



Comment

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**The Rohingyas Crisis:
A Security Perspective from Bangladesh**

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Historically the Rohingyas are a religious-ethnic community residing in Myanmar. However, since the 1970s the then military regime of the predominantly Buddhist state decided to contest the citizenship status of this marginalised Muslim minority which resulted in their persecution and expulsion to neighbouring countries. The huge number of refugees created complex challenges and threat perceptions for the whole region but especially for neighbouring Bangladesh. Due to the reluctance of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to grant the Rohingyas refugee status only a minority of them live in official refugee camps; to date the bulk (more than 500,000) of the Rohingyas are living in unregistered camps. The most directly affected region is the Chittagong Division in the country's South-East Border Area which is located in the immediate neighbourhood of Myanmar's Rakhine province, where the Rohingyas originally settled. It is important to maintain notice of the fact that the Chittagong Division is of extraordinary strategic importance for the GoB. Not only the country primary seaport but also the country's growing tourist industry (especially the coastal area of Cox Bazar) is located there. Furthermore, the fact that the stability of the border area is crucial for various major infrastructure projects (rail, roads, and bridges) in order to connect the country with China and South East Asia makes Dhaka's decision-maker highly sensitive towards any challenges on the safety and security situation in the South East.

Having this in mind, the massive influx of the Rohingyas during the last decades creates a multidimensional security scenario. As stateless refugees they face, as objects of security threats, various forms of psycho-social and human security challenges, in Myanmar and in their new host countries as Bangladesh. Even those able to migrate into Bangladesh, those not residing in officially registered camps live in extraordinarily deplorable conditions. Due to their 'involuntarily', illegal self-settlement they have to deal with the regular security forces, unease and resistance of local communities, much limited access to food, drinking water, sufficient shelter and clothing, and are getting easily targeted by criminal networks, illegal businesses, and Islamic fundamentalist groups.

In addition to being the object of security threats, the Rohingyas are also perceived as subjects of a security peril, meaning that the Rohingyas themselves as a group constitute a security threat for Bangladesh's state and society. In other words, the imbroglio of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is not only the logical consequence of the dramatic security conditions in neighbouring Myanmar, but also perceived as the cause for conflicts in the host country with remarkable transnational spill-over effects. The latter has impacts in different domestic spheres of public life especially with social, economic, environmental political and military aspects. Furthermore, the Rohingyas are also

increasingly classified as a burden to relations between the countries in the region. However, through both (subjective and objective) lenses it became clear that there is an increasing trend among analysts in Bangladesh and beyond to perceive the Rohingyas issue not only solely as a humanitarian and refugee issue. Rather they identify the refugees increasingly as a so-called 'non-traditional security threat' because of following reasons:

First, the Rohingyas conundrum has to be seen in the context of the rising challenge in Bangladesh of controlling Islamic terrorism and political Islam. Basically, one can find following rationale: the Rohingyas problem is contributing to and is partly responsible for the rise of the religious fundamentalist movement in the country. In more operational terms, there is the claim that the Rohingyas are helping to supporting religious fundamentalism in two ways: in an indirect, passive way and in a direct, active one.

Indirectly, the Rohingyas are serving as a (passive) recruiting base for Islamic militant extremists. There are obvious indications that several organised interest groups of the refugees maintain links with domestically and internationally operating religious extremist and terrorist organisation. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), for example, is accused of having formed partnerships with Al-Qaeda and Jamaat-e-Islami among others. Also the interaction with the radicalised Saudi Arabia-based

charity organisation Rabita-al-Alam-al-Islami moved the RSO into the global stream of Islamic fundamentalism.

The direct support for religious fundamentalism by Rohingyas finds its expression in the claim that some radicalized sections of the refugees are actively maintaining links with banned Islamist groupings like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) or Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (Huji). Here it is important to recognize that the radicalized Rohingyas are not only sympathising with their fundamentalist worldview but also actively providing these Islamist outfits, for example with providing training on arms and explosives. Additionally, there is the accusation that the Rohingyas are using their international network to allocate funds from like-minded organisations for militant organizations operating in Bangladesh.

In this context, it is important to be aware that there are further claims of the involvement of state actors in providing weapon training in Rohingyas camps in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region. It is stated that the goal was to increase the ability of militant sections among the (Rohingyas) refugees to defend themselves. Furthermore, the notion was spread that the same militants should be enabled to carry out counterattacks on perpetrators of violence and human rights abuses against the Rohingyas community. There are also accusations that foreign (non-Bangladeshi) intelligence is involved in

this process, but not sufficient in evidence yet. Nevertheless, most of these kinds of action obviously originated from the notion of the necessity of potential operation within Myanmar's border. However, despite the fact that it is difficult to prove to which extent Islamic fundamentalist groups are getting supported by the Rohingyas on Bangladeshi soil or how far foreign and domestic state actors (such as intelligence agencies) supporting the Rohingyas the accusation of this phenomenon remains quite resilient. Furthermore, it seems also hard to identify terrorist activities of Bangladesh based Rohingyas militants, operating in neighbouring Myanmar and India. Nevertheless, there are no doubts that radicalized and militant Rohingyas are actively promoting the course of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. In this context, the refugees are challenging the democratic framework as well as the notions of democracy and tolerance.

Second, Rohingyas are made responsible for the undermining of the general law and order situation in their host societies. Besides terrorism, extremist violence and religious extremism, the Rohingyas crisis is also associated with all kinds of trafficking and other criminal activities including narcotics, human, SALW (small arms and light weapons), ammunition, stealing, armed robbery, and maritime piracy. Other major concerns are smuggling and illegal cross-border infiltrations. Additionally, Rohingyas are increasingly linked with growing rates of

crimes related to extortion, sexual harassment (including prostitution and sexual slavery), killings for organs, domestic servitude, and forced labour. There is the tendency to ignore the fact that mostly Rohingyas are not the perpetrators. Rather, it seems that the general awareness is focusing on the presence of the refugees as the causal factor for upward appearance of misdeeds. However, here as well as in all other facets of the perceptions of the Rohingyas challenge, one has to point out that the contours of being subject or object of security threat are quite fluent. In other words, some sections of the Rohingyas must be perceived not only as victims but also as multipliers of crimes. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the refugee camps Nayapara (subdistrict Teknaf) and Kutupalang (subdistrict Ukhia) in the district Cox's Bazar Sadar have high rates of crime. Consequently, they often become remarkably violent places with spill-over effects into surrounding local communities in the district of Cox's Bazar. This is increasing the level of frustration and threat perception among local communities and Rohingyas and subsequently seriously undermining a constructive dialogue between both sides.

Third, as already indicated there is also a strong economic dimension in the Rohingyas threat perception attached. The Rohingyas are identified by GoB and local communities as a significant disturbing factor in the economic development of the

South East border region due to various reasons: First, the Rohingyas constitute an additional demographic pressure on the already densely populated area with scarce resources. Second, the (mostly illegal) penetration of the refugees in the regional job market leads to further socio-economic inequalities and distortions regarding employment opportunities for the local workforce (by providing cheap labour). Third, there is an increasing awareness about a potential ecological crisis allegedly caused by the Rohingyas. More concrete, the extensive use of the natural resources, especially the forest like the one of the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary. The exploitation of firewood and deforestations for settlements causes severe forest destruction in protected areas. Fourth, there is also the claim that due to instability and consequent security measures because of the refugee problem is seriously leading to a reduction in trade and commerce. In this context, Rohingyas are also blamed for the delay in project to enhance regional connectivity (infrastructure) since it is hampering the working relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Fourth, the Rohingyas are classified as a challenge towards the political-administrative institutional structure of Bangladesh. Three examples are noteworthy in order to outline the unfortunate nexus of hosting state and refugees, namely the impact of the Rohingyas crisis on the country's civil-

military relations, the implementation of Rohingyas in the voters list, and the refugees as catalysers of corruption.

Bangladesh is a country, which has had unhealthy civil-military relations ever since gaining independence in 1971. The experience of two military rules (Ziaur Rahman 1975-81, Hussain M. Ershad 1982-90) as well as an extra-constitutional military-backed caretaker government (2006-2008) must be seen as hint for a traditional lack of civilian control over the armed forces in Bangladesh. This is significant, since due to the deficiencies of the country's governance architecture the civilian governments and their administrations are relying increasingly on the armed forces to avoid internal insecurity. The growth of domestic disorder arising from conflicts with the refugees and extraordinary illegal migration will further add to the dependence of civilian authorities on the security forces to maintain law and order and controlling the borders. There is the concrete threat that the combination of weak civilian institutions, the lack of formal civilian control mechanisms, and the necessity to manage the Rohingyas problem is creating a situation in which the military top brass is able to gain significant decision-making power. In other words, with growing domestic threat scenarios the military top brass is becoming more influential in matters of internal security, law enforcement and national defence. In addition to that, it might enforce a process of strengthening the role (and acceptance)

of coercion in governance and political decision-making. This might have a particularly negative impact on the quality of democracy when the elected civilians, which are supposed to represent the supreme power (the Bangladesh people), are not authorising military decision-making or able to monitor their implementation. More concretely, when the security forces are starting to formulate the goals and to decide on the methods how to deal with the Rohingyas, civilian supremacy is seriously challenged. This would define a crucial challenge towards any processes of democratic consolidation. Having this in mind, one must state that the reports of numerous human rights violations accompanied by activities of the regular and paramilitary security forces and the respective impunity of these actions are pointing at tensions between civilians and military and the unstable state of democracy. Furthermore, besides producing democratic defects, there are indications that security orientated approaches of conflict solutions (unauthorised as well authorised) by Bangladeshi soldiers add to an enhancement of tensions between state and refugees. Undoubtedly, military strategies are in nature much more robust than those of civilian forces. In order to keep the refugees separate from the local communities by gathering them in camps with registration, to avoid unmonitored and uncontrolled 'self-settlement', or deny Rohingyas entrance in Bangladesh the use of coercive force seems to be rather the

norm than the exception. The subsequent level of frustration among the refugees (and local communities) is even more rising by observing that the build-up of infrastructure in the area of operation is predominantly serving security rather than development purposes. Consequently, the Rohingyas are bound to become more desperate and militant to safeguard their interests which will find its expression in a strengthened position of the radicalised elements. In sum, the Rohingyas crisis creates a 'vicious circle' which will lead to a deterioration of the security situation and thereby the quality of democracy at both the regional and national level.

Another political dimension of the Rohingyas crisis is its negative impact on political competition and contestation. Basically Bangladesh politics since the country came into existence can be characterized by an unrestricted zero-sum-game over political power, leading to a 'dog-eat-dog culture' among the country's politicians and political parties. This style of leadership trickled down through the different layers of state and society affecting all spheres of public life. In result, political actors are using all kind of opportunities to outbid potential rivals for power. In the given context, local politicians and their respective parties are trying to use the Rohingyas for their partisan political interests. One of the most prominent examples is that certain politicians with the help of local authorities are supporting Rohingyas (through illegal measures) to enrol themselves in respective

voters lists. In order to do so, the very same influential political-administrative nexus is providing Rohingyas with false nationality certificates like Bangladeshi birth certificates, national identity cards and passports. There is no doubt that local political leaders are keen on fortifying their vote banks with the Rohingyas. This is generating new and enhancing existing inequalities when it comes to ensuring free and fair electoral process. The main argument made here is that getting the illegal migrants enrolled is not only a criminal activity but also constitutes severe disturbances of equal opportunities regarding political competition and contestation. Latter phenomenon is favouring candidates with more influence and financial resources. However, besides severe efforts of Bangladesh's Elections Commission, which for example sets up a Special Committee to clear the voters list from non-Bangladeshi citizen, analysts are stating that there are still thousands of enrolled Rohingyas.

Furthermore, it is argued that the refugees are an extremely economic but also additional administrative burden for the country's weak institutions. As such, it is inducing more 'favourable moments' for corruption among Bangladesh authorities. For example, by having the power of granting Rohingyas refugees free movement, deciding on refugee status and official documents among other benefits, there is a critical amount of bribery involved in undermining the coherence and loyalty of

the country's civil service and policing efforts.

Fifth, the Rohingyas crisis is a source for insecurity and conflict in Bangladesh's international relations. In this context one should differentiate between two dimensions: The activities of Rohingyas in third countries (outside the Bangladesh-Myanmar area) and the ones in Bangladesh. However in both center of action one can find severe linkages with militant extremism and religious fundamentalism. Furthermore, many facets of Rohingyas activities are located within a criminal/illegal context. Especially the involvement of Rohingyas in Transnational criminal organisations is worrying. However, both dimensions generate serious challenges for Dhaka regarding the management of its international relations.

To begin with, one can state that the criminal and fundamentalist actions are worsening the situation between Rohingyas and local communities in the South East border region and the GoB. This will generate further mistrust in potential upcoming negotiations over the status of Rohingyas as well as sharpen the reaction of the state and civil society towards the refugees. There is the threat that this might reduce the willingness among the authorities in Bangladesh and local communities to differentiate between moderate or radical and registered or unregistered Rohingyas. However, such a differentiation is necessary in order to

create a constructive atmosphere for dialogue with moderate segments of the Rohingyas. But instead, the alleged links between Rohingyas, crime and fundamentalism are on the rise. Additionally the situation is turning for the worse due to the tendency of indicting all Rohingyas apriori indicted for the activities of the criminal/militant sections among them.

In this context one has to be aware that there are already tensions between Rohingyas and host/local communities in the context of international development support. There is the accusation that aid agencies are providing service to Rohingyas which are not available for the local communities which are also desperately in need for the very same assistance. Therefore, the image of the Rohingyas of being illegal economic refugees and criminal is further exacerbating (communal) tensions between hosts and refugees. Here, the ban of activities of aid organizations because they would encourage an influx of Rohingyas refugees is not only worrisome from a humanitarian perspective but is also alienating international donors.

However, regardless if the Rohingyas themselves constitute real or perceived threats for the host countries, as long as their problem of being stateless refugees remains unresolved it will strain Bangladesh's international relations. First of all, the Rohingyas-Islamists link is cropping up seriously as an irritant in international relations. Here one should mention that

there is the concrete challenge that not only the Rohingyas but also state and society of Bangladesh are becoming increasingly associated with the rise of fundamentalism and a hub for transnational criminal networks. In this context, one must mention that the trafficking (human, drugs, SALW) and illegal business like enforcing bonded labour or illegal money transfer networks/Hundi system) is perceived as a destruction of the social harmony in neighbouring/third countries suffering from Rohingyas criminal actions. For example the smuggling of narcotics is increasing the rate of drug addicts; the production and/or import as well as export of weapons produces security risks; and illegal Rohingyas workforce and Hundi is generating distortion in surrounding economies. The fact, that Rohingyas are travelling with passports issued by Bangladesh authorities based on false documents is creating further complications between Dhaka and 'third countries', especially if such elements challenge the law and order situation. This problem started increasing when radicalised Rohingyas also started obtaining passports and visa in order to engage in 'critical networking and propaganda' in the respective new host states. There are indications -for example in Indonesia- that these campaigns by radicalized Rohingyas have the potential to provoke extremist reactions in the targeted countries with destabilising impacts for state and society. Such activities will not only be

deconstructive for the course of the Rohingyas but also harmful for Dhaka's bilateral ties with the affected countries.

Furthermore, there is the perception that the GoB is not doing enough to tackle the Rohingyas issue and subsequently also with the negative side effects -marks another irritating determinant for international security circles. The fact that during the last coalition the government run by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) not only Islamist parties obtained power but the state actively promoted Islamic fundamentalis, seriously damaging the image of Bangladesh as a secular democracy. This created an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Ahmadiyya communities far beyond the borders of Bangladesh. In consequence, the international community is concerned about the state of human rights and religious freedom in Bangladesh. Negative consideration might also affect Bangladesh's aid and economic relations especially with the EU which is increasingly linking economic cooperation with quality of democracy and level of obedience towards international human rights and labour standards, for example GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) Plus.

Finally, it seems that at the moment nobody either at the regional, national as well as the grassroots level in the affected countries is committed to resolve the issue of the stateless Rohingyas seeking shelter in Southern Asia and beyond. However, at a

time where the governments and international/regional organisation like United Nations (UN), South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) still do not have the political will, the capacities, or the interests to work towards a coherent and comprehensive political solution for the Rohingyas, latter ones are trying to go ahead. This is of course a justified endeavour but also holds remarkable risks. This is gaining significance since it becomes clear, that sections of the refugees are willing to use illegal and militant means to achieve their goals. Especially if such undertakings are carried by the militant and ideological radicalized sections of the Rohingyas. They will obviously not approach the moderate mainstream of civil societies and charity organisations as well as official authorities/institutions abroad in order to support the course of a peaceful and non-violent resolution. Rather they will look for collaboration with like-minded elements in South- and South East Asia as well as in the Near East. These actions will only strengthen the militant extremist and religious fundamentalist elements within the Rohingyas community. As such, it will enhance processes of fragmentations of the representation of refugee interests by generating a drift between a radical and moderate pole. The situation is getting worse when it starts to undermine the efforts of moderates.

In this context the international community has to understand that any further ignorance of the Rohingyas issue will play in the hands of the Islamists. It is also significant to realise that due to missing efforts to find a political solution for the citizenship status, not only the Rohingyas community in- and outside the Bangladesh-Myanmar area getting radicalised but also regional extremist groups using this issue for promoting terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. To conclude, the need of the hour is that regional governments in South and South East Asia identify the unsolved Rohingyas problem finally as a chance for constructive regional cooperation instead of a roadblock for further collaboration.