



PHOTO: STAR

'ARSA CONNENCTION' IN ROHINGYA CAMPS

Fear or confusion not going away

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE AND MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

The men on the ground, the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) members, have time and again stated that after every incident of violent crime in Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps, the refugees point to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa).

However, whether Arsa has bases in the camps remains debatable as it is not impossible for a terror outfit to enter Cox's Bazar from Myanmar, making it difficult for Bangladeshi law enforcers to track down its operatives.

Even if there are reports that Arsa operates in the refugee camps, the government cannot officially acknowledge its existence here before being more than cent percent sure.

Experts said such an admission will be equivalent to admitting that Bangladesh is hosting a foreign terror outfit in its soil among refugees hugely dependent on foreign aid.

This will ultimately threaten the repatriation goal of Bangladesh, they added.

Rohingya sources have also suggested that the recent killings are a deliberate attempt by Arsa to thwart the repatriation process.

After seven Rohingyas were killed last month, DIG of APBn-14 Sayed Harun Or Rashid recently told The Daily Star that they would not be able to name any criminal gang.

"... the gangs that were active in Myanmar are now operating at the camps. They want to establish supremacy to take control of the drug trade," he said.

Amir Zafar, commanding officer of APBn-8, also an additional deputy inspector general of police, however, said, "We are mostly hearing the name of Arsa in connection with these crimes."

The name of Arsa has cropped up this year especially when criminal activities including murder, smuggling, abduction, trafficking and extortion rose alarmingly after conflicts flared up in Myanmar and some gangs from the neighbouring country took shelter in the refugee camps.

Statistics from the police database show some 2,441 cases have been filed over crimes at the refugee camps from August 25, 2017, to August 20, 2022, against some 5,226 Rohingyas.

commissioner and copies to the camp-in-charge official and the Special Branch in Cox's Bazar, outlining the death threats that he and his colleagues had been receiving.

He requested the office take action against the criminals, which the letter identifies as Arsa members.

Mohib Ullah, the chairman of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, was shot dead at the Kutupalong camp on September 29.

Soon after the murder, his brother Habib Ullah alleged that Myanmar's banned outfit Arsa, locally known as Al-Yakin, was behind the killing.

On March 6 this year, APBn-14 arrested the chief commander of Arsa's Ulama wing from a Rohingya camp. Police said the Arsa leader, identified as Zakaria, 55, issued the fatwa (decree) for the assassination of Mohib Ullah.

A government agency report, prepared last year, also mentioned criminal activities of Arsa in detail.

It said at least 1,000 paid members of Arsa were operating in Rohingya camps and the outfit established dominance in 26 out of 32 camps in Cox's Bazar.

Getting a monthly allowance of Tk 5,000

organisation.

According to the report, Arsa has three wings - Fatwa, Co-ordination and Military.

Detailing the leadership, the document stated that the present leader of Arsa is Ataulah Abu Ammar Jununi alias Ataulah and he controls the military wing.

In his absence, Abbas alias Hash controls the military wing and Hamid Hossain Moulvi alias Abu Shoeb is the spokesperson of the wing.

About human trafficking by Arsa men, the report mentioned that there are 20-25 points in Cox's Bazar which are used for this - they include Sabrang, Jahajpura, Shah PorirDwip, Katabonia, RejuKhal, Himchori, Chowfaldandi, Khurushkol.

It mentioned that after the influx in 2017, Rohingyas have become easy targets for traffickers and they started to exploit Rohingya men, women and children from different refugee camps for both sex and labour trafficking.

The report also claimed there was a nexus between Arsa and Ansar-al-Islam.

"What Arsa states in public that they do not have any link with any international or home-grown terrorist groups does not seem true. There are some Arsa leaders, basically



Afnan, daughter of deceased Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah, peeps into her father's office in Lambashia camp of Cox's Bazar on Oct 1, 2021. PHOTO: MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

to Tk 12,000 depending on their position and contribution to the organisation, the Arsa members have around 30-50 Chinese SMGs, 100-120 9mm pistols and a big number of sharp weapons.

According to the document, the income source of Arsa is mainly yaba smuggling, robbery, abduction and human trafficking.

In January this year, Mohammad Shah Ali, brother of Arsa commander Ataulah Abu Amar Jununi, was arrested and during interrogation, he described his activities "as an Arsa member", said sources.

A case was filed with Ukhiya Police Station on January 16, about 14 hours after Shah Ali was arrested from a Rohingya refugee camp.

"It has been known locally that the arrestee is a member of Arsa. He is also an armed criminal and kingpin of a gang that is involved in abduction and drug trade. During interrogation, the accused admitted that he used to keep firearms for self defence while trading drugs," read the first information report.

Shah Ali told police that he came to Bangladesh from Malaysia in 2017 as asked by his brother Ataulah. Earlier he visited Bangladesh in 1989, 1996, 2001 and 2014.

Though known as a Myanmar national, Shah Ali bears a Bangladeshi national identity card (No 19711591120000018) issued against his name in March 2016.

The NID card mentioned Shah Ali as a permanent resident of the Joynob Colony of the Dewanbazar area under Kotwali Police station in Chattogram city.

During interrogation, he also described how he managed nitric acid to prepare explosives for Arsa on the instruction of Asad, who according to him was the naye-b-e-ameer of the

Rohingyas, who came to Bangladesh in the early 90s and got formal education from some Bangladeshi madrasas in Chattogram These leaders have managed to build up a good relation with homegrown terrorist group named Ansar-Al-Islam."

It stated that Ansar Al Islam infiltrated the camps at regular intervals.

"In 2014, five members of Ansar Al Islam with the help of Arsa leaders took shelter in Rohingya camps aiming to go to Arakan to fight against Myanmar military.

"In 2017, at the time of big-scale Rohingya influx, another 4-5 groups of Ansar Al Islam members went to various Rohingya camps aiming at recruiting new members. These groups stayed there for three months and tried to recruit new members..."

"Still now, many members of Anar Al Islam who are being monitored are seen having connections in Rohingya camps. They are also seen going to camp areas at regular intervals."

The Daily Star repeatedly tried to contact Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan over his comments, but he didn't receive the calls.

Major General (retired) ANM Muniruzzaman, security analyst and president of Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, outlined the obstacles in acknowledging that Arsa might exist.

"Arsa is a banned organisation of Myanmar. Harboring a banned foreign organisation is against our principles. Acknowledging that Arsa might exist brings other complications. If we acknowledge that a foreign banned organisation exists here, it might affect international funding on which the refugee community is dependent," he said.

'We have to re-strategise refugee camp management'

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

With at least seven Rohingyas, including three of the community leaders killed last month, police have started a combing operation to bring back peace in Cox's Bazar refugee camps. So far, at least 75 Rohingyas have been arrested in the drive called "Operation Root Out" that started on October 29. But why did law and order deteriorate there in the first place? What should be the next steps? In an interview, Maj Gen ANM Muniruzzaman (ret), president of Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, shared his views about the issue with The Daily Star yesterday.



TDS: Police have started a combing operation in the camps after some recent killings. Why did these killings take place and who might be involved?

Muniruzzaman: Law and order deteriorated in the camps as Rohingyas got involved

Statistics from the police database show some 2,441 cases have been filed over crimes at the refugee camps from August 25, 2017, to August 20, 2022, against some 5,226 Rohingyas. Of the cases, 185 are over arms, 1,644 are drug cases, 88 rape, 115 murder and 39 over abduction.



Arsa leader Zakaria, 55, who allegedly issued the fatwa for the assassination of Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah, was arrested on March 6, 2022.

in criminal activities like illegal drug trade and human trafficking. Though no evidence has been presented yet, it is assumed that when these types of crimes take place, there is a possibility of small arms trafficking. Then there are gang wars. Besides, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa) has established some communications in the camp.

Amid all these complex equations, there has been a power struggle in the camps. You can notice that it is the majhis (community leaders) who are mostly being killed. All these are security threats for us.

TDS: What should be the steps to deal with the situation?

Muniruzzaman: We have to rethink the overall management and administrative strategies for the refugee camps. The Rohingyas have been living in this country for years and time for providing humanitarian support has already elapsed.

They are long-stay refugees, and the management for long stay refugees is different. We have to re-strategise it. For instance, proper education needs to be provided in the camps. If the youths remain idle, they can engage in different types of crimes - which we are witnessing now.

TDS: Law enforcers sometimes mention Arsa's presence and sometimes not. Is this not creating any problems?

Muniruzzaman: We have to practically see what problems are there. ... Arsa is present and they are getting involved in different types of criminal activities. It is the police who spoke about the presence of Arsa and its involvement in killings.

TDS: What will be the risk for Bangladesh in the absence of proper steps?

Muniruzzaman: Bangladesh will be at big risk... it has already been at risk... Rohingyas are getting involved in clashes with locals. Other criminal activities are also taking place. Rohingyas are violating restrictions imposed at different times.



PHOTO: REUTERS



Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah

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Arsa's activities came to discussion broadly after Rohingya rights activist and leader Mohib Ullah was killed at the Kutupalong camp last September.

In the days after his murder, rights activists have been insisting that the group's "presence" be acknowledged - and tackled with.

Human Rights Watch issued a statement in October 2021 saying, "In the months prior to his death, Mohib Ullah had expressed concern about the growing threats, activists and his family members said."

In August last year, Mohib Ullah sent a letter to the refugee relief and repatriation