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Migration-Development Nexus: The Case of the Rohingya in Bangladesh

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The expulsion of more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims, a minority in Myanmar, to Bangladesh since August 2017 has caused one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the 21st century. It has also imposed a huge burden on one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world, which is also one of the major sources of international regular and irregular migrants globally. As observed in the similar large inflow of refugees to developing nations, this migration creates immense pressure on the host community and can lead to secondary migration to third countries. This paper attempts to assess whether one humanitarian crisis (the forced expulsion of the Rohingya) will lead to another migration crisis (out of Bangladesh), and what the international community is doing to address this dual challenge.

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The Humanitarian Crisis Involving the Rohingya: State of Play and Emerging Migration Risks

The brutal military operation in Myanmar's Rakhine state that started in August 2017 has forced some 740,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh for safety. By January 2020, the number of people living in the 34 refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar district stood at 919,000.¹ One camp alone—Kutupalong-Balukhali—has 600,000 people, making it the biggest and most densely populated refugee settlement in the world in 2018.²

Although the government of Bangladesh hosted Rohingya generously from the very beginning, providing them with shelter, food, and healthcare, it viewed the situation as only temporary. Its sole aim has always been “safe, voluntary and dignified” repatriation of all refugees to Myanmar.³ Therefore, it vehemently opposes any actions that give the impression that it is willing to accept Rohingya permanently, give them citizenship, or integrate them into society.⁴

As such, Rohingya are not allowed to travel around the country, marry local people, access formal education, or work outside the camps, or even construct permanent houses. Since mid-2019, the freedom of Rohingya has been further restricted by continued fencing-in of the settlements, limitation of internet access and restrictions on the presence of foreign NGOs. To de-congest the camps, the government plans to move about 100,000 refugees to an uninhabited island, Bhashan Char, in the Bay of Bengal, with first relocations now taking place.⁵ Bangladesh is not a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and does not recognise Rohingya as “refugee” in the legal sense, which allows them very little rights.

At the same time, all attempts to return the Rohingya to Myanmar have failed, and there is no realistic chance that this will take place in the foreseeable future.⁶ As a result, the refugees are stuck in a kind of limbo, squeezed into congested camps with no possibility of a normal life in the country where they are living, nor prospects to return to their country of origin. As the crisis is becoming protracted, there is a growing sense of hopelessness and despair, fuelling new, serious problems. For instance, international organisations have been warning of a “lost generation” of children and calling on the government to give full access to education to the Rohingya.⁷ Only in January 2020 did Bangladesh's government agree to allow quality, formal education for Rohingya children aged 11–13 to be taught in the Myanmar language,⁸ and following Myanmar curriculum, but without a “chance to study in formal Bangladeshi schools.”⁹ Yet, this has not changed the situation of other vulnerable groups, particularly adolescents and young men and women, who cannot attend Bangladeshi high schools or universities, nor attend skill-training centres outside the camps.

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The situation of the refugees has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit in early 2020, resulting in several hundred Rohingya testing positive and several deaths in the camps as of

¹ Data from the Office of the Refugee Relief & Repatriation Commissioner in Cox's Bazar, 20 January 2020.

² “World Migration Report 2020,” International Organisation for Migration, Geneva, 2019, p. 76.

³ P. Kugiel, “The Protracted Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh and the Prospects of a Resolution,” *PISM Bulletin*, no 44, 13 March 2020.

⁴ This sentiment is supported across Bangladeshi society, including among all Bangladeshi nationals interviewed by the author in January 2020.

⁵ H. K. Bhuiyan, “Govt firm on relocating Rohingyas to Bhashan Char,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 October 2020.

⁶ This was a view shared commonly by most interlocutors contacted in January 2020 by international organisations active in the region, Bangladeshi experts, and NGO workers, as well as government officials.

⁷ “‘Are We Not Human?’: Denial of Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh,” Human Rights Watch, December 2019; “A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” *Asia Report*, No. 303, International Crisis Group, 27 December 2019.

⁸ Known as Burmese in English, the official language is “Myanmar language.”

⁹ “‘Great news’: Bangladesh allows education for Rohingya children,” *Al Jazeera*, 30 January 2020.

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October.¹⁰ Because the refugees are afraid to seek medical help due to misconceptions about COVID-19, the spread of the virus among this community may be even more serious than official figures reveal.¹¹ As Bangladesh itself has been severely affected by the pandemic—about 400,000 detected cases by the end of October—its healthcare system is under immense stress. The accompanying economic slowdown to 3.8% GDP growth in 2020 from 8.15% in 2019,¹² the fall in global demand for Bangladeshi exports, and decrease in remittances may further strain public finances. There are fears that the pandemic may worsen the conditions in the camps and trigger a subsequent humanitarian crisis as Rohingya flee to a third country.¹³ In 2020, there have been more reported attempts of crossing by sea to neighbouring countries, with hundreds of Rohingya reaching Malaysia and Indonesia and dozens of deaths at sea.¹⁴ By 8 November 2020, at least 204 migrants have died at sea in Southeast Asia, which is still far fewer than in the same period in 2015 when the previous “boat crisis” took place (905 deaths).¹⁵

Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bangladesh

The sudden infow of Rohingya to Bangladesh had impact on country’s economy, security, environment and socio-psychological fabric.

The sudden inflow of Rohingya to Bangladesh has created serious challenges for the country in four main dimensions: economic, security, environmental, the impacts on the socio-psychological fabric of Bangladeshi society.¹⁶ There are fears that Bangladesh will be eventually left alone to deal with the challenge, as donor fatigue leads to drops in aid. As one senior official warned recently, his country “is not in a position to continue to take this burden any more.”¹⁷

In addition, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly warned that the Rohingya “are not only a threat to Bangladesh but also to regional security.”¹⁸ This expresses the belief that in the camps there are sympathisers or actual members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, recognised by Myanmar as a terrorist organisation. Because the minority Rohingya were persecuted and marginalised, and continue to face difficulty, it creates fertile ground for Islamic radicalisation, extremism, and recruitment by global jihadist organisations.¹⁹ However, terrorism is not considered the most serious threat by local police in Cox’s Bazar. In the officials’ view, the main security challenges are: 1) drug smuggling (amphetamine) from Myanmar involving refugees; 2) general law and order (relations between refugees and host population), and 3) common criminal activities (armed fights, violence against women, domestic violence). Though official statistics show limited criminality (until 2019, there were just 256 cases reported and 1,209 people accused of various crimes), it is only the tip of the iceberg, as only the most serious incidents are reported to police.²⁰ An NGO, the International Crisis Group, warned in April 2019 that Bangladesh “should institute an effective police presence in the camps and bring the perpetrators of crimes to justice.”²¹

¹⁰ “Rohingya Crisis Situation Report #26,” WHO Bangladesh, Reliefweb, 7 October, 2020.

¹¹ R. Carvalho, “Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh struggle with fear and stigma amid coronavirus,” *South China Morning Post*, 13 September 2020.

¹² “Regional Economic Outlook. Asia and Pacific Navigating the Pandemic: A Multispeed Recovery in Asia,” International Monetary Fund, October 2020.

¹³ F. Haiduk, A. Misbach, “Risking Another Rohingya Crisis in the Andaman Sea,” *SWP Comment*, No 30, June 2020.

¹⁴ “Malaysia detains boatload of 202 suspected Rohingya Muslims,” *South Asia Morning Post*, 5 April 2020; “Nearly 300 Rohingya come ashore in Aceh after months at sea,” *Al Jazeera*, 7 September 2020.

¹⁵ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/asia>.

¹⁶ Interview with a senior official at the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Dhaka, 19 January 2020.

¹⁷ “\$597 million raised for Rohingya refugees at aid conference,” *Euractiv*, 23 October, 2020.

¹⁸ “Rohingyas are threat to regional security: Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina,” *The New Indian Express*, 12 November 2019.

¹⁹ N. Conrad, S. Czimmek, A. Islam, “Rohingya militants active in Bangladeshi refugee camps,” *Deutsche Welle*, 24 September 2019.

²⁰ Interview with a senior police officer in Cox’s Bazar, 20 January 2020.

²¹ “Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” *Crisis Group Asia Briefing*, No. 155 International Crisis Group, Brussels, 25 April 2019.

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The impact of the crisis is obviously felt mostly by the host communities in the southeastern district of Cox's Bazar, and especially in two of its sub-districts (*upazilas*)—Teknaf and Ukhiya—where most Rohingya refugees are located. These used to be among the least populated and poorest *upazilas* in the country, whose inhabitants made their livelihood from agriculture and fishing. The inflow of large numbers of foreigners in just a few months has led to dramatic demographic change, making the local population a minority on its own land.

A major study by the UN Development Programme in 2018 found that this situation has already “placed on the host communities an extraordinary burden” [...] particularly related to the fall in daily wages for labour and extremely adverse impacts on public services and the environment.²² Another study by IFPRI from 2019 found that “if the migrants enter Cox's Bazar labour markets only, their large number could potentially lead to a large drop in wage levels of around 30%.”²³

Though some locals acknowledged positive effects of foreign aid (including investments in local infrastructure, new job opportunities, more demand for certain goods and services), a problem related to it is the unequal distribution of benefits within the host population. Most of the money from the presence of the intergovernmental organisations onsite go to local elites hotel owners, interpreters, local business people.²⁴ This has also led to a relative sense of deprivation among the host communities, who feel they are treated worse than the refugees.²⁵

The competition between locals and Rohingya for resources, public services, and jobs has already led to increased tensions between the two groups.²⁶ After a mass protest of about 100,000 Rohingya on the

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second anniversary of their expulsion from Myanmar on 26 August 2019 raised the sense of insecurity among locals, the authorities introduced “precautionary measures” (internet restrictions, fencing of camps, etc.) to try to control the situation and stabilise relations between the two groups.²⁷ It is feared that “the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could further undermine cohesion and deepen inequalities between communities.”²⁸

Yet, despite these challenges there is no proof that the Rohingya humanitarian crisis has had any major influence on migration from Cox's Bazar in the last 2–3 years or on overall migration trends from Bangladesh.²⁹ There may be several explanations for that. First, the population of the affected district is among the lowest in the country and accounts for only 1.24% of Bangladeshi migrant workers.³⁰ Therefore, any change in migration from this area would have a minor effect on the national level. Second, as the costs of hosting refugees are taken care of by international donors, the overall impact of the Rohingya humanitarian crisis on the

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²² “Impacts of the Rohingya Refugee Influx on Host Communities,” UNDP, November 2018, p. 33.

²³ M. Filipski, E. Tiburcio, P. Dorosh, J.F. Hoddinott and G. Rosenbach, “Modelling the economic impact of the Rohingya Influx in Southern Bangladesh,” *IFPRI Discussion Paper* 1819, Washington, DC, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 2019.

²⁴ Interview with the director of a field office of a Bangladeshi NGO in Cox's Bazar, 20 January 2020.

²⁵ Interview with a Bangladeshi expert with the Inter-Sectoral Coordination Group in Cox's Bazar, 20 January 2020.

²⁶ H.K. Bhuiyan, “Is public opinion turning?,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 27 August 2019.

²⁷ Interview with a senior local police officer, *op. cit.*

²⁸ “2020 COVID-19 Response Plan. Addendum to the Joint Response Plan 2020 Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis,” April–December 2020, p. 14.

²⁹ Interview with Giorgi Gigauri, chief of mission, International Migration Organisation, Bangladesh Office, Dhaka, 23 January 2020.

³⁰ T. Siddiqui, M. Sultana, R. Sultana, S. Akhter, “Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2018—Achievements and Challenges,” RMMRU, February 2019, p. 4.

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national economy is still limited. It has not led to economic crisis or political instability, which would push more Bangladeshis abroad. Third, the pandemic has made international mobility much more difficult. It has caused more Bangladeshis to return home³¹ and has led to the “involuntary immobility” of many potential migrants.³² There are also concerns that the pandemic could inevitably end the “age of migration.”³³ Yet, if the situation returns to the pre-COVID normal one day, Bangladesh may emerge as a major migrant sending country again, as a large majority of returnees plans to emigrate after the pandemic is over.³⁴

Role of International Assistance in the Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

In January 2020, the Kutupalong refugee camp—once a hilly jungle—looked like a huge village, not very much different from many settlements in developing Asia. It had paved roads, public lights, health clinics, quasi-schools, poorly constructed houses, shops, and community centres. The Rohingya depend entirely on international assistance for food rations, LPG gas for cooking, and healthcare. Positive changes are seen in areas surrounding Cox’s Bazar: new roads are being built, hotels and houses are rented to humanitarian workers, and more people are getting better-paid jobs with foreign NGOs and IGOs. Though Rohingya still live in dire conditions, the situation is much better than 1–2 years earlier.

The international community supports Bangladesh in dealing with the crisis by funding the Rohingya Refugee Crisis Joint Response Plan (JRP), updated annually by the UN and other donors in coordination with the government of Bangladesh. The last appeals totalled more than \$900 million and were financed at over 70%.³⁵ The JRP for 2020 was raised to \$1.058 billion to include responses to COVID-19, however, the request was funded at less than 50% as of mid-October 2020.³⁶ As a result, a special conference of donors on 22 October 2020 attracted new pledges of \$597 million more in aid to meet the funding gap.

Donors have directed assistance not only to refugees but also to the host communities and have been working to convince the government to prepare for a move from humanitarian aid to comprehensive development assistance.

From the very beginning, the donors declared that the assistance must not go only to refugees but also to the host communities to strengthen their resilience to deal with the emergency. This has been translated into a “30% rule,” according to which one-third of beneficiaries of the JRP are to be local Bangladeshis.³⁷ As a result, donors estimate that “at least \$415 million has been invested by development partners into Bangladeshi communities across Cox’s Bazar District since 2017.”³⁸ Moreover, international donors have been working to convince the government to prepare for a move from humanitarian aid to comprehensive development assistance.³⁹

This would require more investments in education, skills training, job creation, and infrastructure development of the whole region, but also giving more rights to the Rohingya.

³¹ M.N.I. Sorkar, “COVID-19 Pandemic Profoundly Affects Bangladeshi Workers Abroad with Consequences for Origin Communities,” Migration Policy Institute, 9 July 2020.

³² S.F. Martin, J. Bergmann, “Shifting forms of mobility related to COVID-19,” IOM UN, August 2020.

³³ A. Gamlen, “Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?,” Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, Working Paper No. 146. University of Oxford, 3 June 2020.

³⁴ “Rapid Assessment of the Needs And Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh,” IOM UN, Bangladesh Office, August 2020.

³⁵ The UN appeal for 2017 was eventually funded at 73%, in 2018 at 72%, and 2019 at 75%. Financial Tracking Service, OCHA, UN, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/656/summary> accessed 05 November 2020.

³⁶ “Rohingya Crisis Situation Report #26,” World Health Organisation, 7 October 2020.

³⁷ This is often misunderstood as 30% of funding must go to the local population. The rule applies instead to the share of beneficiaries, not necessarily to the division of funds. Confirmed in an interview with a Bangladeshi employee of the Inter-Sectoral Coordination Group, Cox’s Bazar, 20 January 2020.

³⁸ “2020 Joint Response Plan. Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis,” January-December 2020, Bangladesh, p. 15.

³⁹ Joint Statement from Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, Handicap International, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, and Danish Refugee Council on the release of the 2020 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, 3 March 2020.

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There have been only a few initiatives directly linked with migration from Bangladesh. For instance, the organisation BRAC is implementing the EU-funded PROTTASHA programme aimed at the sustainable reintegration of Bangladeshi returnees. The European Union also is funding information campaigns warning about the risks of irregular migration, although this is seen as ineffective since Bangladeshis are fully aware of the risks and costs of migration, and seem to be undeterred as long as primary drivers of migration (e.g., better paid jobs) are not addressed.⁴⁰ As one new report has shown, 73% of migrants from Bangladesh do it “to find better job and livelihood opportunities,” and for 99%, “better job opportunities” at home is what could persuade them to stay in their country.⁴¹

International organisations have not escaped criticism from some stakeholders. The Bangladeshi authorities occasionally hold IGOs accountable for Rohingya opposition to plans to return them to Myanmar or relocation to Bhashan Char.⁴² It was argued that many Rohingya have better conditions in the camps than they had in Rakhine, and hence, aid itself might be hampering efforts for their resettlement in Myanmar.⁴³ Local Bangladeshi NGOs and activists criticise IGOs for wasting money (huge administrative costs, large salaries for international staff, etc.) and lack of transparency and accountability.⁴⁴ They call for “localisation of aid” by which international organisations would withdraw from field operations and transfer know-how and responsibilities of aid delivery to local NGOs.⁴⁵ They argue that this would allow for better allocation of resources and huge savings, which is especially important in the face of an expected reduction in funding.

Conclusions: Looking for Long-term Solutions

The inflow of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to Bangladesh since 2017 has created a serious humanitarian crisis and imposed heavy burdens on host communities. Looking from the migration perspective, however, this emergency has not impacted trends in migration from Bangladesh. There is no massive secondary movement of refugees outside the country. Though there were more attempts to reach neighbouring states by sea this year, it is still a limited phenomenon. However, as the lack of job and other prospects for Rohingya lingers, some may try dangerous boat trips. Faced with unfriendly attitudes in the region, a new humanitarian crisis involving many deaths at sea is more likely than a major migration crisis.

The inflow of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to Bangladesh since 2017 has created a serious humanitarian crisis and imposed heavy burdens on host communities.

Bangladesh’s hosting of almost a million refugees has had no major impact thus far on overall migration trends from the country, nor from Cox’s Bazar in particular. Though we might need to wait for new data to draw final conclusions, the outbreak of COVID-19 alone may have closed migration options.

Development assistance appears to have played a role in easing migration pressure from Bangladesh, although it was not a stated objective of international donors. Humanitarian assistance has addressed the primary needs of refugees and provided them with basic livelihoods so they are not forced to seek help in other countries. Importantly, from early on foreign aid targeted the host communities, so the crisis has not led so far to local overload. And as the crisis is prolonged, donors have worked with the government to develop more sustainable solutions. Despite some shortcomings and criticism of foreign aid, it seems to be a positive example of a comprehensive international response to a complex emergency.

⁴⁰ Interview with Giorgi Gigauri, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ “Bangladesh: Survey On Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile,” IOM UN, 2020, pp. 3-4.

⁴² Interview with a senior official in the Bangladesh MFA, Dhaka 19 January 2020.

⁴³ “Rapid Assessment ...,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Interviews with several workers with Bangladeshi organisations active in Cox’s Bazar, January 2020.

⁴⁵ Interviews with two heads of important Bangladeshi NGOs active in the camps, Dhaka, 19 and 23 January 2020.

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Yet, the crisis is far from over. International partners agree with the government of Bangladesh that “the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees” to Myanmar, “is the comprehensive solution” that they will seek.⁴⁶ But in the meantime, they have pledged to “shift from short-term critical interventions, to more sustained and stable support” for both refugees and host communities.⁴⁷ This offers an opportunity for development of one of the least-developed parts of Bangladesh.

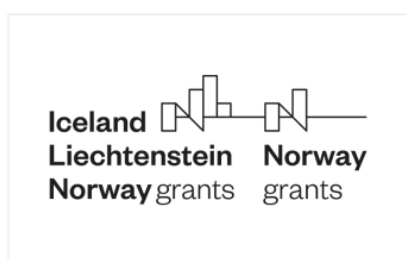
Thus far, though, the government has been reluctant to agree to that shift, fearing it may open a way for Rohingya integration and settlement in the country.⁴⁸ Yet, the status quo in the longer term may be even more dangerous. The decision to allow formal education of Rohingya was a step in the right direction but much more needs to be done to use their potential. As one local NGO worker observed: “Rohingyas make an additional 1 million market.”⁴⁹

Development assistance appears to have played a role in easing migration pressure from Bangladesh.

International partners will need to continue their support in the long term and may react positively to the calls of localisation of aid to provide assistance more efficiently, improve the capabilities of the Bangladeshi NGO sector, and prepare the ground for its gradual withdrawal. But the key to the current challenges is in the hands of the Bangladeshi government. While it must be applauded for its great hospitality and efforts to assist the Rohingya thus far, now it must consider carefully moving on to the next stage. Otherwise, it will face problems of its own making.

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⁴⁶ “Rohingya conference pledges to ‘remain steadfast’ in finding solutions to crisis,” UN News, 22 October 2020.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, all three government officials in Dhaka and Cox’s Bazar interviewed in January 2020 presented the same line of argumentation: Bangladesh does not need more development assistance; the only thing it needs is political support to repatriate Rohingya back to Myanmar.

⁴⁹ Interview with the head of the local office of a Bangladeshi NGO in Cox’s Bazar, 20 January 2020.