

## **Bangladesh's Policy on Rohingya Refugees: Securitization or What?**

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### **Abstract**

This article adopts Copenhagen School, and Paris School approaches belonging to the broader framework of securitization theory in explaining whether Bangladesh's policy on the 2017-18 Rohingya refugee influx from neighbouring Myanmar has been securitized. In doing so, it analyses how the political discourses and governmental actions in Bangladesh have transformed over time. The findings suggest that human security-focused discourse, which was sensitive to the refugees, prevailed in Bangladesh during the initial days of the refugee influx. However, the national security-focused discourse has started to dominate the country's refugee policy as Bangladesh's early repatriation-oriented refugee policy has failed to yield any development for more than two years. Moreover, the lack of sincere efforts from Myanmar to provide security assurance and necessary civil rights to the displaced Rohingyas has made them reluctant to go back. As a result, the refugee settlement in Bangladesh is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. In such a situation, newly imposed securitized actions taken by Bangladesh as restricting the refugees from movement, mobile communication, internet, and livelihood opportunity could be counterproductive. It recommends Bangladesh to develop a comprehensive policy on the refugee issue that will address the country's security concerns and facilitate sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar.

### **Keywords**

Bangladesh, Myanmar, Rohingya, refugees, securitization

### **Introduction**

Previously, Bangladesh had hosted two major Myanmar-origin Rohingya refugee exoduses, first in 1978-79 and second in the early 1990s. The third and the most massive exodus of Rohingya refugees in recorder history started shortly-after 25 August 2017, when a Rohingya insurgent group named the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked several security check-pots in Myanmar's Rakhine state, the place of habitual residence of the Rohingyas. In retaliation, the Myanmar armed forces carried out a series of violent military offensives throughout the Rohingya villages in Rakhine state. Following the military crackdown, more than 742,000 Rohingya people took refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh's Teknaf-Ukhiya Peninsula region in Cox's Bazar district. Initially, Bangladesh was reluctant to allow

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the incoming refugees to take shelter inside its territory, but as the humanitarian situation deteriorated and global opinion intensified, the government decided to accept refugees (Oh, 2017). The local people came up with heavy hearts to provide much-needed emergency relief assistance to the Rohingyas fleeing persecution from the other side of the border. With the support of United Nations (UN) agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), and donor countries, the Bangladesh government has led a massive humanitarian response to 'the world's fastest-growing refugee crisis' of that time (UN News, 2017). The international community has applauded Bangladesh for its contribution to the 'global public good' by providing shelter and assistance to these large number of Rohingyas (Sun & Haung, 2019).

Bangladesh is neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, nor has it any legal status for refugees in its Constitution. From the very onset of the Rohingya refugee crisis, Bangladesh has followed a short-term approach to the crisis. The Bangladesh government did not acknowledge the newly arrived Rohingyas as 'refugees' and signed an immediate repatriation agreement with the Myanmar government on 23 November 2017. Following this agreement, Bangladesh and Myanmar have made two attempts to repatriate the refugees — first on 15 November 2018 and a second one on 22 August 2019. Both the attempts have failed primarily because the Rohingyas are reluctant to go back to the Rakhine state without securing citizenship and other fundamental rights which are being denied by the Myanmar government (Banka, 2019). Hence, it is very likely that the Rohingya displacement crisis will become a protracted one (Uddin, 2020). Therefore, the short-term approach of Bangladesh has already failed as the repatriating process has reached a deadlock (International Crisis Group, 2019). The Bangladeshi officials fear that acknowledging Rohingyas as 'refugees' would only attract more Rohingya to come to Bangladesh from the violence-prone Rakhine state (Sullivan, 2020). Moreover, the short-term approach has practical consequences for the humanitarian response as it restricts the aid agencies to initiate any medium or long-term facilities for the Rohingyas.

Following the second aborted repatriation attempt in late August 2019, Bangladeshi public opinion has significantly shifted against the Rohingyas (Bhuiyan, 2019). The locals in Cox's Bazar have started to blame the Rohingyas for various social problems and have become reluctant to host them anymore (Uddin, 2020). Growing increasingly tired of hosting refugees, the Bangladesh government has also toughened its policies towards the refugees to coerce them to go back to Myanmar (Chowdhury, 2019). Some of the newly taken measures include restrictions on movements, confiscation of mobile phones, ban of high-speed mobile internet, installation of barbed wire fences around the camps, increased surveillance, the expulsion of some NGOs from the humanitarian operation, and reports of increasing human rights violations of refugees by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies (International Crisis Group, 2019). The Bangladesh government has justified these measures to ensure necessary 'security, law, and order' inside the refugee camps (Shahid, 2019).

What is the origin of those visible changes in Bangladeshi public opinion and the government's policy towards the Rohingya refugees? The theory of securitization might provide an essential explanation to this question. Securitization theory holds that the creation of a security issue is the result of an actor's effort to construct topics as representing a security threat through speech act (Buzan et al., 1998). It argues that a securitized issue is resolved through *extraordinary measures*, which are not justified under normal circumstances. In this article, the securitization

theory will be utilized to examine how different actors in Bangladesh have contributed to the creation of Rohingya refugees as a security threat, which allowed the government to implement the ‘tougher’ policies. Accordingly, the newly introduced restrictive policies inside the refugee camps are assumed as securitized measures in this article.

To pursue the research objectives as described above, the article explores how the Rohingya refugee crisis has been securitized in Bangladeshi political landscape following the second failed repatriation attempt in August 2019, leading to the implementation of restrictive policies inside the refugee camps.

Although different explanations and dynamics might contribute to this change in public perception of Rohingyas as a security threat, this article assumes a central role for political leaders in the social construction of this perception. Accordingly, the main goal of this research is to examine how this perception has been constructed in the political landscape following the second aborted attempt to initiate the repatriation process in August 2019. This study can contribute by highlighting the question if the Rohingyas need protection against conflict and prosecution in Myanmar or Bangladesh needs protection against the threats from the Rohingyas.

Based on the mentioned research question, this article consists of the following elements. The first section presents the theoretical framework of the research. In this section, securitization theory as a framework for analysis, as well as its two different approaches, Copenhagen School and Paris School, will be discussed. Afterwards, the methodology is explained. The third section traces Bangladesh’s policies towards Rohingya refugees from a historical perspective. The fourth section constitutes the main empirical chapter of this article. This section explains how the political discourses and policy measures on the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh developed and shifted over time. Based on the findings and analysis, the last section offers some policy recommendations.

### **Theoretical Framework: Securitization Theory**

Traditionally, the notion of security was concentrated on the threat or actual use of force between political actors. The traditional approach primarily focused on military issues, where the states were both the subjects and objects of reference. Securitization theory was developed as a result of the ‘widening and broadening’ of security agenda after the end of the Cold War. Through this development, new security issues like the environment, public health, refugee, and migration got significant attention as security objects by both analysts and policymakers. Initially, the Copenhagen School expanded the literature on security issues, by introducing a new approach to security that is social constructivist and multi-sectorial. Inspired by Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, another understanding of securitization has been developed, which is known as the Paris School approach. It focuses on the role of power relations, bureaucratic politics, and institutional interests in determining who or what issues are securitized and what sort of measures are promoted to resolve the threats.

### ***The Copenhagen School***

The Copenhagen School of security studies was primarily developed by Waever, Buzan, and De Wilde (1998). It argues that a security issue is socially constructed whether the security issue is actual or not. The approach makes a difference between non-politicized, politicized, and securitized issues. A particular issue becomes *politicized* when it enters the public debate. Afterwards, it becomes *securitized* if the

problem is considered as an urgent, existential threat. This process justifies for controversial measures that go beyond usual political actions (Buzan et al., 1998).

The core concepts introduced by the Copenhagen School are the referent object, the referent subject, the securitizing actor, and the audience. Firstly, the referent object is the entity that has a legitimate claim to its existence and survival (e.g., state security, national identity, culture). Secondly, the referent subject is the entity that is threatening-whether imagined or real. Thirdly, the securitizing actor is the one who declares the referent object being threatened. In general, the securitizing actor is the government representing the citizens, but it could also be different institutions, media, or other pressure groups. The only prerequisite is that the actor has the support from the audience to act on behalf of the referent object (Buzan et al., 1998).

The Copenhagen School focuses on public announcements and speeches of a securitizing actor as an initial step to initiate a securitization process. The speech act creates urgency by signaling that “if we don’t act now, it will be too late” (Buzan et al., 1998). The political elite in power always needs the legitimacy of their political actions. The speech act indicates the policy preferences of a government to the people. The securitization is considered as completed if the audience (e.g., public opinion) accepts the proposed extraordinary measures. As securitization is an intersubjective process, security is needed to be expressed and legitimized in the dialogue between the actor and audience. However, in the context of a democracy, if an elected government speaks for securitization, the Copenhagen School assumes that the audience (people) has already supported the speech act of the actor (the government) (Ibid). In the case of Bangladesh’s policy on the Rohingya crisis, audience acceptance is possibly not a challenging step, as the government is democratically elected and, thus, officially regarded as legitimate actors for speaking on behalf of the people.

In the case of the securitization of migration, the government is the central securitizing actor. The head of state is considered as the primary representative of the state and its people, therefore the one who sends signals to migrants and the international community about the state’s current policy (Buzan et al., 1998). McGahan (2009) argues that the Copenhagen School “offers a lens through which to highlight certain actors and processes in analyzing immigration policies, particularly how societal threats are constructed and defended”. McGahan (2009) further mentioned that the political, economic, and social dynamics within the host country should be taken into consideration to analyze the securitization of refugees and migrants. According to Watson (2007), the identity construction of refugees by political elites and media actors has a direct impact on a country’s refugee and asylum policy. He believes that when asylum seekers are presented as *genuine refugees*, the government tries to respect international refugee laws. However, when asylum seekers are perceived as a threat, restrictive policies are introduced that undermine international refugee laws (Watson, 2007).

### ***The Paris School***

The Paris School approach, also known as in-securitization, was initially introduced by Bigo (2000) and later extended on by Vuori (2008), Atland and Ven Bruusgaard (2009), and Balzacq (2010). This approach argues that a securitization process is not necessarily about speech acts. It states that securitization takes place by controlling populations through different bureaucratic procedures, surveillance, and risk management tools (Huysmans 2006). It believes that actual policies are not open to misinterpretation in the way words are as they are a solid and definite act. It puts

particular emphasis on the relevance of action in the process of securitization, which is multi-layered and context-specific. While the Copenhagen School emphasizes on speech acts to understand securitization, Paris School argues that an institution can create a sense of insecurity and unease just by specific actions.

The Parisian approach believes securitization processes help the established elites to strengthen and consolidate power over the risk populations (Huysmans 2006). According to Didier Bigo (2002), security “is often marked by the handing over of entire security fields to professionals of unease who are tasked with managing existing persistent threats and identifying new ones”. These professionals of unease are empowered with in-depth information and claim the monopoly to identify threats and handle those threats with securitized actions. The approach also acknowledges that security discourses of fear and unease are employed to justify more intrusive and draconian government control measures (e.g., Hammerstadt, 2014).

The Copenhagen and Paris School approaches can be considered as complementary. Securitization of an issue is not only about justifying exceptional measures through speeches but also about the execution of specific actions. However, the two approaches have a difference in understanding the political debate. While the Copenhagen School explains how *speech acts*, legitimizing exceptional measures can bring about securitization, the Paris School shows how a particular issue can be securitized, avoiding any political debate. Thus, securitized *actions* are carried out without a precise construction of any threat. Therefore, both the approaches on securitization will be useful to analyze Bangladesh’s policy on the Rohingya refugee crisis within both discourse and practice.

## Methodology

At first, following the Copenhagen School approach, this research conducts a discourse analysis as a qualitative tool to analyze how the security discourse on the Rohingya refugees has developed and changed over time in Bangladesh. Discourse analysis highlights how dominant discourses create structures of meaning, which is closely related to the Copenhagen School’s constructivist approach to security. The empirical material primarily focuses on the Bangladesh government’s *speech acts* related to the Rohingyas coming from Myanmar. However, the research also takes the discourses constructed by Bangladeshi media into consideration, as they are also dominant agenda-setting actors within the political debate. Secondly, following the Paris School approach, the analysis will focus on the actual whether the *policy measures* by the government indicated securitization that will provide more substantial empirical support for the research. The research has relied on secondary data collected from (official) governmental statements, newspapers, books, relevant journals, reports published by various research organizations.

## Historical Background of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

The Rohingyas are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group from Myanmar’s Rakhine state, previously known as Arakan. The Rakhine state is separated from Bangladesh by the two-kilometer wide Naf River and from the rest of Myanmar by the Yoma Mountain Range. The origin of the ‘Rohingya’ word is disputed in academia, and there are different historical narratives. However, At least one historical account by Francis Buchanan (1799) suggests that a group of people referring to themselves as ‘Rooinga, or natives of Arakan’ and subscribe to Islamic faith have been staying in the present-day Rakhine State since the late eighteenth century. However, the

Myanmar government denies the existence of Rohingyas as a distinct ethnic group and consider them as 'illegal migrants' from Bangladesh (Ferrie, 2013).

Right after the independence of Myanmar in 1948, tensions between the government and the Rohingyas gradually increased as some of the Rohingya leaders previously lobbied to merge two Rohingya populated townships of Arakan with East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (Sarkar, 2018). From February to July 1978, the Myanmar military carried out *Operation Dragon King* in the northern Arakan region. The official statement of its purpose was to register citizens in the region and expel 'foreigners' before a national census. As a result of this military operation, more than 200,000 Rohingyas crossed the Naf River to take refuge in Bangladesh, which created in the 'first major wave' of refugees in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar region (Ullah, 2011). Bangladesh set up makeshift refugee camps and accepted aid and assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The then Bangladesh government tried to resolve it through diplomatic engagement. A bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar resulted in a mass refoulement of the refugees by the end of 1979 (Rashid, 2019). However, several studies have confirmed that poor conditions in the refugee camps, reduction of relief assistance, and abuses by Bangladeshi officials forced the refugees to return to Myanmar (Akins, 2018). Later, UNHCR also acknowledged that up to 10,000 Rohingyas had died of malnutrition and epidemics in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar (Crisp, 2018). Therefore, Bangladesh's handling of the 1978-79 Rohingya refugee crisis was a matter of controversy.

In 1982, a new citizenship law was introduced in Myanmar, which did not recognize the Rohingya as one of the 135 'national races.' As a result, the Rohingyas became stateless overnight (Constantine, 2012). Between 1991 and 1992, the Myanmar armed forces launched Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation in northern Rakhine state involving killings, sexual violence, and the destruction of villages and mosques. It resulted in 'the second major wave' of an estimated 250,000 of the Rohingyas to Bangladesh (Piper, 1993). Bangladesh officially recognized the people as 'refugees' and delivered emergency shelter and relief. UNHCR started to provide relief and protection assistance in March 1992 in the 20 registered refugee camp in Cox's Bazar (Kiragu et al., 2011). Bangladesh was again able to reach an agreement with Myanmar to repatriate the Rohingyas on 28 April 1992. All but around 20,000 of the refugees went back to Myanmar between 1992 and 2001 (Rashid, 2019). Similar to the situation in the late 1970s, the Bangladeshi authorities failed to ensure the 'safe and voluntary' nature of the repatriation of refugees (Crisp, 2018). The majority of the repatriated refugees were reluctant to go back and had insufficient information about the security situation inside the Rakhine state (Abrar, 1995).

After hosting a significantly large number of refugees in 1991-92, Bangladesh's policy towards the Rohingyas significantly shifted as the exodus became 'a regular phenomenon' (Rashid, 2019). A smaller influx of Rohingya refugees took place in 1997. The Bangladeshi armed forces tried to halt the influx by force, but some Rohingyas were able to enter inside Bangladeshi territory illegally (ACAPS, 2007). From June 2012 to June 2015, a series of anti-Rohingya communal violence took place in the Rakhine state. Although the Bangladeshi authorities tried to deny any new entry, more than 300,000 Rohingyas took shelter among the host communities in Cox's Bazar (Rashid, 2019). In October 2016, following a low-scale insurgent attack, a military crackdown was carried out in the Rohingyas villages along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. As a result, over 87,000 Rohingyas people crossed into Bangladesh despite restrictive measures by the Bangladeshi security

forces. This time the new arrivals settled in the new Balukhali makeshift settlement in Ukhiya sub-districts. The new arrivals were perceived as illegal migrants instead of refugees, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provided limited humanitarian aid to them (ACAPS, 2017).

The ‘third major wave’ of Rohingyas to Bangladesh started from 25 August 2017. As of 30 April 2020, Bangladesh was hosting 860,175 Rohingyas in registered refugee camps located in different parts of Cox’s Bazar district (UNHCR, 2020). However, the actual number of Rohingyas currently staying in Bangladesh is roughly 1.3 million, according to several observers (Uddin, 2020).

Significant similarities can be drawn between Bangladesh’s responses to the Rohingya crisis during 1978–79, 1991–1992, and 2017–2018. Right after the refugee influx in August 2017, Bangladesh allowed the refugees to enter on ‘humanitarian grounds’ and started preparation for an early repatriation process. Although Bangladesh and Myanmar have agreed to resolve the 2017-18 Rohingya influx through repatriation, the durable solution of the crisis is almost unachievable without restoring necessary civil and political rights of the Rohingyas in Myanmar (Rashid, 2019). Since the 1970s, successive governments in Bangladesh have been addressing the Rohingya refugee influxes as temporary crises. The short-term policy response from the Bangladeshi authorities has repeatedly failed to yield any durable solution to this displacement crisis. Moreover, the ‘forced repatriation’ of Rohingyas during the two previous cases raises an essential question on the ‘voluntariness’ of any potential repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar (Rashid, 2019). With this background, the next section will analyze the implementation of refugee securitization within Bangladesh’s political landscape.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The Bangladeshi political narrative on the 2017-18 refugee crisis can be divided into two different timeframes. The first timeframe encompasses the period from 25 August 2017, the day on which the ‘third major wave’ of the Rohingyas broke out, to 22 August 2019, the day on which the Rohingya refugees turned down a Bangladesh-Myanmar joint repatriation initiative for the second time. This failed repatriation attempt indicated a significant discursive shift in the political discourse of Bangladesh. Therefore, the second timeframe covers the developments that started to unfold from 26 August 2019 onwards.

### **Timeframe I: Human Security Discourse**

Right after the Rohingya exodus in late August 2017, much of the discourse in the Bangladeshi political landscape was sincere to the human security needs of the refugees. The government presented the crisis into broader political narratives of national generosity and religious piety. At the same time, public opinion primarily emphasized religious solidarity, the rights of refugees, and the moral obligation to shelter the refugees fleeing life-threatening situations from the Rakhine state (Lewis, 2019).

#### ***Discourse Constructions***

On 11 September 2017, while delivering relief to the newly arrived refugees in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said (Dhaka Tribune, 2017a):

We can feed 160 million people of Bangladesh, and we have enough food security to feed the 700,000 refugees [...]. We have let the Rohingyas in on humanitarian

grounds, and I ask the people of this country to help ease their suffering in whatever way they can. Bangladesh wants to maintain peace and good relations with its neighboring countries, but it cannot accept unjust acts of the Myanmar government. We will do all we can to ease the suffering of the Rohingya refugees.

In the speech, the target audience was the people of Bangladesh, who were asked to help the refugees in ‘whatever way’ they could. The prime minister portrayed the Rohingyas as the referent object who were ‘in need of security,’ whereas the referent subject was the Myanmar government, which violated the security of the Rohingyas. On 21 September 2017, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the UNGA. In her speech, the prime minister went on to describe the atrocities committed against the Rohingyas as ethnic cleansing (Hasina, 2017):

I have come here with a heavy heart. I have come here just after seeing the hungry, distressed and hopeless Rohingyas from Myanmar who took shelter in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. This forcibly displaced people of Manner are fleeing an ‘ethnic cleansing’ in their own country where they have been living for centuries.

A few days later, while attending a meeting in Washington, DC, Sheikh Hasina reaffirmed strong commitment to uphold the values of humanitarianism by saying (Dhaka Tribune, 2017b):

If necessary, we (the people of Bangladesh) will eat one meal a day and share another meal with these distressed people (refugees). After all, we are human beings, and we stand for humanity. We are not that rich, but we have the heart. They are human beings, and we cannot throw them out into the Bay of Bengal.

Roughly one year later, on the 73<sup>rd</sup> Session of the UNGA, the prime minister continued to mention Bangladesh’s commencement to ensure security needs of the refugees by saying (Hasina, 2018):

The 1.1 million Rohingyas hosted in Bangladesh are living in an uncertain situation. To the best of our ability, we have made arrangements for their food, clothing, healthcare, child-care and security. So long, the Rohingya are not able to return home, they should, as a temporary arrangement, be able to live in a good and healthy condition.

The speeches mentioned above by the Sheikh Hasina highlights the government’s sensitivity to the humanitarian situation. The speeches also signalled that Bangladesh was eager to make the necessary sacrifices to ensure the security needs of the refugees. Thus, the narrative constructed by the government emphasized on ensuring the security and safety of the refugees, not the security national security of Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshi media also echoed a pro-refugee narrative while reporting on the situation (Isti'anh, 2018). Right after the refugee exodus, mainstream media outlets regularly have published reports, articles, and opinion pieces that were dominated by the narratives of suffering and victimhood of the Rohingyas. For instance, an editorial piece of The Daily Star, the most circulated English daily in Bangladesh, titled 'Starving Refugees from Myanmar: Get Coordinated Relief Efforts Going.' The article welcomed the government's decision to set up new camps for the refugees. It called for coordinated efforts with international agencies to ensure food security and other basic needs for the refugees.

Most of the people in Bangladesh responded to their government's call to help the refugees (Joehnck, 2017). Right after the exodus, local people in Cox's Bazar started to respond by distributing food, clothing and giving money. Individuals, civil society organizations, and religious groups from different parts of the country soon arrived in the region to provide food, medicine, and other relief materials. Massive rallies and donation collection campaigns for the Rohingyas were also held in several cities in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2019). While reporting for *Al Jazeera* on the humanitarian emergency in Cox's Bazar, Katie Arnold (2017) wrote:

Moved by their suffering, citizens of Bangladesh have rallied together to deliver much-needed assistance to the new arrivals. Most distribute their goods from large trucks that now clog the rural road between Cox's Bazar and Teknaf.

The Rohingya refugee situation of 2017-18 dominated the political debate of Bangladesh. The refugee-friendly narrative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina significantly increased her domestic position and international credibility as a champion of humanitarianism (Chowdhury, 2017). Large political banners were raised in major public squares proclaiming Sheikh Hasina as 'mother of humanity' and the 'champion for human rights' (Lewis, 2017). Moreover, calls were made inside the country demanding the Nobel Peace Prize for Sheikh Hasina (Rahman, 2017). The discussion enables us to understand that the governmental discourse on the initial situation did not articulate a national security threat for Bangladesh. The criteria of threat construction are thus not met, and there was no securitization of refugees through *speech acts*.

### ***Policy Measures***

Although the initial response to the refugee influx was very local and disorganized, soon, the Bangladesh government took total control of the situation and asked the international humanitarian organizations to initiate a well-coordinated humanitarian response (Lewis, 2019). The government quickly contributed USD 4.37 million from its funds to the humanitarian response plan, which was developed for the first six months of this humanitarian emergency (Khatun, 2018). Moreover, around 6,340 acres of hills and reserve forest land in Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar was allocated to set-up temporary shelter, relief storage, and medical facilities for the refugees and humanitarian agencies (Aziz, 2018).

The government mobilized 'the entire state machinery' to deal with the complex humanitarian emergency in Cox's Bazar (Wake and Bryant, 2018). At the national level, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) became the central decision-making authority. A National Task Force (NTF), chaired by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and having representatives from 29 ministries and agencies, started oversight

and strategic guidance to the overall response. The Office of Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) was set-up as the governing body responsible for the provision and coordination of humanitarian assistance at Cox's Bazar level. Around 40 government officials were deployed as Camp-in-Charge (CiC) to look after the administration inside the refugee camps. The Office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC), the primary public administrative mechanism of Cox's Bazar district, started to lead a District Task Force (DTF) for executing government policies and operational coordination of the humanitarian response. This multilayered bureaucratic coordination structure developed by the government ensured a timely and well-disciplined response that saved many lives and reduced the suffering of the refugees (Sullivan, 2020). Therefore, the policy measures taken by the government indicate that ensuring the basic needs of the Rohingyas was the primary priority during the initial period of the refugee situation.

### **Timeframe II: National Security Discourse**

The second timeframe started in late August 2019 as the Rohingyas turned down a highly publicized repatriation initiative on 22 August. Initially, Myanmar handed over a list of 3,450 Rohingyas to Bangladesh, who were cleared for repatriation. On 22 August 2019, the Bangladeshi officials prepared a large motorcade to send the Rohingyas, and a Myanmar delegation was waiting to receive them on the other side of the border. However, the listed Rohingyas refused to go back primarily due to the lack of security guarantee from the Myanmar government (Rahman, 2019). The Rohingyas have demanded a list of prerequisites that include citizenship rights, ethnic recognition, freedom of religion, and movement inside Myanmar before any repatriation (International Crisis Group, 2019). Although a previous repatriation attempt in November 2018 failed similarly, this second aborted made the Bangladesh government seriously frustrated as they became 'tired of hosting' the refugees (Chowdhury, 2019). Moreover, public opinion in Bangladesh also started to shift dramatically against the refugees, and a popular narrative of Rohingya as a security risk started to develop (Sullivan, 2020). As a result, a discursive change in Bangladesh's governmental discourse and implementation of securitized measures can be noticed.

### **Discourse Constructions**

On his initial reaction to the failed repatriation attempt, Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said;

We (Bangladesh) cannot be taken hostage to their (Rohingyas') demands. They have to realize their demands after returning to their own country (Myanmar) [...]. The comfort will not be there in the future because those who are helping now (aid agencies) will not do so in the future [...] We (Bangladesh) have spent Tk 2,500 crore to Tk 3,000 crore from our own fund. This money will also not be available in the future. The Rohingyas who do not want to return should go back for the sake of their future (Bhuiyan, 2019).

In the statement, the foreign minister indicated to Bangladesh as the *referent object*, which became a 'hostage' to the refugee situation. He presented the Rohingyas refugees as the *referent subject*, whose presence became a threat to Bangladesh.

Moreover, Mr Momen also signalled that the government would not fund any long-term refugee settlement inside the country.

On 25 August, three days after the failed repatriation attempt, around 200,000 Rohingya attended a rally inside the refugee settlement to commemorate 'Rohingya Genocide Day,' the anniversary of the outbreak of violence in northern Rakhine State in 2017. Although the rally appeared peaceful, this huge political gathering by the Rohingyas raised some serious security concerns among the government officials. Moreover, most of the media outlets covered the event in a way that fed public anxiety. For instance, a front-page report of a well-circulated Bengali newspaper titled 'The Rohingya showdown: conspiracy to destabilize the country' (Ahsan, 2019). Several news reports like this raised security concerns over the mass mobilization ability of the refugees and questioned the event's connection with the failed repatriation attempts (Sullivan, 2020). Against the backdrop of a failed repatriation bid, the rally increased domestic pressure on the government to take a 'tougher line against the Rohingya' (International Crisis Group, 2019).

On 4 September 2019, Bangladesh's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense recommended installing fences around the refugee camps as an *extraordinary measure* to resolve the increased security concern over the massive 25 August rally. Muhammad Faruk Khan, a member of the parliamentary committee, said;

We have been observing the Rohingyas are freely moving around the camps and outside. Therefore, to ensure security, we recommended taking measures so that no one can come out of the camps and no one can enter inside the camps (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

On 11 September 2019, while giving an interview to *Anadolu Agency* on the impact of failed repatriation and the 25 August rally, Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam indicated that the government was preparing to be strict in addressing the refugee situation. The state minister said (Kamruzzaman, 2019);

Bangladesh is an independent and sovereign country, but we have challenges in maintaining our own law and order. If we have any issues arising from them (Rohingya), we must take a tougher stance.

The above mention statement from the state minister suggests that the government had decided to implement some specific *extraordinary measures* to safeguard Bangladesh's security challenges from the refugees, the *referent subject*. While criticizing the international community for showing 'less interest' in helping Bangladesh to repatriate the refugees to Myanmar, Shahriar Alam also said;

Until now, they (the international community) have failed to visit those villages in Rakhine state from where Rohingya people fled, but they are randomly working in Bangladesh without any interruption. Ignoring existing law and norms some, NGOs and aid agencies are infiltrating Rohingya to stay in Bangladesh. We must be harder against this (Kamruzzaman, 2019).

This statement constructed some NGOs and aid agencies as a *threat* as they were ‘working against’ Bangladesh’s interest, the early repatriation of the refugees. Moreover, the state minister also suggested that the government would take necessary *extraordinary measures* against them. On 27 September 2019, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed the 74<sup>th</sup> session of the UNGA, third time since the outbreak of the Rohingya exodus. This time, she referred the situation as ‘crisis’ and a ‘security’ threat for the first time by saying;

The crisis is now entering its third year.... The crisis is now going beyond the camps; indeed, despite all our efforts to contain it, the crisis is now becoming a regional threat. Moreover, increasing congestion and environmental degradation is challenging the health and security of people in the host area. We are bearing the burden of a crisis that is of Myanmar’s own making (Hasina, 2019).

On November 2019, while attending an international conference in Dhaka, the prime minister further referred the refugee situation as a ‘threat,’

I would like to say that more than 1.1 million Rohingya citizens of Myanmar fled to Bangladesh in the face of persecution and they are a threat to the security not only for Bangladesh but also for the region (CNN-News18, 2019).

In the statements mentioned above, the prime minister was indicating the refugees as the *referent subject*, whose presence is a ‘security’ concern. The security of Bangladesh and its people are articulated as something to protect, thus representing the primary *referent object*. Moreover, Sheikh Hasina also referred that the security of the entire South Asian region is under threat for the refugee situation in Bangladesh. Thus, this time the narrative constructed by the government started to emphasize on ensuring the regional security of South Asia in general and the national security Bangladesh in particular, not the security needs of the refugees.

Echoing the official narrative, mainstream Bangladeshi media outlets started to publish stories on socio-economic impacts of hosting refugees as ‘threats’ to political stability and national security of Bangladesh. The media presented a securitized discourse in a way that can be considered as a ‘coordinated campaign’ (Ahsan, 2019). For instance, on 6 September, 2019, a report by of The New Nation, a widely circulated English daily in Bangladesh, titled ‘Crime on Rise amid Uncertainty over Repatriation: Security, Vigilance Beefed up at Rohingya Camps’. The report presented a close linkage between ‘crime gangs’ and ‘anti-repatriation elements’ inside the refugee camps. It also welcomed increased presence and surveillance by law enforcement agencies to reduce ‘subversive’ activities by the refugees. The public opinion on the Rohingya refugees also started to shift significantly since August-2019. Following the second aborted repatriation, the host community in Bangladesh concluded that they might have to live with the refugees for the foreseeable future. This realization further frustrated the people as they have been facing problems like environmental damage, price hike, and change in the demographic balance (Sullivan, 2020). Now, the most dominant narrative among the host community is that the

refugees are reluctant to go back to Myanmar as they are 'living a comfortable life in Bangladesh', while some of them even demand that the Rohingyas should be repatriated them back forcibly (Bhuiyan, 2019).

From the above mention discussions, we can say that the governmental discourse on the refugee situation started to construct a national security threat for Bangladesh since August 2019. The criteria of threat construction are visible, and thus refugees were securitized through *speech acts*. In other words, a national security discourse started to dominate at the expense of human security discourse. Thus, the discourse analysis suggests the relevance of the Copenhagen School's securitization approach in the context of Bangladesh's current refugee situation.

### Policy Measures

In August 2019, the refugee situation entered into the third year, and reports on criminal activities like murders, drug smuggling, and human trafficking were on the rise near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. (International Crisis Group, 2019). The deteriorating law and order situation in Cox's Bazar, coupled with the failure to make any breakthrough in the repatriation process, made the Bangladeshi officials anxious and frustrated (Chowdhury, 2019). As a result, the Bangladesh government has taken a series of *securitized actions* that appear to address the national security concerns but significantly restrain the security needs of the refugees.

The first and most immediate *securitized measures* were bureaucratic shuffling and tightening of administrative control inside the refugee camps. Right after the second failed repatriation attempt, the government replaced Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mohammad Abul Kalam and several other administrative officers as they were known to be 'sympathetic to refugees' and 'highly regarded' by humanitarian agencies (International Crisis Group, 2019). From the first week of September 2019, the government took control of all administrative duties inside the refugee camps. Previously, the government outsourced recruitment and site management activities through UNHCR and IOM. The government deployed more personnel to 'directly control' the site management and coordination responsibilities (Hasan, 2019).

The second *securitized action* by the government was strict restrictions on freedom of movement of the refugees. Following the recommendations made by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense, the government assigned the Bangladesh army to erect barbed-wire fences around refugee camps on 'security grounds.' This move was made primarily to impose travel restrictions on refugees beyond the highly congested area allocated for their temporary settlement. Recently, the government installed watchtower and CCTV cameras to 'strengthen the surveillance' on the refugee camps (Sakib, 2020).

The third *securitized action* and perhaps the most drastic one taken by the government was the imposition of communication ban on the refugees. On 02 September 2019, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) banned sales of SIM cards inside the refugee camps in the 'interest of state security and for preserving law and order' (Irani, 2019). Following this executive order, Bangladeshi officials inside the camp reportedly launched a campaign of confiscating SIM cards and mobile phone from the Rohingyas inside the refugee camps (International Crisis, Group, 2019) A few days later, the authorities shut down 3G and 4G networks in an attempt to the 'further clampdown on communications' among the refugees by depriving them access to high-speed internet (UNB, 2019). The restrictions on mobile communication and the internet were primarily aimed at

preventing the refugees from organizing any political event in the future. However, this decision has made it difficult for the Rohingya to contact their relatives inside the Rakhine state and the Rohingya diaspora. Moreover, these ban on mobile and internet also created obstacles to disseminate emergency information on situations like monsoons, cyclones, and pandemics (Sullivan, 2020).

The fourth *securitized action* taken by the government was against NGOs and aid agencies operating in Cox's Bazar. The government had barred 41 NGOs from working inside the refugee camps and imposed a complete ban on two international NGOs in Cox's Bazar over their allegedly sabotaging the refugee repatriation process (Aziz, 2019). Several other humanitarian agencies reported that their activities in Cox's Bazar became very problematic due to increasingly strict bureaucratic obstacles and scrutiny. These newly imposed restrictions had directly interrupted the humanitarian response as the aid agencies became unable to operate efficiently under such conditions (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Apart from restrictive policies imposed in the refugee camps, the reports of alleged human rights violations of the refugees by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies are also significantly increasing. As of 02 March 2020, at least 50 Rohingyas died in 'gunfights' with law enforcement agencies over their alleged involvement in 'crimes' like drug trafficking, robbery, and human trafficking (Alif and Aziz, 2020). Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other rights groups have accused the Bangladeshi security agencies of 'extrajudicial executions' and demanded independent investigations. However, the government has repeatedly denied such allegations raised against its security personnel, and no initiative has been made to investigate any of those incidents (Kamruzzaman, 2019).

Therefore, after the second aborted repatriation attempt, the government's *actions* started to address Bangladesh's national security by marginalizing some basic security needs of the refugees. In other words, Bangladesh's current *actions* are increasingly focused on protecting its security against the *threats* refugees, not on protecting the refugees against the prosecutions in Myanmar. Thus, the post-August 2019 *actions* taken by the Bangladeshi authorities suggest the relevance of Paris School's securitization approach to the Rohingya refugees.

### **Policy Implications**

On 16 September 2019, the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFMM) published its report on the security and human rights situation inside Myanmar. According to the report, roughly 600,000 Rohingya remaining inside the Rakhine state were subject to 'systematic persecution' and living 'under the threat of genocide' (OHCHR, 2019). In such a situation, any premature repatriation of the Rohingyas from Bangladesh to Myanmar may not bring any sustainable solution to the decades-long displacement crisis. Therefore, the Bangladesh government needs to continue its diplomatic activities to mobilize international pressure on the Myanmar government to ensure security in Rakhine state and restore the legitimate civil, and political rights demanded the Rohingyas. According to a report by the *Refugees International*, poor coordination in information sharing and last-minute notification campaigns were the two primary reasons for the failed repatriation attempts. Therefore, to make a breakthrough in the much-anticipated repatriation initiative, Bangladesh needs active consultancy with the refugee community inside the camps.

There are some real security threats for Bangladesh, like increased drug-related crimes, human trafficking, and militancy in Cox's Bazar (Sullivan, 2020).

However, the newly imposed restrictions on movement and communication can be counterproductive for Bangladesh. These securitized policies have the potential to instigate more criminal activities and militancy, which would add more pressing security challenges in southern Bangladesh, a crime-prone and underdeveloped region (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Any rapid repatriation of the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar is highly unlikely (Rashid, 2019). Hence, most of the refugees will stay in Cox's Bazar in the upcoming years (Uddin, 2020). In such a context, at least a medium-term humanitarian response strategy is needed for Bangladesh ((Sun and Haung, 2019). Recently, the government has allowed the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its partner agencies to provide institutional education to the Rohingya children inside the camps. The rights groups and humanitarian activists have welcomed this decision as a 'positive step' (Al Jazeera, 2020). Similarly, the refugees need skill development and livelihood opportunities to empower themselves for a better future after any future repatriation to Myanmar. Therefore, Bangladesh should mobilize more financial and material resources from the international community to develop safer living conditions for the refugees and the host community members in Cox's Bazar.

## Conclusion

This article assessed whether the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar had been constructed as a security issue within the political landscape in Bangladesh. Theoretically, it has shown that the combination of two approaches of securitization — introduced by the Copenhagen School and the Paris School — helps to explain the securitization of a refugee situation in a comprehensive way. The Copenhagen School shows how *speech acts* contribute to make refugees a security issue and legitimize *extraordinary measures*. On the other hand, the Paris School shows how an issue transforms into a threat by some specific *actions*. Hence, it helps to explain the securitization of refugees in Bangladesh by focusing on the policy measures taken by the concerned government agencies.

The empirical findings of this article suggest that a human security discourse dominated Bangladesh's policy response during the initial days of the refugee influx. However, following several failed repatriation attempts, the governmental discourse has started to focus on the country's national security concerns. As a result, narratives and policy responses from Bangladesh have been increasingly shifting towards a securitized trajectory. Thus, the government has started to impose restrictive policies inside the refugee camps on security grounds that violate certain rights and security needs of the refugees. Bangladesh has been facing the Rohingya refugee influx from Myanmar since the late 1970s. Therefore, the political leadership in Bangladesh should come up with a comprehensive policy to resolve the refugee crisis in a way that ensures the country's security concerns and welfare of the Rohingyas.

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