

THE UNHCR AND ITS MANDATE ON REFUGEE REPATRIATION IN THE RAKHINE STATE

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Abstract

The UNHCR is mandated to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees and to seek durable solutions for refugee problem by assisting governments, in cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) with the aim to facilitate voluntary repatriation of refugees. In case of refugee repatriation, an approach has to be implemented in close cooperation among countries of origin, host countries, UNHCR and its humanitarian and development partners as well as refugees. Before signing the Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) between the government of Myanmar and UNHCR, and between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh in 1993, the UNHCR took part in refugee repatriation in the Rakhine State. The objective of this research is to identify issues and constraints in refugee repatriation between Myanmar and UNHCR operating in the Rakhine State. It also analyzes how far the UNHCR carried out its task in managing repatriation and rehabilitation through international community whose major emphasis is the basic humanitarian assistance to refugees while the government of Myanmar and its state government are facing with barriers in scrutinizing the documented immigration records of refugee repatriation and resettlement. The research question that attempted to answer in this paper is whether or not UNHCR and its genuine mandate is based on independence, impartiality and equality in carrying out its humanitarian actions in the Rakhine State in Myanmar.

Keywords: UNHCR mandate, repatriation, resettlement, humanitarian assistance, the Rakhine State

Introduction

The government of Myanmar started scrutinizing documented or undocumented persons in 1978. This led to mass flows of refugees who abandoned their houses and fled across the Naaf River towards Teknaf and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Such situation occurred under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1991-1992 again. In early 1992, both Myanmar and Bangladeshi governments agreed to resettle the Bengali refugees in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships in the northern part of Rakhine State. Between 1992 and 1993, some Bengali refugees were forced to leave the camps by Bangladesh government and to return to Myanmar without any protection. Although there were bilateral agreements between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and UNHCR Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) with both the governments on Bengali refugee repatriation, the initial repatriation programme had been rather slow due to lack of governments' commitments, refusal on repatriation and shortage funding. After 2012 communal violence broke out between ethnic Rakhine and Bengali Muslims in the Rakhine State, the role of UNHCR in refugee repatriation has become more complex and politicized in providing basic humanitarian assistance and protection to conflict-affected persons, internally displaced persons and to other displaced persons. In 2017, terrorist attacks of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on thirty police outposts in Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung Townships caused a third wave of mass Bengali exodus to Bangladesh. The UNHCR has been working with the government and other partners to provide protection and life-saving support to displaced persons, including the delivery of relief supplies. This paper will explain about the mandate and function of UNHCR; its impact and implications on refugee repatriation in the Rakhine State.

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The UNHCR: Mandate and Function

With adoption of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR is mandated to provide international protection and assistance to refugees in the context of voluntary repatriation, resettlement and reintegration in local communities. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that

“A person who is owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return it.”

The emphasis of this definition is on the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution. The 1951 Convention was originally limited in scope to persons fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951 within Europe. Subsequently, in 1967, the 1951 Convention was modified by the adoption of the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1967 Protocol), which eliminated the temporal and geographic limitations of the Convention's definition and extended it to include all refugees on a basis of equality. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are still the most important, and the only universal, instrument of international refugee law.

Functions of the UNHCR are provided under Article 8 of the UNHCR Statute and its responsibility has further developed through the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provisions. The Office is also responsible for promoting activities relating to the application to national laws and regulations that would benefit refugees. By virtue of Article 3 of the UNHCR statute, the UNGA and ECOSOC may, through their resolutions and policy directives, extend the functional responsibility of UNHCR but they cannot impose direct obligations on states.

The resolutions passed by the General Assembly and ECOSOC broadened UNHCR mandate, calling on the Office to assist refugees fearing individual persecution as well as those fleeing generalized violence and also others of concern because of their need of international protection. These include former refugees who have returned to their countries (returnees), specified groups who have been displaced within their own countries due to armed conflict or generalized violence and people who are stateless or whose nationality is disputed. The Office has also been requested by the UNGA to promote the 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions, and to help prevent statelessness by providing to states technical and advisory services on nationality, legislation and practice. But, in many areas, issues relating to international migration and development are of significance to UNHCR in light of implications for persons of concern to the organization.

Policies of the Government of Myanmar on Bengalis

As soon as Myanmar gained its independence in 1948, the Union of Myanmar drew up short-term and long-term plans in building a nation-state, consolidating of national sovereignty, protecting of internal and external hostilities, and restoring of law and order. On one hand, many

internal insurgencies incurred by internal and external armed groups into the country's territory, and political unrest pushed the government to address the issue of illegal immigration.

Operation against illegal entering of foreigners in Myanmar and unfinished border demarcation fuelled illegal immigrant issues in the Rakhine State. In 1978, Myanmar government under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the Ministries of Home Affairs and Religious Affairs launched the Naga-Min Operation (King Dragon Operation) to scrutinize the status of foreigners living within the country in line with the existing law. The operation focused on Myanmar's border areas included several parts of Kachin, Chin, Rakhine States and Yangon Division where many illegal immigrants were living. At that time, the process of border demarcation between Myanmar and Bangladesh was unfinished.

When the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took office on 18 September 1988, the government adopted plans for development of border areas and national races who left far behind in every aspect. The SLORC formed Border Control Unit (known as Na Sa Ka) composed of members of Myanmar Police Force, Immigration and Manpower Department (IMD), Custom Department and the Tatmadaw (especially Military Intelligence Units) in order to protect illegal human movement across the border. It was assigned duties to take four main tasks: (1) to prevent foreigners who enter Myanmar illegally; (2) to protect illegal goods without paying taxes; (3) to take charge of border area security; and (4) to acquire agents information.

In western part of Myanmar, the Na Sa Ka managed to prevent migrants illegally by establishing eight battalions and twenty-five border check points. The Na Sa Ka officials went field trips to the villages and formed Village Law and Order Restoration Council (VLORCs) systematically. The Border Control Unit issued travel documents to Bengali population in every village in the Rakhine State. Family photos were recorded together guest lists accurately. Moreover, twenty-four ethnic or Taing-Yin-Thar villages were built by the Na Sa Ka. It also recruited people who were homeless and jobless in Yangon Division and ethnic Rakhine who lived in extreme poverty in another country, typically from Bangladesh and India were resettled in those villages in order to prevent rapid increase of Bengali population. It can be said that this mechanism in legislation and actual ground operation under the SPDC government could control illegal Bengalis populations to some extent. However, major weak point was illegal attempt to get citizen registration card through bribery and corruption among some authorities in that area.

When President U Thein Sein came into office, the government of Myanmar embarked on a pilot citizenship verification project in June 2014, whereby non-Kaman TICs holders in Myebon Township could apply for citizenship provided that they agreed to be identified as "Bengali." The first round of the process granted full citizenship to forty TIC holders and naturalized citizenship to 169 TIC holders out of 1,094 applicants. The Immigration team encountered protests by local Rakhine, forcing the government to postpone verification of the remaining applicants. The process was restarted across all of Rakhine State in January 2015, but interest in the process has remained low, with only small numbers of non-Kaman Muslims willing to self-identify as Bengali.

On 11 February 2015, President U Thein Sein issued a notification, announcing the expiry of all existing TICs. At the beginning of June 2015, the Immigration and Population Department of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar began issuing new identification cards, formally called National Verification Certificates (NVCs), also known as green cards, in fourteen

townships, to the Muslims who had already returned their white cards to the government. While the Myanmar government claimed that these new cards were intended to smooth the path to citizenship for the Muslim community, many Muslims doubted that they would instead leave them further from citizenship viewing these new cards as disqualifying their status of citizenship by birth.

Since taking office in March 2016, the elected civilian government has placed the highest priority on addressing the situation in Rakhine State. In June 2016, a new pilot project for NVC application was conducted in Bengali communities in three townships- Myebon, Kyaukpyu and Ponnagyun. The NVCs have been issued to fifty-seven men and sixty-nine women in Myebon and forty-one men and fifty-one women in Kyaukpyu. In the case of Ponnagyun Township, as the cards did not mention race and religion, no one had been issued with NVCs yet. The government of Myanmar insisted that the process of citizenship scrutiny was conducted within the framework of the 1982 Citizenship Law. As the first step, NVCs are issued to applicants, and the second step is to start the process of scrutinization of their citizenship. The scrutinization process is conducted, that if a baby was born to citizen parents, they will be a citizen, and that if a baby was born to naturalized parents, they may not be eligible to become a citizen. On 23 June 2016, the government extended the scheme to four villages in Maungdaw as well as to Thet Kay Pyin and Aung Mingalar in Sittwe. However, the Bengalis community reportedly did not come forward to apply for NVCs.

Table 1 Numbers of the issuance of white cards/NVCs to Bengalis in the Rakhine State (1995-2016)

No	Date/Year	Number of Townships	Number of ward/villages	Number of Application	Number of Verification (whites card/NVCs)
1	1995-2013*	NA	NA	NA	734,453
2	2015*	14	NA	NA	3,663
3	2016	NA	NA	NA	2,323

Source: *Immigration and National Registration Department*, Rakhine State, 2016

*White cards were issued to all Bengalis in the Rakhine State until 2013.

*In 2015, NVCs were issued to Bengalis who accept the Bengali identity instead of Rohingya.

Table (1) mentioned above shows that NVC application in the critical township was offered by the Department of Man Power and Immigration but the number of NVC application was quite few even though majority of Muslim population lived and settled in the pilot project areas namely Buthidaung and Ponnagyun where there were no application for NVC. Major limitations of NVC process were the strong protest of the Rakhine people against immigration team, misinterpretation on 1982 Citizenship Law among Muslim people, language barriers and difficult access to villages of Muslim community close to border areas. Although the 1982 Citizenship Law is the only way to scrutinize and officialize the citizenship granting in Myanmar, the government faced with tough response from Rakhine, Muslims and interrogation of international organizations based in area for humanitarian aids.

It is clear that the successive Myanmar governments have tried to solve illegal migration and immigration in the Rakhine State by launching harsh operations as well as deliberative

attempt to resettle agreed refugees in cooperation with Bangladeshi government and the UN agencies.

The UNHCR International Protection and Humanitarian Assistance: Impact and Implications

The involvement of UNHCR in repatriating Bengali refugees started when the government of Myanmar launched Naga-Min Operation during which Bangladesh requested UNHCR for humanitarian assistance. In the High Commissioner's Report to the General Assembly in 1979, it stated that between March and July 1978, approximately 200,000 Bengalis from the Rakhine State of Myanmar had crossed the border into Bangladesh. In May 1978, the United Nations Secretary General had assigned the High Commissioner as coordinator for this assistance. From that time onwards, UNHCR could play an important role vis-à-vis the country of origin, that is, the repatriation and rehabilitation of voluntary returnees.

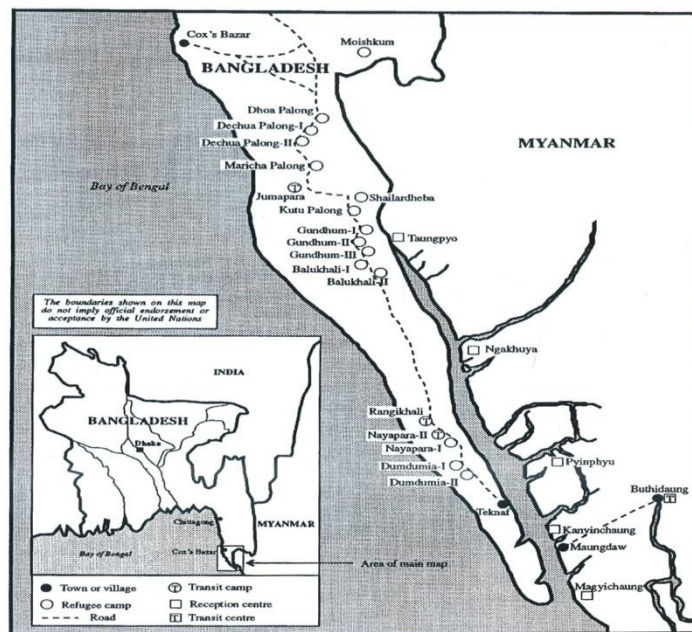
As a first step the High Commissioner had allocated US \$ 500,000 from his Emergency Fund. In July 1978, despite vigorous opposition from within the camps in Bangladesh, the government of Myanmar agreed on a repatriation scheme in order to avoid an armed conflict with Bangladeshi troops. On the other hand, Bangladeshi officials cut food supplies to the camps in an effort to persuade the refugees to go back home voluntarily. The UNHCR failed to challenge the Bangladeshi government's coercive repatriation policy. Faced with suffering and death in the camps, the refugees finally began returning to Myanmar.

On Myanmar side, the UNHCR provided US \$ 588,000 for the returnees from Bangladesh. In addition, it also provided US \$ 400,000 for material support and US \$ 50,000 for building reception camps. However, the circumstances which had caused the influx of refugees were controversial. The explanation of the refugee mass flow was to be found in the registration of all citizens and foreigner residents in Myanmar.

In the early 1990s, after a decade of Bengali refugee repatriation from Bangladesh to Myanmar through UNHCR assistance, Bengali issue was a crucial between Myanmar and Bangladesh which pursued harsh policy of repatriation on refugee camps again. Between 1991 and 1992, nearly 250,000 people fled from the Rakhine State to neighbouring Bangladesh. After an appeal by the Bangladeshi government to the international community, the UNHCR took charge of emergency assistance for the refugees. More than 250,000 Bengalis lived in two camps located in the far South of Bangladesh, between Teknaf and Cox's Bazaar. From September 1992 to January 1993, 15,000 Bengalis were forced to leave the camps and return to Myanmar without any protection. In 1992, the UNHCR quickly withdrew from this role because of difficulties in gaining access to the refugees as well as widespread reports that they were being subjected to abuses by camp officials and forced to go back to Myanmar.

In early April 1992, U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali dispatched Ambassador Jan Eliasson, under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, to Bangladesh and Myanmar in an attempt to obtain a negotiated settlement of the refugee crisis. After agreeing on the repatriation for the residents who actually fled to Bangladesh, arrangement was made to place ten transit camps on Bangladesh side and five reception centres in Maungdaw Township (Taungpyo, Ngakhuya, Pynphyu, Kanyinchaung and Magyichaung) on Myanmar side, on 15 May 1992 (See Map).

Map of the Transit Camps along Myanmar and Bangladesh Borders



Source: *UNHCR Activities Financed by Voluntary Funds: Report for 1993-1994 and Proposed Programmes and Budget for 1995*, A/AC.96/825/Part II/2, UNGA, 16 August 1994, p.2

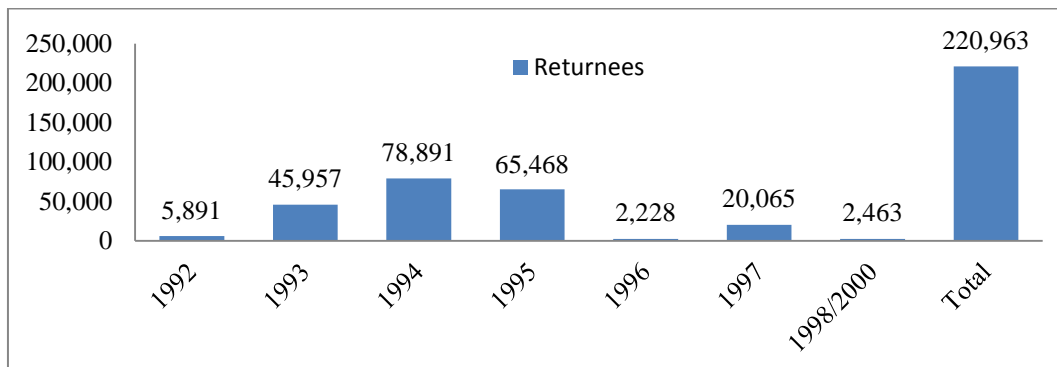
In May 1993, an agreement was signed between Bangladesh and UNHCR, granting the UN agency access to the refugees in order to ensure the return was voluntary. After signing agreement between Bangladesh and UNHCR, UNHCR started the official process to conclude MoU to repatriate so called refugees from Bangladesh. On 5 November 1993, the Myanmar government signed an agreement with UNHCR to facilitate the voluntary return and to carry out the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees. The signing of MoU between Myanmar and UNHCR gave the organization access to returnees, allowed it to be issued with appropriate identification cards and enjoy freedom of movement. The MoU stated that the two parties resolved to carry out the voluntary repatriation and reintegration inconformity with the principles of safety and dignity. It expressly stated that the Myanmar government issued identity cards to all repatriated individuals, who were granted the same freedom of movement as other citizens of Rakhine. The MoU further mentioned that the Myanmar government granted UNHCR full access to all returnees in the Rakhine State. Under the MoU, UNHCR would assist, with the cooperation of the government, in resettlement and provision of supplies for the returnees, being carried out under a Myanmar-Bangladesh agreement and in the development of the Rakhine State in education, health, agriculture, availability of water and construction of small-scale irrigation projects.

The official representation of UNHCR office was carried out under their MoUs which brought mass repatriation of Bengali refugees into Myanmar. Under the MoU between UNHCR and the Immigration and Manpower Department of Myanmar, UNHCR took office in Myanmar in 1994 in order to facilitate the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of refugees and to mitigate the risk of a renewed population outflow. The MoU contained construction of houses, supply of clean drinking water, health and food supplies. In addition, under the assistance, Kyat 2,000 would be provided for repairs to homes each household previously owned, another Kyat 2,000 per household, Kyat 100 in travelling allowances and food supplies would be provided. It

can be said that UNHCR humanitarian assistance had great impact on refugees through aid program who came back to Myanmar from Bangladesh. The UNHCR started a new program of mass repatriation in northern part of the Rakhine State with the aim of completing repatriation. On 30 April 1994, the UNHCR had setup two bases, in Maungdaw and Sittwe, and returnees arrived in Myanmar.

The Chart mentioned on page (12) shows that in accordance with the agreement reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh in 1992, repatriation process started before UNHCR taking office in Myanmar. In 1993, 45,957 returnees from Bangladesh had been systematically received and returned to their home. After signing MoU between Myanmar and UNHCR, the number of returnees reached 78,891 in 1994. However, a case in point was border clashes between the government and Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) terrorists in May 1994. This led to hamper the repatriation process. Since 1995, the number of returnees began to fall down. In 1996, returnees from Bangladesh sharply declined. From 1992 to 2000, 220,963 of total 250,000 refugees who fled to Bangladesh were returned to the northern part of Rakhine State.

Returnees from Bangladesh (1992-2000)



- Source:** (a) “Historic Records of Endeavours made by The State Law and Order Restoration Council”, *Nation-Building Endeavours*, Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Information, Vol. II, From 1991 to 1995, p.98
- (b) “Historic Records of Endeavours made by The State Law and Order Restoration Council”, *Nation-Building Endeavours*, Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Information, Vol. III, From 1995 to 1997, p.161
- (c) “Historic Records of Endeavours made by The State Peace and Development Council”, *Nation-Building Endeavours*, Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Information, Vol. IV, From 1997 to 2000, p.196
- (d) *Burma Press Summary*, the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois, From 1992-1996

From 1995 onwards, the government of Myanmar started to provide Temporary Identification Certificates (TICs) to the Bengali people in line with MoUs. However, the government granted TICs to Bengali people without distinction between returnees and Bengalis who had remained in the country. However, the government clearly expressed that TICs neither conferred citizenship status to the holders nor awarded the same rights as those held by full or naturalized citizens. In contrast, UNHCR strongly insisted that TIC holders would become a citizenship. Such actions led to implications for Myanmar government in solving Bengali issue.

Table 2 Numbers of TICs issued to Bengalis (1997-2008)

Sr.no	Year	Numbers of TICs
1	1997-2000	46,265
2	2006	350,000
3	2007	35,000
4	2008	50,000
5	Total	481,265

Sources: (a) *Nation-Building Endeavours*, Vol. IV, 2000, p.197

(b) *Country Operation Plans: Myanmar*, p.3

(c) *UNHCR Global Appeal 2010-2011*

Table (2) mentioned above shows that 46,265 TICs were issued to Bengalis from 1997 to 2000. In 2006, a total of 350,000 TICs were issued to the Muslim population. Myanmar government issued more than 35,000 TICs in 2007 and nearly 50,000 in 2008. While the TIC did not confer citizenship, it constituted the only valid identity document for people without citizenship and confirms lawful residence in the Rakhine State. Holders of the TIC were entitled to vote in 2008 constitutional referendum.

In 2010, the political environment in Myanmar resulted in both opportunities and constraints for UNHCR's operations. In 2010 elections, the government made some overtures to them, suggesting that their legal status was improved and that restrictions on movement, marriage and other rights were eased. In this context, UNHCR has increased its engagement in the Rakhine State government by significantly expanding activities in the areas of infrastructure, education and health.

UNHCR worked with approximately 750,000 Bengali residents of the Rakhine State who do not have any identity document or citizenship. Myanmar government's estimates indicated that more than eighty-five per cent of those eligible had received TICs and UNHCR monitored the distribution process. In addition, UNHCR has regular discussions with the local authorities on various protection concerns, such as restrictions on Bengali individual's freedom of movement and marriage rights, as well as the repair of their religious buildings. UNHCR also worked with community leaders, women, children and other groups to address the protection needs arising from within the community, such as cultural constraints on women travelling and accessing education.

After 2012 communal violence in the Rakhine State, UNHCR distributed over 14,000 Non-Food Item (NFI) kits to internally displaced persons in response to the emergency aid, including kitchen sets, mosquito nets, plastic tarpaulins, blankets and floor mats. UNHCR also constructed eighty permanent shelters to assist families returning to their villages of origin in Maungdaw and 365 long houses for temporary use for some 18,000 IDPs in rural and urban Sittwe. A total of 1,680 family tents were distributed by UNHCR in Sittwe, while another 425 tents have been delivered in Maungdaw. However, local Buddhists complained about the bias actions of UN agencies in the Rakhine State.

Following the terrorist attacks in 2017, it is reported that over 700,000 refugees have fled to Bangladesh, most of whom have sought shelter in established refugee camps along the border and makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar. On 6 June 2018, a MoU was signed between Myanmar and UNDP/UNHCR to provide the government with the necessary assistance in repatriation process

in consultation with the government. In accordance with the MoU, UNHCR can provide its assistance for the returnees at the Hla Phoe Khaung transit center in Maungdaw Township. The MoU was extended for the next 12 months with exchange of letters between the government, the UNDP and UNHCR on 28 May 2019. In line with the provisions of the MoU, the government of Myanmar has allowed UNHCR to conduct independent field assessments in over 80 villages as of 13 July 2019 and to implement 34 Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) as of 5 September 2019 in order to benefit all communities and the potential returnees. From April 2018 to November 2019, some 415 people from camps in Cox's Bazar have returned under their own arrangement and of their own volition. It can be assumed that since 2018, the continued cooperation between Myanmar and UNHCR has less effect of repatriating displaced persons from Bangladesh.

Discussion

Since the UNHCR has been opened its office in Myanmar in 1994, it gave humanitarian assistance to refugees not only in refugee repatriation but also in providing basic humanitarian needs such as protection, shelter, camp coordination and camp management and non-food items. On the other hand, the UNHCR also aimed to promote the rights and well-being of Bengali people without citizenship in the Rakhine State. To meet this objective, UNHCR focused on improving the legal status and treatment of Bengali refugees in the Rakhine State, promoting their integration into Myanmar society and access to livelihoods through equal access in community life.

Neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol. However, the most important provision of the 1951 Refugee Convention is Article 33 which provides that no Contracting State shall expel or return (refouler) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. It is not quite relevant for receiving countries forced by UNHCR. It is true that there are functions of states to fulfill its people within the boundary. However, every sovereign state prescribes individually strict immigration and citizenship laws, rules and regulations in naturalizing the refugees, stateless or asylum-seekers.

For example, US citizenship law, Canadian citizenship law, Australian naturalization and the Brexit decided by the UK are clear and strict provisions to alienate its own citizens from illegal immigrants. In all these three countries, high level of English language proficiency and understanding to country's political development are basic requirements to apply for citizenship. Learning Arabic and Bengali languages for repatriated refugees caused more disintegration with local Rakhine under the banner of peaceful coexistence.

Findings and Conclusion

The resolutions, strategies and mandates adopted by the UNHCR cover the compulsory rehabilitation, state responsibility and repatriation of refugees regardless of race, religion and social class. In implementing its mandates, the UNHCR is more prominent in handling the refugee issue focusing on voluntary basis. The UNHCR also aimed at promoting the rights and well-being of Bengali people without citizenship in the Rakhine State. To meet this objective, UNHCR focused on improving the legal status and treatment of Bengali refugees in the Rakhine State, promoting their integration into Myanmar society and access to livelihoods through equal

access in community life without learning Myanmar language and culture. It is not conformity with its strategies applying in Europe and other countries for local integration. It is recommended to the UNHCR that even though encouraging the States to follow the universal norms is the only way to keep world peace and stability, state and its sovereignty are the primary actors in deciding national security issues, which is contrary to universal norms to some extent.

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Interview with U Maung Maung Myint, Field Manager, Department of Disaster Management, Myanmar Red Cross Society in Sittwe, Rakhine State

Interview with U Sai Aung Tun, Former Member of the State Council during the BSPP Government