

Why Myanmar must acknowledge existence of Rohingyas as community faces deeper crisis after WFP cuts funds for food

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Opinion

A regional effort may be effective along with a well-developed national framework restoring the ethnic minority status to the Rohingya community in Myanmar

Abhinav Mehrotra and Biswanath Gupta March 22, 2023 15:18:50 IST



Rohingya refugees. Reuters

The World Food Programme has recently announced a cut in the reduction of allocation of money for food from \$12 dollar to \$10 in February 2023. The overall decline is 17 per cent of the entire money. The United Nations also declared that, unless there is a further supply of funds, three will be more cut in the programme. The Rohingyas faced persecution in Myanmar exactly six years back when nearly 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh by mid-August 2018 after a clearance operation carried out by the Myanmar military on 25 August 2017 and they crossed the border to take shelter in Bangladesh. Being a mid-level income country, Bangladesh urged for help from the international community. This influx of Rohingyas inside Bangladesh has created different financial issues.

There are many studies that have shown that the Rohingya refugee camps are suffering from various issues such as food crises, health, and medical facilities. In light of all these hardships, the cut of funding by the World Food Programme will have a serious effect on Bangladesh. Human rights activists already voiced against the cut of funds by the World Food Program and appealed to the authorities to reconsider their decision. In this light, there arise questions regarding the significance of the World Food Programme (WFP), who really are the Rohingyas, the historical significance of the Rohingyas, and the possible way forward.

Historically, the World Food Programme was established as a specialised agency of the United Nations has been working in various parts of the world to eradicate hunger. It is one of the largest humanitarian agencies working in various conflict-hit zones to help people in distress. It was set up in the year 1961 and the headquarters of the organisation is in Rome, Italy. This agency has 81 offices across the world. According to official data from the World Food Program, the agency has assisted 128 million people in 128 countries in 2021.

Moreover, the agency offers technical support to prepare for shortages and logistic facilities for the supply chain to meet the hunger of the world. It has been appointed as an executive member of the United Nations Sustainable Goals initiative to fulfil the United Nations Sustainable Goals of 2030. Most importantly, this organization is awarded the Noble peace prize in 2020 for their extraordinary work in the area of peace and human rights.

Since the beginning of the British colonial era the Rohingyas have suffered gradual marginalisation as an ethnic minority, exclusion from the governmental institutions, and the deprivation of citizenship, effectively rendering them stateless. The Rohingya community has experienced British colonial rule, wartime occupation by the Japanese, independence and faltering parliamentary democracy, and military coups followed by an outright dictatorship. Even in independent Myanmar, the Rohingya were also expunged in 1978, the early 1990s, and 2012. Interestingly, the Muslims who today identify themselves as Rohingya in what is now known as Rakhine State date back to the ninth century, and there are records from at least the thirteenth century onwards demonstrating their presence in the region.

What needs to be understood is that Myanmar officially recognizes dozens of ethnic groups but not the Rohingya and has created a set of differences between the majority of Myanmar's Muslims who live in urban areas, speak Burmese, have Burmese names, and are Myanmar citizens whereas the Rohingya are mostly Sunni Muslims and live in rural areas in Rakhine (formerly Arakan) in the country's Northwest, speak a dialect of Bengali (Chittagongian) and have Muslim names. Furthermore, some Myanmar historians hold two different notions about the place where from the Rohingya of Arakan originate from, some believe they come from Chittagong when the British colonial authorities encouraged labour migration during 1891–1931, and others believe their existence was a result of the civil war in East Pakistan which led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Interestingly, the Rohingyas have been gradually marginalised and excluded through the changing of the Constitutions of Myanmar. The first Constitution of 1947 recognized them as citizens, then in 1948 citizenship law was promulgated that required some conditions to be fulfilled before they can gain their citizenship status. However, the 1974 Constitution introduced much stricter conditions to prove citizenship and the latest constitution of 2008 also kept some onerous conditions to be fulfilled before the Rohingya can claim citizenship. Thus, under the domestic legal framework of Myanmar, the Rohingya gradually lost their identity and finally became stateless.

Going forward, the first step to resolve the dispute may be to acknowledge that the existence of the Rohingya in Myanmar is a historical fact and their status as an ethnic minority needs to be restored, and their political and social protections shall be ensured in Myanmar. Finally, a regional effort may also be effective along with a well-developed national framework.

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