

## A disquieting silence

Since late last year, the crisis facing the Rohingya, Myanmar's predominantly Muslim minority group, has spiralled out of control and sent over 650,000 of the community fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh to escape violent attacks in Rakhine state on the border. The actions of soldiers against the Rohingya in Myanmar bear the "hallmarks of genocide", said a UN Special Envoy on Human Rights. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called it a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing."

Yet India, which has a proud, if patchy, history of helping resolve crises in the subcontinent, has done little more than send basic aid including 500 tonnes of rice, pulses, cooking oil, tea, noodles, mosquito nets, and biscuits. Other than inking an "agreement" with Naypyidaw that normalcy and development would be promoted in the restive Rakhine state, New Delhi's only public position has been to announce that it intends to send the nearly 40,000 Rohingya in India back to Myanmar.

Roughly half of this displaced community have been accepted as refugees for the last decade and a half, and previous governments did not appear to find them to be a security threat. Could it be sheer coincidence that as the Myanmar government's crackdown was unleashed on this vulnerable group, there has been increasingly strident talk in India of the Rohingya being susceptible to radicalisation?

Without proof of this alleged radicalisation being made available publicly, we must conclude that the talk of deportation may be little more than political posturing in tune with the tenor of our times. It is in that context that the comment of the Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju, has to be viewed. He said: "As far as we are concerned, they are all illegal immigrants. They have no basis to live here. Anybody who is an illegal immigrant has to be deported."

While India argues that it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which forbids a country that accepts asylum seekers from returning them to a country where they face persecution and worse (the concept of non-refoulement), it does not follow that sending the Rohingya back to certain death is acceptable.

Myanmar has neither said nor done anything to indicate that it is willing to recognise the now stateless Rohingya as citizens with basic rights, the first step to giving them a secure future. Instead, the Army Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, refers to Rohingyas as "Bengalis", maintaining that they "are not natives".

In terms of regional geopolitics, India has ceded the diplomatic high ground to China, never famous for welcoming refugees. Beijing has stepped firmly into the breach, brokering the broad outlines of what it hopes could be a solution.

With China taking a lead in bringing Myanmar and Bangladesh together in exploratory talks for the eventual return of the Rohingya, South Block must realise that both Dhaka and Naypyidaw are paying more attention to Beijing than they are to New Delhi.

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