


# Alternatives

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## Transforming a Refugeeized World

From the *Alternatives* Desk

ALL indicators suggest that the number of refugees world wide is now on the increase. Presently, if we take UNHCR's official counting, the number stands at 22 million. But these are mostly refugees from political persecutions. If we add environmental refugees to our tally, the number is even greater and somewhat terrifying. One estimate suggests that there are around 100 million environmental refugees across the globe and their numbers are swelling by 3 million every year. It does not take much imagination to understand that if this is the trend, it will not be long when the national and international agencies, charged with the responsibility of dealing with refugees, will simply admit their incapacity and quit. Already in Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania, with so much needed for the bare maintenance of the refugees but not much resource at hand to disburse, the UNHCR has appealed for emergency funding for meeting what is fast becoming a refugee crisis situation.

Given the asymmetry between expendable resource and refugee population boom, it is quite evident that the refugee concerned agencies are fighting a losing battle. Much of the problem, I believe, is historical, connected mainly to the way refugee related activities have been organized. Put differently, refugee concerned agencies have always committed their expertise and resource at the receiving end, dealing almost exclusively with the refugee-receiving nation. But if the world remains *refugeeized*, where structures and politics reproducing refugees continue to thrive, there can be at the best some ups and downs but no stopping of the refugee flow. It is time that the refugee concerned agencies realize this and shape their work accordingly.

Indeed, there has been some realization to this effect, but then it remains limited by the fact that in almost all cases the refugee-producing nation is brought under some scrutiny and reform initiatives (including the policy of providing developmental aid) *only* after it has succeeded in producing refugees! And that again, to the degree such a state is willing to take back the refugees it helped create.

Actually the reform initiatives, apart from being a continuing process, ought to start the moment an alienating structure, capable of producing refugees, is identified in a given national state or a region. The range of activities here could include creative intervention in matters related to education, majoritarian politics, insensitive media, developmentalism, governmentality, irresponsible sovereignty, nationality and statelessness, and the like. In this context, it can readily be said that the time has come for the refugee concerned agencies, including the UNHCR, to rethink their age-old mandate and help in the goal of transforming the *refugeeized* world.



Rohingya refugees returning to Myanmar.

—Photo courtesy: UNHCR

## Limits of Civil Society

# Rohingya Refugees, Locals and the Passage to Unsettledness

by Imtiaz Ahmed

WHEN Rohingya refugees first crossed the border and entered Bangladesh, the local people did not object to their arrival, rather tried to help them in all possible ways. As one inmate of Kutupalong Camp narrated his experience, "I entered Bangladesh seven years back. Before arriving at this camp some two years back I lived in villages near Teknaf. When the government tried to repatriate the Rohingyas, I went underground. But the people of Teknaf helped me a lot during those days. I even got a job. Only recently did I find the locals resenting my stay. One day some locals informed the government officials who then brought me here."

It is important to keep in mind here that it is also difficult to pinpoint instantly as to who is a Rohingya and who is not. Not only the Rohingyas (at least many of them) look like locals, they also follow the religion (Islam) and speak the language (Bangla) of the locals, albeit with a strong Chittagonian dialect. The locals' initial response, which was on the whole positive, may have come about not so much for helping the foreigners in peril as for helping their own people.

In fact, there has been a marked shift in the attitude of the locals towards the refugees, from the time when they first arrived and the way they are looked upon now. A survey carried out in April-May 1998 demonstrates this point. While 35.7 percent of those surveyed 'felt threatened' or 'were concerned' when the refugees first arrived, but when asked whether the refugees bothered them (not physically but mentally), over 90 percent re-

sponded in the affirmative. The reasons for the change in the attitude of the locals are mostly increase in crime rates and prices of essentials, but in that case the question remains, what prompted crime/price to rise? Before addressing this question, I have two more things to say on the positive response of the locals, particularly at the early stage of the refugees' entry into Bangladesh. The locals employed many of the Rohingyas and hardly anyone faced any problem working inside Bangladesh. The types of employment included, day labour, rickshaw-pulling, fishing, shop helper, domestic worker, etc. It is quite reasonable to expect that both Rohingyas and locals interacted well while such employment was at place. But this is not all.

Most of the refugees, including those residing in camps, interact with the locals at work and in the marketplace. For those living outside the camp this is understandable. Little understood is the fact that even camp-based refugees are found loitering around in the marketplace. The reasons, however, are not so far-fetched.

Red Crescent has been given the responsibility of distributing ration to the camp-based refugees, and this includes both food and non-food items. What is interesting is that the allotment is based on *head-count* and not whether a person is adult or child or, for that matter, male or female. What this implies is that a child, even if s/he is one month old, is getting the same amount of rice or salt that of an adult. And if the family is large (most Rohingya refugee families have on the av-

erage over 5 members), it is quite likely that they would have some of the food and non-food items (like salt, cooking oil or soap) in excess. Residents of Kutupalong Camp and also Nayapara Camp informed us that they go and sell some of their ration in the market, although as the locals added to the high degree of matrimonial relationship between the two communities.

But then, this cannot be stretched much since most Rohingyas men living in refugee camps also go to marry Rohingya women, living inside or outside the camps. In fact, some residents of Kutupalong and Nayapara camps, all got married after becoming refugees. A few of them incidentally married twice, both times with permission from the camp authorities. But aside from providing protection and a sense of security to Rohingya refugee women, most Rohingyas men find the marriage economically rewarding. As I found some local cynics say, 'Marriage is profitable for a Rohingya refugee. After all, relief in the camp is given on the basis of head-counts!'

This brings us back to the issue of *ration trading* on the part of the refugees. There seems to be a mixed feeling amongst the locals on this issue. One opinion holds that such selling of goods dampens the price in the local market. As the following report, furnished by Gonoshasthaya Kendra, a local NGO working with the refugees, indicated: "...many refugees are selling the oil, lentils, and powder milk (given to them in the camp) to local traders. Consequently, the market price of

these goods in Cox's Bazaar has fallen to 50% of regular prices. This makes the local middle class consumers happy and may act as a deterrent to the growing antagonism towards such a large influx of refugees."

On the other hand, there is also the opposite view, holding that such selling of goods has led to a price hike of essential items. According to Philip Gain:

"The influx of Rohingyas has caused the prices of the essential commodities to shoot up. Refugees allegedly sell the rice and pulses rationed to them for buying vegetables and other essentials. Around the camp area the average price of a kg of potato is Taka 10-12, four eggs are Taka 14-16, beef per kg is Taka 70-80, chicken per kg Taka 150, one coconut Taka 12-14 and so on. These commodities were much cheaper before the refugee came."

While the above positions may sound contradictory, actually what is happening is quite simple. Items that are sold by the refugees their price have dampened considerably, while the price of those items the refugees are buying has gone up. The overall impression of the locals, however, is that food and other items have become costlier following the refugee influx.

More important has been the dampening of the daily wage of the locals, particularly of the day labourer. Many of the locals that we have talked to pointed out that before the arrival of the refugees a day labourer earned Taka 200 per day, but now the same person earns around Taka 60-70. This has meant more hardship and poverty for the local poor, a situation about which many locals are quick to complain. But that is not all.

Most locals believe that the influx of refugees increased crimes in their respective areas. In March 1992 a national daily reported that the locals living near the Dechuapalong Camp (which is no longer in operation now) clashed (interestingly) with the police because one Hasmet Ali, a local farmer, beat refugee children who were caught stealing cucumbers from his farm. The refugee children complained to the police and that led to a conflict. The police (suggested) siding with the refugee children at this stage provide an interesting dimension to the passage to 'unsettledness', for it did not take long for all this to change.

In fact, in November 1992 (that is, nearly two years after the refugees had first come and eight months after the above incident), a Union Parishad member of Khuniapalong lodged a written complaint with the district administrator that a group of armed Rohingyas looted his house and took Taka 25,000 worth of goods. Often the Rohingyas committed crimes against those locals who were actively campaigning for their repatriation. Abdul Gafur, a local BNP leader, for instance, complained that the armed Rohingyas ransacked his house, destroyed banana plantation and stole poultry and cattle. Gafur is of the opinion that the Rohingyas targeted him because he was actively seeking their repatriation.

To add to the resentment of the locals, there has been a marked increase in *unsocial activities* (like, prostitution, consumption of drugs and liquors, etc.) in recent times, which most locals feel are due to the presence of the refugees. In fact, many locals complained that some of the vices prevalent amongst the Rohingyas are now widely found in the Bengali community, particularly in the border areas. One such vice, according to the locals, is drinking alcohol at a marriage party. In the tradition of the Rohingyas, alcohol is now served and consumed in the Bengali marriage party as well. The locals resent this very much, without recognizing, however, that many of their compatriots have been practicing this vice for years in private!

The relationship between refugees and locals has now reached a level where the earlier positive tone of the locals towards the refugees has simply vanished. In this context, it may be worth pointing out that nearly 80 percent of those locals that we have surveyed believe that the refugees contributed very little to the economy. Moreover, over 75 percent of them now 'dislike' the refugees.

In a situation like this, nothing much can be expected except intolerance and open conflicts between members of the two communities. To cite from the reports furnished by the UNHCR, Dhaka Office (the first one was filed in January 1997):

"Five refugees were arrested during the reporting month. They were absent from their respective camps without prior permission from camp authorities, and arrested from a public tea-stall, having been suspected of committing robbery. They were shifted to Cox's Bazaar Sub-jail and charged under section No. 19 (A) (E) of Arms Act & 26 of 1974 Special Power Act (emphasis mine)."

And again (this was filed in May 1997):

"A clash between local villagers and refugees in Nayapara took place on 27 May 1997. A villager and a refugee were medically treated for minor bruises and cuts received during the incident. Peace and harmony between the two communities were brought about through dialogue and negotiations by the Thana/Camp officials and the local leaders (emphasis mine)."

It is unlikely that locals suspected of committing 'robbery' and that again, picked up from 'public tea-stall', would have been charged under similar Acts and put behind bars! More ominous, however, is the growing role of the 'police', 'officials' and 'leaders', for it signals the limits of civil society in attending to the cause of refugees independent of the role of the government and the police.

## Limits of Civic Response

It is important to clarify one thing at this stage and that is, much of what goes under the banner of civic response in Bangladesh is mainly 'individual initiative'. In fact, one could divide the civic response broadly into 'individual' and 'civil' initiatives, the latter standing for organized, civil or non-governmental, group-based initiatives. In this context, I have no hesitation to say that, while individual initiative is found in plenty, civil initiative in this country is thoroughly disorganized and bereft of any creative

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# The State of Rohingyas in Refugee Camps: A Critical Assessment

by Masud Hassan Siddique

THE ethnic Rohingyas of the Arakan state of Burma have been subject to a long and well-documented history of abuse including torture, rape, abduction, murder, forced labour, forced relocation and religious persecution. This has prompted massive internal displacements and large scale exodus into Bangladesh at least five times since 1942. The government of Myanmar has launched no less than twelve major 'operations' against minorities, especially the Rohingyas, ostensibly for reasons of national security.

In 1978 the Government sponsored operation Nagamin (King Dragon Offensive). This scrutinised each individual to separate citizens and foreigners living in the country in accordance with the Burmese Emergency Immigration Act (1974) designed to remove immigrants from India & China. This resulted in a mass exodus to Bangladesh with over 200,000 having crossed over by May 1978.

After the influx, bilateral meetings in June and July '78 between the Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh reached an agreement on repatriation. Commencing on 31 August 1978 the operation ended in 29 December 1979 and repatriated a total of 187,250 refugees without any involvement of the UNHCR or other international body. By that time at least 10,000 refugees had died, most of whom were children.

**Arrival in 1991:** In 1991, followed a dramatic political shift in Myanmar. Bangladesh experienced another mass influx of Rohingya refugees. SLORC (State Law & Order Restoration Council) refused to accept the results of May 1990 election, provoking a nation-wide protest and demonstration against the military regime. A scapegoat was required, and the Rohingyas, a common enemy of the ruler and majority Buddhists, fitted the bill, resulting in a mass exodus into Bangladesh for the second time in 13 years.

**Response:** At the start of the migration the people and Government of Bangladesh (GOB) welcomed the refugees with a great degree of sympathy and provided relief and shelter. But Bangladesh had limited resources and as an exceptional measure invited UNHCR for the first time in its history to provide care and protection. UNHCR invited international NGOs to assist in providing health and nutrition, water and sanitation services and education facilities to the refugees.

Despite having taken prompt measures to arrange food and shelter for the refugees in its territory, the GOB shifted its position, favouring rapid repatriation, as the refugees' presence had by that time created economic, social and political problem in the area.

Local people started to express their dissatisfaction over the refugee day labourers whose presence and involvement almost halved labourers' salaries in the region. Local residents under the banner of Rohingya Refugee Repatriation Action Committee (RRRAC) set up a six-hour road block at Ukha on the Cox's Bazaar - Teknaf highway on 4 August '92 demanding an early repatriation of more than a quarter-million Rohingyas refugees. The protesters picked out relief vehicles belonging to UNHCR and NGOs operating in the camps and disrupted the operation. In addition, the refugees caused environmental degradation in the region, in particular through depletion of forests.

From the beginning UNHCR experienced problems ensuring that refugee conditions met acceptable standards. Living conditions in most of the camps remained unhealthy and unhygienic. Though the camps were hurriedly built in an unplanned manner, UNHCR failed to take any initiative to rebuild them as per its own guidelines. It took quite some time for the NGOs involved to bring the water and sanitation facilities to a reasonable standard.

The law and order situation of the camps started to deteriorate, leading to various crimes committed by refugees against refugees, including rape, murder and the use of drugs. UNHCR, who was responsible for the protection of the general refugees, did very little to address the situation. This allowed local police to exploit the situation for failing to pursue particular cases.

**Services** After the influx of Rohingyas in February 1992, the GOB invited UNHCR to provide emergency assistance for 250,000 or so Rohingya refugees in 19 camps. In response to UNHCR's invitation international NGOs came forward to assist in providing health and nutrition, water and sanitation and education facilities to the refugees in accordance with international standards. Notably, none of these NGOs (UNHCR's partners) were requested to undertake an education programme, although NGOs did raise concerns with regard to education.

From the beginning the NGOs tried to maintain the standard of their services while attempting to monitor the repatriation process. In August '92, following reports that some

NGOs had been actively encouraging refugees to resist repatriation, GOB took steps which limited NGO activities in the camps, including monitoring all activities and movements of NGO staff. Allegations were made that 'NGOs were engaged in activities that had made things difficult for a voluntary repatriation'.

**Food & Nutrition:** The NGOs continued to raise concerns regarding adequate food and shelter as well as the voluntariness of repatriation. During mid 1994, perhaps in a bid to force refugees to return, the quantity of the food ration was reduced to below the level of WHO's suggested minimum caloric intake for sedentary refugees. This, coupled with restrictions imposed on local trade (on purchasing necessities like vegetables and potatoes from the village markets) and the simultaneous withdrawal of vegetables and sugar from the food basket, resulted in an increase of angular stomatitis (due to riboflavin (B2) deficiency) and reduced the ability of the refugees to survive at a subsistence level.

The UNHCR initiated a **wet feeding program** for all malnourished children. This ration provided through the wet feeding programme was subtracted from the family ration of families with malnourished children, so that the overall ration received by the family remained the same.

**Shelter:** The standard of shelter and living conditions were another major concern. Throughout their stay in Bangladesh the refugees lived in shanty sheds (6 to 10 rooms per shed, each room having a space of 8 ft X 10 ft) made of bamboo fences and a plastic roof (sheet) without any proper floor. Regardless of family-size each family was entitled to a room very low in height with no

cooking place. As a result these rooms were simultaneously used as kitchen, store, bedroom or sitting room among other purposes. More importantly, these sheds were too weak to withstand even relatively small winds. The long-standing promise to repair or replace these temporary sheds and provide stronger makeshifts was never delivered by UNHCR and the refugees had to survive in these temporary huts.

**Water and Sanitation:** The NGOs also looked after the supply of water and sanitation facilities in the camps. In most cases water was brought from the hilly forests through canals to a reservoir, and treated in water treatment plants. After proper treatment it was then supplied to various tap points in the camps three times a day. The refugees collected water from the tap points as they wished but had always complained of insufficient tap points. Hundreds of people, mainly women and children, queued for hours to collect water.

Similarly, latrines, bathing spaces and garbage pits were set up and maintained by the NGOs. Camp cleaning was one of the regular activities carried out by the NGOs. It was none the less difficult to keep the environment of the camps clean due to the fact that the Rohingyas showed little interest in or concern for camp hygiene and sanitation.

**Education:** In 1993 NGOs believed that the refugee operation would last for at least a couple of years and that children should not be deprived from their right to education. By that time the Islamic NGOs were allowed to run Koranic schools (Madrasas) in the camps. Children, mostly girls, started their schooling in these Madrasas, but were limited to

religious education. Parallel to this, some enthusiastic refugee teachers took the initiative to establish schools and started to educate pupils with whatever resources they had.

UNHCR failed to timely address the issue of education for refugee children as laid out in their internal guidelines. Following requests from the NGOs, UNHCR applied for GOB approval to provide assistance and supervise educational activities in the camps. Unfortunately, it took almost four years for the UNHCR to convince GOB to approve educational activities in the camps. This long negotiating process cost many refugee children large parts of their education.

**Refugee Status** A big issue for UNHCR's NGO partners in Bangladesh has been the granting of refugee status. NGOs have seen this in UNHCR's failure to grant the recent arrivals (during 1996 and 1997) any such status (on the grounds that they are economic migrants, fleeing poverty and seeking an 'easy life' in Bangladesh). NGOs also saw it earlier (when NGOs were beginning to question the voluntary nature of UNHCR's promotion of repatriation) in UNHCR's argument that the Rohingyas who have been in the Bangladesh camps for the last few years might not be refugees. The argument was that the Rohingyas' claim to refugee status had never been assessed. As a group they had been granted *de facto* refugee status but (as most refugees appeared to have accepted repatriation?) UNHCR would require any family that wished to remain to make its claim for assessment of its status. Few families were willing to make any such claim and it is not clear whether the interest of the majority to return or the reluctance to be singled out in

interviews came first. Those families which did refuse to return (i.e. which did claim refugee status for themselves) risked drawing attention to themselves with very little guarantee of success in their claim.

It is known that those Rohingyas who requested an interview were classified either as justifiable or as unjustifiable refusal cases. It would seem that the legality of this classification system hinges upon the individual's status prior to the interview? If they were refugees, their status cannot be taken away from them. Presumably, then, the new policy (which includes the idea that refugee status granted to a group must be reassessed for individuals from the group when the majority of group is willing to return) implies that group refugee status is a lesser type of status. The implication for the NGOs might be to insist that UNHCR give individual status (hold interviews with all families etc.) at the time that refugees arrive en masse in a country. The Rohingyas, for example, were never offered the luxury of such interviews when they arrived and are now being treated as **second class refugees** as a result.

**Protection** Protection has always been a serious concern to NGOs, human rights activists and the international community. Abuses in the form of physical torture, threat, extortion, confiscation of family books and arrest have been a regular feature of the refugee camps over the last six years. UNHCR was unable to do a great deal to address these abuses with its Protection team in the field. Refugees, irrespective of involvement or non-involvement in criminal offences or activities were abused in many ways by camp officials and members of law enforcing

agencies. The first phase of abuse occurred during the forced repatriation of refugees in late 1992. Beatings and other forms of abuse were used to 'encourage' the refugees to change their intransigent attitude towards repatriation. This was the start of a systematic pattern of abuse which continued during the time the Rohingyas have been in Bangladesh. Assembly and movement of refugees was restricted. NGOs had to secure permission before talking to refugees. NGOs struggled to secure permission to select and train Traditional Birth Attendants and Community Health Workers, and also faced difficulties in community development work.

Bribing camp staff, police and officials was one of the most common day to day activities for camp residents. Whenever called, they knew they had to honor their 'masters' (sirs) with tofa (bribes). Inter-camp transfer or shifting was one of the most lucrative exercises for camp staff.

## Conclusion

Analyzing the above situation it is not unjustifiable to say that UNHCR failed to provide protection from serious abuse of refugees' rights as per its mandate. It also failed to raise its concerns over the issue as well. The refugees had to survive in a coercive situation as they were back home. A comprehensive suggestion on what could be done to safeguard the remaining 21,000 or so refugees from the coercive condition in the camps is essentially needed.

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