

Military Interface in Myanmar and the Uncertainty of Rohingya Repatriation

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Abstract

Rohingyas are hesitant to return to Myanmar because they are unsure of what will happen to them there, including if they will receive their citizenship back, life security, human dignity, and access to their abandoned homes. This study, which is based on content analysis, looks at the state of repatriation operations, the government's diplomatic skills, and the effects of military intervention on Rohingya refugees in Myanmar. The prime question was how military intervention in Myanmar jeopardizes Bangladesh's current diplomatic efforts to secure the return of Rohingya refugees. Findings show that the deteriorating political climate in Myanmar can be blamed for the failure of repatriation negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Rohingyas are anxious and frustrated since the military government's position on repatriation is still unclear. Evidence of ethnic cleansing has been found by international human rights organizations, but China, Russia, and other powerful nations have sided with Myanmar. The analysis emphasizes how crucial Chinese participation in the bilateral effort to resolve the Rohingya issue is. Concerns are raised about the future of the repatriation procedure in the light of the military coup in Myanmar. Repatriation could be used by the military government to justify its control and to build a reputation abroad. The vulnerable situation of the Rohingyas needs to be addressed with a consistent and morally sound plan. This study emphasizes the significance of having a consistent and ethically sound approach for handling the Rohingyas' vulnerable situation and safeguarding their well-being.

Key Words: Diplomatic Efforts and Geopolitics, Military in Myanmar Politics, Repatriation, Rohingya Refugees.

Introduction

Many analysts have explained that the military in Myanmar has practiced intimidation so that the Rohingyas do not have to worry about returning to Myanmar. Bangladesh has said that it will take back Rohingyas at the Zero Line of the border first when the repatriation process begins. Since the Rohingyas have not yet entered Bangladesh, there is no need to verify their identities. In the long 62 years since its independence in 1947, civilians have been in power in Myanmar for only 15 years. In the last 10 years, Myanmar has been ruled officially by a civilian ruler but realistically by a military ruler. Bangladesh's move to secure its border is particularly commendable given the political

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unrest and democratic vacuum that are currently roiling Myanmar. On the border, Bangladesh needs to be more vigilant and stronger.

The likelihood that the US and other European nations would urgently strive to find ways to end the democratic vacuum in Myanmar, it would increase significantly if the government of Bangladesh took a strict and unambiguous stance. In addition, the constitution was amended in 2006 (25 percent of seats in parliament, three ministries will be from army, and Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief will be the army chief, etc.) to strengthen the military's position in governing the state. It is worth mentioning that after August 25, 2016, about seven and a half lakh Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh with 'Janta' in their hands to escape the brutal killings, brutal torture, indiscriminate rape, and wholesale arson by the Myanmar military (UNICEF, 2019).

At present, there are more than 11 lakh Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, both old and new. Bangladesh has been emphasizing the repatriation process from the very beginning to solve the Rohingya problem. Following this, a repatriation agreement was signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar on 23 November 2016. A task force was formed on December 19, 2016. A 'physical arrangement' agreement was reached in January 2016, under which the Rohingyas would be repatriated to Myanmar within two years from the start of the repatriation process. But in the present context of the military coup, a vital question is raised, what is the future of the Rohingya repatriation process? This study has considered the following objectives to critically analyze the impact of military interference in Myanmar on the plight of Rohingya refugees sheltered by the government of Bangladesh.

- To understand the progress of Rohingya repatriation efforts and explain the diplomatic abilities of the government.
- To perceive the consequences of the military interference in Myanmar and the plight of Rohingya refugees.

The study has also proposed an important research question, to what extent, Military interference in Myanmar will demean the ongoing diplomatic efforts of the government of Bangladesh for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees? This study used a content analysis approach to analyse the state of repatriation efforts, the diplomatic abilities of the administration and the consequences of military engagement in Myanmar for Rohingya refugees. Content analysis enables rigorous exploration and interpretation of available data, yielding appropriate insights and findings. The fundamental research question is, how does military action in Myanmar affect Bangladesh's continuing diplomatic efforts to return Rohingya refugees? To answer this research question, the study has conducted a thorough assessment of relevant materials, such as papers, reports, and media sources.

The websites provide information on the current circumstances as well as the problems faced throughout the repatriation process. Because of Myanmar's evolving political atmosphere, repatriation talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar have experienced significant delays and impediments. The military government's equivocal stance on

repatriation has fueled worry and anger among the Rohingyas, stifling progress in the repatriation process. International human rights agencies have also discovered indications of ethnic cleansing. This study underlines the importance of having a consistent and morally strong plan to solve the problems regarding the vulnerable status of the Rohingyas and ensure their well-being during the repatriation process.

Military Interface in Myanmar and the Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees: A Critical Juncture

Relevant literature and reviews of Myanmar's security forces show how tough they are on the question of Rohingyas. Bangladesh's talks with the country on Rohingya repatriation have been stalled for six months since the military came to power in Myanmar. Shahriar Alam, Bangladesh's state minister for foreign affairs, told the BBC that Bangladesh's progress on the issue had been stalled due to the changing political situation in Myanmar. In his first televised speech since taking power in a coup, Myanmar's army chief, Senior General Min Aung Laing, said that his government would not change Myanmar's current foreign policy. The agreement to repatriate the Rohingyas will not be affected, although he did not mention the word 'Rohingya' in his speech." Mr. Muniruzzaman said: "Such a move by Myanmar is a sign of non-cooperation. The Rohingyas are already afraid of returning to Myanmar. Such an increase in military might would create more fear in their minds." Since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis last August, Bangladesh has undertaken various diplomatic activities (UNHCR, 2019). The UN human rights body and various international human rights organizations believe that there is evidence of ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

In this situation the big powers like China, Russia and regional power India have sided with Myanmar. Analysts explain that various statements and criticisms have no effect on the Myanmar authorities internationally (Imtiaz, 2010). Major General (Retd.) A. N. M. Muniruzzaman thinks that if Bangladesh wants to retaliate on the border, the whole repatriation process could be dashed. Mr. Muniruzzaman said, "Bangladesh should not fall into the trap of Myanmar. If a conflict situation arises on the border, it will never be in Bangladesh's interest." The way the homeless people were supposed to be repatriated from Bangladesh as per the bilateral agreement will continue," he said. On the issue of Rohingya rehabilitation, he said that the rehabilitation work of the displaced people in the temporary camps inside Myanmar will continue. The agreement with Bangladesh will be implemented through negotiations, he said, if it does not harm the interests of the country.

It was decided that those who are accepted among the displaced persons, will be allowed to return according to their 1982 citizenship (Karim, 2000). But a tripartite meeting between Bangladesh, Myanmar and China scheduled for February 4 has been postponed. The Rohingyas could not be repatriated even three years after they took refuge in Cox's Bazar. Bangladeshi officials are now waiting to understand the position of Myanmar's military government. After Aung San Suu Kyi's government, many people in Bangladesh are now questioning whether there will be any difference in position between the

Myanmar military government on the Rohingya issue. After the military has taken full control of Myanmar, there has been renewed frustration among Rohingyas in the Teknaf-Ukhia camps in Cox's Bazar (Nasir, 2018). Mohammad Noor, a Rohingya leader from the Kutupalong camp in Ukhia, said talks were underway with the Bangladesh government on repatriation during Aung San Suu Kyi's government. He noted that there were now doubts among them about the position of Myanmar's military government.

When there was a system of democratic government in Myanmar the international community, including the Bangladesh government, was having talks with them. Now the military government has been formed. It is unknown at this time what he will do after leaving the post. And the army has tortured and driven Rohingyas away (Philip, 1992). So how can they hope positive attitude from that army?" This is a common question of the Rohingyas. Many Rohingya leaders in Cox's Bazar are expressing frustration over the situation in Myanmar. Shortly before the military took over Myanmar, a virtual meeting was held between Bangladesh and China at the Foreign Secretary level on January 19. After more than a year, the meeting was rescheduled for February 4. However, the scheduled meeting has been postponed. Syeda Rozana Rashid, a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at Dhaka University, said there would be some differences between the military government and the previous government.

The Position of Bangladesh Government

At this critical juncture should Bangladesh government take a new strategy to send back the Rohingyas? Bilateral talks will now have a breakthrough. Now, of course, there are new things to be considered. In the past Bangladesh used to think the same way. Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has said that Bangladesh will try to implement the agreement signed between the two governments. "We have an agreement with the government. No one in particular has agreed. So the process should continue. And we have a history. We handled the problem when there was a military government in Myanmar. Why not this time? ""If they do repatriation, there is an opportunity for them to be with others. So they should take that advantage. We have said that the Rohingya repatriation process will continue - we hope so," he said. The agreement was reached between the governments of the two countries (UNDP, 1994). But even in three years, Aung San Suu Kyi's government has not taken any effective steps to implement it.

The then Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque was one of the key players in Bangladesh's efforts to resolve the Rohingya crisis and sign the agreement. Despite the agreement, Myanmar was trying to delay it. Therefore, there is no reason to be optimistic at the moment. Because Myanmar government's intention to take the Rohingyas back has never been clear. Wei Loy, a Myanmar human rights activist, believes that the position of the military government in Myanmar will not differ from that of Aung San Suu Kyi's government in taking back the Rohingyas. He was an adviser to the Kofi Annan Commission on the Rohingya Crisis. He thinks that Myanmar's policy towards the Rohingyas may remain the same. Most of all their foreign policy will be pretty much the

same. It can be mentioned that they have appointed a foreign minister who served as foreign minister since 2010.

The foreign minister will be in charge of the whole situation now. It is expected that Myanmar should have reached the goals of the agreement that Myanmar has made with the Bangladeshi government. While Aung San Suu Kyi was in power, millions of Rohingya fled Myanmar to Cox's Bazar in 2016 due to military operations. That is why even though the army was the main factor Ms. Suu Kyi did not take a strong stand for the Rohingyas. Humayun Kabir, a former diplomat, said Myanmar's military had played a key role in negotiating repatriation with Bangladesh, even though Ms Suu Kyi was led by the previous government. Rather Bangladesh is in a bit of a delay in the process.

It cannot be said that the Myanmar government will move away from the activities that have taken place over the last three years. Now the military forces have come to power by removing Suu Kyi. So, there is no reason why they will move away from the Rohingya problem, no matter how much they move or progress (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Many analysts believe that China's close ties with Myanmar will continue despite the military taking power. In that context, Bangladesh should now focus on getting Chinese help so that the Rohingyas do not come again and the refugees who are here are also sent back.

The Role of China

Syeda Rozana Rashid, a teacher of the Dhaka University said, "China is a factor here. China needs to be more involved in the bilateral process that is going on here. We have approached everyone on the Rohingya issue. We have approached Myanmar. We have gone to all states and the UN and international courts. China has made some progress in this regard. Japan has also made some progress. But China has made many efforts in this regard." Mr. Momen said: "We have placed China in confidence. One of the concerns of many of our western friends is that more Rohingyas may now come from Myanmar. We have secured the border. Those who have come before are accepted by the people of Bangladesh". In this regard, Kuala Lumpur Malay University Institute of China Professor said. "As the third country outside Myanmar and Bangladesh, only China can help Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue," Syed Mahmud Ali told BBC Bangla. "However, Myanmar and China are very much dependent on each other on other issues, including economic, geopolitical and security. The relationship between them is very close (David, 2018)".

It is very difficult to get help from the Myanmar authorities without China's support. China mainly imports oil and fuel gas from the Middle East, which is unloaded at the port. The Chinese have spent billions of dollars building two pipelines through the port over the past few years to supply oil and fuel gas, and Myanmar has had to pay a lot of money for that. The pipeline is used to transport oil and fuel gas from the Middle East to Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan province.

Myanmar is now a full-fledged military state with a military government in place. Democracy, which has been under 49 years of continuous military rule since 1972, got a chance to breathe a sigh of relief in 2011, but exactly 10 years later, that democracy is back in the box of military rule. However, Rohingyas refuse to return to Myanmar. Because where Myanmar will take them? Will they be given back their citizenship, security of life, human dignity? Will they be given back their abandoned home? They did not receive credible assurances from the country. As a result, the first and second rounds of repatriation failed. The repatriation process was almost halted in 2020 due to an outbreak of the coronavirus, but a meeting between the Foreign Secretaries of Bangladesh and Myanmar was held on 19 January 2021 at the Chinese Embassy to resume the repatriation process.

Question of Military Government in Myanmar

A sudden military coup in Myanmar has raised fears and questions whether the repatriation process will end. The military coup does not seem to have stopped the Rohingya repatriation process. One argument is that the way the Suu Kyi government was moving forward with the Rohingya repatriation process with Bangladesh had the support of the military. So the military government seems to be continuing that process. Apart from that, the repatriation agreement that took place on November 23, 2016, was not conducted with the individual Suu Kyi or the government led by Suu Kyi. The agreement was with the state of Myanmar. On the contrary, in the new situation, if the military wants to accelerate the Rohingya repatriation process on its own initiative, it will not come as a surprise. Myanmar's military government could use the issue of Rohingya repatriation to legitimize military rule and establish a positive image of itself to the international community (UNDP, 2018). Therefore, it will depend on Bangladesh's role to seize this opportunity in consultation with the military government of Myanmar, so that the process of Rohingya repatriation can be expedited.

The Factor of International Political Interest

No matter how much human rights and the rule of law may be mentioned, the enduring support of various countries for Myanmar despite the Rohingya genocide is a vital question. This is an example of the fact that all countries put their own interests first in international relations. Many countries, including the United States, Russia, China, and India, continue their investment, trade, and other activities, focusing on the geopolitical importance of the country and the exploitation of the country's natural resources. The issue of law and order and security in Rohingya camps has been a source of concern for some time. However, the killing of a refugee leader inside a security cordon is significant. Earlier, news of the killing of several refugees came in the media. At the same time, the number of fires in the camps has increased recently. Just as it is important to provide proper assistance to the families affected by the fire, it is also important to properly investigate these incidents and bring the culprits to justice (Daily Star, 2019).

There is no point to think that there is a fundamental difference between the position of China and the United States on the Rohingya issue. The position of the two countries is almost the same. Both countries have come and gone with the support and indulgence of the Myanmar government. China has sided directly with Myanmar. On the other hand, the prospect of a new policy of USA on Myanmar under the Biden administration has not been materialized.

It appears from the analysis based on literature review that Rohingya refugees are more likely to be affected by the vicious cycle. Apart from that, in the last four years, Bangladesh has invested a lot of moral capital on the Rohingya issue, which has helped the country to achieve a kind of 'soft-power' in the international arena. Therefore, it is necessary to have a consistent, morally strong, sound and far-reaching plan that is consistent with reality without making hasty and inconsistent decisions on this sensitive issue.

It has recently become clear that the Biden administration has maintained the Trump administration's previous policy in the interests of various corporations, including the US oil company Chevron, which is based in Myanmar. It is implemented despite pressure from the Democratic-controlled US Congress to change Myanmar. Therefore, the administration in power in Myanmar is in a favorable position in all respects, which is unlikely to change in the near future.

Conclusion

Taking advantage of the Rohingya's vulnerability, various groups, such as religious militant groups or human-drug-firearms traffickers, will naturally continue to try to involve the Rohingyas in their misdeeds. This is a risky place. However, the Rohingyas who took refuge in the camps have no chance to be considered as the main culprits of these misdeeds. Many countries, including the United States, Russia, China, and India, take advantage from the geopolitical position of the country and its natural resources. Such disgusting support from the big countries for a state accused of genocide make the issue of repatriation more complex. Such a reality leads Bangladesh to adopt more appropriate diplomatic activities.

Based on the overall situation Bangladesh government has decided to impose strict restrictions on the travel of Rohingyas. Bangladesh government is guided by a sense of responsibility, humanity and awareness. The Myanmar government has repeatedly failed to deliver on its promises. The source of Myanmar's power is China which has played a major role in world politics. It has also failed to address the Rohingya crisis. In the last three years, there have been several ministerial meetings between Bangladesh and Myanmar mediated by China. But not a single Rohingya has returned under the repatriation agreement. China's tactical role, which is the most influential in Myanmar, does not seem to be working on this issue.

Therefore, at this moment, the Bangladesh government needs to start more diplomatic activities. Bangladesh can convince China that both these countries can be friends

economically, socially and politically. On the other hand, it is necessary to convince the Indian government that their full support on the Rohingya repatriation issue is required. On the part of Bangladesh, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should carry out the current diplomatic activities with full attention and importance on Rohingya repatriation.

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