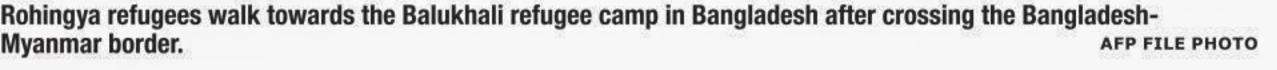
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Rohingya refugee children pose for a picture at the Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on November 15, REUTERS FILE PHOTO

"Rohingya refugee crisis is a time bomb that must be quickly defused to avoid any future flare-up"

Dr. Shamsul Bari, a former Director of UNHCR, talks to The Daily Star about the Rohingya refugee crisis, its local, regional and global implications and the possible solutions to the crisis.

Based on your experience in dealing with refugees the world over, how would you categorise the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh? During my long career with UNHCR, I had the opportunity to deal with refugee problems all over the world. In fact, the influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh in 1978 was one of the first refugee groups I dealt with at the UNHCR, which I joined the same year.

However, compared to that group of around 250,000 refugees, most of whom went back, and a similar number of Rohingya refugees who came in the early 1990s, who too largely went back, and a lesser number who came in 2012 and drew international attention for their desperate efforts to travel to Malaysia and other Asean countries in rickety boats, the influx of August 2017 was of a very different nature and on a much larger

How would you assess Bangladesh's handling of the Rohingya crisis?

International concern and support for the

Rohingya refugees was more than matched by the generosity and support of the government and people of Bangladesh. The spontaneous decision of the government, with the wholehearted support of the local population, to receive so many refugees is rare in history. It has rightly earned international accolades for Bangladesh and for our prime minister.

What is your impression about the evolution of the situation in the last two years? Two years on, the plight of the refugees does not dominate international headlines in the same way anymore. Like many other examples of human resilience in coping with humanitarian calamities of such a huge magnitude, the refugees are now ensconced in hundreds of densely populated camps spread over a large area bordering Myanmar.

Despite admirable success in containing such a volatile situation, there is no room for complacency. The atmosphere in the overcrowded camps and the surrounding region is heating up for reasons not uncommon in such situations.

The statistics from the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh indicate that 52 percent of the refugee population in the camps are below the age of adulthood. Imagine the situation a few years hence when they grow older and find there is no hope for their future and they see no light at the end of the tunnel. It will be an extremely explosive situation.

At the same time, the hospitality of the local population is being strained to the limit. Their complaints about refugee encroachments on their lives, livelihoods and environment are getting louder and progressively more threatening. As time passes, they are likely to get worse.

Clearly, the most urgent need is to inject some hope into the minds of the refugees and the surrounding host population alike. Both must be assured that they are not forgotten, and serious efforts are being made to resolve the crisis sooner than later. Unless there is progress in that direction, darker and more ominous clouds will continue to build up.

In such an atmosphere, there will be no dearth of exploiters to take advantage of the situation and make it worse. Such possibilities have increased manifold because of the fractured international politics of our times. With their help, some refugees can be turned into terrorists, or freedom fighters, depending upon the perception of the observer. But their actions will inevitably involve violence, which will beget more violence and the consequences that follow.

In conjunction with this, there are ominous signs of an onset of compassion fatigue among international donors. By the end of July this year, only 35 percent of the Joint Response Plan of the UN for the care and maintenance of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh for 2019, totalling USD 920.5 million, has been met. If the contributions do not pick up soon, serious consequences cannot be avoided.

What do you see as the possible solution for the

Like any other large-scale refugee situation, the best solution for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is to go back home voluntarily, in safety and dignity, in pursuit of normal lives once again. Voluntary repatriation is normally the only viable solution for most refugee situations in the world. Around 70 percent of world's refugees since World War II have found durable solutions by returning home. Under such circumstances, what strategy should Bangladesh adopt?

Bangladesh had three likely options before it: 1) to let the UN take the leadership role both for assistance and durable solutions for the refugees; 2) to join others in denouncing Myanmar, pursue the accountability path, even if it led to enmity and hostility with it; and 3)



Dr. Shamsul Bari

to undertake a bilateral approach of diplomacy, persuasion and cooperation with Myanmar to promote quick repatriation of the refugees.

Bangladesh opted for the third option. It led to negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar which resulted in the voluntary repatriation agreement between the two, first reached in November 2017 and later revised in October 2018. It is not clear whether both the parties seriously believed in quick implementation of the agreement or whether it was a strategy to start the process, hoping that it would progressively gather momentum.

However, it is clear now that the strategy has not worked and unless new life is injected into the process, unrest in the camps will grow, with all its negative consequences. To avert such a situation, there is, therefore, an urgent need for the two neighbours to come together-this time with the help and support of the UN and the international community—to develop a comprehensive long-term strategy. The strategy should include clear-cut roles for all concerned.

As the host country, beset with such a large refugee population, Bangladesh will have to take the lead in any comprehensive strategy. To begin with, it will have to take the initiative to engage, with the involvement with the UN if considered useful, in renewed and more focused negotiations with Myanmar to resolve the crisis.

The focus and objectives of the new approach must be made clear to Myanmar and the world at large. Both sides must commit to maintain the timetable which may be staggered, if deemed necessary, but firmly pursued. The progress made, as well as the difficulties confronted, must be made public at regular intervals. It is important for the refugees to know what is being done to prepare the ground for their return so that they get mentally prepared to go back when the circumstances are right. For this to happen, it is essential that the UN and other relevant international partners are involved both in preparing the ground and receiving the returnees. UN involvement in particular

is essential to boost refugee confidence in favour of return.

Bangladesh will also have to undertake other bilateral and multilateral initiatives to keep the issue alive in the mind of the international community and to garner their support in ensuring Myanmar's commitment to the process. Appointing a special representative of the prime minister for the Rohingya issue, who would promote the message all over the world in a relentless manner, may help. It would be immensely useful if the prime minister continues to undertake visits to important capitals to share Bangladesh's concern with world leaders and brief them about the dangers of stagnation and non-return, as she did recently with China.

It must be clearly understood by all concerned that without a sea-change in the mindset of Myanmar and all those who may have anything to do with the Rohingyas in Myanmar, there can be no repatriation. For voluntary repatriation to succeed, the negative attitude of the local population and officials of Rakhine State, as well as that of the majority Burman population of Myanmar towards the Rohingyas, must change.

Fortunately, good guidance is available on how to go about the difficult job of creating proper conditions for return. The Rakhine Advisory Commission (RAC), led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, provided, in its August 2017 final report, an overarching framework for addressing the fundamental challenges that underpin the development, security and human rights crises in Rakhine State. They are critical both for the development of the region and for

persons (IDPs), intercommunal cohesion, strengthening trust in security sector, relationship with Bangladesh, regional relations and implementation of the recommendations.

Among these, the two key areas of immediate concern are the cross-cutting subjects of citizenship and freedom of movement. They would need priority attention as they are of fundamental concern for prospective returnees.

Bangladesh's commitment to the refugees should include closer attention to education, health and safe housing needs of the refugees in camps. It may be recalled that international concerns were repeatedly expressed about stringent policies of the Bangladesh government on education and stable housing for refugees in the camps. While this was perhaps understandable in the context of expected early return of the refugees to Myanmar under the bilateral voluntary repatriation agreement, there is a need to revise it under the changed realities

In short, ensuring better facilities to the refugees in the camps and preparing them for return could be a win-win situation for all. International appreciation of continued generosity by Bangladesh will garner international support for the refugees in the country. There is also potential for additional funds from the World Bank and the ADB for Bangladesh to support these projects.

What should UN's role be in the resolution of the Rohingya refugee crisis? While acknowledging the immense difficulties of the task, there is no alternative for the UN but to continue and redouble its efforts to make voluntary repatriation

Firstly, to obtain full and unfettered access to and presence in the areas of origin of the refugees before, during and after refugees begin to return. And secondly, to find a role for itself in the implementation of the RAC recommendations which would enhance the

credibility of the exercise. The Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General to Myanmar, Swiss diplomat Christine Schraner Burgener, could play an important role to promote these objectives and to deepen UN's political engagement with the Myanmar government. She has, reportedly, not been able to make much headway in this regard so far but, in the present context of Myanmar, it is not surprising. But her role remains crucial. Her engagements with other relevant players and regular reporting to the UN Security Council on the progress of the implementation of the RAC recommendation can be immensely helpful. A strategic combination of continued Security Council scrutiny with sustained diplomatic engagement on her part is likely to yield positive results in the long run. Bangladesh should sit together with her to discuss how she can help in the implementation of RAC recommendations. What role could China and India play in resolving the Rohingya crisis?

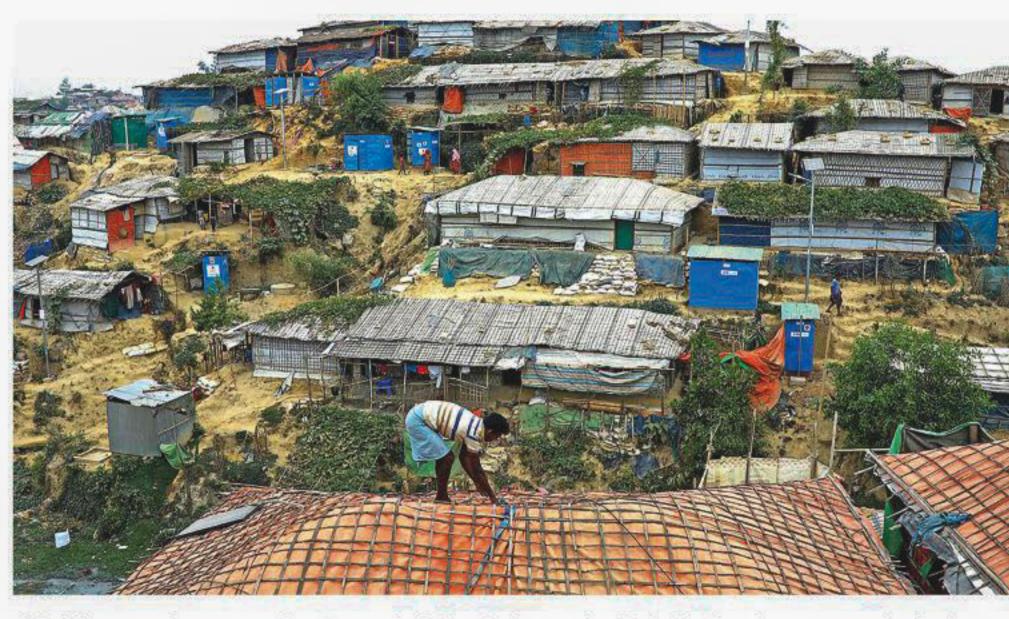
The bilateral relationship between China and Myanmar, both military and civil, has been deepening progressively. China supplies 70 percent of Myanmar's military equipment, and its presence is visible everywhere in the country. China's growing involvement in Bangladesh's development efforts has also given rise to significant Chinese interest in Bangladesh.

With so much economic, political and military clout in Myanmar, China can play a critical role to make Myanmar recognise the importance of close cooperation with Bangladesh in resolving the Rohingya crisis. For surely, lack of progress in bringing peace and stability in the Rakhine State can be enormously detrimental to China's aspirations in the region. The commitment of China to help promote voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar, as expressed to the Bangladesh prime minister during her recent visit to China, is a good beginning in this regard. It

must now be channelled in the right direction. India too is a key neighbour, investor and influencer in Myanmar. It is also a key ally of Bangladesh with whom its relationship has never been better. Yet India remained silent and failed to condemn Myanmar's expulsion of the Rohingyas and the atrocities which accompanied them. While Indian civil society has been reminding the Indian Government of its responsibility to protect refugees under international law and under the growing jurisprudence of the country, there is a need for Bangladesh and the international community to reiterate to India that its disengagement with the Rohingya crisis can only be detrimental to its long-term interest in the region.

Would you like to make any concluding remarks? Let me simply underline that the Rohingya refugee crisis is a time bomb that must be quickly defused to avoid any future flare-up which will have disastrous consequences, including for peace and security, not only for Bangladesh and Myanmar, but also for the region and the international community as a whole. As voluntary repatriation is clearly the only solution for such a large group of refugees, Bangladesh and Myanmar should work together to implement a plan of action based on the recommendations of the Kofi

Anan Commission. This is a shortened version of the interview. The full version of the interview is available on The Daily Star's website.



A Rohingya refugee repairs the roof of his shelter at the Balukhali refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 5, 2019. **REUTERS FILE PHOTO**

creating conditions conducive to the return of the refugees.

The RAC report also contains a set of concrete recommendations for the Myanmar authorities to implement. Myanmar has formally accepted to do so. In an ideal strategy, Bangladesh and Myanmar should now work together, in a spirit of friendship, cooperation and, wherever necessary, compromise, to implement the recommendations. There must be a relationship of trust between the two countries on monitoring progress. I would suggest that the primary focus for facilitating voluntary repatriation of the refugees should be on progressive implementation of the key recommendations of RAC.

There are 88 recommendations under 16 broad categories in the RAC report. Among these, the more important ones, of crucial importance to the creation of conditions conducive to the return of the refugees, include economic and social development of Rakhine State, citizenship, freedom of movement, situation of internally displaced

feasible. Doubters may say that since UN efforts thus far has not altered Myanmar's political stance on the underlying issues that caused the refugee flow, there is little ground to believe that Myanmar may change its stance on the matter. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that China and Russia will change their position on Myanmar. This, however, should not be a reason to give up on them. Over time they are bound to realise that the matter cannot be put under the carpet for too long without serious consequences. The risks of failing to develop a long-term strategy are formidable for all concerned.

UN's efforts in Bangladesh must also be matched by determined efforts to assist Myanmar to stabilise the situation in the Rakhine State. It is important that the lives and livelihoods of the Rohingyas and other Muslim communities who are still there are made secure so that no further exoduses take place and the prospective returnees are not discouraged to return. The foremost task for the UN in this regard may be two-fold.