

Repatriation of the ROHINGYAS All an eye-wash

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN
back from Cox's Bazar

Since November 2018, around a million Rohingya refugees living in 34 extremely congested camps located in the Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas of Cox's Bazar district, have been living under the ultimatum of repatriation. These Rohingyas, most of whom fled their homes in Myanmar facing genocide and atrocities in 2017, consider this ultimatum as their death sentence. Their collective memory is so bound up with the massacres that took place just two years ago that they still cannot think about going back to Myanmar. Repeated demonstrations throughout November 2018 by the Rohingyas against the repatriation programme foiled the first attempt of repatriation since the recent influx. Nevertheless, the Rohingyas got the message that many of them would soon be sent back to Myanmar under the repatriation deal signed between the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments.



SPOTLIGHT

When recent reports revealed that some 3,450 Rohingya refugees will be repatriated to Myanmar, panic struck the camps again. Unlike the repatriation programme of November 2018, this time the families earmarked for repatriation have not been informed yet (as of August 19, 2019). However, leaflets issued by the Myanmar government inviting Rohingyas to come back and resettle as the “residents” of Myanmar have been circulated in all the refugee camps. This publicity campaign intensified panic among Rohingyas because they started to feel that anybody from any camp can be repatriated come August 22.

On August 18, when we first visited camp number 26 also known as Noapara camp in Teknaf, the panic-stricken residents surrounded us and shouted at us, “We don’t want to return. We will be slaughtered. Down with repatriation.” When we assured them that we had not come to register their names for repatriation and explained our case, they calmed down. Najir Hossain, majhi (camp head) of I-block of camp 26 came forward and said, “We have been hearing about repatriation for months. But we have not been informed about the process yet. We are extremely scared.”

Sumnera Begum, 45, broke down in tears when asked why they were so scared

properties, freedom of religion, movement and expression, release of arbitrarily imprisoned Rohingyas and release of Rohingyas from 19 detention camps in Akyab (Sittwe), capital of the Rakhine state.” He added, “We can only return if these legitimate demands of ours are met unconditionally. Otherwise, we shall not return. Even if you kill us, we will die here but will not go to Myanmar.”

Last November, the Bangladesh government faced similar resistance when they tried to start the repatriation programme. According to Rohingya leaders, when the government informed the families who would be sent back, they all fled from their shelters in the camp. Rashid Ahmed, a resident of Jamtoli camp, was listed for repatriation in 2018. According to him, he was informed by his majhi Nurul Islam that he was on the list of returnees. “When I got this news from the majhi, I instantly took the decision to flee from Jamtoli camp. I have four sons and three daughters. With all my family members, I went to Kutupalong and travelled from one to another camp. I spent 10 days like this and when I was assured that the repatriation had been cancelled, I returned to my shelter.”

Like Rashid, many families earmarked for repatriation fled from their homes last year. According to Nurul Islam, last year

informed decision about the repatriation. We believe that repatriation has to be absolutely voluntary. The remaining questions and uncertainties about repatriation is regarding what will happen on the Myanmar side of the border.”

A press statement sent by UNHCR to *Star Weekend* on August 18 could not confirm at that time from which camps the 3,450 Rohingyas would be repatriated. The RRRC office stated on August 19 that informing the enlisted Rohingyas would start from August 20 (we received word that majhis in a few camps were shown lists of the Rohingya families on August 20, the day this issue went to print). According to UNHCR, after the Bangladesh government informs the Rohingyas, UNHCR will take the following steps: “Together with the Government, UNHCR will ask these refugees to come forward and discuss the option of repatriation. UNHCR will meet those who express interest in return in a confidential setting, in order to consult them on their intentions regarding return. Those who express a wish to return will be invited for a second interview to ensure the voluntariness of their decision. They will be asked to complete a voluntary repatriation form.”

UNHCR further states, “Refugee returns must be voluntary, they need to be safe,

tell us to return to Myanmar, when they cannot ensure us of our safety?” he asked.

In fact, UNHCR also admits this serious limitation. Joseph Surja Moni Tripura, UNHCR spokesperson, told *Star Weekend*, “Current limitations on UNHCR’s access to areas of return prevents us from fully assessing the conditions of return. The security situation in these areas is a factor constraining access, which speaks directly to the current environment and conditions for return in these parts of Rakhine State.

According to Rohingya leaders, besides security, citizenship, and recognition as a Rohingya Muslim, is a major demand that has to be fulfilled before any move of repatriation. Under the current repatriation programme, the returnees will be issued a national verification card (NVC), which according to the Myanmar government is a gateway to citizenship; however, the Rohingyas consider this to be a trap. The reason behind this distrust can be easily understood from the leaflets circulated by the Myanmar government themselves. According to the leaflet, the returnees will be treated as “residents” of Myanmar, not its citizens. Thus, NVC denies Rohingyas their right to self-identify as members of Rohingya ethnicity, even though Myanmar’s citizenship system is based on ethnicity and full rights accrue to members of an ethnic group who have been living in Myanmar before 1823.

Besides, NVC holders whose houses are not in liveable conditions (almost all of them), will have to wait in the temporary camps for the Myanmar government to rebuild their houses. The returnees will only be able to travel within their village, requiring permission to venture outside. They will also require special permission to fish in the sea which is a major livelihood for many Rohingyas living in and around Akiyab.

According to Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN), more than 120,000 Rohingyas are still living in Rakhine state, most of whom are confined in different temporary camps. Few thousands have been released over the last few years on the condition that they accept the NVC. In July 2019, BHRN published a report titled “National Verification Cards: A Barrier to Repatriation” which described in detail how these cardholders are still victims of human rights abuse with severe restrictions on education, freedom of religion, and freedom of movement. For instance, according to the report, if an NVC cardholder wants to travel, s/he has to submit a request form (“Form 4”), which is rejected in almost all cases. As a result, the NVC card holders are confined to villages or transit camps with no education and work opportunities—which seems to validate the apprehension of the Rohingya refugees.

Despite these uncertainties and questions around the current repatriation programme, the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments are fully ready to repatriate the Rohingyas. However, there is no doubt that this flawed second attempt at repatriation has been made without addressing the issues that forced the Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh in 2017 and before. Such a move will never improve the human rights condition of the Rohingya refugees.

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Recognition as a Rohingya is one of the key demands of Rohingya refugees; however, this card issued by the Bangladesh government and UNHCR address them as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals.



This leaflet, issued by the Myanmar government inviting Rohingyas back to Myanmar as “residents”, are being circulated in the camps.



The word “repatriation” reminded Rohingya refugees of horrific torture and atrocities purported by Myanmar army in 2017.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

to return. She showed several bullet and splinter wounds in her legs and said, “I had three sons and two daughters. Two of my sons were shot from a helicopter. I was with them but could not save them. I lost my youngest son in the jungle and I could cross the border only with my two daughters. My husband is in a Myanmar prison since 2016 without any reason. They have burnt and bombed our houses. They are inviting us because they want to kill the rest of us.”

While Sumnera was crying, more and more Rohingyas gathered in the spot and started again to chant slogans against the repatriation programme. Nur Hossain, an elderly Rohingya and former headmaster of a school in Rakhine state, came out with a set of written demands and read it out. The demands included: “Full citizenship of Myanmar and recognition of ethnicity as Rohingya, safe and dignified return to own homes not to shelters or another camp, trial of the criminals who killed innocent civilians and raped women, possession of land

the listed returnees were informed five to seven days prior to their repatriation. “This time we have not been informed about the families yet. We only got leaflets describing the benefits of repatriation. We are apprehensive that the government might inform the families at the last minute so that nobody can flee from their homes as they did last time and are compelled to return to Myanmar. If this happens, this will bring disastrous consequence for us. Under the current circumstance, none of us want to return to Myanmar. I can assert that on behalf of around 10,000 residents of this camp,” he says.

Abul Kalam, Bangladesh’s refugee, relief and repatriation commissioner (RRRC) ruled out such apprehensions. “We shall ensure hundred percent voluntariness during repatriation,” he states. “We have taken all logistical and administrative preparations for the last few weeks. In the next few days, we shall inform the families. We have requested UNHCR to consult with the families and assess their voluntariness so that they can take

dignified and sustainable. UNHCR’s role in the process will be determined by whether these fundamental principles are respected. For UNHCR to have a role in facilitating returns, the conditions must be in place for voluntary, safe and dignified return and the physical, legal, and material safety of returnees. This includes UNHCR’s ability to monitor the return and reintegration of returnees.”

However, Rohingya leaders apprehend that reaching out to these families and taking informed decisions through two consecutive interviews is almost impossible in the remaining two days. A prominent Rohingya leader who requested anonymity said, “Repatriation is a welcome initiative. We want to go back. We don’t want to spend our entire life as refugees. But, under current circumstances, there cannot be any move for repatriation. Even UNHCR does not have access to most places in Rakhine state. If they repatriate us on August 22, even UNHCR will not be able to monitor our safe return and reintegration. Then, how can they