

# Learning the ropes

*From Bangladesh standing its moral ground as it takes in another influx of Rohingya refugees to Australia's well-structured refugee resettlement programme, there's a lot that we can learn from one another to better manage refugee crises*

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NOWSHIN

**T**HE Bangladesh government has been globally lauded—and rightfully so—for welcoming with open arms, once again, the persecuted Rohingya people with whom the country has a checkered history. The Rohingyas came to Bangladesh in droves in 1978, 1992, and the 2010s. But at this juncture, many are wondering just how the latest influx of Rohingyas—the highest yet, numbering over 600,000—is going to pan out in the longer term. With Bangladesh—as overpopulated and resource-strained as it is—now hosting almost a million Rohingya refugees, the absence of a coherent plan in dealing with a crisis not of its own doing is turning out to be detrimental. Conditions at the camps are deteriorating and the dangers of child and sex trafficking are becoming more and more real as we speak.

The dilemma we are facing perhaps is a result of any government having to tow the difficult line between humanitarianism and realpolitik: At what point does ceaselessly taking on the burden of more and more refugees turn into an opportunistic tool for the sending country (in this case Myanmar) to achieve its internal objectives? Is Myanmar not taking advantage of Bangladesh's compassion to rid the Rakhine State entirely of the Rohingya?

With a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the repatriation talks, it looks like the Rohingya crisis at our doorstep is only going to balloon with time. It also makes one wonder why Bangladesh—which is no stranger to hosting refugees—has not been able to do a better job of refugee management, particularly

with regard to the Rohingya. If criticising the handling of the latest influx of Rohingyas seems unfair or premature, then what of the thousands who have come here previously and continue to live in squalid camps, with their movement restricted and with little to no chance of ever getting a proper education?

A major reason behind Bangladesh's inability to better manage the crisis is the utter failure of the international community—the usual suspect—to pressure the Myanmar government into bringing an end to the repression of the minority in the first place, so that Rohingya refugees stranded in Bangladesh would feel confident enough to go back. I say the international community because refugee management isn't a one-man show. However, that does not completely absolve the host country of its responsibilities to do its best to protect the rights of these people who have left behind everything they have ever known in fear of persecution. Sadly though, that's not how it always works out.

Refugee crises are ridden with dilemmas. A dilemma for the oppressed to leave or stay. A dilemma for governments to condemn or remain silent. A dilemma for countries to refuse or let refugees in. And once they've done their part to take in a certain "quota", there's yet again a dilemma about doing "too much" for fear that this would act as a pull factor. This has been the case with the Rohingya refugees who have come to Bangladesh in previous exoduses and have had to face restrictions such as limited access to education and no permission to work despite being here for decades.

Bangladesh isn't alone when it comes to being cautious about becoming a haven for refugees. A similar line of reasoning seems to have also been taken by developed



**A Rohingya refugee holds his son on his shoulder as they walk through a rice field after crossing the Naf river from Myanmar into Bangladesh on October 9, 2017.**

PHOTO: AFP

countries like Australia which are far better equipped to handle refugee crises of the scale that we are facing. Australia's controversial offshore processing centres—long regarded as its Achilles' heel in its history of immigration policy—were established in order to stop boat arrivals of asylum seekers to prevent deaths at sea and "break the people smugglers' business model" (as per the official narrative).

But there lies an underlying objective of minimising the "pull factor"—much like the rationale behind imposing restrictions upon Rohingyas who have been living in camps in Bangladesh for years. In fact, multiple Australian immigration

ministers have put forward the not-so-subtle argument that taking in refugees from offshore detention facilities is akin to "putting sugar on the table".

In such humanitarian crises, governments inevitably find themselves between a rock and a hard place: Striking a balance between the moral responsibility of granting refuge to the persecuted and treading with enough caution so as to avoid negative consequences. In light of the critical situation at the Manus Island immigration detention centre—where refugees and asylum seekers have been defying the closure bids by Australia and Papua New Guinea and, as of writing this article,

had until Sunday to stay in the camp—it is clear that the Australian government isn't ready to soften its stance on asylum seekers arriving by boat.

But despite commonalities of ethical dilemmas, no two countries have the same experience in dealing with a refugee crisis—and there's a lot that one can learn from another. For instance, the symbolic significance of the Bangladesh government's opening the borders to hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas is immense: It should be a lesson in compassion for developed countries that can do much more than they are doing to resettle the most vulnerable refugees. But there is also a lot to be learnt for

Bangladesh from countries like Australia and Canada when it comes to refugee management.

In Australia, for example, where the resettlement intake for 2017-18 has been increased to 16,250 spots, an extremely well-structured, comprehensive refugee resettlement programme has been put into place. From ensuring that its governance involves all tiers of the government (federal, state, local) to the provision of medical benefits, interpretation and translation services, and skills and education programmes, Australia's refugee resettlement programme can serve as a model/blueprint for countries like Bangladesh where a strong mechanism of refugee management is lacking. This does not mean Bangladesh should also come up with a "resettlement programme" for the Rohingyas; rather what it can do is take inspiration from existing models of refugee programmes, such as the one in Australia, to come up with its own mechanism to better handle the crisis.

Managing such humanitarian crises comes with extreme complexities to which there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. It requires the Herculean task of skillfully balancing the art of diplomacy, assuaging public opinion, and reallocating limited resources. But if there's one overarching lesson to be learnt, it is to ensure that the traumatising state of in-between, that is often a result of governments wanting a quick fix, does not prolong the cycle of suffering and exploitation of hapless victims of persecution—whether it be asylum seekers and refugees stranded in Nauru or PNG or undocumented Rohingyas in Bangladesh stuck in limbo.

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# Auschwitz, horrors of war and present day

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**T**HE bright, sunny day and blue sky seemed a little out of place as we strolled around in the infamous concentration camp in the Polish town of Oswiecim. Auschwitz was the largest of the German Nazi concentration camps and extermination centres where more than 1.1 million lives were taken. A

chambers and torture on Jewish people. At the site I got to know that the camps were initially built for political prisoners, homosexuals and gypsies. Previously, I got some idea about the systemic targeting of victims during my visit to the Topography of Terror in Berlin. Records of the newly arrived men and women were handled discreetly, and lies were told about disinfecting their bodies, as if for sacrifice. They were asked to take an innocent shower that would eventually kill them. Pictures show how people were judged upon

are open to all. Inside, you can see the living quarters, washrooms and toilets of the inmates as well as the office room of the supervising officer. The corridors are lined with the photographs of registered prisoners, men and women with their heads shaved, and you can see anxiety and fear clearly painted on their faces.

It hurt when I stepped into a room full of hair inside a glass enclosure. I felt how dignity was snatched from those simple people. Gold teeth and artificial limbs were taken off dead

those cells were barely enough for the entry of a small animal. When a prisoner did enter the phone-booth-sized cubicle, he/she was not standing alone in punishment—four people had to stand all night before another hard day's work.

Sometimes I feel that certain places have tortured souls floating around there. I look around in silence as if to grasp their presence. Then again, torture has not left us. Think of the schools and abandoned buildings turned to torture cells during our

be aware of the horrors of war and discrimination. Memorials exist for us to place homage to history, which tells us that tortures, conflicts and wars need to be erased from the face of the earth.

Despite the existence of the UN Convention against torture, protection of human rights remains a vague

concept. Cruelty, perhaps, is too deeply ingrained in the human DNA. Before we know it, Saydnaya may be the next Auschwitz, so we really need to be ready to do anything to prevent that possibility.

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**Visitors to Auschwitz, on January 25, 2015, behind barbed-wire fences at the memorial site of the former Nazi concentration camp, days before the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the camp.**

PHOTO: JOEL SAGET/AFP

gloomy winter day with a grey horizon would have been the perfect default setting for such a place. Its proximity to Krakow allowed us to visit the memorial and museum to pay homage to the victims.

Growing up hearing of the horrors of torture, I was wondering if I could digest the gory reality of the place. As we walked past and through the buildings, and saw what was left of the infamous camp, we sank into deep melancholy.

Nazi concentration camps were known for the gas

arrival—good health meant they could be used as workers in the camp (irrigation or ponds), and those who didn't have that were doomed to die.

Auschwitz has an extension—Birkenau—which has a railway track and a platform where the victims were received. All this is very painful to see. No wonder there was a media uproar when a tourist took a selfie at this place in 2014.

The museum and its exhibits prove proof of unimaginable suffering. The original buildings have been conserved duly and

prisoners. Shoes and spectacles are piled up in remembrance of the lost souls. There are certain quarters prepared just for the children; walking along the wooden bunkers was really heart-breaking.

If the prisoners were not killed immediately after their arrival, there were other horrible means of inflicting torture on them. Disobedience meant that one could be executed (through shooting), hung backwards with their hands tied, starved, or confined in the "dark" or "standing" cells. The doors to

liberation war in 1971.

Currently, the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State face marginalisation and eradication. Bangladesh is bearing the burden of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas who have fled persecution in their homeland. In this day and age, children are still subjected to deplorable treatment and torture by adults who are supposed to protect them. War, too, has not left us.

Auschwitz concentration camp is accessible to all. The idea is to let people know and

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