



Bangladesh: The Long Shadow of Rohingya Displacement

■ EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

For nearly a decade, Bangladesh has found itself navigating one of the most protracted and politically fraught refugee crises in modern history. What began in 2017 as a sudden humanitarian emergency, triggered by mass displacement from Myanmar's Rakhine State, has gradually hardened into a long and exhausting stalemate. The urgency that once defined the crisis has faded into a quieter but more troubling inertia. Today, the Rohingya question persists not because it is actively being resolved, but because it has become too complex, too politically inconvenient, and too internationally neglected to move forward.

This slow paralysis has drawn Bangladesh into what can only be described as an exhaustion trap. It is a situation in which every stakeholder recognises that the current arrangement is unsustainable, yet every effort undertaken merely manages the strain rather than changing the trajectory. Diplomatic statements are issued, meetings are held, and plans are reiterated, but little alters on the ground. What emerges is a pattern where activity replaces strategy, and repetition substitutes for innovation.

At the centre of this impasse lies the continued reliance on repatriation as the cornerstone of Bangladesh's Rohingya policy. In official rhetoric, repatriation remains the only viable and durable solution. It is a position that aligns comfortably with international humanitarian frameworks and allows Dhaka to maintain moral clarity. Yet the gap between this declared objective and the political reality across the border has steadily widened.

The failures of earlier repatriation efforts should have prompted a fundamental reassessment. Attempts in 2018 and 2019 collapsed not because of logistical complications, but because of a profound lack of trust. Refugees refused to return to Myanmar without credible guarantees of safety, citizenship, and dignity. Those guarantees were never forthcoming, and the reluctance of the Rohingya to return was neither irrational nor unexpected. It reflected an understanding shaped by lived experience rather than diplomatic assurances.

Despite this, Bangladesh's policy approach has remained anchored to the same premise, treating repatriation as an operational challenge rather than a deeply political and humanitarian dilemma. This has allowed policymakers to interpret repeated failures as issues of timing or coordination, instead of confronting the underlying conditions that make repatriation unviable. The result has been a cycle of expectation and disappointment, each iteration further eroding credibility.

The voices of the Rohingya themselves have been remarkably consistent. Those who have engaged with conditions in Rakhine State have returned with a clear and sobering message. The environment remains unsafe, rights are uncertain, and the structures that enabled past persecution have not been dismantled. If anything, the evolving conflict within Myanmar has made the prospect of return even more precarious.

Indeed, the regional context in which this crisis unfolds has undergone a dramatic transformation. The assumption that Bangladesh is dealing with a stable

and identifiable authority across the border is no longer valid. Myanmar's internal conflict has fractured control over Rakhine State, creating a complex and unpredictable landscape. The rise of the Arakan Army and its territorial gains have reshaped the balance of power, particularly in areas close to the Bangladesh border.

This shift has introduced a new layer of uncertainty into an already fragile situation. Bangladesh is no longer engaging with a single counterpart but is instead confronted with a fragmented environment where multiple actors operate simultaneously. Armed groups, displaced civilians, informal networks, and humanitarian agencies intersect in ways that are difficult to regulate or predict. In

uation. It accelerates its deterioration.

Bangladesh's reliance on international support has long been a central component of its response. In the early stages of the crisis, global attention translated into substantial financial and political backing. Over time, however, that attention has shifted. New conflicts and crises have emerged elsewhere, drawing resources and focus away from the Rohingya issue.

This shift has had tangible consequences. Donor fatigue has begun to manifest in funding shortfalls and warnings of potential reductions in aid. The prospect of ration cuts within the camps has underscored the fragility of the existing support system. Efforts to reinvigorate international engagement, including high-profile

Rohingya issue does not readily translate into electoral advantage, and the incentives for transformative action are therefore limited. The new government has inherited a framework characterised by continuity rather than creativity, where established positions are reiterated but seldom reimagined.

The interim administration that preceded it did attempt to introduce elements of change. By elevating the Rohingya issue within the national security framework and appointing dedicated leadership to oversee it, there was an implicit acknowledgement that the crisis required a more integrated and strategic approach. There were also tentative explorations of alternative ideas, including proposals for hu-

manitarian access mechanisms into Rakhine State.

manitarian access mechanisms into Rakhine State. Treating it as the sole axis of policy risks narrowing the space for alternative approaches and delaying necessary adjustments. A more realistic and forward-looking strategy would need to operate on multiple levels simultaneously. It would involve maintaining repatriation as a long-term objective while developing interim frameworks that address the immediate realities of displacement. It would require engaging with the evolving dynamics within Myanmar in a manner that is both pragmatic and cautious.

Equally important is the need to integrate humanitarian management with broader considerations of security, education, and economic stability. The camps cannot be treated as isolated entities. Their dynamics have direct implications for regional stability and national security. Addressing the needs of host communities in Cox's Bazar is also essential to maintaining social cohesion and preventing local grievances from escalating.

The decline in international support further underscores the need for strategic adaptation. Bangladesh must explore ways to diversify its support base and develop more sustainable models of assistance. This is not merely a question of funding but of resilience in the face of an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Central to all of this is the need for institutional innovation. The complexity of the Rohingya crisis demands a level of coordination and strategic planning that goes beyond existing structures. A dedicated policy framework that brings together diplomatic, security, humanitarian, and analytical expertise could provide the coherence that is currently lacking.

Time is an increasingly critical factor. The longer the present stalemate endures, the more entrenched its consequences become. The camps risk evolving into permanent settlements marked by generational despair. The border regions risk becoming more volatile as Myanmar's internal conflict continues to spill over. The space for policy innovation may continue to shrink as positions harden and resources diminish.

Warnings about the potential for instability if the crisis remains unresolved should not be dismissed as rhetorical exaggeration. They reflect a genuine concern that prolonged neglect could give rise to outcomes that are far more difficult to manage than the present situation.

Bangladesh stands at a decisive moment in its approach to the Rohingya crisis. Continuing along the current path may offer short-term political comfort, but it carries significant long-term risks. The alternative is more demanding, requiring both political courage and strategic imagination.

It calls for a departure from familiar patterns and a willingness to embrace complexity. It requires recognising that doing nothing is not a neutral act but a choice with consequences. In the context of the Rohingya crisis, inaction is not a pause. It is a direction, one that leads steadily towards deeper uncertainty and greater instability.

The exhaustion trap, in this sense, is not merely a condition to be endured. It is a warning that the limits of the existing approach have been reached. Whether Bangladesh can respond to that warning with clarity and resolve will determine not only the future of the Rohingya within its borders, but also the broader trajectory of stability in the region.



such a setting, the conventional model of bilateral negotiation appears increasingly inadequate.

While diplomacy struggles to adapt, the humanitarian consequences of prolonged stagnation continue to deepen. The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have become emblematic of both resilience and despair. Home to more than a million Rohingya, these settlements have evolved into densely populated spaces where basic needs are met but meaningful futures remain elusive.

As opportunities diminish, vulnerabilities intensify. Reports of recruitment into armed groups have grown, driven by a combination of coercion, economic desperation, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness. Human trafficking networks exploit the absence of viable livelihoods, offering dangerous escape routes that often end in tragedy. The increase in risky sea journeys, some of which have resulted in significant loss of life, underscores the desperation that pervades camp life.

These developments highlight a critical dynamic that policymakers cannot afford to ignore. When conditions become intolerable, individuals do not wait for diplomatic breakthroughs. They seek immediate, if perilous, alternatives. In this sense, the stagnation of policy does not freeze the sit-

visits and diplomatic initiatives, have succeeded in generating visibility but have fallen short of securing sustained commitment.

There is a growing recognition that being acknowledged on the global stage does not necessarily translate into meaningful leverage. Bangladesh's appeals, however justified, are increasingly competing with a crowded and crisis-laden international agenda.

Against this backdrop, the recent political transition in Bangladesh offered a moment of potential recalibration. A new government, backed by a strong mandate, presented an opportunity to rethink entrenched approaches and inject fresh thinking into a stagnant policy space. Yet the Rohingya issue itself occupied only a marginal place in the electoral discourse.

Domestic concerns dominated public debate, reflecting the immediate priorities of voters. Economic pressures, governance challenges, and democratic restoration took precedence over a crisis that, despite its scale, has become normalised within the national consciousness. For many, the Rohingya presence is no longer perceived as an urgent anomaly but as a difficult and enduring reality.

This political context complicates the prospect of bold policy innovation. The