



## Rohingya Crisis in 2017-2018: Geo-politics and the International Reaction

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### ABSTRACT

Rohingya is the largest persecuted minority community and Rohingya crisis the most inhumane event of contemporary civilized world. The armed force of Myanmar and the local Buddhist people are carrying out this persecution in Rakhine state. The unarmed men, women and children are being victim of brutal killing, fire and rape. They are being bounded to flee to Bangladesh and other neighboring countries. Rohingya is now an unbearable imposed problem on Bangladesh. Bangladesh is trying to solve the problem but fails due to lack of effective international support. Both internal and geo-politics of Myanmar are behind the crisis. The local Buddhists don't want to tolerate Rohingyas in Rakhaine and Rohingya repression is a means to gain popularity for the political parties in Myanmar. China and India support Myanmar for geo-political reason while Russia and Israel are backing Myanmar for their political and business interest. Some other countries showed reactions but not took any effective visible measures due their no interest in the region. In this situation the study suggested Bangladesh to be more strategic in both home and foreign policies to handle the problem effectively.

### INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya community has been termed as the 'world's most friendless people'. The last persecution in the term of 2017-18 has proved that the community really doesn't have real friend. It is very important to identify the prime reason behind the persecution. From different sources it has been come to know that geo-politics of the region is the prime reason. Moreover the reason of silence or the ineffectiveness of the international community is also "no gain" from the Rohingya community. Some ineffective steps were also taken but there were also politics behind these. Turkey took some visible steps to be a leader of the Muslim world and to make a new Islamic pool against Saudi Arabia. Turkish president just took some eye washing steps. The USA Government also took some verbal steps just to defend China. It is less concerned about Rohingya and more concerned about China. The neighboring countries and the

powerful European countries also did not play important role as they have limited interest over here. Some neighbors are supporting Myanmar.

The Rohingya community has been facing persecution since 1978. Several times they faced humanitarian crisis but the last period of 2017-18 has crossed all limits of persecution. Since August, 2017 at least 7 lac Rohingyas have been fled to Bangladesh (Petersen, 2018). Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) informed that at least 6700 Rohingyas, including "at least 730 children under the age of five, were killed in the month after the violence broke out" (BBC News, 2018). According to analysis of satellite imagery by Human Rights Watch "288 villages were partially or totally destroyed by fire in northern Rakhine state after August 2017. There are also around 117000 people staying outside the camps in host communities." The Rohingya people took shelter in different refugee camps of Cox's Bazar and the

area has been turned into the world's largest refugee camp. They are suffering from various problems such as natural calamities, malnutrition, lack of medical services, AIDS, child prostitution, etc. Though international and national sources are providing food support, 30% of the 1 million people are now suffering from food crisis, 10000 people are in malnutrition; and there are water crisis, lack of sewerage facilities and so on (BBC News, 2018). Rohingyas are imposed unbearable burden on Bangladesh. Now Bangladesh is seeking a peaceful solution of the Rohingya crisis as she can get rid of the burden and can ensure respectful citizenship of the Rohingya community in Myanmar. As she is not able to solve the crisis by only her own effort, she needs effective international help. But unfortunately no one yet to stand really for neither Rohingya nor Bangladesh. For effectively handling the situation, it requires thorough understanding about the problem and investigation of the causes behind it. With this end, the article discusses about the geo-politics and internal politics of the area and the reaction of international community to the persecution.

## METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical framework

The research questions guiding the present study area how the geo-politics of Arakan is going on and why international community is not playing effective role. It can be justified by theories of ethnic conflict and geo politics. The theory 'Realism' has been found highly relevant to this. Realism justifies geo-political stand of India and China. The theory says that the world politics is a field of conflict among actors pursuing power (Donnelly, 2008). Realism "revolves around four central propositions:

- States are the central actors in international politics rather than individuals or international organizations.
- International political system is anarchic as there is no supranational authority that can enforce rules over the states.
- Actors in the international political system are rational as their actions maximize their own self-interest.
- All states desire power so that they can ensure their own self-preservation."

India and China both are struggling to control the area. To gain the supremacy both are ingratiating Myanmar ignoring the criticism of UN and the whole world. As there is no interest with the 'world's most friendless people' no other countries also did not take any strong position against Myanmar.

### Data analysis

The study is based on secondary data collected from various news portals, websites, newspapers, articles, etc. All the available sources were rigorously reviewed to obtain necessary data to perform the study. Utmost care was taken to maintain the authenticity of information and for this checking, cross-checking, verification, etc. were done for collecting the information. The collected data were classified under several heads according the objectives of the study. The results have been explained in descriptive form.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Geo-politics in the area

Geographically Arakan or the Rakhine state has become very important for last 12-15 years. The area is now being used as an economic corridor for both India and China. Myanmar gets a lot of revenue from the area and support of India and China in international platform. So it is important for Myanmar to make the place empty and peaceful for India and China. For this reason, Myanmar carried out the 'clearance operation' in Rakhaine. Khin Maung Saw claimed some points in favor of Myanmar in his article 'Geopolitics of the Powers and the Bengali Problems in Burma'. Referring BBC he said that 1.5 to 2 million Bangladeshis were refugee to Myanmar during the liberation war in Bangladesh in 1971. The refugees in India were recognized by the international community but as Myanmar was an isolated country no international agencies were allowed and they were not recognized. More people from Bangladesh were also refugee to Myanmar because of natural calamities like cyclone. He claimed that the Rohingyas are the inheritor of those Bengali. The main proof he pointed out is that they cannot speak in Burmese

language. No other document supporting this claim was found available.

China, India and Myanmar are strong player in the geo-politics in this area. Before democracy Myanmar was totally controlled by China. They were dependent on China for economy, military and political backup. China supported the reveler to keep Myanmar under pressure. But after democratic ruling by Suu Kyi Myanmar opened their policy to Russia, Israel and India. Not only from China Myanmar now imports their military equipment from Israel and Russia. Besides China, India is also using the land of Myanmar for economic and political reasons. Both India and China are competing to increase their influence on Myanmar and the area.

### **Why does India support Myanmar?**

India used the Rohingya crisis to get favor of Myanmar. When the whole world condemned Myanmar, India took the opportunity to get closer. Prime Minister Narendra Modi cleverly took the opportunity to develop the relationship. Ignoring the humanitarian issue of 'world's most friendless people', India took two shameless decisions of ingratiating (Biswas, 2017). The first one was to an announcement of deporting the 40000 Rohingya people from India amid the persecution. Analyst Subir Bhaumik addressed it as 'a favorite whipping boy for the Hindu right-wing to energies their base'. This is Modi's old policy. He used the same strategy during last national election of India. During the election Modi used the 'illegal Bangladesh Muslim entrance' issue to get support from the largest Hindu community. Historically India is an opportunist country and Modi is more opportunist. Though India kept itself away from USA the 9/11 made an opportunity for India to get closer to the USA using the terror issue of Kashmir (Lall, 2008). Another reason of the announcement was also to win the heart of Buddhist community and the Government of Myanmar. BBC addressed it as, "an attempt to curry favor with Buddhist-majority Myanmar" (BBC News, 2017). The announcement was come just three days before Modi visited Myanmar. During his visit in Myanmar he expressed his strong support to the persecution. Modi's ingratiation was accelerated as China was

supporting Myanmar. To compete in the field of 'curry favor' India wanted to win over China.

All of above are indirect or invisible reasons. There are direct or visible reasons also. Basically because of four reasons India has chosen the way of ingratiating. These are economic development, increasing influence by trade on Association of South-east Asia Nations (ASEAN), energy security and combating Chinese influence in the area. At present economic growth is at the heart of India's policy making, both home and abroad (Lall, 2008). To fulfill its targets it took 'Look East' policy in 2014. Under the policy India is going to build road and other infrastructures in Myanmar. It is usually known as "Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project" which will connect Kolkata seaport of eastern India with Sittwe seaport in Rakhine state in sea. Then this will be connected with Mizoram state in Northeast India. This transit will reduce cost and time of Indian transport. "Mayanmar is key part of India's 'Act East' policy and Kaladan project has enabled several other associated projects with ongoing development" (Wikipedia, n.d) of at least other nine projects. A large portion of the projects will cross the Rakhine state. India justified its support to Myanmar saying that it doesn't want Rohingya militants to attack their projects. It wants a militant (or Rohingya) free area to launch their projects. With all these projects, export-import business has created a great economic interest of India with Myanmar. The starting point of 'Act East' policy and scope of combating China have created great political interest of India with Myanmar. Because of these economic and political interests, India ignored the issue of human rights violation and prioritized the so called security concern and curry-favor.

### **Why does China support Myanmar?**

The reason of supporting Myanmar for India and China are almost same. Both have economic and political interests here. China is an old player and it needs to sustain but India needs to gain. China planned to invest US\$18000 million in Rakhine for various projects. KYAUK PYU deep seaport in Rakhine is used to store crude oil imported from Middle East. From the seaport oil is transported to China through Rakhine and other

states of Myanmar. The \$1.5 billion oil-gas pipeline passing through Kuyiming is another large project which carries 12 billion cubic meter gas each year. The pipeline faced a strong protest from Rakhine state. It has a great negative impact on the environment and the life of fisherman. But the Myanmar Government strictly handled it. Rohingya people were forced to leave the area and they were kept in two camps (Hossain, 2017). China has invested billions of dollar in Myanmar and a large amount in Rakhine. It also has more plans to take projects in Rakhine state and Myanmar will be benefited from them also. In this case the human rights of the 'world's most friendless people' did not make any importance to both China and Myanmar. They want the state empty.

### **Internal Politics**

In internal politics the Rohingya Muslims are being used by the government as 'whipping boy'. Oppressing those increases Buddhist supporters to the government. There are local clashes between Rohingya Muslim and the Rakhine Buddhist. Instead of ensuring peace the government is helping the extremist to kill Muslims, rape women, burn their houses and make them bounded to flee to Bangladesh. Government does this to make their political basement stronger. It is claimed that to grab land for development projects and make new settlements for Buddhist, government wants to chase them away. Some claim that to balance the number of Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist, government took the initiatives.

### **Reaction of International Community**

International community is like a rich man who is ready to give charity but not take responsibility without any gain. Violation of human rights of a poor community is not so important to the powerful countries. Political and economic gains are more important to them. Even if they talk about the human rights there is a politics behind it. The powerful countries wanted to use the crisis to gain something. The roles of international communities are divided. Some countries and organizations supported (or just showed off) Rohingya and some countries stood for Myanmar. After the last phase of persecution, the international communities can be divided into

three types according to their reactions which are discussed below.

### **Stand for Rohingya**

Almost all countries and organizations stood for the Rohingya. Some countries and organizations were limited in just expressing their concern and providing statements, some were limited in providing humanitarian aid or financial assistance and some took visual actions.

**(i) Supporting by expressing concern and providing statement:** An article entitled 'International Reactions to the 2016-17 Rohingya Persecution in Myanmar' broadly explained the international reactions to the persecution (Wikipedia, n.d). Maximum countries and organizations played their duty by just expressing mere concern and providing statements. From humanitarian ground they addressed the situation, condemned the persecution of Myanmar and expressed their support to the Rohingya community and Bangladesh. Though these were just mere expression these created a global concern. These expressions were also helpful to raise fund. The countries are Afghanistan, Algeria, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, South Korea, Kuwait, Latvia, Malaysia, Maldives, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States and Uzbekistan. Some countries condemned the persecution very strongly. Afghanistan addressed it as 'devastating cruelty and murder of innocent Rohingya'; Canada addressed it 'ethnic cleansing'; Egypt marked it 'massacre and displacement of the Rohingya'; French President described it as 'genocide and ethnic cleansing'; Germany said 'huge burden on Bangladesh to host the large refugee population'; Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei called Aung Sang Suu Kyi a 'brutal woman'; Jordan expressed it as 'unforgivable'; Malaysia noticed the oppression as 'genocide' and warned as 'terror groups might gain a foothold in Myanmar if the crisis was not addressed'; Maldives addressed it 'cycle of

violence'; President of Nigeria compared the persecution with Bosnian and Rwandan genocides and expressed it as 'ethnic cleansing'; Pakistan addressed it as 'a challenge to the conscience of the international community' and 'genocide'; Palestine addressed it 'a disaster'; Turkey President addressed it as 'genocide'; UK mentioned it as 'unprecedented'; The USA vice president marked it as 'terrible savagery', 'historic exodus', 'great tragedy unfolding' and 'sow seeds of hatred and chaos that may well consume the region for generations to come and threaten the peace of us all'; and UN addressed the persecution as 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'. Along with the strong criticism the countries urged Myanmar to stop this ethnic cleansing and request UN to take necessary and effective actions.

There was a notable effort taken by 12 Nobel laureates and 15 prominent citizens demanding the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) urgently address the situation and make an intervention if necessary, with all available options through a joint statement. The statement is as follows:

'We call on UNSC to intervene immediately by using all available means. We request you to take immediate action for cessation of indiscriminate military attack on innocent civilians that is forcing them to leave their home and flee country to turn into stateless people. The arguments that the Myanmar Government is using to deny Rohingyas their citizenship are ludicrous, to say the least. At independence of Burma from the British in 1948 and under successive governments, Burma recognized the people of all ethnicities within its border, including the Rohingyas, as full citizens, having representation in the parliament. The military juntas in the 1980s decided that Rohingyas are not Burmese. Accordingly, they stripped the Rohingyas of their citizenship. They used military and political means to make sure that the Rohingyas leave the country. Systematic persecution aiming at ethnic and religious cleansing began.... A bold change in approach is needed by United Nations and the international community if there is to be an end to the cycle of violence against the Rohingyas. The government of Myanmar needs to be told that international support and finance is conditional on a major change in policy towards the Rohingya.

Propaganda and incitement of hatred and all violence, particularly state violence against Rohingyas must stop, discriminatory laws and policies must go, the recommendations of Kofi Annan's commission must be implemented immediately.'

Some of the countries demanded humanitarian access to affected areas in Rakhine State. The Countries are Austria, Belgium, Canada, Greece, Japan, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the USA (Wikipedia, n.d).

**(ii) Supporting by humanitarian aid:** It was impossible for Bangladeshi Government to tackle the crisis without international support and humanitarian aid. Bangladeshi people shared their foods with the Rohingya people, local NGOs and different organizations support them with tons of foods. Not only food, the local people managed medical aid, cloths, tents, sanitation and other facilities. The government managed everything with high efficiency. But these local efforts are not able to feed more than 600000 Rohingyas. Various countries and organizations provided a huge amount of humanitarian assistance which helped to tackle the situation. It is not possible to figure out the exact amount of assistance but UN organizations and different NGOs demanded US\$951 million.

**(iii) Supporting by taking visual initiatives:** The most important support was visual action to make a permanent solution. Some countries and organizations took some initiatives to ensure permanent solution though those were not effective. Actions taken by Turkey were notable. The foreign minister of Turkey and the first lady visited the Rohingya camps. President Erdogan talked about the issue several times in several international platforms. He talked with the Prime Minister and President of Bangladesh via phone. He also talked with Aung Saan Suu Kyi via phone and expressed his deep concern (Haaretz, 2017). It is thought that Recep Tayeep Erdogan wants to be an iconic leader of the Muslim world and get back the previous honor of Sultan. His recent activities seem that he always take some eye washing initiatives to attracts the Muslim community. But almost all of these are ineffective.

As one of the most super powerful country the statement of USA was important to raise the issue globally. US vice president, Department of State, USA ambassador to UN expressed their views and strong condemned to the Myanmar. It also scraped planned future military cooperation with Myanmar. Officials of USA also visited the Rohingya camps. But no effective actions have been seen from the country. The initiative of the USA was seen as the anti-China position.

Among other countries Maldives has decided to cease all trade ties with Myanmar, Philippines wanted to take 3000 Rohingyas, Foreign Minister of Indonesia visited Bangladesh and International Criminal Court (ICC) that was sat in Malaysia convicted Suu Kyi for genocide. These initiatives raised global concern but not made any impact upon Myanmar to stop violence.

UN and other international organizations like UNAID, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFO, OIC, HRW, Doctor without Border, etc. are playing supportive role to the Rohingya and Bangladesh. Along with providing a lot of humanitarian aid they work to solve the problem. Information about the genocide and ethnic cleansing was provided by different human rights organizations (Haaretz, 2017).

### **Countries want to prolong the crisis**

It seems that Israel and Russia want to sustain the crisis. Providing weapon and training amid of the crisis seems that they want to prolong it. Moreover a number of Bangladeshi think Israel has a long term plan. It wants to see militancy in this area.

### **Countries support Myanmar Government**

Although genocide, rape, fire, cleansing and persecution have made the Rohingya crisis the most inhumane event of contemporary civilized world, some countries are supporting Myanmar Government for their own interest. Among these supporters India, China and Russia come in first count. Their supports become clear by their activities in UNO and by their statements in different times. These supports act as source of courage for the brutality done by Myanmar Government, military (Tatmadaw) and extremists.

## **CONCLUSION**

International community generally doesn't take initiative if there is no interest from it. Rohingya community is not important to the super power. Though the Bangladesh Government sought support from international community she did not get it properly to make a peaceful solution for the Rohingya crisis. Even the friendliest India and China prioritized their economic and geo-political interests over humanity. For this crisis to some extent the foreign policy of Bangladesh is responsible. The country failed to ensure its importance not only in the region but also in the international arena. This failure imposed the crisis upon it. To be protected from other upcoming or further originated crisis from the Rohingya, Bangladesh should be more strategic in both home and foreign policy.

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