

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Rohingya Crisis: Breaking the Unending Cycle of Exodus

By Janet Lim

Synopsis

The current exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar is not new. But it exacerbates the long-standing waves of Rohingya outflow into Bangladesh, followed by mass return to Myanmar. What is new: the dimension of the problem has grown in size and complexity both inside Myanmar and for Bangladesh. Are there lessons to be learned?

Commentary

A COMPREHENSIVE strategy is needed to deal with the latest cycle of humanitarian crisis to afflict Myanmar's Rohingya minority community which has been going on for decades. The current crisis must be responded to quickly by providing immediate protection and assistance to those who have fled to Bangladesh. Immediate steps need to be taken to stop the violence inside Myanmar that is continuing to force people to flee.

Equally it must be recognised that a sustainable solution requires actions which are long term and must address the grievances of both the Rohingya and Rakhine populations. Development benefits must be provided to all communities in this impoverished state in Myanmar. The mistake in the past -- forcing the Rohingya to return before the fundamental problems are resolved -- should not be repeated.

Magnifying the Problem

In the past, massive outflows of more than 200,000 Rohingya had been provoked by military actions in 1978 and 1991/92 but they were quickly followed by bilateral agreements between the two governments for mass return, prompted no doubt by bilateral political considerations. However, the returns in the 1980s were enforced, without participation from any third party. In the 1990s, another mass return

programme was agreed to bilaterally but the UNHCR intervened, with the states involved to assist in voluntary repatriation, promote voluntariness and provide reintegration assistance.

Nevertheless, the degree of voluntariness of the return was highly controversial. Conditions in the camps in Bangladesh were notoriously difficult as assistance was restricted in order to encourage return. At the same time situations inside Myanmar had not changed for the Rohingya in terms of their stateless status and continued denial of their basic rights.

The current massive outflow of Rohingya into Bangladesh has now reached more than half a million, the largest number yet to have fled into Bangladesh in any single outflow. It has been described as one of the largest refugee emergencies in the world today, with refugees arriving in extremely bad shape after suffering losses and extreme violence.

For now Bangladesh has reluctantly agreed to allow the refugees to be sheltered and assisted and for the existing two camps to be expanded, to alleviate the immediate humanitarian catastrophe.

In Bangladesh, the current outflow has magnified the problem of an already complex situation. Prior to the new outflow, Bangladesh has been hosting some 30,000 documented refugees remaining in two camps, after the return of some 230,000 refugees from the 1991/2 outflow.

Beyond the Emergency: Tackle Root Causes

However over the years, there continued to be Rohingya who made their way into Bangladesh, although they were no longer allowed into the refugee camps and have remained undocumented outside the camps. Their numbers are estimated to be some 300,000. Hence there are now a total of some 800,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh whose situation would need to be dealt with in its totality.

In Myanmar, the more recent outbreak of large scale inter-communal violence started in 2012 and subsequent episodes of violence in 2016 and 2017 have deepened tensions and insecurities even more. Some 140,000 Muslims remained displaced in squalid camps while others were forced to leave the country. The militant group known as ARSA has now made its presence felt, giving the military the reason to justify its brutal retaliatory actions.

Beyond the emergency phase concerted efforts by the two governments and the international community will be needed to find a long-term solution. However it will be necessary to have a different approach from the past.

First it is important to deal with the root causes inside Myanmar. The report of the officially appointed Rakhine Advisory Commission, headed by Kofi Annan, has provided recommendations which could be a road map for a comprehensive approach to sustainable return. Among its top recommendations are the urgent economic and social development of the Rakhine State and the resolution of the citizenship status for the Rohingya and other Muslims.

The recommendations in their totality provide the basis of a multi-prong approach that recognises the development, human rights and security dimensions of the current crisis. Clearly, it is unrealistic to expect these recommendations to be quickly implemented, but there should be no delay in starting their implementation.

Much would depend on the continued pressure of the international community as well as their support. The current level of international interest in the Rohingya issue, which was absent in the past, must be sustained.

Need for New Approach: Help Refugees and Host Communities

Bangladesh should not be left alone to shoulder the huge burden of hosting this biggest-ever refugee population on its soil. Significant financial support from the international community will be needed not only for the immediate humanitarian response, but considerable development aid must also be made available to provide assistance to both refugees and the local population.

This is the time to put into practice the new approach to assisting both refugees and host communities at the same time. Instead of establishing a parallel structure for refugees which would be required if they are confined to closed camps as in the past, the scarce resources should be used to create and expand infrastructure and services for both refugees and the local population.

There are no quick fixes to this humanitarian crisis, but a different approach than in the past could pave the way for a more realistic and sustainable solution in the long run.

Janet Lim is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She recently retired from the United Nations, after a 34-year career. She was most recently the UN Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) for Refugees.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg