

## Rohingya repatriation deal signed

Homecoming beckons:Rohingya refugee children await food at a distribution centre in Thankhali refugee camp in the Bangladeshi district of Ukhia on Thursday.AFP

Bangladesh and Myanmar have signed a memorandum of understanding on Thursday on the return of Rohingya people who fled the Rakhine state in the wake of a military crackdown.

The deal was signed by Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmud Ali and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw. At least 600,000 Rohingya people have fled Myanmar to the neighbouring Bangladesh since the army started an operation in August following an attack by Rohingya militants.

Under the deal, the repatriation process is expected to begin in two months, diplomatic sources in Dhaka told *The Hindu* .

### Primary step

"This is a primary step. (They) will take back (Rohingya). Now we have to start working," Foreign Minister Ali told a Bangladesh TV channel. "We will give details of the deal once we return to Dhaka."

Asked when the repatriation will start, the Minister said: "We have to start the process. The houses there have been torched... levelled. They need to be rebuilt." "We are ready to take them back as soon as possible after Bangladesh sends the forms back to us," said Myint Kyaing, a permanent secretary at Myanmar's Ministry of Labour, referring to the registration forms the Rohingya must fill in with personal details.

Just before signing the deal, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina renewed her call to Myanmar to immediately start the repatriation of Rohingya. "We're continuing our bilateral talks with Myanmar so that these Myanmar nationals could return to their country... ," she said.

Diplomatic sources said Bangladesh wanted a time frame for the beginning and end of repatriation which Myanmar did not agree to. Dhaka also sought the involvement of UN agencies in the verification process, which was also rejected by the other side.

### Joint working group

"We've agreed on many things though our expectation is not met fully. It's not possible in any negotiation," a senior Bangladesh official told a Bangladesh news agency.

The two countries, however, agreed to form a joint working group at the Foreign Secretary-level to start the repatriation process.

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary M. Shahidul Haque, the country's envoy to Myanmar, M. Sufiur Rahman, and representatives from the Home Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office also attended the meeting.

Ms. Suu Kyi's office called Thursday's agreement a "win-win situation for both countries", saying the issue should be "resolved amicably through bilateral negotiations".

Rights groups have raised concerns about the process, including where the minority will be

resettled after hundreds of their villages were razed, and how their safety will be ensured in a country where anti-Muslim sentiment is surging.

### **'Ethnic cleansing'**

On Wednesday, the U.S., in what appeared to be a policy reversal, called the military operation in Rakhine "ethnic cleansing" and threatened targeted sanctions against those responsible for it.

"The situation in northern Rakhine state constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya," U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a statement.

The stateless Rohingya have been the target of communal violence and vicious anti-Muslim sentiment in mainly Buddhist Myanmar for years.

They have also been systematically oppressed by the government, which stripped the minority of citizenship and severely restricts their movement, as well as their access to basic services.

(With AFP inputs)

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