

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY

# No more aid and no real solutions

## Has the international community forgotten about the Rohingya genocide?



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Six years ago, the world woke up to the genocide being committed against the Rohingya population of Rakhine state by the Myanmar military. While the persecution had been going on for some time, the military operations of August 2017 truly revealed its scale. Around 700,000 refugees fled to camps in Bangladesh, bringing with them horrific stories of mass executions, torture, rape, arson and infanticide. A top UN human rights official called it a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

In 2018, a UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar concluded that “senior generals of the Myanmar military should be investigated and prosecuted in an international criminal tribunal for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.” Since then, a number of countries, including the US, have recognised the Rohingya genocide, and there is an ongoing case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Myanmar is meant to have submitted a written response yesterday (August 24) clarifying its position on the claims brought against it.

Despite the international recognition, the global outpouring of support (at the time), and the crisis in

of human rights in Myanmar, who said there were reports of Bangladeshi authorities using “deceptive and coercive measures” to compel Rohingya refugees to return, there seems to be a consensus that the current situation has become untenable.

The continued donor funding shortfall for refugees is a major factor

and millions of dollars in aid later, the reality is that when you look at some of the most basic development indicators, there really isn't much to show for it.

The steady decline in international funding has also pushed up anti-refugee sentiment in Bangladesh. Certain media outlets have played an ambiguous role in this, oversimplifying a complicated security situation and resting the blame for drug trafficking squarely on the shoulders of refugees, even as money from the trade flows into the pockets of Bangladeshi drug lords, and allegedly, into the Myanmar military's coffers. Reports suggest that drug production in Myanmar has increased since the military coup, and smuggling to Bangladesh and India has gone up as well. Coupled with the

While the biggest supplier was Russia, countries like Singapore and India have also sold arms worth \$254 million and \$51 million, respectively, without facing any real questions about these deals from their allies. Amid this situation, Justice for Myanmar has called upon the Swedish government to ensure Swedish weapons are not sold to Myanmar via India.

Earlier this year, it was found that companies from at least 13 countries, including the US, France, Germany and Japan, were assisting Myanmar's junta by supplying materials to manufacture weapons. A UN report also exposed how member states had done very little to limit the foreign currency that Myanmar uses for arms procurement. This can hardly be reassuring for the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Estimates suggest that over 6,000 civilians have been killed since the coup, and these numbers could be massively underreported.

Would Myanmar's parallel National Unity Government (NUG) be more inclined to create safer conditions for repatriation? Its public declaration of support for “justice and reparations” for the Rohingya has been a welcome change of tone from a Bamar-dominated administration that had previously turned a blind eye. Although it remains disappointingly vague on Rohingyas' citizenship rights, many consider it the lesser evil. However, the complex political situation in Rakhine, where the Arakan Army is also a major player, means that leaving repatriation to the whims of the military is unlikely to yield sustainable solutions.

Too many of the actors involved – at local, national, regional and international levels – ultimately view this as “the refugee problem.” All over the world, we seem to have used up our store of empathy for refugees, viewing them as drains on precious resources instead of people deserving basic human rights and dignity. As refugees live hand to mouth in overcrowded camps, “leaders” and “stakeholders” hold forums and high-level meetings in five-star hotels to discuss their rights and future, often without a single representative from the community present. There is no better proof of a system that is fundamentally broken.

It is high time for those with the power to do so to actually put the Rohingya in charge of their own fate. Without improving inter-community relations, and including the Rohingya in decision-making processes, there is simply no guarantee that they will not be expelled from their homeland and forced to become refugees again. While one hopes justice will come from the ICJ proceedings, the international community, especially donor and host countries, and those with bilateral relations with Myanmar, can do a lot more in supporting Rohingya refugees and ensuring justice.



PHOTO: AFP

in this. So far, only 30 percent of the \$876-million fund required for the 2023 joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis has been met – the lowest amount ever raised. British, Australian and US governments have cut aid to Rohingya refugees by a staggering 70 to 80 percent over the last few years. The World Food Programme has reduced food assistance in the camps to a paltry \$8 per month. That's less than Tk 30 per day, at a time when the cost of living spirals every day. It should come as no surprise that half of Rohingya children are anaemic, four in 10 children suffer from chronic malnutrition and stunted growth, and 45 percent of Rohingya families have insufficient diets.

These are hardly ideal conditions for anyone, let alone people fleeing traumatic and life-threatening situations. Add to that the chronic lack of safety and increasing security concerns in the camps, lack of access to education and training, and zero employment opportunities for a mostly young demographic, and it becomes clear why trafficking is on the rise. Even the most desperate people are not willing to trade in their hopes of a better future for food stamps and wire fencing in perpetuity. Six years

volatile situation across the border and the constant threat of conflict spilling over – as last year, mortar shells fired from Myanmar killed a 15-year-old Rohingya boy in Bangladesh – one would have to be incredibly naive, to say the least, to believe getting rid of refugees is the ultimate solution to these issues.

Still, the fact is that it is not just Bangladesh's administration that wants out. Rohingya refugees have continuously expressed their desire for safe and voluntary repatriation, even organising protests in June to this effect. It seems almost ludicrous to even point this out, but most refugees, whether they are from Myanmar, Palestine or Syria, would prefer to return to a conflict-free homeland than be indefinitely confined to squalid camps. However, the lack of any real effort towards a peaceful federal democratic future for Myanmar, amid lip-service for creating conditions for safe repatriation, has left activists feeling increasingly frustrated.

Since the coup, the military has managed to import at least \$1 billion worth of international weapons. Arms and associated materials worth \$267 million came from China, now playing the peacemaker in repatriation talks.



PHOTO: MOHAMMAD RAKIBUL HASAN

Myanmar that has now escalated into civil war – the world seems to have moved on. Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, known as the genocide's mastermind, now sits in the country's highest seat and bombs the people of Myanmar with impunity. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh is holding talks with Myanmar on refugee repatriation, with China acting as a mediator. Although concerns have been expressed, including by the UN special rapporteur on the situation



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PHOTO: MOHAMMAD RAKIBUL HASAN

## My life in the Rohingya camp



Mohammed Moshowraf is a Rohingya refugee, originally from Maungdaw township in Rakhine State, Myanmar.

MOHAMMED MOSHOWRAF

For the last six years, I've been living in the world's largest refugee camp – Kutupalong in Cox's Bazar – with my family. However, it didn't have to be like this. My village had everything I wanted: a school, mosque, and all other essentials. But unfortunately, there was no option for 12-year-old Moshowraf but to escape Myanmar to survive.

Since 1978, the Myanmar government has been persecuting my community, with the mission to remove us from the place we've been calling home for centuries. In this brutal process, it has erased our fundamental rights. We, the Rohingya, were not even allowed to visit another village without an official recommendation letter, and the opportunity for higher education was snatched away. Discrimination in every sphere of life was the norm.

This terrible situation culminated on August 25, 2017. At the dead of night, when my family and I were sound asleep, the Myanmar military encircled my village and arrested all the villagers. In the morning, the military and Rakhine mobs started burning our houses, markets and mosques – looting valuables along the way. They killed the arrestees, raped and murdered the women, and didn't even spare the babies. They did all this right in front of the victims' loved ones.

It was the most horrible day the community had ever witnessed.

Nowhere was safe for us, and so, we had to escape to Bangladesh to save our lives. Words cannot do justice to the harrowing events my family and I went through during the journey. We crossed high hills, great forests and unknown lands to reach the border. We didn't eat for seven days, and I had to see children and the elderly dying from starvation and dehydration. In those seven days, I felt like half my life went by.

At one point, we reached the river between Bangladesh and Myanmar. With the help of some Bangladeshis, we reached the refugee camp on a raft and have been living here ever since.

Every person wants to be something in life, and I'm no different. All throughout childhood, my dream was to be an engineer – but as the days keep passing in the camp, that dream is slipping away. After finishing my studies, I really want to help my community restore the peace we once enjoyed, but there are no facilities here for higher education. With little opportunities, many of the youths are just wasting time in the camps, while others have to work to support their families.

In the camp, every single day feels like a year. We live in makeshift shelters made of bamboo and tarpaulin, which offer little protection from the elements. The world's



PHOTO: AFP

largest camp is still congested due to the overwhelming number of people. We lack clean water, and there aren't enough sanitation facilities. There are limited healthcare facilities in the camp, as the establishments remain overcrowded and understaffed. Additionally, there is no safety and security for us; unknown gangs who create conflict rob us of our sleep.

Still, with my parents' encouragement, I'm doing everything I can to pursue my dream. I've just finished 10th grade at a community school, and I'm taking courses on Science Literacy and Foundation of Academic Writing on an online platform. My days go by attending classes and doing homework. I'm also into extracurricular activities such as sports, competitive exams, art and music to stay positive and boost my creativity and critical thinking.

I've found solace in reading. It allows me to find escape through different worlds and characters, expand my understanding of various topics, develop my critical-thinking skills, and it acts as a relaxing activity that helps me unwind. My favourite novel is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, because it is about a family that faces numerous challenges and upheavals, including war and political struggles – similar to my plight.

All over the world, I see students reaching great heights through education – and I feel sad thinking about the future of Rohingya people living in the camps, unable to pursue their dreams. If we stay here for a long time, without any opportunities, we will become hopeless. No one here is living a happy and peaceful life. I always long to go back to my country, Myanmar – but with full rights. In these six years, however, we have not been given any solution to return with dignity and security.

On the sixth anniversary of the horrible events that forced us to flee Myanmar, I'm asking everyone in the world to provide formal education opportunities for Rohingya students like me. I request that you keep us visible in the eyes of the world, so that we can return to our own country, with our rights.