

Why a Humanitarian Corridor into Rakhine Could Be a Risky Move for Bangladesh

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As the humanitarian crisis involving the Rohingya enters its eighth year, proposals have re-emerged for a humanitarian corridor from Bangladesh into Myanmar's troubled Rakhine State. The Myanmar-Bangladesh border is now home to nearly one million displaced Rohingya, making it the world's most populated refugee camp. The objective of the humanitarian corridor is to facilitate humanitarian assistance and to enable the voluntary repatriation of Rohingya refugees currently residing in the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. However, for Dhaka, this initiative may lead to significant unforeseen consequences, at home and abroad. Despite its humanitarian intent, it carries substantial security risks. These risks include potential security threats, drug trafficking, and other cross-border crimes, possible exploitation of the humanitarian corridor by the armed groups in Myanmar, including non-state actors, exacerbating the existing geopolitical tensions in the region, causing sovereignty issues, and other possible unintended consequences such as increased political instability and social unrest.

While the concept of a humanitarian corridor is straightforward, it's crucial to recognize the inherent risks, especially when international support is lacking. In the case of Rakhine, the corridor would need to navigate through a volatile region, the epicentre of Myanmar's ongoing civil war, posing significant dangers. China's deepening involvement in Rakhine and its support for Myanmar's junta, contrasted with Western backing for humanitarian efforts, could turn the corridor into a flashpoint for proxy competition.

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, violence has spread across a large part of the country. Rakhine State, home to the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, is one of the most militarized and unstable regions in the world. Armed ethnic groups, especially the Arakan Army (AA), are in active conflict with Myanmar's military junta. Thus, any corridor operating in or near this environment could expose Bangladeshi aid convoys, officials, or returnees to considerable danger.

Bangladesh, which has long pursued a cautious foreign policy, must also consider the broader geopolitical ramifications. The corridor has the potential to draw Bangladesh into the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, which is already involving various regional and global players, like China, India, the USA, and other Western nations. Major powers have vested interests in Myanmar. China, for instance, has maintained close ties with the military regime and has positioned itself as a mediator in previous repatriation talks. Its influence could affect the success of the corridor. In contrast, Western powers such as the United States and the European Union have taken a hard line against the Myanmar junta, imposing sanctions and advocating for greater international oversight and accountability. Their stance could also influence the corridor's operations and outcomes, potentially complicating the situation for Bangladesh.

Similarly, domestic concerns are equally urgent; the presence of over one million Rohingya refugees has put immense strain on Bangladesh's economy, environment, and public services. Bangladesh is trying to balance major powers using its regional standing, but allowing international actors to operate in a humanitarian corridor formally could potentially undermine its sovereignty. Further, creating a humanitarian corridor without a clear timeline for repatriation, which may result in premature or forced returns, could have political and humanitarian ramifications.

There are also profound legal implications. While Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it remains bound by the customary international law principle of non-refoulement, a fundamental principle of international refugee and human rights law. Non-refoulement means no person should be returned to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This principle has significant implications for repatriation efforts, including the proposed corridor.

Given the continued hostility and lack of legal protections for the Rohingya in Myanmar, any repatriation effort that lacks voluntary consent, international supervision, and safety guarantees could constitute a violation of this obligation. Without addressing these issues, any corridor initiative risks becoming a tool for refoulement rather than a path to justice. Importantly, the Rohingya themselves must be consulted in any process that impacts their future. Past failures have often resulted from treating the crisis as a logistical or diplomatic problem rather than a human one. A meaningful solution requires input from the refugee community and long-term commitments from the international community. Thus, the international community must exert coordinated pressure on Myanmar to address the root causes of the conflict, including citizenship rights, accountability for atrocities, and structural discrimination.

Looking ahead, Bangladesh should continue to advocate for a multilateral approach to repatriation with transparency and consistency. This approach should include consensus-building, benchmarks, and guarantees of safety and rights for returnees. However, the robust international monitoring will provide the necessary reassurance and security. It should resist unilateral or bilateral corridor arrangements that lack transparency or oversight. Lastly, it must seek stronger global burden-sharing, including third-country resettlement options and increased development support for host communities. This is not just Bangladesh's responsibility, but a global one. Sometimes, the most humanitarian move is not to open a corridor, but to maintain its stand in the face of pressure, demand accountability, and ensure that any action taken does not further endanger those it claims to protect. Hence, there is an urgent need to address potential risks and security threats, geopolitical entanglement of Bangladesh in the Myanmar Civil War, and issues involving sovereignty and domestic instability that have the potential to outweigh the intended benefits unless the concerns are carefully addressed with robust international monitoring, with consensus-building among all stakeholders to ensure lasting peace.

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