

The Rohingya challenge to India's diplomacy

An estimated 300,000-plus Rohingya refugees from Rakhine State in Myanmar have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in just about a fortnight. This latest wave of refugees is a direct result of the crackdown by security forces in Myanmar after attacks by a terror group, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), on 25 August killed a dozen security personnel. Until last week—when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on a visit to Myanmar—New Delhi merely condemned the terror attack and avoided talking about the security crackdown and the refugee situation. India's position was much to the relief of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's government, which is facing widespread criticism for its handling of the Rohingyas issue.

While India has now slightly shifted its stance, it is important to remember why it did not criticize the conduct of Myanmar in the first place. One, Myanmar helps India tackle insurgency threats in the latter's northeastern states. Two, Myanmar is key to the success of India's Act East policy. Three, a public condemnation of Myanmar will only push it closer to China. Myanmar is anyway dependent on Beijing's veto in the UN Security Council should the Rohingyas issue reach there. Four, India is also aware of the possible role of Pakistan-based terror groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba in the 25 August terrorist attacks by ARSA. There have been some reports suggesting that both India and Bangladesh had apprised Myanmar of possible terror strikes coinciding with the release of the Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission report on fostering a reconciliation between Rohingyas and other ethnic groups in the western state of Myanmar.

Burdened by the swarm of refugees at a time when the country is also battling floods and disappointed with Modi's stand during the Myanmar visit, Bangladesh finally decided to let its displeasure be known. Therefore, India has now decided to modify its stand and acknowledge the concerns related to the outflow of refugees. The 9 September statement issued by the ministry of external affairs still stops short of censuring the Suu Kyi government for the reasons enumerated earlier.

But the modification is due to another set of reasons. One, like Myanmar, Bangladesh too is important to India's counter-insurgency efforts and Act East policy. Two, the massive rush of refugees has triggered a domestic backlash by the opposition against the Sheikh Hasina government, which is perceived to lean towards India. An unhelpful Indian attitude would only deplete Hasina's position in Bangladesh and strengthen her rival Khaleda Zia, who is known for taking anti-India stands. Three, there has been a history of Hasina's rivals—Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami—working with Pakistan's rogue and anti-India intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Again, there are reports to suggest that one of the aim of the 25 August terrorist attacks was to boost Zia's position in Bangladesh at the expense of Hasina. It is useful to remember that Bangladesh goes to the polls next year.

India is caught in a difficult spot. It is not just trying to balance the contradictory interests of Myanmar and Bangladesh, it has its own reasons to worry about the onslaught of refugees. India realizes that a number of Rohingyas will also land up in its own territory. It fears radicalization of this group and there have already been some statements by Indian ministers calling for deportation of some 40,000 illegal Rohingya immigrants.

The response by Myanmar to the 25 August terrorist attacks seems, by all accounts, excessive. This is not the first time that India is facing a difficult choice between letting an "errant" regime create problems in the neighbourhood and inviting greater Chinese involvement in the region by adopting coercive tactics. That dilemma has only increased as China's pockets have grown deeper. In the past, India continued to engage neighbouring regimes and tried to influence their behaviour through quiet diplomacy rather than following the West's knee-jerk approach of public

lecturing on alleged human rights violations. India's methods, while certainly more effective, require more patience, which Bangladesh doesn't have as refugees continue to inundate its territory.

The solution to the problem lies in Myanmar itself. While India cannot let its guard down when it comes to counter-terrorism cooperation with Myanmar, this has to be done by simultaneously staunching the outflow of refugees. The report by the Annan-led commission, which argues for a citizenship verification process—the Rohingyas have been stripped of citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 citizenship law—to increase the social and economic participation of the Rohingyas, may offer some useful suggestions. Bangladesh and India can indeed give shelter to some refugees, but there are clear constraints that both the countries face in the form of the resulting burden on their economies, alteration in the demography and potential impact on national security.

India has to do a tightrope walk. On the one hand, it has to keep Myanmar engaged in counter-terrorism while simultaneously working to contain the flow of refugees and then creating the ground conditions for repatriation of refugees already in Bangladesh and India. On the other, it has to keep Bangladesh reassured through the process and do so by making public statements. A perception of India's unhelpful attitude should not become a reason for Zia upstaging Hasina in the 2018 elections.

Should India condemn Myanmar's excessive use of force in the Rakhine state? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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