

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

Bangladesh's neighbours must find a durable solution

SHAMSUL BARI

Each refugee exodus looks different—in the numbers of human beings and the duration of their journey, in the acts of violence and atrocity, in the intensity of human suffering. Responses differ in the receiving country and the international community to the needs of the refugees; prospects for durable solutions depend on each situation. Throughout my extensive career with the UN refugee agency UNHCR, I had the opportunity to witness some of the most complex refugee situations globally.

In all the above respects, the predicament of the large influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh in recent months must rank among the most difficult and complex refugee situations witnessed by the international community. The unending flow of emaciated, weary and hungry men, women and children, trudging through mud and torrential rain as they enter Bangladesh, having walked for days and nights through hostile and dangerous terrain, with hardly any belongings, makes the Rohingya crisis one of the most painful in human history.

They have been greeted by unmistakable displays of heart-warming compassion and hospitality. The Rohingya refugee crisis should become known for its paradoxical mix of the most intense human suffering of the arriving refugees and the most generous hospitality of the government and people of Bangladesh. This spontaneous and unflinching response should go into the annals of refugee history as a shining example of humanitarianism.

In doing what they did, the people of Bangladesh were mindful of the generous hospitality that ten million Bengali refugees from the then East Pakistan had received in the neighbouring states of India during our liberation struggle in 1971. Our neighbours received us with open arms; we must do the same for the Rohingyas. It is an essential element of the humanitarian tradition of our region.

Beyond this generous immediate help, there is the need for a durable solution. This is where Bangladesh needs help from all concerned: from Myanmar as the country of origin of the refugees, and from our other immediate neighbours, India and China, both of whom have a stake in resolving the crisis. I would underline the word "stake." In my long UN career, I have seen how political short-sightedness of governments have led to protracted refugee crisis and the resulting insecurity and instability not only for the receiving and sending countries, but also for the region. This must not be allowed to happen.

The refugees who are arriving in Bangladesh today are all worried that they may not be able to go back to their country at all. Such feelings breed frustration, despair and hopelessness. There are many instances where protracted refugee situations have led to armed struggles that have not only destabilised the lives of the refugees but also shaken entire countries and regions.

I have worked with Palestinian refugees in Gaza and across the Middle East and learnt



PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

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firsthand of their aspirations to return to their homeland, which have remained unrealised since 1948. The loss of human lives and the continuing violence that affect both the Palestinian territories and Israel must constantly remind us of the need to find early solutions to large refugee problems.

A relatively smaller number of Rohingya refugees came to Bangladesh at various times since the late 1970s and early 1990s, when I had the opportunity to deal with them. Most of them went back but many remained and some had spread out to various parts of the world. Some of them, I later learnt, joined the Taliban forces as mercenaries in Afghanistan. We now hear that some Rohingya refugees abroad were behind alleged attacks on police stations in late August 2017, which reportedly triggered the military operations in Myanmar. They may wish to carry on their struggle, should they feel compelled.

It does not require much to imagine the situation likely to arise if close to a million Rohingya refugees, reportedly in Bangladesh today, including those who trickled back to Bangladesh intermittently over the years, find themselves living in overcrowded refugee centres with no hope of a solution. Surely, they are not going to remain in such impossible circumstances indefinitely. What would be the alternatives for them?

Such large numbers can surely not be locally integrated. Nor can they resettle in third countries without attracting those remaining in Myanmar to follow the path. One alternative would then be to join those who see their only choice is to take up arms to reclaim their rights in Myanmar. The latter's ranks would thus swell. They will have no dearth of sympathisers to support their cause from all over the world. The fleeing IS and Al Qaeda forces from the Middle East and Afghanistan are looking for causes to join. And many would support them financially and otherwise. The refugees must be spared from such radicalisation.

I have seen in my recent work as UN Special Rapporteur in Somalia how the so-called Al-Afghanis, members of defeated Al Qaeda forces fleeing Afghanistan and Pakistan, joined forces with Al-Shabab and destabilised and devastated that entire country. Such a scenario must be averted in South Asia.

The Bangladesh government is known for its resolve to fight all types of terrorism—Islamist or otherwise—on its territory. If liberation forces develop in camps in Bangladesh, they would certainly be dealt with severely by Bangladesh forces. Where would they go then? Their guerrilla activities would certainly spill over into India and Myanmar, and possibly elsewhere. If that happens, all efforts of Myanmar to stabilise the Rakhine State for development and progress is bound to flounder. This will also affect the hopes of India and China to become Myanmar's partners for development in the concerned region.

The only win-win situation for all the protagonists would be to find an amicable solution where the voluntary return of the refugees to their homeland and recognition of their status under the laws of Myanmar are ensured. This has been recommended by the Kofi Annan Commission, endorsed by Myanmar's Nobel Laureate leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and supported by the international community.

This brings me to India's role in the process. India's initial reaction, to side with Myanmar's position, immediately after the military crackdown on the Rohingyas that triggered the recent refugee flow, caused a great deal of consternation in Bangladesh. This does not augur well for the burgeoning India-Bangladesh relations.

Fortunately, quick efforts by India to amend its initial position by taking pro-Bangladesh stance in international fora subsequently, as well as providing vital assistance to the refugees in Bangladesh camps, have stopped the rot to some extent.

This must now be cemented by India exerting its formidable influence on Myanmar and the international community at large to promote Bangladesh's efforts towards voluntary repatriation of the refugees.

Next, agitation by Indian hardliners against the entry of Rohingya refugees into India and the government's position to deport 40,000 Rohingya refugees that are already there must be stopped as a confidence-building measure in the region. Instead, the value of Bangladesh's war against terrorism and effective cooperation with it to prevent any such development there that may negatively affect India must be extolled. It is equally important to highlight India's long tradition of aiding and protecting refugees. That tradition must be displayed as an essential element of India's emergence as a world leader.

Despite the fear and despondency caused by the influx of such an enormous number of refugees into Bangladesh, and the tales of inhuman sufferings they endured, there is reason for hope. The new Secretary General of the UN was the UN High Commissioner for Refugees before assuming his new job. He knows how such massive refugee problems affect world peace. He has already alerted the international community about it. The UN High Commissioners for Refugees and Human Rights have also sounded unprecedented alarms.

Good diplomacy on the part of Bangladesh, aided by the credit it earned for its generous hospitality to the refugees, assisted by India and hopefully China and others, must now help Myanmar accept that the only realistic solution for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is voluntary repatriation in full security and human dignity.

Dr Shamsul Bari is a former director of UNHCR. He served as UNHCR Representative in New Delhi in the early 1990s. He is presently the chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIIB).

Food security for Rohingyas is beyond blanket assistance

CHRISTA RÄDER

October 16 marks World Food Day, an annual event which this year focuses on food security, conflict, displacement and migration. To date, about a million Rohingyas have fled Rakhine State of Myanmar, over half of them since August 25 this year. This mass influx presents a tremendous challenge not only to their food security but to that of the Bangladeshi host communities as well.

The government of Bangladesh and local communities in Cox's Bazar have shown a strong and praiseworthy commitment to care for this population in crisis; so has the international community. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has by now reached 570,000 people with ongoing rice distributions, nearly the whole incoming population. This is in addition to the food assistance provided to over 100,000 people living in official camps and makeshift sites in Cox's Bazar who have arrived from Myanmar in earlier waves. But rice alone is not enough. Other food items such as pulses and oil are needed. Nutritious food is necessary for small children and pregnant and nursing women in order to reduce the risk of widespread child malnutrition.

Thanks to the commitment and hard work of the government of Bangladesh, the armed forces, host communities, government and private donors, and NGO partners, we will be able to provide more diverse food assistance to the refugees for a further few months. But long-term food assistance for all is beyond the capacity of WFP and the international community, no matter how much goodwill there is. Host communities have been very generous in sheltering and supporting the new arrivals, but for how long will they be willing and able?

Food security beyond the initial period of blanket assistance will require that the new arrivals have opportunities and support for self-reliance, to the extent they can contribute. Men and women should have the opportunity to increasingly earn their basic living through wage labour or self-employment that does not distort local markets. It will require cooperation not only from the government and NGOs, but also from private sector partners to create such opportunities.

To facilitate this process of increased self-reliance and to reduce the pressure on a particular location, it would be desirable if Rohingya settlements could be distributed more broadly rather than being clustered in a few mega sites. As it stands, the clusters of makeshift camps are difficult to supply due to storage and road transport limitations. They will also make it more difficult for people to earn their living. Tightly clustered settlements are also vulnerable to natural disasters, including landslides and cyclones.

The recent influx of over half a million people is a big challenge for an area of Bangladesh that has faced challenges well before the current crisis. To ensure food security and a decent living for both local communities and new arrivals, we must collectively look to create opportunities from which both can benefit. In doing so, we may prevent an even bigger crisis from arising when negotiations could be underway for a safe return of those who have fled to Bangladesh.

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The youth prioritises agriculture



BJORN LOMBERG

DISCUSSIONS about development spending and reducing Bangladesh's climate vulnerability are often dominated—understandably—by politicians and donors. These are the decision-makers who affect how funds are spent.

By way of example, the Danish government recently announced it has earmarked Tk 383 million (30 million kroner) to help Bangladesh face climate change. The lion's share, Tk 255 million (20 million kroner), will support roadworks in the district of Noakhali, while Tk 64 million (five million kroner) will go to protecting water sources, toilets and latrines from flooding. Another five million kroner has been set aside to help Dhaka to handle future climate challenges, including the "exchange of experiences" with cities in Denmark.

These priorities will, no doubt, result in greater resilience and improvements in infrastructure. But how would the most climate-vulnerable Bangladeshis themselves like this aid to be directed?

Over 2015 and 2016, the Copenhagen Consensus Center undertook an extensive research project, Bangladesh Priorities, in partnership with BRAC. We commissioned teams of dozens of specialist economists from Bangladesh, South Asia, and around the world to study 76 specific solutions to improve the future of the country, and support the government's Vision 2021 initiative.

Two volumes of academic research have just been published in Dhaka, detailing the findings. The books also present the conclusions of an eminent panel including Finn Kydland, Nobel laureate economist, Selima Ahmad, president and founder of the

Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, KAS Murshid, director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, and Mushtaque Chowdhury, vice chair of BRAC. These economists were tasked with studying all of the new research and identifying the top priorities.

They concluded that there is a compelling case to invest more in three areas: tuberculosis (TB) treatment, infant nutrition,

its young voices be heard and their concerns taken into account in policymaking and development planning. Nearly a third of the nation is between the ages of 10 and 24.

With funding from Denmark's donor organisation DANIDA, we set out to hold youth forums across Bangladesh. Presenting 25 key interventions from the research findings, we asked the youngsters to do the same as the eminent panel: Identify their top

another set of forums was facilitated by the Bangladesh Community Radio Station Association (BCRA) and included 214 youngsters.

Community radio stations serve the coastal regions and the majority of the climate-vulnerable communities across Bangladesh. Community radio is seen as having an important role helping to combat climate change, and the stations have been recognised

research study found that increasing agricultural labour productivity "is the only way to increase the resilience of Bangladesh to climate change and to meet long-term development goals." Investing around Tk 729,000 (USD 9,000) per worker over two decades could boost agricultural productivity by 10 percent—meaning that each taka spent would generate a return of nearly Tk 4.

One of the students remarked, "If development aid can support climate-oriented agriculture, the youth can be influenced to work in the sector." One of the participants in the BCRA-led youth forum asked, "If we don't have food sufficiency in 2021, what will we do with Digital Bangladesh?"

The same question might be asked of other priorities. Of what use is improved infrastructure or the "exchange of experiences", if Bangladesh does not achieve food sufficiency?

Improving agricultural productivity is the best climate-related development investment that can be made, yet it is often overshadowed by more visible but less powerful "climate aid" investments.

To achieve the most we can with development spending in Bangladesh, we need to ensure that a broad range of voices are heard, including those of tomorrow's leaders.

Youth people will be affected for many years to come by the decisions made today—and therefore, in the next phase of the Bangladesh Priorities project, we hope to continue working with the government, donors and international NGOs about what should be done to help make Vision 2021 a reality for the youth of Bangladesh, so that they can enjoy its fruits by 2021.

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There is a clear consensus that young people believe the top priority for Bangladesh should be boosting agricultural productivity.

PHOTO: STAR

and e-governance. We have conveyed these findings to the prime minister and senior ministers in the Bangladesh government, and we are excited to be working with the government to turn these research findings into action.

But we are also interested in hearing the voices of Bangladeshis themselves—especially young people. As Bangladesh strives to reach middle-income status by 2021, it's crucial that

priorities for action.

The 25 interventions were selected by BRAC and Copenhagen Consensus, after consultation with the Access to Information (a2i) programme of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD). Youth forums organised by BRAC-RED drew 730 young people from different universities across all eight divisions of Bangladesh, while

as critical agents of change in climate-vulnerable areas by UNDP Bangladesh.

What we heard was a clear consensus that young people believe the top priority for Bangladesh should be boosting agricultural productivity.

This is one of the proposals studied under the topic of climate by researchers we asked to examine the smartest ways to better prepare Bangladesh for global warming. The

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