

REVISITING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF HOSTING ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

Arundhati Das*

Abstract

The refugee crisis is not a recent phenomenon, nor is the impacts of the refugee influx on the host country new. Among all the impacts on host countries due to an influx of refugees, the environmental impact is one of the most threatening ones. Bangladesh has been hosting Rohingya refugees since the late 1970s. Bangladesh is already an environmentally vulnerable country and is more prone to natural disasters. Given this context, hosting such a large number of refugees in Teknaf, one of the forested areas of Bangladesh, is creating more pressure on the environment as the basic needs and daily activities of the Rohingya refugees have a massive impact on the environment. This paper thus shows how the influx of the Rohingya refugees is impacting the environment of the hosting area of Bangladesh. The article concludes that the refugees are dependent on the natural resources of that area to fulfil their basic needs until they are provided with the basic requirements by the host country itself. Such dependency on nature creates unbearable pressure on the environment. As a result, serious environmental degradation has already taken place. However, gradual and systematic efforts are necessary to avoid further environmental impacts.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Rohingya Refugees, Environmental Security, Human Security, Security Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the number of refugees fleeing from their home countries due to persecution is increasing. The growing volume of refugees creates a number of new challenges for the host countries. Among those challenges, environmental degradation in the host countries is the most threatening one. The environment and the refugees are closely connected as the environmental issues often lead many people to become refugees and, on the other hand, refugees

* **Arundhati Das**, Research Assistant, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA).

create significant impacts on the environment, such as deforestation, soil erosion, depletion, pollution of water resources etc.¹ Temporary shelters for the refugees are built near environmentally sensitive areas, like reserve forests or agriculturally marginal areas. The basic needs and daily activities of refugees, like building shelters, cooking, earning livelihoods etc., negatively affect the surrounding environment. Thus, the prolonged stay of the refugees is responsible for environmental hazards as refugee camps are often built in areas that are already environmentally fragile.² Sometimes, refugees may drastically use the limited resources in the host countries. Moreover, they may have few incentives to preserve the resources of the host countries that do not belong to them. Such cases are evident in the African region. According to a UNHCR assessment based on 1989 figures, an estimated 11 million or 12,000 hectares of forests in Africa alone were cleared for building refugee shelters, and as a result, not only Goma's³ 200,000 local people faced environmental destruction, but also rare gorillas in this area were also placed at risk.⁴ Therefore, the environmental impact of the refugee influx is a major concern.

The Rohingyas are the fastest-growing refugee emergency in today's world,⁵ and Bangladesh is already an over-populated and environmentally vulnerable region. In this situation, the influx of such

¹ Brisman *et al.*, "Climate apartheid and environmental refugees," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South*, edited by R. Hogg, J. Scott, M. Sozzo and K. Carrington, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp.301-321.

² Mekonen Aregai and Muluberhan Bedemariam, "Socio-environmental conflicts between the refugee populations and their host communities: The case of Eritrean Refugees in North Western Tigray, Ethiopia," *Environmental & Socio-economic Studies*, Vol.8, No.2, 2020, pp.54-62.

³ Goma is the capital of North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

⁴ Shin-wha Lee, "When Refugees Stream: Environmental and Political Implications of Population Displacement," *Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters - European Commission Humanitarian Office*, 1995, p.101, available at: <http://www.nzdl.org/gsdldmod?e=d-00000-00---off-0aedl--00-0----0-10-0--0---0direct-10---4-----0-0l--11-en-50---20-help---00-0-1-00-0-0-11-1-0utfZz-8-10-0-11-10-0utfZz-800&cl=CL1.1&d=HASH01a4ebd36514_def5de_2149a7.5.5&x=1101%20p> (accessed on June 9, 2019)

⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis," 2020, available at: <<https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis>> (accessed on June 16, 2019)

a large volume of refugees is a serious threat to the environment of Bangladesh. Due to this influx of Rohingya refugees, the forested areas of the Teknaf and Ukhiya have been used to construct refugee camps and offices for several government and non-government institutions. As a result, forests and hills have been destroyed. Moreover, the Rohingyas have little knowledge about the importance of preserving the environment and the impacts of destroying forests on the environment. Environmental impact is the most severe impact of refugee influx as the negative impacts on the environment are often impossible to diminish. Even if the effects on the environment can be minimized, it takes a very long time. Since the impact on the environment is a broad phenomenon and Bangladesh is already an environmentally fragile area, the case of the Rohingya refugee influx and its impact on the environment of Bangladesh is a concern.

Given this context, this study aims to show how refugees affect the environment with their day to day activities by examining the case of the Rohingya influx in Bangladesh. In doing so, the study will try to attain the following two objectives:

1. To provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the refugee crisis and environmental impacts, especially the Rohingya refugee crisis and its effect on the environment.
2. To review the ways of current environmental impacts in the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub -districts of Cox's Bazar due to hosting Rohingya refugees, which in turn affect the environment of Bangladesh.

In line with the aforesaid objectives, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How the refugee crisis and the environment are interrelated?
2. In which ways are the basic needs of the Rohingya refugees affecting the environment in the current situation?
3. How can the negative impacts on the environment due to the Rohingya crisis be minimized?

To attain the objectives as well as to answer the research question, the study employs qualitative method of social science research, supported by both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews of the stakeholders. Semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires were used for interviews