

Conscience call: On Rohingya crisis

The scale of the humanitarian crisis faced by Rohingya refugees was highlighted this month when Myanmar claimed it had repatriated a family of five. About 700,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh from their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine province since August 2017. Late last year, the two countries had struck an agreement for their return. Bangladesh, however, rejected the claim about the repatriation of the five family members, saying they had not travelled into its territory, so their so-called return did not qualify as repatriation. In fact, in London this week, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina repeated statements by her officials on the repatriation claim, and asked the international community to put more pressure on Myanmar to "take back their own people and ensure their security". Facing persecution at home in Myanmar, Rohingya have for years been fleeing in the most hazardous of ways, and the UN reckons there were already 200,000 refugees in Bangladesh before the mass flight began in August, with most refugees now concentrated in Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh has been at the forefront of seeing to the needs of the refugees, and trying to get Myanmar to create the conditions for their eventual safe return to their homes. Aid workers are working to strengthen their shelters and move the more vulnerable to safer ground before the monsoon rain comes.

The world needs to do a lot more — especially India, as a neighbour that has an estimated 40,000 Rohingya refugees living precariously on its territory, and as a regional power that is failing this time round to keep up its legacy of providing succour to those fleeing persecution. At the heart of the human rights problem that confronts the world is that no one is confident that conditions obtain in Myanmar to receive the refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said last week that "conditions in Myanmar are not yet conducive for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees". It clarified that there needs to be more than physical infrastructure and logistical arrangements for their journey back. It is crucial that there be movement on Rohingya's legal status and citizenship in Myanmar and their identification with Rakhine. Myanmar refuses to recognise the Rohingya, who are mostly Muslim, as a separate ethnic group and denies them citizenship. It just gives them the option of self-identifying themselves as Bengali, which has its own implications for their rights as inhabitants of the country. Officials do not even use the word Rohingya. It has been rightly termed a case of ethnic cleansing. Pressure on Myanmar, which won plaudits for its recent democratic transition, to recognise the rights of a people who trace their ancestry in Rakhine for generations has so far yielded nothing. As Ms. Hasina suggested this week, it should be reason for the global community to double the pressure.

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