

Fenced in

More grief for the Rohingyas.



"We have an excellent relationship with the soldiers on the other side," says Khalilar Rahman, a Bangladesh Rifles commander at a remote outpost on a hillock in Ghumdhum, on the border with Myanmar. A Burmese outpost is a stone's-throw away, across the paddy-field below, where Burmese labourers are frantically working to build a border fence. Concrete pillars stretch as far as the eye can see. The movement of people and goods here—in happier days earmarked as the route for a highway—has stopped completely.

As Myanmar prepares for elections next year, tensions along the 320km (200-mile) border with Bangladesh have risen. As usual, that involves more persecution for the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority whom Myanmar refuses to recognise as Burmese. Because of them, though no one says it openly, Bangladesh is probably quite happy with the fast-emerging fence.

However, a military build-up on the Burmese side last month prompted Bangladesh to put its border force on alert, and to deploy 3,000 more troops. But Bangladesh's defence preparedness is woeful. So the government has sought to make light of rising tensions over Myanmar's provocative exploration in disputed waters of the gas-rich Bay of Bengal.

Rohingyas, who fled Rakhine state in Myanmar in recent weeks for an unregistered refugee camp, speak of a systematic campaign of killing, rape, torture and religious persecution by the Burmese border force. Monwara, a 25-year-old woman, says that last month Burmese soldiers held her and her eight-year-old daughter overnight. She was raped and fled to Bangladesh. Other recent arrivals speak of slave labour and torture. One says the Burmese have set up camps in Muslim graveyards.

Many local Bangladeshis dispute the refugees' claims. They already compete for food, land and jobs with more than 200,000 stateless Rohingyas, who live around Cox's Bazar, one of the poorest parts of Bangladesh. Some 28,000 Rohingyas have official refugee status, and live in two camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The rest are in unregistered camps. Conditions are atrocious, even by local standards.

For years the fear of a large-scale exodus from Myanmar, as happened in 1978 and again in 1991-92, has scuppered efforts by international agencies to nudge Bangladesh's government into improving the lot of the Rohingyas. Its attitude has softened in recent years, say the agencies. But this is largely confined to improving the lives of registered refugees.

Mostly, Bangladesh is an innocent bystander, but not always. Nosima, a 19-year-old Rohingya, says that after four years in Bangladesh the local MP in the border district of Bandarban sent her family and a few others back to Myanmar. On arrival, her newborn baby died. Locals warned her that she would be killed by the Burmese border forces. So she made her way back to Bangladesh, burying her baby's body on the bank of a river.

Saber Azam, the UNHCR's representative in Dhaka, believes the only solution to the Rohingyas' plight lies in Myanmar recognising them as its own people. But few in Bangladesh harbour hopes of fairness or humanity from the junta.

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