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Bangladesh: The Rohingya Issue: No Solution in Sight!:

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It is to the credit of Sheikh Hasina that despite intense pressure from interested groups, she has managed to keep the Rohingya issue as a bilateral one and any criticism so far has been managed internally. But with the overwhelming success of Hasina in the last General elections and an assured stability in administration for the next five years there are calls that Bangladesh should take a tougher stand as the issue has already been internationalized and more importantly the bilateral talks have stalled with no progress despite four meetings of the Joint Working Group with the last one meeting recently in the first week of this month at Naypyitaw.

A million refugees are in the camps here in Southern Bangladesh near Cox's Bazaar with no prospect of their immediate return.

As one who has seen the situation in the refugee camps in southern Nepal some years ago, of the Bhutanese of Nepali origin who numbered about one hundred thousand, one can imagine the chaotic conditions in Rohingya camps where a million people are housed. In Nepal the refugees were well behaved innocent people and well-disciplined and yet there were problems galore. In the Rohingya camps, there is said to be total lawlessness and the camp officials are afraid to move around after sunset. The ARSA is said to have already infiltrated in many camps and there have been instances of human trafficking. Refugees have been found sneaking regularly into Mizoram and as far away as Malaysia. Even Chennai has a small Rohingya refugee community in Kelambakkam! In addition, there are the drug pushers and Yaba tablets are available in plenty and are being transported to other regions!

An article in the Daily Star of Dhaka has made out a very good case as to why Bangladesh should take a tougher stand on the Rohingya issue. A well- respected Professor Imtiaz Ahmed of International Development at Dhaka University has made out a cogent case for a tougher stand. The points made out are

1. Bangladesh Government should change its approach on the Rohingya issue as repatriation is stalled and it has already proved its humanitarian responsibilities since 2017.
2. Bangladesh has tried to solve it bilaterally. It took the initiative in November 2017 for an amicable solution despite the crisis being an international one.
3. A tripartite agreement was also signed by the two countries in 2018 along with UN Refugee Agency and UNDP wherein the UN agencies were allowed to visit and assess the conditions in Rakhine State for the return of the refugees.
4. In UN's assessment the conditions were not considered 'ripe' for return and the Rohingyas in the camps who had by now have formed into a trade union type of arrangement, also refused to return. There was a suggestion that the Rohingya refugees should also be represented in the Joint Working Groups as they are the ones who are to take a final call for the return. But the refugees refused to be part of the group. It is doubtful whether even Myanmar would have agreed to such an arrangement!
5. A new element has entered into the dynamics of the Rohingya issue with fierce clashes between the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) and the Arakan Army in the last few months. It is likely to be a protracted one.
6. The Myanmar Government which had declared that it was ready to take back the refugees has not amended its laws either to guarantee citizenship to Rohingyas or provide them with other rights.
7. A section of the Myanmar Military is already facing accusations of genocide and some in the West like the European Union have already started imposing sanctions.
8. If Myanmar is sincere, it has to change its laws including the citizenship laws and recognize Rohingyas as an ethnic group and ensure other rights to them.
9. As it is, the Joint Working Group is only deceiving both the Rohingyas and the International Community
10. Perhaps both the countries could opt for a "two-track" diplomacy instead of formal talks.

The situation has indeed been complicated by two factors- one the presence of ARSA in the camps and two, the raging civil war in the Rakhine State where both the Government of Myanmar and the Tatmadaw have vowed to crush the Arakan Army. Unfortunately, the Arakan army is now well entrenched in Rakhine area though it continues with its training and recruitment in the Kachin Headquarters at Laiza. The Rakhines have a proud history, claiming a cultural continuity from 3000 BC to 1784 AD and the Arakan Army is popular with the people.

Left to themselves, Myanmar would not take back even a single Rohingya back and any international pressure would only throw them further into China's lap. The Myanmar Army Chief in his three day(?) visit to China recently specifically thanked the Chinese authorities for protecting them from international sanctions! They cannot be fighting on one hand and at the same time prepare themselves for the orderly return of the Rohingya refugees. They are not ready as yet even with the laws to recognize them as an ethnic unit with rights to citizenship.

Track two meetings may go on but the Myanmar government should first get to come to terms with the Arakan Army and agree for a bilateral ceasefire for peace and stability in the region. Then and then only can anyone think of the Rohingya issue and for peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyan refugees.

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