

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

The Rohingya Crisis amid Shifting Dynamics in Rakhine

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Summary

Armed conflict in Rakhine state in Myanmar has escalated since early 2024, forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes, including Rohingya. As international aid funding diminishes, Bangladesh has tightened restrictions in the Cox's Bazaar refugee camps, leaving refugees with limited resources and little hope of a safe return.

Eight years after the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar in 2017, their situation remains unresolved. The unfolding crisis in Myanmar and in Rakhine, particularly, has given rise to new threats. The growing armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) in Rakhine State since late 2023 has left nearly one million Rohingya refugees stranded in camps throughout Bangladesh, while the future of the remaining Rohingya population in Myanmar is still unclear.

The Genesis of the Crisis

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group, mainly Bengali-speaking, residing in Rakhine State, Myanmar. They number approximately 1.8 million, with over 1.3 million living outside Myanmar as refugees and the rest, internally displaced.¹ Denied citizenship under Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law, they are considered stateless and face systemic discrimination, violence and exclusion. Since the military crackdown in 2017, over 700,000 people fled to Bangladesh, living in sprawling refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. Others live in forced exile, scattered across India, Thailand and Malaysia.

Myanmar’s government contests their identity as an indigenous group. It calls them illegal ‘Bengali’ immigrants from Bangladesh,² leading to their persecution and displacement. In 2013, Rohingya exiles living in Saudi Arabia formed a group called Harakah al-Yaqin, or ‘Faith Movement’, in response to increased persecution after the 2012 Rakhine State riots. It changed its name to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in 2016. A humanitarian disaster ensued after a crackdown by the military in August 2017 in response to an armed attack by ARSA on 30 police posts and an army base in Maungdaw.³

These attacks prompted the Myanmar military to launch a scorched-earth campaign that forced over 7,00,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.⁴ The military’s actions were later characterised by the United Nations (UN) as having the characteristics of a genocide.⁵ Meanwhile, an estimated 6,00,000 Rohingyas remain within Myanmar.⁶

¹ [“Myanmar Situation — Stateless from Myanmar \(Rohingya Refugees and Asylum-seekers\)”](#), UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 31 August 2025. ()

² [“Rohingya: The Deadly Situation in Myanmar Explained”](#), Amnesty International UK, 1 April 2025.

³ [“Myanmar: Attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army \(ARSA\) on Hindus in Northern Rakhine State”](#), Briefing, Amnesty International, 22 May 2018.

⁴ Wa Lone, Kyaw Soe Oo, Simon Lewis and Antoni Slodkowski, [“Massacre in Myanmar: One Grave for 10 Rohingya Men”](#), Reuters Investigates, 9 February 2018.

⁵ [“Myanmar’s Rohingya Persecuted, Living under Threat of Genocide, UN Experts Say”](#), Press Release, United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 16 September 2019.

⁶ [“600,000 Rohingya Still in Myanmar at ‘Serious Risk of Genocide’: UN”](#), The Straits Times, 16 September 2019.

Many are confined to camps for displaced people, monitored, and their movements restricted.

In Bangladesh, relations between the host communities and refugees remain tense in Cox’s Bazar due to the presence of armed groups, drug trafficking and criminal networks. Young Rohingyas, lacking access to education and jobs, remain vulnerable to extremist recruitment while the militarisation of camps and cross-border insecurity raise further concerns. Due to donor shortages, the World Food Programme had to cut monthly rations for Rohingya refugees in 2023 and 2024. Due to donor fatigue and mounting domestic pressure, Bangladeshi authorities have further tightened restrictions on Rohingya refugees, limiting their access to healthcare, freedom of movement and employment opportunities.⁷

Although the Rohingya issue has drawn harsh international censure and condemnation, international pressure hasn't done much to alter Myanmar's stance thus far. In a letter to the Security Council in 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for immediate international action.⁸ Despite mounting global outrage, Myanmar has remained intransigent. Furthermore, there is some political agreement in Myanmar regarding the Rohingya problem. On the Rohingya issue, the state, the civilian government run by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and a large portion of the populace of Myanmar seem to be united in their nationalist stance, effectively shutting the door to outside pressure.⁹

Rise of the Arakan Army

The Arakan Army (AA) was founded in 2009 in Laiza, Kachin State, and was supported and trained militarily by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).¹⁰ It has emerged as a central actor in Myanmar’s civil conflict. Ethnic Rakhine Buddhists formed this group in response to decades of political marginalisation, economic neglect and cultural suppression by Myanmar’s central government. It has gradually gained ground in northern Rakhine State, taking control of significant townships like Maungdaw and Buthidaung and extending its territory along the Bangladeshi border.¹¹

⁷ [“Funding Shortfalls Force WFP to Cut Food Assistance for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”](#), World Food Programme, March 2023.

⁸ António Guterres, [“Rohingya Refugee Crisis a ‘Human Rights Nightmare,’ UN Chief Tells Security Council”](#), *UN News*, 28 September 2017.

⁹ [“Myanmar’s Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase”](#), Asia Report No. 292, International Crisis Group, 7 December 2017.

¹⁰ [“The Arakan Army’s Journey: From Rebels to Rulers and A New Arakan Paradigm”](#), Issue Brief, Center for Arakan Studies, July 2024.

¹¹ [“Rohingyas Call for Justice, Equality, Peaceful Coexistence and Inclusive Governance in Arakan”](#), Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK), 23 December 2023..

This strategic move puts the AA at the centre of the shifting balance of power in the area. It gives it considerable leverage to decide the fate of the Rohingya who are still living in these areas. The AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan, have been urged by 28 Rohingya organisations in December 2024 in a joint statement to guarantee justice, equality, peaceful coexistence and inclusive governance in areas that were previously destroyed by the military junta.¹²

Furthermore, with substantial battlefield gains and a growing support base among smaller armed actors,¹³ the AA is establishing a sphere of influence that extends well beyond Rakhine, presenting a significant threat to the National Unity Government (NUG) and the military junta.¹⁴ With its presence expanding into the Bamar-majority heartland,¹⁵ the AA is poised to assume a dominant leadership role in the conflict. The AA’s battlefield victory over Myanmar’s junta in Rakhine has allowed it to dominate all of Myanmar’s border with Bangladesh.

Rohingya militant groups, long divided in camps, reunited in 2024 and negotiated a ‘unity’ agreement in November 2024 to put aside their rivalries and unite against the AA, whom they perceive as an increasing threat to Rohingya hopes for repatriation and protection.¹⁶ If this spirals into an all-out insurgency, the consequences will be disastrous—for civilians caught in the crossfire, for already strained intercommunal relations in Rakhine, and for Bangladesh, which stands to gain a new wave of refugees as well as a setback in its repatriation plans.

Rohingya Repatriation

In the last few months, there has not been a coordinated, significant repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar since the mass exodus in 2017. The lack of assurances regarding safety, citizenship rights and freedom of movement in Rakhine State has been a significant factor in the failure of several attempts to start the process. In April 2025, media reports suggested that Myanmar was preparing to repatriate 1,80,000 Rohingya.¹⁷ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

¹² [“Joint Statement: Rohingya’s Call for Justice, Equality, Peaceful Coexistence and Inclusive Governance in Arakan”](#), *Rohingya Today*, 23 December 2024,

¹³ Tin Shine Aung, [“Strategic Gamble: The Arakan Army, Rakhine and India”](#), *LSE South Asia Blog*, 10 March 2025.

¹⁴ Rajeev Bhattacharyya, [“5 Factors That Catapulted Arakan Army to Unprecedented Success Against the Myanmar Military”](#), *The Diplomat*, December 2024.

¹⁵ Drake Avila, [“The Arakan Axis: Insurgency Intensifies in Southwest Myanmar”](#), *Stimson Center* (Southeast Asia Section), 5 June 2025.

¹⁶ [“Rohingyas in Bangladesh Start Mobilisation to Fight Rebel Arakan Army, ICG”](#), *The Week*, 18 June 2025.

¹⁷ [“Myanmar Confirms 180,000 Rohingya Refugees Eligible to Return, Says Bangladesh”](#), *Reuters*, 4 April 2025.

(UNHCR) reported the first small-scale voluntary return of Rohingyas in years in May 2025, with about 82 people returning to Rakhine and another 30 to 40 anticipated.¹⁸

Despite this restricted movement, the chances of a more widespread and secure return remain slim. The AA and the Myanmar military are at odds again, and the security situation in Rakhine has drastically worsened, making return highly unsafe due to shifting power and a lack of trust on both sides. Myanmar’s authorities have confirmed that about 1,80,000 people from a list of about 8,00,000 names that Bangladesh submitted are eligible for return, and another 70,000 are still being reviewed.¹⁹ Although Naypyidaw officials have promised to expedite the process, no precise schedule or repatriation roadmap has been made available.

UN Secretary-General Guterres called for renewed international action in March 2025 after visiting the refugee camps, but by August 2025, “no tangible progress” had been made.²⁰ Bangladesh urged continued diplomatic pressure on Myanmar during the July 2025 UN Human Rights Council session, reiterating that the repatriation of Rohingya must be viewed as a shared global responsibility. As such, the recent small-scale voluntary returns do not herald the start of large-scale repatriation, even though they represent a symbolic change following years of impasse.

According to recent reports, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are still very hesitant to return to Myanmar in the current circumstances. Refugees constantly frame their future in terms of safe, dignified and peaceful repatriation conditions, which they do not believe currently exist, according to a September 2025 OHCHR study documenting grassroots Rohingya perspectives.²¹ *Human Rights Watch* also notes that while murders, discriminatory practices that amount to “apartheid”, and other human rights abuses persist in Rakhine State, refugees refuse to return home.²² A 2025 Deutsche Welle report echoes these worries, stating that Rohingya communities have ‘always insisted’ on a return that is both safe and dignified, while emphasising that repatriation is only possible if security and rights guarantees are improved.²³

These findings therefore emphasise that large-scale repatriation is unlikely to be implemented.

¹⁸ [“UNHCR Reports First Voluntary Rohingya Repatriation, with 82 Returning Last Week”](#), *The Business Standard*, 25 May 2025.

¹⁹ [“Myanmar Confirms 180,000 Rohingya Eligible to Return, Bangladesh Says”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 4 April 2025.

²⁰ [“In Bangladesh, UN Chief Vows to Prevent Rohingya Suffering as Aid Cuts Loom”](#), *UN News*, 14 March 2025.

²¹ [“Report on Rohingya Perspectives: Pathways to Their Safe, Dignified, and Peaceful Future”](#), United Nations Bangladesh, 23 September 2025.

²² [“Bangladesh: Halt ‘Pilot’ Plan to Return Rohingya”](#), *Human Rights Watch*, 31 March 2023.

²³ [“Bangladesh Eyes Rohingya Return, but Hurdles Remain”](#), *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 5 April 2025.

Role of Regional Actors

Before the 2021 coup, China had a cautious relationship with Myanmar's military. However, it became one of the few countries to recognise the new junta without first condemning the coup.²⁴ Since then, as Myanmar has become more isolated due to Western sanctions, it has become more dependent on China for political, economic and military support. The UN Special Rapporteur claims that Chinese state-owned and private enterprises gave the Myanmar military more than US\$ 260 million worth of military hardware and dual-use raw materials, such as metals and aviation fuel, between February 2021 and December 2022.²⁵

Beijing's strategic interests, especially in border stability and infrastructure projects like the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and the Rakhine-Yunnan oil and gas pipeline, have fuelled its increased involvement. The Three Brotherhood Alliance, consisting of a coalition of the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), established in 2019, has also promised to protect Chinese investments in conflict areas. China has consistently turned down international requests to stop arms transfers and has demonstrated its determination to maintain influence over all parties involved in the conflict in Myanmar.

India views Myanmar as a vital partner for its Act East Policy, regional connectivity, and stability in the northeast. The two countries share a 1,600-kilometre border.²⁶ The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) strengthens India's economic and strategic presence in the area. It connects Kolkata to Sittwe port in Rakhine and subsequently to Mizoram.²⁷ Long-term unrest in Rakhine jeopardises this project's feasibility and raises the possibility of a rise in cross-border insurgency and refugee flows into northeastern Indian states.

China's increasing infrastructure investments in Rakhine and its increasing control over the junta and ethnic armed groups have raised strategic concerns for New Delhi. India has thus sought to engage with the military regime in a measured and practical manner, striking a balance between its democratic ideals and the necessity to protect its infrastructure investments in Myanmar, secure its borderlands, and reduce Chinese influence.

²⁴ Yun Sun, [“China and Myanmar After the Coup”](#), Stimson Center, 25 July 2021.

²⁵ [“Enabling Atrocities: UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar Reports on Arms Transfers and Resource Flows to the Military Junta”](#), UN Human Rights Council, March 2023.

²⁶ [“India's Connectivity Projects with Myanmar, Post-Coup: A Stocktaking”](#), Observer Research Foundation, 22 February 2023.

²⁷ Vinod Shah, [“Unlocking Prosperity between India and Myanmar: The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project”](#), *Urban Transport News*, 22 April 2024.

Way Forward

Many Rohingya refugees believe it is no longer feasible to return home because the Arakan Army now controls their former areas. While the AA has gained ground in the state's northern regions, the Tatmadaw still controls critical military installations, Sittwe, and portions of southern Rakhine. It also has significant military influence thanks to its superior air power, artillery and naval presence. The Tatmadaw's restrictions on humanitarian access, which include preventing NGOs and UN agencies from entering camps, restricting the delivery of food and medical supplies, and requiring special permits for aid convoys, worsen the situation for the Rohingyas who are still in Myanmar.²⁸

Meanwhile, the Rohingya refugees are causing increasing anxiety in Bangladesh, where they are perceived as a long-term security threat in addition to being a burden on the already faltering local economy. The AA is unlikely to be able to guarantee favourable conditions for the mass repatriation of Rohingya refugees on its own. Reports of the AA's forced conscription of Rohingya further erode trust in the organisation's motives. In addition to continuing to provide humanitarian aid, regional actors should encourage communication between the Arakan Army, Rohingya representatives and the Myanmar military.

As resources continue to decline, the severe financial realities have added to the overwhelming uncertainty. The political calculations surrounding Rohingya repatriation are becoming increasingly complex as Bangladesh gets ready for general elections in April 2026. Mohd. Yonus, the leader of Bangladesh's interim government, warned that the Rohingya issue could blow up if it is not resolved quickly during a June 2025 visit to the United States.²⁹

Myanmar's upcoming elections in late 2025 and early 2026 are regarded as a front to strengthen the military junta's hold on power rather than bring true democracy.³⁰ The pre-election atmosphere is characterised by violence and instability, as evidenced by reports of escalating atrocities, such as airstrikes on civilian areas and systematic repression. Because it is unlikely that the elections will result in reforms that address the rights or security of the Rohingya, the prospects for a safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation remain bleak.

²⁸ [“Myanmar: Junta Blocks Lifesaving Aid in Rakhine State”](#), *Human Rights Watch*, 1 December 2023.

²⁹ [“Bangladesh Leader Muhammad Yunus Warns Plight of Rohingya with ‘No Hope’ Will Lead to ‘Explosion’”](#), Chatham House, 11 June 2025.

³⁰ Helen Regan, [“This Military Junta is Rebranding Itself to Hold Elections — But a UN Probe Has Found Evidence of Intensifying Atrocities”](#), *CNN*, 17 August 2025.

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