

## India's balancing act on Rohingya crisis

As you read this, the Rohingya exodus from Myanmar's Rakhine state to neighbouring Bangladesh could touch 600,000. It has stretched Bangladesh, but raised its profile from a country in need of humanitarian assistance to freely offering it. It is far from India's profile in this instance.

As you know through a series of articulated positions by those in the government of India, Rohingyas constitute a threat to the national security of India. Not Bangladesh, but India, where an estimated 40,000 Rohingyas, mostly Muslim, have already sought refuge under United Nations' auspices, after they escaped earlier atrocities in Myanmar. The matter is in court, and even without that intervention already colours India's policy—that of treading lightly with Myanmar.

The government of India has been battling it out in the Supreme Court with lawyers representing Rohingya petitioners. The government maintains its right to deport Rohingyas who may cross the border into India since the latest wave of violence and exodus broke in late August. On 3 October, a Supreme Court bench questioned that right. A subsequent hearing scheduled for 13 October has been deferred to 21 November, but not before a three-judge bench delivered a lecture on the need to balance national security and human rights. "Children and women do not know anything about it," the court maintained. "As a constitutional court, we cannot be oblivious to it. We expect that the executive will not be oblivious to it."

The executive is obligated to policy, so the government of India's position is unlikely to change in a month. It is unlikely to change even if the court directs the government to stop deportation of Rohingyas. Government will find a way to circumvent it. That will make human rights practitioners see red, but a policy of convenience, for better and worse, will continue to trump a petition of conscience. It will be what-should-happen versus what-will-happen.

The geopolitical and geo-economic argument to India's Myanmar-Rohingya response, and India's related Bangladesh response, bears repetition.

Myanmar, and particularly the Sagaing area bordering India and its neighbouring Rakhine is a crucial link for India's hydrocarbon and trade ambitions that seek to connect north-east Indian states to Sittwe port in Rakhine province through road, railways and fuel pipelines. This is a trade and investment bulwark as much as an intended corollary, to throw a counter to China's influence in that region and country. This has led India's policy since the days of a Congress-led centre turned its back on the then darling of democrats, Aung San Suu Kyi, to embrace Myanmar's generals. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led centre has merely tightened that embrace, now ironically with Suu Kyi, the leading light of Myanmar's politics.

While the link with Myanmar could certainly light up India's North-East, the fullest expression of regional networking will come when India liberally uses Bangladeshi territory for movement of people as well as goods from that country and Myanmar, bringing bounty to eastern India through hubs in West Bengal. The relationship between India and Bangladesh has grown rapidly since Sheikh Hasina became Bangladesh's prime minister in 2009. Bilateral trade has since more than doubled, and diplomatic relations in the Modi years since May 2014 have been highlighted by a series of positives, from exchanging of exclaves to further curtailing of sanctuary for anti-India rebels in Bangladesh.

The relationship is now buffeted by the Rohingya crisis, which India has kept at arm's length by keeping up a narrative of Rohingya-related militancy to prevent an influx.

In July 2013, explosions rocked the Buddhist temple complex in Bodh Gaya. The narrative

reminds us of the media widely quoting confessions offered up by arrested Islamist militants—as offered to media—that the atrocity was planned to avenge the killings of Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Rohingyas came up for discussion in Parliament in March 2016, with a question in the Lok Sabha as to whether passports were issued to “Myanmarese Rohingya Muslims” to traffic them to Saudi Arabia and points beyond as ready recruits for the Islamic State, among other groups.

Yes, the home ministry replied. “In January 2016, the security agencies ... busted a module involved in arranging fake/fraudulently obtained Indian travel documents for Bangladeshis/Rohingyas and arranging visas of West Asia countries. So far, 13 persons have been arrested. As per initial information, the module has linkages with certain terror outfits operating from Pakistan.”

This narrative will win. India will occasionally send relief, as it first did in mid-September, airlifting 50 tonnes of relief supplies to Chittagong, the entrepot for Rohingya relief, to assuage both international opinion and Bangladesh’s irritation at being left to fend largely for itself. Indeed, in some quarters in Bangladesh, India’s relatively scant aid is seen more as *goru maira joota daan*, a colloquialism that translates as killing someone’s cow and then gifting the person shoes made from its skin.

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