

# THE ROHINGYA CRISIS: REFUGEES AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS

*While much of the research on the Rohingya focuses on the plight of the refugees and the anti-minority policies of the state of Myanmar, this article attempts to throw light on the relatively lesser known human trafficking networks that continue to heap miseries on the Rohingya refugees housed in the camps in Bangladesh. The article takes stock on trafficking networks' operational dynamics, growing level of sophistication, and nexus with law enforcers, and lastly, suggests ways to protect the refugees.*

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**C**onsider the case of 23-year-old Nazmin Nahar.<sup>1</sup> As a Rohingya refugee from Myanmar, who settled in a camp in Bangladesh, she was offered a job in a garment factory by one of her distant cousins. She accepted the offer, was taken to Chittagong—100 kilometers away from her camp in Katupalong—only to be sold off as a domestic help, where she was tortured and forced to work without pay. After working for months, she fled back to her camp. Another 23-year-old Rohingya refugee, Parvin Akter, traveled to Chittagong along with a broker who had promised to send her to Malaysia where her husband had been working for the past six years. Once in Chittagong, however, the broker was arrested and Akter was sent back to the camp near Cox’s Bazar.

Nazmin and Parvin are among the thousands of Rohingya refugees who escaped the state-sponsored persecution and violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state and moved to Bangladesh. However, in the past couple of years, they have become targets of human trafficking networks focusing on refugee camps. These two young ladies may have been lucky enough to survive the ordeal. However, this is not the case for several hundred others. For instance, in February 2020, at least 16 Rohingya refugees drowned in the Bay of Bengal when a wooden fishing boat carrying about 138 people capsized near Bangladesh’s St. Martin’s Island in the early hours. Corpses of hundreds of Rohingya refugees attempting to flee the camps were recovered from mass graves in Thailand.

### *Journey to Malaysia: The Scale*

Refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar are currently home to more than 1.2 million Rohingya, most of whom fled Myanmar in August 2017 when the Myanmar military launched security clearance operations targeting the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army after it attacked police outposts. Apart from cases of Rohingya men and women being lured to move into Bangladeshi cities for odd jobs, the journey of the refugees has been unidirectional to Malaysia. Malaysia has a policy of generously welcoming Muslims from any part of the world and is somewhat mistakenly known for being a place with lots of jobs. Even though Rohingyas do not get well-paid jobs, and many of them end up becoming street hawkers or even beggars, Malaysia remains a destination that attracts the Rohingya population.

A number of reports have been published on how the Rohingya from Myanmar spend their last penny to undertake perilous journeys on the sea to Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> On

<sup>1</sup> Nazmin Nahar’s story appeared in a Reuters report. See Naimul Karim, “Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh warned to be wary with human trafficking rising,” *Reuters*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-myanmar-traffic-king/rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh-warned-to-be-wary-with-human-traffic-king-rising-idUSKCN1VD0XD>

<sup>2</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, “Emerging Human Trafficking Networks of Rohingya: A Symbiotic Nexus,” *Mantraya*, Special Report No. 17, 7 June 2019, <http://mantraya.org/emerging-human-trafficking-networks-of-rohingya-a-symbiotic-nexus/>

several occasions, boats sank along with the passengers. On other occasions, traffickers killed the refugees after failing to extract money from their relatives in Malaysia. Corpses on the shore, mass graves, and stories of brutality, torture, and rape in the hands of traffickers are now part of reality for Rohingya refugees and their yearnings for a better future.

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It is, however, difficult to estimate the number of refugees who have become victims of the human trafficking networks. According to the IOM, 420 cases between December 2018 and June 2019 were identified, which was a fourfold jump on the previous 14 months.<sup>3</sup> Most of these people, the IOM said, “were trafficked to Chittagong or the nearby beach town of Cox’s Bazar where men were made to work in factories, construction sites, and the fishing industry while women were forced into domestic servitude.”<sup>4</sup> According to Bangladesh’s Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), 250 Rohingya were rescued from traffickers between January and June 2018. On another occasion, an MHA official said that the ministry had rescued 70,000 Rohingya found outside the camps and sent them back.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, further information is not available. Like most governments, Dhaka does not update such data regularly.

### ***The HT Networks: Lone Men to Sophisticated Groups***

Over 740,000 Rohingya from Myanmar have traveled to Bangladesh since 2017.<sup>6</sup> Added to the existing Rohingya in the country since the late 1970s, the total number of the refugee population is estimated to be 1.2 million.<sup>7</sup> In Cox’s Bazar alone, 900,000 refugees live in two government-run camps set up in Katupalong and Nayapara. More than half the refugees are children. A range of restrictions are imposed on the refugees, which include barring them from seeking employment outside and enrolling their children in regular schools. The inmates are not even al-

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<sup>3</sup> Karim, “Human Trafficking Rising.”

<sup>4</sup> Karim, “Human Trafficking Rising.”

<sup>5</sup> Naimul Karim, “Bangladesh boosts efforts to stop trafficking of Rohingya amid U.S. criticism,” *Reuters*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-trafficking-migrants/bangladesh-boosts-efforts-to-stop-trafficking-of-rohingya-amid-us-criticism-idUSKCN1U41Y7>

<sup>6</sup> “Bangladesh ‘to be tougher’ on Rohingya refugees,” *BBC*, 24 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49460386>

<sup>7</sup> “Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: Facts, FAQs, and how to help,” *World Vision*, <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/rohingya-refugees-bangladesh-facts>

lowed to leave the perimeter of the camps. This suffocating environment, in which the improvement of financial conditions is not possible, increases refugees' vulnerability and forces them to take the help of anybody to move out. Lone, unscrupulous men, as well as organized human trafficking gangs, continue to exploit this vulnerability.

In March 2020, Bangladeshi security officials killed seven suspected members of a Rohingya gang allegedly involved in drug dealing and human trafficking near a refugee camp in the Teknaf sub-district of Cox's Bazar.<sup>8</sup> Another trafficker had been killed in February in the same sub-district under similar circumstances. Several such killings and encounters with the security forces have taken place in areas around the district since 2019. These incidents, at one level, underline the seriousness of the problem caused by the mushrooming of trafficking gangs with transnational connections. At the other, each new incident provides new insights into the workings of these gangs. The instances cited at the beginning of the article involve lone traffickers with a rather simple modus operandi that targets lone victims. Gangs, however, are far better organized. The sophistication of their operating levels appears to be growing over time. Many of these gangs have access to weapons and have become capable of engaging even with the far better armed security forces.

While human trafficking gangs operating in Bangladesh consist of mostly Rohingya refugees themselves, their transnational connections, such as Thai, Malaysian, or even Bangladeshi gangs, are far better organized. Experts have attempted to explain the level of sophistication of these gangs and their interconnectedness by pointing to the fact that such gangs have been operational for years, transporting Rohingyas from Bangladesh and Myanmar to Malaysia through long and circuitous land routes via India, Myanmar, and Thailand. Young Rohingya men are promised jobs while young women are taken for marriages arranged with Rohingya men already in Malaysia. The swelling population in the refugee camps and their urge to leave the camps at any cost have simply reactivated the gangs in multiple countries and rekindled their past connections.

In January 2020, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) of the Bangladeshi police force broke up a syndicate that trafficked young female Rohingya refugees to Malaysia via India, mostly to be sold into sex work. Two human traffickers, both Bangladeshi nationals with Rohingya parentage, were arrested while 13 young Rohingya women from camps in Cox's Bazar, aged between 18 and 23, were rescued. Investigations revealed that the Bangladeshi traffickers were operating in tandem with Malaysian

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<sup>8</sup> Julhas Alam, "8 suspected Rohingya gangsters shot dead in Bangladesh," *ABC News*, 2 March 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/suspected-rohingya-gangsters-shot-dead-bangladesh-69333932>

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as well as Indian syndicates.<sup>9</sup> The women had first been brought to Dhaka with the promise of being given lucrative jobs. They had been provided with forged documents including birth certificates and passports. The plan was to take them into Kolkata (India), using either the land route or through the porous border, and then fly them out to Malaysia. The traffickers confessed that they had executed many such “projects” earlier. Such incidents—big and small—involving Bangladeshi gangs continue to surface regularly.

In February 2020, the RAB personnel arrested and detained three members of a human trafficking racket while rescuing three Rohingyas, including a girl from the Cumilla district. The rescued Rohingyas were from different camps of Cox's Bazar. Fake passports, including birth certificates and other necessary documents to forge the passports, were recovered from their possession.<sup>10</sup>

Again in February 2020, the incident of a capsized trawler carrying 138 refugees from the camps in Bangladesh near St. Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal revealed further details about the rise of native Bangladeshi gangs specializing in human trafficking.<sup>11</sup> 15 refugees drowned in the incident. The Bangladeshi authorities charge sheeted 19 identified persons and arrested a Bangladeshi national who was the kingpin in the entire episode. Eight of his accomplices were arrested. It became evident that in addition to the Rohingya men, who acted as the contact persons within the camps, even local Bangladeshis had become active in this lucrative trade. Over the years, thousands of Bangladeshi illegal migrants have entered India. Since the movement of people has more or less ceased following Indian initiatives along the border, these gangs seem to have started focusing on the Rohingya refugees.

The gangs have also survived due to the nexus they have developed between authorities in Thailand. In July 2017, Thailand, following a lengthy trial prosecuted 62

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<sup>9</sup> Muktadir Rashid, “Bangladesh Police Bust Int'l Gang Trafficking Rohingya Women Into Sex Work in Malaysia,” *Irrawaddy*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/bangladesh-police-bust-intl-gang-trafficking-rohingya-women-sex-work-malaysia.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Human trafficking gang busted in Cumilla, 3 Rohingyas rescued,” *The Business Standard*, 17 February 2020, <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/human-trafficking-gang-busted-cumilla-3-rohingyas-rescued-45417>

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Aziz, “24 sued in Rohingya trawler capsized case,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2020/02/12/24-sued-in-rohingya-trawler-capsized-case>

members of the trafficking network, including a senior army general.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Malaysia established a royal commission of inquiry to investigate human trafficking.<sup>13</sup> The RAB in Bangladesh believes that the local traffickers work in tandem with a number of corrupt officials who arrange Bangladeshi passports for the Rohingya refugees—such things are rather common in the South Asian context.

### *Addressing Push and Pull Factors*

Bangladeshi authorities and aid groups have stepped in to stop such human trafficking activities happening in the camps. Among the measures adopted is an awareness campaign involving the distribution of comic books and enactment of street plays in the camps to warn people of the risks. Police patrols have also increased. Other proposed measures include setting up a center for law enforcers within the refugee camps and building a fence and watchtowers to protect the refugees.

Bangladesh has stringent penalties for human trafficking. It has trained 23,890 police officers on human trafficking in 2018,<sup>14</sup> and in February 2020, decided to set up seven special courts for human trafficking cases. Many measures have been initiated following a criticism by the United States that took to task the country's lax mechanism in dealing with the challenges. Yet incidents have not stopped. The traffickers continue to exploit the miserable conditions of the refugees to keep the trade thriving.

Clearly more needs to be done, both at the points of origin of the problem and the points of delivery. The points of origin include both Myanmar and the camps in Bangladesh. The delivery point includes Malaysia. In that regard, the following four suggestions are worthy of consideration:

- Both Bangladesh and Myanmar have struggled to put together modalities for the return of the Rohingya to Rakhine. The refugees have refused to return to Myanmar without a guarantee for their security. Progress has to be achieved on this front, and the Rohingya must be able to return to Myanmar to live a life of dignity without fear.
- In the camps in Bangladesh, to a large extent, the rule that the refugees cannot work and must not venture out of the camps is adding to the advantages

<sup>12</sup> Tan Hui Yee, "Thai army general gets 27 years jail for human trafficking," *The Straits Times*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/verdict-due-in-major-thai-human-trafficking-trial>

<sup>13</sup> Kaamil Ahmed, "Deaths of 16 Rohingya at sea raises fears trafficking ring has been revived," *The Guardian*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/12/deaths-of-16-rohingya-at-sea-raises-fears-trafficking-ring-has-been-revived>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh," <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/bangladesh/>

of the traffickers. Once the refugees are lured out of the camps, threats of being mentioned to the law enforcers force them to stay silent. At the other level, sheer joblessness at the camps makes them desperate to get out and risk their lives. This too has to change. To expect the trafficking to stop without addressing the vulnerabilities of the refugees would be pointless.

- Bangladesh needs to do a lot more to curb the activities of the traffickers. The extremely low conviction rate in human trafficking, estimated to be less than one percent, has to improve. Bangladesh passed the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012 and has the National Action Plan 2018-22 to combat human trafficking. But activists allege that the implementation has been unsatisfactory.<sup>15</sup> The government formed anti-trafficking committees at district and sub-district levels, but they remain largely inactive. This state of affairs needs to change urgently.
- Lastly, Bangladesh's Airport Armed Police Battalion has increased its checks at Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in recent years. This has made it far more difficult for Rohingya to leave the country by air, even if they managed to obtain travel documents. Bangladeshi officials also claim that they have been able to clamp down on the sea routes. As a result, alternative routes through the Kolkata airport in India are being relied upon. Several instances of Rohingya refugees attempting to fly from Kolkata to Malaysia and Indonesia using fake passports have been reported.<sup>16</sup> Only regional cooperation between Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia can help curb this illegal movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Rock Ronald Rozario, "Bangladesh forms special courts for human trafficking cases," *UCA News*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-forms-special-courts-for-human-trafficking-cases/87252>

<sup>16</sup> Anvit Srivastava, "Rohingya man arrested at Delhi airport with fake Indian passport," *Hindustan Times*, 19 May 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/rohingya-man-arrested-at-delhi-airport-with-fake-indian-passport/story-N7xLRXAJK8ckDcStTz0gYK.html>. Also see, "2 suspected Rohingya women held at airport," *Millennium Post*, 2 March 2019, <http://www.millenniumpost.in/kolkata/2-suspected-rohingya-women-held-at-airport-403793>