

Evidence for International Development Committee - Rohingya

1 and 2. Please could you update us on the general situation in Cox's Bazar and your primary ongoing concerns for refugees in the camps/ What have been the main challenges for coordinating the humanitarian response in the camps?

March 2020 – almost 860k Rohingya are displaced across Cox's Bazar, primarily in Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camp and satellite settlements and camps on a peninsula adjoining the Naf river, which separates Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹ The overall population (including those impacted by earlier waves of displacement) requiring support is 1.2 million people.

Key concerns:

- **Camp conditions:** Over-crowding, lack of adequate sanitation facilities, contaminated water from overflowing latrines, and poor access to food and water as well as vulnerability to natural disasters – such as monsoons and typhoons - are creating very difficult camp conditions. For example, heavy monsoon rains in July 2019 destroyed about 5,000 shelters, despite storm preparation efforts.
- **Violence and illicit crime:** There have been reports of violence, criminal networks and drug related activity in the camps. The illicit drugs economy - and trafficking networks - pose a risk to security and stability in the camps and are exacerbating tensions with the Bangladeshi authorities.
 - Drug smuggling is largely related to methamphetamine ('yaba'), which has been traded illegally for some time across this border region; an increase in drug smuggling has soared in recent years;
 - Local police authorities have arrested some Rohingya arms traders for arms trading since 2017, but this is minor compared to the trade in drugs. This arms trade existed long before the recent displacement.²
- **Covid-19 related risks:** The rudimentary health infrastructure in the camps is not equipped to deal with an outbreak of the disease. The first case in Cox's Bazar district was confirmed on March 24, 2020 but – to date – there have been no confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the Rohingya refugee camps. But in the absence of widespread testing of both Rohingya and host population, it is difficult to be certain of the potential risks;
 - The refugee population faces several risk factors: crowded accommodation, poor sanitary facilities, general poor health and malnutrition. In the camps,

¹ For updated UNHCR data, please see: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees

² For further information see: <https://stableseas.org/illicit-trades/arms-trafficking-bangladesh>

45 per cent of Rohingya refugee households suffer from high levels of food insecurity - even with food assistance.³

- UNICEF and partners are monitoring the situation and working with community mobilisers and volunteers from within the refugee communities to skill up the community on sanitation, measures to support protection from infection, how to identify symptoms and where to seek healthcare.
- But coronavirus panic could fuel further anti-migrant sentiments. If COVID-19 cases are confirmed in the refugee camps, this could lead to further stigmatisation of the Rohingya people in Bangladesh.
- **Restrictions imposed by the Bangladesh authorities:**
 - Since stalled repatriation efforts in mid-August 2019, the Bangladesh government has restricted mobile phone/telecommunication access for refugees. In the current Covid-19 context, this is preventing access to health information, coordination with community leaders and being able to share updated guidance as quickly as possible;
 - This is counter to the Bangladesh government's own advice that those experiencing Covid-19 symptoms should contact the country's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research. Restricting access to means of communication, will impact disease reporting.
- **Humanitarian coordination challenges:**
 - Securitised approaches, such as the construction of barbed wire around the camps that began in Nov 2019, both creates heightened fear and insecurity amongst the Rohingya but also places restrictions on ease of movement in and out of camps to seek help and access services.
 - Other humanitarian challenges include lack of adequate funding to deliver the services identified; and the approach of monsoon season, which will make living conditions worse within the camps.
 - Due to Covid-19, Bangladesh suspended all activities in camps, except for emergency assistance on March 24, 2020, making humanitarian coordination even more challenging;
 - Availability, and access to, personal protective equipment may also be an issue – the funding shortfall already impacts planned activities and without a funding boost it will be challenging to develop Covid-19 specific responses.
- **Funding gap:** Only 24% of the 2020 Joint Response plan (issued by the UN and partner agencies) has been funded to date. The 2019 JRP was eventually funded at just over 70% of what was requested. Funding shortfalls will impact the ability to respond effectively to refugee needs.⁴

³ For additional information, see: https://fscluster.org/rohingya_crisis

⁴ For detailed information, see: <https://hum-insight.info/plan/906>

4. 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?

Gender based violence, and sexual exploitation and trafficking, against the Rohingya population has been well documented. This is not just in the camps, but for countless people it occurred during the violence in Myanmar or during displacement itself. With restrictions on livelihoods and free movement, the Rohingya are stuck in close confinement in crowded conditions, which has seen rise in incidences of domestic violence as well. Frequent harassment of adolescent girls is also an issue. In this context, there is also the issue of girls facing early marriage for cultural and economic reasons. There are also increased risks of trafficking, as traffickers promise jobs and other opportunities.

In 2019, UNICEF recorded that 490 girls and 12,386 adult Rohingya refugees (75% of them female) were recorded as having received support on issues related to gender-based violence. UNICEF has set up a 13 Safe Spaces for Women and Girls programs across Cox's Bazaar, which provide counselling support, vocational training and learning opportunities.⁵ Other organisations, such as Action Aid, also provide similar programs.

Within the community, there are also initiatives to support women and girls impacted by these issues. For example, Razia Sultana (originally from Myanmar but raised in Bangladesh) established the Rohingya Women's Welfare Society, which provides counselling and support for women and girls.

Many of these initiatives provide support and services for women and girls who have become pregnant by rape. However, Covid-19 could have worrying implications for that support if health service providers are redeployed or focused on Covid-19 related responses.⁶

Less documented is sexual violence against men and boys. There has been some analysis of this, for example the Women's Refugee Commission report, "It's happening to our men as well': Sexual violence against Rohingya men and boys' published in 2018.⁷

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

⁵ For further information, see: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/rr-rohingya-refugee-response-gender-analysis-010818-en.pdf>

⁶ For further information, see: <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/guidance-note-gbv-service-provision-during-time-covid-19-myanmar-gbv-sub-sector>

⁷ Available at: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/report/auto-draft/Rohingya-Report-Final-.pdf>

There has been a long gestating plan to move approximately 1000 refugees to Bhashan Char, an island at the mouth of the Meghna River.⁸

However, critics argue the island only emerged less than 20 years ago and is prone to floods, cyclones and harsh weather conditions. These risks are only likely to increase as the region will see rising sea levels and the continued impacts of climate change and natural disasters. Humanitarian organisations have also been highly critical of the move given the site's physical isolation and the access challenges it poses. The UN has said relocation should be voluntary and independent assessments should take place before any relocation.

In Feb 2020, the state minister for disaster management and relief indicated that plans may need to be shelved as they have not – according to him – secured international cooperation with the scheme. Without such cooperation, it would be difficult to arrange access to the services needed for refugees relocated to Bhashan Char.

However, it is unclear how quickly the government will act on this. Certainly Covid-19 will be pressing on the authorities' mind and this will take precedence for now.

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

In Oct 2017 Bangladesh opened formal negotiations with Myanmar on a process for repatriation. The following month, both parties agreed a memorandum of understanding, and set up a Joint Working Group to coordinate repatriation.

However, problematically, UNHCR was not part of the discussions. There was an absence of a 'neutral' party that can help advance repatriation, work out the logistical processes and address any unresolved issues while also ensuring the necessary conditions (safe, voluntary, informed) were met.

Two attempts at repatriation failed in Nov 2018 and Aug 2019 – without a single refugee who had been cleared for repatriation agreeing to return. Both sides have reverted to blaming each other for the lack of progress. However, it is understandable that refugees have expressed strong reservations about returning to a situation, which has not materially changed:

- The Rohingya are still essentially stateless as Myanmar has not developed any viable pathways to citizenship;
- Problematic laws are still on the statute books that legalise systemic discrimination against the Rohingya for example the 1982 Citizenship Law, which does not recognise the Rohingya as an official ethnic group within Myanmar;

⁸ This article provides photos of the new site: <https://tbsnews.net/rohingya-crisis/inside-look-bhashan-char-new-home-rohingyas>

- Other regulations maintain restrictions on the Rohingya's freedom of movement and access to services within Rakhine State. For example, all Rohingya need special permits to travel between townships with security posts and checkpoints outside most towns. In central Rakhine, Rohingya are not allowed to travel outside their villages.
- These measures even impact ethnicities, which are lawfully recognised as citizens by the authorities. For example, the Kaman who reside in Sittwe, also face the same restrictions on movement.
- The destruction of land and property, including building new edifices on top of previously occupied land has been well documented.⁹ As such, it is not clear what the Rohingya would be returning to as land has been burnt down, properties destroyed or appropriated or repurposed.
- Prior to the recent crisis, almost ninety-five thousand people were already living in an internal displacement camp on the outskirts of Sittwe. These camps are often vulnerable to closures.¹⁰ In this context, it is understandable why refugees fear return as internal displacement is a high risk.

Intransigence within Myanmar is both political and cultural. The Rohingya are widely not seen as part of Myanmar and there is strong support for the Burmese authorities' actions. International pressure has done little to change this equation. More thought should be given to how to best support Bangladesh and engage regional actors, such as India or China to pressure Myanmar to make the changes needed for safe, informed and voluntary return:

- Sheik Hasina has made the point publicly and privately that protracted displacement raises risks of instability and insecurity for the neighbouring region for both China and India and could impact their commercial interests;¹¹
- Hasina visited China in July 2019 to call for the country to do more. These appeals have seen China try to adopt a 'mediation' position. But without any real experience in mediation in such contexts, the approach has had limited utility. Visits to the camps and public statements calling for solutions do not seem to have been matched with holding Myanmar to account for its actions;¹²
- There has also been ongoing dialogue with India but the National Register of Citizens process taking place in the Indian northeastern state of Assam has created deep tension between the two countries, making it difficult to get India on board¹³;

⁹ For example, see: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/09/myanmar-scorched-earth-campaign-fuels-ethnic-cleansing-of-rohingya-from-rakhine-state/>

¹⁰ On closure of camps see: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bb72e0da.html>; for further information on IDP situation within Myanmar, see: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/myanmar>

¹¹ For example see: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2019/11/11/pm-rohingyas-threat-to-national-regional-security>

¹² For recent commentary, see: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-rohingya-china-insight/china-struggles-in-new-diplomatic-role-trying-to-return-rohingya-to-myanmar-idUKKBN1ZJ0SD>

¹³ India's NRC and Citizenship Amendment Act processes have been deeply controversial. Local Assamese politicians see Bengali citizens as 'foreigners' and the issue plays into Modi's government populist agenda

- What is desperately needed is a long-term approach (repatriation is highly unlikely in the current context), which also improves the current conditions for displaced Rohingya.
 - However, Bangladesh needs reassurance that this is not a step to a permanent settlement, which is the source of political and local tensions and resentments.
 - And countries should support Bangladesh to maintain pressure on Myanmar to change the situation of the Rohingya within the country.
 - Finally, countries should help meet the funding gap so that Bangladesh can continue to meet the refugee and host populations needs.
 - However, the likelihood of any of this advancing while Covid-19 remains a concern for countries in the region is arguably nil. It is more likely that the ongoing displacement of the Rohingya will not be a political or policy priority unless an outbreak in the camp is seen as a serious risk to neighbouring countries.

which targets Muslim groups. The issue has created some tension between the two neighbours. For further information see: <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/understanding-indias-citizenship-controversy/>