

CPS Policy Brief 12

Rohingya Repatriation: Who decides & Why?



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The sudden influx of asylum seekers has significantly affected Bangladesh due to limited resources, yet Bangladesh has been handling the quandary for quite a while on her own, with the support of other countries and organizations.

However, Bangladesh is yet to find a way for the sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya. In August 2023, the world has marked the 6th year of commemorating the Rohingya Genocide committed by Myanmar. The prolonged stay of the Rohingya in Bangladesh & the multiple effects of geopolitical issues thus raises this question around the Rohingya Repatriation.

This policy brief is based on the Seminar upon “Rohingya Repatriation: Who decides & Why?” for discussing what the present situation of the Rohingya is, and what could be done for their repatriation.

The seminar was organized by the Center for Peace Studies (CPS) of South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University on August 24, 2023.

Status of the Rohingya, their repatriation & the current situation in Bangladesh:

The Rohingya are one of Myanmar's many ethnic minorities and have been described as "one of, if not the, most discriminated people in the world" by *UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres*.

In 2017, the Rohingya were displaced by a targeted attack in Myanmar, and approximately 1 million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to save their lives. Bangladesh, despite having a large number of population and limited resources, accommodated the Rohingya in its small land. Soon the living of the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar started inviting multiple negative consequences such as causing environmental hazards, increasing unemployment, increasing criminal activities and smuggling in the border region, and generating conflict and tension with the local community.

Following the military coup on February 1, 2021 that deposed Myanmar's democratically elected government, the return of the Rohingya is uncertain. The Rohingya community does not have citizenship in their country, Myanmar.

However, dialogues and discussions between Bangladesh & Myanmar until now have shown no sign of finding a solution for the voluntary & sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya. In addition, the remaining Rohingya in Myanmar endure restrictions on movement, forced labor, and arbitrary arrest. This gives others little hope to return.

"EU, alongside donors and development partners continue to support Bangladesh in its response to the crisis. But it is difficult to ignore the elephant in the room; the provision of humanitarian assistance alone is being stretched to the limit. Without UNHCR's access to assess and verify the situation in return spots in Myanmar and having in mind the situation on the ground, conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State are currently not conducive to the sustainable return of Rohingya refugees."

Enrico Lorenzon
European Union Representative

"The Rohingya plight has deteriorated further as a result of recent fighting between an ethnic Rakhine insurgent organization known as the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar security forces."

Brig. Gen. Dr. M. Sakhawat Hussain (Retd)
Senior Fellow, SIPG, North South University

"Accountability for human rights abuses is an essential foundation for building a democratic society characterized by the rule of law.

Gambia brought a case to the international court of justice asserting that Myanmar violated its obligations under the genocide convention in relation to the atrocities against the Rohingya."

Ms. Mackenzie Rowe, Regional Refugee Coordinator, US Embassy, Bangladesh

"Bangladesh refers the Rohingya as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (FDMN)' as it doesn't have a refugee legal framework. Any document we sign and agree on, must have a composite term-FDMN/ Refugee.

Rohingya voices need to be heard, and it's their decision when to go back. The repatriation must be safe, secure and voluntary. The reintegration needs to be sustainable, and it should be a pathway to their citizenship."

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw
UNHCR's Representative of Bangladesh

Factors & Challenges regarding Rohingya Repatriation:

Divergent perspectives are evident among various stakeholders, each of which is subject to its own set of vested interests and policy orientations in addressing the Rohingya crisis.

Dwindling hopes for Repatriation:

In the past two years, global funding for vital services has significantly declined due to attention shifting to other crises and donor fatigue. This shortage is especially severe in 2023, as the UN has had to reduce food aid for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan by one third, allocating only \$0.27 per day per person for rations.

International Crisis Group

China's role in mediating Rohingya crisis & potentials of tripartite approach:

From the geopolitical aspect, Myanmar seems to be a greater ally to China than Bangladesh. Still China is the only country coming forward being the bridge of communication regarding Rohingya repatriation issue.

In early 2023, Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs apparently hinted at returning the Rohingya to their home villages in North Maungdaw, rather than camps. The action still falls short of resolving the primary problem of Rohingya citizenship. The pilot project also does not address the Rohingya's desire for repatriation to their ancestral villages and the restoration of their rights as Myanmar citizens. As things stand, the repatriation issue is still at a "dead end," providing a major conundrum for Bangladesh.

Factors Inhibiting Rohingya Repatriation to Myanmar:

The constitution of Myanmar doesn't recognize Rohingya as independent ethnic minorities. There has been an abrupt failure in negotiating with the Myanmar government as the Rohingya are not recognized as the citizens of Myanmar. There is no unified leadership among the Rohingya, and their voice remains unheard until now. While international communities support the Rohingya in Bangladesh, they do not create pressure on Myanmar regarding the Rohingya repatriation issue.

Myanmar's position on Repatriation:

Whether or not Myanmar will take the Rohingya back is a big question. The initiatives of dialogues and meetings with Bangladesh and the Rohingya give a positive impression about the role of Myanmar in repatriation. However, Myanmar has done little to help the internally displaced Rohingya, which makes the Rohingya in Bangladesh frustrated about the sustainability of repatriation.

The role of International Communities:

From the year 2021, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been taking more time than usual on the Rohingya genocide case and has just recently completed a ground investigation in Cox's Bazar.

Since 2017, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has debated the problem in numerous forums but is yet to take any significant measures to ensure accountability.

The thoughts of the Rohingya - their demands and expectations:

Upon their return from the tour of Maungdaw Township, the Rohingya delegation expressed their discontent with the arrangement & the preparation of the model villages for temporary transfer, stating that they want to visit their ancestral home, 'Janamvita,' rather than any camp or model village.

Breaking the cycle: Empowering the Rohingya

Due to the uncertainty of the Rohingya repatriation, researchers suggest for the empowerment of the Rohingya through access to better education and better job opportunities, so that they can live in dignity. Depending on humanitarian aid isn't a long-term solution, as the process of repatriation might take many more years. With the support of international community, the government of Bangladesh may explore possibilities of empowering the Rohingya that could show promising results for both the parties.

Ways ahead for Rohingya Repatriation:

There are no immediate and plausible solution for a problem this big and complicated, and Bangladesh can't do it alone. Although the main problems and challenges are being faced by Bangladesh alone, other countries and international communities have to come forward- and most importantly, the Rohingya have to raise their own voice by themselves.

Possible recommendations are:

- Tripartite and Bilateral actions are needed to be taken so that Myanmar agrees to take the Rohingya back with due citizenship, rights, and dignity.
- Bangladesh has to convince the international communities to impose sanctions on Myanmar, compelling them to take the Rohingya back.
- Until repatriation takes place, the process of empowering the Rohingya can be explored.
- Initiatives are needed to be taken to equip the Rohingya with marketable skills so that they can utilize these in Bangladesh, and contribute in the economy of Bangladesh.

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