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Working Paper on

BANGLADESH'S
APPROACH TOWARDS
HOSTING THE ROHINGYA

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A. Overall Context

The Rohingya have taken refuge in Bangladesh to flee atrocities and Bangladesh has opened her door so that their lives could be safe temporarily. They, however, must go back to their country of origin. As earlier exoduses in 1978 and 1992-93 led to greater force of repression upon their return, Bangladesh this time has been fully convinced of the necessity to create conditions for a sustainable return, so as to avoid similar episodes in the future.

As for atrocities committed against them and violation of globally recognized principles, they are for the international community to examine and redress. This accountability aspect of the Rohingya crisis thus makes it an international issue. Very important work is currently underway in both the ICC & ICJ to pursue accountability and justice.

Bangladesh's approach to the Rohingya issue seeks to factor in all these dimensions, considering the undeniable fact that Myanmar is a neighbor with which Bangladesh has always sought to maintain an engagement of interdependence, mutual benefit and mutual respect. As proof of such neighborliness, Bangladesh has continuously stayed away from Myanmar's internal difficulties and challenges in the spirit of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's "Friendship to all, malice towards none" foreign policy dictum.



B. Approach to repatriation of Rohingya

Bangladesh, from the very beginning, tried to find a peaceful solution to the Rohingya crisis through bilateral consultation. It engaged Myanmar early for sustainable repatriation in an environment of safety, security and dignity. As such, the bilaterally agreed upon 'Framework Arrangement' and other instruments for repatriation are anchored in the restoration of normalcy, creation of basic conditions for lives and livelihood as well as voluntariness.

At Myanmar's insistence, and the encouragement of a few other countries, Bangladesh tried repatriation twice. Failure of these efforts attest to the fact that the Rohingya do not feel comfortable with the prevailing conditions, which do not make returnees feel convinced of the sincerity of the Myanmar authorities or of the majority community - the Buddhists of Rakhine.

Bangladesh expects friends of Myanmar and other countries in the region to convince Myanmar of the imperative to make material changes in Rakhine - security-wise, economically and politically. Instead, many international interlocutors are found trying to appease Myanmar while heaping all their demands on the doorstep of Bangladesh, the second victim of the Rohingya crisis. We expect international partners to come forward to convince Myanmar to change course and to play their roles as agreed upon with Myanmar according to paragraph 14 of the Framework Arrangement.



C. Conditions of refugees in Bangladesh and efforts to keep them safe and productive

Bangladesh has been trying to improve conditions of the camp-dwellers to the maximum extent possible. The Government has been cooperating and facilitating programs on health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); shelter, and site stabilization and management; food security and nutrition, etc. These combined efforts have helped avoid collapses of hillsides or slopes, outbreaks of any epidemic and to contain the COVID pandemic. The testing capacity of 500 per day is way above the national average of Bangladesh. The case is the same with quarantine, isolation facilities and home-based care. The establishment of 12 Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Isolation and Treatment Centers as well as the allocation of over 300 beds speak of the preparedness. As a result, there were only 6 deaths among the Rohingya. While there are about 60 confirmed cases among them, the number is over 3,000 in the host community (almost half in number). There was no casualty in the last one and a half months among the Rohingya refugees, while less than 40 are in isolation. The Rohingya constitute about 0.61% of the Bangladesh population. The support of WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM have been particularly useful in this regard.

At present, over 3,200 Learning Centers are in operation using a curriculum called Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA). Based on demands for further education for children and youth, it has been decided to ensure access of Rohingya children – according to Myanmar curriculum. The Rohingya have been demanding secondary-level education in the camps following the Myanmar curriculum, with a grading system and certification process for easy reintegration into Myanmar Schools after repatriation. The Myanmar Curriculum Pilot has thus been adopted under the Joint Response Plan. We hope to see its operationalization soon at the middle school (grades 6-9) level.



We expect that the UN agencies would soon develop skill development programs for the Rohingya youth and locals in consultation with our authorities. There could be other kinds of improvement for short-term amenities and facilities if we have adequate support from international partners.

However, it must be clarified here that Bangladesh would certainly not prefer investments which would directly or indirectly prolong the refugee situation and create greater and newer pull factors for remaining Rohingya inside of Rakhine. The Bangladesh Government rejects any notion of local integration. It is expected that interested partners will talk to Myanmar Government and make such long-term investments in health, education, livelihood, and connectivity for Rohingya in northern Rakhine. So far, we discern no such efforts have been made for the remaining Rohingya inside Rakhine.

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D. Various risk factors:

- The Rohingya influx has triggered a demographic imbalance in Cox's Bazar. The total population in Ukhia and Tekhnaf is about 570,000; whereas the temporary sheltered Rohingya is the double that of the host communities.
- Bangladesh has sacrificed over 6,800 acres of forest land to host the displaced Rohingya from Myanmar. That area suffered a huge loss of biodiversity and wildlife. Deforestation in the hilly areas has increased the risk of landslides, raised the threats of flash floods and intensified the likelihood of damages from cyclones.
- Agricultural production in Cox's Bazar has been affected as most of the cultivable lands there are being used for shelters, operational activities and infrastructure of the UN agencies and others. The shortage of agricultural land has consequently created enormous pressure on local agriculture as well as on the food supply chain there.
- The massive increase of the daily demand for fresh water for drinking, irrigation and manufacturing work, and thus excessive dependence on the ground water, has developed a threat of water contamination and scarcity in the Cox's Bazar region.
- Health and sanitation have become a concern in the camp areas due to fecal contamination in surface and groundwater reservoirs. Water-borne diseases have thus become a major threat for the host communities nearby the camps.
- The Internet is not a suitable medium for targeted authentic, authentic instant community messaging. There are many examples of inappropriate usage of social

media. Baseless rumors and misinformation can create panic and destabilize the camps. However, responding to requests for greater internet connectivity, a decision has been taken on lifting of restrictions on 3G/4G mobile network which will be effective soon.



Crimes in and around the camps

Involvement of Rohingya in various crimes - human trafficking, drugs, murder, and abduction for ransom, the sex trade, rape, thefts and robbery are higher than the host communities. Radicalization of youth cannot be ruled out altogether in a situation of despair and hopelessness. In recent times quite a few Rohingya died in internal clashes. The Rohingya have traditionally been used as carriers of methamphetamine, popularly known as Yaba. Despite all efforts, Yaba is being smuggled to other parts of Bangladesh. Criminal activities tend to increase in the nighttime and these insecurities are spreading beyond the camps. As such, Bangladesh has no option but to consider erection of barbed-wire security fences around the camps to curb criminal activities in the area. These are not for their isolation, but for their good and the security of locals. It must be mentioned here that access to humanitarian actors remain unhindered.



E. De-risking and Bhashan Char:

In order to reduce all these risks, Bangladesh has invested hundreds of millions of dollars on infrastructural development of the island to accommodate a maximum of 100,000 persons. It has provisions for 120 clusters. Each cluster can house 768 persons in 12 houses. A total of 1,440 houses and 120 shelter station have been built.

We have undertaken efforts to make the Island ready for habitation. Here are a few highlights:



- a. Arrangement of adequate health, sanitary facility and vaccination, with a referral system for complicated health conditions.
- b. Creation of temporary work and livelihood options (salt-tolerant paddy, horticulture, fisheries, poultry and animal husbandry.)
- c. Arrangement of primary - informal and formal - education which can be extended to secondary education. Vocational education and skill development facility may be established in due course.

306 Rohingya rescued in the Bay of Bengal and sheltered on the Island are doing well. We will soon conduct a go-and-see visit for relatives of sheltered Rohingya and other representatives. If they find the place better than the cramped camps in Cox's bazar, we expect to commence initial transfer of Rohingya to there after the Monsoon season.

UN Teams are expected to visit Bhashan Char & Prepare UN System's assistance response.

We may also arrange a visit of human rights groups and select media to appreciate the facilities created.

The mighty cyclone Amphan has attested to the durability of the island and quality of the structures built. Detractors should now stop their propaganda on Bhasanchar and examine how to relieve pressure from the highly congested Cox's Bazar area where locals are outnumbered at a ratio of 2:1.

Third country resettlement as an alternative to Bhashan Char relocation is a welcome thought. Given the past experience of TCR globally in recent years, this cannot be a serious option, other than some countries getting the satisfaction of offering something new. If a group of countries can jointly offer to take over half a million Rohingya in a time span of 1-2 years, we may consider examining it.



Closing Remarks

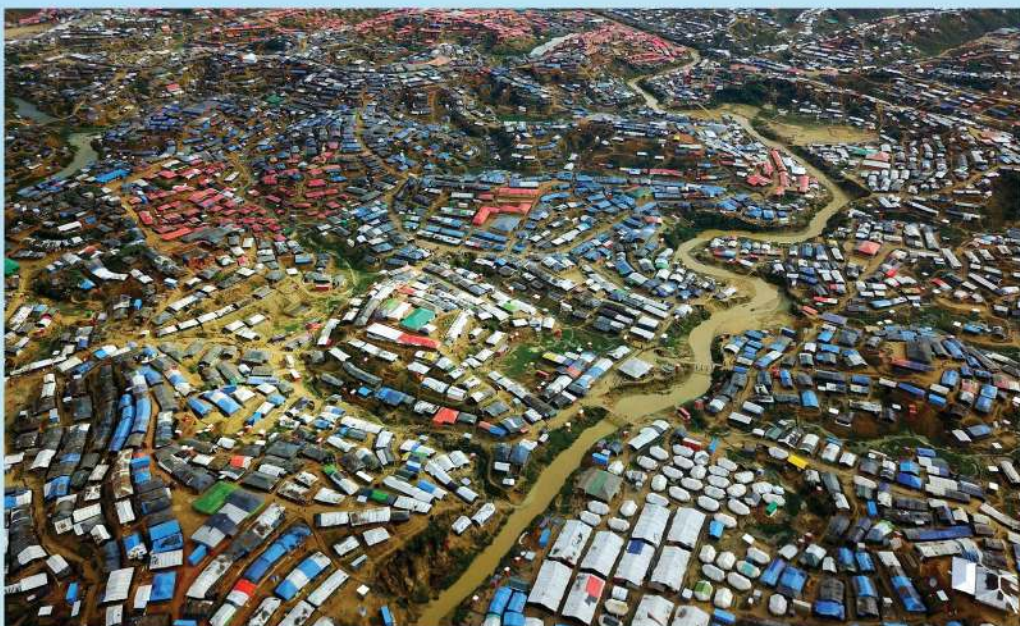
Before closing, if I may summarize, not only just one approach but the multilayered approaches that we are confronted with.

Firstly, Bilateral: I have already talked about it.

Secondly, Regional: The role of ASEAN and the neighbors of Myanmar like India, China and even Japan and Korea would remain crucial in finding a durable solution of the problem.

Thirdly, Multilateral: At the UN, engagements at the General Assembly, Security Council, Human Rights Council, SRSG and at other relevant mechanisms and forums on the issue needs to be monitored and creation of a solution should remain a priority.

Finally, International or Global Community's response in terms of Accountability and Justice: media, think tanks, human rights groups, academia, students, civil society, in fact holders of global conscience, should continue to play their due role. Their collective



response has already acted as catalysts for the accountability response at the ICC and ICJ. We will continue to seek their urgent attention to carry forward the work which will also work as a confidence building measure for the Rohingya in the context of their return.

The strategy of Myanmar is to do nothing to restore normalcy in Rakhine, but to create difficulty for prospective returnees, and finally to do whatever needed to frustrate efforts of repatriation. With the recent clearance operations by Tatmadaw against the Arakan Army in Rakhine and the election in November 2020, we have actually hit an impasse in terms of the repatriation process. Given the enormity of challenges associated with longer-term stay on foreign soils, I would rather demand the international community to refocus on the creation of basic services, safety and security and options for livelihood for returnees. They should make sincere and greater efforts to secure conditions for Rohingya to return to Myanmar and reintegrate into Myanmar society with a clear pathway to citizenship. As we mark 3 years of forcible displacement of the majority of Rohingya from their places of origin, this should be our pledge to a community that was subjected to well-planned machinations to destroy their identity.