



# **POSITION PAPER ON THE ROHINGYA IN BANGLADESH: FIVE YEARS LATER, VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

**August 24, 2022**

## INTRODUCTION

August 25, 2017 is commemorated annually as the Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day for Rohingya all over the world. This date marks another episode of forced exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar because of severe persecution, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide committed by the Union of Myanmar. There is a history of struggle for recognition, including for their human rights and dignity. After finding themselves as legally and culturally excluded strangers in their own land, they now find themselves strangers in a new land. There are now multiple currents that are forcing change upon all stakeholders in the Rohingya crisis.

The Government of Bangladesh graciously and compassionately accepted over one million Rohingya fleeing persecution and fearing for their lives. The world was initially shocked by what was transpiring on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Unfortunately, even after five years, there is no sign of repatriation of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to Myanmar, which has eventually made their present situation complicated and forced them to wait for an uncertain future.

While repatriation is the ultimate solution of this crisis and remains the goal of both the Government of Bangladesh and the Rohingya community, complex geopolitical issues preclude any near- or long-term resolution of their problems. The Center for Peace Studies proposes a set of essential activities that can be implemented immediately at the local level that will likely provide short-term relief and enhanced wellbeing of both the Rohingya and the local host communities. While it is true that legal proceedings on behalf of the Rohingya are winding their way through international courts, it is also true that justice for the Rohingya is delayed. Justice delayed, however, is justice denied. Therefore, the CPS has identified some activities that can help ameliorate conditions for local host communities and speed the delivery of justice for the Rohingya.

## THE POSITION PAPER

The Center for Peace Studies (CPS) of the South Asian Institute for Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University. CPS has studied the situation of the Rohingya inside Bangladesh and the needs of the local host communities, as well as the security concerns of the Government of Bangladesh. For this paper, the authors have consulted existing research in the growing body of literature on the specific topic of Bangladesh, the Rohingya, and local host community frictions. This Paper accounts for hours of research of the published literature, visits to the Rohingya camps, interactions with the local host communities inside Bangladesh, and analysis of ongoing challenges.

The CPS also undertook an extensive literature review of the problems faced by Bangladesh as a result of the Rohingya influx. Finally, this Paper examines

specific complaints of the local host communities and relates them to a set of activities that have a demonstrated track record of success in other settings and may be appropriate for the Rohingya and host communities in Bangladesh.

This Position Paper is written in the hope that the situation of the Rohingya residing in Bangladesh can be resolved in such a way that improves the lot of the local host communities and of the Rohingya, themselves. CPS has considered the situation of the Rohingya in Bangladesh a major priority after the world community was shocked by the events that led to their arrival in Bangladesh. Moreover, the CPS has focused much of its research on the Rohingya, their local host communities, and the problems and possible solutions that confront all of the stakeholders at the present time.

The implementation of the activities proposed by CPS is expected to reduce tension and conflict between the local host community and the Rohingya, and facilitate the creation of humane living conditions for the Rohingya until the Rohingya repatriation takes place. The CPS presents this Position Paper after careful deliberation on the totality of the circumstances currently confronting all parties concerned.

## **PAST FIVE YEARS: HOST COMMUNITIES' EXPERIENCE**

Local host communities in Bangladesh are suffering from multiple effects of hosting 1.1 million Rohingya unexpectedly. According to research conducted by several North South University professors and other researchers, the Bangladeshi communities where the Rohingya are housed describe the following problems:

1. Fewer livelihood opportunities;
2. Loss of farmlands;
3. Disparity in donation and relief;
4. Environmental degradation;
5. Increased crimes;
6. Communication gap and illiteracy;
7. Increased Risks of Hazards.

In this paper, we propose feasible solutions to these identified problems. It is important that the government address these specific and identified problems or else the current antipathy and socioeconomic and cultural tensions could grow even worse between local host communities and the Rohingya, creating an even bigger problem for the Government of Bangladesh. In fact, Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, has already acknowledged that the unresolved plight of the Rohingya and the local host communities could rise to a national security issue.

## “DONOR FATIGUE” FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) will likely soon face “donor fatigue” from the international donor community. “Donor Fatigue” is the term used to describe decreased donations to needy causes due to those causes never seeming to improve. Creation of new problem-solving projects is one strategy that can help to avoid or diminish donor fatigue. The sad fact is that the five-year-old Rohingya situation, both inside and outside of Myanmar, has faded from the front pages of the international media while more immediate and pressing issues take center stage. As a result, it is highly probable that “Donor Fatigue” will eventually set in and the resources coming to Bangladesh to handle the crisis will diminish overtime. In the past, crises occurring in such varied locations as South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Somalia eventually saw diminished donor receipts due to this phenomenon of donor fatigue. Currently, the plight of Syrian refugees is experiencing some donor fatigue. Recognition of this tendency within donor circles and adroit handling of the Rohingya and local host community crisis by the Government of Bangladesh can help to mitigate the consequences of donor fatigue.

### VISION FOR THE FUTURE: ACTIVITIES TO IMPLEMENT

Based on the research findings on the conditions of the Rohingya and the experiences of the host communities, CPS suggests that the Government of Bangladesh begin the process of transforming the view of the Rohingya from the official title of the Forcefully Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) to the contributors to the economy of Bangladesh. With a changed focus, shifted to harnessing whatever short-term local host community benefits that can accrue, nimble thinking on this critical issue has the potential to avert a grave national security concern.

Thus, our recommendation (supported in the academic literature reviewed) is to change local mindsets, including our own, to view the Rohingya, not only as a serially-abused people, but as potential “producers” who can help Bangladesh while they are here while also helping themselves through educational opportunities for Rohingya children and employment opportunity for adult Rohingya. It is from this perspective and with this intention that the following activities are suggested to the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). Such modest initiatives may contribute to the post-traumatic recovery of both the local host communities and the Rohingya while minimizing existing tensions between them both. Below are the suggested activities:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> References may be provided upon requests.

## 1. Increasing Livelihood Opportunities

**1.1 Local Resource Mobilization.** The local and international NGOs/voluntary organizations working in Cox's Bazar, may be asked to recruit local people, instead of outsourcing, according to the skills and interest of the local people. Such prioritization of the local residence of Cox's Bazar in the recruitment process may widen the livelihood opportunities for the host communities. In addition, flexibility in bank loans may be made to encourage the local host communities to do business with bank loans. The Department of Social Services, with the support of the local NGOs may monitor the local resource mobilization.

**1.2 Small and Medium Entrepreneurship (SME) Together.** The donation/relief to the Rohingya can be given to help them begin small business/entrepreneurship together at the local level. Considering the financial hardship of the local host community, a certain portion of the relief /donation may be provided to them to help them begin small business/ entrepreneurship. The Department of Social Services with the support of local NGOs can follow up the progress of the business of both the Rohingya and the local community. Both the Rohingya and local host communities will form partnerships to start the SME in order to receive funding.

**1.3 Skill Development.** According to the demand in the job market, which is managed by the local community, groups of Rohingya can be selected step by step to develop their skills in their areas of interest. Under the guidance of the Department of Social Services, local NGOs may monitor the hiring and job continuation of the Rohingya in the local industries / organizations.

**1.4 Working.** In order to keep record of the types of employment opportunities, how different organizations continue hiring local residents, and how both the host communities and the Rohingya work jointly in different SME projects, a website may be developed. This will be helpful for both the employers and potential employees to sign up and provide employer/employee information to each other online. Such a database, from time to time, will be used to determine the next course of action for the government regarding increasing livelihood opportunities for both the host community members.

## 2. Supporting the Rohingya to Preserve their Cultural Heritage

While fluency in the local language is an asset for getting a job for the Rohingya - whether it is in the formal or informal sector, Cox's Bazar Cultural Center under the Cultural Affairs Ministry will ensure the preservation and production of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Rohingya. This will help

the Rohingya to uphold their own cultural heritage, which is connected to their roots in their own country, and will ease their post-repatriation cultural assimilation in Myanmar.

### 3. Loss of Farmlands

Although it is extremely difficult to restore the farmlands occupied by the Rohingya. However, the concerned Government department may intervene in the unplanned use and illegal capture of land to minimize the loss of farmlands. In Cox's Bazar, the Government may set land aside for a community farming project that may put Rohingya and community people together for farming.

### 4. Disparity in Donation and Relief

According to the May 2022 report of the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), "the 2022 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya response is 13 percent funded as of 23 May, with USD 118 million received against the overall prioritized appeal of USD 881 million", which is only 13% of the appealed amount in 2022. Strong follow up from the Government of Bangladesh is needed for receiving the appealed amount in 2022 on time.

The same report also shows that the Rohingya received \$923,000 and the host community received \$541,000 in 2022. The concerned Local Government unit needs to oversee the progress of utilizing the money at the community level and for the Rohingya in order to avoid disparity. However, the Government of Bangladesh also needs to follow up strictly on the minimum or no funding in the areas of education, nutrition, site management, projection, and health, etc. in 2022.

### 5. Environmental Degradation and Disaster Risk

**5.1 Use of LPG and Solar Panels.** Deforestation in the coastal areas of Bangladesh may be avoided by identifying and supplying an alternative fuel source. Already a shift from firewood to liquefied petroleum gas for cooking has eased the pressure on the environment. However, because of the availability of adequate solar radiation, the use of solar panel/parabolic dish solar cookers can be popularized as a good alternative for cooking, which will reduce the risk of gas cylinder fire as well as deforestation.

**5.2 Tree Plantation.** With the support of the Department of Forest, initiatives can be taken to plant trees at the deforested areas in Cox's Bazar. Both Rohingya and the local host community join the project of plantation and preservation of the trees. They will receive money (from the donation and relief

fund) for their labor in the plantation project.

**5.3 Clean Environment.** With the support of the Department of Environment, initiatives can be taken to maintain the cleanliness of the entire Cox's Bazar district, which was once the tourist capital of Bangladesh, in which both the Rohingya and local people may join. Similar to the Tree Plantation project, both groups will receive money (from the donation and relief fund) for their labour in the cleanliness project.

## 6. Reducing Engagement of the Rohingya in Crimes

**6.1 Social Acceptability Through Income Generation.** While dealing with the crimes related to arms, illegal drug trades, trafficking, and antisocial behaviors is a complex process managed by the law enforcement agency, Rohingya's access to the locally available income generating activities may increase their acceptability to the host community as well as contribute to refraining them from being engaged in criminal offenses.

**6.2 Engaging the Youth and Children to Community Well being.** In order to reduce children and youth engagement in crimes, both the local and Rohingya children and youth can be engaged with the community based paid or voluntary productive activities, such as organizing different events inside the camp as well as in the local host communities, etc. Their skills aligned with their interest can also be explored and strengthened with financial support (from donations) so that they may participate in the job market when they grow up and thus refrain from committing crimes.

**6.3 Yearly / Half-yearly Competition for Youth and Children.** Regardless of the status, both Rohingya and local host community children and youth can be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, community support/social welfare, several constructive programs on self and community wellbeing apart from their academic performance. The local District Commissioner's office, according to their half-yearly/yearly performance in the extracurricular activities, may award the children and youth to encourage them to continue their contribution.

## 7. Minimizing Communication Gap and Illiteracy

Due to the socio-cultural differences between the Rohingya who arrived in 2017 and the ones who came a long time ago and are now registered refugees, a communication gap is evident between them. The communication gap is also acute between the Rohingya who arrived in 2017 and the local host community. Education for all may reduce such gaps. Therefore, all primary, secondary, and

upper-level education institutions in Cox's Bazar should allow the Rohingya to pursue their education along with the local host community. Language of instructions may be determined based on a survey / assessment at the FDMN's camp. Education credentials obtained in the camp, if there is any, should be accepted at the local schools. In fact, education opportunities will most likely close the door of crimes and illegal trades for the Rohingya as an immediate outcome while, in the long run, it will equip them with knowledge to start their life anew after their repatriation.

## 8. Lack of Proper Healthcare

**8.1 Equal Access to Health.** According to the July-August 2021 report of ISCG, 44% of the households in the FDMNs camps reported having experienced or expecting experiencing barriers when needing to access health care. They either have no functional health facility nearby, or the facilities being too far, and also long waiting times at facilities. Since Bangladesh has already sheltered the highest number of Rohingya, CPS suggests that the healthcare system of Bangladesh treats the Rohingya well regardless of their status in Bangladesh.

**8.2 Voluntary Blood Drive.** This program can be developed with both the Rohingya and the local host community, particularly the young generation, who will a) maintain a database of the voluntary blood donors, b) help the patient (who is in need of blood) connect with the local hospitals and the donors, and c) arrange travel for the donors to and from the hospital. The Upazila Health Office with the support of the Camp-In-Charge and the local NGOs will monitor and facilitate such voluntary initiatives. However, the volunteers will receive financial and technological support from donations and relief funds.

## 9. Introducing Innovative Approaches in Camp Management

While the camps are governed by the Government of Bangladesh, involvement of the Rohingya to the management of the camps may earn two-fold benefits: a) the Rohingya will be aware of the rules, procedures, and limitations, etc. of the camp authorities and thus will most likely provide cooperation for better management, b) the CICs will gain better understanding about the problems and perspectives of the Rohingya and thus will be able to design the services accordingly under the guidance of the Government of Bangladesh. Such an innovative approach may involve each Rohingya leader by rotation on a weekly basis to assist the camp authority.

## 10. National Legal framework

Bangladesh has been a safe refuge for the Rohingya not only for the last five

years but also for the last four decades despite having no national legal framework. Although Bangladesh has played an exceptional role in sheltering the Rohingya from a humanitarian perspective, it is necessary for Bangladesh to have a national legal framework for better management of not only the Rohingya at present but also any stateless individuals/groups in future. CPS suggests that the Government of Bangladesh forms a taskforce with the researchers, academics, policy makers, and national experts on security and human rights to prepare a draft of the National Legal Framework for dealing with the refugees/stateless persons in Bangladesh.

## CONCLUSION

While a large portion of the international community including ICJ and regional forums such as ASEAN have been in solidarity with Bangladesh on the repatriation of the Rohingya, clearly the delay in repatriation has been complicating the conditions of the Rohingya and affecting the local host community negatively. CPS strongly believes that the above proposed activities will be useful to minimizing the negative impacts of the Rohingya crisis on the local host community and dealing with the Rohingya issue in a more humane perspective.