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The Rohingya Crisis: No End in Sight

By Tahsina Ahmed

SYNOPSIS

Since 2017, more than 1.2 million Rohingyas have been living a precarious existence as refugees in southeastern Bangladesh ever since they were forced to leave their homes in Myanmar. All efforts to facilitate their return have not yielded positive results. Their plight will persist unless the international community step up its efforts to build more confidence and trust among the communities involved and push forward in a systematic way with increased multi-stakeholder participation.

COMMENTARY

25 August 2023 marked the sixth anniversary of the mass expulsion of the Rohingya people from their homeland by the Myanmar Armed Forces (the Tatmadaw). For six years now, more than 1.2 million Rohingyas have been living in southeastern Bangladesh as refugees, leading precarious and insecure lives. They face an uncertain future as Bangladesh, which has social, economic, political, security and environmental problems of its own, lacks the wherewithal to accommodate them.

Despite several attempts, including the recent pilot project under which a group of Myanmar nationals will return to their homeland to be followed by successive batches, the repatriation issue is stagnated and at a dead end, placing Bangladesh in a predicament. The lack of urgent action by the international community, the politics of humanitarian agencies, coupled with the reluctance among the Rohingyas to return home, have emboldened the Myanmar officials to dodge the issue when dealing with their Bangladeshi counterparts.

As things stand, the Rohingyas have very few options except wait in forlorn hope of deliverance from their sufferings amid the indifference of the international community. Big-power rivalries, notably the geopolitical competition and tensions between China

and the United States of America, the COVID-19 recovery efforts around the world, and the rapidly deteriorating political-military situation in Myanmar are drawing attention and resources away from what is happening at the borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Rohingya refugee crisis began on 25 August 2017 when the Tatmadaw launched a "[clearance operation](#)" – essentially a well-planned campaign of ethnic cleansing – against the Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State. Media reports estimated that during the campaign, [some 25,000 Rohingyas](#) were massacred, thousands of women and adolescents sexually assaulted, and [more than 700,000 Rohingyas](#) forced to flee into Bangladesh, joining some 200,000-250,000 Rohingyas who had arrived earlier in several waves (beginning in 1978) after their expulsion from Myanmar. The United Nations has described the post-2017 Tatmadaw persecution of the Rohingyas as a "[textbook example of ethnic cleansing](#)".

Indifference of the International Community

When the current Rohingya crisis started in August 2017, it attracted the attention of the international community for a brief period of time. The international community, with the US and several Western states at the forefront, initially played an important role providing humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas. However, this interest waned and the Rohingya crisis was [side-lined](#) as a result of pressing issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine where war continues till today.

The growing indifference of the international community towards the plight of the Rohingyas is reflected, first and foremost, in the disbursement of aid. Over the last six years, the provision of funds for the refugees has declined drastically. For example, in 2022, [only 63.8 per cent](#) of the US\$881 million required for the refugees were collected. In the first half of 2023, [only 24.6 per cent](#) of the required \$876 million were raised. A number of international donors, including the United Kingdom, have significantly reduced their aid. British aid for the refugees [dropped](#) from £112.36 million in 2019-2020 to £20.26 million in 2022-2023, a decline of 83 per cent.

In addition, the World Food Programme (WFP) has been compelled to slash its food support for the Rohingyas twice in the first half of 2023, citing a funding shortfall of US\$125 million. The WFP subsequently [decided to slash](#) its monthly food vouchers for the refugees from US\$12 to US\$10 and to US\$8 per person, with deleterious effects on the health of the refugees, besides secondary effects, such as an increase in illegal activities including illegal employment.

Besides the decline in funding support for the Rohingyas, the lack of attention from the international actors have prevented any resolution of the protracted crisis. [Russia, China and India](#) have shielded Myanmar's ethnic cleansing from international opprobrium, while [Japan, Thailand and Singapore](#) have continued to trade with and invest in Myanmar.

Although the US, UK and some other Western states undertook actions against Myanmar, including the [condemnation of the Tatmadaw's atrocities](#), the [imposition of targeted sanctions](#) on Myanmar officials, and the designation of the atrocities as a

[genocide](#), they did not exert significant pressure on Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya crisis during the years up to the 2021 military coup d'état in Myanmar.

In fact, after the 2021 coup which deposed the democratically-elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the subsequent hardening of the West's position on Myanmar, the Rohingyas have remained marginal to their broader approach towards the country. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, represented by Gambia, [filed a case](#) against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, but the case has been dragging on and has not been able to change the situation on the ground.

More can be done for Rohingya Refugees

The indifference of the international community, coupled with the understandable reluctance among the Rohingyas to return home, emboldened the Myanmar government to dodge the issue when dealing with Bangladesh. Among the major players, only China seems to have been more active in pursuing a mediatory role between Bangladesh and Myanmar to kick off the process of refugee repatriation.

Two attempts at repatriation in [2018](#) and [2019](#) ended in failure, and the [pilot project](#) for Rohingya repatriation scheduled to start in April 2023 has stalled as well. These failures can be attributed to the reluctance of the Rohingyas to return to Myanmar without guarantees of citizenship and safety, and to Myanmar's reluctance to take back its own people. More importantly, the Tatmadaw sees no unbearable pressure from other states and international bodies to embark on resettling the Rohingyas.

Furthermore, while the non-governmental organisations that are active among the Rohingyas have been commended for their humanitarian activities, they have also been [accused of discouraging them](#) from agreeing to repatriation. This has created conditions where refugees fall into the hands of criminal gangs, drug cartels, trafficking groups, and terrorist outfits on both sides of the border and beyond. Rohingyas, unemployed and without any future prospects, have become easy prey to drug dealers and made to serve as [couriers to smuggle drugs](#) into Bangladesh.

The safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar is the only solution to the protracted crisis. Bangladesh, with its burgeoning population, does not have the capacity to absorb them, while third countries are [mostly unwilling](#) to take in large numbers of refugees except for token gestures from the US, Canada and Japan. To many in these developed countries, the crisis originated in Myanmar and has to be solved inside Myanmar.

Bangladesh, while doing its best to resolve the Rohingya crisis, has so far seen very limited success in the repatriation of the refugees. Dhaka should therefore ramp up its diplomacy to re-energise the international community and to urge both Western and non-Western countries to use their political and diplomatic leverage over Myanmar so as to step up the process of repatriation and to provide much-needed funds for the Rohingyas.

Simultaneously, the international community should continue to negotiate with the Tatmadaw since it controls the ground situation in parts of the Rakhine State, and

engage with other stakeholders inside Myanmar, such as the National Unity Government and the [Arakan Army](#), to find a solution to the crisis.

So far, the international community has undertaken few significant steps to address the Rohingya crisis in a long-term manner although it has the capability to do much more. It can act more collectively and systematically to instil confidence and trust in joint initiatives among governments, civil society, and even the business community to bring about a solution to the Rohingya crisis.

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