



PROCEEDINGS



Interactive Session on Rohingya: Repatriation Process



Wednesday, 25 October 2023

Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)



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Interactive Session on **Rohingya:** Repatriation Process



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INTERACTIVE SESSION ON

Rohingya: Repatriation Process

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised an Interactive Session on “**Rohingya: Repatriation Process**” on Wednesday, 25 October 2023 at BISS Auditorium. Ambassador Laetitia van den Assum, Visiting Fellow, The Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University was the **Guest Speaker** in the session. **Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc**, Director General, BISS, delivered the welcome address and **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BISS, presided over the event. **Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, Research Director, BISS, made a presentation on “**Rohingyas in Bangladesh: A Deepening Crisis and the Challenges of Repatriation**”.

Presentations were followed by an open discussion session. BISS researchers and participants of the session have actively intervened during the open forum and enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions and observations.



WELCOME ADDRESS



Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc

Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc, Director General, BIISS, at the outset paid his deepest homage to the memory of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and millions of those who made their supreme sacrifices during the War of Liberation.

He stated that the Rohingyas are the most persecuted ethnic group in the world, and their displacement from their own land amid the military persecution has created the most serious humanitarian crisis and security concern of the world. He recalled that when the renewed influx of Rohingyas started in 2017 amid military persecution, Bangladesh came forward to embrace those millions persecuted and displaced Rohingyas and provided shelter to them only from the humanitarian ground. Therefore, he argued, Bangladesh has been counting huge economic and environmental damages due to the heavy burden of these displaced people. Moreover, this crisis is generating spill-over effects on the security environment of the region and beyond.

The Director General emphasised that the only solution of this crisis is the peaceful, dignified and sustainable repatriation of these displaced people to their land, since the crisis erupted due to the internal crisis of Myanmar. He pointed out that one of the key priorities of Bangladesh is peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. He argued that as the geopolitics surrounding Myanmar and the Rakhine region have further complicated the Rohingya repatriation issue, Bangladesh is focusing on engaging major regional and global powers to come forward to solve the crisis and ensure stability in the region.

The Director General further argued that Bangladesh has long been pursuing Myanmar for a peaceful, dignified, and sustainable solution to the crisis. He pointed out that Bangladesh has engaged in constant dialogue with Myanmar to immediately commence repatriation of the Rohingya people. Unfortunately, repatriation did not take place as Rohingyas refused to go back due to their deep concern over the security situation in Rakhine state. The Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh repeatedly raised her voice in different international forums that it is Myanmar's responsibility to take necessary steps for building confidence regarding security among the Rohingyas for repatriation. During the 78th UNGA, Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has urged the world community to redouble their collective efforts to repatriate Rohingyas to their homeland in Myanmar side by side executing the resolutions of the security council and general assembly to ensure a sustainable solution of the crisis.

In conclusion, the Director General highlighted that Bangladesh, with the support of international assistance, has been providing shelter and basic needs to those displaced Rohingya people despite having resource constraints. The country is also facing mounting challenges since funding from the international donors has been reducing gradually. He stressed that the international community needs to come forward and continue to keep this issue at the top of agenda alongside continuing humanitarian efforts to ensure the sustenance of these ill-fated and distressed human beings. He further stressed that the issue of repatriation has now reached a point of stagnation since not a single displaced Rohingya has been able to return to their homes in Myanmar. Lastly, he emphasised that the international community and our neighbours must come forward to end this curse of human history and make a stable, secured and peaceful region.

PRESENTATION

Rohingyas in Bangladesh: A Deepening Crisis and the Challenges of Repatriation



Abu Salah Md Yousuf

Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Abu Salah Md Yousuf, Research Director, BIISS, mainly focused on the present realities of Myanmar that include a summary to see how different dimensions are emerging in the context of Rohingya crisis and what are the challenges of repatriation. He said that due to the delay of repatriation of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs), the crisis is deepening for which the humanitarian challenges and security concerns are widening. The challenges of repatriation are multifaceted and, in this regard, maintaining international attention has now emerged as a major concern.

Also, while talking about the deepening of the crisis, he thinks Bangladesh can look at it from two perspectives. One is humanitarian perspective, and the other is security perspective. From the humanitarian perspective, the main focus he thinks, would be the protection of the FDMNs since 1.1 million Rohingyas were expelled from Myanmar and now living in Bangladesh and their human security, life and livelihood are under severe stress. At the same time, the life and livelihood of the host community is also a subject of concern. A number of international donor agencies are raising their concerns about managing life and livelihood of the host community and the tension between the host community and the FDMNs. Decreasing funding is also a concern for Bangladesh. As we have seen after 2017, there was a good amount of funding but the amount of funding is significantly decreasing, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) data suggests. It is emerging as a great burden for Bangladesh to address the issues, particularly, maintaining day to day life of the FDMNs. Another interesting dimension is the future of Rohingyas, as it is known that the international community and the other actors are not properly addressing the issue to ensure the repatriation and future of the FDMNs. As such, the crisis will be more difficult. From the security perspectives, the increased density and the burden of insecurity is concerning. This insecurity is not only a concern for the southeastern region of Bangladesh rather it is a national security concern. Moreover, the non-traditional security threats, for example, the transnational issues, arms, and drugs are also increasing. At the same time, the environmental cost of the FDMN crisis in Bangladesh as well as in the region cannot be forgotten.

Another important dimension which is raised by Bangladesh in the International forum is the issue of regional security concerns. It seems in almost all the international refugee crises that the region faces one kind of escalation: the tensions among the regional stakeholders as well as in terms of non-traditional security threats. In addition, there remains a fear that it can have a spillover effect on the stability of the Bay of Bengal region which is very important for the littorals of the Bay of Bengal region as well as many other international actors who are very much active in this region. Seeing the deepening of the crisis, the urge of repatriation has increased. In this regard, it is also important to look at the challenges in the process of repatriation that Bangladesh is currently facing.

Academic literatures as well as the policy makers say that, the geopolitics of the region particularly connected to the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh and Myanmar is increasing. The United States' Burma Act, China's policies, and engagement of India in the Rakhine state of Myanmar raise concerns about how international actors will play in this region and how to address the geopolitical issues. Nevertheless, it is said that due to geopolitical issues, the international community is facing challenges to develop a common position to focus on repatriation of the FDMNs. For the repatriation arrangements, Bangladesh and Myanmar both are engaged in dialogue, as well as the trilateral mechanism including China is also in place, but the problems here are: the willingness of the Myanmar authority particularly on the issues of verification and the manageability of the transit camps. They are raising many issues and narratives including the issues of terrorism. Sometimes they want to say that there are terrorists among the Rohingyas who are living in Bangladesh though their terrorist activities took place in Myanmar. It is argued by many scholars that they should take them back and they would be trialled by the law of their land but interestingly, Myanmar government or Myanmar Authority is not always responding properly in this situation. Mr Yousuf thinks that the progress in the negotiation process of repatriation is very much challenging in this context.

Bangladesh is committed to ensure its international obligations and norms but it is another dimension in the process of negotiation. Mr Yousuf thinks that the decreasing international attention on this issue due to other emerging crises in other regions is leaving the FDMN crisis behind and international attention is reducing on this issue. However, in the process of negotiation, if the domestic realities of Myanmar are considered, then accepting the FDMNs in their land is also challenging because of the constitutional and legal factors. It is to note here that, though some internal issues of Myanmar e.g., constitutional issues are overlooked, some of the major issues, particularly the citizenship law are concerning in this regard. If these issues are not addressed properly, then it would be difficult to ensure the sustainable repatriation of the FDMNs. Here, the situation in the Rakhine state is very important but there is no development on the issue. The Myanmar authority did not take any action to solve the internally displaced persons (IDP) issues in the Rakhine state. So, it would be difficult for the FDMNs to be convinced that they would be secured in their land after they return to their homeland, Myanmar. The volatile scenario of Myanmar including the Rakhine state of Myanmar is known to all and it was also mentioned in the report of Advisory Commission on Rakhine State widely known and referred to as the 'Annan Commission report'.

The deepening conflict, debate, and crisis among the different stakeholders and insurgent groups is making the situation even more difficult. In this respect, the securitisation narrative of the Rohingya identity is important which started during the Ne Win government in 1962. But at the same time, it is still deepening and widening particularly when the Myanmar authority narrates the Rohingya identity. The political dimension on this issue



is also a very important challenge to repatriate FDMNs. In this respect, the social factors of the Rakhine state particularly where the FDMNs will return, societal response towards them after the repatriation is a concern and may be a challenge and the Myanmar authority has not taken any initiative as observed to date. These challenges are very much vivid in terms of negotiation as well as domestic factors of Myanmar, and the negotiation process needs to be more focused on these domestic factors.

To summarise the predicaments of Bangladesh, maintaining humanitarian commitments and the security situation is emerging as a major problem here - not only the FDMN camp issues, but also the transnational factors. Secondly, funding and international attention is also a challenge for Bangladesh. Bangladesh is struggling very much on this issue. Bangladesh is pursuing effective international response for the repatriation and the amicable solution of the crisis since the influx of 2017. Bangladesh is desiring an amicable solution of the crisis but to reach an amicable solution, the response from Myanmar and other international community is very less and that remains a challenge for Bangladesh.

As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh always focuses on the safe, secured, dignified and sustainable repatriation, but the framework to achieve this is a predicament for Bangladesh. Bangladesh promotes and desires a peaceful and stable region and focuses on cooperating with other countries and regions including the Bay of Bengal. It also remains a predicament for Bangladesh because without ensuring a sustainable and safe repatriation of the FDMNs, the long-term stability and security of this region will remain elusive.

He concluded by saying that the humanitarian realities and security concerns need much more international attention at present and it is a challenge for Bangladesh. Harnessing more international attention is necessary to reach a solution for the crisis. The repatriation issue is deeply connected with the peace and stability of the region. Without ensuring the repatriation, regional peace and security would not be achieved and this would not only be a burden for Bangladesh rather for all stakeholders of the region and beyond as they all have to face the challenges in terms of development and stability of the region. Ensuring the international humanitarian obligations for repatriation is inevitable. In that respect it is sometimes argued that the engagement of the third parties in the repatriation process in terms of finalising the terms and conditions of the repatriation process is also very much important and it needs to be analysed more and focused when talking about the FDMN repatriation.

However, Bangladesh is committed to international norms of repatriation but at the same time, the deepening crisis is becoming serious concern as Bangladeshi development activities are going to be challenged. So, this is a challenge for Bangladesh, but at the same time, without ensuring the international norms in the process of repatriation, it would be difficult to make the repatriation a sustainable one. A safe, secured and sustainable repatriation is connected with international commitment. If the international community cannot come forward to focus on the issue and to ensure the sustainable repatriation then the international community will have to face new realities in the region. In this respect thus, the response from the international community is very important with regard to the FDMN repatriation.

REMARKS BY



Ambassador Laetitia van den Assum

*Visiting Fellow, The Centre for Peace and Justice,
BRAC University*

Ambassador Laetitia van den Assum, Visiting Fellow, The Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University began her remarks by expressing how important this gathering and exchange of views was for her. She shared that even though she knew a lot about Myanmar, Rakhine and Arakan, she knew much less about Bangladesh. This session was a great opportunity for her to hear about the key issues from Bangladesh. She reflected that when she was a member of the Rakhine Advisory Commission chaired by Kofi Annan, a delegation came to Bangladesh and visited the camps in 2017. But that visit was before the large exodus that started on 25 August 2017. Previously in 2016, there had been a large push-out of about 80,000 Rohingyas and the delegation visited those people in Bangladesh. Although the Ambassador was not part of the visiting group, she mentioned that the visit was very important for the Commission to realise Bangladesh's perspectives and see the conditions in the camps in those days. She mentioned that in the Commission's report, there is a small section on Bangladesh and Myanmar relations.

After these initial remarks,, Ambassador Assum began to explain her views about the crisis in Myanmar and Arakan and discussed how this linked directly to the repatriation of the Rohingyas and also to the condition of 600,000 Rohingyas who stayed behind in Arakan. She clarified that she referred to Arakan particularly for the reason to make a distinction between Arakan as a region and the Rakhine people, i.e., the Buddhist population that probably makes up 68 per cent of the population there. Although Arakan was the historical name of the region, it was taken away in 1989 by the then military government and replaced with Rakhine. But now Arakan is coming back as a name. She reiterated that for this presentation, 'Rakhine' is used to refer to the Rakhine people and 'Arakan' is used to refer to the entire region.

Before going more specifically into the Arakan issue, the Ambassador provided a general overview of Myanmar. Following the military coup on 01 February 2021, Myanmar experienced the biggest crisis since its independence in 1948. The current regime lacks legitimacy, as far as the vast majority of the population are concerned. One can even speak of popular uprising, a popular revolt against the military government that is in charge now. In Myanmar, crises have always been there but there is a difference now. Before 2021, many of the fighting and violence took place between the military i.e., the Tatmadaw and the population of the border areas which were mostly ethnic minorities. However, the present crisis clearly includes the Bamar i.e., the largest ethnic group which makes up 68 per cent. Now they are also resisting and have taken up arms. Thus, it is fair to speak of a popular revolt.

It is also important to note that over the past two and half years since the coup, a highly militarised environment has developed throughout the country. This is in addition to the older ethnic armed organisations that were already operating in the border areas. Quite a large number of People's Defence Forces (PDFs) have established themselves in all parts of the country where there were no military groups operating earlier on. So, the military government in Naypyidaw is now countering or trying to deal with a highly militarised environment. There are a high number of violent engagements on a daily basis. But in comparison to the situation many years ago, this time there is a lot of citizen journalism as many people have joined the resistance. Ethnic armed organisations are now able to share information among each other and also disseminate it to the world mostly by the next day. This is a positive aspect. People have much better scope to know what is happening. But there still remains difficulties because of the wide variety of conflicts that are ongoing at the same time. It is difficult for analysts to look at the overall picture and clearly paint a way forward to predict where this is going.

Since February 2021, Myanmar is also experiencing a major economic contraction, flat revenue and surging inflation which is hitting very hard on ordinary folks in different parts of the country. For example, the price of cooking oil has more than doubled. There is very weak currency control which is wreaking havoc on the economy. The current regime is putting military Generals in charge of the economy. Recently, they have started to put their own people in the international banks and other critical places. This has made matters worse. The poorest people are hardest hit by this economic crisis. Food insecurity is growing. Particularly in Arakan, the food insecurity has been badly hit by cyclone Mocha. It destroyed much of the crops that were ready for harvest. The planting materials and fertilisers needed for the next crop has also been destroyed. A lot of animals were lost which play a very important role in the livelihood of the people.

Another issue that is very important for food security and leads to insecurity is the use of landmines by all sides. The number of landmines seems to rival the number that is being put in place in Ukraine. This makes it very difficult for farmers to go to their fields and do agricultural work to make sure that the whole area has food crops that they need. After discussing the situation of the formal economy, Ambassador Assum shared concerns regarding the illicit economy in Myanmar. There is a very large illicit economy in the country. It is difficult to calculate exactly how large it is, but it has always been substantial in Myanmar. The situation has grown significantly since the coup. There is also a major drop in social services. Health, education and local government services are no longer available in many places. Major unemployment is visible at the same time. Unemployment leads to further outward migration, particularly to China and Thailand. It also leads to inland migration to some of the areas particularly in the Northeast where there is a lot of illicit activities related to jade mining, gold mining etc.

Ambassador Assum further elaborated her views on the highly militarised environment throughout Myanmar. She shared that the military is no longer able to travel everywhere. It probably can get to many places in the country, particularly the big cities. But over the past two years it has been observed that the PDFs know the terrain very well. They are able to hit very hard on these long military columns while travelling. They have also become very good at these works because many of the people who have joined the military resistance are some of the brightest students from Myanmar. They are building drones, 3D printing weapons etc. These are things that need to be taken into account. It is becoming very difficult for the military to keep control in many areas including Arakan. It has to share control with the ethnic armed organisations and the PDFs.



According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) Conflict Index, Myanmar is now home to the highest number of non-state armed groups in the world. According to the index, more than 1500 non-state armed groups are there. This figure is not necessarily carved in stone, it may be a bit lower. If 1500 groups were identified it does not mean that they were in existence at the same time. So, the number is probably a little bit lower, but it is still very significant as these groups are armed. Many of these started off with simple hunting rifles but gradually they have become much better armed. Between July 2022 and June 2023, 8200 political violent events were counted, making it a very difficult situation. In this context, the Ambassador raised questions that if the war continues, would there be further fragmentation, further loss of control by the central government over parts of the country? With the country awash in arms, could these groups turn against each other and make the situation even worse than it already is?

At this stage of the presentation, the Ambassador showed an illustration (Figure 1) of the major security incidents that occurred in the third quarter of 2023. It included a number of security incidents like violent attacks, kidnappings, targeted killings etc. Although the number is not very high in the third quarter, there are risks of more security incidents. It is growing rapidly day by day. The Myanmar military has been moving additional troops and supplies into Arakan. About a year ago, there was an informal truce concluded between the Arakan Army and the military. But it looks like the military may be on its way back because it is going to be the dry season and they may think it would be easier to deal with the Arakan Army and some of the smaller organisations that are there.

The Ambassador focused on the Bamar heartland in the map. That is the place where most Bamar people live. There are not that many ethnic armed organisations located in that place. They are old PDFs. Some have been trained by the ethnic armed organisations. At the moment, the military is making a major effort to do as much damage as they can to these PDFs in the heartland. A lot of air strikes are visible. As the military cannot move easily along major roads, it is conducting more and more air strikes as an important mode of operation. But unfortunately, it is not taking

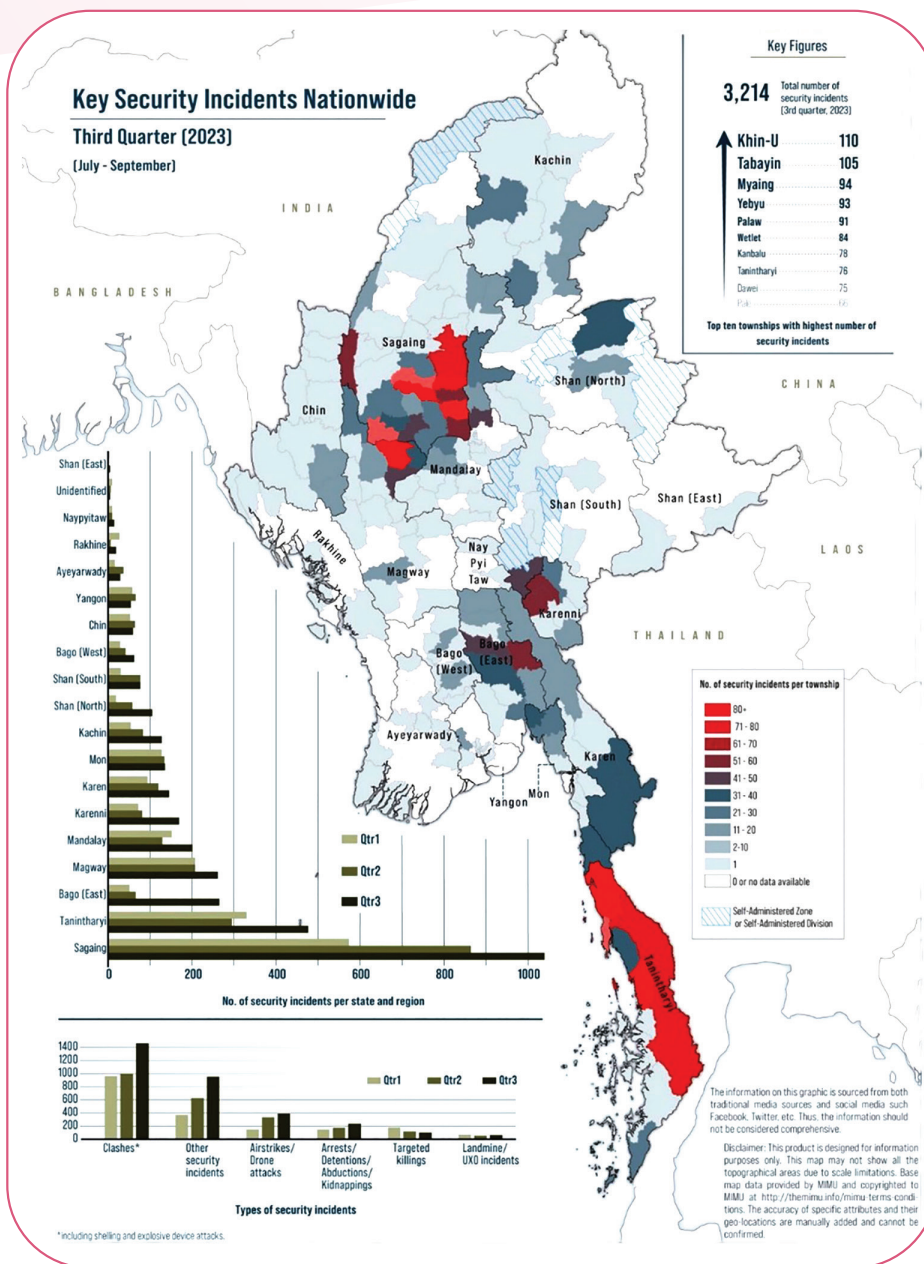


Figure 1

since 2014. Two pipelines are actually operational from Kyaukpyu in Arakan all the way up to Kunming. One is a gas pipeline, and the other is an oil pipeline. These bring in significant resources for the military regime. The oil pipeline generates at least US\$ 25 million annually; the gas pipeline US\$ 400 million. Now what is extraordinary is the role of China in all of these. One would think that the pipelines would be the targets of many attacks by these PDFs, but it does not seem to be a problem. China seems to have been very successful in arrangements with all of these different groups. The pipelines have not been touched. Everything else has been attacked, bombed to smithereens with self-made drones and other weapons. But somehow China is managing to control or to put pressure on all of these groups that live along and operate along the pipeline to show restraint. This pipeline is not in trouble at the moment, and it is a huge income for the military government.

care to avoid civilian targets. A high number of religious buildings, particularly of non-Buddhist religions and high number of hospitals have been targeted. Last week in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Kachin, 29 people died including many children. The Ambassador stated that this is an indiscriminate use of violence.

Next, Ambassador Assum discussed issues related to the Northwest corridor. There is a corridor which runs from the north in Kachin to the heartland where the Bamar PDFs operate and down to Arakan. It is the main supply route for many of these PDF groups and for the Arakan Army. At the moment, particularly in Kachin, the military regime is trying to rupture the Northwest corridor as much as it can with air strikes and other measures. The other Northwest corridor is the one built by China in Myanmar

She referred back to the discussion on Myanmar's illicit economy. In the north is the Kachin state. Kachin produces the finest Jades in the world. Almost all of these goes to China. Some are smuggled and smaller portions are sold in the open market. It is a huge income, and it is estimated that it yields US\$ 31 billion annually. The number may actually be more now. Here she referred to a report from the Global Witness, a reputable international research agency that looks into these kinds of practices worldwide. Their estimation for 2015 was US\$ 31 billion. Some of these goes to the military regime, some also goes to the ethnic armed groups. This is a particularly important source that contributes towards further militarisation and further growth of violence. In the north, it is not only jade, but there is also gold, teak wood and a growing market for rare earth minerals. The biggest supplier in the world for rare earth minerals is Africa; second is China; and Myanmar is third. Increasingly China is recognising that mining these rare earth minerals leads to huge environmental destruction. So, they are doing less of it. But across the border from Kachin, the environmental destruction is just awful. It creates a very toxic environment. But such activities are ongoing, and it also feeds into the resources for the military as well as for the armed groups.

Ambassador Assum also presented her views regarding the current situation in Arakan. Northern Arakan is a contested war zone despite the temporary ceasefire that is in place. Like elsewhere, the economy has suffered. Many young people, particularly from Rakhine are now migrating. The tensions between the military and the Arakan Army are growing. Many fear that as soon as the dry season is here, the fighting may resume. For the 600,000 Rohingyas who are still there, Arakan continues to be an apartheid state. Forced ethnic segregation is in place and there is severe restriction of movement. Apartheid is a crime against humanity. In 1985, Myanmar acceded to the apartheid convention of the United Nations. Thus, the country should be held accountable. Although efforts have been made by Bangladesh, China and others to talk with the regime and to try to help create conditions under which the Rohingya might be able to return safely and voluntarily, yet nothing has been done to deal with this.

The Ambassador was afraid that their return at the moment would be a return into an apartheid state of life. Little has been done to prepare the population for Rohingya return and reintegration since the large exodus of the Rohingyas in 2017. A transitional justice programme does not only include prosecutions which are ongoing, it also includes talk about reconciliation to discuss ways to ensure that the Rakhines, Rohingyas and seven or eight other groups that are there can live together peacefully. Some kind of joint understanding is needed about what happened in the past before one can actually move on. But that has not happened. There are some small NGO activities here and there. The Arakan Army is actually involving Rohingyas more than the Myanmar military would ever have considered. But it is fairly small in scale.

Here the Ambassador further noted that, Arakan's fight for self-determination has been ongoing for a long time. Arakan is probably one of the most isolated states. It is very difficult to enter Arakan as the massive Arakan Mountain range separates it from many states. One can only enter from the South, so it has been isolated. Resistance against central government control has always been there. It is not new. A failure of electoral politics was visible there. In the first election in 2010 and again in 2015, the Rakhine, and the Rohingyas were not allowed to vote. The Rakhine people really felt that perhaps now they could believe in democratic electoral politics. But unfortunately, the response from the centre was very disappointing. There was no recognition given by Aung San Suu Kyi. If the biggest party in the state is the Arakan National Party, then it is normal to at least appoint the first minister from the members of that party. She did not do that. NLD was not very popular there at the time and she appointed a member of her own party and that really laid a basis for a lot of distrust, and it provided legitimacy to the Arakan Army. Other armed groups exist but they lacked followers and credibility. There is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) but they are not popular amongst the Rohingyas. The Ambassador showed a photograph of Tun Myat

Naing who is the most popular man in Rakhine state. He is the commander of the Arakan Army and very young in age. In comparison to the more established ethnic armed organisations, the entire leadership of the Arakan Army is very young. There were a couple of friends who were studying in Sittwe and in Yangon. By 2009 they became very disappointed about the opportunities for greater self-rule. They went up to Kachin state and trained for a couple of years with the Kachin army. By 2015, they started to enter Arakan. Currently their troop strength is estimated to be around 30,000. That makes it one of the biggest, probably the second biggest ethnic armed organisation. The Arakan Army is certainly more accommodating towards the Rohingyas than the military regime and they are open to further discussion about repatriation. But it is difficult to think about how to deal with these openings that are offered not only by the Arakan Army but also by the parallel National Unity Government (NUG).

The Arakan Army is a member of the modern alliance, i.e., a group of ethnic armed organisations on China's border. They have good relations with China. A number of Arakan Army troops are still in Kachin state to help them as an expression of gratitude for what the Kachins did for them when they were starting out. The Arakan Army

has also provided training for some of these newly established PDFs. This is their contribution to the revolution, as they call it. They have a reasonable relationship with the NUG, but the Arakan Army thinks a bit differently about where it wants to go. It is prepared to discuss a confederation, which is a much looser structure with greater powers to the states than the federal structures that are now being discussed by the NUG. But they respect each other. As mentioned, they have provided training to some of these resistance groups that come under the NUG. The Ambassador cautioned that tensions are growing, and one may have to count on further fighting in Arakan soon.

Next, the Ambassador showed a map of security incidents between January 2020 and September 2023 in Arakan (see Figure 2).

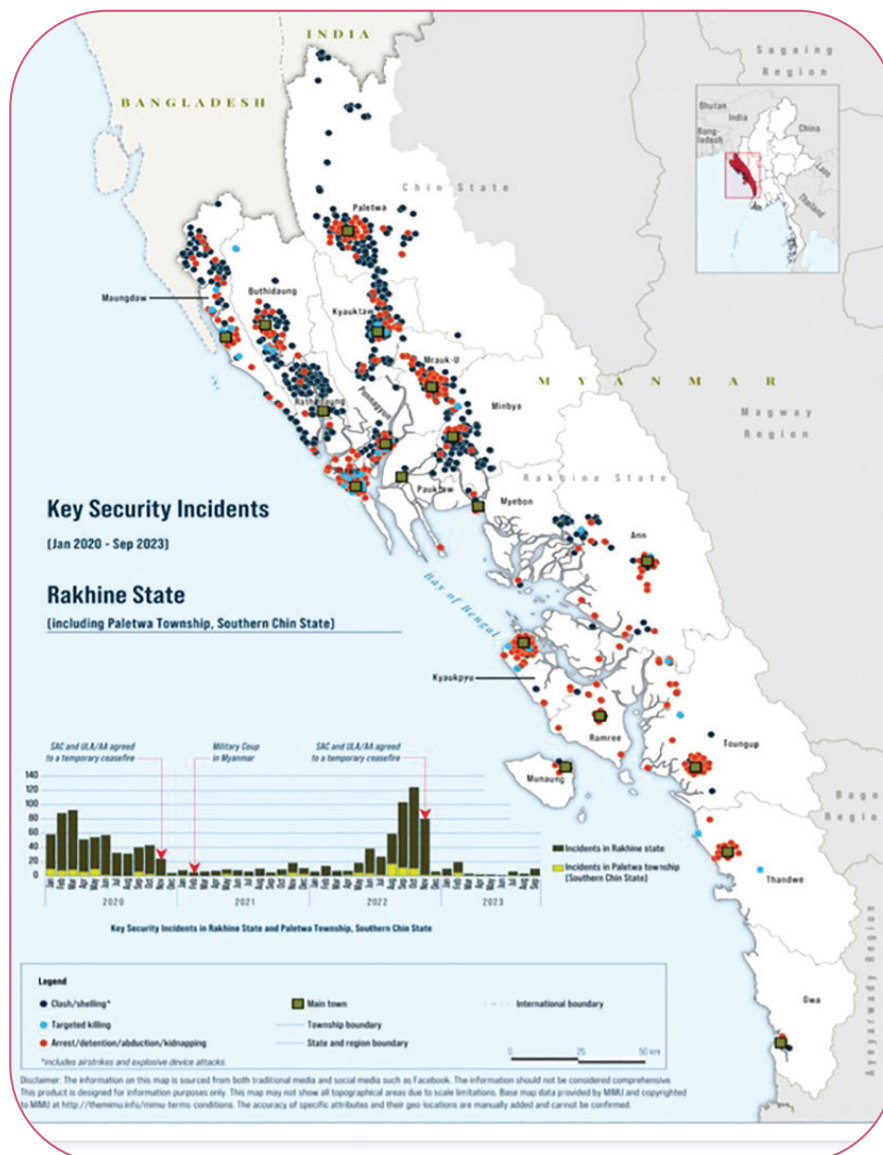


Figure 2

The dark blue point identified armed clashes and shelling. The light blue is targeted killings, and red identified arrests, detentions, abductions and kidnappings. Over a period of about three and half years there have been a lot of security incidents. Many of these are in modern Rakhine state. Previously, between 2018 and 2020 there were many security incidents. Then in November 2020, there was a truce between the military government and the Arakan Army. In that phase it was seen that security incidents went down rapidly. From May last year onwards, it shot up again because the truce was broken. Now it has been fairly stable. There are still incidents but not many that can be compared to what is happening in other parts of the country. After this flat period, security incidents might go up again. Security incidents are happening in Chin state as well. Many parts of the Chin state are controlled by the Arakan Army at the moment. Quite a few people live over there as well. Although the Chin people feel that they should be the overlords of that area, for the moment they seem to let the Arakan Army deal with it. There seems to be an understanding regarding not to fight each other at a time when there are more important things to do.

At this point the Ambassador showed another map (see Figure 3) that reflects the presence of the Arakan People's Authority in village tracts in northern Rakhine. The Arakan People's Authority was set up by the Arakan Army and it is in the business of providing services and judicial mechanisms to the people of Arakan. An illustration of the townships where most of these services are actually being provided is shown in the figure. The growing reality is that services are increasingly being provided by the Arakan Army, not by the military government.

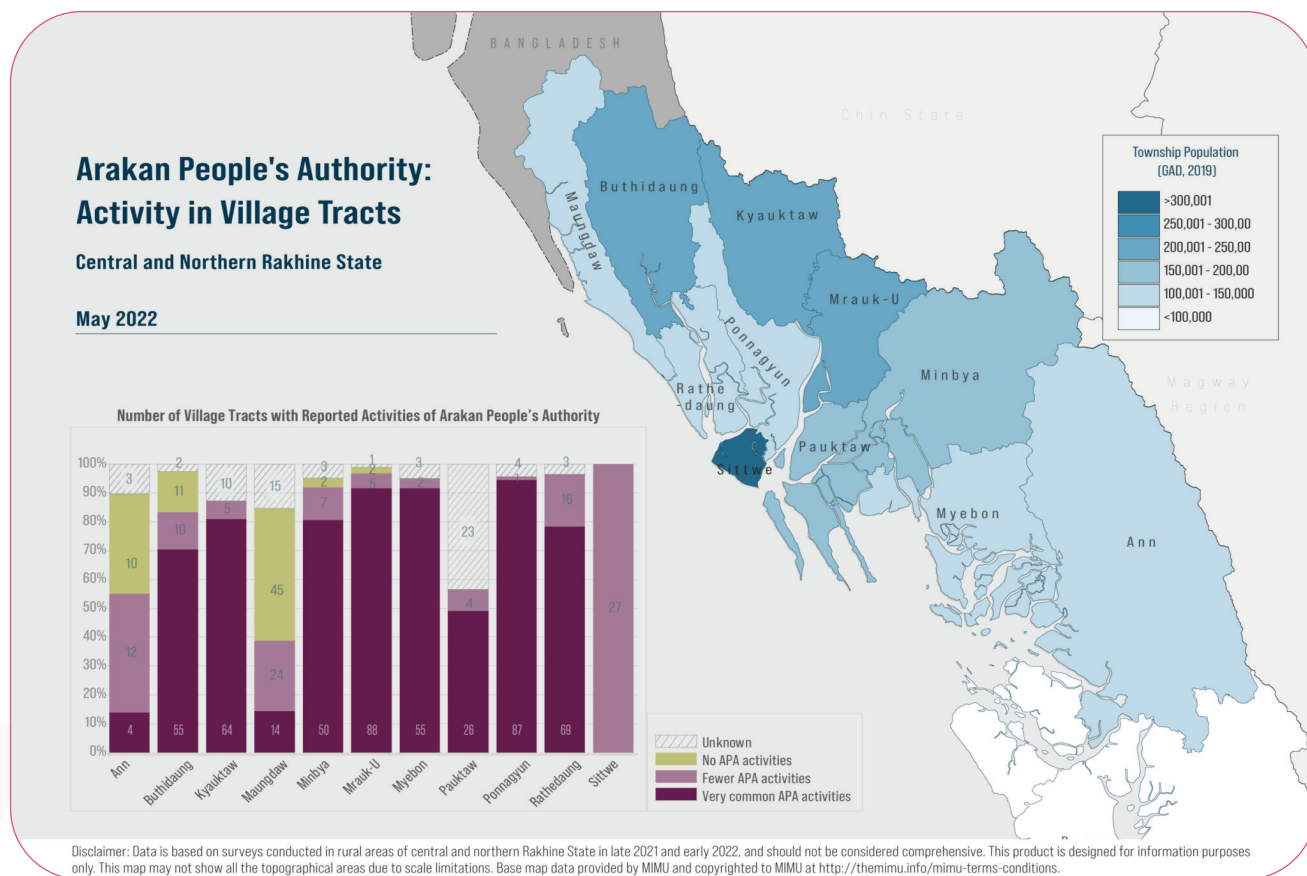


Figure 3

Next, she presented an image (Figure 4) showing that between late 2017 and August of 2023, 6,556 Rohingyas were arrested and jailed for unauthorised travel. Whole families were actually caught and sentenced. At first it was two years, later they started giving them five years for travelling without a permit because Rohingyas do not have freedom of movement. There is lack of available information regarding how many of these 6,556 Rohingyas actually came from Bangladesh, had arrangements across the river from Bangladesh to enter into Maungdaw and then travelled to meet the illegal traffickers that they had arrangement with to travel to Malaysia. This is a large number that actually got caught and were jailed. How many actually managed to get out is not known. That number is probably larger than the number of arrests and the people who disappeared in the high seas facing the tragedy of rickety boats taking people to early deaths in the ocean. If the numbers are combined, it is the people from Rakhine state in the south plus a number from Bangladesh who feel that Arakan is not for them at the moment. They are trying to leave, and they are seeking the services of illegal traffickers. So, it is an indication that more work needs to be done to make sure that the environment in Arakan actually improves so that when the Rohingyas return, they can be quite confident that their lives are going to be better than they were before they left.

The Ambassador shared some pointers related to refugee returns. She shared that it is absolutely clear that the Rohingya repatriation remains a top priority, not only for Bangladesh but for the Rohingyas themselves. If one speaks with an individual Rohingya, one can know that they want to go back. They do not want to stay here longer than necessary. The phrase “safe, dignified, sustainable, voluntary returns” is always used. But it is important to actually have two sets of conditions. Safe, dignified, sustainable, voluntary return conditions need to be in place, but it is also important to work towards stability. That is critical for Bangladesh. It is important to

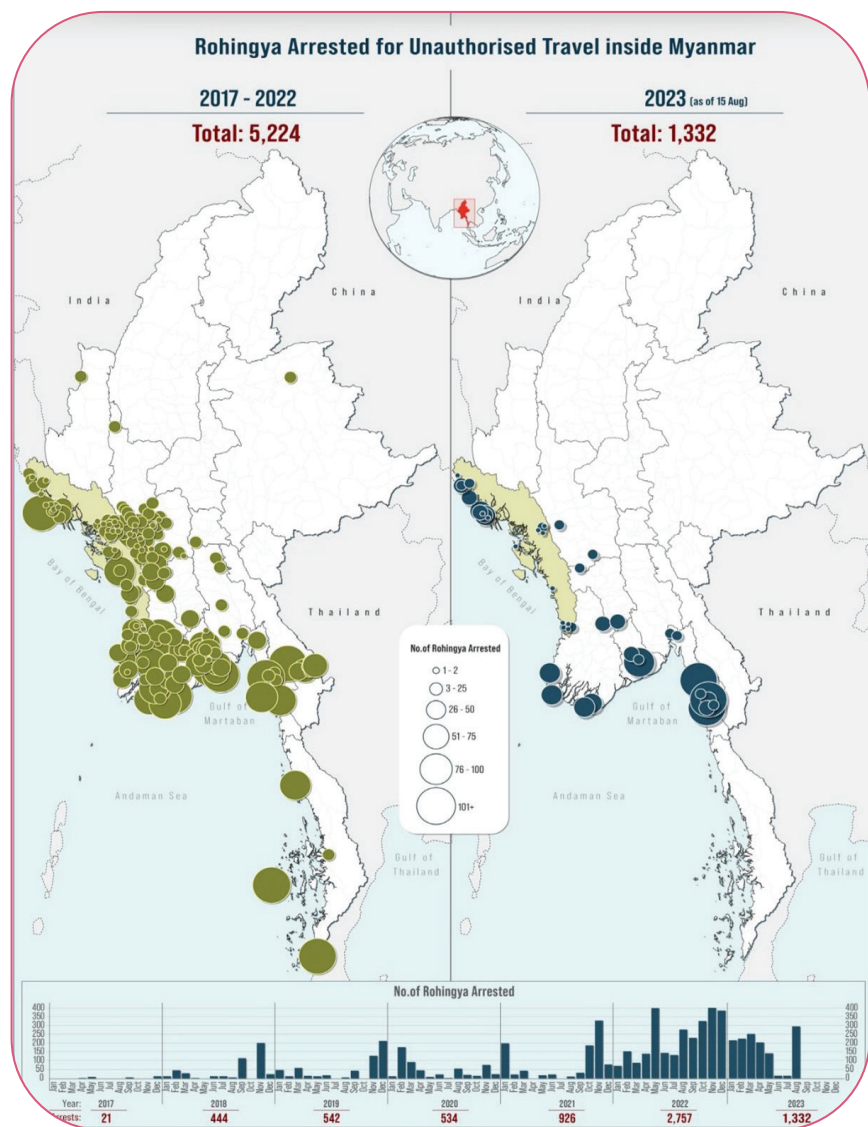


Figure 4

look at the experience with the earlier waves of the late 1970s and the 1990s where Rohingyas came and went back before the situation on the ground had improved. The situation gradually became worse when they returned. This shows the importance of the issue. Bangladesh has been emphasising on repatriation as soon as possible. This has to be in a manner that is sustainable for the Rohingyas. Focus also needs to be here regarding what can be done in terms of working towards stability in Arakan because that is important for the broader neighbourhood as well as for Bangladesh. This is also good for trade. As India starts its major project in Sittwe port and once the expansion in Kyaukpyu takes place that China is seeking, there may be major economic advantages for both.

The Ambassador expressed that if one wants to see success, some engagement has to take place beyond the military regime. Currently the dealings are taking place with the government that is in place, i.e., the military government in Naypyidaw. But they have not really shown that they will be able or are indeed willing to create the right conditions that will make it possible for the Rohingya, the Rakhine and the other minorities to live together peacefully in the long term. The Ambassador mentioned that she was looking particularly at the parallel NUG and at the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) i.e., the civilian branch of the Arakan Army. Very soon after the coup, the NUG issued a fairly detailed Rohingya policy paper. Although it needs to be further elaborated, everything that the Rohingya might want is actually there. The NUG is now working on a new constitution and a new citizenship law, which does not go for an ethnocentric approach to citizenship. It goes for birthright citizenship, so that every Rohingya born in Myanmar will get citizenship. It could also be about those born in the camps in Bangladesh. That is why it is very important that births in Bangladesh are actually registered indicating that these children were born from Rohingya parents. But such discussions are not held widely. The avenues are ready to open but it takes some form of engagements with the NUG and with the ULA/AA to make them open.

The Ambassador referred that the ULA said that it is ready to discuss Rohingya returns if it is accepted as a stakeholder. They said they would come up with proposals for returns. In this regard, the Ambassador expressed that she knew it is not easy. But she believed that the diplomats in Bangladesh are as innovative as some of those in other countries who can find ways of not directly government to government but other kinds of efforts to get the discussion going. Once there is general agreement on citizenship, even if the military regime stays in power, there will be a big shift in terms of moving away from the ethnocentric approach to citizenship. It is not only the Rohingyas, but there are also a lot of Hindus living there. There are a lot of people from Nepal, a lot of Chinese as well as other nationalities. This can be discussed in other settings so that this can be taken forward.

Finally, a lot more has been done to prepare the ground. The report of the Annan Commission has 88 recommendations which anyone looking at the situation can take into account and use as a basis. Almost every resolution by the UN Human Rights Council mentioned the Annan report as a basis for the discussion. That needs to be kept alive. There is also a great report from 2020 that speaks about freedom of movement and the problems of not only the Rohingyas but the people of Arakan in general. This makes it much more acceptable to larger groups. There are a lot of sound recommendations to deal with the problem of freedom of movement. It even has a road map with very detailed suggestions about how this could be taken forward slowly but gradually. These things cannot be done overnight but these things exist, and attention needs to be given. Freedom of movement is actually a great umbrella concept because it links access to health, access to education, freedom

of religion, freedom of expression etc. It is a ready-made tool that can be used. The Ambassador concluded by saying that this is as much about safe, dignified and sustainable voluntary returns as it is about working for more stability in Arakan which is critical for Bangladesh.



OPEN DISCUSSION



Dr Benuka Ferdousi

Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Dr Benuka Ferdousi, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) asked about the National Unity Government's (NUG) commitment to the Rohingya issue and the public sentiment in Myanmar. She questioned whether the NUG's rethinking of the Rohingya issue is mainly for showcasing their commitment for their political gain or whether this is a real commitment on their part. She asked about the public sentiment towards the Rohingyas, given the long-standing propaganda against them. She also asked if there has been any change in public or popular sentiment towards the Rohingyas, particularly after the recent coup.



Ambassador Assum

In response to the first question regarding the commitment of the NUG, Ambassador Assum said that the NUG, immediately after the coup in 2021, came up with a two-page detailed policy statement on the Rohingya. This might have been done to placate the international community and assure themselves of their support. Over time, they did not stop in 2021. They have gone ahead. She said that in August and September 2023, what they have been saying, both at the Human Rights Council and during the ceremony for the remembrance of 25 August 2017, it is quite clear that they are serious about it, and this is becoming a key issue. It is widespread, people know about it, and particularly in those first few months of the resistance, it was clear, particularly from what was seen in Yangon and all the demonstrations there when it was still peaceful and there was lot of support for it.

That support is also there in Rakhine State itself, yet there are still huge problems. She said that the Rohingyas, the Rakhine, and the others now see that there is only one enemy, which is the military regime. There are people in the NUG who are perhaps not yet quite convinced, but they are moving too slowly; they are being left behind by the rest. The NUG has appointed a Rohingya as the Deputy Minister for Human Rights, who is very active and understands

the situation very well. Together with the Minister for Human Rights, they have been working tirelessly to deal with the Rohingya issue.

Ambassador Assum thinks that there is real commitment, but there will always be people who will not change their opinions. The successive military regimes were using divide and rule tactics to get people at each other's throats so that the military could pursue its own policies and strategies. This has happened throughout the country, and the blame would be put on the Rohingyas or the Rakhines, but not on the military itself. She said that ARSA people are now back in Northern Arakan, at the border, and what is happening is that the Arakan Army is now fighting them. The military is trying to stay away from the conflict, encouraging the division between the Arakan Army and ARSA rather than dealing with the Rohingyas, so that the situation works as a distraction from actual conflict i.e., the Army.

In answering the second question, Ambassador Assum affirmed that there have been changes in attitudes, but it is without a major effort as part of the transitional justice approach, where people are sitting together and discussing the atrocities committed against them over the years and why they were forced into detention camps. She suggested that ways have to be found out to get these kinds of conversations going on, and further encouragement is needed to initiate these conversations.



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman

*Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic
Studies (BISS)*

Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) said that he was recently following the NUG and incidents in Myanmar and further asked how much the NUG is in charge of their political, territorial gains, services provided to the people, and international interaction, particularly in matters of trade. He further asked whether trade at the private or informal sector level can happen because that could bring in a lot of beneficial or positive results in an indirect manner.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum noted that the NUG had started immediately after the coup and has been working with its large team to create conditions that need to be in place for when the opportunity arises, they are able to form a government. The military government has tirelessly worked to undermine it. There are a lot of meetings between not only the NUG people themselves but also with some of the ethnic armed organisations. She mentioned that some support the NUG more than others. Ambassador Laetitia said that in the case of the Arakan Army, it is keen to go for a constitution based on confederation, and the NUG is working on the basis of federalism. According to her, some people have said that the NUG is spending too much time on its international outreach, like in Geneva and in New York. She mentioned that there are pictures of them talking to foreign governments and foreign dignitaries in many different places. That is also important because the world will start to recognise them as an alternative and potentially as a new leadership.

But in the real discussions that are also taking place outside Myanmar, whether in Mae Sot or Chiang Mai in Thailand, that there are so many people from Myanmar who are living, working, and studying there now. But as always, the people who were able to leave and stay in places like Chiang Mai and Mae Sot are not necessarily representative of the much wider range of views that may be alive in the country, but it is a start. If the moment comes, they will only be an interim government, preparing for elections and a referendum on a constitution. The desperate situation in the country that we see now prevails and fragmentation is a concern, especially for Bangladesh.

Ambassador Assum said that she thinks that the unity and support for the Arakan Army amongst the people of Arakan is quite strong, and they do have real commitment, and in Arakan it is much more deep-seated. She said that historically there was a lot of damage done in Arakan by the Second World War and the promise that was or was not made by the British and others, that they would have greater possibilities for self-governance. She thinks that in Rakhine, in Arakan, rather, the sense of moving towards, she would not say independence, and she hopes for Bangladesh's sake that it does not happen because that would cause a lot of problems for Bangladesh, but to at least a situation in which they would have a greater say. She added that these US\$ 400 million annually that she mentioned for the gas income all go straight to Naypyidaw; nothing remains behind. She said that they would have become impoverished, although they were well-off at independence, but they are now together with Chin, the two poorest states in Myanmar. Getting back to the NUG, she thinks that the NUG needs encouragement to keep developing the kind of documents that need to be ready to meet wide support from the population for a time that will come when there is a change. She added that if there are going to be negotiations, for the moment nobody wants to negotiate. They should be able to say that here is our constitution. Your 2008 constitution—we no longer want that. She added that it is one of the first things that they are going to say. They are preparing positions so that if it comes to negotiations, they will also be able to use them. She also said that it is amazing how they keep in touch with each other over such long distances, as some are in Myanmar and others are in other parts of the world. But they are managing to get things done with limitations.



Muhammad Mazedul Haque

Research Officer, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Muhammad Mazedul Haque, Research Officer, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) asked how the land restitution process for Rohingya people that will be returning to Myanmar can be made more transparent and efficient.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum said that land restitution is going to be difficult if looked at under the current laws. Because of what the government did, she thinks that it must have been around the time that Rohingya went to Bangladesh that they passed a new law, which was still under Suu Kyi's government, the Fallow Land Law. It said that the land that is unused for a limited period of time returns to the government. She said that in this case, the application of this would not be fair because people will return.

Ambassador Assum said that this problem is a Myanmar-wide problem because there has been so much violence in many parts of the country, and this should be on the table and discussed. She mentioned that, after 2017, some of the reception centres and

temporary holding areas were built on top of Rohingya villages that were razed to the ground. She said that it is going to be very difficult to even find them because they will be overgrown. She acknowledged that it needs a much bigger approach, and it is good that this point has been raised because this must be part of any discussions with Myanmar.

Ambassador Assum added that in December 2016, the Annan Commission had a meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and he asked a rhetorical question: If we give them some land, and with that land, we will make sure the facilities that they need are there, and then they can stay there. She said that she thinks it would probably be in Mangda, Bodhidharma, or one of these places, but she always took that as putting them in a

massive detention camp. She argued that at the same time, when we spoke with some of his military advisors, they would also say that they do not like these Rohingya villages. She asked them why they did not like them, and they replied that they wanted neat, white streets and houses on both sides of the road so that they could control them very easily. She added that the word ‘control’ may be too strong, but they wanted to be able to keep a very close eye on what is happening. Ambassador Laetitia added that it is difficult to find out what is happening to all these designated villages that, in Mangda, mostly Mangda township, have now been designated for returning Rohingya.

The Rohingyas want to go back to their own villages, not to a group of villages that the military has selected for them and probably built these kinds of facilities that would be found in a detention camp. She thinks it is important to look at other issues as well when there are talks of returns. If they are going to be put in Rohingya villages, it should be somewhere in an environment where there are also other ethnicities, whether it is Rakhine or others, so that they can grow up together. Ambassador Laetitia said that this Fallow land law has to go off the table, and if land has been taken from them and other structures have been put on top, they should be compensated. But there is no way to know whether they are actual records, which is also an issue.



Dr Razia Sultana

Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Dr Razia Sultana, Senior Research Fellow Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) emphasised on the need for a peaceful repatriation process in Myanmar, particularly in a highly militarised environment. She said that internal conflict and limited media engagement have been major obstacles, particularly in the last five years. They have also limited the chances of successful repatriation through Track I, Track II, and Track 1.5 Diplomacy. Dr Razia also asked about the progress made in reviving the Rohingya repatriation, which was supposed to begin in October 2023, but was halted. She asked what kind of diplomatic track, aside from track 1, Bangladesh should reinvigorate, including

track II and track 1.5, to complete the process. She also asked what initiatives the Bangladesh government should take to strengthen or enhance the role of the international community, particularly with neighbouring countries like India and distant actors like China and the USA.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum replied that the engagement with the international community is complicated because India, for one, is only starting to begin to become more interested now, probably because some of the people of its border states are engaging with people on the Myanmar side, particularly if looked at Manipur and Mizoram and all of those kinds of places. Overall, the one that is actually the most prominent, of course, is China. She said that it is well known that China finds it very important for them to have the portrait of Xiaopiu as a jewel in the crown of their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). She added that it will probably happen; it will take time because a lot of work has been done on it.

She said that China would want to have a stable, non-militarised environment for its big port in Xiaopiu, and for the growth of trade corridor all the way to Kunming. They speak of Xiaopiu as the backdoor to China. She acknowledged that Bangladesh has issues with China regarding Rohingyas but speaking to them is important. She said that China works very closely with the ethnic armed organisations. China works with the Arakan Army and it is going to be very important for the situation becoming stable. For that to happen, they would also have to make a deal with the Arakan Army to make sure that a lot of the revenue from the pipeline, the railway that is coming, and the roads remain in Rakhine State itself. Ambassador Laetitia suggests that Bangladesh should focus on common interests with countries that have borders with Myanmar, such as India and China. She believes that a more effective approach is to work together with countries with shared interests, such as India and China. She also mentioned that the meeting of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in Thailand, which was supposed to take place, but the Myanmar Generals were not invited for which, it was postponed. She added that BIMSTEC was another forum that could be used. She thinks it is crucial to address these issues in a forum where people can see the light and consider the importance of addressing these issues for progress. The current situation is causing losses for everyone involved, including the potential for significant reductions in border trade with other countries.

Ambassador Assum mentioned that Myanmar's situation is a long-term issue that will take time to resolve. If things were to turn for the better tomorrow, it is unlikely that Myanmar will behave responsibly, look after its people, and deal with its international partners in a responsible manner. The country's large illicit economy will not disappear quickly, and it is crucial to address this issue. She argued that meetings with regional leaders from various countries are ongoing to discuss potential solutions. These conversations are not large-scale, but they are individualised and aim to determine what could be achieved if the situation changes tomorrow. This is the place where the work of the NUG fits in with the constitution and other basic documents of a new state. She said that it is important to find ways of interacting with the Arakan Army and with the NUG to determine whether they need help with their citizenship legislation. Experts can help build an enabling environment quickly when opportunities arise.



Md Jahan Shoieb

Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Md Jahan Shoieb, Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) said that there is a donor's fatigue on the Rohingya issue and the repatriation process does not portray any optimistic view so far. At this juncture, he asked about the options for Bangladesh.



Ambassador Assum

In response to the repatriation issue, Ambassador Assum said that the conditions at the moment are not in place. She was optimistic that repatriation will happen. She said that, at this juncture, it is important to find out who they are, why they have not gone back, and what their experiences are. It is difficult for international organisations to support these individuals if the conditions are not in place. In fact, she considers it risky also in the sense that if people are not sure that they will be okay, they will come back to Bangladesh and will demotivate FDMNs not to repatriate. She suggested to know much more from Myanmar authorities about the plans beyond the reception camps and beyond the temporary living quarters. It is important to get a better idea about their planning of these designated villages.

She mentioned that she was unaware about the plans of Myanmar authorities and assumed that these are going to be prison camps. She highlighted on the importance of continuing discussion with Myanmar, and China about this issue. China has a strong economic interest, and she thought it should not want to accept a situation in which many Rohingyas will go back, but they end up being detained, not having access to proper social services and everything else that they need. She argued that if Rohingyas really want to go back, nobody can stop them, but there is a risk of people going unprepared. It has to be facilitated, otherwise Rohingyas will end up being imprisoned like the 6500 Rohingyas who have been arrested and sent to prison for 2-5 years. Myanmar authority needs to be discouraged from doing that and it has to be facilitated.



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Dr Mahfuz Kabir, Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) highlighted the new events in the international landscape like the Russia-Ukraine war and crisis in the Middle East, especially the Hamas and Israeli conflict. In this backdrop, he wanted to know how the support of the international community like the US, EU, China and India can be seen to pursue the following two issues: (a) the humanitarian support before the repatriation, and (b) the earliest repatriation of the Rohingyas in a peaceful, sustainable and dignified way.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum said that she looks at this from a more positive perspective. She acknowledged that the Rohingya issue has become a protracted issue and emergency funding is more available for the newer emergencies that arise in different parts of the world. But the fact that a name change does not necessarily mean that the international community would not understand that something needs to be done. For her, this is also an opportunity since it allows the international community to look at it afresh.

Questions like what can be done in terms of increasing the resilience of the Rohingyas, and what the international community can do differently to make sure that Rohingyas are no longer reliant on World Food Programme (WFP) rations, was part of the conversation that took place in Bangkok. She referred

to the Global Refugee Compact (GRC) which deals with this particular problem, that is, how to move from an emergency humanitarian situation to a more protracted longer term support system and what tools are available? To prepare for the next meeting in Geneva, it is necessary for Bangladesh to come up with ideas like how the greater self-reliance of the Rohingya might be achieved, and what can be done through other channels than the traditional humanitarian agencies whose assistance is now required in so many other places in the world.

She said that it is important to study the cases of Turkey, Jordan and some other countries where these longer-term strategies have been developed and they continue to be funded. She also added that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has to come up with plans, ideas and proposals. She suggested Bangladesh to take that discussion seriously, because it is not true that the Rohingyas are forgotten. In fact, around the world there is a lot of respect for what Bangladesh has done. She said that the world is indebted to Bangladesh. However, new ways have to be found out to continue from what was an emergency phase.



Miah Md Mainul Kabir

Director General (Myanmar Wing), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Miah Md Mainul Kabir, Director General (Myanmar Wing), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh informed the audience that in the Bangkok meeting, Bangladesh made it clear that funding from World Bank and ADB may be accepted but not as a loan. Bangladesh also made it clear that any idea that may lead to local integration will not be acceptable to Bangladesh because the country is providing skills and education by following the Myanmar curriculum. Bangladesh will continue to provide skills, but it is focusing on the repatriation efforts, not local integration.

After sharing the position of Bangladesh, Mr Kabir raised a few queries regarding Myanmar. First, he wanted to know what difference there is in Myanmar between the current situation and before 2017 or even 1992 when Bangladesh successfully repatriated the Rohingyas. His second question was whether democracy should be linked with the repatriation process or not. Thirdly, he asked whether there is any linkage that just after the submission of the Annan Commission report, these mass atrocities happened.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum said that she made a note for Kofi Annan in which she gave a list of things that had happened over the previous 30 days in 2017, that were worrisome. The members of the Annan Commission were not sure what was happening, but she assumed that something was happening, something was being planned, but the Annan Commission's members were unaware of it. Just after the press conference of Kofi Annan where he presented his findings, the attacks in northern Rakhine state happened. Many people, she said, thought that it was an international criminal activity, but she assumed that it was from the Myanmar authority.

About the differences of existing institutions and the ones that prevailed in 2017 or even in 1992, she said that she was an Ambassador to Myanmar based in Bangkok from 1995 to 2000. Based on her experience, she said that nothing had really changed on the ground compared to the time when the Rohingyas went in 1979 or 1992. She thinks that it is not the responsibility of Bangladesh, rather it is Myanmar's responsibility to take Rohingyas back. Now it is not possible for Bangladesh to address the underlying causes of these huge waves of Rohingyas. But she suggested Bangladesh to ask about the process of repatriation, ensuring sustainable livelihood of them in Myanmar, and the process to stabilise the situation, in international discussions. She thinks that if these questions are not asked, and if those who are willing to help Myanmar to deal with the return of the Rohingyas are not encouraged to look at justice to overcome the grievances of the Rohingyas, such persecution and influx will happen again in future. But it is the responsibility of Myanmar itself and Myanmar is the place from where the solutions have to come.

However, she finds it very encouraging that the Arakan Army and its civilian wing have been working to be more inclusive and willing to include Rohingyas as a part of their local authorities. These small changes are optimistic. These small changes need to be encouraged. She also emphasised on speaking with those who claim that they are also the victims of the military regime in Arakan as they are being played off one side against the other by the military. At the same time, the economic side of it is also crucial.

From 2012–2015 onwards, Rohingyas were pushed to camps, mixed schools were closed, and the economy collapsed. The economy collapsed because the Rohingyas used to perform fishing using the boats owned by the Rakhine and they used to work on the lands that were owned by Rakhine. Since the Rohingyas were pushed into camps, these activities stopped. Thus, there was a massive outflow of people from Rakhine since there was no work for them. At this juncture, she strongly suggested rebuilding these economic relations.

She pointed out that the big Chinese plants, Indian plants, and the port in Sittwe in Myanmar are the opportunities for employment of local people, including the Rohingyas. This needs to be looked at. As an example, she said that when the Rohingyas were locked up, the construction of the port was stopped since it was the Rohingyas who were the skilled construction workers and knew how to deal with electricity, piping and all other construction issues. Thus, the construction collapsed.

With this example, she said that there are a lot of people among the Rohingyas who are skilled. She thus suggested employing any non-governmental organisation (NGO) to conduct a survey to find out the skills present among the FDMNs. This listing of skills will be beneficial for Myanmar as once they get back, Myanmar authorities will know which individual is skilled for which industry. Myanmar authority can use these skills particularly for the Indian and Chinese investments that are coming up.



Miah Md Mainul Kabir

Director General (Myanmar Wing), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

To add to Ambassador Van Den Assum's discussion on the skill sets of the Rohingyas, Miah Md Mainul Kabir said that training programmes are ongoing on different topics including agriculture, fisheries, carpentry, and IT sector. These trainings are being provided so that the Rohingyas can be employed. During the bilateral and trilateral discussions, Myanmar assured that Rohingyas will have livelihood opportunities, lands and fisheries scopes, and they will be provided with boats, seeds, cash money and other necessary items.



Ambassador Assum

Ambassador Assum highlighted that the military government is not in charge of Arakan or Myanmar. She labels it as a tragedy that the world leaders and international communities are forced by the diplomatic conventions to deal with a government that is not trusted by the people. It makes promises but it does not have the resources to keep those promises. Few in the international community want to provide funding through the Myanmar military for the Rohingya. She said that the Arakan Army will be more welcomed by the international community than the military of Myanmar. Thus, she suggested Bangladesh to work with the Arakan Army and explore the possible avenues for earliest repatriation. For her, there is a better chance of success by working with the Arakan Army.

She believed that it is important to continue conversations like the one that took place in Bangkok and the one that is going to take place in Geneva in December 2023. In addition to that, she also emphasised to try

to find other ways like Track 2 diplomacy or something likewise to engage with the people in Arakan and in Myanmar who can help to make sure that the environment improves for Rohingyas to return. She marked that in the entire process of repatriation, engagement of the mass people of Myanmar has been missing so far. An enabling environment for the Rohingyas does not only mean that they will have a place to live, rather they will have places they can call home. Because if it is going to be a matter of moving from one camp to another, the Rohingyas will again be found at the doorstep of Bangladesh.

The Ambassador highlighted that there needs to be continued attempts to bring the people in Rakhine together to talk about their own future. They are perfectly capable of doing that themselves, they just need some help to facilitate these kinds of discussions. She insisted that such attempts can be taken from Bangladesh too. The Myanmar military regime needs to refrain from further fighting in northern Arakan states because that is where the Rohingyas will return. If fighting breaks out again, the progress will be thrown back by a couple of years. Bangladesh along with other stakeholders need to find ways to restrain the military from continuing a war that it may ultimately lose. The Ambassador stated that both India and China have a role here as they would want their big economic investments to be successful.

In conclusion, the Ambassador expressed that she was honoured to share her views in this event. She emphasised that more of these conversations need to be held with those in the region and also with those in other parts of the world who are experienced in these issues and can discuss various options and possibilities that exist.

CONCLUDING REMARKS BY SESSION CHAIR



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker
Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS, thanked all the guests, distinguished speakers, and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their gracious presence. He specially thanked Ambassador Laetitia van den Assum, Visiting Fellow, Center for Peace and Justice, BRAC University for attending the Interactive Session. On behalf of the audience, he informed Ambassador Assum that the house has been immensely benefitted from her views about the matter that concerns us all - the FDMNs issue and the critical need for their repatriation to Myanmar as a solution.

He noted that Ambassador Assum's is uniquely suited to shed light on this issue focusing particularly on the solution and the ways of attaining that. Her deep understanding and experience especially, as a member of the Annan Commission, her wide diplomatic insights of the historical context of the crisis, its on-ground realities, perspectives gained from her sustained interaction with various relevant actors, governments, and international organisations have made her one of the best experts and minds to listen to.

Ambassador Sarker said that this crisis has not only captivated the world's attention but has also left an indelible mark on our collective conscience, which cannot rest until this most persecuted community of the world cannot return to their homeland Rakhine state of Myanmar in a dignified manner and are sustainably rehabilitated. We all know that the problem was created in Myanmar and the answer to that must also be found there.

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The Editorial Team thankfully acknowledges Farzana Fatima, Research Officer, Saraf Wasima, Research Intern for their assistance in preparing the proceedings.

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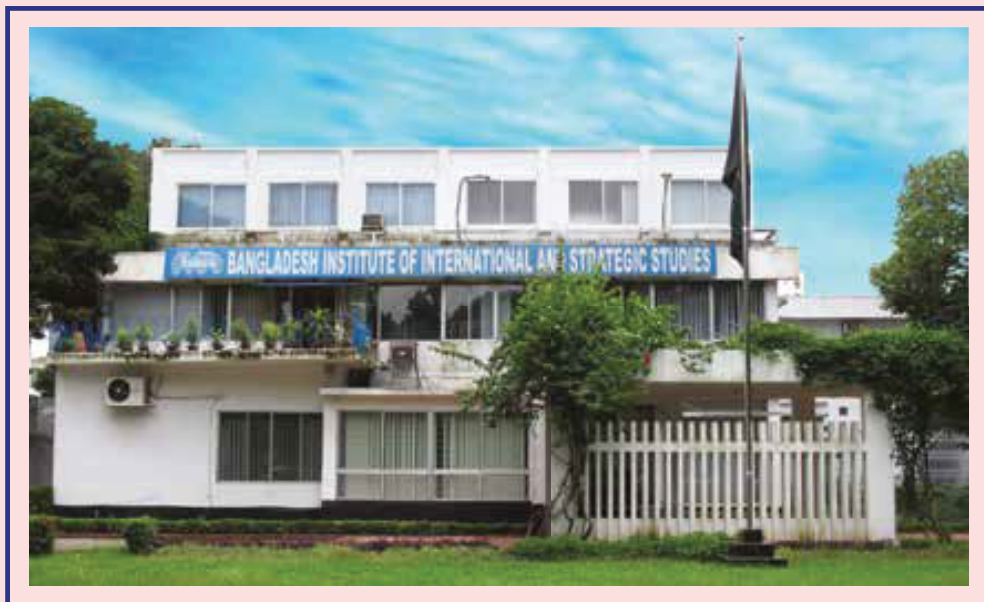
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