

Reasons for Continuous Forced Migration of Rohingya: An Explorative Study

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Abstract

This study aims to identify factors that lead to continuous inhuman forced migration of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh and other parts of the world. The Rohingya are a Muslim Bengali-speaking, ethnic group that live in Rakhine State, on Myanmar's western coast. They are fleeing oppressive conditions in Myanmar or being migrated forcibly, where they are unconditionally denied citizenship rights, as well as subjected to violent repression at the hands of government forces, Buddhist extremists, and the region's majority ethnic group. The nature of this study is explorative and qualitative. The study is conducted mainly based on the secondary data published in the research journals, daily newspapers, broadcasted TV news and documentaries, articles, magazines, and websites of different national and international organizations. Studies found that due to the poor economic condition and poverty, Bangladesh govt. is unwilling to accommodate Rohingya in the geography of Bangladesh; Myanmar is unwilling to recognize their citizenship rights due to the internal conflict of nationalism, racism, religion and political agenda. However, this long strained problem can be resolved by inter-exchanging dialogue among the stakeholders. In this regard, UNHRC, regional associations, international influential body and neighboring countries should come forward to resolve this inhuman problem.

Keywords: Rohingya, Forced Migration, Myanmar, Religion.

Introduction

Forced migration is becoming one of the biggest and most complex problems in the 21st century. The International Organization for Migration defines forced migration as any person who migrates to "escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood". UNHCR's annual Global Trends report says an unprecedented 65.6 million people were uprooted from their homes by conflict and persecution at the end of 2016 [UNHCR website]. The Rohingya are a Muslim Bengali-speaking ethnic group that live in Rakhine State, on Myanmar's western coast. They are fleeing oppressive conditions in Myanmar or being migrated forcibly, where they are unconditionally denied citizenship rights, as well as subjected to violent repression at the hands of government forces, Buddhist extremists, and the region's majority ethnic group, the Arakan or Rakhine. There is no doubt that forced migration of Rohingya is a severe problem for approximately one million Rohingyas. That's why it is important to highlight this problem in

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national and international level through the different sorts of Media and forum so that the problem can be evaluated properly and resolved as soon as possible. One theory suggests that the Rohingyas are descendants of Moorish, Arab and Persian traders, including Moghul, Turk, Pathan and Bengali soldiers and migrants, who arrived between 9th and 15th centuries, married local women, and settled in the region. Rohingyas are therefore a mixed group of people with many ethnic and racial connections. This position is mainly upheld by the political organizations of the Rohingyas, including scholars sympathetic to their cause (Razzaq and Haque, 1992). Another theory suggests that the Muslim population of the Rakhine State is mostly Bengali migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, with some Indians coming during the British period. This theory is further premised on the fact that since most of them speak Bengali with a strong 'Chittagong dialect,' they cannot but be illegal immigrants from pre-1971 Bangladesh. The government of Myanmar, including the majority Burman-Buddhist population of the country, subscribes to this position (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1992, Chan, 2003). A lot of studies have been conducted on Rohingyas and most of these studies focused on the sufferings of migrated Rohingyas. Unfortunately there are very few researches that tried to put effort to find out the reasons and permanent way out of such a continuous, inhuman and forced migration of Rohingyas. Therefore researchers of this study are interested and committed to fulfill this research gap through the present study.

Research Questions

- Is the state, Myanmar itself is responsible for the forced migration of Rohingya?
- Is there any economic factor behind continuous forced migration of Rohingya?
- Is there any religious factor behind continuous forced migration of Rohingya?
- Is there any ethnic conflict between Buddhists and Muslims?
- Is there any subversive activity by the Rohingya for which they are threat for Myanmar?
- What actions can resolve this long-strained inhuman problem?

Objectives of the Study

- (i) To find out the reasons of continuous and forced migration of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh.
- (ii) To analyze the role and position of Myanmar government in the issue of forced migration of Rohingya.
- (iii) To find out the possible solution to this inhuman problem.

Literature Review

There are ample studies on the reasons for forced migration of Rohingya Muslim people of Rakhaine state in Myanmar but they have not focused why this problem has been being continued year after year. However, this study has tried to meet this study gap. To find out this gap, researchers tried to overview the following literatures.

UN identified the root cause of the crisis which is the denial of Rohingya's legal status, suggesting that granting them citizenship would provide resolution (United Nations 2012). In the course of over the last seven decades, governments in Myanmar have discriminated against Rohingyas, failing to count them as a 'national race' or even a distinctive linguistic, religious and cultural group. In 1998, in a letter to UNHCR, Burma's then Prime Minister General KhinNyunt wrote: "Rohingyas are not originally from Myanmar but have illegally migrated to Myanmar because of population pressures in their own country." And a February 2009 article in the government-owned *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper stated that "In Myanmar there is no national race by the name of Rohinja." Deprivation of citizenship has served as a key strategy to justify arbitrary treatment and discriminatory policies against the Rohingya. On 10 May 2008, the Rohingya were allowed to vote in the constitutional referendum but ironically the new Constitution, which was approved, does not contain any provisions granting them citizenship rights. There is no political will for the Rohingya to be accepted as Burmese citizens in the foreseeable future (Lewa, 2009). The term 'Rohingya' itself is derived from the word 'Rohang,' which was the former name of Arakan, leading many to believe that the group is native to the region. Academic literature on the subject and non-Burmese accounts nearly unanimously defend the notion that the Rohingya have existed in Burma since anywhere between the 6th and 9th centuries (Htut, 2001, Jilani, 1999, Razzaq and Haque, 1995).

Authorities have also used Rohingya forced labour and confiscated land to construct 'model villages' for Buddhist Rakhine and Burmans intended to separate them from the Rohingya communities that, once abandoned, relegate them to a literal zone of exception, surviving outside of all social, economic, and political institutions enjoyed by the dominant groups that confer belonging. Such abuses have created a dire humanitarian crisis, further complicated by the government controlling and restricting access to impacted areas (Human Rights Watch 2012). In a recent report of Human Rights Watch (HRW), the group makes accusations of ethnic cleansing supported by evidence of mass arrests and abuse of detainees, large-scale forcible displacement, calls for the elimination of the Rohingya, destruction of homes and mosques, and mass graves, all believed to have been co-ordinated by state-sponsored security forces (HRW, 2013). In 2008 the government began issuing temporary registration cards which have been utilized as a means of racialising citizenship and denoting those who do not belong on the basis of ethnicity. For instance, there is a field on the card relating to 'race' in which the authorities generally write 'Bengali' or 'Muslim'. While the certificates have traditionally only been issued to citizens, those issued to the Rohingyas are clearly marked 'not evidence of citizenship' (Irish Centre for Human Rights 2010). Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 exacerbated tensions between the government and Muslims, in particular the Rohingya. The majority in Burma does not distinguish, socially speaking, between "Burmese" and "Buddhist," hence the Muslim is a foreigner (Yegar, 1972). As China has huge economic relationship with Myanmar that's why China is silent about the Rohingya issue although China is enough capable to influence Myanmar Govt. to change its policy regarding the Rohingya. Sittwe, the capital of the Rakhine State, is now at the center of one of China's most crucial international investments. Both Sittwe port and a pipeline project are now vital for China's energy security (Basavapatna, et. al. 2015). Rakhine state has an international border with Bangladesh, all the countries in the Bay of Bengal region, including India and the

offshore oil and Natural Gas blocs where major exploration work by international companies is being carried out. In fact, Kyakphue port is the origin of the oil and gas pipelines being built by China National Petroleum Corp. that connects it to the Yunnan province. Therefore, having simmering tensions in the state may not be in the best interest of the country as that affects the safety of institutional infrastructure that supports investments (Hukil&Shaunik, 2013).

Al-Jazeera displayed a July 2012 statement by the RNDP's Dr. Aye Maung that "Bengali people should be relocated to suitable places . . . in order not to reside or mix with Rakhines." Certain lawmakers in Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Japan referred to the situation in Rakhine State as ethnic cleansing. While the government has played a significant role in the oppression of the Rohingya, it has not been without the help of Burmese citizens (Warzone Initiatives, 2015). Time magazine described the leader of 969, Ashin Wirathu, as "The Face of Buddhist Terror." While the international community has condemned these activities, the government has done very little to restrain 969 and other anti-Muslim activities. "Rohingyas are trying to improve their lives in our country and our lands. So this symbol and campaign is intended to defend ourselves. I fear that some Bengali Muslims are terrorists and have a mission to Islamise our country." - Sada Ma, 969 Movement's Secretary, (Warzone Initiatives, 2015). U Wirathu has launched the '9-6-9 campaign' (9 attributes of the Buddha, 6 attributes of the Buddha's teaching, and 9 attributes of the Sangha, hence 9-6-9) and calls upon Buddhists not to transact with Muslims economically or socially and to demarcate their houses and properties from Muslims by putting up the '969' sticker. His anti-Muslim sermons have also been circulated on Youtube and via DVDs (The Star, 2014). Besides, the way of thinking about religion by the British officials was that everyone should be defined according to one religious identity or another (Charney, 1999).

Data and Methodology

The study is an exploratory and comprehensive one, which was conducted, based on the both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected through the focused group discussion with the randomly selected respondents from the Leda camp, a non-registered camp in Coxesbazar district of Bangladesh. Basically, the study has been conducted based on the secondary data published in daily newspapers, broadcasted TV news and documentaries, articles, magazines and websites of different national and international organizations.

Discussion and Analysis: Reasons for Continuous Forced Migration of Rohingya

The present study is explorative in nature and conducted based on primary data collected through Focused Group Discussion (FGD) from the Leda Camp which is situated in Teknafupazila of Coxesbazar district of Bangladesh. FGD has identified the following reasons for the continuous forced migration of Rohingya Muslim from the Rakhaine state of Myanmar and most of the identified reasons have been supported by the relevant studies conducted by different researchers and organizations.

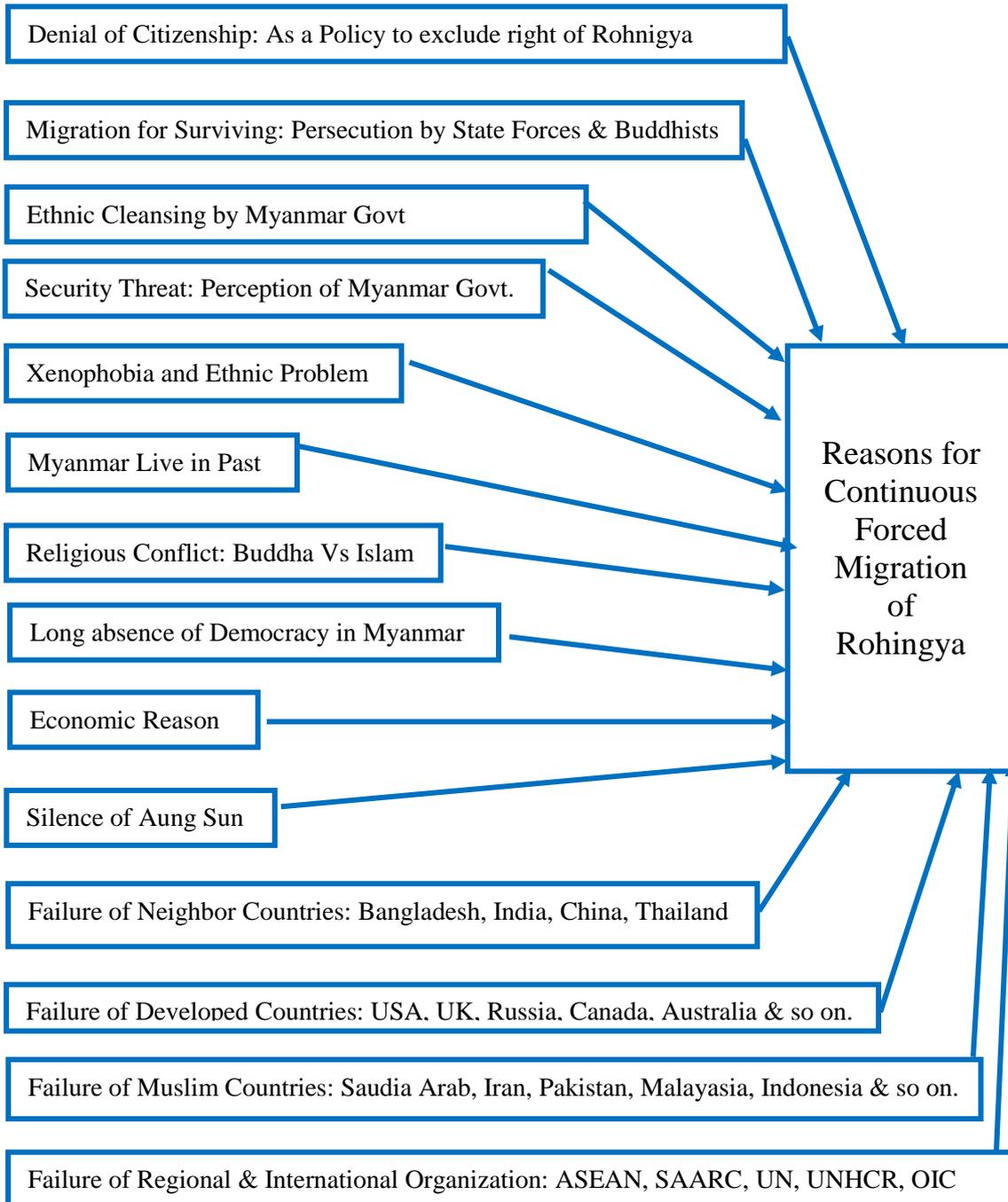


Figure 1: Reasons for Continuous Forced Migration of Rohingya

Denial of Citizenship: The Denial of Rights as a Strategy of Exclusion

As Myanmar Govt. considers that Rohingyas are economic migrants from Bangladesh, especially from the Chittagong area which is adjacent to Rakhaine State of Myanmar, where Rohingyas are living, that's why they cannot be the citizen of Myanmar. There is a strong debate against the claim of Myanmar Government regarding the presence of Rohingya in the Arakan, later on Rakhaine state. The Rohingya enjoyed over a decade of relative calm and religious tolerance until General Ne Win's coup in 1962 brought the abandonment of the Constitution's provisions. Through discriminatory practices enacted by the government and civilians, there has emerged a continuum of state and sectarian domination and rights denial which has produced the Rohingya as a community of noncitizens. Since Ne Win's coup in 1962, Burma's military government and subsequent regimes have been responsible for the violation of human rights. This stems from the Rohingya's lack of citizenship and status as a nationally recognized minority group that leaves them vulnerable to abuses.

Migration for Surviving: Persecution by State Forces & Buddhists

In an interview, a Rohingya stated that "We cannot dream of living. Survival is our only tool and we will cling to it - even if we have to cross borders". The murder, rape, torture, violence, burnings, lootings, and forced evictions of Rohingya are continuing. The Burma security forces have a long history of discrimination and systematic human rights abuses against the Rohingya. It is described by some as an 'open prison' (Lewa 2009: 11). The most frequently documented large-scale abuses include: extra-judicial killings; rape and sexual violence; torture; political arrests and detentions; forced relocation; destruction of livelihoods and confiscations of land and resources; home and business arson; forced labour; child labour; human trafficking; use of child soldiers; and the denial of freedom of movement, assembly, association, expression, and religion (Islamic Human Rights Commission 2005 and Petrusek 2000).

Ethnic Cleansing

The Economist states that main contour is a vicious and bloody campaign of ethnic cleansing by the Rakhines that is intended to drive Rohingyas out. In *Al-Jazeera* documentary's conclusions, a Burmese academic stated that Rakhine State is "our ancestral land, we cannot share that land, you know, for any aliens or immigrants." He also said that "no Muslim, no Bengali living in that town because the town people, town folk, do not allow any Bengali people to come here." A Sittwe-based monk not only repeated this statement but reasoned it is why ethnic Rakhine Buddhists killed ten Muslims there in early June, setting off the initial communal violence: "They felt insulted and were furious when ten Muslims dared to pass through the town".

Xenophobia and Ethnic Problem

Xenophobia is a matter of intolerance of other race; it may be real or perceived. In extreme form it is called racism. Zarni argues that Burma has carefully constructed 'an iron cage — a monolithic constellation of values, an ethos — that locks in and naturalizes a singular view of what constitutes Burma's "national" culture' that relies on 'an enervating combination of pre-colonial feudalism, religious mysticism, belief in racial purity and statist militarism'. While efforts to unite Burma's ethnic communities under one umbrella were subsequently pursued, such attempts were abandoned with regard to the Rohingya, which marginalized the group and set the stage for their exclusion from the nation-building project (Zarni, 2012).

Security Threat: Perception of Myanmar Government

General Ne Win stated in 1979 that today you can see that even people of pure blood are being disloyal to the race and country but are being loyal to others. If people of pure blood act this way, we must carefully watch people of mixed blood. Some people are of pure blood, pure Burmese heritage and descendants of genuine citizens (U Ne Win, quoted in Smith 1991: 36). According to Bahar (2009: 24), following Burma's liberation, successive regimes began to target the Rohingya, identifying them as a threat to the national agenda. Denying accusations that they were committing attacks on their own civilians, the Burmese government claimed that those fleeing to Bangladesh were 'illegal Bengali immigrants who had crossed into Burma as part of a general expansion in the Bengali population in this region' and denied responsibility by stating that the violence was initiated by "'armed bands of Bengalis", "rampaging Bengali mobs" and "wild Muslim extremists"' (Irish Centre for Human Rights 2010: 92).

Myanmar Living in the Past

From 1948 to 1961, the Rohingya Mujahideen fought to create a separate Islamic State. Again in 1971, a group of Rohingya approached the 'Father of Pakistan' Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 'asking him to incorporate Northern Arakan into East Pakistan.' during its fight for independence from East Pakistan (Gill and Ku, 2014; Warzone Initiatives, 2015). The segregation of these actions caused local Buddhist and Muslim communities to continue to foment distrust and lingering resentment among local Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya. During the Inquiry Commission, some Rakhine Buddhists stated that they feared Rohingya could "revive the same violent agenda as previous Mujahid rebels in Rakhine State." Even the new democratic reforms have not altered the perception of the Rohingya with President Thein Sein suggesting in July 2012, in the wake of this violence, that he would not recognize the Rohingya or their rights and wished to turn over the entire ethnic group to the UNHCR (Hukil & Shaunik, 2013).

Religious Conflict: Buddha Vs Islam

Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk argues that Muslim extremists are plotting to transform Myanmar into an Islamic country. Even though Buddhists form the majority of the population, and there is no solid evidence Myanmar is facing an Islamist military threat, the narrative has gained traction amongst many Buddhists fearing that Islam will disrupt Myanmar's Buddhist identity and potentially wipe out Buddhism in Myanmar altogether. A Rakhine state government spokesperson says the Rohingya "are trying to Islamize through their terrible birth rate," citing that Rohingya population growth is 10 times that of local Buddhists. However, 2014 census reveals that roughly 89% of Myanmar's population is Buddhist, and only 4% is Muslim. As a consequence of this fear, discriminatory policies toward the Rohingya have been imposed. According to one monk, 'Rohingyas are eating our rice and staying near our houses. So we will separate. We need to protect the Arakan people. We don't want any connection to the Muslim people at all' (Human Rights Watch 2012). While Buddhism is considered a very peaceful religion in most of the world, Buddhists and even monks have been responsible for widespread violence in Myanmar (Warzone Initiatives, 2015). A major player in the violence was a Buddhist nationalist group led by monks, called 969. It is natural to consider that these factors strengthened religious identification on both Muslims and Buddhists communities and provide fertile ground for confrontation.

Long absence of Democracy in Myanmar

No doubt, ethnic relations in Myanmar have worsened as a result of military rule since 1962. Its adoption of an ultra-nationalist ideology spearheaded by the dominant Burman ethnic group and anchored in Buddhism has resulted in discrimination of the ethnic minorities. Myanmar is a country which is being closely watched as after five decades of military government, the country has its first nominally civilian government since late 2010 and is slowly and gradually transiting towards democracy. However, it could be a different scenario if there were practice of Democracy in Myanmar in the past.

Economic Reason

Myanmar is now considered as one of the last frontiers of globalization and the country is receiving huge foreign investments in fields like infrastructure, energy, human resources development, health care etc. The USA, the EU, and Canada have accepted the government's narrative of democratic transition and have largely lifted the economic sanctions they began applying after 1988. China, India, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and multinational oil companies are doing business with Myanmar. Geo-political and economic strategies with regards to China, which has dominated the Myanmar economy for several decades now, are of primary concern to the West (Hukil & Shaunik, 2013). The US, EU and neighbors like India and China are most unlikely to exert international pressure on Myanmar to stop discriminating against the Rohingyas largely because of their own economic interests in the country.

Silence of Aung Sun Kyi

Human rights activist, National League for Democracy (NLD) leader and winner of Nobel Peace Prize, Aung SanSuuKyi, has been criticized internationally for failing to speak out. She has taken a neutral stance, despite earlier pleas from the EU to take a stand on the issue. Her silence and diplomacy on the issue further problematizes the crisis (Hukil&Shaunik, 2013; Al Jazeera 2012 and The Independent 2012). However, later on Aung San SuuKyi and her NLD have only protested against the violence committed against the Muslims by fellow Buddhist Burmese. Poised to contest the 2015 elections for the president's post (provided the present Constitution gets amended to allow her to do that), she appears reluctant to include the plight of the Rohingyaas part of her democratic cause (The Star, 2014 and Warzone Initiatives, 2015).

Failure of Neighbor Countries: Bangladesh, India, China, Thailand

In an interview with Barnaby Phillips of Al Jazeera on 27 July 2012, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asserted that it was not her country's problem to deal with the Rohingyas and she could not intervene because it was unwise to meddle in the internal affairs of another country. She also said that the international community should insist on Myanmar taking back the Rohingyas and not point an accusing finger at Bangladesh (Basavapatna et. al. 2015). Charles Santiago, a Malaysian politician and chairman of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, said regional countries, as well as the U.S. and China, must push Myanmar to help the Rohingya. India needs to be more proactive in lending assistance to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in this region (Yhome, 2015). Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand had denied assistance to migrants, and have been pushing boats full of vulnerable migrants back out to sea, which inevitably lead to many avoidable deaths. In the aftermath of the increasing global focus on the issue, the Thai government had called for a meeting involving fifteen countries in the region to address the problem. The countries included, among others, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, and USA.

Failure of Developed Countries

In 2012, TheinSein, president of Myanmar attempted to hand over the Rohingyas to the UN refugee agency. Interestingly, later in October 2012, in an assurance to the international community, he refurbished his stance by stating his government will consider resolving contentious rights issues facing the Muslim Rohingya minority, including the possibility of providing them citizenship. Curiously, the move came ahead of US President Barack Obama's historic visit to Burma, the first by a sitting American president (Hukil&Shaunik, 2013; Warzone Initiatives, 2015). This indicates that if the developed and globally powerful countries like USA, UK, Australia, Russia, Canada, Switzerland, Germany and so on come forward to solve the forced migration of Rohingya problem, Myanmar will be bound to resolve the issue.

Failure of Muslim Countries and Organization of Islamic Countries

Rohingyas question the Muslim solidarity and languish their Muslim counterparts of not providing significant heed to their plight considering them as followers of Islam as well (Hukil&Shaunik, 2013). Although, in August 2012, OIC condemned the Myanmar authorities for the "violence" against Rohingyas and the denial of the group's citizenship, and vowed to bring the issue to the United Nations General Assembly. Several protests took place in Iran in 2012, condemning the attacks and called on other Muslim states to take a "firm stance" against the violence. In Pakistan, too, protests against the anti-Muslim riots were lodged by various political parties and organizations, who called for the government, the UN, the OIC and other human rights organizations to take notice of the killings and hold Myanmar accountable. In Saudi Arabia, the Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia also condemned the "ethnic cleansing campaign and brutal attacks against Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya" and urged the international community to protect "Muslims in Myanmar". Further, King Abdullah sent \$50 million of aid to the Rohingya, as a "guardian of global Muslim interests"(Hukil&Shaunik, 2013). But these actions by the Muslim world were not sufficient to resolve the Rohingya problem.

Failure of Regional & International Organization: ASEAN, UN, EU, UNHCR

The international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (Zawacki, 2001). In late 2013, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution urging Myanmar to give the stateless Rohingya equal access to citizenship (Daily Star, 2014). In Nov 2013, Claus Sorrenson, the director-general of the European Union's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department, after the conclusion of a five-day visit, likened the lack of humanitarian aid and the restrictions on movement for displaced Rohingya to the situation in Apartheid-era South Africa, or Poland under Nazi occupation' (The Myanmar Times, 2013). Due to aggressive campaigning from UNHCR, in 1995 the Burmese government issued them the white Temporary Registration Cards which do not mention place of birth and cannot be used to claim citizenship. It indicates that if the international organizations come forward then the problem of forced migration could be solved. ASEAN, a regional grouping of ten countries in Southeast Asia, has spoken out about the Rohingya situation, but done very little to actually pressure Myanmar to make changes. Critics have pointed to this lack of action as evidence of ASEAN's overall ineffectiveness. As the crisis continues, however, and ASEAN-member states have to deal with the influx of refugees, they may be forced to implement more concrete actions on behalf of the Rohingya (Warzone Initiatives, 2015).

Findings

Researchers collected opinions from the migrated Rohingyas who live in Leda camp, a non-registered camp situated in Coxesbazar district of Bangladesh. Most of the respondents were male; approximately 130 and only a few respondents were female. They stated that due to becoming Rohingya, they are oppressed by the local Buddhists and state force in several times. To avoid oppression and survive they migrated to Bangladesh. A few replied that there is no

scope to do any good work or job for earning money, that's why they have migrated to Bangladesh and from here they will try to migrate middle east, Malaysia, Thailand or any other parts of the world where there is opportunity to earn a good amount of money to live a good life. There were some girls whose age are below 25 and replied that some are raped by the police and army of the Rakhaine state and there is no scope to take medical facilities to avoid becoming unwanted mother. This information was taken from the girls taking treatment in a private clinic of Coxesbazar district. Some people stated that their houses have been burnt and lands are forfeited and taken by others. Some people migrated in Bangladesh due to death fear from the violation and tortures. Some young respondents stated that there is no better hope in future in Rakhaine as oppression is daily affairs. Based on the above discussion, the following points are found as a reason for continuous forced migration of Rohingyas from Arakan to Bangladesh and other parts of the world.

- Denial of the citizenship by the state is the root cause.
- Ethnic conflict and xenophobia, religious conflict between Buddhists and Muslims are the important reasons in this regard.
- Economic interests of the developed and powerful nations in the international trade game connected to Myanmar and Rohingya are also important factors for continuing the problem.
- Long-absence of democracy in the country and poor governance are also important reasons.
- Lack of strong role of neighbor countries, developed and powerful nations, Muslim countries, regional and international organizations are crucial factors in this regard.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that Myanmar needs to take a pragmatic approach towards the Rohingyas and denying responsibilities would result in more criticalities not only for the country, but also for the region as a whole. A permanent solution of the Rohingyas lies in the Myanmar government recognizing this fact and granting them citizenship. As Rohingyas are already living in Rakhaine state, Myanmar, therefore it will be the solution of the problem to ensure the citizenship of Rohingyas of Myanmar National. Therefore, Myanmar government should change their present policies and thereby citizenship act.

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