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Bangladesh's Response to the Rohingya Issue and Its Impact on China-Bangladesh Relations

Meng Zijun Zhang Tongda

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Abstract

The large-scale conflicts in Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2012 and again during 2016-2017 triggered a massive exodus of Rohingya people to neighboring countries, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis and attracting significant international attention. As the primary host country, Bangladesh has faced a complex challenge in balancing its humanitarian obligations with its national interests regarding the refugee situation. On one hand, it maintains the position that the Rohingya are citizens of Myanmar, insisting on their "safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable" repatriation while refusing to grant them permanent residency or options for local integration. On the other hand, the country grapples with substantial domestic pressures, where initial public sympathy rooted in religious solidarity has gradually been eroded by growing discontent over the prolonged crisis's economic burdens, security concerns, and competition for local resources. In response, the Bangladeshi government has implemented a multi-tiered domestic management system, imposing stricter controls. It has also invested in the construction of facilities on Bhasan Char Island to relocate a portion of the refugees, thereby alleviating pressure on the camps in Cox's Bazar. Externally, Bangladesh has persistently sought international assistance and advocated for accountability within multilateral platforms. By deepening cooperation with international organizations, it leverages external influence to exert pressure on Myanmar, aiming to facilitate repatriation. This study examines the historical roots and evolution of the Rohingya issue, focusing on Bangladesh's stance, response measures, and the resultant impacts to further analyze the potential implications of this issue for China-Bangladesh relations and interstate cooperation.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Rohingya Issue; China-Bangladesh Relations

Introduction

The Rohingya issue, a prominent challenge in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region, constitutes a complex subject encompassing historical grievances, ethnic tensions, religious conflicts, and disputes over citizenship rights. Since the 1970s, Rakhine State has witnessed repeated clashes between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, triggering large-scale exoduses of the Rohingya population. Particularly, the two major waves of violence in 2012 and 2016-2017 drove nearly one million individuals to flee into neighboring Bangladesh, creating one of the largest and most protracted refugee crises in the world today.

As the primary host country for Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh faces a profound challenge in balancing humanitarian assistance with its national interests. Initially, driven by religious and geopolitical affinities, Bangladesh opened its borders and admitted a massive influx of refugees. However, as the crisis has protracted, the escalating economic burdens, social strains, security risks, and environmental degradation associated with the refugee presence have become increasingly apparent. This has compelled the Government of Bangladesh to shift its refugee policy from offering temporary sanctuary towards implementing stricter controls and limited resettlement, while simultaneously seeking international support and burden-sharing through multilateral diplomatic channels.

Meanwhile, the Rohingya issue transcends domestic and bilateral dimensions, emerging as a non-traditional security challenge with regional and even global implications. Its spillover effects pose potential threats to the stability of both Southeast and South Asia, while simultaneously influencing the dynamics of major-power relations and regional cooperation frameworks. China, as a key neighbor and strategic partner to both Myanmar and Bangladesh, has direct stakes in the issue. The stability of the region is critically linked to China's geo-economic and energy security interests, particularly given that its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), are located in or adjacent to Rakhine State.

To date, significant academic research has been conducted on the Rohingya issue, both domestically and internationally, primarily focusing on the following areas. First is the study of history and identity politics. A significant number of studies examine the historical settlement of the Rohingya in Myanmar and their identity controversies from a historical perspective. Scholars such as Ba Tha, Jilani, and Zaw Min Htut argue that the Rohingya are an indigenous ethnic group with long-standing

historical roots in the Arakan region.¹ A group of Myanmar scholars represented primarily by Bamar and Rakhine scholars, including U Phaw Zan, Khin Kyi Kyaw, and U Tha Kyaw, offers a critical perspective challenging the historical narrative upheld by the Rohingya.² Second is the research on the refugee crisis and humanitarian response. Penny Green, a professor of law, has explored the issue of legal accountability pertaining to the Rohingya crisis.³ Rahman and Sakib contend that the crisis triggered by the Rohingya refugee situation propagates across borders, positing that the Bangladeshi government faces a strategic dilemma in formulating its foreign policy towards this crisis.⁴ In addition, scholars such as Cheesman, Uddin, Zarni, and Ge Hongliang have expressed empathy for the Rohingya community, maintaining that the primary responsibility for the crisis rests with the Myanmar government.⁵ Third is the study focusing on regional security and extremism. Scholars, including Li Chenyang, have pointed out that the large-scale influx of Rohingya refugees into countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, and their potential linkages with local terrorist groups, have exerted significant pressure on regional security in Southeast Asia.⁶ Researchers like John Gee and Xu Liping have highlighted that the issue not only severely impacts Myanmar's domestic politics and foreign relations but also undermines the cohesion of ASEAN and exacerbates non-traditional security crises within the region.⁷ Furthermore, Bovdunov argues that U.S. policy in Southeast Asia has exacerbated the Rohingya crisis, noting that the United States has attempted to use this issue to stir up Islamic extremism within the region, while simultaneously driving a wedge between Myanmar and Muslim-majority nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia, thereby advancing its own strategic objectives.⁸ Separately, a group of scholars including Yhome, Sahoo, and Salahuddin have conducted research on the impact of the Rohingya issue on South Asian states, particularly

1 Ba Tha. Roewengyas In Arakna. *The Guardian Burma's National Magazine*. Rangoon: Vol. VII. No. 5. May 1960; Ahmed F. K. Jilani, *A Short History of Rohingyas and Kamans of Burma*, Chittagong, Bangladesh: Institute of Arakan Studies, 1999; Zaw Min Htut, *Union of Burma and Ethnic Rohingyas*, Tokyo: Maruyama, 2001; Zaw Min Htut, *Human Rights Abuse and Discrimination on Rohingyas*, Japan: Burmese Rohingya Association, 2003.

2 U Phaw Zan, The Sudeten Muslims, research report, September 6, 1951; Khin Kyi Kyaw, The Mujahedin in Rakhine State, *Rakhine Tazaung Magazine*, No. 60, 1959; U Tha Kyaw, Rakhine State and the Problem of the Bengalis Called "Rohingya", research report, November 23, 1989.

3 Penny Green, (with MacManus, T. and A. de la Cour Venning), *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*. London: International State Crime Initiative, 2015.

4 Mohammad Sajedur Rahman, Nurul Huda Sakib. Statelessness, forced migration and the security dilemma along borders: an investigation of the foreign policy stance of Bangladesh on the Rohingya influx. *SN Social Sciences*. Vol.1, No. 160, 30 June 2021; Rahman, Utpala. The Rohingya refugee: A security dilemma for Bangladesh[J]. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 2010, 8(2): pp. 233-239

5 Zarni, Maung, and Alice Cowley. The slow-burning genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya. *Pac. Rim L. & Pol'y J.*, 2014, 23(3): pp. 683; Ge Hongliang, An Abandoned Group: Where Will Myanmar's Rohingya Go?, *World Vision*, No. 11, 2016, pp. 29-31; Cheesman Nick. How in Myanmar "National Races" came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2017, 47(3): pp. 461-483; Uddin, Nasir. A life of football: the vulnerabilities of Rohingya caught between Myanmar and Bangladesh. *South Asia@LSE*, 2018.

6 Li Chenyang, A Rational Analysis of the Hot Issue of "Rohingya" in Myanmar, *World Affairs*, No. 2, 2017, pp. 73.

7 Gee J. Muslim Minority Rohingyas Among Opponents to Burmese Military Regime[J]. *Washington Report On Middle East Affairs*, 2008, 27(1), pp. 26; Xu Liping, The Humanitarian Crisis of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Its Impact, *Contemporary World*, No. 10, 2017, pp. 61.

8 Alexander Bovdunov, Oil, Soros, and Bloody Terror: What's Really Behind the Persecution of Muslims in Myanmar, September 3, 2017, <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/425981-rohindja-musulmane-myanma>

examining its implications for India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.⁹

The scholarly discourse surrounding these perspectives has fostered a pluralistic understanding of the Rohingya issue. However, existing research predominantly prioritizes the Myanmar-centric or international viewpoints, leaving a systematic examination of Bangladesh as a primary actor relatively underdeveloped. This study, by integrating historical analysis, policy document analysis, and case study methods, and drawing upon diverse sources including United Nations reports, official Bangladeshi government documents, academic publications, and media coverage, systematically investigates Bangladesh's perception of, response to, and strategic choices regarding the Rohingya issue. The paper examines Bangladesh's policy evolution, domestic public opinion, international mobilization, and the implications for China-Bangladesh relations within the context of the Rohingya issue. It not only enhances the understanding of the policy logic and dilemmas faced by refugee-hosting states but also provides a more comprehensive interpretation of the multidimensional impacts of the Rohingya crisis. Moreover, it holds substantial practical relevance for assessing regional security architectures, major power interactions, and the dynamics of multilateral cooperation.

Therefore, in terms of its theoretical significance, this study contributes to enriching theoretical debates in international relations concerning refugee governance, humanitarian intervention, geopolitics, and regional security. Specifically, by adopting a “recipient-state perspective” to analyze the policy choices and strategic trade-offs made by states confronting large-scale refugee crises, it can offer new case studies and perspectives for refugee studies, crisis management theory, and South-South cooperation frameworks. Regarding its practical implications, the first lies in its policy relevance. The coping strategies employed by Bangladesh in addressing the Rohingya issue, encompassing domestic control measures, international mobilization, and bilateral negotiations, provide transferable experiences for other nations facing similar refugee crises. Second is the assessment of regional security. The protracted nature of the Rohingya issue is likely to exacerbate non-traditional security threats in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border area, such as the infiltration of extremism, transnational crime, and ecological crises, thereby undermining the stability of the broader Bay of Bengal region. This research facilitates the early warning of such potential risks and contributes to the advancement of regional cooperation mechanisms. Third are the implications for China's role as a major country. Understanding Bangladesh's appeals and predicaments can help China engage more effectively in mediation, promote conflict resolution, while safeguarding its project security and preserving its regional influence within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

9 K. Yhome, Examining India's Stance on the Rohingya Crisis, *Orf Issue Brief*, No. 247, July 2018, pp. 2-3; Niranjan Sahoo, India's Rohingya Realpolitik, The Carnegie Endowment, Oct.31, 2017, pp. 1-3, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Sahoo_Rohingya_final.pdf; Sayed Salahuddin, “Afghans question world's silence over Rohingya crisis”, Arab News, Sept.9, 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1158116/world>

1

Origins and Evolution of the Rohingya Issue

1.1 Historical Roots of the Rohingya Issue

The term “Rohingya” is not recognized by the Myanmar people. They contend that it was constructed and is leveraged by the Rohingya community to legitimize their claims for citizenship. Instead, they refer to the group exclusively as “Bengali,” which categorizes them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. In stark contrast, the Rohingya people themselves assert that the demonym “Rohingya” is etymologically derived from “Rakhine” (the name of the region). They posit their ancestry as descending from a mixture of Bengali, Arab, and Persian peoples, maintaining a continuous historical presence in the Rakhine region of Myanmar for over a millennium.¹⁰

In fact, the Muslim population in Myanmar’s Rakhine region is composed of diverse groups with distinct ethnic origins. These include the Pathi Muslims, originating from the Ayeyarwady Delta region of Myanmar; the Kaw-taw Muslims from Chittagong in Bangladesh; the Cholia, Surati Muslims with roots in India; and the Pashu Muslims of Malay descent.¹¹ According to historical records from various sources, it is well-documented that Muslim communities have indeed been present in the Rakhine region for over a millennium. During the 15th century, in the Arakanese kingdom of Mrauk-U, King Min Saw Mon, having failed to seize power, fled to Bengal and later reclaimed his throne with the assistance of Bengali Muslims. Subsequently, a number of Muslim soldiers settled in the Rakhine region. Successive monarchs of the historic Arakan kingdom adopted dual titles from both Arakanese and Muslim traditions and issued coins inscribed in Pali, Persian, and Arabic, reflecting their close connections with the Bengal region. Furthermore, by the mid-16th century, Muslims held official positions within the Arakanese royal administration, serving in military, domestic affairs, and financial departments. It is also documented that Bengali poets translated stories originally composed in Persian by the Bengali people, facilitating their dissemination within the Arakan kingdom. In 1617, with assistance from the Dutch, the Arakanese King Min Khamaung captured Sandwip Island, northwest of Chittagong, from the Portuguese. Later, Portuguese forces aided the Arakan kingdom in establishing control over the Noakhali and Bakerganj regions of Bengal. From the 15th to the 17th century, southeastern Bengal was intermittently under the dominion of the Arakanese kingdom. During this period, Muslims were brought into Arakan by both Arakanese and Portuguese forces, often as captives or slaves. These Muslim laborers gradually assimilated with earlier Muslim settlers, leading to the formation of distinct Muslim villages in the region prior to the British invasion.

This historical narrative is frequently invoked by the Rohingya as a foundational justification for their claims to indigenous status. However, within the contentious discourse surrounding the Rohingya identity, the Myanmar people draw a critical distinction while acknowledging the veracity of the aforementioned history. They contend that the Muslims who settled during the era of the Arakanese kingdom were a distinct group who largely assimilated into local Arakanese customs and are recognized within the Myanmar state framework. In contrast, they assert that the Rohingya

10 Meng Zijun, The Past and Present of the “Rohingya” , *World Affairs*, No. 22, 2017, pp. 34.

11 By Ambassador Md. Sufiur Rahman, *The Rohingya Community: History and Identity*, Course at North-South University, June 19, 2021.

are primarily descendants of Muslims who migrated in large numbers from the Chittagong region during the British colonial period to meet labor demands for agricultural production, a group whose legitimacy and belonging Myanmar rejects.

According to Collis's analysis, the Delhi Sultanate Muslims, which reached the Bengal region in 1203 CE, had not established a comprehensive Islamic religious system by 1430 and thus exerted no significant influence on the Arakanese kingdom. It was not until 1430, when Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of the Bengal Sultanate of Gaur assisted King Min Saw Mon in reclaiming his throne, that Islam was formally introduced into the Rakhine region. From the establishment of the Mrauk-U Dynasty in 1430 to its collapse in 1784, the ancient Muslims who arrived in Rakhine can be categorized into three distinct groups: the first were the *Myedu* Muslims; the second were the *Kaman* Muslims; and the third consisted of captives taken sporadically by successive Arakanese kings and laborers seized by pirates. While the *Myedu* and *Kaman* Muslim communities are viable subjects for further research based on extant historical records, as well as the contemporary circumstances, languages, and customs of their descendants, the third category of Muslims failed to coalesce into a structured community due to the channels, timing, and circumstances of their arrival. They either assimilated through intermingling with the local Rakhine population or gradually vanished as distinct entities. Historical archives lack detailed documentation pertaining to them.¹²

In 1824, Britain launched the First Anglo-Burmese War, culminating in the forced signing of the Treaty of Yandabo by Myanmar on February 24, 1826. Under the terms of this agreement, Myanmar was compelled to cede Assam, Manipur, Rakhine State, and the territory of Tenasserim south of the Salween River to British control. Rakhine became the first region to fall under British colonial rule. Following the establishment of British rule and subsequent development in Rakhine, a significant migration of people from the adjacent Chittagong region began, particularly into the Sittwe District. Located in northern Rakhine and bordering Bangladesh, Sittwe District has a demographic composition with a substantial Muslim population. The townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung within this district emerged as primary settlements for the Rohingya and later became the epicenters of conflict following the eruption of the Rohingya crisis. An analysis of population growth data from the British colonial period suggests that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in this area arrived as migrant laborers during the era of British administration.

In general, the substantial influx and settlement of Muslims in townships such as Maungdaw and Buthidaung within Rakhine State during the British colonial period can be attributed to three primary factors. First, the annexation of Rakhine into British India eliminated immigration restrictions, facilitating the large-scale movement of Indian Muslims between regions like Chittagong and the adjacent Sittwe District. Second, the expansion of agricultural cultivation in Rakhine created a high demand for labor. Concurrently, the opening of the Suez Canal presented a significant developmental opportunity for Burma (now Myanmar), streamlining its rice exports and stimulating economic growth. To expand rice cultivation in the Rakhine region, the colonial administration undertook initiatives to develop hilly areas and bring new farmland under cultivation. Labor-

¹² Collis, M.S., and U San Shwe Bu, *Arakan Place in the Civilisation of the Bay*, B.R.S. 50th Anniversary Publications No. 2, Rangoon, 1960.

intensive tasks, such as land clearing, digging, canal dredging, and harvesting, created a substantial demand for manpower. Migrants from Chittagong were extensively hired because of their willingness to work for lower wages, initially establishing a pattern of seasonal “migrant labor,” with a segment of this population eventually choosing to settle permanently. Third, the separation of Burma (now Myanmar) from British India triggered a renewed wave of Muslim immigration. The implementation of administrative partition prompted the governments of India and Burma to formalize agreements regulating cross-border movement. This fundamentally disrupted the previous pattern of Muslims traveling to Rakhine for seasonal agricultural work and returning home during the off-season. Consequently, Rakhine, perceived as offering superior resources and living conditions compared to Chittagong, attracted a significant and sustained influx of Muslim migrants.

By the late 1930s, the anti-British struggle in Myanmar had gained powerful momentum. To overthrow colonial rule and secure national independence, patriotic leaders, most notably Aung San, made the strategic decision to accept assistance from Japan. During this period, the Muslim population largely aligned with the British, whereas the Rakhine Buddhists sided with the Bamar people in supporting the Japanese. The confrontation between the two sides escalated into large-scale conflicts, triggering widespread casualties and precipitating the formation of a segregated residential pattern. Rakhine Buddhists were concentrated in the central and southern parts of the region, while Muslims dominated the northern areas. Following the British military’s defeat and their subsequent hurried withdrawal from Myanmar, the deep-seated religious antagonism between Buddhists and Muslims and the entrenched ethnic hatred in Rakhine State were left entirely unresolved, creating a legacy of problems that have persisted to the present day. Following Myanmar’s independence and the subsequent establishment of Rakhine State, which possessed its own police and military forces, the Muslim population increasingly perceived themselves as being pushed into a state of political and economic marginalization. Confronted with this growing sense of insecurity, they began to pursue a distinct collective cultural identity as early as the 1930s. This quest for identity and security escalated into armed mobilization under the banner of “Mujahedin.” It was from the 1960s onwards that the term “Rohingya” began to garner significant attention within the international community.

The Rohingya identity received brief recognition under the 1948 Constitution and in the period preceding the 1962 coup d’état. During the political instability of 1974-1975, small-scale refugee situations emerged. Then the conflicts in 1978 and 1991 triggered massive exoduses of the Muslim population. Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law excluded the Rohingya from citizenship. The decade from 1982 to 1992 constituted the primary period of their systemic marginalization, a situation that intensified significantly around 2012. As conflicts continued to escalate, the plight of Rohingya Muslim refugees received widespread international attention.

1.2 Evolution and Spillover of the Rohingya Issue

The spillover effects of the Rohingya issue have been evident since the 1970s, though initially largely confined to the bilateral dynamic between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Due to the lack of effective identity verification for the Rohingya and the absence of clear asylum policies in both countries, the Rohingya frequently moved across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. After the 1990s, the situation deteriorated markedly due to a combination of factors, including a growing Rohingya population,

intensified constraints on their living space, the emergence of demands for autonomy, and the accumulation of deep-seated grudges. The underlying tensions erupted into overt violence after 2012, culminating in two major waves of severe conflict during 2012-2013 and 2016-2017. These crises precipitated the flight of nearly one million Rohingya from the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region, dispersing across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and beyond, and triggering a profound humanitarian crisis.

In June 2012, Rakhine State in Myanmar witnessed the first large-scale communal violence between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists since 1942. The trigger for the incident was the assault on a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man. The ensuing unrest escalated into weeks of sustained conflict, during which the Myanmar military employed armed force to suppress the violence, resulting in the destruction of villages, numerous casualties, and approximately 140,000 people displaced. Some observers noted that the Myanmar military's response was disproportionate. The International Crisis Group specifically noted that "the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men on 28 May 2012 led long-simmering tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim communities to flare in Rakhine State the following month."¹³

As tensions intensified, there was a marked increase in Rohingya migration to destinations such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, alongside a concurrent rise in maritime migration to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. This period signified the spillover of the Rohingya crisis, starkly exemplified by the widely publicized "boat people" incident of 2015. The incident was characterized by Rohingya from Rakhine State, facilitated by human trafficking and smuggling networks, undertaking perilous journeys in barely seaworthy vessels in an attempt to reach neighboring countries. This led to scenes of stranded refugee boats and the discovery of human remains in southern Thailand and along Malaysia's border regions. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that approximately 130,000 individuals departed by sea between 2014 and the first half of 2015, with many perishing by drowning during the escape and others facing repeated extortion from smugglers.¹⁴

In January 2014, another incident in northern Rakhine State drew widespread attention. The event was triggered by the fatal assault on a Myanmar police officer, which prompted a military crackdown resulting in the deaths of approximately 40 Rohingya individuals.¹⁵ This incident significantly intensified the animosity between the Rakhine Buddhist community and the Rohingya people. Furthermore, it fostered a perception among other Muslim groups in Rakhine that the United Nations only supported the Rohingya. The resulting misunderstandings and heightened tensions erupted again in March 2014, when a group of Rakhine nationalist youths attacked the compounds

13 International Crisis Group, *Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, Asia Report, No. 251- 1, October 2013.

14 A/HRC/32/18, Human rights violations and abuses against Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 29, 2016, pp.1-4.

15 This casualty figure is sourced from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which reported treating 22 injured Rohingya from the January 2014 incident. The Myanmar government, however, denied both the scale of the incident and the casualty figures. Médecins Sans Frontières, *International Activities Report*, 2017, Myanmar, <https://www.msf.org/international-activity-report-2017/myanmar>. 'No one was left' – Death and Violence against the Rohingya, Report, March 9, 2018, <https://www.msf.org/myanmarbangladesh-no-one-was-left-death-and-violence-against-rohingya>

of United Nations agencies and several non-governmental organizations, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which had provided medical treatment to Rohingya injured in the January incident. These assaults caused significant property damage and intimidation of staff, leading to the temporary withdrawal of some organizations from Rakhine State. The situation drew months of sustained attention and coverage from the international community, particularly regarding the rising number of sexual violence victims among Rohingya women and girls.¹⁶ On October 9, 2016, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) launched attacks on three border guard posts and security force installations in the Maungdaw region, resulting in the deaths of nine police officers. The Myanmar government designated this event as a terrorist attack. In response, the Myanmar Armed Forces initiated clearance operations in the area, engaging in several armed clashes with the militants. These repeated military operations and armed conflicts precipitated the flight of approximately 87,000 Rohingya people, who sought refuge in Bangladesh through various means, and led to the deaths of over 70 Rohingya individuals.¹⁷

In response to mounting international pressure to resolve the conflict in Rakhine State, Aung San Suu Kyi convened the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State in September 2016. The Commission was composed of prominent Myanmar figures and three international experts, chaired by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. It was responsible for providing assessments across a spectrum of issues, including conflict prevention, humanitarian assistance, the protection of rights and reconciliation, institutional configuration, and development promotion, including but not limited to the Rohingya issue. On August 23, 2017, the Commission submitted its final report, which provided a comprehensive analysis of humanitarian and development challenges, the provision of basic services, the safeguarding of fundamental rights and security, and legal matters like citizenship. The report notably concluded that “reintegration, not segregation, is the best path to long-term stability and development in Rakhine State,” and put forward a series of specific recommendations.¹⁸ However, almost concurrently with the submission of the Commission’s report, the conflict escalated dramatically in the last week of August 2017. On August 25, at around 1:00 AM, a police station in Maungdaw Township, northern Rakhine State, was attacked with improvised explosive devices. This was followed by a series of coordinated assaults on multiple surrounding locations. In total, over 20 police outposts and stations were targeted in a near-simultaneous manner. Subsequently, around 3:00 AM, approximately 150 militants launched a two-pronged assault on the locally stationed Infantry Base 552. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for the coordinated attacks on August 25 and issued warnings of further operations.¹⁹ According to official reports released by the Myanmar government, as of August 27, the death toll stood at 102 individuals. This figure comprised 12 civilian fatalities and 77 individuals identified by the state as “terrorists” who were killed in security operations. On August 28, the Myanmar government announced that its

16 Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-related sexual violence, S/2017/249, 15 April 2017, op 51-53, p. 15.

17 International Crisis Group, Myanmar: *A new Muslim insurgency in Rakhine State*, Report 283/Asia, 15 December 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/283-myanmar-new-muslim-insurgency-rakhine-state>

18 Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, *Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine*, www.rakhinecommission.org/the-final-report/

19 “More than 20 police stations in Myanmar’s Rakhine State were attacked simultaneously by Rohingya, resulting in 89 deaths,” Guancha.cn, August 25, 2017, https://www.guancha.cn/Neighbors/2017_08_25_424480.shtml

military and police forces had initiated counter-terrorism operations in the area.²⁰ The large-scale clearance operations conducted by Myanmar security forces resulted in the burning of numerous Rohingya villages, an estimated 7,000 casualties, and prompted an exodus of approximately 660,000 Rohingya from Myanmar. This massive influx swelled the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar District to approximately one million.²¹ During the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly convened on September 12, 2017, a group of nations, including Nigeria, France, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, the Maldives, Chad, and Bangladesh, collectively accused Myanmar of committing "atrocities" and "ethnic cleansing." United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres strongly condemned the attacks in northern Rakhine on August 25 and called for three immediate actions: an immediate suspension of military and security operations, guaranteed safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and allowing those who have fled to return safely.²²

As the Rohingya issue continues to spill over borders, culminating in a full-blown refugee crisis, it has garnered increasing attention and sparked intense debate within the international community. Although the Government of Bangladesh has engaged in repatriation agreements with Myanmar, a combination of complex factors, such as political instability within Myanmar and the involvement of external actors, has resulted in the vast majority of Rohingya opting to remain within the refugee camps on Bangladeshi territory.

20 "Terrorist attacks in Myanmar's western Rakhine State for three consecutive days have left hundreds dead," Xinhua News Agency, August 29, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-08/29/c_129691173.htm

21 Kristine Kolstad, Norwegian Refugee Council, *Cox's Bazar: The world's largest refugee settlement*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/august/coxs-bazar-the-worlds-largest-refugee-settlement/>

22 United Nations General Assembly official records, 72nd session: 105th plenary meeting, Monday, 2 July 2018, New York. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/205/84/PDF/N1820584.pdf?OpenElement>

2

The Impact of the Rohingya Crisis on Bangladesh

Bangladesh stands as the primary host nation for Rohingya refugees, with a massive and continuous influx concentrated in the Cox's Bazar and Bandarban districts of its Chittagong Division. As of the present, the registered Rohingya refugee population within Bangladesh has surpassed one million.²³ As one of the world's least developed countries, which only transitioned to lower-middle-income status in 2015, Bangladesh has a relatively low level of economic development and faces constraints in its resource-carrying capacity. The immense scale of the refugee presence has imposed comprehensive challenges spanning humanitarian, economic, security, environmental, and diplomatic spheres, generating profound impacts at the domestic, regional, and international levels. First, at the socio-economic level, the arrival of refugees has intensified competition in the local labor market. Concurrently, it has caused a sharp surge in demand for employment opportunities, wage stability, educational facilities, and healthcare services. The ensuing competition over scarce resources between local communities and refugee populations has ignited escalating social tensions and conflicts. Second, environmentally, the large-scale clearance of forested land for refugee settlements and the ongoing consumption of forest resources for purposes such as fuel and construction materials have triggered severe ecological degradation and an environmental crisis. Third, in terms of security, the inherent complexity of border control between Bangladesh and Myanmar has exacerbated illicit activities such as drug trafficking, coupled with the risks of the potential infiltration of religious extremist elements, thereby intensifying non-traditional security threats confronting Bangladesh. Fourth, on the diplomatic front, Bangladesh's stance and policy responses to the Rohingya crisis profoundly shape its international engagements and national image. The protracted accumulation and interplay of these multifaceted challenges not only strain the government's governance capacity and the efficiency of resource allocation but have also fueled domestic scrutiny of its administrative efficacy. This, in turn, has provoked internal concerns regarding governmental legitimacy and eroded public trust in the elected administration.

2.1 Socioeconomic Pressures

The massive influx of refugees has imposed tremendous pressure on Bangladesh, a country characterized by high population density, constrained resources, and formidable development challenges.

A primary consequence has been resource diversion and soaring costs. Cox's Bazar, the primary site of refugee settlement, ranks among the most impoverished districts in Bangladesh. The establishment and maintenance of large-scale camps have severely exacerbated the pressure on the region's already strained land, water, forests, healthcare facilities, and educational resources. A World Bank assessment report indicates that the direct fiscal costs borne by Bangladesh in addressing the crisis from August 2017 to June 2019 alone reached USD2.42 billion, with the long-term economic burden projected to be substantially greater. Communities surrounding the camps have faced direct negative impacts, including price inflation, a marked decline in the quality of public services, and suppressed wage levels, collectively significantly undermining their livelihoods.

²³ Islam, M.R., Ahmed, E., Updates on Rohingya Repatriation to Myanmar: The Tale of a Never-Ending Process, in Ahmed, k., Islam, M.R., *Understanding the Rohingya Displacement*. Springer, 2024, pp. 281.

Scholars have conducted projections regarding the costs associated with the repatriation and hosting of Rohingya refugees, indicating that under a scenario of repatriating 300 individuals per day, the complete process would require 12 years. During this protracted period, the cost to Bangladesh for hosting the refugee population is estimated at approximately USD9.2 billion. Conversely, should the repatriation process fail to make any progress, the cost of hosting the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh over a decade could reach as high as USD17.2 billion.²⁴ It is evident that financial burdens of such magnitude represent a crippling economic pressure that Bangladesh can scarcely sustain. The 2018 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis sought USD951 million in funding but secured only USD655 million, representing a 31 percent shortfall. In 2019, the financial requirement was USD921 million, yet only 70% of the needed funds were ultimately received.²⁵ As of 2024, the Government of Bangladesh and UN aid agencies have consecutively issued annual response plans for seven years to seek necessary funding. However, securing the full amount has consistently proven difficult, with the overall funding coverage averaging approximately 69 percent. Currently, 80 percent of Rohingya refugees are entirely dependent on food assistance, which costs international organizations and the Bangladeshi government USD24 million per month to provide. Consequently, due to persistent funding gaps, the monthly food rations within the camps were continuously reduced.

On the other hand, social friction and labor market distortions have emerged. The construction of refugee camps led to the influx of heavy engineering machinery, frequent movement of humanitarian relief vehicles, and visits by dignitaries from major international organizations and nations, causing recurrent congestion on the region's highways. The already narrow and sparse road network became overwhelmed, leading to accelerated road surface deterioration.²⁶ Local hospitals and clinics are severely overcrowded, with medical staff and equipment critically overstretched and unable to cope with the dual demands of both refugee and host communities. Local water sources are inadequate to meet the surging demand, resulting in water shortages even for local residents, compounded by insufficient pressure in the water supply network. Furthermore, a centralized sewage system is virtually non-existent, with frequent incidents of septic tank overflows and open defecation becoming commonplace, significantly exacerbating public health and environmental crises.

A substantial number of Rohingya refugees, out of necessity for survival, have inevitably entered the informal economic sector to take on roles such as construction helpers, rickshaw pullers, porters, and fishery assistants, doing jobs characterized by low skill requirements and minimal pay. This trend has directly intensified competition for employment opportunities among local low-skilled workers, exerted downward pressure on overall wage levels, and consequently fueled significant resentment and social friction within local communities. Survey data indicate that following the massive refugee influx, the average wage for workers in Teknaf and Ukhia within the Cox's Bazar region declined by

24 Khatun, Fahmida, and Md Kamruzzaman. Fiscal implications of Rohingya crisis for Bangladesh. *Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)*, 2018, pp.25.

25 "UN Releases 2020 Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Response Plan" , United Nations, March 2, 2020, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2020/03/1051871>.

26 "Emergency Multi-Sector Rohingya Crisis Response Project (EMCRP) Environmental and Social Management Framework" , Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2019, pp.34.

14% and 6% respectively, while the wages of agricultural workers fell by 11%.²⁷

The decline in local wages has objectively reduced purchasing power while simultaneously contributing to rising price levels. Since the large-scale influx of Rohingya refugees into the local communities of Bangladesh in August 2017, the delicate balance between food supply and demand has been severely disrupted, leading to a broad price increase of 8% to 13% in the local market. Specifically, the price of rice rose by about 9%, wheat flour by 15%, and potatoes by about 34%.²⁸ Beyond the refugee influx itself, the arrival of numerous personnel from international organizations and NGOs involved in the relief effort caused a sharp surge in demand for rental accommodation. This is starkly illustrated by the account of a local resident who reported that the monthly rent for a single room had escalated from 2,000 taka to 6,000 taka.²⁹

Additionally, intensified social tensions and anxieties regarding integration have emerged. Fierce competition for scarce resources, profound cultural differences, pervasive security concerns, and some sensationalist media coverage have collectively eroded mutual trust and fostered strained relations between host communities and the refugee population. Consequently, public sentiment among local residents has shifted markedly from initial widespread sympathy towards a growing sense of resentment and exclusion. More profoundly, as the refugee crisis protracts, with many Rohingya having resided in Bangladesh for over six years, and some even longer, issues of identity are becoming increasingly blurred. A significant number of Rohingya children born in Bangladesh possess little to no connection to or identification with Myanmar. This dynamic has ignited profound societal anxieties within Bangladesh concerning national identity and the long-term prospects for social integration, despite the government's unequivocal policy against any form of local integration.

The refugee camps themselves have evolved into a profound “urban” dilemma. These vast camp clusters effectively constitute massive, high-density informal urban settlements. The complexities associated with their planning, management, and service delivery far exceed those of traditional refugee camp models, presenting an immense challenge to the governance capacity of the Bangladeshi state.

2.2 Environmental Degradation

The Rohingya refugee crisis has inflicted severe environmental degradation upon Cox's Bazar, a region renowned for its extensive natural beaches and recognized for its high ecological sensitivity.

In the mere four months following the onset of the Rohingya refugee crisis in August 2017, a total of 1,502 hectares of forest land in the Cox's Bazar District had been occupied by refugee settlements. This total included 793 hectares of natural forest and 709 hectares of agricultural

²⁷ Syed Magfur Ahmad and Nasruzzaman Naeem, Adverse Economic Impact by Rohingya Refugees on Bangladesh: Some Way Forwards, *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research*, Vol. 7, No.1, 2020, pp. 1-14.

²⁸ Alam, Ashraful, et al. Impact of Rohingya refugees on food prices in Bangladesh: Evidence from a natural experiment, *World Development*, Vol. 154, 105873, 2022, pp.7.

²⁹ Habib, Md Reza. Rohingya Refugee-Host Community Conflicts in Bangladesh: Issues and Insights from the “Field”. *Development in Practice*, Vol. 33, No.3, 2022, pp. 317–327.

land.³⁰ Also, according to estimates, the value of the forest resources appropriated by the Rohingya refugees amounts to 5 billion taka.³¹ Beyond the direct conversion of forest land for settlements, the refugees' reliance on collecting firewood from the surrounding woodlands for domestic fuel has led to extensive deforestation. This large-scale forest loss has, in turn, stripped the land in and around the settlements of its natural capacity to mitigate winds, stabilize soil, and regulate water runoff, consequently rendering the area increasingly vulnerable to and frequently impacted by floods and landslides.

The depletion and contamination of groundwater have emerged as critical issues. In response to the massive refugee influx, numerous wells were drilled by the camps, pushing local shallow aquifers to the brink of exhaustion, with many wells having already run dry. According to the United Nations Development Programme, over 5,700 such wells were excavated in the settlement areas following the 2017 influx, with groundwater extraction on such a scale causing the local water table to drop by 5 to 9 meters.³² Besides, the camps suffer from a severe shortage of adequate latrines and sewage treatment systems, leading to the direct seepage of large volumes of untreated wastewater into the soil and its discharge into local rivers and canals. This has resulted in severe groundwater pollution and the eutrophication of surface water bodies, elevating the risk of waterborne diseases such as cholera. Reports from UN agencies indicate that water quality from sources surrounding multiple camps falls far below safe standards. Additionally, the camps generate a vast daily volume of domestic waste, for which no effective collection and disposal system exists. This refuse accumulates in large piles, is often burned in the open, and contributes to severe air, soil, and water contamination, while also fostering infestations of flies, mosquitoes, and rodents that pose significant health hazards.

The degradation of the local ecosystem has significantly constrained the development of the tourism industry. The livelihoods of a substantial portion of the population in Cox's Bazar and Saint Martin's Island are heavily reliant on tourism. However, the resource consumption by the dense refugee camp population has deteriorated the very ecological environment upon which tourism depends. Cox's Bazar, boasting the world's longest natural sea beach, serves as a primary tourist destination for Bangladesh. The towns in this district and their surrounding areas consistently attract the highest number of domestic and international visitors annually. The Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar consume vast quantities of forest resources, and the ongoing decline in surface forest cover is degrading local biodiversity and eroding the area's scenic natural beauty. The degradation of the local ecosystem has significantly constrained the development of the tourism industry. Additionally, refugee settlements in the region generate approximately 10,000 tons of domestic waste monthly.³³ The absence of waste management infrastructure has led to open-air dumping, resulting in noxious odors and further air pollution. These conditions have severely impacted the commercial value of tourism in the area. Saint

30 UNDP. "Report on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx - Executive Summary - Bangladesh." ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/report-environmental-impact-rohingya-influx-executive-summary>, 2018, pp.49.

31 (Babu), Kudrat-E-Khuda, and Michael William Scott, "The Impacts and Challenges to Host Country Bangladesh Due to Sheltering the Rohingya Refugees" ,*Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol. 6, No.1, 2020, pp. 4.

32 UNDP. 2018. "Impacts of the Rohingya Refugee Influx on Host Communities." Bangladesh. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/impacts-rohingya-refugee-influx-host-communities>

33 Mohiuddin, Md, and Mallik Akram Hossain. Determining the Impact of Rohingya Forced Migration on the Natural Environment of Tourism Destination In Bangladesh. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2023, pp.1513.

Martin's Island, another popular tourist destination and Bangladesh's only coral island, also faces challenges. Ongoing instability along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border has prompted authorities to restrict maritime traffic near the island. Local tourism operators express grave concerns that worsening security conditions could trigger mass tourist attrition, leading to business closures. Besides regular tourists, Cox's Bazar is a key overnight stop for people heading to Saint Martin's Island. Consequently, the maritime ban is likely to negatively impact the broader regional tourism economy.

2.3 Security Threats

First, within Bangladesh, the Cox's Bazar region has experienced a dramatic demographic shift. Extremely high population density in the camps, a lack of economic opportunities, and a relatively weak rule of law have together led to a significant deterioration in public security. Incidents of theft and robbery targeting both local residents and refugees are frequent. Frictions and conflicts, triggered by competition for resources, cultural differences, or criminal incidents, commonly erupt between the refugee and host communities, as well as among different refugee groups.

Transnational drug trafficking networks have exploited the refugee camps and surrounding areas as transit routes and operational bases, exacerbating drug proliferation and associated social problems. The cross-border nature of Rohingya displacement makes them vulnerable to being used as couriers by drug traffickers, while their dire economic circumstances increase the likelihood of their engagement in drug trafficking as a means of survival. Within the camps in Cox's Bazar, drug abuse is rampant among the civilian population, profoundly impacting the development of young people in terms of their future prospects and social relationships. Furthermore, the continuous influx of narcotics, alongside small arms and light weapons, fuels the risk of insurgent activities by organized Rohingya groups, thereby posing a significant threat to regional security.³⁴ According to available information, multiple Rohingya gangs are active within the camps, engaging in a spectrum of criminal activities including extortion, trafficking, kidnapping, and murder. These factions frequently clash with one another, vying for control and influence over sections of the camps, and they also regularly engage in confrontations with Bangladeshi armed police and other law enforcement agencies tasked with maintaining security. Documented records indicate that between August 2017 and August 2022 alone, at least 2,441 criminal cases involving Rohingya individuals were formally registered, encompassing ten distinct categories of offenses such as murder, rape, robbery, weapons and narcotics violations, human trafficking, and assaults on police officers.³⁵

Furthermore, the pervasive sense of long-term despair and the absence of viable futures have created a potential breeding ground for the dissemination of extremist ideologies and recruitment, constituting a profound long-term security risk. Available data indicate that there are currently approximately eleven active armed groups operating within and around the Rohingya camps, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), and various bandit

³⁴ Islam, Md Rafiqul, and Maria Hussain. "Rohingyas in Bangladesh: Regional and International Conflict Potential", *Understanding the Rohingya Displacement: Security, Media, and Humanitarian Perspectives*, Springer, 2024, pp. 83-93.

³⁵ Abdullah Sadi, The complexities behind the violence in Rohingya camps, *The Daily Star*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/the-complexities-behind-the-violence-rohingya-camps-3195041>.

factions.³⁶ The RSO, which was originally established in the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh, has absorbed numerous Rohingya refugees and maintains a persistent presence along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, from where it launches terrorist activities targeting the Myanmar government.³⁷ In 2017, after the Myanmar military launched clearance operations against the ARSA, al-Qaeda's South Asia branch issued a statement in support of armed struggle by Bangladeshi Muslims to assist the Rohingya in Myanmar.³⁸ Some Rohingya refugees have told the media that the RSO and ARSA often forcibly recruit refugees in the camps of Cox's Bazar, coercing them into participating in military activities against the Myanmar government forces.³⁹ Moreover, within the Rohingya camps, various armed groups frequently engage in violent clashes to establish spheres of influence, control drug trafficking routes, and settle vendettas. In December 2023, a firefight erupted between the ARSA and the RSO in Camp 15 in Cox's Bazar, resulting in the deaths of three Rohingya individuals. According to police reports, over a mere eight-month period, at least 74 Rohingya were killed in more than 60 separate clashes involving these armed factions.⁴⁰ Despite efforts by the Bangladeshi government to enhance border control and deploy police forces within the camp areas to maintain security and stability, the effectiveness of these measures has been quite limited.

The security threats emanating from the crisis have demonstrated a clear trend of regional spillover. Beyond Bangladesh, which hosts the largest number of Rohingya refugees, Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, are also confronting challenges related to Rohingya displacement. A significant number of Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar via land routes, entering neighboring countries such as Thailand and India. Thailand currently hosts over 100,000 Rohingya refugees,⁴¹ and their substantial influx has been linked to a rise in human trafficking, drug trade, and extremist activities. Southern Thailand has a long-standing history of terrorism, and the influx of undocumented migrants has further complicated the security landscape in this region. The intertwining of illicit activities stemming from the refugee situation with pre-existing terrorism has significantly increased the difficulty of effectively managing the insurgency in Southern Thailand. Meanwhile, Malaysia and Indonesia, as Muslim-majority nations, harbor a natural sympathy for the Rohingya, who share their faith. Both countries have condemned the atrocities committed by the Myanmar government against the Rohingya and have provided vocal international support and advocacy for the Rohingya cause. Situated across the sea from Indonesia and Malaysia, many Rohingya refugees in Myanmar resort to perilous boat journeys in a desperate attempt to reach these shores. Statistics indicate that in 2023 alone, approximately 4,500 Rohingya refugees embarked on

36 Riadul Kuarim, "11 active armed groups in Rohingya camps", Prothom Alo, Feb 27 2023, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime-and-law/sbyhp2noh4>

37 Tazreena Sajjad, "Once We Were Refugees: Refugees, Security, Solidarity and a View from the Global South - A Case Study of the Rohingya Reception in Bangladesh", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.35, No.2, 2022, pp.769.

38 Islam, Md Nazrul, et al., "The Rohingya crisis: Perspectives of Bangladeshi religious leaders." ,*Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 16, No.2, 2022, pp. 353-377.

39 Agence France-Presse, "Militant Rohingya groups in Bangladesh forcibly recruit refugees to battle Arakan Army" , Prothom Alo, May 29 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bangladesh-in-world-media/izgwh96n54>

40 "3 Rohingya killed in exchange of gunfire between ARSA, RSO" , Prothom Alo, Dec 06 2023, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime-and-law/kq7uchgelu>

41 Lu Guangsheng and Li Jiangan, New Trends in the Development of Terrorism in Southern Thailand: Manifestations, Causes, and Trends, *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review*, No. 3, 2019, pp. 55-69.

such treacherous sea crossings. Tragically, it is estimated that “one Rohingya was reported to have died or gone missing for every eight people attempting the journey.”⁴² While both Malaysia and Indonesia have undertaken humanitarian efforts to rescue and provide temporary shelter to these Rohingya boat people, the escalating scale of arrivals has, under increasing strain, led to policies involving the pushback of refugee boats to sea or their forced return to Myanmar.

2.4 Diplomatic Relations and National Image Affected

In addressing the Rohingya issue, Bangladesh faces multifaceted diplomatic pressures. The nation must not only persistently appeal to the international community for sustained assistance but also manage the maritime humanitarian crises and diplomatic frictions arising from refugees occasionally attempting clandestine sea journeys to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Reports indicate that approximately 569 Rohingya individuals were recorded as missing or deceased in Southeast Asian waters in 2023.⁴³ These perilous sea voyages undertaken by Rohingya refugees have subjected Bangladeshi authorities to scrutiny and questioning from the international community. Concurrently, Bangladesh is compelled to respond to international human rights concerns and criticisms regarding its refugee management policies. Confronted with severe overcrowding in the camps of Cox’s Bazar, the Bangladeshi government made the decision to utilize Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal, for relocating Rohingya refugees. Significant infrastructure, including piers, embankments, roads, and housing, was constructed on the island to support the settlement. However, this initiative has drawn criticism from several quarters. Some nations have argued that Bhasan Char is unsuitable for habitation, citing its vulnerability to flooding and its remote location, with certain human rights organizations labeling the plan as “absurd.” Multiple international bodies have repeatedly urged the Bangladeshi government to halt the transfers.⁴⁴ Regarding refugee protection, Bangladesh also faces pressure from international public opinion. Human rights groups have accused the government of failing to adequately curb violence against Rohingya refugees and to effectively shield them from illegal harm inflicted by criminal and armed gangs. They further contend that Rohingya refugees face significant obstacles in accessing security protection and judicial redress.⁴⁵

The Rohingya refugee issue has severely strained bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The stalled process of refugee repatriation and resettlement has plunged diplomatic ties into a deep freeze, significantly impacting border cooperation, trade flows, and regional connectivity projects. High-level visits have become scarce, and diplomatic communication channels remain largely ineffective. The lack of progress on repatriation has also attracted international scrutiny. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concerns that Rohingya

42 “Rohingya refugee deaths surge in 2023; UNHCR calls for urgent action to address crisis,” United Nations, January 23, 2024, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2024/01/1126022>

43 “UNHCR: Urgent action needed to address dramatic rise in Rohingya deaths at sea”, January 23, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-urgent-action-needed-address-dramatic-rise-rohingya-deaths-sea>

44 “Foreign media: Despite opposition, Bangladesh transfers second batch of Rohingya refugees to isolated island resettlement site,” Global Times, December 29, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1687413202955855887&wfr=spider&for=pc>

45 “Bangladesh: Spiraling Violence Against Rohingya Refugees”, July 13, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-spiraling-violence-against-rohingya-refugees>.

refugees risk being returned to Myanmar against their will, warning that any forced repatriation would violate the principle of non-refoulement and constitute a breach of international law.⁴⁶

In navigating relations with major countries, Bangladesh's approach is differentiated. Regarding Western nations, it primarily seeks their moral support for pressuring Myanmar on human rights issues and their provision of the bulk of humanitarian funding. Concurrently, Bangladesh must cautiously manage the accompanying political conditionalities and these powers' focus on its domestic governance. Towards China and India, the two regional giants, Bangladesh maintains a posture of significant importance. The country's deep economic, developmental, and defense cooperation dependencies on these two neighbors shape its engagement. On the Rohingya issue, Bangladesh's central diplomatic objective is to urge China and India to leverage their substantial influence over Myanmar to tangibly advance a resolution.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's decision to open its borders and provide sanctuary has garnered support and praise from the international community, particularly from the Islamic world and Western nations. This response has been hailed as a model of humanitarianism, thereby enhancing the country's international image and securing substantial humanitarian assistance and political solidarity.

On the whole, Bangladesh's international image throughout this crisis has manifested a multifaceted character. Firstly, it is perceived as a "generous host," with its acceptance of nearly a million refugees standing as its most prominent moral credential. Secondly, it is recognized as a "crisis absorber," as the international community widely acknowledges that the nation shoulders a disproportionate burden and expresses sympathy for its predicament. Thirdly, it is also viewed as a "stakeholder facing scrutiny," as its refugee management policies, security conditions within the camps, and human rights safeguarding capability are subject to ongoing examination and criticism from international human rights organizations, media outlets, and some nations. Balancing its humanitarian image with the practical dilemmas of governance remains a persistent challenge for Bangladesh.

46 "UN High Commissioner for Human Rights urges Bangladesh to halt plans to repatriate Rohingya refugees," United Nations, November 13, 2018, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2018/11/1022811>

3

Bangladesh's Response to the Rohingya Issue

3.1 Historical Roots of Bangladesh’s Complex Sentiment Towards the Rohingya

Historically, the formidable barrier of the Arakan Mountains significantly limited the influence and governing reach of the central Burmese feudal dynasties over the Arakan region. In contrast, this geographical seclusion fostered close ties and frequent interaction between Arakan and the territory of Bengal.

In the early 11th century, the Pagan Dynasty achieved the unification of Myanmar, incorporating the Arakan region and establishing a centralized feudal state. Following the collapse of the Pagan Dynasty in 1287, Arakan declared its independence. This led to a tripartite division of power in the region among the Ava Kingdom, the Mon Hanthawaddy Kingdom, and the Arakan⁴⁷ Kingdom. In the early 15th century, Arakanese King Min Saw Mon was expelled by the Burmese and sought exile in Bengal, later re-establishing the Arakanese kingdom with Bengali assistance. By 1459, the Arakan Kingdom had extended its control to include the Chittagong region of present-day Bangladesh. Over the subsequent centuries, political, cultural, and economic ties between Arakan and Bengal intensified. At the zenith of its power, the Arakan Kingdom received tribute from the “Twelve Towns of Bengal,” signifying its regional dominance. It was not until the mid-16th century that a fragmented Burma (now Myanmar) was largely unified by the Toungoo Dynasty, though this unification notably excluded the Arakan region. The region was only fully incorporated and brought under the direct administration of the Burmese central kingdom by the Konbaung Dynasty in 1785.⁴⁸ However, less than half a century later, the outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824 resulted in a Burmese defeat. This led to the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo, an instrument deemed humiliating for Myanmar, which formally ceded the Arakan region to British control. Consequently, Arakan became the first part of the territory of present-day Myanmar to be incorporated into British India as a colony.

Throughout ancient history, while the Arakan region was intermittently incorporated under the rule of various Burmese dynasties, it maintained a significant degree of cultural and administrative autonomy, with its exposure to Burmese cultural influence remaining relatively limited. Following the establishment of British colonial rule over Burma (now Myanmar), a substantial influx of Bengali Muslims entered the Arakan region. This migration objectively intensified the demographic and economic integration between Arakan and Bengal. The Muslim communities that settled in Arakan during this period subsequently formed the primary component of the “Rohingya”. The Rohingya in the Arakan region share close linguistic, ethnic, and religious affinities with the Bengali population of the adjacent Chittagong region in Bangladesh. In terms of faith, the Rohingya are a Muslim community adhering to Islam, distinguishing them from the Hinayana Buddhism practiced

47 “Arakan” is the old name of “Rakhine” .

48 He Shengda, Li Chenyang. *History of Nations: History of Myanmar*, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005, pp. 86-93.

by Myanmar's majority Bamar ethnic group. Linguistically, the Rohingya language⁴⁹ shares greater proximity with the language varieties spoken in southeastern Bangladesh.

Overall, the protracted presence of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is directly linked to the internal ethnic conflicts and religious strife within Myanmar, while also being deeply rooted in the cultural, historical and religious affinities shared between the Rohingya and Bangladesh. Firstly, the historical and ethnic connection is pivotal, as the Rohingya trace their primary origins to the Chittagong region, with linguistic and cultural similarities forming a strong bond. Secondly, religious solidarity plays a significant role. As a predominantly Muslim nation, the Bangladeshi public harbors profound sympathy for their fellow Rohingya Muslims who have faced persecution. However, this sentiment of compassion coexists with deep concerns over the substantial economic, social and security pressures stemming from the massive refugee influx, creating a complex and often contradictory public psyche.

3.2 Bangladesh's Stance and Perspective on the Rohingya Issue

Bangladesh's current stance and policy on the Rohingya issue can be characterized as a difficult balancing act between humanitarian obligations and national interests. Specifically, its position is articulated as follows: First, it maintains that the Rohingya are citizens of Myanmar, and that their forced displacement is solely the result of systematic discrimination, violent persecution, and the denial of citizenship by the Myanmar government. Second, it advocates that the only legitimate, just, and sustainable solution is the "safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable" repatriation of the Rohingya to their places of origin in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where they must be granted citizenship and full rights protection under Myanmar's legal framework. Finally, it insists that Bangladesh is providing only temporary humanitarian sanctuary and firmly rejects granting them permanent residency, citizenship, or any pathways to local integration. Officially, the government consistently refers to them as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals."

3.2.1 Shifts in Domestic Public Opinion

Initially, driven by religious solidarity and ethnic affinity, the Bangladeshi public held widespread and profound sympathy for the Rohingya, largely supporting the government's decision to open its borders. However, as the crisis has become protracted, this initial compassion has gradually been supplanted by growing apprehension and discontent. First is the perception of economic strain. There is a prevalent public belief that refugees are exacerbating the strain on the nation's already scarce resources and driving up the cost of living. Second is the fear for security. Rising crime rates in and around the refugee camps, rampant drug issues, and reports of potential extremist infiltration have significantly heightened feelings of insecurity among local communities. Third is the rise of

⁴⁹ Whether the Rohingya have their own language is controversial. Burmese scholars point out that their language is similar to the Chittagonian dialect of Bangladesh. However, since Rohingya scholar E.M. Siddique Basu simplified the Rohingya language using Roman letters in 1999 and elaborated on the rules of letters, spelling, grammar, and pragmatics, the language has been certified by the international ethnolinguistics professional organization SIL Global in the United States. It has been given the ISO 639-3 code (LHG in Roman letters), and is classified as a member of the Bengali-Assamese sub-branch of the Eastern branch of the Indo-Aryan language family. The script is classified as the "Hanifi Rohingya script." See Lewis, M. Paul, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Sixteenth edition*. Dallas, Tex.: SIL International. 2009.

nationalist sentiment. There are increasingly vocal public demands for the government to adopt tougher measures to ensure repatriation and safeguard national interests. The opposition party frequently leverages this issue to criticize the government as being “soft”.

The Rohingya refugee camps are frequently described by local residents as hubs for illicit criminal activities, with communities often reporting instances of cattle rustling, sheep theft, and robberies involving Rohingya refugees.⁵⁰ One year after the initial influx of Rohingya refugees, an academic survey revealed that 96% of the local populace believed the long-term presence of the Rohingya in Bangladesh was problematic. Furthermore, 76.7% viewed the Rohingya refugees as a burden on the nation, and over 60% specifically identified them as a source of social, environmental, and security threats to their local communities.⁵¹

A Muslim religious leader in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, stated that the Rohingya refugee crisis is a consequence of racially discriminatory policies initiated by the Myanmar military regime since its takeover in the 1960s. He further emphasized that the massive influx of Rohingya refugees has imposed severe pressure on Bangladesh’s economic and social development.⁵² A Buddhist figure in Dhaka also pointed out that Bangladesh cannot sustain the long-term hosting of Rohingya refugees and must collaborate with both Myanmar and the international community to facilitate their repatriation.

In Bangladeshi media coverage of the Rohingya refugees, the topic with the highest frequency is “repatriation,” accounting for approximately 33% of the content. This is followed by reports focusing on the victimhood of the Rohingya, which constitute about 17%. Coverage related to governmental administrative measures makes up roughly 12.5%, while narratives emphasizing “security” concerns and the “burden” on Bangladesh each account for approximately 9%.⁵³

Bangladeshi scholars have also voiced significant concerns regarding the long-term accommodation of Rohingya refugees. A researcher from the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) emphasized that beyond providing humanitarian aid to the Rohingya, the societal and security repercussions of hosting the refugees will have a lasting impact on Bangladesh itself. Consequently, a comprehensive resolution to the Rohingya issue is imperative, extending beyond mere repatriation to Myanmar.⁵⁴ In July 2019, North South University in Bangladesh hosted an academic conference titled “Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh: Challenges and Sustainable Solution.” The participating scholars discussed the substantial economic and social burdens imposed on Bangladesh

50 Siddiqi, Bulbul, Challenges and dilemmas of social cohesion between the Rohingya and host communities in Bangladesh, *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, Vol. 4, 944601, 2022, pp.31.

51 Jerin, Mst. Ismat; Mozumder, Muhammad Kamruzzaman. Exploring host community attitudes towards Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. *Intervention*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2019, pp.169-173.

52 Islam, M.N. Chowdhury, M.M., Hoque, M.A. et al, The Rohingya Crisis: Perspectives of Bangladeshi Religious Leaders, *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2022, pp.353-377.

53 Zaman, Irtifa, *How Did Media Framing Differ Covering The 2017 Rohingya Influx in Newspapers from Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and China?*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kent, 2022, pp.45.

54 Bhattacharjee, Aparupa. Rohingya Crisis: Policy Options and Analysis, *Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies*, 2017.

by the refugee population and advocated for the prompt repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.⁵⁵

3.2.2 Adjustment of Government Measures

Emergency Phase -- Open Borders and Temporary Sanctuary. During the initial crisis outbreak in 2017, Bangladesh opened its borders on humanitarian grounds, admitting over 740,000 refugees. The government, in collaboration with international agencies such as the UNHCR, established an extensive and densely populated network of refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar District, such as sites like Kutupalong and Nayapara. These facilities provided essential life-sustaining aid, including food, water, temporary shelter, and basic healthcare.

Management Phase -- Control, Restriction, and Securitization. In managing the Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has established a three-tiered administrative structure operating at the central, local, and camp levels. At the central government level, the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) of Bangladesh serves as the supreme body responsible for the Rohingya issue, operating under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. The RRRC's mandate encompasses providing humanitarian assistance and support to the refugees, maintaining coordination with the United Nations, liaising with non-governmental organizations, and negotiating repatriation with Myanmar.⁵⁶ What's more, the Ministry of Home Affairs has established a specialized National Committee on Coordination, Management and Law and Order, tasked with coordinating security management and the repatriation process for the Rohingya refugees.⁵⁷ At the local level, district administrative officials are responsible for leading and overseeing the overall implementation of camp affairs. Also, the military and police are deployed to maintain stability and manage certain logistical operations within the settlement areas. Within the camps, refugee relief and repatriation commissioners, dispatched by the RRRC Office, work alongside local government staff to execute specific refugee management measures on the ground.

The multi-tiered management framework primarily targets three key aspects. First is the restriction of refugee movement. To prevent local integration and reinforce the temporary nature of their stay, the government has encircled major camp zones with barbed wire fencing, severely limiting refugees' freedom of movement. Entry and exit require special permits, typically granted only for essential reasons such as medical emergencies. Second is the limitation of refugee subsistence and development. Refugees are prohibited from employment in the formal economic sector for prolonged periods (despite some involvement in the informal economy and limited pilot projects in recent years). Access to formal education is also restricted. (Initially, only temporary learning centers provided basic education. While the use of the Myanmar curriculum has been gradually permitted up to the secondary level in recent years, opportunities for higher education remain extremely scarce.) Furthermore, obtaining Bangladeshi identification documents is strictly prohibited. Third is security control. Armed police camps have been established to maintain order and combat the rising crime

⁵⁵ Li Chenyang, *Where is Myanmar's Rakhine Issue Headed?*, *World Affairs*, No. 16, 2019, 73.

⁵⁶ Bhattacharya, Srobana, and Bidisha Biswas. *International Norms of Asylum and Burden-Sharing: A Case Study of Bangladesh and the Rohingya Refugee Population*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 34. No.4, 2021, pp. 3734-3751.

⁵⁷ Samira Manzur and Tasnia Khandaker Prova, *Governing At The Margins: A Patchwork of Policies and Practices in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Bangladesh*, XCEPT, 2023, pp7-8.

within and around the camps, including theft, robbery, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. There is also close monitoring for potential extremist infiltration risks.

Pressure Diversion -- The Bhasan Char Relocation Plan. To alleviate the extreme congestion in the camps of Cox's Bazar and mitigate environmental degradation, the Bangladeshi government invested in constructing facilities on Bhasan Char, a sedimentary island in the Bay of Bengal, to serve as a designated shelter. Since late 2020, refugees have been transferred in batches, with reports indicating approximately 30,000 individuals relocated to date. This initiative aims to improve living conditions for a segment of the refugee population, reduce the environmental strain on Cox's Bazar, and enhance administrative control. However, the plan has sparked widespread controversy. Criticisms focus on the island's remote and isolated location, which is about 60 kilometers from the mainland, and its high vulnerability to natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, leading to its characterization as an "aquatic prison." Significant concerns have been raised regarding the adequacy of living amenities, livelihood opportunities, and the sustainability of essential services like healthcare and education. The relocation process itself has faced allegations of coercion and a lack of fully informed consent. Moreover, the high operational costs of maintaining the island and its long-term viability are seen as heavily dependent on international aid.

All in all, the Government of Bangladesh faces profound policy challenges in its governance of the Rohingya refugee situation. Firstly, there exists a fundamental tension between humanitarian imperatives and national interests, specifically the challenge of finding a fragile equilibrium between fulfilling international humanitarian obligations and safeguarding the welfare of its own citizens and national security. Secondly, there is the immense difficulty of managing a massive population exceeding one million people confined within closed camps, who lack future prospects. This entails an extremely complex systemic undertaking involving public security, sanitation, education, and psychological support. Thirdly, there is the pressing need to curb the risk of crime and extremism. The dire living conditions within the camps, combined with economic despair and a lack of rule of law, readily foster criminal and violent activities, while also creating fertile ground for the spread of extremist ideologies and recruitment, thereby posing a latent threat to Bangladesh's own security. Furthermore, the government must navigate the challenge of assuaging domestic discontent. It needs to effectively address the growing public apprehension, prevent the escalation of social tensions, while maintaining international recognition for its humanitarian stance.

3.2.3 Regional and International Response and Actions

Recognizing the impossibility of resolving the current crisis single-handedly, Bangladesh has therefore undertaken sustained and high-intensity diplomatic efforts on the international stage.

First is high-profile advocacy and accountability on international platforms. Bangladesh has consistently voiced its concerns within core UN platforms such as the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Human Rights Council. Its objectives include seeking international assistance, submitting draft resolutions, exposing atrocities committed by the Myanmar military, such as sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, and the burning of villages, raising global awareness, and demanding that Myanmar assume its primary responsibility to immediately create conditions

conducive to safe repatriation. In October 2017, during a meeting with officials from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister expressed gratitude for the UN's efforts in raising funds to address the humanitarian needs in Bangladesh and commended and anticipated continued cooperation with the UN on humanitarian assistance.⁵⁸ In March 2018, at a UN event for the launch of a Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya refugee crisis, Bangladesh called upon the international community to maintain its focus on the situation and to encourage broader participation in both providing humanitarian aid and seeking a durable solution. In September of the same year, then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, while attending a high-level UN meeting, urged international partners to support Bangladesh and the United Nations in implementing the Joint Response Plan, thereby ensuring the continuous provision of humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees within its territory.⁵⁹ During the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina put forward a five-point proposal and explicitly stated that it is imperative to ensure the sustainable return of all forcibly displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh to their homes in Myanmar.⁶⁰

Second is the active pursuit of international assistance. Following the outbreak of the refugee crisis, UNHCR airlifted the first batch of construction materials and daily necessities to Bangladesh for the Rohingya refugees, providing aid for approximately 120,000 individuals. The World Food Programme (WFP), jointly managed by the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), initiated food assistance for the refugees. In the settlement areas, WFP primarily distributes rice, red lentils, and soybean oil,⁶¹ and supplies high-nutrient porridge for vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and children. WFP has stated its commitment to continuously scale up its food assistance operations in Bangladesh. UNICEF has established 15 child care centers across various camps and temporary settlements in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to treat 2,000 Rohingya children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, with an additional six similar centers currently in the planning stages.⁶² In addition, through a collaborative effort involving UNICEF, the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the World Health Organization (WHO), measles and rubella vaccinations were administered to children among the Rohingya refugee population, covering a target of 360,000 individuals.⁶³ To mitigate the impact of monsoon rains and flooding on the camps and enhance their resilience to climate-related disasters, the WFP has undertaken initiatives to plant 100,000 trees in the settlement areas and implemented disaster risk reduction projects, including slope stabilization,

58 Mr. Mark Lowcock, the Under Sec. Gen. of the (UN OCHA) and the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Mr. Anthony Lake, the Executive Director of UNICEF jointly called on the Hon' ble Foreign Minister, 2017, https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/dd1441b9-799c-4025-b9c8-a9ffc0d36027/

59 Press Release on PM makes 3 proposals for resolving Rohingya crisis, 2018, https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/16450e39-cff8-4ad8-a8a2-e25b5399aba7/

60 Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's speech at the 14th plenary session of the 72nd UN General Assembly, 2017, <https://www.un.org/zh/ga/72/docs/pv.shtml>.

61 Alam, Ashraful, et al. Impact of Rohingya refugees on food prices in Bangladesh: Evidence from a natural experiment, *World Development*, Vol. 154, 105873, 2020, p.14.

62 "Severe acute adverse events double among Rohingya refugee children from Myanmar in Bangladesh," UNICEF, November 3, 2017, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2017/11/285112>

63 "UNICEF provides measles vaccines to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh," United Nations, November 10, 2017, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2017/11/310082>

road paving, and the construction of drainage systems.⁶⁴ While calling for increased humanitarian funding from the international community, Bangladesh has also continued to deepen its institutional cooperation with the United Nations and other international organizations on refugee management and aid supply distribution. This has led to the establishment of a structured refugee governance mechanism, which is led and coordinated by the RRRC Office and the Strategic Executive Group (SEG), with on-the-ground implementation carried out by Bangladeshi local government authorities, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the WFP, and UNICEF, among others.

Third is leveraging international organizations and seeking support from major powers. In February 2018, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, during a meeting with the European Union Ambassador to Bangladesh, urged the international community, including the EU, to maintain pressure on Myanmar to facilitate the swift return of the Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh has actively coordinated with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to align its stance, prompting the OIC to advocate for Rohingya rights both within and outside the UN system, provide humanitarian funding, and support The Gambia's case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).⁶⁵ In 2021, a delegation from the OIC visited Bangladesh, where both parties coordinated their positions on the issue of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.⁶⁶ Additionally, as a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, Bangladesh has actively participated in forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), urging the organization to move beyond the constraints of its principle of “non-interference in the internal affairs” and play a more proactive, constructive and leading role in resolving the humanitarian crisis instigated by its member state, Myanmar. Following the outbreak of the Rohingya exodus in late 2016, ASEAN foreign ministers convened an emergency meeting in Yangon, aiming to investigate alleged atrocities committed by Myanmar against the Rohingya and to implement response measures, including humanitarian assistance. This meeting marked the first time since ASEAN's founding in 1967 that its ten foreign ministers had gathered specifically to address a domestic issue of a member state.⁶⁷ In 2018, ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) dispatched a fact-finding delegation to Bangladesh to investigate the Rohingya issue. Subsequently, at the 34th ASEAN Summit in 2021, the attending leaders emphasized the need to hold perpetrators accountable for violence and human rights violations against the Rohingya and called for their safe repatriation to Myanmar.

In seeking assistance from major powers, Sheikh Hasina has stated, “We have tried to take on board the major powers, including China and India.”⁶⁸ In November 2017, during a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed appreciation for the humanitarian aid provided by China and voiced hope that China would continue to play a

64 “Torrential rains flood Rohingya refugee shelters; WFP launches largest relief operation of the year,” United Nations, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2019/09/1041462>

65 Li Chenyang, The Gambia Sues Myanmar over the Rohingya Issue, *World Affairs*, No. 2, 2020, pp. 73.

66 OIC Update (No. 20), Center for the Studies of Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Shanghai International Studies University, June 20, 2021, <https://csoic.shisu.edu.cn/36/46/c13602a144966/page.htm>

67 “Rohingya Crisis Challenges ASEAN’s Principle of Non-Interference in Internal Affairs,” Charhar Review, December 23, 2016, <http://www.charhar.org.cn/newsinfo.aspx?newsid=11310>

68 “PM Hasina calls for intensified global actions over Rohingya crisis”, *Prothom Alo*, Sep 23 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/pm-hasina-calls-for-intensified-global-actions-over-rohingya-crisis>.

significant role in facilitating a resolution to the Rohingya refugee issue.⁶⁹ At the sixth U.S.-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue, the Bangladeshi government emphasized that sustained political pressure and various diplomatic actions from the United States towards the Myanmar government are crucial, which would contribute to ending the violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State and enabling the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees at the earliest opportunity.⁷⁰

Fourth is persisting with a bilateral framework to advance solutions. In November 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an arrangement concerning the repatriation of the Rohingya, agreeing to establish a joint working group within three weeks. In early 2018, the first meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on the return of the displaced Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine State was held, formulating a specific repatriation framework with an agreed timeline to complete the process within two years.⁷¹ By 2019, the joint working group had identified nearly 3,500 Rohingya refugees for return to Rakhine State. However, the repatriation buses prepared by Bangladesh departed empty, with no refugees boarding, causing the effort to collapse. It was not until 2023 that Bangladesh and the Myanmar authorities initiated a substantive first batch of repatriations, involving only a little over a thousand individuals.⁷² This number is but a drop in the ocean compared to the vast population of Rohingya refugees remaining stranded in Bangladesh. Despite years of appeals by Bangladesh in numerous international forums for cooperation on repatriation and increased pressure on Myanmar, the immense refugee population continues to be hosted in Bangladesh, with the repatriation process showing no significant progress.

69 “Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Meets with Wang Yi,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, November 19, 2017, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/201711/t20171119_356437.shtml

70 The Plenary Session of the 6th Partnership Dialogue between Bangladesh and the United States was held in Dhaka, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2017.

71 Physical Arrangement for Rohingya Return Finalized, 2018, https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/e610fa10-3725-4aa3-9e4d-f97e368e9038/

72 Bangladesh must suspend pilot program to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, human rights experts say. United Nations, June 8, 2023, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2023/06/1118652>.

4

The Impact of the Rohingya Issue on China-Bangladesh Relations

4.1 Bangladesh's Geopolitical Significance to China

In April 2025, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Neighboring Countries that neighboring countries are an important foundation for China to achieve development and prosperity, a key front to maintain national security, a priority area in the country's overall diplomacy, and a crucial link in the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.⁷³ In 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), comprising the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Southeast Asia and South Asia are pivotal regions for the development of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Within the BRI framework, three of the six major economic corridors are situated in this region: the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). Under the BRI cooperation framework, collaboration between China and South and Southeast Asia has deepened significantly. As of 2024, ASEAN has maintained its position as China's largest trading partner for five consecutive years, with bilateral trade volume approaching one trillion US dollars.⁷⁴ By 2024, the total trade volume between China and South Asian nations had doubled over the preceding decade, approaching USD200 billion, with economic and trade relations maintaining a strong and positive momentum of development.⁷⁵ Situated in the northeastern part of the South Asian subcontinent and bordering Myanmar to the southeast, Bangladesh serves as a crucial node in the BCIM-EC. This corridor is designed to link Southwest China with Eastern India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, thereby establishing a new economic and logistics artery. The stability and active participation of Bangladesh are therefore indispensable for the successful development of this corridor.

In recent years, major power competition has posed challenges to the security environment in China's periphery, particularly with the advancement of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, which has turned Southeast and South Asia into a key arena for extra-regional powers to contain China's rise. Against this backdrop, it becomes even more imperative for China to fully leverage the crucial role of Southeast and South Asia in maintaining regional stability, thereby fostering a stable peripheral security environment conducive to its development.⁷⁶ In Southeast Asia, a region that has evolved into a major destination for China's industrial transfer and outbound investment while remaining a vital trading partner, peace and stability serve as a fundamental external prerequisite for China's peaceful development. In South Asia, the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean are critical chokepoints for global maritime oil transportation. Given that the Middle East

73 "The Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech," Xinhua News Agency, April 9, 2025, <https://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/20250409/b3c7982e015d497183c7da17f00dd4d9/c.html>

74 China-ASEAN Trade Brief in 2024, Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, January 14, 2025, http://asean.mofcom.gov.cn/zgdmjtm/tj/art/2025/art_73f18532c7e6423a98b900453511f46d.html

75 "Economic and trade relations reach a new level. Trade volume between China and South Asian countries doubles in ten years," CCTV.com, July 10, 2024, <https://news.cctv.com/2024/07/10/ARTIitns6Wo665aXjvNBujzd240710.shtml>

76 Luo Shengrong, Zhang Te, and Zhang Xin, The Evolution of Southeast Asian Security Landscape and the Choice of China's National Security Strategy, *Southeast Asian Studies*, No. 2, 2022, pp. 113-128.

Gulf region is a primary source of China's oil imports, the Indian Ocean shipping lanes and the "marine crossroads" Strait of Malacca constitute vital arteries for safeguarding China's energy security. Bangladesh, with its extensive coastline along the Bay of Bengal, is strategically positioned. From China's perspective, this makes Bangladesh a potential key pivot for enhancing connectivity between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and a strategic avenue for mitigating the "Malacca Dilemma." By strengthening cooperation with Bangladesh, China could secure access to the northern Indian Ocean, thereby reducing its strategic reliance on the Strait of Malacca.

Economically, Bangladesh represents a highly promising emerging market, a vital partner for industrial capacity cooperation, and a demonstration window for the Belt and Road Initiative. With a population exceeding 170 million, making it the world's eighth most populous country, Bangladesh possesses a vast and cost-effective labor force. As a rapidly developing economy, its substantial domestic market potential offers a significant export destination for Chinese goods, while also serving as an ideal destination for the Chinese capital and industrial capacity "going global." For instance, the transfer of China's labor-intensive industries, such as textiles, aligns with Bangladesh's status as the world's second-largest apparel exporter, creating complementary synergies with Chinese supply chains and enabling deeply integrated industrial collaboration. Besides, China is a key infrastructure partner for Bangladesh, having constructed numerous landmark projects, including the Padma Bridge and the Dhaka Bypass Expressway. The success of these projects not only enhances China's soft power and influence within Bangladesh and the surrounding region but also establishes them as exemplary models of BRI cooperation.

Furthermore, maintaining friendship with Bangladesh, which has the world's third-largest Muslim population, helps China to enhance its overall relations with the Islamic world and showcases a successful model of cooperation with nations from different cultural and religious backgrounds. On regional affairs, a friendly and stable Bangladesh is conducive to joint efforts in combating transnational crime and maintaining regional security, and contributes to balancing Indian influence in the region.

In general, the advancement of two core regional projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative, namely the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), is highly dependent on regional stability. Myanmar serves as a critical land bridge connecting southwestern China to the Indian Ocean. Its stability, particularly in Rakhine State, is paramount for ensuring the diversification of China's energy imports and the security of its trade corridors. It is therefore a fundamental Chinese interest to prevent the Rohingya crisis from triggering greater turmoil in the Myanmar-Bangladesh region, the collapse of humanitarian control, the spillover of terrorism, or the spread of extremist ideologies that could ultimately destabilize China's periphery.

4.2 Potential Impacts of the Rohingya Issue on the Belt and Road Initiative

From a current perspective, the impact of the Rohingya crisis on the Belt and Road Initiative is more potential and indirect rather than a direct impediment. However, the associated risks cannot be overlooked.

First, its direct impact on China-funded projects in Bangladesh has been limited. Flagship Chinese projects in Bangladesh, such as the Padma Bridge Rail Link, the Karnaphuli River Tunnel, the Payra Coal Fired Power Plant, and numerous renewable energy projects, are predominantly located in other regions of the country. Their construction and operation have been largely insulated from the direct effects of the Rohingya crisis. The Bangladeshi government regards these initiatives as critical to its national development and has prioritized ensuring their progress. Overall, the fundamental framework of China-Bangladesh economic cooperation remains stable.

Second, regional instability constitutes the primary transmission channel for risks. In Myanmar, several cornerstone projects of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor are situated in Rakhine State: the Kyaukphyu segment of the China-Myanmar Railway, the starting point of the China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines, and the deep-water port project within the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone. As the Rohingya issue is unlikely to be resolved in a short period of time, the protracted ethnic and religious conflicts in the region create a breeding ground for extremism and illicit violence. Such non-traditional security threats would expose these BRI cooperation projects between China and Myanmar to a high-risk environment. Persistent conflict, precarious security conditions, social fragmentation, and deficient infrastructure are likely to impede the substantive advancement of these projects and jeopardize their future operational safety. Therefore, a fundamental resolution of the Rohingya issue is a prerequisite for ensuring the security and success of the Kyaukphyu projects. In Bangladesh, should the Rohingya crisis become protracted or even deteriorate, leading to intensified social tensions, an overwhelming economic burden triggering a fiscal crisis, or widespread social unrest, the overall investment climate would be indirectly compromised. This would elevate the political risks, security threats, and operational costs for Belt and Road Initiative projects within the country, thereby undermining their long-term sustainability.

Finally, the issue poses a non-negligible impact on the international reputation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Regarding the handling of the Rohingya crisis, China's stance in forums such as the UN Security Council has been opposing robust sanctions and emphasizing dialogue and consultation. This position has been interpreted by Western nations and human rights organizations as favoring the Myanmar military government. This perception is susceptible to being exploited by certain actors to further accusations that the BRI "disregards human rights" and "pursues only economic benefits," thereby tarnishing its international reputation, particularly in countries and regions with high sensitivity to human rights concerns.

4.3 Long-term Impact of the Rohingya Issue on China-Bangladesh Cooperation

While the direct impact remains contained, the crisis exerts indirect influences across multiple dimensions and shapes Bangladesh's core expectations of China.

On one hand, as previously mentioned, core infrastructure and energy projects in Bangladesh are progressing as scheduled. Bangladesh holds the distinction of being the first South Asian nation to sign a cooperation document with China under the Belt and Road Initiative framework. Furthermore, China has maintained its position as Bangladesh's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years.

Collaboration between the two countries in infrastructure sectors, including bridges, roads, railways, ports and power grids, has yielded substantial economic and social benefits. As a key component of implementing BRI cooperation, both sides are actively advancing the Southern Integrated Development Initiatives of Bangladesh within this framework.⁷⁷ On top of that, China has engaged in project collaboration and provided assistance for numerous infrastructure developments in Bangladesh's Chittagong region, such as the Chittagong Medical College, the S. Alam Power Plant, which is the largest single-unit capacity and highest-capacity coal-fired plant in Bangladesh, the Karnaphuli River Tunnel (also known as the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel), and the Cox's Bazar Wind Power Project.⁷⁸ China stands as Bangladesh's largest development partner, its most critical source of infrastructure financing and construction, and a major supplier of military equipment. This bilateral relationship is underpinned by a solid foundation of mutual benefit.

On the other hand, the indirect impacts and potential risks stemming from the refugee crisis warrant close attention. First is the diversion of fiscal resources. Since 2021, to alleviate overcrowding in the camps of Cox's Bazar, the Bangladeshi government has relocated approximately 36,000 refugees to Bhasan Char Island. However, the vast majority of Rohingya refugees of around 970,000 individuals remain concentrated in the Cox's Bazar area. These densely populated settlements present a severe challenge to Bangladesh's capacity to manage and maintain public security and order. The government is required to expend hundreds of millions of dollars annually on refugee management, incurring substantial opportunity costs. In the long term, this fiscal burden constrains the government's budgetary flexibility, potentially impairing its ability to service existing project loans and diminishing its fiscal capacity and willingness to undertake new large-scale projects in the future. This dynamic could consequently affect the sustained, rolling development of China-Bangladesh project cooperation in the region. Second is the instability of the project development environment. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, a Muslim armed group founded by the Rohingya, has its headquarters established in the Chittagong region of Bangladesh. The group is frequently active along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, and there are indications of its connections with transnational extremist organizations.⁷⁹ The infiltration of extremist elements, coupled with the prolonged unmet demands of Rohingya factions, could lead to changes in the operational scope and targets of these groups. In the short term, if severe discontent within local communities, potential large-scale camp riots, surges in crime, extremist violence, and other social conflicts stemming from the refugee crisis escalate uncontrollably, they could spill over into project sites, jeopardizing construction safety, personnel stability, and the operational milieu. From a long-term perspective, the ensuing non-traditional security challenges will amplify investment risks for Chinese projects in the region and undermine the longevity and stability of Sino-Bangladeshi project cooperation.

Furthermore, regarding the Rohingya issue, the primary expectation held by the Bangladeshi government, elite circles, and the public towards China is for it to leverage its influence as a major

77 Full Text: Joint Statement between China, Bangladesh on the Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, Xinhua News Agency, July 11, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202407/content_6962524.htm

78 "BRI contributes to Bangladeshi power sector development", Xinhua News Agency, July 8, 2024, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1803997387264340390&wfr=spider&for=pc>

79 "Myanmar military releases latest investigation results on Rakhine State terrorist attacks," CCTV.com, March 2, 2017, <https://news.cctv.com/2017/03/02/ARTIJqqnIJQz48jX0B3afks170302.shtml>.

regional power to substantively press the Myanmar government to halt violence in Rakhine State, create a secure environment, and facilitate the voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of the Rohingya. This constitutes the top priority for Bangladesh's diplomacy towards China on this matter. Bangladesh perceives China as the most pivotal external actor capable of influencing Myanmar. Whether this expectation is met will directly shape Bangladeshi societal perceptions of China's role as a "responsible major country" and its assessment of the bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

The Rohingya refugee crisis represents a profound humanitarian tragedy, a severe regional security challenge, and a litmus test for global governance. Bangladesh has borne a burden disproportionate to its national capacity, and its steadfast commitment to the core principle of safe repatriation is grounded in both moral and legal legitimacy. However, the protracted stalemate over six years demonstrates that relying solely on Bangladesh's efforts and patience is insufficient to substantively advance the repatriation process. The ultimate resolution of the crisis hinges on whether the international community, particularly actors possessing decisive influence, can transcend geopolitical calculations and diplomatic rhetoric to demonstrate genuine political will and coordinated action. Concurrently, the equitable sharing of responsibilities, the sustained provision of adequate assistance, improvements in camp management, and the exploration of temporary empowerment measures are all indispensable actions to alleviate current suffering and sustain hope.

As a crucial neighbor and partner to both Myanmar and Bangladesh, China's role is of pivotal significance. It is a crucial choice for China to evolve its approach from "facilitating dialogue for peace" towards "promoting change" in a more substantive way, deftly leverage its regional influence to advance Bangladesh-Myanmar dialogue and cooperation, while deepening support for both countries. This path allows China to demonstrate regional leadership, safeguard regional stability, and protect its own developmental interests.

A fundamental resolution to the Rohingya issue, enabling the safe and dignified return of the Rohingya to their homeland with guaranteed rights to existence, represents the only viable endpoint to this protracted crisis. Achieving this goal demands unity, resolve and concerted action from the international community. Time is not a remedy in this case. Delay only deepens the suffering, perpetuates displacement, and continuously erodes the foundations of peace and security, both regionally and globally.

ABOUT CCS (SIIS-DU)

The Centre for China Studies (CCS), standing as a collaborative research institution at the University of Dhaka, is established to implement the spirit of the 2023 Johannesburg Summit between the top leaders of China and Bangladesh. The CCS is jointly led by the esteemed Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) in China and the University of Dhaka (DU) in Bangladesh, partnering with prestigious institutions such as Tongji University, East China Normal University, Yunnan University in China, and Shahjalal University of Science and Technology along with Noakhali University of Science and Technology in Bangladesh. It embodies a commitment to multidisciplinary research and robust academic collaboration.

The CCS was officially launched on March 24, 2024. Nestled within the dynamic campus of the University of Dhaka, CCS operates independently, focusing on comprehensive research initiatives spanning various dimensions of China's multifaceted landscape. The Academic Board, as the principal decision-making body, guides the Centre's strategic direction by overseeing annual plans, budget allocations, research endeavors, and program development.

At the core of CCS's mission lies the promotion of bilateral academic exchanges, facilitated through pivotal conferences, scholarly dialogues, joint research initiatives, and dissemination of findings via prominent regional media outlets. By inviting Bangladeshi researchers and emerging leaders for academic excursions to China and fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas, CCS endeavors to deepen understanding and bolster collaboration between Bangladesh and China.

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