



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies

1/46 Old Elephant Road, Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Panel Discussion

on

The Rohingyas: From Stateless to Refugee

BIISS, Wednesday, 22 July 2009 from 1100-1340 hrs

Address of Welcome by

Major General Sheikh Md Monirul Islam, ndc, psc

Director General, BIISS

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Excellencies, Distinguished Panelists, Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Assalamualaikum and Good Morning,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to a panel discussion on *The Rohingyas: From Stateless to Refugee*. The topic is important to Bangladesh for multifaceted reasons. The issue of Rohingya Refugees are not only related to Bangladesh's national security, but also to its foreign policy objectives to continue relations with its neighbouring country, Myanmar - a country that has historical linkage with Bangladesh for centuries. In addition, good and constructive relations with Myanmar are linked with the Bangladesh's economic prosperity and energy security in the context of new geo-political paradigm. Unfortunately, the Rohingya issue has put strains in our bilateral relations with Myanmar. Considering the important dimensions of our linkages, this sensitive issue needs a proper and substantive as well as an objective study in both the countries, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The problem of Rohingya Refugees remains a serious concern for Bangladesh since 1978. In 1978, the military rulers of Myanmar launched an anti-Rohingya military campaign declaring them as illegal immigrants in their country. In March-April of the same year, when a mass exodus took place from the Arakan region into Bangladesh, the problem caused strong friction in the political relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. For obvious reasons, Bangladesh government

was concerned as the increasing flow exerted tremendous pressure on the economy of the country. Given the traditional good relations with Myanmar, the government of Bangladesh first refrained from making the refugee issue an international one and pursued quiet diplomacy to bring an end to the crisis. But not finding any positive response from Yangon and faced with the unprecedented task of feeding the refugees, Bangladesh turned to the international community. Amidst much tension, a delegation from Myanmar came to Bangladesh in July 1978 when an agreement was signed where Myanmar agreed to take back all the refugees. Accordingly, the repatriation began on 31 August, 1978 and by 29 December 1979, the repatriation of a total of 187,250 refugees was completed.

Distinguished Participants,

Again in 1991-92, there was another influx of more than 250,000 Rohingyas from the Arakan region of Myanmar to Bangladesh. Following a 1992 Agreement between the two Governments some 230,000 refugees have so far been repatriated to Myanmar with the assistance of the UN refugee agency, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Today, 21,500 Rohingya refugees are sheltered in two camps, Kutupalong and Nayapara, located between Cox's Bazar and Teknaf. The refugees in the Kutupalong and Nayapara camps under UNHCR protection are the visible side of the crisis. Since 1996, thousands of Rohingyas both repatriated refugees as well as new arrivals have continued to trickle back from Myanmar into Bangladesh. They have been denied access to the refugee camps and have joined more than 100,000 undocumented Rohingyas living outside the camps, often surviving in extreme poverty in villages or slums around Cox's Bazar and Teknaf. They have become invisible refugees, being labelled as "economic migrants" by the Bangladesh authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although, at the bilateral meetings between the two Governments, both sides agreed upon a number of measures to expedite repatriation, most of them are yet to be implemented. The slow progress of repatriation and the reluctance of the Myanmar authorities to consider the return of the refugees remain a major source of contention. However, in 1982, General Ne Win redefined citizenship of the Rohingyas, who had inhabited northern Burma, as illegal aliens. The Rohingyas are now people without a country. However, Bangladesh shows no interest about the internal policies of Myanmar government regarding Rohingya issue. Although the issue has humanitarian aspects, Bangladesh perceives security threats from the Rohingya Refugees for their involvements in the criminal and anti-social activities. At the same time, any stern action against the Rohingyas may tarnish the image of Bangladesh in the Muslim world because of the Muslim identity of the Rohingyas.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this respect, the main queries of the today's panel discussion are: Who are the Rohingyas? Where have they come from? What kind of security problems do the Rohingyas pose for Bangladesh? What can Bangladesh and Myanmar do to solve the problem? What are the political, economic and social costs involved in maintaining the current status quo and what could be the consequences if the problem remains in an impasse?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Professor Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka will initiate the discussion on the topic. He is the Executive Director of Center for Alternatives. He had his education at the University of Dhaka, Carlton University, Ottawa, and Australian National University, Canberra. Besides his numerous articles in national and international journals, he has worked extensively on security, terrorism and radicalisation. His publications include *Women, Bangladesh and International Security: Methods, Discourses and Policies* (2004). *Understanding Terrorism: Beyond Statist Discourses* (2006), *Terrorism in the Twenty First Century: Bangladesh Perspective* (2009). He is also the editor and co-editor of national and international journals and fellow member of well known research organisations in home and abroad.

Our second panellist is **Mr. Arjun Jain**. Mr. Arjun Jain has been with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for over 10 years in India, Tanzania, Kenya, Switzerland (Headquarters), Syria, Lebanon and now in Bangladesh. He has served in Bangladesh for over a year and is currently the Representative *ad interim*. He is a lawyer by education.

The third panelist of this morning is **Brigadier General Salim Akhtar, ndc, psc** (Retd.) **Brigadier General Salim** has retired after 33 years of service with Bangladesh Army. During his chequered career in Bangladesh Army, he spent a major portion of his service in instructional and teaching appointments notably as Directing Staff and Senior Instructor at Defence Services Command and Staff College. He was the Commander of Bangladesh Contingent in Bosnia Herzegovina at the height of conflict between 1994 -1995 until the Dayton Peace Accord was signed. He also served as Defence Attaché with Bangladesh Embassy in Myanmar from 2000-2003.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do believe and hope that today's discussion on the topic will help formulate policy options for the decision makers of Bangladesh in securing the national interest of the country, on the one hand, and upholding human security issues of Rohingyas on the other. With that and welcoming you all again, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you.



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Concluding Remarks by the Director General,
Major General Sheikh Md Monirul Islam, ndc, psc

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have come to the end of today's Panel Discussion on **The Rohingyas: From Stateless to Refugee**. We have had a very open and healthy discussion on the subject matter, and I would like to thank the panelists and the participants for their contribution.

Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed in his initial remarks dealt with the birth of the stateless Rohingyas, that is, at what point in time and under what socio-political conditions do we find a distinct and identifiable name – Rohingya - being used by a social group to mark its existence in the state of Myanmar. He also discussed the issue of the stateless Rohingyas becoming refugees, particularly the factors contributing to their flight to Bangladesh on a massive scale and also reflected on the 1978 and 1991 expulsions. He suggested Bangladesh to raise the issue at the global level and seek international support. He also suggested that a meeting of the stakeholders at the national level is required to first brainstorm and fine tune such an initiative.

Mr. Arjun Jain termed the Rohingya issue as a humanitarian issue and said that it is in the interests of the Rohingya Refugees that the issue should be settled rapidly. He mentioned that UNHCR works closely with the Bangladesh Government on this issue. According to him the Refugees want to go back home as soon as the situation in their country is conducive for them to return. In the meantime, they should be empowered to be self-reliant. He said that the issue has become a forgotten issue in the global context and that the international community should pay more attention to it.

Brig. Gen. Salim Akhtar mentioned that it is important to address the issue of the Rohingya Refugees. He suggested that Bangladesh should provide support to the Rohingya Refugees in terms of their skill development and education. Bangladesh Government should also track down the undocumented Rohingya refugees because they may get connected to international gun running and militancy. He further suggested bringing the Rohingya leaders to the table and that they understand the realities of the situation and find out a solution.

In the Open Discussion, we have discussed the subject matter at length. Our learned participants' have pointed out the issue as a humanitarian issue. However, some have also pointed out the

socio-economic and security dimensions of the problem. They stressed the importance of Bangladesh diplomacy in dealing with Myanmar on this issue. In the international context, they urged China, Japan, India and ASEAN to play a more constructive role. Some participants have also expressed their concern about the living condition of the refugees in the camps. It has been emphasized that the issue needs a holistic approach to strike a balance between National Security and humanitarian issue. In the final assessment, the Rohingya issue needs multi-pronged interventions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With the hope of materializing most of the suggested measures to solving the Rohingya issue, let me conclude today's Panel Discussion with a prayer – that is to reverse the title of the topic. Let the refugee-hood of the Rohingyas end and let them go back to the State they deserve to.

Thank you.