
Non-Traditional Security Challenges to Refugee Management in Bangladesh: A Comprehensive Security Analysis

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Abstract

The refugee crisis in Bangladesh due to the massive inflow of Rohingya refugees in 2017 has posed serious challenges to the non-traditional (non-military) sectors of security for the refugee population and host community. State-centred, narrow view of traditional security studies is deficient in comprehensively analysing the non-military (political, economic, societal and environmental) sources of threats due to the refugee influx. This study, incorporating a widened conceptualization of security issues, uses a comprehensive framework for security to comprehend the broader security aspects of refugee settlements in Bangladesh. A widened framework of security—with the inclusion of political, economic, societal, and environmental threats to security—inclusively conceptualizes security across a wide range of issues in the refugee-host relationship. The paper outlines major political, economic, societal, and environmental threats to Rohingya refugee settlements and the Bangladesh government. It argues that the host-refugee relationship analysed from an inclusive security framework shows that refugee management could not be effectively carried out with a state-centric approach. A broader approach to security, incorporating non-military sectors, is required to effectively deal with the refugee problem, given the serious challenges faced by non-traditional sectors of security.

Key Words: refugee management, comprehensive security, Rohingya, Bangladesh, non-traditional challenges

Introduction

The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) is a key legal document that defines the term

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'refugee'.¹ It also outlines the rights of refugees as well as the states' legal obligations to protect refugees. According to the UN Refugee Convention, 1951:

A refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to the country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

Refugees are, therefore, outside the country of their nationality due to the fear of not being protected in their country of nationality. The convention endorses this single definition of the term 'refugee' emphasized in Article I. The UN Refugee Agency (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR) serves as the 'guardian' of the convention. It is mandated to aid and protect refugees under the principles of the convention, which sets minimum standards for the treatment of refugees. In the South Asian context, the region provides a natural experimental framework to understand refugee management in light of the convention's fundamental principles.

To examine the genesis, contemporary scenario, and effective strategies to deal with the refugee problem in any South Asian state, there is a need to consider and emphasize the unique and complex issues of refugee management in the region. More than three million refugees reside in South Asia.² Such a large number of people poses unprecedented challenges for countries that find it increasingly difficult to manage their respective refugee situations due to their poor record of human development and good governance. The region is often characterized by historical rivalries, several inter and intrastate wars, ethnic and religious divisions, limited economic resources, and a narrow conception of the national security framework. South Asia provides a unique case to analyse and understand host-refugee relations due to the varying socio-economic, security, and political realities of the region.

In Bangladesh too, refugee problems are widespread and have demanded effective handling for decades. Bangladesh, despite a

better rank in human development in the region, remains one of the most densely populated and poor countries in the world. It is a developing country with many development challenges. Bangladesh, with an underperforming public sector, pervasive governance issues, and persistent political instability, remains ill-equipped to effectively deal with demographic challenges and contemporary refugee issues. In Bangladesh, over a million Rohingya (a stateless minority) from Myanmar currently reside who have escaped ethnic and religious persecution since the 1990s. The situation of massive refugee inflow is not new. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that Rohingya have previously fled to Bangladesh in 1978, 1991, 2012, 2014, and 2016.³

The first massive inflow of refugees, as the UNHCR notes, took place in 1978 when about 250,000 Rohingya entered Bangladesh.⁴ The latest mass exodus of more than 700 000 refugees took place in 2017 after the military crackdown on Rohingya by Myanmar's regime.⁵ The UNHCR showed that the fleeing refugees comprise a vast majority of women and children: 40 per cent of the people reaching Bangladesh were under the age of 12.⁶ More than 800,000 refugees reside in Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. The UN Refugee Agency has shown that most refugees have settled around existing communities of refugees. The dire need for aid and protection has put immense economic and demographic pressure on the host community, with the largest settlement, Kutupalong refugee expansion, accommodating over 600,000 refugees in an area of just 13 square kilometres.⁷ The number of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence has grown since 2017 and is in need of urgent international protection and humanitarian assistance.

Figure 1**Map of Rakhine State in Myanmar and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh**

Note: Adapted from Sarah Rowland, "The Rohingya Crisis: A Failing Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars Journal*, 2022.

The massive influx of refugees in Bangladesh provides an opportunity to analyse the problems of refugee settlements and policies formulated to deal with the crisis. Using a widened conception of security incorporating traditional and non-traditional understandings of security, the study outlines the response of the Bangladesh government towards the refugee problem while tracing the genesis of the evolving problem. This paper reviews the security situation of refugee settlements from a comprehensive perspective on security involving politico-military, economic, societal, and environmental sectors. Moreover, it includes the study of threats to refugee management seen across various non-military sectors that require an inclusive understanding of security based on human guidelines laid down to deal with the refugee crisis.

The first section seeks to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework to see the efficacy of government responses in light of a broader approach toward security. The second section, while outlining the core features of the policy response of Bangladesh towards the

Rohingya refugees, examines the security situation of refugee settlements in light of widened and comprehensive sectoral framework towards security.

Comprehensive Security Framework: A Conceptual Apparatus

Security from a traditional point of view emphasizes the state's military and political survival. Realist American scholar Stephen Walt argues that the traditional approach toward security tends to focus on a state-centric conception of threats to national security.⁸ The other approach, non-traditional security, is advocated by scholars who emerged in the last days of the cold war and emphasized a more comprehensive approach toward security. This approach, developed under the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, incorporated the threats and challenges to national security emerging from non-military sources: famines, poverty, societal issues, environmental degradation, and refugee settlement.⁹ Barry Buzan, a proponent of the non-traditional school of security studies, advocated a more comprehensive approach toward security in his book *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. By widening the security agenda with greater inclusivity, Buzan reflected on a broader approach to inclusively understand the referent object of security (the entity that is threatened and needs to be protected).

Moreover, Buzan—along with two other advocates of Copenhagen School, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wild—provides a notion of sectoral analysis in the book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. The work by Buzan et al. provides an intersubjective understanding of security, incorporating sectors other than the military as well. Political, economic, societal, and environmental approaches are introduced to widen the agenda of the security framework.¹⁰ The comprehensive security approach also emphasizes the significance of human security, utilizing a more holistic and inclusive view of security. The proponents of this school, notes Buzan,

define security as “freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change which they see as hostile.”¹¹ A human security perspective towards security is also reflected in the Human Development Report of 1994 published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The report defines human security as:

First, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life.¹²

Expanding the scope of national security is important to comprehend the response of the Bangladesh government to the refugee crisis. A more inclusive and comprehensive approach is crucial to understanding refugee problems in Bangladesh, given the significant impact of the refugee problem on human security. Moreover, a broader security understanding is equally important to examine the effects of the refugee crisis on other sectors of security in the country. Such a sectoral approach is vital to broadening the security agenda by grasping how the traditional conception of security in Bangladesh does not address the refugee issues from an inclusive security framework. In addition, the refugee problem in Bangladesh could not be countered by having a narrow or limited security picture viewed solely from a military and political perspective. Therefore, this study attempts to comparatively analyse refugee management in both countries from a comprehensive and sectoral framework.

Widening the Security Approach: A Sectoral Analysis

The Rohingya in Myanmar live in the Rakhine state of Western Burma, where there have been longstanding tensions between Muslims and the majority Buddhist population. A study by Klinken and Aung maintains that the Rohingya are predominantly Muslim and officially viewed as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.¹³ They are denied citizenship by the Myanmar authorities, which regard the language, ethnicity, and religious identity of the Muslim Rohingya as

distinct from the Burmese cultural identity. Anthropologist Victoria Palmer notes that they have consequently experienced persecution and religious suppression for many decades.¹⁴ Most recently, mass violence perpetrated by the Myanmar regime in 2017 caused a large-scale exodus of people to Bangladesh. More than 700,000 Rohingya fled from Myanmar to take shelter in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, where more than 300,000 refugees from previous displacements already resided.¹⁵ Today, close to a million refugees live in camps close to the border in Bangladesh.

The situation of massive refugee inflow is not new. Rohingya have previously fled to Bangladesh in 1978, 1991, 2012, 2014, and 2016.¹⁶ But the latest influx in 2017 broke all records, posing an unprecedented humanitarian challenge in dealing with the refugee crisis. For instance, most of the families that fled did not get enough food due to insufficient food supply.¹⁷ The fleeing population lived in overcrowded shelters with shortages of water supply. Restriction of movement, water contamination, and deprivation of sustained livelihoods are a few among the long list of problems that the refugee population faces in Bangladesh. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) asserts that about half of the refugees are children. They face risks of malnutrition, trafficking, and illnesses, including Covid-19.¹⁸ The UNHCR, in 2017, declared the crisis as "the most urgent refugee emergency in the world."¹⁹ The refugee crisis has posed several challenges for other measures of security—political, economic, societal, and environmental. To understand the different dimensions and dynamics of security threats, a wide range of sectors needs to be incorporated into a security analysis by expanding the security agenda.

Political-Military Security

In the sector of political security, political threats, according to the widened conception of security, are about giving or denying recognition, support or legitimacy.²⁰ When analysed from the

perspective of individuals against the state, political security is defined as the prevention of people from systemic violation of human rights, political repression, and ill-treatment. In this study, the referent object of political security is a stateless societal group that tends to avoid the aforementioned political threats.

The Rohingya, while facing ethnic and religious persecution, have been stripped of their citizenship long ago. State-sponsored ethnic cleansing from the Myanmar regime is coupled with enforced statelessness and suppression. Grant of citizenship and protection from violence are the two goals that refugees from Myanmar seek most urgently. The government of Bangladesh refers to the Rohingya refugees as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals', not refugees.²¹ Therefore, refugees cannot work legally and have lesser protections under the protocols of international law. UNHCR, on the other hand, calls them Rohingya refugees, following an international legal and protection framework. Bangladesh, however, is neither a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention and nor has carried any national legislation to deal with the emergency crisis.

A bulk of the refugee population is unregistered, while most of the people living outside refugee camps are regarded by the government as people who have 'illegally infiltrated' the country.²² A study of the refugee crisis shows that Bangladesh has also tried to stop refugees from crossing the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.²³ Some officials of the Bangladesh government have deemed the state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya in Burma as "a genocide."²⁴ National Commission for Human Rights in Bangladesh considered pressing a trial for charges of murder against the Myanmar army at an international tribunal. However, the initial government response to the Rohingya crisis was based on short-term policies. Conversations on refugee management were focused on providing short-term humanitarian assistance and ensuring repatriation as soon as possible. In the early months after the refugee arrival, Dhaka primarily focused

on ensuring the repatriation of the displaced population as soon as possible. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the UN back in 2019 to pressurize Myanmar's government to allow the return of the refugee population.²⁵ She promised to offer 'temporary' shelter and aid but urged Myanmar to "take their nationals back."

However, plans of temporarily settling refugees before their complete return to the homeland have failed. Firstly, Myanmar and Bangladesh governments have failed to negotiate terms for repatriation for the displaced people. Secondly, Human Rights Watch (HRW) notes that refugees do not feel safe returning to Myanmar, given the Rohingya villages remain destroyed in the Rakhine state.²⁶ Repatriation, according to international law, should be voluntary when refugees feel safe returning to their homeland. The uncertainty of repatriation has created problems of its own. Observers warn that owing to the concern among the local population that repatriation arrangements would not work, the host population is beginning to feel that refugees would remain for an indefinite period.²⁷

Meanwhile, the government has imposed strict restrictions on the movement of refugees.²⁸ In an environment where refugees have to rely on donors for food and livelihood, instances of crime, violence, and unrest in refugee camps have resulted in increasing surveillance, more check posts, and greater fencing from law enforcement. Hence, the Bangladesh government has not effectively dealt with all the political threats that the Rohingya refugees face in Bangladesh. However, the displaced Rohingya have avoided state-sponsored violence, religious suppression, and ethnic persecution by fleeing Myanmar. Therefore, although several political and security threats still confront the refugees, they have comparatively better standards of political security in Bangladesh.

Economic Security

As of this writing, in mid-2022, more than 900,000 Rohingya are settled in densely-populated refugee camps in Bangladesh. After

years of multifaceted collaborative response, the conditions for refugees have gradually begun to stabilize. Yet, the refugees live in precarious living conditions despite some progress in basic assistance. As the Rohingya lack secure legal status, the refugee population is not free to move and work, even though some of them are employed informally. Therefore, they entirely rely on humanitarian aid. Moreover, their engagement in an informal economy comes along with low wages and unethical employment practices.²⁹ For survival, they need basic humanitarian assistance: shelter, food, sanitation, clean drinking water, and health facilities. Refugees live in the most congested refugee camps, dwelling in fragile shelters.³⁰ Crowded populations in closed camps are especially vulnerable to the spread of Covid-19, given the inadequate health facilities in the region. The UNHCR claims that refugees have constantly been deprived of food supply, sustained livelihood, and freedom of movement.³¹ Water contamination, unhygienic living conditions, and lack of access to education are other critical challenges in refugee settlements.

The government of Bangladesh responded to deal with the humanitarian crisis along with NGOs and international donor organizations. It is important to consider that Bangladesh is a developing country facing enormous economic challenges: population growth, a decline in foreign funding, and inflation. Twenty per cent of the population of Bangladesh still lives below the poverty line, according to the Asian Development Bank.³² Bangladesh spends an estimated 1.2 billion dollars yearly on refugees.³³ The massive influx of refugees has put an enormous strain on the country's economy. Moreover, the protracted refugee crisis has adversely impacted the impoverished local population in Cox's Bazar region, one of the most remote and least industrialized regions in the country.³⁴ Adverse consequences of refugee influx have largely been felt by the host population depending on wage labour, farming, and small businesses.

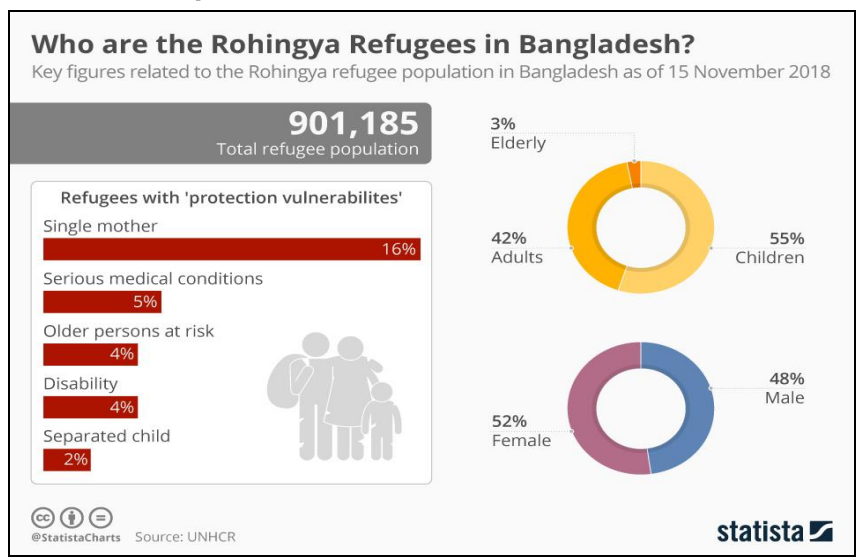
The refugee-host relationship has shifted from one characterized by solidarity to that of resentment due to rising prices of essential commodities, growing competition over natural resources, reduction in wages, and issues related to security-related measures that have affected the movement of the host population.³⁵ The concerns of local hosts have evolved the solidarity of the host population for refugees due to strained limited resources along with declining state capacity to deliver services to the local population. Hence, when Bangladesh state is facing unprecedented economic challenges due to the refugee influx, the host population is facing economic difficulties due to rising inflation, competition over resources, and political uncertainty regarding the future of refugee settlements. The socio-economic predicaments are further compounded for the state due to the critical problems of food, water, health, shelter, sanitation, and movement present in refugee settlements.

Societal Security

Societal security of refugees emphasizes the protection of the identities of displaced groups without any conflict and tension among themselves and with the host community. Societal security is threatened when a community defines development as a threat to its survival as a group with a collective identity.³⁶ Societal insecurity due to ethnic suppression, religious persecution, and state-sponsored violence by the Myanmar authorities forced the Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh. Research on the psychological impacts of displacement has shown that collective violence and statelessness exposed displaced people to experiences of trauma that continue to deteriorate their psychological and mental well-being—especially seen among women and children.³⁷ However, the collective identity of the Rohingya as a cohesive unit and their solidarity for them among the host population has faced challenges in Bangladesh as well.

As the displaced Rohingya are not recognized by Bangladesh as refugees, they are unable to integrate into host communities. The government has disallowed mixed marriages between Bangladeshi nationals and refugees, allegedly denying citizenship and passports that can be acquired using marriage certificates.³⁸ Societal insecurities have been aggravated due to the impact of the refugee crisis on children and women. Refugee women face serious protection issues as gender-based violence, exploitation via trafficking, and restrictions of access to the justice system are pervasive.³⁹ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), hundreds of cases of gender-based violence are reported every week. Children also continue to bear the brunt of the refugee crisis. According to OCHA, they face serious risks of psychosocial distress, neglect, abuse, sexual violence, child marriage, child labour, and trafficking.⁴⁰ These are critical societal threats to the integration and development of refugees, of which 52 per cent are women, and 55 per cent are children under the age of 18, according to the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya crisis.⁴¹

Figure 2
Percentage of Women and Children in the Rohingya
Population and Protection Vulnerabilities



Source: Adapted from Statista. Original source: UNHCR

As mentioned above, the solidarity between the host population and refugees has receded in recent years as tensions have been mounting between the two communities. The UNDP states that the local host population in the Cox’s Bazar region—due to inflation, increased levels of poverty, and strains on natural resources and infrastructure—feels that its needs are side-lined by the government and humanitarian agencies.⁴² Clashes have been reported in the region between the Rohingya and the host population (as well as law enforcement authorities) as some Rohingya have engaged in acts of violence and crime.⁴³ Involvement of some refugees in drug smuggling, human trafficking, and violent clashes with the host population is a major concern for the government.⁴⁴ Moreover, the recruitment of traumatized and frustrated refugees in some extremist organizations and radical groups is threatening societal solidarity. Uncertainty of repatriation, fear of violence and persecution, tensions with the host population, and socio-economic challenges within the

refugee settlements are posing serious societal threats that continue to challenge the cohesiveness of collective identity and the effective functioning of Rohingya society.

Environmental Security

Environmental security is challenged by threats like the disruption of ecosystems, energy problems, natural resource depletion, and demographic problems. The refugee situation in Bangladesh has posed serious environmental and demographic challenges. Refugees reside in overcrowded, densely populated camps in Cox's Bazar region, where 40,000 to 70,000 people live per square kilometre. A news agency TRT World claims that the population density in these enormously crowded camps is 40 times more than the average population density of Bangladesh (the ninth most densely populated country in the world).⁴⁵ The refugee population lives in makeshift shelters made on land that is prone to floods and landslides.

Large refugee settlements have put a tremendous amount of strain on environmental resources. For instance, a study notes that forest depletion has occurred at a rapid rate; in Cox's Bazar, 700 tons of forest are disappearing each day.⁴⁶ Massive deforestation after the refugee arrival caused the year 2018 to see the region become the lowest dense forest area in the last 30 years.⁴⁷ The growing demand for natural resources due to the refugee influx has increased since 2017: fast clearing of forest land has occurred because of the need for fuel, land for housing, and selling of timber in the local market.⁴⁸ Furthermore, massive refugee arrival has made the region more vulnerable to environmental disasters and natural hazards. Large population settlement has affected coastal resilience, increasing the risks of landslides, soil erosion, floods, and land degradation, especially during the monsoon season. The risk of tropical cyclones with speedy winds, extreme rainfall, and storms are more likely on the coasts of Cox's Bazar district. The last couple of years have been hard for refugee settlements in this regard. Frequent floods, extensive landslides, and

destruction of shelters due to heavy rain have left the refugee settlements battered and sinking into a sea of mud.⁴⁹

Lastly, an environmental concern that is related to the refugee settlement in Bangladesh is the decision by authorities to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char—an island in the Bay of Bengal considered flood-prone by the UN and rights groups. The government, however, has claimed the island to be "safe from natural disasters."⁵⁰ Despite warnings from international agencies about Bhasan Char being an environmentally unstable island, the Bangladesh government has started to resettle refugees there. Houses for more than 100,000 have been built on the island, seen by experts as under threat from climate change without having adequate flood and storm protection.⁵¹ Meanwhile, more than 20,000 people have already been relocated as the UN and Bangladesh government have signed an agreement to relocate the Rohingya to the island.⁵² The deal came as a paradigm shift in the stance of the UN and humanitarian agencies, which had previously criticized the relocation. The environmental security of Bangladesh's coastal regions, forests, and inhabitable land is threatened due to the refugee crisis. Policies to effectively manage the refugee situation need to incorporate environmental and demographic considerations for sustainable livelihood in an environmentally challenged country.

Figure 3

Note: Adapted from The Economist. Copyright 2022 The Economist Newspaper Limited

Conclusion

The massive refugee influx of displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh posed serious non-traditional security threats to non-military sectors: political, economic, societal, and environmental. Using a broader and inclusive security framework (involving state-centric and widened security concerns) is imperative to comprehensively analyse the security challenges faced by the host nation and refugee population. The refugee inflow produced political, economic, societal, and environmental threats to refugee settlements and the Bangladesh government. Ethnic and religious persecution, statelessness, problems of recognition, and issues of repatriation pose political challenges to the security of displaced Rohingya. The economic sector also faces serious problems due to the weak economy of the host country, poor governance, lack of access to essential household necessities, need for massive humanitarian assistance for refugees that are not allowed to

work, and tensions with the local population that faces economic strain and resource competition. Societal threats are pervasively undermining the collective identity of displaced Rohingya and the host-refugee solidarity. Moreover, fear of ethnic persecution on return, gender-based violence, child abuse, lack of integration into host communities, and growing tensions in the host-refugee relationship due to socio-economic fallout have threatened the collective identity and functioning of the Rohingya community. Lastly, environmental concerns due to dense settlements, resource depletion, deforestation, and problems of refugee reallocation to an environmentally unstable island have produced challenges to environmental security around settlements. Effective refugee management, therefore, requires a comprehensive security approach dealing inclusively with non-traditional threats to the host-refugee relationship.

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