

Reflective Thoughts upon the Preliminary Observation on the Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh: A Call for Greater Psychological Support

Chalalai Taesilapasathit*

Abstract: This paper is a reflective article based upon the author's experience of providing the preliminary evaluation at the two Rohingya refugee camps – Kutupalang and Balukhali– in Bangladesh. The information for this paper was gathered from resources using the interview and observation methodologies. The author interviewed the refugees in the camps through English-Bangali and Bangali-Chittagonian interpreters, and local staffs who worked in the camps. In addition, the author visited the service centers in the camps, and witnessed the distribution process of donated supplies. Although there were several agencies providing supports for the refugees within the camps, the help was still far from sufficiency. The author aims to use this paper as a platform to call for a greater support, especially the psychological ones. The author classifies the needs into two categories: (1) the urgent needs, which include the issues of children without guidance; lacking cooperation among supportive organizations, and inaccessible information to the services; (2) the important needs, that are the exercise of power by authorities; the lack of psychological support for local staffs, and the perception of the locals toward the refugees.

Keywords: Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh, psychological support, the urgent and the important

Introduction

Since General Ne Win- a military commander, a Burmese politician; a former prime minister and head of the state – came to power through coup d'état in 1962, Ne Win's primary goal in leading the nation toward socialism seemed to set the beginning of

* Chalalai Taesilapasathit, MA, Division of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Library Science, and Geography, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University (Rangsit Campus), 99 Moo 18 Paholyothin Road, Klong Neung, Klong Luang, Pathumthani 12120 Thailand. E-mail: chalalai.taesilapasathit@gmail.com

many threats directed to several ethnic minorities such as Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Rohingya, etc. (Chan, 2005; Green, MacManus & Cour Venning, 2015). Those ethnic groups whose lives were in the middle class had returned to their homelands (Donison, 1970). However, the Rohingyas, many of whom held the national registration cards, decided to stay (Chan, 2005). Nonetheless, with the national registration cards in hands, the Rohingya people were still denied the basic rights that citizenship could have. Many of the Rohingyas decided to migrate out of Myanmar during the 1970s, but the situation was not severe compared to that of today. The number of the Rohingya people who moved out during that time were still far from the Rohingya migration number these days, and many had returned (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). However, the living conditions of the Rohingyas were drastically downward after the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law that intended to deny the rights of citizenship for Rohingya people by excluding their ethnicity from the listed national races (Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, 2014). The Rohingyas were put into the position of the stateless people and had been experiencing many forms of human rights violation, as the results of this law. Without any hopes at home, the sufferings in Myanmar have forced them to migrate out of their country in search of a chance to live as human beings. Since then, the number of migration has been continuously increasing and, by all means, did not seem to stop.

In 2017, the United Nations addressed that the situation of the Rohingya refugees is “the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis and a major humanitarian emergency” (The United Nations Refugee Agency, 2017b). Up to today, there are more than a million Rohingyas migrated from Myanmar, and Bangladesh is home to the highest number of the Rohingya refugees. The recent report from the United Nations Children’s Fund (2018a) pointed out that the total number of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh’s refugee camps were as high as 1.3 million, and among this number, approximately 703,000 were children. Cox’s Bazar is the district nearby the Bangladesh-Myanmar border where several refugee camps have been set up. Kutupalong and Balukhali were two of the main locations in Cox’s Bazar where most of the Rohingya refugees have settled (Guzek, Siddiqui, White, Leeuwen & Onus, 2017).

Several organizations, both the NGOs and government funded, have consistently provided aid to the refugees in the areas. Nevertheless, with a large number of the existing refugees and incessantly additional influx of new comers, humanitarian assistance is challenged each day. The report by the United Nations Children’s Fund (2018a) showed that the highest four sections of needs that were urgently required for providing helps and supports for the refugees were health, education, communication for development, and child protection, consecutively. Apart from what has been

reported through the United Nations Children's Fund, the sufficient need for mental health support for the Rohingya refugee was still out of reach. In 2017, there was only one psychologist working in both the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps (The United Nations Refugee Agency, 2017c). It could not be denied that the lack of psychological support for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh were in crisis. The Rohingya refugees had been through many kinds of traumatic experiences. They fled terrors, human rights violation and numerous types of abuses from Myanmar. Even though their lives were safe in the new land, without immediate and proper psychological support, the mental health issues they had suffered could impact the refugees' lives in the long run.

This paper aims to depict the importance of psychological support for both the Rohingya refugees and the local staffs who work in the areas in order to provide aid for the refugees. There are several essential psychological needs required for the refugees' support. However, the number of the people who are in needs is too high to provide equal assistance; and with limited number of staffs, it is impossible for all refugees to thoroughly receive psychological service, individually. Therefore, the author applies the Eisenhower's principle of "the urgent and the important," in order to express the psychological needs into two categories for convenience's sake of those who are interested in providing support to the Rohingya refugees. Besides the purpose of sharing psychological knowledge, the author also plans to utilize this paper as an open platform to encourage society's awareness; to understand that, when in humanitarian crises, the need for psychological support is no less important than physical health supports.

The procedure and funding resource

This preliminary observation was organized by the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF). The process covered a five-day trip during December 2017. The resources of this paper are the information gathered from the interviews with both the refugees through English-Bangali and Bangali-Chittagonian interpreters, and local staffs, mostly those who worked with psychological issues; and also, the observation of supplies and aids distribution within two locations of the refugee camps – Kutupalong and Balukhali. Lastly, the author adopted the notion of the Eisenhower's principle in order to explain the need for psychological support by categorizing the ideas into two separated frameworks: the urgent and the important.

The Eisenhower's principle

The term "Eisenhower's principle," or "Eisenhower method" came to be famous when the former president of the United States of America – Dwight D. Eisenhower –

addressed to the Second Assembly to the World Council of Churches at Illinois, in 1945, that “I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent” (Eisenhower, 1954 as cited in Peters & Woolley, n.d.). However, this was not the original speech of President Eisenhower. He actually quoted it from Dr. J. Roscoe Miller who was the president of Northwestern University at that time (Common Health, n.d.).

Today, the idea of the urgent and important is widely accepted in the science of time management. It emphasizes the use of the urgent/important criteria to assess tasks at hands. Although the Eisenhower’s principle of the urgent and the important classifies the criteria into four categories: important and urgent, not important but urgent; important but not urgent, not important and not urgent (CommonHealth, n.d.), this paper will focus merely on the two broader criteria: the urgent and the important. The author strongly believes that the need to provide psychological support to the Rohingya refugees cannot be divided into classes involving not important or not urgent. Nevertheless, the type of important and urgent is not appropriate for the task of humanitarian crisis intervention since it is too broad and does not specify orders for providing help. Therefore, the broader categories of the urgent and important seem to be a proper solution.

The evaluation

The urgent needs

Children without guidance

Among the total number of the Rohingya refugees, more than half of them are children (The United Nations Children’s Fund, 2018b). The report from The United Nations Children’s Funds (2018a) suggested that the number of child refugees who were in need for humanitarian support was as high as 703,000 from the overall 1.3 million refugee population; and this is the number represented by the Rohingya child refugees in Bangladesh alone. Many of these children unwillingly were forced to live by themselves since their parents could not make it to Bangladesh’s refugee camps. Without guardian, they have learned to take care of each other, and help other adults with day-to-day tasks; which were not the typical responsibilities for regular children of their ages. This condition was clearly the humanitarian crisis that consistently impacted these children’s lives.

When children are left alone, they are at risk. To be put in the position of child refugees, children’s rights are deprived in every aspect. The article nine of the United Nations Children’s Funds (n.d.) states that one of the children’s rights is that all

children earn the right to be with their parents except if living with biological parents is not safe for them; they have the right to be with others who can take responsibilities of them. However, in the situation of the Rohingya child refugees, it is difficult and challenging for them to find the substitute of their parents due to the overcrowded refugee camps, high number of the child refugees; and limited officers who provide aid in the areas. In addition, to be in the state of child refugees, these children are also immediately deprived of the right for education. No one knows how long the conflict would last; therefore, nobody can estimate when these children can go back to their normal educational routine. The longer the lack of education they are facing, the more their futures are definitely impacted.

The risks that children may face when living alone are uncountable. Even though several organizations including the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration have been consistently providing help and support for the Rohingya child refugees in Bangladesh, nonetheless, the works related to support for children are still in a great need; as it showed in the recent report from the United Nations Children's Fund (2018a) that the funding gaps for the working areas of education for children and child protection are at 73% and 62%, consecutively. This implies that the existing supportive plans for the child refugees are still not enough to reach its goals and that there are high demands from more agencies and cooperation to provide help for these children.

Lacking cooperation among supportive organizations

Talking with the local staffs who worked in the areas revealed that the collaboration between each organization that provided support to the Rohingya refugees in the areas might be ineffective. The interview with the local staffs and visiting to several agencies and service centers pointed out that many of the organizations providing aid in the areas shared similar work goals or refugee populations. Nonetheless, the lack of collaboration was still prevalent. The problem of lacking communication and cooperation between each organization does not only affect the works of the officers by slowing down the helping process, it also greatly impacts the living condition of the refugees.

With more than a million refugee population, it is obvious that no one organization alone can process all the help, support and service to the entire population. It is essential to create the sense of companionship between each agency and organization, because in the time of humanitarian crisis like this the more unified the organizations become, the faster the refugees can receive help.

Inaccessible information to the services

The interview with the Rohingya refugees pointed out that the information regarding support, service and aid do not equally and thoroughly reach out to all refugees. This seems usual for the locations with a crowd of more than a million people. In addition, the actual number of the refugee population is higher than the number of the refugees that are registered with the United Nations. The report in March, 2017a, by the United Nations Refugee Agency showed that there were merely 33,148 registered Rohingya refugees in the two official refugee camps: Kutupalong and Nayapara, among the total of hundreds of thousands who were not registered.

Up to today, the number of the unregistered refugees is still high even though the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (as cited in Perala, 2017) proposes the biometric technology as the potential way to help out identifying the refugees and processing the registration. With this new technique, the latest report in March, 2018, by the Bangladeshi Immigration and Passports Department stated that there was the total number of 1,092,136 Rohingyas who had biometric registration (as cited in International Organization of Migration, Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2018). Still, this number is lower than the overall refugees, and still counting, who are living in Bangladesh. No one knows when the registration process will be completed; and thus, how those without registration can get access to the information regarding all the support and service they could receive.

Despite the problem of unregistered refugees, the communication and broadcast of the service agencies to refugees are also inadequate. Many of the refugees are not informed of the existence of these services and supports. Language barrier and insufficient translators; the mental health issues of the refugees, and limited resources and supplies could all be the reasons behind the inaccessibility to the information regarding the service. This is another urgent problem that is needed to be resolved because the refugees are vulnerable; they should be able to receive proper help and support as soon as they can.

The important*The exercise of power by authorities*

The process of goods distribution to the Rohingya refugees in the camps seems to be an impossible mission for the officers to control crowd; especially, when the goods are not enough for every single refugee. My experience observing the distribution in the Rohingya refugee camps was exactly of what it seemed; however, the exercise of power by authorities in order to control crowd was beyond what the author expected.

The limited number of staff distributors and the overcrowded refugees waiting for supplies made the distribution process difficult to manage. Therefore, several volunteers, both children and adults, were recruited from among the refugees to help out the distributors. Wooden sticks were handed out to these volunteers by unknown agencies in order to control other refugees to stay in discipline. Obviously, aggression that came with the use of these sticks, along with verbally aggressive action, was seen; and these acts came from both the volunteers—children and adults. This technique might work out well, because the process definitely ran in order; however, the psychological impact on the refugees, especially the child volunteers, is also undeniable.

The prominent psychologists in the field of behaviorism, Neal E. Miller and John Dollard, once wrote a book called *Social Learning and Imitation* (1942) which mentioned that fear and aggression are imitated behaviors, meaning they are teachable and creatable in all living things. This claim has been proved as the truth with many psychological experiments up to now. The situation of the distribution of supplies in the Rohingya refugee camps comes with the hidden aggressive act, and it happens from the group of people who have already been suffering tremendously to others who share the same experiences. Without anyone's intention, the process itself is handing aggression toward people who were once victims of aggression themselves. Can this new aggression psychologically influence them to become aggressive in the long run? No one could see the future; however, it may not be too hard to predict since the study of Miller and Dollard (1942) already shows.

It is reasonable and understandable that the need to control crowd is crucial for the process of the distribution of supplies. Nevertheless, the staff, distributors, and everyone who are involved with this process should realize that the techniques used to make the process at ease are important as well. The Rohingya refugees are already a vulnerable population. Every helping process providing to them must be designed to work best for them, physically and psychologically.

The lack of psychological support for local staffs

Interviewing with several staff members who worked in the refugee camps, particularly those whose work was related in the psychological areas, acknowledged that they wish they themselves were in need for psychological support. The Rohingya refugees were the victims of the human rights violation. They suffered many forms of abuses, but they were not the only group who long for the psychological support; the staff members who have faced with their stories everyday were the group of people who were in need for support as much as they did.

The knowledge area of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder these days revealed that the mental health officers are the vulnerable group prone to the development of the disorder, even though they may not have their own traumatic experiences. However, regularly experiencing traumatic incidents by listening or engaging with the trauma victims could be the onset development of the disorder among the mental health officers. Although the United Nations Refugee Agency emphasized on the importance of staff welfare (2013), it seemed that this concern might not cover all the local staff who provided aid to the Rohingya refugees in the camps since there were many other staff members who also provided help with the refugees but not worked under the United Nations Refugee Agency. Therefore, every organization should consider this as the mutual obligation because no staff should be neglected by not receiving the mental health support.

The perception of the locals toward the refugees

The Bangladeshis welcome the Rohingya refugees to their beloved country. Although their perception toward the arrivals is positive, the education about unprejudiced attitude toward those who are different from us cannot be neglected. Education is the key to prevent any form of hatred against others with different ethnicities and also to enable empathy. The information from the observation of the camp locations and discussion with ARF's staff showed that the influx of the Rohingyas exceeds the expectance of both the Bangladesh government and the United Nations, which results to the insufficient resources and scanty land for settling up any more camps. Many refugees find their own ways of resolving this problem by cutting down the forest and utilizing those cut trees for building their shelters. Although the Bangladeshis may seem not worry about this situation at this moment, the future is unseen; and thus, cannot be determined. Nonetheless, the society does not need to wait for any biases and prejudices toward the Rohingyas to happen; the education can start now in the form of prevention.

Discussion

The situation of the migration of the Rohingya refugees is considered by the United Nations Refugee Agency (2017b) as "the world's fastest growing refugee crisis and a major humanitarian emergency". Although Bangladesh welcomes most of the refugees, this crisis affects all of us as human beings. It is the situation that challenges all of us to rethink about how to inclusively live together in this world, how to care and help others who are entirely different from us; how to not have negative biases or prejudices towards someone who we have not known personally, how to accept others as human beings just like us; and how to cherish others' rights as the way we want to be cherished.

The intention of the paper is to point out that the world needs to be aware more of the situation of the Rohingya refugees. There is much more work to be done; and more resources need to be provided to assist the Rohingyas and the staffs who are working closely in the front. The author wishes that this paper would be a call for greater support for the Rohingya refugees, and benefit anyone who currently works or plans to work with this refugee population. The psychological support is crucially necessary for the Rohingyas; and the direct form of psychotherapy, such as therapy and counseling, has already been provided in the areas. Although the number of psychologist staff is still far from enough, the formal and traditional psychotherapy may not be the kind of psychological support that is suitable with the situation due to the limited staff, the locations of the workplace, and the high number of the refugees. Therefore, the author proposes the nondirective psychological support that the author believe could work well for the current situation of the Rohingya refugees in the Bangladesh refugee camps through the framework of the urgent and the important, which is the concept borrowed from the Eisenhower's principle.

Acknowledgement

This preliminary observation was funded and organized by the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF). I sincerely thank the ARF and Mr. Ishak Sohel for assistance and support throughout the entire procedure. I am also thankful to the Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT) for providing me with the opportunity to share my evaluation and concern over the need for more support, especially psychology, for the Rohingya refugees. Last but not least, I thank all local staff in the refugee camps for their courage and devotion for restoring the humanity.

References

- Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK. (2014, December). *A briefing by Burmese Rohingya organization UK: Myanmar's 1982 citizenship law and Rohingya*, Retrieved from <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-1982-Citizenship-Law-and-Rohingya.pdf>
- Chan, A. (2005). The development of Muslim enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) state of Burma (Myanmar), *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, 3(2): 396-420.
- CommonHealth. (n.d.). *Eisenhower's urgent/important principle: Using time effectively, not just efficiently*, Retrieved from <http://www.commonhealth.virginia.gov/documents/wellnotes/UsingTimeEffectivelyNotJustEfficiently.pdf>
- Donison, F.S. (1970). *Burma*, London: Ernest Benn.
- Green, P., MacManus, T., & Cour Venning, A. D. L. (2015). *Countdown to annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar*, London: International State Crime Initiative.

- Guzek, J., Siddiqui, R., White, K., Leeuwen, C. V., & Onus, R. (2017, December). *Health survey in Kutupalong and Balukhali refugee settlement, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: Survey report*. Retrieved from https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/coxsbazar_healthsurveyreport_dec2017_final1.pdf
- Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *Discrimination in Arakan*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm>
- International Organization for Migration, Inter Sector Coordination Group. (2018, March 25). *ISCG situation report: Rohingya refugee crisis, Cox's Bazar*, Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/iscg-situation-report-rohingya-refugee-crisis-cox-s-bazar-25-march-2018>
- Miller, N. E. & Dollard, J. (1942). *Social learning and imitation*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Perala, A. (2017, November 13). UN's biometric registration yields valuable data amid Rohingya refugee crisis. Retrieved from <https://findbiometrics.com/biometric-registration-rohingya-refugee-crisis-411137/>
- Peters, G. Woolley, J. T. (n.d.). Address at the second assembly of the World Council of Churches. *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.easybib.com/reference/guide/apa/website>
- The United Nations Children's Fund. (2018a, March 25). *Bangladesh: Humanitarian situation report no.28 (Rohingya influx)*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF_Bangladesh_Humanitarian_Situation_Report_25_March_2018.pdf
- The United Nations Children's Fund. (2018b, April 4). *Bangladesh: Rohingya crisis*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bangladesh_100945.html
- The United Nations Children's Fund. (n.d.). *UN convention on the rights of the child in child friendly language*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf>
- The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2013, July). *UNHCR's mental health and psychosocial support for staff*, Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/51f67bdc9.pdf>
- The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2017a, March). Bangladesh fact sheet March 2017, Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/50001ae09.pdf>
- The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2017b, October 16). *Joint statement of the Rohingya refugee crisis*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2017/10/59e4c17e5/joint-statement-rohingya-refugee-crisis.html>
- The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2017c, October, 26). *Mental health first aid on the frontlines of the Rohingya crisis*, Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/10/59de22951b/mental-health-first-aid-frontlines-rohingya-crisis.html>