Cross Border Security Challenges for Bangladesh: A Thematic Analysis

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Research Article

Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges of cross-border security in Bangladesh. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study gathers insights from diverse stakeholders, including security forces, analysts, human rights activists, NGO workers, and journalists. Based on thematic analysis, the findings revealed a significant disconnect between the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and local communities, exacerbated by bureaucratic challenges and poor coordination among governmental bodies. The vulnerability of hilly border regions to illicit activities, such as insurgency and smuggling, is heightened by inadequate placement and density of Border Outposts (BOPs). Historical and cultural ties influence border dynamics, complicating security efforts. The BGB faces infrastructure and resource challenges, further hampering effective border management. Extreme poverty and lack of education in border communities drive individuals towards smuggling and make them susceptible to human trafficking. Cross-border criminal activities, including drug and arms trafficking, pose significant threats. Additionally, the influx of Rohingya refugees has led to the control of refugee camps by armed groups, creating further security concerns. This research's originality lies in its thematic analysis application to systematically explore and address the multifaceted cross-border security challenges in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Transnational Security, Collaborative Approach, Refugee Crisis, Arms Smuggling, Drugs Dealing, Border Management.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh has a 4,156 km land and river border with India (Das, 2008) and 271 km with Myanmar (Hazarika, 2001). The border includes plain land, hilly areas, and marshy land (Datta, 2010). The intricate landscape of cross-border security challenges in Bangladesh presents a multifaceted threat to national stability and regional peace (Dasgupta, 2004). With its strategic location in South Asia (Bailey, 2011; Weigand, 2020), bordered by India, Myanmar, and the Bay of Bengal (Basil, 2011; Cons, 2012; Khan, 2016), Bangladesh faces significant security issues, including illegal migration, smuggling, human trafficking, and the infiltration of militant groups (Das, 2008; Hashmi et al., 2011; Jamwal, 2004). These challenges are exacerbated by porous borders and socio-political dynamics in neighboring countries, necessitating a comprehensive understanding and response (Doyle, 2010; Lamptey, 2013; Wolff, 2008).

Illegal migration from neighboring regions into Bangladesh has led to demographic shifts and increased socio-economic pressure, often resulting in communal tensions and resource allocation disputes (Lasco, 2020; Judah, 2017). Smuggling operations, particularly of narcotics and arms, further undermine the country's internal security and contribute to organized crime (Hanlon & Herbert, 2015; Shelley, 2010;

Staudt, 2009). Human trafficking networks exploit vulnerable populations, complicating efforts to protect human rights and enforce the rule of law. Moreover, the infiltration of extremist elements poses a severe threat to national security, demanding robust counter-terrorism measures (Das, 2008; Jamwal, 2004; McDuie-Ra, 2012, 2014).

Poor and fragile border management disrupts a country's economic well-being, corrodes its political stability, and thus debilitates its democratic institutions (Achumba et al., 2013; Marc et al., 2015). A thematic analysis of these cross-border security challenges will provide valuable insights into their underlying causes and interconnections. By examining the specific themes of illegal migration, smuggling, human trafficking, and militant infiltration, this research aims to outline Bangladesh's critical security threats and propose strategic solutions to enhance border management and regional cooperation.

2. Literature Review

Statehood and state sovereignty are primarily associated with the concept of the border (Crawford, 2006), which restricts a zone and differentiates between territories (Craven, 2010; Pickering, 2004). Within a border, a state exercises its jurisdiction, and the border gives it the legitimacy to accomplish development activities and the power to enforce its policies and laws (Abizadeh, 2017). Thus, the border provides a state with legal and geographical validity (Neuman, 2010)Conventionally, the border separates two states; people, vehicles, and goods from one state must enter another country and comply with the latter's laws (Ismer & Neuhoff, 2007; Newman, 2011). A border is usually drawn considering the diverse ethnic lines, zones of economic encouragement, and geographical distribution (Gituanja, 2013). The Inland border consists of a land boundary or fence. In the sea or river, it refers to territorial water. The maritime boundaries encompass 12 nautical miles to over 200 nautical miles, depending on the continental shelf's limit (Jagota, 2021). Moreover, at the airport, it relates to boarding (Prescott, 2014). Some airport borders are hundreds of kilometers away from the boundaries (Park, 2010).

The origin of the term 'border' is steeped in the study by Anderson & Bort (2001). They argued that the border reflects the Westphalian concept of sovereignty. For Europe, the border specifies the boundary of modern nation-states. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the term 'border' symbolized the power of European colonial empires. The border has gradually become a security concern, and its boundary has remained a form of social construction. Over time, the focus of border management has expanded to include sensitive issues such as internal and external security, natural resources, human rights, migration, and organized crimes (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006). Bartlett & Ghoshal (2002) described the economic benefit of effective border management. They opined that a state's success in implementing its global strategies and plans hinges much on its ability to organize and manage its borders effectively and efficiently. The fundamental objective of border management is to protect the national interest and maintain peace, security, and economic development (Hobbing, 2006). In a broader sense, border management covers immigration, customs and excise, and policing to regulate the movement of individuals and properties at the border.

Some studies investigated the challenges in managing the India-Bangladesh border. Jamwal (2004) mentioned that confrontation, tension, internal politics, and poor security systems thwart effective border management. Das (2008) speculated that the India-Bangladesh border is the problem area of tomorrow. Her study identified massive human trafficking, illegal migration, drug and arms smuggling, and transnational terrorist outfits as significant threats to the safety and security of the countries. The empirical studies on border management between Bangladesh and India cover a range of issues, including informal trade, security challenges, and the socio-economic impact on border residents. The study of Priom (2023) in the Panchagarh district in Bangladesh examines the impact of border fencing on informal and formal trade and the livelihood of border residents. The research highlights that despite the fencing, informal trade persists, posing security threats and leading to incidents of violence and deaths. Research papers of the National Defence College (NDC) Bangladesh discuss the day-to-day management of the Bangladesh-India border

and the progress in resolving land boundary disputes (M. M. Alam, 2014; Rouf, 2020). The study by Shahriar (2021) critically examines the socio-political, economic, and cultural issues along the Bangladesh-India border, and Shahriar et al. (2020) investigates human rights violations at the border, focusing on the factors contributing to them and their impact on border communities. Furthermore, the study of Shafique & Islam (2022) measures the effects of informal cross-border trade between Bangladesh and India, highlighting its economic, political, and security implications. Despite extensive research on border management between Bangladesh and India, there is a gap in comprehensively analyzing the thematic interconnections between illegal migration, smuggling, human trafficking, and militant infiltration and their compounded impact on national and regional security dynamics. This study aims to address this gap.

3. Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB)

BGB, formerly known as the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), is the oldest uniformed force in Bangladesh (S. K. Chowdhury, 2023). It was initially established as the "Ramgarh Local Battalion" during the East India Company rule (Ashraf & Sarker, 2016; Sikri, 2012). The force has a rich history spanning over two centuries and has played a significant role in various historical events, including the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh (Huq & Mukherjee, 2020). In 2009, a mutiny within the force led to the tragic deaths of over 50 army officers, including the then BDR Director General Maj Gen Shakil Ahmed (Sikri, 2012). Following this event, the force was restructured and renamed Border Guard Bangladesh in 2010 (Pant, 2017). The new name and structure were formalized with the passing of the "Border Guard Bangladesh Bill-2010" in Parliament, and the force's new flag and monogram were unveiled in January 2011 (S. K. Chowdhury, 2023).

BGB is now a paramilitary force under the Ministry of Home Affairs, primarily responsible for the border security of Bangladesh (D. Chowdhury, 2018). During peacetime, BGB is tasked with anti-smuggling operations, investigating cross-border crimes, and extending governmental authority to remote and isolated areas (Abedin, 2021). In times of war, BGB operates under the Ministry of Defence as an auxiliary force to the Bangladesh Army. Its headquarters is in Pilkhana, Dhaka, along with five regional headquarters equivalents to brigades, commanded by brigadier generals deputed from the Bangladesh Army. It has 16 sectors under the regional headquarters, each commanded by a colonel, and multiple battalions under each sector, commanded by lieutenant colonels. Each battalion comprises six rifle companies, one support company, and one HQ company. Companies are commanded by captains, with majors filling key staff positions. Each company has four platoons, led by naib subedars, with havildars as second-in-command. Currently, BGB has a strength of approximately 70,000 personnel, structured along 64 battalions and numerous border outposts (BOPs). BGB is equipped with various small arms, vehicles, and aircraft to perform its duties effectively.

4. Methodology

The research utilized a qualitative methodology, collecting data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through comprehensive face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire. The snowball sampling method was employed to identify suitable participants. A total of 13 key informants were interviewed, including five members of the security forces, two security analysts, two human rights activists, two NGO workers, and two journalists. The security force personnel interviewed included five Bangladesh Army officers who had served as commanders in BGB across various units in Chottogram, Jashore, and Rajshahi—regions of strategic importance and vulnerability in Bangladesh. The security analysts interviewed comprised one individual with experience in Bangladesh intelligence and another with a solid academic background in security studies. The human rights activists interviewed were involved at the national level in efforts to curb illegal human trafficking and assist refugees. NGO workers

from the hilly regions of Bangladesh were also interviewed to provide a more detailed perspective. Finally, two local journalists were interviewed to gain insights into the less visible aspects of the border areas in Bangladesh. The identities of all respondents were kept confidential to maintain the sensitivity of the subject matter. Ethical consent was obtained from the participants to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided during the data collection process.

4.1. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis procedure involved several steps to thoroughly and systematically examine the collected qualitative data. The process was guided by thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Guest et al., 2012).
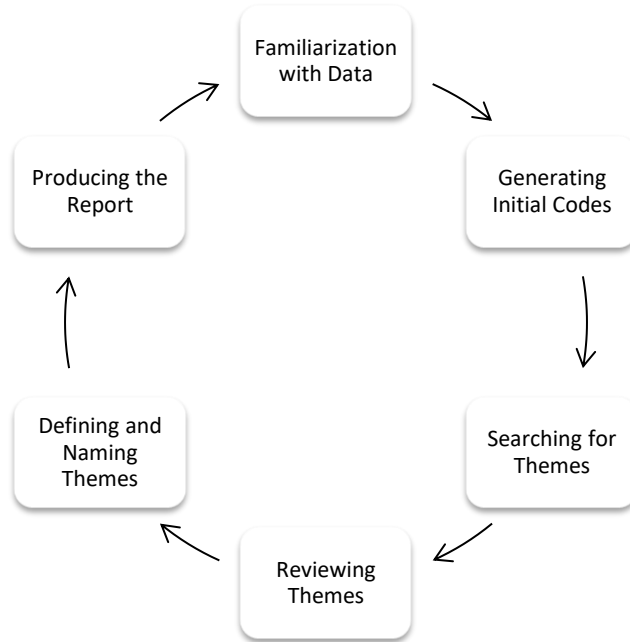

Fig. 1: Thematic Data analysis procedure of the study

As depicted in the figure (Fig. 1), the first step involved transcribing the interviews and reading the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content. Initial notes were made to capture early impressions and potential themes. The data were systematically coded using open and axial coding techniques. Open coding involves breaking down the data into discrete parts and examining them for similarities and differences. Axial coding was then used to link these codes into categories that reflected broader themes. Codes were grouped into potential themes by identifying patterns and relationships within the data. This step involved organizing the codes into broader themes that captured significant aspects of the data about the research objectives. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking the themes against the original data to confirm their validity and coherence. Any discrepancies were addressed by revisiting the data and adjusting the themes. Each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its essence. The defining and naming step involved writing detailed descriptions of each theme, explaining what it captures and how it relates to the research questions. Finally, the findings were written up, and the themes were presented in a coherent narrative. This included using direct quotes from the interviews to illustrate the themes and provide evidence for the analysis.

4.2. Development of Themes

The themes around which the discussion was organized were developed through a rigorous coding and thematic analysis process. The figure (Fig. 2) shows that the development of the study theme follows three

processes. The interview transcripts were coded line-by-line in initial coding to identify significant statements and phrases. These initial codes were then categorized based on their similarities and differences. Then, in theme identification, the categories were examined for overarching patterns, leading to the identification of preliminary themes. These themes were refined through iterative review. Finally, the themes were validated by cross-checking them with the original data and seeking participant feedback where possible. This helped ensure that the themes were grounded in the data and accurately represented the participants' perspectives.

Fig. 2: Development of theme for this study

4.2.1 Themes Identified

The thematic analysis identified several key themes outlined in the table (Table 1). These themes provided a structured framework for the discussion, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the complex issues surrounding cross-border security in Bangladesh. The thematic analysis approach ensured that the findings were deeply rooted in the data, providing an inherent understanding of the challenges and potential solutions for improving border security.

Table 1: Identified themes of the study

Themes	Key Issues from Field Study
Broken trust and blurred lines	The disconnect between the BGB and local communities.
The labyrinth of bureaucracy	Challenges in coordination among different governmental bodies related to cross-border security.
Uncontrolled border regions	The vulnerability of some hilly regions to illicit activities, i.e., insurgency.
The wide net with large holes	Flaws in the placement and density of BOPs along Bangladesh's borders.
Cultural ties and socioeconomic interdependencies	The impact of historical and cultural connections on border dynamics.
Comparative disadvantage	Infrastructure and resource challenges faced by the BGB.
Poverty and peril	The allure of smuggling for cross-border communities
Desperation fuels vulnerability	The socioeconomic and educational deficiencies make local communities vulnerable to human trafficking.
Cross-border criminal activities	Drugs, arms, and shadowy networks.
Fractured frontier	The influx of Rohingya refugees and control of refugee camps by armed groups.

5. Data Analysis, Findings, and Discussion
5.1 Broken trust and blurred lines
The study reveals that BGB has struggled to integrate local communities, resulting in a persistent perception of the BGB as outsiders rather than allies. This disconnect hinders effective collaboration and trust-building, essential for addressing the complex security challenges along Bangladesh's borders. *"……local communities perceive the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) as an instrument of the ruling government rather than a protective force. This perception leads to a lack of cooperation between the local communities and the BGB, with locals often siding with the smugglers and hesitating to testify in court."* (Respondent 2, June 28, 2023). Inadequate focus on integrating security forces with local communities leads to mistrust and hostility. This is not unique to Bangladesh; similar situations have been observed in other regions, such as northern Nigeria, where the security forces' reliance on violence and lack of engagement with social and economic realities have exacerbated security problems (Liman, 2013). The political dynamics within Bangladesh affect how the BGB is perceived. Instead of being seen purely as a protective force responsible for border security, some view it as a tool used by the ruling government to maintain its power and control.

5.2 The labyrinth of bureaucracy
This study highlights a significant lack of cooperation among immigration, customs, police, intelligence agencies, and the BGB. Even unnecessary and time-consuming procedures impede essential coordination between the BGB and other government agencies. This inefficiency delays the border management process and creates opportunities for security lapses and oversight failures. *"……due to bureaucratic processes, intelligence officers often uncover information about smugglers but face challenges in rapidly relaying it to BGB. Instead of direct communication, they must send reports through a conventional approval system, causing delays before the BGB receives the intelligence. This official delayed response provides ample time for smugglers to evade capture. The issue extends beyond just the BGB and intelligence agencies. For example, when customs detect risky shipments, they must immediately share this information with immigration services, but inter-agency coordination is lacking. Even during joint operations between agencies like the BGB and police, their distinct rules and procedures hinder effective collaboration and undermine the operation's success. Entanglement in their respective bureaucracies impedes the seamless flow of information and coordinated action required for robust border security"* (Respondent 3, June 2023; Respondent 4, July 2, 2023).

The lack of cooperation among law enforcement agencies has significant repercussions, making border patrolling, information collection, and rapid response to threats more challenging. Criminals exploit these weaknesses, threatening the country's safety. To address this, the administration must facilitate better collaboration among law enforcement forces by establishing clear channels for communication and promoting cooperation. Joint training sessions and methods for sharing information can help bridge the gaps. Additionally, implementing technology for instant communication and information sharing can make a substantial difference. If required, BGB may establish modern collaborative techniques with neighboring countries, such as exchanging intra-state intelligence data and vital knowledge and increasing the frequency of coordinated border patrols. Previous studies have emphasized that effective border management requires a multifaceted approach, which includes intelligence sharing (Yol et al., 2022; Wagner, 2022), coordinated patrol (Farion et al., 2022), and mutual trust between neighboring countries (Bac, 2023). The absence of these collaborative efforts leads to security gaps that smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal elements exploit (Omolewa et al., 2023).

5.3. Uncontrolled cross-border
Bangladesh shares a significant portion of its borders with India and Myanmar, encompassing diverse terrains that include 429 kilometers of mountainous regions, the coastal boundary with the Bay of Bengal, and riverine landscapes in the southern part of the country. These areas are difficult to monitor and control

and face environmental and security challenges. This lack of constant vigilance exposes the nation to a formidable danger in terms of frontier defense. *"……The mountainous terrain, characterized by its dense jungles, poses significant obstacles to effective border surveillance and control. The rugged landscape makes it difficult for law enforcement and military personnel to maintain a constant presence, which in turn allows for illicit activities such as smuggling of arms and drugs, illegal fishing, and the dumping of hazardous and toxic waste"* (Respondent 5, July 13, 2023; Respondent 6, July 5, 2023).

These activities threaten national security and have detrimental effects on the local ecosystems and biodiversity. Previous studies claimed that the Bay of Bengal is subject to various natural hazards, including cyclones and rising sea levels exacerbated by climate change (Tashmin et al., 2018). These environmental challenges threaten the livelihoods of coastal communities and increase their vulnerability (Uddin et al., 2021). Illegal fishing and waste dumping in these waters further compound the ecological crises, depleting fish stocks and polluting marine environments (M. W. Alam, 2023; Mozumder et al., 2023).

5.4. The wide net with large holes

Establishing border observation points (BOPs) represents a crucial measure for safeguarding national borders, ostensibly serving as bulwarks against illicit activities such as smuggling and unauthorized border crossings. However, despite implementing these BOPs along land borders, a critical flaw emerges from the vast expanses between them. *"……the gaps between BOPs are reported to be almost 10 kilometers, which presents a substantial challenge for border security personnel"* (Respondent 6, July 5, 2023). This is particularly concerning given the complex and multifaceted nature of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, which has been a source of tension and conflict, as well as a conduit for human, drugs, and arms trafficking and used as transit routes for irregular migrants from South Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Deniz, 2022). *"……The porous nature of these borders threatens national security and facilitates the proliferation of organized crime networks, which exploit these vulnerabilities for their illicit operations"* (Respondent 1, July 9, 2023).

Previous research in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan provinces demonstrates how organized crime can, directly and indirectly, influence national security, with factors such as isolated borders and lack of cross-border control (Javadi & Amini, 2023). The situation in the southern part of Bangladesh is further complicated by the influx of over 1.1 million Rohingya refugees who fled violence in Myanmar and sought shelter in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2022). Addressing this critical issue necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of border security strategies, including the strategic placement and density of BOPs along vulnerable stretches of land borders. Furthermore, a border security cooperation framework is crucial for managing these transnational threats, which include not only smuggling but also the movement of illegal immigrants and potential terrorists (Sa'ad & Huda, 2023). The need for cooperation is underscored by the shared challenges among bordering countries, such as the trans-border malaria transmission (Elahi et al., 2013). The use of advanced technologies such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), General Packet Radio Service/Global System for Mobile Communications (GPRS/GSM), Global Positioning System (GPS), and Geographic Information System (GIS) has been proposed to enhance the security and management of cross-border operations (Katara & Pokhriyal, 2017).

5.5. A complex tapestry

The cultural and socioeconomic interconnections between India and Bangladesh, particularly in frontier areas, have deep historical roots that continue to influence contemporary relations and border dynamics. These connections manifest in various forms, including shared markets and unsettled territories due to the legacy of colonial-era border demarcation. *"……In northern Bangladesh, traditional markets known locally as* Ha-at *serve as vibrant examples of the enduring economic and cultural ties between the two countries.*

Historically, these markets have been spaces where people from India and Bangladesh gathered to buy and sell necessary commodities, symbolizing the continuation of pre-partition economic practices and social interactions. They underscore the intertwined lives of communities living along the border and facilitate trade and cultural exchange, reinforcing shared identities and mutual dependencies that transcend geopolitical boundaries. These shared cultural and geographical features are sometimes exploited. Smugglers leverage the ease of movement and familiarity to engage in illegal cross-border activities" (Respondent 7, July 3, 2023).

Previous studies depicted these issues and argued that these socioeconomic interdependencies navigate cross-border cattle smuggling (Sur, 2020). The partition of British India in 1947, which led to the creation of India and Pakistan (with East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh in 1971), involved the drawing of new national boundaries. Cyril Radcliffe's demarcation process resulted in the arbitrary division of territories, often splitting communities and leaving a legacy of unsettled territories. This has led to complex scenarios where citizens of one country own land across the border in the other country. For instance, Bangladeshi citizens possess land in India and vice versa. Consequently, people must cross international borders to care for their agricultural lands, leading to unique socioeconomic interdependencies. *"......presence of unsettled territories and the necessity for cross-border movement for land management further complicate surveillance and enforcement measures. This situation fosters smuggling and illegal crossings, as enclaves provide convenient entry points across the border. People with land on the other side can cross without much scrutiny, facilitating the smuggling of goods, drugs, and even people. Enclaves are hiding places for smuggled goods or individuals, making detection and apprehension difficult. Additionally, there is evidence of potential for terrorist activities, as these enclaves provide safe havens for terrorist groups to recruit and train members and store weapons and supplies"* (Respondent 8, June 25, 2023).

5.6. Comparative Disadvantage

India has taken significant steps to secure its borders by establishing boundary fences and constructing pitched roads in most frontier areas, facilitating security forces' rapid movement and response. To address this gap, the Bangladeshi government has equipped BGB personnel with motorcycles to enhance their mobility and enable them to conduct more effective surveillance between BPOs. In contrast, Bangladesh has yet to develop similar infrastructure along its borders. *"...... lack of pitched roads in the border areas hampers the optimal use of these motorcycles, as the terrain does not allow for quick and efficient travel. This infrastructure deficit poses a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh, as it impedes their ability to respond swiftly to illegal activities, such as those carried out by mafias and smugglers" (Respondent 9, June 27, 2023).*

The lack of adequate road infrastructure in Bangladesh's border regions means that BGB personnel can only partially leverage the mobility that motorcycles are supposed to provide. This limitation affects the response times to smuggling incidents and other illegal cross-border activities and impacts the BGB's overall surveillance capabilities. It underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that includes not just the provision of equipment but also the development of supporting infrastructure to ensure that law enforcement agencies can operate effectively and address cross-border security challenges.

5.7. Poverty and peril

Smuggling in Bangladesh, particularly along its borders, is driven by various factors. The primary cause is the fragile socioeconomic background of the inhabitants, especially those living in rural areas with minimal survival options. They are usually recruited to serve various roles within the smuggling network, including transporters, communicators, and retailers. *"......You would observe a concerning trend among young individuals near the Bangladesh border. These individuals, predominantly from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are often lured into smuggling activities as a means of survival. A typical smuggling operation involving the transportation of cattle (cows) from India to Bangladesh can yield*

significant earnings for those involved. In a single trip, one could earn between BDT 7,000 and 10,000 (equivalent to $85 to $120), which is a substantial sum, particularly in rural village contexts. The operation involves transporters who physically guide the cattle across the border, communicators who relay information and act as lookouts, and retailers selling smuggled cattle within Bangladesh" (Respondent 1, July 9, 2023). Understanding that these young individuals are not hardened criminals driven by greed is essential. Instead, they are ensnared in a web of economic hardship, where smuggling appears to be a viable, albeit illegal, option to provide for their families. This study identifies a vicious cycle. Poverty drives young people towards smuggling, exposing them to dangers such as violence, legal repercussions, and potential injury. These experiences further limit their future opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability. The financial incentive is a powerful motivator for young people facing limited economic opportunities, compelling them to engage in illicit activities to support themselves and their families.

5.8. Desperation fuels vulnerability

The phenomenon of cross-border smuggling and human trafficking involves vulnerable people who have a complex issue rooted in socioeconomic and educational deficiencies. *"……lack of employment opportunities and access to education, compounded by poverty, makes the local communities susceptible to the allure of smuggling and trafficking as a means of livelihood. This vulnerability is exploited by traffickers who offer seemingly lucrative payments to carry illicit goods. They are involved in smuggling everything from motorbikes to beauty products and from medical equipment to narcotics and firearms"* (Respondent 10, June 12, 2023). Studies in other countries found that education, or the lack thereof, plays a pivotal role as a preventive tool and a point of vulnerability. When families cannot afford education or when children are compelled to leave school to work, they become more susceptible to exploitation (Matijašević & Dragojlović, 2021).

Human trafficking represents another dimension of cross-border organized crime driven by poverty in the country. *"...it is often observed that poor, marginalized, and uneducated young men and women are lured by the promise of better job opportunities and sustainable livelihoods in neighboring countries, only to be sold to human traffickers. Even it was evident that Rohingya refugee girls were being trafficked into other countries by holding fake identities. These individuals tend to cross the border illegally, facilitated by mafia groups operating at the frontier who provide secure contacts with human traffickers and security force personnel from both sides. The traffickers ultimately force these individuals to live under harsh conditions in other countries, including oppression and prostitution"* (Respondent 11, June 27, 2023).

5.9. The infiltration of insurgent groups into Bangladesh's mountainous frontier regions

Due to the precarious and lightly guarded borders, the insurgent groups have managed to infiltrate the frontier regions of Bangladesh's hills and mountains, particularly areas such as Khagrachori, Bandarban, and Chottogram districts. They even establish training camps in the mountainous jungles, exploiting the meager surveillance and control. *"...these areas are convenient hiding spots for weapons and equipment acquired by cross-border criminal networks. Law enforcement agencies appear to lack the ability to address this threat effectively. The hesitancy of security personnel to confront these terror organizations stems from a fear of guerrilla retaliation outside of duty hours, as these groups are well-equipped with modern arms and ammunition"* (Respondent 6, July 5, 2023). The study on insurgency in Nagaland (Singh, 2009) outlined the complexities of this security issue. Insurgency in this region, compounded by its complicated geography and borders shared with other countries, is more potent than local efforts can handle. Therefore, robust border security measures and proactive counterinsurgency efforts are urgently needed to prevent further destabilization of these frontier regions and safeguard the nation's security (Jones, 2009).

5.10. Cross-border criminal threats

The threat posed by cross-border criminal networks involved in drug and arms trafficking is a significant concern, while these networks exploit Bangladesh's strategic location. *"……Myanmar has established numerous Yaba and illegal narcotics industries close to the Bangladesh border. Yaba, known for its high methamphetamine content, is a significant issue in the region, contributing to widespread drug abuse and criminal activities. The transportation of Yaba and cocaine through cargo containers and offshore routes in the southern regions of Bangladesh indicates a sophisticated network of drug trafficking. Additionally, criminal syndicates in India have set up clandestine factories along the Bangladeshi border, producing illicit goods such as phenyl, beer, and unlawful small arms and light weapons"* (Respondent 4, July 13, 2023; Respondent 9, June 27, 2023).

Prior research has substantiated that Bangladesh serves as a pivotal transshipment hub for narcotics and arms trafficking between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Studies highlight the strategic exploitation of Bangladesh's geographical position by transnational criminal networks to facilitate the cross-border movement of illicit goods (Mohsin, 2006; Pohit & Taneja, 2003; Rather, 2013). This underscores the multidimensional nature of criminal activities facilitated by transnational criminal organizations. The production and trafficking of these illegal commodities contribute to the proliferation of black markets, jeopardizing public safety by fueling organized crime and violence in the region (Mohsin, 2006; Pohit & Taneja, 2003; Rather, 2013).

5.11. Fractured frontier

The influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh through its southeastern border has significantly challenged the control and management of the Bangladeshi border, particularly in Cox's Bazar district (Ahmed et al., 2018; Filipski et al., 2019). *"……The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas has overwhelmed the region's infrastructure and disrupted effective border management. Mafia syndicates and smugglers have exploited the weakened border control in Cox's Bazar, using the Rohingya refugees as conduits for smuggling drugs and illicit arms from Myanmar. The refugee camps have become hotspots for these illegal activities, with refugees often turning to smuggling for income due to limited opportunities. The precarious conditions within the camps have rendered both Rohingya and locals susceptible to exploitation. The absence of employment opportunities makes them prime targets for criminal syndicates. Armed groups have now taken control of the refugee camps, imposing clandestine rules over the inhabitants"* (Respondent 12, July 9, 2023; Respondent 13, July 5, 2023). This situation constitutes a severe human rights violation and exacerbates the complexity of the border crisis. The unstable environment at the border has enabled multinational human trafficking networks to operate with increased impunity. The prevailing disorder and ineffective governance provide these networks with the necessary cover to conduct their activities, further jeopardizing the refugees' safety and undermining regional security (Sakib, 2023).

6. Conclusion

This study explores the fact that the BGB faces significant challenges in integrating with local communities, leading to perceptions of the BGB as an instrument of the ruling government rather than a protective force. This disconnect hinders effective collaboration and trust-building, which are essential for addressing complex security challenges along Bangladesh's borders. Bureaucratic inefficiencies further complicate border management, delaying the relay of critical intelligence and creating opportunities for smugglers to evade capture. The porous nature of the borders, particularly with India and Myanmar, exacerbates these issues, allowing for the proliferation of organized crime networks involved in human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms trafficking.

Economic hardship in border regions drives local inhabitants, especially the youth, into smuggling activities to survive. The lack of employment opportunities and access to education makes these communities vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers. The influx of Rohingya refugees has further strained border

management, with refugee camps becoming hotspots for illegal activities due to limited opportunities and precarious living conditions. The diverse terrains along Bangladesh's borders, including mountainous regions and coastal boundaries, pose significant surveillance and control challenges. Environmental hazards such as cyclones and rising sea levels further complicate border security and impact the livelihoods of coastal communities. The geopolitical complexities of the region, including historical ties and unsettled territories with India, add another layer of difficulty in managing cross-border activities and ensuring security.

To address these multifaceted challenges, the study suggests enhancing inter-agency cooperation, implementing technology for instant communication, and establishing modern collaborative techniques with neighboring countries. Joint training sessions and clear communication channels among law enforcement agencies are recommended to improve coordination and response times. A comprehensive reassessment of border security strategies, including strategically placing BOPs and developing supporting infrastructure, is crucial for effective border management.

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