

# Humanitarian Diplomacy In Action: The Rohingya Crisis And The Role Of Transnational And Domestic Actors

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The Rohingya crisis epitomizes the intersection of statelessness, ethnic persecution, and humanitarian emergencies in the 21st century. The study examines how humanitarian diplomacy has functioned as a crucial framework in responding to the crisis, highlighting the roles of transnational organizations, regional bodies, and domestic actors, particularly in India. While the United Nations, INGOs, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have sought to provide aid, advocate for accountability, and mobilize international support, Indian civil society and legal networks have struggled to balance humanitarian obligations with state-led security concerns. Humanitarian diplomacy emerges as both a protective shield and a diplomatic bridge, linking immediate relief with long-term political solutions. The Rohingya case illustrates the challenges of upholding human rights amid complex geopolitical realities.

**Keywords:** Rohingya crisis, humanitarian diplomacy, statelessness, transnational actors, India, human rights, refugee protection

## Introduction

The Rohingya crisis stands as one of the most pressing humanitarian emergencies of the 21st century, symbolizing the deep challenges posed by ethnic persecution, statelessness, and forced migration. The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Despite having lived in the region for generations, they have faced systemic discrimination, disenfranchisement, and targeted violence. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law excluded the Rohingya from the list of recognized ethnic groups, rendering them stateless and stripping them of fundamental rights such as freedom of movement, access to education, and healthcare (Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. For decades, the community has been subjected to marginalization, arbitrary arrests, and restrictions, with little recourse to legal or political protection. The situation escalated dramatically in August 2017 when Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, launched what it called "clearance operations" in response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on security posts. These operations rapidly transformed into widespread campaigns of violence against civilians, including mass killings, sexual violence, and the burning of entire villages. The United Nations and several human rights organizations described these actions as ethnic cleansing and possible genocide. Within months, over 700,000 Rohingya fled across the border into Bangladesh, joining hundreds of thousands already displaced from earlier waves of violence. Refugee camps such as Kutupalong in Cox's Bazar swelled to become the largest in the world, creating overwhelming humanitarian needs (WHO, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

Understanding the Rohingya crisis requires more than recounting the scale of displacement or the brutality of persecution; it demands an examination of how the world responds when a population is

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<sup>1</sup> Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK. (2014). *Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law and Rohingya*.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. (2018). *Rohingya crisis one year on*.

left without a state to protect them. Statelessness leaves individuals vulnerable to exploitation, exclusion, and systemic neglect. In such situations, humanitarian diplomacy—where governments, international organizations, and non-governmental actors engage in negotiation, advocacy, and relief coordination—becomes indispensable. It bridges the gap between political realities and humanitarian imperatives, ensuring that vulnerable communities receive protection, aid, and a voice in international forums. This study focuses on the intersection of humanitarian diplomacy and the multi-actor framework that has emerged in response to the Rohingya crisis. Global organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have been at the forefront of delivering aid, advocating for rights, and facilitating international dialogue. NGOs, both international and local, play a critical role in providing food, shelter, education, and healthcare within refugee settlements. Their work often supplements or even substitutes for state-led interventions, especially where political will is limited or absent.

In the Indian context, the Rohingya crisis presents unique policy challenges. India, sharing both geographical proximity and historical ties to Myanmar, hosts thousands of Rohingya refugees across several states. Domestic actors—ranging from civil society organizations to human rights advocates—have engaged in legal battles, relief efforts, and awareness campaigns. At the same time, India's official stance has oscillated between humanitarian obligations and security concerns, revealing the tension between refugee protection norms and domestic political priorities. By examining these various layers of engagement, this study aims to shed light on how humanitarian diplomacy, supported by a diverse network of actors, shapes responses to statelessness crises. The Rohingya case serves not only as a humanitarian tragedy but also as a critical test of the global community's commitment to upholding human rights in the face of political complexity (Outlook India, 2025)<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Rohingya Crisis: Background and Current Status**

The Rohingya crisis is one of the most significant humanitarian challenges of the 21st century, marked by decades of systemic persecution, forced displacement, and statelessness. The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority originating from Myanmar's Rakhine State. They trace their ancestry in the region back centuries, yet the government of Myanmar has consistently denied them recognition as one of the country's official ethnic groups. This exclusion was institutionalized through the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless by refusing them full citizenship rights. Without legal status, they have been denied access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and formal employment, while facing severe restrictions on movement and marriage. This legal and social marginalization has entrenched their vulnerability, making them susceptible to recurrent waves of violence. The crisis has unfolded in several waves over the past decades. Sporadic outbreaks of violence against the Rohingya have occurred since at least the late 1970s, each triggering cross-border displacement. In 1978 and 1991–92, large-scale military operations pushed tens of thousands into Bangladesh. These earlier episodes foreshadowed the unprecedented violence of August 2017, when Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw) launched what the United Nations has described as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." Triggered by attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on security posts, the military's response involved mass killings, sexual violence, and the burning of entire villages. Within weeks, over 740,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, joining an existing refugee population and creating the world's largest refugee settlement in Cox's Bazar. Thousands more sought refuge in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other countries, often undertaking perilous journeys by sea (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018)<sup>4</sup>.

The current humanitarian situation remains dire. In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district, nearly one million Rohingya live in overcrowded camps, dependent almost entirely on humanitarian assistance. While basic needs such as food and shelter are provided, the conditions are far from adequate. Refugees face inadequate sanitation, exposure to natural disasters, and limited opportunities for education or

<sup>3</sup> Outlook India. (2025). *Humans... 'Like Us': Fallacies of India's Ad-Hoc Refugee Policy*

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. (2018). *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar* (A/HRC/39/64). United Nations General Assembly.

livelihoods. The Bangladeshi government has also relocated some refugees to the remote island of Bhasan Char, which, despite improved facilities, raises concerns over isolation and vulnerability to storms.

In India, the Rohingya population is estimated to be between 40,000 and 50,000, scattered across several states including Jammu & Kashmir, Delhi, and Hyderabad. Many live in informal settlements under constant risk of eviction or deportation, as Indian authorities have increasingly labeled them as “illegal immigrants” rather than refugees, complicating access to protection under international law. Security risks further compound the crisis. Refugee camps have witnessed rising incidents of crime, human trafficking, and occasional clashes, while the absence of formal legal status in host countries leaves the Rohingya highly vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, conditions in Myanmar remain unsafe for any large-scale repatriation, with Rakhine State still experiencing armed conflict between the military and ethnic insurgents. The Rohingya crisis, therefore, stands at the intersection of human rights, international law, and regional geopolitics. It is not only a story of displacement but also a protracted struggle for recognition, dignity, and justice—one that continues to challenge humanitarian actors worldwide.

### Humanitarian Diplomacy: Concept and Application

Humanitarian diplomacy refers to the strategic use of dialogue, negotiation, advocacy, and persuasion by humanitarian actors to influence decision-makers and shape policies that protect vulnerable populations and promote humanitarian principles. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is largely conducted by states to protect their national interests, humanitarian diplomacy focuses on safeguarding human dignity, alleviating suffering, and ensuring that the rights and needs of affected communities are met. It operates at the intersection of humanitarian action and international relations, requiring engagement with both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. In practice, it involves a range of activities — from negotiating humanitarian access in conflict zones to influencing international law, mobilizing public opinion, and securing safe passage for displaced persons (IMFRC, 2022)<sup>5</sup>. At its core, humanitarian diplomacy is guided by several key principles. The first is neutrality, which requires actors to refrain from taking sides in political or military disputes. This ensures that humanitarian assistance is delivered without bias and that trust is maintained among conflicting parties. The second is impartiality, meaning aid is provided solely on the basis of need, without discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Human rights protection is another fundamental principle, emphasizing the duty to uphold international human rights standards even in politically sensitive situations. Finally, advocacy plays a central role, as humanitarian actors must actively push for policy changes, increased funding, and stronger protection mechanisms for those at risk. Together, these principles create a framework that not only delivers aid but also addresses the root causes of crises.

In the context of the Rohingya crisis, humanitarian diplomacy has been vital for several reasons. The Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State, have faced decades of systematic discrimination, culminating in the 2017 military crackdown that led to the mass exodus of over 700,000 people to Bangladesh and other countries. This is not merely a humanitarian emergency but also a diplomatic and political challenge, as Myanmar has consistently denied the Rohingya's citizenship and legitimacy as an ethnic group. Humanitarian diplomacy seeks to bridge the gap between the urgent need for humanitarian assistance and the long-term political solutions required for repatriation and justice. For example, organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have engaged in quiet diplomacy with the Myanmar government and regional stakeholders to negotiate humanitarian access, improve camp conditions, and prevent further violence (ICRC, 2024)<sup>6</sup>. International advocacy campaigns by NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have kept the crisis in global headlines, pressuring governments to impose sanctions on Myanmar's military and support international accountability mechanisms.

<sup>5</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). (2022). *Humanitarian diplomacy policy*.

<sup>6</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2024, September 10). *ICRC president urges Myanmar military for greater humanitarian access*.

Meanwhile, domestic actors in countries hosting Rohingya refugees, including India, have had to balance humanitarian commitments with national security concerns, making diplomatic engagement even more complex. Ultimately, humanitarian diplomacy in the Rohingya crisis demonstrates that aid delivery alone is insufficient. Without parallel diplomatic efforts to address legal status, ensure safe repatriation, and hold perpetrators accountable, the crisis risks becoming a permanent condition of statelessness. Thus, humanitarian diplomacy functions as both a shield — protecting refugees from immediate harm — and a bridge, connecting urgent relief efforts to sustainable political solutions.

### **Role of Transnational Actors in the Rohingya Crisis**

The Rohingya crisis has evolved into one of the most pressing humanitarian emergencies in recent decades, marked by large-scale displacement, statelessness, and ongoing human rights abuses. The crisis transcends national boundaries, making it a quintessential case for transnational involvement. While the government of Bangladesh has borne the immediate burden of hosting the majority of refugees, the scope and complexity of the crisis have required the engagement of a wide range of transnational actors. These actors include United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and regional organizations. Their collective interventions are critical in addressing urgent needs such as shelter, food, health, and education, while also advocating for justice, long-term protection, and durable solutions. The role of these actors is multifaceted: they provide direct humanitarian assistance, ensure the protection of basic human rights, facilitate diplomatic dialogue, and push for international accountability for atrocities committed against the Rohingya population. This collaborative approach is necessary because the crisis is not merely a national or regional issue—it is a challenge to the principles of human rights, refugee protection, and international humanitarian law. By pooling resources, expertise, and political influence, transnational actors have become indispensable in managing both the immediate and long-term dimensions of the crisis.

#### **A. United Nations Agencies and Their Role in the Rohingya Crisis**

The United Nations system has played a central role in addressing the humanitarian and protection needs of the Rohingya refugees, primarily through specialized agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP). UNHCR has been at the forefront of refugee protection efforts, focusing on registration, legal support, and advocating for the rights of displaced Rohingya. Registration is a critical step in ensuring access to humanitarian aid and preventing exploitation. UNHCR works closely with the government of Bangladesh to maintain accurate refugee records, while also providing legal counselling and advocating for pathways to resettlement in third countries. The agency also supports the improvement of shelter facilities and coordinates with other actors to ensure a unified humanitarian response.

UNICEF addresses the specific needs of Rohingya children, who make up a significant proportion of the refugee population. Many of these children have been exposed to violence, loss of family members, and extreme deprivation. UNICEF's programs include child protection services, psychosocial support, and initiatives to prevent trafficking and exploitation. Education is a key area of intervention, with learning centers established in refugee camps to provide basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills (UNICEF, 2017)<sup>7</sup>. Health services, including immunization campaigns and nutritional support, are also central to UNICEF's work in improving child well-being in these precarious settings. The WFP plays a vital role in ensuring food security for the Rohingya population. It organizes large-scale food distribution programs, often under challenging logistical conditions in overcrowded camps. Beyond basic food aid, WFP provides nutrition-focused programs to combat malnutrition, especially among children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. By collaborating with local and international partners, WFP ensures that food assistance is timely, equitable, and sustainable. Collectively, UN agencies bring specialized skills and resources to the humanitarian response. They also act as a bridge between host

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<sup>7</sup> UNICEF. (2017, September 29). *UNICEF setting up hundreds of new learning centres for Rohingya refugee children*.

governments, donor countries, and humanitarian organizations, ensuring that aid delivery is coordinated, efficient, and compliant with international standards.

### **B. International NGOs and Their Contributions to the Rohingya Crisis**

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have been critical in delivering on-the-ground assistance and advocating for accountability in the Rohingya crisis. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been a key provider of emergency medical care in refugee camps. MSF operates clinics and mobile health units to address common illnesses, treat injuries sustained during flight, and respond to outbreaks of infectious diseases. Its teams also provide maternal health services, mental health counselling, and emergency response in times of natural disasters that affect the camps (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.)<sup>8</sup>. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have been instrumental in documenting human rights abuses against the Rohingya. Their reports provide detailed evidence of mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement, which are essential for international legal action and advocacy. These organizations lobby governments and international bodies to impose sanctions on Myanmar's military leaders, demand justice for victims, and push for the restoration of citizenship rights.

Save the Children focuses on education and child welfare in the refugee context. The organization runs child-friendly spaces, supports informal education programs, and trains community volunteers to identify and respond to cases of child abuse or neglect. It also works to improve access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and nutritional programs for children. INGOs often operate in coordination with UN agencies but bring their own operational flexibility, field presence, and advocacy power. They bridge the gap between emergency relief and long-term support, ensuring that the Rohingya crisis remains visible on the global humanitarian agenda.

### **C. Regional Organizations and Their Engagement in the Rohingya Crisis**

Regional organizations have engaged with the Rohingya crisis, though their involvement has been limited compared to global actors. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not taken a leading role, largely due to political sensitivities among member states and its consensus-based decision-making structure. However, its engagement, though symbolic, underscores the regional dimension of the crisis. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a modest role by facilitating humanitarian assistance and holding dialogues on the crisis. Its principle of non-interference limits its ability to directly address Myanmar's internal policies, but ASEAN has supported aid delivery and conducted needs assessments in Rakhine State (Nanthini, 2019)<sup>9</sup>.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has been a consistent advocate for the Rohingya on the global stage. It has passed resolutions condemning the persecution, engaged in diplomatic lobbying, and supported legal action against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The OIC also coordinates with member states to mobilize humanitarian aid and raise international awareness of the crisis. While regional organizations face structural and political limitations, their participation contributes to a layered diplomatic and humanitarian response. Their advocacy ensures that the crisis is framed not only as a humanitarian disaster but also as an issue of international law and regional stability.

### **Role of Domestic Actors in India**

India's engagement with the Rohingya crisis reflects a complex mix of national security concerns, legal interpretations, and humanitarian considerations. While the government's stance has largely been shaped by domestic political pressures and security narratives, civil society actors, NGOs, and legal advocacy groups have attempted to address the urgent humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees in the country. This interplay between state policies and grassroots responses highlights the contested space of refugee protection in India, where national interests often conflict with human rights imperatives.

<sup>8</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières. (n.d.). *Bangladesh* (Rohingya refugee crisis).

<sup>9</sup> Nanthini, S. (2019, November 29). *ASEAN, Myanmar and the Rakhine crisis: Two years on*. RSIS Commentaries, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

### **A. Governmental Approach**

India's official position on the Rohingya has leaned towards viewing them as "illegal immigrants" rather than refugees. The government argues that the Rohingya pose security risks, citing potential links to extremist groups, illegal migration patterns, and demographic pressures in sensitive border regions. Consequently, it has avoided signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, maintaining a discretionary approach to asylum. This policy stance has resulted in limited formal protection and heightened vulnerability for Rohingya communities. Legal battles have intensified the debate over refugee rights. In 2017, petitions were filed in the Supreme Court challenging the government's deportation plans, arguing that such actions violated Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. The court proceedings brought attention to the lack of a national refugee law and the tension between India's constitutional commitments and executive discretion (Indian Express, 2021)<sup>10</sup>. While the government emphasized national security, petitioners and human rights advocates stressed India's obligations under international human rights norms, including the principle of non-refoulement. The outcome of these debates continues to influence India's refugee policy landscape.

### **B. Indian NGOs and Civil Society**

Indian civil society has played a crucial role in addressing the humanitarian needs of the Rohingya, often filling gaps left by state policy. The Rohingya Human Rights Initiative (RHRI) has been at the forefront, advocating for the community's rights, documenting abuses, and facilitating access to essential services. By working closely with international organizations and grassroots networks, RHRI amplifies the voices of Rohingya refugees and raises awareness about their plight. Local charities and faith-based organizations, including mosques, gurudwaras, and church-led initiatives, have provided food, clothing, and shelter to displaced families. These community-driven responses often operate without substantial funding, relying instead on volunteer networks and donations. Their work underscores the role of compassion-driven humanitarianism in contexts where official support is limited.

Legal aid groups, such as the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), have assisted refugees in navigating India's complex legal system. They help file petitions, challenge detention orders, and secure access to basic entitlements like healthcare and education. These interventions are critical in safeguarding the rights of a population living under constant threat of deportation. Together, NGOs, faith-based groups, and legal advocates form an informal yet significant safety net for the Rohingya in India, counterbalancing restrictive state policies through sustained humanitarian and legal engagement.

### **Challenges in Addressing the Crisis**

The Rohingya crisis presents a multi-layered set of challenges that extend beyond immediate humanitarian concerns, touching on political, economic, legal, and social dimensions. For host countries like India, the complexity of these issues is magnified by the absence of a formal refugee policy, political sensitivities, and competing domestic priorities. Political sensitivities form one of the most significant hurdles in addressing the Rohingya crisis. India's government has often framed the Rohingya population as "illegal immigrants" rather than refugees, citing concerns about national security, potential links to extremist networks, and demographic pressures. This political stance complicates humanitarian efforts, as it limits the scope for legal protection and can influence public perception. Political debates also hinder consensus on long-term solutions, creating an environment where humanitarian obligations are weighed against perceived strategic and security risks.

Resource constraints exacerbate the situation. Refugee camps in areas such as Jammu, Hyderabad, and Delhi face overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure. Limited donor funding and competing humanitarian priorities—both domestically and internationally—mean that essential services like clean

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<sup>10</sup> The Indian Express. (2021, April 17). *SC ruling on Rohingya is against India's commitments to international law. The Indian Express.*

water, sanitation, healthcare, and education often remain underfunded. This scarcity not only affects refugees' quality of life but also hampers the work of NGOs and humanitarian agencies trying to address urgent needs. Host community tensions also complicate the crisis response. The sudden influx of refugees can strain local infrastructure, including housing, healthcare, and job markets. In some areas, competition for low-wage employment or basic resources has fueled resentment among local residents. Such tensions, if left unaddressed, can lead to social polarization, reduced community cooperation, and in extreme cases, outbreaks of violence.

Finally, the legal limbo faced by the Rohingya in India is a persistent challenge. India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, which means there is no formal legal framework for granting refugee status. Consequently, the Rohingya live without official recognition, limiting their access to rights such as legal employment, freedom of movement, and secure housing. This precarious status also exposes them to the constant threat of detention or deportation, further deepening their vulnerability. Overall, addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that considers political realities while prioritizing humanitarian principles, ensuring resource allocation, fostering host community relations, and establishing clear legal protections. Without these measures, the Rohingya crisis in India will remain trapped in a cycle of uncertainty and marginalization.

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