



## **The Rohingya Refugee Crisis of 2012: Asserting the Need for Constructive Regional & International Engagement**

**March 21, 2013 - Mirza Sadaqat Huda**



### **Introduction**

On the 10th of June 2012, more than 500 members of the Rohingya community, a historically persecuted ethnic group originating from the Rakhine State in Western Myanmar crossed the Naf River into Southeast Bangladesh to seek refuge from large scale sectarian strife that was originally identified as an ethnic conflict between the minority Rohingyas and the Buddhist majority. Ethnic tensions that evolved over time to be a perpetual trait of relations between the Rohingyas and the Rakhine exploded into communal violence in late May 2012, following the rape and murder of a Rakhine woman, allegedly by three Rohingya men. With at least 50 casualties 30,000 displaced [1] and continued indifference by the Myanmar authorities, the Rohingyas were forced to seek refuge in Bangladesh, with the first large groups arriving by boat in June and intermittent influxes in the next few months.

Bangladesh has for the first time refused to accommodate Rohingyas fleeing persecution. The country is currently home to around 28,000 registered Rohingya refugees, housed in two UN High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) administered camps in Cox's Bazar[2], as well as another estimated 200,000 to 500,000 illegal migrants spread throughout the country[3]. The exodus of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh in June 2012 instigated a diverse range of conflicting as well as parallel reactions by Regional and Western Governments, International and National Media, Multilateral Organizations and International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs). The decision by the Government of Bangladesh to provide initial relief to Rohingyas fleeing violence but not provide them with medium to long-term accommodation was unprecedented in the country's history and resulted in a large number of national, regional and global implications.

Although Bangladesh's decision to turn back more than 500 Rohingya refugees was portrayed as emanating from a nationalistic and statist approach, in reality, although some criticisms of adopting a neo-realistic approach to a humanitarian crisis are well directed, the government's decision has been greatly influenced by socio-economic issues that have emerged due to the presence of Rohingya refugees in South-eastern Bangladesh. Thus, the national administration's policy was partly a reaction to significant local perceptions, but this underlying factor was not widely publicized.

On the other hand, the Government of Bangladesh insisted on the authenticity of widely speculative reports of the presence of militants among the fleeing Rohingyas, to secure international acceptance for its policy. Emphasis was also made on Bangladesh's non-obligation to accommodate refugees, due to the supposedly 'internal' nature of the issue. Unlike previous incidents that led to the influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh, initial reports suggested that the June 2012 crisis was solely an ethnic conflict, although reports of state complicity and participation emerged later. This anomaly in the official explanation of the country's policy, together with the subjective and often unrealistic portrayal of Bangladesh as an insensitive and uncompromising neighbor by International Media, INGOs, Western Countries and National and Regional Analysts, has given rise to dichotomous and biased interpretations of the role played by Myanmar and Bangladesh on this issue. This article aims to highlight four intrinsic geopolitical trends that have been made apparent by the Rohingya crisis of 2012:

- a) Recent interactions among national and international actors has revealed a disturbing lack of awareness regarding the impact of Rohingya refugees in South-eastern Bangladesh, the gravity of which is best appreciated through an evaluation of data collected by means of perception surveys;
- b) The crisis made apparent the secularization of refugee-related policy and discourse in the post 9/11 world, as exemplified by Myanmar's predictable portrayal and Bangladesh's less-than-skeptical adoption of the 'militant Rohingya' notion. It also brought into sharp focus the 'stateless' status of the Rohingyas, that has been implemented and utilized by the Myanmar government to effectuate mass atrocities and absolve all responsibilities of protecting this ethnic Myanmarese group, and the semi-acceptance of this status by international actors;
- c) The exodus of the Rohingyas in 2012 and its aftermath highlighted the inability of the regional body, Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN), to collectively address crucial issues, due to prohibitions in its charter. The inclination of Regional and Western Powers to avoid compromising geostrategic imperatives contingent to good relations with Myanmar over the Rohingya issue, amid the romance of much coveted reforms in the country, was also revealed;
- d) Finally, the June 2012 Rohingya refugee crisis asserted the urgent need for constructive regional and international engagement on the Rohingya issue, within the gamut of invigorating ties with a reforming Myanmar.

### **Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh 1978 to 2011**

Situated in South East Asia and bordered by India, China, Laos, Thailand and Bangladesh, the Union of Myanmar is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world; ethnic minorities account for a large portion of its population, inhabiting almost half of the land area of the country.[4] An army coup d'état in 1962 ended Myanmar's 14 year post-colonial experiment with democracy when the now-defunct military junta, which was known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), seized power. The SPDC had maintained a stranglehold on the political, social and economic constituents of Myanmar until it was dissolved in 2011 as part of the democratic reforms in the country. Since the early 1960s, the military junta had brutally suppressed the Burmese population, especially ethnic minority groups.[5]

Bangladesh and Myanmar share a land border that is approximately 276 km in length. Although not overtly long, the border is extremely porous owing to the hilly, riverine nature of the terrain. Across this border, on the other side of the Naf River, lies the Rakhine State, home to the Rohingya community, whom have arguably borne the brunt of military aggression in the SPDC era and in the post-junta period, and are subject to apathy by both the military and democratic reformists in the face of continued ethnic violence.

Due to geographic proximity, international pressure, as well as genuine solidarity with the plight of the Rohingyas owing to some similarities in religion and culture, Bangladesh has been host to hundreds of thousands of registered and unregistered Rohingyas who have fled persecution from the Myanmar Army, with the first large group of refugees arriving in 1978.[6] The refugee influx of 1978 was prompted by increasingly repressive measures by the Myanmar government against ethnic and linguistic minorities. Following widespread violence against the Muslim Rohingyas by the military as well as the Buddhist majority, over 200,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh. Initially both governments had agreed to the repatriation of 200,000

refugees but this process proved to be lengthy, hampered by the prospects of reprisal violence faced by returning refugees. In 1979 around 50,000 refugees remained in Bangladesh while the rest returned to Myanmar.[7]

The government of Myanmar renewed its oppressive stance against the Rohingyas and in 1991-1992 the second large-scale influx of more than 270,000 Rohingya refugees entered Bangladesh. The UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh facilitated the repatriation of more than 220,000 but approximately 22,000<sup>15</sup> refugees continued to languish in camps in Bangladesh with little hope, or in some cases intention, of returning to Myanmar. Their numbers were supplemented by the intermittent influx of refugees from Rakhine over the last two decades.

### **The Impact of Rohingya Refugees in South-Eastern Bangladesh**

Bangladesh's south-eastern region is mostly made up of the Chittagong Division, one of the seven administrative divisions of the country. The Chittagong District and the Cox's Bazar District under the Chittagong Division are two of the most significant regions of the country, with the former being a port city and commercial hub and the latter a popular destination for domestic tourists. Cox's Bazar is also strategically significant as it is home to the two Rohingya refugee camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara and the city of Teknaf that shares a 54km border with Myanmar. As mentioned previously, as of 2012, the numbers of Rohingyas in refugee camps were approximately 28,000 with the number of unregistered Rohingya migrants estimated to be 200,000<sup>[8]</sup> according to official sources and 500,000<sup>[9]</sup> according to local estimates. Around 40,000 of these unregistered Rohingya migrants live in the two settlements of Kutupalong Makeshift Site and Leda Site, which are located adjacent to the two official refugee camps.<sup>[10]</sup>

In contrast to the natural beauty and commercial affluence of trade and tourism, very real economic and social issues exist in the South-eastern region of Bangladesh. Much like the rest of the country, underdevelopment, poverty and mal-governance plagues this region.<sup>[11]</sup> The increasing frustrations of the general masses are further exacerbated by the adverse impact of the presence and activities of registered and unregistered Rohingya refugees, the true extent of which has been largely underreported by national and international media.

A perception survey undertaken by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute and Saferworld, has revealed that a majority of the people of this region identify the activities of the Rohingyas as a threat to the lives and livelihood of the locals. Synonymous to migrants around the world, the Rohingyas garner particular ire by demanding lower wages and increasing local unemployment. However, other socio-economic issues that have been related to Rohingya refugees, such as the increased prices of commodities, rampant deforestation, competition for accommodation and education, and widespread polygamy represent serious concerns that threaten to distort social and communal harmony in South-eastern Bangladesh.

A significant portion of people interviewed in South-eastern Bangladesh attribute the deteriorating law and order situation to the involvement of Rohingyas in petty crimes such as theft and fraud, as well as more serious concerns of robberies, murder, arms and human trafficking. Law enforcement and local people have voiced particular concern about the involvement of Rohingyas in the trafficking of narcotics, most notably yaba,<sup>[12]</sup> due to the profound adverse implications on the locality and the country from the reverberating impacts of drug abuse.

Certain political parties have been reported to be using Rohingyas for securing votes by providing them with national identification cards and other documents, which enable them to register as voters. This nexus between some political groups and the Rohingyas threaten to undermine the function of local elections and democratic governance, as people who are not representatives of their electorates are posed to gain traction in the local political arena.<sup>[13]</sup>

In addition to the localized impact, the Rohingya refugees impinge on the national interests of Bangladesh by using Bangladeshi passports, obtained by illegal means, to travel abroad, where they would regularly be implicated in criminal activities. This tarnishes the nation's image to the international community and is particularly damaging to the vital labor export industry.

Bangladesh's reaction to the Rohingya crisis of 2012 must thus be understood in cognizance of the adverse impact of the activities of the Rohingya refugees on the socio-economic, law and order, political and national interests of Bangladesh. Although a nationalistic and realpolitick approach to a humanitarian crisis has garnered national and international criticism, there is great paucity of knowledge not only internationally, but also within the country about the true extent of the issues that have arisen in South-eastern Bangladesh due to the activities of registered and unregistered Rohingyas. It may be contended that all the issues mentioned above are directly or indirectly related to structural issues such as poor governance and oversight

mechanisms. However, it needs to be recognized that the Rohingyas, according to local perception, have had a deteriorating effect on the already stressed socio-economic, political and law and order matrix of South-eastern Bangladesh. It's likely that these local perceptions, and the failure of previous interactions with Myanmar and the international community to repatriate the Rohingyas and create a sustainable solution to a recurring crisis, greatly influenced Bangladesh's decision to refuse accommodating the Rohingya refugees in July 2012.

### **National, Regional and Global Reaction**

The plight of the Rohingyas received international media attention and resulted in several initiatives by third party intermediaries including foreign countries and INGOs to address the crisis through diplomatic, aid and other measures. The Bangladesh government's decision to not accept the Rohingyas as refugees garnered criticism from both national and global actors.

Although the international media played a crucial role in garnering attention to the grave plight of the Rohingyas, it was generally skewed towards emphasizing the perceived unsympathetic role played by Bangladesh in turning back genuine refugees, and criticisms of the country's overall approach towards the accommodation of vulnerable individuals.[14] The role of border security forces and Bangladesh's policy towards refugees was also called into question by International Human Rights Organizations[15] as well as national and international analysts.[16]

The representatives of various developed countries, including the U.S. [17] and the E.U.,[18] as well as INGOs such as the UNHCR in Bangladesh, have also been quite vocal about what they perceived as the national administration's apathetic approach to a genuine humanitarian crisis. Overall, the international media and the official standpoints of Western countries and concerned INGOs have depicted Bangladesh as a culpable party in the mass atrocities carried out on the Rohingyas. The role of Myanmar for condoning the violence in the Rakhine State has not been genuinely emphasized by either of the parties mentioned above, due to various geopolitical imperatives, as well as genuine misconceptions.

An overall acceptance of this approach was reflected among international and national analysts who commonly overlooked the vested responsibility of Myanmar to protect the Rohingyas, who have lived in that country for centuries but are not granted citizenship, to accentuate the perceived indifferent role of a neighboring country that has been home to Rohingya refugees escaping persecution since the 1970s.[19] Lack of knowledge, even among national analysts and commentators on the impact of Rohingyas on the local community in South-eastern Bangladesh also contributed to biased interpretations.

The emergence of reports that have implicated state complicity as well as participation by security forces in mass killings and arson in Rakhine and the additional measures by Bangladesh to negate infiltration by Rohingyas have given rise to understandable sentiments and concerns for loss of human life. Although sympathy for the Rohingyas is justifiable, this should not distort realistic interpretations of the issue. National, regional and international actors must be sensitized of the significant economic, social, political and security issues that have arisen in South-eastern Bangladesh due to the incessant influx of Rohingyas from Myanmar since the 1970s and the intensification of these issues due to continued non-cooperation by Naypyidaw. An objective analysis, therefore, would be that these realities have not made Bangladesh's citizens and policy makers insensitive to the plight of the Rohingyas but has accentuated the need for a sustainable solution to a recurring and seemingly perpetual problem.

### **The 'Militant Rohingya'**

From 1984, the Burmese army had waged intensive counter insurgency campaigns against various armed opposition groups, including minority movements fighting for autonomy in the Karen, Kachin, Rakhine and Mon States. Thousands of people belonging to ethnic minorities have fled Myanmar to escape the indiscriminate brutality of the army's counter insurgency operations.[20] Since the beginning of reforms in 2008, a high level peace group has been formed, headed by President Thein Sein to carry out peace negotiations with ethnic armed groups, 12 of which has reached preliminary peace agreements with the government.[21] Noticeably, although the government of Myanmar has often associated Rohingyas with militancy, no efforts has been undertaken to reach peace agreements with the various Rohingya militant groups.

There is little doubt that marginalized communities are often vulnerable to indoctrination by terrorist organizations. Exclusion, poverty and discrimination are thought to be some of the conditions that create an environment that is conducive to the breeding of terrorism and militancy. All these conditions are prevalent in the Rohingya communities in Rakhine and Chittagong. Like many other suppressed ethnic groups in Myanmar, some Rohingyas have formed several armed rebel groups,

among which the Arakan Rohingya National Organization and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization are the most well-known. Due to the proximity of the Rakhine State to Bangladesh, these militant groups received a great amount of attention from the media, law enforcement organizations and analysts. Several academics, including Datta (2005)[22], Rahman (2010)[23] and Singh (2004)[24] have suggested that Rohingya militant organizations have established close links between extremist groups in neighboring Bangladesh and even far-off Indonesia.

Militancy does exist among the Rohingyas but there has been no evidence that they pose a greater threat to Myanmar than the other militant groups in the country, many of whom are larger, more organized and their struggle much more protracted and intense. By promoting and amplifying the 'Islamist Rohingya Militant' perception, Myanmar has exploited the contemporary practice of relating all indigenous armed struggles by Muslims, however insignificant, to the likes of anti-western, international groups such as Al-Qaeda, in an effort to justify the exclusion and suppression of the Rohingyas. D'Costa (2012)[25] sums up this policy trend by contending that Myanmar takes advantage of the global climate of fear in the post 9/11 world that has securitized the discourse of refugees, particularly Muslim refugees.

Bangladesh has unwittingly fallen into this quagmire, with the government justifying the country's unwillingness to accommodate the Rohingyas following the 2012 influx due to "security concerns." [26] These concerns emanated from supposedly dubious information received from the Myanmar government that implicated Jamat-e-Islami, a Bangladeshi far right religious political group, for instigating instability in the Rakhine state by arming and aiding the Rohingyas.

### **The 'Stateless Rohingya'**

The crux of the plight of the Rohingyas is the denial of their citizenship by Myanmar's government. D' Costa (2010)[27] provides a timeline of the segmented, deliberate strategy of exclusion perpetrated by the Myanmar Junta, beginning with the restriction of the freedom of movement in 1962 that was followed by the promulgation of the Emergency Immigration Act in 1974 and the census programme of 1977 and culminated in the 1982 Citizenship Law that effectively made all Rohingyas de facto foreigners in their own country.

This policy, unlike the ones that repress other ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, is a reflection of the views of the wider Myanmar society, including religious leaders, policy makers and more alarmingly, democratic reformists, all of whom have denied the century-old Rohingya community a space in the rapidly transforming future of Myanmar, by regularly dismissing them as 'Bengali Muslims'. The international community has to some extent accepted the inhumanity and absurdity of this notion by frequently labeling the Rohingyas as 'stateless'. The semi-adoption of this term by the media as well as significant stakeholders including INGOs and reputed analysts unwittingly plays into Myanmar's policy of portraying the Rohingyas as effectively not belonging to the state, although they were born in Myanmar, are neither illegal immigrants nor refugees from another country. Evident to this was President Thein Sein's offer to the UNHCR to repatriate the 800,000 member Rohingya community to any "third country", implying at the same time that Rohingyas do not belong to Myanmar, are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who will not accept them, and is in effect, the responsibility of the international community. Although technically, the Rohingyas are not citizens of Myanmar, the international community and various stakeholders must emphasize the right of the Rohingyas to Myanmar citizenship and reject all claims by Myanmar to the contrary. Dr. Mahathir Mohammad made an exemplary illustration of such an approach when he stated at an international conference in Malaysia on the Rohingya issue: "The violence surrounding the Rohingya community can only be resolved when the Myanmar government recognizes the group as citizens. The country's inability to accept the Rohingya as an indigenous group has led to years of discrimination, oppression and sectarian clashes...." [28]

### **ASEAN's Response to the Rohingya Crisis**

Article 2, Part 1 (e) of the ASEAN Charter effectively disavows all interferences into the internal affairs of a member country.[29] Until the 1990s this norm was directed outward to negate Great Power intervention. However, when Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997, the deficiencies of the principle of non-interference became apparent as human rights violations by the Military Junta were shielded. Simon (2008) argues that transnational terrorism and the spill-over effect on neighboring countries, due to the influx of refugees arising from deplorable human rights practices by member states influenced the adoption of a new charter in 2007, which constituted a move "beyond sovereignty protection to economic, political-security and socio-cultural communities".[30] Although the political reforms that have steadily changed the trajectory of domestic politics and governance in Myanmar should essentially compliment this transition in ASEAN's role, the fear of isolating the quasi-military regime and thereby compromising Myanmar's arduous transition to democracy has hindered

ASEAN from taking a decisive stance on the Rohingya issue. This, along with preoccupation with the South China Sea territorial disputes, hindered the group from addressing the Rohingya issue until after more than a month had passed into the crisis in Rakhine. However, ASEAN reiterated the need for its members to be accountable to acceptable standards of conduct, even on issues considered to be the internal affairs of a country, when an explanation of the crisis was demanded by the ASEAN Secretary General, Dr. Pitsuwan, at an ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in July. Together with the offer of humanitarian assistance, these are significant steps undertaken by the multilateral body; nonetheless the age-old impediment, the notion of 'non-interference', will continue to hamper substantial multilateral engagement towards a sustainable solution to the plight of the Rohingyas. Only if the countries of the ASEAN can conceptualize the Rohingya issue as having moderate regional importance at present and high regional importance in the future, can this issue circumvent the limitations of the ASEAN Charter. Thailand, which shares a border with Myanmar, is already host to a large number of Rohingya refugees. In the event of future crises, which are inevitable under current conditions, the Rohingyas may seek refuge in the larger South East Asian region, leading to disputes that may instigate regional instability.

### **Western and Regional Powers'**

Reaction to the Rohingya Crisis Criticisms of the Myanmar Government's handling of the Rohingya crisis by the U.S. and other Western countries have also been muted, as they are afraid of instigating a reversion of the political reforms on one hand and loose significant geopolitical and economic opportunities offered by a steadily resurgent Myanmar on the other. India and China, two regional powers in Asia that have great economic, political and strategic interests in Myanmar have also refrained from criticizing Naypyidaw. The regional and global opportunities offered by a reforming Myanmar that of land and maritime transit between South and South East Asia and access to substantial mineral resources have been prioritized by regional and global actors over any other issue.

In effect, although Bangladesh has been accused of adopting a neo-realist, realpolitick approach to the crisis by refusing to accommodate the Rohingyas, ironically, the international community's reaction to the crisis has been contingent on their own geo-strategic interests vis-a-vis a reforming Myanmar.

### **Conclusion**

It would be pertinent to state that Bangladesh, with its own plethora of national and regional issues, has paid a disproportionate amount of social, economic and political costs due to the influx of the Rohingyas, which has been a continual feature of its shared border with Myanmar for over five decades. Non-cooperation by the Myanmar government in repatriating the Rohingyas languishing in refugee camps and the adverse impact on the lives of the residents of Ukhia, Teknaf and greater South-eastern Bangladesh due to the influx of the Rohingyas, both registered and unregistered, and the prospect of aggravating these conditions, have exhorted the government to refuse accommodating the Rohingya refugees in June 2012. Nonetheless, a statist approach to a refugee crisis is impracticable. Bangladesh must take steps to improve governance, law and order and socio-economic security in the Chittagong region in general and areas around the Rohingya camps in particular. The government should engage the international community, particularly India and Thailand, which are also home to a large number of Rohingya refugees, the ASEAN community, as well as China, as part of a wider initiative to engage Myanmar to find a sustainable solution to the Rohingya issue and initiate time-bound repatriation of their countrymen from regional states.

A knee-jerk reaction by the international community and the media on the event of crisis – particularly in criticizing Bangladesh, has not contributed to a discourse on a sustainable solution to a long-standing issue. National and international media, INGOs and analysts, while continuing to acknowledge the political transformation in Myanmar, should remain vigilant in resisting all attempts by Naypyidaw to portray the Rohingyas as 'stateless' or 'Bengali Muslims'. The inalienable right of the Rohingyas to the citizenship of Myanmar should be the primary focus of these stakeholders. Western powers, while continuing to encourage democratic reforms in Myanmar, may consider incorporating the issue of citizenship for the Rohingyas within the gamut of negotiations for the lifting of further sanctions, although the sensitivity surrounding this issue may require cautious but steady interaction.

The West's obsession with terrorism in the post 9/11 world has allowed some autocratic regimes to carry out human rights violations on their own citizens under the guise of countering terrorism. Although countries in South and South East Asia must remain vigilant against the threat of terrorism, as there have been reports of international extremist groups trying to recruit Rohingyas,[31] caution must be exercised on exaggerated claims of militancy that may be more directed at justifying the exclusion of the entire Rohingya community, rather than addressing any genuine security concern.

Although ASEAN has come under severe criticism for its handling of the Rohingya issue, given its limitations and severity of other issues, it has made its views clear on acceptable standards of human rights practices that are required of member states. As Myanmar is set to chair ASEAN in 2014, the other nine member states must evaluate the very real possibility of the Rohingya issue becoming a regional problem, which may, in theory, transcend the 'non-interference on internal affairs' principal.

The Western and Regional Powers are all pursuing their own geo-strategic imperatives in securing access to the vast economic opportunities that are arising in Myanmar as it slowly but steadily ingrains itself into the globalized system of political, security and economic interdependence. As an open, democratic and rapidly developing economy, Bangladesh would also like to be part of Myanmar's future. This overwhelming international response to Myanmar's transition should not only be looked from a neo-realist perspective of states seeking to maximize power above all other considerations, as it also involves the economic and social emancipation of millions of underprivileged Myanmarese. It is within this context that Myanmar's neighbors and friends in the West must address the Rohingya issue. While continuing to reap mutual benefits, Myanmar's cohorts in international negotiations should put forth the issue of including the Rohingyas as valid citizens of that country within its dynamic, democratic and pluralist future.

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