

Chapter 14

Relocation of the Rohingya Refugees to Bhasan Char: Human Rights, Government Policy, and the Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the government policy of relocating the Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char from the perspectives of human rights and refugee rights. Drawing from existing literature and diverse discourses, it explores the complexities surrounding this issue. The transfer of some Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char by the government of Bangladesh has raised concerns among human rights activists and development workers about potential human rights violations and the safety of these displaced individuals. This chapter aims to critically analyse the issues related to the Rohingya refugee crisis, like mass political asylum, the policy of non-refoulement, violence against humanity, and the impact of the Bangladeshi government's decision to relocate the Rohingya refugees on their human rights, in light of the concepts involved in international law.

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INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya have been stateless for more than six generations and constitute one of the most mistreated and persecuted refugee populations globally (Milton et al., 2017). The Rohingya people are one of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar, predominantly residing in Rakhine State. However, they have endured a long history of marginalization and discrimination in Myanmar, which has deprived them of their basic human rights and citizenship. The Rohingyas were denied citizenship under the Myanmar Citizenship Act of 1982 and have suffered a series of horrific abuses, torturous acts, and oppression. As a result, a significant number of the Rohingyas seeks asylum in neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, etc. (Ullah, 2011; Parnini et al., 2013; Prodip, 2017; Shohel, 2022; Rahman, 2022). The major influx in 2017 left the global community utterly astonished, as the brutal ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya ethnic minority resulted in the largest displacement and statelessness in recent history (Shohel, 2023).

The Rohingya refugee crisis has been one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges for the past few years, although the crisis has been ongoing for decades to varying degrees and reached a horrifying scale in 2017. The crisis escalated in August 2017 when a violent crackdown by the Myanmar military targeted the Rohingya population, resulting in widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and the burning of the Rohingya villages. This military operation led to a mass exodus of the Rohingya refugees seeking safety and protection in neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh. According to the UNHCR (2022), more than 742,000 Rohingyas fled in search of safety on 25 August 2017 and Bangladesh became the site of the largest refugee camp. Approximately 203,431 Rohingyas were already living in the Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas of Cox's Bazar district, having entered Bangladesh between July 2005 and August 2017, adding to the already significant population of the Rohingya refugees who had sought refuge in Bangladesh from previous influxes (Khatun, 2017).

Due to severe violence and bigotry in their own country, the Rohingya children have become victims of mass displacement, with some of them being domestically or internationally displaced. They have been deprived of their basic human rights, including food, shelter, healthcare, education, freedom of movement and employment (Milton et al., 2017; Moniruzzaman, 2021; Islam et al., 2022). When they ended up as stateless refugees during the period of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasises equality, equity, and social justice, their fundamental human rights were violated. Approximately 961,729, stateless Rohingyas, including 52% of children, currently live in overcrowded and dire conditions in refugee camps (UNHCR population factsheet; June 2023). The Rohingya children in refugee camps in Bangladesh struggle and have limited access to healthcare and formal education. Some of them face serious health issues due to a lack of nourishing food, medical attention, medications, and basic hygiene. Young girls, in particular, are at risk of gender-based abuse, child marriage, and trafficking for manual labour and prostitution (Shohel et al., 2022).

In the midst of the overwhelming Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the government took a significant step by relocating 100,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. Relocation to Bhasan Char was presented as a solution to alleviate the overcrowded camps and provide a safer and better living environment for the refugees (Hossain, 2020b).

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