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Transforming a Refugeeized World

From the *Alternatives* Desk

ALL indicators suggest that the number of refugees worldwide 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, governmental, 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.



—Photo courtesy: UNHCR

Limits of Civil Society

Rohingya Refugees, Locals and the Passage to Unsettlement

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 representing 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 (Bengali) of the locals, albeit with a strong Chittagongian 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 bother them now (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 Rohingya refugees and hardly anyone faced any problem in 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 farfetched.

In talking to locals as to why many Bengalis marry Rohingya women, three reasons were highlighted. One, marrying a Rohingya woman is less costly; two, Rohingya women are relatively 'fairer' and therefore judged better looking; and three, since there is no legal bar to marry a Rohingya woman, many go on to marry for the second time. One should not, however, rule out 'romance' between members of these two communities. As one UNHCR, Dhaka Office, report suggested:

The abduction of a minor

refugee girl (14) from Nayapara Camp was reported to UNHCR... In an individual interview with the female Protection Officer she admitted to leave the camp voluntarily to join her boyfriend.

Moreover, Rohingyas being Muslims and speaking the same language as the locals added to the high degree of matrimonial relationship between the two communities.

It is quite critical has been the role of marriage in organizing a positive attitude on the part of the locals towards the refugees. Over 90 percent of those surveyed responded in the affirmative to the issue of marriage between the two communities. Although for years marriages have taken place between members of these two communities and in both directions that is, Rohingya men marrying Bengali women and Bengali men marrying Rohingya women, but more recently the prevalent mode has been the latter. A resident of Kutupalong Camp, for instance, arranged his sister's marriage with one of the locals of Teknaf in 1992. His sister is now permanently settled in that area.

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 Gonoreshthaya 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 sit-

uation 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 Dechupalong 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 (suggestively) siding with the refugee children at this stage provide an interesting dimension to the 'passage to unsettlement', 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 Khuniahalong lodged a written complaint with the district administrator that 'a group of armed Rohingyas had 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.

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The State of Rohingyas in Refugee Camps: A Critical Assessment

by Masud Hassan Siddique

Condition in camps

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 calorific intake for sedentary refugees.

This, coupled with restrictions imposed on local trade (on purchases of 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 moderately 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 refugees did very little to address the situation. This allowed local police to exploit the situation by extorting money in return 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 so that Rohingya refugees in 19 camps. In response to UNHCR's invitation, international NGOs to assist in providing health and nutrition, water and sanitation services and education facilities to the refugees, did very little to address the situation. This allowed local police to exploit the situation by extorting money in return for failing to pursue particular cases.

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 (Madrasa) 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 portions 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 group they had been granted **de facto refugee status** but (as most refugees appeared to have accepted repatriation?) UNHCR was unable to do a great deal to address these abuses with its Protection team in the field. Refugees, irrespective of 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 initial 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 gifts (bribes). Inter-camp transfer or shifting was one of the most lucrative exercises for camp staff.

Conclusion
Analyzing the above situation it is not justifiable 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 safe guard the remaining 21,000 or so refugees from the coercive condition in the camps is essentially needed.

The author is Program Officer (Democracy and Human Rights), SIDA and former Project Manager, Rohingya Refugee Relief Project, Save the Children Fund (UK).