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Bangladesh: What future for the Rohingya?



Nearly 700,000 Rohingya people have fled to Bangladesh since August 2017, escaping human rights violations, discrimination and violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar. Villages have been razed, parents and relatives killed in front of traumatised children and women and girls raped and abused. These latest arrivals have joined hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from previous refugee inflows dating back to the 1970s. With a population of more than 800,000, the Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar is the largest in the world. Altogether, UNHCR believes that a million Rohingya are living outside Myanmar. Those still in Myanmar are effectively

denied citizenship, and their movements and access to land, education and public services are restricted.

The Bangladesh Government responded to the latest influx by opening its border with Myanmar, allocating land for shelter and providing assistance. However, it does not consider the Rohingya to be refugees, rejects the possibility of local integration and wishes to see their swift return to Myanmar. Several repatriation plans are being discussed, but the conditions for a safe return of the Rohingya to Myanmar are still not in place. UNHCR and most other UN agencies have not been able to access Northern Rakhine since the crisis began in 2017. Despite the government's ambition to see a quick



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resolution, refugees themselves strongly oppose return until conditions are safe and there has been accountability for abuses suffered at the hands of the Myanmar authorities and army. However, neither the international community nor the Bangladesh Government seems to have a plan to address these people's longer-term needs.

Another massive yet disorganised humanitarian response

A number of people interviewed as part of the case study told us that the early response did not meet basic standards of quality, as the government and local and international agencies struggled to cope with the very large numbers of people entering the country. While quality has subsequently improved, the location of the refugee camps still poses massive challenges. Camps are in low-lying areas at high risk of flooding and landslides. At the time of the study, there appeared to be little in the way of preparedness activities for the forthcoming rainy season, and refugees were extremely anxious about the effects of torrential rain.

Major gaps remain

During the initial months of the response priority was given to life-saving assistance, food security, shelter and WASH over mental health support. However, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues are common, and there is a clear need for consistent mental health and psychosocial support to help the refugees cope with their experiences and begin to heal.

Protection is another challenge. There are questions about safety in the camp, particularly for women and girls, with frequent reports of abuse and exploitation, including within the Rohingya community itself. Victims of gender-based violence may well be dealing with pregnancy and childbirth.

Refugees are not being heard

The Rohingya response in Bangladesh is also failing to meet mandated accountability standards. Refugees are not systematically involved in needs assessments or programming activities, and there is talk of aid agencies being disrespectful towards and excluding them from decision-making.

Language barriers make communication difficult, as neither Bangladeshi nor international staff generally speak Rohingya. Literacy levels are low among the Rohingya, so complaints boxes are not very effective, but as the government does not allow refugees to have Bangladeshi SIM cards or mobile phones other standard approaches to accountability, such as agency hotlines, are also largely redundant. Cultural norms restrict women's involvement in many areas of life, and make it hard for them to raise complaints. There have been accusations that some of majhis (traditional leaders), who should represent the community, have withheld beneficiary cards and demanded money from refugees.

No short-term fixes

With return to Myanmar – at least in the short term – looking unlikely, donors and aid actors are now advocating for longer-term approaches in the refugee camps and with host communities. The future of Rohingya refugees depends on investment in the Cox's Bazar district and Bangladesh as a whole. To achieve a sustainable solution, a major shift in policy will be required, easing pressure on Bangladesh, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions and supporting conditions in the country of origin to allow a safe and dignified return. • CHARLOTTE HEWARD, GROUPE URD

This write-up is based on a case study conducted for the SOHS 2018 by Groupe URD. The full case study can be found at: sohs.alnap.org



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