

Rohingyas: Who really is their friend?

by Philip Gain

Aus dem Bundesstaat Rakhine (Arakan) in Myanmar (Burma) sind seit Anfang 1991 über 260.000 Moslems (Rohingyas) in das benachbarte Bangladesh geflohen, weil sie zu Hause anhaltenden Menschenrechtsverletzungen seitens des Militärs von Myanmar ausgesetzt waren. Dazu gehören die Zwangsausweisung aus ihren Wohnungen, willkürliche Festnahmen, Folter und in einigen Fällen auch Hinrichtungen. Einige hat man auch mißhandelt bzw. gefoltert, nachdem sie von der birmanischen Armee als Träger bzw. Arbeiter zwangsverpflichtet worden waren. Am 28. April 1992 unterzeichneten die Regierung von Bangladesh und Myanmar ein bilaterales Abkommen, in dem sich beide Vertragspartner verpflichteten, für die "sichere und freiwillige" Rückführung der Flüchtlinge zu sorgen, wobei der Hohe Flüchtlingskommissar der Vereinten Nationen (UNHCR) zu angemessener Zeit um Unterstützung gebeten werden sollte. In dem dazugehörigen Abkommen zur Durchführung dieses Repatriierungsprogramms sind aber keine Rechtsschutzgarantien enthalten, die sichergestellt hätten, daß die Rückführung der Flüchtlinge tatsächlich freiwillig und ihre Sicherheit gewährleistet ist. Auch wurde der UNHCR weder über den Durchführungsplan noch über die Rolle, die die Unterorganisation der UN dabei spielen sollte, unterrichtet. Zwar hat die Regierung Myanmars Zugeständnisse gegenüber ihren rückkehrenden Bürgern angekündigt, und es mögen auch einige Flüchtlinge tatsächlich aus freien Stücken zurückgekehrt sein, aber angesichts der Quantität und der Qualität der in den letzten beiden Jahren im Bundesstaat Rakhine an Moslems begangenen Menschenrechtsverletzungen, ist amnesty international (ai) der Auffassung, daß ein organisiertes Repatriierungsprogramm nur dann durchgeführt werden darf, wenn gleichzeitig Vorkehrungen getroffen werden, die eine wirksame Beobachtung der Situation der zurückgekehrten Flüchtlinge in ihrer Heimat durch internationale Stellen ermöglicht. Gemäß internationalen Standards wird der UNHCR ausdrücklich als befähigtes Organ angesehen, die Situation von Flüchtlingen in ihren Herkunftsländern zu beobachten. Die Regierung Myanmars hat der Organisation jedoch bislang untersagt, in ihrem Land dieser Aufgabe nachzugehen. Solange keine Vorkehrungen für eine wirksame internationale Überwachung und die sichere Rückführung der Flüchtlinge gewährleistet ist, ist die bengalische Regierung dazu verpflichtet, für einen wirksamen und dauerhaften Schutz der Flüchtlinge zu sorgen.

In dieser Situation werden seit September letzten Jahres Flüchtlinge in ihre Heimat zurückgesandt. So sind z.B. Ende November über 150 Flüchtlinge gegen ihren Willen zurückgeschoben worden. Meldungen zufolge hatten sie Flüchtlingsbüros gegenüber unmißverständlich erklärt, daß man sie zu einer "freiwilligen" Rückkehr benötigt hat. Die Rückführungsaktionen sind in jüngster Zeit fortgesetzt worden. Zwischenzeitlich sind mehrere tausend Menschen in ihre Heimat zurückgebracht worden, ohne daß das Büro des Hohen Flüchtlingskommissars der Vereinten Nationen hinzugezogen worden wäre. Wegen dieser Vorfälle sah sich der UNHCR gezwungen, seine Mitarbeit an dem Repatriierungsprogramm aufzukündigen. Darüberhinaus ist es in den letzten Monaten in den Flüchtlingslagern sowohl zwischen den Flüchtlingen als auch mit den Sicherheitskräften Bangladeshs zu schwerwiegenden Unruhen und Gewalttätigkeiten gekommen. Meldungen zufolge wurden bei Zusammenstößen mit bengalischen Sicherheitskräften um den 5. Dezember 1992 herum etwa 50 Moslems aus Myanmar verletzt und mehrere getötet.

Nachfolgend veröffentlichen wir - leicht gekürzt - zwei Beiträge, die die bengalische Organisation 'Shetu - An alternative media approach' (Dhaka) in einer Broschüre herausgegeben hat. Sie beleuchten das Flüchtlingselend im Südosten Bangladeshs und die Hintergründe für die Flucht der Rohingyas aus Burma.

Mahammad Rafiq, 22, is one of a quarter million Rohingya refugees (latest census shows the number to be 250.777) who are sheltered in 19 camps located on both sides of the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf highway, popularly known as the Arakan Road. Rafiq is not a newcomer to Chittagong being a regular seasonal worker from Arakan for the past 10 years. But, this time he has crossed over to Bangladesh with his family of eight to escape the Burmese military oppression. They now live in the Dhoa Palong camp, which houses 16.957, and is the first camp on Cox's Bazar-Teknaf highway going to south.

Rafiq and his fellow refugees do not have anything to do except for collecting weekly rations, or expressing their grievances to the visitors about the sad condition in the camps. In truth, the living conditions in the camps have greatly improved, thanks to a generous and somewhat overenthusiastic international community. Refugees of a para or a locality in this camp, however, alleged, that about a dozen of their young man had been arrested by the law enforcing agencies on various charges. Friends and relatives say they have no news of the arrested boys. The annoyed Dhoa Palong camp authorities had confirmed arrest of nine persons for 'genuine offences'.

The typical response of a refugee to the entire situation is: "We are getting rations to live on. But we are as if in a prison. We cannot go outside the camp for fear of arrest. We cannot go anywhere for fear of being attacked." But the local people allege that thousands of refugees have already slipped out of the camps and spread to the villages or cities: "They easily evade the eyes of the camp authorities and cause trouble in the neighbouring villages, destroy forest resources and black market the relief goods." As of 1 June 1992 the number of refugees were 268.921 whereas census in September shows the number to be 250.777. In the camp region, refugees overwhelmingly outnumber the local people.

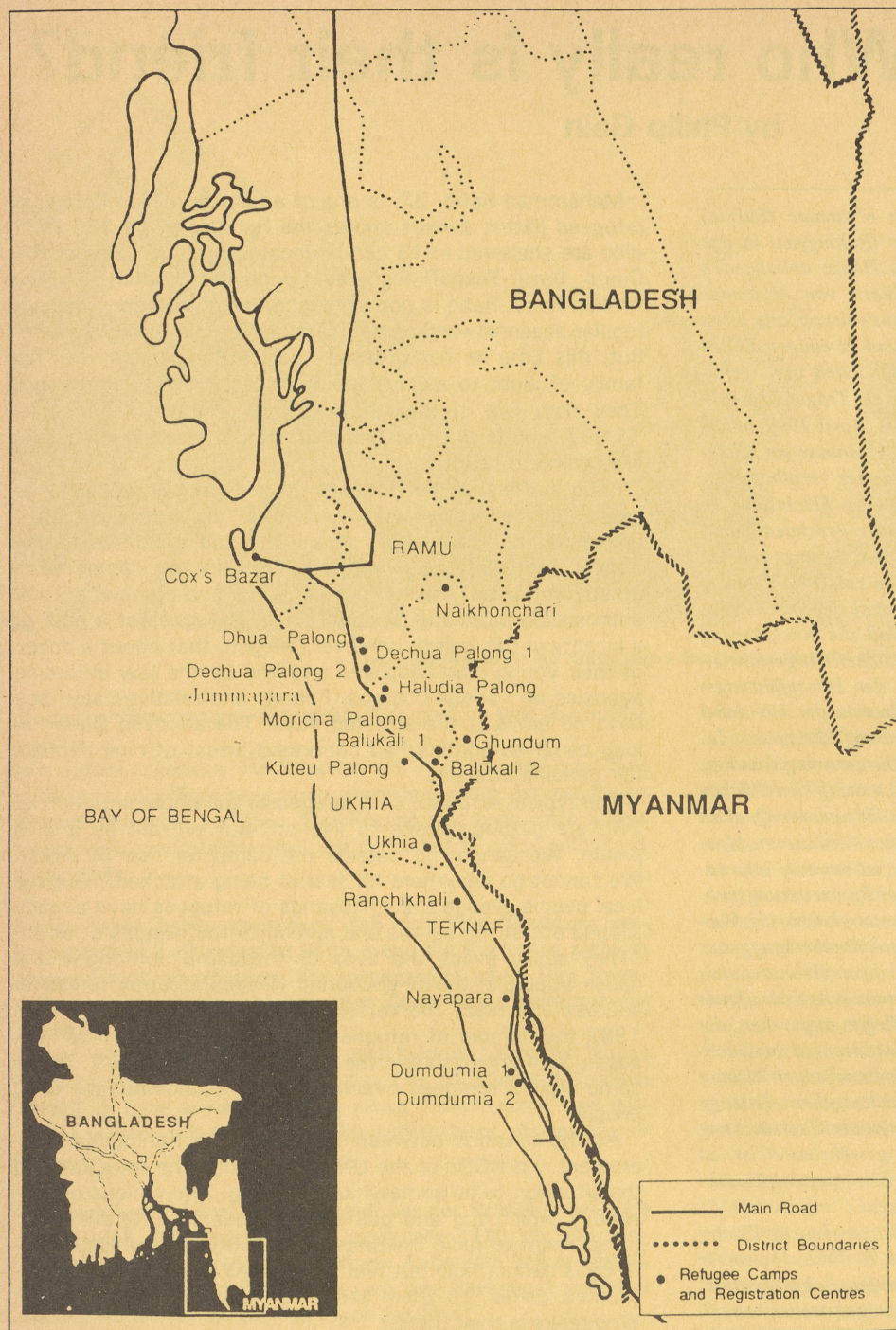
As the tensions between the locals and Rohingyas, government and NGOs or the UNHCR mounts, the refugees find the situation to be somewhat confusing. The various organisations which tug and pull the refugees to different directions, seem to have interests of their own in the issue. Rohingyas cannot help but feel being used as pawns in a complicated game. To them the main question seems to be: Who really is their friend?

The present crisis

The Rohingyas refugee crisis that began in June 1991 with 10.000 refugees entering Bangladesh has now reached its peak. To a visitor it may seem the camps are much more than just makeshift abodes. There are improved shelters, sanitation, drainage and health services. But this does not stop the refugees from grumbling about their condition.

As of 20 September, 2.358 refugees had died in the camps and 3.318 were born. Much worse is the pressure on the habitation, environment and local resources. On top of that the locals are frightened at the 'behaviour of the refugees'. The refugees also have their share of apprehension and suffering.

The Rohingyas had weathered another major exodus during the so-called King Dragon operation between April 24 and July 25, 1978. At that time about 200.000 Rohingyas took refuge to Bangladesh. But in 1978 they returned to Arakan



Rathedaung and Akyab of Myanmar. The influx of the Rohingyas have caused the prices of the essential commodities to shoot up. Refugees allegedly sell the rice and pulses rationed to them for buying vegetables and other essentials. Around the camp area the average price of a kg of potato was Taka 10-12, four eggs were Taka 14-16, beef per kg was Taka 70-80, chicken per kg 150, one coconut Taka 12-14 and so on. These commodities were much cheaper before the refugees came. The refugees who get enough rations of foodgrain to live on are believed to be better off here than in Myanmar. On the other hand, the locals, particularly the farmers and day labourers face a hard time because of the refugees.

It's a tense situation. The locals who live scattered in villages are scared of the refugees who live together and who in a minute can organise a united attack on the locals. Nurul Kabir, Secretary of Khuna Palong Union Parishad told this reporter that the refugees demolished four houses in Khuniapara. Meher Ali, Amir Hossain, Kadam Ali and Amir Hamda of Khuniapara are the victims whose houses had been damaged by the refugees. They were to receive compensation from the government.

Many small shopowners and traders have been forced to close down their businesses in the camp areas. Abdul Wahab who ran a tea stall at Dechua Palong checkpost complained: "The camp authorities have closed down my shop of 36 years four months back without any compensation. On the other hand, refugees are opening their own shops inside the camps." The locals in Dechua Palong commented: "We ourselves have become refugees now." The locals report how some refugees fight

within less than a year and the camps were closed. This time repatriation of the refugees does not seem easy.

With Myanmar's reluctance to involve UNHCR in the repatriation deal, the issue may drag on indefinitely. Meanwhile the growing antagonism between the refugees and the locals, which often results in violence, bodes a very dark future.

Unhappy locals

The locals are very unhappy with the refugees for certain reasons. The 19 camps, two of which are under construction, are located in Teknaf and Ukhia upazilas of Cox's Bazar and Ramu of Bandarban district (see map). Of the total refugee population, 15,032 are sheltered in Ramu. The refugees come mainly from Buthidaung, Maungdaw,

even the law enforcing agencies. They alleged that some groups, backed by fundamentalists and some foreign NGOs, have now infiltrated the camps and are the main strength of the refugees. The locals of Dechua Palong told this reporter: "One of the two such groups has a strong base not far from Dechua Palong and Dhua Palong camps. The refugees are constantly in touch with them. If the refugees stay, the tension will further increase and there will inevitably be major clashes in the camp areas." In fact, two days after (22 September) they spoke to this reporter, at least three Rohingyas were killed and many injured in clashes with the law enforcing personnel in the same locality.

In Khunia Palong union the locals number 20,000 while the refugees are 45,000. There are complaints that the police have no control over the refugees.

Mahmudul Haque Chowdhury, the convenor of the locally

organized 'Refugee Repatriation Action Council' (RRAC), told this reporter that the refugees are causing immense losses to the environment and local resources. The RRAC was convened on June 1, 1992 with a goal to persuade the international community, NGOs, and authorities concerned to expedite the repatriation of the refugees. The RRAC also demand restriction on construction of camps and destruction of forest resources; repair of roads and communication facilities damaged; and relief supplies for the local destitutes.

Repatriation - A tough deal

The first batch of 49 refugees of 11 families were sent back to Myanmar on September 22. Nobody else except the government authorities knew about the repatriation until it took place. Only the TV crew was invited to witness the repatriation. RRRC told this reporter: "Had we not kept the names of the 49 persons and the date of the repatriation secret from the refugees and others, the repatriation might not have been possible."

On September 22, at least three refugees were killed when they organised violent demonstrations against the repatriation and clashed with the law enforcing personnel. Use of guns by the refugees as reported by the press indicates that they must have been backed by elements who want to use them as 'political pawns'. Some locals believe that the Rohingya militant groups which are active in Myanmar might have some role to play in agitating the refugees. The refugees said that most of them want to go back. "But a group having ulterior motives is using political and religious arguments ("Islam in danger") to urge the Rohingyas not to go back to Arakan", writes Brother Jarlath D'Souza an analyst on the Rohingya issue.

Newspapers reported that the repatriation of the refugees scheduled to begin from May 15 was postponed following negative reactions from the camps that left at least 10 persons killed. The incident on September 22 has added more to the casualties. The refugees leading the agitation demanded that the 49 repatriated had to be brought back. Their main conditions to repatriate include: the UNHCR must be involved in the repatriation deal; the Myanmar government must accept and declare Rohingyas as an ethnic race in Arakan; human rights must be guaranteed for the Rohingyas; Aung San Suu Kyi must be freed; the Myanmar government must compensate/return confiscated land and other property; and the military rule in Myanmar must end.

The camp authorities can not convince a section of the refugees that the Myanmar government would abide by the agreement signed with Bangladesh. This section rules out the claim of the Myanmar government that the atmosphere in Myanmar is conducive to repatriation. A large section of refugees, however, are optimistic and want to return to their homeland. But they are confused because of the recent incidents. There are allegations from the camp officials that some foreign NGOs and fundamentalists are seriously disturbing their motivation work. The UNCHR which has pumped 18 million dollars till 30 September to look after the refugees were not happy about the repatriation of 49 refugees of the first batch. The organisation now has offered to ease the tension which followed the event on 22 September. Sources informed that ways to involve the UNHCR in the repatriation deal were being considered and the UNHCR was involved in the repatriation of the second batch of the refugees on 12 October (the UNHCR has later dropped out, d.Red.). Meanwhile, money is the name of the game for the fundamentalists campaigning against repatriation in the camps. Comments abound such as: "The NGOs are doing good business", "the corrupt officials are earning

money", etc. Once the Rohingyas go back and the camps are closed down, there will be no money from the donors and many of those currently employed in the camps will lose their jobs. There are agitations that in places contractors connected with the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party' (BNP) are getting the contracts for the construction work. The locals alleged that construction of the Jummapara camps is patronised by the Ukha-Teknaf MP and his two brothers and that some BNP supporters have been chosen as contractors. "It is a big money deal which the contractors do not want to lose", said local sources.

Refugees - scapegoats?

There are hundreds of allegations against the refugees. But sources believe that the refugees are often being used as scapegoats for offences committed by local criminals. For example, the Forest Department claimed that till September 12 the refugees had destroyed forest resources worth Taka 740 million. There is no doubt about the fact that the influx of refugees had had an unwanted ecological impact on the area and tremendous pressure has been put on the forest in the camp areas. But many believe that the refugees are not fully responsible for the damages as claimed by the Forest Department. It is alleged that corrupt officials of the Forest Department try to hide their own misdeeds and incapability to protect the forest by blaming the refugees. The refugees who collect fuelwood from the forest, are unlikely to cut down too many big trees as claimed by the Forest Department. The big trees are usually cut by timber smugglers in collusion with corrupt forest officials.

Journalists - unwanted

The editor of 'Dainik' Cox's Bazar, Nurul Islam alleged: "Local journalists are barred from entering the camps. The refugees are causing troubles to the locals, spoiling the environment and creating tension with the locals. But the foreigners, NGO people, UNHCR people can enter the camps whenever they wish." He alleged that restrictions have been imposed on the journalist to protect the interest of some quarters who do not want anyone to know what goes on inside the camps.

"We believe that the atmosphere for Rohingya repatriation prevails", says Islam. "But fundamentalist groups under the disguise of 'Repatriation Coordination Committee' led by one BNP local MP and backed by some NGOs are discouraging them from leaving Bangladesh." He feared that there would be explosion and widespread violence if the refugees stay.

Nadeem Qader, an AFP reporter, said that the police of Gundhum-1 misbehaved with him and others on September 20 when they were taking pictures. "We were not allowed to enter the camps and talk to the refugees or take pictures", he said. The camp authorities have also confirmed that they had been instructed not to allow journalists inside the camps without endorsement from the RRRC. The journalists, however, can go to the camp In-charge office, to talk and collect basic information about the camps.

Meanwhile, with the Myanmar government's reluctance to allow UNHCR representatives inside their country and UNHCR's persistence that they be allowed to oversee the repatriation and ensure safety of the refugees inside Myanmar, the Bangladesh government has become the victim. The UN might have its target of bringing democracy in Myanmar and with that target they might use the refugees as an issue to create pressure on the Myanmar military junta. The general opinion in Cox's Bazar and elsewhere in the country is that the refugees must go back to their homeland. The locals in Cox's Bazar fear that the refugees are likely to become

more powerful. With different organisations working for some specific interest of their own the Bangladesh government has found itself in a tight situation. Can Bangladesh afford to sacrifice its own peace for the Rohingyas and the whims of the Myanmar authorities? The government has to act fast before the situation goes out of hand.

UNHCR and the Repatriation Process

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was apparently unhappy about the repatriation of the 49 refugees in the first batch on 22 September without its involvement. Its stand generated criticisms in the national media. There were press reports that some UNHCR officials were involved in the September 22 demonstrations in Dechua Palong and Dhoa Palong refugee camps that left at least three refugees killed and many injured. The UNHCR office in Dhaka expressed its surprise at these news.

Pat Duggan, deputy chief at Dhaka office of the UNHCR, told this reporter: "We are surprised at the press reports. None of the media reporters reported the incidents checking our office. We are not against repatriation, rather we are in favour of repatriation under the internationally agreed principles where the safety and security of the returnees are guaranteed... It is unfortunate that the government did not ask us to be involved in the repatriation (of the first batch of the refugees)," said Pat.

The UNHCR was reported to be holding the view that exclusion of the UN organisation from the repatriation movement sent a wrong signal to Myanmar about the international monitoring. The UNHCR felt, it would be hard to argue with Myanmar that international monitoring was needed if the Bangladesh government in effect omitted UNHCR's participation on this side.

Replying to the enquiry of the press if the agreement between the government of Bangladesh and Myanmar has any provision which makes the Bangladesh government obliged

to get UNHCR involved in the repatriation deal, the UNHCR office in Dhaka referred to the clause of the agreement which mentions: "It was agreed that the government of Bangladesh would fully associate the representatives of the UNHCR to assist them in the process of safe and voluntary repatriation. The government of the union of Myanmar agreed that the services of the UNHCR could be drawn upon as needed at an appropriate time."

The UNHCR has always emphasised on the safe and voluntary return of the refugees to their country. The UNHCR reportedly proposed a framework of cooperation and coordination between Government of Bangladesh, NGOs and UNHCR with the following objectives: a) Reducing tension and friction and violence within the camps. b) Reducing the tension and friction in the neighbouring Bangladesh Communities and c) A limited UNHCR involvement in repatriation with a view to upholding the refugee rights and protecting the refugees who make a free choice to return on the basis of their own assessment of conditions in Arakan or, alternatively, seek to obtain information about the situation through visiting Arakan with the option to return.

The UNHCR officials, however, were associated in the repatriation of 63 refugees in the second batch on 12 October which was 'smooth and voluntary'. The UNHCR office in Dhaka was reported to be satisfied over the 'smooth and voluntary repatriation. Pat Duggan of UNHCR told the press: "The UNHCR is involved in the repatriation of the returnees. We are satisfied that the repatriation was voluntary."

The officials who visited Arakan stated that the situation is congenial for the return of the refugees as the Myanmar authorities have relaxed restrictions on Rohingya Muslims. But there is no independent assessment of the situation in Arakan - the foreign journalists and observers have little access to Myanmar. It is reportedly known that a few reception centres have been opened in Arakan where the returnees received relief goods - rice, blankets and kitchen utensils and then were sent back to their villages.

Rohingyas: a Case for Human Rights Violation

von Brother Jarlath D'Souza, CSC

The Rohingya refugees have been very much in the news headlines since mid-December 1991. There was a major shooting incident at Rejubari outpost on the Bangladesh-Burma border, and the whole of Bangladesh was alerted by the newspaper men. Will there be a war between Bangladesh and Burma? Who are the Rohingyas? What is the Government doing? These, and so many other anxious questions were asked.

A few months before that incident, the Rohingyas had started entering Bangladesh. The daily newspaper 'Ittefaq' of June 1991 spoke of 10.000 Rohingya refugees as having already come in! On 24 September 1991 'Ittefaq' said that now there were 20.000 Rohingya refugees. Shortly after

the border incident in December, the figure started soaring rapidly, at the then reported rate of 3.000 Rohingyas per day entering Bangladesh; and by the end of June 1992 a peak point was reached, as the estimates put the figure at 268.921.

It was against this suddenly emerging backdrop that the refugee camps were hurriedly set up. Kutcha bashas (huts) were put up in Ukhia and Teknaf upalizas of Cox's Bazar and Ramu of Bandarban district. Though in the initial days, from June 1991 till about October 1991, the 'camps' were very make-shift affairs, set up on a sort of stay-whenever-you-can basis, by early December 1991 the camps were organized, and had even a protection force of police and other