

those in the construction, deep sea fishing, and vehicle plying sectors, registered a drop. People of all walks of life were faced with a steep rise of price of essentials, with BDT 80 being the lowest price of any vegetable, at least double the price in pre-August 25. Fares of all transportation, including rickshaws, registered an increase by 100 to 200 percent. The arrival of consultants, aid workers, and relief activities has shored up the rental cost of vans and heavy vehicles, as well as that of flats and houses, by many times. Thus, while the people of Bangladesh in other regions

plans to bring all Rohingyas including the UMN's in the planned camp and has allocated 2000 acres of land. Construction of 150,000 sheds has been planned; of this, more than 75,000 sheds have so far been constructed to accommodate Rohingya refugees. The entire camp will be divided into 20 blocks with each block having an administrative unit to facilitate all kinds of services. The construction of a nine-kilometre-long electricity line is underway. Sources inform that a road will be built by the army to connect the facility with the main road.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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empathise with the hapless Rohingyas, and among them the compassionate and active try their best to raise funds for Rohingya relief, it is the people of Ukhia and Teknaf who are bearing the brunt of the refugee flow.

Ukhia–Teknaf is one of the most economically depressed regions of the country. Roughly, these two unions cover an area of 651 square kilometres and is home to about 500,000 inhabitants. Post-August 25, this region now hosts an almost equal number of refugees. This is not the first time the area is hosting refugees. In 1978 and 1991–92, it hosted 280,000 and 250,000 Rohingyas respectively. Prior to the recent influx in post-August, it hosted around 300,000 of what the government preferred to term as “undocumented Myanmar nationals” (UMN).

News reports inform that a mega-camp fitting 800,000 has been planned around the vicinity in the existing Kutupalong camp. The government

There is palpable disgruntlement in the local community about the way the refugee situation is being addressed. Local leaders, elected functionaries, civil society activists, and intelligentsia appear to be in unison that authorities in Dhaka have not provided them with any meaningful space and opportunity to voice their concerns and offer their suggestions to what may turn out to be a protracted refugee situation. The holding of a long session on October 4 of a minister, local MP, secretary, DG NGO Affairs Bureau and district high officials with local leaders and activists is no substitute to a sustained engagement for formulating a well-thought-out strategy for a crisis that has captured the world's attention and will have an immense impact on the lives and livelihood of half a million people of Ukhia and Teknaf.

There is a near consensus of the local people on several matters.

Firstly, they are at a loss as to why what for decades they understood to be a refugee problem was being labelled as a problem of “infiltrators” initially, and now as “destitute Myanmar nationals”. In this regard, the representative of a local development organisation views that such a shift in labelling will undermine the role of the Rohingya Refugee Repatriation Commissioner, the line agency under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, with whose office they had developed working modalities on refugees for decades. Some felt putting another agency not guided by the UN normative framework as the lead international counterpart actor instead of UNHCR would be an exercise in re-inventing the wheel. “This may result in immense sufferings to the refugees”, an activist with years of experience on refugee management on the ground observes.

Secondly, locals are apprehensive about the feasibility of the proposed a mega-camp. They pondered why the simple logic of rendering services to separate camps of 20,000 residents each would be more inefficient than rendering services to a single camp of 800,000. They felt that the concentration of such a massive number of traumatised people in a confined space would jeopardise their own security, as the mobilisation of a fraction of that number, say of 10,000, for a right or wrong cause based on fact or fiction, may have disastrous law and order implications. Moreover, an epidemic of any sort may also take a huge toll. Inadequate and improper water treatment and sewer facilities will be a breeding ground for such outbreaks. The locals also feel that sinking of thousands shallow tubewells and hundreds of deep tubewells for extracting ground water in a region that is known to be water scarce, in all likelihood will lead to further subsidence of the groundwater table, with adverse impacts not only on drinking water but also on water for irrigation purposes.

Thirdly, after the initial phase of emergency response, any strategy to deal with the refugee population has to factor in the needs of the local population. For a region that straddles in the red zone of the poverty map, the huge burden of the extra population has to be compensated by developing a mechanism that addresses the insecurity of the locals and covers “health, education, gender development, infrastructure, environment preservation and other support”. They insist that this provision be incorporated into the Rohingya strategy and also in the forms of the NGO Affairs Bureau.

Fourthly, the locals feel that aid efforts are being seriously impaired by the endless visits of local and foreign dignitaries. State protocol demands that the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police greet in person some of

the VVIPs and they be escorted with contingents of armed police to ensure safe movements. “Can we afford such luxuries at a time when the nation is in emergency mode”, some ask. Visits, speeches, and photo sessions of ministers, MPs, and sundry in the refugee camps only reflect how insensitive they are of the urgency of the situation. Perhaps time has come to remind the VIPs during their incoming flight to Cox's Bazar the adage that acts of genuine charity demand that the left hand does not get to know what the right hand gives!

And finally, local NGOs feel they have been marginalised. The obsession of UN agencies and bilateral donors to assign responsibility of distribution of certain provisions to a mega-NGO, which thus far had very limited engagement and experience in refugee management, is deeply resented. Contesting the “total and single handle approach” in taking care of food supply and education, they demand allowing local Civil Society Organisations (CSO) a role for “ensuring innovation and diversification”. In a note to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary General to Office of the Humanitarian Affairs who visited Cox's Bazar in early October they observed such an approach is contrary to the principle of “equitable and dignified partnership for an accountable and sustainable growth of CSOs in Bangladesh”. The local organisations were unequivocal in demanding that they should not be seen as “local implementers/partners” but as “decision making partners”. Their list of demands include hiring local consultants, staff members and vendors for supplying goods and services; non-poaching of local staff members by mega-NGOs and international agencies; and publication of project and aid data along the lines of International Aid Transparency Initiative principles.

The above narrative adequately establishes the point that refugee management is a complex and multi-faceted challenge. The best way to meet this challenge is through making decisions with a participatory process. The people of Ukhia and Teknaf have demonstrated their courage and fortitude in facing a challenge of mammoth magnitude. Despite severe resource constraints, they have remained resolute in upholding the dignity of the refugees, sacrificing their own interests. It's time that those at the helm of the state acknowledge their contribution and ensure their voices are heeded in planning and implementing the refugee management strategy.



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