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Research Paper

The Repatriation Deadlock of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN): Humanitarian Crisis and Security Challenges in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This study examines the humanitarian and security implications of the protracted displacement of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) in Bangladesh following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and Bangladesh's 2025 political transition. Findings show that Myanmar's multi-layered state collapse has removed the institutional capacity for safe return; that the Arakan Army's parallel governance in northern Rakhine has added a new power broker and deepened diplomatic fragmentation; that declining aid and overcrowding have intensified insecurity and militarization in the camps; and that Bangladesh's own political transition constrains its policy options. The study argues that the FDMN crisis has become a systemic humanitarian-security problem and calls for stronger international cooperation, sustainable integration strategies and a rights-based approach that restores dignity to the displaced population.

Keywords: FDMN crisis, Bangladesh security, refugee repatriation, camp management

Introduction

Temporary humanitarian support for the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (henceforth, FDMN) is becoming a permanent crisis for Bangladesh. A densely populated country already under economic, environmental and demographic pressure, Bangladesh must balance humanitarian ideals against national security, and its proximity to the conflict demands immediate policy action. Regional cooperation has been weak: India and China have offered little strategic or logistical support for hosting over a million displaced persons, and their non-interference in Myanmar's affairs has left Bangladesh diplomatically isolated and delayed burden-sharing for nearly a decade. (Ahmed, 2021a, 2021b; UNDP, 1994). After years of persecution, nearly 740,000 FDMN fled Rakhine State to Bangladesh in August 2017 (UNHCR, 2023), making Cox's Bazar the world's largest refugee settlement. Hosting about one million people amid overcrowding, scarce local resources and growing socio-economic demands turned a temporary influx into a lasting crisis with social, political and diplomatic consequences. The 2017 exodus culminated decades of exclusion and denial of citizenship, and has been described as state-sponsored ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Myanmar has since rejected FDMN nationality and multilateral return arrangements. The February 2021 coup triggered a full-blown civil war. As central administration collapsed, a security vacuum allowed the Arakan Army (henceforth, AA) to take control of northern Rakhine, where it now runs checkpoints, local policing and taxation along the Bangladesh border (The Daily Star, 2025). Fighting has spilled across the border through artillery fire and drone incursions (Le Poidevin, 2025), yet no official diplomatic channel to Yangon exists.

Conditions in the camps are deteriorating. Early international assistance was generous, but the 2025 Joint Response Plan is about 40% unfunded, forcing cuts to food rations and health services

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(WFP, 2025). Malnutrition and illness are widespread among refugees without formal work, and poor sanitation, congestion, fire, flooding and landslides add to the risks. Relocating thousands to Bhasan Char eased congestion but raised concerns about isolation, mobility and access to services. In sum, the crisis has moved from the 2017 emergency response, through failed policy talks, camp consolidation, COVID-19 and the Bhasan Char relocation, to rising camp insecurity, the 2021 coup and border tensions from 2022, and repatriation is now structurally impossible in the near term.

The Myanmar conflict and the refugee situation in Bangladesh have produced a multidimensional crisis. The AA now dominates much of northern Rakhine, and about 150,000 FDMN fled AA–Tatmadaw fighting in the past year. The UN has described Rakhine as a contested area with no government able to guarantee safe returns. About 1.3 million FDMN now strain Bangladesh's resources, and cuts to the WFP monthly ration to USD 6 per person have deepened desperation (WFP, 2025). Such shortages create fertile ground for trafficking and radicalization (UNHCR, 2024), and governance gaps have enabled violence by ARSA, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and criminal groups (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Illicit trade in arms, drugs and people has made Cox's Bazar a gateway to Myanmar's lawless borderlands. Meanwhile, the interim government of 2024–25 had to manage the crisis without a broad electoral mandate and with reduced policy autonomy (Michaels, 2025), and the newly formed government inherits the burdens of the political turmoil that began in July 2024. The FDMN situation has now become chronic and intertwined: diplomatic formalism and weak security and governance block repatriation and threaten Bangladesh's stability and regional security.

The study aims to examine how Myanmar's political and institutional collapse and new power structures in Rakhine affect prospects for repatriation; assess how declining humanitarian assistance and deteriorating camp conditions prolong the crisis; analyze the humanitarian, security, socioeconomic, environmental and governance challenges the crisis poses for Bangladesh; and identify feasible policy and international cooperation mechanisms for a sustainable, rights-based and dignified resolution.

This study examines the factors contributing to the prolonged repatriation deadlock of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) in Bangladesh. It focuses on three interconnected dimensions: political-governance, humanitarian, and security challenges. The political-governance dimension analyses Myanmar's post-2021 governance fragmentation, the emergence of the Arakan Army as a significant authority in Rakhine State, and regional dynamics affecting repatriation efforts. The humanitarian dimension examines prolonged displacement, declining international assistance, camp conditions, and challenges affecting both refugee and host communities. The security dimension explores camp-based insecurity, criminal networks, trafficking, cross-border risks, and Bangladesh's security responses. The study primarily adopts a Bangladesh-focused perspective and examines how these interconnected factors influence the possibility of safe, voluntary, and sustainable FDMN repatriation.

Literature Review

The study reviewed different aspects related to the crisis such as barriers to repatriation in Myanmar, the Arakan Army, camp militarization, humanitarian management, and regional security in the subsequent paragraphs. Research documents Myanmar's long marginalization of the FDMN and the political obstacles to their return (Black & Gent, 2006; Amnesty International, 2024). Since the coup, the Tatmadaw has disintegrated and its legitimacy is contested in Rakhine, and state failure has undermined the legal order and services that safe return requires. Rahman (2023) argues that the absence of constitutional protection for ethnic minorities reflects political choice rather than administrative failure.

Armed groups are competing for influence in the camps (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Aid shortages and prolonged displacement have increased vulnerability within the camps, allowing armed groups and criminal networks, including ARSA and other Rohingya armed factions, to engage

in extortion, abduction, trafficking, and recruitment activities (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Ghoshal & McPherson, 2024). The interviews conducted in this study add evidence on how aid cuts and governance vacuums enable these networks.

Studies also highlight how declining humanitarian financing has intensified pressure on Bangladesh's response capacity by reducing essential services for both refugees and host communities (UNICEF, 2024; WFP, 2025). These pressures contribute to the protracted nature of the crisis by increasing dependency, social tension, and vulnerability, thereby complicating conditions for a sustainable solution. In addition, regional geopolitics influences the prospects for repatriation, as China's economic and connectivity interests and India's strategic security concerns shape their respective engagements with Myanmar (Khan, 2015; Yhome, 2023). These competing regional interests have limited coordinated diplomatic pressure and contributed to the persistence of the repatriation deadlock.

The literature treats displacement, host–refugee relations, Myanmar's post-coup governance collapse, AA administration, camp militarization, humanitarian delivery and regional geopolitics largely as separate strands. What remains under-examined is how the political-governance, humanitarian and security dimensions interact as a single, mutually reinforcing system during Bangladesh's own 2024–2025 political transition. This study addresses that gap by integrating governance failure and securitization perspectives with primary interview data.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates four theoretical lenses: governance failure, protracted refugee situations (PRS), human security, and securitization into the FDMN Repatriation Deadlock Model (henceforth, FDMN-RDM). The model adopts a macro–meso–micro framework linking structural causes, displacement dynamics, human consequences, and policy responses to explain the persistence of repatriation deadlock.

Macro: Governance Failure and Fragmented Authority

Governance failure theory (Migdal, 1988) explains how non-state actors occupy authority gaps created by state collapse. In Myanmar, fragmented territorial control between the junta and the Arakan Army (AA), combined with institutional and rule-of-law erosion, undermines the possibility of safe and enforceable FDMN repatriation.

Meso: Protracted Refugee Situation Dynamics

PRS theory highlights how prolonged displacement creates aid dependency, restricted mobility, and intergenerational uncertainty (Long, 2013; Betts, 2021). Extended camp confinement and declining international support intensify livelihood insecurity and reduce alternatives to dependency.

Micro: Human Security Erosion

The human security framework (UNDP, 1994) captures multidimensional vulnerabilities arising from economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political insecurity. Overcrowding, limited livelihoods, and resource scarcity increase risks of exploitation, trafficking, and irregular migration among refugees and host communities.

Feedback: Securitization in Bangladesh

Securitization theory explains how perceived threats lead states to adopt exceptional security measures (Buzan et al., 1998). Bangladesh's responses, including increased surveillance, fencing, movement restrictions, and border security measures, may reduce immediate risks but can also reinforce insecurity and prolong the crisis. Together, these interconnected processes form the FDMN-RDM, where governance failure restricts return feasibility, protracted displacement deepens vulnerability, human insecurity increases risk exposure, and securitized responses reinforce the conditions sustaining repatriation deadlock. The FDMN-RDM guided data coding and organized the findings into political-governance, humanitarian, and security dimensions.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative, interpretive and exploratory design, suited to complex, fast-changing and sensitive topics in which war, displacement and governance are socially constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). It combines a review of secondary sources from the reports and press coverage of different international organizations, along with thirty semi-structured key-informant interviews with government officials, security analysts, aid workers, academics and community leaders. Twenty-two interviews were held face-to-face and eight by secure video call in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar between June and September 2025, in English or Bangla, and were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Transcripts and documents were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2019), with NVivo 12 supporting coding; codes were grouped into political-governance, humanitarian and security themes guided by the FDMN-RDM. Participants gave informed consent, could withdraw at any time and were assured of confidentiality; no names or positions are reported.

Findings and Discussion

Across the political-governance, humanitarian and security dimensions, participants described fragmented authority, deepening humanitarian strain and rising insecurity, with particular vulnerability among widows, adolescent girls and female-headed households. These findings largely corroborate earlier research on the Rohingya crisis as a multi-dimensional issue of governance, humanitarian protection, national security, environmental pressures, and regional diplomacy (Ahmed, 2021a, 2021b; Howlader et al., 2025).

Political-Governance Dimension

Fragmented authority blocks repatriation

Respondents across foreign affairs, security and refugee-relief roles agreed that return is structurally impossible while Rakhine remains divided between a weakened junta and the AA, which runs its own administration and rejects agreements made by Naypyidaw. During the interview an official from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (henceforth, MoFA) put it, "There is no government that would be approachable in the north of Rakhine… the AA will not follow Naypyidaw." This observation is consistent with the analysis of the International Crisis Group (2022), which examined how Myanmar's 2021 military coup reshaped the country's ethnic conflicts and intensified challenges to central authority. More recent reporting by Amnesty International (2024) documented the deterioration of conditions affecting Rohingya communities amid renewed fighting in Rakhine State. Howlader et al. (2025) similarly identify political instability, ineffective international engagement, and the absence of a durable settlement as important constraints on resolving the crisis.

Since 2021 the multi-front civil war has degraded Myanmar's judicial and civil services, so no credible agency exists to verify citizenship claims, oversee justice or manage reintegration, and even the best diplomatic accord cannot be enforced.

The AA has created a parallel political order

The AA taxes, enforces and governs, yet is not recognized by international institutions or included in diplomatic negotiations. Its Rakhine nationalism makes organized FDMN reintegration into its territory unlikely, and AA–Tatmadaw clashes and drone and artillery intrusions make bilateral diplomacy riskier. A policy and security expert summarised: "AA is not some diplomatic partner; junta is"—yet the junta no longer controls the ground, so Bangladesh's earlier approach of negotiating with the Myanmar state has been overtaken.

Regional politics compound the deadlock

Interviewees also pointed to the lack of international coordination and regional geopolitical interests as impediments to progress. As participants in the discussion noted, the promotion of durable solutions for the Rohingya population often runs counter to the strategic interests of neighbouring and other influential states.

The security implications of the crisis for the region have been examined by Ahmed (2021b). Howlader et al. (2025) shows the impact of geopolitical rivalries, fragmented regional engagement and limited international accountability. Collectively, the studies support the broader conclusion that the Rohingya problem cannot be solved by negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar alone.

The results indicate that China's Belt and Road interests in Rakhine and India's Act East policy favour the status quo over pressure on Myanmar, and ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus has achieved little. Western governments speak loudly on FDMN rights but provide little assistance or diplomacy to Bangladesh, and no regional refugee regime comparable to the EU Dublin Regulation or the African Union Kampala Convention exists, leaving the burden on Bangladesh. Howlader et al. (2025) identify this imbalance as part of the wider strategic and humanitarian challenge confronting Bangladesh.

The present study therefore finds that regional diplomacy must move beyond expressions of concern towards practical cooperation on protection, repatriation guarantees, humanitarian financing, and accountability. Without stronger coordination among relevant actors, Bangladesh is likely to remain responsible for managing the consequences of a crisis whose underlying political causes lie primarily beyond its territory.

Humanitarian Dimension

Aid cuts deepen deprivation and drive risky coping

Humanitarian respondents were near-unanimous that funding cuts have measurably worsened conditions, from food substitution to health strain; a UNHCR programme manager explained that "cereal distribution substituted lentils in order to save money," which respondents linked to rising tension over food. Multiple respondents connected the 2023 ration cuts to early marriage, transactional sex and trafficking risk among women and girls, and to the recruitment of young men into smuggling networks. As a community educator observed, "extremists have an easy time targeting hopeless and starving children." With education and mental health services underfunded and families receiving under half their dietary needs, one aid worker described the camps as a pressure cooker without a release valve.

These accounts are consistent with concerns raised by the World Food Programme (WFP, 2025), which warned in March 2025 that insufficient funding threatened food assistance for more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Howlader et al. (2025) similarly describe the deterioration of humanitarian conditions amid declining international support and the continuing dependence of refugees on external assistance.

Scarcity strains host–refugee relations and camp governance

Camp officials and host-community respondents described rising friction as aid and livelihood opportunities shrink; a host-community spokesperson said plainly, "refugees took away the work spots, and there is no charity." Fear and intimidation have also undermined camp governance structures, including community leaders and volunteers.

The results support the wider socio-economic concerns raised by Howlader et al. (2025) regarding pressure on local resources, livelihoods, infrastructure and social cohesion. Environmental pressures are also part of that larger picture. Hassan et al. (2018) used satellite imagery and land-cover classification to document large-scale expansion of refugee settlements and associated forest-cover degradation in Teknaf during 2016–2017. In the three settlement areas surveyed, they identified 2,283 hectares of forest-cover degradation.

Hassan et al. (2018) focused on environmental change, not job competition, and found that the rapid expansion of refugee settlements has had measurable effects on the surrounding environment. This evidence, read with Howlader et al. (2025), also helps to frame the host-community concerns voiced in the present study within a larger story of continuing pressure on local resources and services.

Participants also talked about the intimidation and insecurity faced by community leaders and volunteers, and challenged the ability of the camp governance structures to mediate disputes and to support protection. Human Rights Watch (2023) reported violence against Rohingya refugees, including attacks and threats against community members and leaders. This provides relevant context to the security issues identified by interviewees.

Security Dimension

Camp militancy and cross-border spillover are growing

Respondents across NGO, aid and camp-security roles described increasingly organised armed and criminal networks running parallel systems of control, including extortion and informal "shadow courts." An NGO head in Cox's Bazar noted that "ARSA and its offshoot… are now organised networks, not tiny cells." ARSA and RSO exploit unemployed teenagers to expand their influence, consistent with human security theory: trapped and dehumanised refugees are more likely to turn to smuggling, protest or armed groups. Border-security respondents also reported more armed incursions, with a senior officer of Border Guard Bangladesh (hereafter, BGB) describing repeated drone overflights and mortar strikes near Bangladeshi positions.

Participants expressed particular concern about how unemployed and disillusioned young people are vulnerable to recruitment and manipulation. This finding can be explained through the human security framework, which considers that insecurity is not only the threat to the military but also deprivation, fear and lack of adequate protection (UNDP, 1994). But vulnerability is not militancy. It is important to distinguish the behaviour of the wider refugee population from the behaviour of armed groups and criminal networks.

Securitization is deepening, but its effects are contested

A government security advisor noted that "the security agencies are the policy-makers regarding camps," and most respondents agreed that Bangladesh now treats the FDMN mainly as a security issue, through fencing, BGB deployment, surveillance, movement limits and internet restrictions, consistent with recent human rights reporting. Respondents disagreed on whether this reduces risk or breeds distrust. In FDMN-RDM terms, these measures curb illegal activity but restrict freedom, engender resentment and can entrench the insecurity they target. Ahmed (2021a) also provides a relevant national-security and governance perspective on the Rohingya crisis, while Howlader et al. (2025) examine how security concerns have influenced Bangladesh's management of the refugee population. These studies provide context for the participants' perceptions of a more security-oriented approach to camp administration.

Synthesis: a reinforcing cycle

Governance fragmentation in Myanmar blocks repatriation; prolonged displacement and shrinking aid deepen vulnerability to exploitation and unrest; and Bangladesh's securitized response reshapes camp conditions in ways that can entrench rather than resolve instability. Restoring dignity, mobility and opportunity is the only durable way to prevent unrest, and surveillance must sit within a rights-based approach or the camps risk becoming permanent prisons.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings suggest that the FDMN crisis requires a comprehensive approach combining diplomatic engagement, humanitarian support, security management, and long-term planning.

a) Strengthening diplomatic engagement: Regional and international actors should support sustained diplomatic efforts aimed at creating conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation. Engagement with relevant stakeholders in Myanmar, including emerging local authorities in conflict-affected areas, may be necessary to address the current governance fragmentation and facilitate future return arrangements.
b) Enhancing security coordination and border management: Bangladesh should continue strengthening border and camp security mechanisms to address cross-border threats,

trafficking, and organized criminal activities. Using appropriate surveillance technologies, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and coordinated security responses may improve early detection and prevention of emerging risks while maintaining humanitarian standards.

c) Improving humanitarian resilience and self-reliance: International partners should maintain sustainable humanitarian financing and expand support for education, healthcare, skills development, and livelihood opportunities for FDMN communities and host populations. Such measures can reduce dependency, improve social stability, and strengthen protection against exploitation.

d) Developing a long-term crisis management approach: Given the protracted nature of displacement, Bangladesh and international partners should adopt a coordinated long-term framework integrating humanitarian, security, and diplomatic responses. This approach should include sustainable service provision, protection mechanisms, and preparation for future repatriation when conditions become safe and feasible.

Conclusion

This study examined why the repatriation of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) has remained unresolved. The findings show that the crisis is driven by interconnected political, humanitarian, and security challenges. Fragmented authority and institutional decline in Myanmar have weakened the conditions required for safe and voluntary return, while prolonged displacement, declining humanitarian support, and limited livelihood opportunities have increased vulnerability among FDMN communities in Bangladesh. The study contributes to existing research by introducing the FDMN Repatriation Deadlock Model (FDMN-RDM), which explains how governance failure, protracted displacement, human insecurity, and securitization interact to sustain the repatriation deadlock. It also highlights the growing influence of non-state actors, particularly the Arakan Army, as an additional challenge to traditional repatriation approaches. Although Bangladesh continues to manage the consequences of the crisis, a sustainable solution requires coordinated humanitarian, security, and diplomatic efforts. This study is limited by the lack of direct access to northern Rakhine, reliance on participant accounts and secondary sources, and the changing political situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Future research should explore governance challenges, humanitarian pressures, and regional cooperation mechanisms to better understand pathways toward safe, voluntary, and sustainable repatriation.

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