Rohingyas in Bangladesh and Myanmar : quest for a sustainable solution

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Rohingyas in Bangladesh and Myanmar: Quest for a Sustainable Solution

By Iftekharul Bashar

Synopsis

Bangladesh, under international pressure to receive Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, has its own domestic concerns of demographic pressure, resource scarcity, and internal security. For a sustainable solution, the international community needs to assist Myanmar in human development and community engagement for building durable peace in its troubled Rakhine state.

Commentary

The effect of the recent ethnic violence in Myanmar's western Rakhine state has created a complex situation for its neighbour Bangladesh which continues to face a mass influx of the displaced Rohingyas from Myanmar. In spite of repeated requests from the UNHCR, several countries and human rights groups, the Bangladesh government remains firm in its stance to curb the new inflow of Myanmar refugees, while reaffirming its commitment to deal with the asylum seekers humanely.

Though the Bangladeshi authority is providing emergency relief like food, water and medicine to the Rohingyas it has refused to give them shelter within its territory. The Bangladesh government's current policy stance stems from the new domestic complexity created by demographic pressure, resource scarcity, and concern for internal security.

The Rohingya refugees: The push and pull factors

Rohingyas are an ethnic minority in Myanmar, but are not recognised as citizens by the state despite the fact that they have been living there for centuries. The status of the Rohingyas has been contested in Myanmar and often led to persecution in the past.

For Bangladesh the Rohingya refugee influx is not a new phenomenon, having started in 1978 after a military operation in Rakhine state named 'Nagamin Dragon' aimed at suppressing a Rohingya ethnic uprising. Thousands of Rohingyas were killed in the operation and more than 200,000 Rohingyas fled their homes to become refugees in Bangladesh. Another major influx was recorded in 1991, when over 250,800 Rohingyas from Rakhine state took refuge in Bangladesh.

Through UN support and bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar some Rohingyas went back to Myanmar, but many more chose to stay in Bangladesh. Two major factors might explain this trend. Firstly,

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the facilities provided by the UNHCR camps were a pull factor that attracted marginalized Rohingyas. Therefore even in the absence of state persecution or physical violence, Rohingyas chose to become refugees in Bangladesh. Besides, Bangladesh being a Muslim majority country made many Rohingyas feel secure from communal violence.

On the other hand structural reasons such as the lack of opportunities and basic freedoms for the Rohingya community in the Rakhine state was a push factor that to some extent compelled Rohingyas to get out of Myanmar. While allowing Rohingya refugees to enter, Bangladesh continued to pursue both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to persuade Myanmar to take the Rohingyas back.

Lack of human development and integration

In the context of Myanmar, Rakhine state faces a problem integrating the Rohingyas. Rakhine state is one of the most backward regions in Myanmar and in terms of human development it is way behind the national average. There is acutely limited access to education, healthcare and public services like electricity. These factors create fierce competition over scarce resources which often lead to conflict along ethnic lines.

Like many other minorities in Myanmar, the Rohingya community of the Rakhine state suffered from persecution by other communities, which the state often failed to address. The state policies have often led to widespread destabilisation of the country and gave rise to militant ethno-nationalist movements, some of which have been utilized by transnational terrorist networks. Such movements were often ruthlessly crushed, indiscriminately, by the state. Consequently a large number of innocent civilians became victims of separatist movements and law enforcement operations.

Three concerns from Bangladesh perspective

The Rohingya refugees and illegal migrants have changed the demographic profile of southeast Bangladesh. Currently more than 29,000 Rohingya refugees registered with the UNHCR are living in Bangladesh. Another 200,000 Rohingyas are in Bangladesh as illegal migrants. Itself one of the least developed countries, with a population density of more than 900 per square kilometer the refugees add to the mounting pressure on Bangladesh's scarce resources like land and water.

Bangladesh shares a 271-kilometre long border with Myanmar, which cuts through hills, forests, rivers, canals and sea, which make the border management difficult. The porous border is rapidly becoming a conduit of transnational crime such as smuggling of arms and drugs and human trafficking.

The Bangladesh-Myanmar border region has been identified by the Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control as an important point in the infamous Eastern route. There are at least 10 factories in the border area inside Myanmar which produces illegal drugs that are being smuggled into Bangladesh. The Rohingyas are recruited as carriers, intermediaries or traffickers.

The Rohingya militant groups are major security concerns for Bangladesh. Among the groups the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Rohingya National Alliance (RNA) and Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) are considered to be the major groups posing a threat to Bangladesh's internal security. The groups have members, supporters and sympathisers within the Rohingya refugees and illegal migrants in Bangladesh. They have evidently collaborated with the Bangladeshi militant groups such as the Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B).

Even though the Bangladesh army has almost totally disarmed the RSO by 2005, other Islamist, ethno-nationalist and narco-terrorist groups, such as the ARNO, RNA, the separatist Democratic Party of Arakan (DPA) and the narco-terrorist Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) are reportedly still around. The ALP often coerces Bangladeshi local communities into growing poppy in the interior of Chittagong Hill Tracts. The RSO and RNA are in league with the DPA and beyond the control of any government.

A sustainable solution

A sustainable solution of the Rohingya refugee problem depends on how effectively the human development programs are carried out in the Rakhine state. Years of underdevelopment has turned this scenic border region into a simmering conflict zone which is creating multifaceted security concerns for neighbouring Bangladesh. As Myanmar moves forward in its transition to democracy it is time to help the country develop social cohesion through promoting human development programs and enhancing its capacity for community engagement for building durable peace. This will strengthen Myanmar's democracy from within and create a cohesive and integrated society.

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