

India: The Status of Refugees 2022



Rights and Risks Analysis Group



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February 2023

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1. Executive summary: Detain & Deport

India has no refugee law or policy, and it is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. All foreign nationals, including asylum seekers, are governed by the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Registration of Foreigners Act of 1939, the Passport (Entry into India) Act of 1920, the Citizenship Act of 1955 and the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019.

In 2022, India had about 4,05,000 refugees i.e. 2,13,578 refugees recognized/registered by the Government of India and housed in various camps/settlements, about 31,313 refugees belonging to minority communities from neighbouring countries who had been given Long Term Visas (LTV) on the basis of their claims of religious persecution¹ and about 1,60,085 unregistered refugees. As India’s refugee policy is mainly to detain and deport and refugees operate in a clandestine and surreptitious manner, the actual number of refugee populations in the country are undoubtedly higher than the reported number of refugees.

In 2022, instability in Myanmar and attacks on religious minorities in Afghanistan and Bangladesh caused the influx of over 10,000 refugees to India. These includes over 9,000 refugees who entered Mizoram from Myanmar (8,149 refugees by February 2022² and 589 on 31 August 2022³ and 300 Chin-Kuki refugees entered from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh),⁴ about 85 Burmese refugees⁵ and about 100 Sikh and Hindu refugees airlifted from Afghanistan.⁶

Ethnic or religious affiliation determined India’s policy for the treatment of the refugees. While the Sikh and Hindu refugees from Afghanistan were airlifted, India followed ‘detain and deport policy’ with respect to the Rohingya refugees. On 17 August 2022, Union Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri promised allotment of flats and security in Bakkarwala area in West Delhi to members of the Muslim minority. However, the Ministry of Home Affairs quickly stated that Rohingyas will be held at a detention centre and then deported.⁷



Similarly, Mizoram decided to provide humanitarian assistance to the Chin refugees from Myanmar and Kuki-Chin refugees from Bangladesh in defiance of the directions of the Government of India given the fact that the refugees have the same ethnic roots. In Manipur too, indigenous communities in Churachandpur provided assistance as refugees fleeing from Sagaing and Chin State of Myanmar despite the crackdown by the Manipur Police.

In 2022, at least 203 refugees i.e. 118 Rohingya refugees⁸, 85 Kuki-Chin refugees in Manipur⁹ and 20 Myanmar refugees in Mizoram¹⁰ were arrested on various charges ranging from illegal entry into India to arms smuggling. During 2022, two Rohingya refugees i.e. Haseena Begum¹¹ and Jafar Alam¹² were deported to Myanmar.

India even prevented third country immigration of the Rohingya refugees. In September 2022, Senoara Begum, recognized as a refugee from Myanmar by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in New Delhi, sought the exit permit to reunite with her husband following issuance of visas by the United States.¹³ India denied the exit permit on the grounds of no verification of the nationality of Begum and her children by the Embassy of Myanmar and its policy of deporting illegal foreigners to their country of origin and not granting exit to illegal migrants to a third country given the bearing it can have upon similarly placed cases.¹⁴ The Delhi High Court is yet to pronounce its judgment on the petition.

India's 'detain and deport' policy forced refugees to operate in a clandestine and surreptitious manner making asylum seekers easy target of various criminal syndicates. In March 2022, two Rohingya girls were rescued from the Guwahati railway station in Assam and six persons were arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for trafficking and helping Rohingyas illegally entering India. The rackets were active in the border areas of Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya and other parts of the country.¹⁵

2. Refugee populations in India

In 2022, India had about 4,05,000 refugees including 2,13,578 registered/recognized refugees, about 31,313 persons belonging to minority communities from neighbouring countries given long term visas on the basis of their claims of religious persecution and about 1,60,085 unregistered refugees.

In 2022, India had 2,13,578 registered/recognized refugees including 92,837 Sri Lankan refugees¹⁶ and 72,291 Tibetan refugees¹⁷ assisted by the government of India; about 31,313 persons belonging to minority communities from neighbouring countries granted long term visas on the basis of their claims of religious persecution and want Indian citizenship,¹⁸ and about 48,450 refugees and asylum-seekers registered by the UNHCR including 28,613 refugees from Myanmar; 15,344 refugees from Afghanistan; 4,493 refugees from other countries.¹⁹

Further, there were approximately 1,60,085 unregistered refugees including over 1,00,000 Chin refugees from Myanmar residing in Mizoram since 1990s;²⁰ about 20,000 Rohingya refugees not registered with UNHCR (out of 40,000 Rohingyas, about half of them were registered with UNHCR),²¹ over 40,000 refugees who crossed over to Mizoram from Myanmar and Bangladesh since February 2021,²² and about 85 ethnic Myanmar refugees in Manipur.²³ The Mizoram government extended assistance to about 40,000 Myanmar



refugees who crossed over to the state since Myanmar military seized power in on 1 February 2021. Of these, Mizoram government registered about 30,000 as on 28 October 2022.²⁴

The *coup d'état* in Myanmar has been causing threat to regional peace and security and massive influx of refugees.

Among the refugees, the Rohingyas were given the worst treatment and faced detention and deportation. The Chins from Myanmar were welcomed in Mizoram but faced arrest and detention in Manipur.

2.1. Mizoram: The hotspot of refugee influx

During 2022, Mizoram became the epicentre of refugee influx from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Mizoram had about 40,000 refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh at the end of 2022.²⁵

About 10,000 refugees entered Mizoram during 2022.

In January 2022, more than 2,000 people reportedly entered Mizoram from the Chin state of Myanmar.²⁶ A headcount by the district administration in Champhai district found that 8,149 refugees from Chin state of Myanmar had crossed over to Mizoram in the last week of January 2022 and early February 2022 following incidents of “firing and bombing” in at least three Myanmar villages.²⁷ Further, another 589 refugees fled to Lawngtlai, Mizoram after Myanmar military following fresh armed clashes in Myanmar on 31 August 2022.²⁸

About 300 Chin-Kuki refugees belonging to 74 families from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh also entered Lawngtlai district of Mizoram. The Chin-Kuki refugees fled their homes due to arm clashes between Bangladesh Army and ethnic insurgent group Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA) in November 2022. The first batch of the Kuki-Chin refugees numbering 272 entered Mizoram on 20 November 2022, followed by 21 people in the second batch and another 15 people (third batch) fled to Lawngtlai district in December 2022.²⁹



Mizoram welcomes Myanmar Chin refugees, Photo: Courtesy, The Print

At least 20 Myanmar nationals were reportedly arrested in 2022 by the Assam Rifles, one of India's para military forces, for their alleged involvement in criminal activities including smuggling of arms and drugs. Five of them were found to be involved in smuggling of arms for rebel groups.³⁰

2.2. Manipur: Unaccounted influx of ethnic refugees from Myanmar

The exact data on the number of refugees from Myanmar taking shelter in Manipur is not available. The indigenous communities in Churachandpur have the same ethnic roots as the families fleeing from Sagaing and Chin State in Myanmar. Manipur police officials admitted that it is "very hard" for the authorities to distinguish between refugees and locals. A police official told The Print, "*The village chiefs give letters to refugees saying they are residents of the village. Based on that, they get a domicile certificate. A domicile certificate, a phone number and an introducer are all you need to get an Aadhaar card. Once they have all these documents, it's difficult to catch them*".³¹

Nonetheless, Manipur Police arrested about 85 Burmese refugees in 2022.

On 28 June, about 80 refugees, including 20 children and 35 women, were arrested by police in Churachandpur district, Manipur under the Foreigners Act.³² On 10 August, another five Myanmar nationals including a woman were arrested from Ngathal village in Churachandpur district under the Foreigners Act.³³

In November, India suspended the 'Free Movement Regime' (FMR) of people through Tamu-Moreh point (which borders between Manipur and Myanmar) until February 2023. The move was taken primarily to prevent 'illegal entry of Myanmar nationals.' This was the second time since September 2022 that this ban was imposed. Under the FMR, citizens of the two countries are permitted to travel freely within 25km of both sides of the border.³⁴



Kuki-Chin refugees from Bangladesh in Mizoram



2.3 Rohingya refugees

In December 2017, the government of India informed the Lok Sabha, lower house of the Parliament, that there were about 40,000 Rohingya refugees but no census was ever conducted to arrive at the estimates.³⁵ Rohingya refugees live in various camps and slums in different cities across the country, including Delhi, Jammu, Hyderabad (Telangana), Nuh and Faridabad (both Haryana), and Kelambakkam (Chennai, Tamil Nadu). About 5,000 Rohingya refugees were in Jammu region in erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir as on 20 June 2022.³⁶ There were over 1,100 Rohingya refugees who were residing in Delhi.³⁷

The number of Rohingya refugees is unknown and India follows “Detain & Deport” policy with respect to the Rohingya refugees.

According to UNHCR, 291 Rohingya refugees remain in immigration detention, 263 in a holding center in Jammu, and 22 at a welfare center in Delhi as on October 2022.³⁸ About 100 Rohingya refugees were arrested in India during 2022 as given below:

On 16 March, seven Rohingya refugees including six women, who had illegally crossed into India from Cox’s Bazaar refugee camp in Bangladesh, were arrested by Railway Protection Force personnel at New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal.³⁹

On 18 March, 13 Rohingyas, including six children and two women, were arrested by the Government Railway Police (GRP) posted at New Jalpaiguri railway station in West Bengal. They were waiting to board an Assam-bound train.⁴⁰

On 1 April, five Rohingyas including Arift, his father (70), brother and two of his cousins were detained and taken to a detention centre at Hira Nagar prison. They arrived in Jammu in 2012.⁴¹

On 28 April, three suspected Rohingyas were arrested by police at Dharmanagar railway station in the North district of Tripura after they failed to produce valid identification documents.⁴²

On 2 May, 24 Rohingyas, including 10 children, were detained in Unakoti district of Tripura. They came from Jammu by train to Kumarghat via Kolkata and Guwahati.⁴³

On 29 May, police in Cachar district, Assam detained 26 Rohingyas, including 12 children, from Myanmar for allegedly travelling without valid papers. They had travelled from Jammu to Guwahati by train and from there to Silchar in three vehicles. Preliminary findings revealed they belong to three families living in Jammu for many years and planning to enter Bangladesh.⁴⁴

In June, the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) arrested a Rohingya identified as Khalique Ahmed from Aligarh on charges of residing on forged Indian documents. The accused allegedly entered India and became an Imam (Muslim religious leader) at a mosque in Aligarh.⁴⁵

In the first week of November, 15 Rohingyas including women and children were arrested from two districts of Tripura on charges of illegal immigration. Five of them were identified as Syed Nur, Md. Yusuf, Minara Begum, Shaukat Ara and Jannat Ara. All of them were sent to judicial custody.⁴⁶

On 11 November, six Rohingyas including two infants who entered India illegally were arrested in Agartala, Tripura. The detainees entered the Dhanpur area under Jatrapur police station limits in the Sepahijala district, crossing the India-Bangladesh border fence and were arrested



Rohingya refugees in Jammu, Photo: Courtesy Aljazeera

by Agartala Government Railway Police (GRP) from Badharghat railway station. They were identified as Mohammad Safikul Islam (55), Mohammad Abdul Kayer (23), Senwara Begam (19), her one-year-old baby, Nur Kayeda (19) and her 16 months old child.⁴⁷

In 2022, two refugees were deported and they belonged to the Rohingyas.

On 23 March 2022⁴⁸, Haseena Begum, 37 years, was separated from her three children and husband and was deported to Myanmar after year long detention at Hira Nagar prison in Jammu.⁴⁹ She was deported to Myanmar despite the order of the Manipur State Human Rights Commission putting the deportation on hold on 21 March 2022. The Commission said that the plan to deport her appeared on its face to violate the right to life and personal liberty guaranteed by the Constitution of India and Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁵⁰



Rohingya refugees in Jammu, Photo: Courtesy Aljazeera



On 4 May 2022, Jafar Alam, a Rohingya man, who was detained in April 2022, was deported to Myanmar.⁵¹ Alam was separated from his six children and wife.⁵²

On 4 August 2022, the Calcutta High Court temporarily restrained the Government of India from deporting four Rohingya Muslims to Myanmar until the matter is taken up for hearing by the High Court. The petition was filed after the Rohingya Muslims received verbal communication from the jail authorities that they would be deported to Myanmar. The petitioners had served their period of detention on 20 July 2019. However, they continued to remain in the Dum Dum Correctional Home since then. The Court also directed that the petitioners be provided with facilities which are commensurate to their right to live with dignity.⁵³

The fear of deportation had resulted exodus of Rohingya refugees from India to Bangladesh.⁵⁴ About 2,000 Rohingyas had already reached Bangladesh from Jammu through different routes to escape deportation to Myanmar.⁵⁵ In May 2022, 24 Rohingyas were arrested in Tripura as they were planning to enter Bangladesh through Kailashahar. Investigation revealed that they too were from Jammu.⁵⁶

2.4. Sikh and Hindu refugees from Afghanistan

Following persecution from the Taliban, more than 100 Sikh and Hindu refugees from Afghanistan fled to India in 2022.⁵⁷

On 14 July 2022, 21 Afghan Sikhs, including an infant, were evacuated from Kabul, Afghanistan to New Delhi.⁵⁸

On 3 August 2022, 30 Afghan Sikhs, including children and infants, arrived in Delhi by a non-scheduled commercial flight from Kabul, Afghanistan.⁵⁹

On 25 September 2022, 55 Sikh and Hindu refugees from Afghanistan arrived in New Delhi in a special flight following religious persecution from the Taliban.⁶⁰

3. Judicial interventions

India's constitutional courts had to regularly intervene with respect to the violations of the rights of the refugees.

However on 25 April 2022, the Supreme Court stayed a 2021 order of the Manipur High Court that allowed seven refugees from Myanmar including four journalists, a safe passage to Delhi to seek refugee status from the UNHCR. The order came on a petition filed by the Government of India, which said that the seven persons were "untraceable", and responsibility for their going missing ought to be fixed on human rights activist and lawyer Nandita Haksar, who moved a petition on their behalf before the High Court and took personal responsibility that their presence would be marked at Parliament Street police station on their arrival in New Delhi. Taking serious view of the matter, a bench of Justices AM Khanwilkar and AS Oka issued notice to Haksar and stayed the 3 May 2021 order of the High Court "provided the same has not been acted upon by the concerned authority so far". The High Court, in its judgment had stated, "*This court finds it just and proper to extend protection under Article 21 of the Constitution to these seven Myanmar persons and grant them safe passage to New Delhi to enable them to avail suitable protection from UNHCR.*" Of the seven, three were journalists, while the other four were



Afghan Sikh refugees, Photo: Courtesy The New Indian Express

the spouse of one of the journalists and their three minor children. They fled Myanmar fearing persecution and physical danger following the military coup and the subsequent violence.⁶¹

On 4 August 2022, the Calcutta High Court temporarily restrained the Government of India from deporting four Rohingya Muslims to Myanmar until the matter is taken up for hearing by the High Court. The petition was filed after the Rohingya Muslims received verbal communication from the jail authorities that they would be deported to Myanmar. The petitioners had served their period of detention on 20 July 2019 in the Dumdum Correctional Home. The Court also directed that the petitioners be provided with facilities which are commensurate to their right to live with dignity.⁶²

On 15 September 2022, the Telangana High Court directed the State government to release five Rohingyas who were detained in Cherlapally central prison immediately, observing that the State government had no power to detain them. Pronouncing the judgment in a batch of five writ petitions filed by relatives/families of Rohingyas, a bench of Justices Shameem Akther and E.V. Venugopal set aside orders issued by Director General of Police M. Mahender Reddy detaining the five Rohingyas. These five Rohingyas were identified as Raheemullah, Jaffar Alam, Abdul Aziz, Noor Qasim and Nazar-Ul-Islam, who were arrested in 2020 on charge of securing crucial identity documents like Aadhaar card and Elector Photo Identity Card by furnishing fake certificates. Different sections of Indian Penal Code, the Passport Act and the Foreigners Act were invoked against them. The bench said that the State government had no power under the Foreigners Act to detain the foreigners. The power vested with the Central government. The Union of India did not delegate this power to confine foreigners to the State government. The bench said their detention is *“wholly unjustified, ex facie illegal and without specific delegation of power under section 3 (2) (g) of the Foreigners Act.”*⁶³

The Delhi High Court is adjudicating the right to immigrate to third countries by the refugees. Senoara Begum and three of her minor children had arrived in India on 28 February 2018 from the Kutupalong Refugee camp in Bangladesh. They were recognized as refugees from Myanmar by the UNHCR. Her husband was able to resettle in the United States and has been allowed by the United States to bring his family to resettle with him. After obtaining visas from the US embassy in New Delhi, Senoara Begum filed exit permit applications from the Foreign Regional Registration Office, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of



India. However, the same have not been considered and no decision was taken by the Government of India. Therefore, she approached the Delhi High Court.

The MHA in its counter affidavit stated that since there is no verification of the nationality of Begum and her children by the Embassy of Myanmar, the exit permits cannot be issued.⁶⁴ India further stated that it was the policy of the Indian government that such illegal foreigners must be deported back to their country of origin subject to their nationality verification, in consultation with the Ministry of External Affairs. It cannot grant exit to illegal migrants to a third country as it would be totally against the existing guidelines and granting exit permits to illegal migrants like Begum and her children would also have a bearing upon similarly placed cases from other refugees as well and it would convey a message that the Indian government is supporting/facilitating resettlement of illegal migrants in third countries which would be detrimental to the international relations of the Indian government.⁶⁵ When Myanmar does not recognise Rohingyas as its citizens and the victims have fled without any document and Senoara Begum was five years old when she moved from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The petition is pending final adjudication before the Delhi High Court.

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