

The Rohingya Problem: Significance and Aftereffects for South Asia

Sheshmanee Sahu

*Research Scholar, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi,
India*

Abstract

The Rohingya Crisis, which began intensifying in late August 2017 as part of a long-standing ethnic cleansing policy in Myanmar, undoubtedly impacts the Southeast Asian region. However, viewing this significant Burmese domestic issue as confined solely to South-East Asia would be an oversimplification. Myanmar, both geographically and historically, also has ties to South Asia. Therefore, the plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority also holds substantial political significance for the South Asian subcontinent. This paper will specifically examine the crisis's impact on India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as these nations are more directly connected to the affected region of South-East Asia. We aim to explore how significant the Rohingya Crisis is for these South Asian countries and assess how much it affects the broader South Asian region.

Keywords: Rohingya, South Asia, South East Asia, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Bamar, Non-state Actors, Indigenous

Introduction

Since late August 2017, Myanmar's ongoing policy of ethnic cleansing has escalated into violence once more, this time targeting the Rohingya, a minority group within the country. The Burmese military has used alleged "terrorist attacks" by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – a Rohingya militant group – as a justification for launching brutal operations against Rohingya civilians. The military's actions have included burning villages, killing men, raping women, and forcibly displacing an entire population based solely on their identity, not any criminal actions. The core issue of the "Rohingya Crisis" lies in Myanmar's refusal to acknowledge the Rohingya people as an indigenous minority. In 1982, the Rohingya were stripped of their citizenship through legislation, which

denied them legal recognition in their homeland.

From the perspective of Burmese nationalists, to be a citizen of Myanmar (formerly Burma) is defined in terms of ethnicity (primarily Bamar, the dominant group) and religion (predominantly Buddhist). From their perspective, the Rohingya are not considered natives of Myanmar but are viewed as South Asians, particularly Bengalis, who were brought into the country by British colonists during the colonial era. This narrow and historically inaccurate narrative has effectively disconnected the long-standing Muslim population of Rakhine (formerly Arakan) from the region's history. As a result, the Rohingya have been branded as "foreign" or alien to Myanmar, rendering them stateless actors (Non-State Actors) and perceived threats to the nation.

By the time of writing, it is clear that

Myanmar's policy of persecution has been partially successful. Of the 1.1 million Rohingya who once lived in Myanmar, an estimated 650,000 have now fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, with many more continuing to escape the violence. This massive displacement has created a humanitarian crisis of vast significance, not only for Southeast Asia but also for South Asia. The Rohingya Crisis and the Rohingya mass flight into Bangladesh are manifestations of anti-Bengali feelings, which suggests that this crisis will have significant implications for South Asia as well. Myanmar shares borders with both India and Bangladesh, and the fallout from this crisis is bound to affect these countries. From humanitarian, political, and geopolitical perspectives, it is clear that Dhaka, New Delhi, and even Islamabad will be affected by the Rohingya crisis.

This paper will explore the causes and consequences of the Rohingya Crisis and examine its far-reaching effects on the South Asian region. We will analyse how the actions of Southeast Asian countries, particularly Myanmar, are influencing the interrelationships between India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and we will conclude by offering key insights and conclusions drawn from this analysis.

The Rohingya Crisis- What, Why, How, Where?

Who are Rohingyas?

Primarily inhabiting the western Rakhine State of Myanmar, previously known as Arakan, are the Rohingya, a Muslim minority population. Adhering to a form of Sunni Islam, the Rohingya are not recognised as an official ethnic group by the Myanmar government, rendering them "stateless". This lack of recognition means they are denied legal rights and

protections and are often viewed by the Myanmar authorities as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh rather than citizens. As a result, the Rohingya face severe discrimination and hostility within Myanmar, and their plight has led to them being labelled as one of the most persecuted groups globally.

Due to their stateless status and persecution, many Rohingya attempt to flee Myanmar, often resorting to illegal migration to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. In these host nations, they seek asylum and humanitarian assistance, as their living conditions and security in Myanmar remain dire. Despite their efforts, the Rohingya frequently encounter difficulties obtaining refuge and face challenges in accessing support in these countries. Their statelessness and displacement have turned the Rohingya crisis into an ongoing humanitarian disaster affecting not just Myanmar, but the broader Southeast and South Asian regions.

What is the Rohingya Problem?

The Rohingya Problem refers to the widespread Rohingya population exodus from Myanmar, which gained international attention in 2015 when large numbers of refugees, often referred to as "boat people" by the global media, began fleeing the country. Driven by extreme persecution and violence in Myanmar, the Rohingya embarked on dangerous journeys across the seas in overcrowded, makeshift boats. These vessels, often unseaworthy and operated by human traffickers, carried men, women, and children through treacherous waters such as The Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca in pursuit of refuge.

Most of these refugees aimed to reach Southeast Asian countries like

Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, hoping to find asylum and escape the harsh conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The perilous nature of these journeys, coupled with the inadequate resources and poor conditions on board, led to numerous deaths at sea. The refugees also faced uncertain fates upon arrival, as many host countries were unprepared or unwilling to accommodate the influx of displaced people, further complicating an already dire humanitarian situation. This migration not only highlighted the Rohingya people's desperation but also underscored the regional and international challenges in addressing their plight, making the crisis one of the most pressing issues in Southeast Asia.

The Context of the Crisis;

On May 1, 2015, Thai authorities discovered 32 shallow graves on a lonely hillside that served as a "waiting area" for illegal migrants before they were smuggled into Malaysia. Thai news sources state that among the dead, a Bangladeshi immigrant was discovered alive and sent to a nearby hospital for medical attention. The Myanmar Navy rescued 208 migrants who were stranded at sea just a few weeks later on May 22, 2015; the refugees verified that they had fled from Bangladesh. In response to this incident, nationalists staged rallies in the capital of Myanmar, calling on the international world to cease holding Myanmar responsible for the Rohingya situation.

Soon after, on May 24, 2015, Malaysian officials discovered 139 possible graves in a string of deserted human trafficking camps close to the Thai border. It is assumed that these camps housed Rohingya Muslims who were escaping

persecution in Myanmar. The dominant Rakhine ethnic group, which rejects the word "Rohingya" and refers to them as illegal immigrants, is widely hostile toward the Rohingya, an ethnic minority living in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The Rohingya are subject to discriminatory regulations that restrict their freedom of religion, marriage, family planning, work, education, and migration.

Violence between the Rohingya and other religious communities is a common outcome of tensions. A significant dispute started in 2012 when some Rohingya males were suspected of raping and killing a Buddhist woman. Buddhist nationalists attacked Rohingya villages violently in reprisal, murdering people and setting their homes on fire. These acts were denounced by the international community as being a part of a program of "ethnic cleansing". More than 120,000 Rohingya are still imprisoned in internment camps, which were established as a result of the conflict.

The violence intensified in 2015, when local men in the villages massacred over 40 Rohingya. The United Nations confirmed the discovery of 10 severed heads, including those of children, in a water tank. The situation worsened dramatically on August 25, 2017, when the Myanmar military, along with local Buddhist extremists, launched a violent campaign against Rohingya communities in north-western Rakhine State. This brutal crackdown involved mass killings, the looting and burning of villages, sexual violence, and gang rapes, prompting global outrage and escalating the Rohingya crisis even further.

India and Bangladesh: Impact of a Troubled South-East Asian Neighborhood

India and Myanmar have a 1,624-kilometre boundary. It serves as the primary link between South Asia and this nation in Southeast Asia. The border of Myanmar and Bangladesh (193 km) is the other connection between these two regions of Asia. These borders mean that New Delhi and Dhaka are particularly affected by the Rohingya problem. Furthermore, the aforementioned problem can only be especially significant for Bangladesh, which serves as a major shelter for Rohingya refugees, and India, a potential superpower that has an impact on its regional surroundings.

How India Responded;

India has refused to officially allow Rohingya refugees to enter the country, citing concerns over national security. Despite this stance, it has been reported that approximately 40,000 Rohingya migrants have managed to find refuge in various regions of India, including Assam, West Bengal, and Jammu & Kashmir. The existence of the Rohingya refugees, particularly in the Jammu region has sparked unease among parts of the Indian population. There is a fear that the settlement of Rohingya Muslims in Jammu, a city with a Hindu majority, could alter the demographic balance, potentially leading to future violence. Some people find parallels between this worry and the previous departure of Kashmiri Hindus during the conflict with Kashmiri Muslims, which was partially caused by historical tensions. The issue of Rohingya Muslims' presence in the Jammu region has therefore become a highly sensitive matter for Indian security. Indian security agencies have expressed concerns, suggesting that some Rohingya individuals may harbour sympathies for militant ideologies. Based on their

evaluations, Rohingya sympathisers could be active in regions such as Jammu, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mewat, potentially threatening India's internal security.

India's refusal to provide shelter to Rohingya refugees has drawn criticism from various quarters, with detractors accusing the country of failing to act as a "responsible stakeholder" in the global humanitarian crisis. By not taking in refugees and citing security risks, India faces accusations of neglecting its obligations as a regional power and humanitarian actor, particularly given its geographic proximity to the crisis and the vulnerability of the displaced Rohingya population. This criticism points to a broader debate about balancing national security concerns with humanitarian responsibilities in international and domestic policy.

India and the Rohingya Problem: Failing to Act as a Responsible Stakeholder; India sees itself as a rising global force, and the international community frequently anticipates that these powers—especially the more recent ones—will take on the role of "responsible stakeholders". This concept is tied to the idea that great powers bear the responsibility for maintaining international stability. While the actions of countries like the United States and Russia have sometimes contradicted this expectation, the principle remains associated with the responsibilities of influential nations. However, India's response to the crisis in Myanmar has not aligned with the role of a "responsible stakeholder" in promoting regional stability.

India, a democratic country, may have been anticipated to step in, if only for humanitarian reasons, in response to the Rohingya catastrophe. Rather than

confronting the Rohingya people's persecution, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose to show his support for the Burmese government during a three-day visit to Myanmar in early September 2017. Modi centred his remarks on India's attempts to "normalise" the situation in Rakhine State, where the crisis was occurring, by providing developmental assistance; he chose to view the issue mainly as an economic one rather than admitting that human rights were being violated.

India's reluctance to take a stronger stance might be explained by its geopolitical interests. Myanmar is a critical infrastructural link for India's engagement with Southeast Asia, and a strong relationship with Myanmar could enhance India's ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Additionally, India's foreign policy is heavily shaped by its perceived competition with China. India's "Act East" policy aims to counter China's growing influence in the region, and this rivalry seems to be the driving force behind its approach to Myanmar. In this context, geopolitics takes precedence over human rights, a strategy that is also reflected in U.S. foreign policy. However, while this approach may serve India's short-term geopolitical goals, it risks damaging its long-term interests in Myanmar. A stable neighbour is crucial for India's regional security and economic development, and the ongoing crisis undermines that stability. As Phil Robertson, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), points out, "How can you have economic development if people are at each other's throats?"

Additionally, India's position on the

Rohingya crisis affects South Asia more broadly. India's perceived Islamophobic policy towards Rohingya Muslims on its soil, and its tendency to use Pakistan as a scapegoat to justify this stance, further strains its already tense relationship with Islamabad. Such an approach does nothing to build trust between the two countries. Moreover, by not addressing the crisis more forcefully, India is effectively abandoning its ally, Bangladesh, during a time of great distress, as Bangladesh bears the brunt of the Rohingya refugee crisis. This not only weakens regional cooperation but also paints a darker picture of India's foreign policy priorities.

How Bangladesh Responded;

Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister of Bangladesh, criticised economic migrants in her nation, labelling them as "mentally sick" for leaving Bangladesh when they could have had better lives at home. She was upset, saying that their behaviour was damaging the nation's reputation overseas. The government of Bangladesh quickly declared its intention to relocate the 32,000 officially registered Rohingya refugees who had been residing in camps close to the Myanmar border for many years. However, the official relocation plan did not include the 200,000 unregistered refugees. The island of Thengar Char, which is eighteen miles east of Hatiya Island, was originally designated as the relocation site. Later, reports suggested that the relocation site would instead be a 200-hectare area on Hatiya Island, which would require a challenging nine-hour journey by land and sea from the camps.

Bangladesh: At the Epicentre of the Humanitarian Tragedy;

Bangladesh has legitimate reasons to feel betrayed by both its neighbour, India, and

the Burmese government. Despite Dhaka's consistent support for India's efforts to combat separatist movements in its northeast, demonstrating its commitment to India's security concerns, New Delhi has not reciprocated. By siding with the Burmese government and refusing to allow Rohingya refugees into India, Bangladesh feels abandoned by its ally.

Similarly, Bangladesh has attempted to maintain good relations with Myanmar but received little in return. Dhaka even acknowledged Myanmar's fears regarding the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Bangladesh promised to carry out combined military operations with the Burmese army just a few days after insurgents from the Rohingya group attacked twenty police stations in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. When the crisis erupted on August 25, 2017, Bangladesh likely feared that conservative or radical elements might exploit the situation. However, from a practical standpoint, Bangladesh's assistance aimed to address what the Burmese government claimed was the root cause of the problem, in hopes of preventing further refugee influx and a looming humanitarian disaster. Yet, this cooperation went unappreciated, as Myanmar's government and military were determined to expel the Rohingya, whom they view as "illegal Bengalis". The Rohingya were left with a stark choice: death or exile in what the Burmese Buddhist far-right considers their "true" homeland—Bangladesh. From Myanmar's perspective, Dhaka was expected to simply manage the consequences of the humanitarian crisis.

The local communities near Bangladesh's refugee camps are already feeling the strain from the Rohingya crisis. In areas

like Teknaf and Ukhiya upazilas, plantations have been destroyed, economic and educational activities disrupted, prices have surged, and criminal activities linked to the refugee population have been reported. This is not unexpected, given that despite the humanitarian efforts from Bangladesh, NGOs, and residents, the sheer number of refugees has overwhelmed resources, making the camps barely habitable. The refugees now outnumber the locals by a ratio of two to one, exacerbating tensions and worsening conditions.

The refugees in Bangladesh are also at a high risk of experiencing a health crisis. An expansive colony resembling a slum has emerged as a result of the Rohingya population's unprecedented exodus since August 25. These camps are devoid of essential facilities that would shield the refugees from the weather, clean water, and proper sanitation. NGOs have intervened to offer assistance, but the rate of new refugees arriving has surpassed their capacity, resulting in appalling circumstances in the camps.

Lastly, if the global community fails to take decisive action to address the Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh could face serious security threats. Similar to how the Taliban recruited from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, there is a risk that the desperate conditions in these refugee camps could give rise to violence. Just as refugee camps became breeding grounds for violent responses to unresolved crises in Afghanistan and Palestine, there is a concern that the Rohingya crisis could fuel extremism. Such violence might not only be directed at Myanmar but could also threaten Bangladesh, echoing the historical pattern seen in other refugee crises.

What Does the Crisis Mean for Pakistan?

For Islamabad, the Rohingya crisis is politically significant, but Pakistan's main concerns are more closely linked to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and its persistent tensions with India, rather than the situation in Myanmar. Historically, even Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, dismissed a risky proposal from Rohingya leaders to merge their territory with Pakistan. Before his assassination, Jinnah met with General Aung San and assured him that Pakistan would not support any uprising by the Muslim minority in Burma. Instead, he encouraged the Rohingya to remain loyal citizens of the Burmese state. This position has led some to hold Jinnah responsible for the subsequent plight of the Rohingya population.

Pakistan, along with Bangladesh, has been one of the main destinations for Rohingya refugees, particularly those who fled in earlier waves during the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, even in Pakistan, these refugees have struggled to renew or obtain identification cards, which are crucial for accessing basic services like healthcare, education, and employment. Rohingya refugees living in Karachi's Arakanabad slum, for instance, often face harassment by the police due to their lack of documentation.

The Rohingya crisis has the potential to spark a much-needed national debate in Pakistan on issues such as refugees, identity, and how the country deals with its minorities. Notably, protests against Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya have been organised by a wide range of groups in Pakistan, demonstrating that the crisis resonates across different segments of society. It is not merely a cause

championed by the right-wing or conservative elements; the crisis highlights Pakistan's identity as a refuge for Asian Muslims and reinforces the idea that the country is defined by this particular religious identity. Political players in Pakistan may be tempted to deploy identity politics in the same way that India has responded to the Rohingya tragedy.

From an economic and geopolitical standpoint, Myanmar is of particular interest to China. The recent sale of the JF-17 fighter jets to the Myanmar Air Force underscores China's strategic involvement in the region. Although the JF-17 is a joint Pakistan-China project, the deal was finalised by Beijing, and Pakistan did not influence the sale once China decided to proceed. Given the importance of its relationship with China, Pakistan is unlikely to risk straining ties with Beijing over differing views on the Rohingya crisis or Myanmar's military actions against the Muslim minority. Finally, the Rohingya crisis also represents a potential threat to Pakistan's international reputation. Some have suggested that Islamabad is connected to security issues arising from the crisis. In India, there has been speculation, even before the recent surge of violence, that "Pakistan-based militants," including those associated with Lashkar-e-Taiba, have been working with Rohingya militants in Bangladesh. This perception complicates Pakistan's position on the Rohingya issue and underscores the potential for the crisis to impact its wider geopolitical standing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, resolving the Rohingya crisis requires sustained international pressure on Myanmar, recognition of the

country's genocidal policies, and the imposition of sanctions until Myanmar ceases its chauvinistic and racist actions against the Rohingya. However, given the inability of global powers to take decisive action, such a solution seems unlikely in the immediate future. This failure to act will only result in the continued ethnic cleansing and genocide of this Muslim minority. Bangladesh, already bearing the brunt of the humanitarian crisis, will continue to face the overwhelming consequences, while the broader impact on South Asia is likely to intensify.

Anger in Bangladesh and Pakistan is expected to increase as a result of the persecution and murder of the Rohingya, who are being killed mostly because of their religion. Over time, Bangladesh's government may come to view Myanmar as an outright adversary, especially since Myanmar's policies are rooted in anti-Bengali sentiment. The Burmese government has effectively pushed the burden of the crisis onto Bangladesh, expecting it to manage the consequences of the ethnic cleansing. This could

eventually lead to a prolonged period of hostility between the two nations, potentially escalating into a "cold war" scenario. In the worst case, if the international community continues to remain inactive, the tensions between Bangladesh and Myanmar could devolve into an armed conflict, with Pakistan and India possibly backing opposing sides. Such a development would deepen regional instability and draw in other stakeholders.

Ultimately, it is clear that the ongoing crisis is poised to inflict the greatest damage on South Asia, both politically and economically. For this reason, it is imperative that regional stakeholders—India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and others—come together to seek peaceful solutions. The continued failure to deal with the crisis's underlying causes will only increase the likelihood of greater regional turmoil. A concerted effort toward peaceful coexistence, diplomacy, and negotiation is essential to prevent further escalation and to promote stability in South Asia.

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