



Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

The Rohingya crisis has suddenly burst upon the consciousness and conscience of international community over the last several weeks. Impact on Myanmar's neighbours, particularly Bangladesh and India, has been much more intense and severe than on countries situated far away.

Historical Perspective

The Rohingya people are a stateless Indo-Aryan people from the western, coastal Rakhine State of Myanmar. There were an estimated 1 million Rohingyas living in Myanmar before the recent crisis. The majority are Muslim while some are Hindu. Described by the United Nations in 2013 as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, the Rohingyas are not recognized as an ethnic minority. They were denied citizenship under the 1982 Burmese citizenship law. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the 1982 laws "effectively deny to the Rohingya the possibility of acquiring a nationality. Despite being able to trace Rohingya history to the 8th century, Burmese law does not recognize the ethnic minority as one of the national races."

Rohingyas are restricted from freedom of movement, state education and civil service jobs. Rohingyas maintain that they are long-standing residents of Myanmar and their community includes both a mixture of pre-colonial and colonial settlers. Myanmar's government does not recognize the term "Rohingya" and prefers to refer to them as "Bengalis." Rohingya campaign groups, notably the Arakan Rohingya National Organization, demand the right to "self-determination within Myanmar".

The Current Crisis

On 25th August, 2017, after weeks of rising tension, militants from the group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked at least 25 police posts and killed several Myanmar security personnel. The government calls ARSA a terrorist organization. The International Crisis Group (ICG) says the militants have trained abroad and the group is led by Rohingyas living in Saudi Arabia. It claims ARSA's leader is Ata Ullah who was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia. ARSA has been training people since 2013 but their first attack was in October 2016, when they killed nine police officers. Recent clashes were reported from many areas, sometimes involving Rohingya villagers joining the militants to fight the security forces. In many cases the security forces, sometimes backed by armed Buddhist civilians, burned Rohingya villages and opened fire on their inhabitants. It is reported that Buddhist communities were also attacked and some of their inhabitants killed.

According to United Nations, the human rights violations against Rohingyas could be termed "crimes against



humanity." All condemnation by UN and organizations like HRW has been vehemently refuted by Myanmar government. Photos and videos purporting to be from the conflict have been circulated widely. Much of them are gruesome and inflammatory, and most of them are reported to be fake.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK) – Myanmar's de-facto leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who spent many years under house arrest in the junta-run Myanmar - is under growing criticism over this issue. She has claimed that reports in the international media constitute a "huge iceberg of misinformation". She maintains that tensions are being fanned by fake news promoting interests of terrorists. UN Secretary General has stated that DASSK has "a last chance" to halt an army offensive that has forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee abroad.

India's Dilemma

This has put India in a difficult situation. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Myanmar on 5th-7th September, 2017, on way back from China after attending the BRICS Summit, he generously praised the leadership of DASSK and expressed full support against terrorist attacks on Myanmar security forces. DASSK who was under intense international pressure expressed fulsome gratitude for the unambiguous support from the world's largest democracy.

Myanmar is extremely significant for India's security, stability and prosperity, particularly of its northeastern states. Myanmar represents the Gateway for India's northeastern states to other ASEAN countries. It is a vital partner in India's business and connectivity initiatives. Several major connectivity projects including the Trilateral Highway from India's northeast to Thailand and beyond through Myanmar, and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, are in advanced stages of implementation. Myanmar security forces are actively collaborating with India to deny space and territory to Indian insurgents in Myanmar to carry out militant attacks against Indian civilians and security forces across the 1,640 km border with Indian States of Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. Success of India's Act East Policy depends largely on productive relations with Myanmar. The expanding presence and increasing influence of China in Myanmar is a matter of growing concern for India. This necessitates a robust reach out to Myanmar and its leadership.

Simultaneously India's relations with Bangladesh are equally important. On account of bold leadership of Prime Ministers Modi and Sheikh Hasina, relations between the two countries are the best they have been since 1975. Bangladesh has been the worst affected by the refugee crisis. It is reported to have received more than 370,000 refugees over the last 2 weeks. Its capacity to accommodate these refugees is bursting at the seams. Sheikh Hasina finds herself under increasing pressure on this issue from opposition parties particularly Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, both of which lean towards Pakistan. China's increasing leverage in Bangladesh to the detriment of India's traditional primacy and cordial relations is a matter of concern. Bangladesh goes to the polls next year and Sheikh Hasina could face an uphill battle if she



does not find a quick, satisfactory solution to the issue. Because of this India significantly modified its position on 9th September and advised Myanmar to use restraint so that it does not add to the unbearable physical and political burden on Bangladesh. Bangladesh looks upon India to resolve the crisis by persuading Myanmar to stop forcing out refugees and to accept back those that have already fled. Bangladesh needs all possible material, diplomatic and moral support to deal with this catastrophe. Under its "Insaniyat" (Humanitarian) initiative, India has promised 7,000 tons of relief material including food items, medicines, tents etc. for refugees in Bangladesh. Daily flights carrying these materials are travelling to Dhaka to provide succor to the refugees.

Within India, the issue has become extremely divisive. India has traditionally welcomed all refugees whether from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Tibet or elsewhere, although it is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Yet in the present instance the serious concern is that amongst the refugees could be members of ARSA with linkages to Al Qaeda, Islamic State, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Lashkar-e-Taiba etc. Pakistan's ISI is also reported to be active in training terrorist elements amongst the refugees. This poses a serious security challenge to India. It has hence declared its intention to deport 40,000 refugees which have come to India. The government informed the country's Supreme Court on 18th September in response to a petition filed by two refugees that the Rohingyas constitute "a serious security threat to the country" and could lead to social tension and law and order problems. Militant activists have been found amongst refugees temporarily settled in Jammu, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mewar. India does not wish to expose the country to terrorist threat by accepting these refugees.

India has been criticized by domestic opposition parties and civil society groups for deciding to deport these refugees because they are Muslims. The government has staunchly refuted these charges. India has also found itself at the receiving end of international opprobrium including from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and others. India has resolutely defended its position.

The Way Forward

Solution of the issue lies in Myanmar, not in Bangladesh or India or any other country. Vitriolic criticism of DASSK will not make Myanmar change its position. Diplomacy and discussion is the only way to persuade Myanmar to change its policy. Myanmar needs to be convinced that it is in its own interest to have an inclusive, peaceful resolution of the matter. Myanmar needs international support for its political and economic development which it will receive by becoming a responsible member of the international community. India should encourage Myanmar to seriously consider implementing suggestions contained in the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine state. In several areas in Myanmar, the military still calls the shots. It controls 25 percent of parliamentary seats as well as ministerial positions in defense, internal security, border affairs etc. DASSK's flexibility is hence considerably restricted.



There is urgent need for deft diplomacy by India. India has to undertake a creative tightrope walk with Myanmar. It is admirably equipped to do that. It has to simultaneously contend with challenges in its relations with its two extremely significant and sensitive neighbours, Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as with international human rights watchdogs. Domestically it has to stave off outcries from opposition parties and civil society organizations. The coming days will show whether India is able to rise up to the challenge. Its performance over last several months in effectively dealing with even more formidable disputes gives reason to hope that it will emerge triumphant.

The author is a Former Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Sweden and Latvia, and is currently, President, Institute of Global Studies.



About VIF

Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.

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Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org

 @vifindia

