

ISAS Insights

No. 467 – 20 September 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



The Rohingya Crisis – The History and the Possibility of Border Adjustments

Shahid Javed Burki¹

There is nothing new about the mass movements of people in the South Asian sub-continent. Over the last 70 years, when the British packed their bags and went home in 1947, millions of people were forced out of their homes. Since the areas where they were living were no longer considered safe for them, they moved both ways across the border between independent India and the newly-created Pakistan in the hope that they would find safety there. The latest of these flights of people involves the Rohingyas, a small Muslim minority of about one and a half million people that has been living just across Bangladesh's border with Myanmar which lies in neighbouring Southeast Asia. As with the other crises in this larger neighbourhood, this too can perhaps be resolved by some border adjustments involving Myanmar and Bangladesh. If not, there is the real danger of the displaced Rohingyas becoming one more source of international terrorism. This is the fear that has resulted in India's decision to deport 16,500 Rohingya refugees registered in the country by the United Nations.

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994, and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister from 1996 to 1997. He can be contacted at sjburki@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

South Asia's History of Mass Movements of People

Large-scale movements of people have occurred in the past in South Asia. In 1947, 14 million people crossed the newly-drawn border between what is today's Pakistan and independent India. Of these, eight million were Muslims who came to Pakistan from India. This was balanced – if balanced is the right word – by the movement of six million Hindus and Sikhs who left Pakistan for India. Before the Hindus and Sikhs left, non-Muslim minorities made up one-third of the population of what was to become Pakistan. After this mass exodus, Pakistan was 96 per cent Muslim. This had enormous consequences for Pakistan's political development. This movement was not the result of state policy or action by the military which, as discussed below, is the case with the Rohingyas in the Southeast Asian state of Myanmar.

The second large movement of people in South Asia occurred in 1971 when millions of Bengalis left what was to become Bangladesh and took refuge in neighbouring India. There is no estimate of the actual number of people who made that journey – the numbers mentioned are between 3 million and 10 million. The relevant reason was the military action in the grim civil war that was fought between Pakistan's (essentially West Pakistan's) forces and the *Mukti Bahini*, an armed group made up of Bengali dissidents in East Pakistan who wanted independence from West Pakistan. What propelled this movement was the fear of the Pakistan Army *per se*, not any plan by that ruling military junta to empty East Pakistan of all Bengalis. That was not a practical proposition. The other difference between 1947 and 1971 was that those who were part of the first movement did not expect to return to their original homes. In 1971, the refugees who escaped the onslaught by the Pakistan Army did not believe that they were leaving their homes for good. That turned out to be the right expectation and most of them returned once Bangladesh became independent in December 1971.

The third large movement of people was more like a process, not a one-off episode. It began to occur with the flight of Pathans from Afghanistan to Pakistan when the Soviet Union invaded their country in 1979. The conquering army stayed for a decade and the consequence was a steady flow of refugees into Pakistan. An estimated three million people moved, many into the refugee camps set up on the Pakistani side of the border largely with the help of the

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Pakistan's hope that the Afghans would go back home once the Soviet Union withdrew from their country was not fully realised. Some refugees went back but most of them stayed on in Pakistan, with many entering the workforce in Pakistan's large cities. There are more than a million Afghan refugees living in Karachi alone. Their arrival has changed the city's demographic profile.

What makes today's flight of Rohingyas different from those that happened earlier in the larger neighbourhood is the involvement of the Myanmar state and the use by it of its military. Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UNHCR, has called the military campaign "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."²

The Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingyas are moving in large numbers – they are leaving their country for neighbouring Bangladesh. By the middle of September 2017, about 400,000 Rohingyas had moved into improvised camps on the Bangladeshi side of the border. Of those who have made it to Bangladesh since 25 August 2017 when the most recent exodus began, two-thirds of them are women and girls. The immediate cause was the desperate move by a militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that chose to hit back at the government by attacking 30 police posts and an army base. A number of security personnel were killed. The Rohingya militants decided to act once it was clear that the decades-old campaign to turn the ethnic group into non-citizens had not abated with the arrival of democracy in the country. Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for having opposed the long rule by the country's repressive military, did not seem inclined to speak and act on behalf of the suffering Rohingyas.

In despair, the ARSA took up arms but its poorly organised and executed campaign touched off a military crackdown leading to mass displacement. The military's response was brisk and brutal. In a *Washington Post* story titled "Blood flowed in the streets in attack on Rohingya village", Annie Gowen reported on the plight some of those who saw the killings of their dear ones, "Rights groups say it will take months or years to fully chronicle the devastation the

² Stephanie Nebehay and Simon Lewis, "UN says violence against Rohingya a 'textbook' example of ethnic cleansing", *Reuters*, 11 September 2017.

refugees are fleeing. Satellite photos show widespread burning, witnesses recount soldiers killing civilians, and the Myanmar government has said that 176 Rohingya villages stand empty. No death toll is yet available because the area remains sealed by the military.”³ About one-half of the 400,000 who crossed the border into Bangladesh arrived in the week after 10 September 2017.

As of 15 September 2017, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) had counted 1,267 children at one refugee camp who had been separated from their families. According to Christophe Boulierac, a spokesman for the UNICEF, “Amid the disorder of the rapidly expanding settlements in Bangladesh, the unaccompanied children are at particular risk, for human trafficking, sexual abuse, child labor and marriage.”⁴ Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia Director at Human Rights Watch (HRW) said on 15 September 2017, “62 villages in Rakhine have been targeted by arson since August 25. Our field research backs what the satellite imagery has indicated – that the Burmese military is directly responsible for the mass burning of Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State.”⁵

Some critics of Aung San Suu Kyi who remained silent when the Rohingya killing was going on, have called for the withdrawal of her 1991 Nobel Prize. Her fellow-laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, have sent open letters to her. He wrote, “My dear sister: If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep.”⁶ The moves against the Rohingya people were described as “ethnic cleansing”; even genocide. The United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, told newspaper reporters that the Rohingya situation was catastrophic. Asked if he agreed that the Rohingya people were victims of ethnic cleansing, he was blunt. “When one third of the Rohingya population has to flee the country, can you find a better word to describe it?”, he responded. “This is a dramatic tragedy”, he continued. “People are dying and suffering at horrible numbers and we need to stop it.”⁷

³ Annie Gowen, “‘Blood flowed in the streets’ I attacks on Rohingya village”, *The Washington Post*, 17 September 2017, A1 and A12.

⁴ Austin Ramzy, “At risk in Rohingya crisis: 230,000 children, hundreds alone”, *The New York Times*, 16 September 2017, p. A7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Will Worley, “Desmond Tutu joins Malala to condemn Aung San Suu Kyi over Burma’s treatment of Rohingya Muslims”, *Independent*, 8 September 2017.

⁷ Rick Gladstone and Somni Sengupta, “Myanmar leader cancels U.N. trip amid outcry over Rohingya slaughter”, *The New York Times*, 14 September 2017, p. A6.

Experts agree that Myanmar is following a global pattern of how ethnic cleansing begins.⁸ National self-determination, the idea that a nation should have the right to choose its political status, is a central tenet of the international system. It is enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter, which states that its purpose is “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self determination of people.” However, self-determination means not only defining what a nation is, but also who belongs in that nation and who is an outsider. Myanmar’s Buddhist majority, by denying the Rohingyas the right of citizenship, is following this line of thinking. “It is easy to define a ‘state’ – a place with borders, territory and a sovereign government. But a ‘nation’ is a hazier concept – a group of people bound together by some common characteristic, which may or may not match up precisely with state borders.”⁹ This is not only the case with the Rohingyas in Myanmar but also with the Pathans in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

History behind the Present Crisis

While the recent attacks on the Rohingyas have attracted global attention, the ethnic conflict that caused it has a long history. “At the heart of every genocide lies a great theft”, wrote Akbar Ahmed, a distinguished anthropologist of Pakistani descent. Now teaching in a university in Washington DC, he has studied Muslim violence – both by them as well as aimed at them – around the world.

In a newspaper article, he traced the Rohingya history. The Kingdom of Arakan from where the Rohingya community originates, was conquered by the Burmese Kingdom in 1875, and tensions immediately rose as the Rohingyas were forced into slave labour.

Following the rise and fall of British colonialism in South Asia and its neighbourhood, and the establishment of military rule after a 1962 coup in Myanmar (known then as Burma), the politics of ‘Burmanisation’ was put in place. The country adopted a new Constitution in 1974 which named 135 indigenous ethnic groups but excluded the Rohingya people. They were officially banned from becoming citizens, barred from military service and were required to

⁸ For a review of the literature see Amanda Taub, “Myanmar follows global pattern in how ethnic cleansing begins”, *The New York Times*, 19 September 2017, p. A4.

⁹ Ibid.

obtain travel permits to visit neighbouring villages. “The aim was to terrorize the Rohingya into fleeing the land. As many as 250,000 fled into Bangladesh as a result of that early campaign, a stark example of planned and coordinated ethnic cleansing.”¹⁰

The Rohingyas had approached Muhammad Ali Jinnah, while he was campaigning for the creation of a Muslim state out of British India, meeting him twice in Dhaka. “They had come to discuss the Rohingya areas joining the new state of Pakistan and Jinnah was interested. It was, after all, adjacent to East Pakistan, and being a Muslim majority region, the move was in keeping with the basic principle of partition of British India”, continues Ahmed. However, Jinnah was persuaded by the British not to pursue this line of thinking and political action as the Rohingya habitat was not a part of British India but of then-Burma (now Myanmar), a separate British colony. Incorporating Arakan in Pakistan would have opened a number of contentious border issues such as the Durand Line and McMahon Line that the British had forced on the countries that bordered their South Asian empire. The former served as the border between what was to become Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the latter between India and Tibet.

The Impact on Bangladesh

The Bangladesh government is rightly concerned about the consequence for the country of the arrival of about half a million foreigners in the border areas. According to one account, “Bangladesh border guards originally tried to stop people from entering the country, but had to abandon that policy in the face of sheer numbers. Since then, they have tried to contain the refugees in Cox’s Bazar, the coastal area of the country that borders Myanmar.” The Bangladeshi police said, “They should stay in the designated camps until they return to their country. They cannot travel from one place to another by roads, railways or waterways.”¹¹ Meanwhile, Bangladesh is planning to build a vast new camp to house the refugees, thousands of whom have been sleeping on the roadside or under makeshift tarpaulin shelters.¹² Will the government succeed in confining the arrivals in a restricted space? If the Pakistani experience of handling the Afghan refugee influx is a guide, such a policy is

¹⁰ Akbar Ahmed, “Mr. Jinnah and the Rohingya”, *The Daily Times*, 16 September 2017.

¹¹ Kiran Stacey, “Bangladesh limits movement of Rohingya refugees”, *Financial Times*, 18 September 2017, p. 2.

¹² Ibid.

unlikely to work. The Rohingyas will find their way into areas of the country where work is available. Dhaka should not plan on the refugees returning to their homes anytime soon.

The Pakistani experience also suggests that there is a very limited appetite in the international community for aiding the countries that become refugee-havens. The financial burden has to be borne by the refugee-receiving countries. “The international response to the [Myanmar] crime, which rivals the cleansing campaigns in Darfur, Sudan, in the early 2000s and Kosovo in the 1990s, has been shockingly weak”, wrote *The Washington Post* in an editorial. “After a meeting behind closed doors, the U.N. Security Council used its lowest-order form of statement to express concern about ‘excessive violence during security operations.’ The State Department has been equally cautious.”¹³

Conclusion

The unfolding Rohingya crisis is following the familiar pattern of large movements of people as well as becoming a factor in a new global game in which old and new emerging powers are vying for influence in a number of sensitive world areas.

The UN Security Council resolution of 14 September 2017 was weak since the United States, which is walking away from the world scene in a deliberate fashion, could not convince China to act against the government in Myanmar. The Chinese are seeking to fill the space Washington is vacating which means that Beijing is not prepared to pressure the Myanmar military to abandon its campaign against the country’s Muslim minority.

India, another major power in the area, is also unwilling to use its influence on its neighbour to stop the bloodshed as well as applying force on the Rohingyas to leave the land they have lived in for centuries. In fact, the Indian government was also seeking to expel the Rohingyas who had moved into the country to escape from the Myanmar military brutality. A petition was filed in the Indian Supreme Court after Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home Affairs, ordered the state governments to identify and deport illegal immigrants, including Rohingya Muslims. Prashant Bhushan, the lawyer representing the Rohingyas, said the Home

¹³ *The Washington Post* (editorial), “A weak response to Burma’s brutal crimes”, 17 September 2017, p. A22.

Ministry's order is "clearly a case of religious discrimination and an attempt to arouse anti-Muslim feeling."¹⁴

The very fact that the Buddhist majority in Myanmar calls the Rohingyas "Bengalis" as the main reason for not granting the community full citizenship rights has put Bangladesh in a difficult situation. It gives Bangladesh good reason to contemplate whether border adjustments that happened in the case of Yugoslavia, the country where the phrase "ethnic cleansing" came into popular use, would be the right solution to seek. What posture should the government adopt towards India, a country with which it has warm relations? Should the crisis be seen in religious terms with Myanmar's Buddhists acting against the country's Muslim minority or should it be seen in terms of an ethnic conflict? These are difficult questions to answer but they must be addressed in order to come up with a viable public policy response. It would appear that the Rohingya crisis is at an early stage and it could have a number of unforeseen consequences.

.

¹⁴ Associated Press, "Indian Government Says Rohingya Muslims Are Security Threat", The New York Times, 18 September 2017.