



Comment

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**Suffering from Statelessness:
Rohingyas in Bangladesh**

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The Rohingyas are predominantly Muslim and closely related to the Bengali people. Originally many of them migrated from the Indian subcontinent towards the East into 'Theravada Buddhist Myanmar', especially during the British Colonial time. But the initial harmonic relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar started deteriorating during the country's liberation struggle. In consequence, relatively soon after gaining independence, the new rulers in Myanmar identified the Rohingyas as economic refugees, challenging the socio-economic composition and political power structure of the country. In response, a policy of repression was imposed on them arguing that the Rohingya's had illegally settled in Myanmar's territory and as such they should be subject to eviction. Here, one should argue that the dramatic dimension of the Rohingya's migration is a clear result of three intermingling factors: First, the emergence of authoritarian (military) regimes in Myanmar; second, the consequence of a cultural confrontation of different ethnic-religious communities. This conflict gained significance after the military rulers attempted to assimilate religious-ethnic minorities into the mainstream Burmese culture. In other words, a strategy of an enforced cultural unification, namely Burmanisation, was used as a way of 'National Reconsolidation'. Third the large scale ignorance of policy makers worldwide despite the fact that the Rohingya issue was increasingly becoming a global issue. Persecuted and denied citizenship, the

Rohingya ethno-religious minority fled as stateless refugees into Bangladesh from the bordering Rakhine province (former Arakan state) of Myanmar. This process started gradually from 1977 and in the 1980ties turned into a mass exodus. An agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh, facilitated by the UNHRC, temporarily led to a reduction of refugee influx. Nevertheless, the migrations of Rohingyas from Myanmar into Bangladesh continued with varying degree of intensity. Subsequently a couple of hundred thousands were repatriated. In 1992 the situation started deteriorating once again. The flight of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh and other countries did not help to improve their actual conditions and they remained a marginalized and disadvantaged group because these asylum seekers were accused of depleting scarce resources of densely populated Bangladesh. Subsequently the government in Dhaka has always been reluctant to recognise the Rohingyas even as refugees. Consequently, only a limited number of Rohingya's refugees have been documented and received the chance to reside in official camps that have been set up with support from NGOs and the international community. However, the vast majority of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, estimated at 200,000 to 500.000 individuals, remain undocumented and are forced to live in unofficial camps in abominable conditions, deprived of the most basic rights. Many reports state that the Rohingyas are treated

tremendously inhumanly. Economic exploitation in form of cheap labour, no adequate access to food or health services, sexual harassments, torture and other atrocities by security forces and common locals seems to be the conditions the refugees, especially those belonging to the unofficial camps find themselves confronted with on a daily basis. Accusations of being involved in robbery, stealing, destruction of the environment, creating distortions in the regional job market leading to disadvantages for the Bangladeshis is increasing an environment which is hostile towards the disenfranchised Rohingya. Today there are clear indications that some segments of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh are being trafficked or drawn into criminal activities. Despite these examples of an unfortunate trajectory of the relationship between Rohingyas refugees and Bangladeshis, there are also positive glimpses of hope. Locals have in many cases decreased the plight of the Rohingya-out of humanitarian goodwill as well as the due to bonding religious sentiments. This marks a phenomenon which is quite different from the official policy of the decision-makers in Dhaka. Having this in mind, it is important to mention that there is an increasing trend in Bangladesh that analysts are beginning to perceive the Rohingya issue not only solely as a humanitarian and refugee issue. Rather they identify the refugees increasingly as a security threat. The most significant element in this rationale is the claim that the

Rohingyas are serving as a recruiting base for Islamic militant extremists. As such, it is proclaimed that they contribute to the rise of the religious fundamentalist movement challenging the democratic framework as well as the notions of democracy and tolerance. Bangladesh authorities and security analysts don't miss many occasions to emphasize the apparent links between the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and militant fundamentalists Islamic groups like the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (Huji), which are well-known for their terrorist activities. Furthermore, the Rohingya issue has a strong impact on Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar. In this context, not only the government of Bangladesh but also the decision-makers in Myanmar are portraying the refugee's camps on Bangladeshi soil as a national security predicament. As a result, Bangladeshi authorities are trying to stop further migration - or at least, making a migration for Rohingyas into Bangladesh less appealing.

However, the argument for banning the activities of aid organizations because they would encourage an influx of Rohingya refugees is worrisome at best. Of course Bangladesh is confronted with a vast amount of troubles and is itself dependent on foreign aid; nonetheless, Bangladesh should not forget its own history and remember that millions of Bangladeshi

people had to experience the traumatic conditions of being a refugee twice. Therefore, Bangladesh's government should conduct a more proactive foreign policy regarding potential solutions which also rely on external support. In this context, the Rohingya issue should be rather be seen as an opportunity than a problem for regional collaboration. Instead of ignoring an integrated cooperation with international donors and NGOs, Bangladesh's authorities should work towards multilateral, sustainable and coherent initiatives to improve the situation of Rohingya. The latest exodus of Rohingya in 2013 after another wave of violence and discrimination vividly demonstrated once again the conflicting positions and reactions of actors involved, especially of the regional and non-regional governments as well as major international NGOs. Nevertheless, there is a certain understanding among the international community about the on-going human rights violations and the extraordinary absurdity of the policy of portraying the Rohingya as 'stateless. But despite this awareness, it seems that there is not much political will and/or an appropriate forum to address the issue of Rohingya yet. It's time to invite the governments in the broader region, not only Bangladesh and Myanmar, but also India, Thailand and Malaysia among others, to contribute to a discourse on a sustainable solution to a long-standing issue.