

Sarah Champion MP
House of Commons
London
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2 October 2023

World Food Programme assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your letter dated 11 September 2023 regarding World Food Programme Food (WFP) assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

As you noted, in June 2023, WFP was forced to cut the transfer value of assistance to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar to US\$ 8 per person per month – a cut of one-third from the full transfer value of US\$ 12. Up until March 2023, WFP had been able to retain the full voucher value and stave off ration cuts in the face of financial pressures, however, an unprecedented funding gap has forced WFP to take this painful course of action. In addition, you raised concerns over reports regarding the quality of WFP's food assistance for Rohingya refugees, as documented in an article in The New Humanitarian. WFP takes seriously any and all feedback received from our beneficiaries regarding the quality and effectiveness of WFP's assistance, and we relentlessly strive to improve our programmes on the basis of feedback received. We welcome the committee's efforts to ensure that Rohingya refugees receive quality and dignified assistance until such time as they can return home safely – this is also what we, at WFP, strive to achieve.

WFP's General Food Assistance programme supports over 930,000 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar and nearly 30,000 Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char, located nearly 60km from the mainland. In Cox's Bazar, Rohingya refugees receive monthly food assistance via e-vouchers, which are redeemable for dry and fresh foods at WFP outlets throughout the camps. WFP also provides fortified biscuits to over 250,000 refugee children in learning centres in Cox's Bazar and delivers preventative and curative nutrition services to refugees at 45 integrated nutrition sites.

In spite of concerted efforts over the past six years, the Rohingya remain in an extremely precarious situation, with limited freedom of movement, lack of employment opportunities, and exposure to security threats, forcing many to adopt dangerous coping strategies. In Cox's Bazar, overcrowding and vulnerability to climate hazards persist, while social cohesion between the Rohingya and surrounding host communities continues to pose protection risks, including gender-based violence. Meanwhile, the prospect of a durable solution to the crisis appears increasingly challenging, particularly following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

Please see responses to the questions included in your letter below.

What is the current value of the food vouchers for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh per person? How has this changed since the beginning of WFP's response to the crisis?

Since WFP transitioned from in-kind to e-vouchers in 2018, the transfer value has been adjusted incrementally from US\$ 9 to US\$ 12 per person per month due to inflation and other factors. In March 2023, WFP was forced to cut the value of e-vouchers for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar for the first time, from



US\$ 12 to US\$ 10 per person per month. WFP was forced to implement ration cuts as a result of an unprecedented funding gap for WFP's operations in Cox's Bazar. To insulate families most vulnerable to food insecurity, including women and elderly-headed households and households with persons with disabilities, WFP continued to provide an additional food voucher of US\$ 3. This allows them to buy fresh and nutritious foods from WFP outlets. Subsequent to the initial round of ration cuts, in June 2023, WFP reduced the voucher value further to US\$ 8 per person per month, equivalent to less than 9 cents per meal, as a result of funding shortfalls. I can assure you that WFP has already cut its operating costs to maximise the funds available for refugees: the workforce has been reduced by 20 percent and transport and handling costs have been brought down in an effort to stave off cuts in WFP's assistance.

Unlike other emergencies, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh rely entirely on humanitarian partners to meet their essential needs. The latest cuts are estimated to lead to 77 percent of Rohingya refugees being in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 ('Crisis'), including 150,000 in IPC Phase 4 ('Emergency'). If WFP's assistance is suspended due to a lack of funding, 84 percent of Rohingya refugees will fall into IPC Phase 4.

Post-distribution monitoring data collected by WFP between May and June 2023 to measure the immediate outcomes of the ration reduction in the camps found that, as a result of the cut, the proportion of households with acceptable food consumption levels decreased from 56 percent to 22 percent. 94 percent of respondents reported a deterioration of the household food and nutrition situation. The cuts are anticipated to have negative consequences on the nutritional status of the most vulnerable populations, particularly children under five and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Data from the Nutrition Sector reveals a trend of increasing severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) cases, with SAM admissions having risen 11 percent and MAM admissions 4 percent compared with the same period in 2022. Qualitative interviews reveal negative food-based coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, increased sharing of specialised nutritious commodities, and an inability to purchase fresh foods due to the reduced voucher value. WFP is also concerned about the implications of the cuts on security in the camps as families may resort to negative coping strategies. Data from post-distribution monitoring revealed that 93 percent of respondents fear that further ration cuts would worsen the security situation in the camps.

Briefly, across the world, the funding crisis is forcing WFP to scale back life-saving assistance. Almost half of WFP country operations have already cut, or plan to soon cut, the size and scope of food, cash, and nutrition assistance programmes. Globally, WFP estimates that every 1 percent cut in food assistance risks pushing over 400,000 people from IPC Phase 3 to Phase 4. This would mean that an additional 23.6 million people could fall into IPC Phase 4 over the next 12 months – a 50 percent increase – in the case of a 50 percent cut. WFP's current projected operational requirements for 2023 amount to US\$ 25.1 billion, yet current forecasted funding for 2023 stands at US\$ 10 billion, representing a shortfall of over 60 percent.

What funding sources is the World Food Programme drawing upon to support current food assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh? How well supported are these streams of funding? What has the UK contribution to these been since the WFP began responding to the crisis?

WFP is grateful for the support of our donors for funding our operations in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, this includes 13 donors in 2023 so far, of which the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia, and Japan are the top five donors. However, confirmed contributions for WFP's Rohingya response in 2023 amount to US\$ 89 million, a reduction of 56 percent compared to the same time in 2022. Through continued advocacy, we hope donors will respond to our call and enable us to sustain our food, nutrition,



and other essential assistance for the Rohingya. The United Kingdom, through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), has been a major donor to WFP's Rohingya response in Bangladesh. FCDO/DFID's contributions to WFP's operations in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char are as follows:

2018	US\$ 22.3 million (GBP 17 million)
2019	US\$ 36.5 million (GBP 28.4 million)
2020	US\$ 18 million (GBP 14 million)
2021	US\$ 11.7 million (GBP 8.7 million)
2022	US\$ 10.9 million (GBP 8.8 million)
2023	US\$ 15.1 million (GBP 12.3 million)

Are there any concerns about the future viability of the WFP's work providing food assistance to the Rohingya living as refugees in Bangladesh?

WFP is very concerned that funding has not kept pace with needs since the start of this year. WFP requires US\$ 165 million to provide the Rohingya with a full ration through 2024. WFP is urging donors to step up now to support the agency to restore the full ration and keep critical humanitarian operations intact until the Rohingya repatriation. Having been a top donor to WFP's Rohingya response, the United Kingdom is well-placed to advocate with other donors to encourage an increase in contributions. Until the Rohingya can return home safely, the response in Bangladesh must remain a top concern for the international community.

On Bhasan Char, WFP has been able to retain the full ration voucher value of US\$ 15 per person per month. The ration value on Bhasan Char is higher because humanitarian operations on the island are more costly and food prices are higher due to elevated transportation and logistics costs and a shortage of suppliers.

How does WFP monitor the quality of the food it provides to refugees? And how often do you undertake these checks?

WFP is committed to upholding accountability to affected populations and promoting community engagement. We monitor food quality at every stage of our food assistance. Before distribution, WFP Supply Chain monitors the stock inventory and movement in all our warehouses, with visual quality and quantity checks done on a weekly basis, and physical inventory on a monthly basis. Once food is in WFP outlets for distribution, WFP and our cooperating partner staff conduct daily monitoring and spot-checking of food quality. In addition, monitoring is done during and after food distributions at the distribution site to measure beneficiaries' perceptions regarding food quality, access to feedback mechanisms, and the consumption/use of their entitlement. Data from assessments in 2022 showed that 99 percent of refugees in Cox's Bazar reported being satisfied with food availability and quality.

WFP has robust community feedback mechanisms in place to receive, respond to, and analyse feedback once food is distributed to the refugees. WFP's community feedback mechanisms in Bangladesh include a toll-free hotline and help desks at all assistance sites to ensure beneficiaries and community members have a platform to raise concerns and queries. WFP also conducts monthly on-site, telephone, and post-distribution monitoring, as well as regular focus group discussions to address accessibility, accountability, and safety and security concerns. According to post-distribution monitoring data conducted in Cox's Bazar following the recent round of ration cuts, 81 percent of respondents were aware of WFP's community feedback mechanisms and 99 percent reported that they have never faced any challenges in communicating with WFP.



Are there issues with the quality of food being provided to Rohingya refugees? And, if so, what is causing these issues?

Please be assured that food safety is a top priority for WFP. All food purchased by WFP must comply with set requirements or specifications. These align with international standards, national legislation, and specific regulations in Bangladesh.

WFP monitors food quality at every stage of the food assistance chain – at warehouses, distribution sites, and post-distribution. Whenever food is suspected of falling below WFP quality standards it is immediately withdrawn from distribution and quarantined until it is proven to be safe for human consumption. WFP has corporate protocols and a logistics manual on food commodity infestation management, as well as reconditioning and repackaging guidelines. In Bangladesh, we also have a standard operating procedure on warehouse management. WFP staff follow these corporate and country guidelines with due diligence to ensure that only food that is fit for human consumption is distributed to the Rohingya. Examples of food quality issues include high broken grain percentage and infestation problems caused by the country's high temperature and humidity, particularly in Cox's Bazar.

While there are occasionally some quality-related concerns regarding food among the Rohingya refugees, these issues are often resolved at the outlets because the refugees are able to exchange the commodities before leaving the distribution outlets. In order to guarantee quality, WFP utilises a dual retailer system to tackle shortages arising from quality rejections. In situations where a substantial quantity of commodities is rejected due to quality concerns, we have the capacity to temporarily halt the operations of one retailer until they replenish their inventory with items meeting WFP-approved standards. Meanwhile, the other retailer ensures the continuity of distribution.

The quality issues encountered at these outlets mirror those commonly seen in the local surrounding markets, including a high percentage of broken items and infestation. WFP requires retail partners to ensure products adhere to national BDS standards and Bangladesh food safety regulations while undertaking regular and stringent monitoring at warehouses and retail stores to check for compliance. WFP's retail partners are required to implement a warehouse Quality Management System focused on Good Storage and Distribution practices including quality control measures such as fumigation of dry staple commodities, such as rice, and sorting and grading of items like chillies and onions. WFP's Food Safety and Quality team provides guidelines and capacity-building training to support the retailers in maintaining these standards, and issues corrective and preventative actions when non-compliance is observed.

I hope that this response fully answers your questions and addresses your concerns. WFP remains available to answer any further questions you have regarding food assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the committee for its excellent work and unwavering commitment to standing up for the world's most vulnerable.

Yours sincerely,

Heidi Olli
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