

## ROHINGYA RETURN

### It’s crucial that Dhaka, Naypyidaw reach consensus

#### Says Chinese envoy

STAFF CORRESPONENT

The resolution of the Rohingya crisis must start with consensus between Bangladesh and Myanmar and then be expanded to a wider agreement involving ASEAN countries, donor nations, and UN agencies.

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen yesterday made the remark while addressing an international conference in Cox’s Bazar, “Stakeholders’ Dialogue: Takeaways to the High-Level Conference on Rohingya Situation”.

“Any repatriation will be based on bilateral agreements. Bangladesh is now the host; Myanmar is the homeland. Broader consensus must then be built,” he said at a session – confidence building measures.

Referring to his personal involvement in the 2023 pilot repatriation project, Yao said that the process was “extremely challenging” due to differing views among stakeholders.

“Some believe that as long as the Myanmar government remains, it is not the right time for repatriation. But Myanmar is a sovereign state, and its national sovereignty must be respected.”

The envoy stressed that halting further influx into Bangladesh would be the most urgent step.

For this, he said, a ceasefire between Myanmar’s military and the Arakan Army was crucial.

“We understand the Arakan Army controls over 80 percent of the territory of Arakan state and still wants full control. But who provides them with weaponry, finance, and intelligence? China does not play any role; we don’t provide anything to either the Arakan Army or the Myanmar government. However, there is some supply to them from other sources, so all parties need to be part of any agreement; otherwise, a ceasefire cannot be achieved,” he said.

Once peace is achieved, Yao said, repatriation could start on a small scale with a few thousand Rohingyas under close monitoring, supported by coordinated development, education, and livelihood projects by China, Bangladesh, ASEAN, and UN agencies.

He also underscored that Rohingya participation was essential. “Any solution must have their agreement and support. Otherwise, everything will be meaningless.”

Reaffirming Beijing’s commitment, Yao noted that China had already mediated a trilateral mechanism with Bangladesh and Myanmar, hosted several working group meetings, and contributed humanitarian aid projects with the UNHCR and WFP.

“China will never give up. Ending hostilities and achieving consensus between Bangladesh and Myanmar is the only way forward,” he said.

Charles Santiago, co-chair of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, said ASEAN and China must shoulder greater responsibility in resolving the crisis.

He warned that the withdrawal of US aid had cut food assistance for Rohingyas from \$18 to just \$6 per person and urged China, Japan, and others to step up contributions.



Hundreds of Rohingyas attend a rally at the Kutupalong camp in Cox’s Bazar’s Ukhiya yesterday morning, marking eighth Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

## ‘We want justice, we want accountability’

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and MOKAMMEL SHUVO, Cox’s Bazar

Justice and accountability for atrocities against the Rohingyas must remain central to any resolution of the crisis, speakers said at a stakeholders’ dialogue in Cox’s Bazar.

Nicholas Koumjian, head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, stressed the urgency of holding perpetrators accountable, saying the Rohingya want to return home safely and rebuild their lives.

“We want justice. We want accountability,” he said, citing evidence of civilian targeting by both the Myanmar military and other armed groups, including drone strikes and executions in violation of the laws of war.

Speaking on the second day of the three-day event yesterday, Koumjian urged decisive international action, noting that long-term solutions require both legal accountability and political will.

The three-day dialogue aims to engage global stakeholders in finding solutions to the prolonged crisis and relay the takeaways to the High-level Conference on the Situation of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, which is scheduled to begin on September 30.

Huma Khan, head of OHCHR Bangladesh, said justice provides the guarantee of non-recurrence.

She outlined the pillars of transitional justice – truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence – with memorialisation as a new element, but noted that Myanmar’s ongoing ethnic cleansing

challenges the immediate implementation of such processes.

She also stressed complementary local justice mechanisms alongside international processes, citing crimes by both the Myanmar military and armed rebel group the Arakan Army over the past year.

Antonietta Ann Trapani, programme coordinator of Legal Action Worldwide, pointed to recent progress: 25 arrest warrants issued in Argentina under universal jurisdiction, ongoing International Criminal Court investigations, and the case brought by The Gambia at the International Court of Justice.

**“Justice is ensuring that children who survive will never again face the same persecution.”**

Antonietta Ann Trapani, programme coordinator of Legal Action Worldwide

She stressed that justice goes beyond court judgments to reparations, the restoration of citizenship, and recognition of the Rohingya as equal members of society.

“Justice is ensuring that children who survive will never again face the same persecution,” she said, calling for an integrated approach at international, regional, and local levels.

Rohingya diaspora representative Nay San Lwin urged global action against ongoing crimes by both the Myanmar military and Arakan Army.

He called for ICC cases to be expanded to cover the Arakan Army and for stronger

international pressure to ensure ICJ rulings are enforced, stressing that transitional justice, reparation, and security are essential for the safe and permanent return of the Rohingyas.

Addressing humanitarian challenges, Juliette Murekevisoni, deputy representative of UNHCR Bangladesh, highlighted critical funding shortages affecting 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar.

Aid cuts, she said, have strained food, shelter, education, and protection services, particularly for women and children.

“We must involve refugees themselves in these processes and ensure they acquire skills and education to rebuild their country when conditions allow safe return,” she said.

Lance Bonneau, chief of International Organization for Migration’s Bangladesh mission, stressed a dual approach of providing essential services while preparing refugees for voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation.

He cited achievements in literacy, skills development, and the Rohingya Cultural Memory Center, underscoring the importance of preserving culture and preparing refugees to contribute to Myanmar’s future.

Lucky Karim, executive director of Refugee Women for Peace and Justice, echoed the urgency of improving conditions for both camp residents and internally displaced Rohingyas within Myanmar.

She called for a medium-term plan to protect remaining populations and sustained international support to prevent further loss of life and ensure a safe, dignified, and permanent return.

## ‘Engaging all to resolve Rohingya crisis’

Khalilur says refugees seek dignified return

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Stakeholders’ Dialogue has once again reflected the Rohingyas’ clear and unmistakable yearning to return to Myanmar, said National Security Adviser and High Representative for the Rohingya Issue Khalilur Rahman yesterday.

They want to return to their homeland with dignity and safety, with the restoration of their rights and accountability for atrocities committed against them, he said.

To address the ongoing crisis, he said he has been engaging with all key actors, including the Arakan Army and the Myanmar government.

“A solution cannot be achieved by leaving out any important actor. Negotiations must involve everyone in order to be effective. If one party is excluded, any agreement reached is likely to fail or collapse,” he said, while addressing the concluding session of the international conference, “Stakeholders’ Dialogue: Takeaways to the High-Level Conference on Rohingya Situation”, held in Cox’s Bazar.

Khalil also underscored the historic participation of the Rohingya community at the dialogue, marking the first time they collectively presented their perspectives under one roof.

“The upcoming UN High-Level International Conference on the Rohingya issue will be held on September 30 at the UN Headquarters. In preparation, we organised this dialogue to hear the voice of the Rohingya directly.”

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus opened the session with a seven-point proposal expected to shape discussions at the UN meeting.

Khalil stressed that international aid is declining, which is threatening essential services such as food, healthcare, and education.

Trust between parties, he said, remains essential for a sustainable solution, and the dialogue marked a significant step in fostering confidence among stakeholders.

Khalil raised concerns over the criminal activities inside Myanmar that threaten regional stability.

He also clarified that ICC processes are ongoing and do not require acceleration from Bangladesh. Bangladesh has submitted lists for approximately 8,00,000 Rohingya, with Myanmar confirming over 1,80,000 as eligible for return, and further verification is ongoing, he added.

The dialogue also highlighted systematic persecution, and discriminatory laws such as the 1982 Citizenship Law as root causes of the crisis.

Panelists cited ongoing human rights violations in Rakhine, including indiscriminate attacks, arson, mass killings, rapes, and forced conscription by both the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army.

They called for proactive roles from neighbouring countries, ASEAN, the UN, and concerned partners.



## We mustn’t wait till last

FROM PAGE 1

Thirdly, he said, all acts of violence against the Rohingya must cease immediately. “We urge the Myanmar authorities as well as the Arakan Army to ensure safety, security and livelihood of the Rohingyas. They must also allow internally displaced persons from camps in central and northern Rakhine to return home as soon as possible.”

In his fourth point, Yunus said a platform for consultation or dialogue is essential to ease tension and end conflict among Myanmar’s ethnic communities.

Citing the fifth point, he said the role of the international community, especially ASEAN and neighbouring countries, is indispensable. “We support all international efforts to this end, including the ASEAN 5-Point Consensus. We urge the international community to be more active in advancing peace, security and stability in Rakhine and the region. We also need to fight cross-border crimes such as trafficking, arms smuggling and other criminal activities that threaten stability.”

In the sixth point, he urged regional and international stakeholders to stand firm against ethnic cleansing. “We urge all to calibrate their relationship with Myanmar, the Arakan Army and other parties in order to promote an early resolution of this crisis.”

Lastly, he also called upon the international community to give more energy to accountability processes at the International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court and elsewhere. “We urge them to implement the provisional measures decided by the ICJ, ensure justice and accountability, and put an end to genocide and crimes against humanity.”

Noting that in August 2017, around eight lakh Rohingyas crossed into Bangladesh within a few weeks, he said, “Unfortunately, persecution still persists. Hence, we see fresh arrivals at our doorsteps even today.”

“On the eighth Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day, with a heavy

heart, I draw your attention to the forced displacement of Rohingyas... It’ll be a historic blunder if we wait until the very last Rohingya leaves Rakhine. We cannot let it happen.”

Referring to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ visit to Cox’s Bazar during Ramadan this year, Yunus

- Secure Rohingyas’ safe, voluntary, and lasting return to Rakhine.
- Maintain and expand donor support for essential programmes.
- Stop violence and allow displaced Rohingyas in Rakhine to go back home.
- Build dialogue platforms among Myanmar’s ethnic communities to reduce conflict.
- Strengthen ASEAN and global efforts for peace in Rakhine.
- Combat trafficking, arms smuggling, and cross-border crimes.
- Advance intl accountability to deliver justice, end impunity, and stop crimes against humanity.

said, “We clearly heard the Rohingyas’ strong desire to return home as soon as possible.”

Pointing out the three-point proposition he made at last year’s UN General Assembly, Yunus said, “In recognition of my call, the high-level conference was envisaged for this year’s Assembly. I hope this dialogue here in Cox’s Bazar will contribute substantively to shaping the roadmap for an expedited and permanent solution.”

Noting that Bangladesh opened its border in a humanitarian gesture despite limited resources, he said, “Bangladesh is currently hosting 1.3 million Rohingyas, making the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp the largest in the world.”

Around 32,000 new babies are born every year in these camps, he said, while fewer than 5 lakh Rohingyas remain in Myanmar.

“We don’t foresee any scope for further mobilisation of resources from our domestic funds, given our own challenges.”

Referring to the Rohingyas at the event, he said, “Bangladesh supports and is working relentlessly for a sustainable solution to your crisis. This dialogue is aimed at amplifying your voice in rolling out a roadmap towards early voluntary and sustainable return.”

Turning to the international community, he said, “Let’s join hands and commit to contribute to their dignified return, ensuring justice and accountability.”

Yunus also said Bangladesh has reached stability after last year’s uprising and is now ready for the next general election. “We’re ready for another transition in our political history. It will be complete when we also see our Rohingya guests return to their own home, in their own environment.”

At the beginning of the event, a minute of silence was observed and a documentary on Rohingya persecution was screened.

National Security Adviser Dr Khalilur Rahman, also the high representative for the Rohingya issue, delivered the welcome address. Disaster Management and Relief Adviser Faruk E Azam and UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Raouf Mazou also spoke.

Diplomats, international experts, Rohingya community representatives, global organisations and academics from home and abroad, along with representatives from the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami and National Citizen Party, attended the event.

## Poverty soars to 28%

FROM PAGE 1

reported by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in Household Income and Expenditure Survey in 2022.

Zillur said the country is facing the impacts of three overlapping crises: the Covid-19 shock (2020–22), persistently high inflation, and political economic uncertainty.

“So, focusing only on macroeconomics is not enough; we need to focus on people’s well-being, on ground realities, on equitable allocation,” he said, stressing the need to adopt a “people’s lens” in economic planning.

At the event, the PPRC also unveiled the scenario of household income, employment, expenditure, financial resilience, and digital participation in mid-2025. In some cases, it has also made a comparison between the pre-uprising and post-uprising impact on households.

**55% SPENT ON FOOD**

The survey found that nearly 55 percent of a household’s monthly expenditure now goes to food, averaging Tk 10,614.

Education costs average Tk 1,822 per month, healthcare Tk 1,556, transport Tk 1,478, and housing Tk 1,089.

Expenditure inequality has also intensified, with the national Gini coefficient rising to 0.436 from 0.334 in 2022. Gini coefficient is used to measure income or wealth inequality, ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality). The study found while rural inequality remains lower at 0.347, urban inequality has surged to 0.532.

Nationwide, the average monthly household income is Tk 32,685. Rural households earn Tk 29,205 and spend Tk 27,162, while urban households earn Tk 40,578 and spend Tk 44,961.

The divide is stark across social groups. The poorest 10 percent earn just Tk 8,477 a month but spend Tk 12,294, often through borrowing or external support. The richest 10 percent earn Tk 109,390 and spend Tk 101,163 – around 13 and eight times more than the poorest.

Bangladesh is facing an “employment emergency” as 38 percent of those counted as employed are actually underemployed, working less than 40 hours a week, said Rahman.

Female labour force participation is stuck at 26 percent, and nearly half of workers are self-employed, underscoring both resilience and precarity.

**5 EMERGING VULNERABILITIES**

The report identified five new vulnerabilities deepening poverty.

has declined since August last year, it still remains widespread.

Before the political changeover, 8.54 percent of respondents reported paying bribes to access services; the rate fell to 3.69 percent afterward.

The highest amount of bribes was paid at government offices, followed by the police and political leaders.

Households have been paying more

HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS PAID BRIBES/ EXTORTION MONEY	
Before Aug 2024	8.54%
After Aug 2024	3.69%

WHOM THEY PAID BRIBE/EXTORTION MONEY	
Govt employees	46.76%
Police	39.37%
Political activists	33.13%
Local thugs	16.11%
Local govt reps	13.22%

bribes to the police and political leaders in the post-August period compared to pre-August.

Nearly 39.4 percent of households now report paying bribes to the police, up from around 31.8 percent before August, while bribe payments to political leaders have risen to 33 percent from 31.77 percent. Payments in government offices have declined from 52.34 percent to 46.76 percent.

On “Hoirani” (harassment, frustration or dysfunction in systems), 75 percent of respondents said “nothing works without money” best described their experience.

Other frustrations included bureaucratic hassle (36.4 percent), unclear service paths (22.3 percent), and delays or indecision (21.8 percent).

**5 EMERGING VULNERABILITIES**

The report identified five new vulnerabilities deepening poverty.

These are chronic illness, debt burden, poverty with a female-headed family, food insecurity, and using non-sanitary conditions.

More than half of all households (51.3 percent) have at least one chronically ill member. Among them, 34.6 percent suffer from high blood pressure, 26.5 percent from gastric problems, 23 percent from diabetes, and 16 percent from heart disease.

“This is the new dimension of vulnerability. Families are incurring additional expenses on healthcare due to chronic illnesses, which in turn is increasing their debt burden.

“We have to address it with a new type of social safety net,” said Rahman.

Secondly, about one in every four poor households (24 percent) is female-headed. These households are among the most disadvantaged in society and therefore require special support.

Thirdly, poverty is associated with a rising debt burden: the bottom 40 percent have debt burden at least twice their savings while the bottom 4 percent saw a net 7 percent increase in debt levels over the last six months.

“Fourthly, food insecurity is a growing risk. Many of the poorest households skip multiple meals weekly or go a full day without food, and the situation is gradually worsening,” said Rahman.

Finally, with only five years remaining to achieve the SDGs, the sanitation crisis remains critical. Nearly 36 percent of the population still uses non-sanitary toilets. Ensuring safe sanitation has therefore become extremely important.

**SIGNS OF RESILIENCE**

Despite mounting hardship, the report highlighted some resilience.

Around 15 percent of households, mostly from higher income groups, receive remittances averaging Tk 29,000 per month. The domestic consumer market remains vibrant, estimated at \$211 billion.

Digital preparedness is also widespread: 74 percent of households – and 80 percent of those with youth – own smartphones. Families are also adapting their consumption patterns, diversifying energy sources to cope with rising costs.

Yet optimism remains uneven.

While 62 percent of the wealthiest households feel hopeful about the future, only one-third of the poorest share that sentiment, with the majority expressing pessimism about their prospects.