

Who are the So-called Rohingyas?

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THE bloody clashes in Rakhine State between the ethnic Rakhines and the migrant Bengali nationals, a few years back, had made the term Rohingya become world-known. There was an up-roar throughout the world. Even the United Nations and some international communities were sympathetic to their plight. I dare say that the term Rohingya was unheard of to the majority of the populace of Myanmar, let aside the people from other countries, before that incident. The reason for its obscurity was due to the fact that, the name Rohingya does not represent any indigenous nor an ethnic nor a national race of Myanmar.

I called them migrants because they are either recent arrivals from the neighboring country or descendants of migrants who had been sneaking into our country for centuries due to poverty and starvation in their own country. There are many Bengalis who are legal Myanmar citizens, but there are plenty of illegal immigrants, too.

To my knowledge, the term Rohingya was publicized nearly five decades ago, while I was serving in the Akyab (Sittway) District, in the late nineteen sixties. It was almost unheard of before the authorities uncovered an underground organization called the Rohingya Muslim Independence Revolutionary Front (RMIRF) and apprehended their members, who were jailed. They set up their headquarters right in the heart of Akyab, clandestinely. Their objective was to take up arms and fight for the independence of the region that they claimed to be theirs' just because the majority of the populations there were Bengalis.

Most of those who are familiar with our country's past, knew about the Mujahideen rebellion,

citing the same cause, which broke out in Arakan right after we became independent. That rebellion was totally crushed a long time ago before this incident. There was no fuss at the time whatsoever, at home or abroad, as the rebels were recognized as intruders who had no right to claim for an independent state within our borders. In my opinion, the RMIRF movement was the reemergence of the lost cause of the Mujahideens. Their ultimate aim was to establish a Rohingya land on our soil. This fact was quite evident from the name they had chosen for their organization. Every unbiased person will agree with my analysis.

It is true that the majority of the population of the Akyab district, even in those days were Bengalis, especially in the border areas, but that did not justify them to claim for independence. Though some of them may have been descendants of the Bengalis who had dwelt for centuries on our soil and recognized as citizens and some of them may have acquired Myanmar ID cards, they are not entitled to be recognized as an indigenous or a national race of Myanmar as the international media and organizations are labeling them. Granting citizenship to the genuine descendants of those recognized as citizens is one thing and to be recognized as an indigenous or a national race of our country is another, which they are definitely not entitled to.

The authorities at the United Nations should be more cautious in handling that issue, this time around. It was the United Nations, which pressured the Burmese government (as it was used to be called in those days) to re-accept the illegal immigrants who were rounded up and expelled from our country in the early nineteen seventies. That move provided an opportunity for more illegal immigrants to sneak in, posing as those who had been expelled. It was a

grave blunder, as the returning numbers were more than double that of those expelled.

I think it would be necessary to explain the meaning of the term Rohingya. In the past, since the colonial days, people from the neighbouring country used to enter the Arakan area during the paddy growing seasons to work as farmhands for the Arakanese farmers. After the harvesting, they usually returned to their homeland, where people called them Rohingyas, meaning "Returnees from Arakan". Arakan was known by people back in their country as Rohin. However, that term was not widely known, as it is today, outside of their native place in those days. It's quite clear that the term Rohingya is neither a race nor a religion, but just a term to identify a group of people who worked in Arakan and came back.

In my opinion, the term Rohingya does not represent a race nor a religious group. When that name first emerged, as I had mentioned above, even some Rakhine old-timers said they had never heard of that term before. Thus, those people who are calling themselves Rohingyas are in fact, Bengalis who definitely do not belong to any indigenous race of Myanmar. They adopted the name Rohingya to deceive the international community to make it easier for them to migrate to other countries.

I would like to mention briefly about the presence of the Bengalis in Myanmar. Centuries ago, there were no properly defined or permanent border demarcations between the neighboring countries and ours. So people were free to roam and settle down wherever they wished. Thus when the boundaries were properly defined and demarcated, some settlements of our nationals were placed in other countries and likewise some settlements of nationals from other countries were inside our boundaries. When the British annexed

Arakan in 1824, they passed a statute that recognized those Bengalis who were already there to be citizens and those who entered after their annexation as foreigners. The descendants of those who were legalized as citizens were entitled to become citizens if they were born and stayed on our soil.

I presumed that there must be quite a large number of Bengalis already on our soil, even during those days for the British to take such precautionary actions to control further influx of migrants from the neighboring country, namely India, which too was under their rule. It was a farsighted move by the British. They must be wary of the problems that could arise in the future. If that law had been strictly adhered to by the successive governments and their responsible officials, the problems we are now facing would never have arisen in the first place.

In 1969, the Akyab District Security and Administrative Committee was tasked to eradicate illegal immigrants. Over two hundred immigration officers extracted from all over the country were placed under its command to carry out that task. It was carried out in the three townships, namely--Mrauk Oo, Minbya and Pauk Taw. The code name for that operation was "Operation Crow". Over two thousand Bengalis who didn't have any documents identifying them as citizens, were rounded up in just over a month of operation and were sent back to their country, then known as East Pakistan. There was no complaint or outcry, whatsoever, at home and from the international communities or organizations, over the expelling of the illegal Bengalis. That operation was a success. However, the next operation a few years later backfired and our government had to re-accept the Bengalis, who numbered twice the actual number expelled.

Even in those days the Bengali problem was not confined to the Arakan Division only. It had spread all throughout the country. Many a times, the Akyab District

Security and Administrative Committee was approached by other States and Divisions to help them to expel illegal Bengali immigrants rounded up in their areas. Most of the illegal migrants caught were from places like Keng Tung and Tachileik in the Southern Shan State, close to the Thai border. However, today the Bengali migration has spread to many countries in the region, such as Southern Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia and even to the West.

Many years ago, the ultimate destination of the Bengali migrants might have been Myanmar, as our country was more prosperous and more attractive to them than their cyclone-infested, flood-prone and poverty-riddled country. However, as their population in our country had swelled so much, there was no more room to absorb the new comers. Thus they resort to migrate to other countries in the South East Asia region, especially to those where there are Muslim majority. Recently their destinations are as far away as the Mediterranean. So today the Bengali problem is not ours alone but has become a regional problem and if it cannot be checked, it can become an international one.

I would like to remind the international communities that there is no such national race called Rohingya in our country. They are in fact Bengalis from the neighboring country posing as Myanmar citizens and falsely claiming that they had fled the country due to persecutions, oppressions and discriminations against them. I would also like to warn the international communities not to be deceived by them. The reason they use the name Rohingya is to hide their Bengali identity to make it easier for them to obtain refugee status in other countries and pave a safe passage for their exodus. The so-called Rohingya problem has nothing to do with race nor religion, but just an illegal migration issue. Thus it shouldn't be instigated to become a racial or religious issue.
