

Bangladesh and Its Strategic Approaches to Managing the Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Md. Touhidul Islam¹
Md Iftesum Hoque²

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> <i>Date of Submission: 14-05-2025</i> <i>Date of Acceptance: 02-06-2025</i> <i>Date of Publication: 24-03-2026</i></p>	<p><i>Existing scholarship on the Rohingya issue predominantly explains causes of their displacement from Myanmar, complexities in sheltered camps in Cox's Bazar and myths of their repatriation; there is scant attention to how Bangladesh has approached managing such an ever-evolving large-scale humanitarian crisis. Drawing on wider literature and reports from newspapers, think tanks, and rights bodies, this paper argues that, convincingly or unconvincingly, Bangladesh has adopted pragmatic strategies, combining liberal and stringent approaches to deal with the Rohingya crisis. Broadly, it has taken a cooperative approach, engaging international agencies and actors to manage aid-dependent day-to-day humanitarian affairs. Such a partnership approach has also materialised in the disaster reduction and environmental protection sector, albeit with limitations. Over the period, Bangladesh preferred a look east policy to global negotiation for Rohingya repatriation and emphasised repatriation over local integration and resettlement solutions concerning potential further influxes. Nevertheless, despite concerns raised by the international community and rights bodies, it relied on a security-centric nationalistic approach to thwart Rohingya advancements beyond the camp areas; yet it, on a limited scale, embraced a cooperative approach with camp-based NGOs and agencies for gender-based violence prevention. These findings proffer that managing a refugee crisis is a context-driven enterprise, allowing international and local actors to share the humanitarian burdens, which is as crucial as respecting the host nation's preferences in dealing with refugees.</i></p>
<p><i>Keywords:</i> Rohingya Crisis, Humanitarian Assistance, Burden-sharing, Cox's Bazar.</p>	

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Email: touhid.pacs@du.ac.bd

² MSS in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: sergiosiam123@gmail.com

Introduction

Managing a refugee crisis is daunting for any host country; it is even more complicated for countries with limited resources and internal socio-economic challenges. The case of the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh is a point of study as the country hosted more than a million Rohingya refugees, who historically have experienced persecution and atrocities in their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar. History shows that Rohingya, people of a Muslim ethnic-linguistic minority group, were not included among the 135 recognised ethnic groups by the Myanmar state authority, resulting in them suffering systematic violence, denial of rights and persecution in their own country for decades (Uddin, 2015, 2020; Ullah and Chatteraj, 2018). Although Myanmar does not recognise them as its nationals and considers them as ‘Muslims in Rakhine State’ who migrated from Bengal, Rohingyas have a mixed ancestral root linked to Persians, Turks, Arabs, Moors, Mughals and Bengalis who, at different periods, arrived in Rakhine area for various purposes (Ebbighausen, 2017; Uddin, 2020; Ullah and Chatteraj, 2018). During the colonial period, British authorities wanted Rohingyas to fight for them in World War II on the promise of having their territory. The Rohingyas felt betrayed by the British rule for its refusal to grant Arakan autonomy (Al-Mahmood, 2016; Chakraborty, 2017). The systematic violation and persecution increased since 1962, when the military took over state power and significantly changed Rohingya lives, requiring national registration cards and finally making them stateless when Myanmar enacted the 1982 Citizenship Act (Parashar and Alam, 2019). Whenever they experienced large-scale violence, they moved to Bangladesh to save their lives, as happened in the early 1970s, in the early 1990s and recently in 2017 when radical attacks on border police personnel and police posts invited coercive actions of the state forces, leading to most enormous influx from Myanmar to Bangladesh (Islam, 2024; Aljazeera, 2017).

A plethora of literature produced by different scholars argued that despite hosting displaced Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds, Bangladesh has significantly been experiencing the shocks of having more than a million Rohingya people in cramped camps in Cox’s Bazar (Uddin and Nesa, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2022). When Bangladesh opened its border in August 2017 to shelter Rohingyas, who were recognised as the Forcefully Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs), not refugees, it never realised the size of this population nor quickly planned what strategies and approaches it would apply to host refugees and manage such a humanitarian crisis that evolved so swiftly. We use both FDMNs and refugees interchangeably in this paper. Displaced people have plunged Bangladesh into various socio-economic, security, and other associated problems. There is a lack of systematic studies that explore the strategies and approaches Bangladesh has employed to deal with the Rohingya crisis, which this paper aims to address. Therefore, it sets a research question to answer: how has Bangladesh approached to manage an ever-evolving Rohingya displacement crisis?

This qualitative study mainly relied on secondary sources, including books, newspaper articles, online news reports, magazines, and reports of human rights organisations, for data. Despite some methodological limitations, this paper argues that Bangladesh has adopted a pragmatic yet contingency-based strategy to manage the ever-evolving Rohingya displacement crisis. The pragmatism that it has applied determines the approaches to manage this context-specific phenomenon that focuses on international cooperation for meeting the humanitarian needs of Rohingyas, negotiating Rohingya repatriation and reducing disaster risks and environmental protection; while on issues related to national interests and securing agenda, it has beefed up security mechanisms in greater Ukhiya and Teknaf and paid attention to meeting some basic needs of local communities. The country never paid attention to local integration but persistently emphasised Rohingya repatriation over third-country resettlement opportunities for Rohingyas due to the potential risks of influx and uncertainties.

Literature Review

Studies on refugees show that they depend on aid, but poorer host community members often face hidden, consequential losses when host inflow displaces refugees (Chambers, 1986; Maystadt and Verwimp, 2014). Refugee camps frequently serve as a haven for organised crime, leading potentially to significant security issues in the host country (Berti, 2015). Studies also highlighted the international community's role in burden sharing of host countries, often exercised through the UNHCR, donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Newland, 2016). Wherever they are located, in developed or developing countries, refugees often live in difficult conditions in host nations and heavily depend on humanitarian help (Chaux, 2018).

The Rohingya refugee crisis has gained huge scholarly attention recently, exploring various dimensions and conditions of the Rohingya people. Some explored Rohingya persecution and the nature of violent conflict in Rakhine state leading to their forcefully migration to Bangladesh, and their statelessness situation (Ware and Laoutides, 2019), while others analysed their living conditions in camps, their protection, security threats to Bangladesh, host-guest relations etc. (Yesmin and Akhter, 2019; Kudrat-E-Khuda, 2020; Islam et al, 2022; Islam and Wara, 2022). A plethora of other literature examined their temporary relocation to Bhasan Char and the possibility of repatriation to Myanmar (Islam et al, 2021; Siddiqi, 2022; Ware and Laoutides, 2024; Uddin, 2022). Nevertheless, due to evolving socio-economic conditions, the stays of refugees like the Rohingya community cause geo-environmental changes and security challenges, both for the host country and communities (Rahman and Paul, 2021; Ahmed and Naem, 2020). Salehin and Hossain (2025) explored the challenges of local integration of Rohingyas, which include increased government restriction, criminal activities in camps, insecurity of the host population and severe mistrust between the communities.

Ashraf (2021) examined the host state's refugee policy, influenced by Jacobsen's (1996) framework, and explained three dimensions: legal and bureaucratic aspects, attitude towards international relief organisations, and restrictive aspects of admission and refugee treatment. It falls short of touching on some evolving critical contextual issues of hosting Rohingya refugees as dynamics change frequently. Therefore, this paper aims to make a modest contribution to the literature on refugee studies by comprehensively exploring the strategies and approaches Bangladesh has undertaken in managing the Rohingya crisis. The novelty of this paper derives not only from exploring existing data for a comprehensive analysis of the strategies and approaches Bangladesh applied to manage the situation but also from developing a unique analytical framework that connects various critical elements and approaches to refugee-related humanitarian crisis management.

Refugee Crisis Management: A Framework of Analysis

A crisis that falls into the category of humanitarian issues is a crisis for all, not only for the people and country experiencing it but also for the conscience of people worldwide. A generic understanding of a humanitarian crisis refers to a situation where many people are affected by natural disasters, conflicts, or other emergencies, requiring immediate aid for those experiencing such conditions. A crisis like armed conflict and its associated involuntary migration of people from one country to another, earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts or any natural hazards is often marked by various 'uncertainties,' which demand humanitarian assistance in complicated situations, as required in Darfur, Haiti, Japan and Sri Lanka (Habib, 2015; Cioffi-Revilla, 2014).

When a human-made crisis evolves, most, if not all, actors can sense that an event is coming, jeopardising human society; therefore, stakeholders, actors and policy-makers could take some strategies for both understanding the nature of uncertainties and managing evolving humanitarian crises, with adaptive strategies of managing various aspects of it. The primary task for designing any response mechanisms to address humanitarian crises is to undertake 'a complex approach' to understand the nature of the crises and design approaches to respond to those crises (Cioffi-Revilla, 2014). Depending on the nature of a crisis, Fredriksen (2012) suggested a global humanitarian space, applying a 'cluster approach' that involves not only broader actors like the United Nations (UN) and its agencies but also humanitarian organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Red Crescent Movement (RCM), humanitarian NGOs, both international and local, for coordinating activities of those actors who could focus on their respective clusters coherently.

The first and foremost approach to responding to any refugee situation is providing them with humanitarian assistance and aid. Regardless of their intention, local

people on the ground often cannot feed many refugees except by volunteering, donating to humanitarian organisations, and supporting agencies that provide support (Snyder, 2011). The role of citizen initiatives in fostering global solidarity in the refugee situation is vital for responding to humanitarian crises, as voluntary-based initiatives developed in Lesbos address the needs of people on the ground and respond to the problem with rules and regulations (Haaland and Wallevik, 2019). Nevertheless, the primary responsibility for responding to the humanitarian crisis lies with the international community, which must come forward to protect people, address their causes, and provide aid. While the international community and host country want to consider cost-effectiveness in meeting refugee needs, there are issues of equity and fairness in providing support to humanitarian operations, including ensuring last-mile logistics, meaning aid and support are reached by those who need it most (Starr and van Wassenhove, 2014). The leading global refugee agency, UNHCR, has utilised technology-based identification of refugees and their management since 2010. Technology-aided mechanisms like biometric identification of refugees help identify refugees in complex contexts and develop a 'prevalent governance' system in refugee camps (Poyil and Chowdhory, 2020).

Both the 2016 New York Declaration for Migrants and Refugees and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees emphasised a multi-stakeholder approach to engaging wider stakeholders to address all types of issues and needs of the host and refugee population (Boersma and Kraaijeveld, 2018). Therefore, they promote a 'whole of society' approach, meaning no single actor can offer protection alone; media, affected communities, governments, humanitarian actors, and service providers must collaborate through referral networks to identify needs, vulnerabilities, and hazards of both communities in refugee situations (Barbour and Field, 2021). By looking into the discourse of 'relief alone is not enough', Gómez and Kawaguchi (2018) developed a theory for the continuum that argues in favour of multiple approaches to humanitarian crisis management. Not only did they emphasise engagements of bilateral and multilateral actors but also visualise the process as 'a multilayered sequence of phases' wherein issues of funding, strategies and coordination are as important as the contexts where the crisis evolves, and engagement of different actors with activities in crisis management (Gómez and Kawaguchi, 2018: 32).

Although many governments, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and donors get involved in providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, patterns of delivering humanitarian aid are determined by various factors, including the needs of refugees, the overall security situation, and the capacity of aid providers to manage such endeavours. Delivering assistance in physical goods is a common approach to meeting refugees' needs, whereas cash-based assistance, like cash or vouchers, empowers refugees to control their spending and lives (Azad, 2013). Although the UNHCR often takes the lead in managing and offering humanitarian assistance to refugees, many other UN agencies like World Food

Program (WFP), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), alongside the national government, engage in providing assistance and aid. Engaging local actors, such as national and local NGOs, could lead to over-dependence on them, which may pay off in delivering aid and services to refugees but could hinder the overall management process if it remains uncoordinated.

Having such a diverse range of actors in humanitarian crisis management is a blessing, at least for ensuring the basic survival needs of refugees; there are challenges in delivering assistance and coordinating a wide range of issues, including coordination, security and resource management (Ighodaro, 2002). Inappropriate management strategies and approaches to the refugee crisis at the first point could lead to multiple other crises at the latter stage (Maniatis, 2018). Whatever the approaches states and institutions apply in emerging complex humanitarian crises are often not guided by a principled approach but by the contextual evidence-based approach that helps to tailor responses for meeting the needs and addressing the issues of people in concern (Dijkzeul, Hilhorst and Walker, 2013). Nonetheless, handling refugee situations requires states—either host or other concerned countries—to look for improvisation, prioritisation and the creation of alternatives for crisis management when it evolves with various complexes (Oscarsson and Danielsson, 2018). A new crisis entangling an existing refugee situation requires applying a system-dynamic approach to respond to both crises, as was applied in the Syrian refugee context in Turkey during the Covid-19 period, focusing on isolation policies, social distancing, hygiene behaviour to ensure protection and safety of all (Allahi et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, as a displacement or migration-related crisis evolves, state parties have several key issues to consider when responding to such a situation. Regarding the Mediterranean migration crisis and the initiatives or strategies adopted by the European Union, Panebianco (2016) stressed that states design response mechanisms to protect their borders and interests and 'prevent loss of human lives at sea'. Although protecting the border is crucial, serving the humanitarian crisis is at the core of a management strategy for refugee issues, albeit both are related to the political decisions of national policy-makers and leaders (Panebianco, 2016). Despite having different limitations, states emphasise a humanitarian approach but consider the state's long-term national security and interests (Panebianco, 2016). When refugees pose a threat to national and local security aspects and create a culture of fear that encourages political elites and ordinary citizens to share their perceptions about the refugees differently and to shape refugee management policies due to perceived and real risks. Hence, host nations apply a securitisation policy, considering influential political, economic, and social factors affecting their approaches and treatment of refugees (McGahan, 2009). A discourse develops that refugee presence causes new problems and challenges in different aspects, including competition for land, water, healthcare, firewood, deforestation, job

competition, participation in local or national politics, etc. Unfair treatment towards hosts could develop as refugees receive aid from foreign organisations or development partners, which generates problems in host culture and communities when that aid does not consider local sensitivities (Mogire, 2011). Hence, some host nations undertake strong refugee regulatory policies, including passing laws to address critical issues, such as Hungary's "Stop Soros" anti-immigration law in 2018, which is considered to be so (Driscoll, 2018).

Apart from managing a refugee's humanitarian and security aspects, host countries mostly prefer returning refugees to their home country to keep a crisis alive for an extended period. Such a refugee repatriation process develops through negotiation and diplomacy involving various actors. The space for 'migration diplomacy' allows trade-offs that could encourage parties to agree to take back as many irregular migrants and refugees as possible through talks and agreements, as developed between the EU and Turkey in 2016 (Seeberg, 2017). The host country encourages refugees to repatriate when a conducive environment evolves and the conditions of persecution no longer persist in their country of origin. The 1951 Refugee Convention mandates the voluntary repatriation of refugees with safety and dignity, meaning there must not be any visible insecurities but a 'complete restoration of national protection' (Pittaway, 2008). Creating such an environment is challenging due to the cost, effort, and time needed to establish peace, ensure human rights, rebuild infrastructure, restore everyday life, rehabilitate the judicial system, and foster long-term stability (Hathaway, 1997). Although the 1951 Convention does not explicitly address voluntariness, implying state protection for returns, the UNHCR focuses on objective facts rather than subjective assessments conducted by any authority. Hence, whatever policies a state considers for refugee repatriation, they must not disregard the voluntariness of refugees' decisions and use coercive means to expel or force refugees to return to places where different risks and threats are prevalent (Hyde, 2016; Duffy, 2008).

Other than repatriation of refugees, a country may consider local integration of refugees or pursue their resettlement in third countries. In the former case, refugees gradually integrate into local societies, with the potential of having citizenship. Although the 1951 Convention and the UNHCR Statute acknowledge this, many states worry about resource constraints, security, and the potential for evolving enmity when refugees remain indefinitely. Those who have fewer resources and less capacity to absorb refugees into their society tend to be less inclined to integrate them. On the other hand, states undertaking a national inclusion strategy for refugees do so under popular pressure from civil groups on humanitarian aspects, as many European states have considered such approaches (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2018). Under such circumstances, refugees have more rights, including permanent residency and citizenship, and they try to become self-reliant rather than depending on aid and relief. Prioritising the integration of refugees locally is a decision of the host government, while the UNHCR often coordinates such

programmes with diverse partners.

In the latter case, some other countries, encouraged by the international principle of burden sharing and responsibility, relocate and resettle refugees within their borders, which is also considered one of the three key durable approaches to the refugee response. Resettlement becomes an integral part of a complex refugee response when voluntary repatriation or local integration is not possible for refugees owing to persecution, regional threats and insecurities. The resettled country may allow permanent residency to those refugees. Yet, those countries often set resettlement criteria and standards to facilitate the resettlement process, to which the UNHCR could be a party. Nevertheless, whether a country would use strategies to resettle refugees to third countries depends on resettlement's procedural ramifications, which could encourage more newcomers intending to relocate to global north countries, putting the refugee-hosting global south countries under further severe strains (Bjørkhaug and Bækkevold, 2025). Therefore, the host state undertakes strategies and approaches carefully to consider and choose between repatriation, reintegration or resettlement of refugees.

Bangladesh and Its Strategic Approaches to Deal with the Rohingya Crisis: Findings and Analysis

Bangladesh, the country hosting over a million Rohingya refugees, has been a key player in managing this crisis. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has adopted pragmatic strategies and diverse, interconnected approaches to manage this massive humanitarian crisis. One of the key policy strategies it considered is that it did not recognise displaced Rohingyas as refugees; instead, it termed them as Forcefully Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs), which has restricted its responsibilities, especially not allowing some refugee rights (Albert and Chatzky, 2023). It materialised this strategy as Bangladesh was not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, yet it sheltered a large number of Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. It was hesitant to enact new laws that could have forced it to strategise the Rohingya crisis differently. Due to such a limitation in the legal status of Rohingyas in Bangladesh, they were documented differently, like FDMNs, than refugees, which limited their access to formal work, education, and broad healthcare (Mannan, 2020). Another prioritised strategy of the GoB is to take initiatives to repatriate Rohingyas to their country, Myanmar.

Despite not being a signatory to the Refugee Convention but having its socio-economic problems, the people and GoB sheltered Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar camps on humanitarian grounds. Keeping its broad strategic aspect intact, the GoB empowered Cox's Bazar-based Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) to manage the daily affairs of camp dwellers living in Cox's Bazar. The RRRC is under the control of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), which coordinates refugee-related activities from Dhaka. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has to rely on international actors to manage the daily

humanitarian aspects of the crisis. We have categorised Bangladesh's strategic approaches to managing the Rohingya crisis in four parts, which include (i) international cooperation for humanitarian assistance, (ii) administrative and security management of the camps and camp dwellers, (iii) coordinated disaster reduction and environmental management, and (iv) diplomatic engagements for Rohingya repatriation.

International Cooperation and Partnership for Humanitarian Support

When Rohingyas arrived in Cox's Bazar, many people, including locals and others, showed sympathy to them and came up with different quick supports for them. Hosting a huge refugee, temporarily or permanently, requires massive and sustained humanitarian funding to ensure their food, shelter and other essential services. As a least-developed country, Bangladesh, on its own, cannot afford such a large population. Although the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, once stated to feed another 1 million people, which has political rhetoric of statesmanship, supporting people in need and hosting refugees practically is a far different enterprise (Dhaka Tribune, 2017).

Bangladesh has to partner with the international community, including UN agencies and bodies and bilateral support, to manage the humanitarian needs of Rohingyas. UN agencies, including the UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, and WFP, have played key roles in providing essential services, such as food, water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, to Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar camps (Cook, 2019). On 16 March 2018, UN agencies and NGO partners launched the first Joint Response Plan (JRP) for addressing the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, with a budget of \$951 million for covering a wide range of tasks, including camp coordination, delivering services for food, education, health, water sanitation, protection, disaster management etc. Although the GoB has been in the lead of managing the Rohingya crisis, a wide range of humanitarian stakeholders—including international agencies, INGOs, and national and local NGOs, have been working in partnership for sectoral coordination and offering dire fundamental services to Rohingyas (JRP, 2018). Such a process of collecting funding has continued for the last seven consecutive years, meaning assistance has come from diverse sources within the international community.

The 2024 JRP aimed to secure funds for humanitarian purposes to meet the basic survival needs of Rohingya refugees and the communities hosting them. One of its three principal objectives is to deliver life-saving assistance to refugees, while the other two include their protection and sustainable repatriation to Myanmar. Although the GoB is leading, the 2024 JRP, which IOM and UNHCR coordinated, sought to secure \$852.4 million for 1.35 million refugees and the host population (ISCG, 2024). The demand for raising funds for the 2025-26 JRP has increased, seeing \$934.5 million from the international community for 1.48 million people, including refugees in Cox's Bazar and Bashan Char and local Bangladeshi

communities. More than one hundred partner organisations, including UN agencies and international and Bangladeshi NGOs, have come together in the first two-year response plan for working toward voluntary and sustainable Rohingya repatriation, strengthening protection and resilience mechanisms of Rohingya refugees, providing life-saving humanitarian assistance, ensuring the well-being of the local population and enhancing disaster risk reduction and management tasks (ISCG, 2025).

The European Union has recently allocated €32.3 million in 2025 to support food assistance, meet nutritional needs, provide essential services and maintain camp shelters and other facilities (ECHO, 20205). Some governments offer grains or food items in addition to money to purchase goods. For example, the Government of Korea donated 15,000 metric tons of rice to the WFP to support the Rohingya population for 1.5 months. Some other countries provide bilateral humanitarian aid to share the burden of Bangladesh, meet the basic needs of Rohingyas, and save humanity when some powerful countries curtailed international funding for different reasons (Salahuddin 2024).

No country on its own can offer the absolute assistance required for managing a humanitarian refugee crisis. Therefore, like many other refugee-hosting countries, Bangladesh has relied heavily on international cooperation and local partnerships to manage funds for humanitarian assistance and distribute them to the Rohingya refugee community. While the GoB has been at the forefront of managing the Rohingya crisis as a whole, the international community has extended quick support to it. They jointly initiated food distribution programs to ensure refugees had access to basic nutrition, including rice, lentils, and other food items, as well as health, water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities (Lewis, 2019; Holloway and Fan, 2018). Besides the government agencies, international agencies like UNHCR, IOM, and WFP coordinated hundreds of global and national organisations to provide food, shelter, medical care, and safe drinking water and sanitation facilities to displaced Rohingya refugees since arriving in Cox's Bazar. Although Bangladesh does not recognise Rohingyas as refugees, it partnered with international organisations to manage the required funds for providing humanitarian assistance and aid.

Although a local Taskforce was set up to assist displaced Rohingyas, the JRP, a collective effort of more than a hundred UN, local and international organisations, seeks to secure funds to manage humanitarian assistance from the international community to meet the basic needs of Rohingya refugees. When dissatisfaction and mistrust have grown among the local people who host Rohingyas and feel deprived, the authority has focused on seeking assistance for both communities since 2019, albeit disproportionately (Islam et al., 2022). Such conditions created a complex humanitarian dilemma for all stakeholders involved in the humanitarian assistance management process. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Bangladesh has 'extremely high' limits on accessing humanitarian assistance and using its

own resources; therefore, it had to depend heavily on international and bilateral cooperation to meet the basic needs of displaced Rohingyas.

Administrative and Security Management Approaches

Administrative management of the Rohingya refugees has been as crucial as providing security to them and ensuring the safety of the local people. When the mass exodus of Rohingyas happened in 2017, there was no immediate administrative plan to shelter them. Once the number of scattered and uncoordinated refugees made space for themselves in the Ukhiya and Teknaf, Bangladesh rapidly considered undertaking some approaches. One was to settle them in temporary camps, for which the government allocated 2,000 acres of forest land and was ready to allocate more for sheltering them on humanitarian grounds (The Daily Star, 11 September 2017a). The state quickly helped arrange makeshift camps, demarcated the total temporary settlements into 33 camps for displaced Rohingyas, and developed a three-tiered civil administrative governance mechanism.

At the top of it is the MoDMR, which is responsible for overall refugee response, whereas the RRRRC represents the MoDMR at Cox's Bazar level and has been supported by the Camp-in-Charges (CiCs), which manages civil administration matters at the camp level, in conjunction with the army. The registered camps in Kutupalong and Nayapara, moreover, developed a system of Camp Committees and Block Committees (CC+BC) that institute a participatory camp governance system wherein CC+BC members, as representatives of their communities, maintain a channel of information between ordinary refugees and humanitarian agencies, and help in setting the priorities, planning and executing activities, which broadly facilitated aid-providing activities.

Besides this rapid settlement of Rohingyas in 33 camps, with the construction of shelters and developing sanitation systems, the Bangladesh army rapidly constructed 11-kilometre road networks in Ukhiya -Balukhali and Ukhiya -Lambasia- Balukhali areas, making aid workers and administrative personnel's working conditions accessible in rough hilly terrains (AFP, 2017). Bangladesh army's role was to 'assist civilian government' during any national emergency, which not only organised Rohingya refugees in camps but also helped civil authorities distribute aid to refugees by introducing an informal majhi system and using the road networks inside the camps (ACAPS, 2018).

The second quick approach was to bring newly arrived displaced Rohingyas under a biometric registration process to 'restrict' their movements beyond the designated areas and prevent them from being included in the Bangladeshi voter list and having Bangladeshi passports. In association with the UNHCR, this registration process began on 11 September 2017. It was executed by the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) along with the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Cox's Bazar district administration (The Daily Star, 11 September 2017b). Beginning

with twelve booths, which gradually increased to thirty points in the makeshift camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf, displaced Rohingya people enlisted their biometric data, including name, parents' name, birthplace, nationality, country, gender, age, photo, fingerprint, religion etc. (The Daily Star, 11 September 2017b; The Daily Star, 21 September 2017).

Within three months, the authority registered 844,227 Rohingya refugees who received a barcoded identity card containing all their information (The Daily Star, 11 September 2017b; The Daily Star, 15 December 2017). Currently, more than 1.2 million Rohingyas have those smart ID cards. The individual ID or the fingerprint reveals all that information about a person. Bangladesh considered this registration approach for Rohingyas to stay in 'peace' in camps, while the cards became a means for them to receive aid, services, and assistance. Although biometric registration of Rohingyas has established a governance and management process for camp dwellers, giving an identity with dignity to many stateless Rohingyas who never had any official documents (Poyil and Chowdhory, 2020; St-Denis, 2019), many Rohingyas considered smart cards as a 'coercive measure' that prevented them from enjoying opportunities outside the camps (Mazumdar, 2024).

For security purposes, the Bangladesh Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence on 04 September 2019 recommended building security fences around Rohingya camps, aiming to control people's movement from inside and outside (Human Rights Watch, 2019). By the end of the first quarter of 2022, Bangladesh had completed 80 per cent of the installation of barbed wire fencing around the camps to maintain law and order, safety, and security (The Daily Star, 26 September 2019; BSS, 2022). The erection of fencing raised questions on human rights grounds. Human Rights Watch (2019) argued that 'instead of protecting the security of refugees', such installations curtailed the freedom of movement of Rohingyas, turned the camps into 'open air prisons' and put them at risk, especially in situations of emergencies when a quick evacuation is needed. Reports state that such concerns turned into a reality when a fire blaze cost 15 lives, including six children, and displaced more than 50,000 Rohingya refugees (Aljazeera, 2021). They were trapped inside the fencing when the fire engulfed a large area, and the blaze burned some 10,000 Rohingya shelter huts. Many got injured when trying to escape from an exit point, and others wanted to climb over the barbed wire fence (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The fencing hampered the rescue work of firefighters and other emergency services. However, a commissioner defended the fences and argued that those fences did not hinder such efforts as those 'were not built inside the camps to act as barriers between blocks of shanties', and those who died could not evacuate them quickly (Aljazeera, 2021).

The quick administrative approaches have helped manage such a large number of displaced Rohingya refugees, whereas the security-centric approaches to manage them have raised questions on the rights ground, especially on restricting their

movements. Over the period, public perception of many Rohingyas has shifted towards portraying them as security threats, drug dealers, and felons. Hence, the securitisation of Rohingya camps has been influenced not only by the presence of social ills like drug and weapon trafficking but also by preventing them from joining any extremist groups and addressing the evolving security needs of the camps and camp dwellers. Various groups inside the camps fight to establish their control and collect ransom from ordinary Rohingyas and sometimes from local people (Wolf, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Nevertheless, NGOs and organisations working inside the camps engaged in preventing gender-based violence, while Bangladesh deployed forces like the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) in 2020 for the security of Rohingya camps and to reduce tension between the host and Rohingya communities. When the army oversaw security, the situation was more stable than the period when the APBn had been in charge of security management, as complaints mounted against them about excessive use of force, extortion and kidnapping (ICG, 2023).

Coordinated Disaster Reduction and Environmental Management

The refugees, when living in crowded camps, remain vulnerable to various kinds of disasters, natural hazards and environmental concerns. The Rohingya settlements in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char have not been exceptional. The fragile settlement of Cox's Bazar camps has been under severe threat from landslide risks, which generally increase during the monsoon due to shelter construction-related deforestation and the overuse of forest resources for firewood collection (Zaman et al., 2020). In contrast, the low-lying areas remain vulnerable to flash floods. Issues of soil erosion, water contamination due to inadequate and improper waste management systems, and groundwater depletion created water scarcity for the Rohingyas and their hosts. Due to the settlement of over a million people, the local temperature has increased, altering rainfall patterns and exacerbating climate change effects in the locality. Although the Rohingya community considered different coping strategies, the authority undertook various strategies and localised approaches to engage multiple actors, including NGOs, international agencies, Rohingyas and locals, for disaster reduction and environmental management of localities.

As a part of the disaster reduction strategy, the GoB, in association with its partners, local NGOs and Rohingya volunteers, aimed to stabilise the hills against the rainfall-induced landslides and placed bamboo and sandbags on steep hill slopes, constructed drainage systems and planted different types of grass for preventing soil erosion (Zaman et al., 2020). The host government and international agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the WFP carried out a 'cash for work'. They engaged Rohingya people in reforestation efforts, including regular watering, fencing, weed removal, and fertiliser use for plantation (Khan, 2022). This disaster reduction approach aims to mitigate natural hazards and empower camp dwellers to make their environment green and livable.

On the other hand, the International Organization for Migration, in collaboration with FAO and WFP, started a ‘Safe Plus’ project that distributed Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) stoves, fuel tanks and access to refills to refugees and some host populations to reduce costly dependency on firewood but to rehabilitating reforested places (IOM, 2019). The approaches to reforestation increased greenery in camps and made refugees more resilient to live in peace, as they managed green sheds in previously depleted and deserted camp areas (Portilla, 2021). Nevertheless, reforestation projects are costly, amplified by other challenges, such as limited funding, logistical barriers and accommodating an ongoing influx of Rohingyas.

Rohingya camps have around 45 multi-purpose cyclone shelters, which are accessible during the cyclone period. The government flexibly allowed using many other installations, like social, educational, and religious institutions, as temporary shelters to meet the inadequate needs of such a large population living in crowded camps. As Cox’s Bazar was one of the disaster-prone areas when a cyclone like Mocha formed, IOM, its partners and state agencies prepared their 2,000 volunteers with basic casualty kits, ambulances and teams to meet the emergency needs of the people (IOM, 2023). In association with international organisations, some NGOs trained Rohingya volunteers on mechanisms for avoiding disasters, the emergency flag warning system and what to do when disasters happen. Whenever a natural disaster occurs, the District Disaster Management Committee takes the lead and coordinates with other bodies like the Red Cross/Crescent, the Multi-Hazard Response Plan, the RRRC, CiCs and camp-level Disaster Management Committees for addressing the unforeseen issues of disasters (Rohingya Response, 2022). Nevertheless, disaster reduction and management in refugee camps are daunting, requiring not only preparedness, techniques and strategies but also approaches to engage all sectors and research to find better environmental mitigation strategies.

Diplomatic Preference for Rohingya Repatriation over Local Integration and Third-Country Resettlement

Since the beginning of the 2017 influx, Bangladesh has prioritised engaging with a wide range of actors for the repatriation of Rohingyas to their homes in Myanmar. Primarily, it carried out bilateral negotiations with Myanmar, which did not yield any outcome for the repatriation. Such bilateral talks have been mainly unsuccessful due to the lack of reciprocal trust of the parties, the unwillingness of the Myanmar authority to address Rohingya’s citizenship demand, justice, and the fear of reprisals of Rohingyas on return (Szczepanski, 2017). In mid-January 2018, both countries agreed to start repatriation; many Rohingya in the camps opposed and remained wary about Myanmar’s failure to assure their safety and security, promise citizenship, or acknowledge them as a legitimate ethnic minority (Habib, 2021; Rokonuzzaman, 2022).

Although Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2019, it was questioned by human rights groups for not adequately addressing the

justice and citizenship issues of Rohingyas (Anupama, 2021). In September 2019, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister proposed a tripartite solution, and a 'tripartite joint working mechanism' was formed to assess the process (Albert and Chatzky, 2023). The Myanmar military took over state power in 2021, which made the process further complicated and less progressable, while the Rohingya people themselves have been unwilling to return to camp-like installations in Rakhine state. Without safety, dignity and rights, no Rohingya wants to return. Forcing them to return would violate the principle of non-refoulement, which Bangladesh is aware of.

Since there has not been much progress between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Rohingya hosting Bangladesh sought support from China due to its good relation with both countries to speed up the repatriation mediation process and wanted to return around 6,000 refugees by 2023, which did not happen either due to unpreparedness of Myanmar and other evolving contextual conflicting difficulties in Rakhine state (Kawsar, 2023). Ambassadors from eight countries, including Bangladesh, China, and India, visited Rakhine in March 2023 to examine preparations. There has been little progress since then, except for the recent declaration by Myanmar, following a meeting in Bangkok between high representatives of Bangladesh's interim government, Khalilur Rahman, and Than Swe, Myanmar's Deputy Prime Minister, which confirmed that 180,000 Rohingyas are eligible to return (Al Jazeera, 2025). It created hope in Dhaka and Bangladesh to repatriate Rohingyas; yet a more recent statement of high representatives and Bangladesh's Foreign Advisor's opinion indicated a pessimistic scenario for the Rakhine state that does not allow a suitable condition for Rohingya repatriation.

The recent development related to armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military, and the discussion on the humanitarian corridor to Rakhine state, could make the Rohingya crisis management more complicated than ever before. Since resuming their fights with the army in 2023, the AA has significantly gained control of Rakhine state, controlling more than 80% of the territory and 11 townships out of 17. When they gained control of Maungdaw and its strategic western town, the AA established control over a 271-km-long border with Bangladesh (TBS, 2024). On the other hand, the Myanmar military conscripted Rohingya youths to fight against the AA, which not only created distance between the Rakhine Buddhist majority and Muslim Rohingyas but also made the repatriation process far more complicated than ever (ICG, 2024). The advancement of the AA towards more self-governance through armed conflict made the situation critical for many trapped civilians in the Rakhine State. Under these circumstances, a humanitarian corridor through Bangladesh for the Rakhine, appealed by the UN and proposed by the high representative of the interim government, brought a critical juncture in the repatriation discussion. Many of the mainstream political parties in Bangladesh opposed this idea as it could open up a 'Pandora's box', putting Bangladesh into the critical context of ongoing Myanmar conflicts and great power rivalry (Hossain, 2025). However, despite

having the potential to help civilians caught in conflicts in Rakhine and reduce the risks of potential famine, such a corridor, without a discussion and agreement with Myanmar, would benefit those other than ordinary civilians in Rakhine and undermine the Rohingya repatriation process, if not inviting more influx (Uddin, 2025).

Since Bangladesh has prioritised repatriation over reintegration and resettlement, it has never paid much attention to third-country resettlement of Rohingyas, nor to relocating them anywhere inside Bangladesh except for the temporary relocation of around 100,000 Rohingyas in Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal prepared with better facilities for refugees to stay there until they repatriate to Myanmar. Although the Bhasan Char relocation project was severely questioned due to its vulnerabilities to natural disasters, restricting Rohingyas' freedom of movement, isolating them from family and community, and remoteness of the location, Bangladesh relocated some Rohingyas there since 2021 to reduce the congestion in Cox's Bazar camps and ensure the security of displaced Rohingyas (Islam et al., 2021). Nearly 32,000 have been relocated by 2024, with better protection services. In their management process, different humanitarian actors, including local NGOs and donor nations, are involved (UNHCR, 2024; Guardian, 2022).

However, as mentioned earlier, resettlement to a third country has been a low priority for Bangladesh, resulting in limited resettlement options. Some powerful countries, such as the USA and Japan, expressed solidarity with Bangladesh. The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, once declared that the USA would increase the resettlement of Rohingyas (Palma, 2022). Although they have expressed such an opinion, neither the USA nor Japan has a record of settling many Rohingyas from Bangladesh. Third-party resettlement could continue as a parallel process of Rohingya repatriation through which the international community could share the burden of Bangladesh. Bangladesh did not prioritise the resettlement process, which could favour the Myanmar junta government to delay the repatriation negotiation but encourage more Rohingyas to flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh, exploring the opportunity for potential resettlements.

Conclusion

Despite its socio-economic limitations in a country of more than 180 million people, Bangladesh has upheld the spirit of keeping humanity alive by sheltering the displaced Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar. Due to the state's inadequate economic capacity as a host country, Bangladesh has considered undertaking some common, comprehensive strategies and pragmatic, distinctive approaches to managing this ever-evolving complex humanitarian crisis and its associated dilemmas. Primarily, aid dependency has been a source of funds to manage and meet the basic humanitarian needs of the Rohingyas. Although Bangladesh has been at the forefront of Rohingya crisis management, the international community, from

a humanitarian burden-sharing perspective, has partnered with Bangladesh to collect funds from diverse sources. Such cooperation between the host state and international agencies is common in refugee-like crisis management.

Since the Rohingya influx started, Bangladesh has undertaken a civil-military cooperative approach to address the evolving crisis. The MoDRM and its associated bodies, such as the RRRC and CiCs, jointly managed the day-to-day administrative affairs of the crisis, while the Bangladesh army assisted in constructing shelter houses, building main and link roads accessible to all relevant stakeholders, and distributing aid to refugees. Despite concerns raised by some Rohingyas, the biometric registration and smart ID cards gave a dignified identity to many Rohingyas. This approach also helped the government and agencies better manage administrative affairs. Apart from the biometric registration of Rohingyas, Bangladesh defined its security risks and parameters to determine state-centric security approaches and fenced the camps to protect Bangladesh's national interests, ensure the safety of Rohingyas, and prevent them from going beyond the camp areas. Such an erection of barbed fencing raised questions about restricting the freedom of movement of Rohingyas, who do not have legal refugee recognition; instead, Bangladesh termed them the FDMNs, as it is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Hosting such a huge number of Rohingyas has significantly contributed to environmental loss and degradation, as the construction of camps and overuse of firewood undermined the natural forests of Ukhiya and Teknaf, created a scarcity of fresh water, and made the communities vulnerable to natural hazards, increased temperature, landslides, flash floods, etc. A unique cooperative approach has been developed for a massive reforestation project, supported by donor agencies and executed by Rohingya and local communities, aiming to restore the lost greenery. Additionally, humanitarian agencies provided LPG stoves and gas cylinders to Rohingya households, thereby reducing the pressure on forest resources for firewood collection. Despite various limitations, a joint working group comprising government bodies, NGOs, and Rohingyas collaborates during the vulnerable period of natural hazards, collectively working to reduce disaster risks and manage environmental losses.

A crucial aspect of Bangladesh's approaches to managing the Rohingya crisis is preferring diplomatic negotiation for their repatriation over local inclusion or resettling them in third countries. The bilateral talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar did not yield anything substantive for repatriation, nor did the Rohingyas express willingness to return due to threats, insecurities and uncertainties in Myanmar. Therefore, the host country emphasised the Look East policy and sought assistance from China to conduct talks for repatriation, which made little progress. The advancement of the AA and critical discussion on the humanitarian corridor to Rakhine State have made the repatriation discussion more complicated, muddled

with insecurities and risks of a further influx. Nevertheless, the USA and Japan expressed willingness to resettle some Rohingyas to those countries, which did not develop much, nor did Bangladesh prioritise local integration and third-country resettlement, owing to potential risks and further influx. The findings suggest that a host country can strategise its approaches but cannot overcome the complex refugee crisis alone, from humanitarian and associated vulnerability perspectives, or even on repatriation grounds.

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