



MYANMAR'S ROHINGYA CRISIS: AN ANALYSIS OF SECURITY THREATS FOR SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

This paper analyses the security threats emanating from the cross-border movement of displaced Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine State. The paper presents a brief background of the ethnic conflict involving Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims to explicate its historical context. The objective of the analysis is to understand the consequences of escalation of latest crisis in Myanmar. For analysing the threats, reports of leading international organizations such as International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and first-hand accounts of leading international media houses have been consulted. In the conclusion of the study, the author concludes that why is it imperative to prevent further escalation of the ethnic conflict and how.

Keywords: *Rakhine Conflict, Rohingya Crisis, Ethnic Conflict, South Asian Security.*

Introduction

Myanmar's restive Rakhine State is a theatre of invisible genocide. The world community is watching in awful silence as Myanmar government has unleashed a reign of terror on hapless, haggard, impoverished and the stateless Rohingyas – the world's most persecuted ethnic group according to the United Nations (UN). The decades' long cruelty against the community transited into a new phase of systemic persecution after a group of 400 armed Rohingyas attacked three Burma Guard Police (BGP) bases on 9 October 2016. Consequent to this attack the government launched a massive crackdown against the community on the pretext of anti-terrorist search operation, which is described by the President's office as "clearance operations." The crackdown led to widespread displacement of population from northern Rakhine to neighbouring Bangladesh as well as India.

Large-scale population migration often accompanies security threats to a region. In a recent report by UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), more than 66,000 Rohingyas have arrived in Bangladesh since October 2016.¹ The latest flight of Rohingyas is in continuation with the earlier massive displacement triggered by 2012 communal riots in northern Rakhine. Most of the 140,000 displaced people of 2012 are settled in refugee camps at Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. A large number of these uprooted Rohingyas have also sneaked into India through the porous borders with Bangladesh. As per a report in *The Quint*, nearly 36,000 Rohingyas are living in different locations in India.³ Although Myanmar is part of the Southeast Asian regional block but Rakhine State is closer to South Asia sharing borders with the southernmost tip of Bangladesh. Escalating crisis in Rakhine raises serious concerns of security in the immediate neighbourhood. There is also the fear of a renewed Muslim insurgency in Rakhine. This paper analyses the nature of security threats emanating from the extremely volatile situation in Rakhine in the larger South Asian context.

Conflict Genesis

Latest crisis in Myanmar is a manifestation of deep-rooted historical grievances between Rohingya Muslims and Arakanese Buddhists (also called Bamar). Ethnic hostility goes back to the emergence of British colonial period in Burma (Myanmar). The First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826) led to the annexation of Arakan (now Rakhine State) to British India. Post the Burma conquest, Indian labourers from regions part of today's Bangladesh were brought to the province for labour works. The demographic change owing to British-engineered immigration in the sparsely populated Arakan caused socio-economic distress that engendered conflict of interest between the Rohingyas and Buddhists.⁴

¹ Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016, Report of OHCHR Mission to Bangladesh, 3 February 2017, pp.3. Available at www.ohchr.org

² This figure is recorded by International Crisis Group in its report Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State, 22 October 2014. Report is available at www.crisisgroup.org

³ Are Rohingya Muslim a Threat to India? 20 June 2016. Available Myanmar's at www.thequint.com

⁴ Moshe Yegan, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of Minority Group*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), pp.29



Nevertheless the conflict of interest between the two communities hardly manifested through overt violence till 1940. Incompatibility between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims began to manifest during the 1940s decade. In the Second World War, both the communities found themselves on opposing sides; Rohingya Muslims supported the British colonizers while the Rakhine Buddhists took sides with the Japanese imperialist forces. This growing hostility became worse when economic conditions led to the alleged killing of 80,000 Rohingyas by hyper-nationalist Buddhists.⁵ Crisis between these communities deepened further when a mujahidin rebellion erupted in 1948 with irredentist tendency of annexing northern Rakhine state to the erstwhile East Pakistan. The Muslim insurgency of the 1940s created deep ethnic divisions leading to a protracted ethnic conflict that persists to this day.

Historians contest the origins of the Rohingyas in the state. Few claim that they are indigenous people inhabiting the region for centuries. Others point to their origins to 1824 when the British Empire engineered a settlement of Bengalis from Bangladesh. Myanmar government, however, denies both these claims. In fact, the government strongly objects to the use of Rohingya as it will give credence to community's claim of being indigenous.⁶ The government asserts that most of the Muslims in Rakhine have illegally migrated after 1948. According to Citizenship Law of 1982, those immigrants who have settled in parts of Burma before independence in 1948 will be considered legal but the rest lacking valid proofs of immigration of their ancestors before 1948 will be termed illegal Bengali immigrants from Bangladesh. While Rohingyas reject the ascription of Bengali to their identity by Myanmar government. Based on the 1982 Citizenship Law, Myanmar government began the verification process without breaking the deadlock with Rohingyas. Myanmar's government failure to resolve this impasse has spawned most of the violence in Rakhine since 1982.

Ethnic conflict in Rakhine is a heady cocktail of long-standing hostility, hate-filled inter-communal tension between Buddhists and Muslims, and excessive poverty and lack of development. The conflict can suitably be explained by the primordialist theoretical explanation promulgated by Anthony D. Smith. According to this theory ethnic conflicts ultimately are rooted in "differences of ethnicity". Nonetheless primordialists agree to that warfare is not a persistent state of affairs. In Rakhine's case, proximate factors, such as poverty and volatile economic conditions, further exacerbated the inter-ethnic relations. Scholars like David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild differ with the primordialist explanation of ethnic conflict. For them, ethnicity per se is not a cause of violent conflict.⁷ Violence erupts over strategic interactions between and within ethnic groups. However, in the case of Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, the deep-rooted ethnic animosity has been the main driving force behind a genocide-like crisis against the Rohingyas.

Latest Escalation of the Conflict

The latest escalation in Rakhine is a sordid tale of torture, indiscriminate killings, arson, sexual violence, and gross human rights violations. According to Reuters, death toll has crossed 1,000 following the military crackdown since October 2016.⁸ Some UN officials estimate the death tolls to be greater but lack credible data based on ground reporting. According to Amnesty International, a systematic campaign of violence is going on against men, women, children, and entire villages. Amnesty International's Director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Rafendi Djamin, said in a statement that the entire community is being abused as a form of "collective punishment."⁹

The crackdown by the Burmese military has been termed as humanitarian disaster by UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and various other international observer groups. Based on inputs from over 220 interviewees who have fled reprisal from Myanmar security forces, the report highlights the plight of the refugees and potential human rights violations.¹⁰ Commenting on OHCHR's Flash Report, UN Special Adviser Adama Dieng said that the report bolstered the

⁵ Mujtaba Rizvi, The Problems of the Burmese Muslims, Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1978), pp. 86

⁶ Crisis Group Report, Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State, pp.ii

⁷ David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, Spreading, Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Conflict, in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds.). The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp.7

⁸ Antoni Slodkowski, More than 1,000 feared killed in Myanmar army crackdown on Rohingyas - U.N. officials, 8 February 2017, available at www.reuters.com

⁹ Amnesty International, Myanmar: Security forces target Rohingyas during vicious Rakhine scorched-earth campaign, 19 December 2016, available at www.amnesty.org

¹⁰ Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016, Op. Cit.



credibility of the alleged claim of human rights violations by Myanmar security forces.¹¹ Since human rights groups are barred from entering the secluded areas where Rohingyas have been confined the enormity of humanitarian disaster is difficult to assess. Few independent observer groups have raised the possibility of even greater disaster than what is being reported by Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group (ICG) and OHCHR.

Fear of Radicalisation?

ICG has reported that Rohingyas are not yet a radicalised population; community members, elders and religious leaders have previously eschewed violence as they think it will prove to be counterproductive in the long run.¹² Their struggle is for attaining citizenship rights through amendment in the Citizenship Law of 1982, which made them a stateless people. This utterly discriminatory law, in one stroke, made the Rohingyas a people of nowhere. Myanmar wants them to return to Bangladesh and Bangladesh does not consider them as Bengalis. Moreover, geopolitical interests of regional powers like China and India have constrained to raise the issue of Rohingyas with Myanmar. Happymon Jacob, a professor of disarmament and national security at Jawaharlal Nehru University, writes for the Hindu that Rohingyas are of no strategic value to either China or India.¹³ Jacob also explains the reluctance of both US and UN in meddling in the Rohingya crisis.

Until now, the Rohingyas have abstained from taking recourse to armed resistance. With no hope of a political solution and relentless oppression, the Rohingyas could turn to violent means in the near future. Attacks on the BGP post in October 2016 could well prove to be a game-changer in Myanmar. Since the attacks the officially-sanctioned violence against the community has intensified. Civilians are indiscriminately tortured, looted, sexually abused, and killed. Security forces are making anti-terrorist “clearance operations” an alibi for inflicting unimagined cruelty on the hapless population. They have no place to hide and save themselves from the inhuman treatment being meted out.

A pathetically grim situation prevails in the northern Rakhine State. Experiences from other conflict zones in the world have shown that denial of rights lead to radicalization of minds. However, it would be early to arrive at a conclusion that a new phase of insurgency has yet started. ICG has dismissed the resistance against the military as anything resembling a secessionist movement for internal autonomy or independence; the political objective of the Rohingya’s resistance is limited only to securing rights of the community through recognition as legal citizens of Myanmar, which is a comforting sign for the moment. Government of Myanmar still has time in its hand to engage with the community and resolve the dispute without allowing it to escalate to a point of no return. Once the disgruntled community takes up arms there will be large-scale bloodshed. If this happens the conflict over citizenship rights will transform into a civil war or a secessionist movement. Given the risks of transformation of conflict into armed struggle new complexities will emerge in the conflict that will make it much more difficult to resolve.

The continued gridlock could add another dimension to the ongoing crisis in Rakhine. Transnational jihadist group active in South Asia could fill the void created by the current crisis. They could easily find recruits from the disenchanting Rohingya Muslim youths for carrying out terror attacks on Myanmar soils. This poses a grave security challenge for the Myanmar government in the coming years if the crisis continues on the escalation trajectory. Once the disenchantment over citizenship and fundamental rights gets co-opted by transnational jihadists who will insert their own agenda in the local insurgency, the canvass of attacks could expand dramatically beyond Rakhine and civilians may become the target of such terror attacks. Myanmar government must not turn a blind eye to such developments as it will create problems for their own national security.

ICG has reported that Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY, Faith Movement in Arabic) has claimed the responsibility for attacks on BGP. HaY is a militant organisation controlled by a coterie of senior Rohingya leaders sheltering in Saudi Arabia. The group is reported to receive funding from the Rohingya Diaspora in the Middle East. But the official statement from the Myanmar government has held Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), a militant group operating from northern Rakhine, responsible for the attacks on BGP. This is the main reason behind the massive crackdown against the Rohingyas since October 2016.

¹¹ Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state could amount to crimes against humanity – UN special adviser, 6 February 2017. Available at www.un.org

¹² Crisis Group Report, Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State, Op. Cit.

¹³ Happymon Jacob, The Nowhere People Next Door, The Hindu, 23 January 2017.



Security Concerns for South Asia

The entrenchment of the conflict is a grave concern for South Asia. The large influx of refugees into Bangladesh and India raises credible threats to the larger South Asian security complex. Bangladesh is perennially embroiled in internal ethnic divisions. The country is grappling with right-wing terrorism for some years now. Besides, transnational jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS are also operating in the country through local affiliates. Local radical groups incessantly carry out assassinations, bomb blasts and target secular voices. With more and more Rohingyas are settling in different refugee camps they could become a potential target for recruitment by transnational terrorist organizations. They could be used to carry out strikes within Bangladesh and across the border in Myanmar. If that happens, Bangladesh will be left to handle an emerging interstate tension with Myanmar in addition to the increasing internal security threats.

A good chunk of displaced Rohingyas have crossed into India through the porous borders with Bangladesh. As per a report by Indian Express, nearly 5700 Rohingyas are living in shanties in Jammu.¹⁴ Recently the overtly right-wing Hindu organization, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has demanded from the government to deport the Rohingya from Jammu as it could pose security threat in the future. In a recent interview to NDTV India's leading strategic analyst, Brahma Chellaney has alerted the government of the possible security challenges in the future. Among the major concerns Chellaney raised, the fear of recruitment by militant organization operating in the politically vulnerable Jammu and Kashmir is the most troublesome for Indian security establishment. Although state Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti has dismissed any such claims. Mufti clarified that there has not been any evidence of the involvement of Rohingya Muslims in militancy related incidents to date.

India being the biggest nation in the region with vast territory, it faces more challenges to its mainland security due to the refugee crisis. The disgruntled youths of the community would become an easy target for the transnational Jihadist groups. Once the youths get attracted they could be used by Jihadists like ISIS and Al-Qaeda in India to push through their agenda. This could prove to be very noxious for India's security as it is already grappling with insurgency in Northeast and Kashmir. Reports of increasing radicalization among Rohingya community should ring a bell to the Indian security establishment.

Moreover, the low intensity Bodh Gaya bomb blast in July 2013 could be seen in this continuum. This was probably a response to the growing hate attacks against the Rohingya Muslims following the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Muslim men on 28 May 2012. If the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is not resolved the symbols of Buddhism, religious places, and Buddhist shrines across India may well be possible targets for the transnational jihadist groups.

Conclusion

Resolving the Rohingya crisis is in the best interests of Myanmar. The country has just got a democratically elected government after more than half a century of military rule. Peace in other regions has made it a favourable destination for foreign direct investment. Western powers are showing keen interest in development projects in the country. Myanmar has been one of the least open markets for outside world because of the decades' of military rule. The Southeast Asian nation has been under a US sanction for nearly 20 years. With the country's transition to democracy under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Obama administration lifted the economic sanctions in October last year. For the people of Myanmar, this is a hard-earned phase of transition which stands to usher in rapid economic development. The Myanmar government must not allow this historic opportunity to slip out of its hands. The government should make all possible efforts to bring normalcy and restore peace in Rakhine.

Resolution of the Rohingya crisis is also in the best interest of India and Bangladesh. Happymon Jacob exhorts the Indian government to use creative diplomacy to resolve the Rohingya crisis.¹⁵ India could use persuasive tactics to pressurise the Government of Myanmar without undermining its geopolitical interests in the country. Even if violation of human rights is least of India's concerns, it is in the country's national interest to make every effort to bring peace in Rakhine. Political instability in a bordering country when reaches a crisis situation leads to mass exodus. Since Rakhine is close to India's Northeast, which is also a conflict zone for decades, the refugee spill-over could spawn new threats in the South Asia region. The stateless people may become a potential target for exploitation by the insurgent groups who could use the disenfranchised youths as pawns in cross-border illegal activities. The Myanmar government should learn from escalation of ethnic conflicts elsewhere in the world. Since the Rohingya's resistance against military oppression has not turned into insurgency

¹⁴ About 5700 Rohingya Muslims Residing in Kashmir, Indian Express, 20 January 2017. www.indianexpress.com

¹⁵ Happymon Jacob, *The Nowhere People Next Door*, Op. Cit.



movement, Myanmar still has time to proactively engage with the community to prevent further escalation of the conflict. In case its Rohingya policy move in the same direction the country could plunge into protracted ethnic conflict which will make conflict resolution more complex and extremely difficult to achieve.

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