



The Impact of Refugee Movements on India-Myanmar Relations

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ABSTRACT

The refugee crisis, particularly involving the Rohingya, has become a critical aspect of India-Myanmar relations, impacting their diplomatic, security, and humanitarian policies. This article examines how refugee movements, especially since the Rohingya exodus of 2017, have shaped the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar. It explores the historical context of migration between the two nations, delving into Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, including the persecution of the Rohingya in Rakhine State, and how these crises have influenced India's refugee policy. The refugee influx poses significant security challenges for India, particularly in its northeastern states, leading to concerns over insurgency, cross-border trafficking, and militancy. Moreover, India must balance its diplomatic ties with Myanmar, international pressures, and humanitarian obligations, while also managing its relations with Bangladesh, another key player affected by the crisis. This article also highlights India's humanitarian aid efforts, regional cooperation through platforms like BIMSTEC, and the socio-economic consequences of refugee settlements on local communities in northeastern India. It addresses the tensions between refugees and host communities and the strain on India's border management. The conclusion reflects on possible future diplomatic and strategic steps to mitigate the crisis, urging for a multilateral and balanced approach to

1. Introduction:

India and Myanmar share a long history of diplomatic, economic, and strategic ties, with their relationship rooted in shared geography, cultural affinities, and mutual security interests. Historically, both countries have maintained cordial relations since Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule in 1948. India was one of the first countries to recognize Myanmar's independence, and the two nations enjoyed close ties during the early years of Myanmar's sovereignty. Over the decades, these relations evolved, shaped by changing regional dynamics, shared concerns about border security, and economic cooperation. The 1990s saw a renewed push towards stronger bilateral ties, particularly after India's adoption of the "Look East" policy, now known as the "Act East" policy, which aimed to enhance India's engagement with Southeast Asia, with Myanmar being a critical partner in this endeavor.

In the economic realm, Myanmar is of strategic importance to India due to its geographic location, acting as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are key components of India's efforts to enhance regional connectivity and boost trade with Southeast Asia. Additionally, Myanmar plays an important role in India's energy security strategy due to its rich natural resources, particularly in oil and gas. Strategically, Myanmar holds critical importance for India's security in the northeastern states, as the two countries share a 1,643 km-long border. Both nations have worked together to combat insurgencies and manage cross-border threats, including drug trafficking and militant activities.

However, in recent years, refugee movements, particularly the Rohingya crisis, have emerged as a key issue influencing India-Myanmar relations. The Rohingya, an ethnic minority in Myanmar's Rakhine State, have long faced systemic persecution, culminating in a military crackdown in 2017 that forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring countries, including Bangladesh and India. This exodus of refugees has had significant implications for India, both in terms of security and diplomacy. Although Myanmar is a crucial partner in India's regional strategy, the Rohingya refugee crisis has tested the resilience of their bilateral relationship. The significance of refugee movements is twofold. First, they create security concerns for India, particularly in the northeastern region, which shares a porous border with Myanmar.



The presence of Rohingya refugees in India has raised concerns about potential links to insurgent groups and terrorism, leading the Indian government to view them as a security threat. Second, refugee movements have strained India's diplomatic engagement with Myanmar. India has historically refrained from taking a strong stance on the Rohingya crisis to avoid alienating Myanmar, a key partner in its regional connectivity projects and counter-insurgency operations. At the same time, India faces pressure from the international community, including the United Nations, to address the humanitarian aspects of the crisis more forcefully. In addition to these security and diplomatic dimensions, the refugee issue has socio-political ramifications within India. The Indian government has taken a cautious approach toward accepting Rohingya refugees, citing concerns over national security. This has sparked debates within India about the country's obligations toward refugees under international law and its longstanding tradition of providing asylum to persecuted communities. The delicate balance between humanitarian responsibilities and security concerns has made the refugee issue a critical element in shaping India-Myanmar relations today.

Refugee movements, particularly the Rohingya crisis, have introduced new complexities into India-Myanmar relations. What was once a relationship focused primarily on economic cooperation and

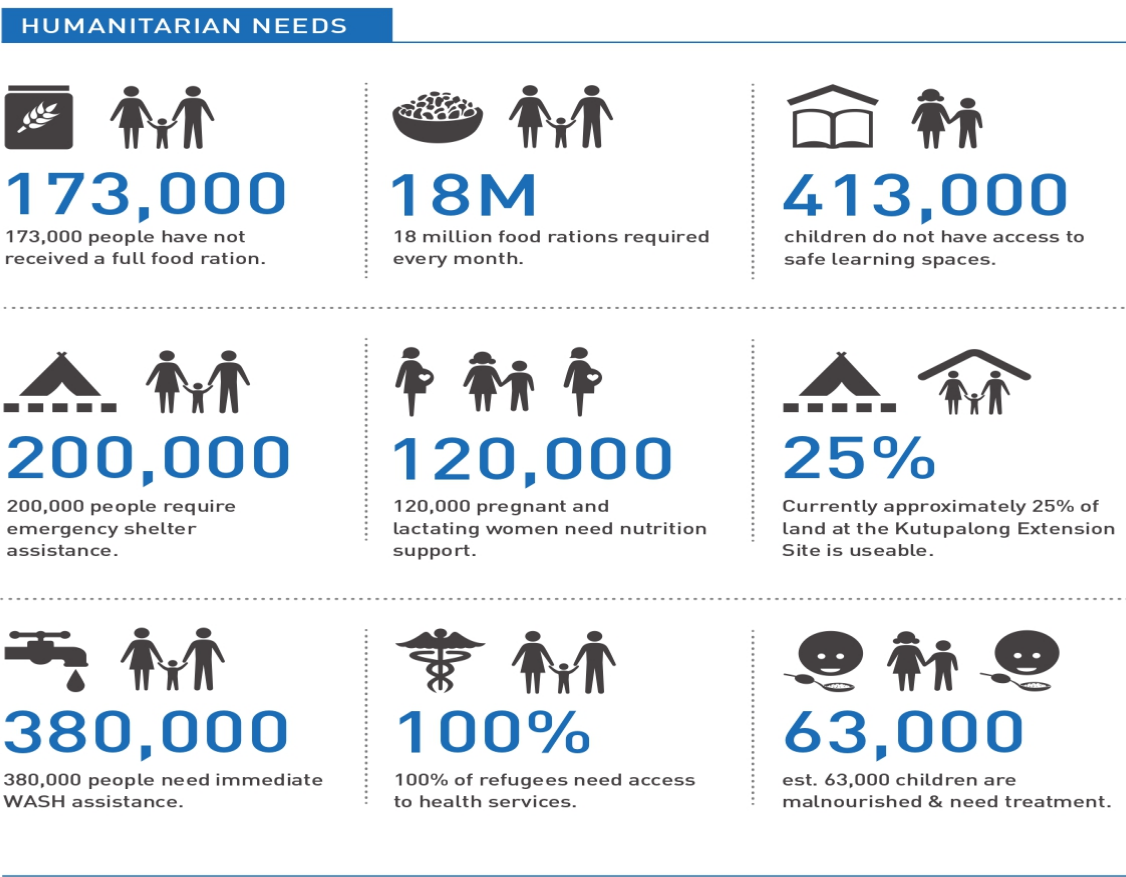
regional security has now become intertwined with the challenges posed by large-scale human displacement. The following sections of the article will explore the historical background of these refugee movements, the security implications for India, and the broader strategic and humanitarian considerations that define this evolving bilateral relationship.

2. Historical Background of Refugee Movements:

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

On 25 August violence broke out in Rakhine state, Myanmar. As a result, 537,000 Rohingya are estimated to have crossed the border into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. People have been traveling for days, arrived with very few possessions, and are settling in overcrowded sites with limited access to basic services.

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Migration Patterns Between India and Myanmar

The history of migration between India and Myanmar is long and complex, dating back to the colonial period when both were part of British India. Migration during this time was often driven by economic factors, with laborers and traders moving across borders. Following Myanmar's independence in 1948, and later India's partition in 1947, cross-border movements continued, albeit under different circumstances. Post-independence migration included the movement of refugees during the Burma Socialist Programme Party's nationalization policies in the 1960s, when many Indian-origin people were forced to leave Myanmar. These migration patterns laid the foundation for the current complexities surrounding refugee movements between the two nations.

Rohingya Crisis (2017-Present)

The most significant refugee movement in recent times has been the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine State. Beginning in 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar following a violent military crackdown. The refugees primarily sought shelter in Bangladesh, but many also traveled to India. The Rohingya crisis has brought intense international scrutiny on Myanmar's treatment of its ethnic minorities and has tested India's refugee policies. While India has provided humanitarian aid to Bangladesh to manage the refugee influx, it has been cautious about accepting Rohingya refugees within its own borders due to security concerns.

India's Approach to Refugee Movements

India has a long history of hosting refugees, including Tibetans in the 1950s and Bangladeshis during the 1971 war of independence. However, its stance on the Rohingya differs significantly. Citing national security risks, India has been reluctant to accept large numbers of Rohingya, with officials expressing concerns about the potential links between refugees and militant groups. This marks a shift from India's earlier policies of offering refuge, highlighting the current government's prioritization of security over humanitarian concerns.

Myanmar's Political Environment and Ethnic Conflicts

Myanmar's internal political environment, particularly its ethnic conflicts, has been a primary driver of refugee outflows. The Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority in Rakhine State, have long faced

persecution, which intensified under Myanmar's military regimes. Decades of ethnic strife, military rule, and flawed democratic processes have made the situation worse, leading to repeated waves of displacement not only of the Rohingya but also other ethnic groups like the Kachin and Shan.

3. Security Implications for India:

India's National Security Concerns

The influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar has raised serious national security concerns for India, particularly in its northeastern region. India shares a 1,643 km porous border with Myanmar, making the region vulnerable to illegal crossings and refugee movements. States such as Manipur and Mizoram have seen a steady trickle of Rohingya refugees, leading to fears that their presence might exacerbate existing ethnic tensions and social unrest in these border areas. India's northeastern states already grapple with insurgencies and separatist movements, and the arrival of refugees adds to the complexity of managing security in this sensitive region .

Linkage with Militancy and Extremism

There are concerns within the Indian security establishment that the refugee influx could be exploited by extremist groups. Intelligence reports have indicated that some Rohingya refugees might have links to militant organizations, which has been a recurring theme in India's national security discourse. For example, groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) have been accused of having ties with Islamist networks in South Asia. The presence of these refugees, especially in sensitive areas like Jammu and Kashmir, has raised alarm over the potential radicalization of the Rohingya and their recruitment by insurgent groups operating in India's northeast. Moreover, the porous India-Myanmar border also facilitates illegal drug trafficking, which has further security implications .

Border Management Issues

Managing the India-Myanmar border has always been challenging due to its difficult terrain, dense forests, and the presence of insurgent groups operating on both sides. The refugee crisis has added another layer of complexity to border management. The lack of proper border fencing and monitoring infrastructure makes it difficult for Indian security forces to control the movement of people and goods across the border. This porous nature of the border also enables cross-border trafficking of human beings

and narcotics, which is a growing concern in the region. Human trafficking, in particular, has seen an uptick as refugees, including Rohingya, become vulnerable to exploitation. Despite efforts to enhance border security, the continued refugee influx has exposed the limitations of India's border management mechanisms.

4. Diplomatic and Strategic Considerations:

India's Balancing Act

India faces a delicate balancing act in its approach to the Rohingya refugee crisis, as it must manage relations with Myanmar while addressing the humanitarian and security aspects of the issue. Myanmar is a crucial partner for India, particularly due to its geographic proximity and strategic importance in India's "Act East" policy. India's cooperation with Myanmar is vital for border security, combating insurgencies, and enhancing regional connectivity. However, openly criticizing Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya issue risks alienating a key partner. As a result, India has taken a cautious stance, refraining from openly condemning Myanmar's military while also providing humanitarian aid to Bangladesh to manage the refugee crisis. This nuanced diplomacy highlights India's desire to maintain a strong bilateral relationship with Myanmar without fully endorsing its internal policies.

Relations with Bangladesh

The Rohingya refugee crisis has also impacted India's relationship with Bangladesh, which has borne the brunt of the crisis with over a million Rohingya refugees residing in makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar. India has been supportive of Bangladesh's efforts to manage this humanitarian crisis, providing financial assistance and aid. However, India's reluctance to accept Rohingya refugees within its own borders has raised concerns in Dhaka about India's long-term commitment to addressing the crisis. The refugee issue also feeds into broader trilateral relations between India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, as both India and Bangladesh seek a stable and cooperative Myanmar to ensure regional security and economic development. This delicate trilateral dynamic influences India's diplomatic efforts in managing the crisis while keeping its regional partnerships intact.

International Pressures

India has faced international criticism for its handling of the Rohingya refugee issue, particularly from global actors such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and various human rights organizations. The UN has repeatedly called on India to offer greater protection to Rohingya refugees, citing its obligations under international humanitarian law. India, however, is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and has taken a more security-focused approach to the crisis. Despite the international pressures, India has defended its position, emphasizing the need to prioritize national security and prevent potential militancy among refugee populations. Additionally, India's strategic interests in Myanmar and its desire to avoid international isolation on the issue have shaped its restrained response to global criticism .

5. Humanitarian Aid and Regional Cooperation:

India's Humanitarian Assistance to Refugees

India has provided significant humanitarian aid to manage the Rohingya refugee crisis, particularly to Bangladesh, where over a million Rohingya refugees have sought shelter. In 2017, India launched "Operation Insaniyat," delivering relief supplies such as food, medicines, and essential goods to Bangladesh to help manage the massive influx of Rohingya refugees in camps like Cox's Bazar. Despite its international humanitarian efforts, India has maintained a cautious stance on accepting Rohingya refugees within its own borders. While India has hosted small numbers of Rohingya in different parts of the country, including in Jammu and Hyderabad, it has limited its support due to concerns about security and the socio-political implications of refugee settlements .

BIMSTEC and Regional Security Cooperation

The refugee crisis has added a new dimension to regional security cooperation, especially through organizations like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). The Rohingya issue has highlighted the need for greater regional collaboration to address human displacement and its security implications. BIMSTEC, which includes both India and Myanmar as members, has emerged as an important platform for regional security dialogues, including discussions on counterterrorism, transnational crime, and human trafficking. However, the organization has struggled to create a coordinated regional response to the refugee crisis. Similarly, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has been ineffective in addressing the crisis due to political

tensions between its members, particularly India and Pakistan, leading India to focus more on BIMSTEC for regional cooperation .

India's Diplomatic Engagement with Myanmar

India has taken a cautious approach in its diplomatic engagement with Myanmar regarding the Rohingya issue. While India has avoided directly criticizing Myanmar for its treatment of the Rohingya, it has worked behind the scenes to support peace and development initiatives in Myanmar's Rakhine State. India has emphasized the importance of development cooperation, focusing on infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and capacity-building programs aimed at improving the living conditions in conflict-affected regions. By focusing on development rather than taking a hard stance on human rights violations, India hopes to maintain stable relations with Myanmar while contributing to long-term peace and stability in the region .

6. Socio-Economic Impacts on Border Regions:

Impact on Northeast India

The influx of refugees, particularly Rohingya, has had significant socio-economic consequences for India's northeastern states, including Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. These states, which share a porous border with Myanmar, have experienced challenges due to the movement of refugees into their territories. These regions are already economically fragile, with limited infrastructure and employment opportunities. The arrival of refugees has placed additional pressure on local resources, including housing, healthcare, and social services. The northeastern states also struggle with high levels of unemployment, and the presence of refugees often exacerbates economic competition, creating tension between refugees and the local population. Moreover, these states are already sensitive due to ongoing insurgencies, and the refugee situation adds to the complexity of the security landscape .

Refugee Settlements and Local Communities

Tensions between local populations and refugee communities in northeastern India have become a growing concern. Refugee settlements in states like Mizoram and Manipur often lead to competition over limited resources such as land, jobs, and basic amenities. The presence of refugees can create friction with the local ethnic populations, who feel that their access to resources and opportunities is

being diminished. Additionally, concerns about cultural and religious differences between the refugees (many of whom are Muslim) and the predominantly Christian local populations have added to the social tensions. The fear of demographic changes and long-term settlements of refugees has created a sense of unease among local communities, who worry about the impact on their cultural identity and economic opportunities.

Humanitarian Response in India

The Indian government has faced challenges in addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees while balancing national security concerns. Civil society organizations have stepped in to provide basic support such as food, shelter, and healthcare to refugee populations. However, the scale of the crisis often overwhelms these efforts, and the government's limited support, particularly in northeastern states, has left gaps in service delivery. The Indian government's reluctance to officially recognize the Rohingya as refugees due to security concerns has further complicated efforts to provide comprehensive humanitarian assistance. Despite these challenges, local communities and religious organizations in some regions have shown solidarity with the refugees, offering limited support to ease their integration into society.

7. Conclusion:

The refugee crisis, particularly concerning the Rohingya, remains a significant and unresolved issue in India-Myanmar relations. Despite efforts from both nations to manage their bilateral ties through diplomatic engagement and strategic cooperation, the ongoing influx of refugees has introduced complexities that strain these relationships. The humanitarian crisis has not only raised concerns regarding security and resource allocation in India's northeastern states but has also led to international scrutiny of both nations' policies. As India seeks to maintain a delicate balance between supporting Myanmar as a strategic partner and addressing humanitarian obligations, the situation remains precarious.

To navigate this challenging landscape, India must consider several policy actions aimed at resolving the crisis. First, multilateral engagement is crucial, as the involvement of international organizations and neighboring countries can foster a cooperative approach to manage refugee movements and ensure their safety and well-being. Regional frameworks like BIMSTEC could serve as platforms for collective

action, facilitating dialogue among India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh to address the root causes of displacement and explore sustainable solutions. Additionally, India should adopt a balanced approach that harmonizes humanitarian efforts with security considerations, recognizing the need for immediate support for refugees while addressing legitimate concerns about national security.

Looking ahead, the outlook for India-Myanmar relations remains uncertain. The refugee crisis is likely to continue impacting bilateral ties as both nations grapple with the consequences of unresolved humanitarian issues. If not addressed, the ongoing tensions could lead to greater instability in the northeastern states of India and further complicate India's relationship with Myanmar. Future diplomatic efforts must prioritize finding common ground and engaging in constructive dialogue to ensure that the refugee issue does not overshadow the potential for enhanced cooperation in other areas. Ultimately, the path forward will require a commitment from both nations to foster a collaborative environment that prioritizes regional stability, security, and humanitarian support.

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