

ROUNDTABLE ON

A roadmap for sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis



The Daily Star in association with North South University (NSU) organised a roundtable titled “A roadmap for sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis” on September 24, 2019. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Dr Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman, Professor and Adviser, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), NSU



North South University recently held an international conference on the Rohingya crisis and some very good quality papers were presented in the conference. We prepared some policy briefs based on the outcome of the conference. We are very proud that we could present the policy briefs to our honourable foreign minister and secretary of foreign affairs before they left for the UN General Assembly. The purpose of this roundtable is to discuss and share the broad observations of these policy briefs based on the proceedings of the conference.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc (Retd), Associate Editor, The Daily Star



Peacebuilding and conflict resolution depend primarily on unanimity among all the parties involved in the resolution of a crisis. Do we have unanimity in the resolution of the Rohingya crisis? What does resolution mean for Myanmar? For Myanmar, resolution of the Rohingya issue is the “final solution.” That is to denude the entire western Rakhine and northern Rakhine of Rohingyas. For Bangladesh, the solution is that the Rohingyas must go back and be given all their rights that citizens of a country are entitled to. And for the Rohingyas, they want to live in a peaceful atmosphere where they will not be subjected to the type of violence they were subjected to.

Then, there should be a facilitator and an honest broker. The one name that came up repeatedly in the presentation is China. We asked China to mediate or at least put maximum pressure on Myanmar. Can China be an honest broker? Does it not have its strategic interests that will stand in the way of its putting pressure? Then again, the three big powers, with some degree of leverage on Myanmar, have allowed their strategic interests to

predominate over any other issues: humanitarian or otherwise. And they are really not much concerned about the many ways this will affect Bangladesh. Bangladesh has given shelter to 1.2 million Rohingyas. Is there any other country in the world which has absorbed so much demographic pressure? So, when other countries tell us that Bangladesh is doing a good job and they are supporting us, I would like to say that patting the back doesn't help.

Prof Dr Atiqul Islam, *Vice Chancellor, NSU*



North South University wants to distinguish itself as the most effectively engaged university in the country. So, we thought it would be appropriate to bring together the best minds in the world at North South University and explore a sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis. So, we thought it would be appropriate to organise an international conference on Rohingyas to project, discuss and debate about the issue and come up with some sustainable and peaceful resolutions of the crisis. We are indeed grateful that no less than Dr. Syed Hamid Albar, a renowned scholar and the former foreign minister of Malaysia, graced the occasion as the keynote speaker. From the conference papers, we have prepared the policy briefs that will be presented here for discussion and debate. We sincerely hope that the policy briefs could add some value in exploring options for a sustainable solution to the crisis. We want to hear more and learn more about the practical things that can be done to resolve the crisis.

Dr Katherine Li, *Director, Office of External Affairs and Assistant Professor, NSU*



North South University and UNHCR organised an international conference on Rohingya crisis in July 2019. We received a total of 230 abstracts under 11 themes among which 175 were accepted. Experts from 16 countries participated as paper presenters during the two-day event. The objective of the conference was to explore and critically assess the Rohingya crisis from multiple perspectives and also to develop concrete policy recommendations with participation from national and international experts.

This brings us to our roundtable today.

Dr M Jashim Uddin, *Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU and Keynote Presenter*



Apart from socio-economic concerns, the Rohingya crisis poses security threats for Bangladesh. It could also affect regional peace and stability in the long run. The demographic imbalance that has been created in Ukhiya and Teknaf region is another great concern for us. It is creating tension between the host community and the Rohingyas. In addition, drugs and arms trafficking pose a serious security threat for us.

The repeated failures of the repatriation process have actually increased our anxiety. From a realistic perspective, for meaningful repatriation, we also need to focus on whether legitimate concerns of Rohingyas are actually reflected in different negotiations, policies and agreements.

The role of the UN, in particular, is vital for the dignified repatriation of the Rohingyas. Without the UN's guarantee, repatriation will not see the light of day. On the other hand, we realise that the role of China as a mediator is very important as it has the "carrot and stick" influence over Myanmar. So, the regional and global powers also need to pursue China to convince it to influence Myanmar to resolve the crisis.



The five-point solution presented by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the 72nd UN General Assembly seems to be pretty relevant to resolve the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh, the UN and western democracies can and should create a global consensus to pursue the Security Council to put appropriate sanctions on Myanmar – either economic or military – if it constantly disregards the international human rights declaration and conventions.

Dr Taufique Joarder, *Research Director, FHI 360*

History shows that almost all the refugee crises turn into protracted emergencies. And that's what we need to really decide: should we give them short-term care, or a simple six-month regimen of tuberculosis treatment, or a nine-month or long-term treatment? Should we give them short-term or long-term family planning services? These are the policy decisions that we need to be mindful of. Whenever there is a refugee influx, we are always

concerned about communicable diseases: measles, sexually transmitted infections, etc. We often forget that these people also have non-communicable diseases. I didn't see non-communicable diseases addressed in these policy briefs.

Maheen Sultan, *Member, Naripokkho*



The Bangladesh government always says that they haven't ratified the refugee convention but even within Bangladesh's laws, there are certain regulations such as birth and marriage registration that can be applied to the refugees. This will ensure prevention of child marriage or following up on divorces. Clarifying the legal framework on the issue of protection against trafficking and forced marriage is also necessary.

Many of the Rohingya children have completed up to grade 3 or 4 and they want to go forward. But under the present system the camp authorities cannot allow that. Why can't Bangladesh manage freedom of movement and right to work when other countries can?

Humayun Kabir, *Acting President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)*



First, we need to see the issue through a new prism because in terms of solution there are a couple of things that could be worked on: 1) repatriate all of them, 2) many of them will return while some remain as in 1992, and 3) none of them will go back. So, with these three sets in mind, we need to develop our policy. Second, China is helping us, we are hopeful. But we have to understand what kind of values we are talking about over here with respect to Chinese involvement in this problem. Yes, they want to help us repatriate Rohingyas but under what condition? As mentioned, China might say "forced migration" but under the agreement we signed on November 23, 2017 it is difficult to go beyond a voluntary resolution of this problem.

Dr Abdur Rob Khan, *Professor & Dean, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, NSU*



It is seen that poverty increased by three percent in the local neighbourhood of the refugee camps. One of the reasons may be that the Rohingya community takes a share of the local employment. Another issue is banning of fishing in the Naf River leading to unemployment of 35,000 fishermen. Third, NGOs take more interest in working with the Rohingya labour force rather than the local labour force. One point to be highlighted is the missing of macro-micro linkage. The problem is localised between Cox's Bazar and Bandarban, but we are uncertain about the impact on the national economy. Even if repatriation starts it will take a long time to complete. So, huge costs will pile up. What we need is continuous monitoring of these costs which will pile up to a macro level

eventually.



Dr Biswas Karabi Farhana, *Professor, Department of Environmental Science and Management, NSU*

The waste problem is a big issue. It is contaminating groundwater and surface water which are already scarce in Cox's Bazar. So far, we have one waste treatment plant which is one of the biggest waste treatment plants in the world. But we need more of these which will stop the infiltration of faecal waste into the water. We need to have a more comprehensive waste management plan, like composting, bio-bins, barrel composting and vermicomposting. Rainwater harvesting is required to lessen pressure on groundwater. A sustainable solution would be plantation of indigenous grass, shrubs, herbs, which have deeper roots.



Shamsheer M Chowdhury *BB, Former Foreign Secretary*

In an article in the Bangkok Post a journalist mentioned the debacle that took place on August 22. The caption was "China's fast-track policies and Myanmar falls flat." The two things to see are "China" and "fast-track". Why does China need a fast-track approach? Is it a recognition of the fact that low-track hasn't worked and is likely to not work anymore? Is China feeling embarrassed that it has not been able to take the issue forward?

Today's report in *The Daily Stars* says Bangladesh is importing onions from Myanmar. We are saying something and doing something else. We are breaking the sanctions.



Brig. Gen. M. Sakhawat Hussain, *PhD, ndc, psc (Retd), Honorary Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), NSU*

Myanmar army is in a difficult position because of their internal problem. Just a month back, an offshoot of the northern alliance, of which Arakan army is a part, attacked and killed 37 people at a military academy of science and technology near Mandalay and that has created an uproar within the army and within the command. The second problem with the Myanmar army is regarding the uncertainty following the current military chief's retirement next year. The army is trying to push him as a presidential candidate which may not be acceptable internationally. We need to carefully

observe the situation and shouldn't make any hasty move that will throw away what we have achieved. We also shouldn't be disgusted with the Rohingyas. They are helpless people. We must ensure meaningful repatriation.

Dr Gias U Ahsan, *Professor and Dean, School of Health and Life Sciences, NSU*



It is apparent that the level of awareness among the Rohingya refugees regarding prevention of diseases is very poor. There is a huge risk of transmission of disease including sexually transmitted diseases from the camp to outside areas that may affect the whole country.

Due to their traumatic experience, Rohingyas suffer from serious psychosomatic disorder. Many of them become dependent on drugs which leads to drug smuggling and other types of problems. To address the abovementioned mental and physical health issues, we should adopt a long-term plan.



Dr Kamaluddin Ahmed, *Member, National Human Rights Commission*

I want to focus on the citizenship issue of Rohingyas. Myanmar government is trying to portray these people as Bangladeshi citizens. Globally, Suu Kyi has her own audience who believes her propaganda against Rohingyas. We must make the world community understand that Rohingyas are not from Bangladesh. They are indigenous to that particular area of Arakan.



Prof Dr S K Tawfique M Haque, *Chair, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

When we were developing these policy briefs, it was shocking to realise how little we know about our neighbour Myanmar. Before the Rohingya crisis, there was a small-scale study where general people were asked about whether they knew that Myanmar is Bangladesh's neighbour. 80-85 percent of the Bangladeshis said they didn't know that we have a border with Myanmar. Unfortunately, we also didn't find any specialists on Myanmar in our universities and research institutions. The reality is that we don't know Myanmar and we don't understand their reality. Therefore, we need more and more research on Myanmar at both the government and private level.



Dr Mahbubur Rahman, *Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

A five-member oversight committee can be formed which will observe and assist the recently-formed working committee, comprising of foreign ministers from Bangladesh, China and Myanmar. The oversight committee should include representatives from Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Rohingya community, and the UN.



Haruno Nakashiba, *Senior Protection Officer, UNHCR*

We congratulate North South University for developing the policy briefs, and we commend the efforts that have been put into developing the policy briefs. In fact, some of the recommendations made in the policy briefs have already been implemented in Cox's Bazar.

Some of the recommendations made in the policy briefs have already been implemented in Cox's Bazar. Since 2018, we have been distributing LPG cylinders and cooking stoves to both the refugees and host community. We have already completed a project of planting trees in 500 acres of land, and this project will continue in the future.

Speaking of the refugee voice, what Rohingya refugees tell us is, first, they have a very strong sense of belonging to Myanmar. They say, "My grandfather was born in Myanmar. My father was born in Myanmar. I was born in Myanmar. I consider myself as Rohingya belonging to Myanmar."



Romena Parvin, *PDL Reporting Officer, IOM*

Confidence-building between the host community and Rohingyas is a burning issue. The service delivery efficiency has improved a lot but issues like communal harmony and social cohesion are very important as well. Everyone should understand that the solution is not here, it is in Myanmar. So, the international community needs to put more pressure on Myanmar diplomatically.



Sigma Ainul, *Programme Manager, Population Council*

We have found that there is a lot of stigma and a religious belief that contraceptives are a sin, but they accept it when it's for birth spacing. So, we have to do the right kind of messaging to effectively reach them with the interventions.



Dr A S M Ali Ashraf, *Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka*

Regarding refugee protection, I find there is a kind of disconnect between what the foreign ministry wants and how the disaster ministry has been working on it. We need to have a solid understanding of how to deal with these twin demands, managing refugee protection and starting the repatriation process.



Dr Md Mahmudur Rahman Bhuiyan, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

When the conference took place, many of the presenters said that the only solution is repatriation but now we've seen that we have to think about alternatives. Also, the projection is important. If repatriation is the solution, we have to think about how long it may take. If repatriation is not the immediate solution, then we have to project what the next plan we have to make.



Dr Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi, *Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

We need to have a long-term approach even though hypothetically we've been expecting the Rohingya crisis to be resolved soon. We also need to take some interim measures to mitigate problems surrounding the Rohingya living in various camps. Finally, the role of international communities is very vital in this context, we need to work together with the international communities to have an effective and sustainable solution.



Dr Ishrat Zakia Sultana, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

Mental health of Rohingya victims is a big challenge and it is clearly identified in our policy briefs and recommendations. We can have day-long debates on Bhashan Char and other initiatives but the main thing is whether we are considering the opinions of Rohingyas. Otherwise, it will turn into another forceful relocation.



Md Saidur Rahman, *Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU*

We need to demystify the idea of 'international community' that is not a homogeneous entity. Countries that are supporting Myanmar need to be separated from those that are working for the Rohingya cause. We need to identify those in the international community who are going to support us to resolve the problems. Resolving the Rohingya crisis should be the responsibility of the global community.

Dr Salahuddin M Aminuzzaman

Few ideas and options have emerged from the discussion: the participants noted that we need to understand the Rohingya issues more creatively and strategically, and have to manage our diplomacy very smartly to look for a sustainable solution. Almost all participants emphasised that we need to understand this refugee issue from a historical, geo-political and humanitarian perspective.

We also have to recognise that China matters and therefore it needs to initiate the diplomatic processes of developing a strategic approach. Concerns have been raised about what Bangladesh has learnt from the previous Rohingya refugee crises to be able to develop a coping and addressing strategy. There is no easy solution. We need to explore alternative windows and make a contingency plan. The Rohingya crisis is just not a refugee issue, but also a political concern with the potential to make the region politically unstable leading to more human catastrophes. The international community should therefore develop a comprehensive approach towards addressing the Rohingya issue.

A sustainable solution can only be achieved when regional and global powers and the UN agree on a comprehensive package.

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