



Research Paper

# The Rohingya Crisis: A Humanitarian Disaster and its Impact on South Asia's Geopolitics

Dr. Rajbir Singh Dalal <sup>1</sup> & Vinay Yadav <sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The Rohingya crisis represents one of the most significant humanitarian issues of the 21st century. This paper explores the root causes, dimensions and regional implications of the crisis. It examines the historical context of the Rohingya minority's marginalization in Myanmar, the displacement of over a million refugees to neighboring Bangladesh, and the international community's response. In addition, it analyzes the crisis's impact on South Asian geopolitics, focusing on India-Bangladesh relations, regional security and diplomatic challenges. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from international relations, human rights and regional studies. The paper highlights the urgent need for a coordinated international response and sustainable solutions to prevent further escalation.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian Disaster, Regional Implications, Minority's Marginalization, Statelessness, Geopolitics and National Security.

Received 07 Jan., 2025; Revised 16 Jan., 2025; Accepted 18 Jan., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

## I. Introduction

The Rohingya crisis, one of the largest humanitarian emergencies in recent years, has exposed deep-rooted issues within Myanmar and the wider South Asian region. The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group in Myanmar's Rakhine State, have been the subject of decades of discrimination, violence, and systemic exclusion. The immediate catalyst for the 2017 crisis was an attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Myanmar's police posts, which was followed by a brutal military response. Myanmar's security forces launched a violent crackdown, characterized by widespread killings, sexual violence, and arson. In the wake of these atrocities, over 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, resulting in one of the largest refugee crises in the world. The international community, including the United Nations (UN), human rights organizations, and neighboring countries, responded with condemnation, but the situation on the ground remained dire. Bangladesh, which became the primary host for the refugees, faced overwhelming logistical challenges in providing shelter, food, healthcare, and education. This placed immense pressure on Bangladesh's already strained resources and created significant social, economic, and political challenges.

India's role in the crisis has been equally complex, balancing its geopolitical interests with Myanmar, regional security concerns, and its diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh. India's response, while sympathetic to the plight of the refugees, has often been cautious, largely due to its strategic and security ties with Myanmar, especially in the context of countering China's growing influence in the region. Thus, this paper examines the Rohingya crisis through historical, humanitarian, and geopolitical lenses, offering a comprehensive analysis of its implications for South Asia.

## Historical Context and Root Causes

The Rohingya crisis has deep historical roots that stretch back to the colonial era when the British colonial administration brought Muslim laborers from present-day Bangladesh to Myanmar. After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the ethnic and religious divide between the Buddhist-majority population and the Muslim Rohingya worsened. In 1982, Myanmar passed the Citizenship Law, which effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless by excluding them from Myanmar's official list of recognized ethnic groups. This legal exclusion turned

<sup>1</sup> HOD & Professor, Department of Political Science, Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa, Haryana- 125055

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Central University of Haryana, Vill- Jant-Pali, Mahendragarh, Haryana-123031 Email- [vinayyadav592@gmail.com](mailto:vinayyadav592@gmail.com)

the Rohingya into one of the largest stateless populations in the world, deprived of basic rights, such as the right to vote, access to healthcare, and freedom of movement. The systematic marginalization of the Rohingya has been compounded by religious and ethnic nationalism, particularly in Rakhine State, where tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine ethnic group and the Muslim Rohingya have escalated. The military junta, which ruled Myanmar for several decades, fostered a climate of ethnic and religious intolerance, portraying the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and a threat to Myanmar's national identity.

In 2012, violent clashes erupted between the Rohingya and the Rakhine Buddhists, resulting in significant loss of life and the displacement of thousands of Rohingya. The government's response was to segregate the communities, placing the Rohingya in internment camps, where they faced continued abuse and neglect. The persecution became even more acute in 2017 when the military launched a crackdown following attacks by ARSA militants. Myanmar's refusal to grant the Rohingya citizenship and its continued suppression of their rights turned what was initially a matter of discrimination into a full-blown humanitarian crisis.

### **The 2017 Crisis and Mass Displacement**

The 2017 Rohingya crisis began on August 25, when ARSA militants launched a series of coordinated attacks on Myanmar's security posts. In response, the Myanmar military initiated "clearance operations" against the Rohingya, leading to widespread violence. The military's brutality during these operations was unprecedented. Witnesses reported mass killings, sexual violence, the burning of villages and forced displacement. The violence was particularly targeted at women, children and the elderly, with numerous reports of torture and summary executions. The United Nations and human rights organizations have confirmed these accounts, describing the events as ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

Over the course of the military operations, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, crossing treacherous terrain and rivers to reach the safety of refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. This influx added to the already significant refugee population in the area. The camps, initially set up for a smaller number of refugees, became overcrowded and lacked sufficient resources to accommodate the new arrivals. Access to basic necessities like food, water, healthcare and sanitation became increasingly limited, exacerbating the health crisis.

The refugee population faced numerous challenges beyond their immediate survival needs. The psychological toll of the violence, the loss of homes and loved ones, and the uncertainty of their future created an atmosphere of despair. The situation was made worse by the spread of diseases like cholera and malnutrition. The international community, while providing humanitarian aid, has struggled to address the root causes of the crisis and ensure the safe and dignified return of the refugees to Myanmar.

### **Bangladesh's Response to the Refugee Influx**

Bangladesh has played a critical role in providing shelter and support to the Rohingya refugees, despite facing immense challenges. As the primary host country, Bangladesh opened its borders to the Rohingya fleeing violence in Myanmar, offering them temporary shelter in Cox's Bazar, a district already dealing with its own economic and environmental challenges. The local population in Cox's Bazar, which had already been struggling with poverty and resource scarcity, was further burdened by the sudden increase in population. The Bangladeshi government worked with international humanitarian organizations to provide food, water and medical supplies, but the sheer scale of the crisis quickly overwhelmed the existing infrastructure. However, the presence of so many refugees in a relatively small area has led to significant social and economic strains. The local population in Cox's Bazar has expressed frustration over the growing competition for resources, such as food and land. Additionally, the lack of adequate sanitation and healthcare facilities in the camps has led to outbreaks of disease, further complicating the situation. Although the Bangladesh government has maintained an open-door policy, the refugee crisis has become a growing political issue. The costs of hosting over a million refugees are significant, and Bangladesh has consistently called for international support and for Myanmar to take responsibility for the safe return of the refugees.

Despite these challenges, Bangladesh has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to the humanitarian cause, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive solution to the crisis. The international community, particularly organizations like the United Nations and the World Health Organization, has provided assistance, but long-term solutions remain elusive. As of now, repatriation efforts have been hindered by Myanmar's reluctance to offer guarantees of safety and citizenship to the Rohingya, leaving the refugees in a state of uncertainty.

### **Impact of the Crisis on India-Bangladesh Relations**

The Rohingya crisis has altered the nature of India-Bangladesh relations, giving a new dimension to regional diplomacy. To a greater degree, Bangladesh has tapped its ties with India for consideration of its position on the influx of refugees. While India has condemned the violence and urged the safe and dignified return of refugees, its response remains muted because of India's strategic interests in Myanmar, a key ally in countering China's growing influence in the region (Mukherjee, 2020). It has not called the Myanmar army action "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide," thus putting at some strain in ties with Bangladesh. The Indian government has called

for diplomatic channels to work to ensure safe conditions under which refugees can return to the country. However Indian backing for Myanmar's efforts in the shared context of security and trade limits more defined action on Rohingya issue (Ganguly, 2019).

Bangladesh, on the other hand, desires even stronger support from India given the enormous strain the crisis brings to bear on their resources. Bangladesh called on India for more active involvement in the safe repatriation of refugees and to make use of its influence to ensure that such a mandate is put on Myanmar to grant citizenship and basic rights to this group. Security concerns are more issues raised-and definitely, India and Bangladesh can also be caught up in extremist agendas when the crisis clears. This has led to discussions on better border management and security cooperation between the two countries to address both the refugee crisis and the broader security challenges posed by the situation.

### **Humanitarian and Legal Dimensions of Crisis**

The crisis of Rohingya reflects one of the most serious humanitarian catastrophes that involve both complex legal dimensions concerning international law and refugee rights protection. All these violations of human rights by the Rohingyas, which include mass killings, sexual violence, and destruction of their villages, stand as very serious breaches of international humanitarian law (Siddique, 2020). Such atrocious acts have hence resulted in large displacements, with more than one million Rohingyas seeking refuge in Bangladesh under fulfilling conditions in overcrowded camps. International human rights law outlines how to deal with such human crises, yet enforcement is still a challenge. Myanmar denies citizenship to the Rohingya, whose historical attachment to this state is considerably long for them to provide access under international law (Chakraborty, 2020). The 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law specifically excludes Rohingya from citizenship; thus, they are stateless de facto because this law does not provide for the state's citizenship. Therefore, the existing legal vacuum denies them all that which is basic in rights and protections opened to those inside the state against persecution by the military or local populace.

The rights of displaced persons are articulated in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, the repatriation process for Rohingya refugees consisted of varied legal entanglements. Some would have been availed temporary asylum by Bangladesh, yet their legal status remains on a tightrope. Besides incomplete citizenship or permanent settlement prospects, additional problems ensued (UNHCR, 2019). There has been domestic resistance toward citizenship for the Rohingya refugees since Bangladesh tends not to favor the consequence that such citizenship might have on the demographic balance of the nation.

Various international human rights organizations have condemned the acts of Myanmar as crimes against humanity and have made calls for action against the guilty ones in an international court. The ICC and the ICJ have been very supportive in the quest for accountability. In 2019, the case entitled *Gambia v. Myanmar* was filed by the Gambia in ICJ accusing Myanmar of genocide against the Rohingya. This case has formed a part of the entire international effort to hold Myanmar accountable for its actions, but the government of Myanmar is resisting these efforts by stating that the issue is internal and rejecting foreign interference (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Despite these legal instruments, international legal mechanisms have limited success because of the dysfunction in efficacious enforcement along with other political dynamics pertaining to the Myanmar military-led government. However, the international society did not have the means of coordinating efforts to hold Myanmar accountable and at the same time meaningfully protect the Rohingya. So, this response will be sufficient but undermined due to violence and sustained instability in that region, showing the difference between the legal norms concerning the implementation of conflict zones.

### **Efforts for Repatriation and Sustainable Solutions**

The current crisis faced by the Rohingya is turning a focus towards the issue of repatriation and ongoing attempts to find sustainable solutions to the refugee problem. Repatriation of the refugees back to Myanmar has taken place at a very slow pace and has not yielded results. The process of repatriation started in 2018, but it was beset with difficulties and, with many rounds of talks, the Rohingya refugees are left home unsafe and unwilling to return. The Rakhine State is still in danger; the Myanmar military continues operations within the area and undermines any assurances of safety for the returning refugees (Rahman, 2020). Indeed, one of the major hurdles towards repatriation is the lack of guarantees for the safety and dignity of the Rohingya in Myanmar. These refugees, being victims of violence and dislocation, remain fearful of returning to a hostile environment which could lead them to severe persecution. Indeed, the Myanmar government has failed to offer adequate guarantees for protection and, therefore, the community of the Rohingyas is still suspicious if they would return without an intact way towards citizenship and legal rights. The United Nations and Bangladesh have, time and again, emphasized the need for an all-inclusive and voluntary repatriation process, but such issues have witnessed Myanmar military leadership's reluctance to consider (UNHCR, 2019).

To create an enduring solution, a multi-pronged approach would be necessary. First, Myanmar should initiate measures to secure the safety of the Rohingya through citizenship and restoration of rights. The

international community would need to supplement these efforts through diplomatic means to exert pressure on Myanmar to comply with international norms and standards. Such measures would include Bangladesh's support in fulfilling the basic needs of the refugees, as well as protection and dignity. International aid organizations have played a crucial role in providing humanitarian assistance, but the scale of the crisis requires continued support (Siddique, 2020).

Also, establishing regional cooperation will manifest in a sustainable solution to the issue. India, as a regional power, has much to play in bringing Myanmar and Bangladesh into dialogue. The diplomacy that India conducts with both these countries will go a long way in mediating the dispute and perhaps promoting an all-comprehensive repatriation plan. Apart from that, the Rohingya will also be well shielded from becoming the pawns of other geopolitical rivalries through regional security arrangements, among which is cooperation on border security and counter-terrorism. Such a long-term solution can only be found in international efforts and the will of the political actors over time. They include also the accountability of Myanmar for what it did, the protection and rights of the Rohingya, and the regional cooperation to tackle the root causes of displacement.

## II. Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis presents a complicated and multi-faceted humanitarian disaster of geopolitical, legal and regional relevance. Major gaps have been exposed in international law and governance regarding the protection and responsibility of states for human rights violations. The international community's role in rendering humanitarian assistance has been significant, yet the provision of a coordinated and comprehensive addressing of the root causes of the crisis remains a great challenge. It can be said that the Rohingya struggle, displacement, statelessness, and violence inflicted by Myanmar's military warrant immediate and long-term attention. Bangladesh is under pressure, with increased opposition facing it by countries having limited resources and security concerns. India is also affected, as its position on the crisis finds itself somewhat complicated, given strategic interests with Myanmar and Bangladesh. The statutes of various international organizations as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court will be central in ensuring accountability and bringing justice to the victims of this crisis.

It is a way forward to negotiation and peace talks; legal processes, humanitarian assistance, and cooperation within the region comprise a range of instruments for the resolution of the Rohingya crisis. These will include the collective actions of the international community to punish Myanmar for its actions and guarantee that the safe and voluntary return of the Rohingya occurs. It will be a combination of effective rights on the refugee side and ensuring that further violations of human rights do not happen, along with addressing the root causes of ethnic and religious conflict in Myanmar.

## References

- [1]. Amnesty International. (2018). Myanmar: "We will destroy everything" – The Myanmar military's brutal campaign against the Rohingya. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/myanmar-we-will-destroy-everything/>
- [2]. Ganguly, S. (2019). India-Bangladesh relations and the Rohingya crisis. *South Asian Studies Journal*, 40(2), 112-128.
- [3]. Human Rights Watch. (2017). "Erased from the map": Ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/07/erased-map/ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims-myanmars-rakhine-state>
- [4]. Mukherjee, R. (2020). India's stance on the Rohingya crisis: Between human rights and strategic interests. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 28(3), 90-102.
- [5]. Rahman, M. (2018). Bangladesh's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis: Humanitarian challenges and diplomatic responses. Dhaka University Press.
- [6]. Siddique, M. (2018). The Rohingya crisis: An exploration of its historical and political roots. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 29(1), 17-34.
- [7]. UNHCR. (2018). Myanmar: The Rohingya crisis. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/rohingya-refugee-crisis.html>
- [8]. World Bank. (2019). The Rohingya refugee crisis: A Bangladesh perspective. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/12/01/rohingya-crisis-bangladesh>
- [9]. Ahmed, T. (2019). The Impact of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis on Bangladesh's National Security. *Asian Security Review*, 34(1), 58-74.
- [10]. Chakraborty, D. (2020). India's Position on the Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Geopolitical Considerations and Regional Diplomacy. *Journal of South Asian Politics*, 12(3), 105-119.
- [11]. Human Rights Watch. (2017). "Erased from the Map": Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/07/erased-map/ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims-myanmars-rakhine-state>
- [12]. Rahman, M. (2020). Challenges of Repatriation: The Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh. *South Asian Journal of Migration Studies*, 28(4), 93-112.
- [13]. Siddique, A. (2020). Myanmar's Military Junta and the Rohingya Crisis: A Geopolitical Analysis. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 14(2), 66-85.
- [14]. UNHCR. (2019). The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: A Humanitarian Disaster. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/rohingya-crisis>