

Can India ignore the Rohingya crisis?

Rohingya refugees stretch their hands to receive food distributed in Kutupalong, Bangladesh . | Photo Credit: [DANISH SIDDIQUI](#)

LEFT | Nehginpao Kipgen

Nehginpao Kipgen

Over 379,000 Rohingyas have fled Myanmar to neighbouring Bangladesh. India should come forward to help the refugees. The reasons are threefold: maintaining a tradition of generosity, and economic and strategic factors.

A welcoming nation

First, not only as a major power in the region but also as the largest democracy in the world, there are expectations that India should extend help to the fleeing Rohingya, at least on humanitarian grounds, and contribute to help resolve the conundrum. India has been historically known to be benevolent to refugees. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, it welcomed thousands of refugees from Myanmar. New Delhi not only provided basic necessities such as food and shelter but also provided refugees the necessary logistics to continue their pro-democratic movement from India.

Another extant example of India's magnanimity in welcoming refugees is the presence of approximately 120,000 Tibetan refugees, residing in different parts of India. From the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the incumbent Narendra Modi, India has been providing all necessary assistance to the Tibetans, including the government-in-exile in McLeodganj, a suburb of Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh. India is also a home for hundreds of thousands of refugees from countries such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, internal refugees from Kashmir, and even some 40,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar.

It is understandable about the concerns in some quarters in India that the Islamist terrorist groups may expand their networks through some hard-line Rohingyas. However, since the refugees have no home to return to, at least at the moment, New Delhi should reconsider the idea of deporting them. The question one should seriously ponder is of where the refugees would go if they are deported at a time when both the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments are refusing to accept them as citizens.

Projects at stake

Second, peace and stability in the Rakhine state is important for India's economic investment. During his September 5-7 visit to Myanmar, PM Modi said India shares Myanmar's concerns over "extremist violence" in Rakhine. He also emphasized the need to bring about overall socio-economic development in the state by undertaking both infrastructure and socio-economic projects. The continued violence in Rakhine state is affecting India's Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport project, aimed at developing transport infrastructure in south-west Myanmar and India's Northeast. The project includes the construction of a deepwater port at the mouth of the Kaladan river in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state on the Bay of Bengal. Reconciliation between the Rohingya Muslims and the Rakhine Buddhists is necessary for peace to prevail. It is therefore in the economic interest of India to show its generosity and reach out to all peoples of the state.

Third, it is understandable that India does not want a strained relationship with Myanmar at this juncture when New Delhi is exploring ways to enhance its presence and influence in Myanmar and the Southeast Asia region through its Act East policy. But this does not have to be at the expense of alienating or marginalizing the Rohingya population.

When there are growing calls from the international community to the Myanmar government to end violence in Rakhine state and address the Rohingya conundrum, it would not be a wise strategic move for India to ignore them. While the government may take a conscious decision to publicly support Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, at the same time it should gently prod her government to adopt a positive attitude toward resolving the Rohingya problem with the help of the international community.

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RIGHT | Chandan Mitra

Chandan Mitra

Had the subject not been so tragic, the lecture to India by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, would have been amusing. He conveniently directed his diatribe at New Delhi and Yangon while skipping reference to Dhaka where the bulk of Rohingya Muslim refugees have sought refuge.

Selective outrage

The UN apparatchik has described the Myanmar government's action against the Rohingya as "ethnic cleansing". He may well be right in that description. But when India faced a similar situation in Jammu and Kashmir in the 1990s, and Kashmiri Pandits were "cleansed" out of the Valley by forces aided and abetted by Pakistan, the UN authorities stayed stupefyingly silent. Similarly, the systematic eviction of Hindus from Pakistan that continues 70 years after Partition has never caused outrage among the self-appointed guardians of human rights.

As far as the Rohingya are concerned, all advice needs to be directed at the Myanmar government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for her valiant struggle to re-establish democracy. There is no doubt that the Myanmar government has, for decades, discriminated viciously against the Rohingya, denying them citizenship and other basic rights.

In recent months violent attacks on them by Myanmar security forces have increased manifold, forcing many to flee to neighbouring but hostile Bangladesh.

Some have managed to sneak into India too, although they are particularly unwelcome in the Northeast already reeling under a steady deluge of illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh, including Buddhist Chakmas turfed out from their homes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

It is argued by India's bleeding hearts that this country has a tradition of sheltering those seeking to escape persecution in the neighbourhood, be they Tibetans, Afghans or many hill tribes of the Northeast. But there is a limit to which our overpopulated country can accommodate without triggering socio-economic tensions. The presence of a large number of immigrants from

Bangladesh flooding into India for better jobs, incidentally, has little to do with the persecution of minorities in that country.

Onus on others

Initially, our government did try to accommodate some Rohingya, resettling a few thousand in Jammu. But this immediately led to protests in that region. There are genuine fears that destitute Rohingya youth would be easy prey to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and international jihadist outfits such as al-Qaeda among others.

Arguably, we have a natural compassion for those persecuted by their own governments in South Asia. But whereas India cannot deny shelter to persecuted Hindus from Pakistan or Bangladesh for they have no other country to turn to, that is not the case with Rohingya Muslims.

It is a measure of the abject failure of the Myanmar regime that after 70 years of Independence it has still not integrated many of the tribes living in that country, particularly the Rohingya. Why should India pay the price for this failure? Further, Pakistan (including Bangladesh or erstwhile East Pakistan) was carved out of India with the avowed purpose of creating a Muslim homeland. Considering Myanmar was part of British India and ruled from Delhi till 1948, it can be argued that Myanmar Muslim refugees too should be accommodated in that "homeland" if necessary.

Home is home

But the home of the Rohingya is Myanmar and they have a right to live there. Myanmar's unwanted children cannot become India's moral burden no matter how tragic their fate has become under a ruthless military which has run amok.

Chandan Mitra is managing director and editor of The Pioneer and a former Member of Parliament

CENTRE | Rajiv Bhatia

Rajiv Bhatia

On the reported presence of 40,000 Rohingya in India, my view is that this is a complex problem. It is difficult to envisage, given the present circumstances, use of force to send the unfortunate and suffering people back as neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh will accept them. At the same time, we obviously cannot send a message that India is willing to receive a huge number of displaced people from Myanmar.

There are thousands of people in Jammu and other places in India. The authorities are repeatedly saying that they are engaged in the process of careful scrutiny in order to look at the specific situation, identity, background, etc. of these people. This should be done through a blend of vigilance, prudence, and compassion.

As for the larger question of what is happening in Myanmar and its impact on Bangladesh now and on other Southeast Asian countries earlier, we have to recognise this is an extremely sensitive issue within Myanmar. The problem is not unidimensional. First, there is undoubtedly the dimension of terrorism. As a result of whatever has been happening in the Rakhine state in the past, terrorism has raised its ugly head there and this has clear links to our western neighbour.

Hence, it makes sense for New Delhi to develop convergence with the Myanmar authorities. Second, there is the angle of development deficit. I have been to this region, although many years ago. The socio-economic development of this region has not improved — this has been a root cause. Besides, there is the underlying angle of perceived discrimination and the way in which Rakhine Muslims have been treated virtually as second-class citizens.

A very heavy responsibility rests on the shoulders of Myanmar's political elite that runs the government, the military and Aung San Suu Kyi. Putting the blame only on her betrays ignorance of the complex political reality within Myanmar. We need to understand the intricacies of Myanmar's polity and the vulnerability of democratic elements.

The government of Myanmar took the right step to appoint the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine state some time back, with notable Myanmar experts included in it. It has come out with a comprehensive report, which needs to be considered seriously by the authorities in Myanmar. We, as neighbours, should also study it carefully as it points a way out of the very complex and tragic problem.

High stakes for India

The stakes for India are very high. The issue does impact us in multiple ways. We also have to take into consideration that it impacts negatively on Bangladesh which is our close friend, neighbour and valued partner in South Asia. We also have good relations with Myanmar, which stand further strengthened with the recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India is in the process of rejuvenating BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), of which both countries are members. So, India may have to play a quiet role to urge and nurture a long-term solution to the problem.

Even in the past, India was able to undertake a creative tightrope walk in Myanmar. We could nurture good relations with the military government while maintaining a cordial relationship with the pro-democracy movement. The world expects us to contribute to a lasting solution to this problem. This is our region. Our Act East policy demands it. We should take an apolitical, pragmatic position that is free from ideological inclinations.

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(As told to Anuradha Raman)

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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