

Research Article

## Rohingya Refugee Camps and Security Threat for Host Country

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### Abstract

Almost every Rohingya refugee camp has been subject to some form of violence that poses a security threat to host countries. Bangladesh is hosting 1.2 million Rohingyas in refugee camps in the southern district of Cox's Bazar. These Rohingyas fled Myanmar's Rakhine state after brutal military crackdowns in 2016 and August 2017. Various sources have witnessed that Rohingya refugee camps today are places of insecurity and outright danger, both for refugees and relief workers, and, by virtue of their destabilizing effect, for those living around the camps. Due to the presence of refugee warriors inside the camps, refugees are subjected to frequent intimidation and harassment. This paper discusses the challenges faced by Rohingya refugees, especially in camp areas. The research adopted qualitative methods, bulk of the information gathered through the in-depth interview with different stakeholders, while secondary sources such as articles, government and INGOs reports were utilized. The paper concludes with a recommendation to the

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Rohingya refugee communities, the host nations, and the international community on how to ensure the Rohingya refugees' right to life, security, and peaceful coexistence at camps.

**Keywords:** Rohingya Refugee Camps, Security Threat, Bangladesh

## Introduction

The Rohingya are a Muslim, Indo-Aryan ethnic minority situated in Myanmar. They are the descendants of a people residing in the west Myanmar region of Arakan, at one time an Islamic, independent kingdom situated between South and Southeast Asia. In terms of their origin, culture and complexion, as well as their present geographical location, the Rohingya are closer with people of South Asian origin than the rest of the Myanmar ethnics. Since the early days of independence, the Rohingya minorities have been systematically excluded from the process of nation-building in Myanmar. “The Rohingya have been denied Burmese nationality by the 1982 Citizenship Law. That law was created in the name of indigenous ethnicity to deny nationality to the Rohingya” (Haque, 2017. p.455). The law has perpetuated the Rohingya citizenship crisis and made them ‘stateless’ in their country of origin. The Rohingya have suffered decades of violence, massive human rights violation and persecution in present nation state Myanmar. Their largest exodus began in August 2017 after a massive wave of violence broke out in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, forcing more than 700,000 people - half of them children - to seek refuge in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2021). The plight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people is said to be the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis.

There are various types of persecution which lead to a refugee crisis. These include racial, social, religious, and political persecution. Religious and ethnic minorities refugees are present almost everywhere in the world. The first major international refugee crisis happened in the 20th century when more than 50 million people were forced to be displaced because of the Second World War. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(hereafter UNHCR) as a UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities. “According to UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide rose to 90 million by the end of 2021, propelled by new waves of violence or protracted conflict in countries including Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Nigeria, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo” (UNHCR, 2022). It should be mentioned that the vast majority of the refugee people live in low and middle-income countries. These countries host bulk of refugees and provide protection and assistance in spite of their limited resources.

The most significant challenge in protracted refugee areas is the presence of refugee warriors. They are often involved in the cross-borders attacks on both host states and countries of origin. Due to their military involvement, humanitarian personnel, fellow refugees and civilians are also highly affected. During the 1980’s Afghan refugees’ long presence in Pakistan created threat to regional and international security (Kirad, 2014). These refugee camps were used as the breeding ground for fundamentalist and recruitment centers of militant groups. Their presence also affected the host countries’ internal politics, and economic and environmental hazards. It is not unlikely that thousands of frustrated Rohingya people who see no hope in the future will be a fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment by different militants including mercenaries.

According to international agencies’ Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis “as of January 2019, over 900,000 stateless Rohingya refugees reside in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas. The vast majority lives in 34 extremely congested camps. The largest single site, the Kutupalong Balukhali Expansion Site, hosts

approximately 626,500 Rohingya” (OCHA, 2019.p.10). The personal security of refugees living in camps is an essential element of international protection. Unless the fundamental rights of camp residents as human beings – to life, liberty and security of person – are safeguarded, other rights and benefits guaranteed by international instruments and legal principles, or by national law (UNHCR, 1993).

Meanwhile, personal security for displaced people in camps and due to their long presence created internal destabilization for host countries. It is not exceptional in the case of the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh. Burma Human Rights Network (hereafter BHRN) mentioned in a report that “arson, kidnapping, trafficking, drugs, and fights were listed as the most common crimes in the camps. 90% of those interviewed said that kidnappings were a problem. People might be sold into slavery, kept in exchange for bribes refugees cannot pay, or sent back to Burma and put in prison” (cited in Root, 2022). U Kya Win, founder and executive director at BHRN, stated that organized crime and militant groups have significant control within parts of the camps (*ibid*). This study field work also got the same experience from the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

In particular, this paper tries to explore the situation of the displaced Rohingya ethnic minority in Bangladesh and how their long presence and refugee camps pose security concerns in the host country. This research investigates the consequences of Rohingya statelessness and forced displaced life in Bangladesh. The overall objective of this research is to analyze the refugee’s right to life and dignity in camps and how they are threatened by the militants. In addition, the study also explores the roles of Bangladesh

government and international humanitarian agencies involved in refugees' daily life at camps.

## Methodology

This study used a descriptive and analytic framework within the broader framework of a qualitative research model. The qualitative approach offers several advantages. It provides a detailed and complex description of the subject being investigated. This allows the research to have a deeper understanding of the participants' personal experiences (Bryman, 2017). The qualitative approaches emphasize the process rather than being concerned with the representatives of the sample. Through the qualitative method, a researcher can develop close relationships with his subject of the study.

The data in this research article was collected through a literature study, obtained from books, academic journals, the media, and relevant documents from the internet. This literature review helped the researcher to gain a better understanding of security, refugee camps and refugees' current situation and real condition. In the second stage, this research conducted two rounds of fieldwork in 2018 and August 2019 when first-hand information was gathered from the refugee camp areas. For this research purpose, researchers still have contact with respondents through various apps.

Key informant interviews are helpful for qualitative research, especially for people who have in-depth knowledge about what is going on inside the community. The key informant technique is an ethnographic research method, which was originally used in the field of cultural anthropology and is now being used more widely in other branches of social science investigation. Samples in qualitative

approaches are usually small and targeted. The sample was taken from different backgrounds who can specifically contribute to this research. Henderson and Bialeschki (2005) emphasize that in order to gain in-depth information, questions in an interview schedule must be designed as open-ended as such questions will allow respondents to further elaborate and explain their responses. In addition, the researchers must ensure the neutrality of the questions by allowing respondents to freely express their opinions without receiving negative or positive reactions from the researcher.

In this study, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with different Rohingya political groups based in Yangon (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and the United Kingdom. All of them originate from Arakan (Rakhine State) and now reside in different places. The researcher got the bulk of the information from the refugee camps through various Rohingya groups. Their valuable information enriched the whole research article. All of them provided data on the ground reality in refugee camps. The researcher also got expert opinions from Bangladesh Government officials, INGOs, human rights activists, and journalists through the open-ended and unstructured interviews. This research is also based upon observation of the socio-political and security conditions of the refugee camps. It provides unique insights into the entire situation that exists for this community.

Much scholarly work has been published on displaced Rohingyas' atrocity in their ancestor land and residing countries. Unlike those works, this article is not focused on the refugee's rights and humanitarian works but rather emphasizes the refugee's security and how it became concerned for peace and stability in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderland. This paper begins with an analysis

of refugee camps', concept of security and how linked to the peace and stability for host countries. Basically, this study explores the situation of forced displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh. This research has no intention of comparative analysis of refugee camps in different country contexts. For better understanding, this paper tries to provide examples of refugee camps situations in Thailand, Turkey, and Kenya. Through the situation analysis and respondents' interviews, including Bangladesh government recent initiatives contributed to understand the multifaceted security problems that the Rohingya refugee poses to the host countries.

### **Limitations of this study**

The location of refugee camps and borderlands is sensitive for both locals and foreigners. Even due to security reasons, international agencies' presence and access are also sometimes controlled by the host country. In fact, numerous humanitarian groups have started working to support Rohingya refugee's aftermath of their exodus from Myanmar in 2016. During the fieldwork, the researcher could not talk directly with border guard high officials in Bangladesh and also failed to discuss the issue of Rohingya with international agency officials, especially the UNHCR. Without their direct comments, it was difficult to draw conclusions about the role of international actors and Bangladesh Government security policy to address the problem of refugee camps. The lack of direct input from these sources is one major limitation of this study. Due to the security issue, the researcher failed to meet and no comments could be elicited from Bangladeshi military intelligence.



## Concept of Security

This section will explore various approaches to security. Apart from Rohingya statelessness, few studies explain why and how insecurity produces refugees in the countries of their residence. In this context, security issues got prioritized in this study. The Rohingya crisis is a decade long humanitarian tragedy; at the same time, it is one of the major sources of tension in Myanmar and her neighbouring countries. There is no agreement on the concept of security. Notwithstanding the wide range of studies of security published over the last seventy years, no single generally accepted definition of security has been produced. The classical view of security as relating to nation states and the protection of their territory still lies at the heart of thinking about national and international security.

Today, however, security encompasses more than protecting the state's territory against military aggression by outsiders. In a world of transnational connections, protecting national territory against hostile armies is not enough. "Particularly after the end of the Cold War, a view of security emerged that gave more weight to social development and individual human rights. The concept of security then centres not only on physical and inter-state violence, but touches on other types of threats to communities and individuals" (Ballin et al., 2020.p.22). Security policy is no longer geared solely to the specific, known threat of armed aggression by another state. Nowadays, it also encompasses anticipation of diffuse, potential threats. The idea that security encompasses more than military and defense issues alone has returned, particularly in light of threats posed by rising nationalism and hostile foreign information operations. It can be stated that

security paradigm of the twenty-first century has expanded to nearly every facet of human life.

There is also growing concern over gang violence, radicalization, transnational crime, privacy threats, and human rights violations worldwide. Issues like climate change and pollution are also increasingly regarded through a security lens. These issues jeopardize human security, meaning they pose a threat to both individuals and humanity as a species. In the post-Cold War era, the security concept concentrates upon its non-traditional dimension. Non-traditional security revolves around the human face of security where socio-economic survival and sustenance are central. Non-traditional security is also defined as human security. Human security stands as an extension of the traditional security discourse.

It is an important question how security is relevant to addressing the displaced Rohingya living in Bangladesh. Most scholars agreed that weapons of mass destruction and internal armed strife remained as traditional security threats. However, environmental pollution, hunger, poverty, violent social and political conflict, economic imbalances, drugs, organized crime, and discrimination on grounds of gender, religion, and race were threats to human security (Chaijaroenwatana & Haque, 2021). This study has focused on the Rohingya refugee issue in Bangladesh from greater context of security. There are many debates about the roles of displaced people in host countries. In fact, many countries have varied opinion on refugees' long presence. It is a common phenomenon that forced migration has many social and cultural impacts. Over the years, the presence of displaced Rohingya has had a significant impact on the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and legal situations in Bangladesh. "Rohingya

residing countries perceived that this group of people is now threat for their integrity. On the other hand, various organizations have pointed out that overall living conditions of the Rohingya have declined and it has become threat to their human security” (Haque, 2014.p.120)

It should be noted that Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, States balanced their legitimate security concerns with the humanitarian needs of refugees who require and deserve international protection. “Legitimate interests in security were also safeguarded by States in Latin America when they adopted regional instruments concerning the protection of refugees, such as the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees of 1984, the San José Declaration on Refugees and Displaced Persons of 1994, and the Declaration and Plan of Action of Mexico to Strengthen International Protection of Refugees in Latin America of 2004” (Murillo, 2009.p.121). Unfortunately, there is no refugee protection mechanism developed in Asia.

### **Understanding of Refugee Camps**

There is no official and legal definition of a refugee camp. Jacobsen (2000) cites a 1958 UNREF document describing a refugee camp as “a group of dwellings of various descriptions ... which, mainly because of the poor conditions of the dwellings but also for other reasons, are meant to provide temporary shelter.” Refugee camps are temporary facilities built to provide immediate protection and assistance to people who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, persecution or violence. It can be stated that camps are temporary protection centre but host country and international humanitarian groups have responsivity to ensure displaced people

basic needs; food, water, shelter, sanitation, medical treatment and other basic services during the emergencies. If the displacement would be longer, in that context humanitarian groups extend their activities among the refugees. “In these situations, UNHCR provides more durable, semi-permanent shelter and works with communities to build those that best meet local conditions and needs. Services are also expanded to include educational and livelihood opportunities to help refugee families rebuild their lives” (UNHCR, 2022).

Today, there are more refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) than at any point since World War II. Driven from their homes by conflict, persecution, environmental calamity, or dire economic straits, these refugees—more than half of whom are children—have been deprived of their statehood, material possessions, and in many cases, their loved ones. Earlier it was mentioned that most of the refugee camps were designed as temporary facilities. However, many have grown and developed into fully fledged cities, replete with vibrant economies, systems of governance, and civic institutions.

“According to the UNHCR, over 84 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are over 26.6 million refugees, the highest population on record. 68% of the world’s refugees come from just 5 countries” (cited in Concern Worldwide, 2022). These numbers are from the end of 2021 and do not account for the Ukrainian crisis. Refugee camps are monuments to human suffering, and the sheer size of these settlements testifies to the severity of forced displacement around the world. Conflict and insecurity in other countries, including Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Myanmar and

Afghanistan have also caused millions to flee their home. The burden of dealing with the world's displaced people has fallen mainly on developing countries. Currently one of the largest refugee camps are situated in Kutupalong- Balukhali expansion site (Bangladesh). This research article mainly focuses in this refugee camp.

### **Refugee Camps in Thailand, Turkey and Kenya**

Apart from Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, this section also explores the protracted refugee situation in Thailand, Turkey and Kenya. UNHCR has been present in Thailand since 1975, and won its second Nobel Peace Prize in 1981 in part for its humanitarian and non-political efforts in South East Asia arising from the “boat people” crisis which impacted not only Thailand but the entire region (UNHCR, 2022). Since the late 1980s, the Thai-Burmese border has been repeatedly crossed by different ethnic religious minorities and other groups fleeing the repression of the junta in power in Burma. The Thai government has allowed small camps and temporary shelters inside Thailand, but these camps have never become militarized, despite the mobilization within Burma of the ethnic minorities and their continuing resistance to the regime. The host government was concerned about the humanitarian works for displaced people from Myanmar. At the same time, the Thai government is also aware that any militarization in camps will destabilize the internal security and make relations with Myanmar.

Turkey hosts more than four million refugees, including more than three million Syrians, whose presence has increasingly come under public scrutiny with figures across the political spectrum blaming them for the country's economic crisis. “The

Directorate General for Migration Management reported 414,313 ‘irregular migrants’ were apprehended as of November 2018. UNHCR reported 185,000 of these apprehensions were Afghan nationals. Some 89,000 were deported to their countries of origin. Most of these individuals were from Pakistan or Afghanistan” (cited in United States Department of State, 2019). Thus, Turkey has become the leading country in accepting refugees from Syria and the largest refugee-hosting country in the world. Turkey hosts refugees in refugee camps and in the cities, mostly those that border Syria. Turkish humanitarian agency AFAD continues to provide services (accommodation, health, education, religious, and social services) in twenty-three refugee camps, with a total capacity of almost 300,000 (Donelli, 2018). Although refugees from Syria who live inside camps have better conditions, approximately 85 to 90 percent of them live outside camps.

Turkey’s open-door policy was appreciated by the international community after the start of the violent conflict in Syria. Some Turkish media stated that long-stay of refugees and sometimes wrong governmental policies have made Syrian migrants one of the biggest problems of Turkey. As a result, security, politics, economy, and social life have been damaged by the presence of an excessive number of Syrian displaced people. It can be argued that Syrian refugees are a matter of security for Turkey until now and it will continue indefinite period. According to Makovsky (2019), while 97% of Turks do not expect that Syrians will return home when the war ends, 83% have negative views about refugees (cited in Karatas, 2021).

Meanwhile the refugee influx brought terrorism to Turkish cities, killing hundreds of people via suicide attacks. As a result, Turkey had to fight ISIS and YPG in Syria by conducting military operations, which also led to the death of soldiers. The situation, therefore, in some border provinces has been perceived and interpreted by the Turkish government as a threat to its national security. The rapid and constant flow of refugees has caused feelings of insecurity among local communities and has transformed the ethnic balance in southern Turkish provinces such as Hatay and Mardin.

The sprawling Kakuma camp in northwest Kenya is another hub of African refugees. Qaabata Boru (2021) is an Ethiopian journalist and former resident of the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya stated that camp and the neighbouring Kalobeyei integrated settlement is home to about 197,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from 19 countries, including South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Ethiopia. In this cauldron of different nationalities and cultures, threats can come from both inside and outside the camp. Often the perpetrators are roving bands of non-refugees. “Insecurity is our major problem,” stated by Malwal Kiir, a refugee leader. “Night-time attackers loot homes, rape women and kill people” (Boru, 2021). Major crime strikes the camp several times in a year. A significant factor is Kakuma’s location in a remote area close to poorly defended borders with Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Violence is often related to the smuggling of firearms from these countries into Kenya.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency which manages the camp, has arranged for Kenya’s government to station policemen in the camp. That has helped somewhat, but has not stopped the crime

wave. Instead, refugees have been forced to become their own guards, particularly after sunset. Residents join together to patrol at night. Among other measures, they ensure that gates between subdivisions of the camp stay locked at night, to stop attackers from moving between the camp's separate zones. Above-mentioned discussion will be helpful to understand the Rohingya refugee camps and how it became a major security concern for Bangladesh.

### **Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh**

The identity of forced displaced Rohingya is a bit complicated. The Government of Bangladesh calls them 'Forced Displaced from Myanmar Nationals' (hereafter FDMN). Bangladesh, a lower middle-income country, has been hosting one of the largest refugee settlements in the world since 2017. It is noted that Bangladesh is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and Protocol, for that reason, they used forced displaced people. The UN system refers to this population as 'Rohingya refugees', in line with the relevant international framework. In fact, Bangladesh Government documents and international agencies used both terms as appropriate, to refer to the same population.

In this section, this paper will elaborate on the Rohingya refugee situation, especially after 1982 citizenship law in Burma. As a result of their statelessness, many Rohingya have fled into neighbouring countries. While a small number have gone to Malaysia and Thailand, the vast majority have sought refuge in Bangladesh which is geographically adjacent to Rakhine State (Arakan). After entering Bangladesh, some of them were arrested and 'pushed back' by the border security forces. A majority of the undocumented refugee people are living at two biggest makeshift camps and



roadsides especially Teknaf and Cox's Bazar highway without institutional support from the state and non-state actors (Haque, 2014). There is no accurate specific data regarding the number of undocumented refugees in Bangladesh. According to the US State Department Annual Human Rights Report on Bangladesh (2014) "the UNHCR estimated that an additional 200,000 undocumented Rohingya lived in Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Chittagong districts, while the government estimated that 200,000 to 500,000 undocumented Rohingya resides during the year in various villages and towns outside the two official refugee camps in Teknaf and Ukhiya in Cox's Bazar district" (Haque, 2014.p.235). Currently many thousands of undocumented Rohingya refugees live alongside the local population in different slums and villages throughout the border district of Cox's Bazar and some also live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, especially the Bandarban district.

The largest number of undocumented Rohingya refugees lives in two major makeshift camps, one directly next to the official Kutupalong camp and the other is Leda, next to the Naf River. The overall conditions in the unofficial camps are far below minimum international standards. All the makeshift camps are named "Tal" (dumping spot or, in Bengali, mass gathering). Usually, undocumented Rohingya refugees try to integrate into the local community but, if this is not possible, then their next option is to try to live in a makeshift camp (Grönheim, 2010).

Makeshift camps are temporary shelters made from bamboo cane and filthy plastic. Families number not less than six to eight, where parents and children live huddling together like packs of rats in a sewer. It is noted that the situation has completely changed for Rohingya Muslims after the 2012 communal riot in

Myanmar. More than one million Rohingya civilians have been entrapped, limbo-like, in the rambling refugee camps that surround the border district of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, since fleeing in scorched-earth military offensives in Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 (Strangio, 2021). As of 01 January 2022, approximately 918,841 Rohingya refugees/ FDMNs are registered in Bangladesh as part of the Government-UNHCR joint registration exercise, residing in thirty-three extremely congested camps formally designated by the Government of Bangladesh (Humanitarian Response, 2022).

Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (hereafter RRRRC) is a Bangladesh government agency under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief responsible for providing relief to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and plan their eventual repatriation to Myanmar. It was established in 1992 when the second wave of Rohingya refugees arrived from Myanmar. In the case of the recent Rohingya refugee incident of 2017, there are around 22 departments of Government of Bangladesh and several ministries coordinated by the Armed Force Division, and supported by UN bodies that were involved in humanitarian responses. In addition, more than 150 organizations including 13 local and 45 national NGOs are working in the refugee camps, which are strengthening the 12 UN agencies and Red Cross and Red Crescent activities (Karin, 2020).

Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies such as Police, Rapid Action Battalion (hereafter RAB), is an elite anti-crime and anti-terrorism unit of the Bangladesh Police, Ansar, Bangladesh Army and all intelligence agencies have been working to ensure highest security for Rohingyas. Junnat and Khan stated that "the

government formed APBn 14 in 2018 and APBn 16 in 2019 to ensure law and order of the district and security of Rohingya refugees. Two superintendents of police rank officials were posted as the commanding officers of the battalions, which have a manpower of 1,176” (cited in *the Daily Star*, 2020). The Government of Bangladesh and its law enforcement agencies play a lead role in ensuring the necessary framework for security, and humanitarian actors will continue to strengthen efforts to support maintenance of safety and security in the camps and host communities. Despite all these initiatives, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees suffer escalating violence and deteriorating conditions at camps in Bangladesh.

### **Refugee Camps and Security Threat**

Aftermath of influxes host country and international humanitarian groups have considered the location and security aspects of refugee camps. In many places, forced displaced settlements are located in the border areas. Rohingya refugee camp is one of the examples. It is noted that camps located too close to international borders or areas of internal civil conflict may be vulnerable to military attacks. Likewise, infiltration by militant groups within a bona fide refugee or IDP population can also provoke attacks upon the camps.

It is an important question why the Rohingya refugee camps and adjacent border areas are sensitive for Myanmar. According to the Rakhine Commission Report (2013) few Rohingya organizations conducted their activities from Bangladesh territory but the RSO was one such organization. During the several formal and informal discussions, in November 2016, February 2017 and May 2019 in

Chittagong, Rohingya leaders boldly rejected this allegation against their involvement with militant activities.<sup>i</sup>

This study tried to get more information about the militant organizations' presence in refugee camps through the conversation with Rohingya political leaders. The 88 Generation organizer Ko Ko Linn alias Mohammad Kalim stated that Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (hereafter ARSA) backed by the Myanmar military and its founder Ata Ullah born in Pakistan and grown up in Saudi Arabia.<sup>ii</sup> Literally, they have no contact with Rohingya ancestor land Arakan or today's Rakhine State. The Yangon based Rohingya community leader Abu Tahy, strongly against the ARSA's activities and accused to law enforcers who directly-indirectly helped this group of people. There are strong evidences that ARSA militants have presence in the camps but Bangladeshi officials always denied it (email conversation, October 2021).<sup>iii</sup> It will detail discuss next section of this paper.

In addition, the state authorities sometimes fail, or are unable or unwilling to exercise their overall responsibility for the security of civilians living in a camp, or to take adequate measures to ensure the respect for the civilian and humanitarian character of the camp (UNHCR, 2003). Article 2 of the 1951 Convention states that "every refugee has duties to the country in which he finds himself, which require in particular that he conforms to its laws and regulations as well as to measures taken for the maintenance of law

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<sup>i</sup> Interview with Muhammad Yunus, President, Rohingya Solidarity Organization, Chittagong, Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Vice Chairman, Arakan Rohingya National Organization, Chittagong, 2016, 2017 and 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Ko Ko Linn alias Muhammad Kalim, leader of the 88 Generation in Myanmar, August 2019, refugee camps, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

<sup>iii</sup> Email conversation and online meeting with Abu Tahay, National Democratic Party for Development in Myanmar.

and order” (UNHCR, 2022). In particular, they should be instructed to refrain from military or other activities likely to jeopardize the safety of the refugee community or the host country, while they enjoy asylum. Camp residents should be involved to the greatest extent possible in decision-making relating to the management and security of camps.

In the name of security, refugee’s freedom of movement is severely restricted. Leaving the camp area without authorised permission and escort can result in arrest and detention. Such restriction may be necessary for the authorities to ensure order and security, but it also bars refugees’ access to education, life skills opportunities and other public services. They remain locked in aid dependence and idleness and cannot reduce their economic and psycho-social stresses. The Fortify Rights (2022) accused the Bangladeshi law enforcers for beating and committing other abuses against Rohingya refugees, including children, in the Cox’s Bazar District refugee camps.

It is noted that during the Ramadan and Eid holiday time in April and May 2022, Bangladesh Police tightened travel restrictions, relying on abusive tactics to confine Rohingya refugees to the camp. Bangladesh Police spokesperson Rafiqul Islam acknowledged increased restrictions on Rohingya refugees and the reported temporary detention of a group of more than 450 Rohingya on May 4 and 5 during Eid and end of Ramadan-justifying the police actions as “security” measures. The Rohingya refugee leader Faruk Ahmad stated that “we are not criminal but police treated us like that and literally live in jail life at camps”.<sup>iv</sup> Speaking to Agence France-

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<sup>iv</sup> Online interview with Faruk Ahmead, Rohingya refugee leader, refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, May, 2022.

Presse, Police official Rafiqul Islam said, “Rohingyas are involved in various crimes. It is unsafe for our tourists. We have strengthened the security of the city. As tourists visit Cox’s Bazar on Eid al-Fitr, we have stepped up patrols to keep them safe” (cited in AFP, 2022). The refugee’s freedom of movement is stated in various rights documents but Bangladesh Government imposed various restriction in the name of security and rights groups criticized it.

The State has the primary responsibility to protect the refugee and host community people and ensuring security from internal and external threats. In addition, due to displacements some organized crime groups have strong presence in caps areas and Bangladesh is not exceptional. In many situations, however, resource limitations, political, economic and social instability as well as conflicting priorities and agendas may render this task extremely difficult. Furthermore, conflicts amongst different groups within the camp and conflict with host community is common problems. There are few studies shows that conflict events are frequently close to refugee camps and also that conflict tends to follow refugees after they settle in camps whether in rural or urban settings (Fisk, 2019). This research field data suggested that Rohingya refugees have involvement with the camps management. In addition, international humanitarian groups also incorporated refugee representative in their daily works at camps.

### **Destabilizing the Camps Security and Response from Bangladeshi Law Enforcers**

Over the years, the Rohingya refugees have a significant impact on the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and law and order situations in Bangladesh. At present, it has added to the

security concern. Various newspapers reported that a section of Rohingyas has a link with domestic and international militant groups. There are also reported to be using camps vacated by the Rohingya refugees, and a number of Rohingyas are known to be involved in the smuggling of arms and ammunitions in Bangladesh. Many of the Rohingyas are now recruited under the banner of some Rohingya organizations such as; RSO, ARSA and RNA. Sometimes, they are fighting with each other for control over the camps. It may be mentioned that there are allegations by some quarters that the Bangladesh government supports an armed movement against the Myanmar government which the former always denies.

The Myanmar Government is also worried about their border with Bangladesh. Myanmar's military has beefed up security along the Bangladeshi border, citing increased activities by the Arakan Army (hereafter AA) and ARSA. "There have been increased activities by the AA and ARSA in Buthidaung and Maungdaw. So, we are carrying out more security work than normal. We have particularly increased security on the land border," military spokesman Major General Zaw Min Tun stated to the newspaper *Irrawaddy* (Zaw, 2020). The military has declared both the AA and ARSA terrorist organizations. The AA is currently engaged in ongoing fighting with Myanmar's military in northern Rakhine. This article will explore in detail about the ARSA activities inside camps and how it created a security threat for fellow refugees and humanitarian workers. In addition, this issue has the potential to cause cross border clashes between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

A prominent refugee leader was shot to death in September, 2021. The camps also are rife with gang violence, drugs and human trafficking, while jobs and educational opportunities

remain scarce (Nikkei, 2022). This research field work witnessed that after sunset whole camps were controlled by the different organized crime groups including ARSA. Bangladeshi law enforcers have argued that the insurgent group does not exist in the camps, and that regular criminals claim to be ARSA members in order to intimidate other refugees. Rohingya sources have also suggested that the recent killings are a deliberate attempt by ARSA to thwart the repatriation process. This is not the only one murder in the refugee camps. “I am living under the knife of a fearful and depressing life,” said Mr. Mohammed, a community organizer whose full name is not being used because of the documented risks he faces. “I came to Bangladesh from Myanmar because I would be killed there. Here, also, there are no guarantees for a safe life” (cited in Beech, *New York Times*, 2021). In the world’s largest single refugee encampment, life is becoming unliveable. Some of those who were killed over the past month had warned Bangladeshi and international authorities that their names were on a hit list compiled by the biggest militant group- the ARSA.

ARSA fighters stated that they are not human rights workers or other civilians, and have spiritual and political authority over the nearly one million refugees (cited in Beech, *New York Times*, 2021). But the ground reality is different. According to refugee camp dwellers, ARSA controlled the illicit drug business in the borderland. There are many small shops inside of the camps and all small owners have to pay monthly to the ARSA commanders.<sup>v</sup> This research field work witnessed that it is simply extortion and Bangladeshi law enforcers ignore it. “Mohammed, whose

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<sup>v</sup> Interview with Rohingya refugee community at refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, August 2019.



community work has brought him into conflict with ARSA members, has repeatedly petitioned the Bangladeshi government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He is pleading to be relocated to a safe place” (cited in Beech, *New York Times*, 2021). His fear intensified after seven men associated with an Islamic school that had stood up to ARSA militants were shot and stabbed to death. A month before his death, Mohib Ullah, who ran a human rights network to which Mohammed belonged, wrote to the authorities asking for sanctuary. It is a very relevant question, why security is still not sufficient within the camps, even after the brutal killings of the past few months.

While the claims of refugees that ARSA members within the camps are funded by Myanmar agents should be looked into, it should not distract the authorities from prioritising Rohingya refugees’ safety. The debate of whether criminals within the camps belong to ARSA or not may delay the only solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis: their safe and dignified repatriation to their motherland (cited in *The Daily Star*, 2021). In addition, it is well reported that wider networks in the Cox’s Bazar region, especially in terms of weapons and drugs trafficking, must be dismantled in order to stop the enabling of the criminal networks that operate within the camps. Johannes van der Klaauw, the UNHCR, Country Representative in Bangladesh, acknowledged the dangers proliferating in the camps but noted that security was the responsibility of the Bangladeshis. After the refugee rights activist Mohib Ullah’s assassination, A.K. Abdul Momen, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, stated that “the government of Bangladesh is committed to investigating into the heinous crime and bringing the killers to justice” (cited in Beech, *New York Times*, 2021).

The law enforcers agencies have taken few measures such as, arbitrarily destroyed thousands of shops, imposing new obstacles on travel within the camps in Cox's Bazar. Human Rights Watch (2022) criticize the Bangladesh authorities' new restrictions, also urge the government to allow markets and schools to reopen, and facilitate donors' efforts to improve refugees' access to livelihoods, health care, and education. Bangladesh's deputy refugee commissioner, Shamsud Douza, said the shops were demolished because they were "illegal" (cited in AFP, 2022). Bangladesh has taken steps to beef up security at Rohingya shelters amid reports of criminal activity and killings at Cox's Bazar refugee camps. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal announced the decision to reporters following a meeting of the National Committee on Coordination, Management and Law Enforcement of Myanmar (Rohingya) at the Secretariat in the capital of Dhaka. The government held discussions with all concerned stakeholders to ensure law and order and overall security inside the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar and arrangements will also be made to increase security (Sakib, 2021). Apparently, Bangladeshi law enforcers have a strong pledge to tighten the security inside refugee camps and simultaneously take hardline against the drug smuggling in Myanmar border areas.

## Conclusion

Bangladesh is now currently sheltering the bulk of refugees from Myanmar. The hosts country and international humanitarian groups have the prime responsibility to ensure the physical protection of refugees and the overall safety of the camps. In recent years, a number of researchers have suggested that camps themselves are at the root of protection problems and that the

eradication of camps will go a long way to resolving these problems. However, it is not possible to evacuate or demolish the camps, because it is an essential element of the humanitarian response to refugees. The Kutupalong- Balukhali Expansion Camp near the town of Cox's Bazar, sometimes referred to as the "mega camp," is now the world's largest refugee camp. It was built quickly and haphazardly on a hilly jungle. Rohingya living in an area less than 13 square kilometers, nine times as dense as the Gaza Strip. In Kutupalong and 33 other refugee settlements, the Rohingya have had to maintain their dignity amid landslides, fires, floods, marauding elephants, human trafficking, and domestic abuse. The recent and continued reports of increasing violence in the Rohingya refugee camps are deeply concerning.

This research fieldwork agreed with refugees' leaders that their camps have become hubs of criminal activities carried out by members of the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA). Their tightening grip on the already insecure camps (with only three battalions of the Armed Police Battalion employed to enforce law and order) came to light after Rohingya rights activist Mohib Ullah was assassinated in late September, 2021. In October, about 50 criminals entered a camp madrasa, killed six men, and escaped. In this context, international humanitarian groups and Bangladesh Government should take immediate action to protect refugees right to life and dignity at camps and perpetrators should not go unpunished. This paper has argued that the only practical way to ensure the safety of camps and protection of refugees, what might be called security, is to pursue a security strategy underpinned simultaneously by a well-trained armed camp security forces with adequate human rights orientation. Rights groups also sometimes

accused the host countries' security personals attitude toward refugees of not meeting the standard of human rights. This paper concluded that the host country government should work with UNHCR and other INGOs to find a way of security measures in refugee camps.

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