



SIPG POLICY BRIEF 29

Towards a National Consensus on
the Rohingya Policy of Bangladesh



SIPG



Introduction

The Rohingya refugee crisis presents one of the most significant humanitarian, political, economic and security challenges for Bangladesh. Since 2017, over a million Rohingya have sought refuge, placing immense pressure on the country's resources. Despite signing with Myanmar a bilateral framework for return of the Rohingya in the 2017-18 period and a trilateral mechanism involving China, conducive atmosphere for safe and dignified return of the Rohingya to Rakhine could not be created and hence no return could be implemented. While ground situation kept on changing, Bangladesh's approach remained unimaginative and unadjusted. This policy brief collates insights from the National Dialogue held on 22 November 2024 towards building a consensus on sustainable strategies for addressing the crisis.

Main Issues for Discussion at the National Dialogue

1. Revisiting the nomenclature (FDMN or Rohingya refugees) by Bangladesh
2. Greater access to services and rights in Bangladesh
3. Humanitarian corridor, safe zones and safe corridors in Rakhine for Rohingya
4. Enhanced security in the bordering areas and the adjoining areas
5. Pursuing accountability and justice for the Rohingya
6. Engagements with new stakeholders (AA, NUG) and redefining Bangladesh-Myanmar relations
7. A broader coalition (UNSG-led High Level International Conference) building on Rohingya crisis

Key Findings, Views And Observations

Humanitarian and Development Needs

The Rohingya refugees in camps in Bangladesh face tough conditions, including inadequate housing, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Education aligned with Myanmar's curriculum is essential to prepare Rohingya children for reintegration. Furthermore, investment in skill development and economic self-reliance could transform the community into a productive asset, reducing their dependency on aid.

Protracted Crisis and Challenges to Repatriation

Repatriation remains the central goal, but safe and voluntary return is contingent on stable conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Engagement with new actors, such as the Arakan Army (AA) and National Unity Government (NUG), is crucial for exchange of views on creating conducive atmosphere for sustainable repatriation. Additionally, a clear pathway to granting citizenship to the Rohingya in Myanmar is a prerequisite to a meaningful resolution of the crisis.

Terminology and Legal Recognition

Exploring change of the nomenclature from "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (FDMN) to 'refugee' is worth serious consideration as it would clarify legal status of the Rohingya in Bangladesh and help address the community's humanitarian and protection needs. A clear, internally agreed terminology might enhance international support towards the Rohingya, sheltered in Bangladesh.

Security and Border Management

Armed groups pose ever-increasing cross-border security threats. Additionally, the lack of unity among Rohingya leadership has led to internal divisions and criminal activities within refugee camps, further complicating the crisis. Effective security and border management strategies are essential to mitigate these issues.

Lack of National Consensus

A coherent national policy has been absent, with past efforts on repatriation marred by *ad-hocism*. Polarization has hindered communication among political parties and other domestic players, and thus deprived Bangladesh benefits of collaborative policymaking. Stakeholders emphasized on the need to move beyond security-focused strategies towards a holistic approach encompassing rights, sustainability, burden sharing and diplomacy.

Geopolitical Dynamics

Bangladesh's efforts on repatriation have been undermined by competing interests of her neighbors, China and India, and insufficient global support. ASEAN has largely remained inactive, with its 5-point consensus on Myanmar remaining grossly unimplemented. International actors, including the UN and major powers, must refocus on the crisis for meaningful interventions in Rakhine and on securing firm commitments on facilitative approach from Myanmarese stakeholders.

Key Moments from the National Dialogue



Key quotes from the session

Cross-border security threats are increasing daily, and this issue affects not only the Rohingya but the host community as well.



Lt. General (Retd.) Abdul Hafiz,
Special Assistant to the Chief
Adviser, Government of
Bangladesh



We are yet to repatriate any refugees, so we must rethink the approach of providing them with the rights to earn and become self-sufficient, rather than remaining entirely dependent on aid.

Professor Sk. Tawfique M.
Haque, PhD

The core issue we face is the lack of national consensus. With only \$12 per person, how are we supposed to manage food for everyone?



Mr. Mohammed Mizanur
Rahman, Refugee Relief and
Repatriation Commissioner
(RIRC)



This is an issue of national interest with a long history. The Rohingya people have been in the region since 1430. They faced genocide and persecution through the centuries.

Mr. AHM Hamidur Rahman
Azad, Bangladesh Jamaat-
e-Islami

When Ziaur Rahman took a stance, people believed in his capability. He had the people's mandate and military power. Whenever we initiated negotiations, we followed that template.



Mr. Amir Khasru Mahmud
Chowdhury Bangladesh
Nationalist Party (BNP)



We are often failing to adequately address the issues of this vulnerable community, whether social or economic. We seek a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

Dr. Abdul Hannan
Chowdhury, Vice
Chancellor, North South
University

We need to ensure that any solution we pursue is sustainable. *Ad-hoc* measures will not suffice. This issue will only become more problematic as time passes, and we must solve it.



Mr. Md. Touhid
Hossain, Adviser for Foreign
Affairs, Interim Government
of Bangladesh

Policy Recommendations

Engaging stakeholders and National Consensus

- **Engage domestic stakeholders:** Involve all domestic actors, particularly political parties, in recalibrating policies to address the protracted refugee situation and respond to the evolving dynamics in the Rakhine state.
- **Institutionalize commitment in election manifestos:** Encourage the political parties to pronounce their positions on the Rohingya issue and to reflect them in their election manifestoes to demonstrate commitment and ownership.
- **Develop a comprehensive policy framework:** Engage all political, civil society, and other non-governmental stakeholders to create a comprehensive national policy towards addressing the Rohingya crisis. This framework should also factor in issues at the border and overall relations with Myanmar.

Enhance Services and Voice of the Rohingya

- **Offer enhanced educational services:** Develop education services and initiatives based on Myanmar's curriculum to prepare Rohingya children for reintegration, ensuring necessary alignment with Myanmar national standards.
- **Provide vocational training:** Offer vocational training and marketable skills to adults to promote economic self-reliance, to reduce dependency on aid, and to prepare them for an eventual return.
- **Expand rights and services:** Reflect on additional services and rights for the Rohingya, such as access to employment, housing and freedom of movement to enhance their quality of life and to reduce their social and economic vulnerabilities.
- **Allow Rohingya leadership to emerge:** Rohingya civilians to be accorded due space to freely decide who could represent them to articulate their views and aspirations on humanitarian needs and also on conditions on their return to Myanmar. Such civilian leadership might also help the community face intimidation from armed outfits and criminal networks.

Legal Recognition and Nomenclature

- **Examine nomenclature changes:** Reflect on changing the terminology used to describe Rohingya in Bangladesh to better represent their status and needs.
- **Consider formalization of refugee status:** Shift from “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals” (FDMN) to formal refugee status to expand benefits and services to the Rohingya as part of international protection. This may help secure enhanced international support.

Enhanced Security and Effective Border Management

- **Increase security measures in camps:** Implement greater security protocols within refugee camps and surrounding areas to combat criminals, to control armed groups with the view to reducing vulnerabilities of the camp-dwellers.

- **Develop robust border systems:** Strengthen border management to address security threats, including human trafficking and other criminal activities of activities of the Rohingya armed group.
- **Build military deterrence:** Enhance military capabilities at the bordering areas to control unlawful activities and to offer a minimum credible deterrence against any adventure from across the border in Rakhine/ Chin State, threatening peace and stability.

Strengthen Engagement with Myanmar Stakeholders

- **Engage the *de facto* authority in Rakhine:** Consider appropriate forms of (indirect) engagement with the United League of Arakan (ULA) / Arakan Army (AA) to discuss basic services, freedom of movement, and citizenship for the Rohingya, in addition to stable and peaceful border. Closely monitor Arakanese efforts towards self-determination. Reconciliation among the Rakhines and the Rohingya need to be pursued.
- **Partner with key Myanmar actors:** Explore ways to collaborate with ULA /AA as well as the National Unity Government (NUG) on stabilization of Rakhine security-wise, economically and politically, beyond formal engagements with Union level authorities. Also engage other ethnic armed groups and political outfits of Myanmar on treatment of the Rohingya as members of the Myanmar society and their reintegration as an indigenous community.
- **Mutually beneficial, interdependent bilateral relations with Myanmar:** Work with all Myanmar stakeholders to establish mutually beneficial relations and foster interdependence with Myanmar, focusing on trade, agriculture, disaster management, and climate change in the short to medium term, and on transport connectivity, energy, and security in the long term.

Stabilisation of Rakhine

- **Explore ways to protect people and to provide humanitarian assistance:** Develop safe zones and humanitarian corridors within Rakhine to provide secure areas for the ones who need protection from insecurity. These zones and corridors may, with necessary changes, receive refugees from Bangladesh in future and help facilitate their eventual repatriation. Remain open to delivering humanitarian support from Bangladesh to the needy in Rakhine.
- **Mobilize donor funding:** Secure additional funding from international donors to address the increasing needs of the internally displaced Rohingya and other community members in Rakhine. Work towards enhanced humanitarian access of the regional and international actors in Rakhine.
- **Promote economic stabilization:** Explore economic interaction between Rakhine and the Chittagong region, value chain linkages to support the economic stabilization of Rakhine state and enable access to global markets for produces of Rakhine.

Multilayered Interdependent Relations with Myanmar

- **Deepen trade relations:** Develop multilayered trade relationships with Myanmar's Union government focusing on key sectors such as agriculture, trade, and energy.
- **Facilitate transport connectivity:** Improve transport links to support economic activities and ensure the smooth movement of goods and people between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Regional and International Cooperation

- **Widen and diversify partnerships and strengthen ties:** While seeking concrete deliverables from China, seek to building greater understanding on the Rohingya cause and support from countries in the neighbourhood in particular India and other major players on the Rohingya issue. Enhance engagement with ASEAN countries, Japan, Russia, and other international actors to secure sustained diplomatic and economic support.
- **Expand the scope of third country Resettlement:** In case of third country resettlement, ASEAN members and countries in the Middle East to be asked to share responsibility.
- **Facilitate high-level International Conferences:** Prepare well to play a lead role on an UN-led Conference going to be held in the later part of 2025 so as to sustain global attention, coordinate strategies, and secure international support.

Advocate for Justice and Accountability

- **Support international prosecutions:** Back efforts to prosecute those responsible for atrocities against the Rohingya under the Genocide Convention.
- **Collaborate with legal bodies:** Work closely with the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other legal institutions to ensure individual and collective accountability of atrocity crimes and to seek justice for the Rohingya community.

Conclusion

Since political and security landscape of Rakhine and also Myanmar are undergoing significant changes, approaches to the Rohingya issue employed by Bangladesh, regional countries and the international community merit to be adjusted accordingly. Engagement with the ULA/AA as the *de facto* authority has become an urgent subject of discussion, regardless of the legalese of recognition. The Rohingya crisis now demands a multi-faceted approach balancing humanitarian, economic and security priorities. Bangladesh must avail this opportunity to renew engagements with China, India, ASEAN members, Japan, US, EU and other major stakeholders to forge a greater understanding on durable solutions in Rakhine and the way forward towards resolution of the crisis, securing rights of the Rohingya.

Brief Program Schedule

Session-01: Inaugural and Setting the Context	Opening Remarks: Prof. Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, PhD Keynote Presentation: Mr. Mohammad Sufiur Rahman Discussant: Dr. Mohammad Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi Special Guests: Ms. Gwyn Lewis (UNRC), Ms. Sumbul Rizvi (UNHCR), Mr. Lance Bonneau (IOM) Chief Guest: Lt. General (Retd.) Abdul Hafiz
Session-02: Roundtable Discussion	Special Guest: Mr. Mohammed Mizanur Rahman Discussants: Mr. Nurul Islam, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Muhammad Nazimuddin, Brig Gen. (Retd.) Hasan Md Shamsuddin, Mr. Shariful Islam Hasan, Mr. Raheed Ejaz, Mr. Porimol Palma
Session-03: Interaction with Political Parties	Mr. Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury (BNP), Ms. Shama Obaid (BNP), Mr. AHM Hamidur Rahman Azad (Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami), Mr. Abdullah Al Kafee Ratan (CPB), Mr. Bobby Hajjaj (NDM), Mr. Abul Hasan Rubel, (Ganosamhati Andolan), Prof. M A Rashid, PhD, Prof. Mahbubur Rahman, PhD
Closing Session	Summary of the Session: Prof. Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, PhD Closing Remarks: Mr. Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury Chief Guest: Mr. Md. Touhid Hossain, Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Session Chair: Prof. Abdul Hannan Chowdhury, PhD, VC, NSU Vote of Thanks: Dr. Abdul Wohab

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