

Rohingya Crisis: National Security Implications

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Over a million Rohingyas who escaped mass atrocities in Myanmar are currently staying in Cox's Bazar, a coastal district in southeastern Bangladesh. With timely response from the Bangladesh government, spontaneous support from the host community and considerable international assistance, the immediate humanitarian crisis has passed. However, four years on, the prospects of a durable repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas remains unsettled. Facing multifaceted security challenges, Bangladesh is paying the prices of being a generous host. This article analyzes, from a security perspective, the national security implications on Bangladesh of the Rohingyas who arrived *en masse* from neighboring Myanmar during the past several years.

What is National Security?

There is no universal consensus on the definition of national security as it refers to different issues to different contexts. Traditional literature conceptualized national security as the protection of the state and its vital interests from attack by other states. Following the end of the Cold War, academicians and policy makers have made an attempt of "widening and broadening" the security agenda to address newly emerging security threats. As a result, national security is now understood as protection against the threats to individual citizens and to their way of life, as well as to the integrity and interests of the state. Through this development, new security

issues like the transnational crime, environment, public health, refugee and migration have got significant attention as security objects.

National Security in the context of Bangladesh

One of the basic principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy is, "Friendship to all, malice towards none". Since its independence in 1971 Bangladesh has been a strong supporter of global cooperation and peaceful settlement of international disputes. Hence, Bangladesh maintains cordial and cooperative relations with its immediate neighbours and other states. Therefore, Bangladesh has been an active promoter of peace and stability in the territorial South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. However, the geography, demography and economy of Bangladesh provide important dimensions to better understand the country's national security setting. With a population of more than 160 million and an area of 147,570 square km, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. In addition to the density of population, limited resources, the vulnerability of the region to natural disasters and climate change have increasingly appeared in the discussion around security in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh and the Rohingya Crisis

Bangladesh has faced repeated influxes of Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine state that dates back to the 1970s. The most recent and largest exodus of Rohingyas in recorder history started in late-August 2017 when the Myanmar armed forces carried out a series of violent operations throughout the Rohingya villages in response to

some relatively low-level insurgent attacks. Over 10,000 civilians were killed¹ and over 742,000 Rohingyas took refuge in neighboring Bangladesh's Teknaf-Ukhiya Peninsula region in Cox's Bazar district.² The speed and scale of the Rohingya influx resulted in a critical humanitarian emergency in Bangladesh's south-western region. According to Mercy Corps, the 2017 Rohingya crisis created the fourth largest displacement crisis in today's world. Despite having limited economic and natural resources, Bangladesh allowed the persecuted Rohingyas to stay inside its territory and delivered emergency material assistance on humanitarian ground. The people of Bangladesh also came forward to provide emergency food and relief materials to the Rohingyas out of national generosity. Subsequently after the influx, the government allowed international humanitarian agencies to provide relief assistance to the newly arrived Rohingyas settled in the makeshift camps. The primary policy of the Bangladesh government was focused on stabilizing the emergency humanitarian situation in Cox's Bazar. The rapid and effective response by the government has saved many lives and reduced sufferings of the people who fled from life-threatening situations in Myanmar. With the support of United Nations (UN) agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), and donor countries, the government has successfully led a massive humanitarian response to the world's fastest-growing displacement crisis of that time.

¹ Abuza, Zachary. "The Security Challenges of The Intractable Rohingya Crisis". *War on The Rocks*, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-security-challenges-of-the-intractable-rohingya-crisis/>.

² "Rohingya Emergency". 2020. *UNHCR*. <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html>.

From the very onset of the latest Rohingya influx, Bangladesh has been working for an acceptable resolution of this crisis. The Bangladesh government signed an agreement with the Myanmar government on 23 November 2017 to repatriate the forcibly displaced Rohingyas. Following this agreement, Bangladesh and Myanmar have made two attempts to repatriate the Rohingyas – first on 15 November 2018 and a second one on 22 August 2019. Both the attempts have failed primarily because of Myanmar’s reluctance to take Rohingyas back.³ The Rohingyas settled in makeshift camps are reluctant to go back to the Rakhine state without securing citizenship and other fundamental civic rights which are being denied by the Myanmar government. The lack of sincere efforts from Myanmar to create conducive conditions for the Rohingya has effectively stalled the much-anticipated repatriation process. More than one million Rohingyas, including those who arrived after August 2017, may have found temporary shelter for now in Cox’s Bazar, but the security implications of a prolonged displacement crisis have turned out to be catastrophic for Bangladesh.

Security Implications for Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been facing significant economic, social, environmental and crime-related security pressures created by the largest influx of Rohingya in the country’s history. Moreover, initially, the Rohingya crisis was considered temporary; but now it has entered into its fourth year and it is likely to turn into a protracted one. This lasting situation has had several tangible effects on the Bangladeshi state and society. The

³ Uddin, Nasir. “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis.” *Federal Agency for Civic Education*. April 27, 2020. <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/308448/the-rohingya-refugee-crisis>.

effects of the Rohingya influx into Bangladesh can be categorized and examined in relation to the economy, social life, environment and law and order.

Effects on Economy

Although the international community and donor agencies are providing financial and material assistance to the Rohingyas, the economic burden on Bangladesh has been noteworthy. The Bangladesh government allocated Tk550 crore in the FY 2018-19 budget to provide emergency health care, sanitation, and food supply to the Rohingya.⁴ The budgetary allocation for the Rohingyas was Tk200 crore in the FY 2019-20 and the government has earmarked another Tk202 crore in the FY 2020-21 budget⁵. Moreover, the government has spent Tk2,312 crore to develop accommodation facilities for the Rohingyas in the Bhashan Char island.

The local economy and employment structure of Cox's Bazar region has significantly changed since August 2017 onwards because of the Rohingya influx. A sensitive issue linked to the influx from Myanmar is the illegal use of Rohingya workers as cheap labor in industry, agriculture, and small business sectors. The local workers of Bangladesh charge much higher than the Rohingyas for similar jobs so employers seek to hire Rohingyas whenever possible in many informal working sectors. For instance, local NGOs and humanitarian actors often hire Rohingya laborers instead of local

⁴ Mamun, Shohel. "Budget FY19: Special Funds for Rohingya Rehabilitation". *Dhaka Tribune*, 2018. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/parliament/2018/06/05/budget-fy19-special-funds-for-rohingya-rehabilitation>.

⁵ Islam, Jahidul. "Four Years on, No Progress in Rohingya Repatriation". *The Business Standard*, 2020. <https://tbsnews.net/rohingya-crisis/four-years-no-progress-rohingya-repatriation-123793>.

Bangladeshis to do manual work. Moreover, cross-border trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar and fishing on the Naf river have all declined significantly.

The sudden influx of a large number of Rohingyas has also negatively affected the local market. The price of many food products has increased and people of the host community are finding it difficult to buy necessary food products for themselves. It is reported that the Rohingyas sell some of their relief products in the local market with a very low price. As a result, small grocery shop owners often face it difficult to sell some products at their desirable price.

Bangladesh's increasingly important tourism industry is centered on Cox's Bazar. The city has the world's longest natural sandy sea beach. Cox's Bazar's nascent tourism infrastructures have become vulnerable as the area became very unstable. Tourism to adjacent St. Martin Island has also declined due to the massive displacement situation. Therefore, any future development of sustainable tourism in Cox's Bazar district needs an immediate repatriation of the Rohingyas.

Social Effects

Cox's Bazar is one of Bangladesh's most vulnerable districts. Most of the human development indicators including education, health status and food security are at crisis levels, and the district's poverty rate is well above Bangladesh's national average. Around 33% people in Cox's Bazar live below the poverty line and 17% below the extreme poverty line.⁶ This volatile societal configuration has been further

⁶ "2018 JRP For Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis - March to December." 2008. Inter Sector Coordination Group - Bangladesh.
<https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/JRP%20for%20Rohingya%20Humanitarian%20Crisis%202018.PDF>.

deteriorated by the unprecedented influx of Rohingyas from neighboring Myanmar. Today the Rohingyas in Teknaf and Ukhiya are more than twice as much as the host community. Moreover, the higher birth rate among the Rohingyas than that of locals is likely to further marginalize the host community in the region.⁷ The nature and extent of local government functions in Tekna and Ukhiya have transformed since the displacement crisis. As a result, the local officials are facing additional pressure to provide healthcare, education, food security, and basic public services. At first, the host community welcomed the persecuted Rohingyas and provided them emergency assistance. However, now the locals are becoming frustrated because of the prolonged settlement of the Rohingyas. Tensions are increasingly rising between the host population and the Rohingyas. The mostly impoverished host community bears excessive socio-economic and cultural burdens from the crisis.

Environmental Effects

Bangladesh has allocated 6,800 acres of hilly reserve forest land in Teknaf and Ukhiya to set-up temporary shelter, relief storage, and medical facilities for the Rohingyas.⁸ Thus, the destruction of ecology and environment of the area is difficult to overstate. Forest areas previously reserved for wild elephants are now barren. The wild elephants are facing potential extinction as their natural habitat and migratory routes are now

⁷ Hasan, Kamrul. "Rohingya Crisis: Population Exploding As 91,000 Babies Are Born in Two Years." *Dhaka Tribune*, 2019. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2019/08/29/rohingya-crisis-population-exploding-as-91-000-babies-are-born-in-two-years>.

⁸ Islam, Jahidul. "Four Years on, No Progress in Rohingya Repatriation". *The Business Standard*, 2020. <https://tbsnews.net/rohingya-crisis/four-years-no-progress-rohingya-repatriation-123793>.

erased. Several violent and deadly encounters between the elephants and the Rohingyas have already been reported.

An environmental assessment published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has identified eleven environmental impacts that have been aggravated by the Rohingya influx. Six of these impacts are physical environmental impacts on: ground water; surface water; acoustic levels; indoor air quality; solid waste management; and soils and terrain; and the other five impacts are on ecosystems: natural forests; protected areas and critical habitats; vegetation; wildlife; and marine and freshwater ecosystems.⁹ The environmental consequences of this massive deforestation and rapid human settlement and will last very long. The green and hilly landscape of Ukhiya-Teknaf Peninsula has been rapidly transformed into the world's largest settlement for the forcibly displaced people.

The Rohingyas collect fuelwood from the forest areas within the 10 kilometers zone around the makeshift camps. As a result, the whole forest land of 26,000 hectares is becoming vulnerable with low biomass and productivity.¹⁰ The risk of social conflict is also very high among the Rohingyas and locals over the extraction of natural resources from the forests. The groundwater sources are becoming depleted and freshwater streams have already become contaminated due to unhygienic usage. Air pollution in the region has also drastically increased because of smoke from firewood

⁹ "Report on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx". 2018. UNDP.

https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/library/environment_energy/a-new-land-use-model--forest-fruit-fish1.html.

¹⁰ Babu, Kudrat-E-Khuda. "The Impacts and Challenges to Host Country Bangladesh Due to Sheltering the Rohingya Refugees". *Cogent Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2020). doi:10.1080/23311886.2020.1770943.

burned by Rohingyas and exhaust from large numbers of vehicles carrying people and goods into the camps. Roughly half of the hills have been completely leveled in the influx area. Hence, excessive rainfall often causes landslides that result in human casualties.

Organized Crime

A. Human Trafficking

The Rohingya displacement crisis has resulted in the mushrooming of human trafficking gangs with transnational connections. Rohingyas, often persuaded by brokers about lucrative jobs in Malaysia, embark upon risky boat journeys across the sea. Consequently, the Bay of Bengal has essentially become a hot-spot of the global migrant crisis.

On most occasions, traffickers exploit and even murder the vulnerable Rohingyas after extracting money from them. Reports on horrific stories of physical and sexual violence in the hands of traffickers and the discovery of mass graves have appeared in the international media. On many other occasions, boats carrying Rohingya men, women and children capsize in the sea. For example, in February around 15 Rohingyas died after an overcrowded fishing boat carrying 130 people sank off the coast of Teknaf.¹¹ Moreover, often Malaysian immigration authorities intercept boats carrying Rohingyas near the country's coastline and deport them back to Bangladesh. Consequently, most of the Rohingya taking risky journeys find themselves stranded in

¹¹ Al Jazeera. "Rohingya Refugees Die After Boat Capsizes Off Bangladesh". 2020.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/11/rohingya-refugees-die-after-boat-capsizes-off-bangladesh/>.

boats at sea. In May, Bangladesh Navy rescued about 280 Rohingyas from a stranded boat in the deep sea.¹² Reported cases of this year and the last two years suggest an increase in trafficking related crimes by the Rohingyas. As of August 2020, 23 people have been prosecuted in 2020 in three trafficking related cases. In 2019, 107 people were prosecuted in 23 cases, whereas, eight were prosecuted in two cases filed in 2018.¹³ The Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have increased their surveillance and monitoring to crack down on the traffickers operating inside the Rohingya camps.

B. Drug Trafficking

Bangladesh is geographically close to the Golden Triangle. As a result, it was used as a transit country by transnational drug traffickers. However, Bangladesh has now become a target destination due to a rapid market expansion in recent years. Currently, at least 7 million Bangladeshis are drug addicts and around 5 million of them consume yaba.¹⁴ Yaba, means “crazy medicine” in Thai, is a combination of methamphetamine and caffeine found as cheap red or pink pills. This highly highly-addictive substance was first developed by the Nazis and now has become the most common drug in South and South-East Asia. As of 2019, United Nations Office on

¹² Al Jazeera. "Bangladesh Quarantines Hundreds of Rohingya Rescued from Sea". 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/8/bangladesh-quarantines-hundreds-of-rohingya-rescued-from-sea>.

¹³ Rashid, Muktadir. "Many Rohingyas Get Involved in Crimes". *New Age*. 2020.

<https://www.newagebd.net/article/114440/many-rohingyas-get-involved-in-crimes>.

¹⁴ Haider, Liton. "Bangladesh Has 7 Million Drug Addicts, Over Half of Them Are Addicted to Yaba". *Bdnews24.com*. 2018. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/05/21/bangladesh-has-7-million-drug-addicts-over-half-of-them-are-addicted-to-yaba>.

Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates the size of the yaba market in Bangladesh at US\$5.5 billion.¹⁵

Yaba is produced at an industrial scale in labs established inside the lawless jungles of the Shan state in Myanmar. Drug traffickers use Myanmar's conflict-prone and extremely volatile Rakhine state as a gateway to smuggle yaba into South Asia, especially into Bangladesh. The Rohingya displacement crisis has further intensified yaba smuggling into Bangladesh. The illicit cross-border trade used to rely on trafficking cartels to smuggle yaba across the border. However, the drug traffickers have recruited a large number of Rohingya men, women and children as mules following the 2017 influx.¹⁶ Moreover, the traffickers are exploiting makeshift Rohingya camps as "yaba storehouses" as it is difficult to trace such small drugs from an extensively overpopulated area.

Official statistics indicate a sharp increase in drug-related cases against Rohingyas over the last three years. In the first seven months of 2020, 136 cases were filed for the possession of drugs or committing drug-related crimes and 249 individuals have been prosecuted. In 2019, 152 cases were filed over drugs and 248 Rohingyas were prosecuted, whereas, 95 cases were filed over drugs in 2018 and 159 were

¹⁵ Ebbighausen, Rodion. "Is Southeast Asia's Drug Trade Too Big to Control?". *Deutsche Welle*. 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-southeast-asias-drug-trade-too-big-to-control/a-53500062>.

¹⁶ Roy, Siddhartha. "Yaba: The Red Pills and The Rohingya". *The Diplomat*. 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/yaba-the-red-pills-and-the-rohingya/>.

prosecuted.¹⁷ The Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies conduct regular operations to bust drug trafficking networks that are active in the region.

Law and Order

The growth of criminal activities and frequent outbreak of factional fighting have deteriorated an already volatile law and order situation in Cox's Bazar. According to official statistics, a total of 725 criminal cases have been filed against 1,664 Rohingyas between August 2017 and August 20, 2020.¹⁸ Apart from drug smuggling and human trafficking, the Rohingyas are also involved in other criminal activities including possession of illegal arms, robbery, rapes, abduction, smuggling, theft, murder, and extortion. As of August 2020, at least 66 murder cases have been reported inside the camps and a total of 179 Rohingyas were prosecuted for murder related charges.¹⁹

Recently, several rival Rohingya armed gangs have waged deadly turf war for control over organized crime and domination inside camps. In early October 2020, eight were killed including one woman and many injured as two armed gangs of Rohingyas engaged in a violent encounter.²⁰ Right after this violence, the Bangladesh government has reportedly increased the presence of armed troops to stabilize the situation.

¹⁷ Rashid, Muktadir. "Many Rohingyas Get Involved in Crimes". *New Age*. 2020. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/114440/many-rohingyas-get-involved-in-crimes>.

¹⁸ *ibid*.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ Khiam, Sharif, and Sunil Barua. "Bangladesh Moves to Control Outbreak of Gang Violence at Rohingya Camps". *BenarNews*. 2020. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bd-rohingya-killed-10072020160835.html>.

Strategic Concerns

An ethnic Rakhine rebel group named the Arakan Army (AA) has been actively fighting the Myanmar armed forces inside the Rakhine state. Moreover, some Rohingya rebel groups - Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) – have also declared to wage an armed insurgency against the Myanmar security forces inside the Rakhine state. Any prolonged conflict in Bangladesh's neighborhood has the potential to create spillover effects in the greater Chattogram region, home to a key seaport and several export processing zones. Moreover, peace and stability across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is a prerequisite to operationalize the proposed regional and sub-regional projects connecting Bangladesh with India, China and SouthEast Asia.

Religious Extremism and Terrorism

The Rohingyas are predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group who follow a very traditional form of Islam. However, protracted displacement has the potential to motivate Rohingya youths to join violent extremist groups and even global jihadist networks. Transnational terror organizations - Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Islamic state (IS) - have repeatedly called for jihad against Myanmar regarding the prolonged Rohingya crisis in the Rakhine state.²¹ Any prolonged Rohingya insurgency can attract fresh recruits from different countries as jihadist groups have set eyes on the region. Therefore, the Rohingya displacement crisis should be

²¹ Bashar, Iftekharul. 2018. "Impact of The Rohingya Crisis on the Threat Landscape at the Myanmar-Bangladesh Border". In *Combatting Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia And Europe: From Cooperation to Collaboration*, 29-42. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

resolved, otherwise, the emerging insurgency-crime-terror nexus is likely to expand throughout the region.

Policy Implications

The two aborted reparation attempts indicate a lack of political will from the Myanmar government to resolve this displacement crisis. Therefore, the Bangladesh government needs to continue its diplomatic activities to mobilize international pressure on the Myanmar government to ensure security in Rakhine state and restore the legitimate civil, and political rights demanded by the Rohingyas. To address the rising security concerns, Bangladesh should take necessary security and vigilance measures inside the Rohingya camps. The international community should share more responsibilities with Bangladesh in addressing the emerging security threats associated with the Rohingya displacement.

Conclusion

The lack of precedence for the Rohingya crisis by the international community has made it difficult for Bangladesh to handle it diplomatically and financially. As this article shows, the refugee situation in Bangladesh has become a security issue with effects on multiple levels. As the humanitarian crisis enters its fourth year, general frustration and disappointment exists within Bangladesh regarding the international community's efforts in resolving the crisis. Bangladesh is a developing country having its own internal challenges. It cannot bear the burden of a crisis that is of Myanmar's own making. Unless the crisis is resolved in a sustainable way its security consequences will go far beyond the borders of Bangladesh in the near future.