

Non-traditional Security and Problems of Rohingya across the Bangladesh –Myanmar Borders

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s Rohingya refugee crisis strained the bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. To promote an understanding of this problem, this paper explores the dynamics of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations disrupted by the Rohingya refugee crisis. Ironically, the Rohingya problem emanated from widespread violations of human rights against this Muslim minority at the hands of the military junta in Myanmar causing their massive influx to Bangladesh. Such a brutal act of the military junta against the Muslim Rohingya in Arakan forced their plight to neighbouring Bangladesh to take refuge, which eventually caused disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar and non-traditional security crisis in the border areas. This study argues that a wider prospect lies in democratization in Myanmar and also in intensive bilateral and multilateral negotiations through credible interactions among Bangladesh, Myanmar as well as other key players concerned to resolve the Rohingya crisis.

Key words: Migration, refugee, Muslim Rohingya, non-traditional security, human rights

Introduction

The Rohingya people rarely draw any attention of the local and global policy makers as the most neglected Muslim minority in Myanmar, who subsequently were forced by the Burmese junta to become illegal migrants to neighbouring countries taking refuge mainly in Bangladesh since 1978. As a result, bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar became contentious over Rohingya issues and continued to be sea-sawed thereafter. Current efforts to overcome points of tension and strengthen ties are focusing on a bilateral agreements signed by both the governments. Timely then is this work which looks at relationships at both the government-to-government and popular levels. Misunderstandings and stereotypes between the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments pose a challenge to policymakers. This is the right time that there has been a focus on Bangladesh-Myanmar relations taking into account the Rohingya crisis between them. Specifically, the work examines government-to-government links and mutual perceptions on Rohingya as well as the role of international and local communities in this respect. It is widely known that Rohingya is a Muslim ethnic group lived in northern Rakhine state of Myanmar, formerly known as Arakan state. Their history traces back to the early 7th century, when Arab Muslim traders settled in the area. Therefore, it is also recognized that they are physically, linguistically and culturally similar to South Asians, especially Bengali people.

Although during the Burmese post-independence period Rohingya's claim of separate ethnic identity was recognized by the democratic government of Premier U Nu (1948-1958),¹ they became stateless without a legal nationality in 1962 when the new military rule denied citizenship, and many of them have been forced to migrate to Bangladesh, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia since 1978. Even though they were able to migrate to the preferred destinations, their sufferings have not ended upon reaching new shores. Thus, the irony of fate is that the Rohingyas have been confined to a cycle of acute discrimination, escape, trafficking, poverty, detention, extortion and deportation. Imtiaz (2010) has pointed out that under the 1982 Citizenship Law, the Rohingya were denied citizenship and rendered stateless by the military junta of Myanmar and the country's military junta considers a large bulk of these people as recent migrants from Bangladesh.

This paper does not deal with the historical origin of the term "Rohingya", which is widely debatable, including its relationship with other terms, like the Arakanese and Rakhine. That is the reason why this study focuses precisely on the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. This study argues that a wider prospect lies in democratization of Myanmar and also in bilateral negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar as well as in multilateral negotiation among the key players by moving the Rohingya repatriation process forward as well as by addressing the problem through a holistic approach to drive concerted efforts of the local and international communities.

Research Problem

The problem of forced migration and refugee is seen as composed of various major clusters of factors and the network of relationships between them. This work takes into consideration the basic components of the Rohingya refugee situation such as forced migration due to repression in native Myanmar, the consequent refugee problems causing conflicts between Bangladesh and Myanmar and the local and international efforts to manage and resolve these situations. For understanding the dynamics of the problem, the activities of the Rohingya refugee and internationalization of this issue are also singled out for particular consideration. Basically, it is a problem which manifests itself in various forms on the societal, governmental and international levels. It is a humanitarian and moral issue, a security issue, a development issue and to a growing extent it is issue of an environmental and natural resources. To refer to an abstract typology, according to Soroos² and Nagel, the refugee problem is both a "transboundary" and a "shared" problem, which can be applied in case of the Rohingya crisis. There is

a voluminous literature on refugees. Especially in recent years much progress has been made in the clarification of its various aspects.

Recent research on the Rohingya refugee situation has concentrated too one-sidedly on the political causes of the problem and failed to pay sufficient attention to the consequences. Although there are little comprehensive researches on the Rohingya problems, some recent studies of Intiaz Ahmed (2010), Thomas K Ragland (1994),³ Mathieson, David Scott (2009)⁴ have focused on the Rohingya problems pertaining to their human rights violations, statelessness, critical repatriation and other related crisis in the border areas. Hardly there is any comprehensive study on Rohingya which looks at the problem by conceptualizing non-traditional security crisis created out of racial differences and governance problems. The Rohingya people have become the victims of domestic discriminatory policies of governance stemming from the deficiency of governance architecture. Which is why, the significance of this study lies in doing research on Rohingya refugee crisis, which will be discussed in the context of Myanmar-Bangladesh relations by exploring the negligible role of international community and Islamic Community to fill the vacuum in this major area to rescue Rohingya from the acute crisis.

Researchers hardly look at the Rohingya problem from the perspective of the flawed local governance in Myanmar intertwined with non-traditional human security discourses to deal with the Muslim Rohingya issues. Moreover, the previous researches on this issue largely failed to address the root causes and severe consequences of the Rohingya refugee crisis particularly against the backdrop of the lack of democracy in Myanmar and the rise of translational crime such as terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, maritime piracy etc. Thus, this research probes into why and how Rohingya problems have been neglected so far by exploring the root causes and disastrous consequences of this crisis focusing on Myanmar-Bangladesh relations in the context of non-traditional and human security perspectives. Here lies the significance of the current study on Rohingya refugee.

The analysis presented in this article is based in part on unstructured interviews done through random sampling and participant observation. I conducted field survey in Cox's Bazaar from June to July 2011 on migration of Rohingya from Myanmar to neighboring country and their refugee status in the host country like Bangladesh. As mentioned earlier, due to gross violation of their human rights in Myanmar, the Rohingyas were forced to leave their native Myanmar and take refuge mainly in Bangladesh. I had interviewed to inquire about the real situation and conditions of Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi border areas and their activism. These conversations also form part of the data for this article. My study found that when Rohingya make rights-based claims on the state, they frame them in terms of their differences with other citizens both in Bangladesh and Myanmar which made them stateless. This finding tells us pessimism about the repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar in order to attain peaceful co-existence and citizenship rights along with other ethnic groups in Myanmar. I was hesitant to address sensitive issues pertaining to forced migration, human rights violations and refugee dynamics among the Rohingyas located in Cox's Bazaar (Bangladesh) where the field survey was conducted. I felt to insist on such a focus would be disrespectful of their commitment to their cause and a violation of their rights and willingness to participate in my study.

Theoretical Underpinning and The Rohingya Crisis

Different types of non-traditional security crisis are particularly relevant for regimes in low-income countries like Bangladesh. For example, one consequence of the Rohingya's influx that struck Bangladesh in 1978 was the destabilization of the government following its inability to cope with the Rohingya intruders or illegal migrants in its border areas due to its limited resources coupled with its own problems of overpopulation and poverty. The concept of national security recently combines the

traditional and revisionist views by seeing national security in terms of three dimensions. The strategic dimension incorporates the traditional view of security, i.e., the ability of the state to defend itself militarily from external aggression. The regime dimension is the capacity of the government to protect itself from internal threats arising from domestic disorder and conflict. The structural dimension addresses the balance between a state's population and its resource endowments (food, water, living space). This balance is upset when population demands on resources become too great and the government is unable to manage or contain them, which is visible in case of Bangladesh. This is particularly critical to an impoverished country like Bangladesh that has been encountered with overpopulated areas with limited resources. The country is again burdened with the influx of the Muslim Rohingya who had fled away from Myanmar. An influx of Rohingya refugees potentially threatens the three security dimensions of a host country like Bangladesh, either by creating new security threats or by aggravating existing ones causing strained bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Jacobsen and Wilkenson, 1993). Refugee camps frequently harbor guerrillas either by assisting them directly or by assisting their families so that the guerrillas are free to fight. The camps are then viewed as a safe haven for the enemy by hostile forces who engage in "hot pursuit" raids into the host country.

The refugees themselves may constitute real or perceived threats to Bangladeshi government. When refugees bring arms with them they create a potentially dangerous armed community. Refugee camps Rohingya in Teknaf and Coxe's Bazar often become violent places with high rates of crime, especially those where long-term tenure has increased frustration levels, and since refugee camps are rarely secure these problems spill over into surrounding communities. Rohingya as long-term refugee populations, particularly those that are forced to reside in camps or areas away from the mainstream, have been said to develop resentment towards their hosts. Even if refugees do not actually engage in the domestic quarrels of their hosts, Bangladeshi governments often perceive them to be a threat and act to avoid or reduce political repercussions by imposing greater controls on refugees. One widely-practiced strategy in Bangladesh is to separate refugees from the local population by housing refugees in camps rather than allowing them to be self-settled. Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi camps are more easily monitored, controlled, and registered, all of which also facilitate eventual repatriation. Security threats affect refugee policies in Bangladesh negatively for several reasons. First, with increased security threats the Bangladeshi army becomes more influential in national affairs. The army is less constrained by public accountability than are other institutions, and army personnel tend to be more concerned with containing security threats than with the welfare of refugees. Containment in Bangladesh frequently means controlling Rohingya refugees by denying admission, restricting them to camps, or practicing refoulement. Thus, human security dilemma as a part of non-traditional crisis is evident in case of Rohingya, which disrupts the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The non-traditional human security discourses can explain well as to why and how the forced migration of Muslim Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh has been posing a great threat to the security of both the countries jeopardizing bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar

The Rohingya Problem and Disruptions in Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations

Due to systematic violations of human rights on the Rohingya, these people have been forced by the Myanmar's military junta to leave the country. Consequently, thousands have been made into refugees, namely in Bangladesh, while others have managed to flee to Malaysia, India and the Middle East. Crossing the border and taking refuge in Bangladesh was not something that was unexpected. But such crossing into Bangladesh did not change their views on the state and also could not change their status (Singh, 2009).

Bangladesh shares 168 km of border with Myanmar. But political and security problems sometimes disturb the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The first is of course the movement of Rohingyas across the border to Bangladesh since the late 1970s. These persons who have crossed over in the past continue to temporarily live in refugee camps in bordering Cox's Bazaar district of Bangladesh. The Myanmar authorities have shown great reluctance in accepting these persons (about 23000 officially) as their citizens. They think that they are foreigners. On the part of Rohingyas in Bangladesh, they are reported to be alarmed at the internal situation across the border and are not happy to be sent back as they think they would be persecuted. In the latest effort by Bangladesh, the Foreign Minister during her recent visit to Myanmar again raised the Rohingya matter. The Myanmar authorities have asked for an up to date list of these refugees so that they can scrutinize and see if they are their citizens. Such exercise has been done many times in the past. Due to this hesitation, Bangladesh is quite fed up and wants a quick resolution, so that relationship can move on to the next higher level. The Rohingyas are in a way drain on Bangladeshi national resources. Yet we cannot just push them back as it would be inhuman in the face of the uncertainties in Myanmar. Reports of fresh influx of Rohingyas are also anticipated due to difficult political situation in Myanmar under the military junta.

'Involuntary' repatriation of the Rohingya was sometimes alleged to be 'forcible' repatriation as well. Even the UNHCR at one point of time had complained that such 'forcible' repatriation were initiated and directed by the government of Bangladesh (GOB). The Rohingya suffered no less from the Bangladeshi state even when the host country was providing them refuge. Although welcomed by the local population in the beginning, the Rohingya refugees were quickly brought under the governmental control and policy measures, mainly with the intention of policing them. Such policing can be divided into three which are as follows:

First, the policy of encampment has lots of difficulties. Officially, there is a total restriction on movement of the camp refugees. No refugee can go out of the camp without the prior approval of camp officials, which is seldom entertained in writing. Anyone caught red-handed out-visiting the camp illegally or more particularly without the unspoken 'unofficial blessing' faces harsh treatment, which includes beating from the police. As one refugee stated in an interview: "I never go out of the camp without the permission of the officials or the police, If the police find out that someone has done so, they beat the person quite a lot and I feared those beating by the police!"

Second, the policy of unburdening responsibility is critical. Bangladesh would be interested to see the continued presence of the UNHCR and the refugees, not for any humanitarian reason but simply for the sake of making profit from their presence. In this context, US Committee for Refugees noted: "Despite Dhaka's claim that caring for the Rohingya is an economic burden, Bangladesh has borne little of the cost of caring for the refugees. With the exception of \$2.5million that Bangladesh spent on relief prior to the UNHCR involvement, UNHCR, donor governments, and NGOs have paid for almost all of the relief operation. If anything, the UNHCR relief operation has led to a net financial gain for the Bangladesh government and its citizens, as it has increased employment."

But then, corruption adds to the profit momentum, contributing thereby to the birth of a series of power blocs (or interest lobbies), not necessarily at the high policy level but more importantly at the middle and lower functionary levels, well disposed to the continued presence of the UNHCR and the refugees. Moreover, the middle and the lower functionaries of both governmental and non-governmental organizations are powerful enough to create conditions for putting a halt to unprofitable changes and reproducing the post-refugee status quo.

Third, the policy of repatriation is in dilemma. Despite the unwillingness on the part of the majority of the refugees to return home for reasons of insecurity or lack of improvement in the situation in Myanmar, the UNHCR, with the direct consent of the GOB, repatriated all but 21,117 refugees by

April 1997. Since then, however, repatriation has been put on hold following the failure of the GOM to clear the reentry of 13,582 refugees out of the remaining total of 21,117. Only 7,535 got permission but those refused reentry blocked their repatriation (Barnett, 2000). GOB quickly declared that no refugees would be allowed to settle in Bangladesh permanently and this position has been renewed time and again, and is still the current policy of the government.

The economic and trade relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar are hampered due to the Rohingya crisis in their border areas. The bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar is only USD 100 million with Bangladesh exporting only USD 3-4 million. This needs to be definitely enhanced with Bangladesh introducing new items like pharmaceuticals, jute, cosmetics, consumer ware especially white goods, leather products, computer and IT ware into Myanmar. In return the government should consider importing food grains, agro products, timber, gas into Bangladesh. It is expected that the bilateral trade will increase to USD 500 million in two years, to be raised to USD 1 billion by 2013. Rohingyas or other unresolved bilateral disputes including maritime boundary issues are considered as an impediment to the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Statelessness of the Rohingya has otherwise come to define the Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, indeed, in ways that is ominous for both. These issues have been jeopardizing the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar by causing non-traditional security threats to their border areas.

Challenges Ahead

The stateless Rohingyas are bound to become more desperate and militant to safeguard their interests. The militancy of the Rohingya Solidarity Organization and increasing involvement of the stateless and jobless Rohingyas in many different criminal activities, including murder, racketeering, bootlegging, prostitution and narcotics is well known. Previously their activities were restricted to Myanmar but with series of pushes and no respite by way of seeking refuge in Bangladesh, it is quite likely that they would expand their operations well beyond the Arakan region and into Bangladesh. In fact, much of the militancy and crimes in refugee camps have been blamed on them. The list of prospective (militant) supporters mainly includes the so-called Islamic political groups, namely the Rabita Al Alam Islami and the Jaamat-e-Islam etc. In the wake of such support for militancy, it is not difficult to see that the state-to-state relationship has entered into a new dimension of transnational forces, not all of which is restricted to the state itself. Two outcomes are particularly worrisome in this connection.

One is the proliferation of small arms and added to this, the possible use of the so-called exotic weapons, namely chemical and biological weapons. Just to provide one example, when the Mong Tai Army of Golden Triangle drug lord Khun Sa surrendered to the Yangon authorities it handed over assault rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, and even SA-7 surface-to-air missiles. More worrisome is the fact that despite repeated denials by the Government of Myanmar (GOM), accusations of chemical and biological weapons used by the Myanmar military against 'ethnic' insurgents have surfaced from time to time. There is no guarantee that such weapons, small or exotic, would not be used to promote or contain militancy in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border areas

Myanmar has already earned a reputation of being a 'narco-state.' If this is the scenario, there is bound to be a sharp increase in illicit drug trafficking, particularly to neighboring countries and beyond, with frustrated groups acting as 'intermediaries' or traffickers in this super profitable business. There are already reports that the drug addiction has increased sharply in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border regions, predictably in collusion with the Rohingyas. Indeed, nothing can be more ominous than the growth of a nexus between arms, drugs and frustrated groups. More importantly the Rohingyas as refugees live in deplorable conditions (especially in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh), which in turn

could possibly make them easy targets for recruitment by Islamic fundamentalists groups and other criminal networks. Should such a scenario materialize, it could potentially trigger a non-traditional security threats to the local, regional and international communities. The maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar has been resolved peacefully by international arbitration on 14 March 2012 with the victory of Bangladesh to fulfill its claim over the resource-rich Bay of Bengal. This is essentially a precedent for other disputes in resolving crisis between Bangladesh and Myanmar including the Rohingya problem.⁵

After the November 2010 election in Myanmar SPDC expanded its offensive activities against ethnic nationality groups to different parts of the country and increased serious international crimes against civilians. Moreover, the SPDC continued its religion-based systematic discrimination of Rohingya in Northern Arakan State, denying them basic and fundamental human rights. The junta subjected Rohingya to de-nationalization, arbitrary arrests, restrictions of movement, extortion, torture, and harassment. Thus, the return of Rohingya refugees repatriated earlier on is an added dimension to the problem, basically underlining the congeniality of atmosphere at that end. In a large part though, this was also due to the relative ease with which they could put up in Bangladesh amidst shared humanitarian concerns of Bangladeshi government and Myanmar through the UNHCR. It is alleged that several of them may have melted away in adjoining places in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Because of the existence of uncertainties and statelessness in Rohingya, the problem has been neglected seriously by the local and International communities for a durable solution though a coercive humanitarian intervention. It is also partly due to the pitfalls of local and global governance agenda in the era of globalization. The Rohingya crisis entails non-traditional security concerns more in line with human security issues, which should be addressed properly by the local, regional and international communities. The UN, ASEAN and other key players such as USA, China and Russia must, in keeping with their own responsibility to protect (R2P), place pressure on the Myanmar's government to stop mass atrocities in the country. International and regional communities can urge the military regime to restore Rohingya's citizenship rights along with their ethnic rights by lifting restrictions on marriage, movement, education. Myanmar's government should have strong political will to find a permanent solution on the Rohingya refugee problems with Bangladesh. Recent democratization in Myanmar and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes through demarcation of maritime boundaries between Bangladesh and Myanmar on 14 March 2012 has built up optimism for resolving the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations in the near future. But it requires coordinated local, regional and international diplomatic and constructive engagement urging the Myanmar government to cease the commission of atrocities against minorities like Rohingya and also to avoid a resort to violence with ceasefire groups. This engagement should be in conjunction with other measures such as the creation of commission of inquiry.

To what extent the role of the great powers will influence the foreign policies of Bangladesh and Myanmar will be a matter of great concern to different corners in recent years. Bangladesh has a number of bilateral disputes with Myanmar which remain unresolved till now. The increasing ties between the US and Myanmar could have a negative impact on Bangladesh-Myanmar relations to resolve bilateral contentious issues. The US puts pressure on Myanmar's current regime to go on armistice with the Karen guerrilla to fulfil the conditions for restoring bilateral relations between the US and Myanmar. But, nothing was mentioned in bilateral talks between the US and Myanmar to solve the Rohingya problems with Bangladesh while considering restoration of the US-Myanmar bilateral relations. Apart from this issue, a tie is supposed to be there between the insurgent groups in Myanmar and the insurgent

groups in southern Bangladesh, which can potentially be solved through cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The findings of the field survey look optimistic due to recent democratization in Myanmar, because the respondents have said that it might open up the door for resolving the Rohingya crisis through viable diplomatic breakthrough and intensified bilateral negotiations between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the basis of win-win situation. The respondents have also recommended that Rohingya should take advantage of the ongoing democratic transition to advocate for their rights in Burma, and to work towards the achievable goal of naturalised citizenship status.

Special initiatives of the international and local architectures require special parameters of the international law to be applied under the United Nations R2P Framework for the protection of Rohingya's human rights by overcoming the weaknesses of both the global and local systems of governance. The bilateral negotiations and credible interactions between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Rohingya crisis are crucial to peaceful settlement of the bilateral dispute. Both the governments must create conditions where both sides have a 'win-win' situation. Thus, concerted efforts and viable interactions among the key players are essential to overcome the current challenges facing the Muslim Rohingya. Such joint efforts to open up a space for humanitarian intervention through constructive engagement would ultimately contribute to a long-term solution of the Rohingya refugee crisis while addressing the peaceful bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar as well as meeting the humanitarian and non-traditional security concerns in this respect.

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End Notes

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