

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

One of the most significant challenges organisations face operationally is the lack of clarity and consistency in the provision of information relating to, and implementation of, policies and regulation regarding activities in the camps. On a relatively routine basis, organisations will receive different information, or have to meet different criteria at the national, district, local and camp levels .

Such directives include the prohibition of the use of volunteers in programmes. In November 2019 a directive issued by the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) prohibited the use of Rohingya volunteers and further restricted the use of cash payments, even for volunteer stipends. Rohingya volunteers are the backbone of the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar, and as such are essential to programmes across the camps, the language and communications complexities alone mean that the response cannot operate without extensive use of volunteers from the refugee community. The use of volunteers is essential in strengthening links to the community, increases trust, and thereby improves the prospect of reaching and supporting the most marginalised, deprived and at-risk within the camps. Beyond this, the training and use of volunteers contributes to the fulfilment of the obligations of the Grand Bargain to build capacity and localise responses.

While this restriction was eased after some weeks it resulted in the significant disruption of services. In some cases, Camp in Charge (CICs) officers locked facilities until agencies produced a list of names of all Rohingya volunteers. Considering the context of the initial drivers of displacement, and the experience some Rohingya will have had regarding relocation in Bangladesh, this created anxieties within and across Rohingya and host communities.

In addition, the Government of Bangladesh does not formally recognise the many Rohingya led civil society groups in the camps, this prevents those groups from receiving much needed resources and – as with the use of volunteers – undermines the commitments and priorities of the Grand Bargain. It also contributes to overall feelings of frustration about the lack of agency and consultation with Rohingya refugees across the response. Related, there is extremely limited scope for Rohingya refugees to participate in the development and design of humanitarian services and response.

At a more macro-level, since the onset of the crisis agencies and humanitarian organisations have found it challenging to engage with the Government of Bangladesh, who have often seemed resistant to consultation. Coordination is also impeded by the high, and increasing, number of bureaucratic impediments faced by NGOs. These include months long waiting times for international staff to receive visas, delays registering NGOs implementing projects in Cox's Bazar, and extended and obstructive procedures to receive Foreign Donor (FD-7) approval from the NGOAB – without which NGOs cannot receive donor funding or implement projects.

In September 2019, the government announced plans to fence off large parts of the camps – separating the host communities from Rohingya and increasing restrictions on movement of the Rohingya between camps and in the immediately surrounding areas. While Rohingya in the camps of Cox's Bazar have never had full freedom of movement, they have enjoyed relative ease moving between camps, especially in the mega camp of Kutapalong. The fencing process being led by the army, at the request of the Ministry of Disaster Management Relief (MoDMR) and the Ministry of Defense (MoD), will severely compromise the little freedom of movement Rohingya are currently afforded.

In December 2019 the army began the first stage of building the fence. By March 2020, pillars for the fences have been placed in several camps in Ukhia – with over 50km of approximately 15ft tall pillars now in place. These pillars have caused a range of issues already.

Some facilities designated for refugees are now outside the boundary of the fence set by the pillars. It is unclear whether refugees will still have access to these facilities or whether Rohingya volunteers currently working at those facilities will be able to continue to do so. As of 15th March, 700 facilities are beyond the fence boundary which has been set in contradiction to the camp demarcations set by the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC).

As a result of the impact of the fence on operations and specific facilities, many Rohingya families will need to be relocated to within the fence boundary – as of March 2020, the army estimated that between 4000 and 5000 Rohingya households will need to be relocated. This suggests that the military's plan is to reassign families to any available shelter rather than acting in the best interests of refugee communities. Similarly, some host community members now find themselves inside the fencing boundaries and will need to be relocated.

Of significant concern is the length of fencing that is planned. In a recent meeting with the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) the Government of Bangladesh confirmed their plans to build 147km of fencing. This exceeds the total perimeter of both the Ukhia and Teknaf sites (80km), and the total perimeter of fencing the two sites individually (120km). The length of 147km suggests that the government will both fence around the perimeter, within the perimeter (restricting movement between camps) and potentially even doubling the outer fence. The Government have also confirmed they plan to fit the fence with watchtowers and CCTV.

Currently, construction of the fence has paused – though the pause is seemingly in response to COVID-19 rather than a shift in policy. Should the construction of fencing continue, it could have a disastrous compounding effect on any camp-wide response to a COVID-19 outbreak – preventing access to Rohingya communities and providing assistance, limiting the movement of Rohingya out of the camps to medical facilities, heightening inter-communal tensions with host communities, and excluding refugees from national efforts to combat COVID-19.