

A Note on Bangladeshi refugees in Myanmar at the time of the Bangladeshi War of Independence in 1971

At the UN, Ambassador Hau Do Suan has in recent times touched on British colonial responsibilities in Arakan. At the General Assembly on 4 November 2019 he said:

The issue of Rakhine is neither an issue of religious persecution nor an act of deporting a group of people out of the country. The Government of Myanmar strongly rejects labelling the issue as crimes against humanity or ethnic cleansing. In fact, it is a political and economic issue involving cross-border migration since colonial times when the British brought in people from Bengal, primarily from the Chittagong region, to Rakhine. There was also another wave of mass migration across the border during Bangladesh's independence war in 1971.

Whether the British “brought in people” to Arakan is questionable. Though the British indeed encouraged Bengali migration to Arakan, this was hardly a “transfer” of population.

Where the Ambassador is on shaky ground however is when he talks of “another wave of mass migration across the border during Bangladesh's independence war in 1971”. I have no knowledge of any such “mass migration”. What happened was that several millions fled from former East Pakistan into India to escape the violence, while an unknown number, possibly several thousands, sought refuge in Arakan. They were looked after by the local authorities as well as by the Bangladeshi consular authorities in Arakan and eventually repatriated. I have trawled the archives of the international press, who do not seem to have made any estimate of the number at the time, or indeed given the matter much coverage at all.

In January 1972 the Burmese Foreign Minister told the then British Ambassador Ed Willan in Rangoon that the number of refugees “had now been reduced to about 2,000”. As the Karachi Morning News put it in an article on 22 April 1974 on the occasion of a visit at the time by General Ne Win to Pakistan: “We remember with gratitude the understanding and sympathy that Burma demonstrated during the 1971 tragedy and the humanitarian assistance that it provided to the refugees and the Pakistani nationals in the following months.” (Quotation taken from Klaus Fleischmann “Arakan” 1981 Pages 103-4).

This is not to say that some illegal migrants might not have used the chaos existing at the time as a cover to move into Arakan, but I doubt that their numbers would have been all that great as the Myanmar military were on high alert at the border. The illegal flow into Arakan happened between 1948 and 1978, and especially in the late 40s, 50s and early 60s; not so much in waves, but at a slow and steady rate, to judge from contemporary materials. Since 1978 the flow has been in the opposite direction.

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