

A Humanitarian Plea to Save Lives of Rohingyas at Sea



A refugee 'crisis' creates multifaceted problems for the host country, and the issues get complicated over a certain course of time. Otherwise, it would not have been called a 'crisis'. Presently, in addition to various settlement problems of Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has been facing a tragic attempt to migrate more than a million of them by sea route, becoming a crisis within a crisis. It is not just a problem for Bangladesh; rather, the South Asian and Southeast Asian nations need to be more concerned about this rehabilitation issue. The possible sinking of a boat in the last month carrying 180 Rohingya people has made the year 2022 the deadliest year after 2013 and 2014. We can dissect the political dynamics of the phenomenon but would not be able to reach a consensus. But, the Rohingyas will continue to lose their lives in the meantime. The countries can come forward to save their lives to the least, rather than arguing over devising a permanent solution.

The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region have historically been used as a maritime route for migration for the South and Southeast Asian nations. The forced migration in this region is intertwined with three issues: economy, conflict, and climate. These three issues shape the mixed maritime migration of the Rohingya refugees. While the conflict in Myanmar and the poverty-stricken economic situation works as the pushing factors to embrace the perilous journey on the sea, the vulnerable climatic space makes their journey deadly and dangerous. After the 2012 conflicts in Myanmar, many Rohingyas attempted to flee Myanmar and cross the

ocean. The magnitude of their tragedy was exposed only in 2015 when 32 shallow graves were discovered on a remote mountain in Thailand. So, they do not just accept their fate at sea; they are also victims of torture, abduction, and killing by organized criminal groups.

The migration-aspirant Rohingyas are victims of smugglers and the inhuman, stringent national laws. The networks of smugglers exist to disrupt the migration governance of the countries and subjugate the Rohingyas into extortion, torture, and killing. On the other hand, the Rohingyas have faced a mix of soft and hard security approaches by the regional countries. Bangladesh has been exemplary in providing shelter to stranded Rohingya people, while some countries have turned a blind eye to the tragic fate of these people. The logic of prioritizing national security over anything else has made these countries push back the Rohingya boats. In the 21st century, it is pretty obvious that the states will prioritize their national interests over everything else. But the lives of these stateless people can be saved for the time being with effective regional cooperation. Without worrying about providing asylum to these refugees, it is first and foremost, the responsibility of the states to save the lives at sea. An effective search and rescue operation featuring regional participation by the respective agencies can be a life-saving initiative for these helpless people. Saving their lives from the torture of smugglers can be the starter for mending the migration misgovernance in this region.

There are multiple arenas where the littoral states in this region can work together to handle the crisis in a better way. Firstly, the conventional method of offshore processing has to be done humanely. The coastal detention centers have to feature some basic human rights where the migration aspirants' lives will not be endangered. This can be ensured while safeguarding the integrity of the national territory. The involvement of international refugee and human rights organizations will be beneficial for all the parties involved here. Secondly, the countries should allow the stateless refugees temporary entry into the designated areas along the coast. The practice of denying the disembarkation of refugees has been increasing among the states in this region. The states, being non-signatory to the refugee conventions, do not feel obligated to accept the entry of refugees into their territory. The logical inferences of this approach also ensemble the concept of deterrence. It is thought that a negative approach towards the refugees will prevent the further arrival of the refugees along the coasts of the states. Similarly, any welcoming approach is considered to convey a welcoming message to the migration aspirant refugees staying in the host countries. But the flow of migration aspirant Rohingya refugees has not stopped in recent days. Ironically, in fear of further influx in the future, states' actions contribute to further loss of lives at sea.

The situation is grave in nature, and the countries in this region have to agree on the magnitude of the humanitarian danger. It is the stepping stone before responding to this crisis. The states in this region have to grow out of the mentality that anything related to the Rohingya refugees

falls in the purview of Bangladesh. This has important implications as the international community also expects Bangladesh to accept the stranded refugees at sea who are being denied entry by other South Asian and Southeast Asian nations. A successful regional forum like ASEAN has to play a decisive role in forging cooperation among the states in handling the crisis. The global powers should also bring this issue into their bilateral relations with the states of this region. We may not devise a sustainable solution to the crisis, but we definitely can stop further loss of lives. These are human lives, as precious as ours - recognized citizens of a country.

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