

**Symposium Report on  
“Rohingya Influx in Bangladesh: Challenges Ahead”  
Date: Thursday, August 29, 2019  
Time: 10:30 a.m. to 01:00 p.m.  
Venue: BILIA Auditorium**

Since the brutal military crackdown on the Rohingya ethnic group by the Myanmar army in August 2017 in the northwest Rakhine state, an influx of around 700,000 ethnic Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh causing multifaceted challenges for the country. Hence, marking the two years of that brutal clampdown, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) organised a symposium on “Rohingya Influx in Bangladesh: Challenges Ahead” on August 29, 2019 at BILIA’s own Auditorium. The Symposium encompassed scholars from different academic and institutional arenas that included Professor Dr. Sadeka Halim, Dean, Faculty of Social Science, University of Dhaka, Ms. Farah Kabir, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh and Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) to give their expert and valuable opinions on the issue. The event was presided over by Ambassador Humayun Kabir, Acting President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI). On the other hand, Dr. Lailufar Yasmin, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka and Deputy Director (International Affairs; Part-time), BILIA, was the designated discussant of the symposium.

**Welcome Address and Inaugural Comments by the Chair Ambassador Humayun Kabir:**

The event began with Ambassador Humayun Kabir making the welcome address on behalf of Dr. Shahdeen Malik, Honourary Director, BILIA. Ambassador Kabir narrated that the Rohingya crisis has challenges not only from humanitarian and economic perspectives but also from geopolitical perspective since our perception about friends and foes is being challenged as well due to this issue. It is a complex problem but he thinks Bangladesh government, NGOs, civil societies, and national and international organisations are working hard to solve the problem and trying to sort out how to help the Rohingyas to go back to Myanmar as soon as possible.

Looking at the situation he highlighted few things. He pointed out that although Bangladesh didn’t create this problem but is bearing the consequences of it which is costing her in various dimensions. He hoped that the distinguished speakers would discuss the various aspects of which Bangladesh has been affected, how we should look at the future in terms of theologises to and possibly might give a sustainable solution of the crisis. He also pointed out that although in the last few years Bangladesh tried to solve the issue but unfortunately Myanmar stalled the process and framed the agenda in their favour despite Bangladesh having international support or the international community at her side. Furthermore, he pointed out the newly developed scenario of Rohingyas raising their own voice which he thinks is a new concern for Bangladesh. Finally raising the question of how we can send them back with dignity, he invited the designated speakers to provide their valuable analyses on the issue.

### **Analysis of Ms. Farah Kabir:**

Ms. Farah Kabir commenced with a brief history of Rohingyas in Bangladesh and the initiatives of government of Bangladesh to send them back. She said after 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 approximately 10-11 lac Rohingyas are now living in Bangladesh and 55-60% of them are women along with a big portion of young population. She also revealed about her visit to the Rohingya camps in 2017 where she saw women within age of 25-26 have 5 kids. She stated that from Bangladesh's perspective the reason behind giving them shelter is our own refugeehood during our 1971 Liberation War and secondly Bangladesh's position on humanitarian response. In this regard, the people of Bangladesh themselves are an example in terms of their situation in 1971. She thinks this is the one that encouraged Bangladesh to help the Rohingyas. She marked the first three months as an absolute emergency since everyday people were coming and during this the shelter Bangladesh gave them is an example which will go down in the history of humanitarian acts no matter how much people criticise that sufficient initiatives were not taken. She reminded that everyday Bangladesh manages food, water and sanitation of 8 lac people and there is no such huge refugee camp in recent history. Hence, Bangladesh has a lot to be proud of.

She explicated the early phase of the influx when the public of Bangladesh also helped them with whatever they had. Though at present there are some complains but it is common in every refugee camp if we look at history. It is no longer an emergency now but it is still a prolonged humanitarian crisis since they are still living in houses made of plastic and living with uncertainty in a socially and economically miserable position. She said when the Rohingyas came here they said that now they can see themselves as humans, they can have their religious freedom and can move freely which indicates the level of oppression in Rakhine where they had to be surveillant while praying or couldn't even give open Adhan. The level of oppression is unbelievable in this case and this is one thing which the international community totally ignored. She pointed out that our friends are not helping us is because China, India, Japan and Russia have very good relations with Myanmar. Even the European countries are seeking every option to go there since it is a very resource rich county.

However, she urged the government to arrange opportunities for their education, jobs and right to live with dignity. She stated that ActionAid Bangladesh works on Rohingyas in several areas, especially put women, adolescence, and young people at the centre and work for their skill development and training. From her experience with the Rohingyas, she said they want to work and to be productive; they don't like to be sitting here and dependant on anyone. She said when they talked to the Rohingyas they all wanted to go back home to Myanmar. But they are very clear that as of 1982 they are not citizens of their country. They have been stripped of citizenship. Regarding their repatriation, she expressed concern that where can they go back to since conflict is still going on in the Rakhine state. The place which is under discussion to repatriate them is actually an internally displaced camp. It's not about taking them back to their villages which have been flattened. That's why the Rohingyas are saying they want to go back

but on the ground of what right since they are now stateless people. So they should return only when they will be given a sustainable solution.

Coming to the funds she said there has been a joint assessment that says at least \$900 Millions are required to support this whole crisis and only 40% of this is given. So she urged the people to be realistic who make allegations like all the money mobilised is being looted or other irresponsible ones. She requested the journalists that instead of spending so much time on what Bangladesh is doing or not doing focus on Myanmar. Myanmar is not ashamed at all and don't consider itself accountable. She praised the Civil Society of Bangladesh since they submitted the issue to ICC and after a lot of efforts on the basis of this the ICC agreed to take the case. But it is also a prolonged issue and right now Myanmar doesn't feel any accountability. So if we only criticise Bangladesh that will indirectly only help Myanmar. Hence, Ms. Kabir urged the people to focus on what is the responsibility of Myanmar. She also lambasted those who advocate a third country solution questioning would they have done it in 1971. While, addressing the crimes of Rohingyas like drug peddling or thefts she told that drugs smuggling and human trafficking are nothing new in Cox's bazaar. Moreover, she pointed out that many people living in Cox's Bazar have been benefitted through businesses like transport, hotel, food, procurement etc. which she called 'Refugee Economy'. However, she acknowledged that the common people are negatively affected by the Rohingyas in many ways but she also urged us to understand that different types of psychologies and issues are working here as well and hence it is not a simple issue. Finally she concluded that it is very wrong to simplify this whole crisis. Myanmar has to take responsibility here as well as Myanmar must be brought to take that responsibility and accountability.

#### **Analysis of Dr. Sadeka Halim:**

Dr. Sadeka Halim began with addressing the general concept of why Bangladesh government couldn't be successful after taking two consecutive initiatives of their repatriation. Here, she thinks that it is not like that rather the negotiations has began pointing out that Myanmar's crosscheck of the list of 55,000 Rohingyas that Bangladesh government gave them where they showed eagerness to take 3,450 people from that list, although on 25 August 2019, no Rohingyas went back to Myanmar. She disparaged the atrocities committed against the Rohingyas in Northern Rakhine and also raised the question that Myanmar has given citizenship to other Muslim groups in Myanmar but not Rohingyas, why is that. However, referring the United Nations and other experts she addressed the crackdown as genocide. She thinks Myanmar as a state has a tendency to oppress and use discriminatory actions against their ethnic minorities. She also thinks there are some diplomatic reasons behind their resentment towards the Rohingyas whom she personally considers as asylum seekers from both academic and also ethical perspectives. Furthermore, she cited an international survey by Migrant Offshore Aid Station which took place when a big portion of Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh in 2017. The survey says among 1360 people who were questioned 78% are willing to return if situation improves where 16% had no desire to return. But then she indicated that situation has deviated a little now.

Discussing the theoretical side, she said there are two schools of thoughts in theoretical analysis of why the Rohingyas are expelled from Myanmar – one is it's an planned ethnic cleansing and the other one is geopolitical reasons where she thinks economic reasons are also associated. She gave example of a renown geographer who said 'the crisis of Rohingyas Muslim community in Rakhine state generated by military-economic interests rather than by mostly religious-ethnic issues' and as a social scientist she also put her emphasis on this point saying 'we cannot ignore the economic reasons in anyway'. However, she cited another theorist who on the contrary said 'there are events of ethnic cleansing as now in Rakhine state back in 1977 and 1992 when there were no megaprojects associated with this issue'. Thus, she thinks this is a very complicated issue to understand. She also took forth the political-economic situation citing China's good relation with Myanmar where she talked about the internal politics of subduing and subordinating their own Muslim groups, even though Bangladesh has a constructive relationship with China. However, she clarified that if we check at how these issues are viewed from the core of the Myanmar government the answer can be found from the statement of one of their ministers that says 'according to the law all burnt lands become government managed land'. Thus the question "where will they go back?" rises when we tell them to go back. Hence, if we take these issues into account along with the pipeline projects there, they literally have no place to go since their houses are flattened and incinerated.

On the other hand, while addressing its affects on the local-economic-social sphere she disagreed with Ms. Faraha Kabir, stating Cox's Bazar's eminence as tourist district and providing remittance from it. She further disclosed that Rohingyas are not only living Cox's bazaar, citing her work experience in Bandarban she said they even reached there. Here she referred to the concern of our honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who rightfully showed the severe damages to our environment and cutting down of mountains. Dr. Halim said these problems are caused as they are settling in those places. She also addressed the situation of Ukhia and Teknaf where due to huge number of Rohingya population compare to the locals a disproportionate demographic change has occurred. Further disagreeing with Ms. Farah Kabir, she also discouraged the idea of indulging petty crimes since a place like Cox' Bazar already had these problems. Though she don't support blaming an entire ethnic group but it's true that lots of problems/crimes like drug, violence, security, insecurity, prostitution have increased here since the Rohingyas arrive. Camps are not that much well protected and also there is a rise of religious extremism which may turn the camps into a fertile ground for this. There are also sexually transmitted diseases. Hence, Dr. Halim thinks they are misusing their right to live in shelters and as a result, the local people are questioning all these. She also questioned the NGOs working here. She appreciates their work but she urged them to be supervised properly as there can be activities that are threatening for the state. Furthermore, stating several data and survey, she expressed that environmental degradation is terrifying in that region as well as the vulnerabilities of women and children, along with the future of the children and dangers of inactiveness of such huge population like getting embroiled into different crimes or bad politics. Dr. Sadeka Halim

also talked about the politics of development indicating the role of INGOs and NGOs. She said that our government is letting them work freely but we must watch out if any of them doing anything which may create negative effects.

She categorised the challenges into two ways putting challenges of the Rohingyas in one side and the challenges of Bangladesh government which represent the challenges of the people of Bangladesh on the other. She put talked about the 5 points put forth by the Rohingyas—citizenship, safety, freedom of movement, recognition of their ethnicity and return to the origin of their home. However, she thinks if Myanmar cleared the list of 3,450 Rohingyas then Myanmar as a state at least recognises the Rohingyas as human being which is a good starting since in no other country in the world repatriation occurred this easily. Finally, in her concluding remarks she praised Prime Minister giving them refuge considering the humanitarian ground which cannot be ignored. And focusing on that, she goaded that we should keep trying which will in turn facilitate the whole process of repatriation that have started.

#### **Analysis of Dr. Fahmida Khatun:**

Dr. Fahmida Khatun focused on the economic dimension of the issue. Addressing the economic issue as one of the major factor behind this crisis she divided the impacts of Rohingya influx in Bangladesh into three broad categories – social, environmental and economic. Expressed her concern for the beautiful environment that turned into a wasteland Dr. Khatun said that it has some costs to pay – social as well economic. She said that the Rohingyas are indeed a burden for a country like Bangladesh, in fact, even developed or developing countries don't want to take refugees.

She explicated that though the way the Rohingyas are looked at or dealt with is very unkind but Bangladesh has shown the ultimate kindness to them. And what happened as a result is right now so many donors, bilateral, international NGOs that are working for this humanitarian crisis. But she warned that there will come a time when these donors will take 'donor fatigue' as in a world where every other day one crisis is going on someplace, in another place a more severe crisis is emerging. Hence, the donors will have to prioritise their donation for which crisis to give. At present the migration issues or refugee issues are the biggest challenges throughout the world. But the donors also have other responsibilities to them. She pointed out that after two years if we look forward we have now realised that the Rohingyas are going to stay here for a drastic good period of time and they are not leaving here anytime soon. Thus in future the Rohingyas may not be a priority for the donors. She further elaborated that the average year or time required for repatriation, lowest is 10 years. It can go up to 25 years, even then total repatriation never happens. And here the economists tried to figure out few scenarios and questions. For example, one such question is if there is donor fatigue then who will bear the cost? The answer to that is the government of Bangladesh. They also sorted out few scenarios based on the MOU signed between Bangladesh -Myanmar for the repatriation of Rohingyas where on provision is Myanmar to take 300 Rohingyas each day. Dr. Khatun cautioned about the last or case scenario

which is if none of them goes back then how much we have to spend. The estimated cost for 2018-19 year was \$1.2 billion. Furthermore, taking into account the population growth for the next 10 years i.e. in 2028 the resource required will be of \$17.2 billion. And obviously after 10 years or even 5 years the donors are not going to pay this whole cost. She questioned since Bangladesh is struggling with her own internal economic problems, then how would Bangladesh take care of this extra burden? She thinks it will be a big challenge for the government of Bangladesh.

She also warned that there are direct as well as indirect or invisible costs. Then there are other costs – like social costs and also environmental costs which are too high and some of them are not repairable since we cannot get back the ecosystems which are lost. The value of ecosystem is invaluable, it is essential for the existence of human being. So, if we don't take into account this it will be a grave mistake. Moreover, she addressed the issue of Bangladesh helping the Rohingyas and in exchange getting some benefits from the developed countries in terms of 'duty free quota free market exchange' or 'one time investment'. In this regard she advised that we have to get in mind that this will not work because we are living in a world where even the developed countries are struggling to improve their economy. We can see this world is also infiltrated by protectionism, nationalism as well as economies of countries are engaged in trade wars. So, when they themselves are in strain, then how they are going to help Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh is already in the process of graduating from least developed country to a developing country. Once Bangladesh graduates into that in 2024, then finally from 2027 onwards Bangladesh will not be able to get duty free quota free market exchange. Again there is FDI. FDI will go where you have right type of infrastructure – physical and social, and also right type of financial incentives, domestic market, large consumer society and a FDI friendly policy. So, FDI will move automatically from a region to region which is not a good thing for Bangladesh either.

However, addressing it as a humanitarian problem where she thinks the big countries of the world has to come together, from Bangladesh's part she suggested a three-pronged strategy:

- i) International dialogues have to be continued, whenever we get opportunities in international forum or regional forum like BIMSTEC, BCIN, ASEAN. We have to raise our voices and have to bring other supporters by our side.
- ii) Secondly, we have to continue dialogue with Myanmar as well as pressurise them.
- iii) And thirdly, till the Rohingyas are here we have to ensure that these people are taken care of. We have to remind the donors that they will have to mobilise the resources since Bangladesh has limited capacity to take care of these people. There are also many unemployed youth and we have to build their skill as well.

Also we have to think about the host community. They are also tired. Though initially they welcomed the Rohingyas but it's still a pressure for them. One example here is the labour market where the Rohingyas are getting more access due to being cheaper labours.

Finally, she highlighted that Bangladesh's trusted friends like Japan, China and India are doing business with Myanmar. Thus, in one hand they are supporting Bangladesh, but again on the other is not. Hence, she thinks it's a complex situation with geopolitical, strategic, social aspects and we have to approach the issue from all angles.

### **Open Discussion Session:**

After the analyses from the distinguished speakers, the chair of the event Ambassador Humayun Kabir invited the audience for the open discussion session. With the participation of former ambassadors, academicians, researchers, teachers, students and media representatives the open discussion session disclosed several debated arenas of the Rohingya crisis. Questions asked about the diplomatic initiatives, present as well as future challenges and also about opportunities in the international domain which we may explore from this crisis.

### **Comments by the Designated Discussant Dr. Lailufar Yasmin:**

The open discussion session was followed by some valuable comments on the issue from the designated discussant Professor Dr. Lailufar Yasmin. She began with pointing out that there are so many nuances of the issue that we have to explore or have to take experts from various arena, which she hoped has been met today from the sociological and economic perspectives, for the various understanding of the issue. Recognising it as a very complex issue, she said we cannot consider it from a one sided perspective or theoretical perspective, rather, we have to breed in societal, economic or other perspectives here. She notified that there are some questions that come forth in the issue which is, is it a statist problem or a humanist problem? There are also lot of implications including societal and economic implications as well as lot of questions that resides with the Westphalian system where a state has a particular sovereignty over a population and area, and where we are separated by the invisible wall of sovereignty. As a result, our imagination ends in that particular tier of order and this is a problem that we see at the very end of the problems of the Rohingyas.

Dr. Yasmin described that Bangladesh government has taken a very firm position on not designating Rohingyas as refugees since a lot of issues will come forward to complicate the issue then. However, at the same time Bangladesh government has also taken a firm stand on not pushing them back because we have that historical experience of being refugees, although we cannot compare the two situations since they are politically very different. We have to understand that the persecuted community are asking for a place to stay and live where their sons and daughters can flourish. This is not like the Mexicans are asking for refugee status or moving to United States neither if we look at the dynamics of other kinds of refugee situations. Here it is purely a humanitarian crisis. They are not fortune seekers who are trying to come here to deforester Bangladesh's lands. Ergo, we also have to take into account the ground realities here. She also suggested that we should have the attitude of taking this issue as a state concern and state security.

After that, she put forward the international relations perspective where economic point of view is added as well. She espoused to see the state system of the world order from a very holistic perspective. She elaborated that in the international system we can see from the very beginning of the Ukraine crisis, especially after the end of the Cold War, the United States took lot of the responsibilities for a few years but longer the debacle became they retreated. Again, we have seen that in the Ukraine crisis Russia tried to redefine the geopolitical order of the world. So we have to see the nature of international order. In 1992, Myanmar had to take the Rohingyas back because there was still sort of balance of power active here. But on the other hand, it has drastic difference with the influx of 2017 because now nobody tries to maintain peace in the system. United States or China none are interested in that. China is trying to expand its economic muscle all round the world but it will still take for China another 20-30 years to expand its military muscle since China has taken the policy of not undertaking huge military modernisation, instead prioritising economic spending. So, we have to see from this perspective that the international community is little detached for a little while and in this time donor fatigue or compassion fatigue (end of compassion for the Rohingyas from people) might happen. She further explained that there is no country internationally eager to take the responsibility of keeping the world order intact as the geopolitical borders will be violated. So, we have to see the various dimensions that have been discussed as well the international dimension.

She explained why in 1978 and 1992 we could resolve it but we couldn't do it now citing there is a bigger international issue here. It's not the failure of our diplomacy rather our diplomacy is trying their best, though she acknowledged that there has been bit of limitations of access. She also applauded that Bangladesh has so little resources in such a small land but still we are able to portray Bangladesh with the highest GDP growth rate among all other Asian countries. Finally she concluded that we need to highlight the Rohingya issue with a national solution and for that we need to work together so that they can go back to their homeland.

#### **Concluding Remarks from the Chair Ambassador Humayun Kabir:**

After the comments from the designated discussant the honourable chair of the symposium Ambassador Humayun Kabir made his concluding remarks where he emphasised to work more intensively with the ASEAN since it has huge influence on Myanmar. He expressed that it began from Myanmar and the end is also up to them. For that he suggested a 'Nuance Diplomacy'. He narrated that there are lots of potentials for investment in Myanmar and lots of countries like Japan, China and also the European countries have their eyes on it too. And Myanmar is using this as a strategy of leverage which we can do as well since those countries have big investments in Bangladesh too which we can use as an element in our negotiation with those countries. The Finally, symposium ended with Ambassador Kabir applauding the speakers and thanking the participants.

*The event was covered by Labib Murshed, Research Assistant (International Affairs), Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA).*