

## Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Regional Security Risks, Repatriation Pathways, and Livelihood Challenges

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### *Executive Summary*

The Rohingya crisis constitutes one of the most protracted and complex humanitarian emergencies in the contemporary world, with over 1.1 million stateless individuals currently residing in Bangladesh, primarily they are concentrated around Cox's Bazar and the remote island of Bhasan Char. This population, forcibly displaced from Myanmar due to systemic persecution and violence, represents the largest stateless group globally, lacking legal recognition, citizenship, and access to fundamental rights. The prolonged displacement and lack of prospects for repatriation or integration have created fertile ground for radicalization, transnational crime, human trafficking, narcotics trade, and cyber security crimes. These threats transcend beyond borders thus requiring coordinated regional responses. The Rohingya issue must therefore be framed not solely as a humanitarian concern but as a multidimensional challenge encompassing political, developmental, and security imperatives.

The demographic composition of the refugee community underscores its vulnerability. Approximately 77% are women and children, 45% are adults, and 8% are persons with specific needs, including the elderly, disabled, and trauma survivors. These figures reflect not only the scale of humanitarian need but also the long-term developmental and protection challenges facing host communities. Compounding the crisis is a severe international funding shortfall, with humanitarian aid to the Rohingya response reduced by 70% in 2024. This dramatic cut has led to critical gaps in food security, healthcare, education, and protection services, threatening to destabilize both refugee populations and local Bangladeshi communities. Beyond its humanitarian dimensions, the crisis poses significant regional and global security risks.

Its implications extend across South and Southeast Asia, affecting regional stability, diplomatic relations, and the credibility of international human rights mechanisms. In light of these complexities, four core policy recommendations emerge: first, regional actors must intensify diplomatic pressure on Myanmar to create conditions conducive to safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation; second, the international community must urgently restore and sustain humanitarian funding to prevent further deterioration; third, host countries and development partners should balance immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term strategies for education, livelihoods, and social cohesion; and fourth, justice and accountability mechanisms

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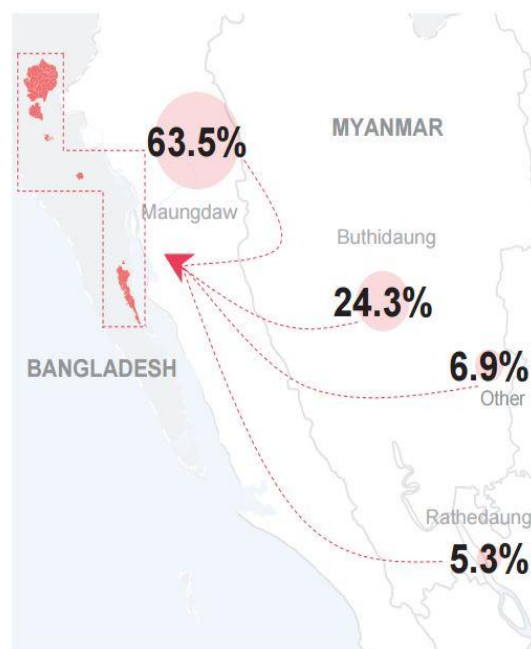
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must be strengthened to address the root causes of displacement and uphold international legal norms. Without decisive and sustained action, the Rohingya crisis risks becoming a permanent fault line in the geopolitical landscape of the region, undermining both human security and regional cooperation.

## ***Background***

The Rohingya crisis is rooted in decades of systemic exclusion and persecution of a Muslim minority group residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Historically, the Rohingya have faced institutionalized marginalization, culminating in the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law, which effectively rendered them stateless by denying their recognition as one of the country's official ethnic groups. This legal exclusion stripped the Rohingya of citizenship rights, access to public services, and freedom of movement, laying the foundation for recurring cycles of displacement and violence. The first major exodus occurred in 1978 during "Operation Nagamin," a military campaign ostensibly aimed at verifying citizenship, which led to the forced displacement of approximately 200,000 Rohingya into neighbouring Bangladesh. The 1990s witnessed further waves of flight, driven by escalating military operations and discriminatory policies. However, the most significant and internationally condemned displacement occurred in 2017, when over 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following a brutal military crackdown in northern Rakhine State, described by the United Nations as bearing "hallmarks of genocide."



*Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2025*

As of March 2025, Bangladesh hosts 1,102,556 registered Rohingya refugees, primarily concentrated in 33 camps across a mere 23.6 square kilometres in the southeastern district of Cox's Bazar. This results in an extraordinary population density of approximately 45,000 individuals per square kilometre which is one of the highest concentrations of displaced persons globally. The overcrowded conditions exacerbate vulnerabilities related to health, sanitation, protection, and access to education and livelihoods. Despite Bangladesh's continued

humanitarian commitment, the protracted nature of the crisis has strained local resources and heightened socio-political tensions in host communities.

Internationally, the initial wave of global outrage following the 2017 crisis has not translated into sustained diplomatic or financial engagement. Geopolitical inertia has stalled meaningful progress toward resolution. Divisions within the United Nations Security Council, particularly among permanent members with strategic interests in Myanmar have impeded coordinated action. Meanwhile, regional bodies such as ASEAN have adopted cautious and non-interventionist approaches, limiting their capacity to influence Myanmar's internal policies. Key regional powers, including India and China, have prioritized strategic and economic interests over humanitarian imperatives, contributing to a diplomatic impasse. This lack of unified pressure has allowed Myanmar to evade accountability and delay efforts toward repatriation or reconciliation.

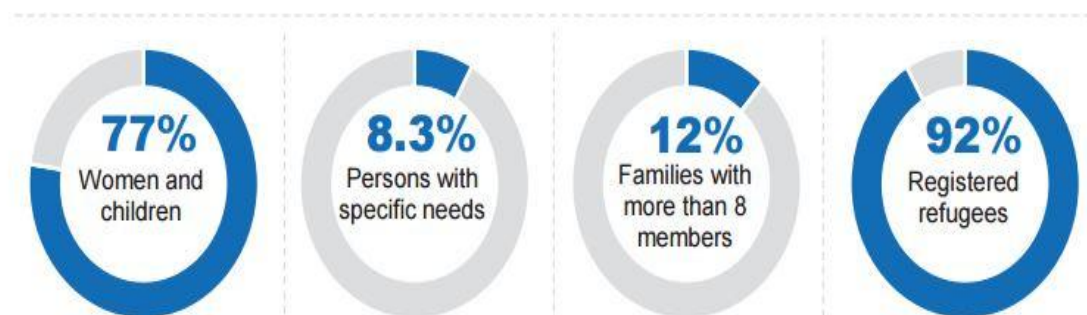
The Rohingya crisis is not merely a humanitarian emergency but a deeply entrenched political and geopolitical challenge. Its historical roots, scale of displacement, and international diplomatic stagnation underscore the urgent need for renewed global commitment. Without decisive action, the crisis risks becoming a permanent fixture in the regional landscape, undermining human rights, regional stability, and the credibility of international institutions.

### ***Key Challenges in the Rohingya Crisis***

The Rohingya crisis presents a constellation of interlinked challenges that span humanitarian, political, social, and security domains. As the displacement enters its eighth year, the situation in Bangladesh, particularly in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, has become increasingly complex, demanding a multidimensional policy response.

#### **1. Humanitarian Strain**

The humanitarian burden remains acute, with over 500,000 Rohingya children lacking access to formal education. The absence of a recognized curriculum and the reliance on NGO-run learning centres with shortened syllabi severely limit educational outcomes and long-term prospects for this generation. Without structured schooling, children are vulnerable to exploitation, child labour, and radicalization.



Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2025

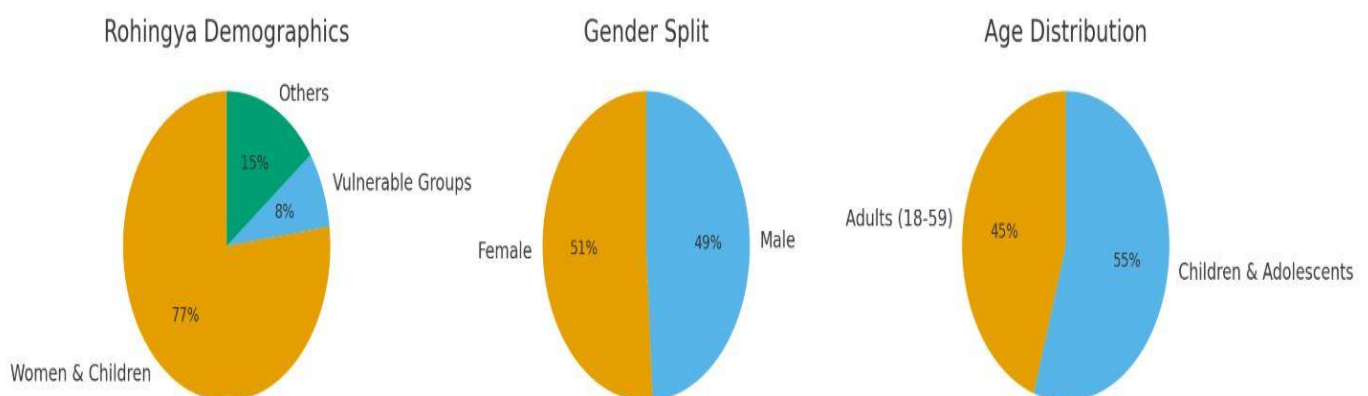
Healthcare infrastructure within the camps is similarly overstretched. Clinics operate under severe resource constraints, with maternal health services underfunded and mental health support non-existent. The psychological toll of displacement, trauma, and uncertainty is profound, yet mental health remains a neglected area in humanitarian programming. Nutrition indicators are deteriorating, particularly among children under five, as international funding cuts have led to reduced food rations. Rising malnutrition rates threaten to reverse gains made in child health and development.



Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2025

Gendered vulnerabilities compound these challenges. Rohingya women and girls face heightened risks of early marriage, trafficking, and gender-based violence. The lack of safe spaces, legal recourse, and targeted protection services exacerbates their marginalization. Inadequate access to reproductive health services and social support mechanisms further entrenches gender inequality within the camps.

Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2025



## 2. Political and Diplomatic Stalemate

Efforts to resolve the crisis through repatriation have repeatedly failed. Agreements signed in 2018 and 2019 between Bangladesh and Myanmar collapsed due to Myanmar's refusal to guarantee safety, citizenship, and basic rights for returnees. The absence of political will and accountability mechanisms has stalled progress toward durable solutions.

International legal efforts, including cases at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), remain ongoing but have yielded limited enforcement. The slow pace of proceedings and lack of binding consequences have allowed impunity to persist. Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council remains paralyzed by geopolitical divisions. China and Russia continue to shield Myanmar from binding resolutions, citing sovereignty and strategic interests.

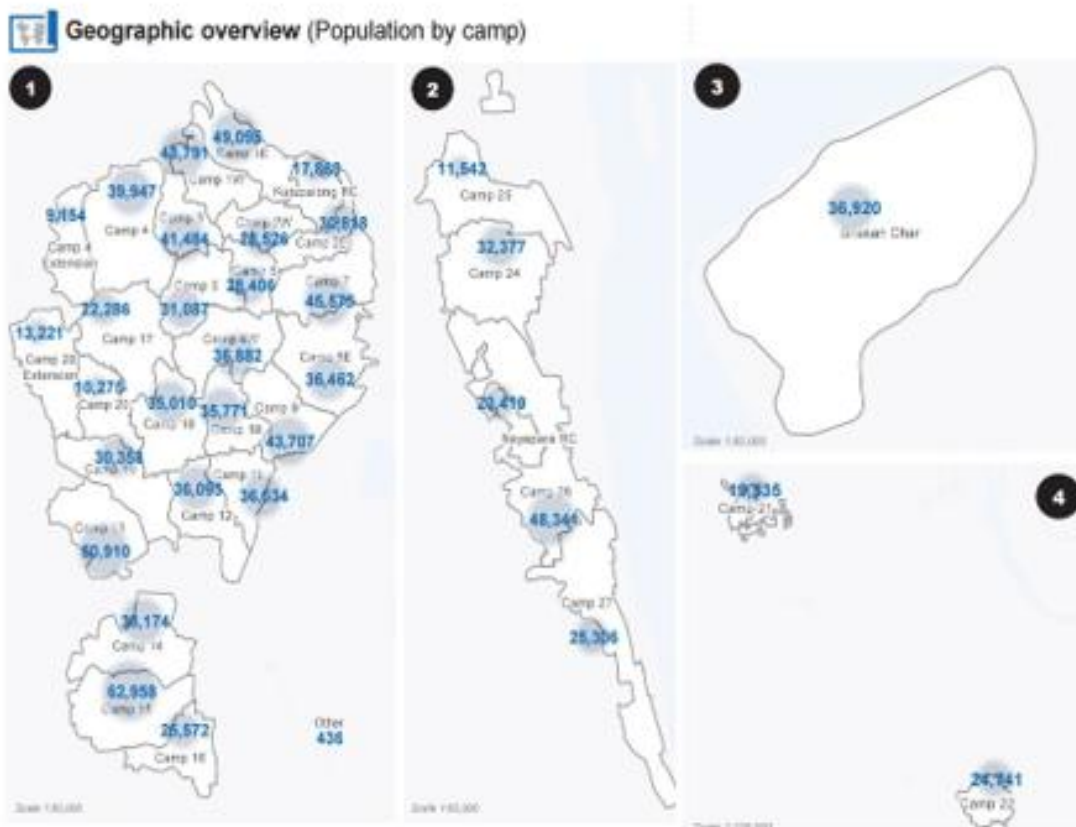
Regional diplomacy is similarly constrained. ASEAN's adherence to its "non-interference" doctrine has prevented robust engagement with Myanmar's internal affairs. While some member states have expressed concern, collective action remains elusive. Key regional powers such as India and China have adopted cautious approaches, prioritizing bilateral ties and economic interests over humanitarian imperatives. This diplomatic inertia has undermined efforts to pressure Myanmar into meaningful reform or repatriation.\

## 3. Local Community Tensions

The prolonged presence of over a million refugees has placed significant strain on host communities in Bangladesh. Economically, competition over daily wage labour has depressed wages for local workers, fuelling resentment and economic insecurity. The recent influx of humanitarian aid directed toward refugees has also created perceptions of inequality, with many poor Bangladeshi families receiving less support than their displaced neighbours.

Environmental degradation is another pressing concern. Deforestation for firewood, soil erosion, and water scarcity have intensified due to the high population density and unsustainable resource use in the camps. These environmental stresses threaten the ecological balance of the region and reduce the resilience of host communities.

Social tensions are rising, driven by perceptions of unequal aid distribution and cultural differences. Host communities increasingly view the refugee population as a burden, and incidents of communal friction have been reported. Without proactive measures to foster social cohesion and equitable development, the risk of instability and conflict in Cox's Bazar remains high.



Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2025

#### 4. Security Risks

The crisis has evolved into a significant security concern for the region. Disenfranchised Rohingya youth, facing limited opportunities and persistent marginalization, are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. The absence of education, employment, and civic engagement creates fertile ground for radicalization.

Organized crime networks have capitalized on the desperation within the camps. Human trafficking routes to Malaysia and Thailand are expanding, with refugees lured by false promises of safety and employment. Smuggling operations, including narcotics and arms, have proliferated, exploiting porous borders and weak enforcement.

Myanmar's Shan and Rakhine states remain major hubs for heroin and methamphetamine production, and the spillover of these illicit substances into Bangladesh poses serious public health and law enforcement challenges. Cyber frauds have also emerged as a growing threat, with Myanmar-based syndicates exploiting refugee vulnerabilities for online fraud and extortion.

The cumulative effect of these security risks is a destabilizing force that extends beyond Bangladesh. If left unchecked, the crisis could undermine stability in India's Northeast, the Bay of Bengal littorals, and broader ASEAN regions. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated regional strategy that integrates humanitarian response with security and

development imperatives. The Rohingya crisis is not merely a humanitarian emergency—it is a multidimensional challenge that demands sustained international attention, strategic diplomacy, and inclusive policy frameworks. Without decisive action, the crisis risks becoming a permanent source of instability in South and Southeast Asia.



Source: UNHCR Population Dashboard 22 April 2022

## *Policy Outlook*

The Rohingya crisis demands a comprehensive and coordinated policy response that integrates humanitarian imperatives with long-term political and security considerations. As the situation continues to evolve, four key policy pillars offer a strategic framework for addressing the crisis in a sustainable and rights-based manner.

### *Repatriation with Dignity and Rights*

The cornerstone of any durable solution lies in the safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. However, past repatriation attempts in 2018 and 2019 failed due to Myanmar's refusal to guarantee citizenship, safety, and basic rights. Future efforts must be predicated on securing international guarantees of legal recognition and protection for returnees. This includes restoring citizenship under a reformed legal framework and ensuring freedom of movement, access to services, and protection from persecution. Repatriation should be conducted under robust UN oversight, with independent monitoring mechanisms to verify conditions and safeguard rights. Furthermore, international aid and sanctions relief should be strategically tied to Myanmar's demonstrable cooperation in facilitating repatriation and implementing reforms. Conditional engagement can serve as leverage to incentivize compliance and accountability.

### *Regional Diplomacy and Burden-Sharing*

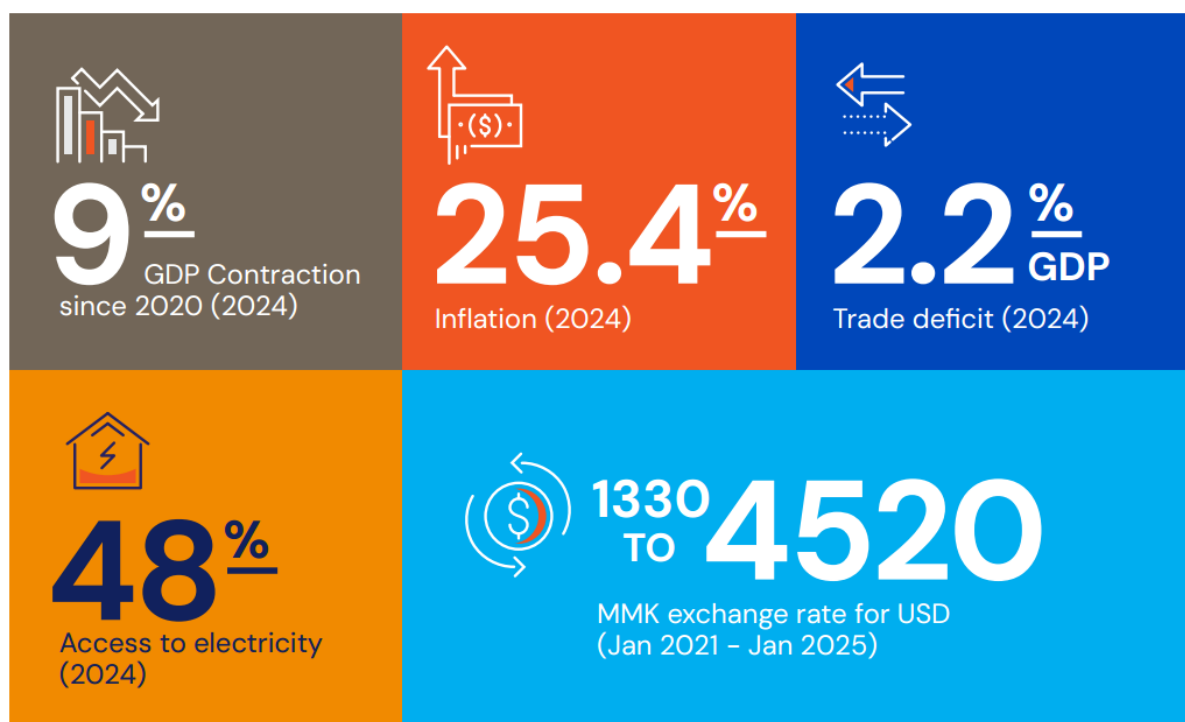
Given the transnational nature of the crisis, regional diplomacy is essential. A dedicated regional contact group comprising Bangladesh, India, China, ASEAN member states, Japan, and the European Union should be established to coordinate diplomatic efforts, share responsibilities, and develop a unified approach. Such a platform can facilitate dialogue with Myanmar, harmonize policy positions, and mobilize resources. ASEAN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) can play pivotal roles in mediation, leveraging their regional legitimacy and diplomatic channels. Additionally, third-country resettlement should be expanded for the most vulnerable groups, including widows, persons with disabilities, and survivors of trauma. While not a substitute for repatriation, resettlement can alleviate pressure on host communities and offer protection to those with urgent needs.

### *Strengthening Humanitarian Response in Bangladesh*

Bangladesh's continued generosity in hosting over a million Rohingya refugees must be matched by renewed international support. The reversal of funding cuts to education, healthcare, and food security is critical to maintaining basic standards of care and preventing further deterioration. Education programs must be scaled up to reach over 500,000 children currently excluded from formal schooling, while health services require investment in maternal care, mental health, and disease prevention. As part of a partial decongestion strategy, relocation to Bhasan Char should be supported with robust safeguards to ensure rights, mobility, and access to services. Moreover, joint livelihood initiatives involving both refugees and host communities, such as skills training, microfinance, and small enterprise development which can foster economic resilience and social cohesion. These programs should be designed to benefit both populations equitably, reducing tensions and promoting shared development.

## Justice and Accountability

Accountability for the atrocities committed against the Rohingya community is essential for justice and deterrence. Ongoing proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) must be supported through diplomatic engagement and resource allocation. Strengthening evidence-based collection mechanisms particularly through survivor testimonies, forensic documentation, and satellite imagery will enhance the credibility and effectiveness of strengthen the legal processes. In parallel, targeted sanctions should be advocated against Myanmar's military-linked businesses and individuals involved and implicated in human rights violations. Such measures can exert economic pressure while signalling international condemnation. Justice efforts must be framed not only as punitive but as foundational to reconciliation and the prevention of future atrocities.



Source: UNDP (2025), "Myanmar's Enduring Polycrisis: Four Years into a Tumultuous Journey"

In conclusion, the Rohingya crisis requires a multidimensional policy approach that balances immediate humanitarian needs with long-term political solutions and regional stability. Repatriation, diplomacy, humanitarian support, and accountability must be pursued in tandem to ensure that the rights and dignity of the Rohingya are upheld, and that the region moves toward a sustainable resolution.

## Recommendations

### For Bangladesh:

To address the protracted Rohingya crisis, a coordinated, multi-tiered policy approach is essential. For Bangladesh, the priority lies in investing in medium-term education and skills development for refugees, particularly the youth, to reduce dependency and foster resilience. Simultaneously, national security must be safeguarded through strategic oversight and community engagement, while avoiding forced returns that violate international norms. Bangladesh should also lead efforts to develop a realistic and attainable roadmap for peaceful repatriation, grounded in rights and dignity.

### Regional partners:

Regional actors particularly countries like China, India, and ASEAN nations must be actively engaged as diplomatic pressure points on Myanmar. Their strategic influence and economic ties position them to play a decisive role in shaping Myanmar's behaviour. ASEAN's involvement should evolve beyond its non-interference doctrine to support constructive mediation and regional burden-sharing.

### International community:

The international community must urgently restore humanitarian funding to reverse the erosion of essential services in refugee camps. Moreover, the Rohingya issue should be integrated into broader global security frameworks, recognizing its potential to destabilize South and Southeast Asia. Finally, sustained support for international accountability mechanisms, including ICJ and ICC proceedings, is vital to uphold justice and deter future atrocities. Without unified action, the crisis risks becoming a permanent fault line in the regional geopolitical landscape.

### Core recommendations:

- Pressure Myanmar through regional diplomacy.
- Restore humanitarian funding from the international community.
- Balance humanitarian needs with long-term integration strategies.
- Strengthen justice and accountability mechanisms.

### *Concluding Remarks*

The Rohingya crisis, while framed as a humanitarian emergency, is fundamentally a regional security threat with far-reaching implications. Without coordinated humanitarian, political, and legal action, instability will deepen across South and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh's continued generosity must not be mistaken for capacity to resolve the crisis alone. Sustainable solutions require equitable burden-sharing, renewed international commitment to justice, and strategic pressure on Myanmar to uphold rights and accountability. The global community must recognize the crisis as a test of collective resolve—where silence and inaction risk entrenching displacement, insecurity, and impunity for generations to come. The time for decisive engagement is now.

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