Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Five Challenges for the Future

*As the repatriation process of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar continues to come under pressure, **Nasir Uddin** looks at what will be asked of Bangladesh if the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar becomes a long-term rather than temporary feature on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border*

After Myanmar's brutal military crackdown in 2017 triggered more than 700,000 Rohingya people to flee Rakhine State for Bangladesh, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar quickly agreed a rapid repatriation process. With their agreement coming up against international opposition, as well as resistance by the Rohingya currently in refugee camps, the prospect of Cox's Bazar remaining a permanent home of more than one million refugees has increased. Should the repatriation deal fail to be altered, what challenges will this area of Bangladesh face in the coming months?

Two Rohingya children in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar | Credit: UN Women, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Food Security

The most pressing problem the Bangladesh government will face in Cox's Bazar will be feeding over one million Rohingya refugees in Ukhia and Teknaf. Maintaining the large number of refugees in these areas with a regular supply of food is a big challenge for any country. But for one of the most densely populated countries in the world, it will be huge.

A report of UNHCR UK published earlier this year stated that the food-needs alone account for 25 per cent of the total relief needed. The report specified that this equates to over 16 million litres of safe water needed every day, and some 12,200 metric tons of food needed every month; at least 180,000 families also need cooking fuel.

After the initial support Bangladesh received from countries around the world, as well as international donor agencies and UN bodies, help has gradually slowed. The Bangladesh government estimated that between August last year and the end of March this year $434 million has been spent on the refugee camps. With $322 million coming from donations and aid, the remaining $112 million has been paid by the Bangladesh government. An estimate shows that taking care of the Rohingya refugees for the rest of the year would require a further $950 million, and the next seven years would require another $4,433 million. Unless international financial support increases, Bangladesh will have to bear a huge financial burden.

Law and Order

Another major issue for Bangladesh is maintaining law and order in Cox's Bazar. Conflict between and among Rohingya refugees is growing at an alarming rate. During the last year, a considerable number of violent incidents have occurred, including the death of 22 Rohingya people inside the camps. In addition, some NGOs have been banned from working in the camps after facing accusations of mobilising refugees against the repatriation process in the form of anti-repatriation demonstrations.

A strong illegal network of markets is also growing. These see relief-goods, food, and other everyday essentials sold in Chittagong's markets. A group of small mobile Bengali business people, along with some Rohingya refugees, have begun selling relief-goods donated to the camps, such as baby-food, stationary goods, sanitary tool kits, clothes, medicine and other items, Journalists have documented such items being sold in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong under signboards that read 'Shops of Rohingya Relief.'

Inside the camps more and more reports are also emerging of Rohingya refugees involved in various inter and intra-group conflicts. In addition, there remains a strong probability of growing ARSA activities inside Bangladesh. Many young Rohingyas are still traumatized by last year's violence inflicted by the Burmese military. With such high levels of distress so present in the minds of so many, the camps are a fertile ground for recruitment.

Women and Child trafficking

Thousands of women and girls have survived rape and slaughter by the Burmese military in Rakhine State, but in Bangladesh they face a different threat. At the end of last year, nearly 40 people were identified as trafficking women and children inside the refugee camps. These people were identified as trying to traffic Rohingya women and children from Cox's Bazar to as far away as the Middle East and Malaysia.

Forced prostitution is sadly becoming a norm in the camps. Women and girls are being bought, sold, exported and often lured to brothels under the pretext of marriage or with the promise of employment. There exists in South Asia a huge trafficking network of women and girls and a risk of the camps on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border becoming permanent will be that traffickers could systematically begin targeting Rohingya refugees, using the camps as potential hubs for trafficking.

Environmental degradation

For decades environmental degradation has been one of the most serious problems that Bangladesh has faced, a problem which has undoubtedly been intensified by the settlement of camps following last year's violence. Hill-cuttings, deforestation, a decline of soil-fertility, and the damage of agricultural lands are major environmental problems exacerbated over the last year. A recent study confirmed that a total of 4,300 acres of hills and forests were cut down to make way for temporary shelters. Around 198 acres out of a total of 375 acres of natural forest land has been encroached and around 3,000 to 4,000 acres of hilly land has been cleared of vegetation, and nearly 6,800 tonnes of fuelwood are being collected each month from the remaining forest and jungles in Ukhia and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar. Cultivable lands are therefore being reduced, as well as fishing water bodies being occupied. The space for poultry & live-stock rearing are also diminishing.

Local Population

With the presence of one of the largest refugee camps in world on their doorstep, and the ensuing pressures therefore exerted on the local population, managing local sentiments towards the camps is vitally important. The creation of security posts in Ukhia and Taknaf areas designed to monitor the Rohingya who move out of the camps however has meant that local residents now have to carry their photo-identity and regularly need to produce it for security personnel. The local population I have spoken to consider this process humiliating. And this isn't even mentioning the rise in the price of daily essentials, due to the increase of foreign aid personal in the area.

When the Rohingya people first fled the violence of the Burmese military to Bangladesh, sympathy for them from the local population was extremely strong. However this support is at risk of drastically transforming over the coming year. While tensions between the local population and those in the camps is not yet hostile, there remains a significant risk of social unrest. As the international community continues to put pressure on the Myanmar military and government to improve conditions in Rakhine, allowing the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar, Bengali citizens in Cox's Bazar are unlikely to support the presence of a permanent refugee camp, especially not in its current state.

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