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MYANMAR

Rohingya refugees becoming Palestinians of Asia

Three years after Myanmar drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into Bangladesh they are no closer to repatriation

By BERTIL LINTNER > AUGUST 26, 2020



A file photo of Rohingya refugees protesting against a disputed repatriation program at the Unchiprang refugee camp near Teknaf, Bangladesh. Photo: AFP/ Dibyangshu Sarkar

BANGKOK – Three years after images of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees streaming across Myanmar’s western border into Bangladesh shook the world, expectations that they will ever be repatriated are fading fast.

With elections in Myanmar scheduled for November, no party that wants to win – and no elected government that wants to remain in power in Naypyidaw after the polls – is likely to agree to take back more than a million mostly Muslim Rohingya refugees who want to be fully recognized as Myanmar citizens.

International pressure is also unlikely to have any impact as Western powers, which spearheaded the condemnation of the August 2017 carnage, have likely come to the conclusion that the only effect of their criticism has been to push Myanmar into the arms of China’s increasingly expansionist leaders.

China and its ally Russia have pledged to defend Myanmar in international fora and as permanent members of the UN Security Council, where they have the power to veto any attempts to pressure or sanction Naypyidaw. Now, in the wake of what appears to be a wave of Covid-19 infections in Myanmar's western Rakhine state, where the refugees came from, the border between the two countries will remain closed for the foreseeable future.

On August 24, Myanmar's Health and Sports Ministry reported 30 new Covid-19 cases, the highest single-day surge since signs of the pandemic were first detected in the country at the end of March. Nearly all of them were detected in Rakhine state.

The day before, a total of 24 cases were reported, 22 in Rakhine state, one in the commercial capital Yangon with the travel history to that part of the country, and only one in another part of Myanmar. A curfew has been imposed on the state capital Sittwe; partial lockdowns are also in place there and elsewhere in the state.

But if the Rohingya are not allowed to return to Myanmar their situation will increasingly mirror that of the Palestinians in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries, where a seemingly permanent refugee population has carved out a state within the state with their own political organizations, administration and agenda.

There are also anecdotal indications that desperate Rohingya are being radicalized by extremists within their own ranks as well as outside agitators.



Rohingya refugees shout slogans at a protest against a disputed repatriation program at the Unchiprang refugee camp near Teknaf in Bangladesh in November 2018. Photo: AFP/Dibyangshu Sarkar

The realization that an Asian version of Palestine is emerging on the shores of southeastern Bangladesh has by now dawned in Dhaka. In June last year, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed said "our security and stability will be hampered" if the Rohingya refugees remain in the camps. The concern is that radicalized refugees could form alliances with indigenous Islamic radical groups and become a security risk that spreads throughout the country.

In November 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a repatriation agreement. The following year, the United Nations got involved in what was supposed to become an effort to create conducive conditions for the Rohingya to return. But only a handful were repatriated, and then through local arrangements.

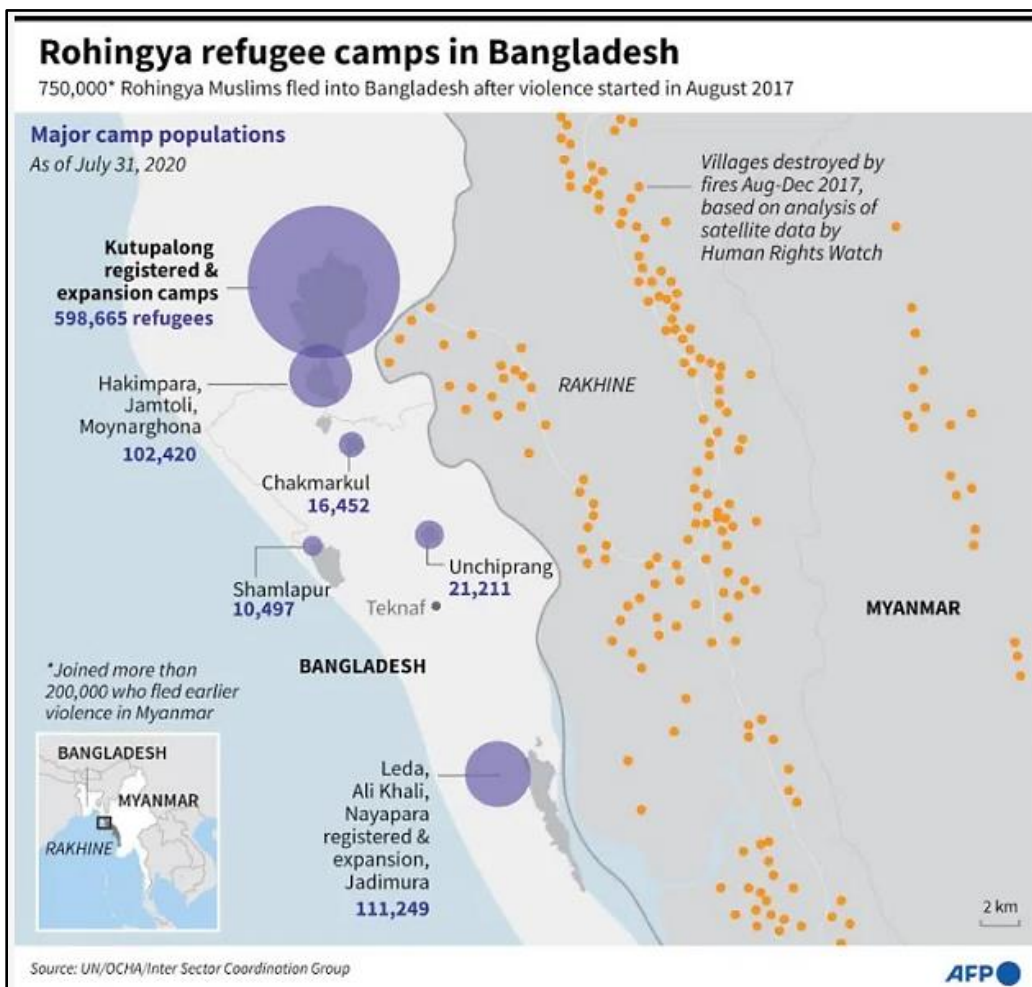
A joint working group comprising representatives of Myanmar and Bangladesh has not met since May last year. After Myanmar postponed several scheduled meetings, a Bangladeshi official was quoted in the August 25 issue of the Daily Star saying that the Myanmar side is using the Covid-19 pandemic “as a pretext for not holding [such] meetings.”

The Bangladeshi daily also reported that Dhaka had collected and sent information about “600,000 Rohingya to Myanmar, but the latter provided Bangladesh with verified information of only 30,000” and then rejected 30 to 40% of them.

Verification of the refugees’ actual identity is the heart of the issue in Myanmar, where the government, the powerful military and, as circumstantial evidence suggests, the general public all believe that the refugees are actually illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

While no one in Myanmar has denied there has been a Muslim minority in the north of today’s Rakhine state for centuries, their identity as “Rohingya” is under question – as are the numbers presented by the Bangladeshis and facilitating international organizations.

According to official Bangladeshi figures, quoted in the Daily Star, 860,365 Rohingya live in 34 camps near the Myanmar border with an additional 230,000 living in towns and villages in the southeast of the country.



The report estimated “80% of these Rohingya are women and children,” which begs the question of where all the men are. In addition, a UN team of investigators asserted in September that 600,000 Rohingya are still inside Myanmar, where they “remain in deteriorating and deplorable conditions.”

If those figures are correct, it would put the total number of Rohingya, a minority traditionally concentrated in three northern townships of Rakhine state, at 2 million or more.

That, in turn, would make them more numerous than several recognized ethnic minorities such as the Kachin, Chin, Pa-O, Palaung and Kayah, also known as Karenni.

Without proper, independent verification, such numbers are only fueling suspicions among the Myanmar public and officialdom that this is an immigration issue and not a question of ethnic rights.

Whatever the case and actual number, Bangladesh, already a desperately poor country, is stuck with a burden it can ill afford to shoulder on its own.

A study by the Bangladeshi think-tank Center for Policy Dialogue states that the estimated cost of hosting the Rohingya is US\$1.2 billion a year and “gradually the cost will increase given the decline in foreign funding, population growth and inflation.”

The study also states that around 2,800 hectares of land has been deforested for the construction of camps and other refugee basic needs.

According to another study by the non-governmental organization Coast Trust, the influx of foreign aid workers has driven up housing rents in the area, while wages for laborers have gone down because many Rohingya are prepared to work for less than local workers. The Daily Star quotes the director of that NGO as saying that “these issues have given rise to Rohingya-local tension” and that the “lack of any income-generating activities and educational facilities” have given rise to crimes “like drug trafficking, human trafficking, and prostitution.”



*A Rohingya refugee man stands before Kutupalong camp in Ukhia near Cox's Bazar on August 13, 2018.
Photo: AFP/Chandan Khanna*

A Rohingya refugee man stands before Kutupalong camp in Ukhia near Cox's Bazar on August 13, 2018. Photo: AFP/Chandan Khanna

He also said that “it is also very likely that militant elements will grow in the camps if the provisions of education, income and better housing are not created.”

As for the specter of refugee radicalization, there is more speculation and anecdote than hard data. Recent videos released over social media by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – the group whose attacks on a number of security outposts in Rakhine state in August 2017 triggered the fierce “area clearance” response by the Myanmar military – show guerrilla fighters in fatigues marching and shouting slogans.

Judging from the footage, they appear to be armed with little more than wooden replicas of real guns, meaning the ragtag, shadowy group has not likely forged alliances or arrangements with well-funded transnational terror outfits.

But that could change if geopolitical concerns, primarily the rise of China and the West's desire to counter and contain it, continue to take precedence over humanitarian concerns.

But the imbroglio that has tragically emerged on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border could yet lead to Asia having its own version of an intractable Palestine-style situation, with all the turmoil and insecurity such a situation would entail.

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