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Ethno-Political Conflict: The Rohingya Vulnerability in Myanmar

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Abstract

This study has been conducted to find out the root causes and consequences of ethnic conflict regarding especially the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. As Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is a contemporary and crucial issue not only in South and Southeast Asia but also in the world; that is why, it has been selected as a research topic. This study is conducted in qualitative approach. In this study, secondary sources have been used for data collection which is based on content analysis. Text books, journal articles, reports of government and non-government organizations, television and newspaper reports are the main sources of data. In this study it has been found that the Rohingya people are considered as the world's least wanted groups. They are the world's most persecuted minorities. About 43 percent of the Rohingyas are still refugees and of them 87 percent are deprived from basic needs. The main objectives of the study are: (i) to examine the root causes of ethnic conflict; (ii) to analyze the current humanitarian vulnerability of the Rohingyas. Rohingya conflict begins with mainly the denial of separate identities and rejection of their citizenship. A large number of Rohingyas are now stateless refugees who are too much vulnerable. The study will reveal the current vulnerable conditions of the Rohingyas. The findings of the study may help the different global organizations of human rights in policy supports for the Rohingyas.

Key Words: Minority, Human rights, Identity, Persecute, Vulnerable.

Introduction: Nationalist and ethnic conflict is a serious threat to global peace and security that actually began since Cold War and it took dangerous condition between 80s and 90s last century. In the last decade of the 20th century, Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Congo, Sierra Leone, Somali, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Haiti, and Colombia were trodden by ethnic war and people of the world experienced a worst massacre of masses. National and international authorities were seriously concerned with global peace and such type of crisis does not reduce in present time yet. In a major study published in 2000, Ted Robert Gurr, a leading expert on ethnic conflict, argued persuasively that the 'tsunami of ethnic and nationalist conflict' that had engulfed almost the entire world in the wake of the end of the Cold War, has shown clear signs of abatement.¹ Ethno-political conflict spread in most of the regional levels from late 1990s and these wars declined a bit through some effective negotiations; but the conflict is still prevailed in major scale in Africa and South-east Asia. In the new century the ethnic wars which are being witnessed, are just a continuous process of the events occurred in last century-there is no new contenders. All the ethnic conflicts in South-east Asia have long history and that are even the consequences of

colonization process. In present time national and regional disintegration and hegemonic trends has been new dimension of the ethno-political conflicts in this regions.

The Rohingya is an ethnic group of Myanmar that is one of the most oppressed minority and stateless refugee group in the world. Burmese government stripped their citizenship in 1982 and forced to flee by military actions since 1940s-over one million Rohingya left the country to others who are still living almost in refugee camps. They are only the minor group who are righteous limitedly to get marriage, travelling beyond their village and building or maintaining their religious structures. So it is observed that Rohingya crisis is a burning issue in the world. Through this research work global eye may be opened and a resolution path would be created. That is why; it has been thought to take the issue as a research topic.

Objectives of the Study: There is a broad objective of the study which aims to explain the history and recent conditions of humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya. Besides, there are several specific objectives of the study. These are: (a) To state the root causes of ethnic conflict; (b) To describe the history of the Rohingya crisis; (c) To analyze the humanitarian vulnerability of Rohingyas.

Method: The study is an explanatory type of research that has been conducted in qualitative approach. Secondary sources have been used for data collection which is based on content analysis. Books, journal articles, record of government and non-government organizations, media (newspaper and television) reports are the sources of data. Moreover, empirical observation is applied herein as the source of primary data. Data has been analyzed in general approach.

Theoretical Framework: Ethnic conflict refers to a violent situation, tension or collision between two or two more ethnic groups. It has been begun actually since Post Second World War that get severity since Cold War resulting in genocide. There are three types of theories of ethnic conflict. These are: primordialist, instrumentalist and constructivist. Ethno-political conflict in Myanmar falls in the theory of primordialist. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar belongs to the primordialist theory. Proponents of primordialist accounts of ethnic conflict argue that ethnic groups and nationalists exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological features and territorial location. There are a good number of political scientists who argue that the root cause of ethnic conflict does not belong to ethnicity rather politico-economical and instrumental factors-they regard it actually as a myth. In fact, the Myanmar Rohingya crisis is rooted in the political factors. Political authority is patronizing the Buddhists against the Muslim Rohingyas that creates violence repeatedly- sometimes it gets involved in the violent activities directly.

Causes of Ethnic Conflict: The causes of ethno-political conflict in South –East Asia focus the significances of understanding the underlying causes. Ethnic conflicts bear the importance of regional and international relations and it is easy to realize the dynamics and interactions of ethnic groups by them. The causes of ethnic conflicts, the processes by which ethnic conflicts become violent, and what well-meaning leaders and governments can do about this problems.²

The dominant explanation for ethnic conflict is primordialism. Primordialists argue that people's ethnic and religious identities have deep social, historical and genetic

foundations and that creates a separate psychology, culture and values within their ethnic and kinship surroundings. Even human security, basic needs and survival motivation come from these subjective and internal forces. Azar and Burton (1986) argue that the move to violence begins with the denial of separate identities, the absence of security for minorities and clear absence of effective participation for these minorities.³ Organized violence is originated with the emergence of nationalist groups dominated by repressive state. Minority groups normally gain international supports. They think that internationalization of their demand can mobilize them and weaken the effectiveness of the state motivation. The most essential problem is anarchism that frequently take-off the statehood of some minorities-so international forums has to pay the attention to the basic problems of the security.

Lack of trust between each other triggers minor ethnic groups to involve conflict. The groups always disclose suspects and conflict behavior- the strong ethnic groups exploits others. In the weak civic and political culture large ethnic community oppress the minority backed by the state power. Global governance raises their voice against the oppressive ethnic conflict, but effective measure has not been taken yet. So in the plural weak states, a new dimension of conflict emerges. Though institutional safeguards is essential but it is seen hardly

The mistrust that develops the desirability for the disadvantaged groups to pursue a pro-active stance and to mobilize against the state in search of independence.⁴ Broken social contracts and weakened oppressive institutions open political space for ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize support. If political and economic resources are allocated in favor of one ethnic group and deprived the other groups, especially the minority, ethnic conflict may frequently be emerged. When state authority favor one group over another, the non-privileged minority group believe that social structure and values is broken down-at this situation third-party is needed to come forward for guaranteeing a minimal security of the deprived group. Independence war originates, if the third-party cannot be found. Without mediator or third-party, ethnic conflicts may not be resolved or sometimes they may be complicated enough

There are, however, scholars who often paint a portrait of polarization in Malay- China relations in the society generally and specially so on university campuses and during the election period. They perceive the *sul generis* of ethnicity as an influence on individual behavioral preference, despite the observed fluidity declining concern for ethnic identity and group interest within the large society.⁵ But the ethnic relations in Myanmar differ with Malaysia and others. Myanmar is a nation of militarism and traditionalism. Besides, here is an underdeveloped society that triggers the ethnic violence between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims.

History of the Rohingya: The Rohingyas (Burmese) are an Indo-Aryan ethnic minority group in Rakhine state (also known as Arakan, or Rohang in the Rohingya language) in Burma. They are the people who are originally related to the Indo-Aryan peoples of India and Bangladesh (as opposed to the majority Sino-Tibetan people of Burma). Myanmar occupied the Rakhaine state in 1700s and it becomes an annexure-Rohingya people came under the rule of Burma. As of 2012, the total number of Rohingya in Myanmar is 800,000 and they practice Sunni Islam. The Rohingya is the most persecuted minority group in the world. Their educational rights are restricted only in fundamental Islamic Studies.

The Burmese have conquered the Arakan state in 1785 and thus nearly 35,000 Arakanese fled to British Bengal (Chittagong) in 1799 to rescue Burmese oppression and to be protected by British India. The Burmese rulers executed thousands of Arakanese men and deported a considerable portion of the Arakanese population to central Burma, leaving Arakan as a scarcely populated area by the time the British occupied it.⁶ According to an article on the 'Burma Empire' published by the British Francis Buchanan-Hamilton in 1799, "the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan" call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan. Sir Henry Yule saw many Muslims serving as eunuchs in Konbaung Dynasty Burma while on a diplomatic mission there.⁷ These Muslim eunuchs came from Arakan.

British rules and policy encouraged Bengali people to migrate to nearby Arakan that was lightly populated and agriculturally fertile valley. The East India Company added the Arakan state with Bengali Administration; so there was no boundary and restrictions to movement between the regions. In the early 1900s thousands of Bengalis especially from Chittagong areas migrated to Arakan and on the other hand, thousands of Arakanese settled in Chittagong regions at the same time. The British census of 1891 reported that the number of Muslims was 58,255 in Arakan and in 1911 this number had increased to 178,647. The migration wave actually was for the necessity of cheap labor from India to Arakan paddy fields. That migration occurred mainly from Chittagong to the western townships of Arakan. In fact, Indian immigration was restricted not only to Burma but also to other countries. Historian Thant Myint-U (2007) writes, at the beginning of the 20th century, Indians were arriving in Burma at the rate of no less than a quarter million per year.⁷ The numbers rose steadily until the peak year of 1927, immigration reached 480,000 people, with Rangoon exceeding New York City as the greatest immigration port in the world. This was out of a total population of only 13 million; it was equivalent to the United Kingdom today taking 2 million people a year. At those times most of the important cities in Burma, Rangoon, Akyab, Bassein, and the British Indian immigrants had been a majority of the population. Under the British rule the Burmese felt helpless and exposed themselves with racism, superiority, and fears.

Japanese Occupation and Rohingya: The Japanese invaded Burma during the Second World War and committed various kinds of violent activities of murder, rape and torture against the Rohingya. At those times 22,000 Arakanese are told to have migrated to British Bengal and eventually 40,000 people crossed the border to Chittagong to escape the violence committed by Japanese forces and Burmese. On 28 March 1942, around 5,000 Muslims in Minbya and Mrohaung townships were killed by Rakhine nationalists and Karenni. Meanwhile, Muslim people also killed nearly 20,000 Arakanese in Northern Rakhine state as revengeful activities. The British forces retreated and at these moments riots erupted massively between Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan. The armed Muslim groups supported the British Allies and they created a buffer zone in northern Arakan when they retreated from the Japanese invasion. Besides, the Muslims opposed the Japanese forces.

Rakhine Miseries in Military Regime: The military juntas which have been ruling Burma for half a century, following strong Burmese nationalism and Theravada Buddhism to prolong the regime—the minorities like the Rohingya, Kokang and Panthay

(Chinese) were then discriminated heavily. Some pro-democracy dissidents from Burma's ethnic Burman majority do not consider the Rohingyas compatriots.⁸ Successive Burmese governments are accused of provoking the violence against the ethnic minority groups like the Rohingya and Chinese. Rohingya people are considered as one of the world's most suppressed and deprived minorities. They have been lost their citizenship in 1982 and they cannot travel without official permission. Their property, marriage and reproductive rights are strictly restricted.

According to Amnesty International Report 2004, the Muslim Rohingya people have continued to suffer from human rights violations under the Burmese junta since 1978 and many have fled to neighboring Bangladesh as a result, the Rohingyas' freedom of movement is severely restricted and the vast majority of them have effectively been denied Burma citizenship.⁹ They are oppressed in various forms such as extortion, different taxation, land grabbing, eviction, and marriage restriction. Rohingyas used to work as forced labor on road construction and military camps, though it has been decreased in northern Rakhine state over the last decade. About 200,000 Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh in 1978 following Dragon King Operation (nagamin) by Myanmar army. Officially this campaign was operated aiming at scrutinizing the citizenry status and illegal foreigners were in targeted actions. This military campaign mainly targeted civilians and a wide spread killings, rape and other offensive activities occurred following the operation. During 1991-92 a new wave of over a quarter of million Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh. They reported widespread forced labor, as well as summary executions torture and rape.

As of 2005, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had been assisting with the repatriation of Rohingya from Bangladesh, but allegations of human rights abuses in the refugee camps have threatened this effort.¹⁰ Despite different sorts of efforts by the United Nations (UN) a huge numbers of Rohingya refugees have still remained in Bangladesh refugee camps and elsewhere. Actually they are presently not able to go back to their homeland because of the reluctances of the ruling authority and facing many humanitarian problems. In February 2009, many Rohingya refugees were rescued by Achenese sailors in the Strait of Malacca, after 21 days at sea.¹¹

Over the last several years, thousands of Rohingyas crossed to Thailand and some 111,000 refugees might have been stayed 9 camps along with the border areas. Many of them have been forcedly shipping out to open sea. In February 2009 there was evidence of the Thai army towing a boatload of 190 Rohingya refugees out to sea. In 2009 a group of refugees escaped by Indonesian authority and disclosed the horrific stories of persecution by Thai Army. A report shows that in this year 5 boats of Rohingyas were towed out to open sea and 4 out of them sank in a storm. In 2015 several numbers of massive grave-yards of Rohingya refugees are traced in Thailand and Malaysian borders. Moreover, in this year, thousands of Rohingyas are found floating on sea towards Malaysia for just survival. The horrible scenario of those trafficking efforts and thus cruel killings of their lives are reported in world media. In fact, violence, rape, torture and mass killings are encouraging the Rohingyas to be fled on water and other ways. Though in 2009 about 9,000 Rohingyas were repatriated from Thai camps to Myanmar through diplomatic efforts, this was a very little repatriates.

Massive Riots in 2012: The 2012 Rakhine State riots are a series of ongoing conflicts between Rohingya Muslims and ethnic Rakhine in northern Rakhine State, Myanmar.

The riots came after weeks of sectarian disputes and have been condemned by most people on both sides of the conflict.¹² Instantly the cause of the riots could not be clear to the world community; but many experts thought that Rohingya Muslims were killed by Rakhine ethnic groups after the rape and killing of a Rakhine woman and those might be the main cause.

The houses of whole villages have been destroyed and a number of public buildings have been razed. According to Tun Khin, the President of the Burmese Rohingya Organization UK (BROUK), as of 28 June 650 Rohingyas has been killed, 1,200 were missing, and more than 80,000 have been displaced.¹³ According to the Myanmar authorities, the violence, between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, left 78 people dead, 87 injured, and thousands of homes destroyed. It also displaced more than 52,000 of people.¹⁴

The government has responded by imposing curfews and by deploying troops in the region. On 10 June, a state of emergency was declared in Rakhine, allowing the military to participate in the administration of the region.¹⁵ The Myanmar law enforcing agency and army has frequently been charged of mass arrests and violence of targeted Rohingya Muslims. A good number of monks' organizations played a vital role to block any humanitarian aids for the Rohingyas. The Myanmar government in July 2012 excluded the Rohingya minority groups from the citizenship- classified as Bangladeshi Muslims since 1982-more than 130 ethnic groups are stripped from their citizenship. They are not also voter and citizen of Myanmar even at present times.

Inhumane Conditions as Refugees: About 29,000 Rohingyas live in official refugee camps in Bangladesh, where they are assisted by United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) and non-government organizations (NGO), and are not legally permitted to work or go outside the camps. About 200,000 Rohingya refugees reside in unofficial camps or Bangladeshi villages where there is no legal protection from arrest or abuse and little to no humanitarian assistance.¹⁴ So it is viewed that about 80% of refugees are unregistered, 24% are in malnutrition and 60% of the refugees are almost deprived from sufficient aid facilities. These unregistered refugees live here and there and they are vulnerable more than the host Bangladeshi people. In one unofficial camp, malnutrition rates are twice the emergency threshold. The scarcity of humanitarian aids for both the unofficial and native people have increased tensions over scarce resources such as water and firewood, leading to physical and sexual violence against refugees, particularly women and girls. The undocumented refugees are hardly secured –they have no access to the police or justice-that leading them to be involved into various criminal activities. About 43 percent of Rohingyas are living in 11 refugee camps of Thailand and Bangladesh.

Results: Several outcomes have been identified from this study. These are: (a) The Rohingya People have been considered as among the world's least wanted and one of the world's most suppressed ethnic groups; because they are deprived from their fundamental rights (citizenship) both in their motherland and refugee camps. (b) Rohingya crisis starts with the denial of their self identity and security. (c) A large number (about 3, 40,000) of the Rohingya people have been stateless refugees and their future are on to uncertainty. Among the refugees, about 80 percent are unregistered and 24 percent of them are in extreme malnutrition in the camps of Bangladesh and

Thailand. Besides, about 60 percent of the refugees are almost in miseries from adequate legal, employment and aid facilities.

Conclusion: There have been stated that the Rohingya people had been considered as one of the world's most persecuted minorities. It is studied that they are not well assisted and supported from the aid organizations around the world. They have been deprived of humanitarian rights from their state and social authorities. The international human rights organizations are concerned of their humanitarian needs, but they are not adequate. Security is an important issue in the world. So, it is suggested that the Rohingya crisis is to be well resolved by global authority shortly. Education, diplomacy, forming various organizations by the Rohingyas may be solution paths of their problems. Rohingya refugees are one kind of burden for Bangladesh as it is a populated developing country in the world. However, it tries the best to do something for the sake of the refugees. In these situations Myanmar should come forward to resolve the problem responding the claims of global communities.

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