

Strategic Pathways for Sustainable Solutions to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

Anika Tabassum*
Md. Shihab Uddin**

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Abstract

With over a million refugees in Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most pressing humanitarian problems in South Asia. Bangladesh has shown compassion by taking up the primary role of housing the displaced Rohingya community since 2017 when more than a million of them fled violence in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The Rohingya situation has, however, transitioned from a humanitarian emergency to an extended challenge for Bangladesh, resulting in significant economic, social, and environmental concerns. The issue has reached a pivotal point, characterized by increasing internal tensions in Bangladesh, a significant leadership upheaval, and increasing border conflicts with Myanmar. This article briefly outlines strategic pathways for sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Rohingya, Bangladesh, Myanmar, forced migration, repatriation, crisis management

Introduction

The Rohingya refugee crisis is considered one of the devastating humanitarian challenges in the 21st century because of years of discriminatory treatment followed by physical abuse and denial of citizenship by Myanmar. A merciless crackdown by Myanmar's military on the Rohingya Muslims in 2017 further exacerbated the crisis and led to an extended refugee crisis dating back several decades. In September 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) characterized Myanmar's treatment of its Muslim Rohingya minority as a "textbook example" of ethnic cleansing. Later, the refugee crisis transitioned from a predominantly humanitarian issue to a complex challenge with profound political, social, and security dimensions over the past more than seven years, especially for Bangladesh. Presently, more than one million

Rohingya migrants inhabit Bangladesh, primarily in the Cox's Bazar area, which accommodates the largest refugee camps globally (Reza, 2024). The Government of Bangladesh, with assistance from the UN and many humanitarian organizations, is addressing the urgent needs of the population, including housing, potable water, nutrition, sanitation, and other essential services.

Initially, Bangladesh gained international acclaim for its generosity, but currently, for Bangladesh, the overfilled camps in Cox's Bazar have emerged as a nexus of difficulties, including resource scarcity and security issues. Also, the sudden political shift has raised significant concerns about the future of the Rohingya refugees and their management. This article examines the development of strategic pathways for addressing

* MSS, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka. E-mail: anikaju1956@gmail.com

** Assistant Director, Centre for Local Governance Discourse (CLGD), Dhaka. E-mail: shihabgpju47@gmail.com

the Rohingya refugee crisis in a sustainable manner and to ensure that the challenge is addressed in a fair and effective way.

Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh: A Brief Overview

Myanmar military's brutal crackdown in August 2017 compelled more than 742,000 Rohingya men, women, and children to escape Myanmar and seek refuge in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2023). Bangladesh is currently hosting more than one million Rohingya (UNHCR, 2024). The majority reside in the Jamtoli camp (59,471), Kutupalong camp (46,825), Nayapara (43,115), and Bhasan Char (35,629) refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, recognized as some of the most extensive and densely populated camps globally (UNHCR, 2024). The primary purpose of the initial phase was to meet urgent humanitarian needs. The United Nations agencies like UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF provide essential services to the refugees, including food aid, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. During the beginning phase, the global community extended significant support, and most people anticipated the Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar would be a brief crisis.

Nevertheless, as the refugee crisis continued, public sentiments transformed. Bangladesh's sympathy was transformed into a sense of burden as the years passed due to the failure of repatriation efforts and the lack of progress in addressing the underlying causes of the crisis in Myanmar. No visible resolution to the crisis has been achieved in the past seven years. Finding sustainable solutions for the Rohingya refugees is becoming increasingly urgent due to a diminished aid budget for the refugees and the internal and external security challenges that the refugee situation poses. The existence of permanent camps in Cox's Bazar presents numerous economic, social, and environmental challenges that have significantly affected our local economy. Since March 2023, the United Nations has announced a decrease in the budget for food aid for Rohingya individuals from US\$12 to US\$10 per person, which will impact the economy of Bangladesh (Hossain, 2023).

Tourism, a significant revenue source in coastal regions, is jeopardized, agricultural land is occupied to build the camps and deforestation has inflicted considerable ecological harm on the area. Rohingyas are now the biggest concern in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar region. They have been involved in various crimes, including kidnapping, drug smuggling, sex trafficking, illegal trading of counterfeit money, robbery, and gold smuggling (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). The attempts of illegal migration to the Middle East and East Asian countries are a common scenario for Refugees pretending to be Bangladeshi nationals with fake National Identity Cards (Islam, 2021). These activities have faded Bangladesh's image on the global platform. Considering all perspectives, including humanitarian concerns and social, national and international security concerns, the Rohingya refugee crisis needs to be solved without any delay.

Strategic Pathways for Sustainable Solutions to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the major crises in Bangladesh as well as in South Asia. However, seven years have passed without any successful initiatives of repatriation. The refugees in Bangladesh are in a dire situation. They are living a miserable life without having proper shelter, education, medication, national identity, etc. Nearly half of the refugees are young, with ages ranging from 15 to 30 (The Daily Star, 2021). They have an uncertain future as well. So, here, the rationale of the study lies in the fact that all the stakeholders, including the Bangladesh Government, global leaders, and the United Nations, should follow some strategic pathways for sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Voluntary, Dignified, and Sustainable Repatriation to Myanmar

The Rohingya Refugees have the right to go back to their country of origin and the right to avoid being sent back to a place where their safety and freedom are threatened. The ultimate solution to the Rohingya crisis is voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation without the prospect of persecution. The question to be addressed,

consequently, is not whether repatriation should occur but rather how it may be realized to guarantee justice and security for the Rohingya. Myanmar might take back its people to the country with substantial political reform, legal recognition of the Rohingya as citizens, and strong international oversight of the powerful countries and global organizations, especially the UN, to prevent further persecution. Without these assurances, any attempt at repatriation would be neither sustainable nor dignified but rather a forced return to oppression.

Relocating Rohingya Refugees across Bangladesh

Only Kutupalong refugee camp hosts more than more than 8,00,000 refugees, exceeding its maximum habitation limit. The existing situation in the camps in Cox's Bazar leads to deforestation and creates environmental problems in the region. (Malteser International, 2025). To minimize ecological degradation, Bangladesh has already relocated a significant number of refugees to the Bhasan Char (Tribune Desk, 2024). Again, relocating the refugees to other remote parts of Bangladesh can alleviate the excessive pressure in Cox's Bazar area.

Promoting Relocation to Third Countries

Resettlement or relocation to a third country is an effective way to minimize the refugee load. In November 2023, approximately 500 Rohingya were resettled in several countries via a partnership between UNHCR and Bangladesh (Korobi, 2023). A few thousand Rohingya have been resettled in the United States and Japan, but this is tiny compared to the one million Rohingya that live in Bangladesh today. As a result, countries such as the United States, Canada, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which have previously sponsored smaller Rohingya communities, may expand their help to resettle refugees. In addition, governments that facilitate resettlement must ensure Rohingya integration into society by giving them access to education, healthcare, and work opportunities.

Regional Collaboration and Responsibility Sharing

The SAARC and ASEAN are the two regional concerned organizations that can take effective initiatives to repatriate the refugees. Bangladesh should work with SAARC and ASEAN by conducting high-level diplomatic talks and developing joint action plans for Rohingya refugee solutions while acquiring assistance from member states, including India, Indonesia and Malaysia, for both repatriation and resettlement measures. Bangladesh must lead an initiative to create a joint SAARC-ASEAN task force that will direct refugee repatriation, humanitarian support operations, and diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

Economic Empowerment and Self-Sufficiency

Rohingya refugees lack income opportunities both within and outside the camp. Out-of-the-camp works like day labor, masonry, and construction labor are not available for them, and they also suffer from inadequate education beyond the camp. Also, Opportunities for females to work outside the camp are minimal. The establishment of a Special Economic Zone in nearby camps should occur, where refugees can receive vocational training while engaging in small-scale industrial labor and microfinance (Sultana et al., 2024). This will facilitate their economic participation.

Building Trust and Cooperation between Locals and Refugee

Improving communication between the local population and Rohingya refugees could provide a sustainable solution, dependent on the creation of mutual benefits, social cohesion, and trust. The market environment needs to be cooperative, which facilitates refugee partnerships with their host communities. Compact cultural festivals, sporting competitions, or artistic exhibitions serve as facilitators for building mutual respect between migrants and residents through sharing their traditions.

Coordinated Role of Media from both Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Global Arena

The media gives voice to the voiceless. It is like a mirror that can set and change narratives. The media has played an important role in establishing, uniting, and reaching the

revolution's success, from the Arab Spring in Tunisia to the July Uprising in Bangladesh. Both Bangladeshi and international media must highlight the humanitarian issue and advocate the Rohingya's dignified repatriation within a possible short time. Websites, YouTube channels, and social media accounts are examples of multimedia platforms that might be developed so that refugees can express their opinions via blogs, videos, and photographs. Through these efforts, Rohingya refugees will be able to share their viewpoints with the world. In addition to calling for more forceful international action against Myanmar, human rights organizations, nongovernmental organizations, activists, public figures, and influential people may use the media to increase public awareness of the Rohingya problem.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has endeavored to address the Rohingya refugee crisis via agreements with Myanmar and the UN; however, these initiatives have always proven unsuccessful without any positive outcomes. Now, a sustainable solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis requires a rigorous effort from the global community, Myanmar, and regional organizations. Repatriation is undoubtedly the ultimate goal in addressing the existing crisis, but it must be supplemented with possible alternative solutions like relocation initiatives, international resettlement programs, economic empowerment measures, and trust-building efforts.

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