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## Why the ultimate solution lies within Myanmar



Rohingya refugees rest after crossing the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, near Teknaf, September 10, 2017. Photo: AFP

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Although steps are being taken to initiate the return of Rohingya refugees, the likelihood of this happening remains low. Based on the past recurring incidents of Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar and nothing done to permanently resolve the crisis, the Rohingya case in Bangladesh is already a “Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS)” which, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refers to those situations in which refugees numbering 25,000 or more are suspended for five years or more without probable end to the situation in the foreseeable future.

To deal with PRS, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) proposes three durable solutions: repatriation to country of origin, local integration in the host country and resettlement in a third country. What do these “durable solutions” actually mean for Rohingya refugees?

With regard to repatriation, on the part of Bangladesh, “bilateral” talks have gone only so far as to the formation of lists of refugees and a “joint working group”. What we see from the international community is the humanitarian intervention, which is commendable, but which perhaps signals their intent to encourage Bangladesh to continue being host to Rohingyas. This assumption is on the ground that there has been consistent failure—and even a glaring display of double standards—on the part of international peacemakers and political actors to engage with Myanmar over the statelessness of Rohingyas and human rights abuse. Regrettably, this has not improved the human rights environment in Rakhine province and greatly diminishes the prospect of voluntary repatriation of Rohingyas.

In the face of uncertainty in the repatriation process, there have been suggestions by various quarters of considering the feasibility of resettlement of refugees from Bangladesh to a third country. The government had suspended the resettlement programme in 2010 out of concern that it would attract more Rohingyas from Myanmar. Presently, however, the National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals adopted by the Cabinet in 2013 shows the government's renewed interest in considering resettlement as a solution. At the global level, the latest New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016 requires Member States to stick to their commitment of increasing resettlement spaces for refugees matching the needs projected by UNHCR. However, commitments are not consistent with practical action: in 2017 for example, the US slashed its refugee resettlement targets by almost 50 percent, from 110,000 persons per year to 50,000.

From a wider perspective, decisions of developed countries with regard to resettlement of refugees are driven more by economic and geopolitical interests and domestic politics—where the pledge to deter migration becomes a low-hanging fruit to win electorates—rather than by a genuine respect for human rights. Consequently, state quotas for resettlement and prioritisation of refugees (who to accept for resettlement) see fluctuation depending on the political climate and desirability of the refugee population.

As far as Rohingyas are concerned, their lack of literacy and skills perhaps makes them unattractive for First World economies. Additionally, economic interests of states outweigh the miseries of Rohingyas. That is why, despite being the largest stateless population globally (UNHCR 2018), Rohingyas' protracted displacement has not featured strongly in political or diplomatic solutions. Such was not the response from world leaders though, in case of refugee crises in Bosnia, Kosovo or East Timor or even during the Indo-Chinese refugee crisis when 70 governments promptly developed the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action to settle refugees temporarily in Southeast Asian nations before resettling them permanently in the US, Europe and Australia.

In the prevailing climate of increasing restrictions on refugees' access to asylum, the UNHCR in its Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2018 report, estimates 1.2 million refugees globally in need of resettlement with the majority from Syria, Congo, Central African Republic, among others. Processing of refugees for resettlement from Asia is on the decline, however, and there is slim chance for thousands of Rohingyas to find resettlement in third countries, as explained in the UNHCR report: “For the majority of the Rohingya refugee population, however, UNHCR's primary focus will be continued advocacy and promotion of temporary stay arrangements with work rights and access to national health and education services in their countries of asylum.”

The conclusion to draw, therefore, is that the prospect of resettlement of Rohingyas in a third country is thin. This leaves the issue under consideration of the next durable solution: local integration of refugees in host countries. The UNHCR favours this particular solution to resolve PRS, including that of Rohingyas, in Asia on the rationale that many Asian states have graduated from low-income status, and their economic and social development make them capable of integrating the refugee population.

However, it is uncertain if the respective Asian host countries share this view of UNHCR with regard to local integration of refugees. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia—recognised hosts of both registered and unregistered Rohingya refugees—do not encourage local integration and essentially view themselves as transit nations from where Rohingyas will move onward to resettle in a third country. Turning to South Asia, with Nepal just winding up its own programmes for Lhotsampa refugees from Bhutan, Pakistan still hosting Afghan refugees, India hosting Sri Lankan Tamils, and Tibetans among others, this region cannot be expected to support the idea of locally integrating Rohingyas.

Speaking of Bangladesh, given the pace of repatriation proposed in the agreement signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh, it would take at least five years for a population of one million to return to their native land, and within these five years there are chances of some unauthorised local integration. If that happens, the situation might be compounded by the likelihood of “donor fatigue” in future. In this regard, Bangladesh needs to be careful in its expectation of continued humanitarian assistance from the international community. Three possible scenarios related to funding can be sketched to explain this caution.

First, for the time being, the international community is active because sentiments are high, the media's spotlight is on Rohingyas, and it is under public pressure to extend a helping hand. So, in the short-term, funding is not much of an issue. However, it is only a matter of time when donor states shift their attention to some other global crisis and funding for Rohingyas dries up over time, as is the case with other protracted situations, for example, Somali refugees in Kenya or Burundian refugees in Tanzania. When that happens sooner or later, the disadvantage for Bangladesh for not being a signatory to the Refugee Convention of 1951 might play out: It would not be able to legally demand cost-sharing from developed states that are signatories.

Hence, in the long-term there is no legal binding for Bangladesh to mobilise and sustain funding to feed the encamped one million refugees. Also, when the global refugee population under UNHCR mandate is increasing every year—17.2 million till 2016 with the majority being high-profile and highly-politicised displacements from Syria, Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and South Sudan—the ground reality suggests that Rohingyas will not remain a priority recipient of humanitarian assistance for long. Indeed, during the Leaders' Summit on Refugees in 2016, the majority of the pledges made by states with regard to financial assistance were meant for refugees in Europe, Middle East and Africa. Saudi Arabia was the only country to allocate USD 50 million for Rohingyas in Indonesia.

Second, donor states recognise a clear distinction between humanitarian assistance and development aid, wherein, the former is perceived from the narrow “emergency response” perspective, thus resulting in sporadic interventions, while the latter is seen as the UN requirement for rich countries to spend 0.7 percent of their gross national incomes to finance development in poorer states. At least there is a global consensus on the UN figure, thus making the contribution a bit institutionalised. By contrast, there is no such financial liability on prosperous nations to continue funding humanitarian programmes for refugees. Particularly, when the issue of statelessness and displacement of Rohingya itself is unresolved in the political sphere, donation naturally remains at the discretion of individual states.

Third, flow of aid—whether humanitarian, climate or development—reflects the broader global economic and geopolitical trends. Rising oil price and the risk of higher inflation levels in major economies will keep the aid prospects uncertain in the medium term.

As safeguards against these scenarios, if Bangladesh pursues a strategy of “self-reliance” to manage the refugee population and allows Rohingyas a degree of legal protection and free movement for livelihood purposes, it would have a window of opportunity to better leverage the refugee crisis in the global dialogue on the safe return of Rohingyas to Myanmar, while simultaneously making a case for larger flow of development assistance, which will prove to be a more sustainable source of funding.

On its part, the international community—having acknowledged the outstanding generosity demonstrated by Bangladesh, despite its low-income status—needs to recognise that local integration is not a durable solution for Rohingyas in Bangladesh, anymore than resettlement is. In the absence of decisive action by the international community, Rohingyas will continue to be sold to slavery on Thai fishing boats, end up in mass graves in the jungles of Southeast Asia, and women will continue being subjected to bestial attacks. The Rohingyas must not become like a “soccer ball” to be kicked around from one court to another. There can be no confusion on the question of the ultimate solution—it must be found within Myanmar.

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