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Myanmar – Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the five countries that surround Myanmar. Myanmar and Bangladesh share a border approximately 271 kilometers long and the two countries are linked historically and socially. Nowadays, however, people from the two countries are not in close contact with each other. Connections between the two countries such as roads and railways are also very limited and not fully developed. Furthermore, although Myanmar and Bangladesh are in close proximity, they do not have close bilateral relations; instead, border tension occurs sporadically and Myanmar's trade relations with Bangladesh are dramatically lower than those with other neighboring countries such as Thailand, India and China.

Myanmar became an open country at the end of its military regime in 2011 and is marching towards prosperity. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, following the lead of India's Look East policy, is looking for potential connections with Southeast Asian countries, and Myanmar is central to the Bangladeshi plan. In this regard, it is the right time for both Myanmar and Bangladesh not only to cement their relations and promote bilateral trade but also to solve longstanding issues like the Rohingya problem and the demarcation of borders. However, these steps have yet to happen. Hence, this paper aims to examine impediments that prevent Myanmar and Bangladesh from improving bilateral relations and explore the potential for future relations between the two countries.

When it comes to relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Rohingya issue cannot be overlooked. This issue is rooted in history, and many people have raised the question of which country the Rohingya people belong to. Therefore, one of the objectives of this paper is to focus on the historical context of these issues and to discover possible solutions for them rather than to single out one country for criticism.

Background: Past to Present

Bangladesh and Myanmar share a land border of approximately 271 kilometers (150 kilometers of which lie in hilly areas), and a maritime border (Kumar, 2016). The territories now known as Myanmar and Bangladesh interacted for centuries and there were well-established trade routes and free movement of peoples before the British era (Morshed, 2011). The British annexed Myanmar over the course of three Anglo-Burmese wars: the first Anglo-Burmese war broke out in 1824, followed by a second war in 1852 and a third in 1885. Arakan (present-day Rakhine State) included one of the oldest of the Burmese Kingdom's territories, which the Burmese had to concede to the British after the first Anglo-Burmese war. This concession laid the foundation for close economic and social interactions between the old Chittagong Division of Bengal in British India (now in Bangladesh) and the Arakan region of Burma, which strongly conditions the dynamics of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations to this very day (Morshed, 2011).

Bangladesh gained independence from East Pakistan on December 16, 1971. Myanmar, was one of the first countries¹ to recognize the independence of Bangladesh, ahead of the West European Powers. The two countries established diplomatic relations on March 21, 1972.² During the early years of Bangladesh's independence, bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh improved significantly. For instance, Bangladesh's foreign minister, Abdus Samad Azad, visited Myanmar in 1972 after Myanmar had recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign state. It was the first official visit by the Foreign Minister³ of Bangladesh to any country after India.⁴ In addition, in 1973, the Bangladesh government sent K.M. Kaiser⁵ as its first ambassador to Myanmar. In return, Ne Win made his first visit to Bangladesh in the mid-1974. Many top level visits took place between the two countries until the period of President Thein Sein's government which transformed Myanmar's military government into a quasi-civilian government. However, over the last 40 years, bilateral relations between the two countries did not realize their full potential despite their having a lot of opportunities to strengthen mutual cooperation in many areas (Banik 2015). The following tables show the visits exchanged by the two countries.

¹Myanmar was the 7th country to recognize Bangladesh's independence on January 13, 1972.

²Retrieved from <http://www.myanmarembassydhaka.com/myanmar-bangladesh-bilateral-relations-2/> (date accessed December 5, 2016)

³Following the first visit of Bangladesh's Foreign Minister to Myanmar, a joint communiqué was issued simultaneously from the two countries emphasizing closer ties and development of bilateral relations on the basis of peaceful co-existence, non-alignment and mutual respect for sovereignty and national dignity. These principles still remain the basis of Bangladesh-Myanmar ties.

⁴Retrieved from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/bangladesh/forrel-mm.htm> (date accessed September 1, 2016)

⁵K.M. Kaiser was widely known to have close links with the leadership of China (including Mao and Chou en Lai) where he had served as Pakistan's ambassador before joining the infant Bangladesh Foreign Service (Kaiser Morshed, 2001).

Table (1) Visits to Bangladesh by Myanmar Delegations

No.	Name/Designation of Delegation	Rank	Year
1	U Ne Win	President	26-29 April 1974
2	U Ne Win	President	22-24 May 1979
3	U Ne Win	President	22 Nov. 1980
4	Senior General Than Shwe	Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)	17-18 Dec. 2002
5	Gen.Khin Nyunt	Prime Minister	April 2004
6	Gen. ThuraShwe Mann	Member of SPDC	September 2005
7	Vice Senior General Maung Aye	Vice President of the State Peace and Development Council	October 2008

Source: Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Table (2) Visits to Bangladesh by Myanmar Delegations

No	Name / Designation of Delegation	Rank	Year
1	Major-General Ziaur Rahman	President	20-30 July 1977
2	His Excellency AbdusSattar	President	23-25 Feb. 1982
3	H.E Ershad	President	26-28 April 1988
4	H.E Sheikh Hasina	Prime Minister	5-7 December 2011

Source: Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Despite these visits, the bilateral relations between the two countries were not significantly better in later years compared to the 1970s. Moreover, bilateral trade relations between the two countries remained relatively poor when compared to trade relations with other neighboring countries. On this, H.E. the Bangladesh ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Mohammad Sufiur Rahman commented in his interview with Mizzima media that:

Ever since Bangladesh came into being we had our internal problems related to democracy and development. We were also inward looking in many ways. And then, we were also more focused on our relations with the West for obvious reasons. I would be honest in admitting that Bangladesh could not do justice to its eastern neighbors. Meanwhile, Myanmar was inward looking from the very beginning, particularly after 1962. When Bangladesh tried to look east towards her neighbor Myanmar and develop friendship, I think Myanmar was not perhaps ready to reciprocate in the manner that was expected. So that was a problem that

happened over three to four decades. Unfortunately, it didn't get better due to lack of communication; misperception that rule that day(Mizzima, 2016).

The development of smooth and friendly bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh was hindered for several reasons. For example, the 8888 uprising in Myanmar and its aftermath caused the government to pay more attention to domestic affairs than to international relations. The country was under a military regime, isolated from the rest of the world for decades. The military government perhaps did not consider Bangladesh a potential trade partner for Myanmar. Besides, the longstanding Rohingya problem and maritime dispute also contributed to a freeze in bilateral relations. The maritime dispute was solved through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in March 2012 (Panday, 2012). The Rohingya issue, however, has yet to be solved and is pivotal for bilateral relations. Therefore, this issue will be further discussed later in this paper.

There are a number of areas where the two countries could cooperate in the future, including on drug trafficking, insurgency and climate change. The Myanmar government occasionally seizes huge amounts of drugs on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, which are assumed to be connected to drug traffickers on the Bangladesh side. On the other hand, insurgent groups have been stationed at the Myanmar-Bangladesh border for years. The existence of insurgent group on the border might be a barrier to promoting bilateral trade in the future. Therefore, the two countries need to cooperate to combat insurgencies. In addition to sharing a border, Bangladesh and Myanmar are two of the biggest victims of climate change (Foizee, 2016). One of the two countries is hit at least once a year by a cyclone. Therefore, the two countries could work together in order to address issues related to global environmental deterioration(Foizee, 2016).

Myanmar's Trade and Economic Relations with Bangladesh

Historically, the Bay of Bengal (BoB) region has played a crucial role as a connector: trade, commerce and cultures have been intertwined there for centuries (Yhome, 2014). Nonetheless official bilateral relations between the modern states of Myanmar and Bangladesh only began following the Myanmar government's recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign state on January 13, 1972. However, a general trade agreement between the two countries was signed a year later on August 13, 1973. In the period between 1972 and 1985, the two countries signed three important agreements:(1) the General Trade Agreement (1973), (2) the Repatriation of Refugee Agreement (1978), and (3) the Land Boundary Agreement (1979).⁶Furthermore, with regard to border trade and economic cooperation, three memoranda of understanding (MoU) were signed on June 1,

⁶Retrieved from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/bangladesh/forrel-mm.htm> (date accessed September 1, 2016)

1989 providing for joint venture (government-to-government, government-to-private and private-to-private) and cooperation within the private sector (FBCCI and UMCCI). Border trade protocol was signed on May 18, 1994 legalizing informal border trade between the two countries. However, trade at the Teknaf-Maungdaw border formally started on September 5, 1995.⁷ After a few years, in 1998, Bangladeshi trade delegation visited Myanmar (Singh, 2009).

The aforementioned agreements show that there is adequate linkage between Myanmar and Bangladesh to improve economic ties between the two countries. The two countries, however, have failed to achieve or to implement the following tools for strengthening bilateral trade: they have yet to sign agreements on (1) investment, (2) shipping or air travel, (3) tourism, (4) road connectivity, and (5) currency exchange (Rahman, 2011).

Unfortunately, bilateral trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh has not significantly increased over the past several years and the amount of bilateral trade between the two countries is dramatically lower than trade between Myanmar and other neighboring and Asian countries. According to a national economic review in fiscal year 2014–2015, Bangladesh exported USD\$ 25.08 million worth of goods to Myanmar and imported USD\$ 31 million (Houque, 2016). But given the figure by the Ministry of Commerce website of Myanmar, the total trade volume of the five financial years (FY) from 2011–2012 to 2015–2016 FY was US\$ 275.698 million which is less than one and half times the total trade volume of Myanmar and Thailand in 2011–2012, which is the lowest bilateral trade volume over the past five years.⁸ Similarly, the border trade at Sittwe and Maungdaw stations is minimal compared to other neighboring border trade stations, such as Tamu and Reed. Nonetheless, the two countries have the potential to create good bilateral trade relations. For instance, during fiscal year 2011–2012, Bangladesh exported US\$13.45 million worth of goods to Myanmar and imported US \$65 million. Myanmar exported over 8.5 million U.S. dollars' worth of goods to Bangladesh through the Maungdaw border point in fiscal year 2011–12, up about US\$1.85 million from US\$6.65 million in 2010–11 (Banik, 2015). In fiscal year 2012–2013, the average amount of border trade was US\$ 6.3 million: US\$ 6.2 million in exports and US \$87,000 in imports. The volume of unofficial trade between the two countries has risen to some US\$ 300 million per year (Yesmin, 2013). Myanmar imports frozen food, chemical products, agro-products, jute goods, leather, knitwear, rice, fish, lentils and timber from Bangladesh, and it exports live animals, prepared foodstuffs, vegetable products, plastics, leather, wooden articles, footwear textiles, etc. (Houque, 2016). In her visit to Myanmar in December, 2011, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed an

⁷Retrieved from (date accessed September 1, 2016)

⁸Retrieved from <http://www.commerce.gov.mm/en/content/>(date accessed September 1, 2016)

agreement establishing a Joint Commission for bilateral cooperation between the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a Joint Business Council (JBC) between the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)(Banik, 2015). These agreements represent important steps toward strengthening future bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

The Rise of the Rohingya Problem

The Rohingya problem began with two operations conducted by Myanmar to address the increase of illegal immigrants: Naga Min (King Dragon) in 1978 and Pyi Thar Ya in 1991. In 1978, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) government under Ne Win carried out routine immigrant checks in Rakhine state, particularly at the Bangladesh border where most illegal Bengalis live. These Bengalis speak almost the same Chittagonian dialect as the Chittagonians with slight variations in their accent, which is locally known as "Chatgaiya" and is a corrupt form of Bengali. In the wake of the Naga Min operation, the majority of these people fled over the border from Bangladesh claiming to be Rohingyas. The Myanmar government, however, denied their claims and declared that they were new settlers who had come from overpopulated Bangladesh following a cyclone that had hit neighboring countries. This claim was vehemently rejected by Bangladesh. The Myanmar government lacked experience with refugee issues and should have requested International assistance to provide food and shelter. Additionally, the government should have issued temporary settling certificate cards to the cyclone refugees. Instead, the Ne Win regime (BSPP at that time) conducted Naga Min Operation to chase out the Bangladeshi refugees. Therefore, the people who called themselves Rohingya became stateless. Nevertheless, Myanmar had to accept them after a bilateral agreement with Bangladesh was signed following pressure from countries such as the United States and China. Rohingyas were accepted into Myanmar from August 1, 1978 to January 5, 1979 through the "Hintha Project," despite the fact that the number of returnees in Maungdaw Township alone was about 30,000, which is more than official refugee count declared by the Bangladesh government. Hence, in the whole Arakan region, the number of returnees was

approximately 70,000 higher than officially claimed (Saw, 2016). The following table shows the number of outgoing and incoming refugees in Maungdaw Township.⁹

Dist. of Maungdaw	Number of Families	Number of People		
		Male	Female	Total
Outgoing	12,496	Unknown	Unknown	79,823
Incoming	17,674	54,935	54,732	109,667

Source: Behind the Mask: The Truth behind the Name “Rohingya”

Tragically, in 1991, Bangladesh was hit by a deadly cyclone. Many devastated Bangladeshis crossed the border into Rakhine State. At that time, Myanmar was ruled by a new military junta known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Following in the footsteps of General Ne Win, the junta conducted an operation similar to Naga Min. Operation Pyay Thar Yar (roughly translated as prosperous state) was launched in 1991,¹⁰ thereby raising the issue of military oppression of the so-called Rohingyas in Rakhine. The Myanmar junta then vehemently rejected the operation and Pyay Thar Yar was aborted. International pressure was more severe than it had been for the Naga Min operation during Ne Win’s regime because the junta’s reputation was worse than that of Ne Win’s BSPP (Saw, 2016). Overall, bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh became strained as a result of the Rohingya refugee problem.

Myanmar and Bangladesh in Migration Context: From Seasonal Labor to the So-Called Rohingya

As stated above, the Rohingya issue cannot be neglected and is important to fostering better bilateral relation when it comes to Myanmar-Bangladesh relations. Therefore, this paper explores the history of the border area in order to understand the background of the Rohingya.

Myanmar and Bangladesh have had a long history since the colonial era. After the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824–26, Arakan fell into the hands of the British, who colonized it. In the aftermath of the war, the British government introduced rice growing policy for two reasons: (1) the availability of many fertile high-yield paddy fields in the Kaladan and Lemro River Valleys of Arakan and (2) the tremendous increase in demand for rice from colonial markets after the opening of the

⁹Cited by Khin Maung Saw (2016); Report on the conditions and sufferings of Arakanese in Maungdaw, Published by Arakanese Security Association, Maung Daw, Arakan, dated 9 October 1988 (in Burmese language), P.4

¹⁰Although the Military junta had learned a lesson from Ne Win’s age regarding cyclone refugees, it is assumed that they chose to follow Ne Win’s path because the SLORC did not want international interference into Myanmar

Suez Canal in 1869. However, labor forces in Arakan were too limited to produce enough rice to meet market demand.¹¹ The British government, therefore, brought large numbers of Bengali Muslims from Chittagong into the Arakan region as agricultural workers. Wages in Arakan were much higher than those in Bengal. According to one of the most commonly known theoretical models of migration, push and pull theory, labor will migrate from places where job opportunities are lacking to places where well-paying jobs are offered. In so doing, many hundreds, indeed thousands of unskilled laborers from the Chittagong District migrated by land and sea in search of jobs and higher wages (Phayre, 1841).

During post-independence and Yangon government administration period in 1950–51, the northern part of Arakan State, including Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung, was under the control of Bengali Muslims. These Muslims had declared themselves the Mujahid party, meaning "*the founder and defender of Islamic law*" in Sunni Islam. In the early years of independence, before the 1950s, the term Rohingya was not yet popular. Instead, the term *Mujahid* was used to refer to the same group. In his famous book, *The Union of Burma*, Tinker clearly refers to "the Mujahids, bands of Muslim adventurers in the north of Arakan, whose terrorist activities were already beyond government control, activities ostensibly devoted to the creation of a separate Muslim State" (Tinker, 1967). Their Mujahid revolt was intended to convert northern Arakan, especially Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships, into *Dar al-Islama* region under Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law prevails (Win, 2013).

The Mujahid's ultimate goal was to incorporate the Mayu Frontier area (present-day Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and most part of the Rathedaung Township) as part of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and to establish an Islamic country. Therefore, after the British Labor Government promised independence for Myanmar, a delegation was sent by Jami-atul Ulema-e Islam¹² to Karachi in 1946 to discuss possibility of incorporating the Mayu Frontier area into Pakistan with the leader of the Muslim League. However, the proposal to award the frontier area to Pakistan was refused by the British government. Later, the Rohingya claimed themselves to be one of the ethnic group in Myanmar because ethnic recognition is sine qua non for them to obtain recognition as an autonomous Muslim zone in northern Arakan covering Maungdaw, Buthidaung and part of Rathedaung Township (Leider, 2016). However, their demand for recognition as an ethnic group was turned down because they are indeed the direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). As mentioned, the group had migrated into Arakan

¹¹According to Dr. Aye Chan, Rakhine state was a scarcely populated area by the time the British occupied Rakhine State, for a considerable portion of Arakanese population was deported by Burmese conquerors to Central Burma (Chan 2005)

¹²Jami-atulUlema-e Islam, a political party, was founded under the guidance of the Islamic scholars before the beginning of the Second World War

after the province was ceded to British India under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo, an event that concluded the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826) (Chan, 2005).

Rohingya ideologues postulate that there have been Rohingyas, as they see them, for centuries. In historical contexts, they tend to systematically replace the term “Muslim” with “Rohingya” when referring to the Muslim presence in Arakan. In fact, the term “Rohingya,” in its present spelling, cannot be traced in print media before 1960.¹³ Today, the term is commonly used in the media to refer to either all or the majority of the Muslim communities in Rakhine State. The conventional use of the term by the media and international organizations puts pressure on all Muslims in Rakhine, especially when leaving Myanmar, to define themselves exclusively as “Rohingyas” for the simple reason that outside of Myanmar, it has a high value in terms of name recognition (Leider, 2014)(Leider, 2016) .

Therefore, immigrants from Bangladesh today proclaim themselves as Rohingya despite the fact that they are from Bangladesh. These boat people have also become a regional concern for Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Myanmar and Bangladesh need to start a dialogue to find feasible solutions to these problems. Myanmar has been following a democratic reform path since Thein Sein’s government took power in 2011. The government should take this opportunity to solve the Rohingya problem. Many Bangladeshis claim to be Rohingyas from Myanmar as soon as they leave Bangladesh. Therefore, in the eyes of international community, boat people are assumed to be from Myanmar. To address this confusion, the Myanmar government needs to prove that there has been no religious persecution in the country since the civilian government took power. The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh should cooperate with other affected countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to find a solution for boat people.

In fact, the Muslims in Rakhine State have been exploited politically by previous governments. For instance, Burmese Prime Minister U Nu used Muslims’ ballots to contest the general election in 1952 and to disband the Arakan Nationalities Union Party (ANUP) after independence from Britain.¹⁴ Similarly, to compete against the Rakhine Nationalities Development

¹³Jacques P. Leider argues that one of the facts that has puzzled both the public and many experts is that the name “Rohingya” can be found nowhere in historical sources—with the single exception of a late eighteenth century text (Leider, 2014)

¹⁴After Myanmar became independent, the political power fell to the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) government since it was the main political party in Myanmar from 1945 until 1962. As they did not pay much attention to Arakanese affairs, during the second term of the AFPFL government administration the Arakanese people established the Arakan Nationalities Union Party, which then became powerful in Arakan state. Therefore, U Nu tried to gain the Muslim vote when AFPFL did not obtain the Rakhine people’s support. Moreover, U Nu’s government itself accepted the financial assistance of Muslim traders to win general election (Myint Thein 2009). As a result, the Arakani Muslim Party (AMP), the allied party of the AFPFL, won all four constituencies in Northern Arakan. Mr. Abu Bawshaw became MP in Buthidaung constituency, Mr. Sultan Mahmud and Mr. Abdul Affar in Maungdaw and Mr. Abul Kai in Rathedaung (Khin Maung Saw 2016).

Party (RNDP) during the 2010 election, the military government issued white cards (to allow voting) instead of scrutinizing citizenship status to confirm voting rights. As a result, Shwe Maung was elected as a member of parliament from Buthidaung constituency despite his citizenship status being under scrutiny. Therefore, scrutinizing citizenship transparently in accordance with law for Muslims in Rakhine State is crucial. Citizenship grants rights that allow freedom of movement within the country. The government needs to aim at solving the issue of citizenship within a specific timeframe.

Policy Recommendation

Given their geographical proximity, Myanmar and Bangladesh have the potential to accelerate trade and economic relations. To this end, it is important to find workable solutions to solve the Rohingya issue.

With regard to trade and economic relations, both countries should discuss opening trade stations along the border where locals can trade freely. For instance, in the recent past, India has established the “Border Haats” concept of local markets across borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar, hoping to encourage cross-border trade and minimize illegal transactions (Yhome, 2014). Border trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh can be similarly promoted by applying this concept. However, it will not be successful unless legal trade across border becomes more attractive than the current alternative: smuggling. Hitherto, many people from Myanmar, particularly from Rakhine State, have been using illegal channels to sell their goods to Bangladesh through waterways.

To resolve the Rohingya issue, the Myanmar government should secure the country’s borders, both on land and at sea. Once the borders are secured, the process of scrutinizing Bengalis should be continued and Myanmar citizenship should be granted in accordance with law to those who are qualified. The process of inspecting citizenship will be hindered as long as illegal immigrants cannot be prevented from entering. The Rohingya problem cannot be solved without implementing the citizenship checking process. According to the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law, full citizenship is granted to nationals of specific ethnic groups.¹⁵ However, Bengali people are eligible for citizenship under section 42 which states that persons who have entered and resided in the State anterior to 4th January, 1948, and their offspring born within the State have a lawful claim to citizenship. Therefore, it is assumed that more than half of Muslims living in Rakhine State can be Myanmar citizens under the 1982 law although they cannot be one of Myanmar’s 135 ethnic groups.

¹⁵Section 3 of Burma citizenship law defines Burma citizens to Nationals such as Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D.

Nonetheless, the human rights of these individuals should be respected, regardless of their citizenship.

Individuals who have been granted citizenship should be allowed to enjoy the rights of full citizenship. Citizens of Myanmar are entitled to freedom of movement and freedom of settlement. However, others who are ineligible for citizen status should be treated in accordance with international practices: for instance, in Bangladesh, Rohingyas are detained in camps run by UNHCR. Regarding individuals ineligible for citizenship, the Myanmar government should collaborate more with UN Aid agencies and the international community. Even if they are detained in camps or in decent places, refugees should have access to education so that radicalization can be prevented. Furthermore, since language is a key factor in communicating and assimilating into the local community, language proficiency should be taken into account when granting citizenship. Therefore, language and cultural training should be provided for those who do not have that knowledge. More importantly, there is also a need of a good reliable database to help register and manage the Bengali people in Myanmar.

Along with citizenship scrutinizing, one other important factor that the government should take into consideration is the resettlement of Bengalis in other places within the country if the citizenship checking process faces lengthy delays or the government does not want to grant freedom of movement apart from within Rakhine State, even if they become Myanmar citizen. The previous government policy toward Bengalis in Rakhine State through the previous governments was “do not cross over the Rakhine Yoma, the Arakan mountain range that separates Rakhine and mainland Myanmar.” This policy resulted in increased concerns for the Rakhine (Arakanese) and created a feeling of insecurity in their homeland. On the other hand, Rakhine State has been suffering extreme poverty; according to a 2010 UN report it is one of poorest states in Myanmar. Consequently, the Rakhine are leaving in search of better opportunities whereas Bengalis are barred from relocated by the “do not cross over the Rakhine Yoma” policy and enclosed in Rakhine State despite the fact that they are also suffering from poverty. Thus while the Rakhine population is decreasing due to migration, the Bengali population is constantly increasing. This situation is like a ticking time bomb: confrontation between the two communities could happen at any time. More importantly, enclosing Bengalis in one place rather than permitting them to settle around the country in accordance with the law poses a major threat to national security, as the October 9, 2016 incident in northern Rakhine state where nine police officers were killed by Bengalis attacks proves. Therefore, an alternative policy for Bengali migration should be seriously taken into consideration when the government handles the Rohingya issue.

Conclusion

Although Myanmar and Bangladesh share history and ancient trade relations, recent bilateral relations between the two countries have not been good. This is mainly because Myanmar was isolated internationally due to its military regime, but a maritime dispute and the longstanding unsolved Rohingya problem have placed more burdens on the two countries' relationship.

Despite this situation, there are some potential opportunities to rebuild solid bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Like India, Bangladesh can look east by enhancing trading with Southeast Asian countries through Myanmar, which is a member of ASEAN and borders economic giant China. Myanmar plays a pivotal role for Bangladesh, not only in entering the ASEAN market, which is the fastest growing economic zone after the European Union (EU), but also in extending connectivity with a bridge to China. Therefore, if Bangladesh's prime strategic objective is to form a link with these countries through Myanmar, it is necessary for Bangladesh to establish solid bilateral relations with Myanmar.

For Myanmar, although the country has a promising future, the long-lasting and protracted Rohingya issue remains challenging for the government. Moreover, the Rohingya problem is one of the significant factors that can trigger religious and community violence at any time, which may lead to instability. Therefore, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has established an advisory commission in Rakhine State led by Kofi Annan to seek solutions for the Rohingya problem. The commission is expected to come up with feasible solutions for this issue. Nonetheless, it is clear that workable solutions to the Rohingya problem cannot be found without collaboration between the two countries.

Against this backdrop, it can be seen that both Myanmar and Bangladesh each have their own interests. It is the right time for the two countries to enhance engagement to improve bilateral relations and resolve some important issues such as promoting bilateral trade and regional connectivity. Starting to find possible solutions together would presumably entail building trust between the two countries. Although there seems to be some potential for strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries, the status quo is likely to remain unless the Rohingya issue is solved within a reasonable period of time.

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