

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

Personnel.

Also by December 1991, relief operations were put in full gear, especially in the medical and health care and hygiene sectors. The 'Rabita-al Alam-Al-Islami', the French organization 'Medicins sans Frontiers', and other groups like 'Gono Shasthya Kendra' have been outstanding in their performances at the camp-sites. Many of the major NGOs in Bangladesh have been quick to respond, and have made their presence felt through support activities in food, shelter, medicine, etc. and some even through volunteer workers.

I was at the refugee camp-sites, 18 to 20 March 1992. I was very impressed by the 'success' of the entire operations so far, and also by the patience and sympathy expressed by the local people of the Cox's Bazar region. But most of all by the Rohingya people themselves.

The Rohingya people in the camps have been suffering, but they appear to be taking things calmly, almost stoically, accepting the Will of Allah. That was the month of Ramadhan; quite a few were fasting. I was impressed by the almost total absence of 'relief consciousness'; for instance, people did not surround reporters (I had a camera in hand) and visitors, 'begging' for help. The queues at the ration centres and the medicare centres were orderly and disciplined. Life in most of the camp areas visited appeared to be of the as-usual type. The normal activities were going on - cooking, bathing, children playing, etc.

The important fact that could be gathered from the visit was that the Rohingyas are proud of their identity - as being Muslim by religion. They are also conscious and vocal about their being part of Burma, and not a few of those I spoke to hoped that they would be going back to their homeland in Arakan (Rohang).

Why have the Rohingyas become Refugees

In October 1984 I wrote a paper for a Human Rights journal in Europe. The paper was entitled, "The Rohingyas - a People Seeking Liberation". Little did I foresee then that this paper would in 1991-1992 be the base reference paper for many anxious and eager social workers and Human Rights workers of Bangladesh and elsewhere.

In that paper I had pointed out how as a sort of an aftermath of Burma's War of Independence from the British 1942-48, ethnic minorities in Burma were being repressed and harassed, and the Buddhists in Arakan began to be strained. Until that moment, all those in Arakan - the Rakhines (Buddhists) and the Rohingyas (Muslims) lived in full harmony. But now an ultra conservative section of Buddhists undertook a sort of campaign to keep the Arakan Muslims under subjection, causing as many as 80.000 Rohingyas to flee from there and to take shelter in Bangladesh (shortly after Burmese independence in 1948). A lot of these evictees were rehabilitated in vacant areas of Subinagar near Dinajpur. Most of these refugees have since been assimilated with the local population there, and some went to Karachi and the Middle East.

Since 1948, upto 1984, there have been no less than twelve major "operations" or eviction campaigns against the Rohingyas carried out by the Government of Burma. Some of these were ostensibly to counter the "insurgency" activities of the Muslim Rohingya groups that sprang up all over Arakan, especially in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw areas bordering Bangladesh. The largest and probably the best documented "operation" was the so-called 'King Dragon operation' of 1978. Between 24 April and 25 July, 1978, more than 200.000 Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh as refugees. At that time no less than eleven major refugee camps were set up and massive relief operations were undertaken jointly by UNICEF, 'Bangladesh Red Cross Society',

'World Food Programme', and notably 'Caritas'-Bangladesh among NGO groups of Bangladesh. The Rohingyas started returning to Arakan by December 1978, and in a few months time the camps were closed.

This time - during the campaign known as 'Pra Saya', which was launched on July 1991, the refugees figure is little over that of 1978 and the causes for the influx are not much different. The 1982 Citizenship Law is a major cause. This law has obnoxious clauses that tend to marginalise religious minorities like the Muslims, that is, the Rohingyas. In the mid 80's there were a sort of lenient application of this law, because the Burma Government was busy with other major issues such as "controlling" the students and the monks, and the Karen insurgency. However, by 1990, Arakan again came into the picture, with the military authorities in Rangoon (SLORC) clamping down on so-called "outsiders" living in Arakan, mostly the Muslims.

This is the ostensible reason for the Rohingyas to come into Bangladesh. But why a large influx? And why have the Rohingya leaders been stressing quite a lot on the angle of religious persecution? Is there a "Hidden Agenda" to clear Arakan of its Muslim majority?

Toward an analysis

Viewed from any angle, the key issue around which all others revolve is one of citizenship, of nationality. Are the Rohingyas citizens of Burma, or not? If the Rohingyas are counted as Burmans - be their religion Islam or whatever - then Burma is their home. If any person, or group of persons, is not allowed to live in one's own home-land, then it becomes an issue of Human Rights. In my opinion, in the current crisis, it is this issue - more than any other - that must be tackled as the first priority.

Shwe Lu Maung, in a recently published and eminently readable book on the Burma of today suggests the "racist phobia" of the Ne Win regime in Burma as being the prime cause of the unrest among the Rohingyas. This study pinpoints the 1974 census of people in Burma as being the incident that triggered acts of severe repression of the Rohingyas. The census showed clearly that the Muslim population in Burma was growing very fast, much faster than the Buddhist population, and this especially in Arakan. Estimates differ, but one could probably accept the statistics given in series of articles in a Chittagong weekly by U Chin U. There is stated that of the approximately 3 million people in Arakan, about 2 million could be Rohingyas, giving them a ration of 2 to 1; yet the strange fact is that in the 27 May 1990 elections out of the 26 Assembly seats of Arakan, only 4 were won by Sunni Muslims (Rohingyas), and one by a Shiah Muslim. It must be noted here that in Burma there has been for long a community of Shiah Muslims descended from followers of the Mughal prince Shah Shuja; they are known as Kaman Muslims.

Not that there is not a religious angle to the whole issue of the Rohingyas. In my first study on the Rohingyas in 1984, I had forecast the possibility of the Islamic dimension coming to the fore. Writing this year in a widely circulated weekly of Bangladesh, Shwe Lu Maung confirms this assessment. It is suggested that the religious angle was somewhat deliberately brought to the fore by the Burma Government - to the extent that in recent years, in spite of Burma being a "secular" country, it is now almost officially a "Buddhist" Burma, with the top brass of the militarist regime making much of Buddhist monks and Buddhist festivals. Writing in a similar vein in another widely circulated weekly, Ali Murtuza hints that one of the motives for the current wave of anti-Rohingya actions by the Burma Government may be reviving the Burmese Buddhist chauvinism

in a bid to turn Burma into a nation of pure Burmese, as a result of which fringe groups like the Rohingyas suffer.

The focus would then turn to militarism. Specifically, the militarism of the type practised in Burma, and so well analysed in Shwe Lu Maung's book. He suggests that the regime in Burma is guided by an amalgam of three cultures or ideologies: Military culture, Mythical culture, and Political culture, with "militarism" dominating life. It is worthy of note that in a country of only about 40 million people (about one third of the population of Bangladesh) Burma had in 1989 an army of 170.000 soldiers, that is, one soldier to every 220 persons; this is apart from the 30.000 or so police force and paramilitary personnel. 'Bo-Kadaw', the wives of Army officers, are the most influential people in society, and many Burmese people feel that even the Black Market is controlled by the 'Bo-Kadaw'.

One other point of focus could be Land, Rohingya-Land itself, the Arakan. In my 1984 Paper, I had referred to geological studies that revealed how the shore belt of Arakan was very rich in deposits of petroleum, in places like Rathedaung and the Rhambres Islands. The 300 miles long coastal waters of Arakan are also very rich in fish, the tapping of which has only recently begun. Then there is the presence of iron and coal, and possibly uranium, as revealed in recent geological surveys. All these, besides the fertile paddy land of Arakan. I had suggested in the paper, it could well be that these potential and actual riches are a prime cause why Arakan is in ferment, and why there is repression against the people of the region, Muslims (Rohingyas), Buddhists (Rakhines/Marmas), and others.

And this is exactly how, in my opinion, the Rohingya problem must be viewed. That is to say, in the context of the entire Human Rights situation of Burma. Not just Rohingyas, but all the ethnic groups in that country. When the Union of Burma emerged (4 January 1948), it was a multi-national State composed of 5 main nationalities - Chan, Chin, Kanchin, Karen and Kaya - and 3 nations - Mon, Burmese (Burma) and Arakanese (Rakhine/Rohingya). In an article in the Bangladesh weekly 'Holiday', Burmese national Shwe Lu Maung traces the way in which only one group out of the eight, the nationality known as Bhamas (Burmese) took control of the politics of the entire country, with the active support of the military leadership. Thus, as Shwe Lu Maung puts it, the Union of Burma became a "sham" union, and all

the different ethnic groups were left out of the circle of power and politics in the country. Specifically unhappy were the Karens, The Kachins, the Mons, the Karennis, and the people of Arakan - both Rakhines and Rohingyas. There was rebellion from all these groups, and repression against all of them by the Army-backed central Government. It is also in this context that the political repression of the Rohingyas must be viewed.

Then, there is the angle of military strategy. Arakan is of



without any provision of rehabilitation. It is these families that have formed part of the initial Rohingya refugees group that migrated to Bangladesh during the current crisis.

Over and above this, it can be noted here that in the process of setting up these military bases, the Burmese army also forcibly used Rohingya youths and teenagers as labour, and sometimes also as a buffer zone "cannon fodder"; this fact was confirmed by a report on the Rohingya refugee camps as early as November 1991. Then, Shwe Lu Maung adds another dimension to the situation, when he questions the massing of Burmese Soldiers along the Arakan-Bangladesh border: "Why the 50.000 troops? It is certainly not to make war with Bangladesh, but to blackmail it into non-action on the refugee situation."

Finally to be considered is the factor of the inherent weakness of the Rohingya groups taking part in the struggle for their rights. Of these the 'Rohingya Patriotic Front' (RPF), once the strongest group, is not much in the headlines these days. The two organizations mentioned most in the Bangladesh media are 'Rohingya Solidarity Organization' (RSO) and the 'Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front' (ARIF). There are some reports that the leaders of these two groups have been keeping for their personal or business purpose the funds raised in other Muslim Communities in the name of the struggle of the Rohingyas. This, if true, is very sad; because, for instance, there is a great deal of illiteracy (90 percent) among the Rohingyas, and the Rohingya leaders are thus reduced to being almost a 'primitive people', these allegations assert. With this type of leadership, can the Rohingyas hope to emerge as a group strong enough to face the rest of Burma, a largely Buddhist Burma, to face them as a group of morally and spiritually strong Muslims? And, why not all the Rohingya groups unite, at least in the context of the present crisis.

Some Observations:

All the Human Rights organizations and citizens in Bangladesh must jointly express strong concern over the Human Rights violations in the context of the Rohingya influx situation, e.g. over the right of the Rohingyas to be accepted as fullfledged citizens of Burma and to be able to return to their homeland Arakan without further delay; about the rights of especially the women and children in the refugee camps to health, sanitation, food, clothing and adequate shelter - about the need for the Rohingyas to be able

military importance to Burma, and could be used as a buffer zone in ease of any war or conflagration in South Asia. It must be remembered also that in the national development policies of Burma, military considerations have always been the most important. An unpublished note by a militant Rakhina leader reveals that both in 1990 and 1991 the Burmese Army extended its military bases near Buthidaung township and in the Lauk-Way-Duk tract, causing hundreds of local families (mostly Rohingyas) to leave their homes,

to live as normal human beings, free from fear and harassment of any sort;

All the Human Rights organizations and citizens in NGOs who are in a position to do so, should arrange to send volunteer workers - female and male - to work in the camps, especially in the fields of health and sanitation. In my opinion, the presence of such a large number of refugees is an opportunity for service and also a challenge to the generosity of our youth and the social workers of Bangladesh.

There is very grave danger of deforestation at a greater rate occurring in the Cox's Bazar region due to the presence of the Rohingyas. I have personally seen the carrying away by the refugees of an unlimited number of stacks of wood freshly cut, for fuel use. There must be some mechanisms of controlling this, or of offsetting this procedure; if not, the result can be catastrophic

The Rohingya problem is clearly one of Burma's own making, and one that really concerns that country internally. Yet, there is a strong international dimension to it, and Bangladesh cannot remain just silent in these circumstances, nor can any other South Asian country or even any other country of the world. As both our national leaders, begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, have expressed, the pressures must be applied on Burma to take back all its citizens. For many weighty reasons, Bangladesh cannot afford to keep these Rohingya refugees for much longer. What has been possible in similar situations in other countries, is not possible here, that is to say, the integration of the refugees in the country of asylum.

Furthermore, the problem must be viewed in the entire context of the struggle for Democracy in Burma. In his book, Shwe Lu Maung, an Arakanese Muslim, speaks of at least 30 groups vying for ascendancy, or taking part in this struggle. Of these groups, in Arakan, there are Rohingya groups and Rakhina groups, who, in the current situation, seem to be sitting on opposite sides of the fence. In fact, there has also been at least one major incident, in the Bandarban area, where a Rikhine village of Bangladesh was attacked allegedly by Rohingya refugees. However, during my recent visit to the Cox's Bazar region, I saw unmistakable signs of a desire for rapprochement, and for the need for joint action by Muslim Arakanese (Rohingyas) and Buddhist Arakanese (Rakhines) together. In this context, reference can be made here to a very balanced recent study of the current crisis in Arakan, which strongly urges that the Rohingyas go for such joint action not only with the Rakhines, but also with all the other nationalities in Burma that are fighting for recognition and human rights, such as the Karens, the Shans, the Mons, and others. Rakhine leader, Maung U Shan also speaks in a similar vein when he outlines the history of the freedom movement in the Arakan region. To me this seems to be a very sensible political approach for peace in the region, and the Rohingyas - as Burmese citizens - have a legitimate leadership role in such a move.

And not the least among the priority actions that I could suggest would be a need for Human Right workers to be there among the local people in Teknaf, Ramu, Ukhia and all the villages near the refugee camps. Over one year now, and it is a long, long period of time to be hosts to so many un-announced guests, the Rohingyas. as a 'Dhaka Courier' report recently pointed out, this cordiality on the part of the Bangladeshis may not last long. Some sections of the media have already gone to the extent of terming the Rohingyas "a bunch of very un-welcome guests" - an opinion which, of course, I do not share. Yet it cannot be denied that the

pressures on the local resources, on food supply, local employment opportunities, and on the ecological environment, can cause an explosion of pent-up tensions and can even lead to strong resentment and violence. And, as the recent newsletter of the U.S. Committee for Refugees states, "There may be calls for the refugees to leave, regardless of the conditions in Burma."

More importantly, the current Rohingya influx must not blind us to the fact that "not only Muslims, but a huge number of Rakhine Buddhists and monks of Arakan have also crossed the border to evade persecution by the burmese troops." These Rakhine refugees have not made the news headlines, though some of these people have been in Bangladesh for more than two years now; some of them took part in anti-Government demonstrations in Burma and had to flee for their lives. These refugee Rakhines are also victims and are also suffering like their Rohingya brethren; and, as a report in weekly 'Bichitra' puts it, this is a problem of the whole of Arakan, of all the Arakan people, not just of the Rohingyas, or the Rakhines, seperately. It is useful to have this fact in perspective, when thinking of the future of the refugees.

Evaluation

There is no dispute about the consensus that all refugees must go back. However, what is needed is something more than desk-top parleys and border outpost-based discussions. The hour calls for conditions to be created across the border in Myanmar congenial to the Rohingyas to return. Not the least among these conditions is that the Rohingyas who can prove their bonafides (as per internationally accepted norms) must be rehabilitated in Arakan, their homesteads, lands, business houses, etc. returned forthwith. In this rehabilitation process, the local Rakhines (mor especially those of Buthidaung, Maungdaw, etc.) must play an important role in seeing to it that there are no actions of reprisal, or similar acts of violence or repression. For if there is one element that seems to be a common denominator factor that runs through the Rohingya refugee camps, it is that of fear - the fear of what will happen to them when the Rohingyas go back to Arakan. There is this strong sense of foreboding that tends to hold back the movement of return, or their desire to return, of the Rohingyas to their homeland. And, as far as this writer could discern, there seems to be a genuine desire on the part of the Rohingyas in the camps to return.

In the final analysis, however, one cannot set aside easily the motivational measures of some unscrupulous and selfish persons connected with some of the Rohingya groups and also with some of the NGOs serving in the area. There seems to be a money angle. Once the Rohingya refugees go back and the camps are closed, there will not be that much of money coming in from the donors and well-wishers, and many of those currently being employed will not be having jobs; is it therefore not better then to prolong the refugee crisis? That position in itself could be part of the dilemma that surround the Rohingya issue. That the Rohingyas have come into Bangladesh as refugees is symptomatic of a problem, but how permanent is that problem? And, must the Rohingyas in the camps continue being hostages - hostages to the desires or whims of certain people? Why must 250.777 or so basically innocent people be obliged to continue to live in tents or shacks rather than in their own homes? These and many other questions arise, as part of the observations. Somehow, the answers must be found.