

The Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh and Myanmar : Health and Educational status

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The situation of the Rohingya refugees demonstrates the challenges in providing protection in an ad hoc, arbitrary and discretionary system. Although many years have passed, Rohingya refugees are still denied freedom of movement, the right to work and the right to education – and thus are denied the chance of self-reliance and self-determination. The Rohingya refugees do not have enough to eat and also predominant health problems are related to the substandard living conditions in the camp. Refugees are forced to engage in clandestine activity, working illegally and for low wages. They have been denied the opportunity to develop, to learn and to better themselves, restricted until recently to informal education classes taught by refugee volunteers with limited courses and grades. This article will explore the present refugee situation in Bangladesh on behalf of the illegal entrance of Rohingyas into the borders and non-cooperative behavior of the Myanmar government. This article also argues that the Rohingya is denied from the basic rights and the basic living slandered, they are facing health issues, food and Malnutrition. This article argues that the Rohingya crisis is no longer only a humanitarian calamity but a potential threat to Bangladesh's internal security.

Rohingya's in Myanmar (Arakan)

Some of the Rohingya refugees wish to return to Burma after spending years in camps in Bangladesh, but conditions in the townships in Arakan from which they fled have still not improved significantly. Discrimination against the Rohingya in Burma continues unabated, and the structural causes of the initial 1991-92 exodus remain unresolved. Denial of citizenship, forced labor, and arbitrary confiscation of property continue to prompt new refugee flows and limit the reintegration of those who have returned (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2002).

Rejection with Citizenship

The most critical issue remains the legal status of the Rohingya in Burma and the implications that it carries in practice. While they have been permitted to reside in Burma, most Rohingya are considered by the Burmese authorities to be "resident foreigners," not citizens. This lack of full citizenship rights means that the Rohingya are subject to other abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory limitations on access to education, and arbitrary confiscation of property. The denials of citizenship, and of the rights that go with it, inevitably pose serious obstacles to the achievement of a durable solution to the refugee flows (Human Rights Watch, 2000: 9-10).

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly urged the Burmese government to repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law or else amend it in accordance with the recommendations of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and to grant Rohingya full citizenship and accompanying rights (Human Rights Watch, 1996). The U.N. special rapporteur called on the Burmese government to "abolish its over-burdensome requirements for citizens in a manner which has discriminatory effects on racial or ethnic minorities.

Freedom of Movement

The Burmese government restricts Rohingya from traveling within Arakan, to other parts of the country, and abroad. Drawing on the Registration of Foreigners Act and Rules of 1940, the Burmese government requires Rohingya villagers to obtain a travel permit from their local Peace and Development Council chairman to cross township and state boundaries. A valid permit allows a Rohingya to travel for up to forty-five days. A copy must be submitted to authorities upon departure and arrival at the destination. Should a Rohingya wish to stay overnight in a village within the township, a similar permit must be procured and then presented to the headmen of the home village and the village visited. Heavy fines of up to 10,000 kyat (twenty-nine US dollars) and detention have been imposed on those violating the requirements. The necessity of documentation has exposed the Rohingya to systemic exploitation by corrupt officials. Rohingya routinely must pay bribes to the authorities to obtain travel documents. A source familiar with Arakan State told Human Rights Watch that a strict screening procedure for those who wish to make the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) has also invited bribery and inhibited the ability of Rohingya to fulfill one of the tenets of the Muslim religion. The western area military commander has final authority over who may undertake the Muslim pilgrimage (Human Rights Watch, 2000: 29).

Education and Employment

The Burmese government reserves secondary education for citizens only. Rohingya do not have access to state run schools beyond primary level. The Rohingya's lack of citizenship also bars them from securing positions in the civil service. Many Rohingya therefore cannot be teachers or health workers nor are they permitted to participate formally in local government (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2002: 21).

Arbitrary Confiscation of Property

As in many parts of Burma with a high military presence, in Arakan, soldiers have required villagers to provide them with rice and livestock. With the central government unable to provide adequately for its 450,000 strong army, battalions have often turned to extortion and theft as well as forced labor. Extortion has manifested itself in the confiscation of food and demands for bribes at checkpoints. Rohingya must routinely pay higher fees than other Burmese for travel (Human Rights Watch, 2000: 30).

Forced Labor

Local government authorities continue to require Rohingya to perform forced labor. Human Rights Watch was told that those who refuse or complain are physically threatened, sometimes with death. The compulsory, unpaid labor includes work in state-run, profit-making industries and construction of "model villages" for non-Muslim migrants in Arakan. In most areas, forced labor is organized by a NASAKA officer or local Peace and Development Committee member. Typically, the officer comes to a village in the morning and demands that a set number of laborers are provided. This demand is passed down through village leaders in order that they instruct villagers to report to the work site. Wealthier villagers can often pay someone else to take their place but others must send family members to the site. Rakhine villagers in northern Arakan do not have to participate in these projects (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2002: 10). The

case above illustrates the use of compulsory labor in state agricultural industry – a profit-making venture. Sources inside Burma also reported the use of forced labor on a NASAKA-owned peanut farm in early 1999. Children as young as seven years old have been seen working on road repair in 1999 in some of the areas to which Rohingya refugees have returned (Ahmed, 2010: 49).

Problems of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

The Rohingya refugees have fled since the 1970's but no process for them to seek protection in Bangladesh; they are rendered vulnerable to persecution, exploitation and arrest (Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP) Bangladesh 2011). The difficulty lies in ensuring compliance and sustainability in the standards of protection when there is no law regulating refugee status itself. The situation of the Rohingya refugees demonstrates the challenges in providing protection in an ad hoc, arbitrary and discretionary system. Although 19 years have passed, Rohingya refugees are still denied freedom of movement, the right to work and the right to education – and thus are denied the chance of self-reliance and self-determination. Refugees are forced to engage in clandestine activity, working illegally and for low wages. They have been denied the opportunity to develop, to learn and to better themselves, restricted until recently to informal education classes taught by refugee volunteers with limited courses and grades (Phiri 2008).

Food and Malnutrition

The Rohingya refugees do not have enough to eat because of a combination of circumstances. One is that almost none of the refugees are receiving his or her full ration. The refugees are totally dependent on the weekly distribution of food. Each family member, including babies from the day of birth, is entitled to the same ration amount and composition. The ration amounts were increased only in June 2000 to meet the standard for minimum daily energy requirements (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2000). For 10 years running, the majority of the Rohingya refugees have been malnourished. In a closed-camp setting, the refugees still do not have enough food. In 2002, 58 percent of the refugee children and 53 percent of the adults are chronically malnourished (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2000).

Health and Healthcare

The Rohingya refugees, predominant health problems are related to the substandard living conditions in the camp. A large population in a tight space has a significant impact on the overall quality of health. Respiratory tract infections (RTI), such as the common cold, continue to be the top cause of overall morbidity year round for children under five. Other communicable diseases, such as chicken pox, also happily thrive in densely populated areas. During the winter season, the number of in-patient admissions rises, especially among infants and children (Arafat 2010).

Diarrhea and skin diseases regularly battle for a close second to RTIs, most commonly as a result of unhygienic surroundings and habits, and untreated water. The mortality rate in the camps remains low, although neo-natal deaths in 2001 account for the highest number of deaths. It is suspected that these babies were born with too low a birth weight to survive in these circumstances. Low birth weight derives from a malnourished mother (Arafat 2010).

MSF and Concern provide counselling to women of 15 to 45 year of age on birth spacing and birth control. 23 percent of the women in Nayapara and 29 percent in Kutupalong are currently engaged in family planning activities. The numbers continue to increase only slowly, as side-effects and cultural beliefs are significant barriers for many to participate.

Those refugees not in the NGOs' target population the over-10-year-olds and non-pregnant/lactating women – can seek care at the health facilities provided by the Ministry of Health (MOH). However, many refugees in MSF's January 2002 survey complained that they were generally dissatisfied with the services provided by the MOH, chiefly because of disrespectful behavior displayed by the MOH doctor. Other refugees revealed that the MOH doctor required payment for services, or for a referral to a health complex outside the camp. This serious matter remains under investigation. MSF and Concern health facilities were also criticised by a small number of refugees, because of long waits for consultation, a poor drug supply, and improper treatment (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2000).

Protection

The absence of legal status is the main underlying factor of the vulnerability of the Rohingya. It makes them easy targets for mistreatment, exploitation and violence, since perpetrators can act with impunity. Access to legal aid for the most vulnerable living in local communities is also to be developed in Cox's Bazar district. Protection activities remain a challenge in the camps. DGECHO will pay particular attention to this issue in 2012.

Water

The water level of the Nayapara reservoir suffers from a shortage during the dry season. From February to May, nearly 225,000 litres of water is trucked in daily from a nearby dam. Water rationing is often imposed throughout the year, with the dry season scarcity used as the explanation (UNHCR 2002). The UNHCR finances a government department to supply the water in the camps and maintain the facilities. Water is transported from the hilly forests through canals to a reservoir, and treated in water treatment plants. Monthly UNHCR reports have indicated a supply of 25 litres of water per refugee per day in Nayapara, which is above the minimum acceptable level of 15-20 litres. The operating time of the water taps – originally two hours per day – was one cause of the discrepancy. In fact, most of the refugees collect only three to four containers (45-60 litres in total) per family per day. With an average family size of 6.5, it is quite clear that the refugees were not attaining the daily 25 litres per person. Another cause of the water shortage was the miscalculation that the amount of water allocated for Nayapara is consumed only by the refugees. In fact, there are hundreds of additional consumers using the supply, 160 camp security personnel, and some villagers. An additional source of the scarcity is the structure itself. The water supply network, including the treatment plant, was installed 10 years ago as an emergency response. By now, the permanent infrastructure has run down, the pipes are exposed and leaking, and the storage tanks have rusted (Ullah, 2011: 153).

The vast majority of refugees from Nayapara, but very few from Kutupalong, in UNHCR's January 2002 survey stated that they sometimes or never have enough water to accommodate their daily needs. Most explained that they have compensated by drawing water from sources outside the camp, or by digging wells in secluded areas inside the camp (Ullah, 2011: 153).

Skin diseases, such as scabies, and diarrhoea have been in UNHCR's top five causes of overall morbidity since 1992. But neither the high incidence of water-related diseases, nor the claims of the refugees themselves convinced the responsible actors that the refugees were suffering from a lack of water.

Education

The Rohingyas are barred from higher education, including medical sciences and engineering. It is not surprising that the Rohingyas in large number remain ill educated, with the abler lot taking up the profession of small business and petty trading for reproducing their livelihoods (Ahmed 2001). Many refugee parents expressed their satisfaction with the recent opening of schools. Because the government had asserted that the refugee presence was brief, educational programmes were considered unnecessary and therefore prohibited. For the first five years, refugee children were denied their right to basic (non-religious) education (USCR 1995). It was not until mid-1996 that the GoB allowed formal schooling in some camps. But in Nayapara, it wasn't until January 2000 when the children could start school. The education levels provided are kindergarten to class five. For learning beyond the primary levels, casual adolescent and adult learner courses have been started for those who wish to maintain their basic literacy and arithmetic skills. However, enrolment in these programmes was quite low in 2001; only 27 adolescent girls and 24 adolescent boys were registered. Many young people do not attend these courses (USCR 1995).

Challenges for Bangladesh

According to Delwar Hossain, Professor of Dhaka University, "Rohingya problem is not created by Bangladesh, it is a problem Myanmar. Initially we had good relations but later it deteriorated by Rohingya issue. It is politically and socially completed issue in Myanmar which side effects also created problems for Bangladesh".¹

Rohingyas presence in Bangladesh has created a security dilemma for their host country. As a country of first asylum Bangladesh is obligated to ensure the protection of the Rohingya but, given the strain created by its own large population, Bangladesh cannot handle that responsibility. Moreover, some refugee organizations depend on arms and drug trafficking for funds while others maintain strong relationships with Islamic extremists. Since human rights violations caused the forced displacement of the Rohingya and they receive hardly any protection while in Bangladesh. Conversely, there are good reasons to regard it as a security concern for Bangladesh, due to its hefty impacts. According to Amina Mohsin, Professor of Dhaka University, "*Rohingya issue is being used by political parties in Chittagong (CHT) region for vote bank*".² The Rohingya crisis is no longer a simple humanitarian tragedy; rather it is a potential threat to Bangladesh's internal stability and a source of interstate tension between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Bangladesh with the help of international community has

¹ Note: Interview Conducted in Department of International Relations, Dhaka University (Bangladesh), During 20th April 2013

² Note: Interview conducted in the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, (Bangladesh), During 20th April 2013.

tried to resolve this issue through diplomatic channel but due to Myanmar military junta's stubbornness, the refugee problem could not be resolved and this is creating security, economic, and social problems in the country. Military junta's refusal to recognize Rohingyas as citizens and continuous attempt to push them inside Bangladesh territory may lead to a conflict situation if not properly handled (Saifuddin 2009).

Relations with Terrorist Organisations

According to reports from Asian security services, militants from the *Jemaah Islamiah*, which is connected to al-Qaeda, are hiding out in the Rohingya camps (Lintner, 2009). In recent years, these camps have, in effect, been run by Bangladesh's most extreme Islamic outfit, the *Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami* (HuJI), which was set up in 1992, with financial support from Osama bin Laden. Rohingya militants collect fund with the help of local and international Islamist parties, and Bangladesh's rightwing party, *Jamaat-i-Islam*, has been known to finance the Rohingya Solidarity Organization. Many of the trainers of the Rohingyas are members of the *Islami Chhatra Shibir*, the student outfit of the *Jamaat* (Lintner, 2009).

Bangladeshi security forces managed to arrest top explosives expert of the Islamic terrorist organization *Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), from the Dhaka area. The explosives expert revealed that JMB has close operational ties with RSO. The RSO had been giving terrorist training to various Islamic militants in Bangladesh since the 1980s and that he and other JMB operatives had been trained by RSO weapons experts at a camp near the Myanmar border (Roul, 2009). While the government is fighting against some radicalism inside the country, the militant Rohingya put immense pressure on its nerve. As a matter of fact, it is more likely that Rohingya terrorist groups spread to other areas of Bangladesh.

But Professor C. R. Abrar's approach was totally different about Rohingya's relations with terrorist Organization, in interview he said "*Rohingya has no link with terrorist but because of their identity they are facing problems*".³

Illegal small arms trade

Illegal small arms trade, a well-turned business along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border areas, is also a security concern for Bangladesh. Pushed back refugees live in the border jungle and get involved in smuggling. Arms smugglers use the Thailand and Myanmar insurgent network through the Chittagong Hills Tracts and sell weapons in the underground market. If Myanmar fails to cooperate in stopping illegal arms trade in the border areas, criminals and terrorist groups may create threats to internal law and order situation of Bangladesh (Saifuddin, 2009). As the number of drug addicts in Bangladesh is increasing, the government is nervous about the illegal drug trade in the border region, which is likely to have a long term impact on the country's internal security.

Volatile bilateral relation with Myanmar

³ Note: Interviews conducted in Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, During 30/04/2012

Good and constructive relations with Myanmar, which is a gateway between Southeast Asia and South Asia and to China in the North, are essential to Bangladesh's economic prosperity and energy security in the context of new geopolitical paradigm, but the tremendous political, economic, and social burden of housing Rohingya refugees has played a major role in defining relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Bangladesh -Myanmar relations is threatened by the refugee problem. The Rohingyas are not recognized as one of the "national races" by the Myanmar government, which proclaims: "Historically, there has never been a 'Rohingya' race in Myanmar.

Bangladesh has absorbed large numbers of refugees from Rakhine State in western Myanmar in the past, notably in 1977-78 and 1991-92. Only 230,000 have returned to Myanmar since 1993, when the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees began a repatriation program. About 400,000 Rohingya refugees are still left in camps in Bangladesh. Persons displaced due to persecution by the Burmese state remain a delicate diplomatic issue between the Burma and Bangladesh – as indeed is the case with most of Burma's neighbours (Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2011).

The very name Rohingya is a creation of a group of insurgents in the Rakhine State," (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1992). In contrast, Bangladesh thinks it doesn't have anything to do with Rohingya citizenship, and thinks of the group only as refugees. At the same time, any stern action against the Rohingyas on the part of Bangladesh would tarnish the country's image in the Muslim world because of the Muslim identity of the Rohingyas. This is the reason that, from the beginning of the issue, Bangladesh preferred to solve the conflict diplomatically. Myanmar eventually entered into a negotiated settlement with Bangladesh regarding the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees but it has failed to fully implement agreements. The slow progress of repatriation and the reluctance of the Burmese authorities to consider the return of the refugees remain a major source of contention for Bangladesh (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1992).

Environmental Problem

The Rohingya refugees are living in overcrowded areas in the camps. The houses are bad in shape and the sanitation system is very poor. Hence, the environment around the camps and outside has been deteriorating over the years. The population density is extremely high in the camp areas.

According to Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director of Research Initiatives Bangladesh, *"high number and prolonged residence of refugees increases the rate at which land and resources are used up, a process which accelerates environmental degradation and in turn leads to greater competition between natives and refugees for scarce land and resources"*.⁴

⁴ Note: Interview conducted in Dhaka (Bangladesh) during 26th April 2

The environment is polluted by the camp people which are largely an outcome of their ignorance. Deforestation is the main environmental threat in the region which is linked to the livelihood of the Rohingya refugees. Furthermore, the presence of large numbers of refugees has had a great impact on the environment because they depend on forests for collecting fuel, cut down trees to make homes and selling them as fuel for their livelihood (Ahmed, 2010: 83-84). The forests department claims that the Rohingya refugees have destroyed forest resources. The forest department further alleges that the refugee camps are being erected on their plantation without their consent or knowledge. Besides, water pollution is another environmental concern. Water drainage systems of Bangladesh-Myanmar border area, Bandarban zone and Teknaf area have become polluted. There is no proper sanitation system in the camps. It also hampers the environment in the whole camp area and beyond. For instance: Teknaf Game Reserve (TGR), a forest and conservation area in southern Bangladesh, has been heavily degraded by Rohingya refugees as they are using its resources for their livelihood (Uddin and Khan, 2007: 149-175).

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