

Rohingya Crisis: A Potential Maritime Quagmire for India

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Continued ethnic strife and the State's overtly discriminatory policies in the Rakhine province of Myanmar have resulted in hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fleeing their homes. As the exodus began in earnest in the late 1970s, the majority of the Rohingyas, escaping prosecution, crossed into Bangladesh through the land route, although a significant number also took the sea route, and fetched up in far off countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and even Australia. Whilst the issue of Rohingya refugees/ illegal immigrants in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia have been widely covered by the international media, there has been no mention, even in the Indian media, about the presence of nearly 40,000 of [Rohingyas in India](#), of whom 16,500 have been [formally recognised and registered](#) by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Most of these are believed to have crossed into India through Bangladesh and have now settled even in far off places like Jammu.

The illegal ingress of Rohingyas poses a serious security threat to India, especially in insurgency affected areas. The proximity of Bangladesh, from where these people are channeling into India, with the insurgency-ridden northeastern states and the Red Corridor, further exacerbates India's security challenges.

According to some estimates, more than 10,000 illegal Rohingya immigrants are settled in Jammu, of which around [7,000 are registered](#) with the UNHCR. The settlement of these illegal immigrants, in large numbers in Jammu, is singularly intriguing as it defies the usual immigration norms. The usual determinants of terrain, climate, culture, food, etc., of Jammu should not have matched with the settlement preference for Rohingyas, nor does Jammu provide any preferential economic opportunities. Proximity to the troubled region of Kashmir and the volatile India-Pakistan Line of Control should have, in fact, de-incentivized the Jammu option for these settlers. Also, the far off location chosen is a pointer towards the conclusion that these people might not have any intentions of ever going back, not even as and when the situation improves in Myanmar.

To compound the situation further, there always exists a high potential of displaced and aggrieved youth becoming cannon fodder for extremist and terrorists groups. The most relevant example in this regard would that be of the Taliban, which was born in the [seminaries set up in the refugee camps](#) of Pakistan, as they poured out of Afghanistan in the early eighties, after the Soviet invasion. Pakistan, a proven exporter of terror to India, would not hesitate in fishing in troubled waters and use misguided youth from the Rohingya community in furtherance of its intention to inflict a "thousand cuts" on India. The presence of these potential recruits in Jammu, close to the India-Pakistan Line of Control, therefore, further complicates the security conundrum for India.

According to an assessment made by Indian intelligence agencies, some of the top Rohingya leaders are suspected to have [links with a number of Pakistan-based extremist groups](#) including Hafiz Saeed's Jamaat-ud_Dawah(JuD) and Masood Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). In fact, the Myanmar-based extremist Rohingya group, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), is even believed to have a Pakistani chapter. As per the International Crisis Group (ICG), the extremist group ARSA is led by Ata Ullah, a Karachi born Rohingya and Rohingya fighters are being secretly trained by Afghan and Pakistani extremist groups.

Renewed violence, since 2016, has worsened the conditions in the Rakhine province, resulting in an accentuated exodus of refugees. Bangladesh alone has received more than [300,000 Rohingyas](#) since August 2017, when violence erupted afresh, thus taking the estimated population of displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh to 600,000 – 800,000. These large numbers of refugees impose huge economic, humanitarian and security strains and Bangladesh might have already reached the limit of its resilience. It will, therefore, become increasingly difficult for Bangladesh to hold such large numbers in its territory, let alone accepting fresh exodus. The consequent probability of some of these Rohingyas crossing over to India through Bangladesh and also directly from Myanmar through the sea route increases manifold.

With a large numbers of Rohingyas already in India and a near certain arrival of many more in the near future, as the situation deteriorates further in Myanmar, India faces a serious security challenge. The potential of their misuse for nefarious activities, including terrorism, also remains high. Amidst the backdrop of these revelations, the Indian government has expressed its intention to identify and deport Rohingyas who have illegally entered India.

It is germane that India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, which spells out the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of countries. Neither does India have a domestic refugee law. As per the existing rules of the land, the illegal immigrants in India could, therefore, well be deported. However, India has a long history of providing refuge to groups fleeing persecution, although on an ad hoc basis, including Tibetans, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankan Tamils and Afghans in recent history. However, national security implications weigh heavily as the Indian Government takes a stand to deport Rohingyas.

Meanwhile, Naypyidaw, for the first time, has offered to take back Rohingyas who have fled to other countries. Aung San Suu Kyi, in her [state address on September 19, 2017](#) has said that *“Myanmar is prepared to start a refugee verification process for those who wish to return.”* This welcome change in Naypyidaw’s policy on Rohingyas has come about soon after the visit by Prime Minister Modi to Myanmar. During his visit to Myanmar, whilst the criticism of Myanmar was growing, the Indian Prime Minister expressed [India’s solidarity with Myanmar](#) and had also shared India’s concerns over the violence in its Rakhine state.

New Delhi must, therefore, continue to work with Naypyidaw and Dhaka to help stabilize the situation such that the exodus stops and conditions become conducive for the return of these migrants to their home country. Although the statement from Aung San Suu Kyi is a welcome change, the identification and deportation of Rohingyas back to Myanmar would still remain a challenging task for the concerned Indian agencies.

Also, with increased chances of India emerging as one of the preferred location for displaced Rohingyas, it is quite likely that these people might take the sea route for transit from Myanmar/ Bangladesh to India. With Bangladesh and Myanmar hardening their stance on not allowing the influx through the land borders, the ingress through land would become increasingly difficult and consequently, the sea route becomes the obvious alternative. Rohingyas are no strangers to the seas, and have travelled by boats to distant places such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia. The east coast of India is hardly a long distance from Myanmar/ Bangladesh for these intrepid seafarers!

Such a development would pose a severe challenge to the maritime security organisation of India off the East Coast. While the maritime security apparatus on the country’s western seaboard has been regularly tested, largely due to regular misadventures by our western neighbor, the eastern seaboard remains relatively

uninitiated to this kind of security threat. All maritime security agencies on the East Coast of India must, therefore, gear up for this challenge, lest we should be taken by surprise by 'Boat People' landing up on our eastern shores.

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