

UNHCR follow-up responses to UK Parliament International Development Committee - Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh inquiry (14/04/2020)

Q1. Please could you update us on the general situation in Cox's Bazar and your primary ongoing concerns for refugees in the camps.

Humanitarian operations in Cox's Bazar are now focused on the COVID-19 response, with the Government allowing only critical activities to continue. These are generally limited to health, nutrition and WASH measures to prevent and prepare for COVID-19 and other lifesaving assistance, including food and cooking fuel distributions, as well as reception and quarantine of new arrivals, and awareness raising. An initial Note Verbale from the Government issued on 22 March indicated that from 26 March to 04 April all non-essential Government and private sector organisations will remain closed, while people have been advised to stay at home. This was later extended until 15 April. Further to this, on 8 April 2020, the Government of Bangladesh also announced a lockdown of Cox's Bazar District. UNHCR remains in close discussions with the relevant authorities in Cox's Bazar and recognizes that temporary restrictions including limitations on movement are necessary for both host communities and refugees alike at this time to minimize risk of exposure to the virus, though such restrictions should not unduly limit freedom of movement or be more onerous on some than others. All humanitarian partners continue to strictly adhere to all Government Advisories.

Ensuring that refugees have access to timely and accurate information is challenging due to ongoing restrictions on 3G/4G mobile internet services in the camps. Though there are no confirmed COVID-19 cases among refugees in Bangladesh yet, one Bangladeshi case was confirmed in Cox's Bazar on 24 March. The patient has since made a full recovery. An outbreak among refugees or host communities would require a major public health response well beyond the capacity of humanitarian actors. Although UNHCR and others are rapidly building isolation and treatment facilities, with the goal of providing 1,000 beds, there is a severe lack of medical personnel and equipment, particularly personal protective equipment and testing and treatment capacity, including intensive care capacity in particular.

While UNHCR and other agencies have reduced their footprint in the camps, humanitarian staff need continued access not only to respond to COVID-19, but also to address other protection risks to which refugees remain exposed. These include gender-based violence (see below) as well as general security risks and the threat of monsoons and cyclones. In August 2019, following large but peaceful demonstrations by refugees, Bangladesh authorities imposed new restrictions, such as those on mobile internet services and perimeter fencing, that potentially compound the protection risks faced by refugees by limiting their access to information and services and worsening tensions with host communities. The international community could support civilian police in camp areas to increase their presence, patrols, and consultations with refugees.

Despite these challenges, UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh jointly achieved a major accomplishment by completing the registration of all Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar at the end of 2019. This has secured the identity of the entire refugee population—now counted at almost 860,000—establishing a basis for confirming their right to return to Myanmar and improving the integrity and efficiency of assistance.

Q2. What have been the main challenges for coordinating the humanitarian response in the camps?

Government coordination continues to be led by the Foreign Secretary through a National Task Force, but there have been key personnel changes, including a new Foreign Secretary in January 2020 and a

new Refuge Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) in September 2019. One coordination challenge faced by the government and humanitarian community has been how to improve camp governance; increasing the number of elected refugee leaders would strengthen both authorities' and humanitarian actors' engagement with refugee communities. Another challenge, as the UN seeks to support the development of Cox's Bazar District, has been to align immediate-term humanitarian work and investments made by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank with government development plans organized not at the District level, but at the Division and Upazila levels.

Coordination among humanitarian agencies has improved over the last year, following a review of the coordination structure and clearer lines of responsibility among the three Co-Chairs of the Strategic Executive Group in Dhaka: UNHCR, IOM, and the Resident Coordinator. This has led to the successful mobilization and implementation of the 2019 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis with 132 partners, a USD 921 million appeal that was 75% funded. The 2020 JRP was launched in March, appealing for USD 877 million. As further refinements in coordination are implemented at the Cox's Bazar level, one challenge will be reorienting a sector structure that has now been in place for over two years.

Q3. What preparations are being undertaken to implement formal education and economic opportunities in the camps?

In January, the Government approved the teaching of the Myanmar school curriculum to primary level refugee children in the camps. UNHCR and UNICEF, along with education partners, had begun implementing a Myanmar Curriculum Pilot to enrol 10,000 students in grades 6-9 by the end of 2020 (with expansion to other grades in 2021), but this has since been curtailed by the COVID-19 response, as the Government has ordered all learning centres in the camps to be closed as a preventative measure.

Refugees still do not have the right to work in Bangladesh. Following the events of August 2019, the Government initially sought to stop refugee volunteer programs in which humanitarian agencies provide stipends to refugees for providing services within the camps, but these have since been allowed to continue. Once normal activities in the camps are allowed to resume, UNHCR and other agencies will seek to expand skills development programs for refugees, as part of the 2020 JRP's strategic objective of supporting refugees build the skills and capacities that would help with any eventual return to Myanmar.

Q4. Gender based violence, including sexual exploitation and trafficking, appears to be a persistent problem in the camps. Why is this and what is the international community doing to prevent it?

The continued lack of formal education and livelihood options leaves refugees vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, particularly women and children. Traditional gender roles expose women and girls to additional risks of domestic violence and child marriage, which is linked to refugee families feeling they have no other options. In addition to efforts to expand education and livelihood opportunities, UNHCR is focused on strengthening the protection environment through community-based mechanisms, including a refugee network of over 400 Community Outreach Members (COMs)—40% of whom are women—who identify and refer persons with specific needs to specialized services. UNHCR is also mitigating protection risks by implementing practical measures, such as supporting camp-in-charges to issue marriage and divorce documentation that can help prevent early and forced marriage, and expanding legal services to 26 camps so that most refugees have improved access to legal support.

COMs have also proven to be an especially valuable network in disseminating COVID-19-related information, though a major concern in the wake of COVID-19 containment measures is how movement restrictions, added responsibilities and stress within the home, disrupted support networks and limited access to services will heighten the vulnerability of women and children and expose them to increased risks of violence, particularly domestic violence, exploitation and abuse. The number of referrals for sexual or gender-based violence cases has already risen in some camps.

Q5. What is your latest assessment of the plan to move some of the Rohingya to the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal? Can this ever be a solution?

Senior Government officials have made recent public statements saying that they no longer plan to move Rohingya to Bhasan Char, and that instead low-income Bangladeshis will be allowed to move there (though reportedly none have expressed interest so far). The UN maintains that independent technical and protection assessments, as well as consultations with refugees, would be necessary before moving forward with plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char.

Q6. What is being done to repatriate refugees and what are the obstacles?

The main obstacle is that the environment in Rakhine State, Myanmar, is still not conducive for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of refugees. Most refugees express the desire to return home, but not until certain assurances are provided, including a pathway to citizenship, security and freedom of movement. Rohingya remain subject to discriminatory movement restrictions and an unclear pathway to citizenship, including some 130,000 confined to IDP camps in central Rakhine. Refugees still fear for their security in Rakhine State, which has been exacerbated by the intensifying conflict between Myanmar armed forces and the Arakan Army.

The responsibility to create the necessary conditions for safe and dignified returns rests with Myanmar. UNHCR and UNDP have an MOU with the Government of Myanmar to work towards improving the environment in northern Rakhine State through rapid needs assessments and quick impact projects that address the day-to-day needs of the communities that remain, such as access to education and livelihoods. UNHCR is also planning consultations with refugees in Bangladesh according to their areas of origin, including on how to create an environment conducive to their sustainable return and restore their access to fundamental rights. Such consultations would inform the Government of Myanmar's efforts to meaningfully implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State and efforts undertaken by other actors, such as ASEAN, to improve conditions in Rakhine State and build confidence in return. This includes implementation of the Government of Myanmar's recently-launched national strategy to close IDP camps, as refugees in Bangladesh are closely following whether Rohingya IDPs will be able to return to their places of origin with freedom of movement.

Another necessary confidence-building measure is confirmation of refugees' right to return to Myanmar. Aided by data gathered through the joint UNHCR-Government of Bangladesh registration exercise, UNHCR is proposing that the Government of Myanmar confirms the right of refugees to return based on their areas of origin and without prejudice to their intentions. This would be a more predictable process than the two attempts made by the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar to begin repatriation in November 2018 and August 2019. On both occasions, the refugees identified by Bangladesh and cleared by Myanmar for return had not been notified until UNHCR verified their intentions in the days leading up to the scheduled repatriations. No refugees chose to return under those circumstances, and no clear explanation was provided to refugees as to why they were chosen for identification and verification.