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Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by

Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile, Nicola Mocci

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BANGLADESH 2017: THE ROHINGYA'S CARNAGE

Marzia Casolari

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In 2017 Bangladesh's political landscape was dominated by the Rohingya crisis, deflagrated at the end of August in Myanmar, causing 600,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh.

This article provides a short historical background of the Rohingya issue to prove that these people, although of Bengali descent, have been living in Myanmar for centuries. The reasons why, after having been fully integrated in Burma's pre-colonial society, they are at present being dismissed as «strangers» or «Bengalis» by the Myanmar authorities are analysed.

In spite of the economic impact of the Rohingya crisis on a poor country like Bangladesh, in 2017 its economy continued to flourish, the GDP rate of growth being about 7%. This positive result was largely due to the political stability ensured by the administration, although not always with orthodox systems.

Also both Chinese and Indian direct investments contributed to Bangladesh's economic growth. However, in the year under review, Bangladesh appeared to gradually move closer to China, attracted by the possibility of being included in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

1. Introduction

The year under review was dominated by the Rohingya crisis that broke out in September. Rohingya refugees have been fleeing to Bangladesh in huge numbers at least since 2015. The Rohingyas' history has always been one of conflict with and discrimination by the Buddhist majority of Myanmar. However, in the last few years the situation has worsened remarkably.

In September 2017, more than 600,000 Rohingya Muslims fled Myanmar to Bangladesh, following the military's reprisal after an attack by the armed group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Myanmar's police, on 25 August. The disproportionate use of force by Myanmar's security forces and the retaliation of the common people provoked one of the most monumental humanitarian disasters of present times.

In spite of the Rohingya exodus, in Bangladesh the relative political calm, due mainly to the government's crackdown on political opponents and radical Muslim groups, had a positive effect on the economy. In 2017 Bangladesh GDP rose to approximately 7%.

As far as its foreign policy is concerned, Bangladesh strengthened its ties with China and started to gradually join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), confirming the steps taken in 2014 for a stronger cooperation with China.¹ Bangladesh tried to keep a balance between India and China and maintain good relations with the two powers in order to obtain economic advantages from both.

2. *The Rohingya issue and Bangladesh: a brief history*

The history of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority is deeply connected with ancient Bengal (and modern Bangladesh). The term Rohingya in Bengali means «people from Arakan». Most likely the word derives from *Rohang*, the Bengali name of the Arakan coastal region, now part of the Rakhine state, in Myanmar.²

Muslims spread from the Middle East all over the Indian Ocean, mainly as traders, and settled in the port towns of South Asia since the 8th century.³ People continuously poured into Arakan from Bengal, mainly from the Chittagong area, and, before the arrival of the British, Arakan was a frontier area between the Bengali and Burmese territories, without clearly delineated borders.⁴

Bengali Muslims have had a well-established presence in Burma since the 12th century and in the 15th century they were subjects of the independent *Mrauk-U* Buddhist kingdom (1430-1785), in Arakan.⁵ The *Mrauk-U* ruler employed Muslim Bengalis as soldiers in their army and as officials at their court. Also, the Arakan kings hired a conspicuous number of workers from Bengal, especially as farmers, and allowed them settle in the kingdom, so that by the 17th century several villages were inhabited only by Bengali Muslims.⁶ In the 18th century, as a consequence of the disputes between the Burman kings and the Arakan rulers, many Muslims from this region fled to the Cox's Bazar area, settled there and were integrated. There was therefore a certain degree of osmosis between Bengal and the Arakan region, and, until the colonial period Bengali Muslims were well integrated into the Burmese society at large.⁷

1. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014: Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Maior* 2014, pp. 234-236.

2. '«The Frictions in the Rakhine State Are Less About Islamophobia Than Rohingya-Phobia»', *The Wire*, 30 September 2017.

3. *Ibid.*; 'Burma/Bangladesh: Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh – Historical Background', *Human Rights Watch website*; 'The true origins of Myanmar's Rohingya', *Asia Times*, 4 December 2017.

4. '«The Frictions in the Rakhine State»'; 'The true origins'.

5. 'Burma/Bangladesh'.

6. 'History Behind Arakan State Conflict', *The Irrawaddy*, 9 July 2012.

7. '«The Frictions in the Rakhine States»'.

During the colonial period, when Burma was administered as a province of British India, the migration of labourers from other South Asian countries, and especially from Bengal, was encouraged by the colonial authorities. Immigration of Bengali Muslim workers was considered as an internal movement within the Anglo-Indian Empire.

At present, the Myanmar government asserts that the migration which took place during the colonial period was illegal and, on this basis, it refuses citizenship to the majority of the Rohingyas.⁸

The term Rohingya to define the Bengali-speaking Muslims of the Arakan region (now Rakhine State) is relatively recent. In British administrative records this term was never used. Arakan Muslims were classified according to the religion (Muslims), language (Bengali) and place of origin (mainly Chittagong). In general, people from India were classified as «foreigners», without any reference to the length of their stay in Burma.⁹ This set a precedent for the Burmese authorities that, after independence, continued to define the Arakan Muslims as foreigners, Bengalis (occasionally «Pakistanis» before the 1971 split-up) and, ultimately, illegal migrants, the term Rohingya being traceable in printed documents only after 1963. At the same time, the Arakan Muslims' ethnic consciousness increased between the 1920s and independence.¹⁰

As reward for their military support to the British against the Japanese invasion of Burma, Arakan Muslims expected, and later on claimed, the creation of a frontier area with special status, one that should gravitate towards East Pakistan.¹¹ An attempt to annex the Arakan territory to East Pakistan failed, due to the latter's refusal.¹²

3. *A complicated situation across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border*

The subsequent heavy-handed, longstanding discriminatory policy of the Myanmar government hardened after the 1962 *coup d'état*, causing several waves of mass migrations of Rohingyas. Facing patent infringement of basic rights, constant threat of deportation, detention, forced labour, torture and sexual exploitation, the Rohingya continued to flee to Bangladesh. While Myanmar's government recognised other minorities, including other Muslim groups, this has never been the case with the Rohingyas. More than

8. *Ibid.*; 'Burma/Bangladesh'.

9. *Ibid.*; «The Frictions in the Rakhine State».

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*; 'Burma/Bangladesh'; 'Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State', *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report n. 283, 15 December 2016, p. 3.

12. *Ibid.*; 'Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency'.

200,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh in May 1978 alone,¹³ reporting deportation, brutality, rape and murder by Myanmar's army. The Red Cross and the Bangladeshi government supplied emergency relief to the displaced and, with the assistance of the United Nations, 13 refugee camps were established along the border. For Bangladesh the presence of this huge number of refugees was a burden and the government refused to settle them permanently within its borders. After negotiations with the Ne Win government and the use of relief funds, the United Nations obtained the Rohingyas' repatriation. In order to discourage the permanence of Rohingya refugees on its territory, the Bangladeshi government allowed only poor reception and living conditions in the camps.¹⁴

Endemic violence and the restrictions the Rohingyas were facing favoured their radicalisation, the consequent rise of a secessionist movement and the growth of an armed insurgency. In 1982 the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) was established, which in the 1980s and 1990s had bases in remote areas of Bangladesh, near Myanmar's border.¹⁵

Another inflow of about 250,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh took place between 1991 and 1992. The refugees were placed in 19 camps in the Cox's Bazar area. After further wearying negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar and with the assistance of the UNHCR a controversial repatriation procedure was enforced. Amidst suspicions of forced repatriation by the Bangladeshi authorities and in spite of the obstructive attitude of the Myanmar's government, finally 230,000 people were repatriated.¹⁶

Trapped between two harsh governments and unable to settle in either country, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh developed a sense of frustration and despair that resulted into the 1997 riots, with clashes between the Rohingya refugees, the police and local villagers. From 1997 the refugee camps in Bangladesh became permanent, as the inflow from Myanmar was continuous. In 1999 the UNHCR terminated the Rohingya relief programme, due to reduced funds from the international donors who perceived the programme as a failure.¹⁷

13. 'Burma/Bangladesh'. The situation of the Rohingyas in Myanmar is similar to that of the Tamils in Sri Lanka: both governments enforced highly discriminatory laws, respectively the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Burma Citizenship Law of 1982. These laws aimed at denying the two minorities citizenship. In both cases, these laws had a tremendous impact and decisively contributed in fostering the insurgency against the governments and radicalising the secessionist militancy. The most radical fringes prevailed in both countries. Secessionist movements of either Sri Lanka or Myanmar tightened the connections with their neighbouring countries: India in the case of the Tamil insurgents; Bangladesh in the case of the Rohingyas.

14. *Ibid.*

15. It split up in 1986 to give birth to the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF). See 'Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency', p. 4.

16. 'Burma/Bangladesh'.

17. *Ibid.*

By the end of the 1990s the RSO ceased to be an armed organisation, but maintained sanctuaries in Bangladesh, where it trained fighters and occasionally organised attacks on the security forces in Myanmar.¹⁸ In Bangladesh it was connected to the militant group *Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh*.¹⁹

The incapacity and the unwillingness to find a reasonable solution to the Rohingya problem by both Bangladesh's and Myanmar's governments, the lack of interest by the international community, the longstanding infringement of the Rohingyas' rights by Myanmar's authorities, the violence perpetrated by the army and by the Buddhist ultranationalist groups, the hatred of common people, left very little choice to Myanmar's Rohingya: fleeing abroad, especially to Bangladesh (or to other South-East Asian Muslim countries), or resorting to violence. In the last years the two options have been interconnected and both are linked to the anti-Rohingya policy carried out by the Myanmar government. The process can be schematised as follows: 1. Myanmar security forces and Buddhist nationalists harass the Rohingyas; 2. Rohingyas react with violence; 3. the police retaliate with disproportionate force, in particular against civilians; 4. Rohingya militants react with armed attacks, 5. common people flee to neighbouring countries.

In May 2015 the tension escalated when a boat full of Myanmar (mostly Rohingya) and Bangladeshi migrants sank in the Andaman Sea after a Thai police crackdown on smugglers. The Thai authorities closed down the smuggling routes to Malaysia, obstructing the flow from Myanmar. The anger of the Rohingya rebels focused on the Border Guard Police (BGP). On 9 October 2016 hundreds of Muslims attacked three police posts close to the border with Bangladesh. Violence escalated in a series of subsequent attacks followed by the retaliation of the army and the Buddhist nationalists.²⁰

This spiral of violence and the discrimination faced by the Rohingyas in Myanmar nurtured the radicalisation of the Rohingya insurgency. In 2013 the Harakah al-Yaqin («Faith movement», HaY), better known as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was founded in Saudi Arabia.²¹ Its senior leaders have connections in Pakistan, Bangladesh and probably India, and some of its members took part in the Afghanistan war and are connected to international jihadist organisations. The group was financially supported by the Rohingya diaspora in the neighbouring countries, especially in Bangladesh, where its militants were trained. Since 2016 hundreds of young Rohingya living in Bangladesh have joined the HaY in Myanmar taking part in the fight.²²

18. 'Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency', p. 4.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

21. Thomas M. Sanderson & Maxwell B. Marcusen, 'Myanmar and its Rohingya Muslim Insurgency', Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 7 September 2017.

22. 'Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency', pp. 9-19.

4. August 2017: A humanitarian disaster

Early in the morning of 25 August 2017 HaY militants carried out a coordinated attack on 30 police posts in the Rakhine State and killed 10 security officers, a soldier and an immigration official.²³

The disproportionate retaliation of Myanmar's military, backed by the Buddhist majority, caused the largest Rohingya mass migration to Bangladesh in the history of South Asia and one of the worst refugee crises in recent history. By the end of 2017 more than 650,000 had fled to Bangladesh, some escaped to other South-East Asian countries, especially Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia.²⁴ The newcomers, added to those refugees who were already living in Bangladesh, brought the number of Rohingya to approximately 1 million. Almost the entire Rohingya population of Myanmar, estimated at 1.1 million, took shelter in Bangladesh.²⁵

When the first wave of refugees poured into Bangladesh, witnesses reported unbelievable atrocities by Myanmar's soldiers, who allegedly went to such extremes as burning children to death and raping prepubescent girls.²⁶ These stories and the «youtube» videos that circulated worldwide shocked the world and Myanmar was unanimously condemned: voicing the feelings of the international community, earlier in 2017 the UN stated that the anti-Rohingya policy of Myanmar's government «indicate[d] the very likely commission of crimes against humanity»,²⁷ while the leaders of Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia joined Bangladesh in denouncing the actions of Myanmar's government.²⁸

International aid agencies described the conditions in Bangladesh's refugee camps as «appalling»,²⁹ with lack of food, clean water and shelter and most children traumatised. Hundreds of thousands of children were at risk of starvation or were vulnerable to disease. The emergency coordinator of *Médecins Sans Frontières* in Bangladesh defined the humanitarian situation in Bangladesh a «complex crisis», where people, especially children, had to be treated not just against the risk of epidemic disease, but also for the trauma they had suffered.³⁰

23. Thomas M. Sanderson & Maxwell B. Marcusen, 'Myanmar'.

24. *Ibid.*

25. 'Myanmar's Crisis, Bangladesh's Burden: Among the Rohingya Refugees Waiting for a Miracle', *Time*, 23 November 2017.

26. *Ibid.*

27. UN News Centre, *UN report details 'devastating cruelty' against Rohingya population in Myanmar's Rakhine province*, 3 February 2017 (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56103#.WoHURXxG3Z6>).

28. Thomas M. Sanderson & Maxwell B. Marcusen, 'Myanmar'.

29. 'Myanmar Rohingya crisis: Bangladesh plea over «untenable» exodus', *BBC News*, 23 October 2017.

30. 'Myanmar's Crisis, Bangladesh's Burden'.

While waiting for a long-term solution to the crisis, the Bangladeshi government allocated 3,000 acres of land for refugee housing; at the same time the UN recommended several smaller sites that could be better managed than camps and be isolated in case of epidemics.³¹

5. *The Rohingya crisis and Bangladesh: internal and international reactions*

In the year under review, the severe humanitarian emergency deeply shook Bangladesh's people and politics. It was feared that the refugee crisis could raise security concerns, worsen the government's slide into authoritarianism and strengthen the most radical groups of political Islam. In fact, some of them threatened to wage a *jihād* on Myanmar, if it failed to stop harassment of the Rohingya Muslims.³²

The humanitarian crisis provoked a rift within the Awami League. The Finance minister, Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, declared that Myanmar had purposely sent the Rohingya to Bangladesh to undermine the country's economy, and compared the attitude of the Myanmar's government to a declaration of war.³³

According to some analysts, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was somehow obliged to welcome the Rohingya refugees by the most radical fringes of the Bangladeshi political scene and by its main opponent, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which criticised Hasina for not having defined as genocide the ethnic cleansing taking in Myanmar.³⁴

In fact, the Prime Minister was personally praised for her humane response by the majority of Bangladesh's population. She was celebrated as «the mother of humanity», especially in Cox's Bazar camps, where her picture was displayed at every corner.³⁵ The Prime Minister was praised even by the representatives of the religious minorities, above all by Dhaka's Roman Catholic Church Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario,³⁶ and obtained the appreciation and solidarity of the international community.³⁷

From the international point of view, there was an uproar of condemnation of Myanmar's abuses, with the UN at the forefront. On 11 September, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al

31. *Ibid.*

32. 'How the Rohingya Crisis is Changing Bangladesh', *The New York Times*, 6 October 2017.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. 'Myanmar's Crisis, Bangladesh's Burden'.

36. 'How the Rohingya Crisis is Changing Bangladesh'; 'Bangladesh cardinal praises government response to Rohingya crisis, calls Myanmar to take them back', *Crux*, 20 September 2017.

37. 'Bangla-Myanmar talks should lead to return of Rohingya: US', *Times of India*, 12 November 2017.

Hussein, delivering the opening statement at the 36th session of the Human Rights Council, defined the violence perpetrated by Myanmar's army «a textbook example of ethnic cleansing».³⁸

Sheikh Hasina participated in the 72nd UN General Assembly in New York on 21 September and launched a five-point proposal to resolve the crisis. In brief, the prime minister suggested that:

1. Myanmar should stop ethnic cleansing immediately, unconditionally and forever;
2. the UN Secretary General should send immediately a fact-finding mission to Myanmar;
3. all civilians should be protected in Myanmar, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion and, for this purpose, safe zones should be created in the country;
4. a sustainable and dignified return of all displaced Rohingyas should be ensured;
5. the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Commission report should be implemented immediately.³⁹

The Rohingya crisis was at the center of the UN's business. At the UN Security Council open debate of 28 September, Secretary-General António Guterres defined the refugees' situation as a «humanitarian and human rights nightmare».⁴⁰ After urging Myanmar to stop the violence and the indiscriminate use of force against unarmed civilians, among other remarks, recommendations and demands directed to Myanmar's authorities, the Secretary General asked Myanmar's and Bangladesh's governments to ensure a voluntary «dignified and sustainable return of the refugees to their areas

38. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Darker and more dangerous: High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on human rights issues in 40 countries*, Human Rights Council 36th session – Opening Statement by Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein, 11 September 2017, (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22041>)

39. 'Hasina floats five-point peace plan', *The Hindu*, 22 September 2017. The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, known also as Kofi Annan Commission, was established in September 2016 at the request of the State Counsellor of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi. It is a national entity formed by the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Office of the State Counsellor. After one year of consultations, the Commission released its final report on 23 September 2017, just two days before the breakdown. It contained articulated recommendations to restore peace and development in the Rakhine State, with practical instructions on procedures of citizenship verification and equal rights recognition. For general information on the Commission, see: 'Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future of the People of Rakhine. *Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State*, August 2017 (http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf).

40. United Nations Secretary-General, *Secretary General's remarks at open debate of the Security Council on Myanmar*, 28 September 2017, (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-09-28/secretary-generals-remarks-open-debate-security-council-myanmar>); 'How the Rohingya Crisis is Changing Bangladesh'.

of origin».⁴¹ Regarding the UN humanitarian response in Bangladesh, the Secretary General committed to continue it⁴² and expressed his personal appreciation to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, whom he had met 10 days earlier, for the care provided to the refugees. He praised also the countries that were supporting Bangladesh's humanitarian operations.⁴³

As a tangible sign of its commitment to resolve the Rohingya crisis, the UN sought US\$ 434 million to help the refugees in Bangladesh.⁴⁴

In November a US congressional delegation, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the foreign ministers of Germany, Sweden and Japan visited the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar to raise international awareness of the Rohingya refugees' issue and help Bangladesh to draw out a long lasting solution for the repatriation of the displaced people.⁴⁵

As she made clear in her speech at the European Parliament plenary session on 12 December,⁴⁶ Mogherini was shocked by the scenes she saw in Bangladesh's refugee camps, especially by the suffering of young children. She defined it as «a moral imperative» to intervene in Myanmar and Bangladesh. She announced that, thanks to her own mediation, a deal had been signed between the two countries, aimed at solving the refugee crisis. She noted that, although the situation was still «extremely difficult», the agreement «could be an entry point to address the crisis». She also announced that, «in the light of disproportionate use of force by the [Myanmar] army» the EU «also decided to suspend invitations to the Commander-in-Chief of

41. *Ibid.*, 'Secretary General's remarks'.

42. UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, IOM, WFP, WHO and other UN organisations have been – and still are – engaged in humanitarian relief operation in Bangladesh: 'UN Chief Guterres talks to PM Hasina over phone, discusses Rohingya crisis', *The Financial Express*, 22 October 2017.

43. 'Secretary General's remarks'. António Guterres met Sheikh Hasina at the High Level Meeting on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, held at the UN headquarters in New York on 18th September 2017 (<https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/purpose>). Sheikh Hasina and Guterres had another personal conversation, when the Secretary General had a phone conversation with the Prime Minister on 21 October. Hasina asked Guterres to exert more pressure on Myanmar's government to take back the refugees from Bangladesh and to support her five point proposal. The Prime Minister informed António Guterres of her intention to initiate talks with Myanmar: *Ibid.*

44. 'Myanmar Rohingya crisis'.

45. 'Bangladesh says it's in talks with Myanmar on Rohingya repatriation deal', *Reuters*, 19 November 2017; European Union. External Action, 'High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini's visit Bangladesh', (https://ec.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35828/high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherinis-visit-bangladesh_en).

46. 'Speech by Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on the situation of Rohingya people', (https://ec.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/37246/speech-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary-session-situation-rohingya-people_en).

the Myanmar armed forces and other senior military officers, and to review ongoing practical defence cooperation.» She emphasised the EU's intense diplomatic activity aimed at promoting a solution to the crisis, its support to Sheikh Hasina's resolution at the UN, and pointed out that the EU had stepped up humanitarian assistance, pledging «more money than the rest of the world combined». She ended her speech by putting the onus to solve the crisis on Myanmar.⁴⁷ As noticed by some observers, the keywords of Mogherini's speech were safe and dignified refugees' return, enforcement of equal rights, implementation of the Annan plan, support to Myanmar-Bangladesh bilateral agreements and, above all, addressing «the root causes of the crisis».⁴⁸

As claimed by Mogherini, the EU had been generous in its economic support of the Rohingya, allocating € 163 million to Bangladesh for humanitarian programmes in Cox's Bazar since 2007.⁴⁹ Additional support came from other quarters. Accordingly, the United Kingdom's International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt, after joining the chorus of those who praised Bangladesh's government for its management of the Rohingya crisis, announced the allocation of UK£ 12 million to support the Rohingya refugees for the next three years.⁵⁰ For his part, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Tarō Kōno offered US\$ 18.6 million to Bangladesh's government for refugee relief programmes.⁵¹

The Rohingya crisis impressed even Israel's government, whose Foreign Ministry started a confidential deal with the Bangladeshi authorities, «to offer a significant humanitarian aid package for the hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees from Rohingya minority».⁵² The offer, however, was not accepted, because Bangladesh is a Muslim country without diplomatic relations with Israel. The Bangladeshi government «politely» declined the offer, «due to the sensitivity involved and the political ramifications that could ensue».⁵³ The Israeli ministry explored alternative ways to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees.⁵⁴

Pope Francis praised Bangladesh's generosity during his visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh at the end of November 2017 (see below).⁵⁵

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar likely to sign MoU on Rohingya repatriation on Thursday', *Dhaka Tribune*, 22 November 2017.

49. European Commission, Press Release, *Rohingya Crisis: Commissioner Stylianides visits Bangladesh and reaffirms EU humanitarian support*, European Commission Press Release, 31 October 2017, (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4223_en.htm)

50. 'UK reaffirms support for Bangladesh, Rohingyas', *The Daily Star*, 27 November 2017.

51. 'Bangladesh says it's in talks'.

52. 'Bangladesh rejects Israeli aid offers for Rohingya refugees', *ynetnews.com*, 21 December 2017.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. 'Il Papa arrivato in Bangladesh. Appello per i Rohingyas', *Corriere della sera*, 30 November 2017.

6. Towards a solution of the refugee crisis

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, when inspecting the refugee camps in September, said that there were no words to express her condemnation of Myanmar and blamed its government for having allowed the army to attack innocent civilians, women and children. She said that the Bangladeshi government would support the Rohingya refugees, but asked Myanmar to take back 350,000 of its «nationals».⁵⁶

The pressure from the UN and the EU was effective, since in November, maybe as a result of the agreement announced by Mogherini, the Bangladeshi government joined talks with Myanmar in order to reach an agreement on the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.⁵⁷ Bilateral top level talks took place in Naypyidaw on 22 November, when the Bangladeshi representatives declared that they had almost reached an agreement. Aung San Suu Kyi, internationally criticised for having been silent on the Rohingya tragedy and for not condemning the crimes committed by the army, said Myanmar was ready to take back those Rohingya who could prove they were resident in Myanmar.⁵⁸ She hoped the talks would be successful and that peace and stability would return to the Rakhine as soon as possible.⁵⁹

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on 24 November 2017. Bangladesh required the involvement of international inspectors and the UN to supervise the operations.⁶⁰ Myanmar agreed that there should be no restriction to the number of Rohingya returning to their homes and pledged that they would not face legal consequences. Both countries agreed that the refugees would return only if they wished. The number of people allowed to return was not specified.⁶¹

The agreement took place after the Chinese government pushed for an immediate solution of the crisis. China's minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi visited both countries in the second half of November and met top figures, among whom were Sheikh Hasina and Aung San Suu Kyi. He proposed a three-stage solution, starting with a ceasefire, followed by talks. Wang wished that negotiations could resolve the causes of the crisis once and for all. China was ready to

56. 'Bangladesh calls on Myanmar to take back Rohingya refugees', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2017.

57. 'Bangladesh says it's in talks'; 'Bangladesh launches talks with Myanmar on Rohingya repatriation deal', *The Express Tribune*, 19 November 2017. In fact, Sheikh Hasina had expressed her intention to launch negotiations with Myanmar during her phone call with the UN Secretary General (see note 43).

58. 'Bangladesh says it's in talks'; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar begin talks on Rohingya crisis', *catchnews*, 22 November 2017; 'Rohingya repatriation: Bangladesh-Myanmar talks begin', *The Independent*, 22 November 2017.

59. 'Bangladesh, Myanmar likely to sign MoU'.

60. *Ibid.*

61. 'Bangladesh-Myanmar agreement on Rohingya refugees revealed', *CNN*, 28 November 2017.

support the economic development of the Rakhine State. Wang also urged the UN to facilitate bilateral cooperation to resolve the crisis peacefully.⁶²

On 19 December Bangladesh and Myanmar formed a Joint Working Group (JWG) with 15 members from each country, led by the respective foreign secretaries. The task of the JWG was to start the repatriation for the refugees, but also to integrate them in Myanmar's society, monitoring the reception procedures. The primary demand of the refugees was the recognition of the Rohingya identity, whereas Myanmar's authorities and people refused to use this term. The scheduled time to complete the return procedure was two months.⁶³ While Bangladesh wanted to repatriate all refugees, Myanmar did not intend to take back the Rohingya who expatriated themselves to Bangladesh before 2016.⁶⁴

During the JWG talks, 18,000 Rohingya were still entering Bangladesh, fleeing from Myanmar.⁶⁵

The agreement came a few days before the pope's visit to Myanmar and Bangladesh (26 November – 2 December). The leaders of Myanmar and Bangladesh were conscious that they should start a reconciliation process before his visit.

7. *The pope's visit to Bangladesh, after Myanmar*

Pope Francis decided to visit Myanmar and Bangladesh immediately after the 25 August attack, when the Rohingyas' suppression by the Myanmar's army had started. The day before announcing his tour to the two countries, he made a plea to stop the violence against the Rohingyas, defining them as «our brothers».⁶⁶

The pope's tour to Myanmar and Bangladesh took place from 26 November to 2 December. The pontiff arrived in Dhaka as scheduled on 30 November, after his journey to Myanmar, amidst impressive security measures and official ceremonies.⁶⁷

62. 'Bangladesh, Myanmar sign off Rohingya refugee repatriation deal', *CGTN*, 23 November 2017.

63. 'Bangladesh, Myanmar form joint working group for repatriation of Rohingya refugees', *Arab News*, 19 December 2017; 'Bangladesh-Myanmar joint working group formed', *The Independent*, 19 December 2017; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar in talks for «Joint Working Group»', *Banglanews24*, 19 December 2017; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar launch joint working group for repatriation of Rohingyas', *Xinhua*, 20 December 2017; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar Form Joint Working Group on Rohingya Repatriation; Experts Sceptical', *The Wire*, 21 December 2017.

64. *Ibid.*; 'Bangladesh, Myanmar form joint working group for repatriation'.

65. *Ibid.*

66. 'Papa Francesco va in Myanmar a difendere i Rohingya perseguitati perché musulmani', *Il Messaggero*, 28 August 2017.

67. 'Il Papa in Myanmar e Bangladesh. Ecco il programma', *Avvenire*, 27 November 2017.

While in Bangladesh, as in Myanmar, Francis met the nation's top authorities, the diplomatic corps, representatives of the civil society, the Church's representatives and the country's youths. He had a private meeting with the prime minister, exactly as he had done in Myanmar with the state counsellor.⁶⁸ In Bangladesh (but not in Myanmar), Francis urged recognition of the Rohingyas as one of Myanmar's 135 minorities⁶⁹ and met groups of Rohingyas. He praised Bangladesh for its generosity and urged the world to assist it in supporting the Rohingya refugees.⁷⁰

The themes of Pope Francis' speeches reflected the objectives of his journey. He warned the Bangladeshi people and political organisations against religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Remembering the 1 July 2016 attack in Dhaka, where 21 people were killed,⁷¹ the Pope asserted that hatred and violence cannot be fostered in the name of God.⁷²

The main objectives of the pope's visit were to publicly express his support to suffering Rohingyas, to personally bring his message to the political authorities involved in the crisis and to underline the Church's engagement in stopping violence and assisting the refugees. Another objective of the pontiff's journey to Bangladesh was to convey his feelings of closeness to Bangladesh's Christian community, which amounts to some 375,000 people, namely 0.24% of the total population, and which is threatened by radical Islam.⁷³

The overall purpose of the visit was to carry a message of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation among people and communities, and to promote interfaith cooperation.⁷⁴ In one of his speeches, the pontiff remembered Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina's father and the founder of Bangladesh, who:

envisioned a modern, pluralistic and inclusive society, in which every person and community could live in freedom, peace and security, with respect for the innate dignity and equal rights for

68. 'Pope concludes apostolic visit to Myanmar, Bangladesh', *Vatican Radio*, 2 December 2017. Unfortunately, official accounts of the pope's private meetings with the leaders of Myanmar and Bangladesh are not available. As far as his public speeches are concerned, they reflected spiritual and moral values rather than political issues.

69. 'Il Papa arrivato in Bangladesh. Appello per i Rohingya', *Corriere della sera*, 30 November 2017.

70. 'Papa Francesco va in Myanmar'; 'Pope greets Rohingya in Dhaka', *The Hindu*, 1 December 2017; 'Il Papa arrivato in Bangladesh'.

71. On the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2016: A Laboratory of Islamic Radicalism', *Asia Maior 2016*, pp. 277-285.

72. 'Il Papa arrivato in Bangladesh'.

73. *Ibid.*

74. 'Pope concludes'.

all. The future of this young democracy and the health of its political life are essentially linked to fidelity to that founding vision.⁷⁵

8. *Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, beyond the Rohingya crisis*

The Rohingya crisis did not significantly affect Bangladesh-Myanmar economic relations. Bangladesh's trade deficit with Myanmar has increased in favour of Bangladesh by almost 31 billion taka⁷⁶ in the last five years. In the fiscal year (FY) 2010-2011 the balance was completely in favour of Myanmar, with approximately 13 billion taka exports to Bangladesh and 330 million imports from Bangladesh. By FY 2015-2016 the gap was almost closed, with slightly more than 3 million taka exports to Bangladesh and 2 million taka imports.⁷⁷

Although cross-border trade has been suspended since August 2017, the 12% devaluation of Myanmar's kyat is expected to boost the bilateral trade. In October 2017, 16 taka traded at 1 kyat, against 20 taka for 1 kyat the previous month.⁷⁸

According to the Bangladesh-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce, the volume of trade between the two countries is higher than the official figures, due to a large informal trade.⁷⁹

Since Myanmar's recognition of Bangladesh in 1972, commercial relations between the two countries have been cordial. Through the course of the years, Myanmar and Bangladesh have signed several important trade agreements. Since 2007 important investments have been approved for the construction of road and railway connections between the two countries. The aim is to connect Bangladesh to the Trans-Asia Railway that, once materialised, should link Bangladesh and Myanmar to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Singapore. Myanmar is also a potential source of energy supply to Bangladesh.⁸⁰ Both countries are preparing to join the ambitious BRI, in spite of the longstanding cross-border tensions due to the Rohingya crisis.

75. Pope Francis in Dhaka: World must assist Bangladesh in tackling refugees crisis', *bdnews24.com*, 30 November 2017.

76. One taka trades for about 0,0097 euro and 0,012 dollars: 31 billion taka correspond to approximately € 280 million and US\$ 372 million.

77. 'Bangladesh-Myanmar deficit trade remains healthy amidst Rohingya crisis', *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 October 2017.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. 'Bangladesh-Myanmar relations'; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014: Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Maior* 2014.

9. 2017: *The «year of exchange and friendship» between Bangladesh and China*

The Sheikh Hasina administration has been strengthening China-Bangladesh ties since 2014. In that year, the Bangladeshi prime minister went to Beijing on an official visit and signed several important agreements regarding military sales, energy, trade and infrastructures.⁸¹

Bilateral relations were consolidated by Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka on 14 October 2016. Xi was welcomed among lavish celebrations, being the first Chinese president to visit Bangladesh since 1986. Hasina is determined to bring Bangladesh to «a new frontier of investment, industrialisation, ecological restoration and all-round prosperity».⁸² To fulfil such an ambitious goal, Bangladesh needs Chinese investment. During Xi's 2016 visit, the two leaders announced that 2017 would be «the year of exchange and friendship» between China and Bangladesh.⁸³

Since 2011 imports from China have grown at a rate of about 20% and exports at 40%. Although China has given duty-free access to several Bangladeshi goods, exports from Bangladesh to China did not exceed US\$ 1 billion, against US\$ 9 billion imports.⁸⁴ This makes Bangladesh an ideal commercial partner for China. Bilateral trade is expected to surpass US\$ 30 billion by 2021.⁸⁵ Both sides decided to upgrade the bilateral relations «to a strategic partnership of cooperation».⁸⁶ On the occasion of Xi's 2016 visit China and Bangladesh signed 27 agreements amounting to approximately US\$ 40 billion for investments in information technology, agriculture, industrial capacity, energy and power. China provided a US\$ 24 billion credit to Bangladesh.⁸⁷

In June 2016 the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) provided loans to Bangladesh for approximately US\$ 165 million to upgrade the power distribution system. China's Jiangsu Etern and Bangladesh's Power Grid Company signed an agreement to rebuild, improve and extend Bangladesh's electrical network. On 28 March 2017 AIIB extended a loan of US\$ 60 million to overcome Bangladesh's energy deficit and improve the production of natural gas from its own deposits.⁸⁸

81. *Ibid.*; M. Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014'.

82. 'Chinese President Xi Jinping in Bangladesh on «historic» state visit', *bdnews24.com*, 14 October 2016.

83. 'Chinese President Xi Jinping's Visit to Bangladesh Gives Boost to Bilateral Relations', *Forbes*, 14 October 2016.

84. 'Bangladesh-China relations & Forecasts', *Grid91*, 30 March 2017, p. 2.

85. *Ibid.*

86. 'Chinese president welcomes opportunities for China-Bangladesh ties', *Xinhua*, 15 October 2016.

87. 'Bangladesh-China relations & Forecasts', p. 2.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The construction of the Padma Bridge Rail Link, connecting Dhaka to Jessore, is a complex project worth US\$ 4.44 billion, including the construction of hundreds of bridges, 14 railway stations and 100 passenger coaches. The project was announced in 2014 and, in the year under review, was already in progress.⁸⁹

Although China is the largest exporter of readymade garments in the world, due to cheaper labour costs in Bangladesh and increasing salaries in China, the latter plans to outsource its production to Bangladesh, which remains the second largest exporter behind China and is expected to become a hub of the readymade garments industry in Asia.⁹⁰

Furthermore, China invested US\$ 83 million in the Disaster Emergency Operation Center and Information Platform.⁹¹ Disaster management is another strategic sector for Bangladesh's development.

Since 2004 Bangladesh has purchased 78% of its military equipment from China.⁹² In July 2017 a delegation of Chinese military officers headed by the minister of national defence visited Bangladesh. This is one of several Chinese top army officers' visits to Bangladesh, aimed at developing military co-operation, training programmes, joint exercises and defence procurements.⁹³

Chinese state-owned Zhenhua Oil initiated a preliminary deal to purchase Chevron's natural gas fields in Bangladesh and to invest in developing natural gas supply and transmission network. The results of the deal are not predictable, but China is eager to have access to Bangladesh's natural gas deposits. With its m³ 200 trillion of off-shore and m³ 13.77 trillion on-land natural gas reserves, Bangladesh has the seventh largest natural gas resources in the world.⁹⁴

Bangladesh is paving the way for its entrance into the BRI and China is interested in consolidating its presence in South Asia, since for China control of this region means dominating all of Asia. However, to be admitted into the BRI, Bangladesh is required to improve its financial system, reduce corruption and settle its political environment.

The advantages Bangladesh may have from its entrance into the BRI are:

- Transit fees
- Economic aid, investments and loans

89. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014', p. 235; 'Bangladesh-China relations & Forecasts', p. 4.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 3, 'Bangladesh to benefit from China's belt, road initiative: MCCI', *The Daily Star*, 12 July 2017.

91. 'Bangladesh-China relations & Forecasts', p. 4.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

93. 'China-Bangladesh defence relations reach «unprecedented heights»', *bdnews24.com*, 31 July 2017.

94. 'Bangladesh-China relations & Forecasts', p. 7.

- Infrastructural modernisation
- Interconnectivity
- Economic complementarity
- Regional energetic cooperation.

10. *Bangladesh-India relations in Modi's era*

Since Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi took power in their respective countries, bilateral relations have begun to flourish.

The first meeting between the two leaders, in 2015, produced unexpected results. On that occasion the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was welcomed as a historic event and the beginning of a new phase in Bangladesh-India relations, considering that border demarcations had been unresolved since 1947. India and Bangladesh exchanged 162 enclaves distributed along the borders.⁹⁵ Previous attempts to resolve the problem had collapsed, due to the complex bilateral relations between India and those nations which, like India, were ultimately spawned by the end of the British colonial empire in South Asia. In spite of India's remarkable support towards Bangladesh's independence, several long pending questions regarding border security, land, water and illegal migration remain unresolved.⁹⁶

In India, the ratification of any territorial settlement involving Pakistan (and Bangladesh as formerly part of Pakistan) requires a constitutional amendment to be passed in both chambers of parliament, unlike Bangladesh, where a similar impediment does not exist. Previous attempts to amend the Indian constitution in view of a territorial agreement, in 1958 and 1974, faced opposition in parliament, besides the opposition of the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal, and failed. Nowadays, good relations with its eastern neighbour are vital for India, given the critical relations with Pakistan, and China's increasing influence along the east and west wings of South Asia and in Afghanistan.⁹⁷

Modi was able to capitalise on the perspective of economic advantages arising from a climate of regional cooperation. The key of his success was the involvement of Assam and West Bengal in the border negotiations.⁹⁸ However, if the LBA was reached in 2015, little progress was made in resolving the other huge pending issue, the Teesta river question.⁹⁹

95. Taminam Chowdhury, 'A new dawn in Indo-Bangla relations?', *The Hindu Business Line*, 14 February 2017.

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. The Teesta River originates in Sikkim and flows through Bengal and Bangladesh. It is Bangladesh's fourth transboundary river, vital for fishing and irrigation. Its floodplain covers 2,750 sq km in Bangladesh's territory. The dispute has been

Sheikh Hasina visited India, for the first time in seven years, from 7 to 10 April 2017. She was given a warm reception by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

During an intensive series of meetings and negotiations the representatives of the two countries signed 22 agreements in the fields of regional cooperation, connectivity, energy and defence, and four MoU on bilateral judicial cooperation, peaceful use of outer space, coastal route and protocol route. India extended a US\$ 5 billion credit to Bangladesh, the largest line of credit opened on a single occasion. Also, India extended to Bangladesh a specific line of credit of US\$ 500 million to buy Indian arms.¹⁰⁰

Although not scheduled, the Teesta waters issue was discussed. On 7 April 2017 Bengal's chief minister Mamata Banerjee proposed to share the waters of other rivers, like the Torsa River, and suggested that the two countries set up a commission to ascertain the quantity of water flowing through the river and establish the respective division.¹⁰¹ Narendra Modi, in the presence of chief minister Mamata Banerjee, assured Sheikh Hasina that an «early resolution» to the Teesta river dispute would be reached.¹⁰²

11. Bangladesh's promising economy

Sheikh Hasina's administration displayed an extraordinary capacity to capitalise on relations with its two powerful neighbours. Bangladesh has been able to create favourable conditions to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). The impressive economic performance of 2017 is largely due to the good relations Bangladesh has been able to create with both India and China.

In spite of the strain that the refugee crisis has put on Bangladesh's economy, it has performed positively. In September 2017 the World Bank estimated Bangladesh's GDP growth at 7.24% in the FY 2017, defining as «healthy» the country's economy.¹⁰³ However, this should be checked against

going on since 1983. In 2011 an interim deal established that for 15 years India should have 42.5% of the Teesta's waters and Bangladesh 37.5. West Bengal's chief minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the deal, which remained unsigned. Bangladesh demanded 50% of the river waters from December to May every year. Farmers and fishermen of both Bangladesh and Bengal largely depend on the Teesta waters. See 'The Teesta river dispute explained in 10 points', *The Times of India*, 9 April 2017.

100. 'Delhi, Dhaka Exchange 22 deals', *The Hindu*, 8 April 2017; 'Hasina, Modi scale up bilateral ties', *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 April 2017; 'Hasina to visit India on April 7', *The Telegraph*, 15 March 2017.

101. 'The Teesta river dispute'.

102. 'Delhi, Dhaka Exchange'.

103. The World Bank, *Bangladesh Development Update. Towards more, better and inclusive jobs*, September 2017, p. 1.

the inflation rate that in December 2017 was 5.83%.¹⁰⁴ For 2018 a lower GDP rate, at 6.9%, is expected.¹⁰⁵ The main component of Bangladesh's GDP is the industrial sector, which contributed for?? 3.18% (against 3.24 in FY 2016) and is dominated by the manufacturing sector (in particular the garment industry).¹⁰⁶

Between 2003 and 2016, more than 1.15 million net jobs were created each year, with employment growing 2.4% annually and female employment increasing by 4.4% annually.¹⁰⁷

Poverty continued to decline steadily: people living below the poverty line decreased from 31.5% in 2010 to 24.3% in 2016-2017. However, the annual reduction of poverty has slowed since 2010 and, in the year under review, 13% of people still lived in extreme poverty. Several factors might have negatively affected the pace of poverty reduction. Remittances, one of the main components of the GDP, decreased by 16.6% in the FY 2016-2017.¹⁰⁸ The fall is attributable to the global economic crisis, particularly strong in Europe, where most expatriates live. A significant diversion of money transfers to the informal channels might also explain the decline.¹⁰⁹ Other causes may have been flat garment exports and increased food prices. Natural disasters have negatively affected the crops and the livelihoods of more than 8 million people and countered the poverty reducing policies.¹¹⁰

Inflation declined to 5.4% in FY 2017, due mainly to a decrease in non-food inflation.¹¹¹

Readymade garments (RMG), which are the leading export goods, had only a 0.2% growth in 2017. The decline was due to reduced export prices, influenced by the fall of global commodity prices, and to logistic bottlenecks.¹¹²

12. Significant reforms and agreements to attract foreign investors

With the ratification of the Bangladesh Economic Zones Act 2010, the government launched the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ).¹¹³ Since Bangladesh's economic growth depends largely on foreign invest-

104. Bangladesh Bank data (www.bb.org.bd).

105. 'ADB: Bangladesh economy to grow 6.9% in 2017-2018 fiscal year', *Dhaka Tribune*, 27 September 2017.

106. 'Bangladesh Development Update', p. 4.

107. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 21.

108. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 29.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

110. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 5.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

112. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 8.

113. Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) (www.beza.gov.bd).

ments, between 2016 and 2017 the government boosted the creation of the SEZ. In 2016 the foundation of 10 SEZ was planned,¹¹⁴ while at the beginning of 2017 the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) approved the foundation of four new Economic Zones.¹¹⁵ In July the government planned to develop the Mirsarai Economic Zone (MEZ) and make it the industrial capital of Bangladesh. The MEZ should become the most important economic zone in the country, a citadel incorporating industrial premises and service areas, residential areas, a school, a power plant, and a hospital.¹¹⁶

In June 2017 a Bangladesh-China agreement was signed for the creation of a Chinese Economic Zone in south-eastern Bangladesh.¹¹⁷ In 2016 a Bangla-Indian joint working group had already set up three SEZ for India in Bangladesh. They are the first Indian SEZ in a neighbouring country.¹¹⁸

Bangladesh ranked 176th among 188 countries in the Doing Business Index. To improve the country's ranking and attract investors, the government approved the «One-Stop Service Act 2017» that facilitates domestic and foreign investors in obtaining 16 specific services. These include, among others, the issue of trade licenses, land registration and mutation, environmental clearance, construction permits, connections of power, gas, water, telephone and internet facilities.¹¹⁹

In 2017 the government approved the proposal for the ratification of the «Preferential Trade Agreement» signed with eight Muslim countries belonging to the D-8 alliance. This includes, besides Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Nigeria.¹²⁰

13. Domestic politics

The eight consecutive years of Awami League Government (Sheik Hasina's prime-ministership started in January 2009), brought about an impressive economic development. The Awami League leadership promotes

114. '10 economic zones set to start soon', *The Independent BD*, 19 January 2016.

115. 'BEZA clears four more private economic zones', *The Independent BD*, 6 January 2017.

116. 'Mirsarai Economic Zone to become country's industrial capital', *The Independent BD*, 10 July 2017.

117. 'Agreement signed for development of Chinese industrial zone in Bangladesh', *Xinhua*, 15 June 2017.

118. 'India identifies three special economic zone sites in Bangladesh', *bdnews24.com*, 15 May 2016.

119. 'Bangladesh Development Update', p. 20.

120. *Ibid.*

the principle of «development first, then democracy».¹²¹ Experts compare Sheikh Hasina with Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia or Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, as examples of the fact that economic development benefits from authoritarian governments.¹²²

No matter how, the outstanding results of Bangladesh's economy in 2017 have been made possible especially by substantial political stability. After the government crackdown following the Holey Artisan Bakery attack of 1 July 2016,¹²³ there were no more disturbances until 17 March 2017, when a suicide bomber assaulted a base of the Rapid Action Battalion in Dhaka.¹²⁴

After the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, the government introduced a range of reforms to prevent the spread of radical Islam and its impact on Bangladeshi politics. On 20 September 2017 the government approved the creation of an Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU), a special body to combat terrorism, with nation-wide jurisdiction.¹²⁵

In October 2017 the government ordered the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board to remove the chapter on jihād from textbooks and in November the police shut down the Lakehead grammar school, charged «for patronising militancy».¹²⁶

Another matter of concern for the Awami League administration was the radicalisation of Bangladeshi expatriates in other Asian countries and in the West. The concern is not unfounded, considering that two Bangladeshis were arrested in Malaysia and Spain respectively in January and July 2017 for suspected links with IS.¹²⁷ The suspect in the New York attack of 11 December 2017 was a 27 year old man, Akayed Ullah, of Bangladeshi descent.¹²⁸ In their search for Bangladeshi militants abroad, the Bangladeshi investigators focus their inquiries especially on international financial movements and cyber terrorism networks.¹²⁹

Unfortunately, the fight against a murderous Islamic militancy has been coupled with the forced disappearance of people whose only fault appears to be that of being opposed to Sheikh Hasina's government. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), in the past years hundreds of

121. 'Eight Years of Awami League Rule. Bangladesh at a Political Crossroads', *The Daily Star*, 5 January 2017.

122. *Ibid.*

123. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2016', pp. 277-285.

124. 'Suicide bomber attacks Bangladesh police special forces base', *Reuters*, 17 March 2017.

125. 'Bangladesh's War on Terror won't end soon', *Rediff.com*, 21 December 2017.

126. *Ibid.*

127. *Ibid.*

128. 'Manhattan bomb: officials will focus on recent activity and overseas links', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2017; 'Akayed Ullah: What we know about the Manhattan explosion suspect', *CNN*, 12 December 2017.

129. 'Bangladesh's War on Terror'.

people have been secretly detained. Most of them have reappeared and been brought before a court. However, according to HRW, there have been 21 cases of detainees who were killed, while the whereabouts of nine others were still unknown when the HRW report on forced disappearances in Bangladesh was released in July 2017.¹³⁰

130. Faisal Mahmud, '«Enforced disappearance» suspected in Bangladesh', *Al Jazeera*, 8 December 2017.