

The Rohingya Crisis and its Impact on Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations

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ABSTRACT The mass exodus of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017 has caused ramifications in the two countries' bilateral relations. The underlying currents between the two nations have become more apparent following two failed repatriation efforts since the exodus. The public display of dissatisfaction and blame-game have only fuelled the tensions. This brief examines how far the Rohingya issue has affected the connectivity, trade and security concerns between Myanmar and Bangladesh. It recommends plausible ways through.

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INTRODUCTION

There are longstanding tensions between the ethnic group of Rohingyas, living in the Rakhine state of western Myanmar, who are mainly Muslim, and Myanmar’s nationalists, who are primarily Buddhist. It was expected that with a new democratic government taking over in Myanmar in 2016 – after decades of military and quasi-military rule – relations between the Rohingyas and the majority Myanmarese would improve. However, the opposite has happened since the National League for Democracy (NLD) government came to power in the country.

This is mainly because the NLD government has not introduced any policy to integrate the Rohingyas into Myanmar society in a way that does not upset the

majority-Buddhist nationalists.¹ Like the nationalists, the government also seems to view the Rohingyas as “outsiders” to their country. Perhaps it also fears that recognising the Rohingyas might threaten the power-sharing agreement it maintains with the military.

In any case, the last major crackdown by the ‘Tatmadaw’ (the Myanmar army) on the Rohingya population in 2017 led to a massive exodus of more than 700,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh; this movement caused a sharp increase in the Rohingya population of Bangladesh to around 885,000.² This brief examines how far the Rohingya issue has affected trade and diplomatic relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the security of both countries. It considers the way forward.



Source: “Rohingya crisis within Myanmar – Bangladesh”, Aljazeera^a

a <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/09/rohingya-crisis-explained-maps-170910140906580.html>

Bangladesh and Myanmar share a land border of approximately 271 km, and a maritime border.³ The two have shared trade linkages, people-to-people contact, and cultural engagements since the pre-colonial times. Myanmar was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh as an independent nation after its creation in 1971. Diplomatic relations between the two were formalised from 21 March 1972 and remained amiable with high-level visits from both sides.⁴ These visits continued till Myanmar's military government transformed into a quasi-military one in 2011, led by President Thein Sein. Despite several opportunities to strengthen mutual cooperation in areas such as trade and tourism,⁵ however, bilateral relations between the two have yet to achieve their full potential —and a crucial reason is the Rohingya issue.

DISPLACEMENT STANDOFF

The Rohingyas are an ethnic Muslim minority living in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships of Rakhine state in Myanmar, formerly called Arakan state, on Myanmar's west coast. The majority Myanmar population calls them “illegal Bengali immigrants” who have infiltrated from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts.⁶ In 1982, the then military government had passed the Citizenship Act that recognised as citizens only those ethnic groups which had lived in Myanmar (then known as Burma) prior to 1824 when the First Anglo-Burmese War began.⁷ In this way, the Rohingyas became officially stateless. They were subsequently denied citizenship documents, education, employment, freedom of movement, and

even the right to marry freely, and were vulnerable to arbitrary detention, forced labour, discriminatory taxation and confiscation of property.⁸

Rakhine, in which the majority of Rohingyas live, is also Myanmar's least developed region. Widespread poverty, along with poor infrastructure and lack of employment opportunities, has intensified cleavages between the Buddhists and the Muslim Rohingyas in the state, exacerbated by their religious differences.

Apart from such discrimination, the Myanmar government also launched two major operations – Naga Min (King Dragon) in 1978 and Pyi Thar Ya in 1991 – to oust so-called illegal immigrants, especially Rohingyas, from the country. In each case, significant numbers of Rohingyas migrated to Bangladesh to avoid communal violence or alleged abuse by the security forces in Myanmar. The Bangladeshi government provided them safe haven in Cox's Bazar district.

Under United Nations conventions, communities like the Rohingyas are categorised as “de jure stateless”. But the Bangladeshi government calls them “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals”.⁹ Like other South Asian countries, Bangladesh has not signed any of the conventions or protocols relating to refugees – the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, the 1954 Convention on Stateless Persons, the 1961 Convention on Reduction of Statelessness, or the 1967 Protocol.^{10,11} As a result, it is not obligated to use the term ‘refugee’ in its official documents relating to

the Rohingyas or provide them special support.^b

In past decades, Bangladesh's response to successive inflows of displaced Rohingyas has been to focus almost exclusively on their repatriation to Myanmar. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas returned to Rakhine state after the forced migrations of 1978 and 1991. Bangladesh had hoped that in 2017 it could negotiate a similar deal. It opened formal negotiations with Myanmar on repatriation in October 2017. The following month, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding, under which, in December 2017, they set up a joint working group to coordinate repatriation in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner. However, after four meetings and two failed efforts in 2018 and 2019, there has been no repatriation so far.

As the crisis continues, Bangladeshi officials are increasingly doubting Myanmar's willingness to take back the displaced people. Both Bangladesh and Myanmar have accused each other of trying to manoeuvre repatriation procedure to slow it down. Tensions became evident in June 2019, when a trusted aide to the Myanmar government told an audience in Japan that Bangladesh was responsible for the failure of repatriation. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina responded saying, "The problem lies with Myanmar, as they don't want to take back the Rohingyas by any means."¹² Public criticism of

Myanmar has continued in recent months, including at the UN General Assembly in September 2019, and at a Non-Aligned Movement summit in October-November 2019. Bangladesh has issued a press release asking Myanmar to stop its unjustified campaign against Bangladesh over the repatriation issue.¹³

The exclusion of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees from the bilateral repatriation discussions – apparently at Myanmar's insistence – implies that there is no neutral party to help iron out logistical problems. China has recently assumed a mediatory role, but it is widely seen as siding with Myanmar, and has made little progress bringing the two sides together.

Bangladesh has been appealing for worldwide pressure on Myanmar to take back the displaced Rohingyas at the earliest. Separately, certain countries and non-government organisations (NGOs) have initiated actions against Myanmar for alleged atrocities against the Rohingyas in the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and in Argentinian domestic courts. An ICJ ruling in January this year directed Myanmar to protect the Rohingyas still residing on its soil. Though the verdict did not cover the Rohingyas living in Bangladeshi camps, it is possible that if other adverse judgments follow, the UN Security Council may prevail upon Myanmar to act on repatriation.

b This does not mean that there are no provisions for refugees or stateless persons in the judicial system of Bangladesh. There are a number of laws and provisions in the Constitution which cover all individuals residing on Bangladeshi territory, whether or not they are citizens. Also, the 1946 Foreigners Act (passed in British India before Partition but still applicable in Bangladesh) does refer to 'refugees'. It also supersedes all other legal provisions, as it grants the government the discretion to decide on the scope of the Act's application. It enables protection to be extended to displaced people through administrative mechanisms.

Whether China – a Security Council member, with veto power – will allow it remains to be seen. There are also limits to the extent any ICJ verdict can be enforced, and its ruling indicting Myanmar may well prove to be largely symbolic.¹⁴

Neither the UN, nor any of the countries or NGOs pressuring Myanmar to address the Rohingyas' plight more constructively, has succeeded. This reflects a persistent domestic bias against the Rohingyas and a defensive attitude to international demands.

To what extent has the diplomatic standoff between Bangladesh and Myanmar affected bilateral connectivity, trade and security?

IMPROVING PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY

Though the two countries share a 271-km land border, connectivity between them is limited. In July 2007, they had reached an agreement to establish a direct road link, a 23-km stretch from Taungbro in Bangladesh to Bawlibazar in Myanmar to be built by the armies of both countries. Another proposal was a road from Teknaf in Bangladesh to Sittwe in Myanmar via Maungdaw, which would also require covering 70 nautical miles of sea across the coast of the Bay of Bengal. But neither has been built yet due to problems in land acquisition, the estimated cost of construction, and lack of political will.

There was another 2007 agreement to lay a 130-km railway track from Dohazari in Bangladesh to Gundum in Rakhine via Ramu in Cox's Bazaar as a part of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR). The TAR, a UN initiative, seeks to link several Asian countries including Bangladesh to six East Asian ones – Myanmar,

Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore – as well as to European countries through Turkey.¹⁵

As for air links, there is only one direct flight between Dhaka and Yangon.¹⁶ Other flights include one or more layovers, either in Kolkata, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur. This greatly inhibits tourism between the two countries.

Despite their tensions, Bangladesh and Myanmar have, however, settled their maritime disputes through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Proper maritime boundaries were demarcated in 2012. Along the land border too, in November 2017, even after the latest Rohingya displacement crisis had begun, the two signed an instrument of ratification demarcating their boundary north of the Naf River.

Multimodal transport will help to streamline connectivity between the two countries. With no direct road or rail links, the sea, and other waterways, becomes crucial. Improving jetties and port facilities is thus vital.¹⁷

Both countries, however, seem to fear that robust connectivity could make it easier for more Rohingyas to migrate to Bangladesh. In fact, such connectivity would enhance trade relations and, with proper security, reduce illegal immigration.

Better connectivity would foster tourism, which both countries would benefit by promoting. Buddhists comprise nearly 0.6 percent (approximately 1 million people) of Bangladesh's total population of 165 million. There are many Buddhist historical sites in

Bangladesh such as the Buddhist temple at Moheshkhali, and a number of ancient Buddhist monasteries, such as the 8th-century monastery at Paharpur, another 8th-12th century monastery at Mainamati, Kamalapur, one at Rangamati, and another in Dhaka, which can be developed as tourist destinations through the joint efforts of both countries. Leveraging this opportunity, Bangladesh could increase its Buddhist circuit tourism, getting more tourists not only from Myanmar, but also other Buddhist majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Japan and Thailand.

Indeed, Bangladesh has already begun showcasing its Buddhist legacy. In 2015, it held an international conference in Dhaka on “Developing Sustainable and Inclusive Buddhist Heritage and Pilgrimage Circuits in South Asia’s Buddhist Heartland”, which called for sustainable development and promotion of cross-border tourism circuits in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁸ It has been reaching out to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries through such initiatives, and could seriously consider doing the same with Myanmar. Building bilateral relations on the basis of a shared cultural and religious heritage is one possible way to build awareness of the Rohingya crisis.

Increasing rail, road and air connectivity is essential not only for the tourism industry, but also for trade between the two countries to improve. Both countries should embark on a detailed plan to do so.

ENHANCING TRADE

Trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar has much scope for improvement. Figure 1 shows

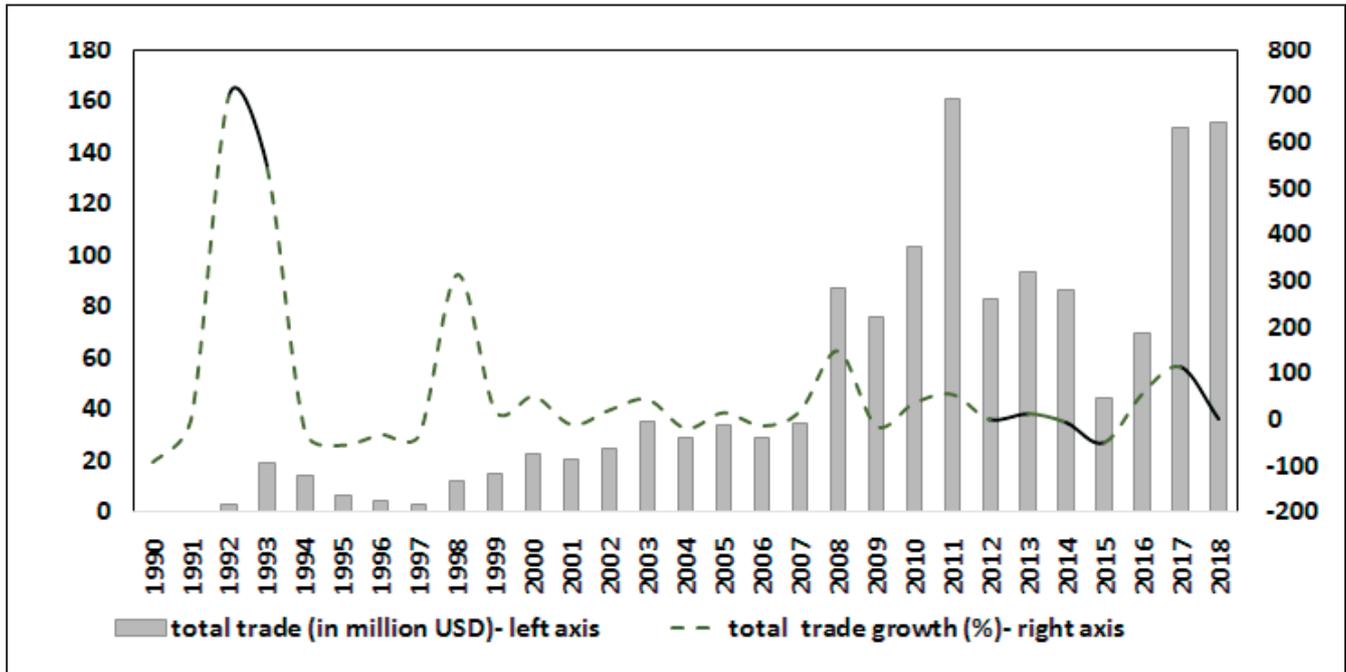
that after reaching an all-time high in 2011, it has dipped. Separate data from Myanmar’s Commerce Ministry confirms the trend – bilateral trade between the two, which stood at \$84 million in 2011-12, fell to \$42 million in 2012-13, rising to \$75 million in 2013-14, only to fall to \$39 million the following year and \$33 million in 2015-16, showing only a slight recovery to \$44 million in 2016-17.¹⁹

Efforts have been made to increase trade. Bangladesh and Myanmar established direct bilateral trade in January 2012, opening letters of credit (LCs) with each other. Earlier, trade was routed through Singapore or Thailand. Banks in both countries are also taking steps to facilitate and expand trade.²⁰ However, bilateral trade is still minuscule compared to their trade with the rest of the world (See Figure 2). At present, the balance of trade is also heavily tilted in Myanmar’s favour.

The products traded include bamboo, ginger, peanuts, saltwater prawns and fish, dried plums, garlic, rice, moong beans, blankets, candy, plum jam, footwear, frozen foods, chemicals, leather, jute products, tobacco, plastics, wood, knitwear, and beverages. Bangladesh imports many food items from its neighbour country.

Apart from official trade, there is also substantial informal trade across the land border. This indicates that Myanmar does not have a fully developed market economy and its participation in the global economy is also relatively low. The changes in the last decade in Myanmar were not merely about moving towards democracy, but also about a shift to a more market-based and globalised

Figure 1: Bangladesh-Myanmar Total Trade



Created by Roshan Saha, Research Assistant, ORF

Figure 2: Exports and Imports between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and Rest of the World

Year	Myanmar Imports from Bangladesh	Myanmar Imports from World	Myanmar Export to Bangladesh	Bangladesh Imports from World
2011	21442	8571168	144080	41221652
2012	82014	7849398	21588	36356219
2013	6884	120009122	35848	35493348
2014	8803	16231476	66378	
2015	9779	16913265	15147	48058710
2016	19449	15695738	21476	43058271
2017	23807	1925 3455	128855	49954201
2018	28091	19345460	99443	57051575

Source: World Bank Data

Unit: US Dollar Thousand

economy. The shift from autarkic economic policies to a market-based economy has its own challenges and opportunities.²¹ There are

opportunities for Bangladeshi investment in the economic shifts Myanmar is currently witnessing, but the governments of both

nations must put in more effort for them to fructify. Myanmar needs investment and proper modalities must be put in place by both.

Investors have remained underwhelmed by Myanmar since it introduced democratic reforms in 2010. The slow pace of change in sectors such as banking, aviation and insurance has kept large parts of the country's \$70-billion economy off limits to foreign investors.²²

Bangladesh appears to be following India's Look East policy to establish enhanced trade with Southeast Asian countries. Myanmar should also be included in its ambit.

The resolution of the sea boundary conflict in 2012 was expected to improve connectivity between Myanmar and Bangladesh. There remains enormous potential for coastal shipping, but the two countries have not reached any agreement on it. For coastal trade to flourish, Myanmar needs to stabilise Rakhine, where the Rohingyas live, and which has a long sea coast. It is also rich in minerals and other natural resources.²³ In the absence of an agreement, many small vessels from Myanmar illegally carry goods to Bangladesh both across the Bay of Bengal and along rivers.²⁴

Indeed, cross-border trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh is highly dependent on waterways. On the Myanmar side, the main border point is Shwe Min Gan Jetty in Sittwe. The Yae Chan Pyin Ferry Dock at Sittwe, from which trucks carry goods to Maungdaw, requires upgrading. The development of Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone near

Maungdaw, is a good opportunity for Bangladeshi investment in Rakhine state, and could also lead to improved Myanmar-Bangladesh connectivity.

ADDRESSING SECURITY CONCERNS

There are security issues on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, and both sides want to secure their border better. Bangladesh's Department of Narcotics Control has identified the Myanmar border as an important entry point of illegal drugs. Bangladesh has made arrests and busted drug running networks. Among those arrested have been a number of displaced Rohingyas. In two years, 2017 and 2018, Bangladesh has either arrested or killed more than 100 Rohingya drug traffickers as they were crossing the border.²⁵ The appalling living conditions in the camps set up for Rohingyas in Bangladesh, along with lack of educational and employment opportunities for them, is leading to increased criminal activity.²⁶

'Yaba', also called the 'madness drug', has become especially popular in the last few years. Agents are paid by the size of the Yaba consignments they bring in – 5,000 Yaba pills transported to Dhaka or any other urban centre in Bangladesh can earn the trafficker 10,000 taka (around US\$120).²⁷ For the impoverished Rohingyas, this is very tempting.²⁸ Also, protection from drug peddlers makes it easier for many Rohingyas to exit Myanmar, despite border security, using the Naf River running between the two countries.

Globally, Bangladesh is mainly a transit point for drugs produced in the Golden

Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand). Teknaf, in Cox's Bazar, has become notorious as a drug gateway to the West. It is said that there are 15 syndicates smuggling drugs through Teknaf to Dhaka and beyond, with Rohingyas at the heart of the operation.

Overlaps between drug smuggling routes and Rohingya migration routes have had far-reaching repercussions for Rohingya livelihoods. The Rohingyas' link to drug smuggling has led to further curtailing of their rights in Bangladesh. Their movement outside camp areas is restricted; they are barred from owning mobile phones.²⁹ Bangladesh has also passed the Narcotics Control Act, 2018, where the maximum punishment for producing, smuggling, or distributing more than five grams of amphetamine products is death.³⁰ How far the poor Rohingyas are aware of the drastic consequences of drug smuggling is not known. Being 'displaced Myanmar nationals' in Bangladesh, they have no rights and little protection.³¹

Human trafficking of Rohingyas is also growing, exacerbated by their isolation and sense of desperation at the failed repatriation efforts. Recently Malaysia turned away a trawler-load of Rohingyas who sought refuge, citing the COVID-19 scare as a reason, forcing them to return to Bangladesh. Such cases of Rohingyas undertaking dangerous voyages in inhuman conditions had been widely reported in 2012 and 2015,³² and were confirmed as human trafficking, and their recurrence has refocused attention on the existence of

trafficking networks.³³ COVID-19 restrictions may well have saved the Rohingyas that Malaysia turned away, from a worse future.³⁴ But the incident does bring to question the efficacy of security agencies tasked to thwart such trafficking activities.

Owing to shortage of funds, as well as of vacant areas where the displaced can be settled, Bangladesh is extremely reluctant to continue housing them, but is bowing to international pressure. While most of the Rohingyas are still in camps in Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh has begun settling some of them in the geographically unstable Bhasan Char island in the Bay of Bengal.³⁵

Rohingya militant groups^c are also a major security concern for Bangladesh. Though based in Myanmar, they have members and sympathisers among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) and the Myanmar police hold regular top-level meetings to counter this and other threats. The last such meeting, the seventh in the series, was held in January this year and highlighted the need to curb illegal entry of Myanmar citizens into Bangladesh, smuggling – especially of narcotics – across the border, combating border crimes, including terrorist crime, and joint border patrolling.³⁶ Sensitive issues, such as exchange of border security members of one side who happened to cross the border unknowingly, and were detained, or the curbing of firing across the border by Myanmar's police or army, have also been discussed at some of the meetings.

c The Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Rohingya National Alliance (RNA) and Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) are the main groups threatening Bangladesh's internal security.

The meetings are a welcome step to counter the mistrust between the two countries. The differences between them need to be mitigated. The resolution of the Rohingya issue would improve their relations immensely. Regional forums can play a crucial role in bringing them closer.

WAY FORWARD: INTER-GOVERNMENTAL, SUB-REGIONAL AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Both nations are members of the sub-regional grouping called the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), as well as of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Bangladesh is also moving towards a closer formal relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of which Myanmar is a member. It has joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and is likely to enter into a Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN.³⁷

Through these sub-regional/regional forums, Myanmar and Bangladesh hope to establish better rail, road, maritime and energy links, which bilaterally they have been unable to forge. With more trade, investment and connectivity within the sub-region, both nations can benefit from new markets, new import sources of high-quality and better priced products, and increased opportunities for transport and logistics. Multilateral or trilateral forums help build better connectivity as well as trade relations.

On the Rohingya issue, the multilateral forums have either taken a constructive approach or remained silent. More is expected from them.

Neither ASEAN nor BIMSTEC has a political and legal framework to deal with issues of displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers. Still, among ASEAN nations, the Philippines and Cambodia are parties to either the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. (None of the BIMSTEC members are.) Moreover, ASEAN has a mandate called the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers. But its focus remains on migrant workers, which does not cover the Rohingyas.

ASEAN has been criticised for not coaxing Myanmar enough to facilitate the repatriation process. ASEAN finally did send an assessment team from the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, led by its secretary general Lim Jock Hoi, to coordinate with Myanmar officials.

The team visited Rakhine province in December 2018 and May 2019 to conduct a preliminary needs assessment. However, the mandate the team got from ASEAN has been much criticised for not empowering it to get the Rohingya viewpoint as well. ASEAN representatives also accompanied the Myanmar delegation which visited Rohingya camps in Bangladesh in July 2019 to convince the displaced people to return. The effort proved futile as Myanmar was unable to guarantee the Rohingyas either citizenship or safety once they got back.

There is little pressure from countries of the region on Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya problem. Only Malaysia, and to a lesser extent, Indonesia, have pushed for a

diplomatic solution to the crisis. Thailand, Vietnam, and even the Philippines, have been supporting Myanmar. All that is currently expected of ASEAN is that it does something about the boatloads of Rohingyas found travelling by sea. They are being denied entry by member states due to the COVID-19 scare and being sent back to sea again where their survival is threatened. But little has been done so far on this score either – the recent virtual ASEAN Summit, held in the last week of June, took no concrete step to address their plight.³⁸ Separately, there is also an UN-backed regional forum, the Bali Process – started in Bali, Indonesia, in 2002 – which seeks to raise awareness of human trafficking. Indonesia, which currently co-chairs the Bali Process along with Singapore, has agreed to provide humanitarian assistance to nearly 100 displaced Rohingyas stranded off the northern coast of Aceh.³⁹

BIMSTEC is meant for technical and economic cooperation, and does not delve into areas where there is no consensus between members. However, observers have noted that though the forum has been growing by focusing only on cooperation, the Rohingya issue could well destabilise South and South East Asia, impacting BIMSTEC too, unless it is handled with sensitivity.⁴⁰ It can be argued that BIMSTEC should intervene since the Myanmar government has already contravened BIMSTEC's mandate of "peaceful co-existence" among member-states. But not a single member, not even Bangladesh, has raised the Rohingya issue in this forum.

In November 2019, at a BIMSTEC conference in Kolkata, its secretariat did hint that if Bangladesh formally proposed it, the

forum might think of addressing the issue. It is vital for sub-regional and regional forums to give the matter the importance and urgency that it deserves. Rakhine state needs to prosper and develop so that it is economically stable enough to take back the displaced Rohingyas. No doubt the security aspect needs to also be considered, and the contraband smuggling and radicalisation of Rohingyas checked.

The national security advisers (NSAs) of the BIMSTEC member-states have been holding annual meetings, but the countries are still in the process of ratifying the mechanism for their cooperation. Once that is done, the NSAs should together draw up measures for cooperation and coordination in law enforcement, intelligence and security. It will boost capacity building of the security apparatus and enable information sharing in real-time.

The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights needs to be strengthened, lacking as it does the mandate to protect vulnerable sections or investigate clashes. Setting up an ASEAN Human Rights Court to interpret and enforce the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration would also help protect stateless or displaced people like the Rohingyas.⁴¹

The Rohingya crisis has exposed how little the sub-region/region can do to help people displaced from one member state to another. The situation needs better monitoring if regional cooperation is to lead to improved protection for displaced and stateless people. ASEAN needs a refugee and asylum policy that includes guidance for action when one member state's internal issues make people

flee to neighbouring states. Such a policy, agreed upon by all ASEAN and BIMSTEC members would further ease opposition to helping the Rohingyas, and prevent future ethnic or religious tensions between states.

HEAVYWEIGHT NEIGHBOURS' ROLE

The two heavyweights of the region could also play a constructive role in resolving the crisis. China and India are among Myanmar's and Bangladesh's closest international partners. Surely, neither power wants a festering border conflict among its neighbours in the Bay of Bengal.

China has important economic and geostrategic interests in Myanmar, including the multi-billion-dollar China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the details of which are being finalised. It is building the Kyakphyu port in Myanmar too. It is also a major investor in Bangladesh, giving it significant leverage.⁴² China has been supporting Myanmar in the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly, and protecting it from stronger Security Council action. It wants Myanmar and Bangladesh to deal with the situation bilaterally instead of having multilateral forums intervening. But it is clear, given the progress so far, that the bilateral process is not working.

Myanmar is even closer to India than to China. Indeed, many media reports have hinted that despite China's support on the Rohingya issue, Myanmar remains suspicious of its intentions, since it believes that China is helping other ethnic militant groups in the country, such as the Arakan Army, with advanced weaponry and technical knowhow.⁴³

The biggest project India and Myanmar are collaborating on is the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project across India's Mizoram border.⁴⁴ Myanmar is also helping India's security – in May 2020 it handed over to India 22 insurgents it had earlier captured; they belonged to Assam and Manipur rebel groups.⁴⁵

The security forces on both sides of the border are working together to drive out insurgents. India has also agreed to train Myanmar army officers at its military academies.

This strengthening of India-Myanmar relations is happening in the backdrop of a recent violent confrontation between India and China in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. This area is now being called a new geopolitical flashpoint in South Asia. Though it is China which has mainly protected Myanmar from greater Western pressure on the Rohingya issue, Myanmar still wants to protect its sovereign interests and is thus increasing interaction with other major powers like India and Japan.

Being an important player in BIMSTEC, India should have been able to nudge its members to ratify regional security cooperation. But with its relationship with some neighbours already going through a rough patch, New Delhi may not wish to displease the others.

Japan was initially indifferent to the Rohingya issue. However, in January 2020, it told Bangladesh that it was willing to mediate if needed.⁴⁶ Japan has been increasingly making investments in both Myanmar and

Bangladesh, and needs both countries to remain peaceful to profit from them.

The current COVID-19 crisis has shrouded all initiatives to resolve the Rohingya issue in ambiguities, since every country's main priority now is to tackle its own share of the rising infections. Yet ignoring the Rohingya issue could well impact the effectiveness of sub-regional and regional forums. Botched repatriation efforts will create a huge security risk. Bangladesh will also continue to need international funding to support the Rohingyas. Long-term planning is also essential to provide the displaced people with at least semi-permanent housing, clean water, proper sanitation, education, and food security till they are repatriated.

CONCLUSION

Despite the Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh and Myanmar need to work together. Bangladesh needs Myanmar to achieve its strategic

objective of extending connectivity to China and the ASEAN countries. It needs to establish solid bilateral relations with Myanmar. The Rohingya issue is an impediment, but given the global COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining stable bilateral and sub-regional/regional relations is essential.

Sub-regional and regional organisations need to play a more substantial role to maintain their relevance in regional political dynamics. Expanding regional trade corridors is essential but so is greater protection for displaced or stateless people.

This is the time for both Myanmar and Bangladesh to enhance engagement with each other and find ways to promote bilateral trade and physical connectivity. But that would first need building mutual trust. Perhaps ASEAN can initiate constructive dialogue between the two countries. For the time being, however, it does look as if their distrust will continue unless the Rohingya issue is resolved in reasonable time. [ORF](#)

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