

Repatriation Mystery and the Rohingya's Vague Fate

Bangladesh and Myanmar reached a compromise on the repatriation of Rohingyas on November 23, 2017, and declared it to the international community on January 16, 2018. The agreement covers approximately 770,000 refugees only those who fled to Bangladesh after October 2016 and August 2017 events. According to the agreement, Rohingyas first were to be settled in temporary refugee camps in Dar Gri Zar village in which the most intensive operations took place. Then they were to be sent to the other temporary refugee camps. Myanmar authorities have stated on 15th January that centers for admission process and three camps had been completed in Maungdaw. Nevertheless, they also stated that the capacity of the camps is for 30,000 refugees. While some photos of the camps have been shared, Myanmar does not allow inside the camps to be visited and scrutinized. Therefore there is no sufficient information about living conditions of them.

In fact, the first statement on the repatriation came on 19 September 2017 during the press conference made by Aung San Suu Kyi. She stated that Rohingyas who fled after 25 August 2017, may return at any time within the context of 1992 agreement. While Bangladesh authorities indicated that the two process of refugee flow are different from each other and objected that, somehow Bangladesh agreed on this condition. China may have a key role in Bangladesh's approve about the hastily taken decision because both parts reached a compromise after China's visit to Naypyidaw. China does not want any outsider to be involved in the region and therefore urged both sides to find any solution while it keeps acting on behalf of Myanmar. Because China does not want to lose its control on Myanmar. Nevertheless, Bangladesh suspended repatriation on 22 January after a very short while upon agreement. Ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement of Myanmar has not stated any clear information whether they are informed by Bangladesh about suspension or not.

According to some, while protests by Rohingya refugees about repatriation conditions have an effect on this suspension, it is still not clear what the real reason about Bangladesh last minute decision is. Bangladesh authorities gave the reason for suspension as not completed lists of refugees and as their preparation for the temporary camps had not started. The very amateur approach of both countries to this very tragic and critical process raised worry and anxiety among Rohingyas. The process has no consideration of Rohingyas security and therefore it has been interpreted as Myanmar's tactic to distract the international attention on the issue.

Both Rohingya refugees and Rohingya diaspora reacted the repatriation agreement. The same army which removed people from their lands will accompany the refugees who are traumatized by their persecutions toward Rohingyas. Myanmar does not state any measurement that will guarantee the security of the people and does not allow any international body, including UN, to monitor the process. A Myanmar border security official's statement caused to worries that Rohingyas can be registered as illegal Bengalis and sent back to Bangladesh forever.

On the other hand, Rohingyas in diaspora prepared a press release on repatriation agreement. They have stated that the existed attitude of Myanmar government and army toward Rohingyas remains same and these people still are considered as illegal Bengali immigrants. It has been questioned in the statement that while fled of Rohingyas continues, how they will be coming back to their territories. Moreover sending of Rohingyas from the refugee camps in Bangladesh to other refugee camps in Myanmar will create an extreme dilemma. Sending the refugees to the camps rather than to their own lands is the clue that repatriated Rohingyas will be constrained in the camps that can be considered as concentration camps.

Some of the points in the statement are important in terms of a radical solution for the Rohingyas. According to the points stated;

- UNRWA has to be present in the process of repatriation.
- These people have to be allowed to express their self-identity as "Rohingya" that has been recognized by UN.
- Representatives from Rohingya communities should be consulted and be involved in all the steps of repatriation.
- Repatriations must be voluntary and Rohingyas should go to their own territory rather than the camps in which Myanmar is planning them to place. UN peacekeeping forces should accompany Rohingyas to guarantee their safety. Myanmar government should compensate their losses.
- Temporary safety zones should be settled in North Arakan in order to guarantee the security of those

people. Rohingyas have already a sense of distrust toward Myanmar government which committed many crimes. Therefore Myanmar should understand their distrust and should allow the existence of peace forces till the people feel secure and trust to Myanmar.

- Myanmar should give Rohingyas their citizenship back, and guarantee their freedom of religion and movement, the right to education, health property.
- 1982 Citizenship Act should be amended in the line of international agreements which Myanmar also sides.
- Army officials and security personnel which took part in the crimes should be put on trials in an independent international court.
- Myanmar government should ban any kind of Islamophobic and racist propaganda that target Rohingyas and Muslims in the country.
- The rape victim women and the children born must be protected.

UNRWA demanded to be involved in the process of repatriation to make sure it's security. It also has stated that there is a need for reasonable time for the running repatriation effectively. Upon this call, Myanmar responded negatively by stating they will cooperate only with Russia, China, India, Japan if there is a need.

Comparison between past and current repatriations shows Rohingyas are more vulnerable in the last repatriation. Compare to 1978 and 1992 processes, in the latest repatriation there are strict conditions that determined by the verification process and according to these conditions return of the Rohingyas are almost impossible. In the 1978 conditions Rohingyas were still the citizens of Myanmar and their display of national identity card or any document prepared in Myanmar was considered. During 1978 repatriation almost 200.000 Rohingya turned back within six months to the North Arakan.

1991-1992 the process of return became tougher than 1978 conditions. Because with the 1982 Citizenship Law Rohingyas' citizenship had been denied and they were left without any official status. However, with the involvement of UNRWA, this problem also had been overcome. Those Rohingyas who were able to show their refugee cards which had been issued by Bangladesh turned to Myanmar and almost 200.000 Rohingya managed to go their home while 30.000 who did not have refugee cards remained in Bangladesh.

This time, all repatriation process and the decision about who is going to return will be managed and decided by Myanmar. The relevant documents which indicate their stay in Myanmar or old invalid identity cards will be requested by Myanmar authorities. But this is very tricky since most Rohingya do not have these documents with them. During highly intensive military operations accompanied by the Rakhine gangs' attacks, Rohingyas fled their homes with nothing. Besides their home burnt down during these operations, with the monsoon rainfall many houses were severely affected. Moreover this time the documents which are issued by Bangladesh will not be considered. Family members who are separated from each other and the orphaned children during operations, need to show documents provided by Bangladesh courts. Myanmar authorities indicated that they are able to receive 300 applicants daily. While it is so low possibility to issue 300 applicants' return on daily basis, this will take years to complete the process.

In contrast to the period between 1978-1992, Rohingyas do not have houses to return back. As mentioned before, while over 300 villages burnt down many houses have been perished. Besides, the lands left by Rohingyas in the North Arakan determined as II. Special Economic Zone. I. Special Economic Zone covers the areas which were evacuated during 2012 events and 120.00 IDPs of those events are still in the refugee camps. In addition, Myanmar Social Welfare Ministry declared that the burned lands over 100km will be confiscated by the state. While all these recent developments raise worries whether Bangladesh and Myanmar are sincere to solve the problem, the upcoming days will show what has been intended with this hastily prepared process.