



## **Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Security Concerns for Bangladesh**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author Md. Saddam Hossain created and designed the study plan. Authors HZ and Md. Sajjad Hosain surveyed the literature and collected secondary information. Authors Md. Saddam Hossain, HZ and Md. Sajjad Hosain wrote the first draft. Author LY organized and checked the final draft. All the four authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at identifying the public and national security issues created by the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Different published sources have been utilized in writing this review paper. The authors of this paper argue that the Rohingya issue is creating a number of security concerns for Bangladesh and a unified effort should be made in solving this issue involving Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, India and other neighboring countries. The authors further predict that although the issue is limited to Bangladesh at this moment, it will spread as a regional security concern soon if not solved as early as possible. Finally, the authors expect that this paper will be beneficial for further research on security issues postured by the Rohingyas.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The northern part of Rakhine (former Arakan) State of Myanmar, can be defined as one of the most mistreated and forgotten people in the world which is struggling to survive and keep up basic rights to live in the land where their ancestors have been for centuries. The inhabitants of this State are termed as "Rohingyas" who are one of the ethnic, linguistic and religious groups of people. Those people are officially stateless and disowned by the Myanmar Government arguing that they are not in fact Myanmar citizens and that migrated there originally from Bangladesh [1, 2]. Most of the Rohingyas are Muslims by religion and illiterate in modern education.

The Rohingyas are considered as the world's largest stateless population [3]. In August 2017 alone, more than 0.7 million Rohingyas compelled to migrate from Myanmar to Bangladesh and the incident has been described as one of the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world [4]. Bangladesh and Myanmar still has a positive relationship as neighboring sub-regional countries in Southeast Asia. Two countries share approximately 271 kilometers common border. The South Asian countries are not politically influential and mostly depended on leading powerful nations such as USA, Russia, China and India (nuclear power countries) [5].

Bangladesh is mainly known as a lower middle income developing economy. Despite of having problems at borders, it has kept friendly relationship with neighboring countries. As a result, foreign investors feel comfortable to invest in Bangladesh. During 2016, the Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh with the proposal to include the country with Maritime Silk Road One Project [6]. Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world with a small piece of land [7]. In this scenario, around 0.9 million Rohingyas have inflexed recently (2017 to 2019) to Bangladesh [8]. In fact, they are migrating from Myanmar to Bangladesh from 1942 (Fig. 1) although most of them went back to Myanmar till 1992 [9].

However, recently (2017 to present) migrated Rohingyas are unwilling to go back and are now staying at the refugee camps located in Cox's Bazar district, south-east of Bangladesh, having received international donations. This Rohingya

influx to Bangladesh has posed a severe challenge on border, public and social security. They are getting involved into several types of felonious activities such as creating fake documents and criminal activities [10]. A number of national and international organizations highlighted the security issue in Bangladesh caused by Rohingyas [11].

Many countries as well as international authorities are trying to assist in solving the crisis. As a result of international responses towards Rohingya repatriation, Myanmar has forced to sign a repatriation treaty with Bangladesh [12]. The repatriation process was supposed to take place on 23 August, 2019. But unfortunately, not a single Rohingya went back to Myanmar so far, rather they have put a number of conditions to go back [13]. After this failed attempt of repatriation, the issue has become a grave security challenge for Bangladesh. Still now, the Rohingyas keep coming to Bangladesh as refugees.

This refugee issue is creating a number of security threats for law enforcement agencies and existence of peace in Bangladesh. It may draw the attention of international extremist groups as they can allure the Rohingyas for money. This paper is aimed at highlighting such security issues and providing some recommendations for further attempts.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Rohingyas: The Only Stateless Nation

In general, the term "Rohingya" is referred as the Muslim minority group who previously lived in North-western part of Rakhine State in Myanmar. However, this is very basic information about them. In fact, they have a long and deep rooted history. A number of historians viewed that the origin of the name "Rohingya" came from "Rohan", "Roham" or "Rosham". Later, those names have changed to "Roshangee" and finally change to Rohingya [14]. Predominantly, they became the inhabitants of the ancient "Arakan Kingdom" presently known as "Rakhine State". But there is not enough linguistic or historical proofs favoring this argument. However, the naming of Rohingya is not very old event. It was only the beginning of 1950 when this name was starting to be used by themselves. In fact, a British journalist who wrote a book on the topic of ethnic minorities in Burma (present Myanmar),

mentioned them as Muslim Arakanese [14]. However, although even this name (Rohingya) is just a recent invention, the history of the Muslims in the North-western part of Arakan is not recent or short at all. A few books have been written by Rohingyas themselves although all of them were written and published abroad by the Rohingyas in exile. However, the Rohingyas insist their long history that begins more than thousand years ago together with their deep commitment in political, economic, social and cultural arenas in Arakan. On the other hand, the Buddhist Arakanese people proclaim a comparatively limited length and depth regarding the identity of the Muslim in the history of Arakan. The present Rohingyas comprehend that those Muslims who had resided in the pre-colonial period were definitely their ancestors, but the Buddhist Arakanese clearly differentiate between those Muslims residing since the pre-colonial period and those who immigrated into Arakan from Chittagong (Bangladesh) area under the British colonial rule. It is also important to indicate that the Buddhist Arakanese adopt the same criterion as the present military influenced Government of Myanmar does, recognizing the people who come into Burma after 1823 (1 year before the first Anglo-Burmese war began) as non-indigenous people.

## **2.2 Rohingya Inflows to Bangladesh and Beginning of the Crisis**

Since August, 2017 to June 2019, more than 1.2 million Rohingyas have fled from Myanmar's Rakhine State to escape the military attack of ethnic cleansing [15]. The atrocities committed by Myanmar security forces included mass killings, sexual violence, and widespread arson, amount to crimes against humanity. As result of these, during August and September 2017, a huge number of Rohingyas entered as refugees in Bangladesh and this heavy entrance can be termed as the beginning of the crisis. They took shelter in overcrowded Rohingya camps in Ukhaia, Cox's Bazar District. As a burden to already overpopulated Bangladesh, they are creating public and health security concerns locally even for the entire country. However, a good number of national and international organizations are working for the Rohingya repatriation although the process is still unsuccessful due to the ongoing violence in Myanmar. Myanmar Government has blocked the humanitarian response and placed restrictions on journalists, human rights observers, local and international NGOs and even the UN agencies. Political and

diplomatic progress to address the root causes of the crisis has been minimal. China and Russia oppose UN resolutions intended to end the campaign against the Rohingyas and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is divided on how to respond to the issue [16]. Even after 2 years since the latest exodus has begun, there is little hope that conflict will be resolved in near future.

According to the UNHCR [17], almost 1.2 million Rohingya refugees have been living inside Bangladeshi boarder who fled from Myanmar. Particularly since the last two years (2016-2018), they are frequently entering into Bangladesh for saving their lives. The history of the Rohingya influx into Bangladesh was actually began in 1942 when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan [18]. In 1942, an estimated 22,000 refugees crossed Naf river into Cox's Bazar Division in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) [19]. It is considered as one of the biggest and fastest growing refugee crisis in the world [17].

## **2.3 Rohingya Settlement, Camp Locations and Condition**

Mass killing and violence occurred during the end of August to end of December, 2017 in Myanmar. As a result, more than 0.9 million Rohingyas crossed border to Bangladesh [4]. Government of Bangladesh (GoB) took the responsibility to rehabilitate them for humanitarian reason at the southeast region in Cox's Bazar District. There were a number of waves of Rohingya influx to Bangladesh but 3 of them were very remarkable that occurred in 1978, 1992 and 2017 [20]. Although, some of them have been deported, sizeable number Rohingya refugees remained in Bangladesh. Those Rohingyas are designated as registered refugees and are managed through the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC). GoB refers them as undocumented nationals of Myanmar (UNM) [21]. The total number of refugees according to UNHCR is estimated to be 1.2 million (registered and unregistered) with 203,137 families [21]. This includes 52% female and 48% male and out of them, 50% are children [21]. Presently, there are 34 refugee camps in total inside Bangladesh [22]. The following Table 1 highlights the physical locations of Rohingya refugee camps and the registered population attached with each camp.

World Health Organization (WHO), recently reported that about 0.1million Rohingya children

have been born at different Rohingya camps inside Bangladesh from August 2017 to September 2019 and more than 89% of mothers are suffering from the lack of nutrition [23]. The children are also having the risks of possible outbreaks of measles, tetanus, diphtheria and acute jaundice syndrome. Moreover, more than 60% of the available water supplies in refugee camps have been contaminated, increasing the risk of spreading communicable and water-borne diseases. Such vulnerable refugees have turned to smuggling and arms dealing in order to pay money for food, shelter and other expenses resulting in risking exploitation, including sexual enslavement and unexpected activities [24].

Around 375,000 Rohingyas belong to the working age covering between 18-59 years. Less

than 50% of the total Rohingya population is engaged as wage laborers, 13.6% Rohingyas are reported to engage in small trading while 21% Rohingyas have been identified selling humanitarian aid as another key income source. However, more than 70% Rohingyas have no permanent source of making money [3].

#### 2.4 Unwillingness to Repatriate

Although a good number of refugees returned to their homes in Myanmar, starting from 1942, the Rohingya refugees who came to Bangladesh have been strictly reluctant to return. They argued a number of reasons for this reluctance. The basic one is the lack of security of their lives and safety. Another one they pointed is the fear

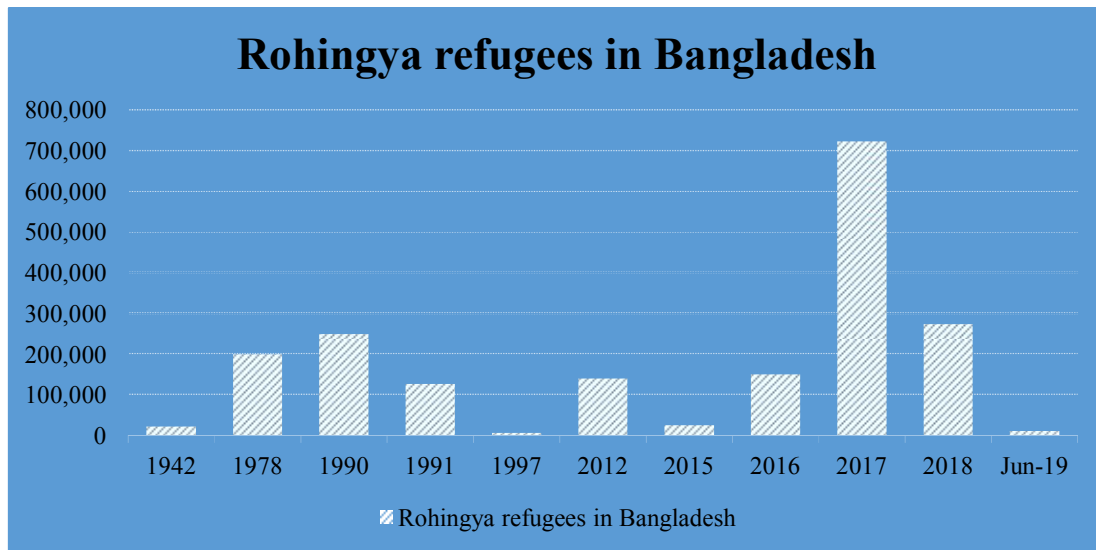


Fig. 1. Rohingya refugee influx into Bangladesh (1942-2019)

Source: ACAPS, 2017 (updated)

Table 1. Location of refugee camps in Bangladesh

Camp location/area	Upazila (Sub-district)	No.of Rohingyas (Registered)
Kutupalong expansion site	Ukiah	610,251
Kutupalong refugee camp	Ukiah	16,251
Camp 14, 15, 16	Ukiah	98,529
Camp 21 (Chakmarkul)	Ukiah	12,823
Camp 22 ( Unchiprang)	Ukiah	21,685
Camp 23 (Shamlapur)	Teknaf	13,049
Camp 24 (Leda)	Teknaf	35,583
Camp 25 (Alikhali)	Teknaf	9,501
Camp 26 (Nayapara)	Teknaf	71,562
Camp 27 (Jadimura)	Teknaf	14,822
Total number of refugees		904,056

Source: UNDP, 2018

of torture by the armed forces. A focus group discussion carried out by Xchange Foundation [25] in 2018 revealed that 97.77% of respondents are reluctant to go back to Myanmar. Out of them, almost all (98%) believed that they would face discrimination and torture upon their return. In addition, to whether they expected to be discriminated against, respondents were given the opportunity to openly share their biggest fears about returning to Myanmar. However, the results of that investigation have been listed on the Table 2.

## 2.5 Rohingya Issue: Security Concerns in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is facing a grave crisis along its borders with Myanmar. Since 25 August 2017, targeting violence against the Rohingya communities in Rakhine State, Myanmar has forced more than 0.9 million Rohingyas, with majority women and children, to repatriate to Bangladesh. Most of the Rohingya refugees got resided at the southern part of Cox’s Bazar such as Ukhaia, Teknaf and Ramu Upazillas (Sub-Districts) [8]. Such a huge number of migrated people have become a sign security threat for Bangladesh. The security concerns posed by Rohingya refugees due to their involvement in a number of activities have been highlighted on the next sub-sections.

### 2.5.1 Border security

One of the militant groups called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has been

accused for killing almost half dozen of security forces in Rakhine State of Myanmar in 2017. The same group might be a strong threat for Bangladesh too. In 2017, ARSA first highlighted themselves near to Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Rakhine [3]. The Bangladeshi security establishment is concerned that ARSA will try to recruit within the refugee camps inside Bangladesh and will use the camps as a base for cross-border fighting. Is ARSA linked to other regional or international terrorist organizations? So far, the clue is still unclear. Shortly before the New Year, Al-Qaeda in the subcontinent issued a declaration urging Bangladeshi Muslims to mount an armed rebellion in support of the Rohingyas. It is hard to predict whether actually those statements resulted from links between the two groups. But the same extremist network (Al-Qaeda) was never exposed themselves in Bangladesh before this. During the period of economic development, Bangladesh does not anticipate any unexpected security trouble in the country, but everybody knows about 1/11 in America.

### 2.5.2 Smuggling, drug storage and supply/transport

A good number of the Rohingyas are transporting “Yaba” (a kind of illegal drug) pill to earn money by selling it [26]. Yaba black market in South Asian countries is very high and Bangladesh is also a part of it. It is very small and convenient to carry more than hundred pills in one cigarette packet. Almost 92% of Yaba pills are carried by the Rohingyas and more than

**Table 2. The fear factors of Rohingya refugees to return back to Myanmar**

Type of fear	Number of Rohingya refugees mentioning	Percentage of sharing
Genocide/ethnic cleansing	712	43%
Killing	674	41%
Rape	588	35%
Burning	192	12%
Shooting	128	8%
Looting	82	5%
Discrimination	29	2%
Gang Rape	28	2%
Torture	26	2%
Beating	23	1%
Finish us	15	1%
Murder	14	1%
Chopping People	10	1%
Mass killing	4	0%
Punishment	1	0%

Source: Xchange Foundation, 2018

96% of Yaba pills come into Bangladesh by the Taknaf route [26]. Near about 200 Yaba hats (small shops) are active at the Kutupalong and Balukhali Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar [27]. Since May 2018, Bangladeshi security forces (Police, RAB and BGB) have become stricter and started crackdown operations on drugs. As a result, around 50 million Yaba pills and 400 Rohingyas and local people very close to Rohingya smugglers have been arrested and 72 smugglers had died in arms fighting with Bangladeshi security forces [28]. However, at present, majority of the Yaba smugglers are reported to be female Rohingyas.

### **2.5.3 Human trafficking and fabrication of documents**

Very recently, many Rohingyas are attempting to flee the camps for better opportunities in countries such as Middle-East, Malaysia and Thailand. For this reason, international human-trafficking gangs are taking desperate Rohingyas to embark on dangerous boat journey to Malaysia or Thailand using Bangladeshi fishing boats. During such dangerous boat journeys, many Rohingyas had died and still dying in the sea or being arrested by the security authorities. In May 2019, around 84 Rohingya refugees attempted a perilous boat journey to Malaysia. During another incident on 18 May, 2019, Bangladesh Coast Guard stopped a fishing boat with 17 Rohingyas and 5 Bangladeshi traffickers near Saint Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal [29].

Another concern is the tendency of fabricating documents such as National Identification (NID) Cards or even Passports. Bangladesh Police have arrested a large number of brokers with fake NIDs and 25,000 copies of Bangladeshi Passports in Chittagong [30]. Such criminal actions can be considered as one of the biggest threats for Bangladesh. Furthermore, they have the strong likelihood of joining international terrorist groups for money due to having similarities in religious beliefs.

### **2.5.4 Murder and injury**

Homeless, vulnerable Rohingyas cross the border into Bangladesh and settled at the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar District. After settlement, the Rohingyas are gradually arrested for attempting to robbery by the Police and RAB with lots of handmade arms. Generally the groups operate early in the morning and after

becoming a security challenge for Bangladesh. They are threatening other Rohingyas for money or valuable goods. There are rumors that a number of groups are active inside the camp areas. At first, the victims or the victim's family members receive death threats for money or valuable goods or join ARSA [10, 11]. If victims disagree with such illegal requests, they are being attacked by the terrorist Rohingyas. The scenario is not only evident inside the camps but outside also. Around 47 Rohingyas and local people have been killed as a result of internal clashes several times [31]. Later, investigations found involvement of ARSA with many of those incidents but ARSA had refused all complains. Furthermore, majority of the victims cannot even take police helps due to the fear of threat.

### **2.5.5 Arms fighting and dealing**

According to Bangladesh Police in 2019 [11], at least 328 cases have been filed against thousands of Rohingyas from August, 2017 to July 2019. Among those cases, around 31% were related to arms fighting and arms dealing where the majority percent of arms were handmade but some of those arms were highly automatic. According to a recent report, two extremist groups led by two Rohingyas named Nasrullah and Yunus engaged in frequent clashes in order to establish dominance at the refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar [10]. In June 2019, Bangladeshi elite force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) had arrested 5 members of extremist Rohingyas with handmade arms near Thainghola Rohingya camp area in Ukhiya Sub-District [11]. During another incident, around 10 to 12 Rohingyas were arrested in 2018 at Maheshkhal Island with a lot of handmade local arms and some of high regulations arms like AK-47, Sniper, some kind of sharp swords and knives [10, 11].

### **2.5.6 Hijack and robbery**

Hijacks and robberies have increased at the Rohingya refugee camps area in Cox's Bazar during night time and even sometime during the day [10]. There are many selected spots where hijacking is a regular incident such as bus stations, local markets, tourist spots and other quiet places with no or inadequate lighting. From December 2017 to September 2019, around 12 Rohingyas have been the sunset. They work as a team targeting any person carrying money or something valuable with them. Cox's Bazar Police had already filed

more than 328 cases from December 2017 to September 2019 and almost 56 members of them have been arrested [10]. Another tendency is attacking those who come to the camps for donating grants or collecting news. In 21 February 2019, 6 journalists (3 of them were German) went to Ukhia Rohingya camp to collect and observe the circumstances were attacked by the Rohingya extremists [32].

### 2.5.7 Extremism and terrorism

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) Report on December 2018, a Mujahideen extremist group will rise up within very short time in South Asia [33]. Most of the Rohingyas are illiterate and blind on the religion. Moreover, they lost everything they had during the last violence in 2017 in Myanmar. Now they have no specific identity and are restricted from free movement. In the meantime, extremist groups such as ARSA are targeting Rohingya to join them [34]. Many extremist groups are applying allusive techniques for attracting Rohingyas to join them such as paying money, providing foods & free weapons and so on. In June 2019, Bangladesh Police have found 3 extremist Rohingyas with lot of extremist symbols like bomb making materials, local arms, gunpowder etc. In September 2018, police found 5 Rohingyas burnt by their own bomb blast. Such incidents can well indicate footprints of Rohingyas joining with extremist groups due to the lack of social status, poverty, blind religious knowledge and lack of opportunities. In particular, young Rohingyas are involving themselves with extremist groups now-a-days [35].

### 2.5.8 Marriage between the Rohingyas and local people

There are many evidences that some Rohingyas are trying to build the relationships with the local people through marriage [36]. As noted earlier, Rohingyas have similar religious beliefs (Islamic) as the local people have. Some desperate Rohingyas are trying to get into the marital relationship with local Bangladeshi people by making fake NIDs and Passports. Such relationships can be considered as one the major security threats to the national identity.

### 2.5.9 Uncontrolled movement

Although the Rohingya refugees are concentrated on several camps, they often flee and mix themselves up with the local people. As

a matter of fact, they can disguise easily among the local people (Chittagongians) as both those people (Chittagongians and Rohingyas) have similarities in body structure, facial structure, language and attire. Such attempts can be considered as one of the serious national identity threats.

## 3. ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is aimed at providing some action recommendations on how to solve this grave crisis and create a permanent solution of such problems. The recommendations have been produced through the following sub-sections. Such action recommendations have been prepared on the basis of national & international security experts, social scientists and political leaders.

1. The first and foremost solution of this refugee crisis is the safe return of the Rohingyas to their native land. But until the security condition cannot be ensured to be safe and inhabitable, they will not return willingly. Therefore, Myanmar can ensure a safe zone for Rohingyas in Myanmar with the supervision of UN peacekeepers. Myanmar should grant unfettered access for the UN and its international NGO partners, as well as the media, to northern Rakhine State for the delivery of essential humanitarian support and in order to allow independent assessment of the situation on the ground.
2. Bangladesh Government and its international partners should deepen their political engagement with the Rohingya refugees and consult them about their future. So far, there is almost no consultation or even processes in place to do so. Also, Myanmar Government should be kept under pressure regarding political, economic and international relations to force them take back the Rohingyas and ensure their safety. Measures can be taken to push the Government of Myanmar to address impunity and discrimination through global arms embargo, bilateral pressure on countries supporting Myanmar's military and referral to the International Criminal Court, although it should be the final measure (that has already been done by a third country, Gambia).
3. The UN can demand access for the fact-finding mission and any UN-mandated

follow up mechanism as well as for the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar and independent media, human rights groups and humanitarian organizations. It can also impose additional targeted sanctions on the Myanmar security officers responsible for gross human rights abuses including Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (already has been imposed by the US and UK Governments).

4. Appoint a high-level presidential envoy on Myanmar (could be a “dual-hatted” officials already serving in Government), who would seek to work with like-minded Governments to lead international efforts to end abuses, provide assistance to refugees, and promote conditions that will permit the eventual safe and voluntary return of the Rohingyas to Myanmar.
5. Lastly, and again, the ultimate solution of this grave crisis is the return of the Rohingyas to their country. As a middle income country, Bangladesh cannot keep those refugees in its already densely populated land which is severely affecting the local environment, economy, society, and culture. Moreover, the international donation on which the Rohingyas are dependent now, will surely not continue for a longer time.

These are the recommendations provided by the authors. They hope that if those recommendations can be implemented, the world will evident a permanent solution for this problem.

#### **4. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This is one of the initial studies of this kind in investigating this important security issue caused by refugees. As an extremely important issue, this area lacks acute attention from the researchers and policy makers. Therefore, the authors hope that this review paper would motivate the academic researchers, security specialists and policy makers for further analysis as well as for policy formulation & implementation.

#### **5. LIMITATIONS, RESEARCH GAPS AND FURTHER SCOPE OF STUDY**

However, although focusing on a very glaring issue, the paper has several limitations. First, it has been written based on secondary and

published sources of information. A quantitative study based on primary data would be more revealing to address the issue. Based on such limitations, the authors suggest further studies can be conducted in this particular region with a large representative sample on multiple countries or cultures. Therefore, there is a very good scope of conducting or extending this research into a next level.

#### **6. CONCLUSIONS**

It is true that the Asian countries often suffer from a lack of regional planning combating mass migration or large influxes of refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, human migration in this region is viewed as a domestic matter or a bilateral issue concerning only the country of origin and the host community. In the case of the Rohingya influx into Bangladesh, Government policy responses and planning have been slow and delayed. The responses from inter-governmental regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have primarily been one of non-interference. Rather, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and Myanmar continue to address the issue bilaterally. So far, Bangladesh is reluctant to introduce legislative amendments and policies related to the definition, regulation and protection of refugees and asylum seekers. Historically, Bangladesh’s response to the influx of Rohingya has been enabled to attract humanitarian relief and implement push-back policy and repatriation. Thus, the lack of legal and policy framework pertaining to refugee protection in Bangladesh leaves the Rohingyas vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in their host environment. Their irregular status and restricted mobility, coupled with their limited access to livelihoods and education, force them to be almost entirely reliant on international aid.

However, it should be noted that unless actions taken right now, Bangladesh as well as the entire Southeast Asian region will be troubled by terrorism and other extremist activities which is already evident to some extent. The authors’ concern in this paper is regarding the regional security and such stateless people are the main sources of cultivating terrorism. Bangladesh should sit with Myanmar involving the international bodies for an enduring solution as soon as possible. It can be also an example for other nations as a pre-cure for such problem created from ethnic cleansing.



## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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