



Roundtable on
The Rohingya Crisis: New Realities and Policy
Options
03 November 2024

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a roundtable discussion on “**The Rohingya Crisis: New Realities and Policy Options**” on Sunday, 03 November, 2024, at the BIISS Auditorium, Dhaka, Bangladesh. **Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc**, Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Textiles & Jute and Ministry of Shipping Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the seminar as the Chief Guest. **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, chaired the event. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General of BIISS, delivered the welcome address.

The discussion involved a keynote presentation from **Kawser Ahmed, PhD**, Adjunct Professor at University of Winnipeg (Pol Sc) and University of Manitoba (NRI), Canada and Executive Director, Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada, on **Evolving Realities and International Response to the Rohingya Crisis**”.

Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, academia, researchers, and faculties from various universities participated in the roundtable and enriched it by presenting their valuable questions, opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.



Welcome Address

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng

Director General, BIISS



In his welcome address, **Major General Iftekhar Anis** stated that the Rohingya crisis remains one of the most critical humanitarian, political and security issues in the region. With over one million displaced Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, the crisis has put significant stress on the country's resources, socioeconomic fabric, and strained its diplomatic relations. It is crucial to recognise that in spite of repeated international initiatives, a long-term solution remains elusive. This reality forces Bangladesh to confront the shifting geopolitical landscape and evolving regional dynamics that influence both the Rohingyas and the host communities.

Myanmar's Rakhine state, the Rohingya homeland, is strategically very important in the context of the Bay of Bengal. However, this area has for long been plagued by ethnic conflicts and warfare. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar shattered any hope for Rohingyas' peaceful return and stability, as the military increased its grip and ethnic armed factions established their power. The instability necessitates renewed international attention and pressure as well, especially when internal disputes continue to threaten the future of rakhine state and Rohingya people. Aside from regional

politics, international response to this crisis has been defined by an initial surge of support, followed by a concerning fall in attention and resources. Global priorities have evolved as a result of conflicting crises, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, Israel-Hamas war, and long-term repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, despite early pledges of responsibility and justice for the Rohingyas from international legal authorities, progress has been gradual with few real results. Bangladesh repeatedly exhibited compassion and endurance, but the burden has escalated, exacerbated by security concerns within the camps and mounting economic difficulties. General Anis said the roundtable would explore the altering geopolitical realities in Rakhine state, how they influence Rohingya prospects, the evolving and frequently fragmented international response to the crisis. He believed it would provide insights into viable policy solutions that would help balance humanitarian and geopolitical components of the issue. As this discourse would start, the joint aim would be to develop and think out concrete, viable options that would bring Bangladesh closer to a long-term solution. He concluded the address by recommending use of collective experience and commitment to create responses that would be as resilient and flexible as the challenges facing Bangladesh.

Presentation

Kawser Ahmed, PhD

Adjunct Professor

*University of Winnipeg (Pol Sc) and University of Manitoba (NRI), Canada
and Executive Director, Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada*



Dr Kawser Ahmed delivered the keynote presentation on “Evolving realities and international response to the Rohingya crisis”. In his keynote address, Dr Ahmed initiated the discussion on potential paths forward to resolve the complex and ongoing Rohingya crisis. Before beginning his formal presentation, he took a moment to acknowledge the unique role of his organisation in researching and addressing the Rohingya crisis. He highlighted that his organisation stands among the few in the West to have consistently focused on the Rohingya issue, with research efforts ongoing since 2017. Now in its seventh year, the organisation remains committed to studying the

complexities of the crisis, including the humanitarian, political, and regional dimensions that influence potential solutions.

Before delving into the main discussion, Dr Ahmed shared two key reasons for his organisation's deep commitment to the Rohingya crisis. First, he highlighted a personal connection, as he originates from the region that has been impacted by the crisis, underscoring the issue's significance to him on a personal level. Second, he pointed to Canada's ongoing and active engagement in addressing the crisis. He referenced the appointment of the Honourable Bob Rae as Canada's Special Envoy to Myanmar, noting that this high-level diplomatic involvement underscores Canada's long-term commitment to the issue. The speaker emphasised that Canada's consistent support, both through governmental initiatives and public advocacy, has further reinforced his organisation's dedication to studying and finding solutions to the crisis. This combination of personal ties and national commitment has been pivotal in driving the organisation's focus on the ongoing conflict and its resolution.

Dr Ahmed, then delved into the main discussion by outlining three main points. First, he discussed the latest situation in Rakhine. He explained the evolving dynamics surrounding ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), the National Unity Government (NUG), the People's Defence Force (PDF), the military, and shifting geopolitical factors, emphasising the need to assess these shifts that are happening. He discussed the situation in Myanmar, where EAOs, particularly the Arakan Army and the Three Brotherhood Alliance, have intensified their activities, capturing significant territory. He emphasised that EAOs have gained control over large peripheral areas, marking a significant shift in Myanmar's power dynamics. However, it is notable that this is not likely the ultimate outcome for the EAOs in relation to the Myanmar Army; instead, a status quo has been established, even as the Myanmar Army has lost considerable territory in the conflict. In this regard, he pointed out that Myanmar's unique geopolitical landscape, marked by violence and conflict mainly in its peripheral regions, complicates the situation.

He examined recent developments in Myanmar, particularly the limited activity of the PDF following the 2021 coup. While the PDF is active in supporting EAOs, significant resistance activity remains largely concentrated in the outskirts rather than central areas like Mandalay. The "horseshoe effect"—a concentration of armed resistance in a peripheral arc—is observed, yet the extent of outside influence on this phenomenon remains uncertain.

Turning to regional dynamics, Dr Ahmed discussed ASEAN's limited effectiveness, as the organisation lacks tools to compel Myanmar toward a ceasefire or reconciliation, including the repatriation of Rohingya. Upcoming U.S. elections are seen as potentially

impactful, with U.S. interests in the Pacific expected to influence its approach to the Myanmar crisis. He also noted India's heightened focus on stability due to concerns in its northeastern "Seven Sisters" region. Recently, India invited stakeholders to New Delhi for discussions on the crisis, which according to Dr Ahmed, indicates a shift in its engagement level.

He, then, discussed China's role in Myanmar which is complex and sometimes contradictory. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investment in southern Rakhine is threatened by ongoing instability, yet China is also perceived as tacitly supporting ethnic groups in Myanmar's borderlands. This dual approach creates ambiguity, with China showing interest in leading on Myanmar issues at times but then retreating from involvement. In this regard, he highlighted the paradox in China's approach, where its strategic and economic interests are intertwined with both supporting and containing instability in Myanmar.

He outlined the uncertain stance of China on a long-term solution to Myanmar's crisis. ASEAN's official mandate respects national sovereignty, limiting its ability to intervene in member states' affairs. However, a shift is evident in their approach, as it barred Myanmar's military government from its recent summit—a first for the organisation. Canada has also shown growing interest in the region, illustrated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's recent attendance at the ASEAN summit in Laos. Additionally, Canada recently submitted a peace intervention proposal under its Indo-Pacific Strategic Initiative, indicating its strategic engagement in ASEAN affairs.

Dr Ahmed then discussed the USA and its multiple interests in the region, particularly through the Quad alliance (USA, India, Japan, and Australia), which appears focused on countering China's influence. While the Quad meets intermittently, little is publicly known about its specific strategic goals in the area, leaving questions about its regional effectiveness. He also highlighted AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the USA), a security pact formed to bolster regional stability, further underscoring Western alliances' nuanced engagement in the Indo-Pacific, yet with uncertain impact on Myanmar's internal crisis. Regarding India's interest in the region, he pointed out recent Indian defence officials' visit to Rakhine which reflects concerns over the Kaladan project and stability in its northeastern "Seven Sisters" region. Meanwhile, China maintains a "wait-and-see" approach, with limited visible diplomatic or other forms of active involvement.

Thirdly, his discussion focused on how international responses to the crisis have evolved, particularly in relation to policies from Western nations, the UN, and the European Union since the 2017 exodus. In this regard, he titled one of his slides as, "Reason for Hope or Despair," drawing attention to changes in the international

community's priorities in response to the ongoing situation. He also noted the changing focus of international efforts since 2017.

He spoke on Canada's significant interest in supporting initiatives like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and advocating for the Rohingya cause, noting substantial media coverage and mobilisation by the small but active Rohingya diaspora. The diaspora succeeded in pressuring the Canadian Parliament to formally recognise the genocide. However, he pointed out that Canada's focus shifted following the invasion of Ukraine, particularly due to the large Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, with many policymakers, including the Deputy Prime Minister, having ancestral ties to Ukraine. As a result, Canada diverted substantial financial resources to Ukraine, providing US\$ 300 million initially and then US\$ 287 million for related projects. Yet, after the funding expired in March, there has been no further financial commitment from Canada to the Rohingya cause. In this regard, he mentioned a recent conversation with Senator Marilou McPhedran, who had visited Bangladesh, where they discussed the unexpected shift in Canada's priorities.

He acknowledged that shifting focus in foreign affairs and geopolitics is expected. However, he highlighted that since March, Canada has not made any new commitments, likely due to other global events, such as the war in Gaza, which have captured international attention. He also pointed out the limited international engagement with the Myanmar crisis, noting minimal discussion around the issue. Canada, despite its recently launched Pacific strategy, maintains only an observer role in ASEAN and has limited involvement in Myanmar, despite some growing interest. Internally, Myanmar's ethnic armed organisations are intensifying their activities and forming cross-border alliances, leading to the Myanmar army losing ground, though the impact on its overall governance remains unclear.

The United Nations, particularly since the ongoing Israel-Hamas war began on 07 October 2023, has shown a decline in interest in the Myanmar crisis. He identified the lack of formal discussion at the latest UN General Assembly regarding the Rohingya, and criticised the vague concept of the "international community," which lacks clear, coordinated action on Myanmar.

Dr Ahmed, then posed a challenging question on the prospects of Rohingya repatriation for Bangladesh, emphasising the term "safe and dignified repatriation," which implies specific and complex conditions. In this regard, he posed another critical question regarding Bangladesh's end-state policy on the Rohingya crisis. He highlighted several policy options, emphasising the need for "marketing the crisis." Unlike other global conflicts, this crisis has not gained significant Western attention, potentially due to a lack of effective showcasing to draw international support.

His second policy suggestion was to focus on regional cooperation and team-building, questioning whether Bangladesh or a coalition of willing regional partners has a cohesive strategy. He anticipated potential foreign policy shifts in the post-U.S. elections, with hopes that the new administration might increase its interest in the region, given the U.S.'s role in global diplomacy. However, according to him, Bangladesh should also coordinate with both India and China due to their significant interests and influence in the area.

Thirdly, he emphasised a regional approach as essential for addressing the Myanmar crisis, arguing that international traction on this issue is challenging to achieve. In this regard, he advocated for a "pre-peace intervention" grounded in regional diplomacy and Track 2 processes, inspired by historical peace efforts like the Panglong agreement, Oslo and Aceh processes. This intervention would involve Track 2 diplomacy led by civil society organisations to convene stakeholders and gradually foster dialogue. If successful, it could transition into mediation, aiming to create a sustainable framework for peace negotiations. Furthermore, he informed about Canada's potential interest in leading, staffing, and resourcing such a regional initiative, given its recent focus on the area. He also suggested convincing ASEAN to support discussions and mediation, noting the importance of providing space for dialogue.

Reflecting on the overshadowing of this crisis by other international conflicts, Dr Ahmed called for timely action. Although the future U.S. stance on Pacific strategy remains uncertain, he asserted that immediate regional action cannot wait. Bangladesh, positioned as the host country, should actively pursue a regional solution, possibly with Canadian support. Besides, he urged for ongoing discussion and exchange of ideas to refine and implement this regional initiative.

In the end, Dr Ahmed concluded by saying that regional initiatives, rather than international action, may be the most realistic approach. His research and personal conviction suggest that regional efforts could yield more tangible results than attempting to gain broader global traction for the crisis.

Open Discussion and Contribution by the Distinguished Guests

Ambassador Mahmud Hassan



Ambassador Mahmud Hassan asked about what Bangladesh and Myanmar had done since the Rohingya crisis erupted in August 2017. This was the third time such a crisis happened. First was back in 1977 and second in 1991. He served as counsellor at the Bangladesh embassy in Yangon, returned in July 1991 to Dhaka, and the second influx began in November-December that year. About why Bangladesh could not send Rohingyas back to Myanmar, he said when the third influx began, the then government did not handle this issue in a professional manner; it was an amateurish way of handling the whole thing. Because, between August and November 2017, there was a flurry of activities between governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar, sending delegations back and forth and so on. Then on 23rd November 2017, an agreement was signed between the two governments; on behalf of Bangladesh, Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali signed it. After going through that agreement, Mr. Mahmud Hassan was surprised and shocked by absence of the word 'Rohingya' in it. He did not understand why this word was skipped. In fact, it was done at the insistence of Myanmar government that the word should be dropped. When the ethnic identity of the Rohingyas was thus denied by omitting the very word they are known by, Bangladesh automatically lost out on that and this was

what happened. The agreement also contained drawn-out stages of repatriation, verification of papers, and many other things. But those did not happen. There were repeated negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar, but things did not materialise.

Mr Hassan said, the word Rohingya is used internationally, by Rohingyas themselves, and Bangladesh too uses it. However, at the insistence of Myanmar, it was not used in the aforesaid agreement and this was the biggest defeat of Bangladesh, in his view. Then he said, Myanmar government actually initiated a nonmilitary aggression (in his view) against Bangladesh: they pushed out a huge number of people into Bangladesh, preceded by genocide, repeated aggression and other atrocities against them. Their aim was to damage the economy, environment, and this definitely constitutes aggression without firing a single bullet. The Bangladesh government back then did not realise what was happening. They took it as a normal problem thinking it would be easily resolved as they were maintaining good relations with Myanmar. What was missing in Bangladesh, was that the aggression was not seen as one. It was ignored, the Rohingyas were tucked up in Teknaf and south of Bangladesh. There was also no discourse in the country about this crisis. The government did not invite any other political party to discuss, find out ways for resolving the problem. Myanmar waged nonmilitary aggression, Bangladesh was divided and that worked as a source of strength for Myanmar's military government. They exploited it knowing Bangladesh's lack of unity and inability to resolve the issue. This was the second defeat for Bangladesh. In 2018, there was a Kofi Annan Commission and there the word Rohingya was not used as well. Rather, "Displaced Myanmar Residents" was used. Nonetheless, if anyone would go into the definition of this terminology, he/she could see it could go nowhere; this alienated the Rohingyas' identity from the whole issue.

Major General Md Shahidul Haque (Retd)

Former Defence Attaché to Myanmar and Former Ambassador to Libya



Major General Md Shahidul Haque (Retd) started by saying neither Myanmar nor the Myanmar military would be disintegrated. This should be very clear to everyone. He said this because for last 6-7 months, lots of Western analysts, specialists, experts were talking about such possibilities. Bangladesh did not actually do anything since 2017 about the Rohingya crisis; here, he agreed with ambassador Mahmud Hassan that the country lacked any concrete policy. General Haque had been dealing with Rohingya issues since 2010 and found out that whenever he made any presentation, recommend policy or suggestion, there was no concrete policy to deal with these issues. Dealing would not mean sending Rohingyas back to Myanmar, but the country lacked any strategy or policy about what to do or how to do. He asked why Myanmar would be compelled to take them back or what was their incentive. There was no incentive as Bangladesh did not give them anything. In a leaked document from 1993, British ambassador in Myanmar wrote, at that time General Ne Win was so perturbed and scared by seeing the time taken by Bangladesh Army to mobilise and send a brigade, which in their analysis was not there. Bangladesh indeed sent a brigade in no time. This event and how Ne Win was forced to deal with it could be found in the aforesaid leaked document. Similar case happened back in 1978. A joint secretary from the Bangladesh

Ministry of Home Affairs was talking with the Myanmar delegation which came to Bangladesh at that time, told them they would have to make sure in taking the Rohingyas back to Myanmar, and Bangladesh would also provide them with weapons. This statement made its way into headlines of several major international newspapers. But what did Bangladesh do in 2017?

General Haque said the Bangladesh military did their job; they made a detail presentation about the crisis to the government. Security wise, it was provided, but it was the Bangladesh government who chose to do nothing and it remained as such. This was an overall understanding of the policy where the country did not actually do anything. About the National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defence Force (PDF), Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), etc., he said the NUG and PDF were not effective entities to face the Myanmar government; however, the EAOs were proving highly capable in that regard. They are very powerful and some of them are extremely large, producing own weapons, even supplying these to many other EAOs around the region, as far as Afghanistan; at one time, they supplied arms to groups like the Shanti Bahini and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) also. Whatever fighting is taking place in Myanmar, can be called "controlled demolition" and are under either China or Myanmar military. The Three Brotherhood operation that began in October 2023, one of the parties, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) agreed for ceasefire. They did this, because about 70 per cent revenue that was supposed to be earned from that region was taken by them and the rest 30 per cent by the government. These are some concessions. These EAOs have power plants, some very big jade and ruby mines, and costing about US\$ 04-05 billion half yearly; such is their wealth.

Talking about the portion of Bangladesh, General Haque said the situation near the border was deeply concerning, but not under control of China, Myanmar or Bangladesh itself. Personnel from the Arakan Army (AA) are truly fanatic. They are winning a lot of battles but winning battles is one thing and wars are different; administering territories is another thing and that should concern Bangladesh. For recommendations, he said for last 7-8 months, he had been advocating for opening a formal communication channel to the AA; this should not be done through track-2 diplomacy and he did not opine for it. Such diplomacy was there indeed and there had been lots of reports on it as well. The suggested channel should be made across without bothering if the Myanmar government would be annoyed as General Haque was told by some people. He asked why Bangladesh should be worried about Myanmar being annoyed when the latter pushed over one million Rohingyas into the earlier. Such policies should not be followed. The AA would not be able to survive without Bangladesh's support and assistance, even if they could capture the whole rakhine state. Bangladesh should also draw a red line. On 02 November, mortar shells fired by the AA landed into Bangladeshi territory, and there were airstrikes carried out by the Myanmar government. It is high

time, therefore, Bangladesh drew a red line. Right now, except for one post at Bangladesh's border, the whole border is controlled by the AA. He asked if Bangladesh was or would be comfortable about having a non-state actor beside itself. This was a crucial question and a policy should be adopted in that regard as the situation was very dangerous now, i.e., a non-state actor is present at and controlling the border. Very soon, they might even control the whole territory; however, some of the territories might not have port facilities like the Chinese-aided and built Kyaukphyu, but it should be noted the AA receives all its necessary support, be that finance, weapons, and others, from China. They do not listen to anybody. At one time, Bangladesh even treated patients from AA in Teknaf. But they did not reciprocate this generosity, disagreeing to call the Rohingyas as such. Hence, dealing with them would have to be very strong. The message should be carried strongly to them: they would either do it, or they would not survive, and this is how they should be dealt with.

Another point was the Rohingya issue. Myanmar is a peculiar country and there are very few like it. One of the reasons is its very strong ethnoreligious character. Aung Sun Su Kyi commented, "One has to be a Buddhist to be a Burmese. If you are not a Buddhist, you are not Burmese." A Nobel Peace Prize winner like hers saying this was quite shocking to General Haque. What could Bangladesh do? He suggested not calling the Rohingyas as such, which he had been saying with their leaders too. If there were 10 Rohingyas somewhere, there would be 12 parties. They are seriously divided and Bangladesh should organise them politically. Here he said Rohingyas could be called rakhine Muslims. While talking to them, he said if they got citizenship, they would also get 100 per cent rights under that identity; what was the problem? They could not answer that. Besides being heavily ethnoreligious, the Myanmar society is extremist. He then suggested 'carrot and stick' diplomacy. Explaining carrot, he said the AA and Myanmar government should be made to understand that Bangladesh is a very important factor and the only country around which provided them a peaceful border for last 50 years. But what benefits did it get in return? Nothing except over one million people pushed into its territory. Myanmar never dared pushing a single person across Thailand's border. It is true there are lots of Myanmar people in Thailand, but whenever there is little bit of commotion at the border, the Thai army is immediately mobilised.



Once, they even mobilised a whole armoured division. Sadly, Bangladesh is not assertive enough about its rights. For the last couple of years, it has only been passive for its own rights and other things. It was high time for change in formulation of policies and going for a practical way of doing things. China has completed the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in Kyaukphyu. From Kyaukphyu, Cox's Bazaar is about 200 kilometres. On 01 November 2024, China began train services to Afghanistan, which was an extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The train may not have reached Kabul but was already on Afghan territory. Bangladesh could propose connecting the aforementioned 200 kilometres with the CMEC; this is very important for its strategic survival. The country has a land route and the sea is only the way out. If there is ever any blockade, the land route will provide a strategic outlet from Bangladesh, take out and sell its products abroad. This can also help generate lots of employment opportunities for the Rohingyas. General Haque said, Arakan receives the highest amount of FDI in Myanmar, but remains the second poorest state, which is obviously a tragedy; he concluded by saying the land route and corridor might help Myanmar develop infrastructure in that area.

Ambassador Shahed Akhtar

Ambassador Shahed Akhtar said he would mostly focus on what could be the way out of the Rohingya crisis in short, medium and long terms. Back in 1978 when this issue emerged, the government solved it in a manner where an effective repatriation took place that had already been recorded. Whatever might be the scenario, there had been some flaws and the issue currently went into the backburner.



Bangladesh has to come out of this and that was the most pertinent point being worked on. From 1978-2024, for 46 years, the Rohingya crisis has been burdening Bangladesh and the country has been unable to resolve it, even get others interested. Only Canada showed interest, and many others gave only lip service. Ambassador Akhtar asked what happened to Bangladeshi experts. There had been certain serious problems in the Philippines, but were resolved and all know about that. They resolved these within their country without sending people away; moreover, Norway came forward with some ideas in that regard. Ambassador Akhtar believed Nordic countries were playing a very effective role in Bangladesh, providing humanitarian and many other types of assistance. Bangladesh at this moment has a government which is quite serious bringing the Rohingya issue to the forefront. Very soon, the BIMSTEC summit is going to be held in Thailand; Myanmar and Thailand both are members of this group. It is difficult for the ASEAN to discuss the Rohingya issue and they will not be interested either. Nonetheless, member countries have given Bangladesh one-to-one assurance that they

will be able to look into these matters as Bangladesh government raised these with the governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and other members; so far, nothing successful happened. It has not resolved the crisis within the region. India is aware of the crisis and discussions are going on with them; China also is a party to it. Problems take many years to be resolved, for example, there are many issues in South Asia, which have existed for over half a century but remain unsolved. Therefore, Bangladesh should not be so desperate, but simultaneously, not also try to live with problems as that is not a solution. The issue is there, Bangladesh has capable diplomats and negotiators. Referring to General Haque, he said Bangladesh government and security forces should join hands together as there is no policy on this matter. This is where Bangladesh is lacking. He suggested immediately, for a short-term basis, a special commission must be formed to resolve the matter. Furthermore, as BIMSTEC has taken the Rohingya issue, output of the roundtable could be given to the chief guest, who is well-versed in this subject and can put that up to the chief adviser. The chief adviser in his own, simplistic way, can put it across immediately and Ambassador Akhtar was quite sure about that. He did not prefer medium and long terms as that would mean the problem would be dragged for long time too. Bangladesh has to get rid of it and start somewhere. There had been many other international players in this crisis, but the point he was trying to make was, the whole country must be united and only then would Myanmar get the message as opined by ambassador Mahmud earlier. About going back to Thailand, he said Myanmar had burnt the Thai capital down, but this did not mean they became enemies. They are still very good friends and there are lots of connectivity projects between these two. He concluded by saying none is permanent friend or enemy, which should be kept in mind and that Bangladesh has to get the burden of the Rohingya crisis off its shoulders.

Ambassador Tariq Ahmed Karim

Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies, Independent University, Bangladesh



Ambassador Tariq Ahmed Karim said he agreed with many of the points raised so far by previous participants. His focus would be on the current situation and where Bangladesh should go forward. But for doing that, there is a need of evaluating what did and did not happen. Bangladesh should evaluate how it succeeded in managing the first two outfluxes and how or why that could not be done in the case of the last influx, what were the strengths and weaknesses, what worked and what did not, etc. A dispassionate evaluation would be needed in this regard. He agreed with the point that the crisis did not start in 2017. When he was in Delhi in 2012, he first saw the report of 100 Rohingyas landing at the Ministry of External Affairs seeking political asylum. He sent out a message saying this was just the tip of the iceberg, Bangladesh would be their next target, which later happened in reality. In the 2017 agreement, Myanmar basically took full advantage of the situation and lack of consensus in Bangladesh, sized up weaknesses and used 2017 to push as many Rohingyas as the could when the country was distracted itself. Here he agreed with ambassador Hassan's point. Bangladesh's weakness has always been the lack of consensus on foreign policy. When the situation is so, anyone who has any aim in Bangladesh, will be able to create divisions, and use these in their play against each other. Hence, this was the need of the hour. People in Bangladesh might have differences among themselves, but as a country, when it faces others, that should be done as an entity. When the entity would appear divided, its detractors would surely take advantage and there must not be any illusion about that. Praising Dr Kawser Ahmed's paper, ambassador Karim said, there were new realities indeed and should be taken into account. Here he asked what was that worked in the late 1970s and early 1990s; if there were elements of Bangladesh's strategies that worked, they should be adopted. When one would negotiate, he/she would always do that by portraying there

were some strengths in and behind. Diplomacy cannot be done merely by holding the olive branch and a pragmatic realist must sometimes flex muscles, in a process saying what the other party is doing is not acceptable and if necessary, they will be hit back. Ambassador Karim expressed surprise that Bangladesh did not have flag marches, flights of its airforce planes across the border and things like these taking place in 2017, for which Myanmar never took Bangladesh seriously. He also termed the 2017 agreement as a farce, calling it basically a sellout. He questioned about it and said any of these Rohingyas would hardly go back even in one year. Referring to BIISS chairman, he said it was wishful thinking and never going to happen. Bangladesh would need now to calibrate its policies: as it is stuck with these people, but can neither swallow nor throw them out. How Bangladesh shall solve this for the other side to say the cost is high for them, and engage in talks, has to be thought about. Otherwise, they are not going to talk. The geopolitics has changed. Three players were mentioned as involved in Myanmar, e.g., the US, because of the Indo-Pacific. Referring to General Anis' mention of Myanmar's strategic location, he said Bangladesh's own strategic position in the Bay of Bengal should not be underplayed. Myanmar may be three and a half times the size of Bangladesh but less than one third in terms of population. From that point, Bangladesh offsets whatever strategic advantage they have in terms of how others view Bangladesh. This is time when Bangladesh needs to bring that into force and send a message to the other side, if they are going to create problems, that will be reciprocated by creating problems for them too. Language like this should be understood and people will take Bangladesh seriously.

The two other very important players in Myanmar are both China and India. India has been sitting on like a mere spectator, doing nothing for last 25 years, while China has taken full advantage; first in its detente with the US and secondly, the network it has built with the ASEAN. The country just uses Myanmar like a sidekick or instrument and is unlikely to leave or part ways with them. It remains very crucial for China who wants to come to the Indian Ocean. If it is unable to come in through the Malacca Straits, it will come overland but will definitely come. Because, China views itself as an Indian Ocean power. The BRICS map that was shown, is actually of the Indian Ocean, but it is looking to west. The US has its escort, but it is looking from the east to the west up to a certain point. Bangladesh has to factor about how it should be dealing with them. There is a development which the country should take note of and start acting accordingly. That development is, a slight difference witnessed in the nature of India-China relationship following the Modi-Xi meeting in the recent BRICS summit. This has always been so. Ambassador Karim predicted that after the elections would be over, and at a certain point, these two countries would continue to engage with each other, at least until the first part of their next term would be on. However, just before the elections, they would engage in skirmishes or shadow warfare. This would be the time when Bangladesh would require to step up its own diplomatic efforts with both of them. Not

engaging in talks with one of them would not be helpful and ambassador Karim was very straightforward about this. The country needs to carefully assess all these in the calculus and feeder out how this calculation is going to take it where it is. He concluded by stressing the need of doing course correction as Bangladesh would move forward.

Mr Mohammad Mizanur Rahman,

Additional Secretary, Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC)



Mr Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, raised the question regarding the current educational provisions in the camp, pointing out that the government has allowed the Myanmar curriculum to be taught from grades one through eleven. While this initiative was approved by the national task force, he expressed concerns about the long-term relevance of this curriculum, especially if the people within the camp are not eventually repatriated to Myanmar. He questioned the efficacy of the Myanmar curriculum, describing it as lacking in sophistication and noting that Burmese is the medium of instruction. There is an additional concern that the teachers might not be providing instruction in authentic

Burmese, which he believes is a significant issue, especially as the Rohingya community has voiced their dissatisfaction with the curriculum.

As a solution, he suggested that the curriculum should instead be in English. Since the Rohingya are effectively stateless, they should be equipped with a global perspective in their education. English, being an international language, could better serve their needs and help integrate them more broadly. He further recommended that the curriculum should be customised to be more practical and globally relevant. In addition, he highlighted the lack of a certification and assessment system within the current curriculum, suggesting such mechanisms should be introduced to provide more structure and accountability to their education. His observation regarding repatriation was that it is unlikely to occur anytime soon. Engagements with China and Myanmar, he noted, have shown little support for proposals that could facilitate repatriation, which he described as disappointing and, ultimately, disheartening. Given these challenges, he proposed focusing on equipping the Rohingyas with educational resources, including higher education, noting that the UNDP recently submitted a proposal for providing online higher education.

Concerning livelihood, he acknowledged that the government approved a framework for skill development, which is currently supported by UN agencies. However, he raised a critical question about the actual utility of these skills. Often, participants complete three to six-month training programs, but with limited follow-up or practical application, these skills are quickly forgotten. He emphasised that this represents a missed opportunity, expressing frustration that the training has little practical impact. His suggestion was to create a more actionable skill development framework that would allow the application of skills within the camp itself, and potentially link the skill sets with external markets without impacting Bangladesh's own economy.

He also highlighted leadership as a significant challenge, noting that many educated Rohingya have started their own organisations, leading to fragmentation. He pointed out that while various agencies are actively working in this area, there is no unified approach to addressing leadership development within the camp. He raised the question of how best to streamline leadership efforts to foster a more cohesive and effective approach.

Reflecting on the history of the influx, he shared a personal dilemma regarding the perceived lack of comprehensive policy frameworks. He noted that the influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh actually began in 2012, yet discussions typically focus on recent arrivals. In 2013, a strategy paper called the "Strategy for Undocumented Myanmar Nationals" was developed to address a population of 30,000-40,000, but since the arrival of over a million refugees, no similar policy has been formulated. He questioned why a strategy was developed for a smaller influx, but not for the larger, more recent one, suggesting that this discrepancy merits closer examination.

Professor Amena Mohsin

*Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*



Professor Amena Mohsin began by referencing existing refugee studies literature, which suggests that the average duration of refugee residency in a host country is approximately 17 years. She pointed out that this indicates the need for patience, not only for Bangladesh but for the Rohingya people themselves. The speaker emphasised that, when discussing peace processes and interventions, it is essential to recognise the complexities underlying these

efforts. She observed that the notion of humanitarian aid has come under scrutiny, with questions arising over whether this aid is genuinely humanitarian or politically motivated. According to her, in many cases, refugees are used as leverage for geostrategic purposes, which undermines the true humanitarian intent of such aid.

She also addressed the concept of Track II diplomacy, which has been employed across numerous issues and contexts. However, she cautioned that simply employing Track II diplomacy is insufficient; it is necessary to analyze and understand the stakeholders involved in these dialogues. Additionally, she suggested that Track 1.5 diplomacy—bridging Track I and Track II with a mix of official and informal actors—may be essential to secure the involvement of policymakers and ensure the political will needed to enact concrete outcomes.

Focusing on the internal dynamics of the Rohingya community, she highlighted a significant lack of consensus among the Rohingyas themselves. She noted that divisions exist between the “old” Rohingyas, who have been in Bangladesh for longer periods, and the recent arrivals, as well as within the Rohingya diaspora globally. For any peace process or intervention to succeed, she argued, it is vital to incorporate the voices of the Rohingyas themselves, despite the challenges posed by these internal divisions.

Shifting away from the geopolitical aspects, which other speakers had already covered, she remarked on the limitations imposed by regional organizations, such as ASEAN. Despite ASEAN’s involvement in various cases, the organization’s principle of noninterference constrains its capacity for meaningful action. She suggested that the substantial investments ASEAN member states have in Myanmar complicate the prospect of any effective intervention in the Rohingya crisis, as these countries have their own political and economic interests to consider.

She further highlighted the importance of grassroots perspectives, particularly the voices of Rohingya youth. According to her, the youth represent the future and hold essential views on what peace could mean for their community. Likewise, she argued for the inclusion of women’s voices, noting that the Rohingya women, who often focus on day-to-day challenges, could offer unique insights into the community’s needs that high-level political discussions might overlook. Engaging women and youth in peace dialogues, she contended, would help shift the conversation from abstract geopolitical discourse to practical solutions grounded in everyday experiences.

As a final suggestion to those participating in peace intervention efforts, she urged them to consider incorporating perspectives from both the Rohingya diaspora and voices from within the camps, specifically highlighting the importance of including women, youth, and children. By weaving in these perspectives, she believed peace initiatives could

become more comprehensive, responsive, and ultimately effective in addressing the complex realities of the Rohingya crisis.

Ambassador Mashfee Binte Shams,
Rector, Foreign Service Academy



Ambassador Mashfee Binte Shams, Rector, Foreign Service Academy began by addressing the keynote speaker's suggestion for regional solutions, emphasising how the Rohingya issue has polarised South Asia along religious lines. She noted that even smaller countries with close ties to Bangladesh—Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, in addition to India—have completely aligned themselves with Myanmar. Despite Bangladesh's longstanding ties with these countries in terms of trade, political, and diplomatic relations, they

have been unyielding in their stance on the Rohingya issue. She highlighted that these countries have consistently refused to support resolutions against Myanmar at the United Nations and have remained unwilling to discuss the issue bilaterally. This lack of support, in her view, demands a stronger approach from Bangladesh.

Reflecting on her experiences as an ambassador in Nepal, she remarked on the absence of sufficient appreciation in Dhaka of the difficulties encountered in dealing with these smaller, yet influential neighbours. Her interactions with Nepal and Sri Lanka revealed to her that Bangladesh had not fully acknowledged how these countries, despite their size, contribute significant moral support to Myanmar's position. She argued that these smaller nations in the neighborhood, while not global powers, collectively provide a

moral advantage for Myanmar, and Bangladesh must put in greater efforts to align them with its own stance on the Rohingya issue.

Turning to regional forums, she highlighted that Bangladesh faces similar challenges in BIMSTEC. Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka's alignment with Myanmar positions Bangladesh at a disadvantage in this regional forum as well. ASEAN's voting patterns also, according to her, reflect a religious divide, with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei consistently supporting Bangladesh, while Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand align with Myanmar. For Bangladesh, the challenge lies in neutralising this religious bias and reframing the Rohingya issue as a humanitarian crisis, rather than one limited to religious concerns. She stressed the need for Bangladesh to prioritise this issue more vigorously in its bilateral relations, emphasising a humanitarian perspective to counteract the religious framing.

She also underscored the importance of Russia, a major actor that has not been actively involved in the Rohingya crisis. She acknowledged China's significant influence in Myanmar but noted that Myanmar also has strong relations with Russia. At one time, Bangladesh itself had strong ties with Russia, though it has not leveraged these ties to address the Rohingya issue. She suggested that there may be merit in exploring ways to involve Russia more directly in discussions regarding the crisis.

She also pointed to the presence of vested interests that benefit from the continued existence of the Rohingya crisis, both within the camps and on international platforms such as the United Nations. She identified various international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), UN agencies, and even local NGOs in Bangladesh as actors who, due to their involvement in humanitarian assistance, might inadvertently contribute to prolonging the crisis. She proposed that a candid discussion on these vested interests might be necessary to address factors that perpetuate the issue.

On Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts with Myanmar, she observed that despite multiple Track II dialogues with other countries, Bangladesh lacks a similar approach with Myanmar. She questioned why, despite the various Indo-Bangladesh dialogue forums, there has been no Bangla-Myanmar dialogue forum. She suggested that Bangladesh could consider establishing a Myanmar studies chair at Dhaka University and inviting Myanmar scholars to Bangladesh or sponsoring Bangladeshi scholars to teach in Myanmar, for example, at the Yangon University. Such efforts could serve to "demystify and demonise" the countries for one another, potentially easing tensions.

In closing, she argued that by starting with non-strategic, non-security measures, Bangladesh might establish a more effective foundation for bilateral relations, one that

could help de-escalate the Rohingya crisis through mutual understanding and cooperation.

Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman



Ambassador Mahbub uz Zaman suggested that the Rohingya crisis should be examined from a political standpoint. The rights of the Rohingya people have been systematically denied. Therefore, according to him, until political, legal, and civil rights are granted, not only would it be impossible to find a solution to the Rohingya situation, but it would also be impossible to return the Rohingya people in a secure and dignified manner. In his opinion, the safest and surest way to arrive at a solution to this crisis is through dialogue. There is a need to have dialogue with the major

actors like the National Unity Government (NUG) and other actors. In particular, he focused on establishing dialogue through informal channels with local ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Although this engagement has often circumvented official channels, this may enable Bangladesh to interact directly with influential groups within Rakhine State. Ambassador Zaman also pointed out the Chief advisor's three points for the Rohingya crisis in his speech at the UNGA. Of the three points, Ambassador Zaman concurred with the first and third point. In the first point, the Chief Adviser suggested that the international community must reassess its strategy towards the Rohingya situation. The UN Secretary-General may promptly organise a conference with all stakeholders regarding the Rohingya crisis. The conference should assess the overall crisis scenario and provide innovative, forward-thinking solutions. However, in the second point, the Chief Adviser stated that the Joint Response Plan, collaboratively administered by the UN System and Bangladesh, requires revitalisation. The resource mobilisation method requires further political impetus due to the deteriorating financial

circumstances. Regarding this second point, Ambassador Zaman was sceptical of its practical implication. The Chief Adviser's third point was to the international community's obligation to earnestly endorse the justice and accountability mechanisms for addressing the genocide crimes perpetrated against the Rohingya community. Ambassador Zaman concurred with the third point and proposed the establishment of a mechanism to expedite the legal process for addressing such genocidal crimes.

Regarding the US' involvement in resolving the Rohingya crisis, Ambassador Zaman added that China's role is also important in making any peace architecture successful for the Rohingyas. Here, he pointed out that, despite China's mediation yielding no positive result thus far, its status as a major power and the National Unity Government's recent commitment to fostering amicable relations with Beijing through its 10-point China policy, proves the necessity for continued active engagement with China.

Mr Manzoor Hasan, OBE,
Executive Director,
Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University



Mr Manzoor Hasan, in his intervention, discussed about the global document called “Global Compact,” the text of which mentions four pillars. Although this compact does not establish legally binding commitments, it offers suggestions for states and other stakeholders to respond more effectively to refugee situations. He subsequently explained the four pillars of the compact, asserting that it is founded on principles of burden-sharing and responsibility-sharing, aimed at alleviating the burden on host nations while promoting refugees' self-reliance, broadening access to third-country solutions, and fostering conditions for safe, voluntary repatriation. In

accordance with this compact, he suggested moving forward to take meaningful actions.

While outlining the recommendations, he suggested allowing livelihood activities for Rohingyas in the camp. However, integrating livelihood activities within the camps

could provide substantial advantages for the Rohingya and simultaneously alleviate certain challenges for the host communities. In this regard, Mr Hasan recommended careful planning, which is necessary to balance these benefits and manage potential tensions between the Rohingya and host communities. Scaling up lifelong skills development for both Rohingya and the host community was another recommendation he proposed to foster mutual advantages and alleviate host-community concerns. Afterwards, he recommended Cox's Bazar as a region in need of attracting investment as there is a growing need arising from the large-scale displacement of Rohingyas. In contrast to solely providing immediate humanitarian aid, it is also essential to adopt a sustainable strategy that harmonises support for the Rohingyas with the socioeconomic requirements of the local host community, which, according to him, can foster stability and resilience in the region. In addition, Mr Hasan suggested that the governance architecture in Cox's Bazar needs to be restructured in order to address the realities that are occurring on the ground. It is also in compliance with another recommendation, which is to update the rules and regulations that are already in place in order to prevent any legal lacuna.

Colonel Harunur Rashid Khan, psc (Retd)

Former UN Security and Safety Risk Management Adviser

Former Research Director of BIISS



From the humanitarian point of view, Colonel Harunur Rashid Khan identified the need for economic desperation and the importance of generating funds for both Rohingyas and the host community. He emphasised the urgency of addressing economic desperation and underscored the critical need for mobilising financial resources to support both groups. In this regard, Colonel Harun highlighted the economic vulnerability that has resulted from the protracted nature of the Rohingya crisis. He pointed out that both the refugees and the host communities are experiencing significant economic strains, which

are exacerbated by the long-term nature of the refugee situation. While international aid

has played a crucial role, he stressed that more sustainable funding mechanisms need to be explored to alleviate economic pressures. This includes both direct financial support and long-term development initiatives that address the root causes of economic instability in the region. In response to these economic challenges, Colonel Harun proposed the creation of an economic zone as a potential solution. He argued that establishing such a zone could offer multiple benefits for both the Rohingya refugees and the host communities. The economic zone could serve as a space for fostering local economic growth, creating employment opportunities for both groups, and encouraging collaboration between the refugees and the local population. By providing a platform for economic activity, the zone could help bridge the economic divide and reduce tensions between the two communities.

He also suggested engaging in dialogue with the Arakan Army (AA), which could be a strategic approach to addressing the Rohingya crisis and advancing stability in the Rakhine State. The AA, which has gained substantial territorial control and influence in northern Rakhine, represents an emerging power dynamic that directly affects the prospects for safe and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees. As a stakeholder with influence over security and political arrangements in Rakhine, engaging the AA in constructive dialogue could complement ongoing diplomatic efforts and open new channels for fostering peace and stability in the region.

Commodore S M Sharif-Ul Islam (N), NPP, PCGM, PCGMS, psc, BN

Director

National Security Intelligence (NSI)



Commodore S M Sharif-Ul Islam, Director of National Security Intelligence (NSI), shared insights from his recent experience with the NSI, focusing on Rohingya camps and the Myanmar border, where he has observed significant challenges.

He first highlighted the difficulty in establishing effective leadership within the Rohingya communities in the camps, as well as engaging with the Rohingya diaspora in Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. He noted the lack of clear leadership among the Rohingya, which complicates efforts to guide them toward a productive future.

Commodore Sharif then provided context on Myanmar's 17 border ports, noting that 11 are controlled by the Myanmar junta, while the remaining six are overseen by ethnic groups, excluding the Teknaf border, which has been closed for years. He suggested exploring potential collaboration with Arakan forces stationed at Myanmar's borders to facilitate border engagement and stability.

Further, he pointed out that while Bangladesh has a geographical advantage and superior resources in education, healthcare, and IT compared to Myanmar, it has not leveraged these assets in economic investments across the border. He proposed considering these strengths as a basis for future investments in Myanmar.

He also addressed the issue of continuity in discussions on repatriation and other related topics. He emphasised the need for a multi-tiered committee structure to follow up on objectives discussed at seminars and roundtables, as these discussions often lose momentum once the event concludes. Commodore Sharif proposed forming smaller, dedicated committees to pursue specific actionable goals at various levels, to ensure progress beyond initial discussions.

Regarding repatriation, he acknowledged the complex, long-term nature of this effort, emphasising the need for economic and diplomatic strategies to support it. He expressed concerns that, without proactive measures, hundreds of thousands more Rohingyas could cross the border, exacerbating existing challenges for agencies like the NSI, BGB, and others tasked with managing border security.

Commodore Sharif underscored the importance of cohesive internal coordination across political, governmental, and economic sectors, as well as strengthening external relations, especially with China, which plays a critical role in the region. He highlighted China's influence with the Arakan Army and the Myanmar junta, stressing the importance of establishing mechanisms to engage China constructively. Lastly, he mentioned ongoing informal communications with Myanmar's junta and armed ethnic groups, suggesting that formalised channels would be essential for achieving sustainable repatriation efforts.

Lt Colonel Imam Hassan

Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI)

Lt Colonel Hassan from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) began by acknowledging that most points had already been discussed. However, he emphasised a few key issues, starting with the need for improved coordination among stakeholders in Bangladesh. While various groups work harmoniously on some aspects, there remains a lack of unified action. Echoing a previous suggestion, he recommended establishing a commission where all key stakeholders could contribute insights, review actions taken over the past seven years, identify weaknesses, and chart future courses of action to form a cohesive strategy for addressing the Rohingya issue.

He observed that neither Myanmar nor its allies appear interested in the repatriation of the Rohingyas. Without internal strength or leverage, the Rohingyas are unable to assert the right to return to Myanmar. He suggested exploring ways to empower the Rohingya community as part of Bangladesh's strategy. He also noted that many initiatives and efforts over the past seven years have been attempted without yielding the desired results, signalling a need to move beyond conventional diplomatic channels and adopt an "out-of-the-box" approach.

Lt Colonel Hassan concluded by referencing past successful repatriations in 1978 and 1991-1992, posing the question of why those efforts succeeded while current efforts have stalled. He urged stakeholders to examine those historical cases closely for potential insights that could guide future strategy.

Dr Ishrat Zakia Sultana

Assistant Professor

North South University (NSU)



Dr Ishrat Zakia Sultana, Assistant Professor at North South University (NSU), began by referring to the idea of Bangladesh seeking its own solution towards resolving the Rohingya crisis in the midst of the inactivity of the international community. Towards that end, she has suggested that Bangladesh should take necessary measures in the very near future to become a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). She emphasised that pursuing this objective should give Bangladesh a plausible chance of solving its

Rohingya issue to any significant degree. She touched upon Bangladesh's stance on the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, noting that Bangladesh is not a signatory and suggesting that the country needs to develop a clear policy framework of its own on refugee issues.

She referenced comments by an earlier speaker who had discussed the lack of a clear policy, indicating that this “no policy” stance is itself a policy. She highlighted that Bangladesh's role in hosting the Rohingya has led to them being viewed primarily as “Rohingya” rather than recognised with a formal refugee status. Dr Sultana pointed out that the lack of an established refugee status creates economic and logistical issues, complicating the process for the Rohingya to return to Myanmar, especially given ongoing concerns about genocide. She emphasised the need for a comprehensive policy formulation regarding the Rohingya crisis and for refugees in general.

She then referred to a “WSP” approach to moving towards resolving Bangladesh's Rohingya issue. Here, the “W” stands for work, where the Rohingyas in Bangladesh can be given adequate work as per their capabilities in order to utilise them to improve Bangladesh's economy in a mutually beneficial setting. They can be better employed towards avenues such as dried fish cultivation to create an export product for Bangladesh. Here, the garments factory in Bhasan Char is a bad example of improperly utilising the capabilities of the Rohingyas, as the cost of moving raw materials there has made the operation completely unsustainable. Feasibility studies before executing such measures would help better employ the Rohingyas for more suitable work. The “S” stands for status, where the Rohingyas would be given a temporary status as a refugee so that they can become integrated into the financial sector for receiving their wages. The “P” stands for policy which, as she has previously mentioned, involves a national-level policy for dealing with refugee populations.

Captain S M Moyeen Uddin
Bangladesh Navy



Captain Moyeen, CSO2 from COMDHK, Bangladesh Navy, began by recalling the mass exodus of the Rohingya on 25 August, 2017. He shared his experience as one of the first responders, serving in the Bangladesh Coast Guard at the time. He was stationed in Teknaf on 26 August (i.e., in 2017), where he witnessed the overwhelming influx of people and acknowledged that Bangladesh was

unprepared for such a large-scale humanitarian crisis, with insufficient personnel and a lack of policy guidelines to manage the situation.

Captain Moin recounted seeing individuals unable to afford passage on boats attempting to swim across the river in groups, tragically resulting in some drowning. He described the haunting memory of four bodies he encountered at the Shah Porir Dwip (i.e., the Shapuree Island), which remains vivid in his mind. During a subsequent visit to the area five years later, he observed the continued suffering of the Rohingya population.

Captain Moin recommended measures to improve the Rohingya's quality of life, noting that some have been leaving the camps, with reports of individuals seeking day labour opportunities at the Naval base. He suggested that improving their living standards and access to education would address some of the social challenges within the camps. He highlighted that over 37,000 Rohingyas are currently housed on Bhasan Char, where the Bangladesh Navy is responsible for security and infrastructure maintenance. He concluded by stressing the need to instil awareness of basic human qualities and law and order regulations among the Rohingya, sharing a disturbing report of an incident involving abuse within the community as an example of urgent social issues that need to be addressed as soon as possible.

Dr Syeda Rozana Rashid

Professor

Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka



Dr Syeda Rozana Rashid, Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, expressed her thoughts during the discussion by focusing on both long-term solutions and immediate challenges in the Rohingya camps. She noted that much of the conversation thus far had centred around geopolitics, international engagement, and optimising relations with other states, as well as efforts to scale up education and skills for the displaced population.

Dr Rashid highlighted an urgent and dangerous issue: forced conscription within the camps, a matter she recently discovered through her research. She explained that this development is impacting both camp residents and the surrounding Cox's Bazar region, pointing to the trans-local dynamics

where cross-border actions in Myanmar have direct repercussions in Bangladesh, adding to the security and political complexities of the situation.

She proposed demilitarisation, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) as possible strategies for managing the immediate and medium-term challenges, while recognising that effective implementation would require further strategic planning. She also emphasised the importance of dialogue, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders connected to both Myanmar and the Rohingya refugee population. Instead of relying solely on Track II diplomacy, she advocated for a multi-track diplomatic approach to facilitate broader engagement and solution-building.

Furthermore, Dr Rashid stressed the need for re-politicising the Rohingya issue, noting it had been depoliticised over time. She urged Bangladesh to formulate a formal, strategic policy involving stakeholders in both Bangladesh and Myanmar, including partnerships with the National Solidarity Institute (NSI), given their existing connections.

On economic opportunities, she suggested Bangladesh explore the idea of establishing economic zones or safe zones within Myanmar to create job prospects that could support Rohingya reintegration upon their return home. Moving beyond traditional durable solutions—such as repatriation, local reintegration, or third-country resettlement—might be essential for addressing the unique complexities of the Rohingya crisis.

Rubel Molla

Lecturer

Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka



Rubel Molla, a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Dhaka, contributed his thoughts to the discussion by focusing on the need for strategic approaches to Rohingya repatriation and relations with Myanmar. He noted the calls for a special commission on repatriation and various initiatives from Bangladesh, but emphasised a different angle—acknowledging the limitations of any immediate, radical solution for the Rohingya issue. Highlighting the unchangeable geographical reality of Bangladesh's proximity to Myanmar, he

stressed the importance of devising a pragmatic approach to engagement.

Mr Molla pointed out that while bilateral relations around the Rohingya issue have been stagnant, there is potential to leverage existing agreements and agencies that foster cooperation. He referenced recent Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) for security dialogue and cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as business relationships, although he noted trade imbalance as a challenge. In 2022, for example, Bangladesh's imports from Myanmar significantly outweighed its exports.

He proposed a more systemic approach to the crisis, suggesting that Bangladesh study public opinion in Myanmar and explore avenues to create popular support for the Rohingya cause. He emphasised the potential of popular diplomacy and urged Bangladesh's diplomatic missions to be proactive in this regard. Citing his own review of the Facebook page for Bangladesh's embassy in Yangon, he observed minimal activity, which he saw as a missed opportunity for engagement.

Mr Molla recommended increasing the embassy's activity in Myanmar's public sphere to gradually build soft leverage and create "soft agencies" between the two nations. Such connections, he argued, would compel both Bangladesh and Myanmar to address bilateral issues, as both would have a vested interest in protecting these agencies. By fostering popular diplomacy and strengthening these ties, he suggested that Bangladesh could better navigate complex geopolitical challenges surrounding the Rohingya crisis.

Md Shariful Islam Hasan

Program Head

BRAC Migration Programme



Md Shariful Islam, Programme Head of the BRAC Migration Programme, presented his views on the limited solutions available for addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis. He outlined three possible options: repatriating the Rohingya to Myanmar, resettling them in third countries, or retaining them in Bangladesh.

Mr Islam began by examining the repatriation process, noting that it is unrealistic to expect all 1.5 million refugees to return to Myanmar immediately. Under the current agreement, 300 people could

return daily, meaning the repatriation would take approximately 17 years if it proceeded at this rate. He then discussed the option of resettlement in other countries, referencing the offers by the United States and Canada to accept refugees. However, based on their current capacities, resettling the entire population would be infeasible; it would take 3,000 years if only 500 refugees were accepted per year. This leads to the conclusion that the Rohingya may likely remain in Bangladesh long-term.

Mr Islam argued that a unified national stance is essential. He suggested that all political parties and relevant agencies in Bangladesh need to come together and recognise the crisis as a national issue, which would help bring international attention to the situation. He urged Bangladesh to work with regional partners like Malaysia and Thailand to make this a global issue, thus encouraging more international intervention.

If resettlement and repatriation prove unworkable, Mr Islam advocated for preparing the Rohingya to be productive within Bangladesh. He recommended initiatives to provide education, skill development, and special documentation to help them contribute to society. By equipping the refugees with skills and education, Bangladesh could produce a generation of future leaders and advocates, prepared to help restore stability when they eventually return to Myanmar or integrate elsewhere.

In closing, Mr Islam emphasised the importance of a cohesive national approach, independent of changes in political leadership. He cited India's unified stance on national issues as a model for ensuring consistent policy. According to him, without this unified, long-term commitment, the Rohingya crisis will continue to be unresolved, with discussions repeating endlessly on this issue.

Shabira Sultana

*Head of Advocacy and Communication
IRC Bangladesh*



Ms Shabira Sultana, Head of Advocacy and Communication at IRC Bangladesh, emphasised the influential role that global media can play in addressing the Rohingya crisis. She highlighted the importance of consistent media coverage at an international level to keep the Rohingya issue in focus. Ms Sultana mentioned specific countries such as the United States, Canada, and Germany, suggesting that these nations could leverage

their media outlets to bring greater awareness and sustain global attention on the situation.

Syed Arif Niazi

CEO, Timely Investment



Mr Syed Arif Niazi highlighted the importance of Bangladesh taking an active role in enhancing its geopolitical and geoeconomic relevance. He noted that the country is currently in a passive stance and urged a shift toward a more assertive and expressive approach. Emphasising the need for an independent policy, Mr Niazi stressed that Bangladesh should not be subservient to any other nation, including India or China. He suggested that this approach, as other speakers had also mentioned, should be pursued assertively in the future.

Remarks by the Chief Guest

Brigadier General (Retd) Dr. M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc

Honourable Adviser,

Ministry of Textiles & Jute and Ministry of Shipping

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh



Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hossain, ndc, psc, Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Textiles & Jute and Ministry of Shipping, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh began by congratulating the presenter on a comprehensive and well-delivered presentation, noting that the BIIS Auditorium was familiar to him from numerous past events. He recalled attending the first seminar on the Rohingya issue held on October 10, 2017, chaired by the then Foreign Minister, Mr Mahmood Ali, with Foreign Secretary Mr Shahidul Huq present. At that initial seminar, optimism about repatriating the Rohingyas in a few months was high, but he had cautioned attendees to prepare

for a much longer timeframe. Today, nearly eight years later, his warning seems prescient. Reflecting on that early seminar, he recounted how his comments were criticised as overly pessimistic and out of sync with diplomatic efforts.

He shared an anecdote from his friend, Brigadier General (Retd) Shafaat Ahmad, who completed a Ph.D. on Myanmar-Bangladesh relations and encountered a lack of documented Myanmar strategy at the foreign ministry. Mr Shahidul Huq has often attributed delays to challenges beyond diplomatic or military measures, noting that a lack of interdepartmental coordination and resources has limited tangible progress. Over the years, honourable Adviser observed that numerous seminars were held, with

consistent yet unheeded discussions on the Rohingya crisis. Early on, he connected with Rohingya leaders through his contacts, discussing their needs and potential solutions. While the national and international response was initially intense, the enthusiasm has diminished without a resolution. He referred to Professor Amena Mohsin who had highlighted a potential 17-year cycle of displacement and resettlement, underscoring the protracted nature of the crisis.

On Myanmar, he emphasised its complexity, noting that since 1948, the country has endured conflicts such as the Karen rebellion, which persists after more than 70 years. He encouraged those interested to study Myanmar's history and the deep-rooted nature of its internal conflicts. In his view, Myanmar's government is "heartless, ruthless, and genocidal," unlikely to respond to diplomatic overtures. He recounted a 1992 episode when, as a brigade commander, he took the initiative to deploy forces at the border. This show of strength, which included Air Force support, resulted in some progress. In contrast, the current approach, which relies heavily on diplomacy, has seen limited success. Historical examples, such as President Ziaur Rahman's direct conversation with Myanmar's military leaders in 1978, demonstrated a more effective, assertive approach. However, the recent past leadership has avoided confrontational strategies, refraining from directly addressing Myanmar's actions against the Rohingya.

The crisis also created challenges for Bangladesh on the international stage. For instance, many Rohingya living in Saudi Arabia possess Bangladeshi passports and are often involved in criminal activities there, which has led Saudi authorities to request their return, complicating Bangladesh's diplomatic relations. Given this situation, he stressed the need for a practical solution, expressing frustration with symbolic agreements, such as MOUs, that fail to address the root problems.

He suggested a stronger national approach, emphasising the importance of achieving consensus, despite the inherent difficulties in Bangladesh's polarised political landscape. He supported the proposal from the seminar floor to establish a Rohingya Commission, which could focus on developing actionable steps to address the crisis. He suggested that this commission could explore methods of pressuring the Myanmar government and identify alternative paths forward.

Reflecting on past initiatives, he noted that connecting with the Arakan Army was once proposed as part of a peacebuilding strategy. However, this option has become complicated to meaningfully pursue as China has shifted its support from the Arakan Army back to the Myanmar government. India, too, has faced setbacks, as its Kaladan project has stalled, leaving it to re-evaluate its stance on the Arakan Army. Thus, he suggested that future efforts should consider moving beyond the Arakan Army as a feasible ally in resolving the Rohingya crisis.

He shared insights from high-level negotiations, recalling discussions between former Bangladeshi and Arakanee generals that had taken place in Singapore. The aim had been to bring Rohingya representatives and Rakhine leaders to a neutral forum, with Geneva proposed as a possible venue. However, these efforts lost momentum after the Myanmar coup and a lack of support from the Bangladeshi government.

While numerous discussions have taken place, it is time for concrete action. He reiterated his support for the Rohingya Commission, urging it to explore all possible solutions, including creating pressure on Myanmar. He highlighted the unique geographical connection between Bangladesh and Myanmar's Rakhine state, suggesting that Bangladesh should assert its influence. A practical solution, he proposed, could involve revisiting the "Mayu Frontier District" concept, which had granted some autonomy to the Rohingya majority areas in the early 1960s. This historical precedent, he argued, could be a basis for a "safe zone" for the Rohingya, offering a realistic path forward without attempting to divide Myanmar or alter its borders.

He concluded by cautioning that the prolonged presence of refugees often breeds resentment from host populations, which could lead to long-term instability. Drawing a parallel with Jordan's experience with Palestinian refugees, he warned that, over time, the host country may become an "enemy nation" in the eyes of the refugees. With this in mind, he emphasised that Bangladesh must strive for a solution to avoid similar tensions. He also expressed concern that international attention on the Rohingya crisis has waned amid other global crises, such as conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Iran, and Ukraine. He suggested that this shifting focus, coupled with uncertainty about the upcoming US elections, further complicates Bangladesh's position. Nevertheless, he reaffirmed his belief in a solution rooted in historical precedent and a pragmatic, action-oriented approach through the proposed Rohingya Commission.

Remarks by the Chair

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman, BIISS



Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS, expressed gratitude to the Chief Guest and the advisor for their valuable insights and pragmatic, well-considered solutions, acknowledging their “voice of wisdom” and extended sincere thanks. He also requested that his colleagues at BIISS prepare a short report to capture significant points of discussion, noting many topics covered should be kept confidential. The report, he suggested, should be sent to relevant government offices. He commended the participants for their thoughtful suggestions, thanking Mr Ahmed in particular for sparking discussion and offering viable options worthy of attention and pursuit.

Emphasising the need for continued engagement within the country as well as with regional stakeholders, including actors in Myanmar and influential international parties, Ambassador Sarker expressed appreciation for the participants’ suggestions and patience. As a final formality before closing, he invited the honourable Chief Guest to accept a small token of appreciation from the Director General of BIISS.

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