

SPOTLIGHT

Fleeing for life

August 26, 2017. The morning started like any other at Shikderpara village in Maungdaw town. He was preparing to visit his paddy fields where around 400 maunds of rice were almost ready to be harvested next month. After the visit, he agreed to sit with some of his fellow villagers to settle their dispute over a

hundreds of villagers, including women and children, and were taken to a marshy land called Kawar Bil. As Ali with the detained Rohingyas stood on the bank of the marsh, the soldiers opened fire at them. "Only one of my relatives and I survived the shooting. When the soldiers left the place thinking we were all dead, we started to march towards Bangladesh through the hills and jungles to save our lives," says Ali.

Ali was almost caught by the patrolling Myanmar soldiers several

Bengal with sampans and landing on the coastline of Cox's Bazar. According to the Bangladeshi government's estimation, around 300,000 Rohingya refugees have arrived in Bangladesh between August 27 to September 9, 2017. And, they are still arriving by the thousands every day, as the scale of violence continues to escalate.

"Keep us as your servants, but don't send us back to Burma"

Although Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) resisted the incoming Rohingyas for several days, leaving thousands stranded in no man's land, BGB has unofficially opened the border for the refugees. Until September 10, the Bangladeshi government did not take any decision about registering the newly arrived Rohingya refugees. Finally on the 10th, after almost two weeks since Rohingyas started entering the country, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal informed journalists that photo identity cards with biometric fingerprints would be issued for every unregistered Rohingya refugee. Md Shah Kamal, Secretary of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, further informed that all newly-arrived

and spent five days sitting aside this road under the relentless rain. All of my children got severe fever. My daughter's condition is very bad. Sometimes she becomes unconscious due to high temperatures. We could not give them any food or medicine for four days. If we have to stay on this roadside any longer, I think all of my children will die," utters a desperate Taiyab. He collected the money by selling his cell phone, the only valuable possession that he managed to bring with him.

At around 9 pm, under the cover of darkness, a ramshackle truck, crammed with traumatised, desperate refugees, started for an unknown destination. From September 5-8, we saw refugees, by whatever means of transport, travelling to different parts of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts by the thousands to save their lives.

There is a possibility that the government's steps to finding, registering and relocating the refugees can make way for further violation of their rights as refugees.

amounts of precious relief materials are being wasted everyday due to the lack of co-ordinated relief efforts.

There is also a severe shortage of relief materials. According to Mohammad Mahadi, co-ordinator of Action Against Hunger (AAH) in Cox's Bazar: "AAH used to provide lunch and biscuits for 1000 Rohingya refugees every day before August 26. However, now it has to provide food for 20,000 people every day and the demand is skyrocketing every hour." The World Food Programme said that it needs another USD 11.3 million to support the newly-arrived Rohingyas and International Organisation of Migration (IOM) said that at least USD 77.1 million is required to provide only lifesaving services to the end of 2017. Md Ali Hossain, Deputy Commissioner, Cox's Bazar district, says in this regard, "We are really struggling to make the relief efforts co-ordinated and organised. The influx was sudden and we were not prepared to accommodate such a huge number of people within a short time. However, I have already formed upazila relief committees and they have started to supervise the relief activities so that aid can be distributed properly."

Documentation or detention? However, experts believe that



Rohingyas have been entering Bangladesh through 200-mile-long Bangladesh-Myanmar border which is now mostly unguarded.

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Starving refugees are passing their days exposed to relentless rain and excruciating tropical heat.

piece of land. Ali was a respected village elder and served as the elected chairman of his village for 15 years until 2016 when his voter ID card and chairmanship was revoked by the Myanmar government. "We the Rohingyas in Myanmar have been persecuted for many years. However, what they did to us on August 26 was unprecedented. I could not imagine how a human being could be so ruthless," says Ali.

It was around 9 am when Ali's village was attacked by the Myanmar army from all sides. Followed by heavy artillery bombardment, infantry men and local militia began a combing operation and rounded up all the Rohingyas. According to Ali, the army detained him along with

times, shot six times by them and finally reached the Bangladesh-Myanmar border after five days of trekking through jungles and hills. He entered Bangladesh through Kanjorpara village under Whaikhyang union and took shelter at a makeshift refugee camp in Thaing Khali. Like Ali, hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas from Myanmar are coming to Bangladesh from every point of the 200-mile-long Bangladesh-Myanmar border. They are coming through the border at Naikkhong Chhari, traversing thick, hilly jungles; through the Kanjorpara-Whaikhyang area crossing vast marshlands; crossing Naf River and entering Bangladesh through Shah Pori Island; many are even crossing the Bay of

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Rohingya refugees would be quartered in a new camp to be built by clearing 2000 acres of forests.

According to Dr C R Abrar, Professor of International Relations at University of Dhaka: "The non-admittance and joint-operation policies of the Bangladeshi government were surely flawed. The decision to unofficially open borders and allocate 2000 acres of land will greatly help the refugees. Now every effort must be made to register them. However, such registration must be done in conformity with international standards." At the time of writing (Tuesday, September 12), the registration process had just started.

Nevertheless Rohingya refugees, who have been living under the open sky for days after traversing treacherous terrain for 5-7 days at a stretch, cannot wait for this 'promised land' and the registration process. They have already started to spread all over Cox's Bazar and Chittagong district.

Abu Taiyab, originally an inhabitant of Myanmar's Maungdaw area, paid BDT 400 to a truck driver to take him and his six family members to a slum at Cox's Bazar. "I reached Bangladesh on the day of Eid-ul-Azha (September 2)

In the last 15 days, at least 300,000 newly-arrived Rohingya refugees joined the unregistered 500,000 already living in Bangladesh for several years. Unlike Mohammad Ali, very few of the recently arrived Rohingyas found shelter at already overcrowded refugee camps. However, like Ali, all the refugees share similar traumatic experiences in Myanmar. Their houses were burnt down and looted; their kith and kin were killed indiscriminately; their children were thrown into rivers and their women raped and killed. When we asked Ali whether he wanted to return to Maungdaw again, he burst into tears. He cries out, "Please sir, don't send us back. They will hunt us down and kill us. Keep us as your servants, but don't send us back to Burma."

Becoming easy prey

With no hope of returning to their homeland again, many of these refugees, who can afford to buy tarpaulin sheets and bamboo sticks, are building settlements all over Cox's Bazar district. The refugee camps have already expanded into massive refugee colonies. The refugees have cut many hills and built their makeshift shelters on the hillside, making themselves highly vulnerable to fatal landslides. Some local political leaders have leased government lands to these destitute people. They are also selling bamboo and tarpaulin at

exorbitant prices to helpless Rohingyas to make a hefty profit.

For instance, an entire hill at Kutupalong has been leased to Rohingya refugees by the local political leaders. "For around 10 feet of space, we have been charged BDT 500 per month. I also bought bamboo and tarpaulin sheets from the landlord and that cost another BDT 500," says Abdur Rob while building his tarpaulin shanty. It is not possible for six of his family members to fit into the 10-foot-long shanty. So, he convinced other refugees to connect their shanties. However, to connect them, they have to pay a further BDT 50 to the men who are supervising the settlement building process and collecting money from the refugees. Seeing journalists, those men quickly moved away and refused to give interviews. However, one of them later said anonymously that they

are the men of Nadvi (Abu Reza Mohammad Nezamuddin Nadvi, Awami League MP of Chittagong-15 constituency) and asked us not to publish the news.

Every morning and afternoon, special bazaars are arranged at different spots where Rohingya refugees gather to sell the property that they managed to carry with them during their long exodus to Bangladesh. Cattle, utensils, jewellery, clothes, furniture—everything is sold here for less than half the market price. Rohingyas have no choice but to sell their only possessions to lease the space, obtain the building materials for their shanties, buy food or medicine, or manage transport fare if they have to go somewhere else for shelter.

The deepening crisis

As the refugee influx continues, severe scarcity of space, building material, food and medicine has now created a chaotic situation. Many refugees have started to take shelter at public buildings and educational institutions. The depth of the crisis became apparent when a relief truck came to distribute food and clothes for the refugees near Kutupalong. Thousands of starving refugees rushed to the truck, creating an uncontrollable crowd. Seeing no way to deliver the aid, the distributors threw the food packets and clothes to the crowd which ultimately fell on the ground. Huge

accommodating and registering such a huge number of refugees who have already dispersed over a vast area would be difficult at this stage. According to Dr Rozana Rashid, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka: "It is certainly necessary to register the Rohingya refugees but this registration should have been done at the border. In this chaotic situation, there is a possibility that the government's steps to finding, registering and relocating the refugees can make way for further violation of their rights as refugees."

She argues that the government has decided to establish camps guarded by barbed wire for the refugees. However, according to all the human rights conventions to which Bangladesh is a signatory, refugees in Bangladesh must enjoy all the basic rights as any other foreigner who is a legal resident, such as freedom of thought, right to justice, freedom of movement and freedom from torture and degrading treatment. "The international agencies should work together with the government to ensure that Rohingya refugees are enjoying their legitimate rights in Bangladesh," she suggests.

Solution lies in diplomacy

Managing such a huge number of refugees and providing them with emergency care is a formidable challenge for Bangladesh.

United Nations (UN) has openly declared that the Myanmar government is committing genocidal activities in the Muslim-populated northern part of its Rakhine state and termed it as the "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". It is obvious that refugee influx will continue and it is unlikely that the Myanmar government will take them back in the near future, which might create a humanitarian disaster in Bangladesh, leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees without food and shelter.

mechanism is in place for the Bali Process to act under such conditions," he argues.

"Bangladesh must also forthrightly demand urgent action from the Organisation of Islamic Conference. The upcoming UN General Assembly session must be used for Bangladesh to garner support from the broader international community," adds Dr Abrar. He also argues that Bangladesh should highlight the fact that the regional security of Southeast Asia is heavily dependent on the peaceful solution of the Rohingya



At least 200 women and children perished during the exodus to Bangladesh

In this situation, experts find the long-term solution in launching a diplomatic offensive against Myanmar. According to Dr C R Abrar, "Bangladesh must forcefully argue the case that Rohingya are not a problem for Bangladesh alone. The wider international community has a responsibility. It must try its best to secure the support of China that has a massive leverage over Burma." He also suggests that Bangladesh should approach ASEAN states as it is a member of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. "The ASEAN countries must realise that in the near future there is all likelihood for secondary movement of refugees from Bangladesh to their region. The

crisis as various transnational actors can target these stateless, persecuted people to expand their operations in Southeast Asia.

However, by the time international community intervenes for a peaceful solution, there is every possibility that the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh will be further decimated by disease and starvation. The threat of forced deportation and detention is also looming over their heads. International aid agencies and human rights bodies must work together with the Bangladesh government to ensure that these refugees receive sufficient emergency support and their rights as refugees are not violated in Bangladesh.

The writer can be contacted at shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO