

# The Curious Case of Bhasan Char: Island Relocation and the Politics of Refugee Containment in the ‘Global South’

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## Abstract

On October 9, 2021, the Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a common framework for humanitarian services for Rohingya refugees on Bhasanchar, an island 37 miles from the mainland in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh’s plan to relocate 100,000 Rohingya to Bhasanchar offers an opportunity to analyze the complex nature of refugee-hosting in the Global South, bringing into focus how a Global South host, rather than being a passive actor, can attempt a context-specific strategy to generate normative and financial support for its role in accommodating a displaced population. This research aims to make three main contributions. First, it seeks to situate the case of the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh within the literature on migration diplomacy and refugee rentierism. Second, it seeks to modify and expand on the refugee rentier state literature by demonstrating how a host country can pursue a path of ‘normative modelling,’ rather than blackmailing or backscratching for purely economic aims. It shows that states may seek to set new norms for refugee hosting for the purpose of gaining international recognition and accolades, in addition to economic support. As such, it finds the existing models of refugee rentierism constrained by its roots in realist IR theory, and suggests a constructivist correction, in which identity and norm setting are relevant to understanding the state’s policy choices. Third, in examining the use of ‘internal offshoring’ i.e. using one’s own territory for redistribution of a population (in this case from a congested refugee camp), it problematizes how Global North practices of extraterritorial ‘offshoring’ such as Australia’s use of the Nauru and Manus islands for immigration detention have served as the framework for understanding Bangladesh’s strategy. While the research outlines the grounds for valid concerns about Bhasanchar, an examination of the political economy of land use in Bangladesh offers a nuanced understanding of the island relocation plan. Such an analysis underscores how imposing the border externalization practices framework inaccurately casts Bangladesh as a case of ‘negative norm absorption’ of migrant deterrence practices, rather than capturing how char (island) living has long been a part of riverine Bangladesh’s sociocultural and economic practices and obfuscates the country’s attempt at norm modeling for refugee accommodation.



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## Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2 Situating the Research</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3 Methodological Approach</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4 Failed Repatriation Efforts, International Indifference, and Rising Resentment: Creating the Logic for Bhasanchar</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5 The Rohingya as a ‘Security Threat’: Opting Against Blackmail</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>6 Bhasanchar in the Context of Bangladesh’s Political Economy of Land Use</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>7 A Triumph of Internal Offshoring and Normative Modelling? Winners and Losers of the Bhasanchar Equation</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>8 Conclusion</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Annex I: Key Agreements on Rohingya Repatriation</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>19</b>

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## 1 Introduction

What explains how countries choose to address the challenge of hosting large refugee populations within their borders? In the field of migration diplomacy, the literature examining the ability of Global South refugee host states to instrumentalize forced migration for their domestic and foreign policy goals is expanding (Fernández-Molina & Gerasimos Tsourapas, 2024; Tennis, 2020; Tsourapas, 2019; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Natter, 2018). Anchored in a realist perspective, Tsourapas (2019) employs a rationalist approach and introduces the term ‘refugee rentier states’ to explain how hosts such as Turkey, extract rent from powerful state actors to maintain refugees within their borders through either blackmail (threatening to expel refugee populations and destabilize neighbors) or backscratching (assuming continued responsibility for refugees in exchange for compensation). Existing rationalist models, however, cannot satisfactorily explain cases where host countries do *not* engage in either blackmailing or backscratching for purely economic gain, despite such options being available to them.

One such case is Bangladesh, whose Rohingya refugee population represents a strain on a heavily populated country with limited land and resources. When its efforts at cooperation did not produce a desired outcome, rather than threatening expulsion of the refugee population and destabilize the region to extract gains from regional and global powers, Bangladesh chose a third path – what I call ‘normative modelling.’ This third path represents an attempt to set new norms of refugee hosting through harnessing its longstanding strategy of land use to not only gain economic support but also harmonize with state identity while gaining recognition from the international community.

On October 9, 2021, the Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a Memorandum of Under-

standing (MoU) to establish a common framework for humanitarian services for Rohingya refugees on Bhasanchar, an island 37 miles from the mainland in the Bay of Bengal (IISS Myanmar Conflict Map, 2021). The MoU signaled the international community's formal acquiescence to the Government of Bangladesh (GoB)'s plan to ultimately relocate 100,000 Rohingya from the Kutapalong-Balukhali 'mega camp' to an island location to address what it had described as an 'untenable' situation. This process, which I term 'internal off-shoring' - i.e. using one's own territory for redistribution of a population (in this case from a congested refugee camp) - ushered in a new phase of refugee accommodation for the Rohingya in Bangladesh, who have sought refuge in the country's mainland in successive cycles, with the largest numbers arriving in 2017. Bangladesh's island relocation plan – the subject of intense international scrutiny and criticism in the early days – offers an opportunity to analyze the complex nature of refugee-hosting in the Global South where multiple realities intersect: a protracted crisis, the statelessness of a refugee population that has limited geopolitical value, resource constraints, a state's intention of being seen as a norm entrepreneur, and a lack of international responsiveness to its efforts to seek a political solution to a displacement crisis. It also brings into focus how a Global South host, rather than being a passive actor, can attempt a context-specific strategy to generate normative and financial support for its role in accommodating a displaced population.

This research aims to make three main contributions. First, it seeks to situate the case of the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh within the literature on migration diplomacy and refugee rentierism. Second, it seeks to modify and expand on the refugee rentier state literature by demonstrating how a host country can pursue a path of 'normative modelling,' rather than blackmailing or backscratching for purely economic aims. It shows that states may seek to set new norms for refugee hosting for the purpose of gaining international recognition and accolade, in addition to economic support. As such, it finds the existing models of refugee rentierism constrained by its roots in realist IR theory, and suggests a constructivist correction, in which identity and norm setting are relevant to understanding the state's policy choices. Third, through examining the island relocation process as internal offshoring, it problematizes how Global North practices of extraterritorial 'offshoring' such as Australia's use of the Nauru and Manus islands for immigration detention have served as the framework for understanding Bangladesh's strategy (e.g. Mountz, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2018, 2021). While the research outlines the grounds for valid concerns about Bhasanchar, an examination of the political economy of land use in Bangladesh offers a nuanced understanding of the island relocation plan. Such an analysis underscores how imposing the border externalization practices framework inaccurately casts Bangladesh as a case of 'negative norm absorption' of migrant deterrence practices, rather than capturing how the char (island) living has long been a part of riverine Bangladesh's sociocultural and economic practices, and obfuscates the country's attempt at norm modelling for refugee accommodation.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I situate the study in the broader literature of migration diplomacy, and refugee rentierism in particular, followed by a brief historical background of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Second, I discuss how the securitization discourse on the Rohingya could have laid the groundwork for threats of mass-expulsion, which the refugee rentierism model would suggest as GoB's most likely policy option. I then contextualize the Bhasanchar decision through the examination of the norms and identity dynamics specific to Bangladesh and show that the country's choice of developing Bhasanchar was driven not primarily by rent-seeking goals, but by a

desire to reaffirm an identity as a nation with a history of being refugees themselves that responds to the displacement crisis within the context of its own development strategy. This, I argue, represents a form of ‘normative modelling,’ rather than blackmail or backscratching. However, while innovative and context-responsive with some international acceptance as part of refugee governance in Bangladesh, the Bhasanchar strategy arguably presents a failure of GoB’s strategic calculation. In conclusion, the research demonstrates how an in-depth understanding of Rohingya relocation in Bangladesh requires attention to norms and identity dynamics, as well as the contextual value of land and its political economy in the country, rather than only economic calculations and diffusion of migrant containment norms in the Global South.

## 2 Situating the Research

Once the Cold War ended, the refugee no longer possessed ideological or geopolitical value for the west. This waning of interest meant that the dependence on poorer countries to contain the forcibly displaced increased multifold. Responsibility-sharing became a *choice* for the Global North, shaped by highly selective refugee resettlement programs and a complex asylum system for the very few, and the *de facto duty* of the Global South. What emerges is that the North – relatively far less impacted by both conditions and consequences of forced displacement – may or may not take the incentive to provide economic support as acts of ‘calculated kindness’ (Loescher & Scanlan, 1986) producing what Betts (2009) called the ‘North-South impasse.’ In pragmatic terms, this translated into the imperative of poorer countries having to absorb and negotiate the everyday challenges of hosting large populations. Meanwhile their wealthier counterparts as UNHCR donors may offer or cut international assistance based on their interests and constraints, while remaining shielded from the ‘disorderliness’ of refugee life. The logic then follows that an assumed one-dimensional and submissive Global South ‘has little choice other than to host refugees’ (Betts, 2009: 13), which in turn has been broadly understood to be a unique problem *of* and *by* post-colonial contexts in which the Global North has played no role.

The corresponding focus on the Global South as refugee ‘warehouses’ has meant that there has been less academic attention paid to the ways in which such contexts shape, and have been shaped by, refugee (im)mobility, norm-setting, international crises, and donor priorities. Framed differently, powerful western countries have historically been seen as being able to more effectively pursue issue-linkages and leverage their interests against developing contexts, which in turn have had limited ability to negotiate effectively on questions of population mobility. Accordingly, academic scholarship has acknowledged the instrumentalization of refugees in cross-border conflicts (e.g. Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006); realpolitik calculations behind refugee acceptance (Higashijima, 2024; Bender, 2024; Whitaker, 2002); and the role of the diaspora in foreign policy-making (e.g. Adamson, 2007; Koinova, 2010; Prasad & Savatic, 2023; Adamson & Han, 2024). However, what has been striking is the framing – explicit and implicit – of Global South contexts, which simultaneously export labor, produce and host displaced populations, and serve as transit states, as largely passive actors (Geddes, 2005; Lavenex, 2008) in population mobility. Yet, in the absence of altruism, consistency, and competing donor interests, these ‘migration states’ (Hollifield, 2004) can function as opportunists (Greenhill, 2010), strategizing around refugees as a valuable resource without necessarily engaging in (violent) coercion. Such approaches have involved negotiations with sub-national authorities, national and international organizations in response to

domestic considerations, international politics, shifts in humanitarian agendas and funding (see e.g. Hamilton & Longhorn, 2011; Mourad, 2017; Paliwal, 2022), responding to cross-border migration with international migration diplomacy (Teitelbaum, 1984; Thiollet, 2011; Tsourapas, 2017; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019), seeking out issue-linkages and leveraging refugees for extracting financial assistance from the Global North (Greenfield, 2003, 2010; Betts & Loescher, 2011; Betts, 2017; Tsourapas, 2017, 2018). Succinctly then, global North-South asymmetries, together with the complexities within the South have come sharply into focus, with greater attention to the agency of traditionally 'weaker' states in terms of labor migration, and the politicking around forcible displacement and international protection regimes (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021; El-Taliawi, 2024).

Correspondingly, migration diplomacy of large refugee host countries has opened the door for a new frontier of scholarship in international refugee politics. Beblawi's (1987) concept of rentier states, which acknowledges Global South states' ability to generate external economic rent through either access to natural resources or strategic location, and introduced by Tsourapas into the international politics of migration studies, has become instrumental in explaining how large hosts may be able to generate 'rents,' such as preferential trade agreements, economic assistance, and even debt relief from international organizations or western donors eager to outsource refugee-hosting (Tsourapas, 2021: 34). Contemporary history offers a number of cases where host-state actors are primary recipients of such rents, even though they are not responsible for the displacement crisis, and they may not channel the income into the management of forcibly displaced groups within its borders. For instance, in 1981, the Reagan administration released a \$3.2 billion aid package to Pakistan for the purpose of containing Afghan refugees displaced by the Soviet-Afghan war and significant internal turmoil. Similarly, although since 2014 there have been no new asylum-seeker sent to Nauru as part of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders, the government continues to pay \$40 million a month to run its offshore processing regime on Nauru (The Guardian, 2021). In fact, between November 2017 and January 2021, of the more than \$1.67 billion spent on 'garrison and welfare,' \$73.3 million was paid to directly to the government of Nauru (The Senate Question, n.d.). The increase in border externalization programs whereby powerful states manage migration flows and enforce immigration policies beyond their borders through collaborating with other countries or non-state actors (Nicolosi, 2024; de Blasis & Pitzalis, 2023; Lee, 2022; Menjivar, 2014) have also generated ways in which refugees today constitute a strategic resource for several Global South hosts. Examples of this include the EU-Turkey deal through which the former has paid over \$11.5 billion to Erdoğan's government (European Commission, 2025), and the EU Trust Fund for Africa's payments to Libya for migration, which between 2015-2021 committed a total of over \$538 million in addition to dedicating over \$74.5 million for protection and border management, and another \$28.5 million for returns and reintegration (InfoMigrants, 2025).

The scholarship of migration diplomacy has also incorporated different strategies of negotiations in conditions of power asymmetry to explain how host states leverage refugees in international politics. Here, Tsourapas' (2021) incorporation of Keohane and Nye's (1987, 735) analysis of diplomacy involving two distinct strategies – blackmailing and backscratching – contribute to the understanding of how refugee host countries can effectively extract rents, despite significant power differentials with Global North donors. The strategy of backscratching for instance, emphasizes the possibility of generating common benefits often through multilateral negotiations to extract benefits. In



contrast, blackmailing allows for the use of threats of unilateral action by the host, with little regard for international laws and norms, as has been seen in the way Turkey has repeatedly threatened the EU with ‘flooding its borders with refugees’ in response to pressure for accepting more Syrians, demanding more aid, and in 2019 for opposing its military incursion in Syria (RFERL, 2019; Al-Arabiya English, 2016). Micinski (2021) refines the refugee rentier model further, reflecting on how Tsourapas’ blackmailing and backscratching strategies rely on the geographical proximity to a superpower (e.g. Turkey vs Europe) but does not account for refugee rentier states such as Pakistan and Kenya that do not share a border with a powerful state, but have used threats of deportation to extract aid because of their recognized importance in regional stability. Even this modified refugee rentier model, however, does not unpack the geopolitical importance attached to specific categories of refugees and the possibility of their return, which may be complicated by their stateless condition such as the Rohingya, and is limited in its applicability to states that share borders with more powerful countries but do not act in accordance with the model’s expectations. Here, I argue, the roots of the refugee rentier model in realist approaches in IR constrain the explanatory power by omitting dynamics generated by norms and identity – factors not weighted as significant to policy decisions in rationalist models. Accordingly, I posit that an expansion of the model to include norms, identity dynamics and sociocultural practices – a constructivist correction – is warranted.

### 3 Methodological Approach

Using a single case study of Bangladesh, this article draws on original materials and interviews from multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Dhaka and Cox’s Bazaar in 2022 with academics, political elites, government officials, and international and national NGOs working with the Rohingya population. I conducted further fieldwork through follow-up interviews in 2023 and 2024. To complement the interviews, I conducted a textual analysis of reports, public statements and documents produced by international and national NGOs, the UNHCR, the GoB, former PM Sheikh Hasina’s international and UNGA speeches, and Rohingya coverage in prominent Bangla and English newspapers between 2017-2023. The textual analysis centered on searching for specific references to the Rohingya and Bhasanchar and identifying key words and tropes that frequently occurred.

Bangladesh offers a compelling case to examine through the lens of the refugee rentierism model, because its policy choices should align with what the model predicts. Yet Bangladesh, despite the security concerns that the congested camps present and the already strained resources of the state, has not employed blackmail in its approach to refugee hosting. While it borders a powerful state (India), the government did not employ the threat of expulsion of the Rohingya as leverage. Neither did its multiple attempts at collaboration in the form of multilateral and bilateral agreements, submission of UNGA proposals, and ongoing absorption of over a million Rohingya – which may be considered backscratching – produce the political urgency for neighboring countries to take part in responsibility sharing or facilitate Rohingya return. Instead, Bangladesh chose a third path: the use of one of its most valuable assets – land – for accommodating refugees with the intention of gaining both international accolade and securing international assistance for their management. As such, a focused examination of the case of Bangladesh allowed for identification of the limitations of the refugee rentierism model and suggestions for constructive expansion.

#### 4 Failed Repatriation Efforts, International Indifference, and Rising Resentment: Creating the Logic for Bhasanchar

The Rohingya are a highly marginalized ethnic minority largely – albeit not only – Muslim, in the northern Rakhine State of Myanmar. Rich in oil and natural gas reserves, and the site for vested political and economic interests for Myanmar, China, and India, it has remained the country's least developed state with an 80 percent poverty rate even prior to the Covid pandemic (UNDP, n.d.). The deeply contested question of the origins of the Rohingya, in which British colonial rule played a critical role, and their unfulfilled promise to create a separate 'Muslim National Area' in return for their support in World War II, have been instrumental in setting the stage for periods of state-sanctioned violence and discriminatory laws against this community (Uddin, 2020). Since the passage of the 1982 Citizenship Act of Myanmar, the Rohingya have also been denied their right to citizenship (Brett & Hlaing, 2020). This last policy is in line with what every Government of Myanmar (GoM) has insisted – that the land had always been exclusively Buddhist, the Rohingya as an ethnic group never existed, and that those who identify as such are 'illegal *Bengali* migrants' (Ibrahim, 2016; Ullah & Chatteraj, 2018). Correspondingly, the Rohingya have remained a convenient scapegoat for the political ambitions of Myanmar's military generals and politicians, and a diversionary distraction from domestic crises subject to forcible displacement since 1942; mass expulsions in 1962, 1970, 1991; and most recently in 2017 and beyond (Stokke et. al, 2018). Over the years, Rohingya have fled ongoing persecution to South- and South-East Asia and Saudi Arabia. The largest host since 2017 with over 1 million Rohingya, Bangladesh received significant numbers of Rohingya in two previous cycles: during the 1977 Operation Nagamin (Dragon King) that included a militarized immigration operation to register citizens and screen out foreigners (Elahi, 1987); and the 1991-92 *Operation Pyi Thaya* (Clean and Beautiful Nation) when over 250,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar (Kaveri & Rajan, 2023). As violations against the Rohingya continue, refugees have not stopped coming to Bangladesh; between 2024 and mid-2025 alone, there were 150,000 arrivals, though the actual number is likely much higher (UNHCR, 2025).

Rohingya reception in Bangladesh has been complex, produced at one level by religious and co-ethnic solidarity (although not all Rohingya or Bangladeshis are Muslims, and neither are all Bangladeshis Bengalis – the closest ethnic overlap with the Rohingya); fluid border identities; family ties; and historically limited border controls (Sajjad, 2022b; Ansar & Khaled, 2021).<sup>1 2</sup> Markedly, in 2017, the GoB also insisted that given Bangladesh's own history of forcible displacement during its war of independence in 1971, which produced 10 million refugees, the country had a *moral* obligation to adopt an 'open-border' policy to host Rohingya fleeing the Myanmar military's violent cam-

<sup>1</sup>Preference for perceived co-ethnic groups is found across a cross-section of countries including Spain, Singapore, Japan, and others. See for instance, Denney, S., & Green, C. (2021). Who should be admitted? Conjoint analysis of South Korean attitudes toward immigrants. *Ethnicities*, 21(1), 120-145; Diehl, C. et. al (2018). Who is afraid of skilled migrants from Europe? Exploring support for immigration control in Switzerland. *Swiss Journal of Sociology*. 44, 59-88; Tsuda, T. (2003). *Strangers in the ethnic homeland: Japanese Brazilian return migration in transnational perspective*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Perceived co-ethnicity does not necessarily produce warmer reception, particularly when the political rhetoric, media representation and government policies can produce out-group distancing. See for instance, Zhou, Y. (2023, March 31). Refugees are brothers and sisters in Uganda, strangers in Tanzania. Epicenter, <https://epicenter.wcfia.harvard.edu/blog/refugees-are-brothers-and-sisters-uganda-strangers-tanzania>

paign (Sajjad, 2022b). This emphasis on the country's identity as a rationale for accepting refugees appeared in UN General Assembly speeches, official statements and interviews conducted (Ibid). Bangladesh's recent leadership in multiple fronts – as one of the top troop contributor to the UN peacekeeping operations, ratification of the eight of nine international human rights conventions,<sup>3</sup> attainment of five millennium development goals (MDGs), and its international engagement on climate and labor issues, has begun to draw international attention and underscores its ambition to build soft power. Its acceptance of the Rohingya and efforts to offer regional and international leadership in refugee management needs to be understood within this context. However, despite periods of Rohingya acceptance, there have also been times of restrictive policies and border pushbacks shaped by Bangladesh's own limitations including as a newly independent country in 1971, the 1974 famine (Sen, 1983; Hossain, 2017), ongoing socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and international funding limitations. In addition, because of Rohingya armed militia operations at the border, human and drug trafficking networks, and the presence of gangs in the camps, refugee-hosting has increasingly been seen as a security concern (Rezvi, Rumman et. al, 2025; Ashraf, 2021; Singh & Haziq, 2016).

As a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Bangladesh has consistently insisted that an early, voluntary, and sustainable repatriation is the country's priority when accepting each large wave of Rohingya arrivals. In fact, in all official statements, interviews and in the PM's UNGA speeches between 2017-2023, there has been an emphasis on the Rohingya being *Myanmar nationals*, that Myanmar is their *homeland*, and their stay in Bangladesh is temporary (Sheikh Hasina's UNGA speeches 2017-2023; Voice of America, 2017). Furthermore, the classification of the Rohingya as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals,' (FDMNs) was strategic given that the label does not recognize them as refugees and simultaneously counters the insistence by successive Myanmar governments that as illegal *Bengali* migrants, the Rohingya have no claims upon Myanmar. Consequently, since 1978, Bangladesh has been party to several separate bilateral frameworks with Myanmar to facilitate Rohingya repatriation with mixed to no result, and in several instances, participated in coercive return programs (Reid, 1994; Human Rights Watch, 1993). Following the 2017 exodus, Bangladesh made several attempts for a repatriation process including submitting three separate UN General Assembly proposals for sustainable repatriation, holding talks, and engaging in bilateral and multilateral agreements with China, India, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the government of Myanmar (see Annex I). In 2023, the China-brokered Pilot Repatriation Plan was implemented, but was not successful (Strangio, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Summarily, since 2019, not a single Rohingya has been repatriated.

While Bangladesh has largely respected the international principle of non-refoulement, interviews conducted reflect a growing sense of frustration with the lack of progress on the Rohingya issue, despite Bangladesh's willingness to work cooperatively with Myanmar, regional actors and the international community, while continuing to absorb new arrivals (interviews, 2022-2023). One civil society actor resignedly noted, 'thanks to Myanmar's position and international indifference, the Rohingya have become our problem now' (interview, Dhaka, 2023). The 2021 crisis in Afghanistan precipitated by the US withdrawal, Covid-19, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have also meant international attention to the Rohingya has significantly diminished. Inter-Sector Coordination Group

<sup>3</sup> The current interim government has ratified the only treaty that was not ratified, the International Convention on Enforced Disappearances in July 2025.



(ICSG) representative noted, ‘given that it has been over five years, and both the GoB and civil society’s response have largely demonstrated their capacity to manage the camps, the Rohingya situation in Bangladesh is no longer considered a crisis’ (interview, 2022). The combination of these factors may also explain why international assistance for the Rohingya in Bangladesh has been dwindling (Sajjad, 2022a). For instance, only a quarter of the 2023 Rohingya humanitarian crisis response plan, that outlined a need of \$875 million, was funded (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). The World Food Program (WFP) also significantly slashed its Rohingya budget; in 2023, the value of the food vouchers for camp residents was reduced from \$12 per person per month to \$10, and in June, to just \$8, the equivalent of 27 cents a day (United News Bangladesh, 2023); in 2025, WFP plans to slash rations to a mere \$6 per month (Amnesty International, 2025).<sup>4</sup>

This frustration became more prescient once international criticism and negative media attention emerged following the Bhasanchar plan, focusing on the island’s remote location, its environmental vulnerabilities and need for more transparency (ECRE, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Al Jazeera International, 2019). For instance, in response to a 2020 UN statement on island relocation to decongest the camps, a seemingly annoyed spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry asked: ‘Where were the UN authorities when the Rohingya people were forced to leave their ancestral homes in Rakhine of Myanmar amid atrocities?’ (New Age, 2020). Similarly, the Bangladesh FM hailed the decision for island relocation to be a prudent one stating:

While the global leadership and the UN agencies have been extending lip service to the persecuted people of Myanmar ... none came forward either for their relocation or sending them back to ... Myanmar. Furthermore, investment trade ... from Europe, ASEAN countries, China, Japan and the UK have only increased ... none of the human rights organizations put any blockade to those countries... They did not even ask them for divestment as they did in the case of Apartheid in South Africa (Bangladesh Post, 2020).

In interviews conducted between 2022-2024, what also became pronounced was the level to which government officials, national NGO workers and civil society actors were aware of the west’s ongoing wall-building practices, border pushbacks of asylum-seekers and expansion of their border externalization programs – a series of practices through which powerful states engage with poorer countries to manage migration flows (Nicolosi, 2025; Gazzioti, Jiménez et. al, 2023). The escalation of western efforts to deter asylum-seekers with explicit violence and structural obstacles came up frequently when questions about criticisms of Bhasanchar were raised. In several instances, interviewees openly spoke about the ‘hypocrisy’ of donor countries who were building walls and actively engaged in refugee pushback at their borders, while criticizing Bangladesh’s plans for refugee relocation, despite the reality that the country was not only home to the largest refugee camp in the world but was also hosting the largest Rohingya population for more than five years. ‘No matter what is said,’ noted an NGO official, ‘at least we are not expelling the Rohingya *en masse* nor building walls to keep them out ... we now host more than one million refugees with more continuing to ar-

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<sup>4</sup>In 2024, it was brought back up to \$10 with assistance from the EU and other donors. However, significant cuts in international humanitarian assistance and WFP’s 2025 decision to reduce rations to \$6 per month has raised concerns about the exacerbation of rampant malnutrition in the camps, particularly putting women and children at risk who constitute 75% of the camp residents.

rive ... Can the west with their wall-building projects and human rights violations really afford to point their fingers at us?' (interview, Cox's Bazaar, 2023).

## 5 The Rohingya as a 'Security Threat': Opting Against Blackmail

The Rohingya in Bangladesh have increasingly been framed as a traditional source of insecurity related to terrorism, narcotics, and political instability. Rana and Riaz (2022) argue that Rohingya securitization in Bangladesh commenced as early as 1992 following the failure of coercive repatriation efforts with the framing of Rohingyas as 'aliens,' and 'illegal economic migrants,' emerging in both speech acts and non-discursive strategies. Such efforts intensified in subsequent years, notably amidst the sectarian violence that characterized the post-2012 landscape in the Rakhine state during which Bangladeshi authorities implemented a push-back policy, sealing both land and sea borders. The 2013 adoption of the National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals played a critical role in formalizing the securitization process.

Despite the 2017 'open-border' policy, the alleged long-standing relationship between the militant Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Bangladesh's largest Islamist political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, (JI), whose existence remains a source of deep contention in the country (Hajjaj, 2023; Islam, 2021), have continued to make the Rohingya camps a site of intense scrutiny. Since 2019, there has been an intensified focus on insurgent recruitment, narcotics trafficking, arson, kidnappings, targeted killings of activists and *majhis* (camp leaders), and turf wars in the camps (Karim, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). Such a focus has contributed to the narrative of the Rohingya *themselves* being a security threat, justifying the deployment of checkpoints in Cox's Bazaar, imposing restrictions on mobility and telecommunications; and the 2019 installment of barbed wire fencing around the camps.

The framing of the Rohingya as a threat to national *and* regional security on an international level arguably first found traction in a joint program organized by the policy groups of Bangladesh and India (UN News Bangladesh, 2019). Both in 2022 and 2023, Bangladesh's UN General Assembly statements reflect this shift, underscoring that the presence of the Rohingya had serious ramifications on the economy, environment, security and sociopolitical stability in the country. Concerns were also raised that Rohingya presence would continue to lead to a rise in human and drug trafficking, a greater potential for radicalization, and such developments 'may affect the security and stability of the entire region and beyond' (Bangladesh Sangbad SangsthaNews, 2023).

The narrative of the Rohingya as a threat demands contextualization *within* the peculiarities of socioeconomic constraints in Bangladesh. In 2017, the former Finance Minister feared that the Rohingya would be a big pressure to the country's economy, while driving away tourists from Cox's Bazaar – a major tourist attraction – and said that 'Myanmar will destroy Bangladesh's economy this year' (Badal, 2017). While such alarmist rhetoric has not been materially substantiated, there have been negative economic impacts in the local context. These included price hikes of food items, increased competition in the local labor force with the Rohingya charging cheaper wages (Ansar & Khaled, 2021; Alam et. al, 2023); and higher costs of living because of the presence of national and international aid workers in the area (Sajjad, 2022b). This is despite the fact that Rohingya-run enterprises face greater challenges and are smaller and less profitable than their local counterparts (Filipski et. al, 2021). In 2020, the Bangladesh Foreign

Minister's statement on Bhasanchar concluded that the growing population in the congested camps was not only resulting in a deteriorating law and order situation, but also fostering desperation among the refugees, such that 'the GoB has been forced to take on the financial responsibility the relocation to Bhasanchar' (Maksud, 2020). Azizul Hoque with the Refugee Unit of BRAC University connected the issues of demographic and economic concerns to the ongoing concern about land shortage and ownership, noting

Once it became clear that the Rohingya were not leaving, there was a fear that there would be a greater Arakan with the Rohingya claiming more land – something already in short supply – and intensifying competition for the existing labor force in Cox's Bazaar where they already outnumber the local population (Interview, 2022).

Last, but not the least, Rohingya presence in Bangladesh have been increasingly seen to be a source of ecological imbalance, an issue that was also raised by the GoB at the 2020 Climate Vulnerable Forum Leaders event. While such challenges cannot be solely placed on the newest arrivals, research finds that the large number of arrivals have stressed the local environment. For instance, Sakib's (2023) research and Sarkar et. al's (2023) studies found that the 2017 arrivals created a severe pressure on the local environment in Cox's Bazar when most of the cultivable lands, hills and forestlands were occupied for settlements, as refugees frequently accessed natural resources. Since 2019 the GoB chose to particularly emphasize that the protracted Rohingya situation posed a *security* threat to the region in the international arena. As I show in an earlier article, the GoB's pivot to framing the Rohingya predominantly as a security threat was a strategic one: it demonstrated that Bangladesh has been paying close attention to the increasing criminalization and securitization discourse in the west, while simultaneously producing a sense of urgency for regional and international actors to act, given that that the language of solidarity, moral leadership and its own cooperative efforts were not yielding the needed outcome (Sajjad, 2022b). Notwithstanding this reframing of the Rohingya from a 'victim' to a 'threat,' what is noteworthy is that between 2017-2024, Bangladesh did *not* pursue a blackmail strategy. Unlike Turkey that threatened to 'flood Europe,' or Kenya and Pakistan threatening (and the latter recently carrying out) mass deportations, it did not use the Rohingya as leverage either against neighboring India, or against any of the ASEAN countries, despite the fact that in each of these contexts, the Rohingya continue to be framed as 'security' threats and 'illegals' ( see e.g. Uppal, Tantray et. al, 2025; Togoo & Ismail, 2021; Pudjibudojo, 2019). Instead, the GoB offered what it considered an innovative project, drawing on its longstanding development strategy of land allocation and its interest to be considered a norm entrepreneur in international affairs, to generate *both* acknowledgement and financial assistance for Rohingya containment.

## 6 Bhasanchar in the Context of Bangladesh's Political Economy of Land Use

Across the Global South, land remains an imperfect commodity, not yet fully integrated into capitalist social relations of production as a form of inalienable private property, yet acting as an asset that substitutes for all costs associated with welfare. This means land – as a productive asset and a cultural practice – remains a material, institutional, and ideological site of intense contestation by multiple stakeholders, including governments

and local communities (Lombard & Rakodi, 2016). Consequently, land and politics are inextricably intertwined, shaping mechanisms of power and control whether through determining constituencies, regulating citizenship, extracting resources, engineering social demography, and maintaining territorial boundaries as in the Global North (e.g. Hassan & Klaus, 2023; Albertus, 2021; Frymer, 2014). Simultaneously, through land the post-colonial South maintains patronage ties for consolidating social and political power (e.g. Lust, 2022; Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2021; Baldwin, 2014), while instilling a sense of identity and belonging (e.g. Toft, 2014). In the last few decades, lack of access to suitable land has generated conditions for conflict even in urban contexts of the Global South (e.g. Peluso & Lund, 2011; Leeuwan & Van der Haar, 2016; Hasan, 2015; Simmons, 2004). The climate crisis – which does not necessarily occur as a discrete event, but can produce different forms of dispossession, loss of access, and productivity (Dorkenoo, Nong et. al, 2024) – has also contributed to the intensity of these tensions. An examination of Bhasanchar as an internal offshoring project aimed at normative modeling therefore needs to be contextualized within the environmental realities and complex politics of the political economy of land use in Bangladesh.

With a population of over 175 million, riverine Bangladesh is the world's eight most populous country and ranked ninth in terms of climate vulnerability (World Risk Index, 2024). Rising sea levels, altered sediment supply from upstream, land reclamation and river engineering, have brought about unprecedented changes to the country's shoreline (Shariot-Ullah, 2024). While residents of coastal areas continue to demonstrate extraordinary adaptability, and new land mass has been created through the accretion process, in the south of the country at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal, rapid erosion is leading to net loss of habitable and arable land, resulting in habitat destruction and coastal community displacement (Islam & Bhuiyan, 2018). Current estimates show that by 2050, Bangladesh may lose approximately 11% of its land, displacing 15-18 million of its population (Seddiky, Ara & Karim, 2024). Within this dynamic context of land contestation and environmental vulnerabilities, a fundamental component of coastal living in Bangladesh has long involved life on the approximately one million hectares of char (island) lands, which today house at least 10 million people.

Historically, char living has been shaped by disputes, violent conflicts, and local and regional influence brought on by the British in Bengal where ownership even of islands was determined by colonial administrators. Until today, this has produced a coercive relationship between the government, local farmers and indigenous communities, including landless farmers in the charlands (Sarker et. al, 2003; Haque, 1997; Zaman 1996). Following Bangladesh's independence, recognizing the challenges in the charlands, the government reclaimed the control of alluvial lands from the *jotedars* (large landlords) and redistributed them among the landless and small landholders (Haque and Jakariya, 2023). The 1972 Presidential Orders were critical in allowing the government to claim chars as *khas* (public) land (Haque, 1997). Some of this land was used to rehabilitate those who were impacted by severe river erosion, laying the groundwork for the *Ashrayan* (shelter/accommodation) initiative – a social security program for landless populations of tremendous significance in later decades – which aligns with Bangladesh's commitment to the UN sustainable development goals.

The 1982 Land Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance – rooted in the 1894 British Colonial Land Acquisition Act used to colonize unsettled lands and collect revenue – and the 1989 Act, which paved the way for the GoB to acquire property, also allowed the GoB to acquire *khas* land for large-scale infrastructure, develop-

ment projects, and resettlement schemes in the face of flooding and erosion (Zaman, 1996). To address ongoing concerns about the power of elites in the charlands (Tariquzzaman and Rana, 2014), modifications were made to alluvial land tenure policies such as the 1994 amendment to the 1972 Presidential Order No. 135, which meant, among other issues, that land that re-emerges after three decades becomes government-owned. In 1997, the Agricultural Khas Land and Settlement Policy was also enacted to distribute *khas* land to the landless on 99-year leases (Masum, 2017). These policies continue to impact those who live in the charlands, who also struggle with annual flooding during the monsoon season, weak health infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities. Consequently, many char dwellers who overwhelmingly depend on fishing (and farming), are heavily reliant on government and NGO-provided social safety allowances. It is within this backdrop that the Ashrayan project continued to expand, bolstered by the GoB's 2001 National Land Use Policy, which offers guidelines for improved land-use and zoning regulations (LANDac, n.d). While initially the GoB had plans to develop Bhasanchar for tourism (Kawser, 2020), in early 2018, as part of the Ashrayan initiative, it formed a 10-member committee to assess if the island was suitable for Rohingya relocation.

#### *Enter Bhasanchar*

Bhasanchar ('floating island') previously known as Char Piya and Thengar Char, is an island in the Bay of Bengal, approximately 30 nautical miles from mainland Chittagong.<sup>5</sup> With an elevation of only 56 feet above sea-level, it is vulnerable to cyclones and submergence especially during high tide – a reality for coastal Bangladesh. Contrary to assumptions about Bhasanchar as 'an empty space,' or a deviation developed *only* for Rohingya management (thereby reflecting the growing practice of refugee offshoring), the island, similar to other charlands, has had a small local population living on its shores since its emergence.<sup>6</sup> It was also the most recent addition to the GoB's Ashrayan Initiative, following Ashrayan 1, phase I (1997-2002); Ashrayan 1, phase II (2002–2010); Ashrayan 2: 2010–2022, to accommodate the country's landless populations, climate migrants, and more recently, the third-gender, Dalits, and Harijan communities. In 2015, under its Ashrayan 3 Initiative, the GoB proposed relocating the Rohingya who had remained in Bangladesh following previous flows to Bhasanchar. Following the 2017 exodus, the GoB revisited the plan to include the newest arrivals in the relocation plan. In 2020, the Foreign Minister stated:

The area where the Rohingya are concentrated is only 6800 acres. Intensive rainfall in this an area causes landslides – and there is always the possibility of Rohingya dying in such an event. *Then the international community will blame us.* Bhasanchar in contrast is a beautiful place. The Rohingya can be involved in farming and raising cattle ... that is why we are trying our best to relocate them there (Maksud, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>The island has been referred to as Bhasan, Bashan or Bhasanchar in various documents. Bhasanchar was not the GoB's only relocation option; there were six feasible sites in the Ukhiya subdistrict that could accommodate 263,000 people. These sites are located between the mega camp and the coast. Since these sites fall within the restraint area designated by the government to limit the free movement of the refugees, they were not considered for the final relocation plans.

<sup>6</sup>The exact number of the local population on Bhasanchar was not possible to attain.



With a budget of more than \$350 million, the GoB tasked the Bangladesh Navy with developing Bhasanchar. Ashrayan-3 comprises of semi-permanent shelters with the possibility of absorbing up to 400,000 people in the future (YouTube, 2019). Many low-lying areas were raised with an additional flood defense embankment to protect the island from environmental disasters (Ibid). In 2020, the government instructed all district administrations to send people from low-income groups in Bangladesh to Bhasanchar to make use of the island's facilities, as part of its 'return to home' initiative for those unable to maintain their livelihood in urban areas (Majumder, 2020). 'The use of islands to provide housing for our poor, landless communities through the Ashrayan Initiative has been an incredibly successful development project by the government,' I was reminded by an official during an interview in Dhaka. 'The use of the char is not an outlier but is merely stage three of the Ashrayan Initiative – except that it now *also* includes the Rohingya' (interview 2022).<sup>7</sup> As of March 2025, Bhasanchar has a total population of approximately 36,920, mainly comprising of Rohingya from the 2017 exodus; although some Rohingya from the 1990s flow have also been relocated there (UNHCR, 2025).<sup>8</sup> In addition, there are approximately 2,000 people, inclusive of the host community, government employees, and NGO professionals currently residing in Bhasanchar.

Contextualizing Bhasanchar within Bangladesh's political economy of traditional land use and its history of social safety schemes is critical in understanding why, for the Bangladesh Navy, the GoB and even for those interviewed outside of the government, island relocation was framed as a source of national pride. With the level of investment in the island's infrastructure following intense negotiations with the UN, the expectation among several actors including the government had been that the project would be seen as a pioneering response to the challenges in the Kutapalong-Balukhali campsite. At the same time, Bhasanchar offered a prospect for both international financial support and recognition for the innovative use of a prime and invaluable resource – land – for a stateless population, at a time when a political solution for the Rohingya remained dim, and anti-refugee practices particularly in the Global North was gaining traction. A P-4 Humanitarian Relief Coordination officer noted, 'one cannot overlook the fact that working in Bhasanchar poses different set of challenges for international aid workers. Yet ... there is far more investment in Bhasanchar for the Rohingya than for Bangladeshis living on many of our islands ... the focus should be on supporting our efforts ... and acknowledging we did not reject our responsibility' (interview, 2022).

## 7 A Triumph of Internal Offshoring and Normative Modelling? Winners and Losers of the Bhasanchar Equation

Following the Bhasanchar plan announcement, international aid agencies ignored an initial government invitation for a guided tour of the island. The U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office released a statement noting, 'we have been clear with the UN and others that without independent, full and detailed assessments to

<sup>7</sup>For instance, Bangladesh had been working with the Netherlands and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to develop five chars located in the same district as Bhasanchar, focusing on building climate-resilient infrastructure, land settlement and titling, and means for livelihood.

<sup>8</sup>In some cases, some Rohingya who have recently been rescued in the Bay of Bengal have also been taken to Bhasanchar, but the actual numbers of sea-to-island movement is unclear. The dynamics of sea operations and the decision to move shipwreck survivors to the island are outside of the scope of this study.

make sure any refugees living there will be safe, this is not an option for any of our funding' (Ahasan, 2020). Such criticisms together with international denunciation that the first two attempts at relocation were not strictly voluntary, met with fierce rebuttal from the GoB, with authorities stressing relocation was an 'internal' affair and for not 'appreciating the good intention of Bangladesh' (Majumdar, 2020). Several interviewees also underscored how Bangladesh had continued to host – *not* deport – the Rohingya and was establishing a livable space for the Rohingya with economic and educational opportunities. In a 2020 Prothom Alo op-ed Maqsud argued ... 'If the international community would work toward [the safe and sustainable return of the Rohingya] instead of stressing about Bhasanchar, the Rohingya community and Bangladesh would be extremely grateful.'

Initially, the GoB shouldered the full financial costs of developing Bhasanchar and relied on approximately 22 local NGOs to resettle the Rohingya on the island. The 2020 MoU was a turning point for international acceptance of the island relocation plan. The GoB also allowed international and national media access and initiated a slew of diplomatic visits to the island mainly from western donor countries, South Korea, Japan, UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner, and the UNHCR Director for Asia and the Pacific. These efforts produced some positive results. For instance, while acknowledging he did not personally visit the island, the UNGA President Bozkir stated, 'I really applaud the work done there ... I think this will be *another example to the world* [emphasis added] on how to deal with refugee issues' (United News of Bangladesh, 2021). In a signal of support, the government of Japan became the first donor to commit to Bhasanchar's maintenance, contributing a \$2 million grant to UNHCR-Bangladesh and the WFP. The UNHCR Representative in Bangladesh noted, 'This first ever funding by a donor to the UN operations on Bhasanchar signals solidarity with the Government and people of Bangladesh' (Business Standard, 2024).

Nevertheless, international financial contributions to Bhasanchar programming have been slow, with donors still expressing hesitation with the project. In 2021, the Foreign Minister stated that the GoB would be requesting 10% of the funding for the Rohingya insisting

it should not be the headache of the humanitarian agencies ... whether Rohingyas are living in Kutupalong, Cox's Bazar, Barisal or in Bhasanchar. Their headache should be providing services to Rohingyas. They're obligated to give them services wherever they stay' (New Age, 2021).

An international humanitarian worker observed the 'dilemma' presented to the international community in facing demands for more assistance, noting: '... relocated Rohingyas are unlikely to get sufficient support despite growing demands on the island over time; yet external funding can lend legitimacy to the island project' (Interview, 2022). Even in 2022, the UN-led appeal for the Rohingya response, which included \$100 million in funding for Bhasanchar, did not receive significant support; the UK committed to funding the initiative for the first time, but the US – the largest donor to the Rohingya response – stated it 'does not currently support Bhasanchar' (Loy, 2022). This challenge to secure steady funding remains. In 2023, the government submitted two proposals to representatives from 17 countries and agencies, requesting assistance for more infrastructural assistance and programming. Bangladesh's 2024 Joint Response Plan (JRP) – the primary framework outlining humanitarian needs for the Rohingya – aimed at raising \$852.4 million, of which only 65% was funded, with over half of that

funding provided by the United States (OCHA, 2024). However, the allocated budget of \$68.4 million for Bhasanchar alone received only 35% of the funding required (UNHCR, 2024). The 2025 JRP has an ambitious target of \$934.5 million for the Rohingya and local hosts on the mainland and on Bhasanchar, but dramatic cuts to US funding under the Trump administration have deepened concerns about the worsening of food insecurity conditions and subsequent health challenges on the mainland and the island.

While an in-depth discussion about the changing conditions on Bhasanchar is outside of the scope of the paper, three issues need to be raised which underscore the importance of the island relocation as a normative and economic calculation. First, only a small percentage of over a million Rohingya were slated to be relocated to Bhasanchar, emphasizing that this experiment would not actually address the serious issues of camp congestion as was presented by the GoB. Second, the vulnerability of Rohingya housing to monsoons and landslides, realities faced by many Bangladeshis in areas of significant environmental precarity, have been worsened by restrictions on what can be built and with what materials in the camps – a fact that was never publicly acknowledged by the government. It also highlights the fact that humanitarian calculations *alone* did not guide the government decisions for the relocation plan. Third, it is important to consider Rohingyas' experiences with the actual relocation process and its aftermath. While there were initial claims of coercion, which the GoB disputed, relocation has been in accordance with the MoU. Several local researchers and NGO workers interviewed have also insisted that the conditions on the island allow for increased mobility, better security, and more opportunities for the Rohingya, although there was acknowledgement that more investment is needed for expanding economic and social infrastructure on the island. There is a growing body of scholarship and reports that highlight the current stability of the island, the opportunities it offers, and Rohingya satisfaction with the relocation (Gazi et. al, 2022; Islam, et. al 2021; Prothom Alo, 2022; ReliefWeb, 2023). Critics have however argued that extensive PR campaigns about Bhasanchar were instrumental in trying to create a 'positive' image for both international and domestic consumption. Reports have also noted the scarcity of verified independent information about the island, and how conversations with the refugees have been carefully curated within the framework of international diplomatic visits (Rahman, 2023; Daily Star, 2021; Devi, 2022). The reality that since 2021 several Rohingya have fled Bhasanchar in search of a future in southeast Asia reveal ongoing challenges on the island and unresolved questions of a future for the Rohingya on Bhasanchar.

## 8 Conclusion

This research set out to explain why states choose certain policies in response to hosting refugees. In particular, it sought to understand the reasons as to why 100,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh were slated to be moved to Bhasanchar – a remote island off the coast of Bangladesh – through the prism of the refugee rentier state model. The study found that the refugee rentierism model was constrained by its roots in realist theory and that further dimensions need to be included to fully understand the GoB's policy decisions. The single case study approach allowed for the identification of non-economic factors not considered significant by existing refugee rentierism models, but which played an important role in the state's policy choice. The analysis revealed not only the value of land in a post-colonial context such as Bangladesh, but also how the use of such a resource to accommodate refugees was seen normatively by the GoB – as a normative *good*, a far cry from the type of incarceration that defines refugee experience on the

Greek islands such as Moria, or Australia's offshoring practices in Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Such a framing dovetails with an image that the previous GoB had carefully curated and focused on refining – a country that understood its moral obligation based on its own violent history of displacement. For decades, despite political turmoil and human rights violations at the home front, the construction of Bangladesh's identity has been that of a state that upholds principles of international solidarity, in line with its history of leadership in achieving several millennium development goals, through being the largest troop contributor in UN peacekeeping operations, and through being an active participant in international institutions of governance. In Bangladesh's calculation, internal offshoring would serve as a winning strategy at a time when the Rohingya issue has largely faded from the headlines, and when doors for refugees are broadly closed in an increasingly anti-refugee era. This normative model was envisioned to both generate financial support for maintaining the Bhasanchar refugee camp but also bring a level of recognition to Bangladesh for its 'innovative' and context-specific project of land allocation. The outcome – criticism, rejection, lukewarm acceptance, and fleeting 'praise' by UNGA President Bozkhir without significant international financial commitment – underscores that Bangladesh has not been able to instrumentalize it for either concrete financial dividends or any notable recognition.

This research does not negate the concerns about refugee vulnerability on a remote island, nor does it answer questions about the future of Bhasanchar as a result of significant aid shortfall, and the 2024 collapse of the former GoB.<sup>9</sup> Narratives about the island remain contested, with the former GoB and several actors in civil society promoting it as an 'ideal place,' while international and domestic critics raise questions about both the viability of the plan and the vulnerability of the Rohingya. Nevertheless, this research draws attention to how Bangladesh framed the issue of refugee acceptance and accommodation based on its own identity, and why island relocation was seen as a feasible response in a context where land concerns remain a site of intense contestation. The case of Bangladesh also illustrates how local context gets misinterpreted when the normative context and the identity dimension are omitted from the analysis; the international community, broadly speaking, understood the choice of an island as comparable to other efforts of offshoring in the Global North that has in actuality little salience for a postcolonial developing context. Neither did it contend with the fact that from the perspective of the GoB they were providing the Rohingya 'prime real estate' in a context where land

<sup>9</sup> On 5 August 2024, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country following a mass uprising against a quota system for public sector jobs, that disproportionately favored descendants of those who fought for Bangladesh in its 1971 War of Independence. The protests intensified following the use of state-sanctioned violence, resulting in the collapse of the government. Bangladesh's parliament was dissolved in August 2024 when the interim government was appointed. Elections are scheduled to be held in February 2026. For more information about the July Uprising, see Sajjad, T. (2024). Bangladesh's protests explained: What led to PM's ouster and the challenges that lie ahead, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/bangladeshs-protests-explained-what-led-to-pms-ouster-and-the-challenges-that-lie-ahead-236190>; Al-Jazeera International. (2024). How Bangladesh's 'Gen Z' protests brought down PM Sheikh Hasina.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2024/8/7/how-bangladeshs-gen-z-protests-brought-down-pm-sheikh-hasina>.

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politics and land crisis continue to shape social, political and economic relations and tensions in the world's largest riverine delta.

At a broader level, the research draws attention to how migration diplomacy across power differentials may be an unsuccessful venture for countries that are geostrategically 'unimportant' and host refugees of 'less political value' to the west, and who do not engage in blackmailing or backscratching to leverage power in the international system. Beyond the issue of miscalculation and financial 'loss,' however, the question that may be raised is the extent to which the quest for a 'model' for refugee containment in places like Uganda and Bangladesh continue to offer the Global North opportunities to absolve itself of equitable responsibility in protracted refugee crises.

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## Annex I: Key Agreements on Rohingya Repatriation<sup>10</sup>

Year	Bilateral Agreement	Parties
July, 1978	Bilateral Agreement on Repatriation of Refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· People's Republic of Bangladesh</li> <li>· Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup>There were other agreements that were reached between the UNHCR and GoB to enable the UN agency to play a role in verifying the voluntary nature of repatriation throughout these periods.



April, 1992	Joint Understanding on Repatriation of Refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· People's Republic of Bangladesh</li> <li>· State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) of Burma</li> </ul>
November 2017	Arrangement on the Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State [Based on 1992/93 Agreement]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· People's Republic of Bangladesh</li> <li>· Republic of the Union of Myanmar</li> </ul>
April 2018	MOU Relating to Voluntary Return of Rohingya Refugees;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Government of Bangladesh</li> <li>· UNHCR</li> </ul>
May 2018	Tripartite MOU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· UNHCR</li> <li>· UNDP</li> <li>· Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar</li> </ul>
March 2023 (ongoing)	2023 Pilot Repatriation Plan (mediated by China))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Government of Bangladesh</li> <li>· Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar</li> </ul>

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