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Joint Webinar  
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***Published by***

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***Printed by***

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# Joint Webinar on

## The Rohingya Exodus in Bangladesh: Regional and Global Security Implications

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) and Bangabandhu Centre for Bangladesh Studies, Canada (BCBS) jointly organized a webinar on “The Rohingya Exodus in Bangladesh: Regional and Global Security Implications” on 09 November 2021. **Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te**, Director General, BISS, gave the opening speech and **Dr Kawser Ahmed**, Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg and the Executive Director of BCBS, moderated the webinar. **H E Dr Khalil Rahman**, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Canada and Chief Patron of BCBS, was present and gave his remarks. **Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed** delivered the keynote speech on “The Rohingya Crisis: Past, Present and Future”. There were two more presentations in the session. First one was made by **Dr Kawser Ahmed**, titled “Ethnic Armed Insurgency in Myanmar and Panglong Peace Treaty: Implications for Future Repatriation of Rohingyas to Arakan”. The other presentation was given by **Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, Senior Research Fellow of BISS, titled “Regional Security Dimension of the Rohingya Crisis”. There was an open discussion session after the presentations.



# Opening Speech



**Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te**  
*Director General, BISS*

At the outset of his speech, **Major General Md Emdad Ul Bari, ndc, psc, te**, Director General, BISS, paid his deepest reverence to the memory of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all the martyrs of the country's liberation war of 1971. He gave a brief account of Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral relations where he pointed out that Myanmar has been struggling since its independence in managing ethnic unrest that had its root in its colonial past. Bangladesh-Myanmar diplomatic relations were established after 1971 and both sides agreed on cooperation in different areas, but the latter's brutal expulsion of Rohingyas into Bangladesh starting in 1978, emerged and remains a continuous irritant in bilateral ties. Although diplomatic communications and repatriation of a portion of Rohingyas back to Myanmar restored some level of stability in relations, the August 2017 exodus has been a critical impasse between these two countries. This long-running crisis, an internal matter of Myanmar, now started to show implications for other countries of this region and severely disturbed the stability in South and Southeast Asia, thus triggering a global outcry.

The Director General highlighted the humanism of the honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. Four years ago, she took a bold decision to open up the border for protecting thousands of Rohingyas fleeing the ruthless persecution. It was the ultimate humane gesture, coming from a country that is small in geographic terms, overpopulated and yet keeping up its journey to becoming a prosperous one. Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina's act of benevolence "we will share our food with them" stems from Bangladesh's collective memory of sufferings as a nation in 1971, a normative vision for a peaceful world bound by brotherhood and based on international norms and law. In this regard, the Director General also said that Bangabandhu's famous dictum, "friendship to all and malice towards none" worked as the moral compass during the Cold War and continues to show path to Bangladesh in difficult times like the recent Rohingya influx of 2017. Being one of the law-abiding responsible members of the international community, withstanding tremendous adversities, Bangladesh continues to spearhead the humanitarian campaign to look after the wellbeing of 1.1 million of forcibly displaced Rohingyas. As the first responder, Bangladesh extended all possible kinds of assistance to these people long before the international community stepped in. Local people in Cox's Bazaar region and the whole of Bangladesh also came out in support of them.

despite their limited resources. Aside from that, Bangladesh government worked with partner countries and various agencies of the UN to provide vaccines in Rohingya camps amid the COVID-19 pandemic and thus making sure the disease would be successfully contained therein. The Director General pointed out that the main concern for Bangladesh remains safe, dignified and swift repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland, Myanmar. Formal negotiations were opened with Myanmar on this issue in October 2017. Both sides signed a deal on 23 November 2017. Thereafter, two failed attempts had been made to start voluntary return. Consequently, about 10 agreements between the two countries including those in areas of land boundary management, prevention of narcotics, trade and transport etc, did not go as planned.



The Director General expressed his concern regarding the recent military coup in Myanmar and resultant political turbulence which might add further uncertainty to the repatriation process. Rohingyas might not be interested in repatriation, if uncertainty continues to persist regarding guarantee of citizenship, safety and basic rights for the Rohingyas and conditions in Rakhine state remain not conducive for their safe return. The pandemic and Myanmar's election in November 2020 delayed the joint meeting between officials of the two countries. Following the coup, a tripartite Bangladesh-Myanmar-China meeting, scheduled for 04 February 2021, was postponed. As a result, new concerns and confusions are now mounting about peaceful and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas.

According to the Director General, while the role of international community regarding the repatriation of the Rohingyas remains largely less than satisfactory, Bangladesh continues to endure the increasing strain caused by over 1.1 million of displaced Rohingyas, who themselves remain homeless and whose children are growing up in utter uncertainty in the congested camps. Eventually, however, the situation turned somewhat paradoxical where humanitarian concerns lie on one hand, and growing multifaceted security concerns on the other. Presence of such a huge number of people has been taking grave tolls on Bangladesh's society, security, economy, natural resources, environment, ecology, and in many cases, some of these socio-ecological effects are irreversible. Yet, Rohingyas are not only a domestic security concern; rather, it could flare up as a regional and global security threat also. They are highly vulnerable to transnational crimes like human, drugs and weapons trafficking, radicalization and other dangerous ventures which could generate trickle-

down effects on regional security. Lingering in repatriation may utterly frustrate and entice them to become involved with different criminal activities further. Such fears stem from the fact that they are already deprived of basic human rights and opportunities due to 'statelessness'. As human trafficking and smuggling remained prevalent in Southeast Asia, these might also be worsened by the Rohingya crisis. Sometimes, it was found that Rohingyas were being smuggled and sold to Thai fishing vessels as slaves to produce seafood sold worldwide. Forests of southern Thailand and northern Malaysia are major stop-off points for human traffickers where they abandon thousands of migrants from overloaded boats that crossed the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Adolescents and young Rohingya women are easily targetted by human traffickers, who lure them to become sex workers or drug pushers. Cox's Bazaar is adjacent to the golden triangle, which makes it a hotbed of drug trafficking. Rohingyas can be a conduit for drug trade as they can be easily lured into it for money. Myanmar is infamous for producing *Yaba*. Therefore, dealers use Rohingyas to push drugs through international borders.

He expressed disappointment regarding the prioritization of strategic competition among major regional and great powers at the expense of dignified repatriation of persecuted Rohingyas. The Director General pointed out that the Rakhine state is rich in oil and natural gas reserves and this has made Myanmar a strategic partner for major world powers. That particular region in Myanmar holds great significance for China's Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, India and Russia's gas lines, their investment in gas exploration and extraction projects in Myanmar have made it a crucial geo-political theatre. American interests lie with its "Indo-Pacific" strategy in establishing strategic ties with Myanmar to maintain 'rule-based order' in South and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, since 2015, there has been growing politico-economic ties with Myanmar in the form of trade, investment, normalization of diplomatic relations based on the hope this will lead it towards democratization. Therefore, China and India, two major powers in this region, do not appear very eager to raise any issue which can affect their national interests. Strategic interests and competition among the regional and global powers facilitate Myanmar to avoid any pressure for the violation of human rights of its ethnic minorities.

The Director General opined that for greater interest and stability of the region, the Rohingya crisis needs to be resolved in a durable manner with utmost priority. The problem was created by Myanmar and its solution must be found in that country. As a nation, Bangladesh has been shouldering a disproportionate and unjust share of this crisis. Hence, immediate resolution of this crisis would be its foremost national priority. Rather than solving the root causes, regional countries should not focus on symptoms of the crisis. It is the responsibility of the international community to act proactively to solve this humanitarian catastrophe. He concluded by saying that the more swiftly regional and global powers act to facilitate sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas, the more successfully they would be able to avoid a pressing and potential security threat in the region and find lasting peace.





# Remarks



**Colonel Sheikh Masud, SPP, psc**

*Research Director, BISS*

**Colonel Sheikh Masud, SPP, psc**, Research Director, BISS, said that there prevails a unanimous consensus that the Rohingya exodus in Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh is emerging as a major security concern for the host country as well as regional and global community. Bangladesh hosted a huge exodus of more than 1.1 million Myanmar's Rohingyas solely on humanitarian consideration. The majority of the exodus was housed in Bangladesh's South-eastern part since 2017, who fled the brutal state-sponsored persecution and ethnic cleansing by Myanmar's military and radical locals.

He noted that alongside the unwillingness of Myanmar, the lack of proper initiatives by both regional and global actors is delaying safe and dignified return of the Rohingyas to their homeland in Myanmar. Under such circumstances, the frustrations and the grievances of marginalized Rohingyas have started showing the signs of severe security concerns in the host country and the security concerns may escalate at the regional and global levels. Particularly, the regional security dynamics of the Rohingya crisis is going to be complicated if the repatriation process loses the focus of the regional and international communities. In this backdrop, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) and Bangabandhu Center for Bangladesh Studies, Canada (BCBS) took a joint initiative to understand the emerging regional and global security concerns in the contemporary context of the Rohingya exodus in Bangladesh.



**Dr Kawser Ahmed**

*Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg  
Executive Director, BCBS*

On behalf of the Bangabandhu Centre for Bangladesh Studies in Canada (BCBS), **Dr Kawser Ahmed**, Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg, and Executive Director, BCBS, appreciated the joint collaboration of the webinar. He appreciated the audience for joining the session. He noted that the topic of the webinar is timely and there is a need to build consensus about the intervention of the conflict in earnest.

# Keynote Speech



**Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed**

*Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka*

**Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, argued that he had deliberately chosen the phrase “past, present and the future” since it is almost impossible to get to the future unless someone is familiar with the present and the past of the crisis. Referring to the root causes of the crisis, he mentioned the issue of identity, which is very critical and related to the 2008 constitution of Myanmar as well the question of autonomy. Then comes the issue of “genocide” and “the intent to destroy”. According to him, it is a classic example of genocide since the definition has nothing to do with the number of killings. Mass killing can be one of the facets of genocide but not the condition. Even killing of ten people can be seen as genocide given the “intent to destroy”. In the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, it was mentioned that if there are one or two villages with 50,000 people of one particular ethnic community, that community will get autonomy. There are a number of ethnic communities within the 135 communities they have; but these people have less population than the Rohingyas. However, the moment the Myanmar Government recognizes the identity of the Rohingyas, they get automatic autonomy. And as per critics’ observations, the reason they are not doing so is because, the moment the identity of the Rohingya community is recognized, then there is a Muslim entity in Myanmar. Then, there are the issues of communalism and racism.

Expulsion and repatriation are not nothing new. Professor Imtiaz argued that critics often have the wrong impression that once a group faces expulsion, they are not later repatriated easily. But in the 1970s, over 200,000 were expelled and through the engagement of the international community including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), they went back. The same thing happened in the 1990s, and more than 250,000 people were repatriated. In both cases, Myanmar’s military was in power. In 2017, the expulsion happened under a so-called civilian government for the first time. Professor Imtiaz emphasized on the phrase “so-called” and explained that Aung San Suu Kyi was in power in a symbolic form but she did not have the real power. That became evident in 2021 when she was removed.

On 23 August 2017, the Kofi Annan report was submitted, and on the 24<sup>th</sup>, the report was published. On 25<sup>th</sup>, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attack took place and the very next day, the expulsion happened. Hence, the international community, particularly the United Nations (UN), did not see through what



the aftermath of the Commission's report could be. Not to forget, the regiment that was brought in Arakan had already been "infamous". Professor Imtiaz opined that the UN should have been alarmed and, in that case, the UN in Myanmar miserably failed.

Addressing the commonalities between the military government and Aung San Suu Kyi's government in Myanmar, Professor Imtiaz explained that both of the regimes would favour military and Buddhism; not to mention the issue of racism. Mainstream critical writers of Myanmar have pointed out that Suu Kyi's writings from England also had very racist viewpoints. Professor Imtiaz added that he was surprised how the Nobel Committee had missed it. Both of the regimes also favoured globalization. The military government of Myanmar thought if Aung San Suu Kyi was brought in, the sanctions would be removed. In this case, they correctly predicted the scenario and even used Suu Kyi. To highlight the differences between the two regimes, he mentioned that, while Suu Kyi represents a political party, the military represents a state institution and a political party. Therefore, there is no way to "remove" the military; it will stay in one form or another. Professor Imtiaz noted that the kind of movement of people here is very unique and any European country would be horrified by the numbers. The expelled population is larger than the entire population of Bhutan. Bhutan had 60,000 years to become Bhutan, but Bangladesh had to incorporate a group of people larger than Bhutan or, to some extent, Maldives' entire population within three months.

Highlighting the issue of humanitarian assistance, Professor Imtiaz then discussed that Bangladesh has only received 29 per cent of the funding and that has been a burden for her. Regarding the violence in the Rohingya camps, he referred to the data on violence collected and analyzed by the Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka. The data shows that between August 2017 and October 2021, within 50 months, only 931 cases of violence and 235 cases of death happened in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. The numbers are much lower than those of Chicago, New York or Detroit. Nevertheless, he thinks that things are getting bad and can get worse in the future. The trend of death in the camps went up in 2019 and recently, there are cases like the killing of Rohingya leader Mohibullah that got international attention.

In order to address why the coup in Myanmar happened, Professor Imtiaz opined that the landslide success of Suu Kyi in the election might be the reason. Her party captured 396 seats in the lower and upper

houses of the parliament. He wondered why the international community was excited with her success in a parliament where an incumbent number of military officers were sitting. He referred to the economic dynamics that might have an impact here given the international community could be interested in doing business in Myanmar. Also, Myanmar made the calculations correctly that ASEAN, China, India and Japan would also be with them.

Professor Imtiaz then referred to the five-point plan presented by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina in the UN General Assembly which also reflects the Kofi Annan Commission's plan and China's three-point plan. According to him, the plan is not being expedited since major powers have economic stakes in Myanmar. The three countries abstained from voting against Myanmar in the Assembly. They still do not use "Rohingya" as an official term. So far as the internationalization of the issue of justice is concerned, there is still only the provisional verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Professor Imtiaz predicted that the Myanmar military would be interested in resolving the issue before the final verdict comes, since that could be an issue of compensation. He emphasized that the moment there is a genocide, it is never a bilateral issue. It is now a global concern, and all kinds of activists should be there internationally, not only in Bangladesh. He noted the importance of re-imposing the sanctions. He criticized the logic that sanctions will hurt the ordinary people of Myanmar questioning why the same logic is not applied when sanctions are imposed on other countries like Iran and North Korea. He pointed out that after the semi-civilian government was thrown out, more than 1,000 people were killed. However, the business interest will still be there since the countries have invested so much in Myanmar. According to Professor Imtiaz, engaging the Rohingya diaspora is important as well. Going back to the point of decoupling of the Rohingya issue from the strategic interest of the major powers in Myanmar, he added that even if the countries start voting in favour of the resolutions for the Rohingyas or, at least, start using the term "Rohingya" officially, or invite some Rohingya leaders for discussing the issue, that will send a message to Myanmar automatically. Finally, Professor Imtiaz addressed the civil unrest faced by the military in Myanmar. He argued that any kind of repatriation would require the support of the Myanmar military since there the issue of security is primary. He referred to the situation as a window opportunity for bringing a solution to the crisis that needs to be worked out.

### RESOLVING THE CRISIS: BANGLADESH PLAN

**PM Sheikh Hasina presented a five-point plan in UN General Assembly in 2017:**

1. Myanmar must unconditionally stop the violence and the practice of ethnic cleansing in the Rakhine State immediately and forever.
2. Secretary General of the United Nations should immediately send a Fact-Finding Mission to Myanmar.
3. All civilians irrespective of religion and ethnicity must be protected in Myanmar. For that "safe zones" could be created inside Myanmar under UN supervision.
4. Ensure sustainable return of all forcibly displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh to their homes in Myanmar.
5. The recommendations of Kofi Annan Commission Report must be immediately implemented unconditionally and in its entirety.



# Presentations



## **Dr Kawser Ahmed**

*Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg*

*Executive Director, BCBS*

**Dr Kawser Ahmed**, Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg and Executive Director, BCBS, at the outset of his presentation titled, “Ethnic Armed Insurgency in Myanmar and Panglong Peace Treaty: Implications for Future Repatriation of Rohingyas to Arakan”, reminded the audience that Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh in her recent United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address made an urgent call for the repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh since the international community did not pay attention to this aspect over the past four years. Bangladesh addressed this issue consistently in the UN in the past as a protracted stay of Rohingyas in Bangladesh would cause regional and international security hazards. The humanitarian crisis would turn into a security nightmare if the international community does not have an urgent intervention, and Bangladesh would be the worst victim. Therefore, the international community must exert their best to help Rohingyas to go back to their motherland.

In discussing the armed insurgency in Myanmar, he stated that there are seven ethnic groups involved in insurgency/civil war in Myanmar, i.e., Karen, Kachin, Mon, Arakanese, Karen, Chin and Shan. Fourteen Arakanese rebel groups have been in conflict with the state since 1784. Most prolific are the rebels of Shan state: Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) of Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) and Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) of erstwhile Communist Party of Burma. They did not sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the Myanmar government and eight ethnic groups in 2015. Founded in 2009, the Arakan Army (AA) operates in Arakan. It is assumed that the group is backed by China. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) dominated Northern Alliance members. Besides, the Northern Alliance (NA) is a coalition of ethnic revolutionary armies. At present, it includes the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA).

Dr Kawser then elaborated a bit on the Arakan Army, which is quite new in the field of resistance in Arakan State. The current conflict in Rakhine State is inextricably linked to the conflict that has been ongoing in Kachin and Northern Shan States for nearly a decade. The United League of Arakan (ULA) is the political wing of the Arakan Army (AA). The ULA/AA's alliance with stronger, better-armed groups in the region allowed it to



build up and train its own forces. The formation of two Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) alliances—the Federal Political Negotiation Consultative Committee (FPNCC) led by the United Wa State Party/United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA) and the Northern Alliance led by the Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA)—has provided an avenue for the ULA/AA to strengthen its position in informal negotiations with the government peace team. The ULA/AA has been denied participation in formal negotiations aimed at having ethnic armed groups sign the 2015 NCA. The ULA/AA has also joined with two other members of the Northern Alliance—the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta’ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA) and Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA)—to form a new grouping named “the Brotherhood Alliance”. In August 2019, the Brotherhood Alliance carried out attacks in Shan State and notably in the Mandalay region on the Defence Service Technological Academy. As a result, the last two months of the year were marked by increased fighting in areas where the PSLF/TNLA are active in Shan State. He then shared a figure with the audience which shows that from 24 March 2019 to 21 April 2019, the violence against the civilians by the Myanmar army rapidly increased, mainly in the Rakhine State. He commented that the situation is highly insecure.

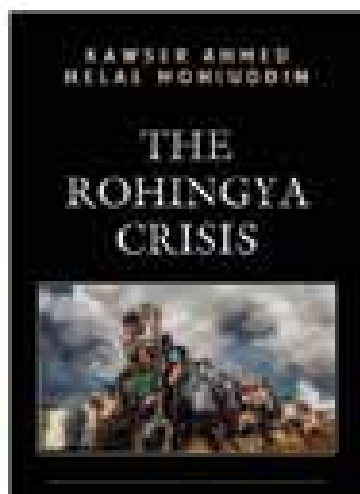
While talking about the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), he noted that it was a ceasefire agreement between the government of Myanmar and representatives of various ethnic insurgent groups, known as ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) by the government. The draft was agreed upon by a majority of the invited parties on 31 March 2015, and the agreement was signed by President Thein Sein on 15 October 2015. The NCA signatories were the Government of Myanmar, All Burma Democratic Front (ABSDF), Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), Chin National Front (CNF), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council, Karen National Union (KNU), Lahu Democratic Union, New Mon State Party, Pa-O National Liberation Army (PNLA), Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS/SSA-South). He informed the audience that following the 01 February 2021 coup d’état, the Tatmadaw violated the ceasefire agreement by attacking the Restoration Council of Shan State’s camps in Shanin Hsipaw Township.

Dr Kawser mentioned that the Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada (CRRIC) invited H E Dr Lian Hmung Sakhong, the Minister of Federal Union Affairs in the National Unity Government of Myanmar, in one of its webinar series titled “Myanmar Conflict and Its Peaceful Resolution” where Dr Lian shared his

ideas about the Peace Treaty. He agreed that repatriation would be nearly impossible unless the Constitution is reformed and a federal state is prevailing in Myanmar.

At this point, in his presentation, Dr Kawser identified some of the challenges. First, He commented that the National Unity Government (NUG) and the Peoples Defence Forces have added a new layer of challenges to peace and repatriation. Second, Militias and their inclusion in the EAO's is a major concern as most of them work with the Myanmar Army. Third is self-determination, which is the sticking point in NCA. Fourth is the China factor and BRI investment. Fifth, constitutional reform, which has been demanded by many both in the West and East. Time will say if the Myanmar military is interested in reforming the constitution. Sixth, the cross-border movement by the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and smaller armed groups are still happening in Bangladesh and nearing borders. Finally, the political economy, which has been triggered by the drug trade. The drug trade in Myanmar's Shan State generates huge revenues for paramilitaries and ethnic armed groups, creating a political economy that undermines peace.

Nevertheless, Dr Kawser expressed his optimism that peace can be achieved in Myanmar. He gave the example of two agreements, i.e. the Belfast Agreement and the Aceh Peace Agreement. The Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, brought conflict resolution of the protracted conflict in Northern Ireland. The Aceh Peace Agreement ended thirty years of violence in Aceh Province of Indonesia. He agreed with Professor Imtiaz that it is actually a window of opportunity. It is high time because the military coup in Myanmar has impacted the legitimacy of the Myanmar Army in the country. ASEAN decided not to invite General Min Aung Hlaing to their meeting and preferred a political representative, which was a huge move from the organization. It shows that ASEAN withdrew support from the Myanmar Military. However, the international community is unclear about what to do and how to do it. In Canada, when they talk with policymakers, there is an abundance of confusion about what to do and how to do it. These two questions are unclear in regards to the participation of the international community. China vetoes sanctions, yet it tacitly approves new initiatives. The Security Council convened a private meeting in Myanmar on 8 November. The meeting was requested by the UK, the penholder on Myanmar. The UK circulated a draft press conference statement on Myanmar on 5 November. There are chances of seeing a change in China's position in this conflict. He recommended that Canada should take the lead with a view to broker a peace treaty, keeping Bangladesh as a co-host so that the Panglong Peace Treaty can be moved forward in terms of long-term sustainable resolution of the conflict. Besides, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) might be used to intervene and discuss a peace treaty. He believed that the NCA is not dead, and there are potentials for it. If the peace agreement is reached, then possibly the Arakan State will be safe, and repatriation can happen again.







**Abu Salah Md. Yousuf**

*Senior Research Fellow, BISS*

**Mr Abu Salah Md. Yousuf**, Senior Research Fellow, BISS, delivered his presentation on “Regional Security Dimension of the Rohingya Crisis”. He made the presentation within the context of the recent changes, developments, and tensions connected with the Rohingya crisis and which may escalate regional security threats of South and Southeast Asia. He said that the regional security dimension is a common phenomenon in almost all displacement crises. However, in the case of the Rohingya crisis, delay in repatriation is deepening the security threats in the region.

He explained the demography of the displaced Rohingya community. There is no authentic demographic calculation of the Rohingyas by Myanmar and any other country. Some Myanmar Censuses and Rohingya organizations perceived and estimated the Rohingya population within and outside Myanmar. He informed that the first time the total Rohingya population came to a report titled “A Short Report in Arakan” by a British Sub-commissioner in the then Arakan in 1826. According to the report, the total population of Arakan was 100,000. Of them, three-tenth was Muslims, six-tenth was Arakanese Moghs, and one-tenth was of Burmese origin. In 1872, the first British Census calculated that 13 per cent of the Arakanese were Muslims. The last Census under the British in 1931 stated that 25.3 per cent of Arakanese were Muslims. There was another Census in 1941, but the document was lost due to World War II. After the independence of Myanmar, three Censuses, e.g., 1973, 1983, and 2014, were carried out. According to the 1983 Census, the total Muslim population in Arakan was 28.5 per cent. Moreover, the Census of 2014 estimated that 35.5 per cent of the Arakan population was Muslim.

He added that the total number of ethnic groups in Myanmar is 135. In the 1931 Census, the British categorized 135 ethnic groups. These categorisation was followed in all censuses in the independent Myanmar. However, the names and categories were changed later. During the British period, the focus was on religion and language, but General Ne Win focused on ethnic identity and language. Mr Yousuf then highlighted some of the historians’ arguments regarding the total Rohingya population in Arakan. Burmese historian Aya Chan argued about the increasing Muslim population in the Arakan. On the contrary, British historian Ronan Lee argued that the proportion of the Muslim population in Arakan between 1826 and 2014 was almost the same. The number the Rohingya had increased, but the way Myanmar historians project, it is not correct. A British historian also pointed that in 1973 and 1983 Censuses, the Myanmar authority did not give the exact proportion of the Muslim population in Arakan. Another argument was given by Than Kin, a British diplomat who served as a desk officer on Burma in the British Foreign Office, regarding the 1973 Census carried out under General Ne Win. He argued that there was depopulation in Arakan after 1962. Hence, the rise of the population of the Rohingya or Muslim community was not historically correct. These arguments are crucial because, in 2012, the Myanmar authority developed some laws claiming that the Rohingya population is rising disproportionately. However, Ronan Lee and Than Kin proved that the claim is not correct.

## Demography and Displacement of the Rohingya Community



Year	Document	Muslim Population in Rakhine/Arakan (percentage)
1826	"A Short Report on Arakan" by Charles Paton	30%
1872	The first census under British rule	13%
1931	The last census under British rule	15.3%

Mr Yousuf then shed some light on the displacement of the Rohingyas. Four major displacements of the Rohingyas took place in 1978, 1992, 2012, and 2017, and Myanmar authorities launched military operations against them. Different narratives prevailed in Myanmar regarding the Rohingyas. In 1978, nationalist narrative was dominant. However, in 2012 and 2017, there was an anti-Muslim or Islamophobia narrative. They feared that the Muslim population was rising in Myanmar, which can be a threat to Burmese security.

While talking about the total number of Rohingya populations inside and outside Myanmar, he mentioned that some documents stated that 800,000 Rohingya are still in Myanmar. Other reports estimated that the number is 600,000. However, all numbers are approximately given by some of the Rohingya organizations and Myanmar government documents. He said that South and Southeast Asian countries, e.g., India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, also raise concerns about the Rohingya people. It is reported that some of the Rohingya are also in China, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Jordan. Besides, some migrated to Australia, Canada, the USA, European Union, and Japan.

Highlighting the regional security concern, Mr Yousuf said that a network is developing among the Rohingya community as they are displaced from their country. Besides, the delay of Rohingya repatriation is creating concerns and depression among them. The Rohingya crisis is also connected with the religious radicalization in Myanmar and the demographic security dilemma. Religious radicals in Myanmar consider the Rohingya community as a threat to them, and this kind of narrative is dominant in Myanmar. Hence, it may emerge as a regional concern for all the countries of the region.

Another tension is related to the internal conflict in Myanmar after the coup of 2021. The National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) is also claiming its legitimacy in the system. There is an apprehension that a civil conflict or war in Myanmar may occur between the Military and other ethnic groups. He stated that ethnic groups after the coming of power of Aung San Suu Kyi were not allied with the National League for Democracy (NLD). On the other hand, now, some of the ethnic groups are trying to develop a link with NUG that may escalate tension and an armed conflict between the military and other ethnic groups.

Mr Yousuf also focused on extremism. He added that extremist groups are not only rising in Myanmar but also in Theravada Buddhist countries, e.g., Sri Lanka, Laos and Thailand. They are developing narratives considering Muslims as a threat. Thus, these narratives may challenge the relations between Muslims and

the Buddhists community. He then talked about the diplomatic tussle between ASEAN and Myanmar. The last ASEAN Foreign Ministers Summit did not invite the Army Chief of Myanmar. However, ASEAN member states did not adopt any sanctions and hard measures; instead, they gave Myanmar a diplomatic message about its domestic development. Mr Yousuf also discussed Myanmar's representation in the UN. Myanmar diplomatically tried to ensure its representation in the United Nations General Assembly. When China and Russia did not apply their veto in favour of Myanmar, it created frustration among the Myanmar authority. Hence, he thought these issues would make more policy changes in Myanmar and regional levels.

Mr Yousuf believes regional dimensions of security due to the Rohingya crisis are getting more complicated. Different narratives are coming regarding the crisis from different groups. On the other hand, inside Myanmar, anti-Muslim narratives are dominant. Recently, NUG is considering the rights of the Rohingya population. At the same time, Ashin Wirathu was released someday before. These organizations also sometimes may lose their legitimacy due to the strong military force. As a result, there is an apprehension that radicalization would escalate in the region. Moreover, the relations between NUG and some of the ethnic groups are developing. Hence, some groups may exploit this development and try to be connected with the active forces. It is reported that some of the local groups in Myanmar, due to their displacement in different countries in South and Southeast Asia, will be transnational, which may create regional concern for the countries regarding the transnational arms and drug networks. It is also reported that sometimes host communities' illicit networks also use Rohingya to transfer other illegal drugs and weapons.

Considering the conflict economy in Myanmar, he stressed the conflict between Myanmar authority and insurgency groups since 1947. Illicit networks are very active, and it is reported that some groups are connected with the government are also taking the benefits of such an economy. When people try to maintain their control on this economy, this may push them or connect them with the regional groups creating security concerns for the countries of the region. On top of that, cyberspace used by these groups is increasing, and they will connect with the international or other networks that may help them transfer illicit weapons and drugs.

In conclusion, Mr Yousuf said that the uncertain future of the Rohingya community makes the regional security situation complicated. If the international community and regional players do not focus on the regional dimension of the security connected with the Rohingya crisis, may escalate security threats in the region.

## Rising Tensions and the Rohingya Crisis



- **Delay of the Rohingya repatriation**
- **Religious radicals in Myanmar and the demographic security dilemma**
- **Internal Conflict in Myanmar after military coup**
- **The rise of religious extremist groups**
- **Diplomatic tussle between ASEAN and Myanmar**
- **Myanmar's representation in the UN**

# Open Discussion

**Brigadier General M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd)**, Former Election Commissioner, Bangladesh and Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance North South University, Bangladesh, used the word “refugee” to mention the Rohingya community living in Bangladesh and raised a significant question, what type of refugee they are. They are not climate, economic, or conflict refugees; rather, they are refugees who are all forcefully sent, cruelly thrown from their homeland. Hence, they have grown a different mindset and become so desperate that they will not go back.



He talked about the latest peace treaty of 2017, which, he stated, is vague and useless. He mentioned that there are many groups among which some of them have settled, and some of them have made self-ruled places like war states. Rests are insignificant. In addition, there is no name of the Arakan army in this treaty. All these have significantly reduced the efficacy of this treaty.

Regarding the Arakan Army, he said that they are now part of the ruling military government; though, during the Suu Kyi administration, they were declared as a terrorist group. Now, they are in very much control of Arakan and represent the Arakan Buddhists. The ruling military government is very comfortable with the Arakan army, and they are gaining more strength. Their number has crossed 10,000 by this time. The Arakan Army and Arakan Buddhists don't want Rohingyas to go back. So, if any negotiation takes place in future, it must be with the Arakan Army, not with Yangon.



He said that though ASEAN initially denied the military ruler for participating in the ASEAN's ministerial summit, but later it invited any official from the government. If ASEAN really had any support for democratic movements, ASEAN could have invited any politician. However, the tussle between ASEAN and the military ended when the military chief promised to cooperate with ASEAN. Therefore, ASEAN has not gone really head to toe against the military government of Myanmar.

In terms of NUG, Brigadier General Sakhawat stated that the Myanmar military is very much in control, and NUG is inactive and invisible. No government of the world recognized when NUG promised to take Rohingyas back. The fact is, unless NUG is supported by the big powers, they will not be able to do anything. No country, like Japan, China, Russia, India or even Pakistan, is supporting the NUG. As such, Bangladesh is the only country forcing Rohingya repatriation. International interest is declining, and their attention is shifting now towards Central Asia, i.e., Afghanistan.

Brigadier General Sakhawat believes that Rohingyas are slowly becoming volatile, which is becoming a threat for Bangladesh. He concluded by saying that Bangladesh is not going to get rid of Rohingyas even in the next decade unless a civil government reconciles. He, hence, stressed finding alternative solutions, to which he believes, BISS can contribute.

**Major General Shahidul Haque (Retd.)** expressed his concern about the Rohingya crisis, which he believes now falls into a diplomatic or international strategic black hole. He added that China on one side and the rest of the world on the other on this account prioritized their interest above the real crisis. He shed light on the emergence of the identity crisis of Rohingyas from 1982 citizenship law, not the Constitution of 2008.



He highlighted the inadequate leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, which eventually led to the military coup in February this year. Firstly, during Suu Kyi's government tenure as State Counsellor of Myanmar and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, she was the tenth person out of the eleven-member committee called "National Defence and Security Council" as she failed to play any significant role to stop the Rohingya persecution. Secondly, there was no position called "State Counsellor of Myanmar" in the Myanmar constitution, which was a de facto position. Thirdly, Aung San Suu



Kyi opposed the extension of the tenure of Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, which was unconventional. He added that even the entire defence establishment and Bamar ethnic group supported Min Aung Hlaing. These factors played a crucial role in triggering the Tatmadaw for the coup.

He talked about the role of Japan and Singapore. While the international community placed sanctions on Myanmar, Japan and Singapore continued their trade with every military regime. He criticized the West as far as their dealing with the military regime is concerned, as they provided continuous support to Aung San Suu Kyi. If she is out of the equation, then the West loses its link to Myanmar's political leadership. This calculation was in the mind of the military leadership all the time and utilized it by arresting Suu Kyi, crippling the West's linkage to Myanmar's political sphere.

General Haque clarified the Panglong Agreement, 1948, as a ceasefire settlement between different ethnic groups of Myanmar formed under the leadership of General Aung San. Aung San Suu Kyi called for the historic "Panglong 2.0" to establish a democratic federal union after the 2014 election, which failed to create appeal among ethnic groups. Since the 1980s, peace was possible because different ethnic groups gained autonomy; and they showed no interest in Panglong 2.0, which they believed was detrimental to their interests.

He mentioned the NUG as old wine in a new bottle since the government is composed mainly of the Bamar people. So far, most of the ethnic groups have not joined the NUG, and they are still looking for a footing in the politics of Myanmar.

Lastly, he referred to a leaked British diplomatic service document, mentioning that the Bangladeshi Ambassador Khawaja Kaiser told the British Ambassador about half a million Bengali crossed into Rakhine during the 1971 liberation war. Although the remark was rejected by the British Ambassador, it has continuously been used against Bangladesh by the Myanmar government to claim Rohingyas as ethnic Bengalis.

**Salahud Din Ahmed**, Former member of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission, stated that problems are not many but few, and it is the gravity and seriousness of the context which do matter. The Bangladesh government must remain focused in terms of solving this problem.



As the involvement of Big-3 countries is prescribed to solve this issue by the experts, he asked how Bangladesh will set its action plan. For him, prioritising the Big-3 will be a challenge for Bangladesh since Bangladesh is closer to all three countries in different magnitudes.

**Lieutenant General Md Mainul Islam**, Chief of General Staff (CGS) of Bangladesh Army, highlighted the exceptional mineral resource ownership rule in Myanmar. He mentioned that unlike Bangladesh, or any other country in the world, mineral resources discovered belong to the respective government. But in Myanmar, it belongs to the person who owns that piece of land. So military leaders buy those mineral-rich lands knowing through satellite images, and it is an advantage that military leadership will not give up easily.



He urged the Bangladeshi diplomats to initiate effective diplomacy to resolve the crisis. By mentioning the Palestine issue, he referred to the interest between USA and Israelis, which he believes keep the Palestinian issue at bay in the diplomatic arena. Especially considering the weak diplomatic relationship with Myanmar, there is always a possibility of a crisis between these two countries.

However, he suggested that Bangladesh redefine its foreign policy so that the reliance on foreign governments can be decreased and improve the relations with Myanmar. He added that Bangladesh missed the chance to bring in UN peacekeepers to intervene and push the Rohingyas back into Myanmar by creating a secure zone in Rakhine. So Bangladesh should remain open to any options to mitigate the crisis and not rely solely on the international community. For example, he mentioned the US request to host several thousand Afghan refugees in Bangladesh. Bangladesh can also make a similar request to the World community to receive Rohingya refugees.

**Dr Helal Mohiuddin**, Professor of Anthropology, North South University, talked about a disbursal strategy to solve the Rohingya crisis of Bangladesh. For him, it is something new, less discussed yet, the only way to solve this concurrent problem. He then expressed his interest to initiate a new study from this dimension for a long-term solution for the Rohingya community.



He said Rohingyas must be disbursed in different countries instead of Bangladesh solely. All the neighbouring countries like Japan, India and China have economic interests in Myanmar; thus, they put all the burden on Bangladesh. As such, all these countries must take some responsibility. It is the diplomatic intervention that can make this happen. After the disbursal, the Rohingyas can be repatriated to their motherland if the situation permits. All Bangladesh needs to do is treat Rohingyas as human beings, giving them a better life, letting them live with dignity and honour. To do so, at this juncture, a disbursal strategy is a creed.

**Mr Abul Hasan Chowdhury**, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, expressed great sorrow that our Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stood firm with the Rohingyas on the humanitarian ground while Noble Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi stood by the Myanmar military who committed gruesome genocide against them. He compared the act of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's, as she welcomed refugees at her doorstep, which was an example of magnificent generosity. Mr Chowdhury supported the suggestion of Lieutenant General Mainul Islam to take the regional initiative to resolve the Rohingya crisis. In that light, he suggested re-energizing the BIMSTEC and ASEAN to build a regional consensus to address the crisis. Mr Chowdhury specifically requested BISS to invite senior leaders of ASEAN to resurrect the repatriation issue and use diplomacy at the regional level to express the tireless efforts of the Bangladesh government.



He mentioned Canada's interest in resolving the issue and called upon the world community to join the effort. He urged the concerned parties to push harder in order to make the repatriation process possible for Bangladesh's national interest. He wholeheartedly supported the suggestion of using Track-II diplomacy and hoped to see Canada playing a significant role in this regard. He asked if possible for BISS to initiate and bring Canada to the table for Track-II diplomacy.

**Dr C Emdadul Haque**, Professor of Resource and Environmental Management, University of



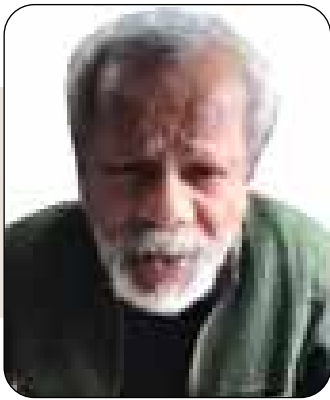


Manitoba, highlighted that the root of the Rohingya problem is that they are the stateless people, one of the most pronounced stateless people of the world. This started back in 1962, and under the 1982 citizenship act, Myanmar denies the citizenship of Rohingya people. Hence, the international community must focus at the very onset on this issue that Myanmar needs to recognize the Rohingyas as their citizens, no matter if the ruling party is civil or military.





# Responses by the Speakers



**Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed**

*Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka*

**Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed** started with the fact that the Myanmar military and Aung San Suu Kyi at the ICJ mentioned Rohingyas as “Arakanese Muslims”, not as “former Bengalis” or “illegal migrants”. ICJ came up with a provisional verdict that unanimously addressed refugees as “Rohingyas”. The term “Arakanese Muslims” indicates that Rohingyas are from the Arakan province of Myanmar, which ends the debate over their residence through ICJ’s verdict. So, Bangladesh can ask Japan and India to address Rohingyas by the terms accepted by their judges at ICJ. He humbly disagreed on the fact that the Myanmar military is strong because if the military were strong, they would not have killed over a thousand citizens of their own country. So he believes that there is a window of opportunity to resolve the crisis. He addressed the question raised in the forum about why Thailand, Singapore, and other countries are interested in Myanmar. As the Myanmar military is weak, these countries can secure better deals with the military regime.

Professor Imtiaz then moved to point out the problem with the third-country settlement. In his opinion, in this process, Bangladesh will lose the point of genocide which is unacceptable. A third-party settlement will jeopardize the ICC-ICJ verdicts on the ground of genocide, and a good number of people in Myanmar wants justice. He shed light on the 1970s and 1980s cases of Rohingya repatriation when everyone lost hope initially, but the crisis was later resolved even after the military regime was in power. He disagreed on the point that having a democratic government in power is necessary for the repatriation process. Because the political parties will lose a significant number of votes if they accept repatriation of Rohingyas, thus the Military is the only option.

Finally, Professor Imtiaz’s immediate suggestion was to engage the vibrant civil society based in India, Japan, and Europe. By engaging Human Rights activists from different countries, these countries will pressurize

their respective governments to act on the Rohingya issue. He urged India, Japan and all the countries with good relations with Myanmar to decouple the Rohingya issue with their respective national interest. He strongly opposed the idea of maintaining diplomatic trades with a genocidal regime as he warns it will open Pandora's box and will become a precedent for every genocidal regime around the world in the coming days. Professor Imtiaz urged the international community to take this matter seriously not because of the Rohingyas' suffering or Bangladesh's condition but instead for upholding the international order established after World War II. He reiterates his hope and faith in the people of Myanmar, who he believes also wants a peaceful solution.



## **Dr Kawser Ahmed**

*Adjunct Professor of the University of Winnipeg*

*Executive Director, BCBS*

**Dr Kawser Ahmed** at the very onset, stated that it is high time to intervene to solve the Rohingya problem. He believes in people's power and movement and argued that the revolution against military power is quite different in 2021 than in 1988. For him, the reasons are globalization, availability and accessibility of the internet, and extensive prevalence of social media. The power of connection, social media, and the internet has changed the present situation, bringing such a difference. At this juncture, he stressed the fact that Bangladesh must revisit the process and strategy of intervention. He asked for making allies with other countries since, for him, these international alliances matter.

He further added that Canada is one of those very few countries that stand beside Bangladesh amid this humanitarian crisis. Canada has been engaged since 2017, though from a financial point of view. Financial help is no less important in such a context to sustain such a large number of Rohingyas in Bangladesh. However, BCBS is lobbying further with Canadian policymakers for helping Bangladesh to become successful. They are also contacting Canadian business people and business groups who are in regular touch with Myanmar. Apart from all these lobbying, he significantly stressed formulating a peace treaty as a form of intervention.



**Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**  
*Senior Research Fellow, BISS*

**Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf** pointed that since Bangladesh's priority is to resolve the issue diplomatically, therefore, the issues of data and historic narratives developed by the Myanmar government need to be replied. By unearthing the real truth, Bangladesh will be able to justify its position in the international arena. He also mentioned that the regime type and the Rohingya repatriation may not be always connected. If international community can influence and pressurize Myanmar, the military government may be more aware about their dealings with the human rights issues.



# Remarks



**H E Dr Khalil Rahman**

*High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Canada and Chief Patron of BCBS*

**H E Dr Khalil Rahman**, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Canada and Chief Patron of BCBS, began his speech by saying that he listened to the discussion with keen interest, and it was fascinating for him. He said that he has been in this sort of session a couple of times, and these sessions have always been a learning opportunity for him. He had enjoyed the deliberation, especially the keynote speech by Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed. He thanked BISS for collaborating with BCBS, Canada and their support in organizing the seminar.

He said that the webinar had been organized with a particular goal in mind, and it was part of a study that BCBS was pioneering about the impact of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh. The centre has identified five major components of the impact study, i.e., social, economic, environmental, health and security. The centre is partnering with BISS to work on the security component of the study, and the webinar was aimed to focus on that particular aspect.

Referring to his personal experience, Ambassador Rahman said that when he first arrived in Canada, everyone told him that Canada was doing a lot in the Rohingya issue. But he pointed out that apart from Canadian involvement in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Canada is not supporting Bangladesh to the extent that Bangladesh wants. The work of Canada is mainly focused on one very particular aspect, which is to retain the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The European Union (EU) and almost all the other developing countries' activities focus on integrating the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, which, in his opinion, is not a solution to the Rohingya crisis. He had told his Canadian colleagues that Bangladesh appreciates their support but as the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said on the 22 September at the UN High-level side event on Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs), humanitarian support is useful, but it is not a permanent solution. Unfortunately, Canada and the other developed countries are focusing on humanitarian aid and not on the real solution to the crisis.

Ambassador Rahman then talked about the early days of his career when he was stationed in India. Everyone talks about what India wants from Bangladesh (such as transit and natural gas), but he always believes that what India most needs from Bangladesh is the security guarantee. He said that Indians and others, particularly the West, understand the language of security. This is why BCBS wants to show the world, with empirical study and evidence, the security implication of the Rohingya crisis—not only for Bangladesh but also for the region and the whole world. He believes that it is the only way the West will understand there is a need to resolve this crisis, and there should be a safe, sustainable and secure solution for these helpless people. He also mentioned that there would be other webinars on the other components of the Rohingya crisis, such as environmental and economic components.

Ambassador Rahman asked the learned audience and the distinguished panel how the security concerns of the Rohingya crisis can be projected in a way that the whole world can have a policy brief to advocate “why this issue should be resolved”. And this is not only in line with the interest of Bangladesh but in the interest of the entire region and the world. He said that there had been a lot of discussion about the economic aspects, such as the Indian, Chinese and Singaporean investment in Myanmar. He said that many developed countries, including those in Europe and Canada, have invested in Myanmar while this crisis has been going on. They never stopped investing in Myanmar, and basically, they empowered the army regime by investing in Myanmar.



# Vote of Thanks



**Dr Kawser Ahmed**

*Adjunct Professor, University of Winnipeg*

*The Executive Director, BCBS*

**Dr Kawser Ahmed** emphasized that the Rohingyas should go back to their motherland with dignity and safety, and the dilemma is what would be the process of doing it. With regards to the Bangladesh-Canada alliance, he remarked that the nature of the alliance for the intervention remains pretty wide open. He echoed H E Dr Khalil Rahman that they are working on a large-scale research impact assessment project where security is one of the components. Consequently, they have partnered with the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) to have the webinar to share ideas and thoughts and seek advice in the future.

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The Editorial team thankfully acknowledges Research Fellow: Mahbubur Rashid Bhuiyan, Moutusi Islam; Research Officers: Lam-ya Mostaque, Syeda Tanzia Sultana, Nahian Reza Sabriet, Md Rafid Abrar Miah, Md Nahiyen Shajid Khan for their assistance in preparing this proceedings.



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