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Between Diplomacy and Displacement: The Contradictions of the Rohingya Repatriation Discourse

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Abstract

The Bangladesh interim administration's announcement in April this year—that it would soon repatriate 180,000 of its 700,000-odd Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar—was quickly hailed as a diplomatic victory. This paper analyses the claim, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analyses of refugee narratives, to highlight its implausibility. It argues that Rakhine State in Myanmar, from which the Rohingyas hail and to which they are expected to be repatriated, is no longer entirely controlled by the military junta in Myanmar, but by an insurgent group, the Arakan Army (AA). It finds other obstacles to repatriation, such as mistrust of the ruling authority, the Rohingya refugees' reliance on humanitarian aid, and the rising aspirations of the youth among the refugees. It argues that any sustainable repatriation framework must engage relevant non-state actors, address structural inequalities, and prioritise the agency of Rohingya refugees.

Introduction

The Rohingya crisis remains one of the most enduring humanitarian and political challenges faced by South and Southeast Asia. Since the mass displacement of over 700,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2017 following violent military operations in the region, international efforts to facilitate their safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation have repeatedly failed. This is due to entrenched structural barriers, volatile security dynamics, and a persistent lack of political will.[1]

However, on 4 April 2025, Muhammad Yunus—who heads the interim administration that assumed power in Bangladesh following the student-led 'July Revolution' of 2024 which ousted former prime minister Sheikh Hasina[2]—made an announcement that gained global attention. He announced, at the sixth summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in Bangkok, that Myanmar, as an initial step, had agreed to take back 180,000 of the 700,000-odd Rohingyas. It was described as a breakthrough in regional diplomacy.[3]

On closer inspection, however, the optimism appears premature. Most of the villages in Rakhine, the state from which the Rohingyas fled, are now under the control of an insurgent group, the Arakan Army (AA), which functions as its de facto governing authority. Since it launched its offensive in Rakhine in November 2023, the AA has made massive territorial gains, capturing 14 out of 17 townships in the region. Of the remaining three, active fighting continues in Sittwe and Kyaukphyu, and at the time of writing, Manaung has not reported clashes. The AA has also expanded its control along the Naf River, taking over key areas including Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Paletwa townships in the adjoining Chin State. Effectively, the entire Myanmar border with India and Bangladesh is now controlled by the AA.[4]

The AA, which comprises mainly Arakenese, the majority Buddhist community of the region, has long been hostile to the minority Muslim Rohingya population.[5] Seeking greater autonomy for the Rakhine and surrounding regions, it does not include the Rohingyas in its vision of 'local community'.[6] The fact that most Rohingya homes have been destroyed

after they departed, and that they have never been given citizenship rights by Myanmar, will make it still more difficult to resettle them.[7] As it is, earlier waves of Rohingya refugees, who fled to Bangladesh even before the 2017 crisis, have yet to be repatriated. The first exodus was in 1978, followed by another in the early 1990s, and yet another in 2012;[a] their total number stands at 1.2 million.[8,9]

Many refugee Rohingyas, most of them living in camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, are sceptical of any deal that may have been worked out, as it does not include any internationally-monitored safeguards, nor guarantees that they will get them justice or restitution once they return. Some of them believe that being settled in a third country willing to accept them is a more realistic and secure option.[10] A section among Rohingya youth is increasingly getting drawn to armed political resistance,[11] frustrated by years of statelessness, the large-scale denial of their rights, and a lack of meaningful repatriation prospects. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), active since at least 2016, has been the most visible armed group, launching attacks on Myanmar security forces that triggered massive crackdowns. In addition to ARSA, other militant outfits—including the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and smaller, less-known factions— have emerged or reactivated over the years, some with alleged cross-border links or shifting allegiances.[12]

This present study uses a qualitative, exploratory design to examine the gap between official diplomatic narratives and the on-ground realities of Rohingya repatriation. Data was collected between March and mid-April 2025 through semi-structured interviews with Rohingya community members, aid workers, journalists, officials, and experts. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed to reach individuals with direct experience or informed insight. Secondary sources, including policy documents, UN reports, and academic literature, supplemented the interviews. The study's findings are not statistically representative and should be viewed in light of evolving conditions in Rakhine State.

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a   The 1978 exodus was triggered by 'Operation Nagamin', a military campaign aimed at registering citizens, which targeted the Rohingyas and resulted in mass displacement. The early 1990s saw renewed flight due to forced labour, religious persecution, and militarisation. In 2012, communal violence in Rakhine State between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims displaced tens of thousands. See: https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims

The Rohingya Exodus: An Overview

Discussions on the Rohingya repatriation issue, framed through the lens of high-level diplomatic negotiations, often fail to take into account the deeply fragmented political, security, and social landscape of Rakhine State.[13] The Rohingyas have historically been excluded from Myanmar's national consciousness, more so after the adoption of the Citizenship Law of 1982, which essentially made them stateless by refusing to recognise them as one of the country's 'national races'. Myanmar's politics is largely dominated by the Bamar community, who comprise almost 70 percent of its population, and both the Bamars and Arakanese of Rakhine regard the Rohingyas as foreigners who were brought there during British rule. Nationalist organisations and state actors have exacerbated this notion.[14] Tensions between the other ethnic groups and the Rohingyas have periodically erupted in violence, most notably during the pogroms of 2012 and the military-led operations of 2016–2017, which were marked by mass atrocities against the Rohingyas and caused their displacement. The other communities in Rakhine have, in some instances, actively supported these campaigns, seeing them as a means to reclaim territory and assert demographic dominance.[15]

The lack of trust between the Rohingya and other communities in Rakhine State[16] undermines prospects of peaceful coexistence and complicates any repatriation or reconciliation efforts that may be underway. Nor should the distrust be viewed in isolation; it is embedded in Myanmar's broader pattern of ethnic hierarchy, militarisation, and state-sponsored exclusion.[17] Any sustainable resolution will require addressing both the legacy of historical grievances and the structural barriers that perpetuate communal divisions.[18]

Gaps in Current Research

A growing body of research has examined the complex dynamics underpinning the Rohingya crisis. A 2020 report from the International Crisis Group, for example,[19] provides a foundational analysis of the 2012 communal violence in Rakhine State, arguing that the crisis was not inevitable but rather the outcome of deep-seated structural discrimination and political neglect. Although the Rohingyas had faced attacks and discrimination before, the 2012 violence in Rakhine State marked a turning point in their marginalisation, setting the stage for more organised and sustained waves of violence. However, earlier episodes—in 1978 and the early 1990s—also involved large-scale crackdowns and expulsions, driven by state-led operations aimed at excluding the Rohingya from citizenship and forcibly displacing them.[20]

Building on this, Myanmar expert Nicolas Cheesman has explored the conceptual underpinnings of Myanmar's exclusionary national identity,[21] showing how the legal and social construct of 'national races' has come to supersede citizenship in determining access to rights. His work illuminates the systemic nature of the Rohingyas' statelessness, which is not merely administrative but ideologically rooted. So too, has J. P. Leider, in his book *Rohingya: the History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar,*[22] unpacked the contested narratives surrounding the Rohingyas' origins, highlighting how historical interpretation has been weaponised by both the state and nationalist movements in Myanmar to justify exclusionary practices.

In his book, *The Myanmar Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis*, Andrew Selth examined the strategic calculus behind Myanmar's military operations during the 2017 crackdown, situating the persecution of Rohingyas within broader patterns of militarisation and ethnic control in Myanmar's security apparatus.[23] In *Understanding Reform in Myanmar: People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*, Marie C. Lall contributed an ethnographic dimension by documenting the lived experiences of Rohingya refugees.[24] Her work emphasises the human cost of displacement and the long-term psychological and socio-economic impacts borne by survivors.

Gaps in Current Research

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), for its part, has provided authoritative documentation of the crimes committed against the Rohingyas, concluding that the Myanmar military's actions, which include murder, sexual violence, and forced displacement, amount to crimes against humanity.[25] The UN's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (2018) has also implicated the Myanmar military, *Tatmadaw*, in these crimes against humanity, calling them acts amounting to genocide.[26] For its part, the Transnational Institute's report, *Arakan Army and the Politics of Ethnic Armed Resistance in Myanmar*,[27] offers a comprehensive examination of the AA's rise and its ambivalent stance toward the Rohingyas.

It is clear from the existing literature that the Rohingya crisis is complex and multifaceted.[28] However, research gaps remain, crucial for deeper academic insight and effective policy responses. Why international legal frameworks have so far failed to prevent the marginalisation of the Rohingyas or resolve their problems has yet to be answered. Numerous treaties and conventions of the United Nations—such as the 1951 Refugee Convention,[b] the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons,[c] and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness[d]— form the backbone of global legal responses to statelessness.[29] However, the Rohingya crisis has shown that these instruments lack robust enforcement mechanisms and often rely on state cooperation, which is not forthcoming in the case of Myanmar.[30] It is clear that these frameworks have neither adequately addressed the conditions that lead to protracted statelessness nor provided effective pathways for accountability or restitution.[31] The Rohingyas' legal status continues to be shaped by state-centric interpretations that exclude them from full protection under international law.[32] There is thus pressing need for critical legal scholarship and policy reform that re-examines the structural limitations of existing frameworks and considers new normative and institutional approaches to safeguard the rights of stateless and politically excluded populations like the Rohingyas.[33]

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b   The UNHCR's 1951 Convention on Refugees defines the term 'refugee', lays down their rights and the standards of treatment they should be globally entitled to. It is signed and ratified by 149 nations.

c   The 1954 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons asserts that, in any country, 'stateless persons', who are not refugees, should have the same status and rights as foreign nationals in that country. It has been accepted by 99 countries.

d   The 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness adds to the 1954 Convention, seeking to help stateless persons acquire a nationality. It has been ratified by 70 countries.

Gaps in Current Research

The suppression of the Rohingyas' historical narrative has eroded their identity. The role of historical memory in both understanding the current crisis and exploring potential pathways to reconciliation remains underexplored.[34] Myanmar's militarised governance has also played a central role in exacerbating the crisis.[35] Despite extensive study of militarisation, its long-term socio-economic impact—especially on access to healthcare, education, and jobs—remains poorly understood. Deeper research is essential to address the institutional barriers facing Rohingya integration and well-being in both Myanmar and the countries which have hosted Rohingya refugees.

The dynamics of inter-communal relations in Myanmar is another poorly understood dimension. While much of the scholarly and policy focus has rightly emphasised state-led persecution and legal statelessness in Myanmar,[36] the role of social cohesion and intergroup trust—both in Myanmar and in the host countries—deserves closer attention. Historically, the Rohingyas have faced deep-seated animosity and systemic marginalisation not only by the state but also by the other ethnic/religious communities in Rakhine State.[37] These tensions have persisted and, in some cases, intensified in the aftermath of their mass displacement in 2017.

The post-displacement experiences of Rohingya refugees have varied depending on the host country. While Bangladesh is relatively welcoming, and India, for instance, currently hosts an estimated 30,000 Rohingyas,[38] their situation remains precarious—some have been subjected to arrest, detention, and even deportation, with Indian authorities citing national security concerns.[39] These developments have further strained relations between the Rohingya and segments of the local population, many of whom view them with suspicion or as demographic and economic threats.[40] The hostility is not limited to state actors—it is also reflected in everyday inter-communal interactions that range from discrimination and social exclusion to outright violence.

Despite extensive documentation of communal tensions in both Myanmar and the host states,[41] the specific role of these inter-communal dynamics in shaping the broader discourse and feasibility of repatriation remains

Gaps in Current Research

under-theorised. As repatriation plans are often framed looking at only their legal and diplomatic aspects, insufficient attention is paid to on-the-ground realities of fractured social fabrics and mutual distrust.[42] For repatriation to be safe, dignified, and sustainable, future research must examine how trust can be rebuilt not only between the Rohingyas and the state but also between Rohingyas and other ethnic or religious groups—both in Myanmar and in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia where they now reside.

Peace-building efforts must go beyond high-level negotiations and include grassroots strategies aimed at restoring social cohesion.[43] This could include community dialogue programmes, reconciliation initiatives, and the inclusion of inter-communal trust-building as a formal component of repatriation frameworks. Without addressing the deeply rooted social fractures, any effort toward repatriation risks being superficial, or worse, reigniting cycles of violence and displacement.

A critical analysis of the politics of humanitarian governance—particularly the influence of aid organisations on repatriation frameworks—is also essential to understand how humanitarian actors sometimes inadvertently perpetuate dependency or how, conversely, they can contribute to sustainable, rights-based solutions.[44] Examining these dynamics will offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of current interventions, while informing alternative strategies that centre the rights and agency of the Rohingya community.[45]

The Rohingya crisis has clear geopolitical dimensions as well, yet detailed analysis of this aspect remains limited. Further research is needed on how regional powers—such as China, India, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)—influence repatriation policies[46] and shape the broader political landscape affecting the Rohingyas' long-term return.

While immediate humanitarian responses to the Rohingya crisis are well-documented, long-term repatriation challenges remain underexplored.[47] Further research is needed on sustainable solutions—including pathways to citizenship, political integration, and reparative justice—to ensure a durable resolution to the Rohingyas' displacement and to inform alternative

policy approaches.[48] First-hand perspectives of displaced Rohingyas are largely absent from academic discourse.[49] Understanding their lived experiences, aspirations for repatriation, and visions for Myanmar's future, is essential to developing inclusive, rights-based solutions.[50] What is needed is a comprehensive, multidimensional approach that goes beyond viewing the crisis solely as a refugee emergency.[51] Such an approach can enrich academic understanding and inform more effective, rights-based policy solutions.[52]

Repatriation as Political Symbolism

Studies have shown that state-led repatriation initiatives are often shaped more by political expediency than by refugee agency or welfare. Migration scholar Katy Long has called such processes 'performances' of state responsibility, rather than genuine solutions.[53] In the case of Bangladesh and Myanmar, multiple bilateral agreements—particularly in 2018 and 2019—have collapsed due to Myanmar's refusal to address key demands related to safety, justice, and citizenship.[54]

Statelessness and Institutional Exclusion

The structural denial of citizenship to the Rohingyas under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law lies at the core of their protracted statelessness.[55] Both Cheesman, cited earlier, and Azeem Ibrahim, author of *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide*, have separately demonstrated that the exclusion of Rohingyas from Myanmar's legal and national frameworks has been both deliberate and systemic. Without restoring legal recognition and addressing historical injustices, repatriation will remain more symbolic than substantive.[56]

The Role of the Arakan Army and Shifting Sovereignty

The AA is today a key military and administrative force in Rakhine state[57] and repatriation policies that ignore its growing influence have become

outdated and ineffective.[58] Indeed, Bangladeshi government advisers have lately stressed that resolving the refugee crisis requires engagement with not only Myanmar's regime but also the AA and the parallel National Unity Government (NUG).[e,59]

However, attributing the stalled repatriation process solely to the AA's growing territorial control of Rakhine State obscures the military's long-standing culpability and ongoing manipulation of the Rohingya population.[60] Recent reports from human rights organisations and media outlets suggest that the military has coerced or recruited Rohingya individuals to fight the AA, exploiting their precarious state for strategic gain.[61]

Thus, Rohingyas are being used as pawns by the very institution responsible for their displacement, calling into question any claims of genuine intent behind repatriation negotiations. The military's periodic engagement in such discussions—often under international scrutiny or diplomatic pressure—appears more tactical than transformative, lacking any meaningful commitment to restoring citizenship, justice, or protection to the Rohingyas.

Citizenship and Military Rule

The 1982 Citizenship Law, which has deprived the Rohingyas of citizenship in their own country, did not emerge in a vacuum. It was the culmination of decades of marginalisation and state-led efforts to redefine national identity in ethnic-Buddhist terms. Before the law was passed, the Rohingyas, while still facing discrimination, at least held National Registration Certificates (NRCs) and were recognised as residents, with some even participating in electoral politics during the 1950s and early 1960s.[62] However, following General Ne Win's 1962 coup and his introduction of the so-called 'Burmese Way to Socialism', ethnic minorities—including the Rohingyas— were increasingly viewed as threats to national unity.[63] A turning point came in 1978 with 'Operation Nagamin' (Operation Dragon King), a

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e The National Unity Government of Myanmar is an association of legislators who were elected to the Myanmar Parliament (called Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) in the last election held in the country in November 2020, but were ousted following the military coup on 1 February 2021.

military campaign officially aimed at rooting out illegal immigrants, but which effectively forced the mass exodus of over 200,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh.[64]

   The 1982 citizenship law formalised this exclusion, replacing the more inclusive 1948 Union Citizenship Act with a rigid, ethnically defined hierarchy of citizenship, which recognises only 135 *'taingyintha'* ('national races' or 'indigenous ethnic groups')—a list from which the Rohingyas were deliberately omitted.[65,66] As both Cheesman (2017) and another Myanmar expert, Matthew Walton (2008) have shown in their work, Myanmar's legal framework is built upon an ethno-nationalist ideology that views national belonging through an ethnically restrictive lens, thereby excluding communities like the Rohingyas from the legal and moral boundaries of the state.[67] As a result of the 1982 law, the Rohingyas were rendered stateless, denied basic rights, and subject to escalating surveillance, forced labour, and movement restrictions—conditions that intensified under successive military regimes. The law's legacy continues to shape not only the Rohingyas' statelessness but also Myanmar's broader ethno-nationalist state-building project. Any sustainable solution, therefore, must contend with the historical roots of exclusion embedded in both Myanmarese law and military governance. The biggest impediment to repatriation lies not in the absence of bilateral engagement, but in Myanmar's entrenched legal and ideological frameworks, particularly the Citizenship Law.

Aspirational Divergence within Refugee Communities

Recent scholarly contributions have also examined the evolving social and economic dynamics within Rohingya refugee camps, revealing complex patterns of adaptation and resistance. While many Rohingyas remain reliant on humanitarian assistance and informal economic activities for survival,[68] some, particularly among the youth who face protracted displacement and limited prospects for mobility or education, have begun migrating to third countries for a more secure and autonomous future. Since no country has committed to large-scale resettlement of Rohingya refugees, those seeking to migrate often do so through irregular and 'unauthorised' routes.[69,70]

Irregular migration by Rohingya youth—often facilitated by smuggling networks—is a desperate attempt to reach countries perceived to offer asylum or better opportunities.[71] It is driven not only by economic motives but also by aspirations for safety, dignity, and basic human rights—none of which are fully assured in their current host countries, mainly Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia.[72] Restrictive refugee policies in the host countries—mobility restrictions, lack of access to formal schooling, detention threats, and fear of deportation—have only reinforced the perception among many Rohingya youth that their future lies elsewhere.[73]

Despite the dangers associated with irregular migration—including human trafficking, detention in transit states, or forcible deportation back to their camps—many Rohingya youth continue to embark on perilous escape journeys by sea or land.[74] These routes have become increasingly common in regions such as the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, where numerous boats with Rohingya refugees have either been intercepted, gone missing, or gotten stranded for weeks without assistance.[75] The absence of a comprehensive international framework for third-country resettlement, coupled with a lack of political will among Global North countries, effectively forces these youth into a legal and humanitarian limbo.[76]

To address this growing crisis, international actors must go beyond humanitarian assistance and work toward creating durable solutions that include realistic resettlement quotas, safe migration corridors, and youth-focused integration policies. At the same time, host states must be supported to enhance rights and protection mechanisms for Rohingya populations.[77]

The Limits of Third-Country Resettlement

The practical viability of third-country resettlement remains highly constrained. Historically, large-scale resettlement programmes have been rare in South Asia, with the Bhutanese refugee case in Nepal being an exception. Over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees were resettled in Western countries between the early 2000s and mid-2010s through a multilateral agreement involving the United States, Canada, Australia, and several

European nations.[78] However, this precedent cannot be easily replicated for the Rohingyas. As separate studies by C. Brun (2003) and R. Chhabra (2016), along with UNHCR reports have shown, the Bhutanese resettlement programme emerged in a highly specific geopolitical context: a protracted diplomatic deadlock between Nepal and Bhutan, coupled with sustained lobbying by international actors and alignment with Western strategic interests during a post-9/11 humanitarian expansion phase.[79] These enabling conditions do not exist in the Rohingya case. On the contrary, the international landscape has shifted toward securitised migration regimes and political appetite for refugee intake has reduced substantially—particularly among Western countries.[80]

Nor have the Gulf nations and other wealthy Muslim-majority states—despite offering rhetorical support and humanitarian assistance—extended concrete offers for resettlement or durable migration pathways to the Rohingyas.[81] Their reluctance is informed by a mix of domestic labour market priorities, sectarian politics, and fears of demographic destabilisation. This lack of substantive commitment from both Western and Muslim countries has made third-country resettlement more of a political talking point than a viable solution.

Given these realities, the continued invocation of third-country resettlement in policy discussions appears too idealistic. It deflects attention from the more politically and structurally difficult task of ensuring voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation or enabling local integration within host states like Bangladesh.[82] Both these alternatives carry legal, political, and logistical challenges—especially given Myanmar's continued refusal to recognise the Rohingyas as citizens and Bangladesh's limited absorption capacity or regional leverage.

Regional Diplomacy and Structural Limitations

Efforts by UN agencies, ASEAN, and the Organisation of Islamic Nations (OIC) to resolve the Rohingya crisis are constrained by geopolitical rivalries, non-interference principles, and a lack of enforceable frameworks.[83] China's backing of Myanmar further hampers putting coordinated international pressure on the latter.[84]

Gaps in Current Research

Repatriation without legal safeguards, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and the inclusion of refugees in decision-making risks perpetuating cycles of displacement rather than resolving them.[85] While Bangladesh has made efforts to repatriate the Rohingyas—motivated by domestic socio-political pressures and limited resources—it does not have the leverage to change the structural conditions in Myanmar that determine the legal status and long-term safety of the refugees. Without changes in these root causes, repatriation efforts are unlikely to lead to durable solutions. Therefore, the repatriation of over 700,000 Rohingya refugees is an urgent priority of Bangladesh, but its capacity to push for meaningful change inside Myanmar's political or constitutional order is severely limited.

Crucially, Myanmar continues to frame the Rohingyas as 'Bengalis'—a designation that serves multiple political purposes. It implies foreignness, reinforcing a narrative that the Rohingyas are recent migrants from Bangladesh and thus illegitimate claimants to national belonging.[86] This discourse is foundational to Myanmar's state ideology: by casting the Rohingyas as outsiders, the state justifies their exclusion from rights and citizenship, rationalises past and present violence against them as protective or defensive actions, and inoculates the public from empathising with their plight.[87] Thus, any proposed repatriation effort that does not guarantee full citizenship to the Rohingyas, as well as protection from persecution and long-term reintegration into Myanmar society, is meaningless.[88] Without a fundamental transformation of Myanmar's conception of nationhood—one that includes the Rohingyas as rightful citizens—any repatriation process will remain unstable and ultimately unsustainable.

R efugee repatriation in South Asia has been shaped by complex historical, political, and regional factors. Analysing past experiences in the region provides critical insights into the challenges faced by the Rohingyas and the viability of proposed solutions to their crisis.

India: Tamil and Bengali Refugees

India's handling of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, following the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2002), and of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan during the Bangladeshi liberation struggle of 1971, illustrates how repatriation efforts are intertwined with geopolitics, ethnic nationalism, and regional security. The repatriation of these groups was facilitated within a context of strong political motivations tied to ethnic solidarity, and India's strategic regional interests.[89]

Pakistan: Afghan Refugees

Pakistan's long-term hosting and phased repatriation of Afghan refugees highlights the role of international collaboration and shifting political will. Hosting millions of Afghans since the Soviet-Afghan conflict (beginning 1980), Pakistan's approach involved engaging with UNHCR and donor nations, illustrating the challenges inherent in managing protracted refugee situations shaped by conflict and foreign policy considerations.[90]

Nepal: Bhutanese Lhotshampas

Nepal's experience with Bhutanese Lhotshampa refugees underscores the difficulties in repatriating populations caught in ethnic and political disputes between their host and origin states. As noted earlier, with repatriation to Bhutan having failed, Nepal facilitated third-country resettlement, demonstrating the limits of bilateral repatriation when there is entrenched political discord.[91]

The Role of Regional Organisations

ASEAN

ASEAN has found it difficult to intervene in the Rohingya crisis due to its policy of non-interference in countries' internal affairs and consensus decision-making. Myanmar's membership further complicates collective regional action, with initiatives such as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and task forces on repatriation yielding limited tangible outcomes.[92]

OIC

The OIC has actively advocated for the Rohingyas, leveraging its influence to mobilise support from Muslim-majority and other countries. Despite Myanmar being a predominantly Buddhist state, the OIC's moral and diplomatic engagement remains important in highlighting the Rohingyas' plight and pushing for humanitarian interventions.[93]

BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which includes both Bangladesh and Myanmar, focuses largely on economic and technical cooperation. Its institutional mandate and political capital are insufficient to address complex humanitarian crises such as Rohingya repatriation.[94]

This comparative overview illustrates that while historical repatriation efforts in South Asia offer some lessons, the Rohingya crisis is distinguished by its entrenched legal exclusions and ethno-political conflicts.

Findings of the Present Study

A thematic analysis of the interviews conducted revealed five themes: (a) lack of trust in Myanmar's commitment to repatriation; (b) fear of the AA and the other communities living in Rakhine State; (c) camp-level complexities and refugee aspirations; (d) scepticism about the political utility of the repatriation discourse; and (e) policy disconnects and institutional silence.

Distrust in Myanmar's Commitment to Repatriation

Most of this author's respondents were sceptical about both the sincerity and the institutional capacity of Myanmar to facilitate a safe, dignified, and rights-based repatriation process. This view was particularly pronounced among Rohingya refugee leaders and youth. Of the 10 interviewed, nine dismissed the notion that Myanmar has undergone any substantive political or institutional reforms that could alter the security landscape for returnees. Their expressions of distrust were reinforced by the perceptions of humanitarian aid workers.

Notably, references to failed repatriation attempts in 2018 and 2019 surfaced frequently, serving as a collective memory marker that reinforces community-wide resistance to return. These prior efforts collapsed due to inadequate consultation, security uncertainty, and absence of international monitoring.[95] Taken together, the findings suggest that in the absence of both, a structural change in Myanmar's governance and international oversight mechanisms, repatriation remains not only unfeasible but potentially dangerous.

Fear of the AA and Other Communities in Rakhine State

A recurring finding across interviews was the recognition that the territorial and political configuration of Rakhine State has undergone a fundamental transformation. Nearly all respondents acknowledged that the AA has emerged as the dominant power in northern Rakhine—particularly in

areas such as Buthidaung and Rathedaung, which historically housed many Rohingyas. This complicates the feasibility of repatriation, as any return mechanism now has to engage with a non-state actor that remains formally unrecognised in inter-government dialogues.

Four among the five regional experts and journalists interviewed confirmed that the AA's position on Rohingya repatriation was either non-committal or implicitly opposed—a view corroborated by many refugee respondents. Contributory factors cited were unresolved historical tensions, local Rakhine resentment over land redistribution, and suspicions about demographic reconfiguration via humanitarian interventions.

The absence of a unified or legitimate governance structure in Rakhine exposes potential returnees to dual sources of insecurity—from both the Myanmar state and non-state ethnic Rakhine militias aligned with or tolerated by the AA.[96] Any durable solution requires not only formal negotiations with the Myanmar government but also strategic engagement with the AA.

Camp-Level Complexities and Refugee Aspirations

While many Rohingya elders expressed a deep emotional attachment to their ancestral lands in Rakhine, younger respondents were frequently ambivalent about, or opposed to, returning. This reflects not only differing lived experiences but also evolving aspirations shaped by prolonged displacement, restricted mobility, and exposure to alternative livelihood pathways.

An analysis of the interviews identified "youth disaffection and alternative imaginaries" as a salient theme. Many youngsters said they preferred third-country resettlement or even irregular migration to Malaysia. In some cases, informal affiliations with NGOs or engagement in cross-border illicit trade along the Naf River were described as viable, if precarious, economic alternatives.

Such narratives align with theories of protracted displacement,[97] which suggest that over time, refugee communities develop new socio-political notions, economic dependencies, and affective geographies that complicate linear return models. In the context of Cox's Bazar, the emergence of a quasi-informal camp economy and a parallel ecosystem of aid dependence, informal labour, and at times, illicit activities, has fostered complex identities—particularly among young people who have spent most or all of their formative years in exile.

This growing dissonance within the refugee population also intersects with broader concerns over security and radicalisation. A number of respondents noted an uptick in militant recruitment rhetoric and trafficking activities, particularly among unemployed youth. These developments suggest that repatriation planning must integrate a nuanced understanding of intra-community dynamics and aspirations, moving beyond homogenised assumptions of refugee desire. There is an urgent need to institutionalise participatory refugee consultations, particularly with the younger generation, in any future repatriation framework.

Scepticism about the Political Utility of the Repatriation Discourse

Many interviewees felt that Bangladesh's repatriation announcement served multiple strategic and political objectives beyond humanitarian intent. A critical theme that emerged was that repatriation rhetoric was being used as symbolic diplomacy—a political manoeuvre to enhance the interim government's legitimacy at both domestic and international levels.

Three motivations were identified:

- Diplomatic visibility: The announcement projected an image of proactive regional diplomacy, portraying Bangladesh as capable of negotiating a high-stakes humanitarian resolution amidst a period of political transition.

- Humanitarian credibility: By emphasising the state's continued commitment to refugee return, the administration reinforced its

humanitarian credentials before international donors and multilateral institutions.

- Domestic distraction: The announcement strategically diverted public discourse from internal governance uncertainties following the July 2024 political upheaval, including concerns over democratic legitimacy of the interim administration and its continuity.

The findings align with scholarship on policy symbolism and securitised humanitarianism,[98] wherein refugee return becomes a vehicle for political signalling rather than a rights-based solution grounded in durable conditions of return.

The absence of detailed logistical planning, of any coordination with the AA, and lack of verifiable safeguards within Rakhine State further supports the conclusion that the announcement was a mere discursive tool of statecraft rather than a genuinely executable initiative.

Policy Disconnect and Institutional Silence

The study confirms a clear gap between official policy narratives on Rohingya repatriation and the realities on the ground. It finds no sustained engagement with the Arakan Army (AA), weakening the chances of a secure and consensual return. Additionally, refugees have not been consulted, violating international standards that emphasise rights-based, community-centred approaches in humanitarian governance.[99]

Representatives of NGOs and UN agencies also expressed concern over the lack of clarity and coordination at the field level. They claimed inter-agency meetings had reduced and that government officials were delaying sharing information, unlike in the past.[100] This has not only impeded operational effectiveness but also reinforced a top-down, state-centric approach that sidelines humanitarian actors and local expertise.

Equally troubling is the institutional silence. Fundamental questions remain unanswered: will returnees get citizenship rights? What mechanisms will be in place for property restitution, legal recourse, and socio-political

reintegration? In the absence of guarantees, the proposed return appears misaligned with the UNHCR's core principles for voluntary repatriation.[101] The findings expose the limits of policy theatricality in humanitarian crises,[102] wherein symbolic commitments overshadow substantive change.

Figure 1 shows a scatterplot created by this author synthesising insights derived from interviews with Bangladeshi officials, UN agencies, Rohingya refugees, and host communities. The categorisation of stakeholders (e.g., Bangladesh Interim Government, Myanmar Junta, Arakan Army) reflects their roles and influence, as discussed in the findings of this paper.

## Figure 1. Stakeholder-Interest Matrix in Rohingya Repatriation
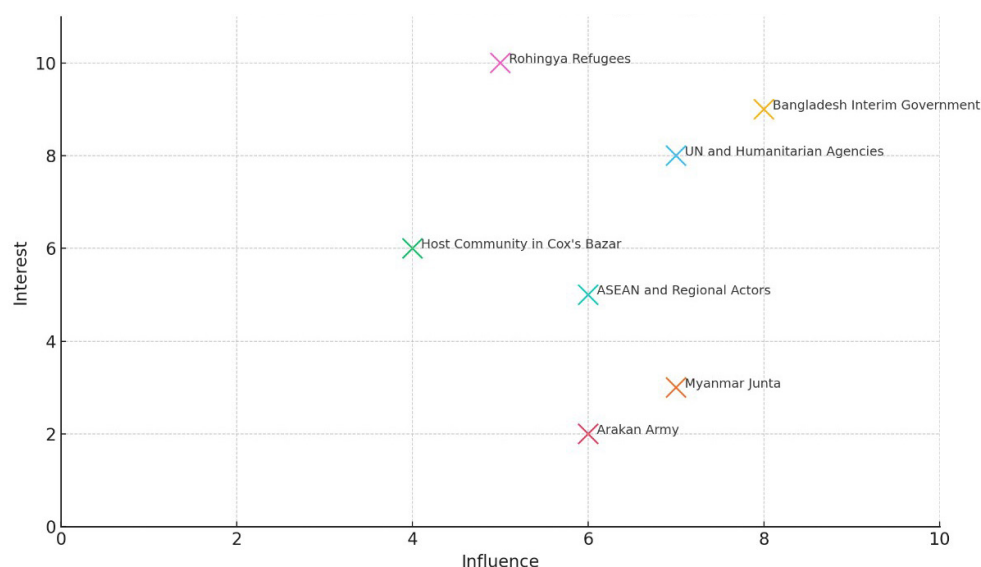
In sum:

• High influence and high interest: Bangladesh government, UN agencies.

• Low interest despite high influence: Myanmar junta, Arakan Army.

- High interest but low influence: Rohingya refugees, host communities.

The Bangladesh government's announcement fits with what scholars Katy Long[103] and Bhupinder S. Chimni[104] have separately described in their work as "strategic containment"—not a solution to the refugee problem but a 'performance' of responsibility.

Figure 2 shows a bar graph created by this author to show the degree of feasibility of the Rohingyas' return. The data for the graphic was derived from field interviews and expert analyses conducted by the author as part of the qualitative research. The specific regions (Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Rathedaung, Kyaukpyu, Sittwe) and their feasibility scores are based on primary data collected from Rohingya refugees, humanitarian workers, and regional analysts.

Figure 2. Feasibility of Rohingya Return, by Region in Rakhine State
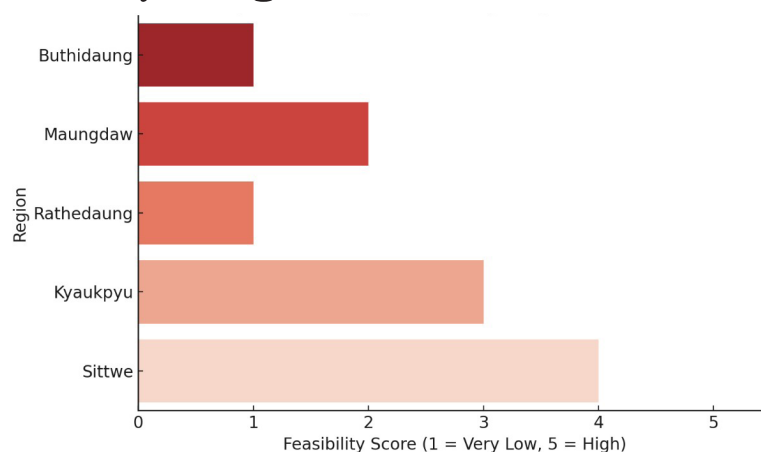
In sum:

- Buthidaung and Rathedaung show extremely low feasibility due to ongoing conflict and Arakan Army control.

- Maungdaw remains insecure.

- Sittwe and Kyaukpyu, while relatively stable, still lack infrastructure and community reintegration mechanisms.

It is clear that China's backing of Myanmar, India's cautious stance on the matter, and ASEAN's non-interference policy, have created a diplomatic paralysis relating to the Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh, balancing hosting duties and limited influence, projects symbolic progress in repatriation. To overcome this, repatriation must evolve into inclusive, multi-stakeholder negotiations.

Findings of the Present Study

Recommendations

Neither Bangladesh nor Myanmar is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol.[f,105] This need not be a deterrent to refugee protection, but it does underscore the need for the two countries to develop some norms—even if informal—of protection and return. The South Asian approach to refugee governance has historically relied on political pragmatism, bilateral arrangements, and ad hoc humanitarianism, rather than on binding legal commitments.[106] This context requires that repatriation strategies to be rooted in political feasibility, diplomatic incentives, and normative pressure.

Indeed, the absence of formal legal instruments in South Asia does not absolve regional actors of responsibility. On the contrary, it calls for the international community and regional stakeholders to re-imagine refugee protection through the lenses of political accountability and moral obligation.

Track-two diplomacy, civil society partnerships, and donor conditionality can be potential levers of influence—particularly in Myanmar, where formal mechanisms of accountability are weak. These can complement formal diplomacy.

The following recommendations emerge from the analysis:

a.   Engage the AA through Backchannel Diplomacy

Bangladesh and international actors must initiate indirect or third-party-mediated dialogue with the AA to secure guarantees of safety and reintegration for returnees. Multiple sources have reported that the AA chief Twan Mrat Naing is interested in establishing good relations with Bangladesh; indeed, he personally appears positively inclined towards granting citizenship to the Rohingyas and facilitating their return. But he has also called upon the Bangladesh government to clarify its position vis-à-vis the AA. So far, while Bangladesh maintains official relations with Myanmar, it has not made any clear statements about its attitude to the AA.

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f   The 1967 UN Protocol on Refugees expands the ambit of the 1951 Convention on Refugees. The latter was primarily focused on Europe and the pre 1951 period, while the 1967 Protocol removes these restrictions.

b. Establish a Multilateral Repatriation Monitoring Mechanism

To ensure that repatriation of Rohingya refugees is conducted in a manner consistent with international legal and humanitarian standards, it is imperative to set up a neutral, credible, and multilateral oversight body. Such a body should include representatives of key stakeholders—UNHCR, ASEAN, OIC, and official delegations from both Bangladesh and Myanmar. This would enhance the legitimacy, transparency, and trustworthiness of the repatriation process.

 The primary mandate of this oversight body would be to monitor that preconditions for safe, dignified, and voluntary return are fulfilled. These include the restoration of full citizenship rights for the Rohingya, guarantees of physical safety and freedom of movement, demilitarisation of the return zones, and rebuilding of essential infrastructure in Rakhine State. The body should also oversee information-sharing mechanisms to ensure that returnees are aware of the conditions to which they would be returning.

 In accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and the principle of non-refoulement, repatriation must be voluntary, free from coercion, and based on the informed consent of the refugees. The oversight body must therefore be empowered not only to monitor logistical arrangements but also to conduct regular consultations with Rohingya communities, both within Bangladesh and in diaspora settings, to assess the evolving conditions for return. It should have the authority to issue periodic assessments and public reports to ensure accountability among all participating actors.

c. Recognise Refugee Agency and Diverse Aspirations

It is critical to recognise the heterogeneity of aspirations within the Rohingya refugee population. Not all Rohingyas want to return to Myanmar. A significant proportion—particularly among the youth and educated segments—favour third-country resettlement as a more viable and secure pathway, citing concerns over safety, identity recognition, and livelihood opportunities in Rakhine State. Others remain open to returning but emphasise the need for concrete guarantees, including full citizenship

rights, demilitarisation of their areas of origin, and the establishment of credible monitoring mechanisms.

Thus, refugee consultations must be institutionalised as a core component of any repatriation planning. Upholding the principle of refugee agency not only aligns with international norms, such as those outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees,[g,107] but also enhances the legitimacy, sustainability, and ethical integrity of repatriation efforts. In contrast, sidelining refugee voices can lead to heightened mistrust, resistance to return initiatives, and political tensions within camp populations. Institutionalising refugee participation helps mitigate these risks.

d. Create a Transitional Justice Framework

Repatriation efforts that overlook the legacy of mass violence and systemic discrimination that led to the refugee exodus in the first place risk not only failure but also the likelihood of traumatising the survivors all over again. For the Rohingyas, return without official recognition of decades of persecution and atrocities jeopardises meaningful reintegration.

To address this critical gap, the international community should actively support developing a transitional justice framework as a parallel track to repatriation, on the lines of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission,[h] established with regional (say, ASEAN) and international support, and ideally involving both Myanmar authorities and the affected communities. Such a mechanism would serve multiple purposes: documenting violations experienced by the Rohingyas, providing a platform for acknowledgment and truth-telling, outlining pathways for restitution or compensation, and initiating processes of inter-communal reconciliation between the Rohingyas and the rest of the Rakhine population.

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g   The UN's Global Compact on Refugees, finalised in December 2018 and supported by 181 countries, aims to ease refugee pressure on host countries, enhance refugee self reliance, expand their access to third countries and ensure that if they are allowed to return home, they can live with safety and dignity.

h   The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa in 1996 to try to heal the wounds of apartheid. Perpetrators of atrocities, who testified before the commission, were given protection and amnesty, while victims got compensation.

Such a commission would contribute to long-term peace-building by addressing the root causes of displacement. Transitional justice does not just look to the past; it aims to reconstruct civic trust and lays the groundwork for inclusive citizenship and shared social belonging. Embedding justice within the architecture of repatriation is essential to transforming the Rohingyas' return from a logistical exercise into a restorative and dignified process.

e.   Strengthen Camp Governance and Youth Engagement

The protracted displacement of the Rohingya community has given rise to a complex set of psychosocial and economic challenges—particularly among Rohingya youth. Confronted with constrained mobility, limited access to formal education, and scarce livelihood opportunities, many young Rohingyas in refugee camps are frustrated, disillusioned, and have fragmented identities caused by their statelessness, lack of a foreseeable durable solution, and increasing economic dependency on humanitarian assistance. They are susceptible to exploitation, recruitment into illicit networks, and potential radicalisation—posing long-term security and developmental concerns for both the Rohingya community and the host society.

To address these vulnerabilities, Bangladesh, collaborating with UN agencies, international NGOs, and relevant donors, should urgently scale up comprehensive, youth-focused programming. This should include giving them expanded access to non-formal and formal education that is culturally sensitive and internationally accredited, alongside vocational training and digital literacy initiatives that align with regional labour market needs. Additionally, community-based peace building and psychosocial resilience programmes—particularly those that encourage intergenerational dialogue, civic engagement, and constructive expressions of identity—are essential.

Such interventions must be designed with participatory inputs from the young people themselves, ensuring that the programmes reflect their aspirations and lived realities. Integrating education, economic empowerment, and social cohesion objectives within a holistic framework

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can transform current cycles of dependency into platforms for agency and dignity. By doing so, Bangladesh and its international partners can help safeguard a generation at risk.

f.   Align Repatriation with a Regional Compact

Bangladesh should take the initiative in drafting a Regional Rohingya Repatriation Compact—a multilateral agreement that would engage key regional actors, including ASEAN, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), China, and India—which would serve as a strategic framework to address the complex and multifaceted nature of the Rohingya displacement. The compact should outline shared responsibilities among the signatories, detailing the roles and obligations of each state in facilitating sustainable and humane repatriation. These could include providing logistical support, establishing cross-border monitoring mechanisms, and ensuring refugee return in line with international human rights and humanitarian standards.

  Robust humanitarian safeguards should be an essential component of this compact, including protection of refugees' safety, their legal status, and access to basic services upon return to Myanmar. It could also address issues of land restitution and livelihood support for returning refugees. A long-term strategy for regional stability and refugee governance must be integrated into the compact.

g.   Enhance Strategic Communication and Counter Misinformation

The complexity of repatriation processes, particularly in the context of the Rohingya crisis, is worsened by the vulnerability of both refugee and host communities to misinformation. False or misleading narratives can spread quickly, eroding trust in repatriation efforts and inflaming tensions. A notable example occurred in April 2018, when the Myanmar government staged the return of a single Rohingya family and presented it as the beginning of repatriation. Bangladeshi authorities and international observers denounced the event as a publicity stunt, revealing that the family had never actually crossed into Bangladesh, thereby undermining confidence in the credibility and voluntariness of future returns.[108]

Similarly, reports have surfaced about false promises being made to Rohingya refugees—such as offers of Bangladeshi citizenship or cash incentives—in exchange for agreeing to return to Myanmar or relocate to Bhashan Char. Though such claims have been officially denied, they contributed to confusion and growing distrust among refugees, many of whom remain hesitant to accept repatriation terms.[109] Host communities, meanwhile, have been exposed to misleading narratives portraying refugees as economic or security burdens, which has further complicated political discourse and social cohesion.

To counteract these risks, Bangladesh should implement comprehensive and targeted information campaigns aimed at both refugees and host communities. These campaigns must explain the terms, conditions, and safeguards of repatriation using accessible, multilingual content across all available media platforms. Preventing manipulation by opportunistic actors—such as extremist groups, political operatives, or criminal networks—should also be a key objective of these efforts.

h. Prepare a Contingency Plan beyond Repatriation

It is increasingly evident that in the near to medium-term, voluntary return may not be a viable solution due to the ongoing instability and unresolved political issues in Myanmar. Bangladesh and its international partners should therefore develop a medium-term containment strategy that prioritises both national security and humanitarian obligations towards the Rohingya population, addressing the immediate and long-term needs of refugees while respecting Bangladesh's sovereignty and maintaining social cohesion.

First, permitting legalised mobility could be explored as a mechanism to reduce the physical and social isolation of Rohingya refugees. Limited movement permits, carefully calibrated to prevent adverse security consequences, could be introduced, allowing refugees to access certain regions or engage in specific economic activities. Obviously, well-defined legal parameters and monitoring systems should be in place to ensure that refugees' movements do not compromise national security concerns. Legal mobility would provide refugees an opportunity to enhance their

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livelihoods, reduce their dependence on humanitarian aid, and enable them to engage more fully in the host society's economic life.

Next, to improve their chances of employment, skill-based programmes should be designed, particularly for the Rohingya youth. This could include vocational training programmes, apprenticeships, and certifications that align with labour market needs in the host country and the broader region. Offering the refugees opportunities for skill development would reduce the risk of their socio-economic marginalisation and potential radicalisation.

Phased integration models could also be considered as part of the medium-term strategy. This would involve creating a pathway for eventual inclusion of the Rohingyas within Bangladesh's socio-economic fabric, without granting them full citizenship or undermining national security. Such integration could occur in phases, beginning with access to basic services, including education, healthcare, and legal protection, before progressively expanding opportunities for economic participation, local mobility, and community engagement. Phased integration would allow both refugees and host communities to gradually adjust to changes, while safeguarding the country's demographic and security interests.

No doubt, protection of refugee rights and adherence to international standards should be prioritised. As a signatory to various international human rights conventions, Bangladesh is bound by its obligations to ensure that refugees live in dignity and have access to basic services such as education, health, and shelter. The protection should go further and incorporate humanitarian safeguards to ensure that they are not subjected to exploitation, discrimination, or abuse. Humanitarian agencies and local organisations should work alongside the government to monitor conditions in refugee camps, ensuring that refugees are provided with adequate protection, both physically and legally.

Finally, it is essential that this medium-term containment strategy be crafted with international cooperation. Bangladesh should continue to work closely with the UNHCR, development agencies, and other international actors to secure the necessary resources and technical support

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to implement such a strategy. A coordinated approach will also ensure that the broader international community remains engaged in finding a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis, whether through continued advocacy for repatriation or creation of alternative durable solutions, such as resettlement.

The experience of Tamil refugee repatriation from India to Sri Lanka after Sri Lanka's civil war ended—despite the repressive post-war situation at the time—could offer valuable insights into how the Rohingya crisis could perhaps be resolved. In the Sri Lankan instance too, many Tamil refugees were reluctant to return due to structural insecurities and lack of justice— yet repatriation was enabled through phased negotiations, supported by third-party monitoring and a degree of political coordination. There are, however, important differences—unlike the Tamils, the Rohingyas lack recognised citizenship, face ethnic exclusion, and do not benefit from any post-conflict peace framework. These make them even more hesitant to return and call for more context-sensitive and nuanced repatriation strategies.

In the past, following the 1978 and 1991 Rohingya influxes, Bangladesh failed to achieve sustainable repatriation despite formal agreements with Myanmar that the refugees would be taken back. This highlights a persistent gap between diplomatic intent and practical implementation. These past experiences too raise important questions about the effectiveness of Bangladesh's repatriation efforts.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's diplomatic strategy to send back the Rohingya refugees seems to have failed on previous instances due to an overreliance on bilateral arrangements, absence of sustained international oversight, and exclusion of refugee perspectives. A more inclusive and effective framework which involves other countries as well, includes non-state actors like the Arakan Army, and is backed by a UN-supported peace initiative, could stand a better chance.

The latest announcement by Bangladesh's interim government in April 2025 about repatriating 180,000 Rohingya refugees has generated a wave of diplomatic optimism, but given the volatile conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State from which the Rohingyas had fled, such hope may be misplaced. Given the gap between policy rhetoric and ground-level realities, the announcement seems to be largely a performative exercise, driven more by a desire for political signalling than a genuine commitment to resolving the crisis.

There are, in all, more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees living in camps in southeast Bangladesh. Bangladesh has provided the Myanmar government with comprehensive lists of 700,000 of them who came to Bangladesh in six stages between 2018 and 2020. However, Myanmar has been consistently reluctant to take them back; only after China's intervention and substantial international pressure did it agree, in early 2023, to the return of 1,100 of them in a pilot repatriation scheme.[110] The list it agreed to was also manipulated: in some cases families were arbitrarily divided, with mothers being allowed in, but not their daughters, or husbands, but not their wives.[111] Many Rohingyas have also been arbitrarily excluded from repatriation lists, with Myanmar authorities labelling them as "terrorists" without due process or transparent verification. This practice has further eroded trust in the repatriation process and raised concerns over the misuse of security narratives to deny legitimate claims to return.[112]

Nor has Myanmar made any effort to address the Rohingyas' three main concerns:[113] physical security, citizenship status, and return of original dwellings. It has also announced that returning refugees will

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be initially imprisoned in repatriation camps. It is entirely likely that Myanmar's junta agreed to a symbolic repatriation as a strategic tool to ease international pressure, deflect attention from internal crises, or seek legitimacy amid rising threats from the AA. Not surprisingly, the refugees have overwhelmingly rejected the offer, which makes the latest Bangladesh announcement all the more questionable.[114]

Rohingya voices and aspirations are largely absent from repatriation discussions, which are instead driven by geopolitical interests, state legitimacy concerns, and diplomatic constraints. Key shortcomings include the exclusion of the AA from talks, lack of legal guarantees on citizenship, and unclear plans for reintegration after return. The younger generation, disconnected from ancestral ties, is increasingly sceptical about returning to Myanmar. Many now see irregular migration, resettlement, or even armed affiliation, as more viable options. Rising human trafficking, a growing informal camp economy, and increasing militarisation further undermine the feasibility of truly voluntary return.

Repatriation needs to be re-imagined as a long-term, inclusive process grounded in justice, safety, and sustainable reintegration—not a short-term diplomatic win. Success requires a global framework with international oversight, legal accountability, and transparent monitoring, while actively including Rohingya voices and engaging non-state actors like the Arakan Army. Bangladesh must adopt a more strategic and flexible diplomatic approach to the Rohingya crisis, moving beyond limited bilateral talks with Myanmar's junta to include the AA. Its success will depend on its ability to maintain balanced ties with both the AA and Myanmar while shifting from symbolic diplomacy to a rights-based strategy that addresses the root causes of displacement and supports long-term, inclusive solutions. ORF

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