



Rohingya Refugees Repatriation and Natural Disasters – A Crisis within a Crisis

Kaleem Ullah¹ & Colin Tint Lwin a.k.a Zhang Tian²

¹ University of Peshawar, Pakistan Email: kaleemullahuop85@gmail.com

² School of International Relations, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangdong, China
Email: zhangt275@mail.sysu.edu.cn

Abstract

The recent 7.7 magnitude earthquake in central Myanmar on March 28th has critically exacerbated the already protracted stalemate in the Rohingya repatriation process. This analysis contends that the natural disaster has diverted the Myanmar military regime's attention and resources towards internal disaster management and political stability, effectively deprioritizing the planned return of refugees. As the earthquake has intensified existing hurdles by damaging crucial infrastructure, eroding the perceived safety of Rakhine State among Rohingya in Cox's Bazar, the international aid has been redirected away from the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the regime's ongoing conflict with the Arakan Army in Rakhine and a flawed, non-inclusive repatriation framework continue to render return conditions unsafe and unsustainable. The paper concludes that the convergence of this natural catastrophe with persistent political and humanitarian failures has effectively halted repatriation prospects, placing an increasing strain on Bangladesh and necessitating an urgent, rights-based international response.

Keywords

Rohingya, Rakhine, Tatmadaw, Cox's Bazar, Cyclone Nargis, Cyclone Mocha, Statelessness

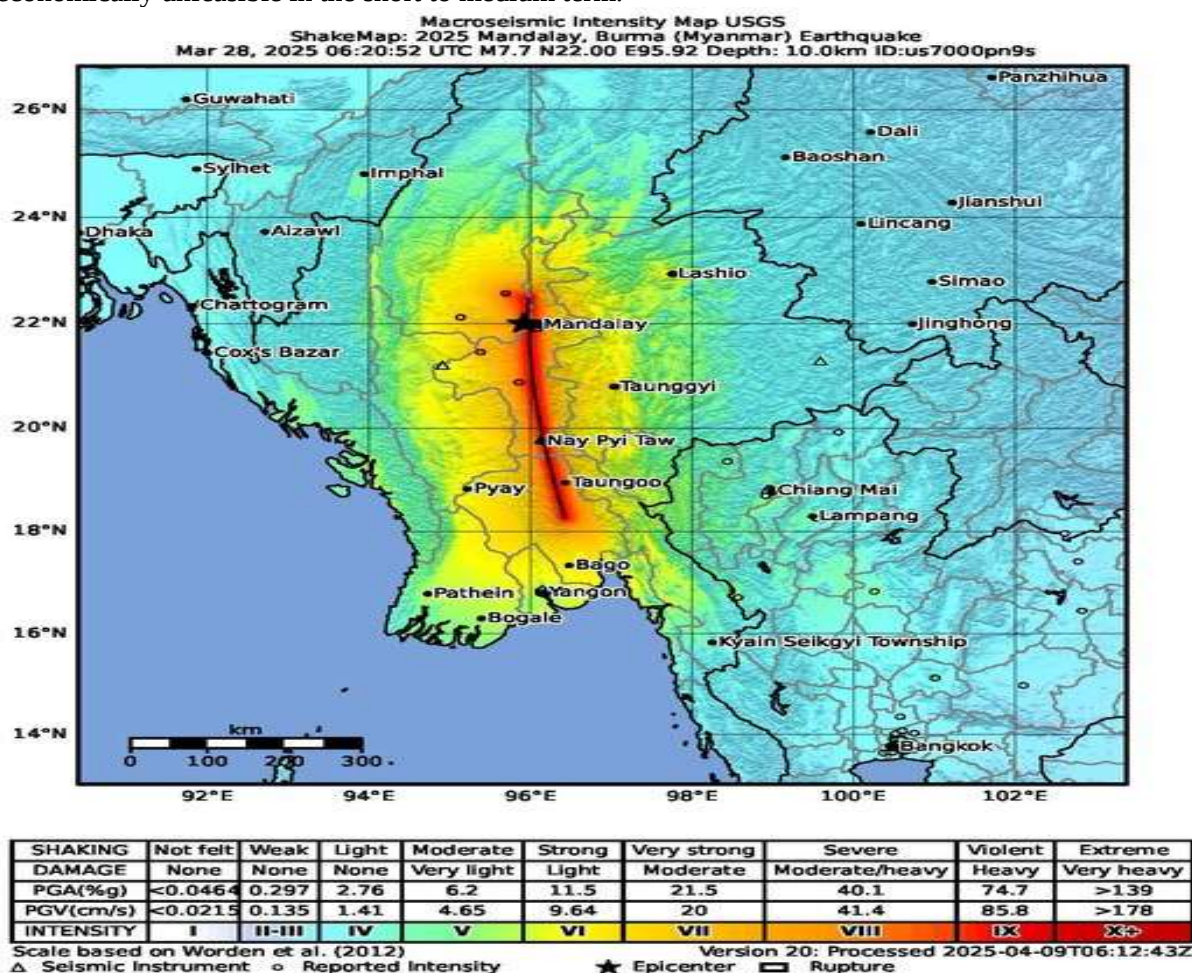
Introduction

The protracted Rohingya refugee crisis represents one of the most severe humanitarian and human rights challenges of our time. For decades, the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State, have faced systematic discrimination, violence, and institutionalized marginalization, culminating in repeated mass exoduses. The largest wave in August 2017, following military "clearance operations", forced over 740,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, joining hundreds of thousands who had fled during previous waves of violence and were already residing in makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar^[1]. The United Nations has described the Rohingya as one of the most persecuted minorities globally including the 2017 crackdown and when during the natural catastrophes.

Historical Context of Persecution

To understand the current deadlock, one must appreciate the deep historical roots of Rohingya statelessness. The 1982 Citizenship Act^[2], a cornerstone of their persecution, effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless by excluding them from the list of officially recognized ethnic groups and requiring proof of ancestry pre-dating 1823 British colonization, a nearly impossible task. This legal erasure has been deepened by decades of policies restricting their freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, and employment, effectively segregating them from the rest of Rakhine society and creating a tinderbox of resentment and vulnerability. Previous repatriation efforts, such as those in 1978 and 1992, failed because they did not address this fundamental issue of citizenship and rights, leading to repeated violence and displacement.

While Rohingya refugees have waited years for a safe and dignified return under international guarantees, a new complication arose on March 28, 2025, when a 7.7^[3] magnitude earthquake struck central Myanmar near the capital, Naypyidaw, and the city of Bago. While Rakhine itself was not the epicenter, it is a remote and chronically underdeveloped region that relies entirely on supply lines and administrative coordination from central Myanmar. Damage to the national infrastructure network, highways, bridges, and railways impedes the flow of goods and materials, making any large-scale construction or preparation in the proposed "model villages" in Rakhine logistically improbable and economically unfeasible in the short to medium term.



Delay in the Pilot Repatriation Program

It appears that the natural disaster has provided a convenient opportunity for Myanmar's military leadership to divert their attention towards disaster response by pausing ongoing discussions with Bangladesh on the planned pilot return of 3,000 Rohingya. This delay is particularly significant in light of the Myanmar government's announcement in April 2025 that 180,000^[4] Rohingya refugees were eligible for return. However, the earthquake damaged critical infrastructure, including highways and government buildings essential for administering a large-scale return. The regime's focus is now entirely on disaster relief and managing public anger over its slow and inefficient aid distribution, leading to the de-prioritization of the Rakhine State crisis. The news immediately caught the attention of international stakeholders, but actions speak louder than words as key infrastructure in central Myanmar was wracked by the quack and no substantial rehabilitation work took place for the proposed returnees. Consequently, Rohingya refugees' beacon of hope for safe restoration to their native villages seems to have been faded.

The regime is now purely focused on disaster relief and maintaining control amid public anger over slow aid distribution^[5], thereby deprioritizing the Rakhine region's crisis, including the "model villages" meant for expected returnees.

The focus shifting by Myanmar's incumbent regime would further strengthen the belief among Rohingya refugees residing in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, that their proposed model villages in

are unstable, insecure, and beyond their reach as no worthwhile talks or announcements have been witnessed, so far, regarding the Citizenship Rights of the Rohingya people, which were abrogated in 1982, leaving their legal status in limbo ^[6].

Attrition of Perceived Safety and Communal Sentiment

The earthquake's impact is not merely logistical but deeply psychological. Within the camps of Cox's Bazar, the disaster is perceived not as a standalone tragedy but as the latest evidence of Myanmar's inherent instability and the incumbent administration's incapacity to govern effectively, let alone guarantee the safety of a vulnerable minority. The refugees' rationale is straightforward: if the state cannot protect its own citizens in the heartland, how can it protect them in the conflict-ridden, peripheral state of Rakhine? This erosion of trust is perhaps the most significant, albeit intangible, barrier the earthquake has erected against repatriation.

A Crisis of Priorities: Exodus Affected vs. Disaster Affected

Life of every human is priceless, irrespective of their nationality, caste, religion, or color. However, diversion of all available resources towards the disaster-affected community while sidelining the refugees' return, who have been waiting for decades, merits attention of Myanmar's top power circles. It is evident from the recent acts of Myanmar sitting regime that Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar see the last earthquake as further proof that their homeland is still uncertain and insecure to accommodate and welcome them. Similarly, in the absence of cogent steps regarding the allotment of full-fledged citizenship to expected returnees and an UN-supervised repatriation process in currently disaster-affected Myanmar, the scenario might further develop a chaotic situation in the Bangladesh across the refugee camps. Myanmar refugees have already been observed staging demonstrations against expected forced repatriation, especially in Kutupalong and Nayapara camps ^[7]. Moreover, the attention of international aid agencies has also been partially redirected to earthquake relief activities in Myanmar, leading to a further worsening shortage of Non-Food Items (NFIs) and Food Items (FIs) in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

The Security Quagmire: Save Or Repatriate First?

Earthquake-affected citizens of Myanmar have expressed their anger and mistrust over the Tatmadaw's weak position in the post-disaster scenario. Public anger over the poor disaster response has further eroded the incumbent Government. Protests in Yangon and Mandalay have also surfaced owing to delayed policy decisions regarding restructuring and relief activities ^[8].

On the contrary, Rohingya refugees stuck in Cox's Bazar are still praying and demanding their safe return. But, on the ground, the situation seems different as the internal fragility contrasts sharply with the regime's promises of stability in Rakhine. As the Tatmadaw is still battling the Arakan Army (AA) in northern Rakhine, making safe returns impossible. Besides, no major or progressive construction has been reported in the "model villages" since the earthquake. Secondly, the United States, European Union, and UNHCR have echoed that the repatriation of Rohingya should be rights-based, not forced or rushed. According to UNHCR reports, conditions in the Rakhine region are not conducive for a safe return from Cox's Bazar, especially in post-earthquake conditions.

The Arakan Army Factor and Shifting Power Dynamics

A critical and often understated factor is the ongoing armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. The AA has significantly expanded its territorial control since late 2023, and as of mid-2025, it commands significant swathes of the northern and central parts of the state, areas to which Rohingya are expected to return ^[9]. Hence, the situation creates an impossible environment for returnees. The Myanmar regime is probably losing its writ to guarantee safety in these areas, while the AA's position on Rohingya repatriation remains ambiguous and largely hostile, viewing them as a demographic tool of the central government. Any repatriation process would require negotiation not only with the Tatmadaw but also with other non-state actors that does not recognize the Rohingya as indigenous. This multi-layered conflict makes the notion of "safe return" a geographical and political impossibility.

The Resource Diversion Dilemma:

The financial and administrative toll of the earthquake is staggering. Preliminary World Bank estimates suggest reconstruction costs will exceed \$5 billion ^[10], consuming a significant portion of the national budget and any available international development loans. The regime's limited administrative capacity is now stretched to its breaking point. Civil servants who were tentatively assigned to pilot repatriation logistics in Rakhine have been reassigned to relief coordination in Bago

and Yangon. Furthermore, international aid, which was already waning for the Rohingya crisis, has visibly pivoted. The UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) released \$15 million for the earthquake response within days ^[11], while the 2025 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis remains critically underfunded at just 25% of its \$875 million goal. This creates a "crisis within a crisis," where one vulnerable population is pitted against another for survival resources ^[12], with the Rohingya consistently losing out due to their statelessness and the regime's discriminatory priorities.

International Response to the Disaster:

Immediately following the news of the recent natural catastrophe in Myanmar, the international community responded swiftly to the earthquake. Beijing dispatched emergency medical teams to the affected areas along with 100-million-yuan worth of emergency humanitarian aid, including tents, first-aid kits, food, and other supplies, alongside emergency cash assistance to help the country's disaster relief and settlement ^[13].

The Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's announcement regarding his meeting with Gen. Min Aung Hlaing of Myanmar's military to prioritize response to the powerful earthquake that hit central Myanmar in late March and to extend the ceasefire, in order to facilitate international aid and relief efforts, was a positive step from ASEAN to reimagine its role in the region ^[14]. However, the primary bone of contention, i.e., the safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees to their respective villages, still prevails and has become a pressing issue to be discussed broadly. Unless the vacuum of trust deficit is filled with solid steps, including the reinstatement of the pre-1982 status of the Rohingya people, any other step taken solely by the Myanmar government or in collaboration with neighbouring countries or international organizations including ASEAN and the United Nations will result in only a negligible number of returnees from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to Myanmar.

Humanity is always above all, especially during natural disasters, and there should be no discrimination among ethnic populations, as catastrophes never target a single community in an area. Relief activities conducted alongside military operations can never be fruitful. Despite announcements of a ceasefire after the deadly earthquake, hundreds of attacks have been reported during the ceasefire period ^[15], including 73 in earthquake-hit zones. Similarly, international aid is always delivered by neighbouring countries and international organizations collectively or individually for the prompt redressal of affected communities. However, as per reports of international observers/rescue teams, international aid was being funneled through Buddhist-populated cities like Yangon and Naypyidaw, far from the devastated regions, raising serious concerns about its equitable distribution ^[16].

Divergent International Agendas:

The international response to the earthquake reveals the fragmented geopolitical landscape surrounding Myanmar. China's swift aid, while humanitarian, also serves to bolster its strategic partner, the Tatmadaw, and protect its substantial infrastructure investments in central Myanmar, such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. This contrasts sharply with the Western approach, led by the US and EU, which maintains stringent sanctions on the regime and channels its limited aid primarily through cross-border NGOs, avoiding direct support to the Tatmadaw. For ASEAN, the disaster presents both a challenge to its principle of non-interference and an opportunity to re-engage through humanitarian dialogue. However, this fractured international response prevents a cohesive strategy. While all parties call for Rohingya repatriation in principle, their on-the-ground actions in response to the earthquake inadvertently reinforce the regime's capacity to delay and obfuscate, as humanitarian engagement with the Tatmadaw for disaster relief is not explicitly linked to progress on human rights and repatriation.

Rehashing the History of Cyclone Nargis

Myanmar has a history of the worst natural disasters in the region, including Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, which has been termed one of the deadliest cyclones in Asia's history^[17]. The cyclone not only wrought catastrophic damage across the Irrawaddy Delta but also delivered a severe and discriminatory blow to the Rohingya community in Rakhine State. The immediate impact was devastating, with thousands of Rohingya homes destroyed, vital fishing boats wrecked, and contaminated water sources triggering disease outbreaks. While the exact death toll was masked by the Myanmar government, estimates indicate several thousand Rohingya perished.

This natural disaster was sharply compounded by systemic maltreatment, as the Tatmadaw deliberately deprioritized Rohingya villages in relief activities and rehabilitation programs.

International aid was blocked for weeks, and survivors were reportedly turned away from government relief camps, while Buddhist-majority areas received assistance. In the aftermath, the Tatmadaw further exploited the crisis to marginalize the Rohingya through relocations into squalid camps and land confiscations under the guise of "disaster prevention," seizing farmland for Buddhist settlers and leaving the community permanently displaced.

From Nargis to Mocha:

The regime's playbook during Cyclone Nargis was replicated with chilling precision during Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 ^[18]. As the cyclone, a Category 5 storm, barrelled towards Rakhine State, warnings were issued, but Rohingya in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sittwe and other townships were forcibly prevented from evacuating to safer ground, effectively left as sacrificial lambs to the storm surge. Post-cyclone, the military actively blocked humanitarian access to Rohingya areas for over two weeks, while allowing aid into Buddhist-majority areas. Satellite imagery analysis by Human Rights Watch showed the stark disparity in reconstruction efforts, with Rohingya villages remaining flattened months later. This deliberate pattern confirms that for the Tatmadaw, natural disasters are not just crises to be managed but strategic opportunities to advance their long-term goal of ethnic homogenization in Rakhine State. The 2025 earthquake, while not in Rakhine, fits this pattern by providing a pretext for indefinite delay and resource diversion, proving that any major shock to the system—wherever it occurs—is weaponized against the Rohingya.

Comparative Analysis: Cross-Case Comparison and Insights

To gauge the status quo in Myanmar adopted by its top brass during the recent dreadful earthquake and Cyclone Nargis, a cross-case comparison and detailed insights of similar incidents are urgently needed. The March 2025 earthquake in Myanmar was not the sole natural catastrophe in the region. Several high-magnitude earthquakes have struck and turned cities into wreckage in different nearby countries.

i. 2002 Afghanistan Earthquake

In March 2002, Afghanistan witnessed 6.2 magnitude earthquakes in the Nahrin district of Baghlan, a northern province. The tremor killed an estimated 800 people; besides, about 10,000 inhabitants became homeless. A total of 80,000 people were affected.

- International aid was immediately accepted by the then Afghan administration for the prompt rehabilitation of the affected community. The people of this tremor-hit province resemble those in Rakhine (Myanmar), as in both places locals have witnessed persecution. However, Baghlan locals later returned to their homeland because they held recognized citizenship, unlike the Rohingya refugees.

ii. 2010 Haiti Earthquake

A 7.0 magnitude earthquake, followed by more than 50 aftershocks, hit Haiti in 2010. About 3 million people were directly affected by the quake. Approximately 200,000 people lost their lives, and about 1.5 million individuals were displaced. A similar number of residences and commercial buildings also collapsed and were wrecked by the quake.

- The United States and the Dominican Republic became their second home; however, the displaced and asylum seekers were repatriated to their hometowns owing to the presence of a recognized government in Haiti. Although the US and the Dominican Republic faced backlash for the forced return of 2010 earthquake affectees, the Haitian government, somehow, managed to accommodate its natives.
- On the contrary, no solid and long-lasting steps have been observed from the Tatmadaw regime for the safe return of Rohingya refugees to their hometowns.

iii. 2015 Nepal Earthquakes and the Lhotshampas

The 2015 Nepal earthquakes, which killed 9,000 people and displaced 3.5 million, intensified the dilemma of the over 100,000 Nepalese-speaking Bhutanese refugees (Lhotshampas) living across various camps in Nepal since the 1990s, adding a layer of crisis to their already lingering statelessness.

- The disaster created an urgent need for durable solutions, yet the possibility of repatriation was non-existent as Bhutan steadfastly refused to allow their return. Such deadlocks cemented the third-country resettlement process as the primary solution, a program that had already been prioritized and which ultimately led to the resettlement of approximately 85,000 refugees in nations like the US, Canada, and EU countries.

- A comparison with the Rohingya situation reveals critical parallels, as both the Lhotshampas and Rohingya were populations rendered stateless and unwelcome in their homelands, and in both cases, a subsequent disaster added immense urgency to resolving their plight. However, key differences defined their outcomes; crucially, Nepal cooperated with and facilitated a large-scale international resettlement effort, an option largely unavailable for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the stance of their countries of origin diverged significantly: while Bhutan never agreed to any repatriation, Myanmar has, at least nominally, engaged in discussions and pretended to consider returns, however disingenuously.

iv. **2023 Turkey-Syria Earthquakes**

The devastating February 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquakes that killed over 50,000 people worsened the situation for the 3.6 million Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey. This led to immense stress on an already overburdened system and accelerated discussions about their fate.

- Repatriation took center stage in the aftermath of the earthquakes and became highly contentious, with Turkey actively promoting "voluntary returns" to Northern Syria, a policy clouded by widespread reports of coercion that undermined its voluntariness. Although the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria offered a nominal amnesty, this did very little to ease the well-founded fears of refugees facing a potential return to the same brutal and persecutory government they had fled.
- A comparison with the Rohingya shows key similarities: both host countries—Turkey and Bangladesh—face significant economic strain from hosting large refugee populations, with refugees in both cases holding deep-seated fears of returning to an unreformed and dangerous homeland. The differences are equally telling: unlike the statelessness of the Rohingya and Myanmar's internationally isolated Tatmadaw, the Syrian refugees have a state to which they could theoretically return, at least insofar as one controlled by a ruthless government. Furthermore, Turkey holds significant regional power and political leverage compared to Bangladesh, allowing it to directly engage in and apply pressure upon the Syrian regime. The situation is a clear lesson that "voluntary" return programs are often a euphemism for coercion when host countries face overwhelming internal and economic pressures.

v. **Cyclone Mocha (2023)**

Apart from the above incidents, the deadly strike of Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, which killed more than 400 people and devastated Rakhine State, was a brutal repetition of the oppression that the Rohingya have been facing systemically. The Myanmar incumbent regime deliberately blocked humanitarian aid to predominantly Rohingya areas, and thus the disaster exacerbated the existing crisis.

- The discriminatory response to the catastrophe, during which the Rohingya were denied help whereas the Buddhist population received it, definitely had a profound impact on the prospect of repatriation. It proved conclusively that the regime's persecution remained unabated, consequently hardening the refugees' resistance to returning without guarantees of safety and citizenship rights. A comparison with a hypothetical 2025 earthquake reveals a critical similarity: both disasters expose the Tatmadaw's foundational discrimination and further erode any minimal trust in its repatriation promises. The key difference is that while Cyclone Mocha directly hit the Rohingya heartland of Rakhine, a 2025 earthquake in central Myanmar would fall elsewhere but would still reveal the general governance and priorities of the regime. The overriding lesson is blunt: every further disaster under this regime, wherever it hits, systematically reduces the chances of the Rohingya returning home, underscoring as it does the impossibility of a safe and dignified life under Myanmar's discriminatory governance.

The Mounting Pressure – Bangladesh and Humanitarian Crisis

Thousands of refugees are still finding ways to enter Bangladesh to save their lives, despite the fact that more than 1.8 million refugees are waiting for their dignified and safe return^[18]. It seems that Dhaka is losing its patience towards the snail-paced policy regarding the repatriation of Rohingya, as the country is not in a position to force refugees to repatriate without international backlash.

The socio-economic and environmental toll on the Cox's Bazar region is profound: local wages have been suppressed, essential infrastructure is overstretched, and critical natural resources like forests and water aquifers have been severely depleted^[20]. These pressures have fuelled social

tensions with host communities and elevated security risks within the overcrowded camps, transforming a humanitarian response into a protracted crisis that threatens Bangladesh's own development stability.

The repeated failure of repatriation efforts has forced a fundamental shift in Bangladesh's policy stance. Initially anchored in the principle of voluntary, safe, and dignified return to Myanmar, this approach has proven unworkable due to the Tatmadaw's persistent persecution and outright refusal to guarantee the Rohingya's safety or rights. With Myanmar acting in bad faith and refugees justifiably afraid to return, Bangladesh has begun to pivot from solely demanding repatriation to urgently advocating for third-country resettlement, citing the successful precedent of the Bhutanese refugee crisis as a viable international solution.

Faced with limited and unpalatable options, Bangladesh now navigates a precarious dilemma. Continuing to shoulder the immense cost of hosting the refugees is untenable in the long term, yet the preferred solution i.e. repatriation, remains a dead letter. While resettlement presents a potential durable solution, it confronts a lack of political will from Western nations and risks absolving Myanmar of accountability. Thus, Bangladesh is strategically amplifying its calls for international burden-sharing, simultaneously maintaining the rhetoric of repatriation while pushing the world to recognize that the Rohingya crisis requires a global resettlement response, as local integration is not an option it can afford to offer.

The international community may honour the efforts of Bangladesh, which it has carried out under a massive humanitarian burden since 2017. Nearly one million Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh across various camps. With a dramatic decline in international funding, restlessness is predominating over the patience of the general masses and officials. Although Bangladesh seeks a plausible solution, a fragile repatriation plan with no guarantees of safety and rights for refugees could put the lives of poor Rohingya at stake and might retraumatize them, causing a further influx of refugees.

Empirical Data on the Camps and Host Community Impact

The scale of the crisis in Bangladesh is quantifiable in stark terms:

- **Population Density:** The Kutupalong-Balukhali camp complex is the world's largest refugee settlement, with a density exceeding 70,000 people per square kilometer, far surpassing that of Dhaka city.
- **Environmental Degradation:** An estimated 6,000 hectares of forest land have been cleared for shelter and firewood, leading to severe erosion and loss of biodiversity in an ecologically critical area. The water table in the region has dropped precipitously, threatening the water security of both refugees and the local host population.
- **Security Deterioration:** The camps have become a breeding ground for criminal gangs and armed groups. According to Bangladesh authorities, crime rates in the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts have increased by over 300% since 2017, including drug trafficking and human smuggling^[21].
- **Economic Strain:** A World Bank study estimates that the direct and indirect cost to Bangladesh of hosting the refugees is over \$1.2 billion annually, a massive burden for a developing nation^[22]. This has led to growing resentment among host communities, who see their resources depleted and wages driven down, creating a volatile social environment.

This empirical evidence underscores that the crisis is no longer just a humanitarian issue but a fundamental threat to the development, security, and social cohesion of southern Bangladesh.

Structural Barriers to Repatriation

- **The Flawed Pilot Program:** The proposed plan for the current repatriation is fundamentally flawed. Myanmar has agreed to allow only individuals who were registered between 2018 and 2020. However, many children have been born in the camps since then and are not part of such lists. This arbitrary cutoff creates a substantial administrative gap whereby numerous children born within camp environments subsequent to this registration period remain unacknowledged in official repatriation protocols. This administrative oversight introduces the considerable risk of family unit fragmentation during repatriation processes, potentially violating fundamental principles of family unity in humanitarian operations as established in international protection frameworks.

- **The "Model Village" Mirage:** The proposed "Model villages" in Rakhine, such as Hla Poe Kaung and Kyein Chaung, are largely empty, poorly constructed, and located in isolated areas, often seems to be adjacent to military bases. The proposed villages resemble detention camps more than thriving communities, with no arable land provided for livelihood and severe restrictions on movement planned for inhabitants. These model villages are probably for continued segregation and control instead of their reintegration^[23].
- **The Citizenship Deadlock:** The Myanmar incumbent regime's promises of "verification" for returning refugees under the 1982 Act seems to be a loop of never ending crisis. This process would require Rohingya to accept the identity of "Bengali," implying they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and apply for naturalized citizenship under a discriminatory law—a condition Rohingya refugees have universally rejected. Without the unconditional restoration of their citizenship, any repatriation process is built on a foundation of legal fiction and would cement their second-class status.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for the relevant stakeholders:

International Communities (UN, EU, US, OIC):

1. **Leverage Humanitarian Aid:** Explicitly link all earthquake relief and reconstruction aid to the Myanmar regime with tangible, verifiable progress on Rohingya rights, including unrestricted humanitarian access to Rakhine State and a clear timeline for a UN-supervised pilot repatriation.
2. **Increase Financial and Resettlement Pressure:** Fully fund the Rohingya Humanitarian Response Plan and dramatically increase third-country resettlement quotas, using the Bhutanese model as a benchmark. Simultaneously, strengthen and expand targeted sanctions against military-owned enterprises and individuals responsible for atrocities.
3. **Support International Justice:** Increase political and financial support for international justice mechanisms, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case brought by The Gambia and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation, to ensure accountability remains on the international agenda.

ASEAN and Regional Actors:

1. **ASEAN's Enhanced Role:** ASEAN must move beyond its "Five-Point Consensus," which has failed. It should appoint a dedicated, high-level special envoy solely for the Rohingya crisis, tasked with facilitating dialogue between the Tatmadaw, the Arakan Army, and refugee representatives.
2. **China's Constructive Leverage:** As the regime's primary patron, China must use its influence to insist on the inclusion of the Rohingya issue in any political dialogue it facilitates. It should condition its vast economic investments on minimal humanitarian standards and the initiation of a credible, inclusive repatriation process.

Myanmar Regime:

1. **Immediate Confidence-Building Measures:** Unconditionally grant full and unmonitored access to the UN and aid agencies throughout Rakhine State. Publicly dismantle the "model villages" and present a new plan for return that focuses on original villages with guarantees of land restitution.
2. **Enact Legal Reforms:** Immediately and unconditionally repeal the 1982 Citizenship Act and replace it with a law that grants full citizenship to the Rohingya, recognizing them as an indigenous ethnic group of Myanmar.
3. **Engage in Inclusive Dialogue:** Initiate direct talks with legitimate Rohingya leadership from the diaspora and the camps, as well as with the Arakan Army, to negotiate the terms of safe return and reintegration into a future federal Myanmar.

Bangladesh:

1. **Formalize the Policy Shift:** Officially and diplomatically declare third-country resettlement as a co-equal pillar of its Rohingya policy alongside repatriation, to galvanize international action.
2. **Improve Camp Governance and Security:** Work with international partners to enhance the rule of law within the camps, invest in programs that benefit both refugees and host

communities, and pilot schemes for refugee education and skilled training to reduce idleness and prepare for future opportunities, whether in Myanmar or elsewhere.

Conclusion

Natural disasters often act as brutal amplifiers to pre-existing political and social vulnerabilities, critically shaping the fate of refugee populations, as demonstrated by the contrasting cases of the Bhutanese in Nepal, Syrians in Turkey, and the Rohingya in Myanmar. For the stateless Bhutanese Lhotshampas, the 2015 earthquakes cemented a third-country resettlement solution, a path made viable only by Nepal's cooperation and the international community's engagement, leading to a largely successful, if culturally disruptive, outcome. In stark contrast, the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquakes exposed the fragility of protection in a host nation under strain, where Turkey's economic pressures translated into coercive "voluntary return" policies towards Syria, a state with which it could negotiate, however unequally, yet still could not guarantee safe repatriation.

Most dire is the case of the Rohingya, for whom Cyclone Mocha and Nargis were not just natural disasters but deliberate tools of persecution, weaponized by the Myanmar Tatmadaw to block local or international aid and reinforce their exclusion. The 2025 earthquake, while geographically distant, has had the same effect: providing a pretext for inaction, diverting critical resources, and shattering the already fragile prospect of return. This event, like any future disaster under the current regime, systematically destroys any foundation for trust, proving that repatriation is impossible without a fundamental change in the political conditions in the country of origin. The overarching lesson is that while disasters create urgency, the political will of host and origin states—whether leading to cooperative resettlement, coerced returns, or continued statelessness—ultimately determines whether a humanitarian crisis becomes a catalyst for solution or a deeper entrenchment of despair. For the Rohingya, the convergence of natural and political catastrophes has created a "crisis within a crisis" with no end in sight, demanding a renewed, robust, and rights-based international response that prioritizes their safety and dignity above all else.

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