

Dhaka should confront the Arakan Army’s abduction of fishermen



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On the morning of March 28, 2026, some 13 Bangladeshi fishermen left Shah Porir Dwip in Teknaf before dawn, as generations before them had done, to pull nets from the Naf River. By around 7:00am, armed men purportedly from the ethnic rebel group Arakan Army arrived on speedboats, seized their boats at gunpoint, and took them into Myanmar. This was not an isolated incident; if anything, it was the 300th verse of the same grim song.

Since December 8, 2024, when the Arakan Army seized Maungdaw and took control of the Myanmar side of the border, at least 399 fishermen have been “abducted” from the Naf River and the Bay of Bengal, according to a New Age report citing data from the Border Guard Bangladesh. As of mid-May, some 165 of them remain in rebel custody. Some have been held for over a year, with many families still unsure whether their relatives are alive. This has, by all accounts, become a hostage crisis for us.

The Naf River is a narrow, tidal waterway forming a natural border between Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar district and Myanmar’s Rakhine State. It is not just a border, however; it is also a source of livelihood. For tens of thousands of fishing families in Teknaf and Ukhiya, the Naf and the adjacent Bay of Bengal are their only source of income. But the river is treacherous. Sandbars on Bangladesh’s side of the border have reduced water depth, pushing fishermen towards deeper Myanmar waters in search of fish. There are no floating buoys or clear markers to show where Bangladesh ends and Rakhine begins. Tides also drift nets far from where they are cast. A man chasing his catch in a wooden boat at night is not a geopolitical actor; he is simply trying to feed his family. Despite knowing that, the

Arakan Army has often sought to weaponise this vulnerability.

The Arakan Army presents itself as a national liberation movement for the Rakhine people, a formidable armed force locked in struggle against the military junta that seized power in Myanmar’s 2021 coup. In many respects, its military record is remarkable. It has captured vast swathes of Rakhine State, including Maungdaw, the border township that was once the epicentre of the Rohingya genocide, and by early 2025, established control over virtually the entire Myanmar side of the border.

But like before, military prowess again brings out darker realities. Since seizing Maungdaw, the Arakan Army has systematically detained Bangladeshi and Rohingya fishermen, holding them in squalid camps—described by one freed captive as “dark like a grave,” with no fan, no light, and mosquitoes everywhere—and using their suffering as leverage. In most cases, families are contacted via Bangladeshi SIM cards, sent photos and videos of detained relatives in distress, and told to pay ransoms of Tk 1-1.5 lakh per person through mobile financial services.

In February, before releasing 73 fishermen, the group made them sign written pledges and swear on the Quran never to enter “Arakan territory” again. A non-state armed group, unrecognised by any nation, with no standing under international law, extracting confessions and oaths from impoverished fishermen from another country as a condition of their freedom. Let that sink in.

The Arakan Army’s claim that it is enforcing maritime boundaries does not hold under international law. As a non-state actor, it has no recognised sovereign authority over maritime territory. Moreover,

what it has often done in the name of border enforcement basically meant taking hostages. And under Article 8 of the Rome Statute and the 1979 Hostages Convention, hostage-taking and ransom demands in armed conflict are war crimes.

The crisis along the border cannot be separated from its longer history of suffering. In 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingyas fled genocide into Bangladesh, forming the

diplomatic channel. Bangladesh’s foreign ministry has acknowledged this constraint. The Myanmar Wing’s director general noted that there is no scope for formal relations with the Arakan Army and that official communication is not possible. While “informal engagement” has led to the return of 234 fishermen since December 8, 2024, many others remain in custody.

Here is the uncomfortable truth that



The photograph, taken on April 6, 2018, shows Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) personnel searching a fishing boat along the Naf River in Teknaf.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

world’s largest refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar. Today, that history has come full circle for many: many of the detained fishermen are Rohingya refugees from those same camps, held by an armed group controlling the very area they had once fled. Stateless in origin and displaced once again, they remain trapped in a cycle of vulnerability that follows them wherever they go.

Meanwhile, Myanmar’s Border Guard Police no longer operate along this stretch. The Arakan Army has effectively replaced a failing state with an unrecognised authority, leaving Bangladesh without a formal interlocutor, treaty mechanism, or

must be stated plainly: Bangladesh has been too passive or deferential in confronting the ongoing “abduction” of its citizens. There are still no floating buoys marking the maritime boundary despite repeated demands from fishermen. Nor has there been meaningful formal escalation at the UN Security Council, the International Court of Justice, or through ASEAN mechanisms, even as the Arakan Army’s actions raise serious concerns under international humanitarian law.

Bangladesh does face real diplomatic constraints, and its tightrope is genuine—direct engagement with the Arakan Army

could inflame the junta and complicate Rohingya repatriation talks. Dhaka’s caution is therefore not without reason. But caution cannot become inertia. A state that cannot protect its own fishermen faces a legitimacy question that bureaucratic restraint cannot fully answer.

What is instead needed is calibrated, urgent action on several fronts simultaneously. The most immediate step is also the simplest: Bangladesh must install sufficient floating buoys along the Naf River and the coastal boundary with Myanmar. This costs relatively little, and there is no defensible reason it has not happened yet. Beyond the waterline, Dhaka must internationalise this crisis, formally raising it at the UN Human Rights Council, briefing ASEAN member states including Thailand and India, both of which maintain informal contact with the Arakan Army, and pushing for a statement from the UN Secretary-General.

The Arakan Army is a de facto governing authority across vast territory, and Dhaka’s refusal to acknowledge that reality through forming a functional, structured communication channel only leaves it without leverage. A formalised back-channel—perhaps through the International Committee of the Red Cross as a neutral third-party mediator—specifically dedicated to the release of detained fishermen and the return of seized vessels, would be a pragmatic step that would not require formal recognition of the group.

Simultaneously, Dhaka should also consider referring the Arakan Army’s ransom operations to the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and request that the ICC Prosecutor’s Office examine the pattern of conduct. Naming these acts as war crimes in international forums changes the political cost calculus for the Arakan Army as it seeks legitimacy on the world stage. Finally, the fishing communities bearing the human cost of this crisis must be supported through compensation for detained fishermen’s families, subsidised boat insurance, and direct cash assistance. This is a basic obligation of the state towards citizens it has failed to protect.

As a super El Niño looms, are we ready for the shock?



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As we have been told by weather forecasters, there is a strong possibility of a “super” El Niño, possibly the most powerful in recorded history, coming to take hold across the world in the coming months. For reference, they are looking back to 1877, the year when the sea surface temperatures in the east-central Pacific region experienced an estimated temperature rise of 2.7 degrees Celsius. The impact was catastrophic: the super El Niño of 1877-78 destroyed crops throughout India, China, Brazil, Australia and parts of Africa, triggering a global drought and a resulting in famine that lasted for at least two years and killed some five crore people. That accounted for three to four percent of the world population at the time. Today, that ratio would translate to a minimum of 25 crore people. As some researchers put it, it was “arguably the worst environmental disaster to ever befall humanity.”

In today’s world, how would a super El

Niño impact the world? Are we at risk of a similarly devastating fate or worse?

The good news is, we are not in the late 1870s, a time plagued by colonial rulers destroying indigenous food systems. And we have something people at that time did not: warning.

After the El Niño of 1982-83, the world came together to completely transform ocean monitoring. Four decades later, a vast network of more than 4,000 instruments across the Pacific Ocean continually measure air pressure, wind patterns, and salt levels in the water, offering a high-detail snapshot of the ocean’s condition in real time.

The bad news is, the world is warmer than it used to be in the 1980s. As Dr Deepti Singh, associate professor at the School of the Environment in Washington State University, who has studied the 1877 super El Niño, explained, “What is different now is that our atmosphere and oceans are

substantially warmer than they were in the 1870s, which means the associated extremes could be more extreme.”

What should Bangladesh do right now?

For Bangladesh, a severe El Niño means poor monsoon rains. Poor monsoon rains mean poor Aman rice harvest, which translates into increased prices for food. Inflation is already on the rise in a country of more than 17 crore people, making hunger an impending reality.

We cannot stop the Pacific Ocean from warming, but we can stop that warming from turning into a catastrophe on the Padma, Meghna and Jamuna river systems. The government, NGOs, aid agencies, and even village communities can take pragmatic measures to prepare for weathering the brunt of El Niño. First, don’t treat this as just another El Niño. The last super El Niño (2015-16) gave us delayed floods and heat stress. An 1877-class event is different. The Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) should make it clear that it is not a normal seasonal prediction—double-checking with experts is recommended—and develop forecast-based early warning systems that have been tested before by various organisations, which would provide timely information to farmers on planting, irrigation practices, and drought-resistant seeds. Local-level contingency plans in districts, upazilas, and unions should be available.

Second, before the next dry season (December 2026 onwards) fully sets in, the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) should conduct a rapid, district-level survey of groundwater levels, river water levels, and reservoir storage (for instance, the Kaptai Lake). Identify which upazilas are already on the edge.

Third, a “lean season” food security buffer must be prepared. The real impact of the super El Niño will not be felt during the heat period, but after about six to nine months, when there will be no crops. This can only be mitigated if the government plans to expand food distribution channels in the northern and western parts of the country, such as the Barind Tract, the greater Rangpur-Rajshahi region, and the char areas.

Fourth, we must re-learn the old wisdom for agricultural resilience. In the past, communities employed resilience practices such as grain banks, crop diversity, and alternate wetting and drying. Colonial rulers destroyed the system to a significant extent. In today’s world, we could re-establish resilience through current agronomic practices such as drought-resistant paddy varieties. Cultivate rice varieties and other crops that withstand drought and high temperatures. Ensure adequate irrigation, water collection from rainfall, and groundwater use, particularly in Barind and other arid areas. Encourage crop diversification and proper storage systems to

mitigate shortages.

Fifth, El Niño does not know borders. If monsoon rains fail in South Asia, countries that export rice will certainly cut back on their exports. Bangladesh must begin negotiations with those countries, or even with international platforms who are ready to provide us with a minimum amount of rice through an agreement. Similarly, we should look into working with Bhutan and Nepal on more hydropower sharing; if our water dries up, we may need their electricity.

Finally, as Dr Deepti Singh said, El Niño’s effects “will cascade globally through interconnected socioeconomic systems.” This implies that if there is a failure in the soybean production in Brazil and palm oil in Indonesia, the international prices of edible oil will skyrocket. The relevant authorities should make a robust plan by securing alternative supply contracts.

Preparation, not panic

The scale of 1877 super El Niño fatalities is unlikely to occur again, not due to any change in nature but because we now have monitoring and modelling systems. However, no technological advancement can help us if we don’t prepare on time. Now is the time when our early warning systems, grain stocks, water pumping systems and, most importantly, our national will for combating disaster will be tested. Only proper readiness will help us survive the looming disaster.

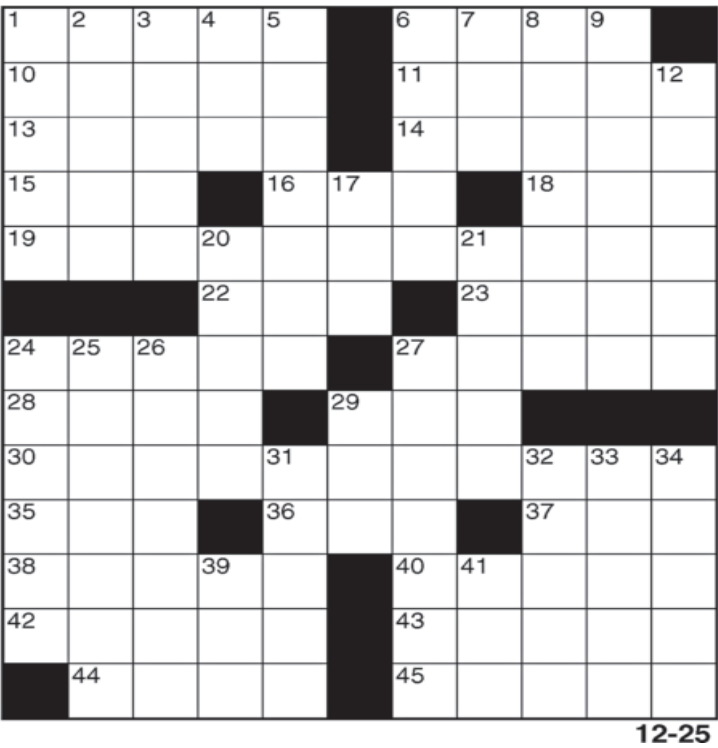
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1Pointy
- 6 Scrabble tile holder
- 10 In a while
- 11 African antelope
- 13 Battery end
- 14 Personnel worker
- 15 Campaigner, for short
- 16 Brewed beverage
- 18 Flamenco cry
- 19 Popular Christmas song
- 22 Backer’s vote
- 23 Neckline shapes
- 24 Curry ingredient
- 27 Robust
- 28 Shortly, in poems
- 29 Peas’ place
- 30 Popular Christmas song
- 35 Fall mo.
- 36 Possess
- 37 “Dig in!”
- 38 A bunch
- 40 Make a speech
- 42 Banks of the Cubs
- 43 Count of music

DOWN

- 1 Openhanded hits
- 2 Vietnam’s capital
- 3 Coral island
- 4 Santa hat color
- 5 Sixth-grader, e.g
- 6 Amy Winehouse hit
- 7 Boxing great
- 8 Yuletide singer
- 9 Rang
- 12 Like formal attire
- 17 Stretch of years
- 20 Contending
- 21 Stay away from
- 24 Sweet-talk
- 25 Mythical creature
- 26 Big Sky setting
- 27 Socializes
- 29 Chapel seat
- 31 Finishes last
- 32 Rental contract
- 33 Classical language
- 34 Spirited horse
- 39 Party staple
- 41 Drake’s music



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