



PHOTO: REUTERS

The Myanmar civil war is the result of decades of non-democratic rule by authoritative, military regimes.

## CIVIL WAR IN MYANMAR

# Bangladesh should revisit its national security strategy



### A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

As fighting between the military junta and ethnic groups rages on in war-torn Myanmar, its neighbours Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand are finding it difficult to keep violence off their own borders.

Bangladesh, for instance, is facing major national security challenges at multiple layers as a result of the uncontained and reckless fighting between the Myanmar military and the armed rebel groups.

Intense gun battle along the Naf River, earlier this month, cut off Bangladesh's communications with its only coral island, St Martin's, located about nine kilometres off the mainland, for about a week. As a result, the island, with a population of about 11,000, was exposed to security risk and essential supplies crisis. Around the same time, heavy explosions along the Naf also caused panic among the residents of Shah Porir Dwip, another island situated at the southernmost point of Bangladesh. It was also reported that a Myanmar warship had been spotted opposite the island.

Indeed, these fears and security concerns are not unfounded. Since 2022, Myanmar has continuously violated Bangladesh's territorial integrity, with the former violating the latter's air space as early as in September 2022, with two shells falling inside the Bangladesh territory, and multiple rounds being fired from fighter aircraft.

As fighting between the factions and Myanmar military escalated, multiple killings and injuries were reported inside Bangladesh's territory. In February this year, two were killed by a mortar shell fired by Myanmar on Bandarban's Gumdhum border, with a child being injured. As recently as April this year, two Bangladeshi fishermen in Teknaf were injured when Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP) opened fire.

The misadventures, if not provocative posturing, by both the Myanmar military and the armed rebel groups around the Bangladesh borders, including in the Bay of Bengal, pose major threat to Bangladesh's national security. The Bangladesh government must be commended for the restraint it has exercised in addressing the situation so far, but it seems that this patience is being misinterpreted by all the factions in Myanmar. While Bangladesh keeps trying to address the situation through meaningful dialogues in a constructive approach, the Myanmar factions have been pushing the nation further to the brink: Bangladesh has now threatened counterfire if Myanmar resumes violent activities along the restive border areas.

However, the security concerns for Bangladesh does not end here. It has been reported by multiple media sources that armed gangs operating inside Rohingya camps inside Bangladesh—Rohingya Salvation Organization (RSO), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)—are actively and forcefully recruiting Rohingya

men and boys (as young as 12) to fight in the civil war. In cases where the refugees are understandably unwilling to join, they are being kidnapped by the gangs. It has even been suggested that the recent arson incidents in the Kutupalong camp have been orchestrated by these gangs to coerce the refugees into joining the civil war. A recent turf war between ARSA and RSO has resulted in the death of three refugees.

What is even more alarming is that many of the refugees who have been forced away from the camps are currently being held inside the Bangladesh territory in the depths of the Bandarban hills, waiting to be pushed into Arakan. Many of the refugees, fearing illegal conscription by the various factions, including the Tatmadaw proxies, are voluntarily fleeing the camps and randomly spreading out across the greater Bandarban region, where it has been alleged that they are trying to assimilate with the locals.

If this is indeed the case, then the local authorities should beef up surveillance to avert internal security risks, given that the refugees are vulnerable to being manipulated by various quarters to serve their vested interests, and there is a high risk that the ones who are fleeing the camps could also potentially be exploited by groups with nefarious intentions.

In addition, Bangladesh has witnessed a new influx of refugees in recent months, as anticipated earlier,

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in the face of growing violence in the Rakhine state. A Bangladeshi official involved in refugee relief and repatriation told the media that many of the new refugees have been allowed to enter into Bangladesh territory unofficially. While Bangladesh has been generous in opening its doors to the Rohingya refugees, allowing them to do so unofficially or without tracking and accountability is a crisis in the making.

It is a no-brainer that in a desperate situation such as this, it would be difficult to keep the refugees from

crossing over into Bangladesh. Under the current circumstances, without beefing up border security—and if required, ensuring a safe, official passage of the recently displaced Rohingya—infiltration would continue, resulting in the creation of small, sporadic pockets of illegal refugee settlement across the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The people in these pockets, desperate and vulnerable to the lures of various vested groups, can pose national security threats in the medium to long terms.

Bangladesh needs to revisit its national security strategy and adapt it to effectively navigate the shifting landscape. We need a multipronged approach to mitigate the emerging security threats.

First, we must acknowledge that our border security needs immediate attention and should do a thorough risk analysis with the support of defence experts and analysts, and come up with a comprehensive plan to counter these challenges.

Second, instead of hoping that the Rohingya refugees would not cross into Bangladesh, we should take stock of the situation and if required allow them official safe passage with strict monitoring of their whereabouts. This would be better than the refugees illegally infiltrating and then spreading across the greater CHT region, without any sight of their movement.

Third, the government should work in close collaboration with key regional players including India and China, since both have leverage with the Myanmar military and the armed factions in some cases, especially China—earlier this year, China brokered a ceasefire between the Myanmar junta and the armed groups—to convince all the parties to come to a negotiating table and discuss and ink a sustainable permanent ceasefire.

Fourth, Bangladesh should continue using diplomatic channels to convince the international community to increase funding for the desperate Rohingya refugees, whose living conditions have declined over the years with aid dwindling fast.

Finally, the Bangladesh government should negotiate a practical and sustainable repatriation deal for the refugees with the Myanmar authorities with the mediation of China. Once peace is restored in Myanmar, China can play a pivotal role by leveraging their influence to offer the refugees a dignified life in their own homeland with full citizenship, rights and security.

The Myanmar civil war is the result of decades of non-democratic rule by authoritative, military regimes, resulting in the persecution of minority groups, which has inflicted deep wounds within the communities. Its solution lies in the return of democracy and acceptance of all its people. The wounds are deep, but in a true democratic system, with rights and dignity restored to all the ethnic groups and communities, and everyone given their due representation and voice, Myanmar can heal, and prosper even, realising the full potential of the diversity the country is gifted with.

In light of the ongoing situation, it is high time Bangladesh revised its national security strategy and worked in close collaboration with the other key regional players to help Myanmar find peace.

## SUDAN CRISIS EXPLAINED

# Why wars are not a matter of the past

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ALIZA RAHMAN

After the October 7 Hamas attacks and Israel's genocide in Gaza that followed, much of the world is reckoning with the consequences of persisting imperialism. The nature of the interweaved global politics of modern times has become evident not just through the sales of consumer goods, but also the sale of arms. In this regard, the crisis in Sudan is in many ways similar, with horrific news repeatedly coming out about the state in which the civilians have been living.

Starting in April 2023, well over a year has passed since the eruption of the crisis that is now termed a civil war. The chilling lines from a UNHCR report that the war has turned "homes into cemeteries" provide a glimpse at the terror that now encompasses the lives of those locked by the fight between the Sudanese government forces and the Rapid Support Forces

the 22-year conflict in 1983-2005 to the present day, with famine and ethnic cleansing being recurring events over many years. The hope that had come in 2019 with the ousting of Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled Sudan for 30 years, was quickly extinguished in 2021, when the already fragile state of democracy in Sudan was ruptured by a coup organised jointly by army General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti.

However, the current conflict occurred when the relationship between the two military leaders festered. Burhan, the commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and Hemedti, the leader of the RSF, were once allies. While Hemedti believed that the dismantling and then reintegration of the RSF into the army would require 10 years, the SAF commander believed it could be done in two. The ensuing crisis that emerged from this conflict has had devastating consequences and a grueling genocide, one which the world has not been ready

we must remember that the sales of weapons from the West has for decades propped up authoritarian regimes in parts of the world called the Global South.

Another recent article in *Le Monde* claims that "some states are actively fuelling the conflict by providing arms and ammunition." From the Russian Wagner group to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), arms have reportedly been supplied to perpetuate the conflict in Sudan, and these groups have reportedly profited from the horrific situation—just as it has been in other conflicts, particularly genocides, throughout modern history.

To look away from Sudan, at this time, is tantamount to complicity. Innocent people losing lives and many barely surviving in a conflict created not by nature but by humans should make us pause, because it lays bare one of the cemented beliefs about the 21st century—that war is a matter of the past. In truth, wars, genocides, and the military industrial



PHOTO: REUTERS

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(RSF). According to a UN report, only 16 per cent of the target have been met for humanitarian aid allocated for Sudan.

According to Al Jazeera, 10 million people have been displaced in Sudan, a matter only exacerbated by the fact that 2.83 million people were already displaced by "previous conflicts." Of the 48 million people in Sudan, more than a quarter have had to flee, with two million crossing borders in fear of their lives. Many Sudanese civilians have fled to Chad, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Sudan—the exodus may place pressure on these nations and cause another cycle of violence. The overall death toll remains unclear, with some estimates of 150,000 according to Tom Perriello, the US special envoy for Sudan. As per the British Red Cross, 25 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance as of April 2024. By some estimates, the current situation in Sudan could surpass the horrific famines in Ethiopia 40 years ago, which was said to have taken the lives of approximately one million people. At present, it is estimated that 18 million people in Sudan are "acutely hungry" and among children, 3.6 million are "acutely malnourished"—excluding severe injuries, both physical and psychological, that will be carried by the affected population for years, if not decades, to come.

Sudan's history is one that is rife with issues, from its independence from British and Egyptian rule in 1956 to

to tackle, and one which has received far less coverage than the genocide in Gaza.

A line from a 2004 article in *Mother Jones* about the Sudanese civil war stated, "If it has learnt from Rwanda, the West should act to stop mass

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killings in Sudan." Almost two decades later, the dismal fact of the matter is that the situation has not changed. As Europe lurches to the far-right, with the stoking of Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiments as one of its most potent tools,

complex are well and alive. As is frequently seen with conflicts today, it is rarely one country or the forces within the borders of a single nation involved in widespread systemic violence of the kind that is happening in Sudan.

The consequences of such decisions place, as usual, the lives of the innocent in grave danger. Sudan as of now has the largest internally displaced population in the world because of both the current conflict and the others that preceded it. The world has had the chance to bear witness to such atrocities through platforms that are not yet regulated the way traditional media has been—through personal phones and social media accounts broadcasting information and current events at a fraction of the cost it takes for traditional newsrooms to show the world what is occurring. It is what allowed young journalists in Gaza to show what was happening on the ground even as the most powerful countries in the world worked to side with Israel.

Yet, many today feel powerless: the nature of modern world politics, as facilitated by civilian and military technology, prolongs wars that could have perhaps been snuffed out had external influences not existed in the pernicious ways that it does. To counter the immense powerful network that works against the innocent, it is imperative that at the very least we pay attention to conflicts such as the one in Sudan.