

## MYANMAR SPILLOVERS: HOW WORRIED SHOULD BANGLADESH BE?

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar has recently spilled over our country, forcing some 330 Myanmar security forces and their family members to seek refuge in Bangladesh. Stray mortar shells and bullets have landed on our side, killing two individuals and creating panic among the locals. Against this backdrop, alongside the persistent Rohingya issue, a number of experts weigh in on what Bangladesh's role should be in traversing this convoluted crisis, in a roundtable discussion organised by The Daily Star.

### Our understanding about Myanmar is limited

In my opinion, our understanding of the world, including our neighbours, is limited. We only focus inward. This limits our knowledge of international and regional dynamics. Our diplomatic engagement often remains transactional, lacking nuance and depth. Consequently, facing crises like the one in Myanmar, we find ourselves hesitant and ill-prepared.

Neither the Rohingya issue nor the recent developments happened overnight; they have a history.

One crucial layer of Myanmar's problems has persisted since its independence: the ethnic/racial dilemma. Myanmar opted for a centralised government instead of a federal structure, which fuelled tensions and violent conflicts across the nation. This explains the ongoing insurgencies within the country. Myanmar has been experiencing a low-intensity insurgency since 1948. This coexisted with a degree of tacit acceptance and established a modus operandi, with the government recognising the presence of various armed groups in different areas. But now, the dynamic has changed.

Following the democratic process initiated in 2010-11, aspirations for growth and prosperity became

widespread, particularly among the Barmars. During my visits to Myanmar around 2015-2016, and in 2020, I saw a clear increase in affluence. This new generation developed aspirations for further economic advancement.

Naturally, the military takeover in 2021 triggered widespread protests demanding participation, democracy, and respect for rights. These demonstrations gave rise to the National Unity Government (NUG) and the People's Defence Force (PDF). Many PDF members received training from existing ethnic armed groups, further complicating the situation. This culminated in a joint military campaign launched by different ethnic groups in October last year, exerting significant pressure on the Myanmar military.

Has Bangladesh thoroughly researched and analysed the Myanmar situation? To my knowledge, Bangladesh lacks dedicated institutions for in-depth research on such critical international and sub-regional

events, unlike other countries. This lack of research culture hinders our ability to fully comprehend complex geopolitical events.

Furthermore, neglecting the influence of sub-national entities like the Arakan government and the historic connections of ethnic groups now residing in both Myanmar and Bangladesh creates a blind spot in our understanding of the conflict's deeper roots and potential spillover effects on the country's security.

Our current approach of "institutional diplomacy" relies solely on government-to-government and state-to-state communication, potentially limiting our understanding and ability to respond effectively.

The current situation involves three distinct levels of complexity: national (Naypyidaw), regional (Arakan and such), and the Rohingya issue. Bangladesh cannot count on simply sending a protest note to Naypyidaw to address the issue when its central government itself holds little control over

different regions of Myanmar.

The recent increase in armed group activities and civilian and non-civilian movements across our borders cannot be solved merely through a military approach. During conflicts around the borders of Vietnam-Laos, Laos-Cambodia, or Pakistan-Afghanistan, there were cross-border movements, and such movements are largely inevitable.

Therefore, it's crucial for us to take initiatives to facilitate a ceasefire in Myanmar. Regardless of the specific form or outcome, achieving a ceasefire might mitigate the emerging complexities within Bangladesh. While I acknowledge our limitations in addressing this issue alone, I believe we should collaborate with those currently possessing the necessary capacity. China's involvement with the Shan and Kachin states demonstrates a potential precedent. Perhaps similar engagement with the Arakan Army, leveraging China's unique influence, could facilitate a ceasefire. This would be key to overcoming the immediate crisis. Discussions on Rohingya repatriation and other long-term solutions can then follow.

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a former diplomat, is president of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI).



### Myanmar civil war deserves an intelligent response

Being concerned about the Myanmar conflict is understandable, but we cannot be fearful. The multifaceted issues posed by the civil war in our neighbouring country deserve an intelligent response. The situations in central Myanmar, in the marginal states, and in Arakan should be regarded separately from one another. For practical reasons, Bangladesh's approach to each of these situations must be different as well.

Although Bangladesh's focus seems to mainly centre on the war in Arakan, the situation in Chin is of import in terms of geopolitics. There are also similarities between the people in Chin and those in Bangladesh's Bandarban. The Chin National Front has already prepared a government and constitution for its region. Such an integrated position has put uncertainty into India's plans towards Thailand and Asean. This could surely get New Delhi to come to an understanding on this front. And since the Chin state borders Bangladesh, there is a need for us to communicate with them somehow.

In my capacity as a writer, I was able to speak to the CNF Vice-President Dr Sui Khar, who is responsible for Chin's negotiations with the Tatmadaw. He told me that they have a positive stance about the Rohingya's return to Myanmar, keeping intact their ethnic identity.

Right now, the Arakan Army is increasingly occupying the townships in northern Arakan such as Mrauk U and also Paletwa in Chin. Realistically, the AA could soon be in control of 70-80 percent of the area.

There are several questions ahead of Bangladesh in this regard. Would discussions be needed with the AA in doing business with Arakan? Would the issue of Rohingya repatriation also need to be discussed with the AA? Would the growing tensions between the AA and Tatmadaw result in more military and civilian infiltration into Bangladesh? As for the Rohingya organisations, such as ARSA and RSO, what should their actions be given the current situation, and what

would their relation be like with the junta and the AA? If the rebels in Arakan are able to completely take over, what should Bangladesh's position be in that case? It should be noted that the Arakan Army does not consider the Rohingya a separate nation. But it does support the return of the Rohingya to Arakan with citizen rights. This was confirmed to us by AA chief General Twan Mrat Naing himself in 2022.

Dr Khar said when the NUG began the Spring Revolution in 2021, they tried to contact the Bangladesh government. I don't know what the government's response was. But the NUG, CNF, and AA all believe that Bangladesh's Myanmar policy, Arakan policy, and Chin policy should all be reviewed. Dr Khar also said that by the end of this year, the Myanmar military will be completely depleted and the changing situation of central Burma and peripheral areas requires a rethinking of Bangladesh's policy.

Besides China, neighbouring India is also closely monitoring the situation in Burma. India shares important borders with Chin and has important investments in Arakan. The situations in these two provinces prompted India to announce the fencing of the Myanmar-India border. But the Zou and Naga peoples are on both sides of this border and are therefore against this fencing. This could be another matter of dispute in the region in the coming days. And since there are Zou people in Bangladesh, too, it demands our attention.

All in all, given the evolving situation, it is crucial for Bangladesh to start recognising the diverse political and military elements of this neighbouring country.

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FILE PHOTO: MOKAMMEL SHUVO

Members of Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP), who sought refuge in Bangladesh to escape the battles on their side of the border, are taken to Ghumdhum Government High School in Bandarban by Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel on February 6, 2024.

### Indecisiveness will cost us

We have been confused about Myanmar's crisis spilling over our border even since August 2017. On August 24 that year, the commander of our border guards, in a press conference, said we would not allow anyone to enter our border. Suddenly, on August 25, we opened our border completely, and the local administration in Cox's Bazar was very accommodating to the Rohingya. Some say this was done to win points for the national election and ahead of the UN General Assembly.

As the crisis unfolded, the question of how to handle it became another source of confusion. Initially, Bangladesh opted for a bilateral approach with Myanmar, holding talks and signing agreements. However, uncertainty arose about the effectiveness of this strategy, leading to discussions about involving the UN through agencies like IOM or UNHCR. This back and forth raised questions about the then foreign ministry's foresight and ability to manage the situation effectively from the outset.

As the crisis dragged on, we cautiously engaged China, even suggesting that a solution without its involvement might be near impossible. The September 2019 agreement with China offered hope, but the pandemic stalled progress in 2020-21. Unfortunately, both China and Bangladesh acknowledged a lack of structured communication with Myanmar. Whether direct engagement with Rakhine or Naypyidaw would be more effective remained debatable, but the reality was that our diplomatic channels were practically shut. My conversations with Chinese diplomats suggest they too haven't seen significant movement on the issue. As these crises drag on, the Joint Response Plan's budget dwindles, placing increasing

pressure on Bangladesh with mounting risks.

From the onset of this current crisis, too, we saw indecisiveness from our policymakers. Until the tragic incident of mortars from Myanmar claiming the lives of a Bangladeshi and a Rohingya within our borders, did local authorities undertake any public warnings or awareness campaigns? No. Were the refugees informed of the potential risks? Again, no. Were precautions taken before armed personnel from Myanmar entered our border? Their armed entry itself presented a dilemma. We have witnessed and tolerated airspace violations and the tragic event involving a BGB member. These incidents demand clarification: are we unwittingly conveying unintended diplomatic or military signals to Myanmar through our actions?

The unsettling truth is, we simply don't understand Myanmar. They remain largely an undiscovered neighbour for us. This is deeply concerning. During attempts to establish civilian-level diplomacy through the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, we discovered shocking misconceptions: Myanmar views us as potential terrorists aiming to occupy its land. This lack of mutual understanding extends both ways. This time too, when armed Myanmar troops entered our territory, we couldn't manage enough interpreters. So, we are not sure if these people are involved in ethnic cleansing. Consequently, we missed valuable evidence for The Gambia case at the International Court of Justice. We must bridge this knowledge gap and understand Myanmar as well as we do our other neighbours.

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### Has our policy towards Myanmar failed?

There should have been a multilayered approach to the Rohingya issue from the beginning. Since there are varied interests in Myanmar of different stakeholders—the West, China, and India—when it comes to investment and economic prospects, there is naturally a conflict of interest. So, it is not wise to depend solely on any of those actors for a solution. This is why we needed to bring up the repatriation issue strongly in multilateral forums.

We can see that the problem with repatriation was created right at the beginning when we introduced the term FDMN (forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals) instead of using the term refugee. How did we come up with this term, and why? Had we used the term refugee, we could have cited the UN Refugee Convention, even if we are not a signatory. We are a signatory state to the Global Compact of Refugees, and it falls upon all signatories to resolve the refugee crisis. We could have brought it to the UN General Assembly in a different way; we could have mentioned the R2P (responsibility to protect) principle. A multilayered approach would have allowed us to offset the conflicting interests we are now having to navigate.

The countries we are looking to for solutions have economic interests in the region of Rakhine—such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, Trilateral Highway Project, investment in Sittwe Port, and the oil and gas pipeline project. This is why we cannot really be certain whether they are serious about the Rohingya repatriation or if we are becoming pawns in their game.

Instead of saying whether our foreign policy failed, I would say that in order for it to be successful, particularly for the Rohingya repatriation, we needed to effectively create the intellectual and institutional space and capacity to pursue the issue. Instead, we made things worse by



not using the term "refugee."

In the current context, one might argue that a window of opportunity has been created for repatriation. With the central authority in a major crisis, and the Arakan Army and the Northern Alliance needing international recognition, we are in a good bargaining place. It is likely that administrative control might go to the Arakan Army in the near future, which means we need to keep the door open. They said in an interview that the Arakan Army is ready to accept Rohingya Muslims as citizens, though they did not use the word Rohingya. Whether or not we will seize this opportunity will depend on whether our foreign ministry is able to exercise its autonomy, or is trapped in the interests of others. We are still solely dealing with the central authority, but now we need to maintain neutrality and create space with other groups.

When it comes to crisis management in foreign policy, there should be a consultation group with experts and independent thinkers to guide the ministry, if we want to ensure our autonomy. The ministry should create a group of consultants who can brief it about the complex terrain in Myanmar and give suggestions. We must remember that in this current geopolitical climate, we need to strengthen our intellectual capacity as much as our intuitional capacity when it comes to diplomacy.

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### We must pursue multi-track diplomacy with Myanmar

Since the very birth of the nation, Myanmar has been dependent on China. Therefore, Chinese influence in Myanmar will remain despite a junta existing. China shares the largest border with the country, is the biggest trading partner and has also been a partner for Myanmar in dire times. We must always remember this context.

Let's come down to the second aspect, which is India. What was India's relation? British India occupied places in Myanmar, in a sense. During that time, it was the Indians who were running Myanmar. Yangon was made by the British. So there were many Indians who lived in Myanmar and were later expelled from the country in the 1950s. The relationship between India and Myanmar has never been that great.

Now let's talk about us. When Pakistan was formed in 1947, Rakhine wanted to come with Pakistan. And they had a leader, who was known as the "Rakhine Jinnah." But Pakistan then declined their request for existent technicalities.

The Tatmadaw's greatest fear is Bangladesh, and the reason is it's a Muslim majority country. They always use reference of Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, that these were countries that did not have a Muslim majority but do now. Bangladesh is overpopulated and will make Myanmar a Muslim majority country. And therefore, the Rohingya are its agents. This is their psyche.

In the present scenario, we have unfortunately failed in our diplomacy. Not just at present, but even earlier. Even after liberation, we haven't done much. Now, what do we do?

In my opinion, by this year, Rakhine will fall. If you look at the map, the areas starting from Paletwa to Mrauk U have been taken over. If you've seen the news, you'll see that the Myanmar authority has demolished two bridges, so that the Arakan Army doesn't come to Sittwe. But as per my estimation, by the end of this year, the whole of Rakhine would be taken over.

So what should Bangladesh do? I think we cannot deal with this situation through a single stream. The biggest mistake in our diplomacy was probably the bilateral approach that we took with Myanmar. Tatmadaw is in a very bad shape because they kept 18,000 troops just for Naypyidaw and Section 144 has been announced. On top of that, they have ordered compulsory military service. So we should also consider a different track for diplomacy, and we must go and try to connect with the people who in future will be calling the shots, which are the NUG and the Arakan Army. Our foreign ministry knows how to best deal with that.

We need to prepare for backup diplomacy with some kind of show of force, otherwise you can't resolve this issue. And we have to work towards making the Arakan Army believe that the Rohingya are their people. They have mentioned in one of their communications that they recognise them as Arakan Muslims, not Rohingya.

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