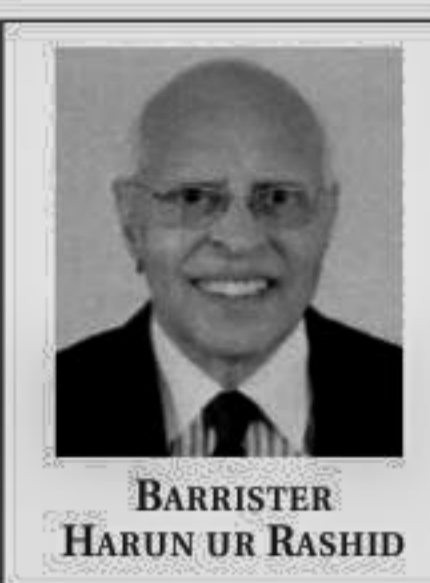


BOTTOM LINE

# Why are Rohingyas being refused entry into Bangladesh?



**M**YANMAR is a multi-religious country with 60 million people. Statistics show that 89% of the population are Buddhists, 4% are Christians, 4% are Muslims, and 3%

follow other religions, including Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith. The name "Rohingya" is derived from "Rohang," believed to be the ancient name of the Rakhine (Arakan) state of Myanmar. The recent violence in Rakhine state has led many Rohingyas to flee Myanmar and attempt to cross the 200-kilometre porous border with Bangladesh. Around 40% of the population of the Rakhine state is estimated to be Muslim. Bangladesh shares borders with two Myanmar states -- Rakhine (Arakan) and Chin. Most people of Chin state practice Christianity and no refugees came from Chin state to Bangladesh. Besides Rakhine Muslims, there are Muslims living in other parts of Myanmar. They came from Gujarat (India) and China, and live peacefully with other ethnic groups in various parts of the country, including Yangon. Rohingyas look similar to Bangladesh people living in the southeast and speak in a dialect which is close to that of Bangladesh people on the border. They can easily mingle with the local people.

It is reported that the recent unrest began on June 3 after the police in Rakhine detained three Muslim men (Rohingyas) in relation to the rape and killing of a Buddhist woman late last month. That was followed by a wanton attack by Buddhists on a bus in early June in which 10 Muslims were killed. 13 Buddhist Rakhines and 16 Rohingyas have been killed, Myanmar officials told AP last week.

The question is, given the unrest in the Rakhine state can Rohingyas be considered as "refugees" under the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees or its 1967 Protocol? To be eligible as a refugee, there must be "well-founded fear of persecution" by the state. The present unrest emanated from an allegedly criminal act on a Buddhist female by some Rohingyas and did not arise from persecution by the authorities. It is considered as a law and order issue for Myanmar. Bangladesh is not a party to the UN Convention of the Refugees and there is no legal obligation to accept them. There could be, however, a moral or humanitarian obligation in a war-like situation, but given the sectarian clash between minority and majority groups in the Rakhine state, Rohingyas cannot arguably come within the definition of "refugees." On June 13, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister

Dr. Dipu Moni said Bangladesh was not willing to give shelter to Rohingyas despite international calls for opening the border. "We're already burdened with thousands of Rohingya refugees staying in Bangladesh and we don't want any more," she reportedly said. In my view, the stance of the government is correct. Some reasons are given below: First, Bangladesh is an overpopulated

Third, Rohingya refugees have reportedly created a bad image of Bangladesh in the Middle East. It is alleged that most of the "Bangladeshis" who committed crimes in Saudi Arabia were Rohingyas with fake or forged Bangladesh passports. Fourth, many believe that, having being deprived of amenities as citizens since 1962 when General Ne Win seized power, some Rohingyas reportedly constituted guerilla outfits including the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front fighting for a Rohingya land in Rakhine state. In 1978, when Bangladesh in agreement with Myanmar repatriated

promised to try as much as she could to help them return home, vowing not to forget them. It is disappointing to note she has been conspicuously silent on the current violence in Rakhine state and on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It is expected that while Suu Kyi is on a tour of Europe, the European leaders and Human Rights Organisations should urge her to address the current unrest and the root causes for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

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Rohingyas reportedly resisted their repatriation until the land was "secure" from their point of view. Fifth, a serious misunderstanding was created in the past between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the issue of Rohingya refugees and Bangladesh does not wish any more to be misunderstood on this issue with one of its closest neighbour, which is on a steady path to democratic reforms. The Bangladesh prime minister visited Myanmar last December and the Myanmar president is expected to visit in mid-July -- after a 26-year gap. Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi last month met thousands of Myanmar refugees now living in a Thai border camp. She

The Secretary General of the UN needs to play an active role in addressing the issues of religious minority community in the Rakhine state with Myanmar authorities. Since Bangladesh is already sheltering more than 300,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, there is a view that those countries and organisations which call upon Bangladesh to open the border to Rohingyas on humanitarian considerations may send their planes or passenger boats to Chittagong, and Bangladesh may open the border on the condition that those who come to Bangladesh from Myanmar will be sent to those countries. Out of 15.4 million refugees in the world as of today, records show that developing countries in Asia and Africa host 80% of them, and not the Western countries which have turned their countries into "fortresses" and are very reluctant to accept refugees in their own countries.

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CONNECTING THE DOTS

## Sonia calls Mamata's bluff



**F**INALLY someone has put Mamata Banerjee in her rightful place. After holding the ruling United Progressive Alliance in India to ransom for more than three years since its inception, Mamata Banerjee finally got the deserved shake-up from the Congress Party. Mamata's drubbing in the hands of the Congress was com-

plete when Sonia Gandhi announced Pranab Mukherjee as the Congress's candidate for the Indian president's office. Pranab Mukherjee is expected to be elected the next President of India with the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) pledging their support and the Left likely to follow suit. They, along with the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), account for a majority in the electoral college. The Congress pulled off a political feat by getting both the SP and BSP to endorse its nominee, while isolating Mamata who had teamed up with Mulayam Singh to put forward the name of ex-President Abul Kalam as the candidate. In a dramatic sequence of events, Mulayam played along with Mamata but reversed gears in time to bail out the UPA. So why did Mamata oppose Pranab Mukherjee? Some people say that Pranab's decision not to grant financial concession to West Bengal led her to not support him. She wanted a three-year moratorium on debt repayment from the Centre. But Pranab, as the finance minister, insisted that such moratorium could be granted on specific projects but would be unconstitutional if granted to states. Some cynics point out that it is always hard for one Bengali to see another Bengali achieve a higher position. But, in all seriousness, I think Mamata's decision is based on the calculation that if she parts ways with the UPA, there might be a mid-term election in India as the UPA would lose majority in the Parliament. Riding on its recent popularity in West Bengal, Mamata's Trinamool Congress may increase its parliamentary seats in any such election.

*I think Mamata's decision is based on the calculation that if she parts ways with the UPA, there might be a mid-term election in India as the UPA would lose majority in the Parliament. Riding on its recent popularity in West Bengal, Mamata's Trinamool Congress may increase its parliamentary seats in any such election.*

Mamata was badly outplayed in Delhi's power play and is now isolated. Will Mamata still have the bargaining power to extract the much-needed financial bailout package from the Centre? I think she has lost the leverage to extract any financial concessions from Delhi. Moreover, after the President's election, the ruling UPA may consolidate their position by replacing Trinamool Congress with Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party. I think Mulayam just used Mamata to get close to the Congress Party. Mamata has no one but herself to blame for her isolation. Her one-year tenure at the helm of West Bengal

government has been marked by decisions that were not based on logic but were populist to the core. Consider the playing of Rabindra Sangeet at stop lights in Kolkata; or taking into custody a university professor for circulating a cartoon on Mamata in Facebook; or erroneously blaming a rape victim for coming forward with the allegations. At the national level, she single-handedly stopped the opening of the Indian retail sector to foreign investments. Domestic issues apart, she has thought nothing of embarrassing the Indian central government even on commitments with Bangladesh. She is bent on not honouring any commitment made by India as a nation because of her spat with the central government. It's like cutting off the nose to spite the face. Last year, she opted out of the delegation accompanying Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh. The last minute rebuff came because she was reportedly unhappy over the pact which India and Bangladesh had agreed to sign on sharing the Teesta waters. Mamata thought that the pact was unfair to her state

given that it was based on an equal sharing of Teesta waters. Her contention is that Bangladesh should get only 25% of the water. Also consider the Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the Demarcation of the Land Boundary that was signed in Dhaka last year. The protocol operationalised the Mujib-Indira Land Boundary Act of 1974 by addressing the 6.4 kilometers of undemarcated border in three different stretches, as well as the issue of the enclaves and land in adverse possession. Everyone hoped that the issue of enclaves and land in adverse possession, one of the main causes of tensions along the Indo-Bangladesh border, would be removed permanently by implementing the protocol. However, the protocol has not been put up to the Indian cabinet, reportedly because of the position taken by Mamata Banerjee with regard to handing over land to Bangladesh. That's not the end of her ego-driven tantrums. She has recently shot off a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh objecting over the Farakka Barrage water sharing with Bangladesh. She wrote that a majority of water from the Farakka barrage is going to Bangladesh instead of remaining in India. Alleging that this is a "conspiracy" to please Bangladesh, she has demanded repairing two broken gates of the barrage. Will Mamata learn her lesson? Given her track record, I am not convinced. She reminds me of a child who runs regular tantrums in order to get things that she wants. Manmohan Singh's appeasement policy convinced Mamata that she was indispensable. Maybe that will no longer be the case.

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WORLD REFUGEE DAY

## Refugees have no choice

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

**T**HE United Nations' (UN) World Refugee Day is being observed today. On this Day we honour the courage, strength and determination of women, men and children who are forced to flee their homelands under threat of persecution, conflict and violence. There are approximately 14 million refugees now around the world now. This year the theme of this Day is "Refugees have no choice. You do."

Currently, a widely discussed and written problem in Bangladesh is the Rohingya issue. Everyday we are receiving requests from many international bodies to accept the Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh is in a dilemma about what to do though our government has already expressed its point of view. The problem is, Bangladesh is cordial by nature to the people of its neighbouring countries, which is why sometimes we feel compassion for the Rohingyas. Our eyes sometimes get wet seeing their faces. We see many pictures of Rohingyas in newspapers which make us wonder about our firm decision. But the vital question is, what should be the appropriate approach to this problem from Bangladesh's perspective? According to UN, thousands of refugees have fled from Rakhine province by boat. Many are already in camps in Bangladesh. Many are said to have been turned back in recent days. Why does everyone want us to provide shelter? Why don't they put pressure on Myanmar to solve the problem? Rakhine state in north-western Myanmar has become restive following communal incidents involving the majority Rakhine Buddhists and the minority Rohingya Muslims. The government has declared a state of emergency there. Recently, Myanmar was able to draw attention and praise from all over the world for its democratic reforms. Bangladesh has always maintained cordial relations with Myanmar. The Rohingya issue affects Bangladesh since the Rohingyas look for refuge in Bangladesh whenever there is trouble in Rakhine -- and Myanmar authorities also pushed Rohingyas into Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been facing the problem of "Rohingya refugees" for the last three decades, but it cannot continue like this. Bangladesh has many national and international problems to handle and this is an alarming problem for us. There are two sides to the violence -- humanitarian and political. Regarding Myanmar's political issues, Bangladesh has nothing to do. If this situation had occurred for the first time it would be a humanitarian issue, but it is not so simple. Bangladesh had

earlier given shelter to many Rohingyas, whose status is still unresolved. They take it as granted. Bangladesh can't pamper them in this way.

"We must work together to mobilise the political will and leadership to prevent and end the conflicts that trigger refugee flows. [...] Despite budget constraints everywhere, we must not turn away from those in need. Refugees leave because they have no choice. We must choose to help," United Nations' Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said. So we can expect the United Nations to put pressure on Myanmar to solve the political problems and remove racial discrimination.

The first time Rohingya refugees -- numbering about 200,000 -- entered into Bangladesh was in 1978. The repatriation of these people was a matter of dispute between the two countries. Most of them have gone back while some are still left in the camps in Cox's Bazaar and other places. Myanmar was not ready to accept all the refugees as its nationals while many refugees themselves are disinclined to go back for fear of trouble.



*The Myanmar government should ensure safety and security of life and property of its people, including the Rohingyas, so that they do not feel forced to leave their country out of absolute despair.*

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called for calm and resolution of the problem at the earliest. Demonstrators in Yangon and some other places in Myanmar are clamouring against the Rohingyas, calling them "terrorists from Bangladesh." The Myanmar government should control its nationals from leaving the country. Myanmar is now on the doorstep of great reforms. This process may be adversely affected if ethnic problems continue unabated. The Myanmar government should ensure safety and security of life and property of its people, including the Rohingyas, so that they do not feel forced to leave their country out of absolute despair. The Bangladesh government has taken a firm position not to allow them to cross into the country. The issue also has a humanitarian angle as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has urged Bangladesh to accept the refugees, among whom are many women and children. Sheltering Rohingyas in Bangladesh is not a permanent solution to the problem. Presently they are in trouble; they have no other choice except entering Bangladesh. But rest of the world and the Myanmar government have many things to do. Let them solve the problem or else it may happen again.

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