The Rohingya Issue – Its wider ramifications for South Asia

Introduction

A Muslim minority ethnic group in Buddhist dominated Myanmar, the Rohingya constitute about 4 percent of the country's population. They inhabit the northern part of the Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State of Myanmar, one of the least developed parts of the country. Persecuted for decades by the Burmese State, their numbers inside Myanmar have diminished steadily over the years from well in excess of a million to a few hundred thousand. Denial of citizenship, religious persecution, killings, rape, massacres and refusal to provide even the most basic of human rights by subjecting them to forced labor, seizure of their land and property, extortion, denial of the freedom to travel to find work, and most humiliatingly placing restrictions on marriage and the number of children they can have has led to hundreds of thousands of impoverished Rohingya fleeing to neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh, over the course of the last seven decades. The United Nations (UN) has described them as "*the most persecuted minority in the world*".

At the core of the issue is the identity and religion of the Rohingya, with the Myanmar government refusing to acknowledge or use the term Rohingya, insisting on calling them '*Bengali*' instead to highlight their alleged foreign origins.

The largest stateless community in the world, the close to a million Rohingya living in appalling conditions in makeshift refugee camps in Bangladesh are confronted with an enormous humanitarian crisis. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stated on 13 December 2017, that while there were 400,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in early 2017, by the end of that year this number had swelled to over 1,000,000. The scale of the crisis is put into clear perspective by the fact that in contrast to their swelling numbers in Bangladesh, only an estimated 180,000 Rohingya remain in their native Rakhine State in Myanmar.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently termed the State of the Rohingya as "*catastrophic*" and "*completely unacceptable*". Their miserable condition is being sought to be exploited by radical Islamic organizations backed by the Pakistani intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) such as the Lashkar-e-Taibah (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), as well as by other Sunni militant organizations, to serve their own nefarious purposes. Rohingya insurgent organizations such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) are being set up, and the attacks against Myanmar security forces launched by these insurgents are providing the excuse for a highly disproportionate response by the Myanmar government, thereby exacerbating the already grave plight of the Rohingya. That the ISI-backed groups are also looking to direct the attention of radicalized elements from the Rohingya against the Sheikh Hasina-led government in Bangladesh and against India lends wider security ramifications to the issue.

US Vice President Mike Pence assessed the situation aptly when he described the Rohingya expulsion as a "*historic exodus*" and a "*great tragedy unfolding*", adding that the situation

may "*sow seeds of hatred and chaos that may well consume the region for generations to come and threaten the peace of us all*".

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya and the Myanmar government hold opposing views on who the Rohingya are. They also interpret Rohingya history differently. The Rohingya claim that they have inhabited Arakan State since the 8th century. They base their claim on a 1799 study titled '*A Comparative Vocabulary of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire*' by Scottish physician Francis Buchanan in which the author states that: "*The first dialect spoken in the Burman empire derived from the language of the Hindu nation that is spoken by the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan*." The '*Classical Journal of 1811'* mentions three languages spoken in the '*Burmah Empire*' and distinguishes between the Rohingya and the Rakhine as the main ethnic groups in the region. Johann Severin Vater in his compendium of languages published in German in 1815, mentioned '*Ruinga*' as an ethnic group with a distinct language. The term Rohingya is believed to originate from the word '*Rohang*', which was the Bengali name given to Arakan at the time. Rohingya, therefore, meant Arakanese. The Rohingya quote these studies as irrefutable proof that they were occupants of the Rakhine State from centuries before the arrival of the British.

The Myanmar government, on the other hand, refutes this and avers that the Rohingya are illegal immigrants who arrived during the British rule of Burma (1824-1948) and thereafter. It cites the fact that British records during their rule did not use the term Rohingya to stress that the word came into use only in the 1950s. It alleges that the term was coined by the Rohingya to screen their Bengali background and to attempt to establish an autonomous Muslim region in north Rakhine State or to make the region a part of East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). The government insists on calling the Rohingya '*Bengalis*'. This is aimed at underlining that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who are a demographic threat to the Buddhist Rakhine who it regards as the original inhabitants of the state. This provides the government a convenient pretext for systematically disenfranchising the Rohingya and driving them out of the country.

The term Rohingya is central to the issue as it accords the Rohingya a historical justification. For the Myanmar government, the word Rohingya is critical. If the government acknowledges Rakhine's Muslims as members of the Rohingya ethnic group, then under the 1982 citizenship law the Muslims should be allowed an autonomous area within the country.

Observers are divided over which of the divergent views on the origin of the Rohingya is correct. In addition to polarization along pro and anti-Rohingya lines, the difficulty in arriving at a firm conclusion is partly on account of the fact that prior to the arrival of the British, the border between the Arakan State and Bengal was fluid and changing, without a rigid demarcation. Historically, large parts of Arakan were often conquered and governed by Bengali rulers, and at other times Rakhine kings held sway over areas up to Chittagong in Bengal. Given this situation, it is highly likely that the Rohingya, who speak a language more similar to Bengali than to Burmese, did not arrive in Arakan at one go or at one time. Some of them most likely already inhabited Arakan before its '*Burmanization*' from the 10th to 14th centuries. Others came as soldiers or slaves of Rakhine kings from Bengal in the 16th and 17th

centuries. The third wave of migration from Bengal was during the period of British rule and in the period post-independence from Britain.

Brief History of the Rohingya

Not much is known about the early history of Arakan. However, discovery of Sanskrit inscriptions from the region belonging to around the 4th century AD indicates that people from the Indian mainland founded the early Arakanese kingdoms. British historian Daniel George Edward Hall has opined that "*The Burmese do not seem to have settled in Arakan until possibly as late as the tenth century CE. Hence earlier dynasties are thought to have been Indian, ruling over a population similar to that of Bengal. All the capitals known to history have been in the north near modern Akyab*".

Around the 9th century, Arab traders began visiting south-east Bengal, bordering Arakan. They brought along with them their religion, Islam, to which locals in Bengal and Arakan converted. This, along with marriages between the Arabs and the locals, resulted in the first stable Muslim populations in the region. The Rohingya claim their history from this period.

Around this time or a little later, the Rakhine also began migrating to Arakan from across the Arakan mountain range. They set up settlements in the Lemro river valley, and eventually established the Mrauk U kingdom there. Burmese forces invaded this kingdom in 1406, forcing the Rakhine rulers to flee to neighbouring Bengal where they remained in exile. In 1430, King Min Saw Mon, with military assistance from the Sultan of Bengal, recaptured the Rakhine throne. Min Saw Mon accepted the suzerainty of the Sultan of Bengal over his kingdom. The Bengalis who accompanied and assisted him set up their own Muslim settlements in the region. They built the impressive Santikan Mosque there in the 1430s. Bengal's suzerainty over the Mrauk U kingdom lasted only a few years – by the 1450s the Rakhine invaded Bengal and occupied Chittagong, which they held till 1666. However, even during this period the Rakhines continued to employ Bengali Muslims in important positions in the royal administration. Slaves from Bengal were also brought in by the Rakhine, adding to the Muslim population.

In 1660, Prince Shah Shuja, Governor of Mughal Bengal and a claimant to the Mughal throne in India, fled to Arakan with his family after being defeated by his brother Emperor Aurangzeb in the Battle of Khajwa. Shuja's staff members settled in Arakan and were recruited in the royal army. In 1666, Emperor Aurangzeb ordered his Bengal Governor, Shaista Khan, to act against piracy by the Arakanese and Portuguese. Shaista Khan led an army comprising 6,000 men and 288 warships and seized Chittagong from the Kingdom of Mrauk U. The expedition continued up to the Kaladan river and the Mughals took control over northern Arakan, where the Muslim population grew further. Interestingly, in 1960, Burmese cabinet minister Sultan Mahmud cited the Kaladan River as the boundary between Rohingya and Rakhine areas.

In 1785, Buddhist Burmese from the south of the country conquered Arakan. They drove out or executed a large number of Muslim Rohingya and about 35,000 of them fled into Bengal, then part of the British India.

The British ruled Myanmar (then Burma) for over a century, beginning with a series of wars in 1824. Burma officially became a province within the British Indian Empire in 1885, and

remained so till 1937, when it was made a separate Crown colony within the British Empire. British policies encouraged migrant labour from contiguous Bengal into thinly populated Arakan to increase profits from rice cultivation. The Bengal Presidency was extended to Arakan. There was no international boundary between Bengal and Arakan and no restrictions on migration between the regions. A large number of Rohingya entered Myanmar as part of these policies in the 19th century. Using census data, historian Jacques Leider has concluded that the Muslim population of Arakan increased from five percent in 1869, to more than 30 percent in 1912. Census data also shows that the Muslim population in Akyab district tripled from 58,255 in 1871, to 178,647 in 1911. Due to this, historians believed that most of the Rohingya arrived with the British colonialists in the 19th and 20th centuries, with the remaining tracing their ancestry much further back. Local Arakanese resented this immigration during British rule. According to historian Clive J. Christie, "*The issue became a focus for grass-roots Burmese nationalism, and in the years 1930–31 there were serious anti-Indian disturbances in Lower Burma, while 1938 saw riots specifically directed against the Indian Muslim community. As Burmese nationalism increasingly asserted itself before the Second World War, the 'alien' Indian presence inevitably came under attack, along with the religion that the Indian Muslims imported. The Muslims of northern Arakan were to be caught in the crossfire of this conflict*."

The British also promised the Rohingya a '*Muslim National Area*' in Arakan in exchange for their support. During the Second World War, the Rohingya sided with the British while Burma's Buddhists supported the Japanese. Following the war, the British rewarded the Rohingya with prestigious government posts, but they were not given the promised autonomous state.

Towards the end of British rule, the Rohingya organized a separatist movement in the 1940s to merge the Mayu region of Arakan into East Pakistan. In January 1948, after Pakistan's independence from Britain, the Rohingya approached Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, with this proposal of merger on the grounds of religion and geographical proximity to East Pakistan. They were uneasy at the prospect of being left under a Buddhist-dominated government. The proposal was, however, turned down by Jinnah.

Burma achieved independence from the British in 1948. Under Article 3 of the Nu-Attlee Treaty of 17 October 1947, and under Section 11(i) (ii) (iii) the Constitution of the Union of Burma 1947 that came into effect on 4 January 1948, the Rohingya were termed bonafide citizens of Burma. The first President of Burma Sao Shwe Theik even stated that Muslims of Arakan belonged to one of the indigenous races of Burma.

Thus, in the period following independence, the Rohingya were acknowledged as indigenous citizens of Burma. Two of their prominent representatives, M.A. Gaffar and Sultan Ahmed, participated in the drafting of the Burmese Constitution. Members of the community were employed in senior government positions and were even elected to parliament and appointed as Ministers. In the 1951 general elections, five Rohingya were elected to parliament and in 1956, the number rose to six. Sultan Mahmud, a Rohingya, served as Minister of Health in the cabinet of Prime Minister U Nu. From 1961 to 1965, a Rohingya language program was broadcast twice a week on the Burmese Broadcasting Services (BBS) under the heading '*Indigenous Groups*'. However, the status of the Rohingya in Burma took a drastic change for

the worse after the General Ne Win-led military junta staged a coup d'état in 1962, and took control of the country.

Persecution

Upon taking power in Rangoon, the military junta cracked down hard on the Rohingya. After the 1960 Burmese general elections, Prime Minister U Nu had set up a separate administrative zone called the Mayu Frontier District for Rohingya-majority areas of Arakan. This zone existed between 1961 and 1964, and was administered directly from Rangoon by the national government. The Burmese army took over administration of the zone in 1962. Eventually, the military government merged the zone into Arakan State in 1974.

Racism directed against those the junta perceived as being of Indian origin increased after the coup. Between 1962 and 1964, over 320,000 Burmese Indians were forced to leave the country. Rohingya political and social organisations were systematically dissolved by the junta. In February 1978, the junta launched '*Operation Nagamin*' (Operation Dragon King) with the ostensible aim of registering citizens in northern Arakan and expelling '*foreigners*' prior to a national census. The real target, however, were members and sympathisers of the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), a political organisation that operated in-exile from neighbouring Bangladesh. The exercise was supervised by military personnel who forcibly evicted Rohingya villagers through intimidation, rape and murder. This resulted in between 200,000 to 250,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. The junta celebrated by announcing that the mass exodus meant that the Rohingya were indeed "*illegal immigrants*". Meanwhile, overwhelmed by this huge influx of refugees and with limited resources and experience to deal with the situation, Bangladesh requested the UN for assistance. Eventually, in July 1978, the governments of Burma and Bangladesh, through the mediation of UNHCR, reached an agreement on repatriation of the refugees, and 180,000 of them returned to Burma. In the same year and once again in 1992, the joint statement by the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh "*acknowledged that the Rohingya were lawful Burmese residents*".

The biggest blow to the Rohingya came in 1982, in the form of the Citizenship Act of Burma. It identified eight ethnicities entitled to citizenship, which did not include the Rohingya though they had enjoyed equal rights since Burma became independent from British rule in 1948. Almost overnight, they were stripped of their citizenship. According to the Act, a Rohingya (or any ethnic minority) was eligible for citizenship only if he/she provided proof that his/her ancestors had lived in the country in 1823, prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824. Else, they were classified as '*resident foreigners*' or as '*associate citizens*', even if one of the parents was a Myanmar citizen. The 1982 citizenship law overturned the Burma Union Citizenship Act 1948, that stipulated that "*Any person descended from ancestors who for two generations at least have all made any of the territories included within the Union their permanent home and whose parents and himself were born in any of such territories shall be deemed to be a citizen of the Union*". Through the 1982 Citizenship Act, the junta effectively erased the Rohingya from its national history.

Lack of citizenship has rendered the Rohingya highly vulnerable. They are not entitled to legal protection from the government, and are deprived of basic rights, such as access to health services, education and employment. The illiteracy rate among the Rohingya is, shockingly, as

high as 80 percent. They also face restrictions on the right to worship freely, to marry, move freely and own property. Rohingya couples are allowed no more than two children. Those who break this law risk imprisonment and the government can even '*blacklist*' their children.

Another major anti-Rohingya move implemented by the junta in the 1990s was changing the historical name of Arakan state to Rakhine, thereby projecting that the state belonged to the predominantly Buddhist Rakhine to the exclusion of the Rohingya.

In the 1980s, the Rohingya supported the 8888 uprising for democracy. The 1990 general election was won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi. She was, however, not permitted by the General Than Shwe-led junta to assume office as Prime Minister and was placed under house arrest. Operations against pro-democracy parties and activists were launched. The Rohingya-led National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR) had won four seats in the Burmese parliament in these elections. The junta banned NDPHR in 1992 and jailed and tortured its leaders. The military gradually increased its operations across the country, and the Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships in north Arakan became centres of persecution. The 23rd and 24th Regiments of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) indulged in rape, forced labour, confiscation of property and destruction of mosques. In the face of this, over 250,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh. Both Bangladesh and Burma mobilized their troops along the border during this crisis. Diplomatic negotiations ensued and an agreement to allow the return of refugees to Burma under a UNHCR-supervised process was reached.

In 2012, a series of riots between the Rohingya and the Rakhines erupted in Rakhine State. The initial trigger was the gang rape and murder of a Rakhine woman in a Rohingya dominated area. This was followed by the killing of 10 Burmese Muslims by the Rakhine. The Myanmar army fanned the flames by calling on the Rakhine men to defend their "*race and religion*" and arming them with knives. As per figures released by the Myanmar government, the violence left 78 people dead, 87 injured and 140,000 displaced. Thousands of Rohingya fled to neighbouring countries. In April 2013, Human Rights Watch (HRW) averred that Myanmar was carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.

In recent years, the Rohingya have faced increasing persecution and attacks, in some cases even from Buddhist monks. Thousands have fled by sea to Muslim countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and Indonesia. However, the governments of these countries have often refused to accept them as refugees. Reports suggest that those who seek shelter in neighbouring Thailand are victimized by human traffickers. In some cases, they have even been pushed back again into the sea by Thai military forces.

Despite the political reforms in Myanmar in 2011, that led to the dissolution of the junta and the first general elections in decades in 2015, the plight of the Rohingya has only worsened. The democratically-elected government formally headed by President Htin Kyaw, with Aung San Suu Kyi playing a prominent role as State Counsellor, has not shown any inclination towards granting citizenship to the Rohingya. A discernible increase in Buddhist extremism has led to disquiet among the Rohingya and sustained tension between the latter and the Rakhine.

In this milieu, in October 2016, a previously unknown Rohingya militant group, the Harakah al-Yaqin (Movement of Faith), staged attacks against Myanmar security personnel, killing nine border policemen. The army responded with a massive security crackdown. Troops started pouring into the villages of Rakhine State and were involved in severe human rights abuses including extrajudicial killing, rape and arson. The Myanmar government denied this, but that did not deter a UN official from making the accusation in November 2016, that the government was carrying out ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Over 70,000 Rohingya were again forced to flee from their homes into refugee camps in Bangladesh.

The Myanmar government, under international pressure, in 2016, set up an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State under former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Commission made several recommendations, including cessation of military crackdowns on Rohingya neighbourhoods, removal of restrictions on movement and a review of the 1982 citizenship law. Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's de-facto leader, welcomed these recommendations that were made public on 25 August 2017. The Myanmar government said it would give the report "*full consideration with the view to carrying out the recommendations to the fullest extent ... in line with the situation on the ground*". However, just hours after that report was made public, a Rohingya insurgent group carried out a series of attacks against the Myanmar armed forces leading to a fresh crisis in Rakhine State.

On 25 August 2017, the ARSA, the Pakistan and Saudi Arabia-linked insurgent group that was previously known as Harakah al-Yaqin, launched a coordinated attack on 30 police posts and an army base in Rakhine State. This triggered a brutal military campaign by the Myanmar armed forces in response. In the counter attacks launched by the army at least 59 of the insurgents and 12 security personnel were killed. Reports of villages being torched, civilian deaths and Rohingya youth being picked up for interrogation followed the militant attack. HRW claimed that the army razed at least 55 villages once populated by the Rohingya. It released images in February 2018, that showed that between December 2017 and mid-February 2018, areas that once housed buildings and greenery had been completely cleared. HRW described the actions of the Myanmar security forces as an "*ethnic cleansing campaign*" and called on the UN and Myanmar's donors to demand an end to the demolitions. In February 2018, the Associated Press released a video showing the site of a massacre and at least five undisclosed mass graves of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The UN's special rapporteur to Myanmar said that violence against the Rohingya bore the hallmarks of genocide. Well over half a million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, and the UN reiterated that the military crackdown amounted to ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

In the face of concerted international pressure, the Myanmar government in late 2017, set up the '*Advisory Board for the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State*' to advise on enacting the findings of the Kofi Annan-led Commission. This move has run into rough weather, with Bill Richardson, a former US Ambassador to the UN and a friend of Aung San Suu -Kyi, resigning from the Board in January 2018. He accused Board-members of trying to '*whitewash*' the Rohingya crisis and behaving like a '*cheerleading squad*' for the government.

On 8 May 2018, human rights organizations Fortify Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Global Center for Responsibility to Protect jointly urged the UN Security

Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court for the violence against the Rohingya that they said amounted to crimes against humanity. Matthew Smith, Chief Executive Officer of Fortify Rights asserted that "*Impunity is entrenched in Myanmar".* "*Domestic remedies have been exhausted—the government failed to properly investigate the heinous crimes that have taken place, and that's precisely why a referral is warranted.*"

International Reactions

The international community, barring a small minority of countries including China and Russia, has been highly critical of the Myanmar government's treatment of the Rohingya and has called upon Myanmar to take back the refugees languishing in makeshift camps in Bangladesh. It has labelled the Rohingya the '*most persecuted minority in the world*'.

The UN has said that it was "*very likely"* that the Myanmar military committed grave human rights abuses in Rakhine that may amount to war crimes. In response to the latest round of violence, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of the risk of ethnic cleansing, calling on Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar's security forces to end the violence. In March 2018, the UN adopted a resolution to set up an independent international mission to investigate the alleged abuses against the Rohingya. The UN investigators must provide a verbal update in September and a full report next year on their findings. UN human rights chief Zeid bin Ra'ad al-Hussein termed Myanmar's security operations against the Rohingya as a "*textbook example of ethnic cleansing*". In April this year, the chief prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague asked the court to rule if it had jurisdiction over the '*deportation of Rohingya people*' from Myanmar to Bangladesh. A ruling confirming its jurisdiction could pave the way for prosecutors to investigate whether crimes against humanity were committed.

US Vice President Mike Pence condemned the '*terrible savagery*' against the Rohingya. Senator John McCain announced moves to cancel future military cooperation with Myanmar. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford cautioned the Myanmar military that *'this cannot continue*'. Sam Brownback, the United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, visited Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and stated thereafter that: "*The President, Vice-President, and Congress are all watching the situation closely. They want justice for the Rohingyas. They want them to be able to go home. This issue has captured a lot of interest in the United States*". The US government contributed $32 million in aid to Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar in September 2017.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in a statement called upon Aung Sang Suu Kyi to stop the violence in Rakhine. He visited Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar, and stated thereafter: "*The plight of the Rohingya and the suffering they have had to endure is one of the most shocking humanitarian disasters of our time. This is a man-made tragedy that could be resolved with the right political will, tolerance and cooperation from all those involved*".

French President Emanuel Macron described the Myanmar government's actions against the Rohingya as "*genocide*" and "*ethnic purification*". German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel expressed concern over the situation in Rakhine State and called on Aung San Suu Kyi to do more to end the conflict. Other European leaders have also urged the Myanmar government

to resolve the crisis in a manner that is fair to the Rohingya. After meeting Rohingya refugees in Dhaka, Pope Francis said "*the presence of God today is also called Rohingya*".

ASEAN, the regional grouping Myanmar is an integral part of, has been criticized for its lacklustre response to the Rohingya crisis. The three Muslim majority ASEAN countries, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, have, however, individually taken up the cause of the Rohingya. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak termed the persecution of the Rohingya as genocide, and Defence Minister Hishamuddin Hussein cautioned that terrorist organisations could make inroads in Myanmar if the issue was not resolved. Indonesian President Joko Widodo also condemned the violence against the Rohingya. He visited Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar in January 2018. Both Malaysia and Indonesia have sent relief supplies for the Rohingya refugee camps.

In September 2017, the Japanese government in a statement condemned "*the attacks carried out against the Myanmar security forces in northern areas of Rakhine State in Myanmar since 25 August as utterly unacceptable"…. "Japan strongly expects that, with the restoration of security, the protection of civilian populations and humanitarian access is assured as soon as possible. Japan will support the efforts by the Myanmar government to implement the recommendations for realizing peace and stability in Rakhine State presented in the Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led by Former United Nations Secretary General Dr. Kofi Annan*".

Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in October 2017, expressed India's support for a permanent solution to the Rohingya crisis. Swaraj advocated that the Myanmar government take back the refugees who are Myanmar nationals and "*punish the terrorists, not innocent people*." India has also sent relief supplies for the displaced Rohingya.

Saudi Arabia condemned the "*human rights violations against the Rohingya*" and called for UN involvement for resolution of the crisis. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the persecution of the Rohingya as genocide. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, who visited Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar, also accused Myanmar of genocide. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, while condemning Myanmar for persecuting the Rohingya, urged the international community to act before it was too late. Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif termed the "*violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar*", a challenge to the conscience of the international community.

China and Russia are the two major powers that have sided with the Myanmar government, including at the UN. Both countries have condemned the attacks carried out by ARSA and supported the Myanmar government's moves to uphold peace and stability in the Rakhine State. Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2017, met Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who is believed to be one of the key players in formulating the policy against the Rohingya. China has also tried to block efforts to internationalize the Rohingya issue, instead positioning itself as a mediator. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Bangladesh and Myanmar and put forth a three-stage proposal for the return of refugees. China's main concern is to protect its $7.3 billion investment in the Kyaukpyu deep sea port project in the Rakhine State, which is expected to become a key constituent of China's One Belt One Road initiative by providing it direct access to the Bay of Bengal.

Bangladesh, the country most severely affected by the influx of close to a million Rohingya refugees into its territory, has labelled the violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar "*a genocide*". Bangladesh's National Commission for Human Rights has stated that it was considering "*pressing for a trial against Myanmar, and against the Myanmar army at an international tribunal*" on charges of genocide. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited a Rohingya refugee camp in September 2017, and called on the UN and the international community to pressurise the Myanmar government to take back the Rohingya refugees. Hasina, in her address to the United Nations General Assembly on 21 September 2017, chastised Myanmar for ethnic cleansing and demanded implementation of the report of the Commission led by Kofi Annan.

Rohingya Repatriation Plan

On 16 January 2018, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed on a repatriation plan as per which Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh would be taken back by Myanmar within two years of the start of the repatriation process. A statement issued by the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry after the agreement did not specify when the process would begin. It said that the return effort envisaged "*considering the family as a unit*", and that Myanmar would provide temporary shelter for those returning before rebuilding houses for them. It added that Bangladesh would set up five transit camps which would send the Rohingya to two reception centres on the Myanmar side of the border. The statement averred that "*Myanmar has reiterated its commitment to stop outflow of Myanmar residents to Bangladesh*".

Myanmar government spokesman Zaw Htay stated that returnees would be able to apply for citizenship "*after they pass the verification process*". Two temporary '*repatriation and assessment camps*' and another site to accommodate returnees had been set up. Myint Kyaing, permanent secretary at Myanmar's Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, said Myanmar would be ready to begin processing 150 people per day at each of the two camps. At this rate, about 17 years would be required to repatriate the one million refugees! In any case, it is unlikely that most of the refugees will '*pass the verification process*'. Hence the number that will actually be taken back by Myanmar is likely to be only a fraction of the total number of refugees.

The present repatriation agreement mirrors previous such agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar from the 1990s onwards. It states that the returning Rohingya's freedom of movement will be based on "*existing legislation and regulations*", which implies that their status within Myanmar will undergo no change. It is, therefore, clear that the returning Rohingya will face the same discrimination, human rights violations and injustice that they were forced to flee from, and which may compel them to flee again in the future. In all likelihood, their aspiration for citizenship and equality will remain a distant dream.

Human rights organizations are, not surprisingly, sceptical about the agreement. UNHCR believes that the "*conditions in Myanmar are not yet conducive for returns to be safe, dignified and sustainable*", and postulates that "*the responsibility for creating such conditions remains with the Myanmar authorities, and these must go beyond the preparation of physical infrastructure to facilitate logistical arrangements*". The Director of HRW's refugee rights programme said: "*Before the start of actual returns, Myanmar should agree to a set of*

prerequisites for return", including '*unfettered, independent monitoring*' of returnees and restoration of lost homes and properties.

Rohingya Insurgency over the Years

The cause of the Rohingya has been promoted by the few political organizations set up by them, mostly overseas, such as the London-based Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and the Rohingya National Council (RNC). They have, however, had little impact. Support groups and human rights organizations have also been formed in various countries to take up their cause. These include the Burmese Rohingya Organisation (BRO) in the UK; Rohingya Concern International (RCI), Burmese Rohingya American Friendship Association (BRAFA) and World Rohingya Congress (WRC) in the US; Rohingya Arakanese Refugee Committee (RARC), Arakan Rohingya Ulama Council (ARUC), Ethnic Rohingya Committee of Arakan (ERCA) and Human Rights Association for Rohingyas (HURAR) in Malaysia; Burmese Rohingya Association in Thailand (BRAT); Arakan Rohingya Organization-Japan (JARO); Burmese Rohingya Association in Queensland-Australia (BRAQA); Myanmar Muslim Council (MMC) in Saudi Arabia; and Rohingya Muslim Organization (RMO) in Bangladesh, among others. These organizations have mainly been involved in international lobbying, establishing claims of the Rohingya being indigenous and publicizing the term Rohingya.

Armed insurgencies have also been launched by Rohingya groups since the 1940s. In 1947, after Jinnah turned down the Rohingya proposal for inclusion of the Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships of the Mayu region into East Pakistan, some elements among the Rohingya demanded autonomy or independence. The newly independent Burmese government rejected these demands. Subsequently, a section of the Rohingya who were known as the '*Mujahideen*' took up arms and fought a separatist rebellion until the 1960s, launching guerrilla attacks against the local authorities and soldiers stationed in the area. After initial successes in 1948 and 1949, the movement gradually lost steam in the face of the Burmese army's sustained operations. It nevertheless continued to simmer till 1961, when a large number of members surrendered.

In 1964, former Mujahideen elements formed a new Rohingya militant organization called Rohingya Independent Force (RIF) led by Jafar Habib. It merged with another similar organization, Rohingya Independent Army (RIA), in 1969. In the mid-1970s RIA renamed itself the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), and continued to be led by Jafar Habib. These organizations did not undertake significant or effective militant activity.

In 1982, in the aftermath of '*Operation Nagamin',* a new militant organisation called Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) was formed by Muhammad Yunus, the former Secretary General of the RPF, by breaking away the more radical elements from RPF. Having a stronger emphasis on religion than earlier militant Rohingya organizations, RSO sought and obtained support from various South Asian Islamist groups including Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh and Pakistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami of Afghanistan and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Based in Cox's Bazar, RSO emerged as the best armed militant Rohingya organization till then. *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism* reported that "*there is evidence that some members of the RSO received training in Afghan facilities during the 1990's*". On the aims of RSO, it stated: "*The RSO and other Rakhine separatist groups have in the past engaged in armed guerrilla activity in Myanmar….. They aimed to gain de facto*

control of the Rakhine state and expel the Myanmar military through harassment and the classical tactics of guerrilla warfare".

Another Rohingya militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), was founded in 1986 by Nurul Islam, the former Vice-Chairman of the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), after uniting the remnants of the old RPF and a handful of defectors from the RSO. In 1998, RSO merged with ARIF and founded the Rohingya National Army (RNA), which became the armed faction of ARNO.

Internationalization of the Rohingya Militancy

In 2002, CNN obtained video tapes from Al-Qaeda's archives in Afghanistan. As per reports, one of these videotapes showed that '*Muslim brothers from Burma'* had received training in Afghanistan. Some footage was reportedly shot in RSO camps in Bangladesh in the 1990s. Afghan military instructors were sent to a large camp that the RSO had set up near Ukhia, Bangladesh. About 100 RSO militants went to Afghanistan and were provided military training by Hizb-e-Islami in Khost province. South Asia Intelligence Review reports indicate that taking advantage of their vulnerability and poverty, Rohingya youth had been lured in exchange for relatively small sums of money to travel to Pakistan to undergo training there and thereafter carry out suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Pakistani intelligence agencies, using proxies, were reportedly behind this. The Rohingya were among the Taliban terrorists captured by the Northern Alliance and coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2001-02. Security analyst Subir Bhaumik has written that the Rohingya have been sent to fight in international flashpoints as far away as Jammu & Kashmir and Chechnya.

RSO was also known to have collaborated with two banned Bangladeshi jihadist groups, Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B). Further, members of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh's youth wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, also reportedly used the RSO camps as cover for their own militant activities.

The ARSA that carried out the 25 August 2017 attacks claims to be fighting for the Rohingya's right to self-determination in Myanmar and argues that it should, therefore, not be branded a terrorist organization. The Foreign Ministry of Myanmar, however, believes otherwise and in a statement in January this year described ARSA as "*extremist elements both funded and inspired from abroad*." In August 2017, Myanmar's Anti-Terrorism Central Committee designated ARSA a terrorist organization. The Myanmar government has on several occasions emphasized that ARSA is linked to foreign Islamist organizations from which it receives funding and support.

The leader of ARSA, Ataullah abu Ammar Junjuni was born in Karachi, Pakistan in a family of Rohingya refugees, and grew up there. Ataullah later moved to Saudi Arabia, where he served as an Imam in a mosque frequented by the large Rohingya diaspora there. He returned to the Rakhine State in 2013, and formed Harakah al Yaqin there. In an attempt to add the geographical and ethnic context to that name and dilute the religious connotation implicit in it, the organisation's name was changed to ARSA in 2016. The move was also aimed at watering down ARSA's links with Arabic-sounding Jihadist radicalism. Despite this, security analysts believe that ARSA emerged out of the extensive Rohingya diaspora in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and especially Karachi. The International Crisis Group (ICG) reported in December

2016, that ARSA leaders have claimed in interviews of having links to elements in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. ICG also disclosed that Rohingya villagers had been '*secretly trained*' by Afghan and Pakistani fighters.

ARSA has sought to distance itself from Islamic Jihadist organizations and claims that protecting the Rohingya is its driving force, as against any religious motivation. However, this is belied by the fact that ARSA firmly adheres to traditional Islamic practices such as requiring recruits to swear an oath to the Quran, referring to their leader as an '*Amir*' and calling on foreign Muslim clerics to issue '*fatwas*'. Further, ARSA reportedly has a leadership council based in Saudi Arabia and several of its local leaders have roots in Pakistan. It also receives substantial funding from both countries. Media reports indicate that Rohingya clerics based in Saudi Arabia have played an important role in fundraising and facilitating money transfers.

Malaysia is also being used as a clearing house for ARSA funds and a transit point for movement of militants. The Thai border town of Mae Sot has become an important conduit for ARSA militants traveling from Malaysia to Myanmar. Mae Sot has a significant Muslim population and serves as a base for migrant workers from Myanmar. In 2013-14, Rohingya militants established training camps near the town, but Thai authorities acted firmly in shutting them down.

As per security analysts, ARSA also has about 150 foreigners in its ranks. Most are from Bangladesh, but there are 8-10 from Pakistan, and a few from Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand and even Uzbekistan. Training has been carried out by veterans of the Afghan wars in camps along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. ARSA is also receiving weapons from abroad. Photographs of a crate of new Kalashnikov-series Chinese manufactured 7.62mm assault rifles and a group of Rohingya youth in sarongs and tee-shirts being trained by instructors in the use of these weapons have recently come to light. Experts believe that these weapons were transported from abroad, most likely from Pakistan, by sea to south-eastern Bangladesh, from where they were moved to the ARSA camps on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. This area has been used for decades to smuggle in arms and ammunition. Several shipments of arms meant for Indian insurgent groups active in the north-eastern of the country were brought in through these same routes. In 2004, a consignment of about 2,000 assault rifles, grenades and rocket-launchers meant for these Indian insurgents was intercepted by security forces near Chittagong.

Videos have also been released by Islamist groups in Indonesia that show dozens of youth being imparted military training in Aceh, Sumatra. The groups claim that the youth are being prepared to undertake Jihad in Rakhine State.

ARSA's claim of its primarily aim being to defend the Rohingya sounds hollow. It was well aware of the heavily disproportionate reaction its attacks of August 2017, would generate from the Myanmar government, and that the main sufferers would be the fellow Rohingya. It had already had a first-hand preview of the same following its earlier attacks, as Harakah al-Yaqin, of October 2016, to which the Myanmar security forces responded brutally, forcing a huge exodus of the Rohingya into Bangladesh. The purpose of the August 2017 attacks, therefore, appears to have been to draw the attention of Islamic countries and radical organizations as a means to generate enhanced financial support for ARSA's violent ways.

The apathy of ARSA to the plight of the common Rohingya becomes more apparent when the timing of the attacks of August 2017, is taken into consideration. The report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State chaired by former UN secretary general Kofi Annan had just been released. The report, which put forth recommendations for peaceful resolution of the conflict, several of which were certainly in the interest of the Rohingya, was welcomed by the Myanmar government. The ARSA attacks muddied the waters and provided an indubitable reason to the Myanmar government to put off implementation of the recommendations. What the attacks actually succeeded in ushering in instead was chaos and volatility, conditions ideal for radical Islamist organizations with nefarious designs from thousands of miles away from the Rakhine State to set up base and exploit.

Pakistan's Dubious Designs – Fishing in Troubled Waters

Media reports quoting intelligence analysts have suggested that Pakistani terrorist Hafiz Saeed, who carries a $10 million US bounty and is the founder leader of one of South Asia's largest Islamic terrorist organizations, the LeT, was actively involved in the creation of ARSA and continues to provide support to it. Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami-Arakan (HUJI-A) leader Abdus Qadoos Burmi, who like Ataullah is also a Pakistani of Rohingya descent based in Karachi, has in videos circulated online called for Jihad in Myanmar. He is thought to be the brain behind the formation of ARSA and is the outfit's mentor. Burmi has been a long-term associate of Hafiz Saeed and the LeT, and has been on the podium in several of the public meetings organized by Hafiz Saeed.

Obaidul Quader, Bangladesh's Minister of Road Transport and Bridges, recently disclosed that his country was investigating the linkages that Pakistani intelligence agency ISI had established with ARSA. This is not surprising as it is common knowledge that LeT is a veritable arm of the ISI and Hafiz Saeed one of its most prized assets. So important is Saeed to the ISI that it has against all odds protected him from prosecution despite coming under tremendous international pressure, most notably from the US and India. ISI's special operations cell reportedly coordinates the activity of the different Rohingya groups.

The tracks of Hafiz Saeed's involvement with the Rohingya issue stretch back at least as far as July 2012, when he organized the Difa-e-Musalman-e-Arakan (Defense of Muslims in Myanmar) conference in Pakistan to highlight the Rohingya cause. Subsequently, in August 2012, Shahid Mahmood and Nadeem Awaan, senior operatives of LeT's front organization the Jamaat-ud Dawa (JuD), visited Bangladesh to establish direct contact with Rohingya elements based in camps along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

In 2013, following the riots in Rakhine State the previous year, the Bangladesh government confirmed to New Delhi that the LeT had instigated militant Rohingya elements to carry out serial bomb blast at the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya, India in July. Earlier, Hafiz Saeed had issued a statement in June 2013, accusing India of assisting the Myanmar regime in its persecution of the Rohingya. The Bangladesh government further informed that the LeT had launched a recruitment drive among the displaced Rohingya, for which senior LeT commanders had been visiting the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area. The LeT was being assisted in its endeavours by Rohingya extremist leaders including Rabiul Alam, a Pakistan-

trained jihadist from the Teknaf region, and Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation.

Pakistan-linked Rohingya terror groups have also been noticed near Mae Sot on the Thai-Myanmar border. Maulana Ustad Wazeer aka Noor Kabir and Fareed Faizullah, both Pakistani nationals of Rohingya origin, were involved in recruiting Rohingya migrants who fled from Bangladesh to Thailand or Malaysia but could not get the necessary documentation in those countries.

After the 2012 riots in Myanmar, Bangladeshi security agencies had made a series of arrests. The prisoners disclosed that Pakistani terror groups and Saudi financiers had hatched a plan to radicalize, train and fund some Rohingya refugees. They also revealed that Al Qaeda explosive expert Nur Bashar and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Shura member, Mufti Abu Zarra ul Burmi, had visited Rakhine State.

In 2012, Bangladeshi authorities also arrested Maulana Shabeer Ahmed, a Pakistan-based Rohingya operative, who revealed that he was coordinating with Rohingya militants in Bangladesh on behalf of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). JeM, like the LeT, is a Pakistan-based UN-designated terrorist organization that enjoys the patronage of the ISI. Ahmed was involved in carrying out illegal financial transactions from Pakistan to Bangladesh.

Jihadist weekly magazine '*Al-Qalam*' that is published in Urdu carries articles written by JeM chief Maulana Masood Azhar under the pen name '*Sa'adi*'. Masood Azhar has threatened the '*oppressive*' Myanmar government to prepare for "*the thudding sound of the footsteps of its conquerors*". He warned that "*the country will be soon deprived of peace and tranquillity*".

Media reports also indicated that Pakistan-backed terrorist outfits active in Jammu & Kashmir, particularly the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), have been inviting the Rohingya to join them 'in fighting for Islam'. In December 2016, Hafiz Saeed in a video message also urged the Rohingya Muslims to join his *'Jihad'*.

In July 2013, another Pakistani terrorist outfit the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) announced the opening of a new jihadist front in Myanmar in support of the Rohingya Muslims.

The role of Pakistan-based groups in training the Rohingya in making improvised explosive devices (IED) was revealed during an IED blast at Buthidaung Township on 4 May 2017. Investigations revealed that two of the four killed while assembling the device were Pakistani nationals of Rohingya origin who were identified as Abdul Rahim and Anarthullah. They had returned to Rakhine State after spending 20 years in the Af-Pak region. The other two killed were local Rohingya.

In November 2017, Firdous Sheikh, the Dubai-based president of Rohingya Federation of Arakan, visited Pakistan to attend a seminar organised by NGO Al-Khidmat Foundation Pakistan (AKFP) in Manshera, Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir, and another similar event in Islamabad in support of Rohingya Muslims. He also met Naveed Qamar, the Karachi-based 'A*mir*' of JuD. This meeting was facilitated by Noor Hussain, Pakistan-based leader of

Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and President of Burmese Muslim Welfare Organisation. Naveed Qamar informed them that two units of JuD offshoot Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF) each were functioning in Teknaf, Bangladesh and Indonesia, where relief material and medical facilities were being provided to Rohingya refugees. Qamar is a US State Department-designated terrorist and FIF has been designated as a pseudonym of the LeT by the State Department. Interestingly, the Al Khidmat Foundation that invited Sheikh to its seminar is part of a network that includes the Jamaat-e-Islami political party of Pakistan. It figured in a US Embassy telegram quoted by Wikileaks as stating that Al Khidmat was involved in recruitment of Jihadi terrorists, targeting children from underprivileged backgrounds for the same. In a move that should set the alarm bells ringing, Al Khidmat is in the process of forming a coalition of groups under the name Rohingya Task Force (RTF) to support the Rohingya.

Rohingya Jihadis have also been found to be fighting alongside Pakistani terrorists in the Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir. Chotta Burmi, one such Rohingya terrorist, was killed by security forces in Jammu & Kashmir along with JeM commander Adil Pathan in October 2015. Chotta Burmi, like Abdus Qadoos Burmi, has shared the dais with Hafiz Saeed at the latter's public meetings.

The motivating factor behind the involvement of the Let, JeM and other Pakistani terrorist organizations with the Rohingya cause is certainly not philanthropy. The first wave of Rohingya came to Karachi in 1978, but the majority arrived during the 1990s both as economic migrants and refugees fleeing the violence in their homeland. *These* Rohingya live in miserable conditions and have not yet been offered Pakistani citizenship. None of the organizations purportedly espousing the Rohingya cause has raised its voice to demand better living conditions or citizenship for them. Pakistani political analyst Ayesha Siddiqa wrote in 2012, that groups like the JuD take up instances of oppression against Muslims to present themselves as defenders of the faith, but they really have little interest in the actual concerns of the Rohingya, especially those in Pakistan. Hafiz Saeed, for example, has argued that the Rohingya in Pakistan should be given Myanmar nationality and "*treated justly in their own country*", rather than being given Pakistani citizenship. This indifference to the sad state of the Rohingya in Pakistan when contrasted with the great interest these organizations take in the condition of the Rohingya several thousand miles away clearly exposes the real intentions of LeT and its ilk. That they are fishing in troubled waters at the behest of the ISI, which seeks to add to the narrative of instability and chaos in the region that has been promoted by it over the last 70 years, becomes starkly apparent. The Rohingya are highly vulnerable in their current circumstances, and present relatively easy targets for the ISI to exploit to further its malevolent designs both against India and the secular Awami League regime in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The Rohingya have since the middle of the 20th century endured unimaginable hardships and the worst form of persecution at the hands of successive regimes in Myanmar. It is in the interest of the international community, especially regional countries most directly affected including Myanmar, Bangladesh and India, to work together to ensure a just solution that is acceptable to the Rohingya. Despite the recent externally-induced jihadist resurgence amongst a section of the Rohingya, what the predominant majority of the community desires is to return back home and live life with dignity. Reports indicate that in the aftermath of the August 2017 attacks, most of the Rohingya were livid with ARSA for providing an excuse to

the Myanmar army to drive them into exile. The need of the hour is to find a lasting solution urgently lest Islamic jihadist forces take over and exploit the issue to further their own destructive agenda. As Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak warned in his speech at an *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (*OIC) meeting early last year, the Rohingya could be '*infiltrated*' by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) if their plight is not resolved, and this could threaten the whole region.

ISIL is in disarray after the pounding it took in Syria and Iraq last year. The real danger emanates from Pakistan, especially the ISI, which has actually launched a concerted effort to exploit the plight of the Rohingya to the full, even if at the cost of the future of the Rohingya themselves. For the international community, highlighting the woes of the Rohingya by itself may not provide the desired long-lasting solution. Pakistan needs to be taken to task and told in no uncertain terms, through imposition of sanctions if necessary, that its despicable policies vis-à-vis the Rohingya would no longer be tolerated. Unless that happens, a Harakah al-Yaqin or an ARSA would invariably emerge on the horizon every time a solution appears likely.

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