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Six long years: exploring resettlement as a durable solution for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

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Rohingya refugees from Myanmar have been living in Bangladesh since the 1970s. Although some successful negotiations with the Myanmar government resulted in repatriation in the 1970s and 1990s, some refugees remained in Bangladesh. In 2017, after their large-scale exodus from Myanmar, Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh for nearly 6 years. So far, none of the refugees have had a chance to go back to their motherland. This study constitutes an exploratory research endeavor using qualitative research methodologies. It explores resettlement as a durable solution option and provides a set of recommendations for ensuring the protection and upholding the dignity of refugees. It argues that any solution options should be based on consultations with the refugee population. The findings of this research also illustrate why resettlement pathways for the vulnerable members of the refugee community should be open to ensure protection and for providing opportunities in a third country in the absence of a viable repatriation process.

KEYWORDS

refugees, Rohingya, Bangladesh, Myanmar, conflict, resettlement, durable solutions

Introduction

At present, most refugee situations around the world are in a state of protraction. With little to no hope for a proper solution for those refugee situations in the absence of proper return conditions in the country of origin, Palestinian, Somali, Afghan, and many other refugees may have to wait a long time to obtain an effective solution for their situation. Similarly, the Rohingya community has been fleeing Myanmar due to government-led persecution and violence. Bangladesh and other neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and India have been accommodating Rohingya refugees since the 1970s.

In 2017, a targeted attack displaced the largest number of Rohingya refugees yet, and nearly one million Rohingya communities fled to Bangladesh to save their lives. Bangladesh, with its population of 160 million in a tiny area, finds itself in an uneasy situation, as the country is unable to carry the burden of an additional one million people. Although Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing economies in the South Asia region, it is still struggling to ensure the basic needs of its population. Spending a large amount of money on nearly one million refugees might also hamper its development potential. Furthermore, a strong sentiment is growing against the refugee population in the host community areas as the host people have started to blame refugees for competing on the job market. It is worth mentioning that Cox's Bazar district is accommodating almost all refugees from Myanmar while being one of the most economically lagging districts in Bangladesh. In addition, the international humanitarian aid contribution for the overall Rohingya refugee response program is scaling down.

From a protection and solution perspective, a durable solution often means one of the three solutions of voluntary return, reintegration, or resettlement. Often, refugees are not included in the discussion as to what could be the preferred solution to their displacement situation. Due to the limited capacity of the international third-country resettlement program, not all refugees will be able to avail themselves of this option. The government of Bangladesh closed the resettlement option for Rohingya refugees in 2010 in the fear that the resettlement opportunity might attract more refugees from Myanmar and also because through the resettlement program (2006–2010) in Bangladesh, only 920 Rohingya refugees were able to settle in developed countries (Paul and Das, 2020). Therefore, even if the resettlement program was still ongoing, it would not have a big impact on the overall durable solution scenario for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Following the recent military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government in Myanmar, the return scenario is not currently clear. The Rohingya refugees do not have any voting rights in Myanmar, and thus, their opinion does not matter in the Rakhine province of Myanmar, and there are no sympathetic rights groups inside Myanmar that could advocate for their rights. During their mass exodus in 2017, most Rohingya villages were burned down, and livelihood opportunities were destroyed. Although Bangladesh has generously provided refuge to Rohingya refugees, considerable efforts are needed in terms of the voluntary repatriation of Rohingya refugees within their country of Myanmar. The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh have been engaged in talks to reach a solution for the voluntary repatriation of Rohingya refugees, but to date, not even a single Rohingya refugee has been able to return to Myanmar.

Due to a lack of opportunities, e.g., education and employment prospects, many Rohingya refugees are using irregular means to reach other countries by boat. The unsafe journeys and human trafficking are leading to deaths and extortion among Rohingya refugees. Without a viable solution scenario, desperation among refugees and conflict inside refugee camps are most likely to increase in the near future.

This research examines resettlement as a possible durable solution scenario for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh by conducting in-depth interviews with refugees, government officials, and humanitarian/development workers. This research article might not be able to solve the decade-old problem in a few days, but it will provide researchers and academics with a deeper understanding of the possible solution options and some thoughts to conduct further research. The recommendation section will also help academics and policymakers to consider how to move forward with the solution options, keeping in mind the best interests of the refugees and achieving a peaceful solution while upholding human dignity.

The majority of existing literature on refugee resettlement is focused on the destination country that hosts resettled refugees and their internal policies and integration issues (Ferwerda et al., 2007; Ives, 2007; McDonald et al., 2008; Gilhooly and Lee, 2013; Nezer, 2013; Elliott and Yusuf, 2014; Darrow, 2015; Schneider, 2021). The existing resettlement-related research in the context of Bangladesh mainly focuses on in-country resettlement/relocation for climate- and disaster-impacted communities (Zaman, 1991; Mutton and

Haque, 2004; Begum, 2017; Rahman, 2017; Rana and Nessa, 2017; Parvin et al., 2022). There is a lack of existing research that explores the possible durable solution scenario for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Various researchers have tried to explore this research arena from security, regional politics, and return perspectives (see the literature review for more information), but a holistic approach to visualizing the problem from the refugees' and other stakeholders' perspectives somehow remains understudied. This research will hopefully fill the knowledge gap in academia on the prospective resettlement challenges and opportunities for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and provide a list of recommendations for policymakers and researchers to conduct further research.

Geographic study area and context

Socio-economically, Cox's Bazar district is one of the least developed districts in Bangladesh. There is a lack of industries and diversified income opportunities for the locals. Tourism is considered the biggest employment-generating sector, with the sea and beaches along with other natural attractions compelling people to visit this district. Apart from tourism, salt production and fishing also provide employment opportunities for the local population. Although many people are engaged in agriculture in Cox's Bazar, due to a lack of arable land to meet the local demand, most of the crops and vegetables are being imported from other neighboring districts. The Cox's Bazar district is well connected with Chittagong city, the economic capital of Bangladesh, via road and airport. A railway project to connect Cox's Bazar is currently underway. The district plays a major role in the trading of goods and other products with Myanmar. Despite the Rohingya crisis, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar is currently on the rise (Khan, 2022).

Due to its geographical location, the district is one of the most disaster-prone districts in Bangladesh. During the monsoon season, there are often flash floods, and due to the improper drainage system and dredging of riverbanks, there is often water logging in Cox's Bazar. Moreover, during the cyclone season, the district is hit by cyclones, which several times have taken the lives of many people. The refugee camps are also vulnerable to various natural hazards, as they have been established on hilly terrains, meaning landslides are very common there. The government of Bangladesh has not allowed the construction of permanent brick-built shelters in the refugee camps as they consider the Rohingya refugee camps a temporary solution. As a result, the Rohingya refugees have to live in unhealthy and risky accommodations made out of bamboo and tarpaulin sheet, and these houses are vulnerable to strong wind and excessive rainfall.

At present, nearly a million Rohingya refugees are residing in various refugee camps in Bangladesh. These refugee camps are mainly situated in the Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar district. Cox's Bazar is the southernmost district of Bangladesh, and it shares a long border with the Rakhine province of Myanmar. Chittagong district is situated in the northern part of Cox's Bazar, and Bandarban district is in the eastern part. The western part of Cox's Bazar is situated on the Bay of Bengal, and the border with Myanmar is on the eastern and southern sides of the district. The River Naf divides Bangladesh and

Myanmar. Culturally, the Rohingya people of Myanmar have a lot of similarities with the Bangladeshi population of the Chittagonian division as they both speak the same language and practice similar cultural traits.

The government of Bangladesh has relocated nearly 20,000 refugees to Bhasan Char, an uninhabited island situated near the Hatiya sub-district of Noakhali district. Rohingya refugees are mainly settled in two mega-settlements: Kutupalong-Balukhali (situated in the Ukhiya sub-district) and Noapara (situated in the Teknaf sub-district). The Kutupalong-Balukhali mega-camp is recognized as the largest refugee camp in the world, and the camp areas are also considered among the most highly dense. All the shelters are made of bamboo and tarpaulin sheets. These shelters are narrow in size and often accommodate 4–10 people in tiny spaces. Some shelters are very close to public toilets or unplanned sewage systems, and people live there in an unhealthy environment. Inside the camp, there is a lack of places for cultivation or any other livelihood-generating activities. Due to a lack of playing fields and other recreational facilities, there is also a lack of mental development opportunities for Rohingya children and youth. Many roads and pathways are still under construction, and during the monsoon season, it is very difficult to transport medical patients. The houses are very congested and close to each other. Therefore, whenever a fire incident takes place, many houses burn before it can be brought under control. Due to the absence of proper roads, water bodies, and fire brigade stations, it often takes a lot of time for fire responders to reach the incident places.

Since the 2017 large-scale refugee influx, the refugee population is greater than the host community population in Cox's Bazar. Refugees are currently residing in 34 government-administered overcrowded refugee camps with very basic amenities. Inside these camps, there is a lack of playing fields, hospitals, sanitation, and protection mechanisms. The Kutupalong refugee camp was established on a reserved forest, which has now completely disappeared, and therefore, there is a lack of established roads, connectivity, electricity, and other basic daily necessities for living a humane and dignified life. This research was conducted by interviewing refugee respondents from the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar and government and humanitarian workers working inside the camp and local communities.

On the government's part, the refugee response program is being overseen by the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. Meanwhile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) are coordinating the overall humanitarian response inside the camp. In the Kutupalong-Balukhali mega-camp, the IOM administers the southern side, and the UNHCR administers the northern side. Both the IOM and UNHCR are supported by other UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and other voluntary organizations. Moreover, the Intersectoral Coordination Group (ISCG) coordinates the camp-level intervention activities of various actors. In terms of resettlement-related work, the UNHCR is currently working toward shortlisting potential candidates and conducting interviews. Before 2010 (the year in which resettlement in Bangladesh was halted by the country's government), the IOM was organizing the

travel arrangements for the resettlement participants (selected refugees) in Bangladesh. At present, the resettlement process has not started in full phase, but there is a strong indication from the government of Bangladesh and international donors that the resettlement process could be boosted soon.

Resettlement: an international legal framework

According to the UNHCR, "Resettlement is the selection and transfer of refugees from a country in which they have sought protection to a third country that has permitted them to stay based on long-term or permanent residence status. It is a solution that ensures refugees are protected against refoulement (forced return), provides them access to rights similar to those enjoyed by citizens, and gives them an opportunity to eventually become citizens of the resettlement country" (UNHCR, 2022).

While resettlement provides international protection to refugees and provides them with a chance to rebuild their lives, there are also cases where people from the host community pose as refugees and fake resettlement cases in order to be resettled (McKenzie et al., 2019). Usually, the UNHCR conducts interviews with the potential candidate, shortlists the pre-selected candidate, and shares the tentative list with the donor country for their approval and further processing (Schneider, 2021). Based on the list provided by the UNHCR, the resettlement country might conduct further interviews with potential candidates to select them or select the candidate based on the desk review of the candidate list provided by the UNHCR (Schneider, 2021). While the entry permit/visa is facilitated by the resettlement country, the arrangement related to preparation and logistics is usually handled by the IOM or UNHCR (Schneider, 2021). At present, there are too few resettlement opportunities around the world that accommodate the need for the resettlement of vulnerable refugee populations (Ahani et al., 2021).

For opening the door to resettlement, the host communities' attitude toward refugees matters, and there should be well-established integration, protection, and support system available for resettled refugees (Esses et al., 2017). The United States is considered one of the main participants of the refugee resettlement program. In major refugee resettlement destinations such as the United States, refugees usually consist of nearly 10% of the yearly immigrant population (Singer and Wilson, 2006). Vulnerability is often used as a selection criterion for selecting refugees for the resettlement process (Schneider, 2021). Many countries are applying their selection criteria based on the integration potential of refugee resettlement participants (Schneider, 2021). The long waiting time to be resettled could put mental pressure on the refugee population (Molly, 2021).

The political situation of host countries often determines the number of refugee resettlement entries for a fiscal year. For example, the number of refugee resettlement numbers dropped for a few years after the 2001 terror attack in the United States (Nawyn, 2006). Moreover, after Donald Trump came into power, the United States reduced its refugee admission ceiling (Kerwin, 2018), and the former president undertook certain restrictions

on the immigration policy and reduced the overall number of resettlements in the country (Scribner, 2017). In some receiving countries, right-wing political parties often oppose the admission of refugees, including through resettlement, and contribute to creating negative attitudes toward refugees in these countries (Esses et al., 2017). Some people in host communities often perceive refugees as alien and try to associate them with terrorism or cultural change (Esses et al., 2017). Often, anti-immigrant movements tend to suggest that immigrants use a large chunk of public resources (Nawyn, 2010). Moreover, in some resettlement countries, the funding allocated for resettlement often remains insufficient for successful refugee resettlement and meaningful integration (Brown and Scribner, 2014).

So far, there has been little literature that has advocated for the resettlement of the Rohingya community in a third country (Hossain, 2020a,b). If countries with low GDPs can accommodate a significant number of refugee populations, then industrially developed countries could also take in more refugees (Kerwin, 2018). Resettlement opportunities were not available for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh until 2006, and very few refugees were able to participate in the resettlement programs (Azad and Jasmin, 2013). The government of Bangladesh prefers repatriation as the main solution, and the country even proposed to the international community to create a safe zone inside Myanmar for the Rohingya community (Hossain, 2020a). The government of Bangladesh canceled the Rohingya resettlement program in 2010, stating that it would act as a pull factor for more refugees from Myanmar (Azad and Jasmin, 2013). The potential of inflicting radicalism and labeling Rohingya people as fundamentalist Muslims with poor health and education levels are among the reasons why there has been less international commitment to resettle Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh (Azad and Jasmin, 2013). Due to the absence of a well-defined third-country mobility option for Rohingya refugees, many of them use brokers to find their way to countries such as Malaysia or the Gulf states. In the irregular migration process, they often have to experience extortion, forced labor, abuse, and exploitation by criminal gangs and traffickers (Azad and Jasmin, 2013).

Method

This study is a qualitative research endeavor that sought to fill the literature gap in academia on this topic. It was based on 6 weeks of fieldwork and data collection, involving 30 semi-structured interviews and in-depth conversations (the duration of interviews lasted from 20 min to an hour) with key actors, such as refugees, government officials, and policymakers involved in the refugee response program and the humanitarian/developmental agencies. This enriched the overall research, as the researcher obtained information from various parties and their perspectives on what they foresee as a solution to the situation could be obtained. The researcher talked to representatives of various organizations and gathered key information from the respondents. Among the interview participants, 12 were refugees, 8 were government officials, and 10 were humanitarian/development practitioners. These interviews were informed and supplemented by a review of secondary resources such as academic articles, research reports,

reports by UN agencies, civil societies, and development and humanitarian actors.

As a widely used qualitative data collection method, interviews provide researchers with some flexibility, and they are less time-consuming than ethnography. Qualitative interviews mainly focus on two types: unstructured and semi-structured interviews. For this Master's thesis, the researcher used semi-structural interviews, and to conduct semi-structured interviews, an interview guide that included a few questions was employed. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer does not always have to follow the exact sort of questions and can ask additional questions based on the new insights/discussion brought by the respondents. It provides opportunities for the interviewee to express their ideas in detail as there is some room for free discussion.

Although telephone interviewing is not commonly used in qualitative research, it was more relevant in the circumstances of the time given the COVID-19-related safety measures and travel restrictions. Yet while a telephone interview can save money and ensure the safety of both parties, it does not provide the opportunity for the interviewer to see the body language of the interviewee to perceive any discomfort or other emotional signs. With the ongoing COVID-19-related restrictions, the researcher adopted online interview techniques to achieve the data collection goal.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to find respondents for this research. Due to their prior experience of working in Bangladesh, the researcher had good connections in the Rohingya refugee camps. Moreover, in the data analysis process, transcribed data are read and reread and then divided into several themes and subthemes. Data in themes are taken from topics that repeat again and again and are based on their linguistic connection and other similarities. Nowell et al. (2017) highlighted that thematic analysis is one of the best analysis techniques for early career researchers. As the process is much more flexible, easy to grasp, and less complex than other associated processes, its thematic structure also helps researchers to create a clear and organized final report. Lastly, thematic analysis helps to highlight key features from a large dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). Based on all the benefits outlined above, the researcher applied thematic analysis for interpreting the data.

Overview of ethical issues

Research ethics is an integral part of social research, and a researcher should make sure they are acquiring proper informed consent and not causing any harm to the participants, invading their privacy, or lying to them about the research purpose (Bryman, 2012). Thus, the appropriate permission was obtained from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) before implementing this research. The researcher abided by the rules and regulations outlined by the NSD, the university (and the country where it is situated, including EU regulations), and the host country, as suggested in various guidelines for conducting social research (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, Etikkom, 2019a,b; General Data Protection Regulation, n.d.; University of Agder, n.d.).

Before taking interviews, the researcher obtained informed consent from the respondents and explained in detail what the aim of the research, how the researcher was going to use the information collected through the interviews, and that the researcher would ensure the confidentiality of the respondents. Where a written consent form was not feasible, the researcher obtained verbal consent from the respondents. The researcher was respectful to all interviewees, maintained a non-judgmental attitude, and was a good listener. A do-no-harm approach was strictly maintained (i.e., as the COVID-19 situation had not improved, physical interviews were not conducted in order to minimize the risk of infection among the refugee community), and it was ensured that the interviews were not creating emotional stress or any other challenges for the interviewees as many Rohingya refugees had had bad experiences related to their migration journey. The researcher did not mention any participant's name, place of residence, identification number, or any other identifiable information to protect them from any form of harm.

Empirical findings and analysis

Resettlement as a durable solution option

Third-country resettlement is considered one of the durable solutions for any refugee situation. Globally, only a small number of refugees have the chance to resettle in a third country. However, during many humanitarian crises such as the Syrian crisis, many countries have provided third-country resettlement options to the displaced population. Similarly, in the South Asia region, many Bhutanese refugees residing in Nepal had the opportunity to resettle in various countries. However, it is worth mentioning that those Bhutanese refugees had better levels of education and other qualifications. Traditionally, the wealthy states of the global north have led as the hosting countries in the resettlement process. Therefore, refugees get access to many resources that might not be accessible to them either in their country of origin or the host country before resettlement. Resettlement provides the refugees with a chance to restart their life in a new way.

Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh since the 1970s, and some of them have taken advantage the resettlement opportunities to start a new life. Out of fear of a further refugee influx, the government of Bangladesh ended the resettlement programs for the Rohingya refugees in 2010 (Paul and Das, 2020). According to the government of Bangladesh, the settlement process can act as a pull factor for Rohingya refugees into its territories. From 2006 until the cancellation of the resettlement program in 2010, nearly 920 Rohingya refugees were resettled in the United States, Australia, and Canada (Paul and Das, 2020).

Following the large-scale influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh from Arakan (Rakhine province of Myanmar), the government of Bangladesh is struggling to meet the need of the additional refugee population. This large influx also provides an opportunity for humanitarian actors to start discussions with the government of Bangladesh regarding resettlement opportunities.

While there have been discussions on durable solution scenarios at the UN/humanitarian workers level and with the

government counterparts, the discussions with the refugees have not been included in these processes.

In qualitative research, it is very difficult to generalize findings because the sample size is small. However, all the Bangladeshi government officials who were interviewed opposed the idea of any third-country resettlements. Their views are aligned with the government's view that resettlement will bring more refugees. Though they would like to see a durable solution to the Rohingya refugee situation, according to these government officials' views, it would create chaos and further challenges at the camp level. One government official who was closely involved with the resettlement process before it was stopped stated:

The process of resettlement is not as easy as it seems from an outsider's view. They (Rohingyas) have benefitted from the resettlement process before. The humanitarian workers preselected the refugees for resettlement based on their vulnerability. Therefore, the most vulnerable, e.g., victims of domestic abuse, rape victims, and other victims of various vicious crimes, were listed. What we witnessed is that suddenly the crime rates in the camps had increased. We have often been informed by our sources that some refugees used these vulnerability criteria to create fake cases, e.g., staged domestic abuse cases and rape cases, to use this resettlement opportunity to send their peers abroad. Remittance is one of the best sources of income for the refugee population, and resettlement could open that income opportunity for the destitute refugees. Therefore, I don't blame them (Interview n. 1, government official, December 2022).

Some government officials also claimed that those refugees who were resettled in third countries were funding separatist elements inside the camp, creating additional challenges for the Bangladeshi government. They also take part in various demonstrations abroad that criticize Bangladesh for not doing enough for the Rohingya refugees living in camps, and they have also claimed that while the resettlement program was running, they also witnessed occasions when Bangladeshi citizens tried to portray themselves as Rohingya so that they could also avail themselves of the option of living abroad. This has created a significant administrative burden on the government to identify who is Rohingya. Additionally, the government does not permit any Rohingya refugees to leave the camp nor the country, and they do not have any option or plan to issue Rohingya refugees with any sort of refugee passport to leave the country.

While government employees spoke from the security perspective, the humanitarian and development workers stressed the importance of education. According to them, the general lack of education among the Rohingya population is one of the constraints that explains why the international community is not interested in pursuing resettlement options for them. According to one humanitarian worker's view, the United States government alone took nearly fifty thousand Bhutanese refugees from Nepal to ease pressure from the Nepalese government and to meet their international commitment to resettle refugees. However, most of the countries that are participating in the resettlement program are not interested in taking Rohingya refugees. Due to government-imposed restrictions, the Rohingya community has

been restricted from pursuing education in Myanmar, and they lack access to technical education and other lifelong learning opportunities. The only education that is accessible to them is Islamic education, which is delivered through madrasas. This education curriculum does not include science, English, and other essential subjects. This lack of proper education, along with their religious identity, could be among the reasons that some developed countries do not strongly advocate for Rohingya resettlement.

Another government official stated:

At present, nearly half of the Rohingya ethnic population is living outside of Myanmar. They have been trying to repatriate them back but there is no progress so far. The rest half of the Rohingya population is still living under strict military rules. Even some of them are forced to live in the IDP camps established by the Myanmar government. If these destitute people heard about the resettlement pathways in Bangladesh, then they might also cross the border. The Myanmar government itself could publicize the resettlement events news to its current Rohingya population in Myanmar so that more Rohingya population leave Rakhine state, and they can achieve zero Rohingya target in that state (Interview n. 4, government official working in Rohingya refugee camp, December 2022).

When speaking to Rohingya refugees, almost all of them showed enthusiasm and interest in participating in the resettlement option. Refugees expressed concern about their future and that of their children. According to them, there are no life prospects in Bangladesh. There is no indication from the Myanmar government that they will allow the Rohingya refugee community to return to their homes in the Rakhine province of Myanmar. The government of Bangladesh is also reluctant to facilitate access to essential services for the Rohingya community. Therefore, the only option they have is to find a way to live in a third country. For a long time, refugees have been fleeing Myanmar and the refugee camps of Bangladesh and taking boats toward Malaysia, the only place they have heard of that does not discriminate against them based on their religious identity and where there are plenty of work opportunities for the Rohingya community. They also have relatives and previously resettled refugees in various so-called Western countries. Those who have already resettled can live a life without fear and give a secure future to their children.

Before the closure of the resettlement program in Bangladesh, only the UNHCR was engaged in the resettlement program in Bangladesh by preselecting candidates. The IOM was also involved in taking care of their travel arrangements. According to the humanitarian workers of Cox's Bazar, neither the UNHCR nor the IOM now has dedicated staff members for resettlement work. Since the resettlement program was postponed a while ago, it does not make sense for humanitarian agencies to recruit staff for resettlement. However, one humanitarian worker mentioned that the UNHCR was then currently in the process of recruiting some durable solutions officials, which might be an indication of opening resettlement options or preselecting some potential staff.

The resettlement program can be explained from the supply-demand perspective. Bangladesh already has a population of 160 million. Therefore, it is difficult for the country to accommodate

an additional one million refugees. In many developed countries, there is an opportunity to accommodate an additional population. Countries such as Canada, Australia, Russia, and others contain the vast majority of the Earth's land. These lands can be properly utilized if they receive an additional population. In some other nations, such as the Nordic countries, the population growth rate is negative. Therefore, the working-age population is rapidly decreasing. In the upcoming years, if the population growth rate has not improved, then these countries might not be able to continue their industrial development and overall development potential. Hence, it is important to explore options to increase the working-age population. Resettlement could help these countries to obtain an additional labor force to fill the skill gap.

Resettlement also provides a burden-sharing opportunity that would help Bangladesh and would fulfill developed countries' international commitment to help developing nations ease the pressure on their countries. One humanitarian worker stated that as far as he knew, only the government of Canada expressed interest in taking some Rohingya refugees into their country if the government of Bangladesh decided to open up the resettlement process. There are also negative cases, as some of the countries already hosting Rohingya refugees as labor migrants are planning to send them back to Bangladesh. A government official stated:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is pressuring the government of Bangladesh to take back around forty thousand Rohingya from Saudi Arabia. Allegedly, a large number of Rohingya refugees were given labor migration options by the Saudi government, and reportedly, most of them used Bangladeshi passports to go there. As the Rohingya people used Bangladeshi passports for arriving in Saudi Arabia, and allegedly, some of them are involved in criminal activity, therefore, the Saudi administration wants them to leave the country. Due to the human rights situation in Myanmar and the absence of Myanmar issuing passports, Saudi authorities cannot send them to Myanmar. Hence, they are asking Bangladesh to take them back (Interview n. 5, government official working on refugee operation, December 2022).

Some Rohingya respondents raised their interest to go to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries as labor migrants. In their opinion, they would feel more comfortable living in a Muslim-majority country in the Middle East or Malaysia. As they faced discrimination based on their religious faith back in Myanmar, they would prefer to remain in a Muslim-majority country.

Few refugee respondents stated that their extended family members were lucky enough to have the resettlement option in a third country. They had heard of opportunities in those countries to invite close family members under sponsorship programs. However, as the government of Bangladesh closed this option, they are not able to go and live with their family members. It is a fundamental human right to live with family. For Rohingya refugees, the definition of family differs from the Western view. In general, the UN and other entities consider a family to comprise a couple and their children, but the Rohingya people define family by including their elderly parents and siblings. In cases where a sibling was lucky enough to attain the resettlement option, their extended

family members also perceived it as their right to live with their brothers and sisters as per the Rohingya definition of family.

A humanitarian worker stated:

The UNHCR, along with other humanitarian workers, is discussing the possibility of resuming resettlement from Bangladesh. Already, there are some pilot cases where some victims of serious crimes and their families were resettled to a third country using a resettlement scheme. Some NGO partners are also advocating for opening the resettlement option for Rohingya refugees, but the government is still adamant in its stand. However, on a recent visit of Bangladesh's foreign minister to Kigali, Rwanda, for a commonwealth meeting, he asked the foreign minister of the United Kingdom to take one lakhs (one hundred thousand) Rohingya refugees to the UK to ease the pressure from Bangladesh. This might be an indication of opening resettlement pathways from the Bangladesh government's end (Interview n. 3, humanitarian workers working with an INGO, December 2022).

Humanitarian workers also stressed the importance of resettling minority communities among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In both Bangladesh and Myanmar, homosexuality is seen as a taboo, and it is illegal under the existing Bangladeshi law. Due to the conservative nature of both the Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi host community, homosexuality is seen as immoral from a religious perspective. As a result, the LGBT population in the Rohingya community faces many challenges from their families and communities. They are often labeled as anti-social, social delinquents, or possessed by the devil. There are also cases where LGBT people are taken to places of worship to remove evil spirits from them by performing religious rituals. Another way the LGBT population is being discriminated against is when they are forced to take herbal/traditional medicine to cure their so-called illness. Among the Rohingya, community homosexuality is seen as a disease, not as a sexual orientation. According to humanitarian workers, lesbian refugee girls were forced to get married to Rohingya men, and they often become the victim of marital rape; indeed, there is a belief among some Rohingya people that sexual intercourse with men could cure lesbianism. To uphold their human dignity and to allow them to live their life freely, a third-country solution was suggested by humanitarian workers who are engaged in providing protection support. As the host country, Bangladesh has also criminalized homosexuality and alienated the LGBT population, including those among the Bangladeshi host population. Resettlement could also provide them with the chance to live in a society as normal human beings without being discriminated against.

Similarly, respondents engaged in humanitarian response also highlighted the protection and resettlement needs for religious minorities among the Rohingya population. An overwhelming majority of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh adhere to the Islamic faith. Other than this, there is a small number of Hindu and Christian Rohingya refugees in the refugee camps of Bangladesh. Due to unrest among various religious factions, Rohingya minority refugees are living in fear. Moreover, the government of Bangladesh has relocated Hindu Rohingya refugees to a separate camp located at a distance from the mega-camp, which is surrounded

by a Bangladeshi host community, as some Hindu Rohingyas were reportedly killed as part of organized attacks by Rohingya extremists in their camps. Similarly, Christian Rohingyas came under attack from extremist groups, with their houses and businesses set on fire. As a result, many of them left their houses and took refuge in the transit camp managed by the UNHCR. As both the Hindu and Christian Rohingya refugees live in fear and under constant threat, they should be allowed to relocate to a third country where they could live freely without fear.

Another humanitarian worker raised the issue of gender-based violence incidents. According to the humanitarian workers, victims of gender-based violence often do not have any place to go. Whenever any incidents happen and they are brought to the government-appointed official in charge of the camp, the option of returning the victims to their husbands is always preferred. In most cases, they do not want to approve divorce cases, and as a result, the victims are forced to live with the perpetrators, which often leads to repeated violence. In the Rohingya culture, girls are taught by their parents to obey their husbands. As a result, they try their best to cope with the situation. When the situation becomes worse, they seek support from their families, but if their families do not support them, they approach humanitarian workers and protection actors. Furthermore, there is a lack of a safe home to temporarily accommodate the victims of gender-based violence, and there is also a lack of long-term support. The victims of rape and other incidents also find themselves being blamed by people, and their cases are perceived as shameful. These victims need additional support and relocation so that they can start a new life.

A refugee respondent raised concerns about the resettlement process. According to the respondent:

We don't know enough information about the total resettlement process. We heard that there is a possibility of reopening the resettlement process from Bangladesh. We are also not aware why the Bangladeshi authority closed the resettlement in the first place. Refugees in Bangladesh are being seen as a burden now. There are no prospects of going back to Myanmar anytime soon, and due to the social unrest and lack of opportunities, we would like to avail the third-country resettlement option (Interview n. 2, female refugee respondent and single mother, November 2022).

Some Bangladeshi camp administrators have criticized the choice of refugees to resettle abroad, accusing them of being more eager to go to a third country than to be repatriated back to Myanmar. Some refugees have stated that they had called the UNHCR personnel and met them in person along with other humanitarian actors to discuss how they and their families could avail themselves of the resettlement opportunities; however, so far, the NGOs and UN are unable to give them any concrete information and guidelines about the resettlement process. The refugees are still hoping that world leaders will soon talk about their issues and that they could soon be allowed to resettle in a Western country. Some refugee respondents also claimed that they were approached by influential persons from their community who offered to list their names in the first track list for the resettlement process if they paid a certain amount of money.

Another concern among the refugees is that some of the law enforcement agencies harass refugees who are vocal on social and political issues that, if relayed to government policies, could have an immediate impact on their lives. Often, law enforcement agencies raid their houses under the guise of searching for drugs and weapons. However, this is done on purpose, especially to Rohingya leaders, to make them afraid and to ensure that they obey the Bangladeshi government, abide by their policies, and do not raise concerns on any issues. Some of their vocal community members have also been threatened by the law enforcement agents, and according to the refugees, some of them are being imprisoned on the wrong charges. These vocal members that are on the government's watch list should be given the opportunity to resettle so that they can continue to advocate for Rohingya rights.

Another humanitarian worker from a UN organization stated that they had been given a target of preselecting several refugee populations for the possible resettlement process, but they were not yet able to fill the target. Some UN agencies have started frontloading staff members in case the resettlement scheme is opened. According to the respondent, the Canadian government has expressed interest in taking some Rohingya refugees into their country, and they were asked to give a list of refugees based on their vulnerability. Other units were also asked to provide a tentative list if the resettlement process was to get through the government approval process. In addition, the United States has recently declared its willingness to take some Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to ease pressure on the country.

Moreover, a humanitarian worker stressed the importance of building skills among the Rohingya refugees so that they can contribute to third countries and ease their labor shortages. If Rohingya youths can be equipped with transferable life skills that meet the demands of the market, they could be an asset for the countries where they settle. Building a skilled labor force among the Rohingya youth could be an opportunity to resettle up to two-hundred thousand refugees in third countries.

Education and labor migration pathways should also be explored as they too could open the third-country option for the Rohingya refugee population. While Bangladesh has restricted education for refugees until a certain class, developed countries should finance and accommodate some meritorious students by providing them with the opportunity to access higher education. They could become an asset for developed countries and help them to ease their skilled labor shortages. In addition, if developed countries and the Bangladeshi government were to explore the labor migration option for these refugees, they could help both the refugees and the Bangladeshi government by bringing in foreign remittances as well as developed countries by filling their labor market gaps. Indeed, many developed countries require a working-age population to fill up positions to keep their industries functional, and many of these countries are suffering from a lower rate of working-age population primarily due to their lower birth rates and aging populations.

Overall, refugees expressed their strong interest in being repatriated to third countries as there are fewer opportunities for them in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the humanitarian and development partners highlighted the importance of skill building

and advocacy as prerequisites for the third-country resettlement process and how this would help the countries participating in the resettlement program to fill their labor gaps. Lastly, the position of the Bangladeshi government seems to be slowly changing toward third-country resettlement. Initially, the government perceived the resettlement program as a pull factor for attracting more refugees, but its mindset is slowly changing, and it is now asking wealthy states to accept more refugees from Bangladesh.

Recommendations

- The selection for the resettlement process should be fair and without the influence of any influential groups.
- People with disabilities, religious minorities, gender-based violence survivors, LGBTQ people, and victims of organized crime should be given priority in the selection process.
- The international community should come forward by accepting more refugees from Bangladesh so that it can ease pressure on the country.
- The Bangladeshi government should cooperate with the international community so that more refugees can access the resettlement option.
- The UN agencies and other humanitarian organizations should increase their capacities so that more refugees can go through the preselection interview process.
- The resettlement decision should be finalized after thorough discussions with the refugees.
- The international community should explore labor mobility and educational pathways as an alternative resettlement strategy.

Conclusion

In general, there could be three possible solutions for any refugee situation—repatriation, resettlement, and local integration of the refugee population. In this study, the researcher has explored the challenges and opportunities of resettlement as a durable solution.

The Bangladeshi government has been working toward repatriating the Rohingya refugee population from Bangladesh as they favor refugee repatriation as the only durable solution to the current situation. Bangladesh experienced successful repatriation in the 1970s and 1990s, and its government is confident that this can be successfully implemented again. The government has taken several attempts at repatriation, but this has lacked enough support from the refugee community. The refugees have raised concerns that the government of Bangladesh is trying to force them to return to Myanmar, which they do not want until their protection, safety, and citizenship rights are ensured by the government of Myanmar. According to the refugees, without citizenship rights, they will have to suffer again, and the risk of another attack would increase without ensuring their full rights.

The refugee community has raised its interest in the resettlement option. According to the refugees, resettlement would provide them with a second chance to reshape their lives and provide their future generations with the chance to grow and

become productive. It would also allow them access to facilities such as education, health, and freedom of movement.

The government of Bangladesh stopped resettlement from Bangladesh in 2010 in fear of it presenting a pull factor for more Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. However, after the large exodus in 2017, there is an indication that they might be willing to facilitate the resettlement option for refugees. Recently, the government of Bangladesh has asked the governments of the United Kingdom and other countries to take Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh through the resettlement process. So far, the governments of Canada and the United States government have raised interest in taking Rohingya refugees into their countries through the resettlement process, although neither have indicated the number of refugees they would like to resettle. Some UN agencies have already started the background work related to the resettlement process and have started to recruit staff and produce guidelines by preselecting some refugees through interviews based on their vulnerability status.

For any solution scenario, it is important to come to a common consensus about the solution, and the refugees should be consulted in a meaningful way. There have been many discussions on possible Rohingya refugee solutions in Bangladesh, but mere discussion will not solve the problem. To find a durable solution to this situation, goodwill is necessary from every stakeholder. World leaders should start seeing these refugees not just as mere numbers but as people who have lost everything and are struggling to live a dignified and humane life peacefully in Bangladesh following their departure from Myanmar. Therefore, they should work together to expand the resettlement option for Rohingya refugees to give them the opportunity to rebuild their lives anew.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary

material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). Informed consent for participation (either verbal or written, where possible) was provided by the participants.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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