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Refugees from Myanmar: Rohingyas in Kelambakkam

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 07/01/2016 - 09:46

Paper No. 6141

Dated 01-Jul-2016

Guest Column by Prof. V. Suryanarayan

Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted and unwanted people in the world today.

Thousands of them were forced to flee from their country: they have taken shelter in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Philippines, Australia and Saudi Arabia. Nearly 10,000 of them have been lured to come to India by Dalals (agents). The dalals portray India as a safe haven, where employment is easily available, they could live in comfort and, what is more, they could lead a secure and peaceful life. They cross the porous Bangladesh-India border, come to West Bengal and take the train to different parts of the country. The Rohingyas are concentrated in New Delhi, Jammu, Rajasthan, Hyderabad, and, to a lesser extent, in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala.

The Author came in touch with Rohingya refugees during the World Refugee Day on June 20, when the UNHCR, Chennai office had arranged a function in the Stella Maris College for an interaction with select group of refugees who live in South India. Some Rohingya refugees had come for the get together and they narrated their tale of woe. The Author wanted to learn more about them and along with his junior colleague Ms. Asma Masood of the Chennai Centre for China Studies visited the refugee camp located in Kelambakkam, 35 kms away from Chennai, in Kancheepuram district.

In order to understand the Rohingya predicament, it is necessary to recall their living conditions in Myanmar, the many acts of discrimination to which they were subjected, the concerted attempts to reduce their numbers and, what is more, why they were compelled to get uprooted from familiar surroundings. Today they are not citizens of any country. They have no permanent home.

The United Nations has described the Rohingyas as the most persecuted minority in the world today. All of them are Muslims, belonging to

the Sunni sect; they have their language and their distinct culture. According to CIA World Fact Book, Muslims constitute 4 per cent of the population of Myanmar. Their largest concentration is in the Rakhine state (formerly known as Arakan), especially around Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Akyab and Kyauktaw. They are one of the early settlers of the country; however, their number increased during the British rule. The British Government encouraged their migration. They migrated from villages which fall within Bangladesh today. They worked very hard and contributed to the economic prosperity of Burma. They number approximately 800,000.

Their legal status under the British rule was that of British subjects and they enjoyed the same rights and privileges which others who lived in Burma enjoyed. After independence in 1948, the Burmese government, mainly representing majority Burmans, began to systematically discriminate the minorities. The Rohingyas naturally felt alienated and their political leaders began to advocate a separate independent nation. This further alienated them from the majority community. The military junta, which came to power in 1962, cracked down on them. The government records referred to them not as Rohingyas, but as illegal Bengali migrants. It was an illustration of denial of their separate cultural identity.

The Citizenship Act of 1982 further worsened their position. According to the rules prescribed for citizenship, one must belong to one of the 135 national races, whose ancestors had lived in the country before 1823. The Rohingyas could not produce the necessary documents and consequently indiscriminate denial of citizenship took place. The President's office issued a statement: "Burma will take responsibility for its ethnic nationalities, but it is not at all possible to recognize the illegal border-crossing Rohingyas who are not an ethnic group in Burma".

Rohingyas had no access to education, health, travel, employment opportunities and, above all, political participation. Those who wanted to get married should apply for permits, which took a long time to get sanctioned. They were forced to do manual labour, without pay, for the armed services. Compounding the situation were regular cycles of violence.

The unprecedented organized riots that took place in 2012 brought the predicament of the Rohingyas to the attention of the international community. As the Minority Rights Group has described: "Since 1982 and their loss of citizenship, Rohingyas have been persecuted and oppressed to an astounding level. They have been particularly targeted for atrocities committed by the Burmese army, such as torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment, extra-judicial killings and summary execution, arbitrary arrest and detention, rape, destruction of homes, forced labour, forced relocation and eviction, confiscation of land and property etc." What further humiliated the devout Rohingyas was the wanton destruction of their places of worship. As a well known authority has put it, "The religious activities of these minorities are also severely curtailed. Many mosques and religious schools have been demolished since the 1980's and repairs to them are often prohibited. There have been substantial reports of Waqf land (mosque land) and Muslim cemeteries being appropriated by authorities, as well as Muslim monuments, place names and historical sites being destroyed".

While reading about the sorry predicament of the Rohingyas, the author was reminded of Hannah Arendt's writings with reference to the treatment meted out to the Jews in Nazi Germany. To quote: "We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our

occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in Polish Ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives”.

The return of Aung San Suu Kyi to active politics has not brought about any improvement in the overall situation. She had been silent on the issue, fearing that any word of sympathy for the Rohingyas would cost her the majority Burman support. When the US Secretary of State John Kerry called on her in May 2016 and raised the subject of Rohingyas, Aung Saan Syu Kyi evaded the issue by giving a diplomatic answer: “All that we are asking is that people should be aware of the difficulties we are facing and to give us enough space to solve our problems”.

When the exodus began, naturally Bangladesh, being geographically contiguous, was the first country of preference for the Rohingyas. But to their dismay they were unwelcome in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi border guards threw them back to Myanmar. Sheikh Hasina, Bangladeshi Prime Minister, asserted that it was not her problem. It is unwise to meddle in the internal affairs of a neighbouring country. At the same time, the Rohingyas constituted cheap labour and many employers were willing to hire them on an informal basis. There is no possibility that the Government of Bangladesh would give Rohingyas permanent asylum. What is worse, the Bangladeshis have started referring to Rohingyas as drug peddlers, arms dealers and Islamic terrorists. In other words, the presence of Rohingyas is viewed not from the perspective of humanitarian considerations, but as a threat to national security.

Unwelcome in Bangladesh, many took the risk of crossing the Bay of Bengal in rickety boats and tried to reach Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. The Rohingyas realized that even in Islamic countries like Malaysia and Indonesia they were unwelcome. The official policy was explained by the Home Minister of Malaysia as follows: “We have treated immigrants humanely, but they cannot be flooding our shores like this. They are not welcome here”. The desperate Rohingyas, fearing for their lives, have also reached the shores of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Philippines and Australia. In addition to hazards of travel the Rohingyas also find that the legal procedures for asylum in many countries are weighted against them.

It is in this backdrop of international apathy, we should try to understand the living conditions of the Rohingyas in Kelambakkam. According to the Factsheet India issued by the UNHCR in May 2016 there are 19,142 Myanmarese refugees in India; according to informed sources the Rohingyas will approximately number 10,000 among them. The Rohingyas live in Jammu, New Delhi, Rajasthan, Hyderabad, Tamil Nadu and Kozhikode. All of them have come from Bangladesh utilizing the services of dalals who have contacts in various parts of India. As far as Rohingyas in Kelambakkam are concerned, some have come from Jammu and few others directly from Bangladesh.

The UNHCR had been the greatest benefactor of Rohingyas. The Rohingyas in Kelambakkam are recognized as refugees by the UNHCR and they are issued a refugee card which lists out their individual particulars like name with photograph, sex, age, date of arrival etc. The refugee card is a guarantee of their legal status; and they cannot be evicted from India against their wishes. The Chennai office of the

UNHCR is confident that as and when validity of the refugee card expires, they could easily get them extended. The UNHCR maintains cordial relations with the Department of Immigration, Government of India.

It had not been smooth sailing for the Rohingya refugees. They were found wandering in different parts of Chennai and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issued notice to the Government of Tamil Nadu seeking clarification on the subject. The Collector of Kancheepuram rose to the occasion and provided them accommodation in the community hall in Kelambakkam. During their days of wandering they lived in a makeshift camp in Manali, but the local residents did not like their presence. When the Rohingyas settled down in Kelambakkam they numbered only 14, but the news that they have a permanent home spread and others joined the group. Today they number 64, and belong to 14 families. They comprise 15 men, 16 women, 24 boys and nine girls.

While the Kelambakkam camp provides a roof over the head, it lacks basic amenities. There is only one water tap outside the main building and only one toilet. We found children urinating on the floor. The open veranda where we talked to the refugees was full of flies. When the monsoon hits, one can imagine the pathetic condition that will develop there. The main hall is partitioned by hanging old clothes and each family occupies a space measuring 5' by 5'. They take their bath and wash their clothes outside; cooking is also done outside with the use of firewood.

Mohammad Kasim, aged 37, is articulate in Urdu and he was the spokesman for the refugees. Following the riots in 2012, he, along with his family, migrated to Cox Bazar in Bangladesh. He migrated to Jammu with the help of a Dalal, paying him 13,000 rupees. He worked as a labourer on daily wages cleaning the railway compartments. He then heard that Tamil Nadu was a safer place to live, with prospects of better job and higher income. After staying in Manali he moved to Kelambakkam six months ago. The men folk are involved in rag picking, mainly plastic waste. They leave early in the morning and return to the camp by about 3 pm. The whole saler comes to the camp and collects the plastic materials. Mohammad Kasim informed that they earned about Rs. 250/per day. I asked him that if women in the camp also work and take jobs like cleaning of house and washing of clothes, they could supplement the family income. But Noor Mohammad was emphatic that women should not go out and work. It was unislamic. It is man's duty to earn and feed the family members.

It was the month of Ramadan and there was a glow in the face of Noor Mohammad when he compared their lives in Rakhine State with the life in Kelambakkam. He recalled that they could not follow Islamic rituals because the majority Buddhists wanted to destroy their religious and cultural identity. Their mosques were razed to the ground, their Madarasas were closed down and the Islamic life was in danger of extinction. In Kelambakkam there was no danger to Islamic life; they could observe all the religious rites prescribed by Islam. They go to the nearby mosque regularly. Even though the language used in the mosque is Tamil, which was unintelligible to them, peace and tranquility have returned to their lives.

However I had a disturbed feeling that orthodox Islam stands in the way of their overall development. They refuse to move with the times and want to cling on to outmoded traditions. Ms. Asma Masood, who spoke to women separately, narrated two incidents which illustrate that

orthodox Islamic traditions stand in the way of their progress. Waheeda (not her real name) in her late 30's had six children in rapid succession. When her last child was born in the Government hospital in Kelambakkam her health was shattered. The doctor warned her not to have any more children and advised her to undergo tubectomy. She did not want to comply saying that it was against Islamic practices. Then the doctor advised her husband to undergo vasectomy or at least practice family planning. The husband also refused stating that it was against the tenets of Islam. Will Waheeda continue to be a child producing machine?

Asma also came across a young sprightly girl, Salma (not her real name), aged 12 and studying in Class VI of the Government High School. Genial and friendly, Salma is immensely popular among her teachers and classmates. In the course of her conversation Salma told Asma that she would like to continue her studies and later take up a job in life. Recently Salma attained puberty. The elders in the camp want Salma to discontinue her studies and wait for the day when her marriage will be arranged. Salma's parents want her to continue her studies, but they do not want to assert their point of view. It is very likely that Salma's promising career would be sacrificed at the altar of Islamic orthodoxy.

The living conditions of refugees can be improved if the Government of Tamil Nadu adopts a more humane and sympathetic attitude towards them. The Collector of Kancheepuram should immediately include the Rohingyas in the category of people who fall below poverty line. People in this category receive 29 kgs of rice free from the public distribution system and also sugar, kerosene and dal at subsidized rates. These refugees should also be entitled to receive sarees and dhoties during Pongal festival. The Government of Tamil Nadu should also give them table fan, mixer and grinding machine which they have given free to the local people. It is worth highlighting that the Sri Lankan Refugees living in the camps are entitled for these doles. Why deprive the Rohingyas of the state Government's noble gestures to improve the standard of living of the poor people in the State?

As we were leaving the camp I asked Mohammad Kasim whether he believed that he could go back to Myanmar as equal citizen of the country. He replied that he would love to, provided their land is returned to them and the Government respects their Islamic identity. Till such time comes, he would love to remain in Tamil Nadu.

Mohammad Kasim's hope and anxiety about returning to Myanmar reminded me of the famous lines of the poem, The State of Siege, written by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. The poem opens with the lines: "There on the hill side, gazing into the dusk and canon of time, near the shadow-crossed gardens, we do what the prisoners and the powerless always do, we try to conjure up hope".

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