

A LOOK AT ROHINGYA CRISIS

FROM PAGE 1

Aug 26, 2017

As fighting spreads between the army and ARSA, thousands of Rohingyas flee to Bangladesh.

Sept 2, 2017

More than 2,600 houses are razed in Rohingya-majority areas in the week following the Aug 25 attack, the government says.

Sept 11, 2017

The UN human rights high commissioner calls the military operation "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

Sept 19, 2017

Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi vows to punish the perpetrators of rights violations but does not address UN accusations of ethnic cleansing.

Oct 12, 2017

Rohingya Muslims are not natives of Myanmar, says the army commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, during a meeting with US ambassador Scot Marciel.

Nov 2, 2017

Suu Kyi urges people "not to quarrel" on her first visit to Rakhine since the crackdown.

Nov 27 to Dec 2, 2017

Pope Francis visits Myanmar and Bangladesh, avoiding the word "Rohingya", which is rejected by Myanmar, until meeting refugees in Bangladesh.

Dec 21, 2017

The United States imposes sanctions on 13 "serious human rights abusers and corrupt actors" including the general who oversaw the crackdown against the Rohingyas.

Jan 10, 2018

The military says its soldiers murdered 10 captured Muslims in Inn Din village in Rakhine during insurgent attacks.

Feb 23, 2018

Myanmar has bulldozed at least 55 Rohingya villages that were emptied during the violence, Human Rights Watch says.

March 12, 2018

Myanmar's military is building bases where Rohingyas homes and mosques once stood, Amnesty International says.

April 11, 2018

Seven Myanmar soldiers are sentenced to 10 years of hard labour for the Inn Din massacre.

Sept 13, 2018

Suu Kyi says in hindsight her government could have handled the situation in Rakhine better.

Nov 15, 2018

A Rohingya refugee repatriation effort stalls amid protests in camps.

Jan 4, 2019

Rakhine nationalist Arakan Army insurgents kill 13 policemen as Myanmar marks Independence Day, setting off more conflict.

March 18, 2019

Myanmar's army says it has set up a military court to investigate its conduct during the 2017 crackdown.

May 27, 2019

A military spokesman says Myanmar has granted early release to seven soldiers jailed for the Inn Din killings.

June 22, 2019

Authorities order telecoms companies to shut internet services in the conflict-torn west, an operator says, where government troops are fighting Arakan Army rebels.

Aug 20, 2019

The UN refugee agency and Bangladesh authorities launch a new repatriation bid, but it fails after no refugees agree to return.

Nov 11, 2019

Gambia files a genocide case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Nov 14, 2019

The International Criminal Court approves a prosecution request to investigate crimes against humanity against the Rohingyas in a separate case.

Nov 26, 2019

Myanmar begins a military investigation into killings of Rohingyas at Gu Dar Pyin village during the 2017 crackdown. The army later announces soldiers have been punished.

Dec 11, 2019

Suu Kyi appears at the ICJ in The Hague and rejects accusations of genocide against the Rohingyas as "incomplete and misleading".

Jan 20, 2020

Government-appointed panel investigating allegations of abuse say they had found no evidence of genocide but war crimes were possible.

Jan 23, 2020

The ICJ orders Myanmar to take urgent measures to protect the Rohingyas remaining inside Myanmar.

Jan 25, 2020

Two Rohingya women are killed and seven people wounded when shells hit a village. The army rejects accusations it was responsible from a lawmaker, a villager and Arakan Army rebels.

Feb 21, 2020

Myanmar's army says it will court-martial soldiers over abuses against Rohingyas in two more villages during the 2017 crackdown.

April 16, 2020

Bangladesh rescues 396 Rohingyas from a boat adrift for weeks after failing to land in Malaysia. At least 32 die on board. Several other boats adrift for months before landing in Indonesia and Malaysia.

April 29, 2020

The UN envoy to Myanmar says it is committing war crimes in Rakhine after civilians are hit with air and artillery strikes in the conflict against insurgents. Myanmar says the allegations are "biased".

May 25, 2020

Myanmar files a report on its adherence to measures to protect the Rohingyas to the ICJ. Details are not published.



PHOTO: ANVIL CHAKMA

Struck hard by the pandemic, indigenous families sell vegetables, grown through jhum cultivation, in Bilaichhari area of Rangamati Sadar upazila to make a living. They have also put up a bamboo fencing in front to them to maintain social distancing for avoiding transmission of the virus. The photo was taken recently.

Result zero

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Rohingyas, along with hundreds of Rakhines, were killed and thousands were displaced as fighting between Myanmar military and Arakan Army raged in the recent months.

REPATRIATION EFFORTS SLOW

The meeting of Joint Working Group -- comprised of officials from Myanmar and Bangladesh -- was not held since May last year though two meetings are scheduled a year, officials concerned said.

"The second meeting was due in the last quarter of 2019. Myanmar pushed it forward to February this year but that also did not happen. Now Myanmar is using coronavirus as a pretext for not holding the meeting," an official told The Daily Star.

In the last three years, Bangladesh sent the information of 6,00,000 Rohingyas to Myanmar, but the latter has provided Bangladesh with verified information of only 30,000.

Again, 30 to 40 percent of the 30,000 names were rejected.

There are cases that one was rejected and others were selected from a family for repatriation, but this proposition is not helpful in any way for the Rohingyas to return to Myanmar, the official said.

Dhaka had proposed Naypyidaw for a bilateral technical committee meeting to sort out these issues, but was responded with indifference, which is indicative of delaying Rohingya repatriation, he said.

Through informal discussion in January this year, the two sides agreed for a targeted approach. The idea is that Myanmar will find out the Rohingyas villages least affected and then have a comprehensive plan for repatriation.

Accordingly, all the families of the villages concerned will be repatriated. A meeting was scheduled in February, but Myanmar did not show interest.

"Now Myanmar's attitude is that you return our people, we will do what's needed. Myanmar now seems more emboldened. This is because the global powers don't have any coordinated approach to address the Rohingya issue. So, Myanmar can get away by doing anything," the official said.

Nay San Lwin, co-founder of Free Rohingya Coalition, said Myanmar also has made no attempt to amend discriminatory laws, including the citizenship, freedom of movement and education, which is very basic reforms required.

MYANMAR BENEFITS

Foreign policy experts say though there were sanctions from western countries on some military officials, the global

powers are still largely divided over the Rohingya issue because of their geopolitical and business interests.

For example, the UN Security Council has failed to adopt any resolution yet in last three years because of opposition from China and Russia, two veto powers.

Regional powers China, India and Japan -- all good friends of Bangladesh and Myanmar -- want bilateral solution to the Rohingya issue without putting pressure on Myanmar. The approach has not worked until now, analysts said.

Meanwhile, US imports from Myanmar has increased from \$366 million in 2017 to \$821 million in 2019. US exports also went up from \$211 million in 2017 to \$347 million in 2019, according to US Census Bureau.

Myanmar benefits from the European Union's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), namely the "Everything But Arms" scheme that grants duty-free and quota-free access to the EU market.

According to the European Commission, Myanmar's exports increased from €573 million in 2015 to an estimated €2.8 billion in 2019. Also, according to UN Comtrade data, Myanmar's exports to UK went up from less than \$300 million in 2017 to \$536 million in 2019.

The businesses between Myanmar and other countries flourish though a UN fact-finding mission last year appealed for targeted sanctions, as well as an embargo on weapons sales to Myanmar, warning that a web of businesses run by Myanmar's army is financing military operations on the Rohingyas.

The mission's report identified at least 59 foreign companies -- including firms from France, Belgium, Switzerland, Hong Kong and China -- that have dealings with army-linked ventures. It also named at least 14 companies that have sold arms to the Myanmar military, including state-owned entities in Israel, India, South Korea, and China.

BANGLADESH LOSES

With no repatriation in sight, Bangladesh is counting losses. A study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) showed, the estimated cost of hosting the Rohingyas \$1.2 billion a year in the first five years if there is no repatriation for sheltering and providing them humanitarian assistance.

"Gradually, the cost will increase given the decline in foreign funding, population growth and inflation," CDP Executive Director Dr Fahmida Khatun told this correspondent on August 21.

The study also said around 7,000

acres were deforested due to the Rohingya settlement -- having long term ecological implications in the region, a tourist district of the country.

A study by COAST Trust, an NGO working in the country's coastal belt, says transport cost went up by 35 percent and house rent by 60 percent since the Rohingya influx, while wages for laborers went down because of more labour supply from the Rohingya community.

"These issues have given rise to Rohingya-local tension," said COAST Trust Executive Director Rezaul Karim Chowdhury. Also, lack of any income generating activities and education facilities gave rise to the crimes like drug trafficking, human trafficking and prostitution, he said.

"It is very likely that militant elements will grow in the camps if the provisions of education, income and better housing are not created."

Prof Imtiaz Ahmed, director of the Centre for Genocide Studies at Dhaka University, said lingering of repatriation means rise of human trafficking through the sea and extremist ideologies -- that will ultimately affect the entire region's development.

China, Japan and India -- all have their large investments both in Bangladesh and Myanmar -- and they should come forward to creating conditions conducive for Rohingya return at the earliest, he said.

"Myanmar may be fighting between Arakan Army and its military as a pretext. In that case, a combine force of China, Japan, India and ASEAN can help create a safe zone as sought by the Rohingyas," said Prof Imtiaz, who teaches international relations.

LIGHT OF HOPE?

Prof Imtiaz said the good thing is that the ICJ in its verdict acknowledged the ethnic identity of the Rohingyas. Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi also used the word "Arakanese Muslims" in the ICJ hearing in December last year -- it's a step towards Rohingyas' recognition.

"Justice at the ICJ may take time, but must happen. Germany paid reparations for genocide against the Jews. Eventually, Bangladesh also should claim reparations from Myanmar for the enormous cost it's bearing for Rohingyas influx," Prof Imtiaz said.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury said Dhaka must go for creative diplomacy, involving the regional civil societies, academia and media, apart from state actors, to create a broader consensus on the Rohingya repatriation and justice.

Suspects confess

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Later, the police arrested three youths after tracking the call list of the girl's mother.

On August 9, the accused testified under Section 164 in separate courts of Narayanganj Senior Judicial Magistrate and Judicial Magistrate. In their confessional statement, the accused said that they had killed the schoolgirl in a boat after raping her and threw her body in the Shitalakhyia river, said police.

After their confessional statement, the accused were sent to jail. Since then, the trio -- Md Abdullah, 22, Md Rakib, 19, and Khalilur Rahman, 36, -- are in jail.

Addressing the press briefing, ASP Mostafizur Rahman said, "Today, we came to know that the girl was not raped. The girl met one of the three accused on the day of the incident. Later in the night, she fled with her ex-boyfriend named Iqbal," the police official said adding then, the two got married and started living in a rented house in Bandar Kushiyara area.

On the afternoon of August 23, the girl called her mother and asked for money. Later in the morning police found her in Kushiyara area and arrested her husband, the police official said.

About the confessional statement of the accused, Mostafizur Rahman said, "Why they made the confession will be known after investigation."

Shiuli Akhter, mother of accused Abdullah, said, "Police arrested my son without any proper investigation. Later, he was beaten in remand and forced to confess to gang-rape and murder."

Rakib's elder brother Md Sajib said, "My brother is innocent. He says he is being framed. Even after that, the police took him in remand and beat him twice. Later, police took this statement."

Khalilur's wife Sharmin Akhter said, "SI Shamim Al Mamun of Sadar Model Police Station demanded Tk 20,000 from us. He took Tk 10,000 saying that my husband would not be beaten. The SI beat up my husband even after taking the money and forced him to make statement. I want justice."

Abdullah's mother Shiuli Akhter also brought similar allegation against SI Shamim.

When asked about the allegations, ASP Mostafizur Rahman said, "No such complaint was found. This matter will be investigated. If any police member is guilty, departmental action will be taken against them."

Contacted, SI Shamim Al Mamun expressed unwillingness to make any comment in this regard.

Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Sadar Model Police Station Asaduzzaman said, "The confession was made in court, not to the police. I don't know why they lied. It may be that they have admitted to a previous incident."

He also said the allegation of beating was "false". "If money changed hands, it will be investigated," he added.

Exclusion

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Such a decision was made at a joint meeting of the information ministry and the organisations concerned," the Council said in a statement.

Referring to the government decision that newspapers have to get separate approval for publishing news online, the Council urged the government to find a logical solution.

Naem Nizam, the editor of daily Bangladesh Pratidin, signed the statement on behalf of the Editors' Council.

"A list of 34 news portals was published in the first phase of registration of online news portals. We noticed with surprise that the names of the country's widely-circulated and reputed newspapers were not on the list," the statement reads.

"It is noticed with great concern that incidents of harassment and filing cases against journalists across the country have increased at an alarming rate. And the Digital Security Act is being used purposefully for this. We strongly protest it."

"There is no safeguard for newspapers and journalists. We think it is very urgent to bring necessary amendments to the law," it noted.

The statement further mentioned that the newspaper industry is facing an uncertain future across the globe amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"The newspaper industry in Bangladesh is facing the same situation. The number of readers as well as the circulation of newspapers has dropped. Advertisements have declined alarmingly."

"The newspapers in the country have never faced such a situation before. We have continued publications despite all the obstacles."

"But the newspaper industry has not received any substantial assistance and cooperation from the government... It is deprived of the government support that profit-making industries have received. The newspapers placed their demands before the ministries concerned at different times. But sadly the government has never taken those demands into account..."

"Amid the pandemic, journalists are risking their lives to serve the people. They have to work in the face of threats and intimidation. News organisations and journalists are being forced to maintain self-censorship, which creates obstacles to building healthy administrative and social systems," it added.

Myanmar frustrating

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Rakhine and the election in November, we have actually hit an impasse in terms of the repatriation process," Momen said.

Some 750,000 Rohingyas fled a brutal military crackdown since August 25, 2017 and took shelter in Bangladesh, joining some 300,000 other Rohingyas who had fled earlier waves of violence since the 1980s. Over the last three years, two attempts of repatriation failed as Rohingyas refused to return.

Meanwhile, some are thinking of integrating the Rohingya people into Bangladesh society, but foreign secretary Momen rejected any such notion. Considering the forced return in the past, he said, "Bangladesh this time has been fully convinced of the need for creating necessary conditions for sustainable return, so as to avoid similar episodes in future."

Momen said the international community should make sincere and greater efforts to secure conditions for Rohingyas to return to Myanmar. "...These should be our pledge to the community [Rohingyas]," he said, but added that many international interlocutors are found trying to appease Myanmar while heaping all their demands on the doorstep of Bangladesh.

The role of ASEAN and India, China, Japan and Korea would remain crucial in finding a durable solution to the problem. Search for a solution at the UN and relevant levels should also remain a priority, he said.

Former Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haue said Bangladesh had always sought to maintain friendship with Myanmar but the "elephant in the house is repeated exodus from Myanmar".

Myanmar tried to provoke Bangladesh time and again. For example, in 2017, Myanmar air force violated Bangladesh airspace 17 times between August 26 and September 14. In 2018, Myanmar claimed rights on St Martins' Island.

"If Bangladesh reacted to the provocations, the history of South Asia could have been different," said Former Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haue.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Earl Miller said the Rohingya crisis is a global political and diplomatic issue and the international community should work for a solution at the earliest.

"We must continue to press Burma for voluntary repatriation... Bangladesh should not be left alone to face the crisis," he said.

Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Benoit Prefontaine, said Canada supports repatriation as well as accountability issues of the Rohingya and will continue to do so. He stressed on Rohingya education and improving living conditions.

In response, Foreign Secretary Momen said involvement of Rohingyas in various crimes are higher than the host communities and radicalisation of youth cannot be ruled out altogether in a situation of despair and hopelessness.

"As such, Bangladesh had no option but to consider barbed-wire security fences around the camps to curb criminal activities in the area. These are not for their isolation, but for their good and security of locals."

Responding to requests for greater internet connectivity, the government has decided to lift restrictions on 3G/4G mobile network soon, he said, but added that the internet helped destabilise the situation in the past.

Media gag on govt employees

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which would curb media freedom.

Over the last few months, several government and autonomous bodies instructed its staffers to refrain from speaking to the media.

In its letter sent to the secretaries on August 18, the public administration ministry said some public servants, violating section-22 of the rules, are taking part in talk shows and discussions in different media outlets, including Betar, Bangladesh Television and private TV channels.

Going beyond their jurisdiction, some are also giving comments or opinions and writing articles or letters in newspapers and online portals without taking approval from their department chiefs, it mentioned.

On many occasions, they are giving comments or opinions on government's policy decisions, the letter read.

In such a situation, the secretaries are asked to give necessary instructions to the public servants under ministries or divisions and subordinate agencies so that they follow the section, it added.

Section-22 of the rules says: "No government servant shall, except with the previous sanction of the head of the department or in the bona fide discharge of his duties, participate in a radio or television broadcast or contribute any article or write any letter, either anonymously or in his own name or in the name of any person, to any newspaper or periodical."

"Provided that such sanction shall generally be granted if such broadcast or such contribution or letter is not, or may not be considered likely to jeopardise the integrity of the government servant, the security of Bangladesh, friendly relations with foreign states, or to offend order, decency, or morality or to amount to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence."

"Provided further that no such sanction shall be required if -- such broadcast or such contribution or letter

is of a purely literary, artistic, or scientific character or connected with sports; such broadcast or such contribution is required to project government activities on development works to the people by the commissioner of divisions, deputy commissioners and sub-divisional officers."

Earlier on April 16, the nurses of all public hospitals were instructed by the Directorate General of Nursing and Midwifery not to speak to the media. A week later, Health Minister Zahid Maleque ordered health officials not to talk to the media. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University also followed suit by silencing their healthcare workers.

In a press statement on May 19, ARTICLE 19, a British human rights organisation, said it is alarmed by the Bangladesh government's crackdown on freedom of expression since the coronavirus pandemic began.

"In particular, there has been an upsurge in attacks on media critical of the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic in Bangladesh. The government is increasingly using the deeply flawed Digital Security Act 2018 to harass, charge and arrest journalists," said the press release which is available on its website.

"There have also been restrictions on dissent by the public: medical professionals have been told not to talk to the media; social media is being monitored; and government employees have been told not to like, share or comment on social media posts that are critical of the Bangladeshi government," it added.

Talking to this newspaper, noted rights activist Nur Khan Liton said the pattern of the government in 1979 when the rules were formulated and that of a democratic government are not the same.

As per the rules, government officials are allowed to speak to the media about the government's development

work but cannot talk about corruption, accountability, and a lack of transparency in government work, he said.

"This is double standard... This would harm democracy in many ways."

"It would shrink scope of work of the media, which would indirectly but ultimately curb media freedom," he noted.

Such move would also limit spaces for verifying information and help creation of news based on assumption, which would not bring any good to the people or the country, he added.

Govt to start

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ranging from a few minutes to half an hour.

CONFIRMED CASES NEAR 3 LAKH
Meanwhile, 42 more people died from novel coronavirus in 24 hours till 8:30am yesterday, according to a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services.

With this, the death toll from the virus in the country rose to 3,983. The death rate was 1.34 percent.

During the same 24-hour period, as many as 13,382 samples were tested in 91 laboratories across the country and 2,485 of them tested positive for the virus with a positivity rate of 18.57 percent.

The overall positivity rate in the country now stands at 20.40 percent with 297,083 confirmed Covid-19 cases till 8:30am yesterday.

The DGHS release said 3,784 patients recovered from the virus infection during the 24-hour period. With them, the overall recovery rate crossed 61 percent (61.56).

Of the latest deceased, 31 were males and 11 females. Thirty-eight of them died at hospital and four at home.

Two of the dead were aged between 31 and 40, nine between 41 and 50, 12 between 51 and 60 while 19 were aged over 60.