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A conceptual analysis of the Rohingya–host community conflict over scarce resources in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh hosts over a million Rohingya on humanitarian grounds and offers them food and shelter. The Rohingya compete with the local community for access to economic and environmental resources and public services. I analyse this competition and conflict using conflict theory, which is a sociological perspective on social conflict. I argue that while the Rohingya are unquestionably marginalized, so is the local community, who are citizens and have the right to life and livelihood. I find that the presence of the Rohingya constrains the poor local community's already limited access and that leads to conflicts on various issues such as access to inadequate public services, local and economic activities such as labour markets and environmental resources, and there is an emerging problem of safety and security that they are facing. We can understand this as a type of resource conflict which emerges within the south-south forced migration, statelessness, and refugee-hood context between the citizens and the refugees, as countries in the Global South, such as Bangladesh, generally lack the resources and capacity to govern people.

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Introduction

The world is beset by refugee crises. Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa are in turmoil, as is South Asia. The Rohingya make up most of the refugees in the South Asia region. They are considered to be one of the most vulnerable and persecuted communities in the world (Washaly, 2019). The Rohingya live in the northern part of the Rakhine state of Myanmar, but the government does not officially recognize them as an ethnic Muslim minority (Tilbe et al., 2017; Roy Chowdhury & Abid, 2022); it identifies the Rohingya as illegal immigrants originally from Bangladesh (Kipgen, 2013; Leider, 2018). The military junta government took away their citizenship rights in 1982 and made them stateless (Albert & Maizland, 2020; Roy Chowdhury, 2020). Immense discrimination, persecution, violations of their human rights, and atrocities that followed have forced the Rohingya to leave their homeland (Brinham, 2019). Millions of Rohingya have sought sanctuary in other Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh (Roy Chowdhury, 2021; UNHCR, 2019). At the end of August 2017, the military, police, and local militias undertook 'clearance operations' in Myanmar,

forcing over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh (Albert & Maizland, 2020; Miklian, 2019). Bangladesh is a new, tiny, resource-scarce country experiencing political uncertainty, economic instability, and inflation. It is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The country does not have refugee legislation either. About 24.3% of the population lives in poverty, according to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016 (HIES) (BBS & WFP, 2020). Despite this, the Bangladesh government and the local population accepted the Rohingya based on religious ethnic affinities and post-colonial shared histories.

Most of the Rohingya in Bangladesh are settled at Ukhiya and Teknaf. The Rohingya and the local community have common or similar language (many Rohingya can speak Bangla, and the Rohingya language is similar to the Chittagongian dialect of Bangla) and religion (Islam) in common (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). They share a common language, culture, and religion, and to a lesser extent used to share a sense of community, trust, and cohesion. Almost 85% of the Rohingya live in collective sites,¹ 13% in collective sites with the local community, and 2% in detached/dispersed sites² (MoDMR et al., 2019). Initially, the local communities offered the Rohingya protection, food, and shelter (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021; Grossenbacher, 2020), and unconditional solidarity and support. They interacted in daily life (Jerin & Mozumder, 2019), and they, particularly the older generations, were respectful toward and patient with each other (Grossenbacher, 2020).

However, it was from 2012, when a major communal violence and a state-led counter-insurgency operation took place in Myanmar and Rohingyas started coming in huge numbers to Bangladesh, that the ambivalence and local hostilities against the refugees increased steadily. Further, the massive influx of the Rohingya since the 2015 boat people crisis, and later even more in 2017–2020, has soured their relationship and led to tension and conflict. The conflict has strengthened the local community's identities and ties and emphasized the distinctions between them and the Rohingya. In Cox's Bazar, aid organizations provide more assistance and services to the Rohingya than to the local community because the Rohingya are more vulnerable and marginalized, and the international funding and aid that comes in are for the refugees and have to be channeled for that specific purpose in a time-bound manner, which will ensure a steady flow of funds to the NGOs. But many members of the local community are extremely poor, and aid organizations must provide for them too.

The unequal distribution of limited resources has the potential to produce conflict (Collins, 1975). To reduce that potential, organizations have launched ration and cash programmes. The poorest residents receive 20–25% of the relief. Allocating services to the local community is not enough, however. To equitably distribute aid, the organizations must correctly identify the eligible poor and prevent the overlap of beneficiary selection, and they must distribute resources fairly, not on the basis of political connections.

The members of the local community in Cox's Bazar used to receive free medical treatment from the government and aid organizations. The Rohingya now receive preferential access to primary healthcare services. Aid organizations favoured the Rohingya over residents during the pandemic. The difference in the delivery of healthcare services is a particularly sore point.

At present, the government shelters the Rohingya on humanitarian grounds, though it identifies them as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) (ISCG et al., 2019; Roy Chowdhury, 2019) and limits their access to identity, civil rights, public services, and

local opportunities (International Rescue Committee, 2019). To settle the Rohingya, the Bangladesh government donated over 6,500 acres of land, including 3,700 acres for the Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site, to set up 34 temporary camps in Cox's Bazar, a district in south-eastern Bangladesh (ISCG et al., 2019). Cox's Bazar hosts more than a million Rohingya, and the sheer number has overwhelmed the host community (Olney et al., 2019), particularly the poorest of the poor, whose livelihoods depend on land, grazing, forest resources, and fishing. Cox's Bazar is home to nearly 2% of the country's population (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). About 16.6% of the district's population lives in poverty. The poverty headcount (40.2%) is higher in Ukhiya *upazila* (sub-district) than in Teknaf (30%). The infrastructure is poor, and the cultivable land and water supply are insufficient. The district is prone to natural calamities and, therefore, environmentally vulnerable (Inter Sector Coordination Group-Bangladesh, 2019).

The services and opportunities in Cox's Bazar, limited even before the arrival of the Rohingya, are under additional stress now (Tay et al., 2018). The local community resents the competition and the preferential access to resources and humanitarian aid given by the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to the Rohingya (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). Nearly half the members of the local community resent the Rohingya's access to local facilities and services. About four-fifths oppose living near them (Xchange, 2018), and social tension is rising (Grossenbacher, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note at the onset that it is not the responsibility or fault of the refugees or host community members that a conflict is growing between them. Factors, mostly contextual and structural, such as existing poverty, lack of resources, lack of proper institutions, organizations and regulations in Bangladesh; the protracted nature of the conflict; and a lack of concerted effort from regional countries and the global developed world to resettle Rohingya refugees, play the most important roles in the deteriorating refugee–host community relationship (Habib, 2021, 2022).

The Rohingya are certainly marginalized: communal conflicts in Myanmar have displaced them, made them stateless, dispossessed them of their assets, and rendered them dependent on the relief and assistance provided by humanitarian groups and the government of Bangladesh. But the local community, too, is marginalized and poor, and the presence of the Rohingya constrains the poor local community's already limited access to inadequate public services and scarce economic and environmental resources. While most refugee studies literature tends to focus on resettlement to Europe, the US, and Australia, I focus here on the south-to-south migration of refugees fleeing violent conflict that gives a new perspective on refugee–host community relations. I analyse the conflict between these two rural proletariats using the conflict theory – sociological perspectives on social conflict – of Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), Lewis Coser (1957), and Randal Collins (1975).

Study area and method

Most of the Rohingya refugees are settled in the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar district. The specific research areas are the Kutupalong and Balukhali villages in Ukhiya and the Unchiprang and Leda villages in Teknaf. I undertook the fieldwork there in 2021, between June and October.

After the recent influxes, particularly into Ukhiya and Teknaf, the Rohingya now constitute three-fold the local population in these two sub-districts (UNDP, 2018b). The Rohingya make up 27% of the population in Ukhiya (total local population is 207,379) and 59% of Teknaf (total local population is 264,389) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2014; UNDP & UN Women, 2017). Most of the Rohingya live in extremely congested camps near the four villages. Over 600,000 Rohingya are accommodated at the Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site, known as the Mega Camp, the site is the largest refugee camp in the world (Hassan et al., 2018). Some live unregistered ('illegally') in the local community. The villages are heavily affected by refugee-host community disputes.

I adopted snowball sampling to select respondents. To get the primary data for this study, I conducted almost 30 in-depth interviews (22 males and 8 females): people of the host community (08), Rohingya (04), government and non-government officials (04), local journalists (02), environmentalists (02), healthcare professionals (02), business-people (02), community leaders (04), and teachers (02).

To understand the recent settings, evidence, and studies, I reviewed and analysed secondary sources: the academic literature; news articles; policy documents; reports published by local NGOs; online news portals; and the research and project reports published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Sociological understanding of refugee–host community conflicts in Bangladesh

Material and natural resources are limited in every society; groups, institutions, and organizations compete for access to scarce resources, and the competition leads to conflict between and among groups, institutions, and organizations (Johnson, 2008; Wiewiorka, 2013). Conflict is considered an important process of social change (Coser, 1957); the process of change may occur at the micro, meso-, and/or macro-level (Johnson, 2008; Wiewiorka, 2013). Conflict results from purposeful interaction among two or more parties in a competitive setting. It refers to overt behaviour rather than to the potential for action and subjective states (Oberschall, 1978, p. 291). 'Social' conflict refers to conflict in which the parties are an aggregate of individuals, such as groups, organizations, communities, and crowds, rather than single individuals, as in role conflict (Oberschall, 1978; Wagner-Pacifici & Hall, 2012).

Marxist conflict theory focuses on the economic class conflict between the proletarian working class, or the poor, and the bourgeois ruling class, or the owners of means and wealth. So, direct application of Marxist theory is not possible here, as I am not talking about the mode of production or class conflict here. In any case, the host community is primarily composed of peasant producers who are either landholders or landless, and wage earners and can be referred to as the rural proletariat, whereas the refugees, regardless of which class they previously belonged to, have been rendered stateless, dispossessed, and proletarianized by state and military-led counterinsurgency operations. So they are in somewhat similar positions in the economic class hierarchy. The refugees are slowly developing a kind of political consciousness about their social position. However, that cannot be understood through the lens of class consciousness or class position. It is a

kind of group consciousness where identity and religion play a primary role, and politics (not economics) mediates the primary mode of interaction between the refugees and host-communities.

Analysing modern 'industrial' societies, Dahrendorf (1959) criticizes Marx's viewpoint of early capitalism because his explanation of class formation and conflict is not relevant to a modern 'post-capitalist' industrial society, dominated as it is by corporate forms of capitalism. Social conflict derives from, and is driven by, power and authority (legitimate power). Power is factual and a fact of all human life (Dahrendorf, 1959). In societies with a corporate structure, control over power is more important than ownership; those who control power control society (Dahrendorf, 1959). Though the notion of power and legitimacy gives a pertinent direction for analysing the issue here, Dahrendorf's (1959) explanation of the conflict between dominant and subordinate classes in modern industrial societies cannot help us fully analyse the conflict in Cox's Bazar between the local community and the Rohingya because both are subordinate groups that have very limited power. But the conflict here is about a dominant group with access to citizens' rights (the host community of Cox's Bazar), who are relatively more powerful than the refugees, and are mobilizing discrimination to deny and control scarce resources due to differences in citizenship and migrant/refugee positioning vis a vis the state.

The government and bureaucracy have greater power and authority in rapidly industrializing societies like Bangladesh, where neo-liberal development is in sway. The government manages the refugee crisis with a top-down governance policy. The government and bureaucracy can be challenged, but not easily. In this context, the government is attempting to defuse the conflict by speaking with both groups and attempting to repatriate the Rohingyas or relocate them to island camps such as Bhasan Char. The refugees do not want to be relocated to the far island because of lack of facilities and are agitating. However, any challenge to the government and its bureaucracy brings in the possibility of strong repression and violence from the government, as well as the cutting of civil society activities and funds.

Social conflict [is] a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflict groups are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals. (Coser, 1956)

Coser is a functionalist (1956), however, scholars such as Turner (1998) considers his functionalism has elements of conflict theory and names it conflict-functionalism as he sees a functionality in conflict in the face of scarce resources. Conflict plays a key role in maintaining social systems in equilibrium and increasing group solidarity (Coser, 1957). Coser (1956) focuses on the positive function of conflict and proposes that conflict may be internal (within a group) or external (between groups). Internal conflict is considered less violent and more common than external conflict. Following Coser's classification, the conflict between the local community and the Rohingya can be described as external. External conflicts may strengthen group solidarity and facilitate social integration, but they may also create group distinctions –'us' and 'them' (Coser, 1956). The host community in Cox's Bazar self-identifies as a group (the in-group) distinct from the refugees (the out-group), despite cultural, language, and religious similarities; and trust, trustworthiness, altruism, social preference, and favouritism are higher among the members of the in-group.

A conflict between groups may stimulate new regulations and norms, including institutions (Coser, 1957). The Bangladesh government has enacted new laws and regulations on marriage between the two groups in Cox's Bazar and on the Rohingya's freedom of movement and the registration of their children's births, and it has enforced these laws and regulations. The government established the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) to manage the settlement and services for the refugees and host community. In collaboration with the UN-led Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), the RRRC provides public services and overall life-saving support in the camps and the most affected host communities.

According to Max Weber, the economy is not the main cause of conflict. Weber identifies three main resources – class, status, and power – that contribute to social inequality and set up the conditions for conflict. Weber also holds that scarce resources may be economic resources (broadly, all material conditions), power resources (social position in control or organizational networks), or status or cultural resources (control over rituals that create solidarity and group symbols) (Dahrendorf et al., 2006).

Following Weber, Collins analyses conflict from a micro-structural perspective and considers it one of the types of interaction between inter-related individuals or peoples (Collins, 1975): 'The unequal distribution of each scarce resource produces potential conflict between those who control it and those who do not' (Dahrendorf et al., 2006). The local community in Cox's Bazar is very poor and deprived of the economic opportunities they need. Resources and services, already limited, have been constrained further by the presence of more than a million Rohingya. The aid and development programmes of humanitarian agencies give the Rohingya preferential access. Consequently, an anti-refugee sentiment has grown and the local community considers the Rohingya as rivals.

'Potential conflicts become actual conflicts to the degree that opposing groups become mobilized' (Collins, 1975). Resources may be material resources or emotional, moral, and symbolic resources. The competing groups in a conflict need material resources for organization; they also need to mobilize emotional, moral, and symbolic resources to create social identity, boundaries, attention, and energy within the group. Both groups in Cox's Bazar are fighting to improve their physical position and unity. Although the groups have similar rituals of solidarity, they emphasize the importance of separating social identities and creating emotional strength among their own communities by making their group boundaries stronger.

Collins (1975) explains geopolitical theory based on the nation-state – rather than on the economy – and highlights the characteristics and roles of a nation-state: it uses its legitimate power in the form of rituals that produce nationalism. The nation-state deploys armies to defend its territorial boundaries from internal or external threats (Collins, 1975). Myanmar considers the Rohingya a national threat; its government has deployed military force against them in Rakhine for years, and they have forced the Rohingya to flee their homeland and seek refuge in bordering countries and killed many in military operations that demonstrate their genocidal intent.

Stensrud (2016) says that in the case of the Rohingyas, the legal definition of genocide should be avoided, as that would stretch the term too far. However, the non-legal and analytical dimension of understanding genocide as a process that develops over time, which precedes the actual act of genocide, has already happened in Myanmar. So, it can be used as a sensitizing term in a non-legal way so that the situation is continually

monitored and international pressure is sustained in Myanmar. It is in this context that Zarni and Cowley (2014) earlier said that the Rohingya issue in Myanmar is a slow-burning genocide.

The Rohingya refugee crisis has drawn the attention and response of the international community, including developing and developed countries. Several developing countries have taken steps: a case has been filed in the International Criminal Court at The Hague to convict military personnel of committing genocide against the Rohingya. Relations between Myanmar and neighbouring countries have deteriorated, and regional geopolitical conflicts have erupted. But China, Russia, and India strongly support the Myanmar military establishment, leading to a global geopolitical conflict of interests.

Inter-community conflict: relations between the Rohingya and the host community

The natural and economic resources in Cox's Bazar are scarce and the opportunities and public services inadequate. Aid agencies prioritize the needs of the Rohingya over those of the local community, who resent it and perceive the Rohingya as the 'other' (International Rescue Committee, 2019). About 65.3% of the local community feel that the Rohingya create social problems, 69.8% feel they are responsible for the environmental imbalance, and 76.7% of the local community feel that the Rohingya add to the pressure and demand on the already scarce resources. However, more than 70% of the local community acknowledge that the Rohingya have created opportunities, too (Jerin & Mozumder, 2019). Aid and humanitarian investment have increased, and medical services have been improved. Labour is cheaper, and there are more high-paying jobs for educated and skilled workers. The local communities are receiving material aid from NGOs in the form of tube wells, latrines, blankets, hygiene kits, and household items. New classrooms have been built for children, and markets have grown significantly (Olney et al., 2019; UNDP, 2018a).

Conflict over public services

The government does not have a policy or governance structure for distributing public services and regulating access to resources. And NGOs and INGOs, which are fund-driven, direct resources towards the Rohingya crisis. Teknaf and Ukhiya now have a million refugees and thousands of NGO employees, and the delivery of public services is a challenge for the authorities. During the influx of the Rohingya, the military personnel of Bangladesh used the buildings and premises of schools and local institutions as camps for temporary storage and relief; consequently, school-aged children could not go to school (Babu, 2020). Concerned about the safety and security of their children, especially girls, parents did not let them go to school. Some high school and college students dropped out to work in non-profit organizations or earn money for their families. The best local teachers quit to join NGOs and INGOs for better pay (Grossenbacher, 2020). A teacher at a school in Teknaf says:

Many students stopped going to school and started working with NGOs for better income. Teachers in local schools have involved themselves in such activities, which is why we are

lagging far behind in education. In addition, the government has completely stopped birth registration in these areas due to the arrival of the Rohingya; we are not able to enroll our children in schools due to not available service of birth registration services.³

MSF Holland does not provide the local community free medical care like it used to before the Rohingya arrived (ISCG& WHO, 2017). The health sector partners run over 150 health-care facilities – primary healthcare centres, health posts, special facilities, and field hospitals – in and around the camps in Cox’s Bazar (WHO, 2021), but, to receive international grants, they favour the Rohingya over the local community. District hospitals and sub-district health complexes are overloaded, and citizens wait longer for emergency services at clinics. Doctors at healthcare centres spend more time with refugees, and the quality of services has fallen (UNDP, 2018b). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the local community used discriminatory language against the Rohingya, accused them of carrying and spreading the virus, and alleged that aid agencies prioritized treatment for the refugees (Anas, 2020). A health officer at Palangkhali Family Planning Complex, Ukhiya says:

In the beginning, we provided health care to both the local and the Rohingya communities; at that time, there was no camp-based quality health care. There was a lot of pressure at that time; there was not enough medicine or medical equipment. Due to the proximity of the camp, we are still unable to provide adequate medicine and other services to the local residents. Because the Rohingya are still coming, the allocation for the local community is being spent on the Rohingya.⁴

The government and aid agencies restrict the local residents’ access to their own resources and to humanitarian aid. An official of a local NGO said that 75% of the assistance is allocated to the Rohingya and 25% to the local community. The local community feels that they have suffered due to the Rohingya presence. The host community thinks that aid agencies should assist them and the Rohingya in equal measure and that they have lost confidence in their government.⁵ If the local community’s dissatisfaction, frustration, and anti-Rohingya sentiment explode, the area may turn into a permanent conflict zone (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019).

The transport fare has increased in Cox’s Bazar. As the population has increased, so has the number of vehicles. The implementing NGOs and INGOs use vehicles to deliver food and essential supplies to the Rohingya, clogging the narrow, winding roads and causing pollution, traffic jams, and accidents (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019). The influx of refugees damaged many local roads in Cox’s Bazar, and more than half the residents feel that the roads are overcrowded now and worse than before (UNDP, 2018a).

To stop the smuggling of methamphetamine (*yaba*), a drug illegal in Bangladesh, and prevent the Rohingya from travelling to other parts of the country and settling there, the police have set up several check-points on the road from Teknaf to Cox’s Bazar (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019), restricting the local community’s freedom of movement and increasing their commute and travel time.

With the arrival of the refugees, there was undoubtedly a disruption in the delivery of public services in sectors such as health, education, and access to other resources. This was mostly because of the inadequate governance system for effective access and distribution policies, including the fund-driven nature of NGOs and INGOs. Apart from public services, the adverse effects of refugee settlement are also seen in the local economy of Cox’s Bazar. The influence on local food markets, housing rents, employment opportunities, and daily wages fuels conflicts between refugees and host communities.

Conflict over local economic opportunities

Thus, the influx of a huge refugee population, the arrival of the NGOs to manage the situation, and later temporary shifts in NGO funding has transformed the labour market structure of Cox's Bazar region that previously served local communities. The underprivileged local communities of Ukhiya and Teknaf could afford the housing rent until it was raised tremendously after the Rohingya and the NGOs arrived (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019). Some members of the local community are building new structures on their land and renting them out to implementing NGOs and INGOs to use as branch offices or use them as hotels or restaurants. Consequently, rents have risen so much that low-income people cannot afford the rent any more. A resident (female) of Ukhiya says:

Due to the arrival of many NGOs, house rent has increased from 2,000 Bangladeshi Taka or USD 22 to Bangladeshi Taka 6,000 or USD 65 now. Low-wage people are not able to rent a house at a higher price.⁶

The influx of refugees has also affected food security and prices, local jobs, labour wages, local businesses, and the government budget. The demand for food has increased, as has the cost of transportation, pushing up the prices of all local goods and services. The refugees sell huge quantities of relief food items at low prices near the camps, reducing the purchases at local shops and frustrating the shopkeepers. A businessperson at Teknaf says:

The population has multiplied here due to the arrival of the Rohingya. Demand for food has also increased, people are no longer producing food as earlier, and the number of agricultural lands has decreased. The local community, especially day laborers and low-income people, are not able to buy cheap food like before.⁷

The government used to let the Rohingya run small businesses near registered camps and work as fishing and construction labourers (Babu, 2020), but the refugee crisis in 2017 changed the employment structure. Nearly 42% (375,000) of the Rohingya are of working age (18–59 years), and the pressure they exert on the local job markets is immense (UNHCR, 2018). The overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Cox's Bazar is estimated to be 54.8%, or 3.4 percentage points lower than the national average of 58.2% (BBS, 2018). Emergency Level 3⁸ was the starting point of the influx, and the amount of foreign funds was significantly high, giving the local unemployed people, including the youth, the opportunity to work as translators, field facilitators, drivers, and labourers for the government and for local and foreign NGOs and development organizations (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019). The emergency level has fallen to 2, and it is now falling to 1; and a shortage of funds has forced many NGOs to stop their activities. The job opportunities are shrinking for the local youth, and they are dissatisfied.

The youth have formed *Adhikar Bastabayan Committees* (Rights Implementation Committees- organized by Bengali youths) in Ukhiya demanding job opportunities in local and international agencies. Hundreds of local people took to the streets on 4 March 2019 to demand jobs and blocked the highway for hours. They made 14 demands; one was that the local administration should stop NGOs from firing the local youth and instead give them jobs (Dhaka Tribune, 2019). Aid agencies employ local day labourers in camp construction activities, shrinking the pool of labour available to work on local farms and businesses. The daily labour wage in the camp areas used to be BDT 500/600 or USD 7,

but now it is only BDT 150/200 or USD 3. According to a study, in Teknaf and Ukhiya, the annual income of households with labourers and service workers dropped by more than 30% from 2016 to 2020 (Ullah et al., 2021). Fishing in the Naf River is one of the main sources of livelihood, but it is restricted now for reasons of border security, stopping Rohingya infiltration into Bangladesh, and drug smuggling. The influx of refugees certainly raised the cost of living and food, as well as created an imbalance in the labour market that resulted in reduced pay and job losses. People also want to address the issue of locals losing their jobs to NGOs as a result of a sudden drop in funding and the unregulated structure of Bangladesh's informal labour market, which also needs to be monitored and controlled.

Conflicts over environmental and natural resources

The host community's economy is heavily reliant on the environment and natural resources. Additional pressures from refugees and donor agencies may degrade the environment and deplete natural resources, putting local people at risk. Most of the large makeshift camps were established in the forest areas of Kutupalong and Balukhali and in other areas of Cox's Bazar. The large-scale influx of Rohingya refugees and their protracted presence have depleted Cox's Bazar's water resources and contributed to deforestation, land degradation, and environmental waste. Over 3,000 hectares of forest area – almost 1.67% of the forest area in Cox's Bazar and 0.05% of the total national forest area (Khatun & Kamruzzaman, 2018) – were cleared of vegetation to settle the refugees, and the trees were cut for fuelwood. The resident communities rely on forest resources for their household firewood, as do the refugees, and the competition over forest resources is escalating tension. An Assistant Forest Officer, Teknaf, says:

Since the arrival of the refugees, the forest classification has changed, the water level has also dropped a lot, and the canals have been filled to make way for new houses. The environmental system has been destroyed. Nearly 8,000 acres of land in Teknaf and Ukhiya have been occupied and destroyed. Rohingya cattle are damaging local gardens, causing the local community to quarrel with them.⁹

More than 60% of the land in Cox's Bazar is forested – and not suitable for farming – in comparison with 40% of the entire country (UNDP, 2018b). Within six months of the arrival of the Rohingya in 2017, 100 hectares of cropland had been destroyed, and the refugee settlements and humanitarian agencies occupied almost 76 hectares of arable land (UNDP, 2018b). Therefore, the residents, especially those living near the camps, cannot cultivate their agricultural land. Many have stopped farming and are labouring in the local market and inside the camps for low wages (Sohel & Siddiqui, 2019). A resident (male) of Teknaf says:

When we gave land to the Rohingya, they cut down our trees; additionally, we can't now cultivate the lands, before we could raise cattle, now we can't, if we keep our cattle for grazing, they are being stolen.¹⁰

Freshwater sources, particularly in Teknaf, are limited, and the local community and refugees are often in conflict over access. More than 5,700 deep tube wells were installed in the camps after the arrival of the Rohingya in 2017 (UNDP, 2018a). Both the local community and refugees have withdrawn groundwater so heavily that the water level has fallen

5–9 m (UNDP, 2018a). Local people usually depend on ponds, canals, and the Naf River for their daily needs, but heavy rainfall polluted the surface water, and waterborne diseases spread between both communities. The drainage and solid waste facilities are insufficient. Since the refugees arrived, nearly 10,000 tons of surplus solid waste have been produced in a month (UNDP, 2018c), polluting the air and contaminating the surface water.

Conflict over safety and security

If the Rohingya refugees are not repatriated and they stay in the camps, in the long-term frustration may encourage them into criminal activities and extremist networks, posing a safety and security problem for Bangladesh (International Crisis Group, 2019). Mohib Ullah – a well-known Rohingya Muslim leader and chairperson of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH) – was shot and killed in Kutupalong camp on 29 September 2021 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The gunmen were later identified as members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). By killing Mohib Ullah, the gun groups wanted to establish and extend their factional power over the entire community and hinder the repatriation of the Rohingya that the Bangladesh government is trying to accomplish (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

The Rohingya in the camps have several factions, and the conflict between them ruins security and peace for both the local community and the Rohingya, and making them feel unsafe (Minar, 2021). The refugees and some influential local people make money by smuggling *yaba*, and they make, sell, and buy fake Bangladeshi passports/documents (Hossain et al., 2020). A Councillor at PalongKhali Union, Ukhiya, says:

In 2017, the Rohingya started taking shelter around our homes. They gradually started stealing fruits from our gardens, and we were suffering from a kind of insecurity. They were always in conflict with the local community for theft and robbery. They are also involved in smuggling *yaba* from Myanmar, and local youths are addicted to drugs and involved in drug smuggling.¹¹

Rohingya refugees are victims of atrocities and displacement in Myanmar; they are perpetrators of crime in the host countries; and they are also victims of police brutality. Some of the Rohingya and the host community members and groups have recently been exceedingly impatient and violent towards each other. That has also elicited a harsh response from the state security agencies. A Rohingya robber group shot and killed a youth leader of the ruling party *Awami League* in the Hnila union under Teknaf. In protest, the local community blocked the highway for a couple of hours and damaged several shops and houses in the Rohingya camp of Jadimura union (The Daily Star, 2019). The local police alleged that seven Rohingya were involved in the murder, arrested them, and killed them in a ‘gunfight’.

The Hakim gang is alleged to have kidnapped members of the local community for ransom and killed them if their relatives did not pay (Hindustan Times, 2020). While looking for the gang leader in the forest near the Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar in mid-2020, the police killed four Rohingya. Over 40 Rohingya refugees suspected of being involved in drug smuggling,¹² murdering, kidnapping, robbery, and human trafficking activities have been killed by the police, Rapid Action Battalion, and Border Guard Battalion in ‘gunfights’ (The Irrawaddy, 2019).

These incidents of violence and counter-violence are deeply disturbing as they put the human rights of the Rohingya and the citizen’s rights of the host community in jeopardy.

The Rohingya – particularly women, children, and girls – are vulnerable to being trafficked by the local community. The Rohingya have been kidnapped from the camps for money; they blame the host community. Girls and young women are hired as housecleaners or maids in Cox’s Bazar town but are forced to participate in commercial sexual activities. In May 2020, a group of 306 refugees left by boat for Malaysia, but they could not succeed, and the Bangladesh authorities had to rescue them at sea (UNHCR, 2021).

Security-related issues, such as murders, robberies, smuggling, trafficking, kidnapping, and armed conflict, affect both refugees and members of the host society. Not only are the Rohingyas involved in criminal activity; some powerful local people are also involved in illicit trade with the Rohingyas in the locality. Different Rohingya groups are in conflicts with one another in an attempt to preserve their dominance in the camps. The host government must have the required policies to maintain a safe and peaceful environment both within and outside of the camps.

Discussion and conclusion

The Rohingya who have fled Myanmar have found refuge in several countries in South and Southeast Asia. About 101,000 Rohingya live in Malaysia and 18,000 in India; and Indonesia, Nepal, and Thailand have smaller populations (Tremeau, 2021).

Bangladesh provides refuge to more than a million Rohingya. Though the government does not officially facilitate their social, economic, and political integration into society, it provides the Rohingya protection and life-saving support, including the opportunity to relocate to Bhasan Char Island, in collaboration with international aid agencies.

Because Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its Protocol 1967, it has no obligations towards the economic inclusion of the Rohingya, but a considerable number of the Rohingya participate in informal economic activities.

Refugees can be integrated, repatriated, or relocated, but none of these approaches has yielded results in the case of the Rohingya. It is claimed that over the past 10 years, more than 10,000 Rohingya have been resettled with UN assistance in countries like Canada, the United States, Japan, and New Zealand (Gorlick, 2020), which is a very small number in comparison to the total number of Rohingya refugees. Therefore, only a few Rohingya have been resettled (Mostofa, 2022). Resettlement of Rohingya refugees is always challenging since the United States and Europe are reluctant to accept more Muslim refugees (Das, 2017). Bangladesh and the international community must take steps to repatriate, integrate, or relocate the Rohingya in third countries, particularly in the relatively prosperous and rich developed countries.

In a recent statement, the US expressed a desire to enhance the resettlement of Rohingya people from the areas, including Bangladesh, so that they can rebuild their lives there (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2022). Additionally, the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh has already emphasized more opportunities for the resettlement of Rohingya refugees in Japan under the direction of UNHCR (Palma, 2022). Surprisingly, the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum does not mention the Rohingya in Bangladesh, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite being explicitly focused on the refugee crises in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The EU is more concerned with refugees on and near its borders than it is with refugees from ‘far-off’ countries (Hossain, 2020). Moreover, the Rohingya were detained on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea in an Australian-run

detention centre. The Australian Immigration Centre puts further pressure on refugees to voluntarily return to their home countries, including by offering financial assistance (Holmes & Doherty, 2017). The British Foreign Secretary emphasized the need for a safe and sustainable return of the Rohingya people to their homeland in Myanmar, despite a recent request from Bangladesh's foreign minister for the UK to take in 100,000 refugees (bdnews24, 2022).

The key mandate of the UNHCR is repatriation and resettlement, but the UNHCR or the other UN agencies have failed to negotiate the resettlement of the Rohingya with a developed country. On 16 January 2018, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement to voluntarily repatriate 156,000 Rohingya to Myanmar by 2020. But no action has been taken yet (UNDP, 2018a).

On 1 February 2021, a coup overthrew the civilian government in Myanmar and established a military government. About 600,000 Rohingya live in the country's Rakhine state in concentration camps, or camps for internally displaced people, or outside camps; the current military administration in Myanmar may violate the human rights of the Rohingya in even worse ways (Rahman, 2021), and repatriating the Rohingya to Myanmar will be even more challenging now (Tayeb, 2021).

The international aid community continues to offer the Rohingya and other crisis-affected populations in Bangladesh financial and other assistance, in a practice known as 'responsibility sharing' (Khan & Dempster, 2019), but funding for humanitarian aid fell significantly from 2017 to 2020 (Mostofa, 2022), because donors had the Afghan and Ukrainian refugee crises to contend with. The shortage of funding may challenge the refugee management system in Bangladesh and exacerbate the conflict between the Rohingya and the host community.

Bangladesh considers the Rohingya children to be citizens of Myanmar. The country does not have a policy for their educational integration. The Rohingya children can only attend the schools in the camps that are operated by UNICEF and Save the Children International; they are not allowed to attend public schools.

The host community is concerned about their freedom of movement and the deteriorating transport and communication facilities in Cox's Bazar. The presence of the Rohingya has severely raised food prices and housing rents, lowered the labour wage, and increased the demand for jobs in local markets. Economic adversity and competition over inadequate resources lead to conflict, by Coser's definition (Coser, 1956). In line with Coser's explanation, new rules and regulations have been instituted: the local community and the Rohingya may not marry; and the office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) has been set up to manage and govern the refugees. The Rohingya are restricted from travelling within Bangladesh to prevent their informal assimilation into society.

The Rohingya do not have the right to cultivate the land in Bangladesh. Both communities depend on scarce natural resources, and their competition has brought about deforestation, loss of vegetation and species, land degradation, soil erosion, and the depletion of water resources. Clearing and destroying forests and other natural resources for collecting firewood and building new settlements are common causes of conflict. Both communities face social, economic, and environmental challenges. The host community in Cox's Bazar feels that the influx of the Rohingya has interfered with their normal social lives.¹³ Members of both communities have started conflicts on numerous instances. The

law enforcement agencies are working to stop these incidents, but the large population makes it difficult.

In a poverty-stricken area like Cox's Bazar, an integrated approach to managing refugees and host community members is required to ensure that a section of the marginalized poor is not excluded. The government and the NGOs need to design and implement long-term projects that develop and provide resources to empower both communities to practice alternative livelihoods, boost their confidence, and facilitate sustainable development. Capacity-building training and sensitization programmes would improve the knowledge and skills of the residents and refugees. Aid agencies can provide refugees with vocational and skill development training that they can use in Myanmar after repatriation.

The government and NGOs must improve the quality of the healthcare and education they deliver to both communities. Government banks and local NGOs can offer local traders business loan facilities. The refugees and host community should be actively involved in environmental conservation programmes such as social forestry, reforestation, soil and mountain management, and the use of renewable energy like wind and solar power. The number of patrolling forest conservation groups needs to be increased. Multiple stakeholders, especially traditional leaders (*imam and Majhi*), play a key role in resolving conflicts and promoting social cohesion. Local and border security threats are a challenge for the host community and the government; the initiative must be taken to reduce criminal and terrorist activities in the camps and host communities.

This study concludes that the influx undoubtedly brought about significant changes in the sociocultural milieu, the security situation, and the social cohesion between the host society and the refugees.

From the perspective of conflict theory, both the Rohingya refugees and the poor citizens of Cox's Bazar belong to the marginalized category. Rather than negotiating with the state over their respective rights, it's really unfortunate that they are fighting among themselves. It should be noted that, even before the Rohingyas arrived, Cox's Bazar was not a particularly prosperous region, and thus, in any case, the responsibility of developing the region and the quality of life of the citizens, whether before or after the arrival of the refugees, is largely in the hands of the state. Now, after the arrival of the refugees, it is also the responsibility of international civil society organizations and regional and international governments to help Bangladesh manage the crisis situation. As both host communities and refugees are underprivileged and poor. Refugees are entitled to the same benefits and services from the host country that the local community receives as part of their citizenship rights in their home country. By providing proper public services, economic support, access to environmental resources, and security, a host country like Bangladesh has a responsibility to protect the civil rights of local residents as well as the humanitarian rights of refugees. The host country and the international community must approach both communities equally and in an integrated approach to take the necessary actions to improve their standard of living in order to stop any situation from getting worse and increasing tensions. Additionally, developed countries and international aid organizations should step forward to assist the government of Bangladesh repatriate the Rohingyas to Myanmar or resettle them in a third country in accordance with their wishes.

Notes

1. Only Rohingya refugees live in these 'collective sites', which are similar to camps. This category includes old formal refugee camps, makeshift settlements, and areas of spontaneous settlements in which there are no Bangladeshi communities.
2. Villages and isolated areas where Rohingya refugees live among Bangladeshi host people are referred to as dispersed sites.
3. A Teacher interviewed at Teknaf on 20 July 2021.
4. A Health officer interviewed at Ukhiya on 8 August 2021.
5. An NGO official interviewed at Cox's Bazar on 15 October 2021.
6. A female resident interviewed at Teknaf on 14 July 2021.
7. A businessman interviewed at Teknaf on 12 September 2021.
8. A new policy on emergency preparedness and response has been introduced by UNHCR in 2017. The policy sets out the steps that usually take place before an emergency. The policy also defines different levels of emergencies: Level 1: proactive preparedness – Ability to initiate preparations for a potential humanitarian crisis, such as missions and initiatives to increase human, financial, and material support. Level 2: stepped-up bureau support – is activated when additional support and resources are required for an operation. Level 3: UNHCR response as a whole – activated in extremely severe situations where the scale, speed, and consequences of the crisis exceed the existing response capacity (UNHCR, 2017).
9. An Assistant Forest Officer interviewed at Teknaf on 12 September, 2021.
10. A resident (male) interviewed at Teknaf on 17 September, 2021.
11. A Councillor interviewed at Ukhiya on 13 July 2021.
12. There are immense challenges and problems with drug smuggling and addiction not only among Rohingya refugee youths but also among the poor locals who take up this trade full-time or to supplement their merger income by smuggling drugs in desperation as that is the only way to survive and to provide for the family. It most certainly has a debilitating effect on the health of addicted youth (Alsaafin, 2018).
13. A resident (male) interviewed at Cox's Bazar on 20 October 2021.

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