

# ROHINGYA REPATRIATION AGREEMENT

# Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

MAYA BAROLO-RIZVI

**A**MIDST widespread international outcry and faced with the strong diplomatic stance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Myanmar government has been persuaded to repatriate the Rohingya refugees, according to an agreement reached between the two countries late last week. Experts, however, are not optimistic, as the criteria for the repatriation of the Rohingyas is yet to be worked out by the Joint Working Group. The United Nations is not directly involved and the agreement does not have the guarantee of the international community.

If the Rohingyas are able to return to their homes with an agreed process that would lead to their full citizenship, the world can breathe a sigh of relief and move on. Bangladesh will have shown its humanitarian commitment and acted as a leader on the global stage, showcasing our values of plurality, tolerance and openness. However, as the experience of the repatriation of refugees across the globe has shown, the process is often uncertain and slow.

The Rohingyas who came to Bangladesh in 1992 are yet to be repatriated. In the case that the Rohingya repatriation is not as speedy as one might wish, we must begin to expand the scope of relief efforts beyond the immediate term.

There is only six months to go till the next monsoon season, when many of the houses in the Rohingya refugee camp—built on the sides of hills and small ravines—will slide away because of rain. Before that, winter will come and with already existing fuel shortages, families will struggle to stay warm. Cyclone season will follow, and with it will come waterborne diseases and the risk of pandemics.

Camp administrators and relief



Many of the houses in the Rohingya refugee camps are built on the sides of hills and small ravines, making them susceptible to landslides because of rain.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

agencies are struggling to meet the immediate needs of the refugees and it is only natural that food, shelter, sanitation, health and security are the first priorities. There are over 200,000 school-age children and it is imperative that going forward relief efforts include arrangements for the provision of education.

It is understandable that the government has shied away from looking beyond providing immediate humanitarian relief for fear that it might be misconstrued in Myanmar as a signal that Bangladesh is prepared to keep the Rohingya for the long haul.

For that reason, perhaps formal education does not feature in the discourse. Moreover, given the recent diplomatic agreement,

investing in the development of the refugees may on the surface seem to be a waste, if the Rohingyas are on the verge of returning home. If that turns out to be the case, all we would have lost is some effort, time and money, which is a far better proposition than looking back in retrospect—if the process takes longer than

expected—regretting that we could have and should have invested in sustainable developmental opportunities.

A more considered response would be to see this humanitarian disaster also as a developmental opportunity. The international community has the chance to invest in the future of a people that have been historically excluded and marginalised. Along

with the children's future, aid agencies must also consider the situation of the thousands of women whose husbands have been killed, leaving them as the primary breadwinners of the family.

When they return to Myanmar, these women will be the heads of their households but are completely unequipped for the task. Investing in skills development and vocational training with which they can support their families will not only help the Rohingya women in the short-run but will be a tool for development within their community and eventually in the Rakhine state.

Development initiatives however must go beyond the camps and into the surrounding areas. The local

community in Cox's Bazar has been remarkably hospitable; ordinary people have demonstrated extraordinary charitable instincts as well as an impressive ability to adapt to a huge influx of outsiders. But it has not come without its challenges.

Given the huge demographic shift—estimates say that for every 10 people, there are now seven refugees to three Bangladeshis—the cost of living has increased several folds and there is often a scarcity of consumer goods in the market. Both the civil administration and aid agencies have recognised the importance of ensuring that the needs of the local population are not neglected.

Of course, fear remains that the refugees may not want to return to Myanmar. So long as there is lack of safety, it is neither likely that they will return nor should we force them to. But experience shows that when conditions improve and safety returns, no one wants to live in a foreign land, especially under such dire conditions. In 1971, following the end of the Liberation War, 10 million Bangladeshis returned in days, rather than weeks, and without any assistance nearly everyone found his or her own way home. We can be sure that once the Myanmar government creates the necessary conditions in the Rakhine state, the Rohingya will return home.

The Rohingya influx is not the result of a sudden policy change of the Myanmar government. Nor is it the result of the supposed ARSA attacks on Myanmar security forces, which took place after the Rohingya exodus began. The eviction was a systematic, brutal and deliberate attempt to rid Myanmar of an unwanted ethnic group.

As the US recently acknowledged, it was ethnic cleansing—and nothing short of a war crime. If the world community fails to respond adequately to this situation,

minorities in every plural society in the world will be left at the mercy of majority communities. The National Human Rights Commission should use the interim period to document and record the human rights violations and prepare individual case histories. If in the future the international community wants to convene a war crimes tribunal to bring the perpetrators of the ethnic cleansing to trial, this documentation will be necessary.

Bangladesh's own experience as refugees and of genocide in 1971 has perhaps sensitised us to the needs of the Rohingyas. The PM's response to the Rohingya refugee crisis showed remarkable compassion as well as political bravery. No less worthy of praise is the civil administration and the tireless, dedicated effort of the international agencies and non-governmental organisations, which have worked together to avert what could have been one of the 21st century's greatest humanitarian disasters. And the exceptional hospitality of the local Cox's Bazar community has been an inspiration to the world.

The recent agreement between Dhaka and Naypyidaw is a success. We should all be optimistic about the bilateral agreement but we should not lose sight of the reality on the ground. The repatriation of refugees is a long and tedious process and much will need to be done before the Rakhine state is safe for the Rohingyas to return.

There is still a chance that the overwhelming international reaction and Aung San Suu Kyi's meteoric fall from grace may stir the Myanmar government into action, but we cannot afford to abandon our efforts now and, in fact, must begin to plan for the medium, if not long-term.

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## The glaring gaps in our research

  
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In certain kinds of

literature on NGO activities in Bangladesh—documents, annual/mid-term reviews, etc.—there is often this methodological explanation. For example, for the sake of argument, if we accept that there is an "objectivist" science behind this kind of social research, which is of course being questioned in various forums, I would still ask, how "scientific" is this research design anyway? For example, can a rise or decrease in any number be always attributed to the work of the development organisation involved? Take, for example, the case of child marriage, an issue on which a lot of development agencies work. What if at the inception of a development project in an area, the occurrence of this phenomena was recorded to be 30 percent and, say, after three years of work, the percentage came down to 25 percent? Can we "scientifically" claim that this reduction was due to the "successful" operation of the organisation in question?

I don't think so because, firstly, people don't live in incubators, in controlled situations, and researching humans in controlled situations is being increasingly seen as unethical, if not totally uncalled for. In the case of the example of child marriage, there can be many factors for which the rate can increase or decrease, and all the changes cannot be credited to one NGO working in that area. It could be possible if such organisations were operating in isolated islands, which is not possible. Despite this flawed premise, however, this type of study/research report continues to be manufactured in the development industry of Bangladesh and perhaps

the world over. There are other complications when it comes to such practices. How can one come up with a different explanation other than the one desired by the agency that has funded the study in the first place? Like it or not, often some of these studies are funded by NGOs in the country. For me, this last question brings to the fore the more pertinent point related to the state of our social science research and the research culture that exists today. Generally, when it comes to doing social science research in Bangladesh, I feel there is an extremely limited option. But this was not always the case. Why haven't we been able to develop a vibrant research culture in the universities? Isn't it fair to say that our universities, especially the public ones, were supposed to contribute a lot in this regard?

Frankly, after working for several years in a public university, I can only say that research activities get the least priority in our universities. Our universities today have become more like "teaching centres," a far cry from the guidelines of the 1973 Act under which some of the major public universities are run and where there is clear guidance on teaching and research. If there are some researchers known for doing world-class research, that's because they have managed to do so all by themselves with no university support. There is usually no institutional structure to promote research among the teachers. Nor is there any fund for them to travel to other countries to



attend conferences or for other research-related purposes. Again, when it comes to accessing online resources, the facilities provided to the students and teachers are very poor. It seems that for the university authorities, research-related activities are the least of their concerns, whereas there is no lack of vision when fancy cars are bought for the newly appointed to the administration!

In the UK where I have had the opportunity of studying for a brief period, I saw a strong research infrastructure. They have institutions like Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) that provide funding for research organisations, university

faculties, and other professionals or individuals with appropriate affiliations. Funds are given on a competitive basis. Proposals are often written by university faculties and include plans for years of research on a particular topic or a set of related issues. These research projects are characterised by innovative thinking, often taking into consideration the latest of what is available in research methods, with very innovative methodological strategies guided by strong theoretical overtures and ethical guidelines. Throughout Europe, there are many organisations where discipline-specific funding is provided. A lot of efforts are put in at the beginning of the projects. Only

after hard work can the scholars, individually and in groups, avail themselves of the funds and conduct the research. Thus, through years of hard work and preparations, publications come out and "new" knowledge is produced.

None of these exists in Bangladesh in any significant proportion, when it comes to the social science research. Development organisations sometimes provide some opportunities but these are very limited in scope, approach and imagination. Some University Grants Commission (UGC) based funds are available but they are not adequate and do not allow the researchers to plan big with integrated options for student researchers pursuing MPhil/PhD degrees at their universities. The scene is somewhat different in our neighbouring country India where students pursuing terminal degrees receive various types of funding for their education.

Some years ago, I discovered a website on Bangladesh Social Science Research Council and what I gathered was that they had an office with some directors and a very modest funding opportunity without any clear mission or goal. Googling very recently, I could not even find the website. It seemed to have vanished into thin air! I think it is high time we thought through these issues. But the question is, who will come forward?

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