

Understanding the Rohingya Crisis

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Rohingya: An
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Life,” explains that
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In consideration of their stateless status in Myanmar, prolonged refugeehood in Bangladesh, and their ongoing vulnerable position of the Rohingya, they are known as the world’s most persecuted minority. Despite living in Arakan/Rakhine state for centuries, Myanmar’s Citizenship Law in 1982 rendered the Rohingya stateless as it conferred citizenship to 135 ethnic groups excluding the Rohingya. In 1978, Burmese security forces started Operation Nagamin, which produced the first Rohingya influx to Bangladesh (about 250,000). The second influx occurred in 1991-92 (about 200,000). Then, some 360,000 Rohingyas were repatriated to Bangladesh under an agreement brokered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Even after the UN agreement, the third influx started in 2012 (125,000), and the fourth in 2016 (87,000). However, the Rohingya crisis reached a critical stage in 2017 when Burmese security forces launched the deadly Clearance Operation campaign as a ‘counter-insurgency’ measure against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The Clearance Operation displaced 740,000 Rohingyas, killed 10,000, raped 1900 girls/women, and completely/partially burned 400 Rohingya villages in Rakhine state. Considering the intense brutality of the campaign, the UN Human Rights Commissioner termed it a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing,” and the US declared it a “genocide.”

Bangladesh now hosts 1.3 million Rohingya refugees in Ukhia and Teknaf, the largest refugee camp in the world. Since Myanmar stripped them of citizenship and Bangladesh does not recognize them even as refugees, the Rohingya exist nowhere in the legal framework of any state. Since hosting 1.3 million people is creating an economic burden and many socioeconomic problems, Bangladesh is gradually becoming reluctant to shelter them. Besides, the Rohingyas are considered potential threats to regional security in South and Southeast Asia because of their alleged involvement in human trafficking, illegal border trades, and militant outfits. Apart from that, some of the Rohingya refugees have been involved in infights and inter-group conflict in the camps resulted in more than 100 killings during the last five years including the assassination of Mohibullah, a Rohingya leader. Such infights and deadly conflict reconfirm the presence of armed groups in the camps which are considered as a potential threat to national and regional security. Bangladesh made two repatriation attempts in November 2018 and August 2019 but failed because no Rohingya were willing to return as the conditions in Rakhine state remained unchanged and hence unsafe.

Recent events have made the Rohingyas’ future in Myanmar a more complex proposition. The 2021 military coup inspired violent resistance by regional ‘insurgent’ groups and the People’s Democratic Fronts (PDF). The National Unity Government (NUG) also leads a counter-coup civil disobedience movement. Consequently, Myanmar society is becoming increasingly intolerant; hence, there is little space for potential social integration. Bangladesh has initiated the relocation of 100,000 Rohingyas to Bhasan Char, which might slightly reduce mounting tensions in Ukhia and Teknaf. However, this relocation will not resolve the Rohingya crisis. As most nations are reluctant to accept additional Rohingya refugees, a third-country resettlement plan is not in place. As a notable exception, the United States recently agreed to accept up to 800 Rohingya refugees per year. Given this limited support, the Rohingya, Bangladesh, and Human Rights Organizations believe that the international community should come forward to redress the Rohingya crisis under the auspice of “burden sharing” and “global justice.”

Many entities within the international community, including the G8 nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the USA, and the UK), the European Union (EU), UN Bodies, Australia, China, India, and more, supported Bangladesh to run the refugee camps. From 2017 through September 2022, the US provided \$1.9 billion to aid “the vulnerable people in Myanmar and Bangladesh...” Similarly, through August 2022, “the EU has allocated over €320 million for the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the region.” Additionally, many other countries and institutes contributed to the support package. But the funding flow is gradually reducing. According to UNHCR, the “2022 response plan sought over \$881 million for more than 1.4 million people, including Rohingya refugees and more than half a million residents in the most affected host communities. So far, it was funded at only 49%, with \$426.2 million received.”

In response to the military coup in Myanmar, Australia, the EU, the United Kingdom, and the United States penalized commercial enterprises directly connected to the junta through economic sanctions, asset freezing, travel restrictions, and other measures that aimed to cut revenue, but these efforts did nothing to resolve the Rohingya crisis. The UN Security Council could not act on the matter due to Chinese and Russian “veto” power. ASEAN played hardly any role except expressing “concerns about the civilian casualty” in the anti-junta movement. China and India, important regional powers, were mainly concerned with their economic and geopolitical interests; rather than the potential solution to the Rohingya crisis. All in all, the international community has taken little effective action to redress the Rohingya crisis. Consequently, Bangladesh must bear the “burden” of 1.3 million refugees. And the Rohingya people lead their lives bearing the scars of an atrocious past, navigating a perilous present, and facing an uncertain future.

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I have conducted extensive research in Washington, DC, which included consultations with the staff of US senators directly involved in adopting “the Rohingya Genocide Determination Act, 2021,” former diplomats to Myanmar, policy analysts working with leading think tanks based in DC, journalists, and academics. Based on my findings, I suggest five points as potential solutions:

1. The United States and the international community should continue supporting the restoration of democracy in Myanmar and the return of a civilian government. As it is the governance framework that is more likely to provide the Rohingya legal recognition and foster an inclusive society in which returning Rohingya can live safely. However, without legal recognition and inclusivity, the restoration of democracy will bring nothing meaningful for the Rohingya.
2. In order to share the demographic “burden” with Bangladesh, the United States and the international community should establish a multilateral resettlement program that provides asylum to Rohingya refugees in western countries
3. The Rohingya refugees should take upon themselves some responsibility to stop their inter-group conflicts and illegal activities. They should peacefully and democratically form a collective to represent the Rohingya in dialogue with others.
4. The international community fund a significant aid package for Bangladesh that includes more high education scholarships for Bangladeshi, expanded opportunities for migrant labor in western countries, relaxed immigration policies for Bangladeshis, lessened export-import trade barriers, programs to promote foreign investment in Bangladesh, more export opportunities for the country’s ready-made garment (RMG) sectors, and increased development aid to compensate the costs of hosting Rohingya refugees.
5. As repatriation of Rohingya refugees is unlikely in the near future, Bangladesh and the international community reach an agreement to ensure Rohingya refugees’ rights and entitlements as human beings are duly respected. In line with this aim, refugees should have access to basic education, healthcare, job training, community development tools, and economic opportunity.

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