

Proceedings

Lecture on

US Policy on Refugee, Migration and Population Dynamics

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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) held a lecture titled “US Policy on Refugee, Migration and Population Dynamics” on 21 January 2015. **Ms. Anne C. Richard**, Assistant Secretary, US Department of State, was the designated speaker in the programme. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS delivered the address of welcome. **Mr. Md. Shahidul Haque**, Secretary,

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, concluded the programme with his remarks.

Address of Welcome



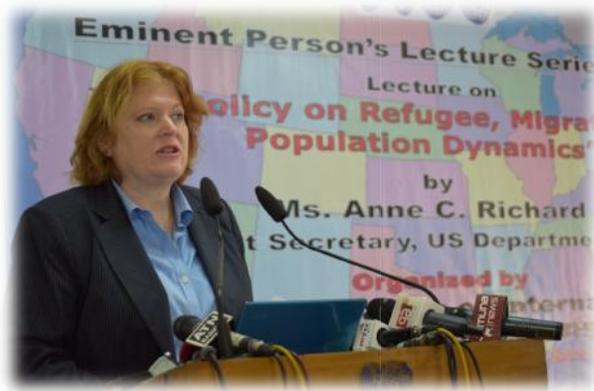
Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, BISS said refugee and migration have gained importance as human security and human rights issues, with serious impact on political and socio-economic development and stability nowadays. These concepts are linked with poverty, lack of opportunities, deprivation, climate change, natural and manmade disasters etc. Migrants and refugees often face harsh treatment, violence and aggression with negative attitudes rising globally towards them these days. Population dynamics, conversely, is a much broader concept under which levels of social amenities, demographics, anthropology, population dynamics etc could be brought. Migration is an important issue in the US as the country is overwhelmingly made up of migrants; it continues to receive them in large numbers. They benefit the US with regular supply of low skill or unskilled cheap workforce and also highly talented young people helping the enrichment of its intellectual resources.

Bangladesh never saw any major foreign colonisation in large numbers, except in more recent times. During the partition of India in late 1940s, some non-Bengalis migrated to East Pakistan from India. Many assimilated into the local populace and many other reached Pakistan during and following our War of Liberation through organised repatriation or other means. Yet, a sizable number still remains to be repatriated. Refugees from Myanmar are a concern to Bangladesh for various reasons who number here now about 28,000 documented and 3,00,000-5,00,000 undocumented respectively. Bangladesh cannot alone bear this added load. It seeks assistance of all and hopes these refugees would safely and appropriately return homes. The US is aware of the problem, its causes and possible solutions. US President

addressing this issue on several occasions in his interactions with Myanmar is a promising development in recent times.

Besides, Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. It is facing more and more extreme weather conditions, more frequent and devastating natural disasters raising internal displacement—climate refugees.

The Lecture



Anne C. Richard, Assistant Secretary, US Department of State delivered the lecture titled “US Policy on Refugee, Migration and Population Dynamics”. She termed Bangladesh as a valued partner for various reasons. The country, despite facing many challenges has stood strong with determination and enlightened policies that in turn promoted economic growth and progress. She praised Bangladesh’s achievements in diverse fields like

several of those in Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Bangladesh is the only country to participate in all three of US President Barack Obama’s major development initiatives—health, food security and climate change. The US remains profoundly grateful to Bangladesh for its crucial contribution to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide, some of which are operating in dangerous theatres of conflict. The US Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration helps provide humanitarian aid to people in those very volatile areas which makes US’ and Bangladesh’s missions interlinked.

The US has been facing several critical issues globally, e.g. the ongoing Syrian war, the rise of Islamic State (ISIL), civil war and chaos in Central African Republic and South Sudan, the present Ukraine crisis etc which it is trying to resolve both by diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. The country is the largest global donor in humanitarian assistance, evident in provision of over US\$ 6 billion in this regard in 2014.



Ms. Richard said, since 2011, ethnic violence caused internal displacement of about 1,00,000 people in Kachin and Northern Shan states of Burma. Violence between Rakhaines and Rohingyas in Rakhaine state has displaced about 1,40,000 people. She visited these areas and participated in a high-level human rights dialogue. The US supports internally displaced people in Rakhaine providing them with food and shelter, helping both Muslims and

Buddhists. Through the UNHCR, the US helped make new homes for both communities. In this regard, she reiterated the US’ gratitude to Bangladesh for hosting thousands of

Rohingyas; Bangladesh launched the National Strategy for Undocumented Myanmar Nationals that she hoped can provide vital humanitarian assistance as well as protection.



The US uses diplomacy and financial support worldwide to focus attention on and protect those caught in conflicts. It prioritises responding to plights of large numbers of urban refugees around the world as two-thirds of refugees served by the UNHCR live outside camps and most live in cities. Thailand (Bangkok), India and Malaysia have high numbers of refugees living in towns and cities. In December 2014, the US Department of State sponsored a UNHCR workshop

for Bangkok bringing together practitioners for sharing best practices and devise action plans for aiding urban refugees. The length of time people usually remain in exile has also changed, e.g. two decades for average refugees, which means they need other long-term opportunities. The US supports many programmes that take into account the issue of more vulnerability of some displaced people; women and girls are more susceptible to violence and exploitation. Here Ms. Richard quoted the US Secretary of State John Kerry—“Gender-based violence plagues every country and perpetuates conflict. It creates instability that can flow from generation to generation, and it tears apart the ability of states to hold together as states in some cases. It makes all nations that experience it less secure, less prosperous and clearly less free.” Secretary Kerry also signed the *Safe from the Start* initiative that is assisting international organisations and NGOs in addressing sexual and gender-based violence at the very beginning and their responses to conflicts.



Ms. Richard also shed light on statelessness. There are at least 10 million stateless people worldwide and one-third of them are children. Statelessness spans generations, rendering people to indignity, deprives them of basic needs of life, restricts their internal and external free movements and even equal legal protection resulting in harassment, exploitation and physical violence. Burmese law does not recognise

Rohingyas as citizens making them stateless. It is a root cause of their suffering there forcing them to flee to neighbouring countries. The UNHCR’s Global Campaign to End Statelessness over the next 10 years is commendable and can hopefully be achieved. Already there has been some progress; since 2003, over four million stateless people have obtained a nationality. The Bangladesh High Court’s verdict in 2008 on granting citizenship to 3,00,000 Urdu speakers is a shining example.

The US attaches importance to humane management of global migration although many migrants are maltreated or even killed while travelling. Traffickers care little about the well-

being of migrants but remain active about making high profits and using loopholes in protection measures. Each year, numerous of such journeys occur amid desperation and hope yet meet tragic end. In 2014, this number was 4,272 much higher than 2013. Many of these travellers attempted by marine routes and over 60 per cent tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe though such perilous travels are not confined to Europe only. For example, about 54,000 migrants tried to cross the Bay of Bengal among whom 540 died. Some 16,000 Rohingyas left Burma-Bangladesh border from between October and November 2014; since the violence began in Burma in June 2012, about 1,00,000 fled by boat. The US focuses on saving lives but coping with irregular migration may be difficult—both in terms of politics and logistics. In South Asia, the US emphasises search and rescue operations, harmonising disembarkation and reception conditions, temporarily protect those who would be endangered if they are sent back home. US government, other concerned governments and organisations need to address reasons that drive people to undertake risky journeys, develop regular and safe alternatives to these as well as crack down on the perpetrators. Many refugees who cannot return home have been resettled in the US, e.g. 15,000 Burmese were in 2014. MS. Richard said the US looks forward to expand partnership with Bangladesh in years ahead. She asked to learn about Bangladeshi perspectives and advance her own understanding of the refugees’ situation here to describe these back in Washington.

Open Discussion:



Zakir Hossain Khan, senior programme officer, Climate Finance Governance, Transparency International Bangladesh asked about US policy regarding internal displacement due to climate change in terms of access to the US, in terms of response to the global action for allocation to the Green Climate Fund, as the US government has recently pledged to allocate US\$ 3 billion to these fund. He wanted to know how much funding would be allocated for climate change refugees especially for countries like Bangladesh who are highly vulnerable to such impacts.

Amir Khasru, correspondent, Voice of America (VOA), asked what impression Mr. Richard got after visiting the Rakhaine State. Was Myanmar taking Rohingyas back or Bangladesh would need more spending on them?

Nurul Islam Hasib, senior correspondent, bdnews24.com asked if Ms. Richard could explain any solution to the Rohingya crisis.

Lieutenant Colonel (retd.) **A K M Saifur Rashid**, asked if there is any scope of funding for stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh to return to Pakistan.

Kamruzzaman Bablu, planning editor, timenewsbd.com, said the US' voice regarding human rights violation anywhere in the world is very strong. But in case of that in Myanmar, US' voice is not strong enough because Rohingyas are Muslims which is alleged by many others.

Ambassador (retd) **Jamil Majid**, said in the 1940s, Wendell Willkie, who even ran for US presidency, wrote a book titled "One World" that made a very compelling case for globalisation. In that book, he attributed US pre-eminence to the fact that it represented the biggest expanse of territory without any barriers to the exchange or movement of ideas or borders. This could be applied to people also; undocumented refugees give more back than they take from the host (s). They work against lesers privileges for longer hours. And in this area, traffickers seem to work more closely than government authorities do. He wanted to know if Assistant Secretary Anne C. Richard believed a liberal international regime concerning migration would benefit all.



Replying to various queries, Assistant Secretary Anne C. Richard said US President Barack Obama in his recent State of the Union speech mentioned climate change and termed migration as an outgrowth of it. The Obama administration puts a strong focus on this issue; the right person to deal with it is US Secretary of State John Kerry. There have taken place a number of conferences on climate change and resultant migration issues, including the

ones hosted by the Nansen Initiative at Geneva. Yet, unlike refugees fleeing political, ethnic or ideological persecution, climate change refugees are not covered by any international norms or regimes. She said she would like to learn more from Bangladesh in this regard as this country has to deal with natural disasters quite often.

After the cyclone Nargis in 2008, Myanmar began opening up to the rest of the world. She told of her visits to Rakhaine, Kachin, Sittwe, Mondgdau etc. Wherever she visited, she found people were very fearful of their neighbours. The situation in Rakhaine is really worrying and cannot be ignored or pushed out of sight. The economy is suffering due to this situation and that is beneficial for none. She also met many delegates from Myanmar in Washington over the past three years who are working on human rights in Myanmar. In many meetings, she participated with them on this issue. Reforms are going on in Myanmar. If real

reforms do take place in Myanmar, those are going to leave some of the country's people out indeed. The US is holding high-level talks with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. Rohingyas are demanded by the government to show particular documents that they are in fact Myanmar's citizens. However, the Myanmar government in fighting other ethnic minorities in the country. The US suggests the government to be patient and try sincerely to build peace with them and start productive thinking; the time is now. Assistant Secretary Anne C. Richard countered the notion that US voice on human rights violation of Rohingyas in Myanmar is weak. There is a vital nongovernment community in Washington who continuously speak over and deal with human rights issues. Here, she mentioned that many Vietnamese people/refugees were resettled in the US after the Vietnam War ended.



Cambodians were also resettled. And there have been discussions going on behind the scenes for dealing with the Rohingya problem too. But there are two countervailing pressures: a) the pressure to do business with Myanmar as the country is opening up gradually; b) the pressure that Myanmar recognises and treats all its citizens equally. These pressures often seem to go

in cross purposes and therefore, the US needs to work in a very careful and balanced fashion. In addition to diplomatic efforts, the US engages its military as well for dealing with human rights issues in Myanmar; here she mentioned that the US delegation sent to Myanmar on these issues also contained Lieutenant General Anthony G. Crutchfield, Deputy Commander of the US Pacific Command. General Crutchfield emphasised the necessity of strong civilian control of Myanmar's military. Assistant Secretary Anne C. Richard believed that the General's dealings with Myanmar government could have much more influence than she herself could. The US is also trying to be united in governmental approaches, trying sincerely to hold sophisticated conversation with Myanmar and besides, emphasising strongly the needs of political reforms as well as elevating its human rights records. Derek Mitchell, a very talented diplomat, has been appointed to Myanmar as US ambassador for those purposes. The world without migration could freeze. The question remains if the international community can develop means to promote legal migration, i.e. for valid reasons and at the same time, protect migrants from exploitation or abuse. The UNHCR in December 2014 held a conference on migration via the Mediterranean into Europe. Ms. Richard attended that event where she invited the US Coast Guard but the US is not in a position to look into migration problems of other countries as it has its own works to do; many Caribbean migrants undertake perilous journeys over the sea to reach the US. There is also the border security issue. The US tries to strike a balance among different categories of migrants. Nevertheless, the country does not have a specific department or authority dedicated to deal with migration because it is a cross-cutting issue involving several government agencies in the US which makes the task even tougher. The country keeps up its humanitarian efforts, that is, saving lives.

Concluding Remarks



Mr. Md Shahidul Haque, Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh said Bangladesh has been closely following the Rohingya issue with Myanmar on mobility between the two countries. He noted that the US has been extremely vocal and strong to suggest Myanmar government for addressing effectively these refugees' issue who are, by religion, Muslim. The US suggested Myanmar to take them back, provide them with all kinds

of freedom, and informed that President Barack Obama was very categorical in saying to give their citizenship back.

Mr. Haque appreciated Assistant Secretary Ms. Richard as passionate, committed and dedicated to the cause of refugees and noted that unlike other bureaucrats, she has been going around the globe to assist the helpless. He also noted that the US policy on migration and development issues has been shifting and, as a migrant sending country, Bangladesh appreciates it; migration is the area where the US, like other areas, should take the leadership. Today's world is different than it used to be two decades back and it would be a radically different in one two decades ahead of now. Currently, the world is going through transformation. In this process, migration, mobility, migrants and refugees are main components. They can also derail the process of a true transformation. He noted the statement of Secretary General and mentioned he had rightly pointed out that in terms of development agenda, migration and migrants play an extremely important role. This is the first time that the space for a migration debate within the global debate has been created and here the US has been playing an important role. Quoting Ambassador Jamil Majid, he said migration is inevitable, necessary and desirable. The debate over whether migration is good or bad is gone. Nobody now questions the rationale of migration and mobility and its impact on development or its negative impact on development if it is not governed well. In the post 2015 development discourse, migration has a space for its own. In this architecture, countries should try to marshal all their resources to build a different new world. He talked about the 16 goals agreed upon by all states and noted that within those goals, four are directly linked to migration; another four strongly focus migration and mobility. Migrant workers' right comes in very strongly under goal eight including women migrants and well managed migration policy. Goal 16 emphasises trafficking which is also a governance goal and is quite contested.

Foreign Secretary noted that governance is sometimes misunderstood by peoples, countries and delegates. On one hand, migration is coming through inequality, and then through peaceful society angle. Therefore, it is going to influence the architecture and people's life in future. Secretary General has already said that 2015 is likely to be a critical year for development discourse. Many think 2015 and 2016 would be crucial for migration and

mobility issues. He informed that Bangladesh would be chairing the global forum on migration and development in 2016. Besides, hopefully by the end of 2015, an architecture for a new framework where mobility issues would have its space both in terms of ensuring its maximum impact its own development and minimising its negative impact would be observed. The US would have an important role in that discourse.

He noted that in the programme there has been discussion on climate change and displacement; not only internal displacement but also displacement across border has also been discussed. He also informed that in April the first South Asian Regional Consultation under Nansen initiative on migration and displacement will take place and, there, decision makers would try to come up with guidelines on how do states have to address the issue of population displacement induced by climate change for which Bangladesh is also preparing.

He finally thanked and welcomed the Assistant Secretary Assistant Secretary Anne C. Richard to Bangladesh and mentioned this programme as crucial to flag the concerns of Bangladesh. The country has been hosting Rohingyas for over two decades with its limited resources. He also thanked the US and international community for their support for refugees in the camps and people in the makeshift ones. He welcomed Ms. Richard to visit the makeshift camp at Cox's Bazaar and get hold of both sides of the issue since she has already visited Myanmar. He further mentioned that how to move forward on this issue remains a critical point but, he also opined, Bangladesh and Myanmar could make some progress with the help of the US and other friends.

Summing up by the Chair



Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmed touched two points. First, he mentioned that while talking about migration and Bangladesh, it must be noted that Bangladesh is a labour sending country. Secondly, he appreciated the role India played as a neighbouring country back in 1971 by hosting large number of refugees from Bangladesh and expressed gratitude for that support. He thanked the US Assistant Secretary, the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and all the participants.