

‘Maritime Ping-Pong’¹? : The Rohingyas on boat

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This paper tries to unveil the journey of the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority ethnic group from the Arakan province of Myanmar- described as the world’s largest stateless persecuted community by the UNHCR- to Bangladesh, India and Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia. Fleeing mainly to neighboring countries like Bangladesh, a country separated from the Arakan region by only the Naff River, the Rohingyas have been living under the state of protracted refugee-hood in mostly the Cox’s Bazar area of Bangladesh. Although, initially the government of Bangladesh had allowed them to stay in the Cox’s bazaar region, it started strict measures of “pushing back” the refugees after they started pouring in large numbers following renewed violence in Myanmar in 2012. Currently, around 32,000 Rohingyas are registered with the UNHCR in Bangladesh living in two camps in Cox’s bazaar - Teknaf and Kutupalong in Ukhiya. However unofficially, around 3-5 lakhs of unregistered refugees are living under abject poverty and malnutrition just outside the formal camp areas. They do not have formal access to food, shelter or work there. In order to seek a better life, they are now being compelled to take to the sea in perilous journeys to Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, with Bangladesh and Thailand being the main transits. Labeled as the ‘Asia’s new boat people’ their plight is being compared to the ‘Vietnamese exodus by boat in the 1970s’². A large number of Rohingyas are seeking shelter in India too, through land routes from Bangladesh and due to abject ignorance of the authorities are being put in correctional homes under the Foreigner’s Act of 1946.

This essay primarily traces the migration of Rohingyas as asylum seekers from Bangladesh to mainly South East Asian countries in boats. Despite risks, the accessibility of sea in compared to land has ushered them into being trafficked to the southeast and middle east, and also including Australia. The focus in this paper is on their evolution as ‘boat people’, the precariousness of their journey to seek out a secured territory and their tedious journey both physically and metaphorically. Many do not even make to the destination and perish midway. The piece tries to trace the history and context of these maritime drives- arguing that the phenomenon is not new- reasons that allure them to take to the sea from Bangladesh, reactions of the recipient countries, and also the recent media attention to the phenomenon generating mass awareness of the issue internationally, especially in Bangladesh, and to some extent, India. Geographically, the essay also focuses on the boat journeys undertaken on the Bay of Bengal, specifically the strait of Malacca, and Indian Ocean with occasional references to the Mediterranean, simultaneously examining safety measures and protection regime in the high seas.

¹ I have borrowed the term from Joe Lowry, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration in Bangkok; and ‘Illegal Migration: Maritime “ping-pong” must end’, Masum Billah, The Daily Observer, May 18, 2015.

² ‘Who are the Rohingya boat people?’, The Telegraph’, by Jonathan Pearlma, Sydney, 21 may 2015 - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmamyanmar/11620933/Who-are-the-Rohingya-boat-people.html> , accessed on 30-7-2015.

I have mostly relied on interviews and primary sources collected from my field trip to Bangladesh in July 2015 (under a research project of the Calcutta Research Group) to the two camps and also on a historical account of the 'boat people' for this research. The paper is just the first draft on this as the work is still in progress.