The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: A Challenge for Bangladesh

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Abstract: Rohingya refugees forcibly expelled from Myanmar have taken refuge in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Myanmar is in favor of building a Buddhistcentric country, so it demands identity documents from the Rohingya to prevent their return, but the return of the Rohingya to Myanmar is cancelled because the stateless Rohingya do not have an identity card and essential documents. On the other hand, the local population fears possible future competition between Bangladeshi people and Rohingya over job market and settlement land. Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar refugee camps do not have any basic rights. They are indulging in anti-social activities to earn money which is undermining Bangladesh's security system. The condition of Rohingyas in refugee camps has become deplorable due to Covid-19 pandemic. Despite taking necessary steps by GOB, lack of education in the camps, lack of advanced medical services and restriction of basic freedoms are creating barriers to medical treatment in emergency situation. A business system of food loan has been created around the shortage of ration in the refugee camps.Considering the concerns of the local residents and the better life of the Rohingyas, the Bangladesh government started the project of constructing Rohingyas refugee camps at Bhasan Char as an alternative arrangement. Although this project is criticized but Government of Bangladesh is trying to complete the project successfully from all aspects.

Keywords: Rohingya Refugees, Livelihood of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar Refugee Camp, Economy and Security, Role of RTM, Role of GOB (Government of Bangladesh), Ethnic Conflict, Bhasan Char, Role of UNHCR.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, the refugee problem is a very important topic of discussion and the Rohingya refugee problem is one of them which remain unresolved till today. A look back at the history of the Rohingyas shows that their problems began in their home state Myanmar. The Rohingyas are one of the world's least wanted minorities. They fought for their homeland Rakhine state of Myanmar and for their citizenship rights but due to the Myanmar government's inhuman torture and Rohingya extermination process, the Rohingyas have fled and taken refuge in different parts of the world to save their lives and currently, Bangladesh has the largest number of Rohingya refugees in the world ^{1.} The Myanmar government publically portrays the Rohingyas as guilty but the Myanmar government is condemned on the world human rights forum. Government of Myanmar has termed the expulsion of Rohingya Muslims as ethniccleansing. Myanmar's main goal was to build a Buddhist-centric country. The problems of the Rohingyas have multiplied since they became stateless. After taking refuge in Bangladesh, the government of Bangladesh identified them as residents of Myanmar and Myanmar identified them as Bangladeshi Muslims 2.

Rohingyas are mainly Muslim inhabitants of Arakan or Rakhine state. Arakan is a part of Myanmar which lies to the South East of Bangladesh and north of India and China. Arakan traditionally and culturally close to Chittagong in Bangladesh 3. The Emergency Immigration Act of 1974 stripped the Rohingya of their nationality. In 1978, the Burmese government carried out the Dragon King operation to persecute the Rohingya and inhumanely killed the Rohingya. As a result, about 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in 1978 4. Over the next sixteen months, a bilateral agreement between the government of Burma and Bangladesh led to the repatriation of a number of refugees by Myanmar government, but the situation of the Rohingya did not change after they returned to Myanmar⁵. Many Rohingya returned landless and undocumented. They were denied citizenship, subjected to other abuses, denied freedom of education, employment, movement and access to government services 6.

At the time when the Rohingyas took refuge in Bangladesh, Bangladesh was beginning to build itself up financially as a fledgling country and even though it did not have the capability to take charge of the Rohingyas at that time, Bangladesh gave shelter to the Rohingyas. The government of Bangladesh built a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar to provide accommodation to the Rohingyas and gave them essential items to Rohingyas. At that same time, people of Chittagong also came forward and provided food and water to the Rohingyas and massive protest in support of the Rohingyas were held in various cities of Bangladesh 7. The government of Bangladesh (GOB) has encouraged the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from the beginning and has clearly stated that the asylum arrangements provided by the Government of Bangladesh for Rohingya refugees are never permanent.

2. Rohingyas Livelihood in Refugee Camps

The lives of Rohingyas in refugee camps are poor, unsanitary and problematic. Of the twenty refugee camps built in Bangladesh in 1992, only two remain today in Southwest Bangladesh ⁸. The first is the Nayapara camp near Teknaf and the second one is the Kutupalong camp near Ukhiya Upazila. The size of the accommodation in the camp is much smaller than the size of the refugee population and the houses made of bamboo and tarpaulin in camps cannot withstand natural calamities. Here they cannot leave the camp freely. Their lives are confined to cramped quarters with insufficient water, inadequate shelter and little educational opportunity ⁹. Most of them are malnourished and have no proper opportunity to earn.

2.1 Food

Regular surveys since 1992 have found unacceptably high rates of malnutrition among adult and child refugees. In this case, the issue of food and insecurity has always come up. Almost none of the refugees are receiving their full rations, relying only on weekly food distributions. According to them only in presence of MSF (Medecines Sans Frontieres Holland), they get proper amount of ration. Since 1992, MSF has been serving Rohingya refugees by running feeding centers for malnourished children and mothers, supporting water sanitation services and treating the sick 10. To meet food shortages, Rohingya refugees started borrowing and lending as a coping mechanism and this system created a food loan situation where one refugee borrows from another to pay off his debt and a business environment developed within the camp. According to humanitarian workers, it is becoming increasingly difficult to properly deliver relief to this huge refugee population. On the one hand, the amount of reliefis constantly decreasing; on the other hand, corruption is increasing at the center of relief distribution. This relief of Rohingyas is distributed through Majhids and due to not receiving proper relief, Rohingya people expressed complaints against the Majhids as well as humanitarian workers 11.

2.2 Health, Healthcare service & RIM

Various forms of trauma and mental health problems have been observed among most of the Rohingyas ¹². Rohingyas health problems are related to the poor quality of life in the camp. Thecommon cold is the leading cause of overall morbidity for children. Other infectious diseases such as chicken pox spread easily due to densely populated areas. Diarrhea and skin diseases also occur regularly due to unsanitary environment and untreated water. The Rohingya refugee camp has a 'Refugee Health Care Centre', jointly run by the Government of Bangladesh and RTMI which is a non-profit

organization that provide information support and technical services in the education, health, and environmental development sectors for implementation, design, and development of local capacity. A medical team consisting of Medical officers, Health Advisors, EPI Health Assistants, Pharmacists, Medical Assistants, and Community Health Workers has been deployed to provide healthcare to the Rohingyas. There has also a delivery sector run by NGOs ¹³. But this manpower is not sufficient to serve the current huge Rohingya population. There are no specialist camps for the treatment of Rohingya refugees. UNHCR reported that the home delivery rate before the arrival of RTMs in the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps was over 98 percent resulting in high infant and neonatal mortality rates 14.

Refugees are very vulnerable to HIV prevention in terms of their lifestyle and sexual behavior. RTM hosts raise HIV awareness among refugees. Rohingyas from Myanmar brought many health complications to the refugee camps in Bangladesh with children being the most affected. Rohingya are kept in isolation in camp due to disease and movement is restricted. RTM also establishes two secure delivery units in each camp for delivery. Skilled doctors and nurses provide services at these two centers. This delivery unit promotes breastfeeding and safe motherhood and postnatal family planning in camps by giving them contraceptives oral pills and condoms 15.

Shortage of Health care providers and pressure of large number of patients in health care centers have compounded the situation and this pressure is increasing day by day and making it difficult to provide and manage patients properly. According to the Rohingyas, they have to wait long for check-ups and when they finally get an appointment, doctors do not treat them in a timely manner. If they need to be taken out for treatment in case of emergency, they have to take permission from the authorities but after getting that permission, they have to wait at the check post on the road and get the permission only after that they have to go to the district hospital¹⁶.

2.3 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic in Refugee camps

Rohingya refugee camps make Rohingyas particularly vulnerable to Coronavirus infection. It was practically impossible to implement preventive measures in such an overcrowded environment. They had limited knowledge about the mode of transmission and symptoms of coronavirus due to their lack of proper education and were completely unaware of basic preventive measures such as social distancing and personal protection ¹⁷. Lack of potable water and sanitation facilities in the camps makes frequent hand washing and washing clothes impossible, although 13,500 hand washing stations have been set up within the refugee camps, but these are inadequate and mostly non-functional 18.

Due to the Covid-19 emergency, one five-bed isolation ward at Cox's Bazar District

Hospital and two fifty-bed isolation wards at Ramu and Chakaria Upazilas have been constructed for the Rohingyas ¹⁹. Although the laboratory is open in Cox's Bazar Medical College, the testing capacity there is very limited. There was a high risk of contracting Covid-19 among healthcare workers due to extreme shortages of personal protective equipment and medical equipment, which hampered the provision of services to refugees. Rohingya communities have been terrorized by rumors of an epidemic. Since 2019, Rohingyas have also been denied access to internet communications, furthering the spread of misinformation. Also the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in violence against women and girls, particularly intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse ²⁰.

2.4 Education

Education is seen as a fundamental human right in international human rights law. It was formally recognized as a human right with the adoption of the UDHR (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) in 1948²¹. The Rohingya ethnic community in Rakhine state was denied access to education due to increased state-led violence. On the other hand, discrimination against their right to basic education continues in refugee camps of Bangladesh since they took refuge in Bangladesh. Many children from refugee communities have no access to education in the camps. They face enormous difficulties in getting an education. There are 400,000 school-age Rohingya children. Some NGOs in the refugee camp provide basic non-formal education but cannot meet the educational needs. About 300,000 of these children attend UNICEF-supported education centers, and about 100,000 school-ages Rohingya refugee children do not attend school ²².

UHICEF is working to reach these children and remove their barriers. Rohingya refugee children have been traumatized by witnessing atrocities committed by the Myanmar army. Therefore safe Schooling in safe place is needed to provide a sense of security and normality. Educational environment can reduce the trauma of Rohingya refugee children in camps.

2.5 Economy and Security

Rohingya refugees taking refuge in Bangladesh put pressure on Bangladesh's employment and economy. As refugee, Rohingyas are denied employment opportunities in Bangladesh. Sometimes Rohingyas are provided temporary employment by NGOs but this creates hostile relations between Rohingyas and locals ²³. As the Rohingya community in Bangladesh has no legal source of income, the Rohingyas are involving in various criminal activities including drug addiction, robbery, and prostitution. Women and teenage girls engaged in prostitution or survival sex to survive, making Cox's Bazar widely popular as sex tourism destination and spreading various infectious

diseases including HIV which is a threat to locals and refugees. Rohingyas join militant groups for financial gain as a means of survival and engage in anti- social activities such as human trafficking, terrorism, arms smuggling which is a growing international security concern 24.

3. Role of GOB (Government of Bangladesh)

As of March 2020, Bangladesh has sheltered about 8, 59,160 Rohingyas, of which 54 percentare children. Bangladesh authorities have officially recognized the forcibly displaced Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar²⁵. Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention andthe 1967 Protocol so Bangladesh is never obliged to assist refugees. That is why Rohingyas have no formal status in Bangladesh. in this regard, the Bangladesh government has said that despite the fact that they have not signed the 1951 refugee Convention, they have hosted the refugees to fully respect the international protection system because Bangladesh is a state party to various main international human rights treaties, therefore Bangladesh is bound to respect the fundamental rights of the refugees and be equal under the law ²⁶. It is obliged to provide necessary services with facilities and security and securing these rights has become a real challenge for Bangladesh.

Another thing to worry about is that Rohingya refugees are different from the majority population of Bangladesh. If the Rohingyas try to establish a nation state in future, there is a strong possibility of ethnic conflict between the Rohingyas and the people of Bangladesh, which is a matter of great concern to the Government of Bangladesh.

That is why the prolonged presence of Rohingyas in Bangladesh is a cause for concern. Also there is growing concern among the people and government of Bangladesh that the influx of Rohingya people could Destroy Bangladesh's resources and deteriorate the economy. On the one hand, Bangladesh is trying to return the Rohingyas in Myanmar for that many Rohingyas have been sent back to Myanmar against their will; on the other hand, government of Myanmar is repeatedly refused to accept the Rohingyas and stated that only Rohingyas with identity documents would be repatriated. This condition was a ploy by the Government of Myanmar to not accept the Rohingyas, resulting in stateless Rohingyas not being able to return to their homeland due to lack of proper documentation and only a small number of Rohingyas being able to be repatriated ²⁷. According to the people of Bangladesh, the presence of Rohingyas will create an environment of competition in the job market, as a result of which the people of Bangladesh will be deprived of job opportunities ²⁸.

4. The Alternative Arrangement for Rohingya Refugees

Cox's Bazar is a tourist center within Bangladesh where the influx of Rohingyas

will have a negative impact on, environment, natural resources, and tourism revenue. The long-term residence of these large numbers of Rohingyas is increasing the rate of land and resource use, leading to greater competition between locals and refugees for land and resources. The government of Bangladesh has taken an alternative approach to providing shelter to the Rohingyas and considering the local people, settling Rohingyas in Uninhabited floating settlements that are separate from the mainland of Bangladesh but this resettlement plan of the government has also been strongly criticized.

4.1 Bhasan Char

This new char was created in 2006. It is an island in the Bay of Bengal. The Government of Bangladesh has included this Char in the Char Ishwar Union of Hatiya Upazila of Noakhali. From the mainland of Bangladesh, have to go to this pasture by boat for two hours. The original name of this char is Thengar Char which was renamed as Bhasan Char by Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2017 ²⁹. At the time the island was formed, localBangladeshis were identifying it as a floating island. This char is submerged and built by silt at high tides. The area is prone to cyclones and floods due to heavy sea waves The Camps in Cox's Bazar could not have faced natural calamities but the camps in Bhasan char have been built much more securely. Most of the areas of Bhasan Char are dark so crime happens more at night.

As some of the low-lying areas of Char are submerging, in 2015 the Bangladesh government began developing the Char and a plan to relocate refugees to the Char after the development ³⁰. Finally in 2018 the Bangladesh government decided to relocate 100,000 Rohingya to Bhasan char. Construction of high sea wall at Char, 120 cyclone centers, provision of electrification, mosque, a police station, community clinic, construction of local market, road and drainage network, power plant, drinking water management, 1,400 cluster housing facilities, construction of lighthouses, sanitation ensured Plans to build a helipad on the island, and to plant trees and build roads were undertaken by the Bangladesh government at an estimated cost of over USD 350 million ³¹. Now a light house has been built on top of the ninety meter high tower, Animal husbandry has started in Bhasan Char and there are many small grocery shops.

International organizations including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have expressed concern over this plan by the Bangladesh government ³². According to them; theRohingyas are being forcibly transferred to Bhasan Char by the Bangladesh government. Many Rohingyas have found their names on the list prepared for Bhasan Char without their consent and they do not want to live in Bhasan Char, but the Bangladesh government does not want to listen to the Rohingyas, Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations believe that there may be a risk of human rights violations in this case. Also Human Rights Watch expressed concern that

the char is uninhabitable because it is made of accumulated slit and has a significant chance to sinking during cyclones or high tides 33.

According to Government of Bangladesh, they are continuously trying to return Rohingyas toMyanmar but it will take time to return such a large number of Rohingyas so this project is done by GOB to shelter them in a humanely healthy environment and the transfer of Rohingyas from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan char is voluntary. Also the Government of Bangladesh says that this char is completely safe to live in as a strong infrastructure has been built here with the help of renowned British companies and the Bangladesh Navy has built a 12.1 K.M.- high embankment to ensure the safety of the char during cyclones and tidal surges ³⁴. The Rohingya camps in Bhasan Char are much better and less crowded than cox's Bazar. In 2021, a delegation of foreign diplomats from 10 countries, including the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and France, visited Bhasan Char and found that Rohingya refugees were living a happier and safer life in Bhasan Char than in Cox's Bazar 35. The UNHCR Committee provided a positive report to the United Nations on the improvement in the living conditions of the Rohingya in Bhasan Char, and the UN clearly recognized the humanitarian and security needs of the Rohingya refugees in Bhasan Char ³⁶.

5. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion it can finally be said that Bangladesh government has unlocked its border and accepted millions of Rohingyas in the distant past and provided them with accommodation and food from the humanitarian ground and the United Nations, NGOs and INGOs have been continuously providing assistance to meet the basic needs of the Rohingyas but such assistance cannot be sustained in the long term and Bangladesh along will not be able to help the Rohingyas for a long time.

Government of Bangladesh has built a refugee camp in Bhasan Char for these Rohingyas with the tax money of the people of Bangladesh. How long the Rohingyas will stay well in Bhasan Char or how long they can be kept well is a big challenge for Bangladesh. Bangladesh has limited resources, so the more the international organizations help in this project of the GOB, the more this project will be successful. Also, since Bhasan Char is isolated from the mainland, care must be taken to ensure that rumors do not spread and that the situation in the camp does not deteriorate in any way.

Stateless people are mainly the source of cultivation of terrorism so it is imperative to solve the refugee problem for that solving the Rohingyas problem is absolutely necessary because it is not only the humanitarian crisis but also a threat to regional security and peace. Due to the inaction of the Myanmar government, the Rohingya refugee problem is still unresolved, so the Myanmar government should come forward

and take up the repatriation program immediately. To make this program successful, all the countries and the United Nations should unite and stand by Bangladesh keeping in mind world peace and security. Right now, repatriation is the only way to solve the Rohingya refugee problem.

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