

Bangladesh's burden to bear: on the Rohingya issue

It took three days for the heavily pregnant Nafisa Begum, 26, to scramble to safety. On September 9, after walking over 20 kilometres of treacherous mountainous terrain and being occasionally carried by her husband and her brother in a makeshift palanquin, the family fleeing from Rakhine's Maungdaw reached Teknaf's Lambabil border point in Bangladesh. They were forced out after the Myanmar military initiated a violent crackdown since August 25, an onslaught that shows no sign of ending. "We desperately wanted to protect our unborn child," says her husband, Zahirul. A day later Nafisa went into labour and gave birth to a boy under the open sky.

Hungry and weary, the family is relieved to be alive. But the relief is short-lived as an uncertain future awaits them, stemming from a realisation that they are unwanted here as they were back home. Nafisa holds her baby close to her chest. "The army killed our people, raped our women, murdered our children. I have lost count of the number of people stabbed to death. We just fled with the clothes we are wearing. We have nothing with us."

In Bangladesh, a hungry and traumatised Rohingya everywhere

Hasina Begum, 32, a resident of Rakhine's Kuanchibon locality, also gave birth under a starry sky — mother and baby are lucky to have escaped violent death; there's no knowing if the father has safely made it. At last count, there have been at least 100 deliveries in the past two weeks in Bandarban district of Chittagong Hill Tracts and in Teknaf and Ukhia sub-districts of Cox's Bazar along the banks of the Naf river on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

Three Rakhine townships — Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung — have been torched by the Myanmar security forces, who, in the name of flushing out terrorists, have destroyed 2,000 houses in these areas. The forces have now targeted Sittwe, the Rakhine capital, forcing an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya across the 271-km boundary with Bangladesh. Their numbers are estimated by the UNICEF, UNHCR and other aid agencies as 400,000 since August 25, with thousands more arriving every day. Around 60% of the refugees are children, according to preliminary estimates announced by UNICEF on September 14. The UN Migration Agency, International Organisation for Migration, has appealed for an immediate fund of \$18 million for humanitarian assistance.

The refugees bring with them bloody accounts of what appears to be state-sponsored genocide. Kalimulah, who crossed the border from Rathedaung along with his mother, wife, three children and two young brothers, says, "We saw bodies scattered across our region when we rushed to the border." Says Abdur Rob, who fled from Buthidaung, "The military first ordered the male members to enter their houses, singled out young women, took them away, and then set the village on fire." Rob doesn't know the whereabouts of his two brothers, who he claims were picked up by the army.

At home and in the world: on the Rohingya issue

Bangladesh faces an acute problem of space. For a country which has given refuge to some 500,000 Rohingya in the last three decades, the current crisis presents a tough challenge. "Despite our limited resources and space shortage, we are taking in refugees," Bangladesh's Disaster Management Minister Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury said while visiting refugees in the border areas.

The two biggest registered camps in Kutupalang and Nayapara in Ukhia and Teknaf sub-districts are overpopulated, forcing others to take up temporary shelter on the Ukhia-Teknaf road, and in

schools, madrasas, mosques and nearby hills. The 81-km Marine Drive that connects Cox's Bazar and Teknaf is a never-ending line of desperate people who braved a dangerous boat ride through the Bay of Bengal to reach Bangladesh shores.

The Myanmar authorities have belatedly acknowledged that 176 of 471 ethnic Rohingya villages in three townships are now "completely empty", and that at least 34 villages are "partially abandoned". The country's presidential office spokesperson Zaw Htay admitted to at least 86 clashes till September 5, but none since. "What that means is, when the security forces are trying to stabilise the region, they have succeeded to a point," he said.

The Myanmar army's actions are being projected as reprisals for the August 25 attack by insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on over 30 of its camps and those of the border police. But many Myanmar experts in Bangladesh are of the view that these are not mere acts of retaliation, coming as they did close on the heels of the report of the Rakhine Advisory Commission led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which was aimed at finding a lasting solution for the decades-old crisis.

Under pressure from the world community, the Myanmar government had constituted the commission to identify the central issues of "citizenship verification, documentation, rights and equality before law". Its recommendations went on to say that "... if they are left to fester, the future of the Rakhine state — and indeed of Myanmar as a whole — will be irretrievably jeopardized". "No state would tolerate attacks on its security personnel, but to punish an entire community is never an acceptable response to aggression by a few," says Major General (retd.) Abdur Rashid, a Bangladeshi security analyst.

It is perhaps an irony of history that Bangladesh, 10 million of whose population had to take refuge in India during the 1971 liberation war, finds itself in a situation where it has to provide shelter to a people as desperate as once they were 46 years ago. Initially, the government refused to accept the Rohingya, but found it difficult to push hundreds of thousands of desperate people back, especially after the police recovered over a hundred bodies from the sea and the Naf river — of Rohingya who drowned during their bid to escape.

Can India ignore the Rohingya crisis?

On September 12, Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina visited the Bangladesh-Myanmar border](#) and talked to refugees at the Kutupalang camp in Ukhia, before proceeding to denounce the atrocities in Rakhine state as "acts against humanity". The Prime Minister was categorical in her condemnation: "Myanmar has to take back its nationals and give them a safe place to live in their homeland. The international community should put pressure on Myanmar. This must stop... We will make arrangements for them [the Rohingya] until the Myanmar government is ready to take them back."

Dhaka's predicament stems from several concerns. On the one hand, there is public anger that the government was not doing enough; on the other are serious security concerns. The ARSA, previously known as the Harakah al-Yaqin, is believed to be a radical Islamist group which local security experts claim receives assistance from jihadists, including from Pakistan. Dhaka has repeatedly condemned attacks on Myanmarese military posts by insurgents and also proposed joint inspection along the border to flush them out. It has also called for creating a "safe zone", if necessary, inside Myanmar under UN supervision to protect the innocent, and full implementation of the Annan Commission's recommendations. But all this has elicited no response from Naypyidaw.

The name Rohingya originates from 'Rohang' or 'Rohan', the names given to those who lived in

the Arakan region during the ninth and tenth centuries. Another group, the Rakhine people, are the ethnic majority, with a Hindu and Mongol background.

In Buddhist-dominated Myanmar (88% of the population, with Muslims comprising a mere 4.3%), the Rohingya, who speak a dialect close to Chittagong version of Bengali, have suffered a history of abuse, and since World War II have been fighting for recognition as a distinct ethnic group. They were not included in the citizenship law in 1982, and thus become stateless, and continue to suffer persecution, including forced labour, confiscation of property, rape and other forms of violence. Violence has visited upon the Rohingya in phases, most notably beginning in 2012, when inter-religious conflict forced them to flee their homeland. In 2014, they were refused enumeration during the Myanmar census, the government identifying them as Bengali which they refused.

For Rohingya, there is no place called home

In the successive rounds of violence following 2012, thousands of Rohingya fled their homes and sought refuge in Bangladesh, with others moving to Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. Before the latest exodus, an estimated 87,000 Rohingya had fled Rakhine to Bangladesh since October 2016 when the Myanmar military stepped in to quell insurgents. This time too, the Myanmar army says it targeted “only the terrorists”, while refugees say the offensive aims to push the Rohingya out of Myanmar.

Although the overwhelming majority of the Rohingya are Muslims, in the wake of continued violence, some 550 Rakhine Hindus (Hindus constitute 0.5% of the Rakhine population) have also taken shelter in Bangladesh. “It’s genocide, no matter who are conducting it,” said Rana Dasgupta, the leader of the Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council, after a visit to the Hindu refugee camp in Ukhia.

The latest Rohingya persecution has been condemned worldwide, with the exception of China which has defended Myanmar’s action against the insurgents. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi avoided addressing the humanitarian catastrophe during his recent visit to Myanmar, but the External Affairs Ministry said New Delhi remained “deeply concerned” about the situation in Rakhine and the outflow of refugees from that region: “We would urge that the situation in Rakhine State be handled with restraint and maturity, focusing on the welfare of the civilian population alongside those of the security forces. It is imperative that violence is ended and normalcy in the State restored expeditiously.” After a nudge from the Hasina government, New Delhi has rushed consignments of humanitarian aid for the refugees in Bangladesh.

The disaster next door: on the Rohingya issue

Ignored for decades, the violence in Rakhine has for the first time prompted the United Nations to give serious thought to the issue. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, at a press conference at UN headquarters in New York on September 13 ahead of the 72nd United Nations General Assembly, said the situation in Rakhine was best described as “**ethnic cleansing**”. He said: “When one-third of the Rohingya population had to flee the country, could you find a better word to describe it?”

The 15-member Security Council met behind closed doors on September 13 at the request of Sweden and Britain to discuss the crisis for the second time since it began and agreed to publicly condemn the situation. The council “expressed concern about reports of excessive violence during the security operations and called for immediate steps to end the violence in Rakhine... re-establish law and order, ensure the protection of civilians... and resolve the refugee problem”.

A number of Muslim-majority countries, especially Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, not only expressed serious concern but also tried to rally support. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rallied Organisation of Islamic Conference countries into denouncing Myanmar's actions, but given Ankara's dubious record on human rights, the initiative is more a political posture than a humanitarian gesture.

The Myanmar army has allegedly planted landmines along the border with Bangladesh. The landmines, banned worldwide, have killed at least nine refugees and a Bangladeshi relief worker in Bandarban, and seriously injured dozens of others. "This is another low in what is already a horrific situation in Rakhine State. The Myanmar military's callous use of inherently indiscriminate and deadly weapons at highly trafficked paths around the border is putting the lives of ordinary people at enormous risk," said Tirana Hassan, Amnesty International's Crisis Response Director, after a visit to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Earlier last week, the spokesperson for Myanmar's State Counsellor and Foreign Minister, Aung San Suu Kyi, dismissed reports of an army hand behind the planting of landmines along the border, but Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque subsequently confirmed that Dhaka had launched a formal complaint with Myanmar.

Geography apart, Bangladesh has historic ties with Myanmar and also has a colonial legacy. Myanmar counts among the first countries to have accorded recognition to independent Bangladesh. The two have bilateral trade and are involved in infrastructure projects. They resolved a long-standing maritime boundary dispute in 2012. But unless the situation arising out of the exodus is swiftly addressed by Naypyidaw, 400,000-odd Rohingya might cast a long shadow on friendly ties.

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

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