

The Role of International Community and UN in Rohingya Crisis: A Critical Analysis

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The most recent exodus of Rohingyas fleeing persecution from Myanmar to Bangladesh started in late August, 2017. The Myanmar armed forces carried out a series of violent military operation in Rohingya-populated areas of Rakhine State in the name of “counter-terrorism”. In the following days, more than 742,000 Rohingyas took refuge in Bangladesh’s Teknaf-Ukhiya Peninsula.

The Rohingyas in Bangladesh reported gross violation of human rights by the Myanmar forces, including killings, physical and sexual abuse, arson, and extortion. The then United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein described Myanmar’s state sponsored violence against the Rohingya minority as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.¹

The Bangladesh government opened the country’s border for the Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds and led the humanitarian response in the makeshift camps. A top UN aid official described the situation in Bangladesh as “the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis”.²

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international aid agencies were allowed to initiate their Level 3 (L3) emergency humanitarian response

¹ “UN Human Rights Chief Points to ‘Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing’ In Myanmar”. 2017. *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansingmyanmar>.

² “UN Seeks More Funds to Assist Rohingya Amid World’s Fastest Growing Refugee Crisis”. 2017. *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/10/568002-un-seeks-more-funds-assist-rohingya-amid-worlds-fastest-growingrefugee-crisis>.

in the Rohingya camps. With spontaneous support from the host community and considerable international aid assistance, the Bangladesh government has been successful to tackle the immediate humanitarian crisis caused by this human displacement. However, four years on, the prospects of a durable solution of the massive displacement crisis remains unsettled.

Right after the Rohingya influx, Bangladesh has worked for an acceptable resolution of this displacement crisis. The Bangladesh government signed an agreement with the Myanmar government on 23 November 2017 to repatriate the forcibly displaced Rohingyas. Following this agreement, Bangladesh and Myanmar have made two attempts to repatriate the Rohingyas – first on 15 November 2018 and a second one on 22 August 2019. Both the attempts have failed primarily because of Myanmar's reluctance to take Rohingyas back.

Dhaka has also taken the Rohingya issue to different international forums such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).³

It is a well-recognized fact that the UN is a legitimate body to resolve the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh and protect the thousands of civilian Rohingyas who have been trapped inside the Rakhine state. However, the response of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to the Rohingya crisis has been very limited, primarily due to the opposition from two permanent members - China and Russia. This deadlock at the UNSC had

³ Rashid, Syeda Rozana. 2019. "Finding a Durable Solution to Bangladesh's Rohingya Refugee Problem: Policies, Prospects and Politics". *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5 (2): 174-189. doi:10.1177/2057891119883700.

effectively constrained the scope of other specialized UN agencies to carry out humanitarian activities inside Myanmar. Without visible enforcement framework like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), the UN failed to establish any safe zone inside the Rakhine state to protect the trapped Rohingyas and stop exodus into Bangladesh. Hence, the responses from the UN agencies were limited to rhetorical condemnation against Myanmar armed forces⁴ and some non-binding resolutions for Rohingya protection.⁵

The top global alliance of all Muslim-majority countries, the OIC, has been outspoken in condemning Myanmar's atrocities against the Rohingya. The 45th OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers held in Dhaka established a specialized OIC ministerial committee to mobilize political support and resources to file a case against Myanmar for its gross violation of human rights against the Rohingyas at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Gambia, on behalf of OIC, requested the ICJ for provisional measures to address Myanmar's genocidal conduct against the Rohingyas.

On January 23, the ICJ ordered Myanmar to take immediate measures to prevent the genocide of the Rohingyas in northern Rakhine state. However, justice for the Rohingya is still a long way off. The ICJ ruling against Myanmar is not binding and there is no international police force to enforce ICJ's decision. Yet, this ICJ verdict can

⁴ Tanzimuddin Khan, Mohammad, and Saima Ahmed. 2018. "Rohingya Refugee Crisis, UN General Assembly and Bangladesh Diplomacy". *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/rohingya-refugee-crisis-un-general-assembly-and-bangladesh-diplomacy-1551688>.

⁵ Bhuiyan, Humayun Kabir. 2019. "Human Rights Violation Against Rohingyas: UNGA Adopts Resolution Condemning Myanmar". *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2019/12/28/resolution-on-myanmar-adopted-at-unga-with-overwhelming-majority>.

be considered as a major breakthrough to establish accountability for crimes committed by Myanmar's security forces against the Rohingya.⁶

The OIC, the only united political bloc of the 57-Muslim-majority countries, should act more proactively to resolve the Rohingya displacement crisis by using its leverage over global powers like the United States, European Union, China, and Russia.⁷

China has been a close regional ally of Myanmar for decades. Beijing has repeatedly supported Naypyitaw in the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly, and vetoed actions proposed at the UNSC. China wants Myanmar and Bangladesh to address the Rohingya issue through bilateral arrangements, bypassing western-dominated multilateral forums.

In November 2017, China has tried to assume a mediation role. Beijing has offered a three-step solution to the Rohingya displacement crisis which involved- reduction of violence in the Rakhine State, repatriation of Rohingyas, and long-term development in the region. The current standoff in the China-brokered Rohingya repatriation process suggests either the limits of Chinese diplomacy or the lack of efficient diplomatic pressure from Beijing on Naypyitaw to initiate repatriation.⁸

The other regional power, India has responded to the Rohingya crisis in a passive way. India claimed to remain neutral in the crisis and provided limited humanitarian and economic assistance to both Bangladesh and Myanmar. As a result, New Delhi has not yet provided any framework to resolve this highly complex displacement crisis, in

⁶ Choudhury, Angshuman. 2020. "What Does the ICJ Preliminary Ruling Really Mean for The Rohingya?". *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/what-does-the-icj-preliminary-ruling-really-mean-for-the-rohingya/>.

⁷ al-Ahsan, Abdullah. 2017. "The Rohingya Crisis and The Role of the OIC". *Al Jazeera*, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/2/18/the-rohingya-crisis-and-the-role-of-the-oic/>.

⁸ Banerjee, Sreeparna. 2020. "The Rohingya Crisis and its Impact on Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations". *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-rohingya-crisis-and-its-impact-on-bangladesh-myanmar-relations/>.

which two of its important neighbors are direct stakeholders, primarily due to its strategic compulsions vis-à-vis China in the region. From the very onset of the crisis, Dhaka has been asking New Delhi to act more proactively in resolving the crisis.⁹

The United States, Canada and European Union placed sanctions on Myanmar on its mistreatment and human rights abuses against the Rohingya minority. These sanctions are targeted towards Myanmar army officials and businesses linked to the army. However, the practical effectiveness of these sanctions is dubious as they only apply to a handful of individuals.

The lack of sincere efforts by the international community has made it difficult for Bangladesh to handle the Rohingya crisis both diplomatically and financially. Bangladesh government needs to continue its diplomatic efforts to mobilize international pressure on the Myanmar government to resolve the displacement crisis. The regional and global powers should recognize the potential consequences of a protected displacement crisis along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and work toward a sustainable solution.

⁹ Asif Shawon, Ali. 2020. "Dhaka Again Seeks Delhi's Support for Rohingya Repatriation". *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2020/08/19/dhaka-again-seeks-delhi-s-support-for-rohingya-repatriation>.