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Myanmar: Rohingya Issue- Getting more and more complicated

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The Rohingya problem which was a local bilateral issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh and had then become a regional issue with the Rohingya refugees spreading out of Bangladesh.

It is now getting into international dimensions and one cannot but agree with the statement of A.M.A Muhith, the Finance Minister of Bangladesh that the Rohingya repatriation back to Myanmar will never succeed!

Baby Steps towards Repatriation and Outbursts from UN

Just when Bangladesh provided the list of the first batch of refugees to Home Minister of Myanmar Lt. Gen. Kyaw Swe in the middle of last month to begin the first “baby steps” for repatriation, the UN Assistant Secretary General Andrew Gilmour, made a statement on March 6 that it was “inconceivable” that any Rohingya would be able to return to Myanmar in the near future. He added that the nature of the violence against the Rohingyas has changed in Myanmar from one of frenzied blood letting and mass rape of last year to a lower intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation that seem to have been designed to drive the remaining Rohingyas from their homes. This statement is hardly helpful for those refugees who were being persuaded to make a beginning of “repatriation”.

The UNHCR Human Rights Chief has gone even further in calling for a new body on lines similar to the Syrian conflict to prepare criminal indictments over the alleged abuses Committed in Myanmar.

It is known that most of the refugees in Bangladesh camps have “unionised” themselves and it is said that they will not leave for Myanmar

unless their safety and security are assured. Some of the additional demands now put forth by them include stationing of UN Peace Keeping Forces in Rakhine and for Aid agencies and the media to be given free access to the State. As could be seen, the demands are getting more and more political in nature and more such demands could be expected.

The first list provided by Bangladesh recently has the names of 8032 refugees from 1673 households and they will be repatriated once their prior residence is verified by Myanmar. Liaison offices at Mangdaw township of Myanmar and Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh to coordinate security and checking of cross border trade of illegal drugs said to be rampant in the border areas are yet to set up before any repatriation could begin. This is going to delay the repatriation of even the first lot any time soon.

Over 90 percent of Rohingyas are said to have fled Rakhine State!

The Irrawaddy of 23rd February has given some details of the refugees in the camps. These details were obtained by them from Myanmar government sources- the GAD, the United Nations Reports from OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). It is said that between August 25 and Jan. 27, 688,000 new arrivals were registered in the camps.

The GAD (General Administrative Department) of Myanmar have put the total Rohingya population before the latest crisis as 767,038 and this would mean that around 90 percent of the population has fled into Bangladesh and that only 10 percent (79,038) remained in the three major townships that had considerable population of Rohingyas.

Another report of The Irrawaddy maintains that despite the ongoing preparations for repatriation, more than 2500 refugees have crossed into Bangladesh just this year and according to Government statistics roughly an average of 75 Rohingyas leave the villages each day,

It is seen that the Government reports (GAD) describe the Rohingyas as “foreigner” or “Bangladeshi” and not as Bengali or Rohingya and not even as Muslim community from Rakhine State as Suu Kyi had described them once in 2016!

The Irrawaddy has also quoted some unnamed sources that most of the places of residences of Rohingyas have been razed to the ground and that would mean that the repatriated refugees will not be able to trace their former residences or stay in nearby places!

The Buffer Zone and Unregistered Refugees:

For repatriation, the first priority should have been those who continue to stay in the “buffer” zone between Myanmar and Bangladesh. There are about 6500 refugees who continue to stay in the buffer zones and they will have to be verified first for repatriation before the cases of those in the camps are to be considered. Myanmar believes as mentioned by their government Spokesman U Zaw Htay that some of the militants who took part in the coordinated attacks on security posts in the Northern Rakhine State are hiding among the refugees in the buffer zone. If this is true, it is doubtful whether Myanmar would take any of those stranded in the buffer zone at all before a “thorough”

verification is made and no one could say how long it would take!

Myanmar government has also mentioned that the buffer zone refugees who are not registered in any camps are still receiving food and medicines from some “groups and organisations” and it is alleged by them that these refugees are being used to put international pressure on Myanmar.

Foreign Media Coverage:

The foreign media coverage in the last few months has also not been helpful in the smooth repatriation of the refugees and has only resulted in building up of fear and insecurity among the refugees. One such report was of Associated Press of February 1st that documented the discovery at Gu Dar Pyin Village in Buthidaung Township of mass graves containing the bodies of Rohingya villagers. The Government has denied the existence of such “mass graves.”

Such reports have also driven the Tatmadaw to be defensive and perhaps for the first time it has admitted of killing 10 Muslims at Inn Din village on September 2nd last year.

Government Assets Outside the Country Vulnerable:

Amidst all these, there is growing concern within Myanmar of the possibility of foreign terrorists who will surely try to exploit the situation by launching attacks in coordination with the radical elements within the country. The country’s assets outside including their embassies and other entities will have to beef up their security and vigilance in the face of increased attention about the alleged atrocities on the Muslims inside Myanmar. In view of the international condemnation of Myanmar’s handling of the crisis, more attacks by the ARSA elements who are still around among the refugees and inside cannot also be ruled out.

Conclusion:

In conclusion we could make the following observations:

1. Repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh back to Myanmar is not going to be an easy task and may take many years if at all that happens.
2. The issue that should have been settled bilaterally between Myanmar and Bangladesh has now acquired international dimensions and this has only complicated the issue.
3. The possibility of renewed attacks by the ARSA or of attacks of international terrorists in coordination with radical elements within the

country cannot be ruled out either.

4. It is not surprising that the Bangladesh Government has built up regular permanent structures in a newly formed island from the sediments carried by the rivers to house over 100,000 refugees from Myanmar.

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