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The Rohingya imbroglio

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Most independent observers would agree that over the years, ethnic Rohingyas in Myanmar has been discriminated and persecuted by the ruling military junta purposefully inciting Burmese nationalism. Even the stance of mainstream democratic forces in Myanmar has not been any better towards Rohingyas. From time to time, to save their lives, they have fled their homeland and have taken refuge mostly in Bangladesh and to a lesser extent to Thailand or in very few cases, to third states. This is also happening in the recent weeks after the latest wave of persecution by the security forces in Myanmar. In most cases, they have been pushed back to Myanmar, and even those who are granted shelter are not receiving sufficient assistance to maintain a dignified human existence.

Arguably, pushing Rohingyas back to Myanmar is a violation of the principle of non-refoulement that is people cannot be sent to a country where they have a well-founded fear of serious harm - a well-established norm of customary international law. While Bangladeshi authorities claim that as a non-signatory of the Refugee Convention of 1951 and 1967 Protocol, Bangladesh is doing more than what it legally needs to, (according to official estimates, more than two hundred thousand Rohingyas live in Bangladesh, and unofficial estimates suggest that the number may be up to half a million) it has to be borne in mind that pushing Rohingyas back to Myanmar is contrary to the non-refoulement principle which is not only a treaty obligation but also a norm of customary international law which applies to all countries. Almost routinely many national media reports in Bangladesh (often bordering on propaganda) has branded Rohingyas living in the country as engaged in criminal activities which rather unsurprisingly is believed by a sizeable section of Bangladeshis. However, there does not seem to exist any methodical report bearing any credible evidence of the Rohingyas being disproportionately involved in committing serious crimes in Bangladesh. For some reason unknown to me, human beings are almost always more receptive of the known and the ones like them and would treat the unknown and unlike them with mistrust and they are often hostile to

refugees branding them as the root of many evils. This seems to be the case for not just Bangladeshis but any country in which there is a sizeable influx of persecuted people. And unfortunately, xenophobia sells to many.

Even if for the sake of argument, if we accept that many desperate Rohingyas are engaged in criminal activities in Bangladesh (and naturally some of them would be for the sheer helplessness) and also that some of them are carrying illegally obtained Bangladeshi passports and committing crimes in those third countries. This, many claims, dents the image of Bangladesh. However, there should be two important questions about this which are often ignored. Firstly, the Rohingyas engaged with criminal activities are almost certainly patronised by goons in Bangladesh who use them as their pawns. While for these goons some Rohingyas may be easy preys, even in the absence of any Rohingya refugee, some hapless Bangladeshis may fill the void. Secondly, as Rohingyas are not eligible for the citizenship of Bangladesh, there is no way for them to obtain genuine passports. Hence, obviously, some Bangladeshi officials are engaged in the business of issuing passports illegally, and Bangladesh Government needs to punish them for the violation of law.

Sometimes it is possible to squabble fairly or unfairly about the motives of people who flee their homes and seek refugee status beyond their shores. And it is well-documented that some people flee their homes because of no fear of persecution but in the quest for economically rewarding life. However, Bangladesh, being an economically backward country with a per capita income of just over US \$1,000 or even Thailand (with a relatively better per capita income) are hardly likely to be a lure for economic migrants. Indeed, even the authorities in Bangladesh or Thailand while pushing the Rohingyas back, have not questioned the gravity of their plight. These would indicate the genuine nature of the persecution of the Rohingyas. Indeed, the fact that most Rohingyas try to take refuge in Bangladesh rather than in Thailand may indicate that they are driven by a genuine fear not for exploring better economic opportunities because a natural choice of economic migrants should be Thailand, not Bangladesh.

It has been rightly pointed by many in Bangladesh that less than half a century ago millions of our ancestors fled their homes and took refuge in India. If India behaved towards them the way our authorities are behaving toward the Rohingyas today, million more Bangladeshis could have died during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Surely Bangladesh has no dearth of resource pressure, but that in itself cannot morally justify the pushing back of desperate people who are fleeing for lives. There was no dearth of Bangladeshis shedding tears for Aylan Kurdi, but if we cannot be receptive of the Rohingyas, such shedding of tears would be nothing but crude hypocrisy. Of course, Bangladeshi authorities cannot provide them with shelter for eternity and have to work for unequivocal and meaningful international pressure on the authorities in Myanmar to end the persecution of Rohingyas.

Nonetheless, to turn our backs to persecuted people fleeing to save their lives is so cruel that it does not in any way fit with the pride that most of us take that 'Bangladeshis are great hosts'.

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