

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF HAPPINESS

Happiness? In this economy?

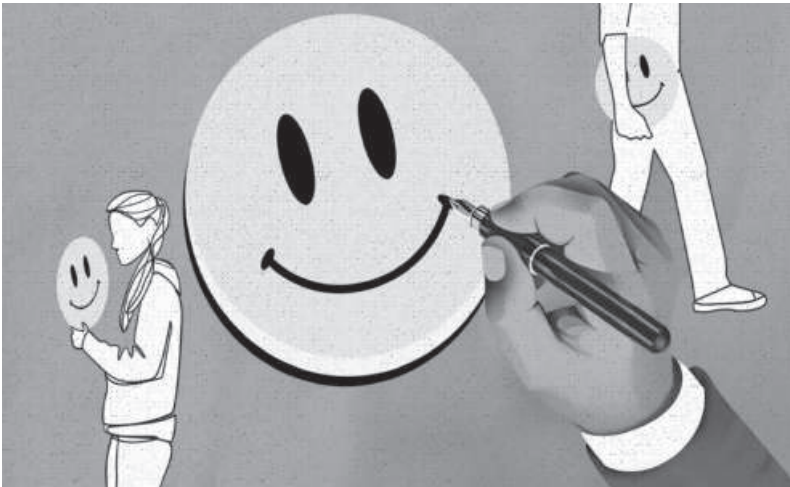


MIND THE GAP
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Today is the International Day of Happiness, a delightful concept for those who don't live in Bangladesh. Somewhere in Scandinavia, a group of people are probably celebrating by sipping honey oat milk lattes in their efficiently designed apartments, basking in their government-mandated work-life balance. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, we celebrate happiness the way we celebrate rain—by watching it happen somewhere outside.

Let's start with the obvious question: who exactly in Bangladesh is happy? Is it the rickshaw puller who wakes up at dawn, dodges death at every intersection, and earns just enough to afford a packet of puffed rice and some existential dread? Or is it the corporate employee stuck in an overpriced Uber, scrolling LinkedIn, while wondering if selling kidneys is still a viable business



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

model? Perhaps it's the youth, those poor, unemployed souls who spent years getting degrees only to realise that their best shot at success

involves either leaving the country or mastering the art of brown-nosing someone in power.

Ah, the *hope for happiness*—the one thing that encourages us to set aside our inflation-induced anxiety, and chronic disillusionment with governance to embrace *positivity*. This day, when Instagram talks about gratitude, well-being, and mental

their own zip codes.

But let's be fair—happiness is a complicated thing. It's not about having a perfect life or a flawless country (if that were the case, no one on this planet would be happy). It's about resilience, adaptability, and the ability to laugh at absurdity even when it's all you have left. And if there's one thing Bangladeshis have mastered, it's the art of finding joy in chaos.

Take traffic, for instance. Objectively speaking, it's a waking nightmare, an urban purgatory where cars, rickshaws, and pedestrians battle for dominance in a never-ending game of "Who gets to move first?" But within that madness, there is something oddly unifying. Strangers stuck in the same jam exchange knowing glances, vendors weave through the gridlock selling everything from guavas to phone chargers, and somewhere, someone is making a TikTok about it. And doesn't that count for something? The ability to turn misery into content, suffering into shared experience?

And then there's our legendary air pollution—where stepping outside feels like lighting a cigarette but without the pleasure of actually smoking it. The way we collectively hack, cough, and pretend this is fine

would make even the most hardened satirist weep. But here's the thing: we still show up. Students still make it to class, workers still report for duty, and dreamers still dare to imagine a Dhaka where the sky isn't an ominous shade of grey. If that isn't hope, what is?

Our economy—now that's a fun one. Officially, it's *booming*. In reality, a trip to the grocery store requires financial planning that would make an accountant sweat. But amidst the absurdity, people find ways to adapt. Small businesses are still hustling, garment workers are still keeping the country's biggest industry alive, and young entrepreneurs are creating digital startups that defy the odds. It's almost as if Bangladeshis refuse to be beaten down, no matter how much the system tries.

And then there's our *so-called* democracy. Yes, elections here are more predictable than BTv's programming lineup, but political engagement is at an all-time high. Students took to the streets demanding justice and have now moved on to politics. People are talking about accountability. And no matter how many laws are passed to keep opinions in check, people still find ways to say what they mean. If there's a silver lining, it's that the thirst for real change has never

been stronger. The need for brighter futures is being thrived towards.

Despite everything—the air, the traffic, the economy, the politics—there is something about this country that refuses to be defeated. You see it in the way strangers help push a broken-down bus, in the laughter that echoes from roadside tea stalls, in the warmth of communities that come together in times of crisis. We complain, we rant, we meme our way through misery, but we never really stop hoping. We find small moments of joy in sipping coconut water on the side or the occasional fuchka-jhalmuri breaks from the hustle of corporate life.

And maybe that's what happiness looks like for us—not the absence of struggle, but the determination to find light even in the thickest of smog. A belief that things *can* get better. Because if there's one thing Bangladesh has proven over and over again, it's that no matter how many times we are knocked down, we always—*always*—get back up.

So, on this International Day of Happiness, let's celebrate the resilience, the stubborn optimism, and the relentless spirit that keeps this country going. If we can laugh through it all, maybe, just maybe, we'll be the ones who get the last laugh.

What should be discussed at the international Rohingya conference



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LAETITIA VAN DEN ASSUM

Since taking office in August 2024, Bangladesh's interim government has sought to mobilise international support for a solution to the Rohingya crisis. In November 2024, the interim government's determined lobbying resulted in a UN General Assembly resolution calling for a "high-level conference" in the second half of 2025 which would contribute to "a comprehensive, innovative, concrete and time-bound plan for the sustainable resolution of the crisis, including the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya Muslims to Myanmar." The UN conference is an opportunity to draw attention to the wider issues that should be tackled, including the underlying causes of the Rohingya crisis.

A recent report titled "Behind the Wire" from Doctors Without Borders estimates there are 2.8 million Rohingya around the world, of whom just 23 percent remain in Myanmar—a vivid reminder of the brutal effectiveness of decades of

who fled within the past five years want to return to Myanmar but only 28 percent of those who left more than 20 years ago want to do the same. This suggests that solutions should be tailor-made and guided by the objectives of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, including easing pressure on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions in Myanmar for voluntary return in safety and dignity.

Given the number of Rohingya in Bangladesh, it makes sense for Dhaka to make repatriation to Rakhine one of the conference's major issues. However, experience has shown that pressure to move fast risks continuing the "revolving door" phenomenon seen since the 1970s, in which flight from Myanmar has been followed by return from Bangladesh, before the cycle begins again. If the underlying causes of the Rohingya crisis are not addressed, much-needed progress and stability will

tolerance in host countries appears to be slipping.

These issues belong on the international conference agenda. Countries in the region should be encouraged to consider how the living conditions of refugees might be improved. In the case of Bangladesh, this could include accepting the use of sturdier

government donors make it difficult to address even the basic needs of refugees. If well prepared, the international conference could also serve as a major fundraising effort.

Engaging the Arakan Army (AA) Rebuilding Rakhine state from the ravages of war will be a major challenge. While it has long been one of Myanmar's poorest states,

will remain illusory. More pragmatic approaches are needed. For the Rohingya conference organisers, this means contacting the AA and finding ways to include it in the conference. However, Bangladesh seems to still have some hesitancy about engaging a non-state actor, even when it clearly has de facto authority.

report speaks of two million people at risk of starvation due to conflict, trade blockades, cratering incomes and indiscriminate air strikes by Myanmar's military. It will take years to rebuild Rakhine state. A comprehensive long-term recovery plan and roadmap are needed to capture the monumental task ahead. The voluntary, secure and dignified return of Rohingya refugees should be part of such a plan.

One of the most complex and pressing questions will be strengthening the cohesion of the state's diverse ethnic and religious communities, particularly the Rakhine and the Rohingya. Both sides continue to harbour deep fears of each other. Some Rakhine saw their fears corroborated when they witnessed the recent fighting by many Rohingya on the side of the military forces of Myanmar's regime and against the AA.

The past few years were characterised by a fog of war that shrouded much of northern Rakhine state and the Rohingya camps near Cox's Bazar. The fighting in northern Rakhine, the lack of free access by independent observers and the State Administration Council's blocking of regular communications made it difficult to verify reports about what was happening in Maungdaw district. As rumours and disinformation abound, it has been difficult to separate truth from falsehoods. The same applies to the situation in the camps in Bangladesh where news about growing insecurity and the growing role of armed Rohingya militias has alerted many but full information remains elusive.

To make progress, along with reconciliation, independent assessments are needed to guide preparations for the conference. It will also be important to recognise what the different ethnic communities in Rakhine state have been going through. Over the past five years, the Myanmar military intensified its abuses against all communities in Rakhine state, not just the Rohingya. They tortured, killed and maimed people, destroyed livelihoods, burned down homes, hospitals, schools, markets and prayer houses, blocked the transport of basic goods and cut essential services. All the people of Rakhine are victims now.

If the conference wants to make a meaningful contribution to the resolution of the crisis, it must not only deal with the plight of the Rohingya but help *all* people in Rakhine rebuild their state together. This approach should be at the heart of a transitional justice programme with an emphasis on institutional reforms, truth, justice, reparations and memorialisation.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Rohingya refugees arriving in Bangladesh near at Shah Porir Dwip in Cox's Bazar on November 9, 2017.

According to the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, of the Rohingya living abroad 76 percent of those who fled within the past five years want to return to Myanmar but only 28 percent of those who left more than 20 years ago want to do the same. This suggests that solutions should be tailor-made and guided by the objectives of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, including easing pressure on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions in Myanmar for voluntary return in safety and dignity.

oppression and discrimination. Only one percent of Rohingya managed to obtain a passport, citizenship, or resettlement in a country where they have no fear of arrest, extortion, or abuse for identifying as Rohingya.

Aside from Myanmar, the countries with the largest Rohingya populations are Bangladesh with 1.1 million, Pakistan with 400,000, Saudi Arabia with 340,000 and Malaysia with 210,000. The situation of the Rohingya differs between these countries.

In Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, for example, most Rohingya arrived decades ago, and their children have never seen their homeland. According to the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, of the Rohingya living abroad 76 percent of those

remain out of reach, with growing impacts for the entire region.

Many Rohingya continue to flee from Bangladesh and Myanmar. In the current dry season, several thousand have fled by land and by sea, arriving in Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. According to UNHCR, the increase in numbers is driven by continued instability in Myanmar; lack of progress in addressing the root causes of Rohingya displacement; growing insecurity and declining humanitarian assistance in the camps in Bangladesh; more active smuggling networks and a decrease in the cost of sea journeys. Tragically, over 1,000 Rohingya travelling by boat perished or went missing at sea in 2022 and 2023 (UNHCR report, May 2024). At the same time,

building materials in camps, wider access to education for all children and young people as well permitting paid employment of refugees.

Bangladesh should also address the growing insecurity in the refugee camps. Armed Rohingya militias have been operating openly. They have been instrumental in the recruitment of young men for their own forces and for Myanmar's military. In November 2024, Reuters reported that between 3,000 and 5,000 Rohingya had been taken across the border into northern Rakhine state, many against their will. It is hard to imagine that the departure of such large numbers escaped the attention of Bangladesh's authorities.

Moreover, the arrival of large numbers of new recruits in Rakhine state further destabilised the border areas which, in turn, led to the flight of some 80,000 Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh over the past few months. The insecurity has also eroded the already fragile trust between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. Therefore, the conference's key issues should address the urgency of restoring stability along the borders as well as security in the refugee camps.

While more must be done, resources are finite. The unexpected halting of USAID support as well as major budget decreases by other

much of its economic and social infrastructure has been destroyed, including roads, bridges, health facilities, schools, markets and prayer houses.

The UN resolution on the conference reflects a traditional state-centric approach. It assumes that Myanmar's central government can shape political life in all its component parts. Multiple references to "Myanmar" appear to refer exclusively to the military regime that has lost control of much of the country. In Rakhine, it barely retains a toehold: following recent heavy losses, its authority is limited to the state capital Sittwe, the island of Manaung, and small sections of Kyaukpyu.

Even before the AA's emergence as a major power, this state-centric approach had already failed. Since 2017, China made several attempts to mediate the start of Rohingya repatriation between Bangladesh and Myanmar's central government. The attempts failed, in large part because both the Rakhine and the Rohingya, the state's two largest communities, were excluded from the deliberations. Efforts to resume repatriation after the 2021 military coup were even less successful.

If the de facto territorial control of the AA is not acknowledged, progress on repatriation and other urgent issues related to Rakhine

While full recognition of the AA may be some way off, it is in the interest of both sides to cooperate on areas of mutual interest. These could include establishing a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine to deliver assistance to all communities in need; resuming bilateral trade; and countering cross border crime. In this, Dhaka could draw lessons from how Myanmar's other neighbours, particularly China and Thailand, interact with non-state groups along their borders with Myanmar. Emphasising win-win opportunities rather than potential difficulties should be the way forward.

For now, it is unclear what kind of state will emerge in Rakhine to replace the former regime. The AA rejects the recent political past with its centralisation of power in Myanmar's capital Nay Pyi Taw, and has occasionally suggested a confederate structure, but it has not excluded other options. Over the past few years, the United League of Arakan, the AA's civilian wing, has expanded administrative and judicial services in parts of Rakhine, and started training more civilian personnel. This, however, is only the starting point for building greater autonomy.

Conditions in Rakhine have worsened since late 2018, when violent conflict between the military and the AA intensified. A recent UN