

Rohingya issue and Bangladesh-Myanmar relations

CFAS and The Daily Star organized a roundtable on 'Rohingya Issue and Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations' on June 25, 2012. We publish a summary of the discussions
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Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star

Myanmar is our second neighbour, we have only one other. Now we have an opportunity to open up with the second neighbour. Myanmar is going to come to prominence in global scene, especially in the regional scene. Could we not have been a little more generous to the Rohingyas than we have because this time the number is very small, less than 600? I am saying the unpleasant, for us they are figures but at the end of the day they are human beings. I have had an experience of being a refugee in 1971. When I am seeking help at that point I would like to be counted as a human being not as a number. The message from The Daily Star is that we want the Bangladesh-Myanmar relations to go ahead under all circumstances, Rohingya or no Rohingya. Even if it becomes more complex and more difficult but our bilateral relationship should progress. I think this is a grand opportunity. There is some sense of democratization in Myanmar and we should capitalize on that. We should welcome these democratic developments and push as much as possible.

Ashfaqur Rahman, Former Ambassador and Chairman, CFAS

The economic and trade relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar are being hampered due to the Rohingya crisis. Our trade is about 100 million dollars but we export not more than 3-5 million dollars. It is expected that the bilateral trade between the two countries could be as high as \$one billion by the year 2013. There is a lot of militancy associated with this issue. It is a big challenge because this list of militancy includes supporters of Islamic political groups. Nexus among arms, drugs and frustrated groups could lead to the recruitment of Islamic fundamentalist groups and criminal networks. Now in these circumstances UN and ASEAN are the key players including the US, China and Russia. They must think of the new doctrine that is called R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and need to put pressure on Myanmar government to stop the atrocities. The Myanmar government must restore the citizenship rights of the Rohingyas.

It is must be seen that whether there is any scope of humanitarian intervention through constructive engagement, and whether there is any scope of long term solution.

Brig Gen (Retd) Shahedul Anam Khan, Editor, Op-Ed and Strategic Issues, The Daily Star

It would seem that the only subject that defines the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar is the Rohingya issue and any problem that occurs in the State of Arakan in Myanmar. And of late the maritime boundary issue. Our relationship has not moved beyond these. So when some scholars call the relationship ambiguous perhaps there is very little we can take issue with them. In spite of the much flaunted 'Look East' policy the state of relationship between the two has not been carried forward.

We were quite happy to leave Myanmar to its own devices perhaps fearing that if we did come close to a county which is considered a pariah state, we could suffer as a result of that. But we did not exploit the strategic significance of the county which is multiplied by its huge strategic resources. We slept almost 24 years on the issue of maritime border demarcation.

In the context of the present situation I think we should consider three broad issues. You have to consider the overall bilateral relationship. I think there is a also need to look at the impact of Rohingya refugees locally in the Cox's Bazaar region. We have to also consider the country's economy and local ecology as well. We have to look at the security and humanitarian aspect of the issue.

Mostafa Faruk Mohammed MP, Former Ambassador

In 1990 when I was in Myanmar an election was taking place and Suu Kyi party was supposed to get a big win over Unity party, backed by the then army. I had a talk with one of their government officer who informed me that after the election they would frame a constitution considering opinion from all ethnic groups, but I did not find the name of Rohingyas in the list. They told me that they would not accept them as Burmese.

In 1947 when Suu Kyi's father was assassinated a Rohingya named Abdur Razzak was also killed among the cabinet members. In the 60's even there was a radio programme in their dialect. They situation gradually changed. We found that ethnic conflict occurred at the time of census. The govern-

ment denied Rohingyas their rights to citizenship.

Another point is the working of international organizations on the Rohingya issue. I met several times with the UNHCR authorities, but found no interest among them to work in Myanmar; rather they were interested to reside on the Bangladesh side and create pressure on the government of Bangladesh. I think these organizations should go to the ground and find local solution rather than pressing Bangladesh government for allowing shelters to the Rohingyas.

Jamaat Islam has still good relations with the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and Arakan Muslim Front, and I think this party has been encouraging the Rohingyas to infiltrate into Bangladesh. If you go to Cox's Bazaar or down south you will find institutions where Rohingyas get armed training and then



they work around Bangladesh and some of them also go to Myanmar. We have to be concerned about this security aspect.

Another important point is that there are thousands of Rakhine Buddhist in Bangladesh especially in Cox's Bazar, Barisal and Kuakata, who may face the wrath of the Rohingya situation deteriorates. This might create serious security problems inside Bangladesh which the government should take note of.

Air Commodore (Retd) Ishfaq Elahi Choudhury, Registrar, Brac University Myanmar government itself decided to close down the country for decades and had been cut off from the rest of the world. Fortunately we have succeeded to demarcate every inch of land border and of late our maritime border with Myanmar. But the way we celebrated the maritime verdict looked like we had won a war, and I think that did not go well with the people of Myanmar. It should have been projected like that Bangladesh and Myanmar both agreed to go to the arbitration and the decision came in our favour which is also mutually agreed by both parties.

The Myanmar is going to be an emerging democracy as well as economy, and that is why world attention is on it. The Americans are interested, the Indian prime minister called on Suu Kyi but, unfortunately, we are far behind and failed to exploit the emerging trend to our favour which we should have done.

I think US engagement with Myanmar will have positive impact because more and more Myanmar engage with the world it is better for us to build our relation in a free and fair environment.

Coming back to the present situation I think by denying they shelter in Bangladesh and send them back in the sea we have harmed our images to the rest of the world and that goes against our cultural norms.

Saida Muna Tasneem, DG, UN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh Myanmar relations is a much broader issue and content in its foreign policy dimension for Bangladesh. To use the word 'Rohingya' is misleading. We officially term them 'refugees from Myanmar', and they should be, all time, referred as Myanmar refugees. There is a tendency to assimilate them as Bengalis which is complete denial of the historical facts and international law. According to the Myanmar's constitution they are Myanmar national. As per international law it is the responsibility of the Myanmar state to provide protection to all its nationals.

Myanmar is a very important country for Bangladesh. A democratic reform is going on in Myanmar and we welcome these moves. We

are looking forward to engage them robustly. Since 2009 there has been a series of bilateral consultation with Myanmar. It started with the foreign ministers visit in 2009. Repatriation of the remaining Myanmar refugees from Bangladesh was the top in the agenda. Our bilateral relations, economic opportunities, potentials of connectivity through Myanmar through Asian High Way as well as to BIMSTEC, and later on Kunming connection which will go through the Rakhine state. So they are integral part of our plan. We had a series of foreign office consultations focusing the border situation, the security situation, repatriation, trade and economics and connectivity and energy sectors. These are the key issues of our bilateral talks. These efforts were culminated during the prime minister's visit. We are trying to use the window of opportunities. All these visits do indicate that there is a new trajectory in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, and we, definitely from the Bangladesh side, are trying to keep it up.

The settlement of the maritime boundary with Myanmar is looked at as a win-win resolution of a long outstanding issue with Myanmar. After this verdict there were many positive comments from the Myanmar side.

The relations got strengthened, that is the feeling from both side.

When we talk to the Myanmar government officially they have always recognised Myanmar's refugee issue. They were repatriated according to the agreed list and following international norms. Bangladesh has always lived up to international obligations and played a responsible role in terms of refugee issue.

Since 2005 there is no repatriation. During this time a large number Myanmar's national crossed into Bangladesh. This period of non repatriation caused more Myanmar's national to enter Bangladesh illegally. There is an indication that they will get permanent residence in Bangladesh and most of them are economic migrants. We took a soft stance to this issue and did not impose our Foreign National Act on them.

Maj Gen (Retd) Azizur Rahman Bir Uttam This is the first time Bangladesh is officially refusing the Rohingyas to enter. I think our government is right to say enough is enough. International organizations do not give us importance because we are weak and poor, otherwise they would have taken it more seriously. For example, in January, 2011, US Assistant Secretary of State visited Bangladesh and suggested to sort out the Rohingya problem between Bangladesh and Myanmar between themselves.

Diplomatic efforts by Bangladesh are not visible to us, though they are trying a lot. We need to create confidence between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Once we asked the Myanmar government to help us to destroy an insurgency camp of Shanti Bahini in Myanmar and they replied back in three line: As you have no insurgent camp in Bangladesh so we do not have Shanti Bahini camp in our territory. Earlier we had rejected their request so their reply was same to us. Ultimately we detected the insurgents groups and destroyed the camps. After three days they did inform us they had just destroyed the Shanti Bahini camps. So this is their attitude which we have to consider in dealing with them.

Myanmar government adamantly refuses Rohingyas as their citizen and they will try to push them out through either Bangladesh border of Thailand border. So we have to protect our border and maritime boundary to check the Rohingya influx in our country, and for this we need credible military strength to back our diplomatic efforts.

M Zamir, Chief Information Commissioner

All together 3,93,000 Rohingyas were repatriated from Bangladesh. We have to consider two aspects of the Rohingya problem. One is

that Myanmar's government and political parties including Aung Sung Suchi's do not recognize Rohingyas as their citizens. So we have to press that issues and ask the US and EU to put pressure on Myanmar so that they solve the citizenship problem.

Another point is that Canada has so far given shelter to 8 or 9 Rohingyas, and Australia to 11 or 12. So then why they press us to give the Rohingyas shelter in our country where our population is already very high. They could do well because they went as refugee to Canada and Australia, and settled there.

It appears that our missions abroad are not sufficiently informed about the evolution of events as it is happening in real time. I think they should be informed regularly so that they can take action and contact with the respective governments in this kind of situation. The Foreign Ministry should take the lead, and put the regular brief on the website.

Kazi Anwarul Masud, Former Ambassador

I think repatriation process is very slow, and double the number of people you repatriate come back because they are persecuted. You

or for an international approach. Why can we not talk to our friends who are very influential, to impress upon the Myanmar government to solve the problem once for all? Otherwise I am afraid this will recur.

Among the two neighbours we have relatively less problem with Myanmar, but we have very little information about Myanmar. If we read Saratchandra's 'Pother Dabi' you will find in that people were very much familiar with Myanmar. After 1948 our interest about Myanmar declined. So we should cultivate good relation. One might say that Myanmar itself took the policy of isolation. But did we try to look at Myanmar as a viable route for connecting with South East Asia. In the past there was an initiative to construct a route that would connect Cox's Bazaar with Myanmar; that route would have led us to China even, but we missed the opportunity. We have tremendous opportunities to expand our bilateral relations with Myanmar because it is a virgin market for our products. If the Rohingya issue could be solved then these relation could be promoted.

CM Shafi Sami, Former Foreign Secretary Bangladesh and Myanmar have treated each other as very distant neighbours. But in the recent years our relation have progressed very significantly which includes border agreement, agreement of demarcation of the land section of the boundary, foreign secretaries annual talks, joint trade commission, delimitation of maritime boundary, etc. Many of these efforts have not achieved the desired level of success.

To create a constructive relation with Myanmar we should learn from China, India, and Singapore who have been maintaining good relation with Myanmar. We should not make our bilateral relations contingent upon the Rohingya issue.

Brig Gen (Retd) Chowdhury Khalequzzaman, Former Ambassador

I do not think the Rohingya problem is a bilateral issue. We should engage China and the US in this, and they can really bring change.

We should strengthen our bilateral trade and cultural relations with Myanmar, and the Rohingya should not be allowed to come to the front. If we can develop other sectors of cooperation then the Rohingya problem would be subsided.

Mahmood Hasan, Former Ambassador Bangladesh has made repeated efforts to build up relationship with the government of Myanmar, but somehow it has not been reciprocated.

I am little bit frustrated about Suu Kyi's statement. We should not expect much from her because her position in the parliament is very weak; she has only 44 seats out of 642 seats. Even her compatriots of the NLD do have a negative attitude towards Rohingyas. So we should rather focus on Than Shien government because there nothing going to change immediately.

MuhammadNurul Huda, Ex-IGP

I want to focus on the law and order issue. When these people come to our country they need to be quartered, even quarantined. Otherwise it will create adverse impact on our law and order situation as well as our labour market.

Shahed Akhtar, Former Principal, Foreign Service Academy

I think we should seal our border completely and send the message to the other side of the border that now it is difficult to stretch for Bangladesh. And another message should also be given to them that the Myanmar government is going to take back Myanmar refugees from Bangladesh. I think this will help to stop their infiltration.

Brig Gen (Retd) Shakhawat Hossain, Former Election Commissioner

Unscrupulous politicians of that region have made it a big issue, and every time when a voter list is prepared this people are called and turned into a vote bank. As an election commissioner I had gone to all these places where they have been recruited as voters. We had to remove 48,000-50,000 names from the voter list. This list was prepared producing all the documents. We had to produce another set of document to verify. So, unscrupulous Bangladeshis are inviting this trouble. When I asked the Cox's Bazar DC, how did they get passport he just said because the Union Council people issued them birth certificates. So we decided that we are not going to accept birth certificates in Cox's Bazaar. So I want to just say that it not only Myanmar's problem, it is our problem also.

Shamim Ahmed, Former Ambassador and Director, CFAS

If again any influx happens due to persecution in Rakhine state then a serious moral question will arise for Bangladesh and the government will have to take a position under the glare of the world media. The Foreign Ministry might consider holding a consultation with the people who have dealt with Myanmar as well as Rohingya issue.