

The Rohingya refugee crisis: forgotten then, forgotten now

Tarik Kadir • Secours Islamique France

Lifted with difficulty to the category of major crisis, the situation of the Rohingya refugees at the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh is forever bogging down. Whilst the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, has declared that “this seemed to be a classical example of ethnic cleansing”, Western chanceries are hesitating, hindered by the ambiguous position of Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize winner. Tarik Kadir, engaged in the field alongside Secours Islamique France, explains to us the situation, its origins and its perspectives.

The Rohingya ethnic group has been described as the most persecuted population on the planet. What can be added to this is that they are arguably the most forgotten population, given the lack of attention to their plight, and that despite the severity of the conditions under which they live and the atrocities committed against them.

The vast majority of Rohingya are stateless, and therefore non-entities in the countries in which they have lived since their origin as an ethnic group, namely Myanmar. Being stateless leaves the Rohingya with no recourse to national legal systems, rights, and simply recognition of their existence. In order to cope, many Rohingya have travelled to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, and the Middle East, seeking a better life, and meeting with many dangers along the way, including human traffickers and enslavement.

At the end of August 2017, a heavy flow of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh began as people fled harsh military reprisals to attacks [led by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's – ARSA – rebels, editor's note] on military installations. Widespread reports of rape, torture, indiscriminate killing, mass graves, and other atrocities accompanied the Rohingya crossing into Bangladesh, which already housed between 300,000 and 400,000 Rohingya from Myanmar.

What is the origin of this crisis?

For many actors, the magnitude of the current refugee crisis eclipses the historic background which has begotten it. In reality, as grave as it is, it is simply the latest event in a series of focused efforts to exclude the Rohingya from Myanmar since the 1962 independence¹.

¹ Human Rights Watch, “Historical background”, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-01.htm>

Some key dates

1978: Operation “Naga Min” (Dragon King); violence in Northern Rakhine forced approximately 250,000 people to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.

1982: Citizenship Act listing 135 ethnic groups as part of Burmese identity, excluding the Rohingya, which denationalized the population, making them stateless.

1991: Operation “Clean and Beautiful Nation”; again, more than 250,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. Most Rohingya were repatriated to Myanmar, though a fraction were granted refugee status (currently about 25,000), few of whom have had any choice but to stay in a camp, as a 3rd country solution has been altogether elusive.

More recently, violence in 2012 forced approximately 120,000 Rohingya into camps outside of Sittwe, the Rakhine State capital. As a result, aside from a single guarded neighborhood, no Rohingya are to be found in Sittwe Town. The camps where the Rohingya have been living with severely restricted movement have been described as concentration camps.

In October of 2016, violent resistance to the oppression resurfaced² with attacks on military installations in Rakhine State by a small armed group of the ARSA. Its subsequent attacks, especially that in August 2017, while small in scale, provided a pretext for wholesale military intervention in Rakhine, targeting ethnic Rohingya indiscriminately, regardless of the fact that the vast majority of Rohingya are non-violent and that many of them are persecuted by the rebellion that attacks military installations in their name.

Working conditions for humanitarian actors

On the frontline to response the soaring humanitarian needs of the Rohingya are the aid agencies working in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Prior to the 2012 violence in Rakhine State resulting in displacement of hundreds of thousands and relocation of approximately 120,000 Rohingya to camps outside of Sittwe, few aid agencies were present in that State. Before and after the 2012 violence, even fewer agencies had an operational presence in the Northern part of the State (principally in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathidaung), which is accessible from Sittwe only by hours of boat and then car travel, and where movement restrictions are applied and means of ensuring security limited (satellite telephones are forbidden). Periodic violence against aid workers in the State, at times targeted, has also compromised the ability of aid agencies to access beneficiaries.

Similarly, prior to the current refugee influx into Bangladesh, not many aid agencies, especially international NGOs, were operational in Cox’s Bazar District, the main area of Rohingya concentration in Bangladesh, and one of the poorest parts of what is one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite the persistent high level of humanitarian needs, in past years most NGOs found it “too difficult” to work in Cox’s Bazar, with official access authorization elusive and a stigmatization that those working to aid “illegal immigrants” or “undocumented Myanmar Nationals”.

The primary reason for this lack of presence has been indeed the difficulty in obtaining this authorization, either in Myanmar or in Bangladesh. Moreover, many aid agencies felt that they

² The first violent resistance emerged in the early 1990s.

would unacceptably be forced to compromise on humanitarian principles (as free and fair access) in order to obtain authorization. In addition, humanitarian donors were reticent to fund work in Northern Rakhine State and in Cox's Bazar area, especially again without the near-impossible government authorizations for NGOs.

“When the house is full, how can you have more guests?”

That was already declared in 2012 by a Rohingya refugee on living in Bangladesh, Kutapalong Makeshift Camp. Since the influx of refugees beginning in late August 2017, Bangladesh has witnessed a flood of aid agencies to Cox's Bazar, the destination of the now nearly 700,000 refugees fleeing the most recent violence in Rakhine State. Bangladesh has, in the short term, welcomed the support of aid agencies, as the crisis has transformed it in the largest refugee camp on the planet, overwhelming the already strained local infrastructure.

The main area of refugee settlement is south of Ukiah, bordering the Kutapalong Registered Camp (established in 1991), which in turn is surrounded by the Kutapalong Makeshift Camp, whose population has periodically augmented and decreased since the establishment of the registered camp, initially populated by those hoping to be granted refugee status and later by those seek safety in numbers, and with nowhere else to go. The new area of settlement, Kutapalong Extension or Kutapalong-Balukali (the two areas indistinct) are so densely populated that refugees have approximately 8 square meters per person, while the international standard for refugees is 45 square meters³. This density poses enormous problems for aid workers seeking space for basic installations such as water points, latrines, bathing areas, clinics, schools, and more. Moreover, since the vast majority of shelters have been built in an *ad hoc* fashion, the pathways through the camps resemble a warren that will be difficult to access when the rains come (beginning in April) as deforestation and precarious building on slopes begets a high risk of landslides and flooding, the latter of which will block access routes.

Rohingya exodus: a look back at the summer of 2017

By Pierre Failer

In August 2017, thousands of Rohingya families, fleeing their villages in Myanmar, crossed the border into Bangladesh and began walking along the N1 national highway linking the towns of Teknaf and Cox's Bazar. They were headed for the refugee camps, some of which were newly established, others in place since the first exodus in 1978 (see “Some key dates” in Tarik Kadir's article). A virtually uninterrupted flow of 700 000 people stretching over dozens of kilometres advanced inexorably to a point 30 km south of Cox's Bazar where the northernmost camps were located. They were not authorised to go beyond this point. They carried bags on their heads or shoulders, stuffed with the few possessions they had managed to grab in their hasty attempt to escape from the Myanmar security forces. All along the roadside, families rested for however long it took them to find the strength to carry on. The arrival of bad weather worsened the already desperate conditions of this population in exile. Outside the pre-existing camps such as

³ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, “Chapter 4: Minimum Standards in Shelter, Settlement and Non-Food Items”, www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/95884/D.01.02.a.%20SPHERE%20Chap.%204-%20shelter%20and%20NFIs_%20English.pdf and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Emergency handbook. Camp planning standards (planned settlements)”, <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/45582/camp-planning-standards-planned-settlements>

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Kutupalong, which had already been sheltering 30,000 refugees before the events of August 2017, families waited for the head of their household or group to return with news of where on the wooded hillside they had been allotted shelter. The elderly, young children and babies were the worst affected by this forced exodus. Some families had spent a whole week walking through the forests in the north of the Myanmar state of Rakhine, with nothing to eat other than what they could find in the forest. One mother we encountered had fed her children on nothing else but ground leaves for several days. In the new camps, the refugees arrived in a state of utter exhaustion and spent most of their time sleeping to recover. As for the children, at least they had their games to distract them briefly from their exiled status. In October 2017, the Bangladeshi government began assigning the exiled Rohingya to specific camps, registering them and providing them with identification cards (*Myanmar's national registration card*). An agreement concluded between Bangladesh and Myanmar at the end of November 2017 was supposed to enable this population in exile to return home. But there is still little sign of this happening and meanwhile NGOs are left with the huge task of ensuring acceptable living conditions for over a million people.

Pierre Failler is research director and lecturer in the University of Portsmouth (UK) Economics Department. He makes regular trips to Bangladesh for his work, especially to the south of the country on the border with Myanmar. During his trips, he has been able to observe (and photograph – see his photograph introducing the “Perspectives” section) the exodus and installation of Rohingya migrants in the camps.

Translated from the French by Mandy Duret

Attempt to analyze and foresight test

While negotiations have been ongoing between Myanmar and Bangladesh for the repatriation of the Rohingya fleeing this most recent wave of violence, it is hard to give credence to the idea that repatriation will take place in the near future, and, moreover, that the Rohingya will be voluntarily repatriated given the extreme violence they have witnessed.

Should the Rohingya refugees filling the Kutupalong-Balukhali Camp since August 2017 remain for the indefinite future, aid has to shift from relief to mid and long-term support. Moreover, the longer the refugee population resides in Cox's Bazar, the deeper the impact on the impoverished host community, which has seen large-scale deforestation as trees on what was national forest land are cut for cooking fuel, and an increase in competition for daily labour, which many rely on for their livelihood.

Without wanting to pursue a pessimistic line of thought, the outlook for the future of the Rohingya is grim. Several scenarios can be advanced, which time will confirm or deny:

- the Rohingya recently arrived from Myanmar will not return for a long time (probably in terms of years): hence, their situation will become entrenched;
- as rhetoric of repatriation schemes comes forth, aid agencies will stay in a pattern of “hurry up and wait”: discouraged from anything surpassing emergency response efforts yet finding that time passes with no durable solution. The evidence for this can be found in the fact that it is already nearly half a year since the current displacement began and no credible way forward has been established;

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- most NGOs responding to the refugee influx into Bangladesh are not going to stay long;
- access for humanitarian workers in Rakhine State will remain severely restricted, especially for Northern part.

The source of the problem and the solution lie in Myanmar. Certainly there will be no durable solution for the Rohingya in the near future until such a time as they are accepted as citizens of Myanmar and granted all commensurate rights. As history has shown, compromises on these rights has lead to the Rohingya living under a heavy burden of persecution begetting humanitarian indicators that in any other context would call for emergency response.

Biography

Tarik Kadir • Tarik Kadir has been working for over 20 years in the humanitarian sector since earning his MPH in 1997. Having been based or worked in Africa, Asia, Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East, Tarik has worked with several NGOs and taught in several universities. As Regional Operations Director-Asia for Action contre la faim, Tarik worked to support interventions in Myanmar and Bangladesh, visiting both countries numerous times. Most recently, Tarik has twice worked in Bangladesh with Secours Islamique France (SIF) and their partner the Bangladeshi NGO Friendship [see No. 2 of our review for a presentation] in response to the most recent Rohingya influx.

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