

## The Gradual Ramp up of Rohingya Crisis and Bangladesh's Challenges: An Overview from Bangladesh Perspective

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### Abstract

*The paper endeavors how Rohingya exodus from Myanmar from August 2017 onwards is generating new challenges for Bangladesh. It also inquires why the Rohingya crisis is caving into other parts of Bangladesh from the designated Rohingya camps and signaling a security breakdown. The paper investigates what sorts of impacts the Rohingya influx has on the local communities. It points out several current trends related to Rohingyas residing in the Southern part of Bangladesh such as escaping from camps, migrating to other countries by using counterfeited documents, involvement in drug and human trafficking, local crime rings, violent extremism, and violence within camps using Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database to explain the impingement of Rohingya inhabitation on Bangladesh. The database used and cited in the paper mapped all the incidents about Rohingyas reported in Bangladeshi dailies. This paper uses the database to emphasize the intensity of the crisis. Later the paper analyzes the key reasons behind the escaping of some Rohingyas and their apparent involvement in illegal activities such as congested living area and lack of economic opportunities within camps. To understand the local community's dissatisfaction, this paper also inquires how Rohingyas are facing the backlashes from local communities like fear of being the minority in this area and facing cultural repercussion. Finally, the paper provides a brief overview of the policy stagnation of Rohingya repatriation process.*

*Keywords: Rohingya influx, local community, Bangladesh, challenges.*

### Introduction

The imposing Rohingya influx from Rakhine state of Myanmar to Bangladesh from August 2017 has become a prolonged headache for the host country as the crisis has become a social, financial, and environmental burden to Bangladesh. The number of registered and unregistered Rohingyas residing in thirty-four congested camps at Cox's Bazar and Khagrachhari in the southern part of Bangladesh varies from 9,00,000 to 1.3 million. (UNHCR, WHO, 2019) Bangladesh had welcomed the displaced Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds when Rohingyas were forced to flee Myanmar as Myanmar army carried out its operation against 'so called insurgents' at Rakhine state after several police posts and military outposts were attacked by Arakan Salvation Army (ARSA), a separatist outfit on 25 August 2017. (Fair, 2018) The operation commenced by the Myanmar army was widely criticized and described as a large-scale campaign to 'ethnic cleansing' by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch referencing the satellite images. The atrocities committed by Myanmar security forces, including mass killings, gender-based violence (GBV), and widespread arson, amount to crimes against humanity. Military and civilian officials have repeatedly denied that security forces committed abuses during the operations, claims which are contradicted by extensive evidence and witness accounts. (Marx, Windisch, Kim, 2019) The Rohingya have faced decades of discrimination and repression under successive Myanmar governments. Effectively denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, they are one of the largest stateless populations in the world. (Lewa, 2009: 11) Restrictions on movement and lack of access to basic health care have led to dire humanitarian conditions for those displaced by earlier waves of violence in 2012 and 2016. (Human rights Watch, 2018)

The forced exodus of Rohingyas left Bangladesh into an uncomfortable situation as the country did not have the structure, logistics, or resources to shelter this large number of displaced people. (Chan,

Chiu and Chan, 2018) Additionally, Bangladesh did not expect to reside them for a longer period of time as it started negotiating process of Rohingya repatriation with Myanmar government as the events were proceeding. The repatriation process has become stagnated in recent months although Bangladesh and Myanmar had signed a deal on 23 November 2017 to start the repatriation process from 22 January 2018. (Dhaka tribune, August 24th, 2019) But the repatriation process has made little progress since 2018 due to stonewalling from Myanmar government and reticence of Rohingyas to go back. (Kipgen, 2019)

The delays in the repatriation process has worsened the situation and created unique challenges for the host country. As Bangladesh is a densely populated country, it has limited space to shelter the displaced Rohingyas. As a result, the designated camps are very congested. Despite getting financial and logistical assistance from international donor countries, IGOs, and NGOs, it is still a massive task for a developing country like Bangladesh to feed and shelter an additional million people. Also, the displaced Rohingyas have created unique security challenges for Bangladesh. Firstly, the most common trend the crisis is possessing is the attempt by a handful of Rohingyas to escape the designated camps. As there is limited economic opportunities in the Rohingya camps, many Rohingya youths tend to escape and venture into other parts of Bangladesh. In recent months, the law enforcement of Bangladesh detained a hefty number of Rohingyas who tried to escape the camps and sent them back. (Dhaka Tribune, February 14th, 2019) Secondly, Cox's Bazar, the district in which almost all displaced Rohingyas are residing is known as the hub for illegal drug trade from Myanmar to Bangladesh especially, yaba pills, type of recreational drugs. Rohingyas are working as the middleman in this business, according to the law enforcement agencies of Bangladesh. A few of them died in 'gunfights' with Police too. (The Guardian, August 25th, 2019) Thirdly, some Rohingyas were involved in robbery, theft and other petty crimes as Bangladesh Peace Observatory data mapped. (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 2019) Fourthly, one of the urgent concerns for the law enforcement agencies of the areas in which Rohingyas are residing is the 'internal clashes' among the Rohingyas. As BBC reported recently, there are different sects among Rohingyas within camps who involve into violent clashes intermittently. (BBC Bangla, August 27th, 2019) According to local police, there are forty-five reported deaths in internal clashes in last two years at Rohingya camps. Fifthly, some Rohingyas who escaped the camps and tried to immigrate in Southeast Asian countries or Middle-east using forged documents later caught by law enforcement agencies (Police, Custom, and Coastguard). They are usually detained in Passport offices, airports or in the Bay of Bengal.

The paper analyzes the present trends regarding the displaced Rohingyas using the Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database. Later it discusses the impact of Rohingya crisis on the host country.

### **Research Methodology and Data Collection Strategy**

The paper applies 'mixed method' that embroils integrating both qualitative and quantitative research. This approach is used as the integration provides a better understanding of the present trends regarding Rohingya crisis and the challenges Bangladesh is facing because of it by adopting both incident based data analysis (quantitative) and review of peer-reviewed journal articles and daily newspapers (qualitative). The method fixes the inherent weakness possessed by both qualitative and quantitative approaches if used exclusively. As the Rohingya crisis is fairly recent phenomenon, there is a significant gap on well-researched studies on it. Therefore, the paper used the references of daily newspapers extensively. Although the mixed method is a continuous research method, it is better suited in terms of studying a new phenomenon based on evidence-based data analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data are used on parallel basis in this study.

The paper utilizes both primary and secondary data in conducting research for the paper.

The primary data include review of database on displaced Rohingyas and review of Rohingya related news from prominent daily newspaper. The paper primarily uses the database of Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) from June, 2018 to June, 2019 published by Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS), University of Dhaka. The database maps the violent incidents occurred in Bangladesh. The analysis using the database provides a unique observation on Rohingya related violence occurred in Bangladesh within a period of one year.

The secondary data include review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books and documents and reports published by independent think-tanks on Rohingya crisis.

### Rohingya Crisis and Bangladesh’s Challenges: Present Trends

The Rohingyas are voluntarily and sometimes forced to involve into various petty crimes in Bangladesh out of desperateness as an attempt to alleviate themselves from their current condition. As they were fleeing from mass killing and ethnic cleansing, many of them are still recovering from trauma. As their stay in a thirteen-kilometer congested area that is designated for more than 700,000 refugees is prolonging, many of them are becoming intolerant and concerned about their future. Therefore, a handful of them are escaping the camps and a few of them become the victims of human trafficking. Many involve into various petty crimes like goods, drugs, and arms smuggling.

#### 1. Escapade from the Camps

A vast number of displaced Rohingyas, approximately 742,000 people are staying within a limited space of 13km areas in Cox’s Bazaar’s Kutupalong and Nayapara camps. As there was minimal built-in structure before Rohingya inhabitation in designated areas for camps, it is near impossible for Bangladesh government to meet all the challenges this enormous population has been facing. Despite the additional foreign aid from developed countries, NGOs and humanitarian groups, it is still a humungous task. Contrarily, China and India along with other donors had built new houses for Rohingyas in Myanmar if they want to go back although the Rohingya repatriation process is smoldering repeatedly. (Deccan Herald, July 11th, 2019) This undecided future, congested camp environment, and lack of economic opportunities led the Rohingyas to attempt to escape the camps. According to the Police and BPO database, the Rohingyas usually escape the camps in groups. Police often detained mostly large group of Rohingyas who traveled across the country. According to BPO, some 798 Rohingyas were detained by law.

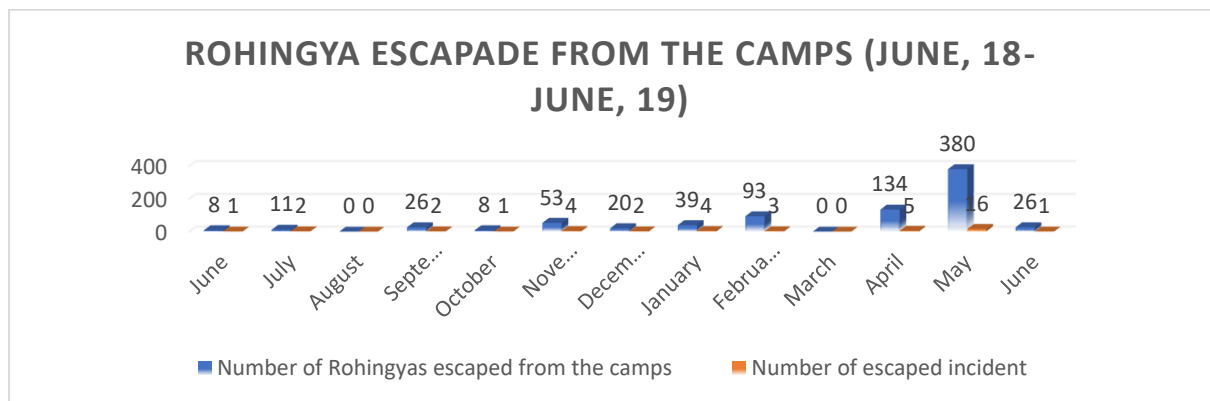


Figure 1: Rohingya Escapade from the Camps (June, 18 – June, 19)

#### 2. Involvement in Drug Trafficking

Southern part of Bangladesh, especially Cox’s Bazar is the center of a drug trafficking route that consists of both India and Myanmar. Yaba is the most lucrative drug in the area as the peddling yaba pills deems most profitable. (Ubayasiri, 2019: 260) Though new routes have been established in which drugs come through the Indian borders of Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram and enter into Bangladesh via Sylhet, Cox’s Bazar remains the hub of drug peddling fueled by the chaos brought by the Rohingya crisis. The intensity of drug trafficking has increased over last two years. The law enforcement agency’s Anti-Narcotic drives have become more frequent within this area. These drives are used by the law enforcement agencies to capture the local drug traffickers who occasionally use Rohingya youths as the peddler. (Dhaka Tribune, August 22nd) Rohingya involvement in drug trafficking is coming into the picture due to their poor living condition in the camps where their mobilization is restricted and the relief goods barely meet their basic needs. (Banerjee, 2019) Rohingyas are usually handy to the local drug lords due to their familiarity with the drug trafficking routes and willingness to risk their lives to earn money. (Banerjee, 2019) The delivery man crosses the Bangladesh border using the inaccessible routes, collects the drug and comes back to Bangladesh territory. Sometimes they got captured by the law enforcement agencies along with massive amount of yaba pills. These led to the rise of the drug

trafficking incidents in the greater Cox’s bazaar area. Rohingya women and children mostly used to carry the drug parcel as it will be less eye-catching to the security in border area. The BPO database showed that between June 2018 to June 2019, 120 Rohingyas were arrested in 35 separate incidents in drug related offences starting from low to very high misdemeanors.

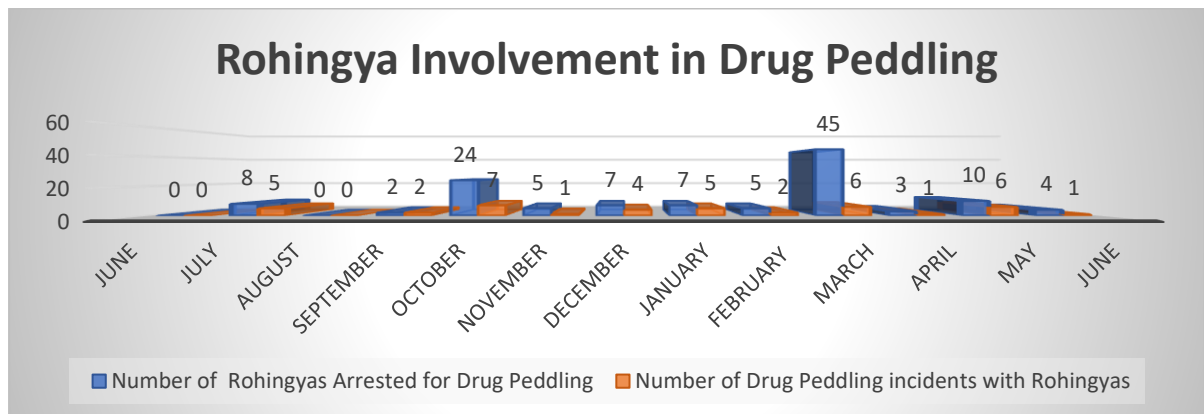


Figure 2: Rohingya Involvement in Drug Peddling (June, 2018 – June, 2019)

### 3. Involvement in Violent Extremism

Radicalization of Rohingyas especially the formation of ARSA is often used by Myanmar government and army to justify its heinous act of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in August 2017 in guise of ‘so called de-radicalization’. (Fair, 2018) Although some elements of Islamic radicalization are present in some disfranchised Rohingyas, carrying out a large-scale operation targeting an ethnic minority is not justifiable. Radicalization inextricably linked to violent extremism. It refers to the growth or making of a singular idea about the world and its value systems. It denies and defies plurality thereby creates intolerance both within and outside. Rohingyas are targeted and perpetrated by subsequent Myanmar governments since the 1980s. (Kipgen, 2013) Many extreme Islamist outfits are trying to recruit Rohingyas by using their vulnerability. (Selth, 2018) The process of driving the Rohingyas towards violent extremism starts from the camps where many known and unknown Islamist groups such as Hefazat e Islam are using the Madrasah network to influence the Rohingyas for Jihad against Myanmar Army. (Selth, 2018) There has been rumors that ARSA has the connection with Rohingyas in the camps and tried to coax the community to cooperate with them as they gave them hope for better future. ARSA has allegedly formed a partnership with Al-Qaeda and Jammaat-e-Islami and they have links with the Rohingyas here for recruiting new members. (Merritt, 2017) The escapee Rohingyas are also recruited by Bangladeshi violent extremist group outfits like Ansar al Islam. Bangladesh police arrested an alleged recruiter of an Islamic group from Ukhia, Cox’s Bazar adjacent to Rohingya camps. (The Strait Times, December 31st, 2017) The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) reported in December 2018 that Jammatt-ul-Mujahidden Bangladesh (JMB), a notorious extremist group recruited at least 40 Rohingyas from Cox’s Bazar to carry out terrorist attacks in thirty-first night. (Dhaka Tribune, December 14th, 2018).

### 4. Involvement in Petty Crimes

The increasing crimes rate in Cox’s Bazaar in recent years has been noticeable comparing to the other parts of Bangladesh, according to the BPO database. Some Rohingyas are involved in the crimes such as hijacking, drug peddling, robbery and theft and other petty crimes mainly for economic reasons. They are also used by the local crime rings and recruited to do various illegal activities in Cox’s Bazar. This trend develops a security concern for law enforcement agencies and a bad reputation of Rohingyas to local people. The escapee Rohingyas were involved into gang-robbery and kidnapping in other parts of Bangladesh which generate fear and hate towards Rohingyas. Various security experts warned that the Rohingya influx might have brought another wave of a crime and responsibilities of law enforcement agency will be amplified. (The Daily Star, August 27th, 2019) According to Cox’s bazaar

police, Rohingyas mainly youths are involved in illegal arms trade and till at the mid of 2018, there were more than thousands of Rohingyas got arrested for various types of crimes and 563 of them have been sent to jail. (Dhaka Tribune, September 1st, 2018).

### **5. Internal Violence within the camps**

Rohingyas are now recognized as a security threat for Bangladesh as their involvement in the crimes is increasing and comparatively the crime rate is higher than before which impacts social, economic and cultural life of the locals. (Merritt, 2017) Rivalry among the groups in the camps causes more violence compared to the other type of crimes. Rohingyas within the camp formed various groups and tried to establish supremacy over the camps which led to violence and number of people got killed over the rivalry issue in last two years. In the July 2018, a Rohingya man was killed by a Rohingya gang over establishing supremacy in a camp at Ukhia, Cox's Bazar. (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 2019) Gender Based violence often occurs within the camp where women and children become tortured, abused and raped by the men especially the youths who involved in crime. (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 2019) Few crime gangs within the camp are formed to suppress and maintain dominance over the weak and innocent ones and simple issues often led to bigger clashes in the camp. Moreover, their desperation often pushes them towards illegal activities like drug peddling and gang-robbery. A few use the camps as the store house of Yaba pills which often led to internal clashes between the groups. From 2016 to 2018, sixty people got killed within the camp area in violent clashes.

### **6. Victim of Human Trafficking**

Many Rohingyas are prone to human trafficking due to their vulnerability and desperation. The poor living condition and poverty lead many attempting to migrate in Middle East or Southeast Asia by escaping the camps and using illegal means. A few ultimately succeeds but fall into the trap of human traffickers. According to Bangladesh peace Observatory data, since November 2018 to June 2019 approximately 440 Rohingyas were detained by Bangladesh Police, Coast Guard and Border Guard while they escaped from the camp and tried to immigrate in Malaysia via Sea route. (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 2019) According the daily Bangladesh Observer, in May 13th, 23 Rohingya teenage girls were rescued along with four traffickers by Bangladesh police from Dhaka. The traffickers lured them with the promise of work. In fact, many Rohingyas tried to flee in abroad by forging fake documents and making Bangladeshi passports with the help of local brokers. (IPS, May 12th, 2019) Since July 2018 to June 2019, Police arrested at least 30 Rohingyas who tried to flee abroad by counterfeiting documents. (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 2019).

### **Impact of Rohingya Crisis on the Local Communities**

The perception of the local communities towards Rohingyas have changed rapidly since Rohingya mass exodus in 2017. As the repatriation of Rohingyas keep pending, the local communities are becoming more frustrated. Many locals believe that the Rohingyas have overstayed their welcome. There are few reasons why the negative perception regarding Rohingyas are thriving among the locals. Firstly, the number of Rohingyas exceeds the total population of Rohingyas. As a result, the local communities have become minority in their own land. (BBC Bangla, August 27th, 2019) Many locals also had lent their spare land and other resources to Rohingya families s after observing the trauma they had face in their escaped from hell; Myanmar. But as there is limited progress in Rohingya repatriation, locals seem to regret their donation. Secondly, Many Rohingyas escaped from the camp and later involved into criminal activities such as hijacking, drug peddling, robbery, theft, violent extremism which actually solidify locals' reticence against Rohingya. Thirdly, Rohingya crisis attracted large amount of foreign aids from different NGOs and IGOs. Although Bangladesh government requested these organizations to distribute at least 20% of aids to locals, they seem to ignore it. As the region is poverty driven, this practice has a negative impact on them. Fourthly, the Rohingya crisis has made the region less secure. Multiple militant groups of different interest; drug trafficking, Rohingya subgroups etc. are active in the Rohingya camps and the surrounding areas. The law enforcement is also predicting a future security breakdown and chaos in the region. As of late, the Bangladesh government has decided to set up new police stations in the Rohingya camps.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As the Rohingya repatriation is delaying, the crisis is posing new challenges for Bangladesh. Initially, the key challenge for Bangladesh was to ensure the basic needs of almost a million Rohingyas. Bangladesh kept up with the challenge since it has built temporary camps, provided education and healthcare and other basic needs with assistance from foreign donors. It is still spending millions of dollars to shelter the Rohingyas. But the extended stay of Rohingyas has raised unique challenges such as eminent security breakdown in the areas Rohingyas are residing. Rohingyas are becoming more prone to criminal activities like drug peddling and arms smuggling. The in-fighting in Rohingya camps have become more frequent as more and more bloody incidents are reported. The Counter-Terrorism Unit is predicting that Rohingyas have become the main recruitment target of the domestic and international Islamic extremist groups. Rohingyas who tried to immigrate in the Middle East by acquiring a Bangladeshi passport are detained from passport offices from all over the country. The reported Rohingya escapade has become more common than any other time. Also, in this period of time, the government's attitude towards Rohingyas has shifted from humane to overwhelmed drastically following the present trends. Besides, the local communities also have become overburdened with the presence of Rohingyas. The Bangladesh government has to innovate and find a multi-pronged feasible and durable solution to the crisis in which both Rohingyas and local communities will be satisfied alongside track one and track two diplomacy with the Myanmar government regarding the repatriation.

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