

## Interview with an official from the Political Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the matter of repatriation of the displaced persons from Rakhine State

**Q: Could you please first brief us on a detailed account of why the displaced persons from Rakhine State crossed into Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017 as there has been a mixture of speculations and narratives in the media?**

**A:** There have been numerous media reports, articles and news by various media, particularly foreign media, covering the account of the background of mass displacement from Rakhine State to Bangladesh since 2017. However, almost all of the media coverage are anyway one-sided narratives which never accurately reflect the reality of the ground situation at that time and are based on political agendas.

Actual events in October 2016 and August 2017 originated with coordinated attacks on police outposts and a regiment headquarters in Northern Rakhine State by extremists and members of the ARSA terrorist group. After their coordinated attacks failed, the terrorists impelled and threatened the residents to abandon their villages so that the displacement took place as per their coordinated plan. The first round of coordinated attacks using firearms, swords, spears, and slingshot crossbows was carried out on 9 October 2016 against the Kyikanpyin Border outpost Headquarters in Maungtau Township by approximately 90 attackers, the NgaKhuYa Police Station by approximately 300 attackers, and the Kotankauk outpost in Rathedaung Township by approximately 20 attackers. In those raids, 9 policemen were killed and weapons were taken. When the Tatmadaw and the Border Guard Police jointly conducted counter-terrorism operations with a view to ensuring the prevalence of security, stability, and the rule of law in the region following the attacks, combined forces of extremists and between 300 and 800 strong ARSA counter-attacked the security forces, resulting in the casualties of security personnel. It is found out that these attacks were orchestrated by Harakah al-Yaqin which later changed its name to Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) as they claimed the responsibility for the 2016 attacks later on 29 March 2017 and that Atta Ullah, a Bengali who used to live in Saudi Arabia, is the leader of the ARSA.

Since the passable success of the attacks in 2016 encouraged the ARSA terrorists, more than a thousand members of the ARSA terrorist group including well-trained extremist villagers launched coordinated and simultaneous attacks against 30 police outposts and a regiment headquarters in Maungtau

district, Rakhine State, on 25 August 2017. During these attacks, 11 Myanmar policemen, two Tatmadaw soldiers, and one immigration officer were killed. ARSA terrorists not just attacked the security outposts but also committed various terror acts including torching villages of local ethnic people and Hindus as well as their own villages and killing the family members of local communities. It is reported by the victims of the acts of violence by the ARSA that over 100 Hindus from Khamaungseik and Yebawkyia Village were abducted and massacred while eight adult females were compelled to convert their religion and sent to Bangladesh. Some 300 Hindus were also threatened and forced to cross into Bangladesh. Following information provided by Hindu villagers who managed to flee the massacre and return to Sittway Township, 45 dead bodies of Hindus were found near Yebawkyia Village.

Such terrorizing acts and terror threats of ARSA are the actual accounts that led to the displacement of people, mostly Bengali, in Rakhine State to the other side of the border.

The international media, however, have always deliberately left and disregarded the root causes of the incidents and reality of the ground situation which includes terrorist attacks, coercion, threats, killings, and burning of villages including their own by the ARSA members and associated extremists. Instead, they have always unreasonably portrayed the incidents as if the displacement issue arose due to religious and ethnic implications to exert pressure on Myanmar.

Besides, the sufferings of local ethnic people and Hindus inflicted by violent acts of the ARSA terrorists have been ignored and barely mentioned by any international media.

**Q: Could you please enlighten us about the ongoing talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh for repatriating displaced persons?**

**A:** After the incidents in 2016 and 2017, Myanmar and Bangladesh have been negotiating to repatriate the displaced persons who crossed over to Bangladesh at that time.

I would like to highlight that three repatriation instruments have been signed between the two countries. The first instrument is "the Agreement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State" which was signed by the Minister-level officials of both countries in Nay Pyi Taw on 23 November 2017. The second instrument is the "Terms of

Reference (TOR) for the Joint Working Group on the Repatriation of Displaced Myanmar Residents from Bangladesh" which was signed by the Permanent Secretary-level officials from Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries in Dhaka on 19 December 2017. The third instrument is the "Physical Arrangement for Repatriation of Displaced Myanmar Residents from Bangladesh under the Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State" which was also signed by the Permanent Secretary-level officials from Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries in Nay Pyi Taw on 16 January 2018.

The Government of Myanmar is proceeding with the implementation of the repatriation process in accordance with those bilateral instruments. And it is important to note that Myanmar will only receive those who crossed over to Bangladesh after 9 October 2016 and 25 August 2017 as per the bilateral agreements. Regarding the repatriation process, the Chairman of the State Administration Council expressed in a statement on 8 February 2021 that relevant agreements will be implemented through bilateral discussions if they are not harmful to the national interest.

It should be noted that Myanmar will verify and receive displaced persons based on the five criteria for eligibility to return as outlined in the instruments. Those five criteria for eligibility to return, adding one criterion to the four criteria stated in the 1992 repatriation process between Myanmar and Bangladesh, are "(i) Returnees must be residents of Myanmar; (ii) Returnees must be the ones who voluntarily wish to return to Myanmar by themselves; (iii) The members of split families and their left-behind members, and orphans need to be certified by a Court of Bangladesh; (iv) Both parents of additional offspring born on the other side of the border must be residents of Myanmar; and (5) Children born out of unwarranted incidents are to be certified by a Court of Bangladesh".

I would like to let you know that the Myanmar side keeps checking and verifying the verification forms of displaced persons sent by the Bangladesh side in accordance with the five criteria for eligibility to return.

I would also like to share information regarding the ongoing bilateral talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh based on the bilateral instruments. The key negotiation mechanism between the two countries for the repatriation process is the meeting of the Joint Working Group on the Repatriation of Displaced

Myanmar Residents from Bangladesh. The Joint Working Group (JWG) meetings were held four times in January, May, and October of 2018, as well as in May of 2019.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, JWG meetings were unable to take place for three years; nevertheless, the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Joint Working Group between Myanmar and Bangladesh was held in virtual format on 14 June 2022. The 5<sup>th</sup> JWG meeting was co-chaired by U Chan Aye, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Mr Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, and attended by the Joint Working Group (JWG) members from respective ministries of both sides.

At the meeting, both sides exchanged views on how to resolve difficulties encountered during the verification process, preparation works done prior to the commencement of repatriation of verified displaced persons, and resettlement plans for prospective returnees, and both sides agreed to further cooperate on repatriation and verification process, to commence repatriation under a Pilot Project and to issue court certificates by relevant Bangladesh courts for children born by the displaced persons in Bangladesh.

Besides the JWG meetings, the two countries formed the Ad Hoc Task Force for Verification of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State late in 2021 in order to discuss challenges encountered in the verification process. The first meeting of the Ad Hoc Task Force of both sides was held via video conference on 27 January 2022, followed by the second virtual meeting held on 16 September 2022.

All these measures reflect Myanmar's commitment to continue and maintain its sincere cooperation with Bangladesh for the successful implementation of the repatriation of displaced persons from the Rakhine State in line with the bilateral agreements.

**Q: There is some criticism over the progress of repatriating displaced persons. Would you like to respond to that matter?**

**A:** Following the negotiations between Myanmar and Bangladesh to kick off the repatriation process, two attempts were made to commence the repatriation on 15 November 2018 and 22 August 2019 respectively. On both occasions, Myanmar had fully arranged everything with Bangladesh at the border to launch the repatriation process. The numbers of the prospective returnees agreed upon by both sides to receive were 2,260 for

the first attempt and 3,450 for the second one.

Officials from Myanmar, accompanied by representatives from the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN-Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT), were waiting at the border gate to receive the prospective returnees on both occasions.

However, due to the threats and intimidations from destructive elements and terrorists in the camp, as well as various pressures on those displaced persons who wish to come back, the scheduled repatriations did not occur. I would like to emphasise that Myanmar has always been ready to receive the verified displaced persons since the first attempt but any of those have not been sent back to Myanmar up to this point.

I believe that it explained why the repatriation process has not been able to start until now, but there exist misperceptions from some countries and international media that Myanmar hesitates to start the repatriation process based on unfounded allegations and fabricated narratives.

**Q: I would like to know if there are any further negotiations between the two countries to begin the repatriation of displaced people.**

**A:** Notwithstanding the failure of two attempts to kick off repatriation, the Myanmar side continues to negotiate with the Bangladesh side to repatriate verified displaced persons in accordance with the bilateral instruments. Negotiations are currently underway between the two countries to start the repatriation of around 1,000 verified displaced persons under a pilot project.

As there naturally are newborn children of the displaced persons, the Bangladesh side has already agreed to issue the court certificates for those newborns to certify that they were born in Bangladesh. In order to verify them, the Myanmar side will check not only the court certificates but the past residency of the parents whether they are displaced persons from Rakhine State who crossed into Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017, in line with the bilateral instruments. Furthermore, as the prospective returnees wish to return to Myanmar family-wise, all the members of the households are being checked by the Myanmar immigration authorities.

The relevant ministries are coordinating and undertaking the preparatory

works, including the measures to prevent, control and treat COVID-19, for the smooth and successful reception of displaced persons under the pilot project.

**Q: What are the key challenges encountered in implementing the repatriation process and how Myanmar is coping with them?**

**A:** The main challenge for Myanmar is to verify data of individuals sent by the Bangladesh side such as names, addresses, and family members filled in the verification forms are inconsistent with the official data of the registered family household lists updated annually on the ground by the relevant authorities of Myanmar in Rakhine State, and that makes the verification laborious.

Furthermore, the concerned Bangladeshi authorities filled out the verification forms according to the pronunciation in the local dialects of the displaced persons that do not match the spellings used in the official family household lists of Myanmar. In addition, some have filled out the verification forms with their last addresses instead of official addresses registered in the family household lists. Some displaced persons might have also got married or divorced while in Bangladesh which makes the Myanmar Immigration authorities difficult to verify.

As I previously stated that Myanmar will only receive individuals who meet the five criteria for eligibility for return, it is thus imperative that the verification forms of the displaced persons need to be filled in with accurate and complete data in line with the registered lists of family households in Rakhine State.

Despite the criticism stemming from incomprehension of the difficulties and complexities involved in the verification process, Myanmar will address the challenges through the Ad-Hoc Task Force for the verification mechanism between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Moreover, unconstructive perceptions, that Myanmar is not committed to starting the repatriation process based on groundless allegations and fictitious narratives, are not supportive and conducive to the successful implementation of the repatriation process. It is also blatantly disregarding the underlying reasons why no displaced persons returned at the two previous repatriation attempts by the Myanmar side.

Regarding the causes of the failure of the two attempts for the commencement of repatriation, it is learnt that the main obstacle to commencing the

repatriation process is the presence of the Hardline groups and elements of the ARSA terrorists mingling with the displaced persons inside the camps in Cox's Bazar. They are reportedly threatening the displaced persons not to return otherwise they will be killed even upon their return to Myanmar. In addition, some so-called Bengali activists reportedly do not want the commencement of repatriation and are advocating for the denial to return and demands to fulfil their political agenda. Thus, even though Myanmar is best prepared to receive verified displaced persons, it would be difficult to start the repatriation if the threats and pressures still exist.

I would like to stress that Myanmar has made all necessary arrangements and preparations to receive the verified returnees since the first attempt. Myanmar always looks forward to receiving supportive cooperation from the Bangladesh side to send the verified displaced persons back to Myanmar in order to practically kick-start the repatriation process.

Therefore, it could be obviously observed that Bangladesh will also have to work shoulder to shoulder with Myanmar while understanding the challenges encountered by both sides so that the repatriation will soon be implemented in accordance with the bilateral arrangements.

**Q: Do you have any additional comments to share on the repatriation process?**

**A:** The State Administration Council continues bilateral negotiations with Bangladesh and preparatory works to implement the repatriation process in accordance with the bilateral instruments since taking the responsibilities of the State. And the verification process for displaced persons from Rakhine State has never been halted. Besides, new technical-level mechanisms between Myanmar and Bangladesh for repatriation and verification of displaced persons have been established under the current Myanmar Government while continuing the existing JWG meeting mechanisms.

Furthermore, relevant committees and ministries are also taking preparatory measures such as the renovation of reception and transit centres, including livelihoods, security and access to education and health services at the resettlement places to create conducive conditions for the prospective returnees under the pilot project.

It is reported that some foreign na-

tions have expressed their concerns about the developments of the internal affairs of Myanmar would impact the efforts to start the repatriation of displaced persons from Rakhine State. On the contrary, I would like to reiterate that Myanmar keeps its commitment to implementing the repatriation process and its efforts to make necessary arrangements to receive the verified displaced persons in accordance with the bilateral instruments and the existing laws.

Additionally, it is advisable to be cautious not to fall for the one-sided news that is based on false narratives and fabricated information crafted by some international media and so-called Bengali activists to mislead the readers to achieve their political motive.

It is also important to highlight that the number of displaced persons is inaccurately inflated by some foreign media and countries, stating that 1.1 million displaced persons are living in the Cox's Bazar Camps. However, according to the official registered lists of family households in Rakhine state which are taken door to door annually by the relevant authorities, the number of people who left Rakhine State for Bangladesh after the 2016 and 2017 incidents is just around half a million people. Furthermore, there are just 6,365 verified individuals who remain to be repatriated from Bangladesh under the 1992 repatriation process but no one has returned to Myanmar since 2005 due to their own reasons. Therefore, regarding the exaggerated number of displaced persons, I would like to underscore that the Myanmar side will only repatriate the verified displaced persons who entered Bangladesh from Rakhine State after 2016 and 2017 including newborn children who meet the five criteria for eligibility to return.

In conclusion, as bilateral cooperation is the only means to resolve the current repatriation issue, Myanmar, in view of the good-neighbourly relations between the two countries, will continue to cooperate with Bangladesh in good faith for the successful implementation of the repatriation of displaced persons from Rakhine State in line with the bilateral instruments.

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*(This is an unofficial translation of the Myanmar version of the Interview which appeared in the daily newspapers (Kyemon-The Mirror, Myanmar Alinn and Myawady Daily) published on 24 February 2023.)*

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