

The Genesis of the Rohingya Crisis and Role of International Actors: Possible Sustainable Solutions.

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ABSTRACT

Rohingya Muslims are believed to be one of the most persecuted and vulnerable communities in the present world. They are Muslims in faith and culturally near to the Bengali culture as before colonial period Arakan was a combined kingdom with the Eastern part of Bengal (now this part is in the Bangladesh). Due to persecution, refusal to recognize as the citizens of Myanmar they have been pushed by the army ruler to the boarder of Bangladesh, claiming on their ethnic identity of Bengali. Bangladesh is trying to solve this problem diplomatically and expecting support of two of powerful neighbors India and China and United Nations (UN) also. In fact these two countries have close economical and geographical interest in Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis has exposed the interests of the major powers in Myanmar. Rohingya crisis is no longer only a humanitarian calamity but a potential threat to Bangladesh's internal stability and possible threats to regional security. This article will highlight the genesis of the Rohingya crisis and the strategic interests of India, China and Russia in Rakhine state which have serious impacted upon the fate of the Rohingyas. The paper also brings out some recommendations for possible sustainable solutions in this crisis.

KEYWORDS: Crisis, Government, International Actors, Myanmar, Rohingya.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The state of Burma now officially called 'Myanmar', with an adjoining border with Bangladesh is 6,77,000 sq. km. Myanmar has common borders with five countries, Bangladesh on the west, India on the west and north, China on the north and north-east and Laos and Thailand on the East, with the Bay of Bengal on the west and the Gulf of Martaban and the Andaman Sea on the south-west and south. The land border between Bangladesh and Myanmar is 233 kilometres only. It is subdivided into seven regions and seven States. It is ethnically diverse, with 135 officially recognized races. The majority population of Yangon (capital of Myanmar) during the colonial period was not Burmese. The government officially recognizes eight ethnic races: The Burman, Mon, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine. There are several different sub-ethnic groups in each ethnic group. The majority ethnic group is the Burmans that make up 68% of the population. Most of the population are Buddhists and speak Burmese, the official language of Myanmar.

The Genesis of the Rohingya Crisis: Myanmar was a part of British India until 1937. Myanmar became independent from British rule in January 1948 and it did not join the Commonwealth of Nations. The change in name from Burma to Myanmar was decreed by the military government in June, 1989.¹ Myanmar rulers belong to Burmans who constitute about 68% --- of the Population and that is why the country was formerly called Burma. In Myanmar there are eight main groups of Muslims. The Rohingya is the largest group lived in Rakhine State. The Buddhist

Burmese call them by the pejorative 'Kalar' (black-skinned).² At many places of Myanmar, "Buddhists aren't allowed to buy or sell land from Muslims".³

The Rohingya is Arakanese Muslims. The Rohingyas have been an international refugee issue at Myanmar-Bangladesh border.⁴ The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group in Rakhine, are considered among the most persecuted, vulnerable, and oppressed minorities in the world. The Rohingyas are an ethnic Muslim minority who practice a Sufi-inflected variation of Sunni Islam. Rohingya, term commonly used to refer to a community of Muslims generally concentrated in Rakhine (Arakan) state in Myanmar (Burma), although they can also be found in other parts of the country as well as in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh and other countries. They are considered to be among the most persecuted minorities in the world. In the early 21st century, the Rohingya made up an estimated one-third of the population in Rakhine state, with Buddhists

constituting a significant proportion of the remaining two-thirds. Rohingya political leaders have maintained that there is a distinct ethnic, cultural, and linguistic community that traces its ancestry as far back as the late 7th century. However, the broader Buddhist populace in general rejected the Rohingya terminology, referring to them instead as Bengali, and considered the community to be largely composed of illegal immigrants from present-day Bangladesh.

The Arakan Division of Myanmar adjoining the districts of Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh had a large Muslim population some of whom were of Arab origin, known as ‘Rohingyas’⁵ and had settled down long before the advent of the British rule in what was then known as the independent kingdom of Arakan (now Rakhine)⁶. In the 8th century most of Rakhine converted to Islam. Their culture was dominant in the region from the 15th to the 18th centuries when the Muslim Mrauk U dynasty ruled Arakan. In 1785 the Burmese kingdom conquered Arakan (Rakhine) and ended the Mrauk dynasty. Nonetheless the Rohingyas continued to stay in Rakhine as subjects of the Burmese kings. In 1826 the British annexed Arakan from the Burmese after a series of wars and the Rohingyas became British subjects. During World War Two the Rohingyas fought with the British against the Japanese while the Burmese fought against the British siding with the Japanese. The British promised a separate state for the Rohingyas but did not keep their promise.⁷

In 1799, Francis Buchanan, a surgeon in the British East India Company, traveled to Myanmar and met members of a Muslim ethnic group “who have long settled in Arakan [Rakhine], and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan.” That would indicate there were self-identified Rohingya living in Rakhine at least 25 years before the 1823 cut-off for citizenship.⁸ The Rohingyas speak a Burmese dialect with a mixture of Arabic, Persian and Bengali words. Until the Arakan kingdom was conquered by the Burmans in 1784, they lived in amity with Buddhists. In contemporary history, in 1947, when India was partitioned and Pakistan was established, some Muslims in the Rakhine region wanted to be part of Pakistan. However, they did not receive support from the leaders of the Muslim League.⁹ In 1956 general elections Muslims retained all their five seats of north Arakan. 1957 Sultan Mahmood, was inducted into cabinet of Prime Minister U Nu as Health minister.¹⁰ When in 1962, the Burmese military in a coup d’etat removed the parliamentary government and enforced military rule, the situation worsened. Deprived of any legitimate representation and subjected to increasing atrocities by the Burmese military, the various ethnic group gave up any hope of negotiated settlements and continued their armed conflicts with renewed pace.¹¹ The lack of political recognition has stripped the Rohingyas of their ethnic identity.

For the first time, from April to June 1978, about two lacs Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar and came to Bangladesh. This time Bangladesh was able to send them back after the conclusion of a repatriation agreement. The repatriation commenced on 31 August 1978.¹² 1982 was a watershed year as far as the Rohingya were concerned. In that year, the military government of Myanmar passed their nationality law. Citizens, as defined by the 1947 Constitution, are persons who belong to an “indigenous race”, have a grandparent from an “indigenous race”, are children of citizens, or lived in British Burma prior to 1942. The 1982 law refined the definition of “indigenous race” by listing 135 ethnic groups amongst which the Rohingyas were not included, thus effectively barring the Rohingyas from citizenship and pushing them into statelessness.¹³ This law deprived the Rohingya of citizenship and the Rohingya insurgency was radicalized with Islamic jihadi ideals.

By April 1992, more than 250,000 Rohingya civilians had been forced out of northern Rakhine State (Arakan) as a result of the increased military operations in the area. This was the second time incident of Rohingyas, in large numbers, being deliberately forced out of their homes and being pushed into Bangladesh by military force. This year Bangladeshi government succeeded to send back some of the refugees. In 2012, for the first time Bangladesh refused to accommodate the *Rohingyas*. The Government of Bangladesh decided not to welcome the *Rohingya* refugees in the territory of Bangladesh because of national security and unmitigatingly over burdening the country due to the *Rohingya* refugees, who have been staying in Bangladesh for more than 20 years without contributing any economic and social benefit to the host country. On 17 August 2012, the Foreign Minister Dipu Moni further said that Rohingyas would definitely be sent back to Myanmar soon, categorically adding, “We have finalised to send them back to their homeland through discussion with the Myanmar authority but could not do so due to the occurrence of a riot there”. Dipu Moni further said, “We have already urged Myanmar about the safe return of the Rohingyas so that they can come back to their homeland voluntarily with their rights and dignity.”¹⁴ Since 2012, other developments, including a series of proposed legislative measures (some of which were passed by Myanmar’s parliament), resulted in further restrictions on the limited rights of the Rohingya.

In 2014 Myanmar government decided to have a citizenship verification process by which Rangoon identified Rohingya Muslims as Bengalis. Rohingya Muslims were given a temporary resident card that made them either second class people or illegal immigrants.¹⁵ Since the introduction of newly devised wicked citizenship law, Yangon had started to call Rohingya Muslims as foreign citizens with Bengali heritage coming from Bangladesh. The temporary resident cards issued to Rohingya Muslims were also cancelled in 2015 and for the first time in 2015 they were denied to vote.¹⁶ Unlike her father, Suu Kyi did not need any Muslim vote to

return to the helm of political power of Myanmar. Under a new law in June 2015 Suu Kyi government made the Rohingya Muslims completely stateless under the so-called the Identity Cards.

In August 25, 2017 violence erupted again in Myanmar's Rakhine state between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims. Military operation was aimed at evicting the entire Rohingya population from Myanmar. About 750,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh since August 2017, what was termed by UN (United Nations) a "classic example of ethnic cleansing".¹⁷ In 2017, Myanmar security forces and local supporters burned down over 350 Rohingya villages in whole or in part.¹⁸ Regarding the current crisis, a repatriation agreement was signed by Myanmar and Bangladesh declaring the repatriation of 1,500 Rohingya per week from January 2018. Due to the lack of safety guarantee for the Rohingyas, the beginning of the enforcement of this agreement has been postponed.

Recently, the refugees have refused to return to Rakhine state, demanding guarantees for their safety and citizenship. Most refugees do not want to go back unless they are confident they will be safe, able to move around freely, make a living, access basic services, and obtain citizenship, which they have been denied for decades. Yet, all this seems doubtful. Rohingya villagers still living in some parts of Rakhine State could not travel easily from rural areas to markets or hospitals, because they feared attacks by Rakhine Buddhist citizens. Some health centers refused to treat Rohingya patients.¹⁹ Only those Rohingya who can provide the extensive documentation required for citizenship have any chance of obtaining it. But most lost what records they had in the 2017 violence or in past interactions with state officials.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina proposed a five-point action plan in at the 72nd UN General Assembly (UNGA) session pertaining to the issue. The five points presented were to stop the practice of ethnic cleansing and violence; a fact-finding mission to be deployed immediately; ensure a sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees; creation of "safe zones" under UN monitoring; and implementing the recommendations of the Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine in its entirety.²⁰ In Bangladesh's annual address to the United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appealed to the international community to "understand the untenability of the situation". She also said, "The crisis is now going beyond the camps. Despite all our efforts to contain it, the crisis is now becoming a regional threat".²¹ The Rohingya crisis is a concern for Bangladesh, currently hosting more than 1.1 million Rohingya people who have been subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing, and systematic discrimination for years in Rakhine, Myanmar.²² UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein was made comment in 2017 that the treatment of Rohingyas is a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". The UN has also said that it has received information and satellite imagery of the Myanmar military and local militia resorting to extrajudicial killings in Rakhine.²³

Role of International Actors: Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, China and the Russia have become a part of the wider geopolitical dynamics of the issue and due to their diverse interests. While the Rohingya endure a life of hardship in the world's largest and most population-dense refugee camps, the paralyzed international community remains unable to persuade Myanmar to create conditions to facilitate their voluntary and safe return, due to conflicting equities. It is true that the international community cannot overlook the serious violations of human rights experienced by the Rohingya. It is crystal clear that the international community is paralyzed into inaction by conflicting strategic interests in Myanmar. Some measures of accountability and seeking justice for the Rohingya are essential to international community. As a member of international community the immediate task is to continue to support Bangladesh and the Rohingya refugees with humanitarian assistance.

India: India has a vested interest in Myanmar for potential connectivity projects and border patrol cooperation. India, like China, eyes connectivity projects in Rakhine that would allow India to supply its northeastern states via the Bay of Bengal and through Myanmar, which would take pressure off the narrow Sittoung Corridor that connects the northeast with the rest of India. It is a strategic vulnerability for India, and New Delhi fears Beijing's encroachment there.²⁴ India has built a port in Sittoung that will serve as one of the anchors to this planned ground supply route. India also shares a long border with Myanmar along India's restive northeast where insurgent groups have long exploited the porous border to obtain sanctuary, small arms, engage in criminal economic enterprises, and rendezvous with sources of external support for their intermittent war with Indian forces.²⁵ India needs robust relations with Myanmar both to ensure Myanmar's cooperation against Indian insurgents on its soil and to facilitate Indian cross-border operations on the same. Indian Army Chief said this comes at an opportune moment as India is trying to strengthen its ties with Myanmar.²⁶

Aung Sun Suu Kyi's 2015 election-win and her ascension to power have brightened the India-Myanmar relationship. India considered it as a golden opportunity to revive the 1991 "Look East" policy, now dubbed as

“Act East” to forge economic relations.²⁷ Another key reason for New Delhi’s new “Act East” policy is to counter China’s growing clout in Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal. The convergence of all these aspects has impelled New Delhi to invest heavily in Myanmar, setting forth several maritime and land-based Myanmar infrastructural development plans, such as the landmark Kaladan multimodal project, India-Myanmar Thailand Asian Trilateral Highway, and a road-river-port cargo transport project.²⁸ India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government and its sometimes-deadly Islamophobic supporters have tended to portray the downtrodden Rohingyas as either terrorists or would-be terrorists and is actively trying to expel the Rohingya population currently in India. India’s home ministry has submitted an affidavit to the court saying it could confidentially share intelligence information with the Supreme Court showing Rohingya links to ISIS and Pakistani militants.²⁹ India was among the key friends of Bangladesh that stayed away from the voting for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation-sponsored UN General Assembly condemnation of Myanmar in November 2017. India has reservation on OIC moved resolutions as the Islamic countries’ grouping earlier adopted resolutions in Kashmir in favour of Pakistan. India also conveyed that it never voted in any country-specific resolution in the UN, except one in favour of Palestine.³⁰ Also, India considers Myanmar a key ally in maintaining the security and stability of Northeast India (NEI). The four NEI states— Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland—share a common border of 1,643 km with Myanmar. India considers cooperation with Myanmar a critical stepping stone to limiting the influence of insurgency.

China: China has also, for geopolitical reasons, supported the Myanmar government. At the beginning of the Rohingya influx, China claimed that it is a bilateral issue and both Bangladesh and Myanmar are responsible for resolving this. Being an extremely resourceful country in a strategic location, China stands beside Myanmar to retain the influence made over three decades of massive development aid and supply of military hardware which makes matter more complicated. Myanmar is a geographically strategic point for China for both economic and diplomatic interest. China made significant investments in this country which makes the issue more complicated. Myanmar junta’s interest in increasing power capabilities by soliciting military weaponry and infrastructural development support from China. China’s use of Myanmar as a means of gaining power through expansionist tactics and increased power capabilities. China provides Myanmar with military supplies and the economic means to develop; increasing Myanmar’s strength.

China is eyeing Myanmar’s conflict-ridden Rakhine state for a series of projects that are part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2015, a Chinese consortium won a bid to build both a special economic zone and a deep-sea port on the island of Kyaukphyu, off the coast of Rakhine state. In early 2017, China opened a long-delayed crude pipeline that permitted China to further reduce its dependence upon the contentious South China Sea by offloading crude oil at Kyaukphyu port and onward through the pipeline. However, China wants yet more infrastructure deals that Myanmar has been hesitant to grant, in part because local Myanmar residents oppose China’s land acquisition strategy.³¹ China has played interference on behalf of Myanmar at the UN Security Council and will expect concessions on its Rakhine infrastructure in exchange for continuing to shelter Myanmar from the much-deserved international opprobrium, while Beijing also sustains criticism for doing so.³² China has supported Myanmar’s security operations against the Rohingya for other reason also. Generally, Myanmar and China have forged common ground about the existential threat their relatively small Muslim minorities pose to their respective states. Both countries have used similar strategies to manage these purported threats from Muslim minorities, including brutal force and camps in which Muslims are concentrated and unable to move independently.³³ Chinese unconditional backing to Myanmar military government is very clear to all concerned parties. At present it is very clear that Beijing is standing by Myanmar at a time when whole world has been righting accusing Suu Kyi government for all kinds of heinous crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, perpetrated against its Muslim citizens. Beijing has already secured its economic interests up to all gas fields in Rakhane State, which can easily be used as connected points up to the oil and gas fields of all Middle Eastern countries. Along with gas pipe-lines from Rakhaine to Chinese territories, Chinese oil pipe lines would be able to bring Middle Eastern oil for its thriving economy. China knows very well that for next half a century its economy would depend on “Muslim Energy” that will not require any more petro dollars.

Russia: Russia has also shielded Myanmar from any censure at the UN Security Council, although its motives are less apparent at first blush. Like China, Russia fears its own Muslim minorities and has defended its own ruthless methods to put down Muslim uprisings and suppress Muslims more generally.³⁴ Russia also takes a keen interest in challenging U.S. efforts to resolve the situation—as it has done in Syria, Iran and Pakistan. However, there is yet another reason why Russia is

keen to facilitate Myanmar's impunity: arms sales. Myanmar's armed forces have long relied upon Chinese weapons systems, although the Myanmar military has become wary for substandard quality of military hardware and China support for powerful ethnic armed groups in the north. Myanmar's generals have not hidden their displeasure with the quality of Chinese military hardware and jet fighters, but they know that a more assertive and powerful China remains a key player while Myanmar faces mounting international pressure over the crisis in Rakhine State. It is true that Myanmar will seek a more balanced diplomatic approach toward powerful neighbors such as China and India as well as Russia, a UN Security Council member, to provide it with diplomatic cover.³⁵ To balance its overwhelming dependence upon Chinese weapons systems, Myanmar's air force has been purchasing air platforms from Russia for some time, including fixed wing and rotary fighter aircraft. Dr. Ludmila Lutz-Auras, assistant professor at the University of Rostock, Germany mentioned that Russia views Myanmar as part of its pivot to Asia, and as key to extending Moscow's foothold in Southeast Asia. She also remarked, "Engagement in Myanmar offers a good opportunity to check its own positions on the international political stage".³⁶

In fact, Rakhine's geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean and its billion dollar infrastructure projects explain China and India's interest in the area. Rakhine state lies in the mid-western region of Myanmar along the eastern sea-board of the Bay of Bengal. Due to its proximity with the sea-lane of the Indian Ocean and the natural resources in the off-shore areas has made it strategically important. Both China and India have stakes in this region. Both these countries are investing in Rakhine state to secure their own interests. This has stated a power play in the region. Bertil Litner, a Thailand-based scholar of Asian affairs, has rightly called "The Great Game East", referencing the strategic competition between India and China in Southeast Asia.³⁷ China and India also supported the Government of Myanmar's (GoM) stance and addressed the Rohingya issue as Myanmar's internal affair. Myanmar has developed a closer tie with China and India. In fact, New Delhi and Beijing have been fighting for their economic interests over Myanmar so ferociously that Western capitals are not that relevant for Yangon. Moreover, for China, the territories of the entire Myanmar are too important. Like Bangladesh, Myanmar is too precious for Indian economy as well.

Possible Solutions: The findings and recommendations of this study would really be helpful for world actors to formulate pragmatic policies so that all stakeholders can play a constructive role in Rohingya crisis management and betterment of human beings.

1. GoM should revise the 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar, and ensure the citizenship for all citizens including the Rohingya. The government should issue one type of national identity cards for all citizens.
2. Freedom of movement, humanitarian access and education for all citizens in Rakhine State is a legal act for the Government, and the GoM should implement these rights immediately.
3. Another recommendation is those refugees who are confined to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Rakhine. It is imperative that the government should to close all IDP camps.
4. The only acceptable solution which would facilitate the repatriation process is the commitment of the state of Myanmar towards the reintegration of Rohingya through drafting a Strategy and an Action Plan for the reintegration of Rohingya in Myanmar. The only solution for the state of Myanmar is to accept their own citizens and create policies which contribute to diversity, peace and security.
5. A safe zone has to be demarcated for the Rohingyas in Myanmar where they can live after their return.
6. Support efforts to establish stabilization force to protect the Rohingya inside Myanmar, in order to facilitate a peaceful repatriation process and stem future violence. International monitors are a necessary component of any repatriation process that supervises the safe return of those displaced to their home country.
7. The two parties may also consider getting the UN Secretary-General to oversee the whole process. The Secretary-General plays the role of a "world moderator". Article 100 of the UN Charter has stated that the Secretary-General should play an impartial role.³⁸
8. The Government should take steps to build cooperative environment to all ethnic minorities in the country. Both Myanmar and Bangladesh form a Joint Commission to return all the Rohingyas to the Rakhine State safely. The GoM should train the human rights policy to the security personnel, so that they can treat all the citizens equally. The government should provide full and regular access for domestic and international media to all areas of the country.
9. The process of further 'Burmanisation' of Myanmar has to be stopped.
10. Bangladesh needs to work with China, India, Russia as well as ASEAN to help make a breakthrough in the relations. Bangladesh should perceive geopolitical interest of major powers in the Rakhine State and acts to solution this problem.
11. The global community has come forward to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas.

12. ASEAN should offer to facilitate a process of “Go home” dialogues between Myanmar and Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar in order to build a foundation of trust needed for the voluntary repatriation of Rohingyas.

13. Resettlement and other options to move abroad should be explored in the Asia region and beyond. There is public sympathy for the plight of the Rohingya, and several Southeast Asian and Gulf States have vibrant economies which can and do provide work opportunities. Regional solidarity through a managed programme of moving Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to neighbouring countries would be a positive example of global responsibility sharing envisioned by the UN New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact on Refugees which have received strong diplomatic and political support from Bangladesh.

II. CONCLUSION:

Indeed, the Rohingyas who had been living in the Rakhine state of Myanmar since the last few centuries have been subjected to brutal persecution by the Myanmar government. Generally it is believed that Rohingya issue is religious and identity crisis, but it is stark reality that there lies deeper geopolitical maneuvering. This geopolitical interest overrode the humanitarian aspect of the issue. Bangladesh cannot even bear the burden of more than one million Rohingya Muslims as refugees as they are rightful citizens of Myanmar. Bangladesh wants all of the refugees to be repatriated as soon as possible due to national security threats and strains on its own economy. Ironically, the main responsible organ of the United Nations and international community has utterly failed to persuade Myanmar to come to a table of negotiation to agree with some specific terms and conditions of the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to their own birth-places, which were utterly burned or destroyed by Myanmar government. Further extensive research should be done on the Rohingya issue from the perspective of the concerned international actors and strategic geopolitical interest.

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