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Rohingya:

Repatriation or Rehabilitation

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The Rohingyas are one of the many ethnic minorities in Myanmar mostly based in the Rakhaine state. Being the largest Muslim community in the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, they are said to be the descendants of the Arab traders in the subcontinent having their own language and culture. But referring to them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, the government of Myanmar has been denying their citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law¹ and excluded them from the population census in 2014². The Rohingyas have been facing systematic discrimination, forceful eviction and widespread barbarity by the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) leading them to flee their homeland for over decades. With the earliest arrivals to Bangladesh recorded in 1948, the first big influx of 200,000 Rohingyas reporting brutality, expulsion, rape and murder by the Burmese Army happened in May 1978. Earlier, the government of the Burma under the Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) started repression of the social and political organizations since they came in power in 1962. In 1977, with Operation Nagamin the government initiated a national screening to identify the Rohingyas as foreigners and exclude them from the National Census. It led to another state patronized oppression of Rohingyas and hence the influx. Under strong pressure from both the government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the United Nations (UN) on taking back the Rohingya refugees staying in the then 13 UN camps, the Burmese authority did acknowledge the Rohingyas as the legal residence of Burma in the 'Repatriation Agreement' dated July 1978³. Despite Rohingyas' legal return to their country, Burma continued with their ill-treatment of this minority community. And once again in 1991-92 another influx of 250,000 Rohingyas happened. The refugees again accused the Burmese army of rapes added with forced labour and religious persecution. On June 2012, the rape and murder of a Buddhist women by three alleged Muslim men sparked widespread revenge clashes and riots. Centering the incident, the civilian Buddhist mob destroyed Muslim neighborhoods and killed several Rohingyas as the law enforcement officials watched inactively⁴. From 2016 onwards, severe military oppression and restrictions on their basic human rights further accelerated. On August 25, 2017, the Rohingya militants attacked and killed 12 members of the border police in Northern Rakhaine state. This unleashed the deadliest violence on Rohingya people as the security forces supported by the Buddhist militia responded with 'clearance operation'⁵ that the UN later on termed as 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'.

¹ Burma Citizenship Law - Human Rights Watch, 1982

² Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis, 2020

³ HRW: Burma/Bangladesh Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution, 2000

⁴ DW: Myanmar's Rohingyas: A history of forced exoduses, 2017

⁵ BBC: Myanmar: What sparked latest violence in Rakhaine? 2017

With mass rape and sexual violence being a particular feature, the Burmese army committed murders, torture and continues shelling, initially killing at least 1,000 people. Around 3,00,000 people immediately flee the persecution to seek shelter in Bangladesh⁶. At least 6,700 Rohingya people including 750 children were killed following the violence⁷.

As the genocide continued, so did the influx. Over the span of a few months, more than 700,000 forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (FDMN) arrived in Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, bringing the total Rohingya population in the region to over 9,00,000⁸. The GoB – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) joint exercise have registered over 8,55,000 Rohingyas in 34 makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar, making it Bangladesh's one of the most vulnerable districts. This added to the number of FDMN (Rohingyas) having biometric registration to 11, 18,576⁹. There are approximately 200,000 to 500,000 unregistered Rohingya in Bangladesh¹⁰ who have no legal status and are categorized as 'illegal foreigners' although their exact number still remains undetermined. The absence of proper documentation on unregistered Rohingyas gives them the advantage of being untraceable by the regulatory authority. This large section of scattered population that remains imperceptible has become a major concern for the National Identity Card Wing of the Election Commission of Bangladesh¹¹. Meanwhile, the FDMN (Rohingyas) keep on finding loopholes within the system to become voters by acquiring forged documents with the help of corrupt local politicians and responsible government authorities possessing threat to the overall state of security of the country.

Bangladesh has demonstrated a lifesaving humanitarian commitment under the leadership of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to the protection of forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals who sought sanctuary here. Partnered together with the Joint Response Plan (JRP), 08 UN agencies, 61 national and 48 international NGOs have been implementing 160 large projects with diversified components worth USD877 million over the last three years to support the GoB in response to the crisis¹². Hundreds of civil society actors, including faith-based organizations and various government-to-government support programs are assisting in the response activities for the last three years. Up until March 2019, the NGO Affairs Bureau had listed 30 NGOs working for emergency relief projects¹³.

⁶ The Guardian: Who are the Rohingya and what is happening in Myanmar? 2017

⁷ BBC: Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis, 2020

⁸ IOM Report on Rohingya, 2020

⁹ Ministry Report 15 July 2019, Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner's Office – RRRRC, 2019

¹⁰ South Asia State of Minorities Report – Minority Rights Group International, 2019

¹¹ Daily Ittefaq: Unregistered Rohingyas are the poison for EC, 2020

¹² Joint Response Plan Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis - ReliefWeb, 2020

¹³ NGO working for emergency relief projects approved for March 2019 for forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (Rohingya) – NGO Affairs Bureau

In December 2020 alone, 16 national and local NGOs together with four (04) INGOs were implementing social cohesion and emergency response projects worth BDT47,63,08,665 for the internally displaced Myanmar nationals¹⁴.

However, with district population of 2.65 million and locally lingering malnutrition, poor health status, food insecurity and higher poverty rate — the host communities have been enormously affected by the increasing refugee population (90 thousand new born and another 30 thousand Rohingya women expecting). This population density, coupled with the lack of sustainable alternatives for meeting Rohingyas' basic needs, is putting massive pressure on the environment and livelihood ecosystem by contributing to deforestation and depleting water resources. The current situation risks slowing or worse, reversing efforts towards socio-economic development of the district. Additionally, spiked rate of abduction, extortion, narcotics smuggling, murders, chains of human and sex trafficking inside the camps and presence of sleeper cells of extremist groups are affecting both the general Rohingyas and the local community as the law-and-order situation is only worsening. Again, even after ramping up the informal education programs for undocumented refugee children, there exists an absence of crucial information on Myanmar and its behavior towards its citizens'. This is leaving them ignorant about their homeland. Therefore, a generation is growing up without a sense of national identity, sheltered in a foreign land while the host community themselves are struggling with the basic needs.

Ultimately, the solution to the predicament of the Rohingyas lies in Myanmar by implementing the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhaine State, to which the Government of Myanmar has committed but not acted upon so far. Followed by the Rohingya influx that started in late August 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a bilateral agreement in the same year on November 23 on the repatriation of the persecuted people from Rakhaine State bordering Bangladesh. In mid-January 2018, both the countries agreed that the repatriation would take place within two years of its commencement – by January 22, 2020. According to the agreement signed between Dhaka and Naypyitaw, Myanmar will be responsible for creating conducive state for the safe, secure, voluntary and dignified return of the persecuted Rohingyas within agreed timeframe. But Myanmar failed to gain trust of the Rohingya community in terms of creating a safe space to return to. Thus, two attempts at repatriation in November 2018 and August 2019 went unsuccessful.

¹⁴ The Guardian: Who are the Rohingya and what is happening in Myanmar? 2017

Then, the actions on repatriation between the two countries were halted for nearly a year over the COVID-19 pandemic and general elections in Myanmar¹⁵. During a trilateral meeting among Bangladesh-China-Myanmar on January 19, 2021, the Burmese government has once again agreed to start the repatriation process in the second quarter of this year. Nonetheless, question remains as Myanmar is yet to accept Bangladesh's proposal of village-based repatriation together with families and relatives of the Rohingyas. Myanmar has proposed a verification-based repatriation approach which means randomly selected 42,000 individuals from a list of 830,000 Rohingyas would be taken back first. However, they would not be from the same family and locality¹⁶. Undoubtedly, such approach would not facilitate in gaining the missing trust of the Rohingyas on the Burmese government about a secured return to Rakhaine.

Despite Bangladesh's repeated positional statement of being unable to continue providing for the refugees for long, the pressure from global stakeholders do not seem adequate. Specially, having the greatest political influence on Myanmar, the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) till date have remained unbothered about the gravity of the issue siding with Myanmar's defensive anti-Rohingya narratives. In the International Conference on Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response held on October 2020 hosted by the US, UK, EU, and UN Refugee Agency, the donors pledged USD600 million to continue supporting the humanitarian response to the Rohingya crisis indicating to multi-year planning on Rohingya rehabilitation in the country. Bangladesh's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam reaffirmed its clear intention of Rohingya repatriation stating the continuation of hosting million refugees as tiring and untenable¹⁷.

Looking at the 2020 Joint Response Plan (JRP), the objectives seen are strengthening the protection of Rohingya refugee women, men, girls and boys; delivering quality, life-saving assistance to populations in need; fostering the well-being of communities in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas; and working towards achieving sustainable solutions in Myanmar.

Now, all the donors and their implementing partners (IP) are working for mainstreaming FDMNs' protection with a few activities on the development of the host communities for realizing the objectives.

¹⁵ The World News: Bangladesh, Myanmar and China meeting on Rohingya repatriation begin, 2021

¹⁶ The Daily Star: Bangladesh expecting to start Rohingya repatriation in 2nd quarter of this year,2021

¹⁷ ASEAN: Overhaul Regional Response to Rohingya Crisis, 2020

An audit on documents of 605 projects and activities undertaken by different local, national and international NGOs and charities– which got approval from the relevant authorities including the NGOAB and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Office was done¹⁸. However, only a handful of the emergency response programs involve advocacy or initiative for the return of more than one million Rohingyas to their homeland. Despite Bangladesh’s multiple effort-bilaterally, multilaterally, tri-laterally and through the judicial system on interstate dialogues to begin the repatriation process, the conversation keeps fading away due to lack of sensitization activity by the service providing organizations. Moreover, the international community has been resisting the GoB’s relocation plan to the newly built special safe zone in Bhasan Char in Noakhali. The process already being initiated with relocation of 1671 Rohingyas in early December 2020¹⁹, they have reportedly expressed satisfaction with the provided facilities contrary to the human rights concern expressed by the global activists²⁰.

Therefore, making the Rohingya repatriation and relocation a cross-cutting issue would need pressure — both internationally and from within the local CSOs and Rohingya community in the camps. Orienting the I/NGOs on making the issue of Rohingya repatriation as the core of all crisis-response programs is required. The stakeholders including the GoB, donors and civil society should conduct sustained advocacy for instilling the idea of returning to Myanmar as its citizen into the psyche of the Rohingya community. It could be done by keeping them informed about their motherland’s current condition and changes of demography brought in by the Burmese junta in collusion with the extremist Buddhist monks and the political leadership. Redesigning the current informal education curricula for the Rohingya children with texts on genocide and repatriation would aid the process. Additionally, the Rohingya community could be trained to utilize the social media platforms for campaigning in favour of their repatriation to counter the propaganda perpetrated by the cyber soldiers of the Myanmar regime. On top of that, the GoB and the CSOs along with the media may mobilize a joint lobbying platform with the Chinese and the new US administration for stronger public pressure on Myanmar to prevent further stalling of the repatriation process. A bilateral expectation management mechanism could also be devised to rest assure the host community and Bangladeshi citizens in general that a safe and peaceful return of the forcibly displaced Myanmar national (Rohingya) is a long drawn process, however, not impossible.

¹⁸ List of NGO/INGO Activities within Rohingya Camps (Approved by RRRRC’s Office)

¹⁹ Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner’s Office – RRRRC, 2020

²⁰ Dhaka Tribune: Rohingya man: More than happy with Bhasan Char facilities, 2020

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