



PROCEEDINGS

Webinar on



THE ROHINGYA CRISIS: RESPONSE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE REPATRIATION PROCESS



BIISS Auditorium, Dhaka
Wednesday 21 April, 2021



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Webinar on

The Rohingya Crisis: Response of the International Community and the Repatriation Process

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organized a webinar on “The Rohingya Crisis: Response of the International Community and the Repatriation Process” on 21 April 2021. His Excellency **Md Shahriar Alam**, MP, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, was present at the webinar as the Chief Guest. **Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari**, ndc, psc, te, Director General, BISS, chaired the session and delivered the welcome address and concluding remarks. **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir**, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI); **Brigadier General M Sakhawat Hossain**, ndc, psc, PhD, (Retd.), Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University; **Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmad**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka; **Mr Md Delwar Hossain**, Director General, Myanmar Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh and **Mr Abu Salah Md. Yousuf**, Senior Research Fellow, BISS, presented their respective papers in the webinar.

Insightful discussion by the designated speakers was followed by a lively open discussion where senior officials from Bangladesh government, retired ambassadors, representatives from different foreign missions, businessmen, members of academia, researchers, teachers from various universities and media representatives took part and articulated their observations on the issue.



Welcome Remarks by the Chair



Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te

Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari ndc, psc, te, Director General, BIISS welcomed everyone to the webinar and expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the Honourable Chief Guest **H E Mr Shariar Alam, MP** for gracing the occasion with his kind presence. At the beginning of his address, he paid his deepest tribute to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and to all martyrs who laid their lives for the nation.

Indicating the latest developments in Myanmar, General Bari said that the Rohingya repatriation issue had become further precarious. Bangladesh has continued to endure the increasing predicament caused by over a million persecuted Rohingyas who themselves remain homeless and whose children are growing up in utter uncertainty, while the international community remains largely skeptical. He pointed out that Bangladesh, with its limited resources, had shown great generosity and compassion by opening the border for those displaced people. Its inherent obligation towards humanity compelled itself to act rationally. However, the situation has turned somewhat paradoxical where humanitarian concerns lie on the one hand and growing multifaceted security concerns lie on the other.

General Bari expressed his concern that the Rohingyas remain vulnerable to human trafficking, as well as exploitation by radical or organized criminal groups. Furthermore, the Rohingya influx had an adverse impact on local commodity prices, tourism, employment opportunities, and wages. In addition, the natural environment had been severely affected. The Rohingya crisis is a potential security concern not only for Bangladesh but also for the region. However, Bangladesh continues to provide Rohingyas with generous assistance. Recently, they are also being relocated to more comfortable dwellings at Bhasan Char.

General Bari opined that the major exigency for Bangladesh now is the sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya community. In that bid, Bangladesh had opened formal negotiations with Myanmar on repatriation in October 2017. Moreover, both countries signed a deal on 23 November 2017 for the possible repatriation of thousands of Rohingyas. Thereafter, two abortive attempts have been made to start the voluntary return. He also noted that the unresolved Rohingya issue naturally affected mutual positions of the two countries in other areas of cooperation as well. Consequently, about ten agreements between the two countries, including those in areas of land boundary management, prevention of narcotics, trade and transport, etc., had not gone as desired.

The 02-01-21 coup or the military coup on 01 February 2021 added further uncertainty to the repatriation process; repeated attempts of Rohingya repatriation had failed, and the Rohingyas are getting skeptical regarding the conditions in the Rakhine state, which might not be conducive for return as there had been no guarantee of citizenship, safety, and basic human rights. The pandemic and Myanmar's election in November last year had led to the delay of the joint meeting between officials of the two countries. Following the coup, a tripartite meeting involving officials from Bangladesh, Myanmar and China scheduled for 04 February 2021 had been postponed. As a result, new concerns and confusions have been mounting regarding peaceful and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas.

The Director General expressed concern that the repatriation efforts are not producing desired results for Bangladesh. The international community or major powers had done little; while the European Union (EU), the United States (US), Canada and Australia condemned Myanmar and called for sanctions, the proposal failed in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition. He mentioned that due to strategic competition, powerful states seemed not much eager to concentrate on the issues of the humanitarian crisis; rather, they had been trying to engage the countries according to their respective strategic game planning. The Sino-Indian competition in Myanmar is visible almost in all the strategic and investment aspects. Therefore, China and India did not appear very eager to raise any issue which could affect their national interests. Such strategic competition facilitated Myanmar to avoid any pressure for violation of the human rights of its ethnic minorities.

General Bari emphasized that China and India have a significant role in solving the crisis between Bangladesh and Myanmar and strengthening the relationship. For the successful repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar, China's involvement is crucial as it is an influential actor in Asia and probably the only actor with strong stakes in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. Other regional and extra-regional actors, e.g., Japan, the US and India, who have been mobilizing their strategic channels and economic diplomacy to be a gainer in the geopolitical race and have stakes (especially in connectivity and infrastructure development), could play vital roles in bringing the unresolved Rohingya issue to the negotiation table.

Indicating the tradition of Bangladesh, which follows a policy of peaceful settlement of disputes with the neighbouring countries, General Bari recommended that Bangladesh needs to develop an effective negotiation framework where it can engage all the stakeholders to ensure the return of the Rohingyas to their own land. Although sometimes ceaseless negotiation becomes complicated due to domestic unstable political process and power distribution in Myanmar, a multi-layered negotiation with different stakeholders might produce effective outcomes. Multilateral forums could develop a convergent approach to resolving the Rohingya crisis. Organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) could pursue Myanmar to understand the necessity of cooperation with Bangladesh regarding Rohingya repatriation.



and other issues. Global civil society organizations (CSOs) and think tanks should come forward to pursue international public opinion in resolving the Rohingya crisis as well as create pressure on Myanmar. Additionally, CSOs in Western and democratic countries could help by pressurizing their respective governments for taking measures on humanitarian issues of Myanmar.

At the conclusion, General Bari expressed optimism that the distinguished panel of the webinar would shed light on those important issues. He again expressed gratitude to the honourable Chief Guest, distinguished audience for encouraging BISS with their kind participation and also hoped for an intriguing discussion followed by an engaging, interactive session.

Paper Presentations



Ambassador M. Humayun Kabir

President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

Ambassador M Humayun Kabir, President, BEI, spoke on “the West and the Rohingya Crisis”. He lauded the webinar as a timely initiative. Although the crisis had been a much talked about issue over the last three years, he believes the interaction between Bangladesh and Myanmar concerning the Rohingya repatriation remained largely stalled. Recent political developments in Myanmar takes priorities in a different direction. In that context, the discussion is a timely reminder that the repatriation of Rohingyas remains a high priority. This is a problem that not only demands early resolution, but the future process or situation should also be taken into consideration that might be loaded with lots of risks unless the problem can be properly and satisfactorily addressed.

Ambassador Kabir said that he would discuss the Rohingya issue from two perspectives—official and civil society. Before going into that analysis, he spoke about some recent developments that took place in Myanmar. Since August 2019, the discussion or dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar at the official level has been modest at best other than one or two meetings that took place but were halted again. The second development was the COVID-19 and the election in Myanmar. These two developments, he believes, stalled the discussion for accelerating the repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar. The third element that came out on the 1st of February 2021, i.e., the military coup, dealt a serious blow to this process. Consequently, the whole discourse on Rohingya repatriation has been diluted. Consequently, the West and other partners, who could play a critical role in the resolution of the problem, have their attention diverted to a much larger issue as they are now talking about the political situation in Myanmar. The Rohingya issue has now largely been marginalized. Therefore, in this context, he focused his discussion on what has so far been done and should be done. Regarding the official position of Western governments, he said it might look monolithic that they are taking a common position on this issue, based on four areas: humanitarian aspects, diplomatic-political aspects, legal aspects and geopolitical context. But a deeper look into their position reveals that some Western countries are driven more by humanitarian considerations, some are by legal compulsions and some by geopolitical context.

He touched upon the humanitarian aspect as this is important for both Bangladesh and Myanmar;

moreover, for supporting the Rohingyas, their livelihood and survival, this aspect carries equal importance. Here, Ambassador Kabir acknowledged and conveyed gratitude to Western countries as a group for all kinds of support they are extending for the Rohingyas in Bangladesh as well as in Myanmar. With reference to support, from the total outlay of around US\$ 877 million for Rohingyas up until 2020, almost 60 per cent had been received; nearly 50 per cent of this assistance came from the US while the rest came from the EU and others. A crucial thing to be noted is the growing tension between Rohingyas and the host community. In his opinion, donors or Western countries had been attentive to both the components. As he was going through records, he found that they had been providing humanitarian support up until 2020 for about 860,000 Rohingyas in Cox's Bazaar area and also for 950,000 of the host community. Thus, it could be seen that the Western governments had been quite active and supportive with regard to addressing humanitarian aspects. In his opinion, one thing should be kept in view that as long as Rohingyas stay in Bangladesh, the country will continuously need such or even more support from Western countries. Diplomatic and political dimension can be observed at two different layers. One layer is the UN system. In terms of the UN General Assembly resolutions, discussions at the UN Security Council, discussions, adoption of resolutions and setting up of mechanisms at the UN Human Rights Council, Western governments had been strongly supportive of Bangladesh both as part of a regional group (e.g., the EU) and individual states. Western civil society organizations have also been playing an equally important role in this regard.

Here, two components are important, according to Ambassador Kabir; the first being the think tanks, INGOs and media who have been extraordinarily supportive. The fact that the Rohingya issue is still in discussion, on the front burner of international discourse, is mainly because of the continuous effort put in by the INGOs, global media and think tanks in this regard. Although they sometimes focus on the humanitarian side, nonetheless, they highlight the need for sustained, safe and early return of Rohingyas to Myanmar. They sometimes also work with the Myanmar government to facilitate the process of the Rohingyas' return. Thus, when Western governments would be talked about, it would be vital to take note that the West is not composed of governments only but also their civil societies: INGOs, media, think tanks etc. INGOs have, in particular, been playing a positive role. Ambassador Kabir believes the Bangladeshi association or initiative to work with them could be very helpful and act as a force multiplier because Western governments respond to public opinion, and these are the organizations that could frame and nourish a particular kind of narrative necessary for early and safe repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar. Bangladesh has been working with them but would perhaps need also to continue this effort.

On geopolitical context, he said it is slightly complex as, among Western countries, Japan and South Korea take a somewhat nuanced position, keeping their geopolitical interests in view. Following the coup, although Japan has taken a strong stand on the Myanmar issue, still, they are driven by the Myanmar narrative and are more focused on protecting their own geopolitical interests. Referring to the Director General of BIIS, he said Japan always had the Chinese rule in mind; India also had that. Following China, Singapore is the largest investor in Myanmar. He did not categorize Singapore in the Western camp as it is an ASEAN member but mentioned simply to draw attention to what the country is doing, which, according to him, is also important.

In terms of what could be done as for way forward, he referred to an interesting development recently taking place in Myanmar and is worth noting: the proposal or effort for forming a national unity government by the elected representatives. In this government, all ethnicities of the country would be included, as has been said in the initial announcement. Against this backdrop, he said the fight between the Myanmar military and Aung San Suu Kyi is essentially a Bamar issue, a fight between two Bamar groups. But what is being heard from the proposed national unity government is that they want to build up a federal structure containing Bamars and

non-Bamar groups, including Rohingyas from Rakhine. Bangladesh can observe this trend and how it actually develops. On 24 April 2021, an ASEAN meeting would be held, and General Min Aung Hlaing would attend that; the national unity government also asked for a place there. It remains to be seen what evolves. If their idea of a federal Myanmar would progress farther, that could open up some space for Rohingyas and other small



minorities who are facing difficulties in Myanmar. Bangladesh must keep up engaging with Western countries to ensure the humanitarian support continues at this level and, if required, be enhanced or increased.

The next thing Ambassador Kabir suggested is that the present trilateral collaboration with China should also be continued. Although it is understood that China is facing a lot of difficulty in Myanmar after the coup. Like his predecessor, President Joe Biden is focusing on the Indo-Pacific Strategy; in the last QUAD meeting, the Myanmar issue was also brought in. Democratization in Myanmar would be a part in the QUAD or Indo-Pacific Strategy. In that case, the Rohingya issue could play a role; here, Ambassador Kabir said he believes Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts could prove very important as it is now understood that the US would continue to promote the Indo-Pacific idea. Here, the Rohingya issue remains a vulnerable spot, as Bangladesh continues to engage with its Western friends at various levels, particularly with efforts for ensuring humanitarian and diplomatic support, but a new dimension that came up is to align the Rohingya issue with the US and Japanese priorities. India and Japan could also be brought in to promote the Indo-Pacific Strategy if the US would assume a leadership role to take the initiative on the Rohingya issue as a pending and festering problem. In his view, this could be the opening to look for and pursuing.



Brigadier General M Sakhawat Hossain, ndc, psc, PhD (Retd)

Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University

Brigadier General M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd), Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University, structured his speech under four different heads: firstly, what is ASEAN, who are the member states, what are the characteristics and role of the ASEAN member states? Secondly, where are the Rohingyas in South Asia residing, which are the countries most affected by the crisis, and which of them are interested in seeing the Rohingyas repatriated? Thirdly, what is the position of Myanmar in ASEAN? Finally, what should Bangladesh do about the Rohingyas, and what should Bangladesh expect from the ASEAN countries?

While briefing the audience about ASEAN, Brigadier General Sakhawat mentioned that ASEAN has ten member states, including Myanmar. The country has borders with Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh and Laos. He opined that Myanmar is an important member of ASEAN since it became a member of this organization.

Brigadier General Sakhawat then discussed about how many Rohingyas are present in ASEAN countries. According to his statistics, Malaysia has 150 to 250 thousand Rohingyas present in its territory. Thailand has 20 to 30 thousand Rohingyas, who are now in the southern part of the country, within the border between Thailand and Malaysia, where the Malay Muslim majority people are residing. Indonesia has 25 to 40 thousand Rohingyas. Most ASEAN countries are not signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. Most of the Rohingyas in Malaysia are illegal, and they are being persecuted. There was a lot of hue and cry about that, particularly for boat people, who are going from Bangladesh and elsewhere to Malaysia. Indonesia is far away, and not much is heard about the Rohingyas there. Some of them are being looked after by UNHCR, but that does not include all. Most of the Rohingyas in Malaysia are not in camps. They are staying at the periphery of smaller towns and being engaged as illegal immigrant workers in various farms, which is creating discontent among the Malaysians, especially during the time of the pandemic, as the Rohingyas are accused of transmitting Covid in Malaysia.

While talking about the ASEAN structure, Brigadier General Sakhawat mentioned that the organizational structure of ASEAN does not allow discussion on internal issues of member states. Besides, there is no collective mechanism in ASEAN to resolve such crises. Referring to the ASEAN summit in Indonesia, he said that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who is now controlling the government in Myanmar, has been invited. He believes General Hlaing's invitation indicates that the ASEAN countries are not much interested in what is happening inside Myanmar, especially after the military coup. Therefore, the Rohingya issue will not be on the ASEAN summit's meeting agenda, he remarked. Their main agenda would be resolving the crisis in Myanmar through a negotiated settlement between the army and the rest of the people.

Regarding the National Unity Government (NUG), Brigadier General Sakhawat said that NUG has not been recognized by any country so far. Though they have demanded their presence at the ASEAN summit, but will not get any space this time. He also highlighted the fact that none of the associate members of the ASEAN is invited to the summit, including Korea, Japan, China, New Zealand and Australia, and to a certain extent, the USA. Therefore, he believes the upcoming summit is going to be exclusive, and its main agenda will be how to resolve the crisis.



At that point, Brigadier General Sakhawat talked about what Bangladesh could expect from ASEAN. In the past, the country had not seen anything from ASEAN. In fact, Singapore, one of the member states of ASEAN, is the second-largest investor in Myanmar. The country has hardly condemned Myanmar's military coup. As a matter of fact, any of the ASEAN countries have hardly condemned the military takeover in Myanmar. The main destination of Rohingyas among the ASEAN member states is Malaysia. The reason behind that is mainly economic, for which Malaysia remains a lucrative country for Rohingyas. Despite being two large countries with a Muslim majority, Malaysia and Indonesia are not vocal at international fora regarding the Rohingya crisis. They are not part of the ICJ, though they are part of OIC, but have not supported Bangladesh even in that way. He noted that Bangladesh should not expect much either from the ASEAN summit or ASEAN member states. As far as the ASEAN is concerned, the Rohingya issue is on the backburner. ASEAN is more interested in settlement of the internal crisis in Myanmar, he added.

Highlighting the current position of the military government in Myanmar, Brigadier General Sakhawat, at this moment, noted that the military junta is in a tough situation, in a sense that they have never expected such opposition from the people. He believes there is some pressure from China; that is why the military has said that there is going to be an election in two years as per the constitution. Brigadier General Sakhawat thinks that the military is not going to negotiate with the past regime, that is, Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) government.

Regarding the junta's handling of the Rohingya issue, Brigadier General Sakhawat highlighted two things. Firstly, the military has mentioned the Rohingya issue and said that they are trying to resolve it. But at the same time, they have asked for international funds. They might also be interested in discussing the issue with Bangladesh, Brigadier General Sakhawat said. Bangladesh is one country that has neither condemned nor taken any stance on military issues in Myanmar. However, the point is that the Rohingya issue is now on the

backburner, he remarked. The military government in Myanmar might try to open a dialogue with Bangladesh in the coming days to showcase to the West that they are trying to negotiate this humanitarian issue. Secondly, they might take back some Rohingyas selectively, but the repatriated Rohingyas will not be taken to their old places. Previously, north Arakan had been dominated by the Rohingyas, where they were the majority. If the Rohingyas are now taken back to Myanmar, they will be diluted to the whole Arakan, from south to north.

There are indications that the Rohingyas, who were Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Myanmar, their lives have been relaxed a bit by the present military government, as the Arakanese have supported them. But, within Arakan, the Arakan Army, which was little empathetic of the Rohingya issue initially, is not that much supportive right now. At present, they are in line with the Military junta in Naypyidaw. Therefore, they are now fighting with “the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)” — two organizations, which are now claimed to be working for Rohingya as a militant group. So, the Arakan Army, in support of Tatmadaw, is fighting against these organizations. Brigadier General Sakhawat believes it will be difficult for Bangladesh to send back Rohingyas to Myanmar, depending on how much pressure the Bangladeshi government can put on Myanmar. Even if Myanmar takes some of the Rohingyas, they will be diluted within the whole Arakan.

Brigadier General Sakhawat then shed some light on the options for Bangladesh regarding the crisis. Based on his own study and understanding, he remarked that Bangladesh has not looked after ASEAN countries that much for resolving the Rohingya issue, especially Malaysia or Indonesia. Bangladesh has not been active in this sector. Referring to Singapore, Brigadier General Sakhawat said the country has not yet discontinued its investment in Myanmar. It has not condemned the military coup that much. Singapore is now trying to negotiate with the Military government to save its own investment. He stressed looking into the East, particularly Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, to resolve the Rohingya crisis. These countries could individually, not as ASEAN, put some pressure on the Military government as well. Brigadier General Sakhawat strongly believes that NLD is not coming back to power soon. He also highlighted that the Military is yet to face opposition from larger Bamar Buddhist monks, which, according to him, is very noticeable.

Brigadier General Sakhawat stressed the importance of working with Myanmar. He said Bangladesh has no other options but to proceed diplomatically. He opined that ASEAN countries fall within the geostrategic equation in the South China Sea between China and the West. Many of the ASEAN countries, like Laos, Cambodia, are very close to China. Thus, ASEAN is sitting on the tussle between China and the West. He believes no ASEAN country, even the Philippines, would want to get into this problem. Therefore, geo-strategically, ASEAN would like to remain aloof from the activities of Indo-pacific, or QUAD. People need to wait and see the developments in Myanmar. Myanmar military is not going to give away; it will bring its own type of government. Though there are some elements of fighting, like the Karens and Kachins, have started fighting against the Myanmar Army, but that will not worry the Myanmar military that much.

In conclusion, Brigadier General Sakhawat said that Bangladesh should not depend on the West to resolve the Rohingya crisis. According to him, West is mainly working on the humanitarian ground. But they have not put much pressure on Myanmar, mainly due to its geostrategic location and geopolitical significance. Bangladesh should actively consider engaging with ASEAN countries alongside opening dialogue with Myanmar. The Rohingya issue is not going to pass away in the coming years. Therefore, all concerted efforts should be on the diplomatic front on how best Bangladesh can mitigate this issue. Bangladesh has done enough alone and is now suffering due to the crisis. Therefore, for Bangladesh's own sake, it needs to resolve the problem as peacefully as possible.



Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmad

Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, spoke on “the Role of India and China in the Rohingya Repatriation Process”. He began his presentation by pointing out that both China and India have similar interests in Myanmar. The country is the meeting place for China or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India or the Indo-Pacific Alliance (IPA). This is something that is needed to be brought into calculation when seeking their role in the Rohingya repatriation process. He highlighted four similar interests of China and India. First, keeping peace at their respective borders. India’s insurgency-related unrest in the Northeast and China’s drug-related unrest in the southern borders both got relatively contained by defending Myanmar. Second, creating connectivity for their own economies. This will improve China’s access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean and India’s unlocking of the Northeast part through Myanmar. Third, getting access to Myanmar’s market. China’s bilateral trade with Myanmar reached nearly US\$168 billion in the first 11 months of 2019, while India’s trade with Myanmar is worth US\$1.5 billion in 2019-2020. Fourth, developing multiple relations with the Myanmar military. In 2019, India emerged as Myanmar’s top arms supplier selling US\$100 million of military hardware compared with China’s US\$47 million.

He then identified two factors for driving out the Rohingyas from Myanmar on 26 August 2017, which was 17 months after Aung San Suu Kyi became part of the state power. First is the submission of the Kofi Annan Commission report. The Commission was favourable to reviewing Myanmar Citizenship Law and granting the Rohingyas human rights. The military thought it would be prudent to go for the final solution in August 2017, knowing well that Suu Kyi could not afford to go against it. She could not contain the pressure of the international community, proving the military correct. Suu Kyi went to The Hague to defend the military. Now that the sanctions have been withdrawn and unlikely to return, the Myanmar military can go without her. Suu Kyi although broadened her political base by going to the Hague and opposing the Rohingyas. Despite that, her effort proved ineffective to the military in that the provisional verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) was concerned. The military thought it could play the card better with the international community on the Rohingya genocide issue. On the other hand, Suu Kyi can be made to return if the domestic turmoil goes out of hand, but that is a long shot. She lost her credibility with the international community, and the current geopolitics hardly favoured her in getting such support.

The second factor relates to the constitution. There was no denying the fact that recognition of the Rohingya identity remains central to the problem. It is the greatest stumbling block and, conversely, a way out of resolving the crisis. The disruptive policy of Myanmar, which has gradually disenfranchised and dehumanized the Rohingyas, comes from an unspoken racial feeling of the military and civilian elite of the country. This, unfortunately, found the legal expression in the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. As

Thant Myint-U, the grandson of U Thant, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, points out in his book titled *The Hidden History of Burma* published in 2020. Professor Imtiaz quoted from the book, “The constitution included an arching formula that tried to raise multinational races which population constitutes at least 0.1 per cent of the national populace which will be around fifty thousand people in 2010 was entitled to representation in the local legislative assemblies and ministerial portfolios in the local administration. If it constituted more than half a township, it would be entitled to an autonomous zone. So, if ever the Rohingyas are recognized, they are, by the definition of the constitution, would get autonomy. That is something unacceptable for the rest of Myanmar.” He quoted further, “I have heard many Burmese warn that giving Muslims in northern Arakan

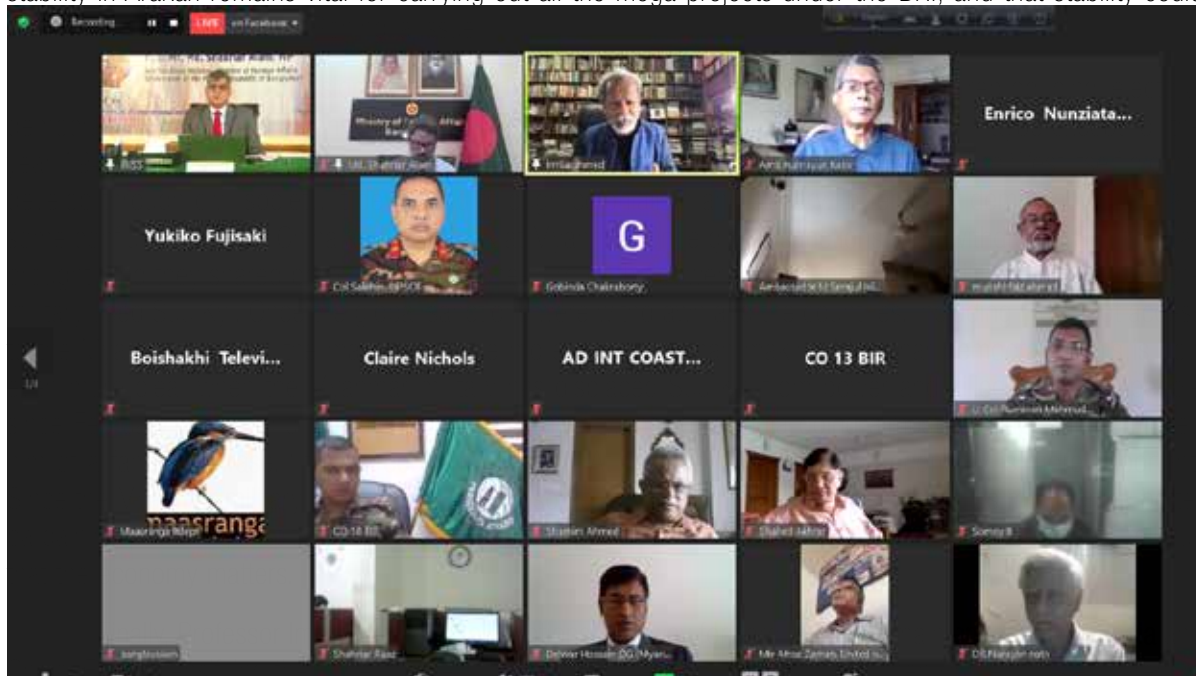


status as Rohingya would mean automatically to their being entitled to a zone of their own. A part of Burma would fall under Sharia law.”

Neither the ICJ nor Suu Kyi mentioned that Rohingyas are illegal Bengalis. However, she never used the word Rohingya but only once. Throughout the deliberation of Suu Kyi and her team at the ICJ, the word that was used was “Arakanese Muslim”. From that standpoint, if they are Arakanese Muslims, then they have to go back to Arakan. More importantly, the ICJ came out with the verdict, saying they are Rohingyas. However, countries including Japan and India are still using some other terms such as “displaced people” rather than Rohingya. Bangladesh should insist on that. If the ICJ can use the term Rohingya, then why not some democratic countries? In India, the BJP supports the two-nation theory; this contention of Arakan falling under sharia law will have some impact on BJP’s thinking. Referring to his personal experience, Professor Imtiaz said that when he travelled to Myanmar and India before the pandemic, he heard the highest officials using the word illegal Bengalis. Bangladesh has not done much work on this. Even in official documents, India refrains from using the word Rohingya which needs to be corrected.

Professor Imtiaz argued that the Rohingyas cannot ever be repatriated without the consent of the Myanmar military. The world cannot think of Myanmar without the military unless there is a revolution. The military of Myanmar is part of the state. There is no hope for Rohingyas without the support of the military. Bangladesh has some positive memory on that issue. Back in the 1970s and 1990s, when the bulk of the

Rohingyas were repatriated, Myanmar was under military rule. Therefore, here no one should rule out the military yet again playing such a role. Here, China could be effective because of its historical relations with the Myanmar military. And more so, if Bangladesh and some of the regional powers could convince China that the stability in Arakan remains vital for carrying out all the mega projects under the BRI, and that stability could



Modi came, Honourable President of Bangladesh, in his speech, spoke about the Rohingya issue before him. Secondly, Bangladesh, including the international community favourable to the Rohingya, needs to convince India and Japan to decouple from Myanmar. Once India and Japan are decoupled from Myanmar, international pressure on China can intensify indeed to a point where China would see greater merit in putting pressure on Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya crisis. But since Myanmar is the meeting place of BRI and IPA, innovative diplomatic manoeuvring will be needed. Thirdly, India has a vibrant civil society; it is important to engage the Indian civil society that could rise to the occasion and put pressure to decouple India from Myanmar. When a genocide takes place, it does not remain bilateral. Genocide, by definition, is international. Back in 1971, India supported Bangladesh because of genocide. They had high moral ground mainly because of the genocide committed against the people of Bangladesh, and 10 million refugees ended up in India. It is important that the media, human rights activists and writers should be engaged and brought to the mainstream so that the Indian government feels pressure and tries to decouple itself. Finally, an international effort ought to be undertaken to shame international investors in Myanmar. This is where the Rohingya diaspora spread over 17 countries can play a major role. The international community need to help the Rohingya diaspora to form unity and organization. Webinars and media can be instrumental in making the diaspora vibrant. A significant number of Myanmar citizen dissatisfied with the military; hence, there is a possibility of them joining in this accord. This will sensitize the people of both India and China, which could pressure the Myanmar military to resolve the crisis.



Mr Md Delwar Hossain

Director General, Myanmar Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh

Mr Md Delwar Hossain, Director General, Myanmar Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, spoke on the topic, “Multilateral Organizations and The Rohingya Crisis: The UN, EU and OIC”. At the outset of his presentation, he expressed his deep appreciation to the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) for organizing the event. He also thanked the organizers for giving him the opportunity to join in this very important webinar as a panelist.

Mr Hossain began by giving a brief overview of the Rohingya crisis and the initiatives undertaken by the government of Bangladesh for their repatriation process. He stated that the Rohingya crisis has become a perennial problem for Bangladesh. The magnitude and intensity of the exodus of 2017 surpassed all previous records. Previously, Bangladesh repatriated the Rohingyas and resolved the crisis purely on a bilateral basis. This time, Bangladesh government has undertaken initiatives to resolve the crisis permanently. In this regard, he emphasized that for a durable solution, it is essential for Bangladesh to obtain international support as bilateral negotiation has certain limitations. Sometimes it appeared very difficult to raise certain issues in a bilateral setting which required collective efforts. As a result, the Bangladesh government has contacted several multilateral bodies. They discussed the issue with institutions, civil societies and media both at home and abroad. Besides, the government has ensured unhindered media access in Cox’s Bazar and a relaxed visa regime in order to facilitate international access to Rohingya camps.

At this stage, Mr Hossain discussed the response of the United Nations (UN). After the crisis began in August 2017, Bangladesh took this issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The UNSC discussed the human rights situation of Rakhine state on 13 September and came up with some media statements on a consensus basis. Subsequently, it met as many as four times in September 2017. Since then, the UNSC has remain seized with the Rohingya issue. However, sometimes other issues got more priority than the Rohingya issue. Besides, the UNHRC has undertaken some commendable initiatives, particularly the independent fact-finding mission. It has come up with two very comprehensive reports on atrocities in Myanmar. The latest report, which was published in September 2019, identifies the funding sources of the Myanmar military. Moreover, it contains some specific recommendations to the international community, particularly for the UNSC. After the latest exodus, in September 2017, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh raised the Rohingya issue and placed the five-point proposal at the 72nd UNGA session in New York. In subsequent UNGA meetings, she put forward specific recommendations and all those were duly taken care of in UNGA resolutions on Myanmar.

Regarding the responses of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), he stated that it has also played an active role in the Rohingya issue, particularly on the accountability front. Bangladesh hosted the



45th OIC Foreign Ministers' Conference in Dhaka in May 2018. At that conference, a resolution was adopted to put forward an ad hoc ministerial meeting to advance the accountability issue. In subsequent OIC Foreign Ministers' meetings, that issue featured prominently. Finally, in 2019, at the 14th OIC summit in Mecca, OIC leaders gave a green signal to the Ad Hoc Ministerial Committee to file a case at the International of Justice (ICJ) on behalf of the OIC. Accordingly, Gambia filed a case. After hearing the case, the court indicated four "provisional measures" as requested by the Gambia. Shortly after those provisional measures, there was a UNSC meeting to discuss the role of the UNSC in relation to the provisional measures. However, once again, there was a division among UNSC members. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority was in favour of regular monitoring and intervention on behalf of the UNSC for the implementation of the provisional measures. On the other hand, some members were not in favour of UNSC intervention in this case. As a result, no encouraging outcome was achieved from that UNSC meeting.

Like the OIC, the European Union (EU) has tried to be involved in the Rohingya crisis in terms of humanitarian assistance. They have been very vocal about accountability. Recently, the EU has imposed sanctions against ten individuals and two military-controlled companies following the footprints of the US. Hence, there are intense activities in different multilateral forums. Likewise, the ASEAN summit of November 2018 in Singapore adopted two paragraphs in their final communiqué regarding the Rohingya crisis. In those paragraphs, they made specific commitments, e.g., ASEAN will send a need assessment team to Myanmar to assist repatriation. Besides, Singapore Foreign Minister came to Bangladesh and travelled to Cox's Bazar accompanied by the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. Since that summit in 2018, ASEAN and ASEM have been taking the Rohingya issue seriously. Every time, certain paragraphs are visible in their outcome documents. Despite all those initiatives and resolutions, he expressed, there is hardly any shift in the attitude of Myanmar towards the Rohingya issue.

At this stage, he pointed the contributions of the international community in providing humanitarian

assistance and facilitating repatriation. He opined that there is very little commitment on the part of the international community to take decisive actions or concerted efforts to resolve the crisis. Moreover, there is a divergence of opinions in the international community, particularly among leading nations. In this respect, he mentioned media reports about Myanmar's widening economic relations and military cooperation with different countries, e.g., the supply of dual-purpose materials through different organizations to Myanmar from the West.

In summarizing his presentation, Mr Hossain stated that the Rohingya crisis is a ticking time bomb, and hence, needs to be resolved at the earliest possible. If the international community fails to resolve this crisis, it may entail the highest security risks for the region. Since a huge displaced population with their grievances and aspiration unattended for decades are always prone to different types of illegal activities. Therefore, the international community needs to understand the long-term impacts of the crisis in the region and beyond. He believes that at this juncture, the international community needs to join hands as it is their common responsibility to resolve the Rohingya crisis for the betterment of the region and the world in general. He reiterated that there is a divergence of opinions among nations regarding the Rohingya issue. Considering the fact, recently, Bangladesh has consulted with all the major stakeholders to resolve the crisis. He viewed that there is a need of coming to a consensus regarding some basic things for the successful facilitation of repatriation. He discussed several basic things. Firstly, security, which is non-negotiable. Secondly, the opportunity for Rohingyas to lead a normal life. Thirdly, pathways to citizenship through issuing proper identity cards because it will be unambiguously recognized Rohingya as the citizen of Myanmar. He concluded by saying that the international community should collectively try to advance those basic elements as it is the collective responsibility of all, not only the government of Bangladesh.



Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf

Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf, Senior Research Fellow, BISS, delivered his presentation on “the Dilemmas of the US Sanctions against Myanmar”. He made this presentation within the context of the international response to Myanmar’s persecution of Rohingya minorities and the recent military coup that took place in February 2021. He argued that among all international sanctions, those by the US are the most important. In his presentation, he briefly explained those sanctions from a historical perspective. He explained the US sanction in Myanmar in three phases. The US started to impose sanctions against Myanmar in 1997, which was aimed at supporting democratization and promoting human rights in the country.

The first phase was a hardline approach that had been in place from 1997 to 2010. The US was not closely cooperating with Myanmar during the Cold War. It was more focused on the security and stability in the Asia-Pacific and containing communist expansion in the region. In 1992, General Than Shwe came to power in Myanmar and adopted a policy of open economy, which increased the presence of Western companies in the country. During that time, the US also showed its interest to promote democratization in Myanmar. Therefore, the Clinton administration decided to impose sanctions against Myanmar in 1997 to limit exports, restrict imports or impede the flow of finance in the country. Mr Yousuf argued that these sanctions were comprehensive in nature as they completely isolated Myanmar from the West and increased its dependency on China.

Mr Yousuf traced the origin of the second phase of US sanctions against Myanmar in 2010 that lasted till 2017. He termed this phase as the “engagement period”. He mentioned about the introduction of the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar that started a democratization period. Under the rule of President Thein Sein, the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, visited Myanmar in 2011, and President Barack Obama also went there in 2012 and 2015. During this period, most sanctions were waived as the US considered Myanmar as a transforming democracy. According to Mr Yousuf, the US engagement with Myanmar during that time coincided with the US strategic policy known as Pivot to Asia or Rebalancing Asia. He argued that the US was concerned about the increasing presence of China in Myanmar. Thus, according to him, the US engagement with Myanmar can be considered as a greater strategy to limit Chinese influence in the region.

He termed the third phase of US sanctions against Myanmar as the “paradoxical phase” and believes that this time the US is not adopting any comprehensive sanction rather imposing targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions in Myanmar. Moreover, the present US strategy in the region is known as the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), aimed at containing Chinese influence in the region. He also thinks that this policy was reflected by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s statements during his recent visit to Japan and South Korea. In this context, he argued that the US policy on Myanmar is not only limited to humanitarian

considerations; rather, it is also connected to its strategy in the region.

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting interface. The main window displays a presentation slide titled "Introduction" with the following bullet points:

- ▶ Sanctions are considered as an important instrument of international pressure
- ▶ There are increasing voice for adopting sanctions against military regime of Myanmar
- ▶ The US sanctions are considered the most influential one
- ▶ There are debates about the effectiveness of the sanctions in the international relations
- ▶ The US sanctions are not always only for human rights and democracy, it has connections with the US greater strategy in the region
- ▶ At present, the issue of sanctions facing a number of dilemmas

In the bottom right corner, there is a video feed of a man, identified as Mr. Yousuf, speaking. The Zoom interface includes standard controls at the bottom like "Mute", "Stop Video", "Screen Share", "Participants", "Chat", "Share Screen", "Pause/Stop Recording", "Reactions", and "More".

Mr Yousuf briefly explained several dilemmas of the US sanctions against Myanmar. There is a debate among scholars about the effectiveness of sanctions. He cited prominent Myanmar scholar Thant Myint-U, who argued that the sanctions are ineffective as they make Myanmar tilted towards China. Moreover, the sanctions also empower the Myanmar military to introduce new strategies to adapt to sanctions. However, Mr Yousuf also believes that in the present context, it would be difficult for Myanmar to deny the influences of Western sanctions as it has significantly increased business engagement with Western countries since the early 2010s.

Afterwards, he shed light on the geopolitical compulsions of the US on imposing sanctions against Myanmar. The geopolitical interests of the US in the region are limiting the scope and nature of sanctions as new sanctions would increase Chinese influence in the country. Therefore, he believes that the China factor has become a crucial issue with respect to the US policy on Myanmar. Moreover, he mentioned about policies of close allies of the US on Myanmar. The two US allies within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), namely Japan and India, have different policies with respect to Myanmar. Therefore, the disagreement between the US and its allies in the region has made the sanctions less effective. Additionally, the interests of mega-corporations have become another dilemma for the US in Myanmar. Several multinational companies, including Chevron, Total, Telenor, have huge investments in Myanmar. He cited a 2019 report by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission that recommended these corporations to take the widespread human rights violations in Myanmar into consideration. However, no major initiative was taken to limit the investments of those companies. Therefore, corporate interest has become another major obstacle for the US and its allies to take strong sanctions against Myanmar. These companies have a strong influence over policymaking in Western countries. Therefore, the interest of the mega-corporations will remain a very important factor in US policy on Myanmar. According to Mr Yousuf, the next dilemma of the US is whether to impose targeted sanctions or introduce new comprehensive sanctions. He believes that at present, the Biden administration is primarily focused on targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions in Myanmar. However, he doubts that there will hardly be any attempt to impose comprehensive sanction on Myanmar by the Biden administration. Afterwards, Mr Yousuf mentioned about the opportunity cost related to sanctions. Due to previous sanctions, the US and other Western countries

missed an opportunity to engage with Myanmar. Therefore, he argued that remaining engaged with Myanmar gives the US and its Western allies an option to influence the country's policymakers as most of its military leaders have business interests.

Mr Yousuf also focused on the internal economic structure of Myanmar. For 70 years, the country has been experiencing civil war between the military and several armed ethnic groups. Thus, there is a vast conflict economy brewing up in Myanmar, which is run by both sides. As a result, he believes that sanctions may not necessarily make an impact on the conflict economy in that country. Afterwards, he mentioned about the possibility of international justice instead of sanctions. He thinks that the legal procedure will create pressure on the military of Myanmar.

In conclusion, he said that complete democratization in Myanmar is not likely to materialize in the near future. He believes that the China factor and the US strategic interests in the region will continue to dominate the US policy on Myanmar. However, he recommended that the US should mobilize support from its allies to impose more effective sanctions that can yield more scope for the US and its allies to negotiate with the Myanmar military to develop some human rights standards in the country.

Open Discussion



M S Siddique, Legal Economist, enquired whether Bangladesh has been successful in term of convincing other stakeholders to take sides in its favour.

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed, Former Chairman, BISS, said it was a wonderful and well-timed webinar initiated by BISS, considering the dynamic changes rapidly taking place following the military coup in Myanmar. During the discussion, he emphasized on several points. Firstly, he stressed on putting the Rohingya repatriation issue as a priority for the national unity government as authorities did not include it in their agenda yet. Then he talked about the tripartite- efforts among China, Bangladesh and Myanmar that should be intensified to seek a resolution of the issue since China is the most influential state as far as Myanmar and its army are concerned. He further emphasized on engaging India, Japan and other countries who have interests in Myanmar along with the ASEAN countries. Lastly, He emphasized the ongoing ICC-ICJ process that must be continued to keep international pressure upon Myanmar, no matter if their government is a democratically elected one or a military junta. His observations and suggestions ended with two questions; firstly, is the ARSA a reality or an excuse created by the Myanmar military? Secondly, is there a possibility of a counter-coup against the Myanmar army?



Major General Shahidul Haque (Retd) started his discussion by analyzing the current situation and stated that the situation has shown bankruptcy of the West and Americans. He identified the reason that they cannot see beyond China containment policy and Aung San Suu Kyi. In this context, he considered the rise of China as a problem for Bangladesh in a different sense. As such, to contain China, the West and Americans are doing everything in their way, which is, for him, has gone into the geopolitical black hole. Then he focused on why Rakhine is peaceful whereas entire Myanmar is against the coup. For him, two underlying factors are at the core. First is the release of Dr Aye Maung, one of their leaders and secondly, the spouse of the Myanmar army chief, whose patriarchal residence is located in Rakhine. For these two major causations, General Hoque considers Rakhine is still numb against such crime. He finished his discussion with an enquiry to the Honourable Chief Guest about Bangladesh's policies regarding repatriation.

Ambassador Shamim Ahmed enquired about two issues. First, he sought Professor Imtiaz Ahmed's opinion on What does he mean by decoupling



with Myanmar? He asked Mr Md Delwar Hossain the second question: Is there any open UNSC meeting that ended with a doctrine of a resolution on Myanmar?



Mr Md Emdadul Islam Chowdhury, Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked two questions to Prof Imtiaz. Firstly, he wanted to know the impact of the conflict between Myanmar army and Burma over Rohingya repatriation. His later enquiry was about the impact of the ICJ and ICC initiatives over the repatriation process.



Colonel Md Mamun Azad Salehin, afwc, psc, Senior Instructor, Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT), talked about the regional impact of the Myanmar coup, that is, democratic regression, in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia. He also asked: Will there be further democratic backsliding leading to further regional instability? And, who might take advantage of the military coup in Myanmar?



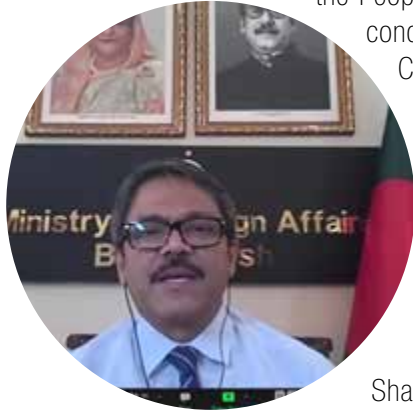
Professor Md. Aminul Karim, PhD, (Lieutenant General (Retd), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), put emphasis on two topics that are, for him, utterly sensitive and pivotal in this very context. One is “Containment of China” and the other is “Resolution of Problem”. The first one is a strong term because it involves military, security, trade, commerce, and diplomacy. Unfortunately, the US is not applying containment to China like it did against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). For the matter of resolution, Professor Karim advised to take all comprehensive measures for a better outcome regarding the repatriation.

Distinguished participants use the ZOOM chat box to place few questions. Two questions were directed to the Chief Guest from the media representatives attending the webinar. Highlighting the misleading news reports published by International News outlet Al Jazeera regarding the living condition of the Rohingyas in the Bhasan Char, they wanted to know: What measures have been taken by the the government to respond to Al Jazeera’s inaccurate reporting, and whether these reports will bring ill effects on the Rohingyas living there?



Responses

H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, said that the issue of Bhasan Char is not a matter of concern anymore for the government as it has been resolved. According to him, "Bhasan Char issue is done and dusted". Bhasan Char was built with Bangladesh's own resources, and the Rohingyas moved there of their own free will. After several visits from friendly states and international representatives, they found the installation up to the standard, and there is no dispute regarding living condition there anymore. It is expected that, like Kutupalang and Ukhia camps in Cox's Bazar, the UN and other international donor organizations will take the initiative to assist and fund Bangladesh to create a better settlement for Rohingyas in Bhasan Char.



Answering the question asked by Ambassador Shamim Ahmed, **Mr Md Delwar Hossain**, Director General, Myanmar Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, pointed out several open UNSC sessions regarding the Rohingya issue. He mentioned that the first meeting was held in late September 2017, then subsequently, there was another one. On both occasions, two press releases were circulated on behalf of the UNSC. On 6th November 2017, the UNSC president issued a statement on this subject which is considered as an official UN document; but there has not been any formal resolution adopted so far.



Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, highlighted whether Bangladesh has succeeded or not in terms of convincing other stakeholders to work in its favour. For him, this is too early to address the question since the final outcome is yet to come. On sanctions, he put emphasis on globalization through which Myanmar started engaging with the international community. With such engagement, it is gaining international support, and in this regard, bilateral trade figures will not matter.



He stressed on the importance of negotiation and engaging with Myanmar. Having said that, he dismissed the traditional negotiation process and encouraged practising out of the box diplomatic manoeuvres in a creative manner. Though a good number of people considers the concurrent chaos between Burma and Myanmar army as an opportunity for Bangladesh, but he clearly rejected the notion with the statement, "chaos won't bring any revolution which will replace the army. Myanmar army, historically, thrives on chaos, and this army will be there with whom we will negotiate." Alongside, he put emphasis on few other issues like ICJ and ICC's intervention, international political support, and Indo-Japanese intervention through pressure from their own civil societies.

Professor Imtiaz strongly believes that legal processes at the ICC and ICJ have to continue. As long as this is a genocide, it is no longer a bilateral issue because genocide, by definition, is international. As such, the ICC and ICJ have to play one of the major roles. Their support for Rohingyas is, however, not related to their

influx into Bangladesh, rather provide justice against the genocide that took place. Since Myanmar is currently domestically weak, neighbouring states surely will grab the opportunity to get a favourable economic deal, and the Myanmar army will happily agree on those deals as international recognition is the topmost priority that they now care for, not merely economic gain. Another way that he pointed out was Indo-Japanese intervention through their civil society. Both countries have strong civil society, yet, he thinks it will not work because, due



to economic interests, India and China will be in favour of Myanmar.

On the issue of decoupling, he opined to bring all the parties involved in Myanmar and urge them to initiate strong measures and convince them that this will help their business interest as it will bring stability to the country. A strong civil society in India and Japan can put forward the issue of decoupling themselves by pressurizing their government to push the Myanmar army to resolve the Rohingya issue as well as address the issue of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Bangladesh should explore different diplomatic manoeuvres and think out of the box to lead creative diplomatic solutions.

Regarding the ICC-ICJ issue, he said Bangladesh's constitution mandates its support for freedom aspiration of the people and stands firm with the disempowered. But he also said that the support for the process of ICC-ICJ is important due to the genocidal incident that took place in Myanmar, which is not a bilateral issue but rather a matter of international concern.

Answering the question raised by Colonel Salehin, he pointed out that military regime seeks recognition from any quarters available. Thus, the regional economies know very well that this is the best time to get favourable business deals for themselves as recognition is important for the regime. From his understanding, he opined that the Myanmar army thrives on chaos and conflict. Moreover, even after the killing of 500 civilians, the West is silent, which indicates their interest is more in business than the unrest. For that, the Myanmar army believes they will be able to cut a favourable deal with the crucial powers in the region.



Answering the question regarding the counter-coup issue, **Brigadier General M Sakhawat Hossain, ndc, psc, PhD (Retd.)**, Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance, North South University said it is possible, and again not possible. Myanmar civilization is old, and they are intelligent people, and they know what they are doing. That reflects in their constitutional response and how they handled the ICJ. People in Myanmar are

protesting because they tasted a certain degree of freedom after reform, and hence military is prepared for every possible outcome that arises from the coup. But the counter-coup is unlikely as their senior officers and generals are all involved in numerous businesses in and out of Myanmar; as a result, they share a common economic interest that makes a counter-coup very unlikely. On the issue of ARSA, raised by Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed, he said that it is not clear whether ARSA is a reality or an excuse created by Myanmar army.

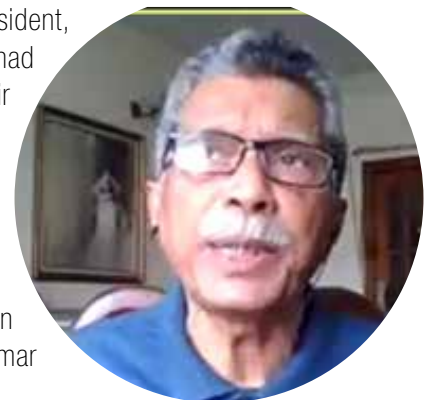


About the Rohingya repatriation, he said it is an issue between Myanmar and their citizens (Rohingyas) rather than Bangladesh and Myanmar. There could be limited repatriation, unified repatriation or even scattered repatriation could be a possibility. But the important issue for consideration is whether the Rohingyas will return to Myanmar under the current circumstances or the condition provided by the Myanmar army. So far, little voice could be heard from their leaders in camps or their diaspora leadership regarding their stance on repatriation.



Abu Salah Md. Yousuf, Senior Research Fellow, BISS stated that in the case of US policy to Myanmar, the issue of sanction remains very crucial. The US will certainly consider the position of its allies when it takes policy regarding Myanmar. Hence, he argued that there is hope that Western allies could be engaged to create more pressure on Myanmar that may create space for democratization for the country or for upholding human rights issues in the country.

Ambassador M. Humayun Kabir, President, BEI argued that Myanmar's banking sector had been sanctioned; military, business leaders and their connections had been sanctioned. This time, the sanctions are coming from Japan. Many major companies that have invested in Myanmar are withdrawing already. Some companies from Singapore are also coming under pressure because of the sanctions, for which many Western companies are unable to do transactions. Hence, they are leaving. Though Ambassador Kabir is now sure whether the sanctions will produce a restoration of a kind of democracy in Myanmar that will lead to repatriation—but, Myanmar



is under tremendous pressure.

He identified two things related to Rohingya repatriation. First, he focused on giving a calibrated voice to the Rohingyas themselves. Here for him, the calibrated voice would mean nothing should compromise Bangladesh's interest. However, he emphasized that Rohingyas should come out themselves and raise their voice regarding their expectation. Having said that, he acknowledged that not everything they will say should be taken into account, but at the very least, they must be heard. He assumes it may create some impact on the fast-evolving domestic situations as the establishment of a federal army is also under discussion. Amid such a fluid context, he argues, Rohingyas can now take part in the discussion and perhaps be a part of the evolving national discourse. The second point he highlighted is Myanmar's deep trouble which is now in discussion around the world. He quoted some experts who started considering Myanmar as a soon-to-be failed and collapsed state. As such, he prescribed Bangladesh to be very careful as already Thailand, India, China are facing a new stream of refugees. If Myanmar collapses, Bangladesh will face the same as those three countries, and indeed, it will cause additional security problems. Hence, he advised observing the Myanmar situation from a larger context with a view to preventing other problems spilling over into Bangladesh.

Address by the Chief Guest



H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP

Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

H E Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, appreciated BISS for organizing the webinar and thanked panel speakers and audiences for their insightful deliberations and comments. He referred to the most recent influx of Rohingyas in 2017 as one of the biggest events for the region, where Rohingyas fled atrocities and crimes against humanity which was perpetrated by their own people in their own country, Myanmar. On that occasion, Bangladesh saved them and saved the world from a possible catastrophe. He recalled the fateful day of 25th August 2017 as he, along with Mr Anisul Huq, MP, Honourable Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, met the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva on that day. They briefed the then high commissioner on the ongoing crisis, who then went on to term the crisis as the “textbook case of ethnic cleansing”.

Honourable State Minister talked about Bangladesh's role during the crisis as a responsible member of the international community. Even before the international community stepped in, as the first responder to the crisis, Bangladesh did its part by providing temporary shelter, treating the wounded, and sharing food with the Rohingya community. Considering the limited resources and high density of population, this was a colossal task for Bangladesh in the initial months of the crisis. The difficult terrain of the makeshift camps made it difficult for delivering services and relief goods to the Rohingyas. Since then, every year, Bangladesh continued to spend millions of dollars and coordinated a massive humanitarian operation where safety and security of the Rohingya camps were ensured, and the living condition was improved. To build these camps, deforestation of almost five thousand acres of the land took place. Bangladesh is now trying to bring back the ecological balance by reforesting this vast land.

He provided a brief description regarding the government's effort to build a dedicated place for Rohingyas at Bhashan Char at the cost of over US\$ 350 million from Bangladesh's own budget. This housing project was implemented by Bangladesh Navy, which can house up to 100,000 Rohingyas. Future extension of the project will cost less as the initial project included physical infrastructures such as dams and cyclone shelters. He informed the audience that 20,000 thousand Rohingyas got shifted there through voluntary relocation facilitated by the Bangladesh government. Recently, representatives from the UN and some other friendly countries visited Bhasan Char and informally expressed their satisfaction and willingness to assist in

this new living arrangement for the Rohingyas. Therefore, he believes the UN will get engaged soon in the humanitarian operations in Bhasan Char. He also informed that, so far, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, 40,000 tests have been conducted at the Rohingya camps, among which approximately 490 positive cases have been recorded with ten deaths.



Mr Alam noted that the repatriation of the Rohingyas was supposed to begin in January 2018, but due to Myanmar's mindset, policies and approach to date, not a single Rohingya could return to their homeland. One good diplomatic effort that Bangladesh has made was the visit of Bangladesh's then Foreign Minister to Myanmar when Bangladesh and Myanmar signed two bilateral instruments, which should have paved the way for repatriation of the Rohingyas, but unfortunately, that did not happen. So far, the Myanmar authority did not show any genuine political will for the repatriation process. Rather, they presented falsified and misrepresented facts, made unsubstantiated claims, laid unjustifiable blame on Bangladesh to deny their own obligation and thereby tried to misguide the international community. Although things have changed a bit in recent times, many sections of the international community increased their trade with Myanmar and went on with their business-as-usual approach. Hence, continued international investment and development assistance undoubtedly encouraged Myanmar to flout the decisions of international legal regimes and continue with their mass atrocities on minorities with an even greater sense of impunity. But information flows, and all came to know that situation is looking bleak in Myanmar. Demographically speaking, out of approximately more than 2 million Rohingyas from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, more than a million now is in Bangladesh, half a million are scattered in other neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and approximately 3,00,000 are living in the state of Rakhine. Against the backdrop of the recent political turmoil in Myanmar, Bangladesh is not expecting an influx of other minority communities from Myanmar. For the last six months, the Rakhine state has been in a war-like situation with a heavy military presence; therefore, it is highly unlikely that other persecuted minorities of Myanmar will be able to cross over the conflict zones of Rakhine and enter Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh has every reason to be concerned as the situation continues to deteriorate every minute in Myanmar.

Honourable State Minister opined that the Rohingyas are not expected to return to Myanmar of their own volition unless Myanmar creates a conducive environment in the Rakhine state and build confidence among them. In this regard, Bangladesh made some good grounds as the government took Chinese representatives along with Myanmar officials to the Rohingya camps to listen to their plight and the obstacles against their return to Myanmar. During that visit, Rohingyas expressed their intent and desperation to return to Myanmar as that is their birthplace. The objective of such a visit was to make China witness to this reality, and it was proven to be a successful venture as the message was passed from Beijing to Naypyidaw that Myanmar should take confidence-building measures among Rohingyas for their safe return. All the parties agreed that Myanmar should address the fundamental concerns of Rohingyas, including safety and security for their living in their places of origin and the issuance of a proper identity document. Following the exodus of 2017, one of the ministers of Myanmar said that the fishing rights of Rohingyas would cease to exist. Certain policymaker of Myanmar even went on to say that following the atrocities, once Rohingyas left their place of living in Myanmar, their land and asset would automatically belong to the state. These issues must be resolved to give confidence back to the Rohingyas.

The state minister talked about the ongoing procedure both at the ICJ and ICC, termed them as of utmost importance to end the long history of persecution and deep-rooted culture of impunity in Myanmar. As Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government believes in democracy, Bangladesh has been supportive of the democratization process in Myanmar. However, the shape and form of democracy that Myanmar had were



not very healthy, useful or fruitful as it was weak and fragile. It takes time for democracy to evolve and take a meaningful form, as it took hundreds of years in Europe. In the case of Pakistan, a single Prime Minister is yet to complete his or her full term. On the other hand, Bangladesh has been playing its role to uphold the justice and rights of the Rohingyas in the international fora. The international community should remain focused to pursue justice and accountability through international judicial mechanism vigorously. In this connection, he expressed sincere gratitude towards the Netherlands and Canada for expressing their interest to follow up on the ICJ case against Myanmar. Repatriation of all displaced Rohingyas remains a compelling priority for Bangladesh, and they are desperate to return to their home with dignity and security at the earliest possible

time. Given the gravity of the situation of one million Rohingyas, the mindset of Myanmar authority and the experience from the bilateral diplomatic effort with Myanmar suggest that Bangladesh alone cannot solve the crisis. The international community should not shy away from their responsibilities and relieve Bangladesh from the burden that Myanmar has imposed on it. In this regard, they should engage Myanmar to create a conducive environment for the Rohingyas to return to their homeland and find a lasting solution to this crisis. Key nations in the region and ASEAN who have diverse and direct leverage over Myanmar have added responsibility to create confidence among Rohingyas, ensure peace and stability in the region. While Bangladesh is committed to its effort, it has to be mindful of the developments which are taking place in Myanmar with the political turmoil.

At the end of his speech, the Honourable State Minister encouraged BISS to organize more seminars on the Rohingya issue in collaboration with other like-minded think-tanks from ASEAN countries. He also requested BISS to conduct academic research to bring in the counter-narrative in order to deal with the baseless anti-Rohingya narratives and misinformation from Myanmar. He wished everyone well, urged them to follow the health safety procedure in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and thanked everyone for their active participation and insightful comments.

Summing up by the Chair



Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te
Director General, BISS

In summing up the session, **Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te**, Director General, BISS, said there are things happening in Myanmar that he personally thought are unacceptable in the 21st Century. Some people romantically believe the turmoil that is happening in Myanmar to be the birth pain of democracy. But this hypothesis is questionable when it is seen that there is also significant support in favour of the atrocities that are going on. Drawing from discussions of the webinar, he said there are many other dimensions to the Rohingya crisis than humanitarian ones. Referring to the Chief Guest's comments, he also emphasized that Bangladesh needs to develop a long-term approach which would take time. All the discussants pointed specifically to take all-out effort, particularly Ambassador Humayun Kabir, who mentioned that Bangladesh must start including Rohingyas into the discussion.

He also wondered about how many of the stakeholders in this crisis are genuinely concerned deeply enough for the sufferings of the Rohingyas because whatever the dimensions are—diplomatic or geopolitical, at the end of the day, these humans are suffering on the ground and their children are growing up in uncertainty. At this point, he recalled the philosophy of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and said that if all activities and efforts of Bangabandhu are analyzed, it can be seen that those were directed towards human beings. And in the case of the Rohingya crisis, human beings are suffering on the ground. Then he urged everyone to take an all-out effort to solve the crisis. He expressed gratitude to the Honourable Chief Guest for gracing the occasion and sharing his valuable comments. He concluded by thanking learned panellists for sharing their expertise and knowledge and participants for their presence.

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