

Reorienting Bangladesh's Rohingya Policy: Emphasizing Resettlement Besides Repatriation

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Abstract

This article argues that the government of Bangladesh should actively work on resettling a section of the Rohingya refugees and Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) in third countries while keeping the effort to repatriate the Rohingya to the state of Rakhine in Myanmar. The resettlement option needs to be encouraged for the protracted Rohingya refugee situation for the following four reasons: (a) resettlement will allow the Rohingya to get access to basic rights, notably access to education and employment; (b) an educated Rohingya diaspora community can keep contributing to speaking for their community, which might also lessen the burden for Bangladesh in internationalizing the Rohingya issue; (c) once they are resettled, they can be a resource or asset for their community and can contribute to rebuilding their community back in Rakhine; (d) on top of all, refugees will end up having a state. This article argues that developed countries need to come forward to make the burden-sharing an evident reality by resettling a large number of the Rohingya from Bangladesh.

Keywords: *Rohingya, Refugees, Bangladesh, Resettlement*

Introduction

It has been seven years of providing shelter to nearly a million Rohingya in Bangladesh. Amid the resource constraints, Bangladesh has sheltered them on humanitarian grounds to save them from genocide carried out by the Myanmar military in 2017. The international community is supporting Bangladesh through humanitarian assistance to bear the burden of hosting Rohingya refugees. However, international assistance is gradually falling short of meeting the required basic amenities for every day for the Rohingya staying in the camps. For instance, out of the overall prioritized appeal of \$852 million for 2024 under the Joint Response Plan by the Inter Sector Coordination Group, only 64 percent of

funds were received (ISCG, 2025). Funding received for 2022-2023 was also limited to 62-64 percent of the overall required amount. Amid the funding crisis, the World Food Program had to oscillate between reducing and increasing food rations. It decreased food rations per Rohingya from \$12 to \$8 in May 2024 and later increased to \$11 in June 2024 (New Humanitarian, 2024). When the Rohingyas in the camps struggle to meet their everyday basic amenities, the protracted refugee situation is likely to keep a generation of the Rohingya in darkness. The young generation who crossed the borders to escape from genocide and live a life of what they want is in uncertainty. This article argues to resettle a portion of the

Rohingya refugees and Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) to third countries.

What is Resettlement?

There are three classical solutions to any refugee crisis: repatriating the refugees to their country of origin, integrating into the host society, and resettling in third countries. When the first two options seem not viable, resettlement is encouraged. According to the UNHCR, the UN-mandated refugee agency, “Resettlement is an invaluable tool to protect the refugees whose life, liberty, health, or fundamental human rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge” (UNHCR, n.d., para.1). Resettlement allows the refugees to access fundamental rights, and, eventually, after due process, refugees can obtain citizenship in the country in which they are resettled (UNHCR, 2024). However, less than one percent of refugees are annually resettled (UNHCR, n.d.).

Why Emphasize the Resettlement of the Rohingya Refugees and FDMNs?

Bangladesh has signed an MoU in 2018 with Myanmar to repatriate Rohingya refugees. However, the government of Myanmar has not yet taken any concrete measures to take the Rohingya back by giving them their rights of citizenship and recognition of their ethnicity. Hence, no Rohingya agreed to return to Myanmar under a pilot project of repatriation in 2023. Repatriation attempts failed in previous years – in 2018 and 2019 – as well. Amid the continuity of the violence against the Rohingya who are left behind, armed conflict between the government forces and the Arakan Army, a Rakhine nationalist armed force fighting to establish autonomous Arakan for the Rakhine, has already turmoiled the water for the repatriation of the Rohingya. Although the International Court of Justice, in which a case on Rohingya genocide is under trial, instructed the Myanmar government to protect the Rohingya community, the latter has not taken any evident measures to do so. Moreover, the ongoing fighting in the Rakhine is now forcing out the remaining Rohingya. Amid this, it is now becoming challenging for Bangladesh to repatriate the Rohingya. In addition, the ongoing conflict

between the Myanmar government forces and the ethnic nationalist Arakan Army (AA) has exacerbated the deteriorating law and order situation in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. In such a situation, a durable repatriation of the Rohingya refugees and FDMNs is unforeseeable.

For the Rohingya staying in Bangladesh, immediate repatriation, as discussed above, appears unfeasible to carry out within years and Bangladesh is unwilling to allow local integration. However, the Bangladesh government should not stop finding ways of repatriating the Rohingya refugees as a large majority of the Rohingya refugees want to return to their places of origin and be recognized as citizens of the Rohingya ethnic community. In its effort to find a durable solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis, the government has taken an appreciative initiative by appointing an aide to the Chief Advisor on the Rohingya issue. Regarding the integration option, Bangladesh does not have the leverage to allow the local integration of a million Rohingya within the existing constraints of having nearly 170 million people of its own. Along with geographical limitedness, the size of its economy does not allow the option for coopting that large size of Rohingya. Bangladesh’s government, since the 1970s, has been consistently not only downplaying the possibility of integrating Rohingya refugees officially but also taking measures of not letting refugees integrate with the local community. Due to this, local integration for the Rohingya in Bangladesh is not a foreseeable option. Hence, the option of resettlement can be considered.

There remains the third classical solution – resettlement- open for the Rohingya refugees and FDMNs. During fieldwork carried out in 2022 and interviews with the Rohingya, it was observed that a section of the young Rohingya prefer to settle in third countries as they see neither repatriation nor local integration in Bangladesh happening sooner. Refugees from well-off families want to be repatriated soon, but those who did not own much property in Myanmar prefer to stay in Bangladesh or be resettled in third countries. The attempt of the Rohingya to flee from the camps for other countries bears testimony to their desperate urge to have a better life when both their country of

origin and the country of host cannot offer a future even with fundamental minimum rights as a human being. The protracted Rohingya refugee situation poses a challenge for Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus-led interim government. However, he is better positioned to understand and take an initiative that previous leadership could not have on the Rohingya issue. His international reputation and connection with global leaders can bring change to the current protracted refugee situation. Along with prioritizing repatriation of the Rohingya as a “sustainable solution,” Bangladesh needs to focus on resettlement option for the Rohingya. The current government needs to rethink the earlier government’s approach of not encouraging resettlement. Earlier, Bangladesh discouraged resettlement for two reasons: it will work as a “pull factor” for more Rohingya to come, and the number of the resettled will be insignificant. However, whether the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh are resettled or not, the influx of the Rohingya from the Rakhine state to Bangladesh does not stop.

Bangladesh had supported the UNHCR-led resettlement of the Rohingya refugees in the past. After advocacy from UNHCR and human rights groups, the Bangladesh government allowed the resettlement of the Rohingya in 2006. From 2006 to 2010, only 920 Rohingya were resettled in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the US (Paul & Das, 2020). After a long gap, in 2023, only 500 Rohingya found them resettled in Australia, Canada, Japan, the US, and other countries (Korobi, 2024). Trump administration’s anti-migrant approach and measures have already troubled UNHCR’s ongoing Rohingya resettlement program under a plan announced by the US government in 2022. When under the Trump administration, resettling Rohingya as planned earlier might face challenges; the other top refugee resettling countries, including Australia, Canada, France, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the UK, have to be brought in broad to share the refugee burden. Within a couple of months of swearing on the oath, the interim government head had asked the International Organization for Migration to “faster the

resettlement process for Rohingya” (Paul, 2024). Along with calling others to share the responsibility of hosting the Rohingya, Bangladesh needs to develop a strategy for making other countries share the responsibility. As already some Western countries have urged Dr Yunus to take good care of the Rohingya refugees, his government can also take the initiative to convince other developed countries to share the burden of the Rohingya by resettling a significant number. Under the special aide on the Rohingya refugee, the government should form a dedicated team of experts, academicians and policy-makers, professionals to chart out the strategy to resettle a good number of Rohingya to third countries. The government should also communicate with some non-Western countries to take some Rohingya. If the government takes the concrete initiative to convince the developed countries, that might lead to the resettlement of many refugees.

When, it is expected, the resettlement of some thousands will not make much difference to the existing situation, the resettlement option for the Rohingya needs to be encouraged for the following reasons: (a) resettlement will allow the Rohingya to get access to basic rights, notably access to education and employment; (b) an educated Rohingya diaspora community can keep contributing to speaking for their community, which might also lessen the burden for Bangladesh in internationalizing the Rohingya issue; (c) once they are resettled, they can be a resource or asset for their community and can contribute to rebuilding their community back in Rakhine; (d) on top of all, refugees will end up having a state.

Young Rohingya men and women need to be prioritized for resettling along with the vulnerable refugees needing protection and resettlement. Some of the Rohingya who have managed to settle in the Western countries and were resettled from Bangladesh have now become Rohingya rights advocates and activists. They have significantly contributed to the internationalizing of the Rohingya issue. Their activist efforts have resulted in filing cases in the court in Argentina, in the International Court of Justice, and the US and Canada recognized the Rohingya genocide carried

out by the Myanmar military forces. Some of them have been working in the fields of engineering, medicine, and law while keeping the Rohingya issue alive through their activism and advocacy. They also play role in nurturing leadership among the Rohingya living in Bangladesh and other countries. These all have been possible as they have accessed to a life where basic needs are met.

Conclusion

Although globally, only one percent of the refugees are resettled, it does help to change the situation of the refugees. Resettled refugees can be advocates for their cause and help the community in several ways. The government of Bangladesh needs to reconsider its policy and proactively work with UNHCR and other organizations in resettling some Rohingya in third countries. Both the developed and developing countries should stand by Bangladesh and materialize the “burden-sharing” principle by taking Rohingya refugees/FDMNs from Bangladesh.

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