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Researcher: Malaysia-born and Myanmar-born Rohingya have distinct identities

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Speakers on the first day of the 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Towards Sustainable Solutions' Conference at DU on Monday; April 2, 2018 **Rajib Dhar/Dhaka Tribune**

'Though some grow up in Malaysia and adapt to the people, culture and environment, they still struggle with the fact that they (Rohingyas) do not truly belong to Malaysia'

An International conference titled “Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Towards Sustainable Solutions” was inaugurated at Dhaka University (DU) on Monday, with one of the sessions including a presentation on displaced Rohingyas in Malaysia.

The two-day long program is being organized jointly by Brac University, DU Center for Genocide Studies and Action Aid Bangladesh, at DU’s Sir Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate building. Six papers have been presented by national and international researchers in three sessions on the first day.

The third session, titled “Protection Issues: Implications for Gender/Women and Children/People with Disability,” was co-chaired by former diplomat Nasim Firdaus and Brac University Disaster Management Department Prof Dilruba Haider.

At the concluding session on the first day, research analyst with the Malaysia Programme at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Chan Xin Ying presented a paper on “The Case of Malaysian Born Rohingyas: A Deepened of New Ethnic Identity?”

She said: “The Rohingya refugees who are staying in Malaysia cannot identify if they are Malaysian or Burmese. The newly born Rohingya children may get birth certificates if their parents are UNHCR cardholders, but they cannot attain citizenship or any form of legal recognition, hence remaining stateless. They also have restrictions on access to education and employment, as well as risks of detention and arrest.”

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She cited Article 14 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, which says: “Any child who is born within the Malaysian Federation is, by operation of law, a Malaysian citizen if he or she ‘is not born a citizen of any country’ and cannot acquire citizenship of another country by registration within one year of birth.” But the article does not implement on refugees.

In her study, Chan Xin Ying demonstrated that a vast number of Rohingyas staying in Malaysia identify themselves as Malaysian Rohingyas rather than Myanmar Rohingyas. Majority of the new born Rohingyas in the country are growing up with Malaysian identities, while a minority identify as Myanmar Rohingya and some without any nationality, the study read. As the research project is ongoing, the statistical figures are not mentioned.

Of the Rohingyas who were born in Malaysia, the majority wanted to stay in the country or few others wanted to settle in a third country and none wanted to return Myanmar.

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The study reads: “Though some grow up in Malaysia and adapt to the people, culture and environment, they still struggle with the fact that they (Rohingyas) do not truly belong to Malaysia. Most Malaysian Rohingyas speak basic or fluent Malay, some speak Basic English, yet many still suffer from discrimination. Sometimes, they are able to camouflage themselves as Malaysians for security and better integration.”

“Opportunities to earn livelihoods is much more positive for Malaysia-born Rohingyas, due to their network with the locals, language fluency and adaptation to the culture,” it added.

However, it further said that many of these Malaysia-born Rohingya began introducing themselves as Rohingyas after the Malaysian government spoke up on their behalf in 2016.

Distinct “shared memories” between Malaysia-born Rohingyas and Myanmar-born Rohingyas have created different identities for these two groups, but Rohingya still remains a very important element of their identity, the study said.

Later, Sara Hossain presented a paper titled “A Focus on the Needs of Rohingya Adolescent Girls and Young Women,” which was prepared by her in collaboration with Dr Sajeda Amin.

The closing session of the conference will be held on Tuesday at 3:30pm, where a “Dhaka Declaration” will be announced. A set of recommendations and suggestions for sustainable solutions to resolving the Rohingya Crisis will be included in the declaration.