is the pact on Rohingya important?

Who signed the deal?

Bangladesh and Myanmar announced last week that they had signed a Memorandum of Agreement to begin the repatriation of more than 6,20,000 Rohingya refugees who have fled to Bangladesh in the past few months. According to Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali, who travelled to Naypidaw to negotiate and sign the 'Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State', this was a "first step."

He stipulated that a joint working group including officials from Bangladesh, Myanmar and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) will be set up in three weeks, and Myanmar would begin to repatriate the refugees within two months, by January 23, 2018.

What had led to the exodus?

The agreement was welcomed by many countries. Since August, when the Myanmar military began a crackdown on Rohingya villages in Rakhine after a series of terror strikes on army camps, the numbers that have escaped burning homes and alleged atrocities by the authorities, have risen rapidly, with most seeking shelter across the border in Kutupalong camp of Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar. The UN has condemned the violence as a case of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide", putting pressure on Myanmar's leadership to end it.

How did China help?

What sets this agreement apart is that talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar appear to have been guided not by international agencies, but by China. After back-to-back visits to Naypidaw and Dhaka by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Beijing announced that it favoured a "three-step" solution, comprising a ceasefire in Rakhine, a bilateral deal for repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar and long-term solutions, including the economic development of the Rohingya areas.

Why is it interested?

Beijing has deep interests in Rakhine, especially in the Kyaukpyu Port, with oil and energy pipelines to Yunnan province forming part of a $10 billion economic zone in its Belt and Road Initiative.

While on the one hand, China has protected the Myanmar regime from international sanctions at the UN thus far, it has tied itself to the success or failure of the repatriation agreement, on which the fate of the Rohingya now rest.

What is Myanmar's stand?

The signing came as a surprise to many because the Myanmar government led by the National League for Democracy as well as its military leadership have thus far been categorical about not accepting more repatriation, and have denied any wrongdoing by the security forces. The turnaround may be ascribed in part to growing international pressure as well as United Nations resolutions, particularly pushed by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. In September, the Human Rights Council in Geneva voted to extend the mandate of an international fact-finding committee to investigate allegations of human rights violations in Myanmar, and the UN General Assembly's Third Committee voted overwhelmingly in condemning Myanmar's actions. International human rights agencies have also called for targeted sanctions and an arms embargo

against the Myanmar security forces. The signing of the deal also came at a time when Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi faced international criticism for not stopping the violence, and several awards and honours given to her for her work in restoring democracy have been revoked over the past month.

What lies ahead?

According to the deal, Myanmar has committed not to delay sending those repatriated back to their original homes, but this task will be made more difficult by the fact that that many of the Rohingya villages have been burnt down. Also of concern is the stipulation that those who will be accepted by Myanmar must show their Myanmar-issued identity cards, not just their Bangladesh-issued refugee cards. Finally, international human rights agencies have warned that refugees cannot be forced to return while threat of violence against them persists, even as they process the trauma borne of the atrocities they fled from.

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