Rohingya Repatriation: Waiting for Godot?

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The situation in Myanmar's Rakhine state has tensed up again, with another incident of shootout between the military and the Arakan Army (AA) taking place recently. The military has been using mortars and launching airstrikes against the Arakan Army. The military choppers entered Bangladesh airspace several times, violating international laws. Hostilities across the border have raised new tension and pose a threat to the chances of repatriation of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

More than 1.1 million Rohingyas are living in 34 camps in Cox's Bazar at present. The country accommodated the displaced Rohingyas and took multiple initiatives to repatriate them to their homeland, Myanmar. At least two attempts for repatriation have failed since the latest influx in 2017. In August this year, observing five years of their exodus to Bangladesh, they reiterated the urgency of repatriation to their homeland. Before that, they arranged a campaign under the banner "Go Home" in the camps to draw the global communities' attention to take emergency steps to repatriate them with safety and dignity. During the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet's visit to the camps in August, they demanded UN's effective initiatives to improve the situation in their homeland and start the repatriation. In response to that, she only urged the Rohingyas to be patient.

Meanwhile, a newly elected government was overthrown by a military coup in February 2021. Later, a shadow government, formed in the name of National Unity Government (NUG), with its armed wing the People's Defence Force (PDF), started a movement against the military junta, building strong resistance against the military that turned violent. This escalation has made Rohingya repatriation even more uncertain, the refugees' wait increasingly threatening to turn into a modern-day rendition of *Waiting for Godot*.

The situation right now

The Rohingya refugees inhabit the hilly areas of the southern coastal region of Bangladesh. They have been living there with rudimentary facilities, no work, and little access to education. Being stuck in the overcrowded camps, their lives have become inhumane.

Over 80 percent of the refugees in Cox's Bazar rely on external aid to survive. Every family gets a monthly food ration of Tk 1,030 per person. Rohingyas repeatedly stressed that running a family with this allocation is very hard. On the other hand, the influx of refugees has put immense pressure on the host communities, and the environment in a densely populated country. The host communities in Cox's Bazar are also highly vulnerable and at high risk of hunger like the Rohingyas, according to a WFP report.

The population growth rate in the camps is alarming; Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said in April this year that some 35,000 babies are born in the Rohingya camps yearly. Little access to safe water, sufficient nutrition, and healthcare facilities are causing malnutrition and disease outbreaks. There is little scope

Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar reiterated the urgency for their repatriation through a campaign called 'Go Home.'

FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

for formal education for the Rohingya children – 75 percent of the children are deprived of formal education. The frustrated teenagers are growing up without skills and goals for their future, which makes them vulnerable to organised youth gangs and criminal activities.

The internal security in the camps is also at risk as several armed organisations' activities are intensifying gradually. Local police said that around 2,441 cases have been filed against the Rohingyas in the last five years, covering at least 14 types of criminal activities, including killings, drugs, human trafficking, abduction, theft, robbery, snatching, arms and rape. At least 109 people died in "gunfights" with security forces. Around 14-20 armed criminal groups are active in the camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf. As of August 2022, 115 murders have been reported in the last five years in internal conflicts among these gangs. In the last four months, at least 20 people were killed, most of them pro-repatriation leaders.

What's next?

The camp situation is deteriorating as most of the aid for the Rohingya camps comes from Western countries, who have turned their attention to the Russia-Ukraine war. Various global crises like the Covid pandemic, the Afghanistan crisis, and most recently the Russia-Ukraine war have exacerbated vulnerabilities and worsened the condition. Reports say only 43 percent of the required amount of USD 881 million under the Joint Response Plan 2022 has been funded in 2022. In 2021, the disbursed amount was 72 percent of the required USD 943 million.

New tensions in the Rakhine state poses a new threat to the Rohingya population. At least 20 Rohingya families fled to Bangladesh in September due to the ongoing clashes.

According to the newly arrived people, about 1,000 Rohingyas are waiting to cross over on the other side of the border.

On October 20, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said the current military government in Myanmar had agreed to take back Rohingyas after verification, but there is no specific timeframe for that. Previously, on June 14, Bangladesh handed over a list of 830,000 individuals containing biometric data, but the Myanmar authority has only verified 58,000. This implies that their motive is apparently to delay the process.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon the UN to play a strong and effective role to create a safe environment for repatriation. China and Russia are backing the junta military for their own political and economic interests. The UN Security Council also failed to come up with an effective solution to the Rohingya crisis, despite widespread global support for the persecuted people. Though the Western blocs raised their concerns and funded assistance for the refugees, they couldn't play an effective role that can facilitate repatriation. Lingering the process is making the Rohingyas ultimate sufferers.

As regional powers, India and Asean member states should collaborate with the afflicted nations as the crisis festers and gives rise to more radicalism, extremism, and cross-border crimes. The only solution is repatriating the Rohingyas to their own land. Therefore, the world must look onto effective measures and use all available tools to hold Myanmar accountable on repatriation.

World Cup revealed our media's vulnerability to fake news

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The FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar proved to be a challenging ground for traditional football giants, with Germany dropping out of the tournament in group stage and Brazil, France, Spain and Argentina losing matches against weaker opponents. Some underdogs emerged as tough contenders towards the beginning. But there was no way to predict a possible winner before December 18.

However, several Bangladeshi media outlets, on December 1, prophesised that Messi's penalty miss in Argentina's third group-match against Poland was actually a "good sign" and indicated the GOAT could win this World Cup. They claimed to have discovered a "remarkable pattern" in Messi's penalty miss and in Argentina's two previous World Cup triumphs.

A report by a leading newspaper on Messi's "historic penalty miss" being a "good sign" says: "Mario Kempes missed a penalty in Argentina's third match against Italy in the 1978 World Cup. Argentina was the champion of the service and Kempes was the top scorer. Diego Maradona missed a penalty in Argentina's third match against Bulgaria in the 1986 World Cup. Argentina were also champions and Maradona won the best player award. This time again, Messi missed the penalty in Argentina's third match in the World Cup. So what... let's see, time will tell."

Unfortunately, the missed penalty of Lionel Messi does not hold any pattern – notwithstanding the fact that Argentina, indeed, went on to win this World Cup. Rather I, as a fact checker, have found a pattern lately in *deshi* (local) media's reportage: it is flooded with misinformation and sometimes outright fake news when it covers international stories.

Mario Kempes did not miss any penalty shot in 1978 World Cup; neither did Diego Maradona in 1986. In fact, Argentina was not awarded any penalties in those two matches against Italy and Bulgaria, respectively, according to the FIFA website records.

A few clicks on the FIFA archive can lead anyone to the information and even a video record of the full matches held in those tournaments.

Later corrected silently by some outlets following fact checkers' reports, this story is not the only instance of Bangladeshi mainstream media publishing false information or unverified rumours as "authentic news."

In the first two weeks since the World Cup kicked off in Qatar, fact-checkers in Bangladesh debunked at least 10 different fake or misleading news stories, eight of which are related to the football tournament, in top newspapers and TV channels.

Among the false stories covered by *deshi* media are: Dr Zakir Naik being invited by Qatar to attend World Cup inauguration; Saudi players being awarded Rolls Royce by the king; Messi's wife Antonela Roccuzzo posting about Bangladesh; footage of Saudi coach inspiring his team against Argentina; and a woman slapping French President Emmanuel Macron.

Why is our media so vulnerable?

I analysed nine false and misleading stories that were published in the media to get an idea of possible factors contributing to deceiving the newsroom gatekeepers. In most cases, Bangladeshi newspapers solely relied upon the reports of foreign news sources like the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Express*, and some other websites that are well-known for clickbait journalism based on unreliable sources. Oftentimes, these websites quoted a dubious Twitter or Facebook account as the only source of the claim. No one seemed to have bothered to authenticate the accuracy and reliability of the sources. In some instances, Bangladeshi media outlets themselves picked social media posts from imposter accounts of celebrities and failed to identify them as such.

On one particular occasion, media outlets in Bangladesh – and also in India – sourced, from New Delhi based agency Asian News International (ANI), a story of a viral video that allegedly shows a woman slapping the French president in late November this year in France. In reality, nothing like this happened this year, and the video was related to an incident reported more than a year ago. After fact-checkers debunked it, ANI apologised and removed the report.

But here the question arises: why would the news of an incident claimed to have taken place in Europe have to be sourced from a Delhi-based news agency? Why would one not cross-check it with sources from France itself? An attack on the French president is not a trivial issue but should never be overlooked by the European or Western media.

Secondly, a responsible Bangladeshi newsperson is expected to have the general knowledge of the media ecosystem in this region. ANI has been identified in 2020 by a top European research organisation as one of the prime players in a vast disinformation campaign that promotes the Indian government's interest. There are examples where ANI repurposed fake news related to Bangladesh, quoting dubious websites in recent years. So a credible media outlet should not pick up news stories from it without cross-checking with other sources.

Lack of willingness for or understanding of online verification, which is considered an essential skill for modern-day journalism, leads to such disasters. When you see a claim on social media or on a random website that is deemed newsworthy, you have to have the mastery of verifying its authenticity using online tools.

Bangladeshi media's role in proliferating misinformation has been a topic of discussion lately. Statistics show that the media has been, for years, among the actors that pollute the online information ecosystem in the country. For the sake of not damaging the already diminishing trust in the media, we need to put a halt to this trend. News managers should urgently consider training their manpower in online verification techniques. These skills – which include advanced search methods, reverse searches for images and videos and more – are must-haves for all journalists nowadays, but particularly important for those who work in the international desks and online sections of the media houses.

In an exemplary move, the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) has taken initiatives to train newspersons on fact-checking and verification. But as a trainer for the institute, I feel there is more to do.

Bangladesh is approaching a national election and the days ahead will be crucial for journalists who will have to deal with waves of political fake news from every corner of the spectrum. Hence, it's high time for the local newsrooms to invest some time and resources to make themselves impervious to online misinformation.