

ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Nearly two years after they fled Myanmar following a brutal crackdown, more than [270,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh](#) have been provided with identity cards, the United Nations said recently, to safeguard their right to voluntarily return home to Myanmar. This is a welcome development for the Rohingya, who are considered Muslims of colonial-Indian origin by Myanmar and have thus long been denied proper citizenship rights.

The humanitarian crisis began in August 2017, when the Myanmar military reportedly responded to an attack on police posts by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army militants in northern Rakhine State. The widespread violence in that restive region led to more than 700,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border in just over three months. Human rights agencies said that thousands were killed, rape was used as a weapon of war, and villages were burned to the ground.

An independent investigation by the UN determined that Myanmar's military chief and other leaders should be investigated and prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity. Although the evidence is overwhelming, Myanmar's leaders, including the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, refuse to accept the allegations, much less responsibility.

A voice for Rohingya

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is struggling with the ongoing influx of Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh authorities, who often said that improved conditions would only serve as a pull factor, had for long sought to block services from international humanitarian groups. That changed under public pressure when the mass influx began in August 2017, with many Bangladeshis recalling the protection and assistance they had received from India in 1971. While Dhaka may have hoped that the Rohingya would be short-term guests, Myanmar refuses to bend two years on, and the Bangladesh government's welcome is wearing thin. The 1.2 million refugees there are crammed into camps without freedom of movement and restrictions on their rights to obtain employment, education, and social services.

Under pressure from China, in January 2018, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement to repatriate refugees. However, one such attempt failed last November. "Not a single Rohingya has volunteered to return to Rakhine due to the absence of conducive environment there," the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary told the UN in March 2019.

It is likely that Myanmar will only agree to create the environment for safe and voluntary return if the costs of continued defiance become too high to bear. Thus far, veto-wielding members China and Russia have blocked action at the UN Security Council, such as an International Criminal Court referral, targeted sanctions or even a global arms embargo. India could be a force for positive change if, instead of deporting its own Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, it joined the international community to insist that Myanmar protect the Rohingya's rights and ensure their safe return.

The writer is the South Asia Director at Human Rights Watch

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Indianness

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