at the Rohingya crisis created more anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2017). This sentiment could instigate Bangladeshi Muslims to get involved in conflicts with Bangladeshi Hindus, and these conflicts will affect the friendliest relation of Bangladesh with India.

8 CONCLUSION

Rohingya refugees are creating potential threats to the security of Bangladesh. Temporarily, the GoB could seek aid from the global communities to meet the needs of refugees, and at the same time, take necessary steps such as a stricter controlling system to tackle security threats. But these steps will not enable the GoB to overcome refugees' threatening impact on the land and all other sectors. However, as refugees have opposed to going back two times without the rights of citizenship, the safety in Arakan and settlement in their lands; therefore, the GoM must meet these demands first. Then, refugees' repatriation, which can solve the crisis permanently, may begin. In this

case, Bangladesh should continue its bilateral discussions with Myanmar and seek supports from neighboring and other influential countries and organizations.

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