

Global migration crisis and the Bangladesh experience

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More than 1 million refugees have entered Europe by land and sea in 2015. The mass exodus of people from North Africa and Middle East have made the migrant crisis Europe's worst since World War II. While more than 80% of the migrants have arrived by sea routes, the fierce winter has not been able to slow down the daily influx, particularly in Greece. Europe has been struggling to deal with these large groups of helpless people, registering them as migrants and refugees, catering to their basic needs of shelter and food. In many stances, relocation of the migrants to share burden among the EU nations have failed due to resistance from both some of the EU countries as well as migrants who wanted to migrate to their country of choice. Hence, balancing the crisis has become a key challenge for Europe both socially and economically.

While there is ongoing debate on Europe's policy on refugee management, Bangladesh has experience and learnings from the successful refugee migration and repatriation in a number of cases. During the liberation war in 1971, approximately 10 million refugees from Bangladesh fled to neighbouring India facing brutal aggression by the Pakistani military force. After the 9-month-long war ended, they were successfully repatriated back to their homeland. Bangladesh also has successfully managed the waves of Rohingya refugees who have fled from Myanmar at different stages in time.

Despite resource constraints, Bangladesh has successfully repatriated majority of the refugees through mass repatriation and provided citizenship to many of them who chose to stay back. Even in the context of Biharis, a large portion of the minority chose to stay back after 1971; many of them in recent years have applied of citizenship and have been granted. Hence, the country has a strong record of success stories in dealing with migrant flow as both the source and destination country. These case studies could provide substantial learning evidence for both pragmatic policy resolution as well as effective means to deal with the migrant crisis facing Europe.

In the face of Pakistani aggression on Bengali civilians of the then East Pakistan, millions of Bengali refugees fled to the bordering states of India, particularly West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam. The humanitarian and economic crisis faced by the Bengalis was overwhelming as hundreds of refugee camps were established along the Indo-Bangladesh border that sheltered the impoverished and panic stricken people of Bangladesh. India provided training and healthcare support to the MuktiBahini and bolstered the diplomatic movement for Bangladesh's acceptance as a new country in the world map. By the end of the war, repatriation of refugees began; starting in early December 1971 and eventually gaining speed after the surrender of Pakistani Army on the 16 of the month, the mass repatriation of over 9 million refugees was complete by February 1972. This was largest mass repatriation operation after



A camp of Rohingya refugees at Kutupalong of Ukhiya upazila in Cox's Bazar district

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

World War II, accomplished with the UNHCR and coordinated efforts on both sides of the border.

Even though majority of the refugees did not have food and shelter in their newly liberated country, they accomplished the repatriation actively and willingly travelling by foot, rickshaws, vans, bicycles, trucks, buses and trains. The refugees were provided with food for the journey, medical assistance, and two weeks' basic rations during their return.

271 transit camps were set up to provide medical services, food rations and free transport. By the end of 1972, USD 6.3 million worth of repatriation contributions were transferred to Bangladesh government to finance relief and rehabilitation of the returnees.

UNHCR endorsed an agreement between the Indian Red Cross and the Bangladesh Red Cross to transfer equipment and supplies to nutritional centres for use at the transit and reha-

bilitation camps in Bangladesh. However, many of the refugees returned directly to their communities without registration at either of the camps across the two neighbouring countries. The UNHCR liaison office in Dhaka worked closely with the United Nations East Pakistan Relief Operation to coordinate the international aid and assistance

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