

Resolving the Rohingya Crisis Requires Justice in Myanmar and Solidarity with Bangladesh

Written by Mukesh Kapila

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MUKESH KAPILA, JUL 13 2023

I clung atop a palm tree praying furiously while cyclonic winds threatened to whip me away. It was the early 1970s and I was a humanitarian volunteer on Moudubi island in the Bay of Bengal. I was teaching and living in the island's ramshackle school. That first visit to Bangladesh was in the dark shadow of its 1971 Liberation War which saw three million killed in genocidal atrocities. It was soon after Supercyclone Bhola had already cost 0.5 million lives in 1970. Fully expecting that by now the island would have disappeared under rising seas, I am heartened to see just the opposite. A google-maps flyover reveals a bustling Moudubi and a lively Facebook page extols my former school's many achievements.

The plucky survival of this tiny speck is a metaphor for a nation once described as a "basket case" meriting just a two-hour stop-over by US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Today Bangladesh is a lower-middle-income country. It's 169 million people have seen poverty headcount halve and income jump to US\$2500 per capita (in current dollars) from US\$400 at the Millennium.

Many more Bangladeshi children survive birth, grow up healthy and educated to live longer and productively. The nation has got better at coping with frequent disasters and its population will stabilise by mid-century as growth rate falls below 1% annually. But it still ranks modestly at 129th (out of 191) on the Human Development Index and its resilience is under test. It is the sixth most climate-vulnerable country, even as it confronts many social, economic, and political challenges, in common with other developing countries.

I returned many times to see how Bangladesh navigates an increasingly perilous world. This was in different official capacities in the British government, International Red Cross Red Crescent, and United Nations. I learnt that key was the grim determination and natural resourcefulness of its people. Also the supportive partnerships its government has built with many nations and international organisations to attract aid, trade, and financial investment.

My latest visit took me to Cox's Bazar. Recalling the darkest days of the 1970s when 10 million Bangladeshis found safety in India, it is Bangladesh's turn now to provide a safe haven for one million Rohingya fleeing Myanmar. Cox's Bazar is the world's largest refugee settlement and the Rohingya live in some 33 heavily-congested camps that are frequently devastated by fires, cyclones flooding, and disease outbreaks. Nevertheless, it is an enterprising and energising place.

Bangladeshis are naturally generous and the authorities have diverted significant national resources to help the Rohingya while facilitating some 100 countries, international organizations, philanthropies and NGOs to come and bolster Bangladesh's own humanitarian endeavors. I saw that despite the challenging and fragile physical environment, commendable efforts addressed critical refugee needs starting with infrastructure for shelter, sanitation, and clean water. Healthcare facilities provide clinical services, immunizations, maternal and childcare. Tackling malnutrition and preventing communicable diseases get special attention.

In an echo of Bangladesh's own development journey, fostering hope, empowering communities, and rebuilding productive lives are recognised as important to enhance future prospects for the refugees. Learning centres provide

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basic education, vocational training and skills development to thousands of refugee children and youth. Bangladesh has also established legal aid services to guide refugees seeking justice and protection in collaboration with international partners. That includes registering and documenting all refugees to further safeguard their rights.

The Rohingya have been fleeing Myanmar for at least 50 years, with big purges in 1978, 1992, 2012, and the biggest-ever exodus in 2016. No one becomes a refugee out of choice, and none want to stay exiled longer than necessary. Neither do they wish to depend on the charity of others. “We don’t want to be confined in camps. We want to get back our land, and we will build our own houses there,” said Oli Hossain. Another refugee, Abu Sufian, added that “We want nothing but a safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation.” Rohingya prospects were discussed recently in Geneva between Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi. Long-term solutions require most refugees to eventually return home with a minority settling permanently in Bangladesh or third countries.

The Muslim Rohingya fled their Buddhist-dominated homeland in Rakhine state where they had lived for centuries because the Myanmar state and military denied their ethnic identity, cancelled their citizenship and inflicted terrible violence and atrocities that are alleged as genocide in a case working its way through the International Court of Justice. There are no prospects of meaningful Rohingya returns while Myanmar’s repressive regime continues and the nation remains embroiled in other internal conflicts. Overall, these have forcibly displaced around 3 million Myanmar people, mostly minorities living at the periphery of this vast nation.

Re-settlement in other countries is relatively modest. Malaysia hosts around 150,000 Rohingya, Thailand nearly 100,000, and small numbers live precariously in India, Nepal, and Indonesia. Hundreds of fleeing Rohingya have lost their lives in perilous sea crossings. Safer migration and re-settlement in Asia-Pacific or in the West should be possible if nations act in solidarity according to their Refugee Convention obligations. The energy and enterprise of the Rohingya make them an asset to any country that admits them.

The global refugee system is heavily-stretched, and a refugee may, on average, spend twenty years in limbo before finding a durable solution. That is both inhumane and a waste of human resources. Recognising that most of the Rohingya are likely to stay in Bangladesh for some time before returning home means helping the Bangladesh authorities and international agencies to care for them in a more sustained manner. Also, enabling the refugees to depend less on humanitarian aid and contribute more to their host country’s economy and development. Fairness also requires helping the approximately 538,000 local Bangladeshi population to benefit equitably from hosting their Rohingya guests. De-congesting Cox’s Bazar by voluntarily relocating some of the Rohingya to safe parts of the country can ease and distribute the burden.

But the challenges are considerable. The Rohingya Humanitarian Response Plan of the United Nations and partners seeks US\$875.9 million for 2023 of which only 28% had been received at mid-year. Recently, Rohingya food rations have had to be cut... again and again. Discontent and insecurity are to be feared in a geopolitically sensitive part of the world. Of course, there is also much pain and suffering in other parts of the world. But there are still enough resources to go around even under current difficult global scenarios. The world’s dispossessed should not be put into undignified competition with each other.

Neither Bangladesh nor the Rohingya should be left alone and the international community must be more generous in playing its part. This can be a collective win-win and breathe genuine meaning into this year’s World Refugee Day slogan to bring “hope away from home”.

About the author:

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